



INFLUENCE OF INDEGINOUS LEARNING EXPERIENCES RELATED TO INITIATION RITES ON SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IN MAASAI SOCIETY OF KENYA

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ABSTRACT

In Maasai society of Kenya, adolescent children are subjected to initiation rites which include surgical operation of the genitals followed by a period of seclusion and learning experiences on the responsibilities and obligations of adulthood. This study examined those learning experiences and attempted to explain why they make Maasai school children to detest schooling. The study was conducted in designated research sites: Olokurto in north Narok District, Narok Town- Lemek in central Narok and Morijo in southern Narok. Its data was collected using document analysis, respondent interviews and focus group discussions. The study established that learning experiences associated with initiation rites in Maasai society prepared adolescent children to become full members of their society. During this stage in life, some of the lessons obtained included: responsibility, citizenship, patriotism, abandonment of children habits, comradeship and family life, among others. The study further established that these lessons make Maasai initiates who were already enrolled in school to lose interest in school. The study concluded that subject elements of Maasai people's learning experiences associated with initiation rites could be identified and that they invariably influenced adolescent Maasai children to detest schooling.

KEY WORDS: Indigenous Learning Experiences, Initiation Rites, Circumcision, Clitoridectomy, Maasai, Kenya.

1. Introduction

Many African societies perform initiation rites on their children in order to admit them into the status of adulthood with attendant responsibilities and obligations. Initiation rites are ceremonies of transition through which initiates are given instructions and advice in preparation for their expected new roles in society (Munthali and Zulu, 2007). Among the Maasai pastoralists of Kenya, initiations rites are marked by surgical operations that are characterized by circumcision for the boys and clitoridectomy for the girls.

Once these operations have been done, Maasai boys and girls are secluded in separate homes and as they recuperate, they are trained about general and specific responsibilities and obligations of adulthood. As in the case in Maasai society of Kenya, initiation ceremonies in some communities in Malawi in southern Africa provide a platform for addressing the widely held notion among initiates that attending these ceremonies symbolizes that one is not a child anymore and can have sex, and therefore capable of procreating (Munthali and Zulu, 2007; Ronoh, 2008). This study focuses more on the learning experiences associated with initiation rites among the Maasai rather than the surgical operations of the genitals.

1.1 Literature Review

In most African societies, initiation to adulthood is marked by circumcision and clitoridectomy of adolescent boys and girls respectively. This cultural activity is held in high esteem. According to Munthali and Zulu (2007), circumcision is the most commonly practiced rite in African societies. Ronoh (2008) observed that during Kenya's colonial and post colonial periods, the Maasai society held initiation rites with attended learning and training experiences, which had significant implications on school attendance. Vavra (1991) noted that in Maasai society, initiation rites take place between early teens and mid twenties. Keating et al (2005) observed that apart from group attraction, initiations can also produce conformity among new members. Kamau (2012) noted that those initiated together developed a strong group identity.

Ronoh (2008) further pointed out, that these rites are distinct obsession of the Maasai youths and they result in a marked disinterest in schooling. Saitoti (1986) vividly captured Maasai school boys' obsession of circumcision thus '...many students would run away to be circumcised... (and) many never returned (to school)' p.39. Earlier in 1950, the principal of the Government Masai School (GMS) at Narok Township reported about how circumcision ceremonies made Maasai boys become disinterested in schooling (KC, 1950). In 1969, the Narok District Commissioner reported that in Maasai society, 'circumcision has a retarding influence to (sic) development as it usually takes children out of school' (ROK, 1969, p.4).

Perhaps the indigenous learning experiences encountered during initiation stage stress the superiority of the Maasai culture and subsequent rejection of aspects of foreign culture imposed on them, including school-based education. This may be in keeping with observation made by Rigby (1985). He stated that pastoralists believe that their cultures are superior to those of other people that and show little inclination to accept change, the origin of which is external. Klumpp and Kratz (1993) added that the Maasai ethnic pride makes them to believe in their superiority over other ethnic groups or races, hence their near rejection of school-based education, which is a social structure of the West. This belief is so entrenched that

Holland (1996) observed that for every six Maasai children, only one goes to school. With respect to the reviewed literature, the questions are: What elements in the indigenous learning experiences related to initiation rites make Maasai youths to lose interest in schooling. How do such elements make Maasai youngsters to detest schooling?

