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**CULTURAL CONTEXTUALISATION; THE CHURCH ENGAGEMENT IN THE  
MALE CIRCUMCISION AS A RITE OF PASSAGE IN MERU KENYA**

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## **Abstract**

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This thesis analyses the intricate intersection between cultural traditions, religious beliefs and the evolving dynamics of male circumcision within the Meru community of Kenya. It explores the process of contextualising theology within the framework of male circumcision ceremonies in the Meru community. Male circumcision is a rite of passage that has been ingrained into the social practices of the Meru community and stands at the crossroads of evolving religious beliefs. Male circumcision among the Meru community is a timeless emblem of cultural identity and a mark of transition from childhood to manhood. The practice has evolved over time, navigating the dynamics of modernity while maintaining its cultural significance. This study has focused on the role of the church, a relatively new player in this traditional practice. The active role of the church in organising and overseeing the practice introduces a multifaceted dynamism where elements of modern religious practices intersect with traditional African practices. This interplay unfolds in the framework of contextual theology, raising questions on how religious practices are adapted within these cultural contexts.

The study adopts a qualitative approach combining interviews and observational techniques. The researcher conducted interviews with various participants who included initiates, church leaders and community elders, to understand their perception on the involvement of the church in traditional male circumcision. The interviews provided a rich qualitative data and offered a platform for community members to express their opinions. The data collected from these interviews was subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis which helped to unveil several major themes and subthemes that sum up the depth and complexity of the research findings. Key among these themes is the historical and cultural significance of male circumcision within the Meru community, the involvement of the church, and perception of the community towards the involvement of the church in this cultural practice.

The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of the interplay between cultural traditions and religious beliefs. It highlights the impact of Christian elements on traditional cultural practices and how it affects the fabric of tradition and community identity. These insights give perspectives of how cultural heritage adapts with evolving societies. The findings extend beyond the boundaries of academic inquiry and are of significance to several domains. In the context of contextual theology, the study seeks to provide a lens through which theologians and religious scholars can examine adaptability and the potential of theological

perspectives in different cultural contexts. The study also offers a practical understanding of the delicate balance between tradition and faith, and it offers guidance on how to navigate the terrain of cultural adaptation while preserving cultural identity. Finally, it underscores the transformative potential of contextual theology within culturally diverse and evolving contexts.

## **Abbreviations**

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|         |   |
|---------|---|
| CMS     | Church Mission Society                                      |
| NSD     | Norwegian Center for Research Data                          |
| NACOSTI | National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation |
| PCEA    | Pentecostal Church of East Africa                           |
| MCK     | Methodist Church in Kenya                                   |
| HIV     | Human Immunodeficiency Virus                                |
| AIDS    | Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome                          |
| GDPR    | General Data Protection Regulation                          |
| PDA     | Personal Data Act   |

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## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

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### **1.1 Approaching Contextual Theology and Male Circumcision in the Meru Community.**

Contextualizing theology is a dynamic and multifaceted process that involves adapting religious beliefs, practices, and teachings to fit the unique cultural, social, and historical contexts of a specific community (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020; Du Plessis & Nkambule, 2020). It recognizes that theological principles and doctrines, though universal in essence, can be understood and applied differently depending on the cultural background and experiences of individuals and communities. This approach to theology acknowledges that God's revelation and truth can be discerned and expressed in diverse ways, reflecting the diverse tapestry of human experiences and cultures. According to Du Plessis & Nkambule (2020), contextualisation of theology is one of the most important issues in mission today. This thesis approaches the field of contextual theology through studying the case of male circumcision in Meru, Kenya. The Meru people have a rich cultural and traditional heritage in which male circumcision takes a considerable dominance. As such, it provides a good grounding for possible ways of contextualizing theology a possibility that this study seeks to explore. As presented in the proceeding chapters, this study investigates the perception of various stakeholders in the male circumcision cultural tradition on the involvement of the church in the practice.

The study seeks to explore the dynamic interplay between theology and contexts within the Meru community. To achieve this objective, the study will focus on the involvement of the church in male circumcision ceremonies. In this context, contextualisation theology involves the adaptation of religious beliefs, practices, and teachings to align with the unique, cultural, social and historical backgrounds of a specific community (Mugambi, 2013). The Meru community has a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in traditional practices and beliefs. Similarly, Christianity has played a crucial role in shaping the religious landscape of the community. However, the integration of Christianity into traditional cultural practices like male circumcision, raises questions about identity, cultural preservation, and evangelistic opportunities.

Male circumcision is the surgical removal of the foreskin from the male genitalia. The meaning and purpose of this practice can vary depending on the cultural, religious, and social context of

its practice (Morris et al., 2017). In many contexts, male circumcision is perceived as a sacred and symbolic act that reflects profound theological and cultural beliefs. In the realm of contextual theology, male circumcision is often perceived as a religious or cultural rite of passage. It is a tangible expression of faith, identity and belonging within a particular religious or cultural community. According to Downs et al., (2017), contextual theology recognises that the interpretation of male circumcision can be highly contextualised and multifaceted. It holds that such cultural practices are not isolated from the cultural, historical, and social contexts in which they occur. Instead, they are intertwined with the lived experiences and beliefs of communities, shaping, and getting shaped by them in return. In this regard, the study will seek to establish the effect of this cultural interaction between the church and the Meru community traditions and investigate possible effects to both the culture and traditions of the Meru people and the church in general from a contextual theology perspective. The theoretical framework of the study (Chapter 3) will provide an extensive elaboration on contextual theology as well as on how it is used in this study, while the case of male circumcision and the cultural and geographical context of Meru region will be presented in Chapter 2 on context.

## 1.2 Personal motivation

The primary personal motivation in choosing contextual theology for this thesis is rooted in the desire to bridge the experienced gap between the cultural heritage and my faith of the researcher. It is possible that others too, experience that gap. Many of the Meru people the researcher spoke to had similar experiences. The interactions with church leaders revealed profound commitment to bridging the gap between faith and culture. Notably, they expressed their belief in the transformative potential of this integration, with a focus on its potential in fostering unity and spiritual growth. The initiates on the other hand, expressed a sense of pride in their cultural heritage and an eagerness to embrace the teachings of Christianity.

The Meru community, on the one hand, holds a rich blend of traditions, customs and practices that have shaped its identity for generations. Christianity, on the other hand holds, an immense significance in guiding beliefs, values, and perceptions. As such, choosing contextual theology will help to explore the harmonious integration of these two aspects of identity. More importantly, the choice of contextual theology as pursued in this case will help the researcher to contribute to the ongoing dialogue between culture and faith. By examining the involvement of the church in male circumcision through this lens, it is possible to make meaningful

contribution to the Meru community, the church and the broader academic discourse. As such, this study hopes to contribute to the creation of a harmonious coexistence that preserves the essence of our cultural heritage while embracing the transformative power of the Christian message.

### 1.3 Problem statement

Male circumcision is an important social and cultural rite of passage in the context of the Meru community. The increase in the influence of Christianity among African communities has led to the involvement of the church in this cultural practice. Various studies have analysed the historical relationship between the church and the Meru community. However, there is little literature on the effects of the engagement of the church in male circumcision as a rite of passage. As such, this research aims to address this gap and investigate the dynamics, implications and potential conflicts arising from the intersection of the church and religious beliefs. The research will assess the historical relationship between the Church and the Meru community. It will examine the involvement of the church in male circumcision and the impact of this involvement on the cultural authenticity, social dynamics and individual experiences within the community. By understanding how Christian symbols and rituals are incorporated into the traditional practice of male circumcision, the study will shed light on the process of cultural adaptation, negotiation and transformation in the Meru Community.

The study seeks to offer a practical application of culture and theology to community members, religious leaders, and policy makers. It hopes to contribute to informing the discussions and decisions regarding the preservation of cultural heritage, the promotion of religious tolerance and the importance of respectful dialogue between traditional cultural institutions and religious institutions. Consequently, the study explores the historical relationship between the context of male circumcision as a rite of passage and the involvement of the church in such traditional practices. It examines the extent and nature of the engagement of the church in the traditional male circumcision and investigate the perceptions, experiences and attitudes of the community members and religious leaders in regard to the integration of Christian symbols and rituals. The study also analyses some of the gaps in the social and cultural implications of the involvement of the church in male circumcision and provide insights and recommendations for fostering

dialogue, understanding and harmony between traditional cultural practices and religious beliefs in the Meru community.

#### 1.4 Study objectives

The focus of this study is to explore the engagement of the church in the cultural practice of male circumcision as a rite of passage within the Meru community in Kenya as it applies in different viewpoints. The study aims to understand the historical relationship between the church and the community and examine the extent and nature of the involvement of the church in male circumcision. The study will achieve this objective by exploring the implications and the dynamics that arise from the intersection of cultural traditions and religious beliefs. It seeks to establish the reasons behind such involvement, the part of the cultural practices if any that the church seeks to transform through a direct involvement, the benefits of such involvement to the church and Christian faith and how such involvement can be contextualised and compared to the church theological teachings and doctrines.

The study further seeks to find the perceptions of the local community and the proponents of traditional circumcision practices and how the church aims to appeal to their sentiments. In doing so, the study aimed specifically at finding out how the church involves the local community in their programs and how the specific measure aimed at enlightening the community on the need for such involvement.

With a focus on understanding the interplay between cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and community dynamics, this study aims to shed light on the multifaceted nature of this practice. To seek further clarification on the matter, the following sub-research questions were employed in the study.

1. How has the Church engaged with the cultural practice of male circumcision?
2. How do community members perceive and value the involvement of the Church in male circumcision ceremonies?
3. What controversies and challenges arise from the intersection of religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and the involvement of the Church in male circumcision?

## 1.5 Structure of the Study

The thesis comprises of several distinct sections that seek to provide key information on the research topic. Chapter one of the thesis provides an introduction and delineates the aims and objectives of the study. It also describes the problem that the study seeks to resolve and highlights the motivation of the author in conducting the research. Chapter two provides a contextual analysis of the study. It acts as an anchor point for the study, laying a foundation for understanding the intricacies of the Meru community in Kenya. Chapter three focuses on the theoretical framework and serves as an academic backbone that guides the study. It provides a critical review and synthesis of various theoretical models relevant to the study. Chapter four highlights the approach adopted in the research process. It details the utilization of interviews and observations as the primary methods of data collection tools. Chapter five presents a culmination of the study, describing the findings of the study. Chapter six provides a comprehensive analysis of the findings of the study. Chapter Seven summarizes these findings and implications drawn from the research.

## CHAPTER 2: CONTEXT

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### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the contextual background for the study. It highlights the interplay of historical, cultural, and religious factors that influence the dynamics of the relationship between religious and the traditional practice of male circumcision. To that end, the chapter accounts for the history of male circumcision and its practice in the Meru community, the relationship between the Church and the Meru community, the role of social interactions in shaping cultural practices as well as the emergence of a distinctive cultural and religious synthesis. These dimensions will provide a comprehensive backdrop for understanding the role of the church in male circumcision rituals in this setting

### 2.2 Background of Male Circumcision

Male circumcision is one of the oldest and most common surgical procedures known to humans. Traditionally, the ritual is undertaken for specific religious significance or as a mark of cultural identity (Aggleton, 2007; Morris & Cox, 2012). Historically, male circumcision was practiced among ancient Semitic people including Egyptians and individuals from Jewish faith. The earliest records that depict the practice of male circumcision on Egyptian temples and wall paintings dates back to 2300BC (Morris & Cox, 2012). The advancement in surgery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the increase in mobility in the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to the introduction of the procedure to some cultures who previously did not practice the ritual for both health related and social reasons (Mwashambwa et al., 2013). According to Brondz & Aslanova (2019), current estimations indicate that approximately 30% of all males across the globe are circumcised, representing approximately 1.226 billion of the total global population of men. The number is largely distributed among three religions with Islam accounting for 68%, while less than 1% of Jewish faith and 13% being non-Muslim and non-Jewish individuals (Mwashambwa et al., 2013). As such, circumcision is a tradition that has been largely accepted by the three Abrahamic faiths.

In the Christianity religion, the Coptic Christians in Egypt and the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians are two of the oldest surviving forms of Christianity that maintain Christianity traditions, including male circumcision. According to Mwashambwa et al. (2013), some forms of Christianity do not prescribe male circumcision as a tradition. In the Roman catholic church, for instance, a papal Bull that was issued in 1442 stated that male circumcision was unnecessary. It, therefore, encouraged Christians to abandon the practice (Golomski & Nyawo, 2017).

Scholars on the practice of circumcision in sub-Saharan Africa have not found any compatibility of male circumcision with Christian beliefs. Some churches oppose the practice and term it as a pagan ritual (Mwashambwa et al., 2013). In other cases, such as the Nomiya Church in Kenya, members have to undergo the ritual of circumcision to be accepted into the church (Golomski & Nyawo, 2017). Similar observations have been made in focus groups in Zambia and Malawi (Golomski & Nyawo, 2017). The practice has been for both religious and non-religious purposes.

Circumcision has been practiced for non-religious reasons for many years in sub-Saharan Africa. In most cultures, the ritual is an integral part of a rite of passage to manhood (Yurdakul, 2016). However, it was originally seen as a test for bravery and endurance. The practice is associated with factors such as masculinity, spirituality, self-identity, and social cohesion among boys of the same age. From a psychological perspective, it was used to remove ambiguity in social roles that creates tension (Golomski & Nyawo, 2017). It is also a symbol of reclassification that is essential as individuals approach transition from being considered as a child to being an adult. The desire to maintain ethnic traditions has also been cited to be a major contributor to the practice of circumcision.

Throughout the history of the practice of circumcision, the ritual has been considered to be a social statement by the initiates. In societies where the majority of boys are circumcised, the desire to conform is an important motivation for circumcision (Thiessen, 2011). The perceived health benefits and sexual benefits have also been contributed to the uptake of the practice of circumcision. More recently, the perception of improved hygiene and lower risk of infections as a result of male circumcision has driven the spread of male circumcision (Alahmad & Dekkers, 2012). In Nyanza region, a region in the western part of Kenya, where male circumcision is not a common practice, respondents to similar surveys have indicated that it was easier for circumcised men to maintain cleanliness.

In general, male circumcision is a widespread phenomenon cutting across different religions and cultures. The reasons for the practice are diverse and range from cultural norms, medical reasons, to rites of passage. In many African societies, circumcision has a cultural and spiritual connotation, and it is regarded as a rite of passage. It is regarded as a transition from childhood into adulthood. In Kenya, the geographical context of this study, it is estimated that 84 percent of the adult male population is circumcised (Kamoyo & Nyaga, 2018). Before the circumcision,



boys undergo a stage of special instructions and thorough beating to instil bravery into them. This stage is referred to as “*gatuuri*” in the Meru language and it usually occurs after the age of 16 years (Nyaga, 1997). This is to prepare the initiate into a responsible adult since after the circumcision, the initiate is expected to manifest maturity in his speech, thought and conduct. These skills are further developed through a thorough set of teachings usually conducted in seclusion immediately after the circumcision. In the Kenyan region of Meru, this task of cultural teaching is entrusted to young warriors and elders (Kamoyo & Nyaga, 2018). It is conducted in secrecy, and it is only privy to the initiates.

There has been an increased effort by the church in Kenya to get involved in the male circumcision process. The church is seen to be playing a direct role in sourcing for medical practitioners to circumcise the young boys, offering boarding facilities to the initiates during the healing process and organising an education program that trains them on various social economic and religious values (Morris & Cox, 2012). Mbito and Malia (2008) note that the traditional circumcision ceremonies in traditional African set ups are normally characterised with practices that could be viewed as unacceptable to the religious teachings.

While various religious groups may have different perspectives on traditional male circumcision, there is a general consensus on arguments against the manner in which it is conducted (Morris & Cox, 2012). Key among the primary tenets for the arguments against the traditional male circumcision as practiced by the Meru community is that it violates the principle of bodily integrity. According to Gichaara, (2013), some factions of churches argue that circumcision should be a personal choice and not an obligatory practice and individuals should have the freedom to decide what happens to their bodies. As such, when circumcision is performed on boys who cannot provide informed consent it is seen as a form of mutilation and barbaric act.

Despite the contradicting cultural and Christian teachings, many faithful Christian in Meru still embrace elements of cultural practices especially when it comes to male circumcision. Morris & Cox (2012) connects such double lives to a historical perspective noting that the missionaries that introduced Christianity demonized the African traditional practices. The first Church Mission Society (CMS) missionary settled in Kenya arrived in Kenya in the 1840s, but they did not make a lot of progress until the 1870s. What followed was concerted efforts to replace traditional African cultural practices with Christian practices. The missionaries followed a 19<sup>th</sup>

century anthropologists' view that the cultural development was tied to species evolution (Kobia, 2013). They viewed the American and European societies as advanced species and so was the superiority of their culture as compared to the African. This notion led the early missionary's perception of African cultural and religious practices as ancient and one that needed to be replaced with the more advanced western cultural and religious practices. The African converts, not ready or willing to drop their traditional beliefs and practices, lived a double life (Kobia, 2013). Publicly proclaiming the Christian teachings but secretly adhering to the traditional norms and practices.

