

Aspects of male circumcision in sub-equatorial African culture history *



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The distribution of circumcision and initiation rites throughout Africa, and the frequent resemblance between details of ceremonial procedure in areas thousands of miles apart, indicate that the circumcision ritual has an old tradition behind it and in its present form is the result of a long process of development.

Wagner (1949:335)

Abstract

This paper describes the general cultural background of male circumcision for the Bantu speaking peoples of sub-equatorial Africa. Where the contemporary cultural context of male circumcision is now variable and often transformed amongst groups who continue the practice, traditional practices were commonly of a particular and rather narrow profile linked to the toughening, training and initiation of male adolescents into warrior status. For those groups the normal social context of circumcision was in the adolescent rites of passage typically called 'initiation schools' in the ethnographic literature. These in turn were highly associated with 'age-grades', age ranked male cohorts whose membership was defined by participation in the same initiation schools in the same year. Linguistic evidence suggests the schools and circumcision are very ancient and typological arguments suggest that those Bantu groups which do not circumcise males have abandoned a once more widespread practice. In the main, the Bantu groups which do not circumcise males belong to certain contiguous linguistic groups and their neighbours from amongst bordering Bantu subgroups. Almost all groups which have abandoned male circumcision have also abandoned initiation schools and age-grades. This constitutes a culture area in terms of those dimensions of those societies. Circumcising and non-circumcising groups are suggested to have their distribution due to diffusion of loss and it cannot be expected that differential risk behaviours in relation to HIV infection will be found to sort similarly amongst Bantu-speaking or other African peoples. But such mapping, for those who would do it, can now take place with the knowledge that a cluster of cultural traits typify the non-circumcising Bantu groups.

* This paper was developed at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen and finalized at the Health Transition Centre, National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University.

Background

The African AIDS epidemic is a predominantly heterosexual epidemic with a subordinate epidemic involving mother to child transmission. Transmission through intravenous drug use, male homosexual activities and other means significant on other continents are rarely

observed in the African epidemic. Mundane penile-vaginal sex acts are the main mode of transmission across the continent. The primary demonstrated cause for elevated rates of HIV transmission through sexual contact is the presence of genital ulcer diseases and this seems to be the general background as to why parts of Africa have a raging heterosexual epidemic and why other parts of the continent and, for instance, poor people in wealthier nations do not¹ or have seen such develop more slowly. Lack of male circumcision has been mentioned as a possible factor in elevated rates of female-to-male transmission in published case-control studies from Africa since about 1986 or 1987 and in *prospective* studies of individuals since 1988 (Cameron et al. 1988, 1989). Cameron et al. (1988, 1989) inspired two ecological studies (Bongaarts et al. 1989; Moses et al. 1990) which showed a striking positive relationship between those parts of Africa which have high rates of HIV-1 and those that have low rates of male circumcision. I shall not comment here on the resulting literature but refer the reader to some recent articles² concerning the 'chancroid/circumcision' model of the epidemic. Here, over ten years after lack of male circumcision began to be mentioned as a possible factor in the epidemic, I wish to start talking about what male circumcision means or has meant to Africans in the Bantu-speaking portions of the 'AIDS Belt' of sub-equatorial Africa, and to consider why it has its historical distribution amongst Bantu speakers.

Organization and results

The geographical distribution of African groups traditionally practising male circumcision is reviewed. It is noted that the central and southern portions of a region where it was not practised in the AIDS Belt is dominated by groups speaking 'Bantu' languages. Recent archaeological and linguistic theories as to how Bantu languages came to have their historical distribution are mentioned. Terms for 'male circumcision' and 'male initiation school' amongst Bantu languages are discussed in light of what evidence they might offer for the general antiquity of male circumcision amongst Bantu-speaking groups. A typological argument is presented suggesting that either male circumcision was a practice of societies speaking Proto-Bantu or that the practice came to be general amongst Bantu speakers quite anciently but after the disintegration³ of Proto-Bantu. The distribution of non-circumcising groups of Bantu speakers is explained as due to subsequent loss through a continuous area whose edges are defined by the edges of a series of Bantu language subgroups. It is noted that sub-equatorial groups, regardless of language family, tend to do what their neighbours do in respect to circumcision.

Male circumcision in sub-equatorial Africa

General background

¹That is, because of a difference in frequency and kinds of sexually transmitted diseases, especially genital ulcer diseases.

²Caldwell (1995), Caldwell and Caldwell (1993, 1994, 1996), Conant (1995), Mertens and Caraël (1995), Moses et al. (1995), and Ntozi (1995) refer to the general behavioural literature and some of the biomedical literature. Plummer et al. (1991) makes chilling reading at this time as it provides the cultural background of Cameron et al. (1988, 1989) and a model for the central core of the next many millions of infections through the AIDS Belt.

³The divergence of 'daughter' languages through geographical spread, passage of time and the isolation or localization of speech.

Male circumcision appears to have been a general practice in all of Africa with the exception of three major areas (Map 1). Here we will be concerned with the continuous area of Central, inland East and inland Southern Africa running from southern Sudan and the Lakes Region to Southern Africa. Groups in Zaire⁴ mainly practise male circumcision as do most groups on the coast of the east and south. Various maps of historic and contemporary distributions can be observed in Bongaarts et al. (1989). Map 1 follows Moses et al. (1990) which was developed from Murdock⁵ (1981) but the present version represents the situation around the lake more precisely.

