Colonialism and Its Implication on the African Family Stability in Embu North Sub-County of Kenya from 1895 to 1965

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Authors’ contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Family value system is the basic foundation on which stable societies are created. Sustaining the authentic traditional family value system in a wave of change as strong as western imperialism called for a society that was ready to struggle to retain their culture. This study is on colonialism and its’ implication on the African family stability in Embu North Sub-County of Kenya from 1895 to 1965. The study employed the descriptive research design. Data was obtained from oral, archival and secondary sources. The researcher interviewed a total of 50 respondents who were purposively sampled using snowballing technique. The study corroborated data from oral, archival and secondary sources to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. The discussion starts with aspects of the traditional values that existed among the Aembu by the time colonialism was imposed on Kenya in 1920, advances to how these aspects were executed in family and communal life among the Aembu and moves to how the Aembu were able to retain these family practices and values during the colonial period of 1920 to 1965. Cultural Evolution theory was used to examine colonialism and its implications on the African family stability in the area of study. The findings of the study were that there were family values that the Aembu people maintained before and during colonialism like circumcision (especially female circumcision), the culture of dowry payment, naming system, hospitality, and polygamy; that these family values were evident in their
that; the Aembu were polygamists whose homesteads comprised several huts for different members; they had a supreme council Kiama kia Ngome and were mixed farmers; they had an elaborate family value system with strict safeguards on social, political and economic aspects that ensured a very stable family unit. Missionaries built the first station in Embu North Sub-County at Kigari in 1910 after arriving in 1906; there was concerted effort to end female circumcision and ensure monogamy was exercised in place of polygamy; there was positive and negative implication on family values after imposition of colonialism; people abandoned some cultural practices, embraced others and merged the good from both cultures. The study concluded that the coming of the British missionaries to Embu North Sub-County impacted on European imperialism and led to cultural subjugation. The study has contributed to the historiography of the Aembu.

With increased European involvement in the native affairs of the Aembu through missionary work and colonialism from 1920 when Kenya was made a British protectorate, the Aembu' family values were greatly compromised. The people had to ease into a new social order as dictated by colonial policies. Murray, [1] observes that the female circumcision conflict granted chiefs an opportunity to be hostile and aggressive to mission followers who were reluctant to be submissive to their authority. For instance, chiefs begun to prosecute C.M.S adherents on the grounds of desecrating local sacred groves. Later, the colonial administration discovered that the chargers were fabricated. After futile attempts of fighting against female initiation, the Anglican hierarchy allowed the Embu Mission to compromise on the practice. The compromise allowed the CMS to enjoy its stay in Embu, the privilege of rebuilding an outpost and mission schools which started to compete favorably with African Independent Schools. Chesaina [2] highlights the significance of patriarchy and justifies polygamy regardless of reaction from women. In one of his proverbs, he explains that there is no cock which serves only one hen. Moreover, the Aembu did preserve the esteemed concept of polygamy.
2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a descriptive research design. Kothari [3] suggests that descriptive research design is used to depict the features of a particular situation or individuals in an accurate way. This study described, recorded, analyzed, reported and presented the findings of the current study as they exist. This design was preferred for this study because it described, recorded, analyzed and presented aspects of family value system that were preserved during the colonial period 1920 up to 1965. This study also fitted within the provisions of descriptive research design because the researcher collected data and reported the way things were without altering any variables.

3. DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES AND PRESENTATION

Data was analyzed by the use of Qualitative Data Analysis. Qualitative data obtained from the oral interviews were qualitatively analyzed based on content analysis. This was influenced by the data obtained from primary sources, archival sources and secondary sources which were corroborated to meet the reliability and validity of the study.

The researcher presented an introduction letter to the respondent and with the consent of the respondent, the interview was conducted. Research permit was obtained from the National Council for Science, Technology, and Innovations (NACOSTI). The researcher booked appointments with the respondent to conduct the interview prior to the interview. The purpose of the interview was explained to the interviewee who participated in the interviews purposefully and where the interviewee sought to remain anonymous, the researcher respected the will of the respondent guided by Grinyer [4].

