

AFRICA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

**VALUE PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS ON FORMAL EDUCATION
FOR THE GIRL CHILD IN LIGHT OF CULTURAL PRACTICES
AMONG THE ABAKURIA OF SOUTH NYANZA IN KENYA**

**BY
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**A Thesis submitted to the University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in Christian Education**

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Student's Declaration

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SOUTH NYANZA IN KENYA**

I declare that this is my original work and has not been submitted to any other
College or University for academic credit

The views presented herein are not necessarily those of the Africa International
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ABSTRACT

The Abakuria have for a long time accorded minimal attention to the education of the girl child, as specific gender and cultural practices in the community continue to affect her educational attainment, and yet this is a neglected area of study. Low educational attainment among the girls in Kuria district appears to be related to the value that the parents and the wider community place on formal education for the girl child. The purpose of this study was to understand parental value perceptions of formal education for the girl child, in light of the cultural practices of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriage in the Abakuria community.

A qualitative research design employing the ethnographic tradition was used for the study. Data was collected through face-to-face open-ended interviews. The twenty four participants interviewed in the research were drawn from Mabera division of Kuria district. Voice files recorded during the interviews were transcribed and the data was analyzed.

This study established that among Abakuria families, there is a significant adherence to the Christian faith, which advocates values that are contrary to the traditional practice of FGM. The committed Christian parents have therefore abandoned FGM and do not put their daughters through it. Their daughters were also observed to have a high educational attainment. FGM however, continues to be practiced among those families where parents are nominal Christians, and families where parents are non-Christians, and who still value this cultural practice.

The age of girls undergoing FGM presently was found to have dropped by at least ten years from what it was in the traditional setting and children as young as eight years are undergoing FGM. The traditional purpose of FGM also appears to have undergone change, and most of the girls currently do not get married soon after FGM as in the past. Rather, most of them return to school, and it would appear that formal schooling is what keeps them from early marriage. Many girls however still drop out of school at various stages after returning to school, which greatly compromises their chances of a high educational attainment. Besides the cultural factors, limited financial resources to pay for secondary and higher education for girls also emerged as a contributing factor to the low educational attainment among girls in this community.

In light of the various subjects examined, and concerns arising from the study, the researcher includes some recommendations on possible ways of dealing with the cultural practices of FGM and early marriage, in order to provide assistance to raise the educational attainment of the girl child in Kuria district.

In order to obtain a holistic picture concerning the education of Kuria girls, several recommendations that appeal for further research were made. Among them, research on non-cultural factors that affect the educational attainment of the Kuria girl child was recommended.

TO

To the Kuria girl child, the passion for whose education was my principal motivation
for this work.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Gender inequity in education has a long history in Kenya, which has its roots in deeply entrenched beliefs about the importance and the role of women in the traditional African society. Poverty and the patriarchal ideology in most African societies have served to greatly favour the education of the boy child over that of the girl child, and available resources are invested in the education of the male child when limited opportunities and resources pose a challenge. When resources are depleted, it is the girl who is normally taken out of school and forced into early marriage in order for her family to raise money through the payment of bride price, which resources are channelled to the education of the boy child (Macheru 2009). As a result, although most communities in Kenya have embraced education for the girl child and there has been an increase in the participation in education for girls, there are still more boys than girls in school, and the completion and transition (to higher levels) rate for boys is higher in most cases (Centre for the Study of Adolescence 2008). Lack of basic education and low educational attainment for females has historically characterized education in Kenya. Although the effects of these long historic injustices cannot be erased overnight, every effort should be made to ensure that the African girl child beats all odds to remain ahead of these cultural beliefs and traditions which have seen so many generations of women drown in ignorance due to lack of basic education.

Despite the introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) in Kenya more than seven years ago, there are still significant geographic and gender disparities

between the numbers of children attending school. Out of the gross enrolment of 1.23 million children who were enrolled in primary school after the introduction of FPE, 592,310 were girls, which was only 48.2 per cent (Okech 2005). The Central Bureau of Statistics reveals that there are higher drop-out and lower completion rates among girls, especially in upper primary and secondary levels in certain parts of the country (Centre for the Study of Adolescence 2008). This then suggests that there are other issues to be addressed besides the pronouncement of the FPE policy. There are other major factors that cause low educational attainment among girls in these areas. According to CSA, poverty, gender discrimination and preference for the boy child, as well as several cultural practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) that favour early marriage are some of the factors contributing to this current state of affairs (Centre for the Study on Adolescence 2008). Among other reasons therefore, girls are kept out of school by critical issues that have a cultural bearing, and they are more likely to drop out of school due to social and cultural challenges (Okech 2005).

In Kenya, like in most post-colonial African states, education policy and practice have failed to address issues that will reinforce and challenge cultures within society to ensure that the girl child is given an equal opportunity to education as her boy child counterpart (Okech 2005). Based on figures from the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), the Centre for the Study of Adolescence reports that Nyanza province, in which Kuria district falls, recorded the highest dropout rate for girls overall, at both primary and secondary school levels between 2004 and 2006 (Centre for the Study of Adolescence 2008, 28-29). The number of girls that complete primary school education is lower than that of boys in the same province, those that proceed to secondary school is even much lower, and the number of girls that progress to university and post-secondary education is negligible compared to that of

the boys and compared to the situation in other districts in the country (Centre for the Study of Adolescence 2008, 32). The magnitude of the problem of low educational attainment among girls in Kuria district is aggravated by parental attitudes and perceptions of the value of formal education for girls, given that FGM and early marriage, which significantly interfere with girl child education, are enduring cultural practices among the Abakuria.

Problem Statement

Specific gender and cultural practices continue to affect the educational attainment of the girl child among the Abakuria, and yet this is a neglected area of study. Certain cultural practices such as FGM and early marriage have persisted in some parts of Kenya including Kuria district, significantly hindering girls' access to education. The multi-faceted nature of these practices frustrates government efforts to ensure the right to education for girls, often altering their whole destiny. Despite the existence of legislation prohibiting these two harmful cultural practices, they are still common, and continue to have a negative impact on the lives of Kuria girls.

Low educational attainment among girls in Kuria district continues to be a disquieting problem. This problem seems to be related to the value that the parents and the wider community place on formal education for girls, which ultimately appears to determine the education level to which parents are willing to encourage and support their daughters to attain. In Kenya, Primary education is free but not compulsory, and secondary education still attracts a number of non-tuition fees costs to be met by parents. The decision and responsibility of sending or not sending their daughters to school therefore rests on the parents. The parents' decision is no doubt based on what they perceive to be the value of girl child education. Their perception of the value of education for girls is in turn influenced by cultural views concerning

the proper role of women, and deeply entrenched cultural practices in the Abakuria community, namely Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriage. As such, the investigation of parental perceptions of educational attainment for girls, in view of FGM and early marriage in this community, becomes the research issue for this work.

Purpose of the Study

More than fifteen years of interaction with members of the Abakuria community as a partial insider has drawn the researcher's attention to issues of great concern that education policy and practice have failed to address. These are cultural values and practices that pose a great challenge to the educational attainment of the Kuria girl child. This realization aroused an interest in the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of these specific cultural values and practices, and to investigate the value placed on formal educational attainment for girls in this community in light of such cultural values and practices. Such an understanding would help to challenge the Kuria culture, in order to ensure that the Kuria girl child is given an equal opportunity for formal education as the boy. The overriding objective of this study was to discover facts relating to the parental value perceptions of girl child educational attainment, in view of the cultural practices of FGM and early marriage.

Research Questions

The research was guided by the following central research question (CRQ):

CRQ: What are the value perceptions of parents on the educational attainment for the Kuria girl child in light of the cultural practices of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriage?

Research Sub-questions (RSQ1, RSQ2, RSQ3)

RSQ1. What value do Abakuria parents attach to the cultural practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)?

RSQ2. What value do Abakuria parents attach to the cultural practice of early marriage?

RSQ3. What value do Abakuria parents attach to educational attainment for girls?

Limitations and Delimitations

Delimitations

The Abakuria are a large community who inhabit a large geographical area and straddle across both Kenya and Tanzania. This study was however limited to the small community of Abakuria people living in Kenya and did not address the Abakuria of Tanzania. Kuria is an administrative district in the Nyanza province of Kenya, and Maberu division is located in Kuria district, four kilometres from the Kenya-Tanzania border town of Isibania. The interviews were administered to informants selected from parents in Maberu division in Kuria district. With regard to external validity therefore, the findings of this study will only be generalized to members of the Abakuria community living Maberu division, although application can be drawn for the wider Abakuria community living in Kenya. Since the researcher could not expect to gain a deep understanding of all the cultural practices of the Abakuria people in a broad sense due to the scope of the study, the study only focussed on parental perceptions of formal educational attainment for girls in light of two cultural practices, namely Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriage.

Limitations

The researcher being a member of the Abakuria community by marriage, speaks sufficient *Egekuria* (the local language) to communicate and to carry out everyday conversation, but was not confident of having sufficient language proficiency and culture-specific vocabulary to carry out the research fully in *Egekuria*. This inability to use complex language structures was a setback to some extent. The researcher has full language proficiency in Kiswahili, and all of the people interviewed were able to communicate in Kiswahili, given that they live on the Kenyan side of the Tanzanian border where the predominant language of communication is Kiswahili. Yet there was a limitation, in that the Abakuria people interviewed could possibly explain some things better in their mother tongue. The influence therefore of their thinking in vernacular (*Egekuria*) while expressing themselves in another language (Kiswahili), may influence the interpretation of findings to some extent. Sensitivity of the cultural practices to be addressed, especially that of FGM, could not allow the researcher to conduct joint interviews with both parents. Therefore, fathers and mothers were interviewed separately, which meant that interviews needed to be allocated a longer period of time.

The religious commitment of informants was not a criteria used in selection of the study sample, because this factor was not the focus of this study. The analysis of the study was however based on three categories created on the basis of informants' religious commitment. The proportions of the religious commitment categories in the study may however not be a true reflection of their distribution in the wider Abakuria population, and the researcher therefore acknowledges the limitations that this may impose on the findings of the study, especially with regard to generalizations.

Significance of the Study

Numerous campaigns have been made by human rights and children's rights activists concerning harmful cultural practices that affect the girl child, and studies have been carried out in many communities concerning the cultural practice of FGM and early marriage. However, it appears that little academic research has been carried out to understand parents' perceptions of these practices and how they affect the educational attainment of the girl child, specifically among the Abakuria. This study will therefore be significant to various stakeholders. The findings and recommendations of this research will inform education policy makers as they strategize on providing assistance for the Kuria girl child in order to raise her educational attainment level. Similarly, the findings of the study will aid churches and NGOs in their efforts in FGM and early marriage mitigation, so as to more effectively serve the Abakuria community. This study will also serve as a resource to Parents-Teachers Associations (PTA) of schools in Kuria district. It will provide them with resourceful insights as they seek to improve communication and develop links between the schools and the community. These links will serve to communicate directly to parents, not only the value of formal education but also the significance of a high educational attainment for the girl child, and the effects of FGM and early marriage on it. The communication it is hoped will provide a practical solution to the problem of educational wastage, which among the Abakuria manifests in girls leaving school prematurely. This study will add to the repertoire of existing knowledge, by introducing the perspective of how parental perceptions of FGM and early marriage, affect the educational attainment of the girl child in this community. It will also serve as a reference tool for researchers who wish to do studies in related fields.

Definition of Terms

Education: A broad definition of education is the process through which knowledge, skills and values are transferred from one generation to the other. In this study unless otherwise specified, the term “education” will refer to the formal or school mode of education.

Educational Attainment: Educational attainment for the purposes of this study will refer to completion of any of the three major levels of formal education in Kenya, namely primary school, secondary school or university and post-secondary institutions.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM): The term in this study refers to procedures that intentionally remove, alter or injure female genital organs for non-medical reasons, but rather for cultural, traditional, and/or religious reasons.

Early Marriage: For the purposes of this study, the term will refer to the marriage of a girl who is a minor, defined as a child less than 18 years of age. Other terms applied to early marriages include “child marriages” and “child brides.”

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the Abakuria community, traditional values and ways of life are of prime importance, especially to the older people. Many parents are misinformed about the value of formal education for girls, especially considering the importance they attach to these traditional values and practices.

This section will begin by discussing formal education, and women education in Kenya. A brief history of the Abakuria people and their culture from a general perspective will follow, and then the researcher will proceed to discuss the specific cultural practices of FGM and early marriage. Finally, other non-cultural factors that are likely to interfere with the educational attainment of the Kuria girl child will briefly be discussed.

Formal Education in Kenya

Formal education was introduced in Kenya in the 19th century by western Christian missionaries, and it was therefore linked to Christianity. Its aim was to train Africans to read the Bible so that they could help to spread Christianity, and to write, in order to facilitate easier communication with the missionaries and the colonial administrators (Eshiwani 1993, 16).

After independence, the Government of Kenya embarked on a campaign to fight ignorance, with an emphasis on education (Eshiwani 1993, 37). The Government of Kenya set up Education Acts and Commissions to look into the development of education in Kenya. They were named the Ominde

(1964), Gachathi (1976) and Mackay (1981) Commissions respectively, after the persons who chaired them (Eshiwani 1993, 20). Kenya's present public formal system of education, popularly known as the 8-4-4 system was born out of the Presidential Working Committee on the second University (Mackay Commission). These numbers represent the number of years completed at the primary, secondary and university levels respectively. Kenya has one fundamental goal for her education: "To prepare and equip the youth to be happy and useful members of society (Republic of Kenya 1981, 7). The Government announced Free Primary Education (FPE) for all in 2003, which had a tremendous impact especially in terms of enrolments. However, primary education has not been declared compulsory, and some parents still choose to deny their children, and especially daughters, their right to this basic education (Macheru 2009). The free Secondary school program which was rolled out in 2008 only covers the cost of tuition and leaves parents responsible for all non-tuition costs such as boarding, transport, books and school supplies (Clarke 2007). The Government of Kenya is also committed to providing quality university education. Presently, there are seven public universities in Kenya and at least fourteen chartered private universities (Kenya Education Directory 2011).

Women in Formal Education in Kenya

Eshiwani's findings revealed that in Kenya, the enrolment of girls in primary school had increased steadily since independence (Eshiwani 1983). Quoting the Kenya Women's Manifesto the Akili Dada Mission notes that with the advent of FPE, girls now represent a successful rate (48%) of primary school students. However, according to the mission, the retention rates for girls in primary school are still low (Akili Dada, 2009). Among the main factors perceived to contribute to and result in the phenomenon of low retention rates are, economic limitations, traditional

attitudes concerning the proper role of women, the low priority placed on girls' education, cultural preference for early marriage, the need for girls to help with household chores and to contribute financially to maintaining households, and drop out from school due to early pregnancies (ibid).