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Indigenous learning experiences in Maasai societies engender for reaching socio-cultural results. They enabled the society to understand their culture and the natural environment. Indigenous learning experiences related to initiation rites formed strong transitional elements from childhood to adulthood in Maasai society. Such experiences make recipients to shun anything they had been engaged in as children and encouraged them to project a new image of a grown up. When Maasai school children participate in initiation rites they develop a strong opposition of anything they had been doing as children, including attending school by those that had enrolled in such institutions. This study examined the elements in those learning experiences that made Maasai youngsters to stop attending school. At the same time, the study explained how indigenous learning experiences associated with initiation rites made children to detest schooling in Maasai society.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

To conduct this study the researcher pursued the following objectives:

- To examine the subject elements of indigenous learning experiences related to Maasai children's initiation rites.
- To explain how indigenous learning experiences associated with initiation rites makes Maasai youngsters to detest schooling.

1.4 Research Methodology

This study was conducted in the Maasai district of Narok in Kenya as part of a wider research project that lasted from 1999 to 2008. It was carried out in three designated research sites: Olokurto in the north of Narok District, Narok Town – Lemek in the Central Narok and Morijo, the south of the district.

Data for the study was collected using three distinct techniques: Analysis of documentary sources, respondent interviews and, focus group discussions. Documents were published or unpublished and were obtained from libraries and archives. They included colonial and post colonial official reports and records as well as theses and dissertations. They were records made by actual participants or witnesses of socio-cultural activities in Maasai society. Structured interviews were conducted on samples derived from the following respondents: Maasai elders, head teachers and youths. These respondents were selected on the basis of their resourcefulness in relation to the study problem. Focus group discussions were held with secondary school students in the three research sites. The discussions were based on a guide that had questions focusing on the study problem.

2. Study Findings and Discussion

One of the findings of this study was that indigenous learning experiences associated with initiation rites prepared Maasai youths to become full members of their society. The rites formed a formidable transition from childhood to adulthood in the society. The study further established that adolescent Maasai boys and girls

had to take part in these rites without exception. Initiation rites were held in any month of the year, though in most cases they took place during wet months of November and December.

2.1.1 Indigenous Learning experiences Related to Maasai Girls' Initiation Rites

After clitoridectomy, Maasai girls were secluded and nursed in the home of their sponsoring mother. During this period, they received learning experiences with varied subject elements to prepare them for wifehood and motherhood. These included lessons on how to behave towards their husbands and how to take care of children. The experiences also entailed lessons on marital responsibilities, attributes of good character as well as social and family life. Initiated girls were also taught how to take care of their husbands' relatives, including parents-in-law as well as members of husband's age-set.

In addition, girl initiates received lessons on humility, generosity, child birth and child rearing practices. Besides, girl initiates also received learning experiences related to domestic chores such as preparation of different types of meals, milking, and washing of milk calabashes, among others. At this stage, Maasai girls were instructed about the importance of being a responsible citizen and to be patriotic to the society and especially by upholding its culture and pride. Thereafter, patriotism was exhibited through Maasai women's commitments to their ethnic identity and personality with specially prepared necklaces, beaded ear straps, metallic bangles, and beaded vestments, among others. Similarly, emphasis was placed on the awareness of cultural norms and beliefs and exhibition of uninhibited participation in ceremonies and festivals. Maasai girls were also advised to relinquish childish behaviour and to assume the habits of adults. For Maasai girls, initiation rites were gateways to marriage. For this reason, female Maasai initiates enjoyed their lessons and earnestly looked forward to the day when they would be married.

The subjects of indigenous learning experiences related to initiation rites of Maasai girls were relevant to immediate life in the society unlike school subjects. Indigenous Maasai learning experiences had a disruptive influence on girls' attendance of school. Maasai girls went through initiation rites when they were in primary Standards five, six or seven. So strong were the learning experiences that girls lost interest in schooling and yearned to get married. When they rejoined school after these rites, they felt big and would detest to be instructed together with uninitiated children. They frowned at lady teachers especially from communities that did not initiate, and this attitude invariably made them to drop out of school.

The society encouraged initiated Maasai girls to drop out of school and look for husbands. A number of respondents and focus groups observed that Maasai society generally gave signals to initiated girls that they were ready to be wives and mothers rather than attend school. The respondents and focus groups stated that in Maasai society, there was an entrenched belief that girls were not meant for school. In the society, the girl-child was considered to be a second rate human being so that a boy-child would rather be sent to school while his sisters remained at home. One girls' focus group revealed: 'Our fathers silently encourage us to engage in relationships with men, especially the old ones. When we become pregnant, it is their joy for they anticipate dowry from whoever is responsible.' A primary school head teacher in the Morijo research site in southern Narok narrated an incident where the only girl in primary Standard Eight in 2001, slackened in school attendance. After investigation, he established that the girl was involved in an intimate relationship with an old man in her home's neighbourhood. When the head teacher requested the girl's father and brother to dissuade her, they were indifferent. The father refused to cooperate as the brother bluntly stated: 'What my initiated sister does with men is not my business and I don't even want to know.' Thus the learning experiences received during initiation period helped to psyche Maasai girls to anticipate marriage. Such experiences therefore made such girls to lose interest in school-based education and subsequently led to their dropping out of school.