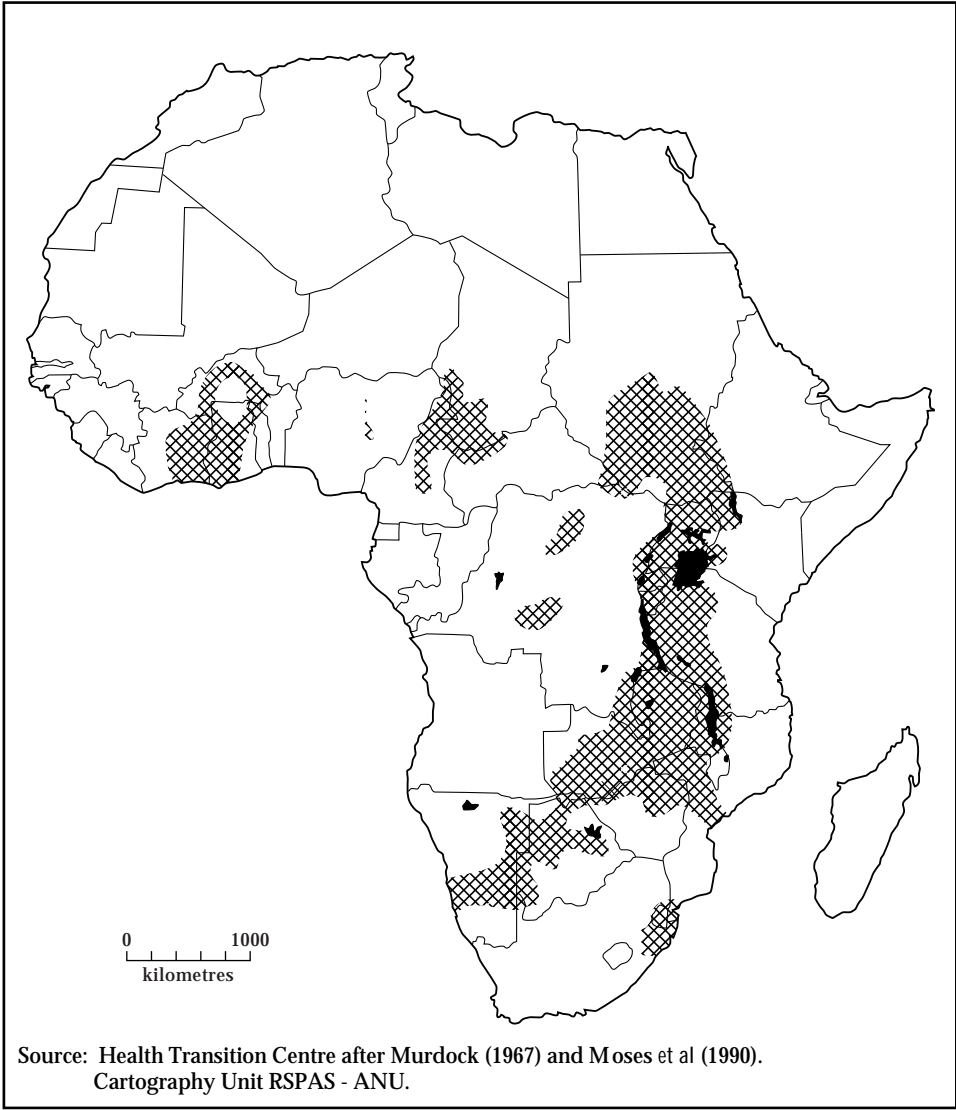
Only four language families are found in Africa other than those introduced during the colonial period. Their distributions are shown in Map 2. The focus of the present study is 'Bantu' speakers as they constitute such a large portion of peoples in the AIDS Belt. Formally, Bantu languages are those shown on Map 3. They are a subgroup of Niger-Congo languages which is the largest subgroup of Niger-Kordofanian, the language family with the largest number of speakers in Africa. Some other languages are known as 'Bantoid' and belong to the Niger-Congo subgroup with Bantu or 'narrow Bantu'. But only those languages indicated on Map 3 are formally termed 'Bantu' or 'narrow Bantu' in the linguistic literature.

Both the circumcising and non-circumcising areas of Africa include speakers of all the African language families except Afro-Asiatic who always circumcise males. Some Nilotic groups circumcise (e.g. the Maasai and the Eastern Nilotic subgroup in general) and some do not (e.g. the Luo and the Western Nilotic subgroup in general). Ancient practices of the speakers of the various language families probably underlie the historic pattern but boundaries today are areal rather than strictly according to language group (cf. Map 4). The main exception I am aware of for Bantu speakers and their neighbours are the Luo who inhabit the area around the northeast shore of Lake Victoria. While surrounded by circumcising Bantu and Southern Nilotic groups, the Luo do not circumcise.