The proportion of girls reaching Secondary school is low according to the Centre for the Study of Adolescence (CSA). The Akili Dada Mission, quoting the CSA, reports that less than 30 percent of girls who graduate from primary school in Kenya make it to secondary school (Akili Dada 2009). The CSA, based on figures from the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), also reports that the drop-out rate of girls at both primary and secondary levels in southern Nyanza, where Kuria district falls, is the highest in the country (CSA 2008, 31-32). Dr. Mohochi, who claims to be one of only seven PhD holders in Kuria district, notes that Kuria district has a notoriously low school completion rate, especially among the girl child (Mohochi 2009). The same situation is true for enrolment in post-secondary institutions compared to the number of girls at secondary school level. According to Akili Dada Mission, CSA reports that women's enrolment in universities stands at a mere 30.8 per cent nationally (Akili Dada 2009). Eshiwani carried out interviews with a cross-section of women leaders in his study, in which study findings pointed out that in certain areas of Kenya the attitude of parents towards the education of girls is still negative (Eshiwani 1993, 66). Figures in the Education sector report in 2007 indicate that the number of women pursuing higher education in universities and other post-secondary institutions continued to rise every year from 2004 to 2006 (Kenya national Bureau of Statistics 2007). However, in certain areas of the country, notably North Eastern and Nyanza provinces, the number of girls that make it to that level is negligible (CSA 2008, 20).

FGM and early marriage are some of the harmful traditional practices which hinder the education of girls in Kenya. According to CSA, available estimates show that almost 13 percent of girls, who leave school in communities where FGM is practiced, do so due to early marriage (CSA 2008, 24). Among the Abakuria, both FGM and early marriage are actively practiced. Kuria's Education Centre for the Advancement of Women (ECAW) chairlady Dennitah Ghati, notes that the school dropout rate among girls in Kuria district is alarming and blames the worrying dropout statistics on the retrogressive cultures in the district (Miruka 2010, 18). This study set out to explore these two cultural practices, and how they influence the value that parents attach to formal educational attainment for girls.

Traditional Education

The main goal of traditional education was to train the young for life as adults to fit in their societies as responsible members. Its main role was that of socializing individuals to participate in society, and it provided knowledge, skills and values relevant to the society (Eshiwani 1993, 15).

In most traditional African societies, young people were considered to be ready for marriage soon after the onset of puberty. At this time, they were instructed and prepared for adult responsibilities. Erny and Wanjohi emphasize that education was part of the traditional rite of passage (Erny and Wanjohi 1981, 21). There was an extended period of social preparation and in-depth teaching relating to matters of adult life, which happened during the initiation process, and which took different forms among different communities. It is noted that "the initiation camps were indispensable preliminary preparations prior to marriage" (TAG 1994, 11). In this time they were instructed on sexual matters, parenting issues, in-law relationships, how to relate to the opposite sex and a lot more. Gachiri asserts that the education

given during initiation time is holistic although sex education is explicitly dealt with and is central to the complete rite of passage (Gachiri 2000, 94). At the end of the initiation camp, the young person was adequately prepared for all aspects of adult life so that once they left their home of birth they could build their own families with minimal difficulty.

Because FGM as a rite of passage is still observed among the Abakuria, organized post- initiation training still exists. In this community, the instruction takes place during a period of seclusion following the initiation rite, which for the Kuria girl takes the form of female circumcision. Training is carried out generally by older women in the community, specifically by the girls' own mothers and grandmothers, and it takes place under the supervision of a female mentor or sponsor, who is specifically appointed by the girl's parents. This initiation education is aimed at enhancing the woman's maturity through improved relational and ethical standards. Among the Abakuria, a person's progress in establishing a family is of prime importance, and the post- initiation instruction is essentially preparation for married life (Ruel 1997, 26). Training during the seclusion period therefore essentially includes instruction on sexuality, responsible womanhood, parenting and home-making, in-law relationships, how to relate to the opposite sex within certain parameters, and a wide range of other values related to marriage.

The Abakuria People of South Nyanza

The Abakuria are an agro-pastoralist society that inhabits Bukuria in South-western Kenya and across the border in the vast districts of Musoma, Mara and Serengeti in neighbouring Tanzania. According to the census of 1994, their population is estimated to number 348,000 (Sim 1979, 45). They are unified by one

language, '*Egekuria*'. This study focuses on the Abakuria of Kenya, who are a small Bantu-speaking people of southern Nyanza, often referred to as the Western Bantu.

Culture

The culture of the Abakuria, according to Abuso, is an amalgam of many cultures owing to the fact that they sprang from many directions (Abuso 1980). The Abakuria practise male circumcision and clitoridectomy (FGM) at regular intervals.

The importance of the ritual system to the Abakuria is a key element of their culture, and Ruel notes that the Abakuria referred to themselves and were spoken of by other tribes as '*abakora inyangi*' (those who perform ritual). The emphasis in Kuria ritual is however on the rites of passage (Ruel 1997, 23-25). In this community, parenting is not synonymous to adulthood, and Kuria rites of passage mark a person's progress through life preparing them for adulthood, but even more important, a person's progress in establishing a family, preparing them for parenting. The most important of these ritual initiation ceremonies is *ogosaara or esaaro* (circumcision), which gives adult status and the right to bear a child, and which followed by marriage ceremonies (Ruel 1997, 26). Because the emphasis among the Abakuria is on establishing a family, marriage becomes a sequel rite to initiation, irrespective of the age of the girls involved. This age factor has implications for the education of the Kuria girl.

The patriarchal family structure

The Abakuria family life is organised along patriarchal lines, where men hold the positions of power and prestige, and are the decision makers. The patriarchal system helps to explain why the boy child is highly valued as the successor of the family, and a sure hope for the continuity of the ancestry (Omagwa 2007, 11). The

Abakuria also have a patrilineal descent system, in which the male retain responsibility for their parents, and daughters become part of their husbands' families (Eshiwani 1993, 63).

Marriage

Marriage is a very important rite of passage among the Abakuria due to the significance of family propagation and ensuring posterity for each household. Marriage in this community takes two forms; the regular man-to-woman marriage which more often than not is polygamous, and the woman-to-woman marriage. Chacha elaborates on the latter by explaining that the woman who does not have a son among the Abakuria, has the option of paying bride wealth for a young girl and taking her as a 'wife' to bear children on her behalf. A man from the extended family '*omutwari*' (a male consort) is appointed to facilitate the procreation, although he has no 'father' function or rights to the children (Chacha 2002). Paying bride price involves the transmission of property at marriage, and is a "marriage payment made by a prospective husband, or more often by his family to the family of the bride" (TAG 1994, 19). A Kuria marriage is only seen as complete after the transfer of bride price (cattle) has been made. The Abakuria still practise the form of polygamy, where a man marries more than one wife. The option of marrying multiple and young wives (presumed stronger) may have implications for the education of girls.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

FGM is a practice that has been referred to with a variety of terms, including female circumcision, female initiation, the female genital cut and clitoridectomy among others. It can no longer be seen merely as a traditional custom, as it has

become a problem of modern society in Africa as well as in Western countries. In recent years, concern has grown over how to stop the practice, rather than whether it is appropriate to intervene. Anti-FGM activists view it with contempt and call it female genital mutilation, which suggests disfigurement, damage, injury, or maiming. On the religious front, the Bible does not speak expressly about FGM, but there are general principles and patterns that can be applied in generating a Christian response to FGM. When God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, his son and male members of his household as a sign of the covenant, no mention was made of Sarah or of female members of his household (Genesis 17:10-14). Christian perspectives of FGM therefore stress that God never commanded female circumcision, and that FGM defeats the divine purpose by not respecting, protecting and caring for female body organs (Kunhiyop 2008, 300). Among the Abakuria, FGM is simply referred to as female circumcision, and this term tends to equate the practice to male circumcision.

The term FGM refers to a spectrum of genital procedures, and describe rituals that emphasize the intentional physical disfigurement, removal, alteration or injuring of female genital organs for non-therapeutic reasons, but rather for cultural, traditional, and/or religious reasons.

The practice of FGM is most common in the Western, Eastern, and North-Eastern regions of Africa, in some countries in Asia and the Middle East, and among certain immigrant communities in North America and Europe (Wasunna 1999). Gachiri, quoting Toubia, notes that Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia and the Sudan, account for approximately 75% of all FGM cases in Africa (Gachiri 2000, 37). According to a report of the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 100 to 140 million girls and women worldwide are currently living with the physical

and psychological consequences of some form of FGM (WHO 2005). It is estimated that in Africa, 92 million girls between 10 and 15 years have undergone FGM (WHO/UNICEF/UNFPA 1997).

The procedure is normally carried out by traditional circumcisers, and has no health benefits for girls and women (American Medical Association 1995). Gachiri observes that all types of female circumcision are damaging to the female body, unlike the simple operation carried out in male circumcision” (Gachiri 2000, 31). As Furphy notes, the practice is no doubt painful and traumatising and has been related to a range of psychological and psychosomatic disorders (Furphy 2010).

The painful reality of FGM is that it is irreversible, and the effects last a lifetime. The effects of the surgical operation on women are both immediate and long-term, depending on the type of operation. They can be medical, gynaecological, emotional and psychological, but can also be economic and social, and the extent of complications depends on numerous factors. The surgical procedures can cause severe bleeding and later, potential childbirth complications, and if the same instrument is used for the circumcision of several girls, HIV/AIDS may be transmitted from one to the other during the operation (WHO/UNICEF/UNFPA 1997).

The argument held in communities where FGM is traditionally practiced, including the Abakuria, is that the ritual signifies cultural identity. FGM is associated with cultural ideals of femininity and modesty, and is considered a cultural tradition, which is the reason often used as argument for its continuation. FGM among the Abakuria marks the marriageability of women, as well as the right to bear children. Ruel notes that in this community FGM is considered a necessary part of raising a girl ‘properly’, of socializing her into acceptable womanhood, and a way to

prepare her for marriage (Ruel 1997, 27). The ceremony is surrounded by feasting and elaborate celebration, and the event is filled with processions and symbolic songs and dance intended to teach the young girl her duties and desirable characteristics as a wife and a mother. For the Kuria girl as for other women around the world, FGM comes with its implications of marriage and child bearing. FGM is internationally recognized and classified as a violation of the basic human rights of girls and women (WHO 2008). Miruka, quoting the children officers from Kuria district, notes that while the Government of Kenya has banned FGM, the Tanzanian authorities are yet to, and the fact that the community spreads across the Kenya and Tanzania border, greatly pulls back the anti-FGM war (Miruka 2010, 19).

Reasonable alternatives to FGM have been found to achieve significant success among the Maasai, the Meru and the Kalenjin communities in Kenya. One such program is the *Ntanira na mugambo* (circumcision through words) rites of passage program, which is presently carried out among the Meru (Wasunna 1999).

Early Marriage

Early marriage is an ancient, world-wide custom. Expressing disagreement with two common terms used to describe this practice, Nour argues,

The term 'early marriage' can be considered as vague and does not necessarily refer to children, and in addition, what is early for one person may be late for another. The term 'child bride' on the other hand seems to glorify the process, implying perhaps a celebration and a bride who is happy to start a loving union with her spouse, but for the most part, girl brides do not know and may have never met their groom. (2006)

Nour proposes the use of the term 'child marriages' instead. The researcher fully identifies with Nour's argument against the use of the terms 'early marriages' and 'child brides', and concurs with the use of the term 'child marriage' which paints a clearer picture of the child involved in such marriages. For purposes of uniformity

however, and with the understanding of how the term is used by UNICEF, and the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child, the term ‘early marriages’ was adopted in this study (UNICEF 2005).

At the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, international law defined children as persons under 18 years of age (UNICEF 2006). Yet all over the world and certainly in Africa, grinding poverty and adherence to tradition results in girls being married off before they turn 18, and the girls themselves rarely have any say in the matter. Statistics presented at a United Nations Conference on the status of women in 2007 show that 36% of all global marriages are early marriages (Kanyoro 2007). According to UNICEF, early marriage is a violation of human rights that prevents girls from obtaining an education, enjoying optimal health, bonding with others their own age, maturing, and ultimately choosing their own life partners. It compromises the development of girls and often results in early pregnancy and social isolation. Young married girls face onerous domestic burdens, constrained decision-making and reduced life choices (UNICEF 2005). The Children’s Act of 2001 in Kenya, which provides for protection of children against harmful cultural practices, largely remains a policy statement, and there is no evidence of commitment to its full implementation. As a consequence, early marriages are still widely practiced in several communities in Kenya.

After marriage, young girls’ access to formal education is greatly limited because of domestic burdens, childbearing, and social and cultural norms that view marriage and schooling as incompatible. This, Nour explains, is particularly tragic since education for girls is one of the most effective ways to fight the cycle of poverty and promote democracy and development (Nour 2006). In families with limited resources, early marriage is often considered a way to provide for a

daughter's future. Even girls that have the rare chance of going to school after the introduction of Free Primary Education in Kenya have their dreams cut short when their fathers marry them off without their consent (Mwangi 2004). Among the Abakuria, poverty and adherence to cultural practices result in many girls being married off early, which becomes an impediment to their high educational attainment (Mohochi 2010). Poor families have few resources to support more healthy alternatives for girls, while economic gains through marrying off a daughter may also motivate poor parents to choose this path. Samson Kerario, the chief of Nyabasi West location in Kuria district, acknowledges that FGM is still rife because parents value bride wealth due to poverty (Miruka 2010, 18). The researcher is optimistic that promoting educational and economic opportunities for girls can reduce incidences of early marriage.

The Kuria Girl Child

Mohochi, in his proposal for the establishment of an educational foundation to improve education in Kuria district, notes that the Abakuria community has very little regard for the girl child, and much less for her formal education (Mohochi 2010). Among the Abakuria, the girl is viewed only as a potential homemaker, and is raised and socialized to be a wife and a mother. Marriage is often a welcome survival strategy for her family (UNICEF 2005), who can earn some bride wealth, paid upon her marriage. Among the Abakuria, girls spend more time on household chores than boys, leaving them with little time to study at home. For numerous social and cultural reasons, many Kuria girls drop out of school before reaching a stage where their educational attainment constitutes a valid qualification for them to pursue further training or secure employment. Okech expresses concern that traditional practices such as FGM and early or forced marriages trap the girl child into a life of

subservience without rights (Okech 2005). The practices of FGM and early marriage are part of the Abakuria culture, and are likely to affect girl child education too.

Non-cultural Factors that Affect the Educational Attainment of the Kuria Girl Child

Besides cultural factors, there are numerous other factors that could affect the educational attainment of the Kuria girl child. The role of the home environment in determining the educational attainment of the girl child is very important. Fontana noted that a depressed background in which a child has no encouragement to study presents problems for school children (Fontana 1981, 154). Lack of facilities for study in the home environment such as inadequate lighting and poor living conditions discourage children with the result of poor performance, which may eventually force them to withdraw from school before they attain a good education (Raju 1973, 49).