2.1.2 Indigenous Learning Experiences Related To Maasai Boy's Initiation Rites

As was the case with girls, Maasai boys undergo initiation rites immediately after circumcision. Initiation rites took place during any month of the year but preferably in November and December. As Bernardi (1948) observed, circumcisers are not Maasai but in most cases they were Dorobo or Kikuyu tribesmen. Maasai people seem to dislike activities and operations that lead to shedding of blood of a fellow Maasai.

Unlike girls, Maasai boys received limited learning experiences during initiation period; this is because they were yet to join the warrior hood (Il-murrang) stage during which the training and learning experiences are not only formal but more vigorous and diversified. Thus during initiation periods, Maasai boys obtained less intense lessons which normally psyche them for the impending experiences during the warrior hood stage, which were normally more comprehensive, relevant and intense.

During their initiation periods, Maasai boys took lessons on indigenous civic education with subjects like: Comradeship, social cohesion, patriotism, leadership, command, conflict resolution, reconciliation and effective communication. The

study established that during boys' initiation period, office bearers of age set spokesman and his assistant are selected from the oratorically gifted initiates. This finding matches with what was established earlier by Bernardi (1948)

One primary school head teacher at Olokurto research site in north Narok District noted that boys were particularly instructed about their clans and how to socialise and live in the community. They were also instructed on skills of property (cattle wealth) acquisition and importance of animal husbandry. In addition, various skills were developed among the boys during this initiation stage, for instance, the skills of leadership, defence, command, and matrimonial harmony. At the same time, attitudes such as commitment to Maasai culture and identity as well as attitudes of joy and desire to enter into the next stage of life (warrior hood) after this stage were enhanced in male initiates. The subject matter learned through initiation rites were relevant to the lives of Maasai in their local environments unlike school subjects, which had contents which were sometimes of no immediate use. The onset of the warrior status soon after circumcision caused Maasai school boys to lose interest in schooling. This is because initiation rites provided relevant and exciting learning experiences unlike school-based education. Similar findings were recorded by Tignor (1976) and were frequently reported by the principals of GMS.

Initiated Maasai boys despised women teachers, as they do to other female folk. In their indigenous learning and training activities, they were socialised to believe that women were lesser people who were not different from children. The result of this socialisation was not without strains on social cultural relationships including attendance of schools. One Area Education Officer captured this disposition as follows: 'Older boys and men consider all women, including their mothers and lady teachers as inferior or simply children who should never have control over them, let alone punish them. As a result, older boys and men do not take lady teacher seriously. At times school boys reacted violently against lady teachers when the latter punished them. In the Morijo research site in southern Narok, a young male respondent stated that he dropped out of school after being caned by a lady teacher. He narrated the incident thus: 'On the last day I went to school, I differed with a lady teacher. As she punished me by caning, I grabbed the cane and beat her before fleeing to join murranism (warrior hood), which I liked very much'.

As a common attitude enhanced by indigenous Maasai initiation learning experiences, many respondents and focus groups suggested that women teachers should not punish initiated Maasai school boys. Thus the position of women in indigenous Maasai society vis-à-vis their position as teachers is a factor that contributed to a negative adoption of school-based education. This is because, while Maasai traditions treated women as lesser beings, schooling promoted their equality with men. Many Maasai youths stopped attending schools because of such or similar circumstances that tended to be in conflict with their upbringing. Their upbringing and especially learning experiences obtained during initiation rites were too strong in deflecting them to the extent that boys who were already enrolled in schools found it uncomfortable to remain in such institutions.

3. Conclusion

Maasai children including those attending schools were initiated into adulthood when they attained adolescence age. Initiation rites included learning experiences on subjects that enhanced responsibilities and obligation in Maasai society. Lessons obtained during this stage, made initiates to take pride of their culture and identity and shun anything that tended to misrepresent these attributes, including attendance of school. Invariably, indigenous learning experiences related to initiation rites made Maasai school going children to lose interest in schooling. This was because such experiences had very exciting lessons with subject contents which were in tandem with Maasai children's quest for survival.

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