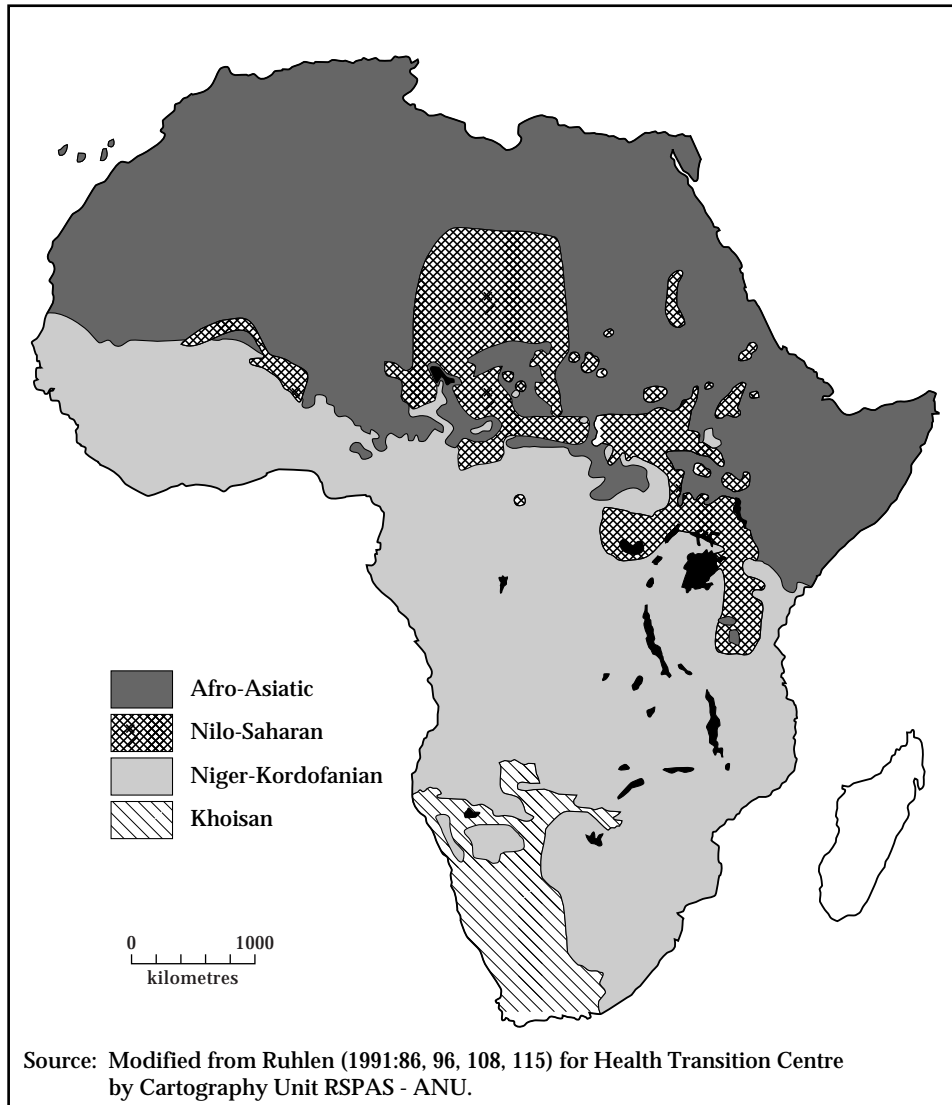
Sutton (1995) has recently edited a volume which includes articles on the emergence of Bantu speech through sub-equatorial Africa and Vansina (1995a) is another important work speaking to some of the same issues. Those articles reflect general unanimity amongst archaeologists, linguists and other culture historians as to the general reasons for Bantu languages being spread as they are. The basic outline (cf. esp. Vansina 1995a,b) is that horticultural populations speaking Niger-Congo languages were slowly expanding out of an ancient centre of plant domestication in West Africa and by about 3000 BC (Vansina 1995a:189) some such speakers were established in what is now Cameroon. From there speakers of a language or group of dialects called Proto-Bantu emerged slowly east and south into new territories, speakers of some descended languages reaching the East African highlands by about the early first millennium BC. A similar slow progression out of the Cameroons eventually saw Bantu speakers arriving in what is now Angola.

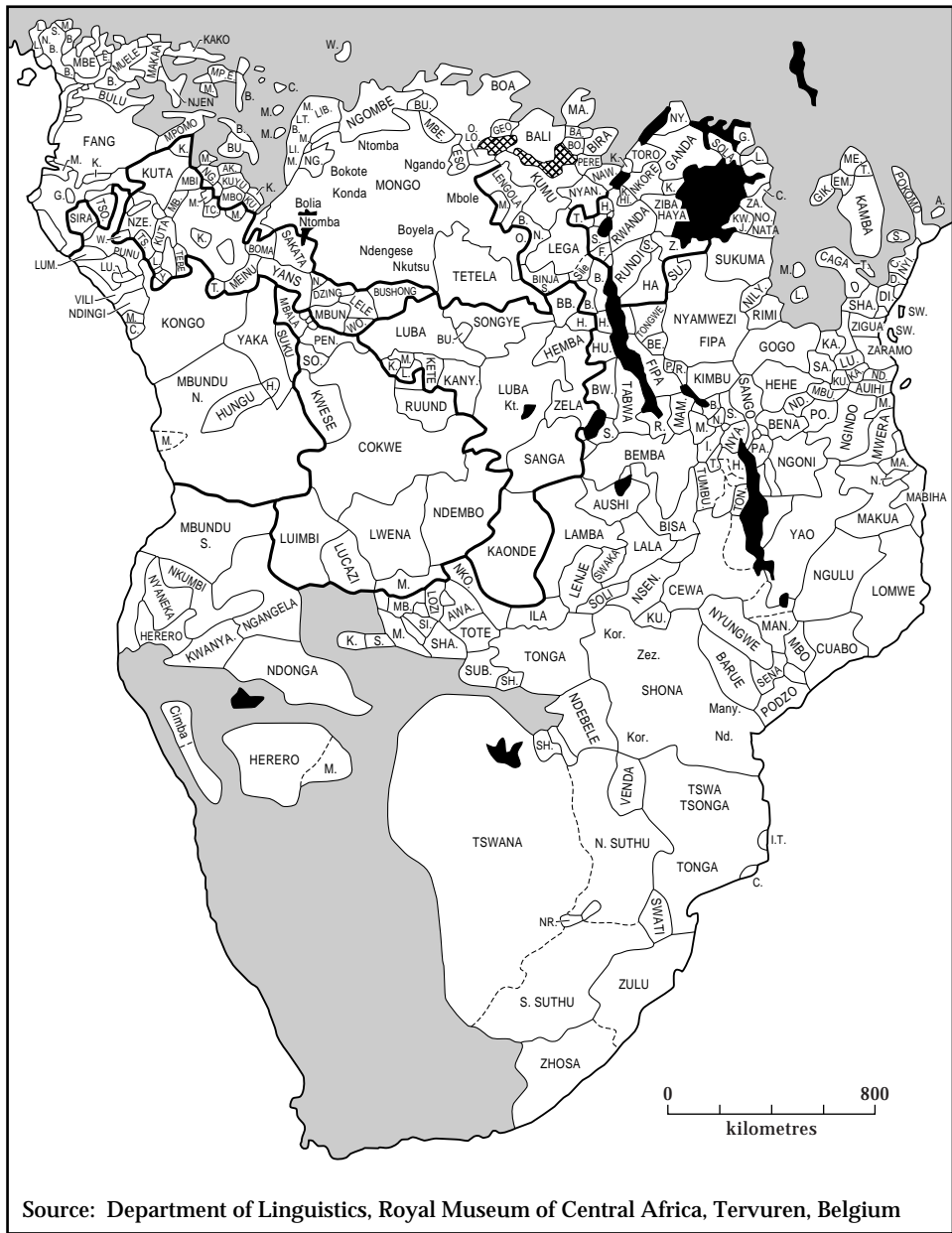
⁴ Except along its eastern border.