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Aspects of Family Value System Preserved from 1920-1965

In the colonial wave of change that hit the traditional Aembu family value system between 1920 and 1965, the people were able to shield
some of their highly regarded cultural practices from erosion. For the Aembu, these family values that are evident in their cultural traditions and practices, serve to explain their unique African identity and were held in high regard from 1920-1965. They include circumcision (especially female circumcision), the culture of dowry payment, naming system, hospitality, and polygamy among others.

On circumcision, Aembu boys and girls were culturally mandated to be circumcised. Boys were circumcised to graduate from boyhood to manhood and demonstrate their readiness for marriage. Mucangi (O.I, 2021) points out the fact that Aembu circumcised both boys and girls to usher them into marriage which every person had to undergo so as to ensure both familial and community continuity. Circumcision would be held any time in the year except two months before the long rains. Traditionally, boys were circumcised between the ages of 18 and 22 years. When it was time for the boy to be circumcised he would show his readiness by paying a goat called mbûri ya nduo, the goat of circumcision. The boys would be taken to Rupingazi River on a cold morning and dipped in the water to ensure pain reduction during the cut. (Gicovi O.I, 2021) remarks that the circumcisor, mûtani, would pull the initiates’ foreskin and cut it off with a kaviû, a sharp knife after which the organ would be wrapped in banana leaves and fiber to stop bleeding and heal. After that he would be led back to his parents’ compound and live there as he heals in a specially built hut under the care of a specially appointed sponsor or supporter. In seclusion he got education on family and community secrets and general conduct and expectations as a grown up.

Missionaries were able to increasingly oppose the traditional initiation ceremonies. Various aspects of the ceremonies were seen as obscene and degrading. Young male converts were encouraged to have the operation carried out in mission hospitals and dispensaries. This was not fought to a large scale by the Aembu who felt that it was not a total overhaul of their traditional practice. In as much as having their specialists conduct the operation on the streams of kavingaci was their best practice, they were glad that male circumcision was to continue, albeit in a hospital setup with European medics. From these colonial times the rite of male circumcision became increasingly westernized as the Christianized families took their sons to hospital and dispensaries for the operation. The non-Christian families continued with their traditional rites with little interruption from colonial administrators. This situation did not change after 1963 when Kenya gained independence. It was noted that the Aembu were comfortable with the fact that male circumcision progressed and the accompanying rites were not greatly tampered with by the Europeans. Though there could be variations in the way of initiation after 1965, male initiation is still a preserved culture valued by the Aembu families. Besides male circumcision among the Aembu, female circumcision was preserved as a critical component of initiating young women. Werimba (O.I, 2021) a female respondent from Nginda, asserts that girls underwent clitoridectomy between the ages of 14 and 18 years before the first menstruation. Those who failed to be initiated could only be married as a second wife, a less prestigious position. During the initiation ceremony both boys and girls were expected to prove their courage and thereby their readiness to accept adult responsibilities, by persevering extreme physical pain without crying or flinching. After the cut the initiate would heal in a hut under the supervision of supporter or sponsor. Parents whose sons and or daughters were circumcised were held in high regard and felt prestigious.

In 1925, the British colonial administration and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) congregation representative found it hard to forbid FGM operations in 1925 [5]. Due to the extent of resistance from the Africans, some missionaries suggested that girls could also undergo the operation in mission hospitals which involved the surgical removal of the clitoris and some portions of labia [6]. However, after one brief experiment carried out by Anglican missionaries in Kabare of Gichugu, it became apparent that the operation was a brutal bodily mutilation and as such it became totally condemned. From then onwards the Protestant missionaries were unable to accept a hospital operation for girls. Murray (1976) further observes that this issue came to a heated climax in what came to be known as the “female circumcision controversy”. The Church Missionary Society and the Anglican Church stood rather apart from the other missions who partly accepted it. They made it a condition that for one to achieve church membership they were to reject female circumcision.

The District Local Councils consisting of chiefs and prominent local men came up with by-laws regulating female initiation. They established
regulations which demanded that only one operation by a trained and registered woman was permitted per girl. In addition, the initiators were supposed to be licensed and go through regular refresher courses. Failure to adhere to the new rules attracted fines and withdrawal of license. However, the restrictions on acceptable extent of incisions on female were openly defied. Colonial chiefs admitted that it was impossible to outlaw female circumcision practice owing to its strong Embu cultural roots (Embub District, LNC Minutes, 17.7.1925). The admission by colonial chiefs implied that FGM was a practice deeply rooted among the Aembu who were determined to preserve it.

