

# Influence of Christianity on Female Circumcision Rite among the Atharaka Community of Tharaka North Sub-County, Kenya, 1920 - 2010

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of Christianity on the Female Circumcision rite among the Atharaka community in Tharaka North Sub-County, Kenya, from 1920 to 2010. Female circumcision had for centuries been observed as a cultural rite of passage, deeply embedded in the Atharaka people's identity. The arrival and spread of Christianity introduced teachings that challenged the practice, presenting it as harmful and inconsistent with Christian values. The research was guided by Merriam's (1964) theory of culture change to interpret the transformation of cultural practices under religious influence. A descriptive research design was adopted. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, archival sources, and government reports, complemented by secondary literature from books, journals, and thesis. Stratified, snowball, and purposive sampling techniques identified 50 respondents from the Tharaka North Sub-County population. Findings revealed that Christianity significantly reshaped community attitudes toward Female Circumcision. Missionary education, church teachings, and Christian-led campaigns introduced Alternative Rites of Passage (ARPs) that emphasized dignity, morality, and education over physical circumcision. By 2010, Christianity had eroded the cultural dominance of Female Circumcision and redefined concepts of morality within the Atharaka community, shifting emphasis from ritual practice to character and spiritual values. This study contributes to understanding the intersection of religion and culture in Africa and offers insights into how faith-based interventions can promote social transformation.

**Keywords:** Atharaka, Christianity, female circumcision, cultural transformation, Kenya, religion

## INTRODUCTION

Female circumcision (FC) has historically been practiced in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia as a cultural rite of passage into womanhood. In Africa, its roots are traced to ancient Egypt, from where it spread widely across the continent (Kouba & Muasher, 1985). In East Africa, FC acquired strong cultural value, shaping perceptions of maturity, marriageability, and morality. Kenya was no exception, with several ethnic groups, including the Atharaka, adopting FC as a central cultural marker (Mwaniki, 1985; Kenyatta, 1938).

The spread of Christianity in Africa introduced new ideas that challenged indigenous practices. Missionaries condemned female circumcision as harmful and degrading to women (Toubia, 1994), viewing it as incompatible with Christian morality. Among the Atharaka, missionary activity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century disrupted the traditional age-set system and gradually undermined the legitimacy of the rite (Lowenthal, 1973). Through church teachings, Christian schools, and evangelization, missionaries promoted alternative forms of socialization emphasizing education, morality, and spiritual values over circumcision.

Despite resistance, Christianity significantly transformed the practice of FC in Atharaka between 1920 and 2010. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, traditional practices such as the naming of initiates by sponsors (*Maami wa Muthenya*) gave way to Christian baptismal names (Kabui, 2015; Muguna, 2014). The tension between adherence to traditional customs and the adoption of Christian teachings created cultural and religious divisions within the community. This study examines how Christianity reshaped the perception and practice of

female circumcision in Atharaka, highlighting the role of missionary education, church campaigns, and alternative rites of passage in redefining cultural and moral values.

### Statement of the Problem.

The Atharaka community traditionally practiced female circumcision as a central cultural and religious rite of passage. However, the arrival of Christian missionaries in Tharaka from 1920 introduced new dynamics that challenged this tradition. Missionaries strongly campaigned against the practice, framing it as harmful, immoral, and inconsistent with Christian values. Despite these efforts, female circumcision was not completely abandoned, as many community members continued to practice it secretly while simultaneously engaging with Christianity. In the post-colonial era, the church intensified its opposition by promoting Alternative Rites of Passage (ARPs), such as *Ntanira na Mugambo*, which emphasized moral instruction and Christian values over physical circumcision. Yet, the persistence of clandestine circumcision practices revealed the deep cultural attachment to the rite and the limits of missionary influence. While several studies have examined female circumcision in African societies, little scholarly attention has been paid to the specific historical influence of Christianity on the Atharaka community between 1920 and 2010. This gap has left unexplored how missionary teachings, Christian education, and church-led initiatives interacted with Atharaka cultural identity to reshape or sustain the practice. Addressing this problem is essential in understanding the extent to which Christianity transformed the female circumcision rite, and the implications of these transformations for the Atharaka community.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Christianity and Female Circumcision Rite

Christianity's introduction in Africa challenged indigenous cultural systems, particularly rituals linked to identity and morality. Missionaries viewed practices such as female circumcision (FC) as incompatible with Christian ideals of purity and sanctity (Thomas, 2003). Churches such as the Church Missionary Society and the Church of Scotland Mission led aggressive campaigns against FC, condemning it as heathen and morally degrading. This stance created conflict with African communities, where FC was a symbol of social belonging and moral responsibility.