Male circumcision has remained to be one of the few dominant traditional African ritual practices that have survived the domination of western culture and are being practiced in most cultures today. Although the origin of male circumcision is unknown, the practice has been in place for a long time in Africa (Yurdakul, 2016). As noted above, male circumcision has a long history and it depicts a lot of similarities in its practice across various communities. Circumcision rituals were used as a platform for teaching and socialising the initiates while they were recuperating in seclusion before graduating into various age grades. Primarily, circumcision was intended to instil fortitude and endurance, hence toughening the initiates since they were being trained to become warriors. Male circumcision has retained a great degree of Africanness in practice despite undergoing massive transformation in the contemporary world (Earp, 2013). One of the main changes has been the involvement of the church in the practice.

### 2.3 Origin of the Meru Community

The Meru Community is a Bantu speaking group that inhabits on and adjoining the slope of Mt Kenya. Fadiman (2013) alludes to a three-century old of the Ameru history. He notes that out of the three centuries, only two centuries record can be traced most of which is oral recollections from senior living members of the community. The Meru community had an oral tradition of preserving their history through songs, stories, and narratives. The old members of the community ensured posterity of their customs and history through oral instructions to the younger generations. The oral traditions provide a rich historical account of the origin and traditions of the Meru. The Meru originated from Manda Island in the south coast of Kenya. Their ancestors are said to have been conquered by a neighbouring group in the early 1700s that forced them to flee. Fadiman hints at the possibility of the conquering neighbours being

the Arab traders from the reference to them as Nguu ntune (meaning red cloth-probably in reference to their light skin). The Meru were held captive until their great leader organised their escape across the receding water. They migrated along the Tana River and reached the base of Mt Kenya, Tigania, and Nyambene in the 1730's. Manda is an island in the Indian Ocean but close enough to the dry land where they could often cross to for agricultural activities and animal rearing. During the low tides, the Meru ladies would collect the cowry shells and star fish which they later dried to make ornaments worn at their necks and waist (Fadiman, 2013). Fadiman hints at the presence of medicine men referred to as aga (curse removers) among the Meru by stating that they would also join the women in low tide to collect shells that they used to perform various types of magic. According to Fadiman (2013), the Meru people were guided by a wise Muga (curse remover) in their various undertakings. It is this wise Muga, referred to as Koome Njue, who would guide them during the conquest time and later lead them in the escape. The migration from Mbwa is said to have taken 30 years. They crossed river Tana on the south and moved inland along its bank. Tough ecological conditions would later push them westwards. They followed the seasonal rivers probably informed by their agrarian nature that led them to the foothills of Mount Kenya.

#### 2.4 Modern Settlement of the Meru

The name Meru refers both to the community and the administrative unit of Meru which was adopted from the colonial administrative units. According to Fadiman (2013), the name Meru referred only to the five sub ethnic groups of Igembe, Tigania, Imenti, Miutini (Probably referring to the present day Mitine) and Igoji. He posits that it is the British administrators in the colonial era that included Tharaka, Muthambi and Chuka into the Meru administrative unit. Tharaka live in the Eastern plains of Meru while Chuka borders the pre-colonial Meru to the south. In the modern geographical demarcations, the Meru community predominantly occupies the current Meru, Tharaka Nithi and parts of Isiolo counties located in the eastern part of Mount Kenya. The community comprise of seven ethnic groups namely Igembe, Tigania, Imenti, Tharaka, Igoji, mwimbi and Chuka. The Language spoken is Kimiiru which has some level of semblance to the Kikuyu, Kikamba and Kiambu languages who constitute the neighbouring communities. The Ameru people are said to share a common ancestry having settled in their current location after years of migration from the North (Peatrik, 2020). Their land is fertile agrarian land. The Meru region covers approximately 13000 square kilometres stretching from

Thuci which borders Embu County to the Northern border with Isiolo county (Peatrik, 2020). The Meru people, even though dominated with diverse linguistic dialects of the Kimeru language and peculiar traditional practices, are united in their common ancestry and a homogenous culture.

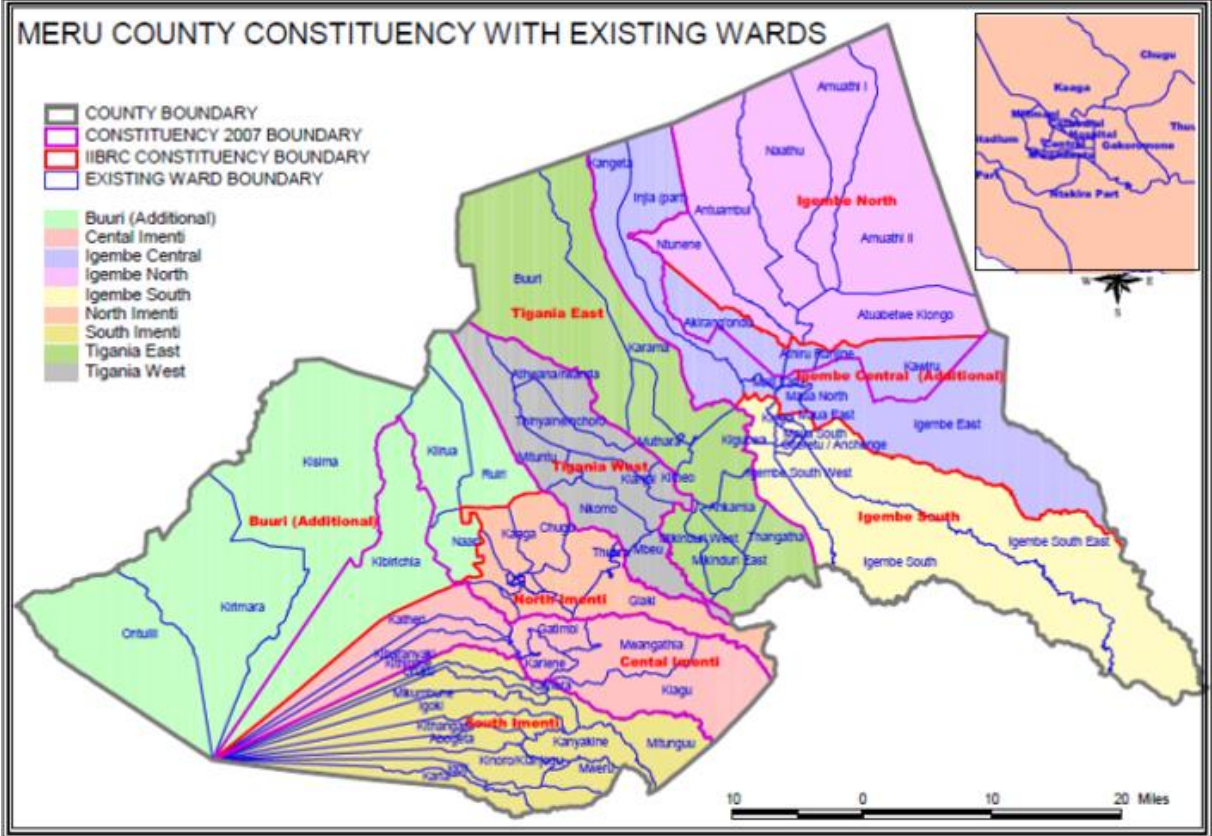


Figure 2. 1 A map of the area occupied by the Meru People.

2.5 Traditional Rites of Passage

Rites of passage, such as the above-described circumcision practices, are ceremonial events that exist in all historically known societies. They mark the transition from one social or religious status to another. According to Janusz & Walkiewicz (2018), typical to the rites of passages in other parts of the world, these rituals in Africa utilizes symbols to express and convey meanings. In the context of African traditional societies, rites of passage are performed as customary, standardized, and symbolic social communication that is repeated according to fixed patterns (Glozah, 2014; Sebbeh, 2020). Typically, African societies have different age-linked rituals which mark the passage from one stage of life to the other. However, the number and nature of these rituals differ from one society to the other (Schroeder et al., 2022). The literature on the

rites of passage can be analysed from the historical and cross-cultural perspectives or the psychological and sociological perspectives.

The historical perspective of rites of passage reveals their deep roots in human civilization as well as their significance in shaping societies. According to Anyim (2021), the history of rites of passage dates back to the ancient civilizations and have evolved and transformed over time. Rites of passage played a critical role in ancient civilizations in maintaining the social and cultural fabric of societies. Christianity rituals and rites of passage have domineered most African countries, and, in some cases, they have replaced traditional African rituals. Christianity rites of passage began to gain popularity during the medieval period, as Christianity began to become a dominant religion in Europe. The age of exploration and colonization of various regions led to the encounter of different cultures and religions and hence the assimilation, adaptation or suppression of indigenous rites of passage. European colonizers imposed their own religious and cultural practices, hence modified the existing indigenous rituals. In more recent history, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed a resurgence of interest in understanding and preserving traditional rites of passage (Peatrik, 2020). Anthropologists have sought to study the role of rituals in individual and societal transformation. While the impact of globalisation, urbanisation and cultural shifts has influenced the practice of rites of passage in modern world, efforts are being made to reclaim and adapt traditional rituals to contemporary contexts. There has been a rise in cultural revitalisation movements which seeks to maintain the cultural heritage and significance of traditional African rituals and promote a sense of identity, belonging and continuity in the highly dynamic culture.

Traditional African rites of passage hold significant psychological and sociological significance within their respective communities. They provide a foundation for the formation of an identity by instilling a strong sense of cultural belonging and personal significance (Golomski, 2012). Traditional African rituals help individuals to gain a clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities, and expectations within the community. This understanding plays a critical role in fostering a cohesive sense of self and fosters a deep connection with one's cultural heritage. Besides, traditional African rituals offer individuals with opportunities for self-discovery and personal growth (Ohaja & Anyim, 2021). Initiates undergo transformative experiences during the initiation process such as tests, teachings, and challenges. As a result, they gain self-awareness, develop a greater understanding of their strengths and capabilities and build

resilience. The rites of passage act as a catalyst for fostering self-confidence and a strong sense of purpose. From a sociological perspective, rites of passage reinforce social integration and cohesion by strengthening the bonds within the community. They create shared experiences, values and cultural practices, sense fosters a sense of collective identity and promote social cohesion and solidarity. They also help in the transmission of knowledge and traditions hence ensuring the preservation of cultural practices and values. This helps to support cultural continuity across generations (Ohaja & Anyim, 2021). The rites of passage serve as a means of cultural transmission, instilling a sense of pride and understanding of one's cultural heritage.

The significance and practice of rites of passage in African societies have evolved and faced various challenges in modern times. According to Ohaja & Anyim (2021), Globalisation, urbanisation and changing societal structures have impacted traditional rituals and leading to either modification or decline of their practice. The influence of the media, consumerism and individualism has also shifted the nature of these rituals from community-oriented ceremonies to individualistic experiences. People are increasingly prioritizing personal achievements such as wealth creation over participating in traditional rites. Nevertheless, there has been contemporary adaptations and initiatives that seeks to address these challenges and preserve the essence of traditional African rites of passage (Golomski, 2012). There are significant efforts to reclaim and reinterpret these rituals in ways that resonate with modern generations. There is also a growing recognition of the need to involve both men and women in traditionally gender segregated ceremonies. This allows for a holistic and balanced approach the understanding of cultural values and promotes social harmony. Collaboration between church leaders, elders, community leaders and youths has also been crucial to the adaption of traditional African rites of passage to contemporary contexts.

## 2.6 Cultural Practices in Meru

The Meru community has a rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions. It has a distinct set of cultural practices that have shaped their identity and social fabric over generations. The Meru culture is intertwined with a wide range of customs and traditions that reflect their values, beliefs and worldview. Cultural practices in the Meru community encompass various aspects of life such as rites of passage, social interactions, and religious observations. These practices hold significant meaning to the members of the community and serve as a means for maintaining

their cultural heritage and passing down the ancestral knowledge from one generation to the next. The cultural practices of the Meru community align with their historical roots and reflects a shared history and collective identity.

Male circumcision, as a rite of passage is one of the most important cultural practices in the traditional African communities. Studies have established that the practice of male circumcision is both an emotive and culturally sensitive practice in many African communities since it is regarded as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood (Mtike, 2009; Mutiria et al., 2019). In the Meru community, a circumcised person is regarded as an adult regardless of their age. This could be problematic if not carefully approached with proper instructions to the initiate following the fact that many young Meru boys are circumcised in their teenage immediately after completing their primary education. According to Mtike (2009), traditional African circumcision is accompanied by teachings and rituals that appear to support sexual promiscuity. This could, in Mtike's thinking, easily erode the moral and spiritual values of the initiate if not well programmed. Despite what they consider to be a harsh and cruel treatment to the initiate, Brown et al., (2019) note that the Meru community appreciates it as an effective training of the young boys to be responsible adults. They further note that there is much stigma associated with medical based circumcision with some reported conflicts between the advocates and initiates of traditional circumcision and the medical circumcision.

Despite the challenges mentioned above, many residents of Meru community still value and highly regard male circumcision as a rite of passage. In the recent past, the church has been highly involved in the circumcision practices in Meru replacing some of the traditional teachings that accompany the rituals with modern and Christian friendly values laced with knowledge-based circumcision programs (Rukunga, 2019). This has led to both praise and condemnation from the proponents and opponents of church-based circumcision programs in the community. Brown et al., (2019), for instance notes that some critics to the church involvement feel that the church is eroding their cultural values as its involvement is leading to the production of soft and weak men following the eradication of some training methods such as beating the initiates to instil in them obedience and responsible manhood.

## 2.7 Circumcision in Meru Community

According to Mutiria et al. (2019), the Meru community highly values circumcision as a rite of passage. The community used to practice both Male and female circumcision to graduate their teens into adulthood, but over the years the Kenyan government, heeding to pressure from human rights activists and the church, outlawed female circumcision. The church and other community organizations introduced an alternative rite of passage for girls commonly referred to as “ntanira na Mugambo” in the kimeru language simply translated as “Circumcising using the word”. Here the teenage girls who would otherwise have been considered by the community as being ripe for circumcision are gathered and taught on responsible social and economic practices that would graduate them as initiates without going through the physical cut (Brown et al., 2001). While there appears to be positive strides in the elimination of female genital mutilation in the Meru community, Peatrik (2020) notes that their male counterparts continue to brave the harsh and cruel treatment that comes with advocates of traditional male circumcision practiced in the area. A study by Wilcken et al., (2010) on the varieties of male circumcision, reveals that male circumcision in the traditional African set up is highly regarded as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Teenage boys are expected to undergo the physical cut at times without anaesthesia as a sign of bravery and an act of becoming a man.

The Meru community practices a variety of male circumcision as a rite of passage. The most prominent ones are the traditional and the medical circumcision (Peatrik, 2020). Under the medical circumcision, one gets anaesthesia to reduce the pain while undergoing the cut. This could be done in a medical facility or administered by a trained professional at home. Nonetheless, in most circumstances even those who undergo the medical circumcision are taken into seclusion where they undergo a variety of teachings on responsible manhood and other social instructions (Peatrik, 2020). The advocate of traditional male circumcision abhors this practice and often ridicule those who have undergone the medical circumcision as “Kiroge” meaning one who has been bewitched or “anesthisised”. (Brown et al., 2019)

*The figure below shows a traditional Meru warrior donned in traditional regalia in a circumcision ceremony.*





**Figure 2. 2 A traditional meru warrior in a circumcision ceremony, (Author, 2022)**

*This Photo is captured and published with the permission from the meru traditional practitioners' elders in this particular event.*

The traditional circumcision is the most revered in Meru community. Under this practice, the foreskin is cut using a knife by a traditional specialist in an open field usually surrounded by a group of other boys awaiting the cut and youthful men chanting traditional circumcision songs. After the cut, the teenage boy is secluded and taught on 'how to become a man' (Peatrik, 2020). Most often, the initiate is thoroughly beaten to harden him for manhood and to develop him into a brave warrior who is ready to defend his community. Those who have undergone traditional circumcision often have much prejudice towards the medically circumcised men.

Cases of confrontation among the two groups have often been reported. In some instances, where the medically circumcised men come close to the traditional circumcision centres, they get beaten and even ‘re-circumcised’ traditionally (Brown et al., 2019).

The figure below depicts a seclusion centre for a circumcised meru teen. The initiate stays in here during the healing process while receiving traditional social teachings from the elders and young circumcised men, (Author, 2022).



**Figure 2. 3 Kiganda/Gicee- A secluded house of a circumcised meru male teen, (Author 2022)**

***Permission was sought from the Meru traditional circumcision proponents in the area to capture and publish this photo.***

## 2.8 Circumcision styles in Meru Community

The Meru community practices different styles of circumcision mostly based on the sub-ethnic region that one comes from. Culture, social status, and religion have been noted as playing a key role in the style of circumcision that families adopt for their adolescent sons (Ifedha, 2017). Three common styles of circumcision have been noted to be prevalent amongst the different

subethnic groups in Meru community (Ifedha, 2017). These three styles are varied in design and shape. They also leave the male genitalia with a varied appearance based on the type adopted. (Brown et.al., 2019). In a study on the various types of circumcision practiced by the Meru community, Brown et.al., (2019) classified these as type A, B and C. These circumcision rituals are not isolated events but are part of a larger cultural context that includes teachings, ceremonies, and gatherings.

The first form of circumcision, known as circumcision without excision, involves the removal of the foreskin without cutting into the inner part. Typically, the procedure is done during adolescence, and it symbolises transition from boyhood to manhood (Brown et.al., 2001). This form of circumcision is celebrated with community wide ceremonies and teachings that highlight the expectations of change of behaviour of the initiates and the duties associated with being a responsible adult (Brown et.al., 2019; Ifedha, 2017). This form of circumcision lays a foundation for the role an individual is expected to play within the community. It also introduces the initiates to the traditions and responsibilities that is expected of them to uphold.