⁵ Murdock (1981) gives the 'traditional' situation to the extent possible. Caldwell and Caldwell (1993, 1996) present maps based ultimately on Murdock but modified to reflect the contemporary situation to the extent possible.

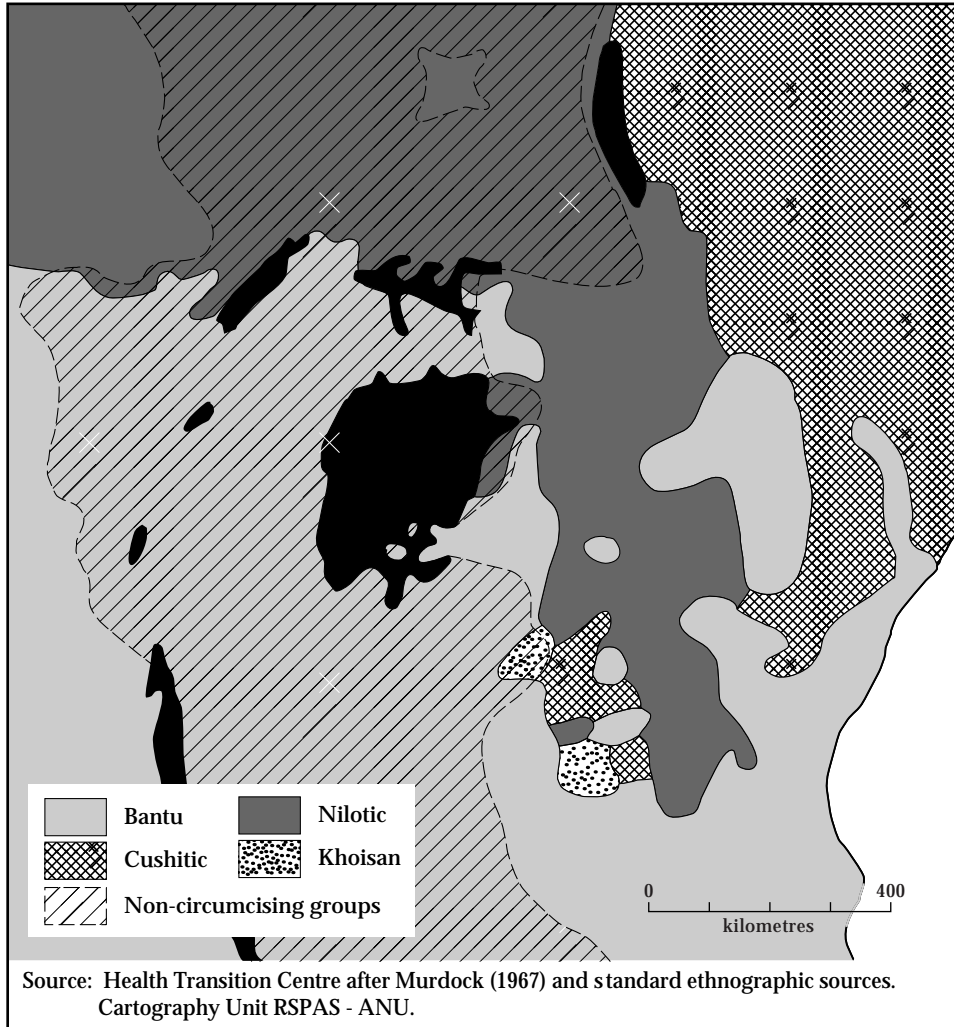


Source: Health Transition Centre after Murdock (1967) and Moses et al (1990).
Cartography Unit RSPAS - ANU.