Socio-economic factors also play an important role in influencing access to education for children. The Abakuria are a peasant, low income community. This community according to Mohochi is highly marginalized, and in the year 2006, a national poverty survey placed Kuria in the bottom three districts in terms of poverty level. Mohochi further notes that one area where the Abakuria have lagged behind, and which is perhaps the most significant contributing factor to their state of underdevelopment, is education (Mohochi, 2010). According to Wallace, poor people, given their resource constraints, see education in terms of costs and benefits (Wallace 1975, 40). This view could influence parental perception towards girl child education; such that their daughters' formal schooling is subordinated to the bride price that could be gained from marrying them off. Although primary school education in Kenya is free in the sense that tuition fees has been waived, poor

parents are still burdened with other miscellaneous expenses such as uniforms, and school development levies. In addition, although the Government of Kenya presently subsidizes secondary school education by covering tuition fees and learning materials, parents are still required to pay substantial amounts of money, to cover all other costs such as uniforms, transport, school supplies, holiday tuition, mock exam fees, school projects and boarding fees for those attending boarding schools (Clarke, 2007). Eshiwani notes that when parents are faced with the constraints of limited opportunities, they will favour the education of male children (Eshiwani 1993, 66). Further on this matter, Raju asserts that lack of money to pay for the education of both sons and daughters is the most common cause of premature withdrawal from school (Raju 1973, 49). Speaking to the Abakuria situation, Mohochi explains, “It is still customary for Kuria families to withdraw their daughters from school in order to marry them off and raise money from bride price in order to pay for the boys’ tuition” (Mohochi 2010).

The value that the society attaches to education will determine the childrens’ view of education, and affect their educational attainment (Askew and Carnell 1961, 72). The low educational attainment on the part of the Kuria girl child is probably therefore attributable to the attitude towards the education of girls among the Abakuria. Raju observes that there is a general lack of communication between schools and the community, and therefore the purpose and values of education are not directly communicable to parents (Raju 1973, 49). Misinformation or insufficient information on the value of education may contribute to parental perceptions of girl child education. The education level of parents has a role to play in influencing the academic preferences of the child. Atkinson asserts that there is a direct link between the level of education of parents and that of their children” (Atkinson 1983, 118). Bilton agrees with this point, when he says that the parents’

educational level will exert influence on the educational interests and inclinations of the child (Bilton 1981, 112). Ezewu argues that educated parents, unlike their illiterate counterparts, have been discovered to encourage high educational attainment in their children (Ezewu, 1983). The illiteracy rate in Kuria district is still very high (Mohochi 2010). Most parents thus may not offer much parental guidance and encouragement to girls towards a high educational attainment. Family size is an important factor, as many Abakuria families are polygamous and large. The education level attained by the girl child may therefore often depend on the number and gender of children in the family.

Methodological Literature Review

Review of methodological literature is deemed necessary as it enables the researcher to choose an appropriate research design from a variety of methods. That is the purpose of this sub-section.

The Ethnographic Study

Of the different types of qualitative research proposed by Creswell (1998, 27), the researcher adopted the ethnographic design in this study. Ethnography is the “first hand intensive study of the characteristic features and patterns of a given culture” (Gall et al 1996, 593). The design has been used widely by ethnographers, and mainly focuses on understanding and interpreting an aspect of a cultural or social group (Creswell 2002, 481). The anthropologist Malcom Ruel, employed the ethnographic design, in carrying out fieldwork among the Abakuria people between 1956 and 1958. His work was devoted to understanding an African religion, and it explored the coherence of the religion and the place of ritual in it. Participant observation and in-depth ethnographic interviews were his methods of data collection

(Ruel 1997). In this study, the researcher attempted to explore and gain a deeper understanding and a holistic picture of the cultural practices of FGM and early marriage. The ethnographer in a research attempts to understand the insider's or emic perspective of the cultural aspect under study from the insiders themselves, and he/she must be guided by experience among the community under study, and not theory. An ethnographic researcher therefore immerses himself/herself in the context of the community under study, seeking to understand the views and experiences of the informants. In this study, the researcher was seeking to understand the views of parents regarding the cultural practices of FGM and early marriage, and how those views influence their perceptions of girl child educational attainment in the community.

Data Collection

The key issue in research, whatever the methodology, is data collection. In-depth interviews are a primary method of data collection in qualitative research, and have been used widely by ethnographers. In-depth interviews, consistent with ethnographic studies, were the main methodology of data collection for this study, as they were considered appropriate for a study that is a discovery process. The researcher engaged in copious note-taking throughout the field study. The qualitative data generated in this study consisted of the researcher's own field notes about the Abakuria people, which included personal interviews, records of informal discussions, chance conversations, overheard remarks, and observational notes. Walford recommends the use of audio and/or video tapes to facilitate recording of information given by informants for further review and analysis (Walford 2001, 8). In this study, recorded audio interviews form the data. Open-ended interviews were chosen so that the researcher could directly hear the views and experiences of the

informants. The researcher personally conducted all the in-depth interviews with selected parents. This was in order to obtain first-hand information and an in-depth understanding of the two cultural practices, and how they were perceived to affect formal educational attainment for girls. This would also help the researcher to compare and contrast parental views to information in the substantive literature review.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The Research Approach

This chapter describes the methods and procedures that were employed in this study. The study was ethnographic, aimed at inquiring into the value perceptions of parents on the formal education for the girl child in Kuria district, in light of cultural practices. Parents in the study area voiced their opinions, attitudes and views about formal education for girls, as well as their beliefs and values about the two cultural practices of FGM and early marriage. The researcher collected and reported detailed views of the parents. This chapter describes the research design.

Rationale for a Qualitative Research Approach

There are various reasons why a researcher would choose to adopt a qualitative approach to his/her study. Creswell explains that qualitative research is often chosen when an area of study is immature due to lack of prior research (Creswell 1994, 146). Patton also points out that a qualitative study is chosen when the researcher is seeking to understand the people's experiences (Patton 2002, 33). With these insights in mind, the researcher chose a qualitative approach, because she was not able to find any previous studies that focussed on the perceptions of parents about formal education for the girl child in this community. In addition, the researcher was seeking to better understand the meaning and value that Abakuria parents attach to the practices of FGM and early marriage. The

research design most appropriate to this study was ethnography, because the researcher aimed to explore, to deepen her understanding and to interpret the cultural practices, as well as to find out how they influenced the value that parents attached to girl child educational attainment.

The Ethnographic Design

The study of cultural or social groups is the focus of ethnography. In this field study, the researcher set off to study a cultural aspect of the Abakuria people. The ethnographic design in this study included developing open-ended interview questions for parents selected as informants, conducting the in-depth interviews, recording of data, data analysis and interpretation. One of the primary methods of data collection in ethnographic studies is in-depth one-on-one interviews. By way of asking relevant questions both in friendly conversations and during formal interviews, the researcher attempted to understand the cultural practices of concern. The researcher intentionally selected and interviewed informants, who were parents that have daughters from the Abakuria community, living in Kuria district. It is the parents that make decisions regarding both the cultural initiation and education of their daughters, and they were therefore deemed to have the information that was relevant to this study.

Researcher's Role in the Study

The researcher is a member of the Abakuria community by marriage, but originally comes from a different community where FGM is not practiced and where girl child education is highly valued. However, the researcher's interaction with the Abakuria girls and parents over a period of not less than 15 years had enhanced her awareness of the interference of FGM and early marriage with the Kuria girl child's

education. The information that the researcher possessed, and her perceptions of the two cultural practices of concern to this study though, were only shaped by exposure, observations, personal conversations and experiences among the Abakuria people. Because these perceptions were not based on disciplined inquiry, the researcher consciously attempted to suspend her viewpoint and guarded as much as possible against bringing previously obtained information, her own personal values, feelings, cultural biases and assumptions into the study, and cultivated a listening and a learning attitude throughout the interviews. This would help to avoid any ethnocentric tendencies in making interpretations and judgements. The researcher has lived on-and-off in the community over the years, and had established substantial relationships in the area of study. It was therefore unlikely that she would be treated as an intruder, and instead, the exercise was seen as efforts on the part of the researcher to get to learn and blend better into the community. The researcher was still considered by some informants as a partial outsider, but this was an advantage to the study. This is because the informants provided information in detail, without assuming any foreknowledge of the cultural practices on the researcher's part. The most useful tool that the researcher possessed was the ability to communicate in the local language. This served to put the informants at ease and set them free to express themselves in a language they were comfortable with. This way, data that would otherwise have been withheld for lack of expression in Kiswahili or English was captured. The researcher embarked on this study with a conviction that a deeper understanding of these cultural practices is essential in informing intervention efforts for educational attainment for the girl child in Kuria district.

Being the primary instrument for data collection, the researcher was actively involved in the study. She travelled to Kuria district and conducted all interviews

with the selected informants, using the interview questions as a guide, and adjusting them depending on how the interviews proceeded. The researcher interacted with the data collected on a regular basis during the study, in order to do ongoing analysis. The data so analyzed and research findings constitute the response to the research questions posed in this study.

Entry Procedures

A letter from the Academic Dean at the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST) was necessary as proof to the Provincial Administration authorities at divisional level in the area of study that the researcher had the responsibility and permission of the institution to carry out the study. The researcher is well acquainted with the Provincial Administration officials at the location and sub-location levels, and visited their offices in advance to announce her presence and to report on her intended activity in order to facilitate the study. The researcher being a member of that community had free and open access to the families and homesteads while collecting data. Prior personal requests were made to the selected research participants to seek their consent and appointments to interview them.

Ethical Considerations

Ethnographic research requires that the researcher safeguards the rights, interests and sensitivity of the informants (Spradley 1979, 36). Keeping this in mind, the researcher described the nature and purpose of the research to all the interviewees and sought their consent. In this way, the researcher ensured that all participants were willing. Informants were at liberty to narrate their experiences in their own language in place of Kiswahili if they so wished. Whenever the vocabulary posed a challenge due to the cultural nature of the topic, the use of two interpreters from the community

was employed, one for each gender of informants interviewed. The researcher however had learnt ordinary language well enough to be able to monitor the comments of the interpreter in *Egekuria*, and to determine his/her effectiveness, as advised by Williams (1967, 34). The names of informants have not been used in the research report, in order to protect their privacy and maintain their anonymity.

Research Participants

The population of this study comprised of all parents from the Abakuria community who have daughters, whether those daughters are presently in formal schooling or not. Parents living in the natural setting, in Maberera, division of Kuria district were selected. Although Maberera is only one of the four divisions of Kuria district, the researcher has lived among the Abakuria in this division for over 15 years, and thus the decision to carry out her research in Maberera division. The Abakuria are predominantly subsistence farmers, and parents were able to make themselves available in the afternoons for interviews after morning farm work. From this population, the researcher selected the informants.

Study sample

Sampling was necessary for this study because all Abakuria parents in the entire division cannot possibly be interviewed. For the sample to lead to adequate information about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, the purposeful sampling approach was used. Generally, the informants were selected based on their ability and willingness to provide in-depth and relevant information on the subject of the study. All the parents met the criteria of having daughters who were either attending school at the various levels of formal education, or were not in school, and/or daughters who were married or unmarried. The selection was done

with the cooperation of the divisional administration officer and sub-chiefs in Maberera division, who helped to identify the participants from the administrative sub-locations in the entire division. The initial sample constituted sixteen (16) carefully selected parents, who were not necessarily couples. The researcher was however unable to reach data saturation with the initial sample of sixteen (16), and an additional eight (8) informants were interviewed. In total therefore, twenty-four (24) informants were interviewed, six (6) from each of the four sub-locations of Maberera division, namely Suba-Kuria, Nyabonanse, Nyankore and Nyamaharaga. Since the Abakuria are a patriarchal society, the inclusion of women's views balanced the study findings.

The religious commitment of informants was not considered as a factor in the selection of the study sample during the purposeful sampling procedure, as this factor was not the focus of this study. Yet, during the interviews, religious commitment emerged as a major factor that shaped the perceptions of the informants, as seen in three categories: (i) Non-Christians, (ii) Nominal Christians, (iii) Committed Christians. Due to time constraints and the difficulty of reassembling all the informants, the study sample could not be changed. The proportions of those categories in the study may however not be a true reflection of their distribution in the wider Abakuria population. The researcher acknowledges the implications of this weakness on the external validity of the study findings.

Data Collection for the Study

Data collection was mainly achieved through open-ended, one-on-one interviews. The researcher made appointments to visit the selected participants in their homes for interviews. The Abakuria are a very hospitable people, and interviews were carried out in the informants' houses, or for most male informants

under a tree in the homestead, in a relaxed atmosphere, almost always over a cup of tea or a meal. The interview questions were designed to enable the researcher gather detailed information, and interviews served to draw out parental views, and value perceptions of the two cultural practices of concern and girl child education, in response to the three research sub-questions posed in this study.

In the African context, conversation, especially with new acquaintances, is approached cautiously and progresses slowly. The Abakuria in general are a highly relational community, and they value conversation and relationship. The questions in Section A were therefore introductory into the interviews and were designed to facilitate a friendly approach to the informants and pave way for the main interview questions. Section B of the interview questions was aimed at drawing responses to the first research sub-question, RSQ 1, which addressed the value that the parents attach to FGM. The interview questions in section C were aimed at responding to the second research sub-question, RSQ 2, which addressed the value that parents attach to the practice of early marriage. Section D of the interview questions was aimed at drawing responses to the third research sub-question, RSQ3, which inquired into parental perceptions on girl child education. The raw data obtained from these interviews was analyzed and research findings constitute the answers to the central research question (CRQ) posed in this study.

The interviews were captured with the help of a voice recorder and saved as voice files on a computer. At the same time the researcher took detailed notes during the course of the interviews. Due to the large volume of data involved, the researcher recorded her meditations or impressions (memos) on the data while they were still fresh in her memory. The interviews were then transcribed from the saved voice data files to facilitate further reflection, counterchecking of information and analysis. The

number of interviews before transcription were limited to four, in order to allow for clarification or revision and revealing and filling in of existing gaps in the collected data. Where new categories of data that required further investigation or clarification emerged during the ongoing analysis, new questions were formulated or questions adjusted accordingly. As new themes and categories emerged from data collected, the researcher went back and forth between reviewing the data collected and the informants for further interviews, clarifications, affirming authenticity and revision of collected data.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis involved making sense of text data. Data collection and analysis happened concurrently, so as to maintain proper and reliable storage of information with its collection. Data analysis was therefore ongoing throughout the course of the field research. First, the data was prepared for analysis by transcription of the interviews. The researcher then read through the data to get a general sense of its meaning. Next, content analysis was done to reduce the voluminous raw data and to look for recurring words and patterns in the data. Detailed analysis began with open coding where the material was organized into manageable portions. The researcher then examined the data for emerging patterns, identified materials with similar patterns and labeled each of those categories with a different code, which in each case was a term in *Egekuria*, the language of the participants. These codes helped to identify and organize the patterns into themes or categories for further analysis. As the analysis proceeded, the codes were isolated to group material with similar codes together, based on responses to the three research sub-questions to be answered by the study. The researcher coded the responses that

addressed the perceptions of parents on the following issues, in response to the research sub-questions:

- Views of Abakuria parents regarding the value of the cultural practice of FGM.
- Views of Abakuria parents regarding the value of the practice of early marriage.
- Views of Abakuria parents regarding the value of educational attainment for girls.