The second type of circumcision is the partial excision. This form of circumcision represents a more advanced stage of the rite of passage and holds a deeper significance with the cultural and social framework of the Meru community. The practice goes beyond the basic removal of the foreskin and involves excising a portion of the inner skin (Brown et.al., 2019; Ifedha, 2017). This form of circumcision marks a significant step in the journey of the young initiates towards adulthood, responsibility and leadership within the community (Ifedha, 2017). Individuals who have undergone this form of circumcision are considered to have acquired a deeper understanding of their cultural heritage and their role in the social structure of the community.

The third form of circumcision is circumcision with complete excision. This form of circumcision involves the removal of the entire foreskin including the outer and inner layers. This form of circumcision is a preserve of individuals who have demonstrated exceptional maturity, leadership qualities and strong commitment to community (Brown et.al., 2019). Individuals who undergo this form of circumcision are considered to be the true role models and leaders within the Meru community (Ifedha, 2017). The practice is associated with a specific set of leadership roles. Individuals who have gone through this form of circumcision

are expected to guide and mentor younger generations in upholding the values and traditions of the community.

## 2.9 Religion and culture of the Meru community

The Ameru people, just like many other African communities, led a religious and spiritual life that was distinct from the modern-day religion practiced in the region that was later introduced by Western missionaries. The African places of worship ranged from the Mountains, Rocks, Rivers to worshipping under some sacred trees. The African worship included the rituals of sacrificing to their gods. The traditional African worship was central to communities' daily lives (Rukunga, 2019). Many aspects of the African communities were guided by their religion and spirituality. They would often sacrifice for rains as most of them relying on rainfed agriculture and rearing of animals for food. The Meru community was well organised with a hierarchical leadership that was charged with the communication and appeasement of their God. To the Ameru people, God was one powerful and supreme being from whom all blessings emanated. Their worship service was dominated with rituals and rites. They practiced communal worship with their worship rituals and rites believed to shape every aspect of the community. The Meru spiritual leaders also doubled as the political leaders who were highly respected and venerated by members of the community (Rukunga, 2019). According to Rukunga (2019), the Ameru had a council of elders known as the Njuri Ncheke who acted as both religious and administrative leaders. Such councils of elders exist among the Meru community to date albeit with limited political and religious influence. Nonetheless, the council remain a respected group tasked with settlement of disputes with the Kenyan government recognising them as alternative dispute resolution channel especially on matters of land and cultural issues amongst the Meru people.

The Meru believed that God worked with special people in the society. To serve as a religious leader in the Meru community, one had to be endowed with special talents and skills. Such skills ranged from social to spiritual. (Rukunga, 2019). According to Fadiman (2013) Koome Njue, the respected Meru leader who directed them in the migration to their present-day land, was both socially and spiritually endowed. It is such spiritual skills that he is believed to have used against the Nguu ntune (The conquering neighbouring community) that oppressed and drove the Meru people from their ancestral land at Mbwa. The religious beliefs of the Meru before the colonial period were based on God (Murungu or Ngai), ancestral spirits (Nkoma),

and a system of supernatural rituals. While belief in God was considered more important, the role of good and bad ancestral spirit was equally important (County Government of Meru, 2023). The practice of religion was guided by various practitioners such as medicine men (Muga), diviners (kiroria) and curse detectors (aringia). While these practitioners were integral to the social culture of the Meru, the Mugwe, the prophet and spiritual tribe of each tribe played the most important religious roles (County Government of Meru, 2023). The role of these practitioners faded during the colonial role and today religious practitioners in the Meru community serve as ministers and preachers in various churches across the country.

## **CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

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### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the theoretical approach adopted in this study. First, the study will account for how culture is understood in this thesis. Thereafter, it will present theories of contextual theology and account for how these will serve as an analytical tool to explore the impact of the engagement of the church in male circumcision in the Meru community.

### **3.2 Culture**

Culture refers to the elements of people that differentiates them from the other human societies in the family of humans. The study of culture in all its vastness belong to the discipline of anthropology (Wu, 2018). Typically, culture entails the totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to a people to the extent that it marks them out from other people or societies. According to Raeff et al. (2020), these distinct traits may include their language, dressing, work, religion among others. It also expands to include the social norms, taboos and values of a community. In this context, values are beliefs that are held about what is what is right and wrong and the important aspect of a person's life.

The world culture was coined by a philosopher known as Edward Taylor. Taylor regarded culture as a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws and customs of a community or any other capabilities and habits that have been acquired by the members of a particular society (Raeff et al., 2020). This definition covers the understanding of culture comprehensively. There are varied definitions of the term culture based on the understanding of the scholars interested in the phenomenon. According to Wu (2018) one of the definitions that attempts to provide a holistic view of culture defines it as the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms, hence distinguishing one group of people from the other.

Culture is passed from one generation to the other through the process of socialisation. According to Wu (2018), children just grow into and within the cultural heritage of their people and imbibes it. As such, in the context of African societies, culture is caught rather than being taught. It is acquired through observing and mimicking the actions of elders and siblings. As

such, any human being who grows up within a society is likely to become infused with the culture of that society during the process of societal interactions. Wu (2018), argues that it is not necessary to have all the definitions of the concept of culture and its defining characteristics to understand its concept and meaning. The underlying characteristics of all definitions of culture is the attempt to capture and portray culture as the entire way of life of a particular group of people. According to Raeff et al. (2020), an entire way of life would embody, in addition to its other elements, how people organise their lives to ensure survival. Essentially, there can never be any culture without a society. Besides, culture is uniquely human and is shared with other members of society.

The concept of culture within the Meru community is intricately intertwined with the practice of male circumcision. Male circumcision holds significant cultural and social importance as a rite of passage. It is embedded in the web of cultural beliefs, traditions and social expectations that define the collective identity of the community. The cultural context of the Meru community provides the foundation for understanding the engagement of the church in male circumcision. The fundamental question that this study seeks to answer is the intersection between cultural traditions and beliefs with religious beliefs and practices. In this context, the concept of culture helps to understand the perceptions, experiences and attitudes of community members and religious leaders towards the involvement of the church in male circumcision. More importantly, culture provides a framework for the analysis of the potential conflicts and challenges that may arise from the intersection of religious beliefs and cultural traditions. It helps to identify the areas of tension and negotiation and the strategies that can be employed by the community to reconcile or adapt cultural practices with religious values.

### 3.3 Contextual Theology

According to Bevans (2002), theology does not exist outside of its context. Bevans argues that ‘doing theology contextually’ helps in the comprehension of the Christian faith in the specific contexts of its application. In making a case for contextual theology, Bevans further teaches that the scriptures were fairly influenced by the human experiences and contexts. Nevertheless, there is need to find the best fit for them in the local contexts for proper interpretations (Bevans, 2002). Bevans hints on the dynamic nature of theology by teaching that the current trends and developments in the society calls for a practice of theology that is sensitive to the location, culture, and the social changes in the said context.

Contextual theology is a dynamic and adaptable approach to understanding and applying religious beliefs and practices within specific cultural, social, and historical contexts. It is done from the perspectives of the marginalised and the oppressed people (Bevans, 2018). There are several approaches to contextual theology, each emphasizing on different aspects of the contextual process. Key among these approaches is the incarnation approach, liberation approach, feminist theology, and black theology (Bevans, 2018). The incarnation theology is the most applicable approach that can be applied in the context of the study of contextual theology in the male circumcision in Meru community.

Incarnation approach to contextual theology emphasizes on the significance of the incarnation of Christ as a model for engaging with specific cultural contexts (Ranto, 2021). It recognises that God's revelation in Christ occurred within a particular historical and cultural setting, and therefore, theology should be rooted in the lived experiences of people in their respective communities (Du Plessis & Nkambule, 2020). Male circumcision holds a lot of cultural and traditional significance in the Meru community (Mugambi, 2013). As such it is a crucial context for contextualising theology. Through the application of the incarnation approach, this study will explore how the church adapt its beliefs to resonate with the cultural expressions, symbols and narratives present during male circumcision ceremonies (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020). The approach provides a better understanding of how theology is integrated into the ceremonies to make Christianity more relevant and meaningful to the community members (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020). It also encourages theologians to interpret Biblical texts in light of the context of the community, and hence create a connection between the Christian beliefs and the traditional cultural practices of male circumcision.

### 3.4 Contextualisation

Although the vocabulary of contextualisation dates back only to as far as the 1970s, concerns over the issues of contextualisation have been a fundamental part of the Christian church since its inception (van den Toren & Hoare, 2015). Contextualisation has been a perennial challenge in the practice of Christianity every time they have to communicate the gospel across language and geographical boundaries. The church has struggled with the problem of theological contextualisation for long and the problem has evolved from one era to the other (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020). Fundamentally, contextualisation is concerned with how the gospel and



culture relate to one another across geographical space and down through time. Theological contextualisation captures in method and in perspective the challenge of relating the gospel to culture (Womack et al., 2020). From this perspective, the concern of contextualisation is ancient dating back to the early church as it struggled to break from the Jewish cultural trappings and enter the Greco Roman world of gentiles. On the other hand, it can be considered to be a relatively new concept since there has been an explosion in the writing, thinking and talking about contextualisation since the emergence of the term in the 1970s.

Contextualisation is a popular theological discussion in missionary circles today. Missionaries always wonder whether the way they learnt to undertake certain Christian rituals is the best way to do them in different cross-cultural contexts (Bevans, 2011). According to Van Eck (2016), all religion is contextual. Bergmann & Vähäkangas (2020), further argues that it is plausible to argue that the concept of theology does not exist since there is only contextual theology. All forms of theology have always been contextual, whether Pauline in the New Testament, or Priestly in the Old Testament (van den Toren & Hoare, 2015). Some of the most famed theologians to address the issue of contextual theology included Augustine who theologizes in the context of controversies that raised questions for Christianity. The context of Aquinas, on the other hand, was the new culture of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Europe and the recent rediscovery of Aristotle.

This consciousness of the contextual nature of theology has not always been the case. According to De Vries (2016), theology in some cases such as in the case of Western European males have claimed universal validity and this claim still persists in some quarters. However, Christianity have recently realised that such claims tend to portray theology as universal rather than produce a theology that transcends history, culture and human circumstances (van den Toren & Hoare, 2015). Doing theology is ultimately the interpretation of experience. This was the primary basis for the establishment of the scriptures. It is also the basis for the formation of the doctrinal traditions and it is how theologians theologize today (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020). Historically, this has been the fundamental basis of theology.

Contextual theology, therefore, proposes the recognition of this aspect of theology in a conscious and deliberate manner. As such, questioning the nature of contextual theology is really to question the nature of theology itself (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020). The practice

of modern contextual theology is therefore the practice of theology in dialogue with two realities. According to van den Toren & Hoare (2015), the realities in this context are the experience of the past recorded in Scripture and the tradition of the church and on the other hand is the experience of the present or the context in which the theologians of the church live. Typically, contexts consist of at least for aspects which include the social location, current human experience, the cultural identity of the individual and the change within a context.

The new consciousness of the nature of theology as applied in this study is as a result of certain external and internal factors. External forces are the changes in the history of the world in the past few decades (Womack et al., 2020). The emergence of the sense of nationalism at the end of the colonial era has resulted in the development of a sense of consciousness of the irrelevance and the oppressive nature of theologies that claim validity. Besides, the concept of nature has evolved over time from the classist notion as described by Bernard Lonergan where culture is conceived as a universal and normative concept to a somewhat empiricist notion where culture is conceived as a set of meanings and values that inform a way of life (Mugambi, 2013). The second understanding holds that all cultures are equal and all cultures are good and holy and they can be a source of theology.

Internal factors, on the other hand are aspects in Christian traditions itself that have been discovered with the recognition of the external cultures. Christianity is a fundamentally incarnational reality which calls for the continued incarnation of God at all times, in all circumstances and in all cultures (Mugambi, 2013; Du Plessis & Nkambule, 2020). It acknowledges the sacramental nature of reality where any person, object or event can mediate God's saving presence. Another important internal factor is a change in the understanding of divine revelation among Christians (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020). As opposed to understanding revelation in conceptual and informational terms, contemporary theology has recognised that it is the offer of God's very self and as such it is a divine presence experienced in the weave of history and in the lives of people (du Plessis, 2020). Another internal factor is the dimension of the church that holds both the universal and local in creative tension. This factor calls for local theologies in dialogue with each other (De Vries, 2016). Finally, the unity and diversity found in God's trinitarian existence points to the possibility and imperative that Christian theology is to be done in dialogue with the particular.

Womack et al. (2020), have provided a detailed explanation of the necessity of integrating African culture expressions and practices with Christian beliefs to create a contextualised faith that resonates with the lived experience of African communities. One of the fundamental arguments presented is that Christianity should not be perceived as a foreign or alien culture imposed on African cultures but rather as a faith that can be embraced and expressed within the African context (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020). The conclusion, therefore, is that it is important to acknowledge and affirm African cultural values, beliefs, and practices as legitimate and valuable expressions of faith. In such cases, contextual theology is considered to involve a dynamic dialogue between the Christian faith and African cultural context and this allows for mutual enrichment and transformation (De Vries, 2016). One of the fundamental approaches to contextual theology in this context is the recognition of the African cultural heritage and its relevance to the Christian faith. Van Eck (2016), have emphasized on the need for African Christians to reclaim and integrate their cultural traditions and practices such as community life, rituals and symbols, within the framework of Christian beliefs. In doing so, they can create a more inclusive and participatory worship experience that resonates with the sensibilities of African communities.

According to Bergmann & Vähäkangas (2020), there is need for contextualisation and renewal of the church through engaging with and responding to specific cultural contexts. This approach to contextual theology emphasizes on the need to bridge cultural gaps and to facilitate dialogue between the church and local communities (Ezigbo, 2021). Besides, the presentation of the gospel should be in a manner that resonates with the cultural, social and historical context of the community in question. This approach to contextual theology recognises the fundamentals of effective communication of the Christian faith as understanding and addressing the unique needs, concerns and aspirations of the local culture (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020). The approach points to the need for mutual transformation and reciprocal learning in the process of contextualisation (De Vries, 2016). The church should approach cultural contexts with humility and openness, recognising that the gospel has the potential to transform both the lives of the individuals and the cultural expressions of a community (Greenman & Green, 2012). As such, it is imperative to adopt an approach that allows for the renewal of both the church and the culture it engages with. At the same time contextual theology should be focused on fostering intercultural and interreligious dialogue (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020). The church should consider itself as a part of the broader cultural and religious landscape and as such engage with

it in a respectful and inclusive manner. The church should listen and learn from other religious traditions and cultural expressions, seek common ground and promote understanding and harmony.

The process of contextualising theology in the context of this study involves a careful and respectful engagement with the community. It requires listening to the voices and perspectives of the community members, and understanding their values, traditions and aspirations (Womack et al., 2020). This process allows religious leaders to identify points of concern connection and find common ground between Christian beliefs and cultural expressions (De Vries, 2016). Notably, contextualisation as applied in this context is not a one size fits all approach but rather a more dynamic and elaborate process that is adapted to the specific context under study. It involves a delicate balance between preserving essential theological truths and embracing cultural expressions that enhance the transformative power of the gospel (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020; Du Plessis & Nkambule, 2020). It encourages creative and innovative approaches to presenting Christian teachings, and ensuring that they speak to the hearts and minds of the community (De Vries, 2016; du Plessis, 2020). Fundamentally, contextual theology seeks to foster a harmonious coexistence between cultural traditions and Christian faith. It does not seek to replace or erase cultural practices but rather to infuse them with Christian values and meanings (du Plessis, 2020). As such, contextual theology emphasizes the universal nature of the gospel while affirming the unique expressions of faith that arise from diverse cultural contexts.

The essence of contextualising theology lies in finding meaningful points of connection between religious messages and the lived realities of the community (Mugambi, 2013). It embraces the cultural narratives, symbols and expressions that resonate with the people and uses them to make Christianity more accessible to these communities (Du Plessis & Nkambule, 2020; (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020). Through theological contextualisation, leaders can address the spiritual needs of the community while honouring and preserving their cultural identity and heritage. The emphasis on theological contextualisation is significant in the context of this study since it acknowledges and addressed the spiritual needs of the Meru community while honouring their cultural heritage, leaders can bridge the gap between traditional practices and religious engagement, especially in the context of male circumcision.

### 3.5 Models of Contextual Theology

There are several models that can be deduced in this study in the attempt to articulate faith in particular contexts depending on the emphasis placed on either or a combination of these four elements. In contemporary theology, there are four main operative models that can be discerned from the interacting with the four elements of contextual theology. These models include the anthropological mode, the praxis model, the synthetic model, and the semiotic model. Typically, models are relatively simple cases that are artificially created, and they help to simplify complex and differentiated realities (Van Den Toren & Hoare, 2015). As such, models are constructions derived from either abstraction from actual concrete positions or theoretical positions that do not have any concrete expression. This means they are to be taken as like symbols, seriously but not literally. According to Matheny (2012), the notion of models can be used in an exclusive sense to highlight theological options. It can also be used in an inclusive sense to capture certain aspects of reality or position (Matheny, 2012). Implicit in this case is the idea there is no single model that can capture all the aspects of contextualisation. Therefore, to offset the shortcomings of individual models, theologians need to employ a combination of irreducibly differentiated models. The study will apply the anthropological, praxis and synthetic models since each of them offers a unique lens through which to understand the relationship between religion and male circumcision in the Meru community.