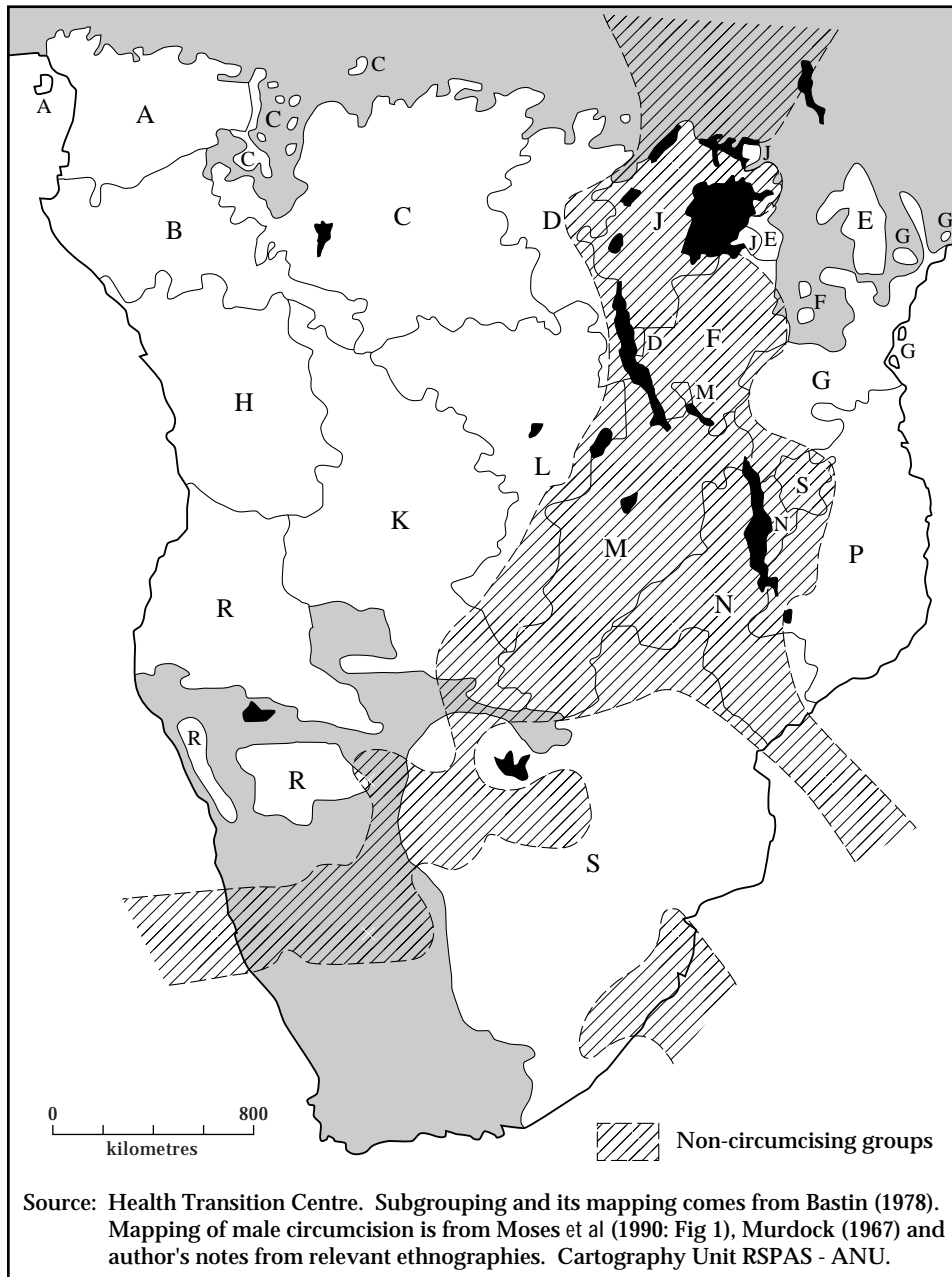
Source: Department of Linguistics, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium



Map 4

Distributions of East African language families and male circumcision amongst them

Source: Murdock (1967) and standard ethnographic sources for the groups not covered by Murdock. Generalized in some instances when all groups surrounding a group for which no source was found were known to all have the practise or, alternately, all known not to have the practise.



Proto-Bantu speakers were root-crop horticulturalists and had neither iron, grain cropping nor herding traditions. These were adopted later in the east and were apparently quite significant in three distinct expansions out of Tanzania into the south by AD 100 and associated archaeological remains are found all over southeast Africa by AD 350 (Vansina 1995b:15).

Culture historians have good reason to use such terms as 'migration' and 'expansion' carefully as their use has a chequered past in archaeological, anthropological, and linguistic literature concerning changes in distributions of cultural characteristics in prehistory. Literature of the nineteenth century and even up to recent times failed to define 'migration' and similar terms and their use sometimes implied raging hordes of people overtaking new territories, and social, cultural and demographic processes that have no precise analogy in recorded history. Vansina (1995a:173-180) speaks narrowly to such issues and explains the theory of Bantu expansion in modern demographic terms. There were cultural and subsistence changes through time and space. Although a nearly universal result was replacement of previous languages, much of this could have been through 'language shift' where previously existing populations adopted the languages of Bantu speakers with whom they came into contact.

I shall now consider the distribution, practices and terminologies associated with male circumcision amongst 'narrow' Bantu speakers and suggest why many Bantu-speaking groups have the practice and why some of them do not.

Linguistic observations

The standard ethnographies and dictionaries⁶ for Bantu speaking groups do not provide enough data to comment in detail on the probable history of terminologies for 'male circumcision'. The only broadly distributed terminological agreements encountered were for parts of Southern Africa⁷ and were for the names of initiation schools. Those agreeing terms also have the meanings 'make friends' and 'drum', the former coming from the common friendship bonds or formal organization of age-grades that result each time such schools are held, the latter coming from the most common musical instrument in use in the course of a typical school and its ceremonies. The only other agreements were for such adjacent and closely related groups as the Nyaneka and (Ov)ambo of southwest Angola and northwest Namibia (which agree on a word for the school or lodge-encampment). Thus no etymological argument resulted from the present work to suggest that the schools or male circumcision are ancient. But Baudouin Janssens brought to my attention two published reconstructions for western Bantu (Vansina 1990:280-281). The first, **-gandá* 'boy's initiation', is derived from the base for 'skin' so circumcision seems to be implied. The second is the verb **-yénd/-bénd* 'to circumcise'. Vansina judges the first to be a possible Proto-western Bantu word and the

⁶The Africa collections at the libraries of the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen and the Ethnographic Collection, National Museum of Denmark were examined for works on Africa that commented in any way on male circumcision or male adolescent rites of initiation. The information obtained was later supplemented in various ways from the same and similar ethnographies at the libraries of the Australian National University. Although libraries at those institutions do not contain all published African ethnographies, it is here maintained that the patterns observed and now reported could not be the result of sampling error. The dictionaries consulted in the present project were those of the Department of Linguistics at the Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium where Baudouin Janssens was consulted.

⁷Where all the Bantu languages are fairly closely related and constitute a single subgroup in all classifications of Bantu.

second to be of such a distribution as to be questionable for Proto-western Bantu but to 'support the notion of great antiquity for circumcision' amongst Bantu speakers.

The result is that we cannot presently say, on etymological grounds, whether initiation schools and male circumcision are ancient in the ultimate sense of having reconstructable names for the Proto-Bantu language. They could just as well be post-Proto-Bantu practices which were adopted by various African groups from their neighbours in a process that affected all or most of sub-Saharan Africa. The African distribution in general is certainly due to borrowing to some extent. The great similarities between the schools and circumcision practices sometimes found amongst groups across unrelated language families⁸ are clear evidence of such.