In Kenya, missionaries consistently opposed FC. Among the Kikuyu, missionary opposition led to cultural resistance and the rise of independent churches (Ndubai, 2016). Among the Nandi, female circumcision was linked to ancestral spirits, but missionaries denounced it as idolatry (Rono, 2017). The Maasai and Samburu faced similar struggles, with missionaries promoting Alternative Rites of Passage (ARP) as substitutes (Hughes, 2018; Mahero, 2019). These interventions included Christian education, civic awareness, and church-based refuge centers for girls fleeing the rite (Palm, Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017). Cultural resistance persisted, however, as elders perceived missionary interventions as an attack on heritage.

Not all Christian institutions uniformly opposed FC. The African Independent Pentecostal Church of Africa (AIPCA) accommodated FC while maintaining Christian identity (Ndubai, 2016). Christianity's role in shaping perceptions of FC was thus complex. Some churches rejected it entirely, while others tolerated or redefined it. For the Atharaka, this duality created a contested religious space around female circumcision.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Merriam's Theory of Culture Change (1964), which argues that cultural practices are dynamic and transform when exposed to external influences or internal reinterpretations. Change occurs through adaptation, assimilation, or resistance, depending on how a community responds to new value systems. In the Atharaka Community, female circumcision was traditionally a central rite of passage. With the arrival of Christianity in the 1920s, new religious values challenged its moral and spiritual basis. Missionaries condemned the practice and promoted alternatives rites of passage. This led to varied responses: some adopted Christian teachings, others resisted, while many continued the rite secretly. The theory explains these shifts by showing how Christianity acted as an external influence that reshaped the practice, leading to both persistence and transformation within Atharaka society.

## METHODOLOGY

A descriptive design was employed to examine cultural change over time, capturing narratives on Christianity's influence on female circumcision among the Atharaka Community between 1920 and 2010. The study was conducted in Tharaka North Sub-County, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya, in four locations: Gatue, Kathagacini, Kanjoro, and Maragwa purposively selected for exposure to both traditional practices and missionary activity. Participants included Atharaka community members across three age cohorts (18–35, 36–59, 60+years), as well as medical personnel, traditional circumcisors, and clergy. Using stratified, purposive, and snowball sampling, 50 respondents were selected: 30 community members, 8 traditional circumcisors, 8 health professionals, and 4 clergy.

Primary data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews schedules. Archival documents from the Kenya National Archives and secondary literature from libraries supplemented the data. Data were analyzed thematically according to research objectives. FGDs and interviews were transcribed, categorized, and interpreted to identify patterns of change. Approval was obtained from the Tharaka University Ethics Committee and NACOSTI. Informed consent was obtained, confidentiality maintained, and participation voluntary.

### **Influence of Christianity on Female Circumcision Rite of Atharaka Community From 1920 To 2010**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the influence of Christianity on the female circumcision rite among the Atharaka Community of Tharaka North Sub-County from 1920 to 2010. The discussion focuses on three main areas: the prelude to colonial rule, the establishment of Christianity in Tharaka Sub-County, and the subsequent influence of Christianity on female circumcision. The chapter integrates archival evidence, oral testimonies, and focus group discussions to provide a historical, cultural, and socio-religious analysis of this transformation.

#### **The Establishment of Missionary Activities in Tharaka**

Before the arrival of missionaries and colonial administrators, Kenya's interactions with the outside world had already shaped its social, economic, and cultural development. The country had served as a key node in long-distance trade routes connecting East Africa with Arabia and the broader Indian Ocean region. Arab traders, particularly from the Swahili coast, established commercial networks through which goods such as ivory, spices, gold, and slaves were exchanged. These interactions facilitated the diffusion of ideas, cultural practices, and early religious influences, notably Islam along the coast. The interior, including Tharaka, however, remained largely untouched until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when European colonialism and Christian missions penetrated the region. Unlike earlier traders, missionaries sought not merely economic engagement but also moral and spiritual reform, targeting indigenous customs such as the female circumcision rite, which they viewed as incompatible with Christian teachings on bodily purity and womanhood (Anderson, 2005).