#### 3.5.1 Anthropological Model

According to Bevens (2002), the anthropological model is ‘the most radical of the six models’ since its main emphasis is on the cultural identity and relevance ‘over scripture or tradition’. Its primary concern is the “establishment or preservation of cultural identity by a person of Christian faith.” (Bevens, 2002, p.54). The focus of this study was the church’s involvement on the Ameru cultural practice of male circumcision hence the need to investigate if this is informed by the need to contextualise theology in a bid to make it more relevant to the local Meru community hence the adoption of a model that capitalizes on cultural identity and relevance. The anthropological model is based on human experiences in culture, social trends, and geographical/historical contexts. It involves finding the presence of God in every culture, social location, and society. According to Bevens, “it is within human culture that we find God’s revelation.” (Bevens, 2002, pg.56). According to Bevan, the anthropological model is premised on the notion that, “it is culture that shapes the way Christianity is articulated.”

There are several notable general features of the anthropological model. Firstly, the model recognises and strongly affirms the basic goodness of human nature and human culture. The model views culture as the place where God's revelation occurs and as such one may find Christ in a culture, rather than bring Christ to the culture. The model views culture and human experience as holy and it provides a material which can be used to express the Christian message and discover the message within, the forms of culture itself. As such, culture is considered an important concept (Jara, 2023). The model does not make reference to the accommodation or adoption of the gospel to culture since the gospel has been a part of culture all along. Further, the model does not focus on the issue of baptising since culture has been baptised all along. In the more radical forms of the anthropological model, each culture is perceived to be unique. The model emphasises on the uniqueness of a cultural group rather than on the similarities between cultures (Havea et al., 2022). As a result, contextual theologians have to protect themselves and their theology against invasion by other cultures.

One of the fundamental tenets of the anthropological model is that the most genuine and normative form of culture emanates from the language, behaviour and experiences of the ordinary members of a society. Through the analysis of the behaviours, language and religious practices of the ordinary people, scholars who apply the anthropological model attempt to thematize aspects of culture and in the process, they relate the way different aspects of culture illumine the Christian message, leading to the emergence of a genuine contextual theology (Havea et al., 2022). Fundamentally, the procedure of the anthropological model is a movement from culture to the expression of faith in terms of culture. This means that culture sets the agenda for theology and not as is normally displayed in the description of the translation model, scripture or tradition.

The anthropological model of undertaking contextual theology is a valid approach. Its perception of culture makes it evident that even the formulations in scripture and in the documents of tradition are coloured by their cultural context and that language and culture create a worldview that is grounded on a neutral content (Havea et al., 2022). The application of the anthropological model further helps to perceive Christianity in the context of their culture and in a new and refreshing perspective. It is an affirmation of the basic goodness of people and their orientation to God and this more Christian than viewing culture either neutral or corrupt.

Nevertheless, the extreme application of the anthropological model can make it a prey to a cultural romanticism which in its extreme form opposes cultural and social change. Jara, (2023), has strongly opposed any kind of liberation theology in any society. The commonly given explanation for this opposition is that these communities are basically happy and do not need to be liberated. Such assertions can only be received with a certain extent of scepticism. This form of radical approach of the anthropological model tends to ignore the power dynamics between religious communities and the wider socio-political context. According to (Matheny, 2012), this limitation can hinder the comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions between culture, religion and power. In such cases, the model misses important aspects of the social and political influences in religious expressions (Jara J, 2023). For instance, it may overlook how power hierarchies within a religious community influence the adoption or rejection of a certain cultural practice or how power imbalances between different religious or cultural groups impact interfaith or intercultural dialogue.

### 3.5.2 Praxis Model

The praxis model is the way of doing theology that is formed by knowledge at the level of reflective action and it has a rough precedence in Christian tradition. Typically, the term praxis is used as a trendy alternative to the words practice or action (Hutchings et al., 2013). The central insight of this model is that theology is done by providing relevant expressions of Christian faith and the commitment to Christian action. The model employs a method which is understood as the unity of knowledge as activity and knowledge as content (Hutchings et al., 2013). It works on the conviction that truth is at the level of history not in the realms of ideas. Its primary presupposition is that the insight that is the highest level of knowing is intelligent and responsible doing (van den Toren & Hoare, 2015). As such, it posits that theology is a process of faith seeking intelligent action. The practitioners of this model believe that one can develop a theology that is truly relevant to particular context by first acting and then reflecting on the action in faith.

In the context of this study, this model bridges the gap between academic theories and the lived realities of the Meru community. It involves a continuous process of reflection, action and analysis that informs the theoretical framework of the study. The model forms a basis for the

critical analysis of the existing theories and scholarly work on cultural practices, rites of passage and the role of the church. The model emphasizes the importance of fieldwork and direct engagement with the target population. This is achieved in the study through the use interviews and observations. The engagement allows for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences, beliefs and cultural practices that relate to the traditional male circumcision in Meru community. The practical experiences acquired in this case helps to refine and expand upon the theoretical framework and provide a more nuanced understanding of the cultural dynamics and complexities surrounding the engagement of the church in male circumcision. It also forms a basis for a reflective approach to data analysis. The research critically examined the collected data and considers how it aligns with or challenges the existing theories and conceptual frameworks. The ongoing reflection helps to refine and develop theoretical perspectives based on the empirical findings.

### 3.5.3 Synthetic Model

The synthetic model attempts to balance the insights of the above models and incorporates the insights of other cultures and way of thinking. It is a bridge model that relies on spiritual justification on the whole process of the formation of the various biblical books (Whyte, 2023). It reaches out to the resources of other cultures and other theological expression for method and content of its own articulation of faith. More importantly, it is synthetic in the Hegelian sense of attempting to combining various concepts and providing a compromise and in developing a creative dialectic that is acceptable to all standpoints (van den Toren & Hoare, 2015). Its fundamental presupposition is the composite nature of human culture or the situation which humans live. A critical aspect of this model is the emphasis on both uniqueness and complementarity since it provides an identity that includes both (van den Toren & Hoare, 2015). The composite nature of culture means that despite the exchange of practices between cultures, each one of the remain unique.

The application of the synthetic model in this study integrates the different theoretical approaches into a comprehensive theoretical framework. It allows for the synthesis of ideas, concepts and findings from different perspectives and enables a deeper analysis of the cultural, social and historical factors that shape the practice of male circumcision and the involvement of the church. The application of the synthetic model in this study helps to examine the intersection of these theories and how they complement each other. It helps to identify common



themes, pattern and connections across theoretical approaches. It also makes it possible to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between cultural practices, religious beliefs, and community dynamics with a focus on understanding the complexities and nuances of the church engagement in male circumcision. It also facilitates an elaborate exploration of the implications and impacts of the church involvement in male circumcision ceremonies. It allows the researcher to consider multiple layers of meaning, power dynamics and cultural negotiations involved. By synthesizing these different perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural and religious implications of church engagement in male circumcision as a rite of passage.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

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### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter accounts for the research process and the methodological choice and challenges applied in this study. It presents the research design, data collection methods and data analysis techniques employed in the study. Further, the chapter details the research methods applied in the study, the rationale behind their selection and the effectiveness of the methods in allowing the researcher to delve into the multifaceted cultural practice. The study employed semi structured in-depth interviews as well as observations to generate data on the intricate relationship between the engagement of the church in male circumcision as a rite of passage within the Meru community.

### 4.2 Access, Sampling and Gaining Trust

Any qualitative research aims at getting as much information as possible on the subject of interest. However, Bryman (2012) teach that this is often impossible due to some constraints that researchers are often faced with. He terms time and resources as one such constraint that the researchers may encounter in their study. Similarly, this study, being a thesis with strict deadlines to be met, is limited on time. It would also be a costly affair to interview the entire population of Meru and hence the choice of a careful selection of the respondents through a sampling criterion. For this reason, the study employed the purposive sampling method in its execution.

Bailey et al. defines purposive sampling as a criterion that, “involves purposefully selecting participants with certain characteristics important to the study.” (Bailey et al., 2020, pg.92). According to Bailey et al. (2020), researchers who adopt purposive sampling target participants who are rich in the information on the subject under study to get a detailed and deep understanding of the issues involved in the research. Purposive sampling best suited this study since it aimed at getting an in-depth understanding of the church’s involvement in the Ameru cultural practice of circumcision from the various individuals who have deep insights on the matter. For this reason, the study sought information from the initiates, the Meru youth and

elders involved in the traditional circumcision, representatives from the church groups participating in the male circumcision and members of the Ameru community not directly involved in the cultural practice. This was specifically broken down into:

- Three elders in the traditional circumcision,
- Three initiates
- Three church representatives who are in direct contact with the circumcision practice, a pastor and two church members of the Ameru community thus making the sample total to nine participants.

This helped in getting a balanced representation of the population under study since Bryman (2012) points towards the need for having a sample that captures diverse characteristics of the population under study.

Nine respondents are a small fraction in comparison to the entire Ameru community population but Bailey et.al. (2020) teach on the need to have small samples stating that they enable the researchers to have an in-depth engagement with the respondents on the subject matter leading to the richness of the information obtained. Such depth and richness of information greatly enabled this study to establish divergent perspectives on the Ameru cultural practice of male circumcision and the implications of the church’s involvement in the exercise.

**Table 4. 1: Participants Description**

| <u>Group</u>            | <u>Age</u> | <u>Gender</u> | <u>Interview duration</u> |
|-------------------------|------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| <u>Initiate</u>         | <u>14</u>  | <u>M</u>      | <u>44 minutes</u>         |
| <u>Initiate</u>         | <u>15</u>  | <u>M</u>      | <u>36 minutes</u>         |
| <u>Youth</u>            | <u>15</u>  | <u>M</u>      | <u>52 minutes</u>         |
| <u>Church Leader</u>    | <u>40</u>  | <u>M</u>      | <u>66 minutes</u>         |
| <u>Church Leader</u>    | <u>55</u>  | <u>F</u>      | <u>53 minutes</u>         |
| <u>Community Member</u> | <u>33</u>  | <u>M</u>      | <u>45 minutes</u>         |
| <u>Community Member</u> | <u>35</u>  | <u>M</u>      | <u>72 minutes</u>         |
| <u>Community Elder</u>  | <u>65</u>  | <u>M</u>      | <u>65 minutes</u>         |
| <u>Community Elder</u>  | <u>58</u>  | <u>M</u>      | <u>53 minutes</u>         |

To ensure that the respondents selected were the most knowledgeable on the subject under study, this study sought the help of gatekeepers. Bailey et al. (2020) encourage the involvement of gatekeepers noting that they have a deep knowledge of the various characteristics of the population under study that could greatly benefit the researcher in getting the right participants who have the right information that could enable them to reach the objectives of the study. Bailey et al. (2020) further teach that gatekeepers could benefit the study by convincing respondents to easily participate in the study. The gatekeepers were mainly identified through my personal contact and relatives living in the areas under study. The study will reflect on the impact of my positionality on the study below. In instances where the researcher did not have relatives or friends, he approached the area local administration who guided me on the right people who in their opinion had the right information that this study sought. This is after explaining the objectives of the study to them.

In conducting this study, community leaders, religious leaders, initiates, and elders were instrumental in building trust and ensuring that the study is conducted in an ethical and culturally sensitive manner. They provided support, guidance, and cooperation throughout the research process. In ensuring an effective collection of data rich in details, the researcher established a rapport with the interviewees before the commencement of the interviews. This was further supported by asking of open questions in an empathetic way and probing the interviewees to tell their stories. This is in line with the teaching of such an approach as an effective way of getting 'in-depth and emic perspectives' on the topic under research (Bailey et al., 2020). The areas of interest in the data collection process included the engagement of the church in the process of circumcision. Key among them is ritual performance and activities such as the role of church leaders, symbolic meanings associated with male circumcision, social interactions between the individuals involved in the circumcision ceremony, narrative and discourses surrounding male circumcision as well as adaptation and changes in the practice of male circumcision over time. By observing these aspects, the researcher can analyse the data and draw connections between the observations and the research question, helping to answer the research question in a comprehensive manner.

One challenge that the researcher encountered in the data collection phase was gaining the trust of the traditional practitioners of male circumcision since this is an area with highly guarded

secrets. However, the researcher's positionality as a member of the community who has undergone the male circumcision as a rite of passage helped to open them up for conversations. However, since the researcher had stayed away from the community for many years since then, he was met with apprehension especially by those who don't know him personally. The researcher overcame this challenge by employing data collection assistants from the area among them being people he had interacted with in the past. The assistants helped in identifying and contacting potential participants. They liaised with gatekeepers and community members to facilitate access and build trust. Besides, since they were more familiar with the local culture, they provided guidance to the researcher, helping navigate sensitive cultural issues and ensure that the research was conducted respectfully. This helped in creating a rapport with the locals who highly guard the secrets of traditional circumcision rites from getting into the hands of the uninitiated members of the community and foreigners.

The support and trust of the local community was further enhanced by the distribution of gifts that are culturally relevant in the area. Again, since the researcher had spent his formative years in the region under study and with the guidance of the gatekeepers, he was able to identify what to include in the gift package for the various groups interviewed. For-instance, for the old men, the researcher bought sniffing tobacco, a kilo of sugar and in some cases a walking stick as a gift pack to be presented before the interview. The researcher was reliably informed by the gatekeepers and from his own experience as a member of the Meru community, that it is considered mean to visit a Meru homestead or even meet guests empty handed.

In some regions of Meru where this study was conducted, the researcher had to buy alcoholic beverages and even Khat for the interviewees as this was considered more appropriate to the cultural settings. This proved to be a challenge as some of the gatekeepers found this as going against their faith as they termed it as a sin for a believer to be associated with alcohol. However, the researcher explained to them that the study had to be objective and getting the information from diverse sources was imperative.

### 4.3 Observations

Observation is an effective technique in helping researchers to have a rich analysis of the social settings. It equips them with tools to observe people's actions, their interactions within the social settings and the way they behave thus making it an important method when observing

and attempting an interpretation of people's cultural behaviour (Bailey et al., 2020). This method best suits the study since it mainly focuses on the church's involvement in the Meru male circumcision which is a cultural practice. Walshe et al. (2011), notes that to ensure reliability and validity of the observations, researchers should adopt a systematic structured approach in conducting observations during data collection. As Weston et al. (2022), suggests the researcher developed a research observation protocol and a checklist to guide the data collection process. The protocol outlined aspects such as the sequence of events, the role of individuals, the use of symbols and rituals as well as social interactions among participants. Observation during the study involved attending various circumcision ceremonies, seeking permission from the members of the community to observe and document the events. To achieve a more balanced data that incorporates the different ethnic groupings within the Meru community, observations were arranged and executed in the Mwimbi, Imenti and Tigania sub-ethnic groups with an observation lasting between one to two hours in each of the regions. The observations involved attending the actual circumcision ceremonies in both the traditional and church-based circumcision events in each of the regions. A key strategy for enhancing reliability of the observations applied in this research was to use triangulation, comparing and cross referencing the observations with other data sources such as existing literatures (Paradis et al., 2016; Fix et al., 2022; Busetto et al., 2020). As a result, the study achieved a more comprehensive understanding of male circumcision among the Meru community and ensured the reliability of the data. Fix et al. (2022), argues the use of reflexive journaling, reflecting on personal experiences, biases and assumptions throughout the observation process. The application of these strategies during the observation process helped the researcher to acknowledge his positionality and potential influence on the observations, hence creating a balanced interpretation of the data.

#### 4.4 Semi-structured interviews

Another Primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. According to Bailey et al. (2020) semi-structured interviews can be described as a 'conversation with a purpose'. This is because the interviewer seeks to get detailed information for his topic of interest through a deep conversation with the interviewee. Hennick, Hutter and Bailey (2020) however caution that this conversation is not a two-way dialogue, but the interviewer should only facilitate the interviewee to give his insights into the topic of interest without much interference. The

interviewer's role thus mainly focuses on stimulating the flow of the conversation freely from the interviewee. Such detailed insights from the interviewees best suit this study as it aims at getting a detailed information on the Ameru cultural practice of male circumcision from divergent angles ranging from the church's involvement, the respondent's opinion on the same and the social trends informing such involvements all of which call for in-depth information to arrive at an informed conclusion.

The interview process followed a meticulous process to ensure that it ensured cultural sensitivity, ethical integrity and productive engagement. The process started with establishing contact with the gatekeepers who granted access and approval for the research. As elaborated above, building rapport and trust was also important during this process. The researcher attended community events and religious services to familiarize themselves with the community members and gain trust. The gatekeepers acted as intermediaries between the researchers and potential interviewees. The researcher conducted in person interviews in locations that were considered to be culturally appropriate such as churches, community centres and private homes. The choice of location was influenced by the preference of the interviewee. This helped to maintain their comfort and encourage their willingness to share their experiences. The interviews were primarily conducted in Kimeru, the native language of the Meru community and the mother tongue of the researcher. This helped to ensure effective communication and to capture the perspectives of the participants accurately. The use of semi structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask open ended questions while maintaining a loose framework to explore specific research topics. The approach encouraged the participants to share their thoughts and experiences in their own words, hence providing rich and detailed insights. The interview periods differed based on the willingness and comfort level of the interviewees. The interviews period ranged from 45 minutes to 1hr 30 minutes on average. The flexibility in the duration helped to allow the interviewees to share their stories at their own pace.