Ethnographic observations

Amongst Bantu speakers at the time of the classic⁹ ethnographies, male circumcision was normally associated with adolescent initiation schools, which, in turn, commonly defined age-grades. The absence of male circumcision and of initiation schools is highly associated and the societies concerned also typically lack age-grades except in the extreme south of the distribution of non-circumcising Bantu groups.

Male circumcision in sub-equatorial Africa continues to be practised in areas that had initiation schools but abandoned them in the historical period so, ultimately, it needs to be understood in its own right and independently of initiation and age-grades. Still, the social context of male circumcision amongst Bantu speakers was almost always the initiation schools in the past so I will now present summaries of three groups which have or had both.

I shall outline those of the Bukusu¹⁰ (also Vukusu) (Wagner 1949), the Tsonga (also Thonga¹¹) (Junod 1962) and the Nyaneka (Estermann 1979) which are groups more or less from three far corners of the Bantu groups which had the practice. The Bukusu live along the Kenyan border with Uganda and practised circumcision at the time of Wagner's fieldwork. They still do so and still conduct initiation schools although these are not, perhaps, as long or elaborate as those described by Wagner (Vincent Muange, personal communication). The Tsonga are spread through what is now southern Mozambique and into South Africa and practised male circumcision at the time of Junod's description. The Nyaneka inhabit southwest Angola.

The Bukusu and Tsonga may have some common linguistic history apart from the Nyaneka in the sense that both are sometimes classified as 'eastern Bantu' where Nyaneka is classified as 'western Bantu'. But the division of Bantu into eastern and western groups is indicative and not diagnostic¹² (cf. Nurse 1995) and the similarities of Bukusu and Tsonga to each other and to Nyaneka are offered as evidence of the great antiquity for the general

⁸The similarities of certain Nilotic and Khoisan initiation schools to those of neighbouring Bantu groups, for instance.

⁹I use that term loosely to indicate the standard topics of ethnographies from the first half of this century although more recent ethnographies are considered of the 'classic' variety if they include, at least, the standard topics of the older ethnographies.

¹⁰The word-initial sound concerned is a 'voiced bilabial fricative', like an English 'v' sound but made by pressing both the lips close together rather than the lower lip against the upper teeth, as in English. Wagner spells the name 'Vukusu' but it seems generally to be 'Bukusu' in the linguistic literature. (The present author is a linguist, thus the bias).

¹¹A more archaic spelling from the linguists' point of view.

¹² Herbert and Huffman (1993) and Huffman and Herbert (1995) provide a detailed alternative linguistic model to the 'Eastern Bantu' notion and explore some of its possible archaeological correlaries.

pattern of initiation schools and circumcising boys and/or young men during such schools (and not as proof of the situation amongst speakers of Proto-Bantu).

The Bukusu (Wagner 1949)

The Bukusu are amongst a series of circumcising Bantu groups along the southern portions of the Kenyan-Ugandan border. The immediate cultural-linguistic group of which they are a part is contiguous with Nilotic groups to the east which circumcise (Sabei and Nandi) and with Nilotic groups to the south (Luo) and north (Teso) and Bantu groups to the west (Soga) which do not (see Map 4). Bukusu and languages of neighbouring Bantu groups which circumcise (e.g. the Gisu/Bagisu/Bagesu) seem generally classified as closest to Soga, Ganda and other Bantu languages of Uganda (cf. Nurse 1995:76-81)¹³ whose speakers do not practise male-circumcision.

The closest linguistic-ethnic relatives of the Bukusu, which Wagner (1949) called the Bantu Kavirondo tribes, were practising male circumcision at the time of Wagner's work

but it is less general among the tribes living along the border of the Nilotic and Teso-speaking groups who do not circumcise. Among the Wanga, as a rule, only the eldest son in every family is circumcised. It is said that formerly only the ruling Hitsetse clan which had split off from the Tiriki practised circumcision and that the subsequent adoption of the custom by other clans was due to the influence of the neighbouring Bukusu... Among the Nyole... it is not practised among all clans, and even among the clans which do practise it I have found a number of uncircumcised people of middle age who, although with some reluctance, admitted that they had adopted the Luo custom and evaded circumcision.

Wagner (1949:336)

Wagner (1949:337) could find no legendary origin theories of male circumcision amongst the Bukusu and this seems a general report from West and Central Africa although origin myths are commonly reported from Southern Africa.

The Bukusu ceremonies were held every three or four years and candidates involved were aged from as young as twelve to as old as twenty-two or even older, the age depending upon local group preferences, pressure to initiate more warriors¹⁴ and the freedom allowed potential candidates to decide whether to participate or to wait for a school at a later date. 'If a boy persistently refuses to be circumcised, his father or his circumcised brothers eventually catch him and have him circumcised by force, especially if he is the eldest son' (Wagner 1949:337-339).

Elders decide if a school is to be held in any given year and considerable time and resources then become involved. Three phases to the ceremonies are described by Wagner:

The first phase consists of preparatory observances by the candidates and leads up to the actual operation. The second phase comprises the life of the circumcised boys in the *etumbi* or hut of seclusion where they stay while their wounds are healing up and for a further period of time during which they are instructed in both practical and theoretical knowledge.

¹³ The circumcising Bantu groups on the southeast shores of Lake Victoria such as the Gusii (south of the Luo and north of the Sukuma) are generally classified as closest to Kikuyu, Kamba and other Bantu languages of the Kenyan highlands and coast (cf. Nurse 1995:76-81).

¹⁴ Most Bantu groups that had initiation schools required that men wishing to participate in warfare be already initiated (warrior status was normally defined in terms of having been initiated).

The third phase, finally, begins with the 'feast of coming out of the hut of seclusion', is then followed by a series of further rites and festive occasions...