Due to the desire to defend their custom, the Aembu people embraced the support of Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) leaders. K.C.A leaders were advocating for rejection of missionary teachings, specifically those against abandonment of African customs such as the female circumcision practice [6]. Muriuki [7] similarly observes that KCA Leaders denounced elders and senior chiefs who did not support initiation and in retaliation, British officials curtailed the activities of KCA and Christian separatists because of their dangerous implications.

In 1926 the new Embu Local Native Council had passed a by-law limiting the extent of the operation and making registration of the operators compulsory. In 1931, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) representative, J. Comely, enforced a pastoral letter from the Anglican bishop advocating for outlawing of the practice of female initiation. The letter required disciplining of parents who allowed their female children to be initiated [1]. In January 1931 Reverend Comely got the full support of the Kigari Pastorate Committee and a resolution was passed and read out in Kigari and at the outreach churches; that any communicant allowing female circumcision should be put under discipline; that candidates for baptism and confirmation should agree to put away female circumcision. In response to CMS forbidding female initiation, the school went on strike. There was a drop in enrolment of students at Kigari mission station from 1551 in 1930 to 289 in 1931 and the numbers kept on declining every month [6]. The church emptied and within a short time the dissidents were commencing independent schools and conducting prayers separately. This was followed by conflicts between the mission adherents, independent Christians and non-

Christians. Majority of the Africans verbally abused and harassed mission loyalists who, in turn, feared for their lives. In one incident, a mission elder’s son recalls being advised by his father to run away from home for fear of attack by an angry Africans.

At the time that Reverend Comely and the Kigari elders had agreed against female circumcision, the District Commissioner Lambert was making an attempt to further modify the act to make it medically less harmful and was seeking to encourage performance of the operation in infancy or early childhood, as was the custom among some other Kenya peoples. Kigari elders were members of the Local Native Council, one leading chief being an Anglican and they were totally against any form of female circumcision and very loyal supporters of Reverend Comely. There were angry clashes between Reverend Comely and District Commissioner Lambert, and between Lambert and one of the Kigari elders who was an LNC member. Arthur, the Christian chief, was put under church discipline for having followed Lambert’s directives on supporting female circumcision in his area of jurisdiction [6].

The female circumcision conflict granted chiefs an opportunity to be hostile and aggressive to mission followers who were reluctant to be submissive to their authority. For instance, chiefs began to prosecute C.M.S adherents on the grounds of desecrating local sacred groves. Later, the colonial administration discovered that the chargers were fabricated. After futile attempts of fighting against female initiation, the Anglican hierarchy allowed the Embu Mission to compromise on the practice [1]. The compromise allowed the CMS to enjoy its stay in Embu, the privilege of rebuilding an outstation and mission schools which started to compete favorably with African Independent Schools. With the Africans denied the practice, several left the mission church and this ushered in the birth of the Independent Church and Schools Movement. Near Kigari came up the headquarters of the National Independent Church of Africa, under Bishop Willie Nyagah, whose father left the Anglican Church during the controversy in 1936. Other independent churches in the area were the Salvation Army which was introduced by migrant workers returning from Nairobi in the late 1920’s. Polygamists and those who continued to circumcise were able to become members.

The dispute mostly affected the daughters of Christian families. When all these conflicting
controversies surrounding female circumcision erupted, most of the Christian elders at Kigari Mission were young married men with small children. Those who stood with Comely remained firm, sometimes under severe attack from the community, which caused them to form a rather closed Christian settlement near the mission. The wives supported the decision of their husbands and from the date of the decree onward no daughters of this group were circumcised. The first girl to marry uncircumcised was one born in 1925 although another report mentioned a girl born as early as 1914. However, circumcision continued strong in the area as a whole, and in 1972 a survey made showed that 60% of Embu girls at secondary school had undergone circumcision.