Before the commencement of the interview sections, the researcher sought the permission of the respondents to audio record the interviews using a mobile phone device. This was to ensure accurate representation of the data during the analysis phase. To ensure security of the data, these audio recordings were password protected.

## 4.5 Data analysis

Hennick, Hutter and Bailey (2020) define data analysis as the process of, “immersion in data, through which you can identify and interpret the experiences of your study participants.” They further note that, “It is through immersion in your data that you are able to identify the unique perspectives of your study participants, understand social or cultural meanings attached to behaviour and begin to explain people’s beliefs or behaviours”.

For the purposes of data analysis, the audio recordings were played several times and transcribed. These transcripts together with the field notes collected formed the basis for the data analysis. It was further corroborated to the observations made by the researcher during the observation sessions to draw meaningful conclusions.

According to Hennick et.al., (2020), the data preparation process involves analysis and interpretation aimed at ensuring the data captures the respondents’ own experiences and that it is evidence based. In line with this teaching, the researcher coded the data collected and analysed it to see any recurring motifs in the data. Such recurring motifs were classified into themes. The data collected was coded where segments were systematically labelled with descriptive tags, which allowed for easier categorisation and organisation of the data. The data was further analysed to categorise it under the different themes obtained from the recurring motifs identified. This analysis involved sorting, grouping, and synthesizing the coded segments to highlight common threads. The themes were then analysed, compared, and contextualised within the broader cultural, social, and religious frameworks of the Meru community. Finally, the interpretations were synthesized into a coherent narrative that provides meaningful conclusions and implications within the context of the objectives the study.

Since Bailey et al. (2020) allude to an evidence-based analysis of the data, the researcher liaised with literature in the related fields of study to provide evidence of the collected data and give the conclusions reached therein some external validity.

**Table 4. 2: A summary of the major themes of the study**

| <b>Theme</b>                 | <b>Sub Theme</b>        | <b>Description</b>                                       |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| <b>Cultural Significance</b> | Historical significance | Male circumcision is deeply rooted in the Meru community |



|   |                             |  |
|---|-----------------------------|--|
|   | Evolution over time         | The practice has evolved over time but have retained its primary role within the community.  |
| <b>The Involvement of the Church</b>    | Roles and activities        | The church actively organises and oversees traditional male circumcision in the Meru community.  |
|   | Impact on Practices         | The involvement of the church in this practice has led to some changes in the way the ritual is practiced.   |
| <b>Community Perceptions</b>            | Positive Perceptions        | There is a positive community perception based on the view that it is a harmonious blending of faith and tradition.  |
|   | Concerns and criticism      | There are concerns and criticisms voiced by community members who express reservations about the impact on traditional practices.                                      |
| <b>The experiences of the initiates</b> | Spiritual Journey           | Highlights the spiritual journey of the initiates as they engage with the fusion of traditional practices and Christian elements, exploring how it shapes their faith. |
|   | Identity and formation      | Explores the experience of initiates and how they contribute to the formation and reformation of their personal and cultural identities.                               |
| <b>Community Dynamics</b>               | Interpersonal Relationships | Analyses the impact of the involvement of the church on interpersonal relationships within the community, including family dynamics and social interactions.           |
|   | Community Values            | Explores the influence of the integration of Christian elements on community values,   |

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
|  |  | discussion the evolution on shared values within the community. |
|--|--|---|

#### 4.6 Research Validity

The validity of this research is anchored on the multifaced approach to ensure the credibility of its results. Firstly, the research design and methodology were aligned with the research objectives. The use of semi structured observations and observations allowed for in-depth exploration of the experiences of the interviewees, contributing to the internal validity of the findings. The researcher collected qualitative data through in-depth interviews. This approach was ideal for the exploration of the richness and depth of the experiences, perceptions and cultural practices of the participants. The use of quantitative methods in the collection of quantitative data such as demographic information and other numerical related data helped to provide statistical information and patterns. The systematic implementation of the research methods in the study allowed the researcher to maintain consistency in the data collection process across all participants and observations.

The triangulation of data sources such as through the interviewing different stakeholders enhanced the external validity of the study. It reduced the risk of bias by ensuring that every point of view was considered during the study. The reflexivity of the researcher and acknowledgement of their positionality as a member of the Meru community was also critical in addressing potential bias. The transparency on the background and biases of the researcher as well as their engagement with the gatekeepers contributed to the validity of the study.

#### 4.7 Positionality

The concept of positionality plays a critical role in this study since the researcher is a Christian and a member of the Meru community. Positionality is the recognition and acknowledgement of the researcher's own social, cultural, and personal perspectives and how they influence the research process. Fundamentally, it acknowledges that the researcher is not neutral and detached but rather an active participant who bring their biases, assumptions, and experiences

to their studies (Reyes, 2018). The positionality of the researcher also affects their interactions with the participants and the power dynamics that unfold during the research process.

It has become increasingly common for researchers to be part of social groups they wish to study. The researcher in such cases is considered a native or insider before the study begins. Being an insider of the group under study presents some benefits to the researcher. Key among them is understanding the culture under study which means that the researcher does not alter the flow of social interaction naturally (Bourke, 2014). The existing relationship between the researcher and the participants promotes the telling and judging of the truth. It also allows the process of practice to be explored. The benefits of this form of positionality contributes to the body of theological study knowledge as opposed to the benefiting the bases of other disciplines. It also helps to reduce the challenges associated with researching in the real world.

My positionality as a member of the Meru community further benefited the study as the researcher was privy to some secret hand gestures and coded language used by circumcised men in the community to pass a message. Brown et al., (2019) established that knowledge of the coded messages and secret hand gestures helps in convincing the circumcised Meru men that one had undergone the rite and therefore opening them up to share even some information considered as secret on the subject matter.

The identity of the researcher provides certain benefits and challenges to the study. On the one hand, my familiarity with the cultural norms, traditions and language of the Meru community provides me with insider knowledge and deeper understanding with the context of his study. As such, it made it easier to create a rapport with the participants of the study and enhanced my ability to access and interpret cultural nuances and symbolic meanings associated with male circumcision (Secules et al., 2021). The researcher's shared cultural identity with the participants helped to foster trust and open communication, allowing for more candid response during the interviews.

On the other hand, the positionality of the researcher as a member of the Meru community also introduced certain levels of limitations and potential biases that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, is the risk of confirmation bias where the researcher might have been tempted to consciously seek the evidence that aligned with his preexisting beliefs or cultural norms. As a

member of the Meru community, the researcher has personal experiences and emotional connections to the topic of the involvement of the church in male circumcision. This may have influenced his interpretation of the data and may have made him to potentially overlook alternative perspectives. Besides, his close ties with the Meru community and the practice of male circumcision presented some challenges in obtaining objectivity. The researcher's familiarity with the context of the church taking part in male circumcision ceremonies created expectations and assumptions that may have inadvertently shaped the research process and the findings of the study. In some cases, the researcher was inclined to prioritize certain voices and perspectives which unintentionally sidelined and downplayed conflicting viewpoints.

One of the strategies the researcher applied to mitigate these biases and promote balanced objective research was reflexivity. This involved a critical self-reflection and examination of my own biases, assumptions and preconceptions. The researcher actively acknowledged my personal beliefs and experiences that may influence the research and as such the researcher-maintained objectivity throughout the research process. The researcher kept a reflexive journal to assist in documenting and reflecting upon my positionality throughout the study. The use of triangulation in data collection also played a critical role in mitigating the biases associated with positionality. The use of interviews and observations as the primary data collection methods, helped to enhance the validity and reliability of the research findings. The triangulation of data from different sources helped to corroborate and validate the results, reducing the impact of personal biases on the interpretation of the data.

#### 4.8 Ethical issues

According to Berg (2007), social science researchers have an obligation to maintain high ethical standards when involving themselves in research since their work may entail invasion of people's social lives. Berg further teaches on the need for the researchers to ensure privacy, rights and welfare of the people involved in the study. In this study, ethical considerations involved both following Norwegian and "international" ethics standards as well as following local ethics protocol as accounted for in the section on access, sampling and gaining trust.

Ethical consideration in collecting personal information is paramount in safeguarding the rights, privacy and well-being of the participants (Wexler & Largent, 2023). The study collected

personal information such as age of the respondents, education background and religion. This facilitated in getting prior consent and arranging for the interviews, getting the opinions and feedback of the respondents after the interview before publishing the processed information and aiding in categorising the information gotten abased on the age parameters. To get permission to process this personal data, the researcher sought approvals from the relevant authorities both in Norway and Kenya before commencement of the data collection exercise. In Norway, the researcher sought approval from the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) prior to the commencement of the research project. In Kenya, the researcher sought the approval from the Kenyan National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), which is the institution responsible for granting research permits and ensuring that research is conducted within the legal and ethical provisions of the law.

Before collecting any personal information, researchers must clearly and transparently explain the purpose of the study, the nature of the information to be collected, and how it will be used (Song et al., 2016). Ethical consideration during this study included the application of informed consent. In every stage of the study, the participants willingly agreed to participate without any form of coercion or pressure. They were allowed to ask questions and seek clarifications regarding any aspect of the study. According to Wexler & Largent (2023), this form of open dialogue ensures that the participants had a clear understanding of the extent of their involvement in the study. The researcher formalised informed consent through the use of informed consent forms. The participants and their legal guardians in the case of the minors, were asked to read and sign the consent forms as an indication of their voluntary agreement to participate in the study. The researcher applied the use of ongoing consent and informed consent was reaffirmed and reiterated throughout the research process.

The need to uphold respect for cultural sensitiveness was also a major ethical consideration during the research (Wexler & Largent, 2023). The involvement of local gatekeepers was the hallmark of the recognition of local culture during the study. The researcher engaged with local gatekeepers and community leaders. They were consulted to seek guidance and approval for the research. The consultation process played a critical role in ensuring cultural appropriateness and observance of local protocols. Besides, as a member of the Meru community, the researcher understood the sanctity of the circumcision ceremony. As such, the researcher demonstrated sensitivity to the ceremony by seeking permission to observe these ceremonies and by following the guidelines provided by community leaders. The researcher also approached discussions with

community members and initiates with high cultural respect. Wexler & Largent (2023), argues that questions should be phrased in a manner that acknowledged the cultural importance of the practice and participants allowed to share their experiences and perspectives extensively and without limitations on their viewpoints. These actions ensure that cultural sensitives were recognised and integrated into the research process.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

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### 5.1 Introduction

This section presents the results of the findings emanating from the interview questions posed to the respondents as well as from the observations. This study set out to explore the following research questions:

1. How has the Church engaged with the cultural practice of male circumcision?
2. How do community members perceive and value the involvement of the Church in male circumcision ceremonies?
3. What controversies and challenges arise from the intersection of religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and the involvement of the Church in male circumcision?

Three classes of respondents, and a total of nine people were interviewed representing the church, the traditional practitioners of male circumcision and community leaders. In order to structure the chapter, the chapter's main headings are organised relating to the research questions, while the subheadings name the themes that were generated through thematic analysis.

### 5.2 Significance of male circumcision in the Meru community

This subsection presents findings relating to research question number 2. The traditional male circumcision practitioners in all the three subethnic groups in Meru sampled for this study seemed to agree that male circumcision was an important and extremely valued event in the life of an initiate. It served as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, signified a change of social status, gave the initiate a sense of identity and provided for special teachings that guided the morality and ethics of the initiate. The church representatives interviewed in the region appears to agree to this conclusion but differs on the execution of the transitional practices involved as discussed in detail below.

#### 5.2.1 A Rite of Passage

All the respondents agree that circumcision serves as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. According to the first respondent in the traditional practitioners in Imenti region, a young man got the right to marry and bear children only after circumcision as he was now considered an adult. While nodding to this narrative, the third respondent in Tigania region

emphasized that it was considered an abomination for an uncircumcised man to get a woman pregnant. A cleansing ceremony would be held to rid the community of any spell in case such an occurrence happened. The first respondent in imenti region gave a nod to this narrative by expounding in the imenti dialect that:

*Rutano niru rwonanagia muntu akugimara. Iru rwa ejaga nthaka ruutha rwa kugurana na kwona twaana. Mwiji ona agakura atia atetikiritue kugurana kana guciarithia mwari. Untu ta buu buringionekana gwacuagwa muga akeeja kuringa mbugu na kutheria mugongo jutikagwatwe ni kirumi na mwiji tou atanagwa au au.*

*Circumcision signified adulthood. It gave one the right to marry and bear children. No matter how old a uncircumcised man got, he was never allowed to marry or to get any lady pregnant. In case of such an occurrence, a medicine man would be sought to cleanse the community from curses and such a boy would be circumcised immediately.*

### 5.2.2 A sense of Identity

Both the traditional practitioners and the church agree that Circumcision is a rite of passage into another age group, which gives identity and sense of belonging. The second respondent in the traditional practitioners in imenti enlightens that the Meru community is comprised of age sets and age groups in their social strata. The age groups are determined according to the period in which one was circumcised. He further notes that the most common age-groups in the area are Kibabu, Kiruja, and Mung'atia.

According to the interviews, it was clear that these age group names varied in the different meru sub ethnic groups. In Tigania and Igembe regions, Kilamunya, Lubetaa and Michubu were the predominant age group names. The respondents observed during the interviews that it was a common practice for men to name their sons after the name of the age groups they admired or even the age group of the person the son is born after; *ritawe* (Meaning one's namesake). On the importance of age groups among the Ameru community, the second respondent from the traditional practitioners in Imenti quipped in the Imenti dialect that;

*Nthuki ciaei gitio mono. Kagita gwa kagita, nthuki iria nkuru niyo yaejanaga atongerira ba mugongo jwa amiru. Nkuruki ya buu ni ati nthuki yaejanagwa kuringana na mwaka juria muntu anywire rwenji. Guti mwiji waejagwa nthuki. Nthuki yagitagwa nyuma ya miaka ikumi. Mumiru amenyekaga na gutiwa kuringana na nthuki yawe. Nthuki cionthe iria nini niciaete gitio mono na kuomba kirira kuuma kiri nthuki iria nkuru. Muntu wa*



*nthuki ya ithe wa muntu ari ithe kiri aana ba antu bonthe ba nthuki yawe na aana baa bamuejaga gitio na kumumenyera o ta uria bamenyagira na gutia ba ithe bao bongwa. “Age groups were highly respected. Most often, it is the older age group that produced the Meru community leaders. One joined the age group that existed in the year he was circumcised. Uncircumcised boys were never given an age group. An age group normally lasted a decade before naming a new one. A merian got his identity and by extension respect according to his age group. All younger age groups respected and sought for wisdom from their predecessors. A person in one’s father age group was considered as father to any child of his peers and such children respected and treated him the same way they would treat their own fathers”.*

### 5.2.3 Change of Social status

From the interviews, it was apparent that circumcision gave one a new social status in the Meru community. The first respondent in the traditional practitioners in Tigania expounded that once circumcised, a young man automatically assumed the role of a warrior. These warriors did not only protect the society from external aggression but also were tasked with guarding the moral fabric of the society.

All the respondents agreed that anyone who deviated from the set moral standards, his whole age set was considered responsible and were prone to a severe corporal punishment otherwise known as *kianga or giatu* in the local dialect depending on the subethnic group.

Upon circumcision, one was secluded in a private area for a period of not less than one month where serious teachings on the community morals, warrior training and ethical standards were conducted as noted by the third respondent who quipped in the Tigania dialect that;

*Muntu atanwa aejaga laing’o e kugitira mugongo. Ariaga Kigandene kagita ka mweri yumwe aria ataragwa na kuritanwa mikarire na nthoni cia kimiru. Ntane yatura yerigagirwa kuthiatira moritano yaria ya borithi na sheria. Aba murata oku ongiaterire kana kuregana na watho bwa nthaka! Nthuki yenu yonthe yaringagwa kianga ja ikanukia. Kwou nthuki niyo yerigiri gukarania yo yongwa ni kenda wagi nthoni botikonekane ndene ya mugongo.*

*Upon circumcision, one automatically became a warrior to protect the community. The initiate was required to be secluded for a period of not less than a month where he was taught on the cultural values and ethics of the community. Woe onto you if you deviated*

*from the teachings! This had serious consequences which at times called for a corporal punishment on both the errant and his entire age set. This was meant to be a self-regulating mechanism where the age set members were tasked with reminding each other of the community ethics to ensure discipline and good behaviour prevailed.*

### 5.3 The Church involvement

This subsection will outline findings related to research question 3. The observations depicted a scenario where the church is extensively involved in male circumcision. The ceremony commenced with a word of prayer led by a church elder. This was an indication of the spiritual significance attributed to the ceremony. As the ceremony unfolded, a procession took shape, marked by the rhythmic flow of traditional dance and song. This integration of cultural expressions and religious ritual was a hallmark of the involvement of the church in the male circumcision ceremony.

The interviews made it clear that the church is increasingly assuming an active role in the male circumcision in Meru. According to the first respondent in the church group in Imenti region, the church has organized centres where young boys who are ripe for circumcision in the community are gathered, circumcised, and secluded for the religious and social teachings. This study sought to investigate how and why the church in Meru is getting itself involved in a practice widely seen by many in the area as a cultural activity and a preserve for the traditional Meru elders and young men.