The Portuguese arrival in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century under Vasco da Gama introduced a different dimension of European influence. Although largely confined to the coast, their commercial and religious engagements laid the groundwork for subsequent ideological incursions. Catholic missionaries accompanying Portuguese expeditions sought to convert local populations, often facing resistance from coastal Islamic authorities (Kirk-Greene, 1968). These early efforts, albeit limited, created precedents for the later, more organized missionary activity into Kenya's interior, which intensified under British colonial protection.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) and Consolata Fathers established mission stations in Tharaka, introducing Christianity alongside education and medical services (Thomas, 2003). Missionaries' objectives extended beyond spiritual conversion; they sought to reform indigenous social systems. Female circumcision, perceived as barbaric and incompatible with Christian moral principles, became a primary focus of their interventions (Lonsdale, 2023). This moralizing mission intertwined with colonial administrative policies, which together undermined traditional authority structures such as the *Njuri Ncheke*, the council of elders responsible for overseeing initiation rites (Muraya, 2009). The Atharaka society, organized

around age-grade systems, performed female circumcision as a central rite marking readiness for marriage and communal integration. Elders orchestrated elaborate ceremonies blending ritualized cutting with ethical instruction and kinship education. One oral historian Kinya from Gatue recounted:

“Ntaano was not just cutting; it was our school.” Its embeddedness in cosmology rendered it resistant to external critique, a resilience later challenged by Christian moralizing. (Kinya O. I Gatue, 2023)

Muthoni from Kanjoro similarly reflected on the transformative impact of missionary contact:

“Before the coming of the white man, the Atharaka community had organized systematic social life. All rites of passage were clearly observed. Murungu was worshipped in shrines. When the Whiteman came, he brought his religion that confused the Atharaka community. He forced the community to abandon female circumcision and brought education, medicine and dressing very different from what the community knew.” (Muthoni O.I, Kanjoro, 9th Dec, 2023).

These observations underscore the dual nature of missionary influence: religious and moral reform intertwined with social and cultural disruption. African Inland Mission (AIM) in particular targeted youth, condemning ancestral rituals as pagan while promoting education and Christian salvation (Sandgren, 1989). The missionaries’ presence created generational and ideological rifts, as educated Tharaka converted to Christianity and adopted new lifestyles that challenged traditional initiation norms.

### **Influence of Christianity on Female Circumcision Rite among the Atharaka Community**

Christianity was formally introduced to the Atharaka Community in the 1920s through British colonial missionary societies, primarily the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and Methodist missions. Missionaries condemned female circumcision as “heathen” and incompatible with Christian ethics, particularly because of the associated health risks and perceived violation of bodily integrity (Murray, 1976). The 1920s and 1930s saw the rise of the “Female Circumcision Crisis” in Kenya, with missionaries demanding that converts renounce the practice, while traditional elders insisted on its continuation (Thomas, 2003).

Archival documents illustrate the perceived urgency of missionary and colonial intervention:

“Female circumcision is dangerous and usually results in difficulties when a woman is giving birth. It definitely should be abandoned.” (KNA/MRU/1/9/3/1957)

Missionaries imposed educational and religious alternatives, emphasizing hygiene, morality, and spiritual formation as substitutes for physical cutting (WHO, 2025). Educated women began questioning the necessity of FC citing health complications and advocating for Christian-led symbolic alternatives, known as Alternative Rites of Passage (ARPs) (Chege et al., 2001).

Colonial authorities occasionally enforced bans on FC, although inconsistent implementation fostered resistance. By the 1960s, Christianity had influenced only a minority of the population, largely those in proximity to mission stations. Post-independence African-led churches offered more contextualized Christianity, allowing a nuanced negotiation between faith and culture (Githiga, 2001). The rise of global anti-FC discourse, particularly through WHO and UNICEF campaigns, further reinforced Christian advocacy against the practice.

Christian NGOs such as World Vision and TWWP partnered with local churches to provide moral education, ARPs, and mentorship. The government’s 2001 Children’s Act and the 2010 Constitution provided legal reinforcement, yet clandestine circumcisions persisted due to cultural and economic pressures (UNICEF, 2025; WHO, 2010). The interaction between Christianity and FC reflects a syncretic approach, blending moral instruction, communal ritual, and cultural negotiation (Githiga, 2001).

### **Role of Missionary Education in Transforming Female Circumcision Rite Among the Atharaka Community.**

Missionary education played a pivotal role in redefining womanhood and moral authority among the Atharaka. Prior to missionary intervention, FC represented a central rite of passage, combining ethical instruction,



spiritual observance, and social apprenticeship (Thomas, 2003). Missionary schools offered alternative curricula emphasizing Christian morality, hygiene, literacy, and delayed marriage, thereby undermining the circumcision-marriage link (Karanja, 2003).