The researcher did an inductive analysis, which involved discovering patterns, themes and categories through intense engagement with the data, and then examined points of agreement or disagreement within and between the coded responses of informants. These categories formed the basis for the summaries of the findings, for drawing implications and making recommendations (Wolcott 2001, 120-27).

As a final step in data analysis, interpretation of the data had to be carried out. The interpretations helped to show lessons drawn from the study, as well as to affirm or show a divergence of findings from material that is available from the reviewed substantive literature (Creswell 2003, 190).

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

This chapter highlights the findings and interpretations of this study. The central research question of the study is: “What are the value perceptions of parents on the educational attainment for the Kuria girl child in light of the cultural practices of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriage?”

The data collected was analyzed following the research questions, study objectives, and themes which were developed from the coding categories corresponding to the three research sub-questions below:

- What value do Abakuria parents attach to the cultural practice of *esaaro y'abaiseke* (Female Genital Mutilation)?
- What value do Abakuria parents attach to the cultural practice of *ogoteta kw'abaiseke abake* (early marriage)?
- What value do Abakuria parents attach to *egesomo ky'omuisseke* (Education for girls)?

Respondents

In the following section, a summary of the respondents is given.

Table 1. Summary description of respondents and their general information

Code	Gender	Age Bracket	Number of Daughters	Level of Education	Religious Commitment
MR1*	Male	30-40	2	Teaching Diploma	Committed
MR2	Male	50-60	1	Tech Certificate	Committed
MR3****	Male	50-60	6	None	Committed
MR4***	Male	50-60	4	Post-Grad Diploma	Committed
MR5**	Male	30-40	2	Post-Sec Certificate	Committed
MR6	Male	40-50	3	None	Committed
MR7	Male	70-80	2	None	Non-Christian
MR8	Male	60-70	9	None	Nominal
MR9	Male	60-70	2	None	Nominal
MR10	Male	40-50	4	None	Nominal
MR11	Male	60-70	4	None	Nominal
MR12	Male	70-80	7	None	Non-Christian
FRI*	Female	20-30	2	O-Level	Committed
FR2	Female	40-50	1	Post-Sec Certificate	Committed
FR3	Female	50-60	2	None	Committed
FR4***	Female	40-50	4	Bachelor's Degree	Committed
FR5	Female	30-40	2	None	Nominal
FR6	Female	50-60	1	None	Nominal
FR7**	Female	20-30	2	Primary	Committed
FR8	Female	80-90	1	None	Non-Christian
FR9	Female	30-40	3	None	Nominal
FR10	Female	50-60	5	None	Nominal
FR11	Female	40-50	3	Lower Secondary	Nominal
FR12****	Female	40-50	6	None	Nominal

As shown in Table 1 above, there were twenty-four (24) respondents in total, twelve (12) were male and twelve (12) were female. Eight of these respondents were four couples, indicated with an equal number of asterisks against their codes. All the respondents were parents, and between them they had a total of 64 daughters. The age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 90 years.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher held one-on-one interviews with respondents on different occasions, male respondents separately from female ones. The interview guide attached as appendix 1 was used to help in generating responses to the three research sub-questions.

The researcher created categories from the information provided by the parents, along the purpose and objectives of the study. An initial analysis of the data resulted in twenty-one (21) themes or concepts, but upon further reflection, some proved to be redundant while some overlapped. Materials with similar themes were categorized together and coded with a name that represented their common attributes. In the final analysis, only eleven (11) themes survived.

Views of Abakuria Parents Regarding the Value of *Esaaro y'Abaiseke* (FGM)

RSQ1: What value do Abakuria parents attach to the cultural practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)?

In response to the first research sub-question which sought to understand the parental perception of FGM, four themes emerged. They are;

- (1) Parental understanding of traditional FGM. (2) Benefits and detriments of FGM.
- (3) Effects of FGM on the education of girls. (4) Girl child education after FGM.

Parental Understanding of FGM

In order to investigate the parents' understanding of FGM, respondents were asked, "What is your understanding of FGM and of what significance is FGM to you?"

The Abakuria community had one term for circumcision, which is *esaaro* or *ogosaara* (verb), which refers to both male and female circumcision. An *Egekuria*

equivalent of the term FGM does not exist, since female circumcision was never viewed with contempt among the Abakuria, as the term FGM would insinuate. *Ukeketaji*, the Kiswahili equivalent of FGM, and which all informants understood, was therefore used to refer to FGM for some interviews. Only respondents, who had at least an O-Level education, meaning those with a secondary school education completed, were familiar with the acronym and term FGM. Parents of uncircumcised girls did not seem to mind the usage of the term FGM or *ukeketaji*, while on the other hand, those whose daughters had undergone FGM, did not like these terms. The researcher therefore used *esaaro y'abaiseke* (female circumcision), to refer to FGM in most of the interviews, as a polite term to respect the feelings of the informants.

The respondents in general identified and described FGM as a deeply entrenched cultural practice, which had its roots in the long established customs of the Abakuria people, and which had been handed down through the generations. The general parental description of traditional FGM is presented first. Apart from the general understanding of FGM as a traditional practice, three different understandings of FGM as a cultural practice emerged from the respondents.

- (1) FGM as an indispensable cultural practice.
- (2) FGM as an acceptable and harmless cultural practice
- (3) FGM as an unacceptable and outdated cultural practice.

Parental description of traditional FGM

When the term *esaaro* (circumcision) was used among the Abakuria, it assumed in many people's minds a positive connotation, both for female and male circumcision. The study established through the six oldest respondents, *abanto bakoro* (old people) that traditionally, *esaaro* was for physically and mentally well

developed boys and girls, aged approximately 18 to 20 years or older. There are two *Egekuria* terms that are used to refer to girls or women that have not undergone FGM; *Abasagane* and *Amakunene*. *Omosagane* (singular) referred to a young girl who had not undergone FGM, mainly because she was not of age. *Irikunene* (singular) on the other hand was a shame-filled term that referred to a woman above 20 years, who had intentionally avoided circumcision. The *omosagane* (uncircumcised girl) and the *irikonene* (uncircumcised woman) are both looked down upon the community, while the *abaiseke* (circumcised ones) are valued.

The *abanto bakoro* explained that FGM marked a transition from childhood to adulthood, and girls that underwent FGM were considered ready for marriage. According to one informant MR9, circumcision signalled readiness and availability for marriage on the part of a girl, because among the Abakuria, a man could not relate sexually with, or marry a girl that was not circumcised. Setting the FGM age at 18 to 20 years therefore preserved the uncircumcised girls from relating sexually with men, or getting pregnant until such a time when they experienced it and were ready for marriage. Another of the six oldest respondents MR8 said,

Esaaro was for boys and girls who were physically mature. Girls were circumcised when they were physically fully developed, at about the age of 18-20 years, meaning when they had fully developed breasts. Circumcision at such an age prevented our girls from getting destroyed by getting pregnant at a young age. It also prevented them from getting married before then, because after a girl went through it, she would begin to associate with men and soon get married.

There was a general consensus of opinion among all the parents that girls presently undergo FGM at a much younger age than before. All the parents affirmed that girls presently undergo FGM as early as when they are eight (8) years old.

Why FGM is presently taking place earlier than in traditional times. The researcher pursued the question of why FGM is happening earlier today than in

the past, and several responses were given.

The first explanation which was offered by nine (9) respondents including the six (6) eldest ones, had to do with the close intervals at which FGM takes place presently, compared to the case in the past. In the past, the event took place at intervals of between no less than 7-10 years. The decision as to when the ritual took place in the past was the prerogative of the ancestral spirits. The *abagaka b'inchama* or tribal and clan elders consulted with the spirits, who then issued or denied the permission for the circumcision of the boys, the girls or both genders during a particular year. An old man, MR7, explained that the situation had changed over time, and presently the clan leaders no longer go through the process of consulting the ancestors. Instead, the elders had resolved to hold the circumcision of both girls and boys every two years, during the long school holidays in December, when there was no harvesting or planting work in the farms. All nine respondents agreed that this change of timing was mainly occasioned by the need to accommodate the changes that came with the introduction of formal schooling.

FGM at a young age was believed by thirteen (13) respondents whose daughters had experienced it, to be for the good of the girls. They claimed that over time, they had discovered that if children underwent circumcision at a younger age, the healing process following the operation was faster. The long school holidays therefore presented an opportunity for young school-going girls to undergo the ritual early in the holidays, and have sufficient time for the healing before reopening of school. According to MR12, a clan elder, the decision for FGM to take place every two years is aimed at ensuring that all the children have the opportunity of experiencing it at a young age, which is defined as 'before completion of primary school'. This normally would be between 13 and 14 years. Seventeen (17) parents

including all the women observed that nowadays, girls matured much faster both mentally and physiologically than in the traditional setting. They said that the girls, especially in the final two years of primary school, also develop an unhealthy preoccupation with their sexuality. This situation they confessed made them increasingly anxious about the possibility of their daughters becoming sexually active, or even getting pregnant before FGM, which is taboo among the Abakuria. They saw early FGM was therefore a solution to their anxiety.

FGM taking place earlier than in the traditional setting appears to a large degree a parental response to the introduction of formal schooling. There was broad unanimity among all parents that formal schooling, provided an education and environment that almost always caused the girls to refuse to undergo FGM once they joined secondary school. It was widely understood among parents that most girls either underwent FGM before they completed primary school, or would not undergo the operation. Some parents said that they believed that whatever the girls are taught in secondary school paints a bad picture of FGM and encourages them to start viewing it with contempt. They added that interacting with girls and teachers from communities which do not practice FGM, caused the girls to view FGM as an embarrassing and undignified custom, and to challenge their parents regarding the practice. They noted that such girls end up refusing to undergo FGM. None of the informants could identify a single girl in the four sub-locations, who had not experienced FGM while in primary school, and had accepted to undergo it after joining secondary school. Twelve out of the fifteen parents whose daughters had undergone FGM said that FGM at an early age avoided a situation where their daughters abandoned the cultural concerns of their parents regarding the practice.

In contrast, seven informants, including five who had received formal education, said the reason why FGM was happening earlier at present was because the main traditional purpose of FGM had changed. They said that FGM was not done to prepare girls for marriage any more, but simply because it was a custom. Their opinion was based on the fact that most girls who underwent FGM while in Primary school still returned to school after FGM, some completed secondary school, and a few even pursued post-secondary education before getting married. These informants believed that parents insisted on early FGM as insurance, in case a daughter did not complete secondary school or other post-primary training, and had to marry a less educated Kuria man who looks for FGM status in a wife.

The fact that uncircumcised girls could not get married in this community appeared to be a deeply entrenched custom, because it was mentioned by fifteen informants. Nine of these noted that a girl who did not go through FGM could only marry an *omokebara* (outsider), and not a Kuria. MR9 said,

If by exceptionally rare chance a girl got married before undergoing *esaaro*, (circumcision), she was derogatorily referred to by her in-laws and the entire village as *irikunene*. Such a woman was despised and was excluded from all family celebrations and gatherings at her marital home. She was considered unworthy even to shake her father-in-law's hand or to eat with the rest of the family. She was not even worthy to open *ikihita*, the gate to the homestead.

Before the traditional rite, the *abasagane* were viewed as young children, and it was therefore a disgrace for a man to seduce an uncircumcised girl, let alone marry her.

The oldest informant FR8, a woman of about ninety (90) years, strongly emphasized that for an uncircumcised girl to become sexually active, or worse still to get pregnant, is considered grave promiscuity and taboo. She stressed that it was an abomination and an extremely shameful thing in the community, and added that such a girl was a great embarrassment to her parents. To explain the consequences faced by an uncircumcised girl that got pregnant she said,

The father of a girl who did such a dishonourable thing not only had to pay a higher fee than usual for her circumcision, but was also fined one goat by the *Ngariba*, or traditional circumciser. Besides, such a girl was considered to be of little worth, and at best could only be married by an old man as a third, fourth or even fifth wife. Her only other hope of marriage was to be married to an older childless woman under the *ubusinu* (woman-to -woman marriage) arrangement, in order to bear children on her behalf. The father of such a girl only received a minimal number of cattle for her bride price.

FR8 went on to explain that on the other hand, if a circumcised girl got pregnant before marriage, she could still get married, although it was highly unlikely that she would ever become a first wife. On the same matter, the example of one *Kibwabu* (not his real name) was cited by eleven (11) informants. To illustrate this point, MR10 for example said, “Such a girl can only be given to ‘Kibwabu’ in marriage”. They all explained that Kibwabu is an old man in one of the villages, who is presently aged about 80 years, whose name has become synonymous to one on whom girls that got pregnant before FGM, are dumped, as he had already married four such girls.

Society’s training of girls after undergoing FGM. Most informants explained that as a part of the cultural practice, during the one month after undergoing FGM, the girls go through a series of initiation education that significantly transforms their attitudes and their way of thinking. They described how the young initiates move in large groups from one homestead to another, where they are received and fed. They also go to the shopping centres, escorted by groups of cheering, dancing and singing villagers, and attract crowds of spectators. MR2 who is a pastor hastened to point out that the initiates were neither welcome by, nor went to homesteads of Christian families. He said,

As they walk through the centres, everyone is free to encourage, challenge, provoke and offer them instruction. The spectators are the teachers, starting from those who are the age of the initiates to the old men and women. The old

men and women often stop the procession to give a word of instruction, while most others freely shout remarks as they pass. The initiated boys also receive similar instructions and comments.

MR2 stressed that the initiation education did not end with the FGM operation, but mothers, grandmothers and chosen mentors continued the teachings and training at home in the seclusion hut. A female informant, who had undergone the training, explained that the roles of a mature woman are taught and instilled into the innermost essential character of the girl, until they are absorbed without questioning or alterations. She said that the girls are constantly reminded by their trainers that they are adults and should conduct themselves as such, and be respected by uncircumcised children. FR1 noted that the girls are also taught about the experiences, privileges and responsibilities that accompany their new raised status. FR8 who is an old woman stressed that the teachings are designed to prepare the girls for marital responsibilities, as this was expected to be the next major occurrence in their lives.