According to respondent two in the community representative group, the three areas covered had different denominations which predominated them. In Mwimbi the Pentecostal church of east Africa was the majority group while in Imenti and Tigania the Methodist church of Kenya and the Roman Catholic church were the majority. All these denominations had their own arrangements of male circumcision but all of them had established centres mostly in schools and other church institutions that were set aside during the school holidays for the circumcision rites. Some of the respondents reported that a number of middle-class families in the area book private homes and rental rooms for the circumcision, seclusion, and teachings.

From the interviews, it was established that several reasons informed the church's involvement in the cultural rite of circumcision. Key among them was the need to transform the culture into Christian friendly practices, health concerns and using it as an evangelism/mission opportunity.

### 5.3.2 Cultural transformation

According to some of the respondents who represented the church, the events surrounding the Meru male circumcision ceremony and some the cultural teachings that accompanied it were vulgar, derogatory, and even bordered on contradicting the Christian teachings. The respondents specifically singled out the communal beating for errant members as retrogressive and one that defied the rule of law.

Two of the church elders opined that these among other elements of the Meru culture on circumcision and the rites of passage ought to be transformed to align with the modern-day Christian teachings. It was noted that there are some elements in the culture that could be easily blended in with the contemporary society, but others needed to be refined to respond to the modern-day society needs. One group of the interviewees noted that the need to train warriors to safeguard the society had been surpassed by time as the governance structures provide for a more viable alternative.

One however noted that this concept could be borrowed to train modern day warriors of morality and Christian faith. The respondents observed that the church's decision to continue with the initiates seclusion period following circumcision was a good move as it provided for an ample time to train the initiate on new and emergent social challenges such as the HIV and Aids pandemic and how to deal with it. It also provides for an opportunity to train the initiate on financial discipline and the emerging social and entrepreneurial opportunities as stated by one respondent:

*Unfortunately, not everyone has the opportunity to continue with higher education after circumcision. The seclusion period offers a perfect opportunity to train the initiate on the various entrepreneurial opportunities out there that can make them self-reliant members of the society. The new social challenges such as drug and alcohol abuse continue to ravage our youth destroying their future.*

*The traditional rites of passage don't have a solution for the emergent social issues. In any case they encouraged alcohol abuse as it was part of the celebrations that*

*accompanied the ceremonies. The church seeks to provide an alternative by training the youths on responsible behaviour that promotes morality to safeguard them from both the traditional and emerging social challenges.*

### 5.3.3 Health Concerns

Most of the respondents pointed out that the Meru male circumcision was often carried out as a communal exercise. Circumcision ceremonies were normally held during the harvesting period as this ensured enough food supplies for the initiate during the seclusion period. The third respondent in the community representative group in Tigania expounds that all the boys ready for circumcision could be gathered for an overnight ceremony before facing the knife early the following morning in a communal ground surrounded by dancing and armed warriors.

The second respondent in the traditional practitioners' group in Mwimbi notes that there are very few traditional circumcisers among the Meru community as this was a highly respected and thoroughly vetted office. With the many circumcision events having to take place all at the same time and at specific times, getting the circumciser for specific groups was a tough battle between the warriors. They would most often face each other aggressively and the winning team could slip away with the traditional circumciser as taught by the third respondent in the traditional practitioners in Imenti who stated that:

*Overnight vigils were conducted at the initiates homes where young warriors and elders wine, dined, and sang traditional circumcision songs. The initiates spent the night with them undergoing a series of last-minute instructions on the new role and status he was about to assume in the society. In the morning, select warriors armed with traditional regalia, spears and knives would go to bring the traditional circumciser. To get the circumciser was usually a fierce contest amongst the different warrior groups seeking for his services.*

Based on the observations, the circumciser came with his tools of trade. He could use the same knife on all the initiates without having to sterilize. This raised the concerns of the church. The church leadership saw this as a possible brooding ground for HIV and AIDS transmission and yet the need to intervene with a new and modern ways of conducting the rite of circumcision. On touching on this, one of the community elders alluded that:

*HIV and Aids pose a serious threat to our youth in Meru. Before the church's intervention, the community had continued to record a sustained increase in the infection among the young adults. Most of these infections could possibly have been caused by the unhygienic practices during the traditional circumcision ceremonies.*

The need to provide the initiate with secure and hygienic food and drinks during the seclusion period also dominated the response from the interviewees as informing the church involvement noting that;

*“In the traditional set up, we lost many young men to poisoning. This is because in seclusion, any member of the community could prepare food at his place of choice and bring the same to the initiate. Criminals occasionally took advantage of the same to poison children of their perceived enemies. This is impossible in the current setup where both hygiene and food security are guaranteed since it is prepared centrally.”*

#### 5.3.4 Evangelism/Mission opportunity

There appears to be a consensus among most of the respondents that church in Meru has for a long period condemned and dismissed most of the cultural activities as ungodly and teaching against the Christian doctrines. However, church elders, noted that the gospel “needs to be preached even to the lost and those considered as outcasts in the society”. He cited several instances where Jesus interacted and fellowshiped with those considered as social deviants in the society.

The respondent noted that engaging in cultural activities such as circumcision provided the church with a perfect opportunity to reach and “evangelize those lost in the tradition”. He noted that this also help in redeeming the Christian faithful who also torn in between embracing the Christian teachings or going for their cultural roots as some of the members would be actively involved in church activities but secretly practice the traditional rites. On this he noted that;

*Our members who secretly practice traditional rites of passage such as the circumcision are termed as hypocrites by their peers. By finding a rite of passage that accommodates the Christian faith while borrowing from the tradition, the church succeeds in serving their members and reaching to the outsiders in a way that appeals to them thus providing an excellent opportunity of preaching to them.*

The researcher observed that the circumcision ceremony presented an opportunity for mission and evangelism. The setting of the ceremony comprised of a blend of traditional symbols and religious elements. Through a seamless integration into this cultural event, the church could honour the traditions of the community and weave a narrative of faith that resonates with the cultural fabric. The rituals, symbolic elements and communal interactions are potential avenues for fostering dialogue about Christian beliefs and values. This missional opportunity highlighted the potential for the church to bridge the gap between cultural heritage and Christian faith, using the male circumcision ceremony as a context for meaningful engagement and shared spiritual exploration.

#### 5.4 Community perception on the church involvement in male circumcision

In this section, the study presents the views of the opinion leaders in the society identified from the various leadership roles entrusted to them in the society. This relates to research question number 2.

From the interviews, one can safely conclude that there is a varied and at times near contradicting perception on the church involvement in male circumcision as a rite of passage in Meru. While some members of the community embraced it terming it as modern and transformative, others dismissed it as an “act of brainwash and indoctrination from the western missionaries to abandon the cultural values handed down to the community by the forefathers” as noted by the first respondent from the community representatives from Mwimbi region.

The interviews established that the community feels that the church involvement in the male circumcision in Meru is an act of invasion into their cultural space which is unjustified. On this, the third respondent from the community representative from Tigania region hinted that,

*“There is nothing wrong with the traditional male circumcision as a rite of passage. The church ought to stick to the spiritual matters and restrain from invading the local spaces that have functioned seamlessly over the centuries. There need to be a clear boundary between the church and culture and the two shouldn’t contradict each other for they serve the same people.”*

The respondents perceived, greed, cowardice, inaction from the community elders and moral decadence as key issues surrounding the church involvement. They felt that the church didn’t

have a proper motive in getting involved in the cultural activities. According to them, the church's involvement has led to the erosion of their cultural heritage and a general moral decadence in the society. Similar sentiments were echoed by the second respondent from the community representatives in Tigania. He further quipped that;

*“These present here (referring to the young men who had undergone the traditional rite of circumcision who had accompanied him to the interview) are some of the few remaining heroes of our traditional male circumcision, which is a rite of passage and the only true one as passed over from our forefathers.”* They all nodded in agreement. He paused for a while and continued, *“today, the greed for money by our churches (in reference to the circumcision fees charged by church-based programs), cowardice from our young boys to face the real knife, and the inaction of our elders has eroded the important cultural values and practice that accompany the transition from childhood to adulthood through circumcision.”* The rest of the group clicked in unison to register their disgust towards the alleged cultural erosion. *“Today our young men have been reduced into cowards who have to be anesthetized instead of enduring the traditional pain that defines a real Meru man.”* (The group appeared to spit in unison and roared “Iroge!” loosely translating to “the bewitched ones” in reference to the anaesthesia that accompanies medical circumcision procedure adopted by the church-based circumcision programs.)

On the one hand, some of the respondents feel that the community elders have either abandoned their roles or have been compromised by the church leaders for their inaction towards the church involvement. They felt the need for the elders to rise to the occasion and issue a proper guideline to the church on the boundaries that ought to be respected when it comes to cultural issues. On the other hand, those in support felt that the world is moving towards modernization and hence the need to embrace the new reality and abandon retrogressive cultural practices that doesn't align the community to the new and emerging social economic developments. The third representative from the community representative in Imenti applauded the church's involvement noting that it had brought sanity to an otherwise vulgar and derogatory cultural practice that bordered on both mental and physical cruelty to the initiates.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSIONS ON THE FINDINGS

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### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive discussion of the findings derived from the study on church engagement in male circumcision as a rite of passage in the Meru community. Through a thorough examination of the findings, this chapter provides an understanding of the cultural anthropology and religious dimensions of male circumcision within the Meru community. It highlights the interplay between cultural practices, religious beliefs, and social dynamics, contributing to the existing knowledge in the field. The discussion attempts to offer insights into the implications of church engagement in male circumcision and sets the stage for further analysis of the impacts, controversies, and future trajectories of the practice in the Meru community.

### 6.2 How has the Church engaged with the cultural practice of male circumcision?

This section focuses on the theoretical interpretation of the answers to the sub questions related to the way the church is engaged in male circumcision in Meru. The interview with Mr. Alfred Kimathi, one of the respondents in this study and a church leader, illustrated the evolution of the perception of the church towards traditional African traditions. As pointed out in the findings section, Mr Kimathi pointed to the interplay between the church and African traditional culture. Notably, the encounters between early Christian missionaries and the Meru community were denoted by cultural clashes and tensions. Initially, the church viewed traditional practices such as male circumcision as pagan rituals that needed to be eliminated (Ifedha, 2017). However, as more elaborate approaches emerged over time, the church began to understand the significance of these cultural practices to local communities. Rev Kimathi underscored the fact that the engagement of the church with traditional African culture has been a process of integration and adaptation rather than eradication. Gradually, the church established ways through which it incorporated cultural practices into Christian teaching and values, hence creating a symbiotic relationship. Rev Kimathi described how many religious leaders have participate in circumcision ceremonies, providing religious guidance and offering blessings and prayers. According to Peatrik (2020), this active participation of religious leaders in traditional cultural practices is demonstration of the recognition of the church of significance of these practices and its commitment to supporting initiates and their families.



The conflict between missionaries and male circumcision among the Meru community is rooted in the clash of religious beliefs and cultural practices during the early stages of the interaction between the two. The arrival of missionaries introduced a new religious framework that challenged the traditional beliefs and practices (Peatrik, 2020). Missionaries viewed traditional cultural practices such as male circumcision as a barrier to acceptance of Christian teachings and sought to promote the Christian concept of baptism as a replacement for circumcision. However, the Meru community revisited the attempts to eliminate male circumcision since they were deeply rooted in their cultural traditions. Male circumcision holds significant cultural meaning as a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood in majority of communities in Africa (Tusa et al., 2021). It symbolises maturity, initiation to adulthood and social acceptance. It was also used as a means to preserve and transmit cultural values, norms and communal identity.

The understanding of the conflict between Meru cultural practice and Christian teachings has significant implications within the field of cultural anthropology. Anthropologists would be interested in exploring the cultural significance of male circumcision as a rite of passage and its role in shaping Meru social identity (Hutchings et al., 2013). The resistance from the Meru community to abandon the practice highlights the importance of cultural continuity and the need for anthropologists to understand the underlying motivations and meanings attributed to cultural practices. The conflict also raises questions about the dynamics of power and agency. Cultural anthropologists would analyse how the introduction of Christianity and the influence of missionaries impacted the power dynamics within the Meru community. The resistance to abandoning male circumcision suggests that the Meru community actively negotiated their cultural practices and asserted agency in the face of external pressure. Understanding the power dynamics involved in the clash between the Church and the Meru community is crucial for comprehending the broader socio-cultural context in which the conflict occurred.

The results obtained from observation provided important insights of the perception of the community on the involvement of the church in male circumcision. One of the dominating views is the acceptance and integration of the participation of the church. The incorporation of the of Christian ritual during circumcision among the Meru community is an example of the observations that the researcher made that point to the acceptance of the involvement church in the traditional male circumcision. Typically, churches and other religious organisations exert formative influence on the beliefs and behaviours of many communities in the sub-Saharan

Africa (Dan Stockman & Saszko, 2021). Religious leaders are highly respected authorities in the community. As such, their involvement in traditional male circumcision in Meru have led to the incorporation of Christian activities during the ceremonies. Key among the Christian activities observed during these ceremonies included singing of Christian hymns, recitation of bible verses, and the delivery of Christian messages and leading in prayers by Christian religious leaders. These rituals reflect the blending of Christian elements with traditional practices and highlights the willingness of the community to incorporate Christian beliefs and values in the cultural values of the Meru community. It therefore, recognises the compatibility and relevance of both religious traditions.

The acceptance of the involvement of the church in traditional male circumcision among the Meru community aligns with the fundamentals of the praxis model which was elaborated in the theoretical framework. This model emphasises on the transformative nature of rituals and their role in shaping social dynamics (Steyn & Masango, 2011). The model holds that rituals are symbolic processes that bring about profound changes in individuals and communities. According to Steyn & Masango (2011), the integration of the church in the traditional male circumcision ceremony represents a significant transformative process. It involves the practical engagement of individuals and communities in rituals that are rites of passage from one social status to another. The incorporation of Christian symbols and rituals provides the initiates and the community as a whole with a profound transformation symbolically and experientially. Further the incorporation of Christian symbols and rituals in traditional male circumcision signifies the departure from ordinary social roles and transition into a sacred place where participants undergo a rite of passage. The primary indicators of these changes are a change in social status, as boys are recognised as adult members of the community. In this context, the praxis model helps us to understand the practical implication of involvement of the church in traditional male circumcision among the Meru community (Wogu, 2018). It highlights the transformative nature of rituals and their capacity to shape the experiences of the initiates and social dynamics. It therefore serves as a platform for negotiation of religious and cultural identities within the Meru community. More importantly, the model emphasizes the importance of practical engagement and active participation in rituals. It underscores that rituals are not just passive events but rather interactive processes that shape cultural and social realities. As such, the involvement of the church in these rituals represent a practical engagement of individuals and communities in a transformative ritual experience.

The respondents in the interviews highlighted several challenges and controversies that revolve around the involvement of the church in traditional male circumcision. The controversies associated with the involvement of the church in traditional male circumcision come out to play during the interviews with community elders. One of the main areas of conflict that was highlighted during the interview was clash of beliefs. According to Onuzulike (2008), African traditional beliefs systems are very pragmatic and realistic (Adamo, 2011). These traditions are applied to a situation when need arises. Onuzulike (2008) further notes that these beliefs are embedded in local language such that, to understand these rituals properly, one need to know their language. Since African culture is intertwined with traditional religion, it is difficult for Christians to maintain some traditional cultures and rituals since Christianity contradicts traditional African beliefs in some cases (Nmah, 2017; Suwarno, 2005). One of the specific cases that came out during the interviews with community elders and that was presented in the findings chapter was this inherent clash between the two religious' beliefs. According to the elder, the clash stems from the inherent differences between the two beliefs. While some community members seem to embrace the integration of the church, others express concerns and resistance fuelled by these differences. On the one hand, traditional African beliefs view male circumcision as a sacred and essential cultural practice that symbolizes the transition from boyhood to (Tusa et al., 2021). According to the community elder, these traditional beliefs are deeply rooted in the upbringing of the Meru Community and they are passed down through generations. On the other hand, Christian religious values hold different views and interpretation of rites of passage and spirituality (Anwar et al., 2010). The result of these clashes in perceptions is tensions as individuals struggle to reconcile their traditional cultural practices with the newfound religious beliefs. This raises questions about the compatibility and coexistence of these belief systems.

The interviews with community elders highlighted how power dynamics plays out. Power dynamics between Christianity and traditional African religions have always been complex and varied throughout history (Baumard & Chevallier, 2015). The imposition of Christianity on African communities by European colonizers created power imbalances as traditional African cultures were suppressed and marginalised. This power imbalances have created a sense of apprehension among the Meru community. According to Aschenbrenner, (2023), the church is an organised institution that has established hierarchies and religious doctrines that yield significant influence over its followers. In the context of male circumcision, the church seems

to be exerting dominance over traditional African beliefs and practices. The result of such a scenario is the creation of a cultural hegemony where the dominance of one belief over the other leads to the marginalisation of alternative cultural expression (Aschenbrenner, 2023). The interviewees recognised that the church has the potential to impose its religious beliefs and practices on the traditional cultural context of male circumcision. As a result, they expressed concerns about the preservation of the autonomy of the Meru community in defining and shaping their cultural traditions.