Besides, the Aembu retained their family tradition of naming. Ndûrûme explains that the Aembu social life is seen in the way they name children. Traditionally the first two children born in a marriage were named after the parents of the man, and then the other two after the parents of the wife. Since the Aembu were polygamous, a couple would get as many as ten to fifteen children, but due to the high mortality rate many children died in infancy. For this reason, the Aembu parents who lost many children in infancy wanted to ensure that their children would grow to maturity, just as the young of wild animals did, without much care and would give them animal names to ward off the spirit of death. This is why some children had names such as Njiru or Mbogo which means a buffalo, Nthia which is an antelope, Njoka a snake, Ndwiga a giraffe, Njuki a bee, Njogu an elephant, Nyaga or Kivuti an ostrich, Ngoweri a Columbus monkey or Munyi a rhinoceros. Other Embu names came from natural phenomena such as Mbura the rain, Riua the sun or Nduma to mean darkness. Some other names were derived from behaviors associated with characters of the person the child was named after. For instance, if the relative to be named was a person who drank too much alcoholic beverages the child would be named Kinyua or Mukundi. The main significance of this naming practice is that it gives honor or recognition to the person after whom the child is named; it creates a special relationship between the child and the person she or he is named after and creates a particular bond between the parents and the child and the person after whom the child is named. All this influences and dictates the behavior between all the individuals involved. Points out that she was named Marigu after her fathers' mother who had the habit of carrying ripe bananas and other fruits even when she went to visit other people or to the farm and since children especially knew they would find edibles in her basket they always accompanied her.

Furthermore, the Aembu managed to preserve, to a large extend, the traditional family value of dowry payment. Marriage was perceived as incomplete and illegal if the prerequisite of dowry is not met. Mutwiri, discusses the marriage process and dowry negotiations in details. He explains.

“There were three phases through which a solid marriage union would be build. Phase one involved requesting for friendship was to request for friendship, kûria ûthoni. When a man had identified his bride, he would inform his parents. They would thereafter organise a visit to the girl's parents. Five to ten trusted and close people would attend. The agenda was to report the love relationship. If the girl had already moved in with the man, gûkîria, the illegal marriage was reported. Among the gifts brought, Mûratina wine had to be present. The young man could be accepted or rejected. Rejection would usually be due to family ties or mere unwillingness of the girls’ parents to get associated with the family because of a previous incident of blood spilling, Njavì, incidences of premature death, stealing, abnormal diseases or genetically related conditions. If the friendship request was accepted, Mutwiri noted that the marriage process kicks off including dowry negotiations where the bride’s family requests for the following items.

Nthenge ya Ngusu- a He-goat to be eaten by the girl’s brothers and friends to appease them. Going forward, they would provide the man somewhere to sit when he visited. Nthenge ya Mûviriga, a he-goat to be eaten by the clan. Mvarika ya gülongoreria nthenge- A she goat to lead the he-goats. This remains in the homestead. Ndûrûme, a male sheep. Only if the girl had a baby prior this negotiation. The first phase phase ended there with the man’s family having now been accepted as kanyaña and they set a date for the next phase. The second phase is known as slaughtering, kûthinja. On this day, the man brings the aforementioned items. On this occasion, he had to take with him enough mûratina (wine) alongside the men to slaughter the animals. Mutwiri further reveals.

The meat was divided as follows: one front leg is taken to the girl's first born uncle on the mother's
side, *mama*. The man getting a wife is given one front leg, *gūcokerua guoko*. The lady getting married is also given some meat, *nthio*, the buttocks. Hide legs and *ngunguro* are eaten by women. Skinners leave generous flesh on the skin to be extracted and eaten by village uncircumcised boys. Old men, *athuri*, eat the liver, lungs, spleen, all the soft parts and the ribs. Cooks may taste the kidneys for salt as they cook. Young men, *anake* eat the neck. Intestines are shared. The slaughter men take an unnoticeable piece from every part. This is cooked as *ūthinji*. There's a special way the chest is skinned so as to leave a small skin. The chest is eaten by the girl's father. He's also given the testicles and the penis, *mūraagi*. The man intending to marry only took the best, fattest, castrated he-goat to his in-laws. Otherwise, he could be fined. The *ndūrūme*, male sheep, is eaten later by the mother and father of the girl. At this point *ūthoni* or a marriage relationship was officially initiated.

The third phase of dowry negotiations was called *kwarīnia rūraio*. This could be done on the day of slaughtering. A team of select men from both sides enter into a prepared room for the negotiations. The following compulsory items were requested: 15 goats, 2 cows, 2 bulls, a huge he-goat for lowering the bushes for the goats to eat, and 20 litres of honey, *Kīthembe kīa ūkī*. In addition, one was required to bring a mother’s dress, head scarf, and 2 blankets.