Wagner (1949:340)

The first phase begins when a boy or young man hears that there a school is to be held and begins to wear the emblems of a candidate, which in the case of the Bukusu are iron beads which they wear around their waists and about a month later, iron wristlets, cow bells and other items. During this time they defy their fathers to prevent them from participating and visit relatives who feast them (Wagner 1949:341). No collective activity of the initiates is described until they shave their heads, have a night of drinking beer, bathe ritually the morning of the circumcision, and appear before the 'operator', as they are commonly called in the African ethnographies¹⁵, being met on the way by their fathers who once again try to dissuade them (Wagner 1949:343). Before the candidates appear before the operator, they are to have attended various confession and purification rites (Wagner 1949:346) and this is apparently done before elders or before the operator at the time of circumcision (Wagner 1949:349) according to the customs of the individual Bukusu group. If it is before the operator, the operator gets fines from the boy's father according to what the candidate confesses.

Wagner (1949:349-350) describes variations in the act of circumcision for the Bukusu and their closest relatives. Some groups do not remove as much skin as others or leave a small distinctive flap of the foreskin hanging from below the glans penis. All appear to involve a number of cuts in contrast to descriptions from some of the other ethnographies which almost seem to suggest that boys are cut in a single stroke so it is over before they realize what is happening. Still, the procedures Wagner observed took only about ten seconds (Wagner 1949:351), the operators are in competition for the number they do in a day (Wagner 1949:347-348) and there is also here the element of surprise.

Wagner (1949:350) notes that

Among the Logoli, the operator carries with him only one knife, and it was stressed by my informants as an important rule that he must not wash the blood off the knife nor off his hands or his body until after he has finished circumcising all the boys. This rule stands in direct contrast to the practice prevailing among the neighbouring Nyole where the operator has a whole basketful of knives, and must use a different one for each clan, a rule that is carefully observed by the clan-elders who inspect the knife before the first boy of their clan is circumcised. Among the Idaxo, the operator cleans the knife after every operation by dipping it into a calabash of water which one of his assistants carries for him. In Kitosh, where double-bladed knives are used, one knife always serves four candidates, the older two being circumcised with one blade and the younger two with the other...

Boys who suffer from a disease, though not necessarily a contagious one according to European notions, are generally circumcised with a special knife which is kept separate from the others...

No medicine is applied to the wound to stop the bleeding which commonly continues for thirty or forty minutes after the operation has been performed... If the wound bleeds

¹⁵They are often barbers in Africa judging from the ethnographies I have seen but other accounts describe families who simply have the status of circumcisors for a group or series of groups. The latter pattern is described for the Bukusu (Wagner 1949:346).

excessively this is considered a sign that the candidate has committed a theft at some time in the past...

Among the Bukusu, immediately after a boy has been circumcised, a girl who is in love with him or who has already been courted by him rushes towards the boy and from behind throws her arms around his hips, thereby claiming him her future husband...

Wagner (1949:350-351)

After their circumcisions, the candidates proceed to seclusion huts in a special compound or 'lodge' in the bush and the initiation school begins, running over the course of the next few months. 'They are from now on separated from their relatives and live under the care and control of a number of tutors or guardians'. The initial phase centres around the lodge. The guardians 'instruct them both in general knowledge and in the particular ritual observances which are demanded from the initiates... The only other persons with whom the initiates regularly come into contact are young girls, the... "female guardians". Their main tasks are to bring food to the initiates and to provide them with water and firewood...' (Wagner 1949:353).

Some days after the circumcision, the operator returns for the ritual cleansing of the initiates which is accomplished by pouring water over their hands (Wagner 1949:356). Wagner also mentions medicines made of plants which are used in the days after the circumcisions to promote healing and prevent pus from forming; he says that infections are rare and that in one instance of the circumcision of several hundred boys, 'not a single case of death or serious illness seems to have occurred. Although such cases would be hushed up, they would certainly have come to the notice of my Christian informants'. Deaths of initiates are 'passed over in silence. His relatives are not properly informed but... told by the tutor that they do not need to bring food for him regularly...' (1949:357).

After the ritual purification, instruction continues and the candidates are free to walk around the village a bit although numerous avoidance behaviours must be followed (Wagner 1949:358-360). At the initiation camp they are taught practical skills such as making household items and hunting along with learning the avoidance behaviours that must be followed at the time (1949:361). Halfway through the period in which they are secluded to some extent at the initiation camp, there is a sacrificial ceremony which 'consists of a ritual enactment of the death and rebirth of the initiates' (1949:362) amongst some groups closely related to the Bukusu but which, amongst the Bukusu themselves, is 'a purification ceremony... which apparently serves a similar purpose' (1949:363).

Life at the initiation camp ends with 'a series of elaborate ceremonies and a period of feasting' and finally, a feast of coming out (Wagner 1949:363). In preparation they burn the bloodstained banana leaves they have slept on, spending that night around a large fire where young women join them. There is lovemaking but 'They are warned, however, not to go beyond the customary limits of premarital sexual enjoyment'. The next day they wash off the white clay they have worn while in the camp and exchange their old skins (clothing) for new. They shave their heads again and return to their homes where a feast is waiting and at which time their

fathers or other elders hand them shields, spears, clubs and other weapons. Holding these weapons like a warrior and standing straight and steady, one boy after the other moves to the centre of the yard of his 'old father' [father's eldest brother] where, in the order of seniority, every initiate is given extensive rules of conduct by his father.

(Wagner 1949:364)

Initiates who attend the same school become members of one age-grade (Wagner 1949:373), social units of considerable importance through much of sub-equatorial Africa. But amongst the Bukusu, Wagner notes (1949:378) that

the looseness and informality of the bonds between age-mates and the fact that a mutual obligation between them exists only on one occasion, viz. at their sons' circumcision, seems to leave little doubt that the chief function of the age-grades is not a horizontal grouping of the tribal society but a means of defining seniority in individual relationships.

