

The purpose of this study was to establish the reasons behind the continued practice of clitoridectomy among the Tharaka people, despite the presence of various agents of change like Christianity and formal education in the Tharaka. Clitoridectomy has been discouraged since the colonial era and some rituals and ceremonies that accompanied it have been abandoned, leaving mainly the surgical operation. A further concern was to establish whether those who practice clitoridectomy are aware of its implications to health. A basic assumption was that clitoridectomy has social and religious significance, and as such is a resilient custom. The study area was Meru East District that is composed of three divisions namely, North Tharaka and South Tharaka.

Female circumcision is one of the customs that have been a source of dispute and conflict in Kenya and elsewhere in the world. Various groups of people continue with the practice while others are against it. This study adopted a theoretical framework derived from Dahrendorff and Coser's theory of equilibrium, conflict and social change. The theory assumes that every society experiences social conflicts that lead to change. In the study, it is noted that conflict is part and parcel of the process of change affecting clitoridectomy among the Tharaka.

The primary data were collected through questionnaires, observation and interviews. The informants were sampled from three administrative divisions of Tharaka District. The data were transcribed and incorporated with the library sources. They were interpreted, analyzed, and used as basis for explaining change and continuity of female circumcision among the Tharaka.

The major findings from the study revealed that clitoridectomy is prevalent among Tharaka people and is practiced as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Due to various factors such as formal education, urbanization and Christianity, the practice has undergone several changes. The study observes that clitoridectomy had a major social and religious role that worked best in the indigenous Tharaka community. Nevertheless, in view of the dangers that result from it, those who undergo clitoridectomy suffer more harm than good. It is recommended by this study that more information is vital to enlighten people in Tharaka of the dangers associated with female circumcision, in a move towards its eradication.

The study observes that those who attack it often enhance cultural resilience. It is therefore recommended that the stakeholders like the local men and women leaders in Tharaka be involved in developing any program that may bring meaningful change. It is only those who practice these religious rituals who can make a judgment about their modification or their usefulness. The Tharaka themselves have the ultimate responsibility of evaluating the making conscious choices about their behaviour.