Society's regard and treatment of girls after FGM. The general understanding of the traditional Abakuria is that the circumcision rite alone enables a girl to be accepted as a grown-up person, who is allowed to join in the activities of the circumcised members of the community. All informants mentioned that during the celebrations that accompanied FGM, the girl received congratulatory remarks on her promotion, and gifts from her parents, relatives and the community. After FGM, the newly initiated girls begin to receive special attention from men, and recognition from their families and the entire community. According to the *abanto bakoro* (elderly people), after FGM, the girl immediately loses the *omosagane* (uncircumcised girl) label, and acquires the title *omoiseke* (young woman). They are now permitted to relate freely with circumcised young men, and to other adults. They

are also no longer strictly forbidden to engage in sexual relations, and are accorded the freedom to make decisions concerning their own lives. Thirteen informants said that some parents marry off their daughters forcefully after FGM, in order to get cattle as bride price.

All the fifteen informants whose daughters had undergone FGM said that the community expected them to regard and treat their circumcised daughters as adults in line with the expectations of Abakuria culture. Most of them appeared to have no problem accepting to treat their daughters as adults after they had undergone FGM, despite their age. Two informants, who were old men, explained that this rite of passage brings about a profound change in the girl, and clearly establishes a natural difference between a child and an adult. One of them, MR7 said, “of course I viewed and treated my circumcised daughters as women and not as children, because then, any man could buy them and give me cows. No one gives you cows to marry a child”.

Girls' attitude after undergoing FGM. All fifteen informants, whose daughters had experienced FGM, pointed out that the attitude of girls changed significantly and noticeably after FGM. They said that the girls manifested a radical change in their attitude and behaviour. According to them, the girls acquired a form of arrogance which made them disregard parental guidance and become defiant to parental authority. Eleven of them revealed their thoughts that because the girls start to feel that they are mature and attractive to men, they are likely to start engaging in sexual relations with boys sooner than those who have not undergone the experience. It emerged clearly that the girls after FGM expected their parents to recognize and treat them as adults, just as other members of the community did. Most parents attributed this change of attitude to three main factors; the informal initiation

education and training, the new regard and preferential treatment they received from the community, coupled with the respect they received from the uncircumcised children, and the remarks about their new status in the community. This group of parents said that as a general trend, the girls develop an excessive preoccupation with their sexuality, and begin to perceive themselves as mature and independent adults.

Female genital mutilation: An indispensable cultural practice

One category of informants, representing 12.5% of all participants understood FGM as an indispensable or essential cultural practice that could not be done away with. This category consisted of the oldest generation of parents, aged seventy (70) years and above. They said that they did not subscribe to Christianity, but rather were staunch traditionalists. They had received no formal western education. This category of parents is referred to in this analysis as ‘non-Christians’. All the informants found in this category practiced African Traditional Religion (ATR). Two of these informants, MR7 and MR12, were members of the Abakuria council of elders, locally referred to as *abagaka b’inchama*. They claimed to have witnessed the tradition of FGM all their lives. MR7 said that it was a requirement of the ancestors for the ritual to take place at regular intervals, and if this did not happen it was considered betrayal of the ancestors, who would punish the community with famine, deaths and other calamities. FR8, the oldest of the three and an old woman, said that the girls would be cursed by the ancestors if they did not face FGM. She explained that she had undergone FGM, and put her daughter through it because she considered it the most important custom for a Kuria woman, which gave her the status of womanhood in the community, and opened the opportunity for marriage. She explained that the mark or scar obtained from FGM distinguished those who had undergone it, as women belonging to the Abakuria tribe. This category of informants

viewed FGM as a perfectly legitimate practice that gives the girls cultural identity. MR7 said, “We circumcise our girls because it is our *ikimira* (culture). It is for the same reason that you (referring to researcher) do not circumcise girls; because it is your culture.” These three informants said that FGM had to be kept going, not only so that the *ngariba* (circumcisers) could perform their sacred duty to the ancestors and service to the tribe, but also to sustain their livelihood. They believed that FGM must be continued mainly in order to uphold the Kuria culture, of which they believed they were custodians. All ten (10) daughters of the informants in this category had undergone FGM.

Female genital mutilation: An acceptable and harmless cultural practice

Ten (10) parents (41.7%) understood FGM as an acceptable and harmless cultural practice. Most of them were in their middle to late old age, between 50 and 70 years. Except one participant in this category who had a lower secondary school education (two years completed), the rest were non-literate, having received no formal schooling. This category is referred to in this report as ‘nominal Christians’.

The parents in this category said they were Christians, who attended church and participated in most church activities, but admitted that they also valued their culture and could not abandon it totally for Christianity. They saw nothing wrong with, and raised no objection to FGM as a traditional practice, provided that the girl concerned was willing. Most nominal Christians argued that the white Christian missionaries, who introduced Christianity to the Abakuria, also had their own culture and customs or rituals which they practiced. They said that they too could be Christians and still continue to practise FGM as part of their culture. One of them, FR6 said, “We go to church for eleven months of the year, while FGM happens only in December. Besides, the girls can still return to church and to school after they are

healed”. Six or 60% of them reported that they had already sent all their daughters for FGM, while 40% said they had only sent some. Only one nominal Christian had chosen not to send her one remaining uncircumcised daughter for FGM. Thirty-three (33) daughters in total, of the ten (10) parents in this category had experienced FGM, and only six (6) had not. Seventy per cent (70%) of the parents in this category who had put their daughters through FGM professed to be members of the Catholic denomination. This study established that the nominal Christian parents in this community perceive FGM as a harmless cultural practice.

Female genital mutilation: An unacceptable and outdated cultural practice

Eleven (11) informants (45.8%) categorically stated that they understood FGM as an unacceptable and outdated cultural practice. They all claimed to be committed to the values, teachings and practice of the Christian faith, and are referred to in this study as ‘committed Christians’. This category comprised both non-literate and formally schooled parents, and their age ranged between 20 to 60 years. Seven of them had an O-level education or above. One had Primary school education, while three were non-literate. Despite differences in their level of education, the committed Christian parents held similar views about FGM. They differed with the non-Christians’ claim about FGM being a requirement of the ancestors, and maintained that this superstitious belief and other myths kept the traditional practice alive. They cited their adherence to the Christian faith and commitment to its teachings and values as the main reason for their view of FGM as unacceptable. Each of them argued that FGM contradicted their faith, which teaches values that are contrary to the practice. One pastor, MR5 said, “FGM is unacceptable to me and my family. It holds no value to us because it is a cultural practice that goes against biblical teachings”. MR6, who is a church elder, said that there was neither a

pattern, nor a command in the Bible for female circumcision; therefore FGM was sinful.

All the committed Christians, most of who were exposed to western education and culture also believed FGM to be an outdated cultural practice. They reported that they had been exposed to rigorous anti-FGM campaigns through a program which is jointly carried out between local Protestant churches in the district and an NGO which champions the rights of children and women. Their view they said is a response to biblical teachings in their Church and the NGO regarding FGM. A social worker, FR2, expressed her disappointment that the NGO was educating the Abakuria community about FGM being outmoded and having harmful effects, yet there were parents who attended the Church and NGO workshops, and still sent their girls for FGM. The committed Christians explained that the Church also rescued girls from forced FGM, but regretted that after the season, the girls return to their homes and are faced with the same danger and segregation by their families and the community.

Exposure to formal education, to modern ways of life and to different cultures through interaction with other tribes that did not practice FGM, was cited by eight committed Christians as a reason for viewing FGM as an outdated traditional practice. Seven of them were formally schooled parents. The interaction which they believed contributed to their perception of FGM, took place during employment assignments outside of Kuria district for some of them, while attending formal schools and colleges in multi-ethnic contexts, or in the course of running their small businesses.

The schooled committed Christians in particular said that FGM had harmful consequences to the education of girls. They also explained that exposure to formal

education especially in upper primary school and secondary school led the girls themselves to realise the harmful effects of FGM. Some girls then educated their illiterate parents about the same, and this particularly contributed to the parental perception of FGM as unacceptable and harmful among the non-literate committed Christians. Parents in this category emphasized that FGM was totally unacceptable to them, and was not just a practice that needs to be stopped, but in essence, the product of social norms that need to change.

All committed Christians reported that they had abandoned FGM. Nine (9) of the eleven (11) had not put their girls through FGM at all. The study found that those committed Christians who practiced FGM before conversion, once they were converted had a clear shift of values from traditional ones and embraced Christian values and teachings about FGM. This was the case with two non-literate parents in this category, who had already sent their daughters for FGM before conversion. MR3 said, “Before I became a Christian, I had already sent my three elder girls for FGM. Now that I know that biblically circumcision is only commanded for men, I cannot send my three remaining girls for it”. Sixteen girls (84.2%) out of the nineteen (19) that had not undergone FGM were all daughters of committed Christians. All the informants in this category claimed to be adherents of the Pentecostal denomination.

Benefits and/or Detriments of FGM

When parents were asked what they considered to be the benefits or detriments of FGM to their daughters, seventeen (17) parents recognized that the disadvantages of FGM outweighed its benefits, cultural or otherwise, while seven (7) parents including the three non-Christians still believed that FGM had benefits of a social and cultural nature to the girl. All eleven committed Christians portrayed sufficient knowledge of the adverse physical, psychological and social effects of

FGM on the girl child's education and on her total life. They said that FGM had no demonstrable benefits to girls, and said that if anything, FGM had more disadvantages than the cultural benefits that its proponents believed it to have. They all agreed that the material benefits if any, went to the men in the girl's family. FR7 narrated how her parents put her through FGM at 10 years, and tried to marry her off at 11 years so as to pay bride price for her brother's wife. She resisted the attempt, and even more vehemently when she became a Christian two years later. She regretted though, that she only managed to get through primary school which was free, because her parents refused to support her secondary education. FR7's story confirms the superior value attached to the Kuria boy child over the girl child.

The nominal Christians were reasonably well informed about the detriments of FGM, although not as well as their committed counterparts. They said they had received this information from the joint Church and NGO program, which was open to all, and which they participated in occasionally. They however claimed that the main benefit that FGM held for their daughters was that they were able to experience a very important cultural rite, which gave them the tribal identity, and the assurance of marriage within the community. As parents, they said a daughter's FGM earned them respectability. The non-Christian parents on the other hand seemed poorly informed about the detriments of FGM.

Most parents cited health hazards arising from the unhygienic conditions under which the operations were carried out, and problems related to childbirth as the most familiar physical detriments of FGM. The committed Christians identified a faulty self- image as the most crucial psychological detriment, where girls as young as 8-12 years begin to view themselves as mature simply because they had experienced FGM, and said that this was the real challenge. The two committed

Christians, whose daughters had undergone FGM, confessed that the sudden obvious loss of parental control over the girls, to them was a worrying disadvantage of FGM. Most of the parents whose daughter's had not experienced FGM, said they believed that this loss of parental control and consequent lack of guidance for the girls, often led to the most common social consequence of FGM; early marriage. Only half of the nominal Christians showed some concern for this matter, while the non-Christians showed minimal concern for the issue of loss of parental control. MR4, who chose to educate his only daughter outside Kuria district to avoid FGM, said he was convinced that FGM exposes girls to several temptations that encourage them to drop out of school. Although all except seven parents said FGM had more disadvantages than benefits for girls, the daughters of fifteen parents had undergone FGM. Ten of these parents were nominal Christians, three non-Christians, and two were committed Christians.

Out of the fifteen (15) parents whose daughters had experienced FGM, only four (4) openly assumed responsibility for their daughters' FGM. Three (3) of them were non-Christian parents, who admitted sending their daughters for FGM by choice, to fulfil their cultural obligation. The fourth who was a committed Christian, said he had done so due to non-adherence to the anti-FGM Christian teachings, before his conversion. He also admitted to having been ignorant about the dangers of FGM then, which he had now learnt through a Church program. The remaining eleven (11) parents did not want to openly assume responsibility of their daughters' FGM, and attributed it to different reasons. Their reasons included forceful submission of their daughters to FGM by more powerful members of the family, persuasion, encouragement and even secret arrangements made especially by grandmothers without the parents' knowledge, and the girls themselves desiring or

escaping to go for FGM due to peer and social pressure. FR2 who was a committed Christian said, “My husband insisted that his daughters had to be circumcised, so I kept quiet to avoid conflict with my husband and with the children’s grandmother”.

Effects of FGM on Girls’ Education

In order to establish parental views on how FGM affects the education of girls, the parents whose daughters had undergone FGM were asked, “For any of your daughters who underwent FGM while in school, in your opinion how did that affect her schooling?”

All except one of the fifteen (15) parents whose daughters had experienced FGM confirmed that their daughters had experienced FGM while in primary school. The daughter of one parent had never been to school. According to them, the age factor is the one significant thing that had changed, but most other ramifications of FGM in this community had remained the same as in traditional times. Some of the aspects that parents said had remained the same are the physical operation, the content of initiation education, the community’s attitude, treatment and expectations of the girls and the self-perception of the girls after FGM. Both the committed and nominal Christians whose daughters had undergone FGM said that the aggregate of these factors about FGM had led to most of their daughters dropping out of primary school. Most parents said the girls especially dropped out of school because their attitude and self-perception as mature caused them to struggle to comply with the discipline that comes with formal school institutions. According to them, after dropping out of school, the next option was marriage, even if for some it was not immediately. The two committed Christians whose daughters had undergone FGM believed that dropping out of school, followed by early marriage were the most crucial consequences of FGM on a girl’s education.

The views of parents whose daughters had not undergone FGM were also sought. The committed Christians said that the girls' change of self-perception, attitude and behaviour affected their education. They associated this sudden change of attitude with strongly influential, ancestral spirits, which almost always led the girls to sacrifice the vision of pursuing education for early marriage. Committed Christians said they were convinced that the immoral behaviour that was common among girls after FGM, led to some of the girls getting unplanned pregnancies. One, committed Christian who is a school teacher, said FGM had serious implications for the girls' destiny. He said,

Because they feel they are ready for marriage no matter what their age is, after FGM the girls exercise no restraint. They begin to see every man, even their male teachers as an equal and potential partner to relate freely to, because after all, other men outside school relate freely with them. Most of them at this point engage in indiscriminate sexual relations, and end up getting pregnant even by their own teachers. This condition then forces them to leave school, and a large number of them get married after that.

Out of a total of 64 girls whose parents were the informants, forty-five (70.3%) had experienced FGM. In order to assess the effect of FGM on the girls' educational attainment, the researcher considered the school retention rate for these 45 girls, who had all undergone FGM between the ages of 8 and 14 years. The 15 parents of these 45 girls were asked to indicate at what educational level their daughters dropped out or discontinued their education, if they were not still in school.