In addition to the items requested above, a huge water tank and a *sufuria*, aluminium cooking pot would be asked for since these changes in dowry payment and wedding were part of the evolution after the coming of Christianity, it was noted that those interested in a church wedding were to buy full wedding suit for the parents. The man would also cater for other costs associated with church wedding. He however was not expected to pay everything in full at once. When he eventually finished paying, his first born son is entitled to a cow from his mother's parents or their representatives, *Ng'ombe ya ndumbutho*, and he should carry a goat as he goes to receive his cow.

The dowry negotiations and payment were accompanied by ceremonial occasions. Wanginda reveals that *ūcūrū wa mūkio*, gruel, potatoes mashed with cereals and vegetables, *nyenyi cia njūgū* among other Embian assorted delicacies, *Mūratina* wine was only served to responsible adults in the evening where the more the supply the merrier the party was. Song and dance could erupt at any instance. Everybody would go home happy and arrangements to come and pick the daughter unceremoniously through waylaying, capture and delivery to the grooms’ house would be executed. This communal involvement in marriage ensured few instances of divorce as it was seen to be embarrassing to break a marriage after taking the entire community through the rigorous process. The above detailed description underlines the significance of dowry payment. Fortunately, westernization and Christianity did not challenge the payment of bride wealth and accompanying ceremonies. That is why the culture persisted even with the end of colonialism and after.

Moreover, the Aembu did preserve the esteemed concept of polygamy. Chesaina [2] highlights the significance of patriarchy and justifies polygamy regardless of reaction from women. In one of his proverbs, he explains that there is no cock which serves only one hen. Moreover, the Aembu did preserve the esteemed concept of polygamy. Hence, a man could many as many women as he could. For instance, Njagi wa Mûthagato had five wives before the arrival of British imperialists while other men had married at least two women.

The idea of polygamy among the Aembu supported by Njoka (O.J. 2021) asserts that the Embu men being polygamous could marry as many women as one would be able to cater for materially. This meant the polygamous man had to put up a hut for each of the woman he married since co- wives did not share a hut. When you entered a homestead, you would first see some cattle shed on the left side. The granary for storing cereals was a smaller hut and built at the far end of the compound, raised from the ground with poles to keep off water and rodents from accessing the grains. From the front entrance, *gitonyero/ mūvīrīga*, there would be huts around the compound, the wives’ huts with the single doors facing the middle part of the compound. The first wives hut was built to the right of the man’s hut and the subsequent wives huts would follow in order of most senior behind first wives’ hut. At the middle was the man’s hut, *gaarū* whose door faced away from the other huts. Every wife co-slept with her young sons and unmarried daughters in her hut. The young uncircumcised boys would sometimes sleep in their fathers’ hut but after circumcision the men lived in their own huts that they themselves built between the first and second wives huts. They
could also curve space in the grain store and live there.

The Traditional African Value System of the Aembu was impacted negatively and positively after the imposition of colonialism and missionary establishment. Education served to improve family life among the Aembu as it was given to children from tender ages of around ten to fifteen years. The parents through policy enforcement by chiefs and headmen ensured children were enrolled for elementary education at Kigari Mission Station, the first establishment in Embu North. Here they were taught basic literacy on reading and writing, alongside receiving teachings on Christianity. The grading was from standard one to standard four. Those who passed in standard four proceeded to study at Kangaru intermediate school. As much as education after colonialism was made formal, many Aembu parents were in support of children’s education whether formal or informal.

In addition, the African custom of sharing was upheld and preserved by the Aembu community. Mwinga asserts that the Aembu people showed their hospitality by sharing. Food was supposed to be shared and to be accused of being a selfish person mündū múthunu is not only a terrible insult but also labels a person as unworthy to receive other people's support, even in times of trouble. When there is no food to be offered to a visitor or a person passing by an explanation is usually offered. It was very bad manners to try to eat more than others, particularly if the people were eating from the same bowl [8].

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that the British missionaries and colonists put in great effort to endear their culture as better than the indigenous one but the more they disregarded the African culture, the more the African saw need to fight for the survival of their own values. Amidst all these changes the Aembu were willing to defend their cultural values with blood and sweat to an extent that the colonizers and missionaries bowed down and accommodated them.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, respondents’ written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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