### 6.3 Self-Identity and Cultural Authenticity in the Context of the Involvement of the Church in Male Circumcision

The intersection of self-identity and cultural authenticity emerges as a significant aspect when examining the involvement of the church in male circumcision among the Meru community. According to Grant et al. (2004), self-identity and cultural authenticity are interconnected concepts that play a significant role in shaping the sense of an individual and their relationship with the world around them. It is therefore imperative to assess how individuals in the community navigate questions of self-identity, cultural authenticity and the role of the church in shaping these dynamics. Self-identity in the context of this study is shaped by cultural practices and traditions associated with male circumcision, which holds significant cultural and social significance as a rite of passage (Grant et al., 2004; Moywaywa & Akaranga, 2017). The involvement of the church in male circumcision among the Meru community appears to evoke questions of how individuals perceive their self-identity within the context of cultural authenticity.

The interviews with the initiates provide valuable insights into how individuals perceive and navigate the issue of self-identity when the church is involved in male circumcision. Their perceptions of self-identity reflect multifaceted understanding that encompasses both cultural and religious dimensions. For some individuals, their cultural background may play a central role in shaping their self-identity. In such cases, embracing and preserving their cultural authenticity may be vital to their overall well-being and sense of belonging (Moywaywa & Akaranga, 2017). The initiates of the initiates expressed a strong sense of cultural pride and connection to their cultural heritage. They perceive male circumcision as an important aspect of their cultural identity, and they consider themselves as custodians of the traditions of their

community. As such, the involvement of the church in this ceremony helps to integrate their religious beliefs with their cultural practices, hence reinforcing the sense of self-identity that is deeply rooted in their Meru heritage. In other cases, the initiates approach the issue of self-identity with a more nuanced perspective, and they recognise the interplay between cultural and religious influences (Grant et al., 2004). On the one hand, they acknowledge the importance of their cultural heritage and on the other hand they embrace the spiritual significance of the involvement of the church in the ceremony. They consider their self-identity as a blend of cultural authenticity and religious faith, finding a sense of belonging and coherence in the blend of these elements.

However, there is ambivalence and tension regarding the involvement of the church in male circumcision and its impact on self-identity. Key among them is concern about the potential for dilution of cultural authenticity when Christian symbols and rituals are integrated into the ceremony. In some cases, the inclusion of male circumcision within a religious context may lead to a loss of certain traditional elements that were once associated with the cultural practice. Religious rituals may take precedence over certain cultural nuances, potentially altering the experience and symbolism of the circumcision (Wu, 2018; Moywaywa & Akaranga, 2017). Participants in this study have expressed the fear of the possibility of erosion of the traditional significance and symbolism of male circumcision which may lead to the loss of cultural identity. Besides, the issue of generational and contextual factors on self-identity is a fundamental concern in this context. Typically, younger initiates exhibit a greater inclination to question and challenge established traditions (Moywaywa & Akaranga, 2017). They may be more influenced by external factors such as modernisation, globalisation and alternative religious ideologies which can shape their self-identity. As a result, they tend to express a desire to adapt cultural practices to align with their evolving self-identities, seeking to reconcile tradition with contemporary sensibilities.

The synthetic model provides insights into how the perception of self-identity among the initiates in the Meru Community is shaped by the integration of cultural and religious elements in the context of the involvement of the church in traditional male circumcision. The model recognises the interplay between cultural and religious dimensions, and emphasizes on the potential for integration and mutual enrichment (Prescott & Camilleri, 2018). In the context of this study, this model helps to explain how individuals navigate the complexities of self-identity

by synthesizing the Meru culture and Christian faith. According to van den Toren & Hoare (2015), the model highlights the transformative potential of this integration. By integrating cultural and religious elements, the initiates engage in the process of reinterpreting and reshaping their self-identity. Synthesis of cultural and religious dimensions enables individuals to navigate the complexities of their identity formation and recognise the interconnectedness of their cultural heritage and Christian faith (van den Toren & Hoare, 2015). This integration allows for a mutual enrichment as cultural practices are infused with religious meanings and religious beliefs find expression through cultural traditions. The initiates perceive their self-identity as a blending of cultural authenticity and religious faith, embracing both aspects as integral to their self. The synthesis in return creates a space of individuals to reconcile and harmonize their cultural and religious identities, fostering a sense of coherence and continuity.

However, the synthetic model also raises some questions and challenges in the assessment of the concept of self-identity. For instance, it prompts individuals to critically examine the process of integration and the potential tensions that may arise (Whyte, 2023). Initiates must navigate the complexities of striking a balance between cultural authenticity and religious adherence. This may raise the question of how much adaptation and reinterpretation is permissible without compromising the integrity of their cultural traditions or diluting the religious significance. According to Bevans (2018), the synthetic model recognises that the process of synthesis is not universally applicable. Each individual and community may negotiate the integration differently based on their unique experiences, beliefs and contextual factors. It is therefore, important to have ongoing dialogue and reflection within the community to allow diverse perspectives and interpretations of the synthesis between culture and religion.

#### 6.4 Cultural Transformation in the Context of the Involvement of the Church

The concept of cultural transformation in this study highlights the dynamic nature of the cultural practices and their adaptation to religious influences. When the church becomes actively involved in a particular cultural context, it can have a profound impact on various aspects of that culture (Pillay, 2017). The cultural transformation observed in this study signifies a shift in the traditional practice of male circumcision. The introduction of Christian symbols, rituals and teachings has created a hybrid of cultural and religious elements (Ward, 2005). Primarily, this finding challenges the notion of cultural practices as a static and unchanging, and highlights the

ability of the community to reinterpret and adapt their traditions in response to evolving social and religious contexts. According to Ward (2005), the integration of Christian symbols such as crosses and prayers into the traditional male circumcision rituals is a representation of the cultural transformation. One possible interpretation of this observation is that there is a willingness among community members to embrace the transformative aspects of their cultural practices, seeking to forge connections between their cultural heritage and their Christian faith (Prescott & Camilleri, 2018). The cultural transformation further extends beyond the surface level integration of symbols and rituals. It influences the attitudes, values and behaviours of individuals within the Meru community. The adoption of Christian teachings and values such as love, forgiveness and community service into the fabric of their cultural identity speaks deeper to the integration of religious principles into their daily lives (Prescott & Camilleri, 2018). This finding reveals the dynamic nature of cultural practices and their potential to evolve as communities engage with new religious influences.

The generational dynamics observed in this study contributes significantly to the cultural transformation. The elder generation, consisting of community elders and older individuals, often held a more traditionalist approach towards male circumcision. They emphasized the cultural significance of the practice and the preservation of traditional rituals without significant Christian influence. Some of them expressed concerns about the potential dilution of cultural heritage due to the increasing involvement of the Church in the ceremonies. The middle generation, comprising individuals in their middle age, showed a more nuanced approach towards the integration of Christian elements. They acknowledged the importance of maintaining cultural traditions but were also open to incorporating Christian teachings and rituals into the male circumcision ceremonies. For some in this generation, the involvement of the Church provided a sense of spiritual enrichment and an opportunity to connect their faith with their cultural heritage. Younger generations, influenced by external factors and alternative religious ideologies, actively engage in reinterpreting and adapting cultural practices. Their involvement drives the evolution of cultural traditions, creating a space for the blending of cultural and religious elements. As such, the agency of younger community in shaping the cultural landscape and the ongoing negotiation of self-identity within the context of cultural and religious influences is quite evident.

However, cultural transformation creates some challenges and tensions within the community. Key among these concerns is the challenge of striking a balance between cultural adaptation and cultural loss in the integration of Christian elements into traditional practices. According to Pillay (2017), this delicate balance requires careful consideration of preserving cultural heritage while embracing new religious influences. It is imperative to identify and safeguard the core aspects of cultural practices while allowing for cultural adaptation and transformation. The main challenge in this case is determining which element should be adapted and which should be preserved. The Meru community should engage in thoughtful and reflective discussion to identify the core values, meanings and symbolism that are central to their cultural practices. By identifying these elements, the community can ensure that they are not compromised or lost in the process of integration.

The anthropological model as elaborated in the theory chapter, forms a basis for understanding the concept of cultural transformation as it plays out in this study. According to Havea et al. (2022), the anthropological model emphasizes on the cultural dimension of self-identity and the influence of cultural practices on the perceptions of individuals on themselves. The model helps to understand the dynamics of cultural change and adaptation within the Meru community. It acknowledges that cultures are not static entities but evolve over time as they interact with external influences such as religious beliefs and practices (Jara J, 2023). The integration of Christians symbols, rituals, and teachings into the traditional practice of male circumcision reflects a process of cultural adaptation. The adaptation occurs as the community negotiates the intersection of their cultural heritage and the influence of Christian faith (Jara J, 2023). The anthropological model allows for the recognition and appreciation of the agency of the community in actively engaging with their cultural traditions and navigating the changes that arise from the integration.

The anthropological model further helps to underscore the significance of cultural practices in shaping individual and collective identities. Cultural practices, such as male circumcision hold deep cultural meaning and symbolism within the Meru community. The cultural transformation observed in this study depicts how individuals negotiate their self-identity in relations to these practices (Jara J, 2023). It also emphasizes the importance of cultural authenticity in the construction of self-identity. The challenges and tensions that arise from the cultural transformation reflect the desire of the community to maintain the integrity and authenticity of



its cultural practices. This resonates with the focus of the anthropological model on the cultural dimension of self-identity and the significance of the cultural practices in shaping individual personal perceptions.

### 6.5 The Implications of Health Concerns

Health concerns emerged as a significant finding in this study. The involvement of the Church in male circumcision ceremonies raises health concerns, as traditional practices may not always align with modern health guidelines and standards (Ahmed et al., 2009). In both the interviews and the observations, the researcher identified valuable insights into the impact of the integration of religious and cultural practices on the wellbeing of the initiates. One of the key observations made was the potential compromises of the health of the initiates due to the lack of sterilization during the circumcision. This raised the question of potential risk of infection and other health complications associated with the practice. The initiates and their families also registered their concerns regarding the involvement of the church and how it may compromise the safety of the practice. Other concerns related to the prioritisation of traditional cultural practices and rituals over safety measures.

The health concerns identified in this study underscore the need to prioritize the well-being of the initiatives. It highlights the importance of ensuring that the integration of the religious and cultural practices does not compromise their health and safety. As such it is important to emphasize the significance of implementing the appropriate health guidelines and regulations to protect the initiates during the circumcision ceremony (Siegler et al., 2012). The Meru community can address the health concerns identified in the study by implementing some health guidelines. According to Fox & Thomson (2005), The guidelines should cover various aspects of the circumcision process such as sterilization of instruments, maintaining a clean and sanitary environment, and ensuring proper wound care after circumcision. These guidelines should be based in evidence-based practice and established medical standards. As a result, the community can promote the highest level of safety for the initiates.

One of the primary purposes of health guidelines is to prevent the transmission of infections. Proper sterilization of instruments such as circumcision tools reduces the risk of introducing harmful bacteria to viruses into the bodies of the initiates. Fox & Thomson (2005), argue that

the maintenance of sanitised environments during the procedure further reduces the risk of post circumcision infections. The community should also learn to practice proper wound care such as the application of appropriate dressing to prevent complications and promote optimal healing. The implementation of these health guidelines may require the involvement of health care professionals (Downs et al., 2017). Their expertise is crucial in providing medical supervision, guidance and intervention during the circumcision process.

The role of the church in the implementation of these health guidelines is crucial since the church holds significant authority and influence in the community. The church plays a critical role in overseeing and organising male circumcision ceremonies. Its active participation in the development and implementation of safety guidelines can help to ensure that the process of circumcision occurs in a safe and medically responsible manner. Further, the participation of the church facilitates the dissemination of health information to community members and the initiates. Religious leaders can use the church as a platform to educate the community about the importance of health and safety during circumcision. They can emphasize the need for medical supervision the benefits of seeking the appropriate healthcare and the potential risk associated with lack of such services during circumcision. This awareness can help to dispel misconceptions, promote health seeking behaviours and encourage a culture of prioritising health and wellbeing. The implementation of health guidelines by the church fosters a sense of accountability and responsibility. It demonstrates its commitment to the community to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the initiates. By prioritising health, the church showcases its role as a responsible institution that considers both the cultural significance of male circumcision and the health needs of its members.

From an anthropological perspective, health concerns associated with male circumcision are a socially constructed phenomena that are influenced by cultural beliefs, practices and social norms. Havea et al. (2022), argue that cultural factors shape the perception, interpretation and response to health concerns to health issues including the integration of health guidelines within cultural practices such as male circumcision. The anthropological model recognises the role of shaping health behaviours and decision-making process (Jara J, 2023). It acknowledges that health is not solely determined by biological factors but is it is also influenced by social and cultural dynamics.

The anthropological model depicts health concerns as the products of cultural beliefs and practices surrounding male circumcision. Cultural beliefs shape perceptions of health risk and the importance placed on health and safety measures during the procedure. For instance, some cultural beliefs may prioritize ritualistic aspects of male circumcision over medical safety, exposing the initiates to potential health risks. The model also highlights the role of social factors in shaping health concerns (Havea et al., 2022). Power dynamics, community structures and external influences play a significant role in determining the implementation and effectiveness of health guidelines. The model allows for the examination of how community leaders, religious authorities and healthcare professionals influence health related decision making and shape the perceptions of health concerns in the community (Wu, 2018). The model also allows the study to explore how health concerns are perceived and addressed in the Meru community. It allows for the examination of the cultural meanings attributed to health, the negotiation of health beliefs and the impact of social structures on health-related decision making.

#### 6.6 Assessment of the Evangelism/ Missionary Opportunity

The involvement of the church in male circumcision ceremonies in the Meru community presents a unique opportunity for evangelism. Male circumcision holds significant cultural and symbolic meaning in the Meru community. The observations made in the study depicted extensive participation of the church in the male circumcision ceremony. The participation of the church in these ceremonies allows for the establishment of connections, the sharing of Christian teachings and the fostering of relationships with community members (Gathogo, 2022). By engaging in these ceremonies, the church can tap into this cultural relevance and establish connection with community members, the initiates and their families. Effective evangelism during male circumcision requires a respectful and contextually appropriate approach. Religious leaders take into account the cultural sensitivities and beliefs of the community, ensuring that the integration of Christian elements respects the traditional cultural context (Gichaara, 2013). The practice serves as a platform for fostering unity and understanding within the community. It creates an opportunity for shared spiritual experiences, promoting a sense of belonging and community cohesion.

The contribution of the involvement of the church in male circumcision towards building of relationships was evident during the interviews. Participants shared their experiences of interacting with religious leaders and church members during the circumcision process. They described how the presence of the church in these cultural events created a sense of familiarity. Observations further affirmed the building of relationships. Religious leaders actively engaged with community members, initiating conversations, offering support and demonstrating care. According to Gathogo (2022), these kinds of interactions are critical in building trust and establishing rapport with community members. As such, the community members perceive the presence of the church as a gesture of care and support. The involvement of the church in these cultural rituals is an indication of its recognition and respect of the cultural practices of the Meru community (Gichaara, 2013). The cultural relevance in turn increases the acceptance and willingness of community members to engage with religious leaders and church members. Further, the church positions itself as an ally and a trusted partner within the community, promoting a sense of belonging and mutual understanding. The resulting relationships allows for open dialogue and effective communication between the church and the community to thrive. It forms a safe space for sharing thoughts, concerns and spiritual experiences. Consequently, there is a deeper understanding of the needs, beliefs and aspirations of the community.

One of the key responsibilities of the church in its involvement in male circumcision is to offer spiritual guidance and counselling. The process of circumcision typically elicits a range of emotions and introspection among the initiates and their families. Given these circumstances, the church has a unique opportunity to offer spiritual guidance and counselling and address the spiritual concerns and needs of members of the community (Downs et al., 2017). The interactions between spiritual leaders and community members during circumcision ceremonies tend to delve into deeper existential questions, personal reflections and spiritual inquiries. Religious leaders can establish safe space to explore spirituality through actively listening and offering compassionate responses. The provision of spiritual guidance by religious leaders during ceremonies allows them to address the spiritual dimensions of the lives of the community members (Moywaywa & Akaranga, 2017). They can offer insights, share scriptures and provide teachings that relate to the journey of faith of the initiates. These interactions allow the spiritual leaders to implore community members to reflect on their personal beliefs and values. The opportunity extends beyond the circumcision ceremonies since spiritual leaders continue to

provide support and guidance to initiates and their families, nurturing their spiritual growth and offering assistance in navigating their life challenges.

The establishment of discipleship and Christian formation helps to nurture the spiritual growth and development of individuals and provide a platform for sharing Christian teachings. Discipleship involves guiding and mentoring individuals in their spiritual journey, helping them grow in their faith and understanding of Christian beliefs (Moywaywa & Akaranga, 2017). The participation in cultural rituals provides a unique opportunity to initiate and foster discipleship with community members. Discipleship allows for individualised and personalised attention, tailored to the specific needs and questions of the participants. As such, it allows religious leaders to offer a deeper exploration of Christian teachings and help individuals understand the significance and relevance of faith in their lives. This process fosters a deeper connection with the community and facilitates a transformative experience that aligns with the evangelistic goal of leading individual to a personal relationship with God.