Out of the 45 girls who underwent FGM, only one of them had never been sent to school. The remaining 44 underwent FGM while in primary school. An analysis of the parents' responses revealed that six (6) of these 44 girls (13.6%), dropped out straight after, and did not return to school to continue with primary education after FGM, while thirty eight (38) of them returned to school immediately after the school holiday during which they underwent FGM. The return-to-school

rate after FGM was therefore 86.4%. Twelve (12) girls (27.3%) subsequently dropped out of primary school before they completed class eight. Seven (7) of these twelve had dropped out within the first two years of returning to school after FGM, and the remaining five (5) dropped out at different times within the following two to two and a half years, ahead of sitting for their Primary school certificate examination, KCPE. A further twenty (20) girls (45.5%) reached their terminal stage of school at the end of primary school after sitting their KCPE. Only four (4) girls (9.1%) progressed to secondary school, and they all reached their terminal stage of schooling at the end of secondary school, having sat their secondary school certificate examination KCSE. None of them proceeded beyond that level. Only two (2) girls (4.5%) that underwent FGM still remain in school, one in Primary school and one in secondary school. Based on this information, it is clear that after FGM, the largest percentage of girls (86.4%) dropped out of school or discontinued their education before obtaining a secondary school education. The prospect of any of the two girls that are still in school pursuing secondary and post secondary education is therefore dim, and it cannot be ascertained whether they will proceed to a higher level of education or not.

Out of the total number of 64 girls, only nineteen (19) had not undergone FGM. In comparison to the statistics of those who underwent FGM, all nineteen (19) girls who had not undergone FGM, are still pursuing formal education at various levels. Eleven (11) of them are in primary school, three (3) are in Secondary school, and five (5) are pursuing university education. The school retention rate of girls who have not undergone FGM is therefore 100%, and their educational attainment is evidently higher. It is also worth noting that 2 of the girls in school are daughters of nominal Christians and are below the age of 8 years. They have not undergone FGM,

and their age probably explains why. Given the trend with daughters of nominal Christians, this raises uncertainty about how long they will remain in school, should they undergo FGM. The third girl, whose parent is also a nominal Christian, is already 14 years, but lives outside Kuria district. She is in secondary school, and is unlikely to be exposed to or undergo FGM, or discontinue her schooling as an effect of FGM.

Girl Child Education after FGM

To gather the parental views on what they considered would be the way forward for a girl's education after FGM, the informants were asked to indicate their opinion on what they believe to be the best course of action to take concerning a girl's education after FGM, and why?

The formally schooled, committed Christians said that since eliminating FGM was proving to be a big challenge in Kuria, it was important to decide on a strategy for the education of girls after FGM. The eight schooled, committed Christians, expressed regret that despite Kenya having ratified conventions laying down international standards in relation to FGM, there appeared to be lack of political will to enforce these conventions. They reported that the Provincial Administration in Kuria district had failed to enforce laws that prohibit FGM, and as a result, FGM was still being practiced. MR4, a highly schooled, committed Christian said, "Most of the government officials here are Kurias who have cultural, social or political interests in the practice. Others fake ignorance of the law about FGM, while some chiefs take bribes and allow parents to carry it out". FR4, another highly schooled parent said that since FGM is not banned in neighbouring Tanzania, some parents from Kuria had devised a strategy of taking the girls to Tanzania for FGM.

Twenty parents (83.3%) voiced the opinion that girls should return to school after FGM. Sixteen of these twenty said that the girls should not be given a choice in the matter, as most of them were still very young. The other four believed that the girl should make the choice herself, in order to ascertain her commitment.

The twenty parents advanced several reasons for supporting the return of girls to school after FGM. Most of them were of the opinion that since girls today underwent FGM at a very young age, and primary education was free, returning to would give them a chance to grow older, and in the process to acquire knowledge and skills. A committed Christian, FR3, reasoned that school would reduce idleness by occupying the girls, which would discourage immoral behaviour. The schooled parents emphasized that every child had a right to education. Most of the female respondents pointed out that some girls did not choose to undergo FGM, but were forced by either parents, or grandparents, while others had bowed to family, peer and societal pressure. They said that some of the girls are made to believe and even fear they would be cursed if they do not face FGM. For these reasons, they should be given a chance to return to school after FGM. One schooled, female, committed Christian reasoned that girls who had been forced into FGM also risked being forced into early marriage, and suggested that such girls should return to school soon after FGM, to avoid the possibility of such incidents. Another committed Christian explained that both boys and girls were made in God's image, and girls too deserved to continue with their education just as boys after circumcision.

Although almost all parents advocated for girls to return to school after FGM, eight parents who had received formal education expressed the need for some strategies to help the girls settle back and remain in school. One of these eight, MR2, was convinced that whether the girl chose, was forced or influenced into FGM, when

she underwent FGM, considerable damage was done. He said, “The water is spilled, whether it gushed out, is poured, sprinkled, or trickled down. Something is lost when a girl undergoes FGM, but all is not lost, and a plan B can always be adopted to salvage the worth that is left in these girls.” This group of parents proposed intensive education and support programs both in church and in schools, to reverse the attitude and teaching the girls had received during initiation. The committed Christian parents in particular proposed constant prayer to wipe out the effect of ancestral spirits.

Four parents (16.7%) differed with the return-to-school opinion, categorically stating that girls after FGM should simply get married. Two of them were committed Christians, while the other two were non-Christians. One of the non-Christians had sent his two daughters to school until the time they underwent FGM, while the other had not even sent her only daughter to school at all. The Christians and non-Christians who did not support a return- to- school strategy though, had vastly different reasons for their views. The illiterate committed Christian MR6, said,

“Once a girl chooses to be circumcised, her mind is tuned to marriage, and there is no hope of her concentrating in school. She creates discipline problems and spoils those children in school who want to learn. *Esaaro* and school do not go together, so she should simply get married”. One of the non-Christians said that girls did not need formal education to manage in a marriage, and that he would rather marry her off instead of sending her back to school after FGM.

Interpretation of Findings

This study established through the informants that FGM is a deeply entrenched cultural practice, which, has been handed down through the generations of Abakuria people. Apart from this general parental understanding of FGM, three

distinct perceptions of FGM emerged, which were held by three categories of informants. These categories also reflect the religious commitment of the informants, and their age profile.

The non-Christian category of parents (12.5% of the informants), perceive FGM as an indispensable cultural practice. They are the older generation of parents, aged 70 and above, who highly value their culture, and continue to hold tightly to cultural values and practices. This explains why they insist on FGM. These parents have neither embraced Christianity, nor received any western formal education. Their own unschooled status and traditional beliefs about the role of a woman suggests why they do not have much value for formal education, especially for girls. This category of parents does not readily accept the standards and practices of the western culture, and the process of acculturation on their part is extremely slow. This means that this category of parents is experiencing cultural lag.

The nominal Christians (41.7% of the informants) perceive FGM as an acceptable and harmless cultural practice. They are torn between loyalty to two opposing forces; The Abakuria culture and tradition, and the western culture which comes with a new religion, western education and modern ways. They continue to partially embrace Christianity and put their children through formal education, even though a large majority (90%) have themselves not received any formal western education. On the other hand, they retain many cultural values and participate in their traditional practices. It is clear that even though they still largely practice FGM as a tradition, they are gradually accepting elements of western culture, which is an indication that this category of parents is experiencing culture transition.

The committed Christians (45.8% of the informants), perceive FGM as an unacceptable and outdated cultural practice. They have fully embraced Christianity

with all its values and practices, and most of them have received western education as well. The abandonment of the cultural practice of FGM in favour of Christianity and western education indicates their change of values from cultural to Christian values. This category of parents has therefore embraced culture change.

The fact that schooled and committed Christian parents demonstrated a full awareness of the adverse effects of FGM suggests that it is this group of people who have been better exposed and open or receptive to ideas in anti-FGM campaigns and literature, as a result of access to Church, school and NGO forums where anti-FGM awareness is addressed. The denominational picture also shows some differences, and possibly demonstrates the effect of the churches' policy regarding FGM. The fact that the largest numbers of uncircumcised girls are daughters of committed Christians who are all Pentecostal adherents, points to a strict anti-FGM policy and practice among the Pentecostals in the study area. On the contrary, the largest number whose daughters had undergone FGM are nominal Christians that claim to be adherents of the Catholic Church, which suggests that the Catholic Church may need to educate her members more on the subject of FGM.

There is evidence of acculturation in this community, regarding certain aspects of FGM, such as the age, timing and probably purpose, due to the introduction of formal schooling, among other reasons. Forty five (45) daughters of informants in this study underwent FGM between 8 and 14 years of age, while FGM in the traditional setting was intended for older girls of between 18-20 years. This means that today, FGM is carried out on girls 4-10 years earlier than the age at which they would traditionally have been considered for FGM, in readiness for marriage. Findings of the study show that a majority of the girls (86.4%) returned to school after FGM. This suggests that although FGM is still practiced by many as an

important traditional practice, the purpose of FGM in this community has changed, and it is not necessarily preparation for marriage any more, but for other cultural and social reasons.

Among the most important reasons given for earlier age of FGM were the changes that came with the introduction of formal schooling. The tribal elders must have selected the long school holidays in December for FGM, in order to fit in with the formal school calendar. Formal education can be seen as an agent of cultural change for these girls. Parents had observed an early onset of puberty among the girls, compared to traditional times. Mainly female parents associated this early onset of puberty with early sexual activity, which to them increased the possibility of teenage pregnancy, before the girls undergo FGM. Given that sexual activity and pregnancy before FGM is taboo among the Abakuria, it is plausible that these parents are anxious that these two could happen and thus a reason for sending their girls for FGM at a young age as a precaution. Some parents said that once girls joined secondary school they refused to undergo FGM, which explains why those who valued FGM put their daughters through it before they join secondary school.

What emerges from an analysis of the parents' responses in this study is that the nominal Christians raise no objection to FGM, but in fact they encourage it, provided that the participant is willing. International law (and Kenyan law) defines a child as a person under the age of eighteen (18), and in legal terms one who is considered not to be legally responsible for his/her action. This means that the primary school girls, who undergo FGM in Kuria presently, are considered children under the law. They cannot be held responsible for their choices, and can therefore not be described as willing participants. A conflict is evident here, on how national law and traditional Abakuria culture understand who a child is. While national law

defines a child according to their chronological age, this culture does not consider any girl who has undergone FGM to be a child, irrespective of chronological age.

There was a general understanding among parents that they were no longer able or even expected to control or influence the decisions of their daughters after they had undergone FGM. This being the case, it means that the only opportunity that parents have to influence or guide the decisions of the girls is before they undergo FGM. Presently, it is clear that only the committed Christian parents (45.8%), guide the decision of, and stand by their daughters against FGM. The rest of the parents (54.2%), who are a combination of nominal Christians and non-Christians, continue to encourage and influence their daughters towards a decision in favour of FGM.

Despite the existence of legislation against practice of FGM in Kenya, FGM remains an enduring tradition among the Abakuria. Some committed Christians partly blamed the government for failing to enforce legislation that prohibits FGM. The fact that administrative leaders in Kuria district have failed or found it difficult to eliminate it on the local level, means that FGM definitely holds deep cultural value for those who perpetuate it and may be political importance too. The fact that some Kenyan Abakuria take their daughters to Tanzania where FGM is not banned to undergo the ritual, suggests that the cross-border nature of the community must be recognized as a greater challenge in eliminating FGM among the Kenya Abakuria. An important socio-economic factor identified by the older and non-Christian parents, is that FGM is a source of income for the *Ngariba* or circumcisers. Since the *Ngariba* are old women, this means that FGM is arguably an irreplaceable source of revenue for them, and that money is possibly their motivation for FGM besides culture. The implication is that unless an alternative source of income can be created

for them, these *Ngariba* will continue to be a tough lot to deal with for anti-FGM crusaders.

Non-Christian parents in this community, whose daughters have faced FGM, are the only ones who openly take responsibility for it. Most of the other parents (73.3%) did not unambiguously take responsibility for their daughters' FGM. This is likely because they understand that legally, FGM is prohibited, and will not want to risk arrest, by openly appearing to perpetuate the practice. Many of them claim that the girls themselves want or are willing to undergo the procedure, while they themselves have socialised the girls to have this desire, a fact that they conveniently ignore. Even when girls appear to be in agreement with FGM, or have a desire to undergo the procedure, their decision cannot be considered informed or free of coercion as these girls, being so young (8-14 years) cannot be expected to make responsible choices.

The committed Christian and educated parents believed that substantial psychological and social damage is done to girls who undergo FGM, particularly through the initiation training. If this parental claim is well founded, it may explain why a high return-to-school rate of 86.4% (see page 53) after FGM did not necessarily translate to a high school retention rate or a high educational attainment among the forty-four (44) cases observed in this study.

Views of Abakuria Parents Regarding
Ogoteta kw'Abaiseke Abake (Early Marriage)

RSQ2: What value do Abakuria parents attach to the cultural practice of early marriage?

In response to the second research sub-question, these four themes emerged to suggest parental value perceptions of early marriage.

(1) Importance of Marriage in the Abakuria community (2) Preferred form of marriage for a daughter (3) Parental views on early marriage (4) Effects of early marriage on girl child education.

The Importance of Marriage in the Abakuria Community

The informants were asked, “How important is the marriage of your daughter(s) to you, and why?”

On the whole, respondents recognized marriage as very important, in the Abakuria community, especially for the purpose of family propagation.

Preferred Form of Marriage

In order to investigate parental views on the preferred form of marriage for their daughters, the parents were asked, “Between the monogamous, the polygamous and the woman-to woman marriage, which one would you desire for your daughter and why?”

The monogamous marriage was the most popular type of marriage that parents desired their daughters to have, and it was endorsed by 91.7% of the informants. The committed Christians recommended marriage at a mature age, to a single man of about the same age, who was responsible and goal-driven. The formally schooled parents added that appropriate marriage partners for their daughters should have the same level of formal education as the girls, or higher. This, according to them, would ensure that both marriage partners recognized the value of education, and that they would in turn educate their children. All the nominal Christians also endorsed it.

The polygamous marriage was not popular with parents for a daughter’s marriage. The committed Christians strongly condemned it, claiming that it

amounted to interference with, the first marriage, and one of them MR4, a unionist, even added that polygamy promoted child labour. The nominal Christians considered polygamous marriages a second but undesirable option. To them, inability of the old husband to sufficiently provide for the needs of the young girl and the risk of the young girl being widowed early upon his death were the major factors that contributed to its unattractiveness. Two non-Christians favoured polygamy, because it promoted Abakuria values such as large families and many children.

The woman-to woman type of marriage, also known as *ubusinu* or *nyumba mboke* marriage was by far the most unpopular choice for a daughter's marriage. It was disapproved by the same 22 or (91.7%) informants who said they preferred the monogamous marriage. Among these 22 who strongly objected to the *ubusinu* marriage were two respondents, who had personal experiences with the *ubusinu* marriage. The general view of the parents, especially the committed Christians, was that the woman-to-woman marriage encouraged irresponsible sexual behaviour, prostitution and increased the risk of contracting STIs and HIV. They said that nowadays, there was no control over which man or men fathered the young woman's children. Findings revealed that most girls that get pregnant before FGM and out of wedlock, including those who drop out of school due to unplanned pregnancies, are not a popular choice for marriage to young men in this community. These girls therefore almost always end up being married off to older, desperate, sonless women under the *ubusinu* arrangement, or to old men, who are often willing to pay much fewer cattle in bride price for them, in order to gain a larger family and greater labour force for their farms.