Archival evidence demonstrates deliberate curricular strategies to challenge FC:

“Girls were taught domestic science, hygiene, reading, and scripture, with a strong focus on sexual purity and the dangers of traditional customs.” (KNA/DC/MRU/3/4/1, 1932)

By the 1930s, missionaries introduced ARPs, providing symbolic rites to replace cutting while retaining the communal aspects of initiation (Shell-Duncan & Hernlund, 2000). Focus group discussions with middle-aged adults in Maragwa (June 2024) highlighted the ideological shift:

“We used to believe a girl was only a woman after the cut. But in school, we learned that becoming a woman was about character and knowledge, not pain and blood.” (FGD, Maragwa, June 2024).

Missionary education, therefore, created a new moral and social framework for Atharaka girls, privileging education, faith, and spiritual maturity over traditional genital cutting.

### **The Emergence of Independent Institutions and Reinterpretation of Atharaka Female Circumcision Rite.**

Independent African schools and churches emerged as mediators between missionary demands and cultural preservation. These institutions, such as AIPCA and AIC, maintained moral instruction while transforming initiation practices by substituting physical cutting with Christian teachings, mentorship, and symbolic ceremonies (Kinoti M. K, 2021).

An oral testimony confirmed this approach:

“In Tharaka, these movements gained momentum in the post-World War II era... by the 1950s, AIPCA and the African Inland Church (AIC) had established mobile prayer houses and schools across Marimanti, Tunyai, and Chiakariga.” (O.I Rev. M’Itung’u, 2023).

Archival documents corroborate that independent schools conducted alternative ceremonies, locally referred to as *kubatizwa kwa kawaida*, replacing the traditional circumcision rite while retaining moral and communal functions (KNA/DC/MRU/4/3/7, 1965). Focus group discussions with women elders also highlighted the inclusivity of independent churches:

“We joined the independent church because it allowed us to attend worship even though many of us had undergone the cut. Mission churches excluded us.” (FGD, Gatue, March 2024)

Through these reforms, independent institutions facilitated internal cultural negotiation, allowing the Atharaka to reconcile Christian values with elements of tradition.

### **The Post-Colonial NGOs and Female Circumcision Rite Among the Atharaka Community**

Post-independence NGOs expanded anti-FC efforts using rights-based, health-oriented, and participatory strategies. Organizations such as MYWO, AMREF, Plan International, and World Vision Kenya promoted community education, health awareness, and ARPs (Njue & Askew, 2004).

Archival evidence underscores earlier patterns of resistance:

“Propaganda encouraging early initiation had been entirely successful... The people perceive missionary resistance as foreign interference, and cling to their traditional ways with even more intensity.” (KNA, DC/MRU/1/3, 1943)

NGOs employed culturally sensitive methods, incorporating local languages, idioms, and symbolic rites. *Ntanira na Mugambo* (1996) is an example of ARP integrating moral, spiritual, and social education, reaching thousands of girls and aligning with Christian ethics (Kamwara, Schroeder, & Kamande, 2022).

Livelihood programs for former circumcisers provided economic alternatives, further reducing dependence on traditional FC practices. Oral testimony highlighted this transformation:

“I used to cut girls to survive. Now I teach them how to protect their dignity and earn from training. My life changed, and I have peace.” (O.I with Mama Agnes N., Maragwa, 2023)

Despite these interventions, resistance persisted in

some rural areas through clandestine or “medicalized” FGM, illustrating the interplay between cultural, economic, and religious forces (WHO, 2010).

## CONCLUSION

The transformation of female circumcision among the Atharaka community was shaped by missionary education, independent schools, churches, and post-colonial NGOs. Missionaries opposed the practice on moral and spiritual grounds

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Strengthen Alternative Rites of Passage (ARPs):** Churches, NGOs, and local leaders should continue promoting ARPs that preserve cultural identity without physical circumcision. These programs should emphasize dignity, education, and moral growth.
2. **Integrate Education and Faith:** Schools and church institutions should reinforce values of morality, womanhood, and personal dignity through teaching and mentorship, offering young people alternatives to the traditional rite.
3. **Promote Community Dialogue:** Open forums bringing together elders, women, and youth should be encouraged to reduce secrecy, stigma, and resistance around the abandonment of female circumcision.
4. **Support Policy Implementation:** Government agencies should work closely with churches and community organizations to enforce existing anti-FGM laws while respecting cultural identity and promoting community ownership of change.

## Future Research

Future studies should build on this historical foundation by exploring how younger generations in Atharaka Community view female circumcision and Christianity beyond 2010. Such work could examine whether the cultural changes observed have endured, declined, or taken new forms. Areas of focus may include the role of modern churches, NGOs, social media, and legal frameworks in shaping attitudes, as well as comparisons with neighboring communities such as the Akamba and Kikuyu.

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