Christian formation on the other hand, encompasses the broader process of shaping the beliefs, values, and behaviours of individuals in alignment with Christian teachings. The involvement of the church in Male circumcision provides an opportunity for Christian formation within the community (Gichaara, 2013). The incorporation of Christian elements such as prayers, hymns and sermons into the ceremonies, religious leaders are able to impart foundational Christian teachings and values to the initiates and community members present. The church leadership as observed in this study used Christian formation to expose the initiates to the central tenets of the faith such as love, forgiveness and the teachings of Christ. Such exposure can spark curiosity, reflection and receptiveness to further engagement with the church (Gichaara, 2013). Further the involvement of the church in male circumcision can foster the development of a supportive network. The sense of community fosters belongingness and offers ongoing opportunities for spiritual growth, accountability and support.

Discipleship and Christian formation can be understood through the lens of cultural adaptation, the significance of rituals and the role of the community in shaping beliefs and behaviours as expressed in the anthropological model (Gathogo, 2022). The anthropological model acknowledges that cultural adaptation is a two-way process (Bevans, 2018). As the church integrates Christian rituals and teachings into the male circumcision ceremony, the community,

in turn, influences the way these elements are received and understood. Discipleship and Christian formation present an opportunity for religious leaders to further adapt their approach to meet the specific needs and beliefs of the community which allows for a deeper level of cultural integration and understanding (Ahmed et al., 2009). Essentially, rituals are at the core of shaping the cultural practices and reinforcing collective beliefs within the anthropological model. The incorporation of Christian elements in male circumcision ceremonies among the Meru community allows leaders to tap into the significance and the emotions that associated with these rituals.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

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### 7.1 Introduction

This study explored cultural contextualisation and the engagement of the church in traditional male circumcision as a rite of passage in the Meru community in Kenya. The study conducted in-depth interviews and observations to provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between cultural practices and religious beliefs within the context of male circumcision. The study has provided detailed findings that highlight the deep-rooted cultural significance of male circumcision within the Meru community. Key among them is the intertwined nature of the practice with the Meru culture, identity, values and traditions. Male circumcision serves as a rite of passage, symbolizing the transition from boyhood to manhood and reinforcing communal cohesion. It is a marker of cultural identity, connecting individuals to their heritage and establishing a sense of belonging. Another notable conclusion of this study is that the church is actively involved in male circumcision ceremonies among the Meru people. The engagement has both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, the involvement of the church provides moral support and spiritual guidance to initiates in the community. More importantly, the church contributes to the preservation of cultural traditions within the context of religious beliefs. The similarity in the physical process of circumcision between the biblical prescribed circumcision and the practice of traditional male circumcision in the Meru community acts as a unifying factor for the two practices. On the other hand, the influence of the Church introduces adaptations and modifications to the ritual, which may dilute or alter its cultural meanings. Furthermore, the research highlighted the intricate social dynamics and power relations within the context of male circumcision. The roles of religious leaders, initiates, and community members were examined, revealing the influence and authority they exert in the practice. These power dynamics shape the social interactions and hierarchies surrounding the ritual, often mediated by religious institutions. This study contributes to our understanding of the cultural anthropology and religious dimensions of male circumcision in the Meru community. It underscores the importance of considering the interplay between cultural practices, religious beliefs, and social dynamics when examining rites of passage. The findings emphasize the need for a nuanced approach to church engagement, recognizing both the positive contributions and potential challenges it brings to traditional cultural practices. By shedding light on these aspects, this research offers valuable insights for communities, religious institutions, and scholars interested in understanding and navigating the complexities of cultural practices within the context of religious engagements.

## 7.2 Cultural Contextualisation and Complex Interactions

The study underscores the depth of cultural contextualisation in male circumcision ceremonies in the Meru community. The integration of Christian elements in this rite of passage reflects the delicate integration of the negotiation between cultural heritage and religious faith. The study has depicted how the engagement of the church serves as an avenue for fostering unity and harmonising the two concepts. The study acknowledges that the engagement of the church in male circumcision serves as a bridge between spiritual and cultural realms. The church establishes a connection that resonated with the spiritual convictions of Christianity and the cultural expressions of the Meru community by integrating Christian symbols, rituals and teachings into the ceremony. This is evident where the study notes the seamless integration of Christian hymns and prayers with traditional chants to create a unique blend of cultural and spiritual significance. The study also notes that the involvement of the church in these rituals is not an improvisation of external beliefs but a conscious adaptation that respects the heritage of the Meru community. However, this conclusion does not overlook the complexities associated with contextualisation in this case. The study highlights varying perspectives on the navigation of this integration. While many celebrate the harmony between religion and culture, challenges can arise from differing interpretations and priorities. There is need for ongoing dialogue and sensitivity to ensure that neither cultural authenticity nor spiritual depth is compromised.

## 7.3 Synthesis of Faith and Traditions

The study highlights a meaningful connection between the cultural and the spiritual which leads to a dynamic blend that resonates with the values and aspirations of the community. The cultural practices of the Meru community and the traditions of Christianity find a common ground in the integration of Christian practices and teaching in the rite of passage. The interviews with the initiates reveal that this synthesis resonates deeply and allows them to embrace cultural identity while nurturing spiritual growth. The integration of the two creates a collective experience for the initiates that is particularly pronounced in during the feasts, where Christian prayers are integrated on these celebrations. As such, it serves as a catalyst for holistic growth and nurtures both the cultural heritage and spiritual development. Religious leaders emphasised on the role of the church in enhancing the understanding of Christian values while respecting the roots of the community.



Further, the study addressed the relevance of cultural practices in the modern context by offering a framework that aligns with contemporary spiritual needs. The integration of Christian elements serves as a platform for rejuvenating traditional practices, by ingraining them with concepts that makes sense to the younger generation. This is evident in the enthusiastic participation of initiates who perceive the ceremonies as a harmonious fusion of the past and the present. It also reinforces the commitment of the church in facilitating transformative experiences that resonates with the community. The commitment to transition extends beyond the initiates and includes the broader perception of the role of the church.

#### 7.4 Cultural Transformation and Evolving Dynamics

The study highlights the changing dynamics within the Meru community as expressed through the shifts and adaptations in the practice of Male circumcision. The study illustrates how the incorporation of Christian elements and symbols has led to subtle transformation of these traditional rituals. While the core essence of the ceremonies is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the community, the incorporation of Christian practice in these practices introduces a dimension of renewal and adaptability. The study has also highlighted an enhanced sense of pride among the initiates in the participation in cultural practices. The initiates expressed a deep appreciation of the cultural practices that have shaped their identity. The pride is enhanced by the support provided by the church which leads to a positive perception of the ceremonies as culturally relevant and spiritually meaningful.

The study reveals the new layers of meaning and significance of male circumcision ceremonies that have been introduced by the presence of Christian elements. Christian symbols and rituals intertwine seamlessly with traditional practices creating a synergy that resonates with the older generation and youth. The incorporation of church songs and prayers during the ceremonies for instance infuses them with spiritual depth, further solidifying their importance in the journey of the initiates from childhood to adulthood. On the other hand, the study emphasizes on the need for maintaining a balance to avoid overshadowing the cultural authenticity of the ceremonies with Christian elements. The community need to maintain a sense of continuity with ancestral practices even with the introduction of the new dimensions. This balance is essential since it honours the past while embracing the changes that will continue to occur within the society.

## 7.5 Challenges and Resilience

The study has identified some of the potential tensions and conflicts that may arise when attempting to harmonise the two significant aspects of the identity of the Meru community. The main challenges relating to the integration of the church into the cultural practices emanate from the difference in the interpretations of church teachings and cultural norms. Traditional cultural practices carry deep rooted meanings that are intimately tied to the identity of the community. On the other hand, Christianity introduces its own set of values and principles. This leads to some tension in the process of reconciling the two. The study has highlighted some of the strategies that can be used to navigate these challenges. Key among them is dialogue and open conversations between community elders, church leaders and the initiates. Such dialogues can provide a platform for individuals to express their concerns, clarify misunderstandings and find a common ground. Such engagements underscore the desire of the church to preserve its cultural heritage while embracing transformative power of faith.

The Meru community and the church act as cultural guardians and change agents at the same time. They navigate the essence of their heritage while navigating the complexities of modernity and external influences. This dual role requires an adept understanding of the dynamics involved in this interaction and the willingness to engage in critical conversations that address potential conflicts arising from the intersection of faith and culture. It is important to note that cultural contexts are fluid and evolving. These conclusions are made based on the data collected within a certain timeframe and context. It is therefore imperative to conduct further research in the future to identify the specific nature of these challenges by exploring the instances of successful resolutions and ongoing efforts to strike a balance between tradition and faith.

## 7.6 Contextual Theology

The findings of this study offer insights that can enrich the field of contextual theology. The study has highlighted the complex and dynamic relationship between culture and religion, and explained some key aspects that can inform contextual theology. The study for instance, underscores the dynamic nature of religious and cultural practices within the Meru community. It reveals how the church has engaged with cultural traditions of the Meru community and created a synthesis of faith and heritage. The study highlights the adaptability of religious

beliefs to local customs, challenging the notion that faith and culture are mutually exclusive. Further, the study emphasizes on the significance of understanding and respecting the perspectives of local communities when contextualising theology. The involvement of the church in male circumcision among the Meru community exemplifies the significance of engaging with as opposed to imposing upon local traditions. Such engagement fosters a sense of inclusivity and respect within the community, hence promotes harmonious coexistence.

Further, the study highlights the multifaceted nature of faith by exploring how participants perceive spiritual significance of the male circumcision rituals. The study helps to reveal the depth of meaning that individuals attach to traditional practices such as male circumcision. As a result, the study highlights that faith and spirituality are not limited to formal church doctrines but can be intricately woven into local customs and traditions. This finding challenges the conventional notions of religious orthodoxy. It implies that religion can adapt and intertwine with cultural practices without losing its spiritual depth. As a result, it challenges theologians to consider how theological doctrines and teachings can be expressed and understood in the context of diverse cultural traditions.

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## Appendices

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### **Appendix 1: Informed consent**

**Are you interested in taking part in the research project?**

**“CULTURAL CONTEXTUALISATION; THE CHURCH ENGAGEMENT IN THE MALE CIRCUMCISION AS A RITE OF PASSAGE IN MERU KENYA”?**

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to establish the reasons behind the church’s involvement in the male circumcision as a rite of passage in Meru County, Kenya. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

### **Purpose of the project**

The project is carried out as a partial fulfilment for the award of the degree of Master of Theology at the MF Norwegian school of theology, Religion and Society. Its main objective is to investigate the church involvement in the male circumcision as a rite of passage in Meru. The study aims at establishing the main reasons why the church feels obligated to intervene in this culturally sensitive practice and how it is dealing with dissent from the proponents of the traditional circumcision practices in the area. It seeks to find out the perceptions of the local community on the church’s involvement and possible ways if any that the church is employing to enlighten the community on its involvement. The study will be guided by the following research questions:

- 1.What does the local community think of the church involvement in male circumcision as a rite of passage in Meru?
- 2.How have the proponents of the traditional male circumcision in Meru responded to the church involvement in the male circumcision as a rite of passage?
- 3.In which way is the church dealing with and addressing the critics of its involvement in the male circumcision as a rite of passage in Meru?

### **Who is responsible for the research project?**

MF Norwegian school of theology, Religion and Society.

### **Why are you being asked to participate?**

Your thorough knowledge of the Meru culture on the male circumcision as a rite of passage being a local resident of Meru partly informs the reason behind your selection to participate in the study. The study feels that your interaction with the cultural practice and the church involvement in the area will greatly help in providing rich information on the study objectives. The sampling was purposive sampling whereby the study targeted people with the relevant information to fulfil the study objectives.

The use of gatekeepers was involved in the selection of the sample. In this case community elders, church leaders and youth leaders assisted in the selection of the sample. the researcher promised anonymity in the processing of the data where necessary as a prerequisite to gaining your contact. the researcher also promised the said leaders of my intent to ask for your informed consent before involving you in the study.

### **What does participation involve for you?**

The study will involve an oral interview guided by a semi-structured interview guide. The interview will take approximately 20 minutes. In the interview, the researcher will audio record the conversation and take some notes to enable an accurate account of the information obtained. The audio recordings and notes will be properly stored and processed to avoid any unauthorised access by third parties.

### **Participation is voluntary**

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

### **Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data.**

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

the researcher will safely store the personal data obtained in my personal computer and use a password to prevent unauthorised access. the researcher will code the data obtained and store the coded and original copies in separate files for processing. All names will be

coded and anonymised. Kindly note that my thesis supervisor may have access to the information to advise me in the necessary processing procedures.

### **What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?**

The project is scheduled to end 30.06.2023. Once coded and processed for analysis in this study, the data will be deleted from my personal computer.

### **Your rights**

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you.
- request that your personal data is deleted.
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified.
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data.

### **What gives us the right to process your personal data?**

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with Norwegian school for theology, MF, Data Protection Services has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

### **Where can the researcher find out more?**

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- The MF Norwegian school of theology, Religion and Society via Maren Seehawer, [maren.seehawer@mf.no](mailto:maren.seehawer@mf.no).
- Our Data Protection Officer: Berit Widerøe Hillestad, [personvern@mf.no](mailto:personvern@mf.no)
- Data Protection Services, by email: ([personverntjenester@sikt.no](mailto:personverntjenester@sikt.no)) or by telephone: +47 53 21 15 00.

Yours sincerely,

Fredrick Mwenda Mugambi, [fredmwenda2011@gmail.com](mailto:fredmwenda2011@gmail.com), +4793932104 (Student)

Project Leader

Maren Seehawer

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### **Consent form**

the researcher have received and understood information about the project, Cultural contextualisation; the church engagement in the male circumcision as a rite of passage in Meru Kenya, and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. the researcher give consent:

to participate in Interview and audio recording of the same.

the researcher give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx.15.11.2023.

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(Signed by participant, date)

### **Appendix 2: Interview Schedule/Guide**

#### **Participant Categories:**

1. Church Leaders
2. Community Leaders
3. Initiates (Young men who have undergone male circumcision)
4. Elders and Traditional Leaders
5. Community Members

Interview Structure: Semi-structured interviews, approximately 45-60 minutes per interview.

Location: Meru County

Language: Interviews will be conducted in Swahili and Meru language as appropriate.

#### **Introduction and demographics**

1. Could you provide some background about yourself?
2. Tell us what your role in the community and any involvement in male circumcision ceremonies is.
3. What is your relationship with the church in the context of male circumcision.

### **The involvement of the church in male circumcision ceremonies**

1. How does the Church participate in the organization and conduct of male circumcision ceremonies in the Meru community?
2. What religious and ceremonial elements does the church introduce during these ceremonies?

### **Community perceptions**

1. What religious and elements does the church introduce in traditional male circumcision ceremonies.
2. What is the general perception of the community members towards the involvement of the church in male circumcision ceremonies.
3. Have you received any positive or negative feedback from community members regarding the involvement of the church in these ceremonies?

### **The experience of Initiates**

1. Can you describe your personal experience of undergoing male circumcision in relation to the Church's involvement? How did it affect your perception of the ceremony?
2. How have these experiences shaped your cultural and spiritual identity?

### **Community Dynamics**

1. How do you think the involvement of the church in male circumcision has affected the dynamic, relationships and values of the community.
2. Are there any notable changes in community interactions or cohesion due to this involvement?

### **Role of Tradition**

1. How do you see the role of customs evolving or adapting in response to the introduction of Christian elements during male circumcision?
2. Do you think some elements of traditions have been transformed or transformed through this interplay?

### **Community Identity**



1. What is the perception of community members to their cultural and cultural identities in light of the changing practices and beliefs?
2. Have you observed any cultural or religious hybridity within the community? Explain.

### **Challenges and opportunities**

1. What are some of the challenges or opportunities presented by the intersection of cultural heritage and religious beliefs? How has the Community adapted to change?
2. Are there any efforts to harmonize tradition and faith within the community? What are the strategies being applied to achieve this harmony?

### **Conclusion**

1. What are your final comments or reflections on the involvement of the church on male circumcision ceremonies in the Meru community?

### **Closing Remarks:**

Thank the participant for their valuable insights and contributions to the study.

10/26/23, 10:48 PM

Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger

[Notification form / CULTURAL CONTEXTUALISATION; THE CHURCH ENGAGEMENT  
the researcher...](#) / Assessment

| Reference     | Assessment type | Date       |
|---------------|-----------------|------------|
| number 182141 | Standard        | 06.09.2023 |

Assessment of processing of personal data

**Title**

CULTURAL CONTEXTUALISATION; THE CHURCH ENGAGEMENT IN THE  
MALE CIRCUMCISION AS A RITE OF PASSAGE IN MERU KENYA

**Institution responsible for the project**

MF vitenskapelig høyskole for teologi, religion og samfunn

**Project leader**

Maren Seehawer

**Student**

Candidate number 1007

**Project period**

05.07.2022 - 31.12.2023

**Categories of personal data**

General

Special

**Legal basis**

Consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 6 nr. 1 a)

Explicit consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 9 nr. 2 a)

The processing of personal data is lawful, so long as it is carried out as stated in the notification form. The legal basis is valid until 31.12.2023.

[Notification Form](#) 

### **Comment**

Data Protection Services has assessed the change registered in the Notification Form.

We find that the processing of personal data in this project is lawful and complies with data protection legislation, so long as it is carried out as described in the Notification Form with dialogue and attachments.

Processing of personal data has been extended to 31.12.2023.

### **FOLLOW-UP OF THE PROJECT**

We will follow up the progress of the project at the new planned end date in order to determine whether the processing of personal data has been concluded.

Good luck with the project!

<https://meldeskjema.sikt.no/62825086-5a29-426d-b773-44f03e149b74/vurdering>

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