Parental Views on Early Marriage

When the respondents were asked their views about early marriage, it was discovered that the term ‘early marriage’ did not exist in the community, because the only people that qualified for marriage in the traditional Abakuria community were a circumcised man and a circumcised girl. In the traditional understanding of marriage, eligibility was not based on chronological age, but on having acquired adult status, by undergoing FGM. The acculturated understanding of marriage on the other hand is that it is a union between two consenting adults, where the adult status is defined by chronological age, which under the law is set at 18 years and above. The term that was used in the interviews to convey the idea of early marriage was *Ogoteta kw’Abaiseke abake*, which means the marriage of young (circumcised) girls.

Eighteen parents or 75%, who were eleven (11) committed Christians and seven (7) nominal Christians, were opposed to early marriage. These 18 parents include nine (9) informants, who confessed that their sixteen (16) daughters had dropped out of school or discontinued their education, and got married. This group advanced a variety of reasons for their daughters’ early marriage, even though they opposed it. The most common was that the girl had eloped with a man, only for the parents to be informed later of her marriage. In five (5) of these cases, the girls became pregnant and chose to get married soon or shortly after, and three (3) of them were even married off forcefully by their fathers. The committed Christians and schooled parents in particular disapproved and condemned early marriage. FR4 said, “Early marriage is criminal, and strong protectors of children must not allow it to happen. God will judge us harshly for that”. Four other well schooled parents strongly opposed because it interfered with the educational attainment of the girl. Nine out of the twelve female respondents had an early marriage (before the age of

18). They opposing early marriage, they said that a girl needed to be physically, mentally and emotionally mature to handle family responsibilities. As a direct result of her conversion to Christianity, one female informant, FR7, said she strongly resisted her parents' attempts to marry her off at 11 years, after forcing her into FGM. Six parents did not oppose early marriage, among them the three non-Christian informants, who said that after FGM and initiation training, a girl was well equipped for marriage.

Informants were asked what they considered to be the appropriate age for a daughter's marriage and why. All the highly schooled parents felt that their daughters were not at liberty to choose when they got married. MR4, a highly schooled Christian parent said, "The right time for my daughters is when they have attained the highest level of education that is available to them, not simply after class 8". For all informants, the preferred age for a daughter's marriage ranged from 18 to 35 years. FR4, a well schooled female parent, recommended a late marriage age of between 30-35, during which the girl would be well educated and mature enough to handle family matters, and when she would have gathered resources to live a good life.

Effects of Early Marriage on Girls' Education

In order to assess the effect of early marriage on the education of girls, the researcher considered the school drop-out rate or discontinuation of education due to early marriage, among the sixty four (64) daughters of the informants. The parents were asked, "If any of your daughters is married, at what age did she get married, and what level of school did she complete?"

An analysis of the data revealed that out of a total number of 64 daughters of the informants, 43 or (67.2%) were already married. The parents' responses indicate

that all of the 43 girls were married before they attained 18 years of age. Only one girl who had never been to school, got married at 14 years of age. Sixteen (16) girls got married at the age of 15 years, while twenty one (21) girls married at the age of 16 years. Five (5) girls married at the age of 17 years. The youngest girl was 14 years at the time of marriage, while the oldest was 17 and a half, having sat her Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination.

While one of these girls had never been to school, forty two (42) of them had been to school, but had dropped out of school during primary school, or discontinued their education after the end of primary or secondary school. Of these 42, eighteen (18) girls (42.9%) did not complete primary education, as they did not remain in school up to the final year (class 8). This number includes 6 girls who did not return to school straight after FGM. Twenty (20) girls (47.6%) completed Primary school education, and sat their Kenya Certificate of Primary Education examination (KCPE), but discontinued their education at that point. Four (4) girls (9.5%) progressed to secondary school, and reached their terminal stage of schooling at the end of secondary school, having sat their KCSE examination.

The parents of these 43 girls, who dropped out or discontinued their education, explained that their daughters got married at different times after dropping out or after their terminal stage of school. Only seven (7) girls, of which one had never been to school, and six who did not return to school after FGM, got married immediately after FGM. Those who returned to school after FGM got married at different times at the earliest at least two years later, when they dropped out of or discontinued their primary schooling. Others married long after, when they had completed Secondary school. None of the married girls obtained post-secondary education.

Out of 64 girls, only twenty-one (21) girls (32.8%) were not married, while 43 (67.2%) were. These twenty one (21) unmarried girls are all presently pursuing formal education at various levels. Thirteen (13) of them are in primary school, three (3) are in secondary school, and five (5) are pursuing university education. Seventeen (17) of these twenty one (21) are daughters of committed Christians, while four (4) are daughters of nominal Christians. No daughters of non-Christians are unmarried.

Interpretation of Findings

This study established that marriage in this community was a very important rite. While eligibility for marriage under international law depends first and foremost upon attaining a majority age of 18 years and above, readiness for marriage among the Abakuria was not marked by chronological age, but by undergoing the ritual of FGM. Traditionally however, only girls aged 18-20 years underwent FGM, which means girls were not married under the age of 18, and early marriage as it is understood by the law today therefore did not happen. This explains why the concept of or a term for early marriage does not exist in this community. The forty five (45) girls in this study, who had reportedly experienced FGM therefore, would have been considered to be ready for marriage in Abakuria culture, despite their age.

The conventional monogamous marriage was endorsed by almost all parents as the type of marriage they desired for their daughters, while the polygamous and woman-to woman forms of marriage were clearly not popular choices. This indicates a change of attitude towards the traditional Abakuria forms of marriage. The widespread parental view that woman-to-woman marriages encouraged irresponsible sexual behaviour due to multiple partners for the young married girl, appears to contradict Chacha's explanation that in such a marriage, a man from the extended family '*omutwari*' (a male consort) is appointed to facilitate the procreation (Chacha

2002). However, the informants' use of the word 'nowadays' confirms that multiple partners were not the case traditionally. Acculturation is evident in this community, where the polygamous and woman-to woman marriages are losing their acceptance, which is likely due to the influence of Christianity and formal education. Most parents (75%) did not favour early marriage, while all the older, non-Christian parents supported early marriage. This view is likely influenced by their cultural values. An analysis of parental views on the preferred age of marriage for a daughter indicated that the marriage age preference has shifted from the traditional 18-20 years, to 18-35 years presently. This may be attributable to a change in the committed Christian parents' perceptions of maturity, educational attainment and economic independence of girls.

Although the girls underwent FGM much earlier than the case in the traditional past, findings of this study did not show this to be the case with marriage. Out of the 43 married girls only seven (7) married soon after FGM. Findings indicate that after FGM at 8-14 years, most of the girls still did not get married immediately after. Rather, those who returned to school (86.4%), married between 15 and 17 years of age. Considering the finding that a majority of the girls returned to school after FGM and did not necessarily get married soon after, it is not clearly evident that early marriage is the cause for school drop-out or discontinuation. The findings of the Centre for the Study of Adolescence (2008, 24), that in communities where FGM is practiced, most girls who leave school do so due to early marriage, are not confirmed by the findings of this study. What emerges from the findings of this study is that a majority of Kuria girls studied got married a little later, instead of soon after FGM, as would have been the case in the past. Marriage in this community also happens slightly earlier than in the past, which traditionally would have been at least after

FGM at 18-20 years. Since most girls returned to school after FGM, it seems that formal schooling is keeping them from getting married immediately after FGM. This means that formal schooling is causing change in traditional marriage patterns in this community.

None of the informants' daughters, who were presently married, had pursued post-secondary education. Although there may have been several factors that caused the discontinuation of school such as limited resources, it is disconcerting that 18 or (28.6%) out of the 63 girls in this study that enrolled in primary school, dropped out before completing their primary school education, a level where education is ostensibly free. The reasons for this were however not pursued with the informants.

Views of Abakuria Parents Regarding *Egesomo ky'Omuiseke* (Girl Child Education)

RSQ3: What value do Abakuria parents attach to educational attainment for girls?

In response to the third research sub-question, three themes emerged.

(1) The importance of formal schooling for girls (2) Parental value of educational attainment for girls (3) Parental benefits from girl child education

The Importance of Formal Schooling for Girls

In order to explore the parents' views on the importance of formal schooling for girls, the informants were asked, "How important do you consider formal schooling for girls?" The parents were to enter a value perception by responding verbally with 'extremely important', 'very important', 'important', 'fairly important', and 'not important'.

The parental value perceptions of formal education for girls were encouraging, with all parental views ranging from extremely important to fairly important, and none of the parents viewing formal education as not important. All

committed Christians considered education for girls as either extremely important, or very important. Those who considered formal education for girls as extremely important were also the five parents that possessed the highest levels of formal education. The nominal and non-Christians, who were almost all illiterate considered formal education as either important or fairly important.

Most of the parents believed that formal education was necessary preparation for employment. All female respondents except were convinced that formal schooling complemented the informal training girls received at home. Illiterate parents in particular viewed the ability to read and write as a major benefit of formal schooling that the girl could not get at home. All committed Christians emphasized the importance of formal education for the Kuria girl who had not undergone FGM. These parents were fully aware that the community would discriminate against their daughters, and that the girls were unlikely to marry in the community, because they had not undergone the cultural rite. They however said that a good formal education will be compensation for any shortcoming. Four parents, whose daughters were pursuing university education, noted that Abakuria girls needed role models in education, and they believed that formal schooling would make their daughters role models for other girls in Kuria who wanted to pursue higher education.

Parental Value of Educational Attainment for Girls

In order to gather parental views on educational attainment for their daughters, the respondents were asked, “What are your views about educational attainment for girls?”

Eleven (11) or 45.8% of all informants valued a high level of educational attainment for girls. Eight of these parents were committed Christians, while three were nominal Christians. Seven of the committed Christians were formally schooled.

One of the nominal Christians had also attained lower secondary school education. Three parents, though illiterate, were convinced that one could not be content with O-Level education. One of them had concluded that O-Level education in Kenya today was as good as none, because many of those who struggled in life like her, had also completed form four. MR4, who has post-graduate education said, that he was willing to sell all his property if need be, to support his children, both boys and girls, to attain the highest level of education possible, even up to PhD level. One of the measures that the schooled parents said they were taking to encourage high educational attainment was to avoid FGM for their girls. To this end, all the seven schooled, committed Christian parents had not put any of their eleven (11) girls through FGM. The three nominal Christian parents mentioned here each had a daughter, who had not undergone FGM, and was still in school, even though all their other daughters who had undergone FGM were married. This study revealed that the total of fourteen daughters of the eleven (11) parents who valued a high educational attainment continued school uninterrupted. Five (5) girls were already pursuing their education at university level, two (2) were in secondary school and seven (7) were still in primary school. The daughters of the eleven (11) committed Christians were also likely to pursue high educational attainment as their siblings, but the same cannot be said with certainty in the case of the daughters of the nominal Christians.

Nine parents (37.5%) valued a moderate educational level for girls. These nine parents were satisfied with secondary school education for their daughters. They considered O-level education to be adequate to enable the girls secure employment, so as to be able to support themselves and their families.

Four parents (16.7%) among them three non-Christians and all illiterate, held a low value for high educational attainment for girls. One of them, a female and the

oldest informant, had never sent her only daughter to school. The other three who were all male informants had sent their sons to secondary school, but not their daughters. MR9, a nominal Christian among them, believed that a girl before marriage only needed enough education to be able to read a letter and to understand basic instructions for medication given at the health centre. He said,

I did not educate any of my girls much before they got married. It is a waste of resources, and I would rather educate a boy. A girl does not belong to my homestead. Once she is married and has children of her own, she will no longer concern herself with my household but she will be thinking of her husband and her children. A boy and his education remain with me and will always be useful to me.

The non-Christian MR7 on the other hand, said that he had sent his girls to primary school before they got married because it was free, but he was not prepared to pay fees for them to go to secondary school. He also believed that primary school education was sufficient for a girl to be able to count the profit from her small business and to write a letter.

Parental Benefits from Girl Child Education

When the parents were then asked what benefits they hoped to derive from the formal education of their daughters, two main views emerged.

One view was advanced by fifteen (15) or 62.5% of the informants, who are subsistence farmers, and have no stable financial base. Thirteen (13) of these fifteen farmer parents were totally illiterate, and believed that their daughters' education would serve as security for them, as the girls would fill in on issues the individual parents were ignorant about. In general, these farmers said that they expected to reap direct material benefits and financial support from the education of their daughters.

Nine (9) out of these fifteen (15) farmer parents still had their daughters in school. They all raised a concern, that even though they desired to support their

daughters to a higher educational level, economic constraints made it impossible for them to meet the required secondary school non-tuition expenses, especially for more than one child at a time. Most of these nine said that they were often forced to choose which child to educate in secondary school, and confessed that their choice favoured boys. Six out of the fifteen farmer parents were female. They all regretted that when they could have acquired some formal education, or attained a higher educational level themselves, unlike their brothers, they had not received any. One said that she had been withdrawn from school, in favour of her brother's education. The six feared that the same fate would befall their daughters if they could not afford to pay the extra secondary school costs. As would be expected, this was no concern to financially stable parents who were mostly educated, committed Christians.

On the other hand, the highly schooled, parents were convinced that even if they had to wait longer, it would be a more gratifying social reward to have the honour and prestige of being the parents of the most educated girl(s) in the community. They perceived the greatest benefit from a girl's education to be the benefit to her community, through helping other Kuria girls to attain education. The common benefit that almost all parents said they desired to get from the education of their daughters was the satisfaction of seeing her become self-supporting, living a life of sufficiency, and not being dependent on them or on other people.

Interpretation of Findings

Almost a half of the parents (45.8%) indicated that they valued a high educational attainment for girls, while 37.5% valued a moderate level. Eshiwani, referring to findings of his study carried out in 1966, pointed out that in certain areas of Kenya, the attitude of parents towards the education of girls was negative (1993, 66). The findings of this study however show that the value that parents attach to girl

child education has shifted positively since Eshiwani's study. Parents who had obtained formal education were found to place a high value on high educational attainment (university level) for their daughters, and were willing to support their daughters to achieve the highest level of education available to them. These findings affirmed Ezewu's assertion, that educated parents encourage high educational attainment in their children (1983, 26). All five girls that are presently pursuing university education are daughters of highly schooled parents, who have provided a good background for their daughters' education, and acted as role models for them. These findings back up Bilton's argument that the parents' education level will exert influence on the educational interests and inclinations of the child (1981, 112). This study established a clear-cut difference between the educational level of girls whose parents were not formally schooled, and those whose parents were highly schooled. A high educational attainment (university level) was observed for only daughters of highly schooled parents, while moderate (secondary school) and low (primary school) educational attainment was observed for girls whose parents were non-literate. These findings affirm Atkinson's (1983, 118) assertion that there is a direct link between the education of parents and the education of children. A few parents, notably the oldest, unschooled ones, were more willing to invest in a son's education, because they believed that girls only required basic formal schooling, as they would get married and move to their husbands' homes, while male children would be expected to remain with their parents. The formal schooling of several female parents was also sacrificed in favour of their brothers'. This pattern of thought agrees with Omagwa's views, that the patriarchal system highly values the boy as the successor of the family (Omagwa 2007, 11).

The finding that parents who were peasant farmers expected direct material and financial support from a daughter's formal schooling, is likely related to their poor economic status. These findings affirm Wallace's views (1975, 40) that poor people, given their resource constraints, see education in terms of costs and benefits. Highly schooled parents were also employed and had steady incomes, which likely explains their perception of social and psychological benefits gained from a daughter's formal education as more rewarding.

Most parents who were peasant farmers and small scale business persons, and who had daughters in school, due to lack of resources were often forced to choose which gender of child to educate, and priority was given to the boy. This information appears to support Raju's view, that lack of money to pay for the education of both sons and daughters is the most common cause of premature withdrawal from school and low educational attainment for girls (1973, 49). However, it is important to note that Raju's study was based on the Kenyan situation over three decades ago, and may not necessarily be true for the situation today. Closer home, although these parents' views bear out Mohochi's observation that the Abakuria community has little regard for the formal education of girls (Mohochi 2010), the statistics in this study do not corroborate that view. On the contrary, the value attached to a daughter's education depends on the educational attainment of the Kuria parent. The Kuria girl whose parents have limited resources in most cases is only assured of primary school education, which is free. The implication then is that if the girl has no assurance of continuing with education past the basic level due to economic constraints, this may force her to drop out of school, or encourage her to undergo FGM in preparation for early marriage. Her parents being financially insecure may also insist on FGM as insurance for marriage. The educated and therefore financially stable parents, on the

other hand are confident of their ability and are willing to pay for their daughters' higher education. This means that they can anticipate that as educated women, their daughters would be eligible to marry educated men, who would not be concerned with their FGM status. This suggests another reason apart from their faith, why they do not consider it important for their daughters to undergo FGM. Girls, who did not experience FGM, could not be married in this community. This means that by parents providing such girls with a good formal education, they believed it would cover for the perceived inadequacy imposed by cultural values, giving the girls an opportunity and open-mindedness to marry outside the community if they chose.

Summary of Findings

Abakuria parents in general identify and describe FGM as a deeply entrenched cultural practice. Three other perceptions were held by three corresponding categories of informants, which also reflect the religious commitment and age of the informants. The study established that directly or indirectly, both FGM and early marriage affect the educational attainment of the girls. FGM in itself appears to have an indirect relation to school drop-out, while other notions associated with it, including its cultural connotation of marriage, are also contributing factors. The study revealed that FGM occurs at an earlier age today than in the past for several reasons, the most important being the introduction of formal schooling.

While to qualify for marriage under Kenyan law depends on attaining a majority age of 18 years, eligibility for marriage among the Abakuria traditionally was based on having acquired adult status, by undergoing FGM. Most of the informants (75%) were opposed to early marriage. Study findings showed that forty three or 95.6% of the girls, who underwent FGM while in primary school, married at different times after FGM, before any acquired post-secondary education. However,

the girls do not get married soon after FGM, but rather tend to return to school, and formal schooling is therefore seen to be preventing them from marrying early.

Twenty or 83.3 % of the informants, have a positive perception of girl child education, and place either a high or moderate value on high educational attainment for girls. However, parental perceptions of educational attainment for girls are largely influenced by several factors. Among the main factors are, the value that parents attach to FGM and early marriage, their economic status, and the parents' own educational attainment.

As explained in chapter three, the religious commitment of informants was not a criterion used in selecting informants during the sampling procedure. Since however it emerged as an important factor influencing parental perceptions, three categories based on this factor were created and used in the data analysis. The proportions of these three categories however, may not be a true reflection of their distribution in the wider Abakuria population. The overall results of this study should therefore not be generalized to the entire Abakuria population.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to explore and understand the value that parents attach to the educational attainment of the girl child, in view of the cultural practices of FGM and early marriage among the Abakuria. In order to respond to the three research sub-questions, which together would in turn respond to the central research question, the researcher interviewed twenty four parents of daughters, drawn from Kuria district.

Conclusions

During the interviews, several interrelated themes emerged from individual informants. These themes included parental value perceptions of FGM, of early marriage, and of educational attainment for the girl child.

The high proportion of Abakuria Christian parents sampled (45.8%), acquisition of formal education and subsequent exposure to western culture, were found to lead to an increasingly negative perception and low value attached to FGM. These are the category of committed Christians, whose age also ranged between 20 and 60 years. The findings of this study however indicate that a larger proportion of parents (54.2%) who are a combination of nominal Christians (41.7%) and non-Christians (12.5%), still valued the traditional practice of FGM, and continued to encourage and subject their girls to it. FGM was discovered to occur 4-10 years earlier than in the traditional past. FGM and all its other ramifications often led to school drop-out, and subsequent early marriage, even

when not immediately after. A large majority, (95.5%) of girls who experienced FGM were observed to drop out of school before acquiring any post-secondary education. It also emerged from the study that despite marriage having occurred soon after FGM in the past, this is not the case today. Findings of the study suggest a slight contradiction between the timing of both FGM and early marriage in the traditional past, and today. Although all of the girls who had undergone FGM married under the legal majority age of 18 years, most married well after FGM, even in cases where they had dropped out of school or discontinued their education. The girls presently experience FGM much earlier, and get married slightly earlier than in the past. Based on findings of the study therefore, early marriage does not directly appear to be tied to FGM. Rather, formal schooling seems to keep the girls from early marriage, even when they undergo FGM at a younger age. This being the case, it is realistic to suggest that ensuring a high primary school retention rate even after the girls undergo FGM, and promoting progression to secondary school, would be strategic in improving the educational attainment of the girls. A very high marriage rate (95.6%) and a low educational attainment were observed on the part of girls who experienced FGM. Formally educated and committed Christian parents were found to attach great value to a high educational attainment for girls, and they avoided FGM for their daughters in order to encourage this high attainment. A 100% school retention rate was observed for the girls who did not undergo FGM. A 0% marriage rate and a high educational attainment were also observed among them, with 26.3% already pursuing university education.

As indicated under ‘study sample’ in chapter 3, the religious commitment of informants was not taken into account during the purposeful sampling procedure. As interviews proceeded however, religious commitment repeatedly emerged as a major

factor influencing parental perceptions of the issues of concern to the study. The three categories of analysis created were therefore based on the religious commitment of informants. However, the proportions of the three categories in the study may not be truly representative of how these categories are distributed in the wider Abakuria population. This then means that the overall results of this study can only be generalized to the Abakuria living in the study area, Maberera division, but should not be generalized to the entire Abakuria population. Since however each of the three categories finds representation in the wider Abakuria community, the findings may be applied cautiously to the Abakuria population. Furthermore, the findings of this study have far-reaching implications for other communities in cultural transition, and those communities where FGM and early marriage are still being practiced.

The findings of this study indicate that FGM is indirectly related to school retention. This discovery points to a necessity for intensified joint efforts between the Church and Non-Governmental-Organizations, the Government of Kenya and education policy makers, and the media, in order to challenge the Abakuria culture, so to rethink FGM. These joint efforts it is hoped will encourage a higher school retention rate among Kuria girls and provide assistance to improve on their educational attainment. In light of these findings, the researcher makes the following recommendations.

Recommendations

To the Church and Non-Governmental-Organizations

It is recommended that both the Catholic and Protestant denominations work together in encouraging commitment to Christian values that are anti-FGM, and to

come together in a common strategy of FGM mitigation. The Church will need to teach the biblical perspectives of FGM, stressing that God never commanded it. To do this, it should first introduce appropriate training programs for its leaders on matters of FGM and early marriage, so that they can in turn train their congregations to cooperate especially in influencing attitudes. The Church in Kuria must use every available educational and counseling resource, and through its educational ministries provide educational programs about FGM and early marriage, that exercise sensitivity to the cultural background of the girls and parents. Opinion leaders such as chiefs, elders, circumcisers, older men and women, and circumcised women should be targeted by these programs. If these opinion leaders are persuaded, they can influence the attitude of the entire community towards the discontinuation of FGM. The Church also needs to team up with the government and NGOs operating in Kuria district to come up with more lasting solutions to the dangers and problems faced by girls that it rescues from undergoing FGM. It is also recommended that the Church partners with the NGOs, and with the Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs, to design and offer reasonable alternatives to FGM, that will still accomplish some of its social functions. Such alternatives have been found to achieve significant success among various tribes in Kenya (Wasunna 1999). In addition, as FGM is essentially a rite of passage into adulthood among the Abakuria, an initiation approach should be taken. An alternative rite of passage program that marks the transition into adulthood should be provided in this community. In designing such an alternative rite of passage program for Kuria girls, much thought needs to be put into it, in terms of what is culturally acceptable, but at the same time what is legal and what is empowering to the girls. Towards stemming the practice, it is recommended that NGOs organize cultural exchange programs between Abakuria elders and elders

of other communities who have learnt to discard some aspects of culture that are no longer useful. The Church and NGOs should take note that FGM sensitization needs to be done all year round instead of waiting until the FGM season sets in.

To the Government and Education Policy-makers

In order to back the efforts of parents towards a high educational attainment of Kuria girls, it is recommended that the government takes certain measures. First, the government needs to take legislative, social, administrative and educational measures to enforce the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, with specific reference to education (article 28) and protection of children from harmful cultural practices (articles 19 and 24). The government must therefore take action against Provincial Administration officials in Kuria district who reportedly misuse their positions and the law to the disadvantage of children, thus sabotaging the educational attainment of the girl child. Because the cross-border nature of the community poses a challenge in the fight against FGM, it is recommended that the Provincial Administration officials on both sides of the border should hold frequent meetings, and the Kenyan side should persuade their counterparts in Tanzania, to cooperate in combating FGM by banning it. The government should also create an alternative source of income for the traditional circumcisers in response to the challenges implied by them giving up their crucial role in FGM.

Teachers play a great role in shaping the views and attitudes of children. Including FGM education in the lower primary school curriculum is therefore recommended. This will impact young pupils' perception of FGM as a retrogressive practice, which will consequently influence the decisions that they will make in future concerning FGM for their own daughters, and subsequent generations. It is further recommended that the government declares primary education completely

free and compulsory as an initial step towards solving the problem of school drop-out. In order to encourage the number of girls attaining secondary school education in the district, the Ministry of Education needs to consider reviewing budgetary allocations to secondary schools upwards, so that girls are not kept out of secondary school by non-tuition school expenses. The Ministry of Education could also apply the quota system, to ensure that Kuria girls, who qualify for higher education, do not miss places in public universities. The government should also identify successful women from the community, who have attained a high level of education, and deploy them in public and parastatal offices in Kuria district. These women will serve as role models and an encouragement for Kuria girls to pursue a high educational attainment.

Since the study found out that formal schooling was keeping girls from early marriage after FGM, special attention should be paid to action aimed at improving school retention and completion rates. Concerning girls that have already gone through FGM but returned to school, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education, through Parents-Teachers-Associations, institutes measures aimed at providing guidance and counseling programs and staff for both primary and secondary schools in the district. With insights from this study, the researcher also recommends that Parents-Teachers-Associations in Kuria district purpose to improve the communication between schools and the community, by designing programs for educating parents on the purpose and value of girl child education.

To The Media

The media is a powerful social tool in shaping opinions through information, education and entertainment. The researcher therefore makes a recommendation for the media to participate aggressively in creating awareness on the dangers of FGM.

Local media stations broadcasting in *Egekuria* should take advantage of their proximity to the Abakuria community, their knowledge of the cultural practice, and their ability to communicate effectively in the local language, to reach out to the local population with the message of women and children's rights, the importance of girl child education, women empowerment, and FGM and early marriage intervention. The media can also take advantage of media freedom to name and shame government officials and political leaders who aid in perpetuating the practice.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study primarily focused on parental perceptions of two cultural factors affecting the educational attainment of the Kuria girl child. From the researcher's discussions with parents however, it was clear that the educational attainment of the Kuria girl child is affected by more than cultural factors.

In order to gain a holistic understanding of the factors affecting the girl child's education in Kuria district, there is need to open this study up to further investigation. The researcher therefore recommends a further study that explores non-cultural factors that affect the educational attainment of the Kuria girl child.

The researcher further recommends a study that will fully investigate the factors that have led to the phenomenon of FGM occurring at a younger age than in the traditional setting. Understanding these factors may be vital to the campaign towards higher school retention rates, which would in turn increase the chances of a higher educational attainment for the Kuria girl child.

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APPENDIX I

Interview Guide

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Tell me briefly about yourself and your family.

Section B: Perspectives on FGM

1. How many daughters do you have and what are their ages?
2. Have any of your daughters undergone FGM, and if yes, at what age?
3. What is your understanding of FGM and of what significance is FGM to you?
4. What would you consider to be the benefits or detriments of FGM to your daughter(s)?
5. In what ways would you view your daughter who has gone through FGM differently from the one who has not?
6. If any of your daughter's underwent FGM while in school, in your opinion how did that affect her schooling?
7. What in your opinion is the best course of action to be taken for a girl's education after FGM and why?

Section C: Perspectives on Early Marriage

1. How important is the marriage of your daughter(s) to you, and why?
2. What are your views about early marriage?

3. What would you consider the appropriate age for your daughter's marriage and why?
4. "Between the monogamous and the polygamous marriage, which one would you desire for your daughter and why?"
5. "If any of your daughters who underwent FGM is married, at what age did she get married, and what level of formal schooling did she complete?"

Section D: Parental Value for Girl Child Education

1. "How important do you consider formal schooling for girls to be?"
 - a) Extremely important. b) Very important. c) Important.
 - d) Fairly important. e) Not important.
2. What is the highest level any of your daughters has attained in school?
3. What are your views about educational attainment for girls?
4. Up to what level of education are you willing to support a daughter and why?
5. What benefits do you as a parent hope to derive from the formal education of your daughter?

APPENDIX II

Authority to Carry Out Research



NAIROBI EVANGELICAL GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

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31st March, 2010

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: INTRODUCING MRS. DYMPHNAH KATONI KITOLOLO

The bearer of this letter, Mrs. Dymphnah K. Kitololo is a student at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST) and is doing research towards the completion of the Master of Arts in Christian Education degree. The research is on **“Value Perceptions of Parents on Formal Education for the Girl Child in Light of Cultural Practices Among the Abakuria of South Nyanza in Kenya”**.

Any assistance that you can give to Mrs. Kitololo will be highly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Prof. Samuel Ngewa
Academic Dean