*The Tsonga*¹⁶ (Junod 1962)¹⁷

Junod (1962:71-73) begins by speculating about the origin of circumcision amongst the Tsonga as there are commonly origin myths regarding it around Southern Africa. I shall only observe here that around Southern Africa there seems to be more abandonment of initiation schools (and circumcision) at times of continuing warfare and more subsequent reinstitution of the schools than is apparent in the sources for East Africa or western sub-equatorial Africa. Re-adoption is sometimes accomplished through borrowing the practices of neighbouring groups rather than by reviving a group's own previous practices. The Tsonga described by Junod often had joint schools with other groups (who speak fairly closely related languages) such as Sotho groups (Junod 1962:74).

Junod formally makes his presentation in the idiom of van Gennep (1909), dividing the description into separation rites, marginal rites and aggregation rites. The first involves withdrawal from society and the leaving behind of the candidates' former social status. The second involves a period of seclusion and 'marginality' in the sense that they are cloistered away from the rest of the society. The third involves the ceremonies associated with the candidates returning to society in their new status.

The schools are called *ngoma* 'drum; general word for rites', are held every four or five years and are attended by boys from about ten to sixteen. The candidates are assembled by the chief and council of headmen who have called for the school to be conducted. Boys from the previous school attend to supervise the candidates and serve the instructors. A lodge is constructed away from the village, consisting of a walled or fenced compound with sleeping huts, other buildings and ceremonial areas within it. The assembled boys march from the area of the chief's house to the lodge (Junod 1962:74-75).

The candidates run a gauntlet in groups of eight as they enter the lodge and all their clothing is taken upon entry into the lodge. Their heads are shaved and they then sit confronting the instructors, 'Lion-men' whose heads are covered in lions' manes. They are then hit from behind and while their attention is diverted the circumcision operator seizes the foreskin and cuts it off in two movements of the knife, more or less before the candidate is aware of what is happening. 'The boy has now *crossed*...., a technical expression which shows clearly the character of this rite of passage. He is introduced into the lodge' (Junod 1962:75-76).

Then begins the 'marginal period' which lasts about three months. While the Bukusu allow some contact with the outside world, the Tsonga restrict access to the lodge to initiated persons and it is tabu to others, especially women, who come and go for various reasons in the Bukusu situation. Sexual relations are forbidden to the candidates, the helpers and the

¹⁶Also 'Thonga'.

¹⁷As for the summary of the Bukusu, I tend to speak in the present tense as I do not presently have specific information for the Tsonga that the practices concerned have ceased.

instructors. Even marital sex acts back in the village by men who are not instructors are supposed to be conducted quietly. A range of special vocabulary is in use during the school and the candidates must learn it. 'Evidently, the aim of this terminology is to increase the impression of mystery which the rites must convey to the uninitiated'. The body is smeared with grey clay during the marginal period (Junod 1962:80) as with the Bukusu.

Junod (1962:82-85) then describes certain trials for the marginal period which occur within a context of the initiates being required to develop their personal fierceness. They are beaten for small transgressions, they sleep naked (and it is winter), they are not allowed to drink water, they eat mainly porridge and no other food from the village, and some of them may die of infection from the circumcision wound, their mothers being informed of their deaths 'by a notch cut in the edge of the pot in which she brings the food' (1962:85). Otherwise their time is passed learning chants, and hunting is the only practical skill they are said to be taught during the marginal period (1962:85-90).

The 'aggregation rites', those which return them to the community, occur over a period of time which begins many days before the residential school is over. The first involve the candidates only and occur within the lodge compound and then, in stages, are ceremonies that involve more and more public participation. The lodge and all their old possessions are burnt on the last day when there is a procession into the capital of the chief and a great deal of ceremony there (Junod 1962:90-94).

Junod (1962:94) concludes that the purpose of the school is to 'introduce the little boy into manhood, to cleanse him from the *bukhuna* to make him a thoughtful member of the community'.

The Nyaneka-Nkumbi (Estermann 1979)

Estermann (1979:50-58) describes initiation schools of the Nyaneka-Nkumbi of Southwestern Angola which are not very different from those of the Bukusu and Tsonga. The rite is organized if there is a chief's son of the appropriate age. No special preparations on the part of the candidates are mentioned and they are circumcised the day after they enter the initiation encampment. Boys of highest rank are circumcised first and the following days are spent learning traditional songs. From the start they begin to learn the dance they will perform upon re-entering society (1979:51). As with the Bukusu and Tsonga, the candidates rub their bodies with white earth (or ashes) during the time at the encampment (1979:52). As with the Tsonga, the time of year is winter. Traditionally, no woman could enter or come near the camp (1979:53) and the parents of the candidates could not have sex with each other or anyone else during the time of the encampment, or at least up to the time a certain procession of the candidates through the bush announced the healing of their wounds (1979:57).

After their wounds heal, the boys begin to spend their days hunting (Estermann 1979:52). Entrance of women to the school encampment occurred in some groups but is said to represent a loosening of old rules which prohibited their approaching the camp at all (1979:53). Seclusion lasts about four months and the only activities mentioned during this time are hunting and practising songs and dances. On the final morning of the camp, they bathe and put on new clothes and have prepared a variety of ornaments that they will wear when they dance in the 'feasts of the return' (1979:54). As they return to the village, they are presented with new baskets their mothers have made for them, a basket with a cut bottom returned to a mother signalling the death of her son, of which she might already be aware because of returned food during the encampment (1979:54-55). There are then the ceremonies of the initiates' return to the village.

Discussion

These three descriptions contain such essential similarities that some ancient areal diffusion or practices inherited from a common ancestral society or a combination of the two are clearly the source. It cannot be coincidence, as the quotation from Wagner at the beginning of the paper asserts. While works since van Genep (1909) have pointed to the similarities of male rites of initiation across unrelated cultures, the specific practices of covering the body with white ash or grey clay during the school, the shaving of the head, the oblique ways of informing relatives of the death of a candidate and other specific practices suggest common ancestry and/or diffusion of a whole complex of behaviours as the source of similarity in practices amongst Bantu speakers. Thus the non-circumcising belt seems best explained as existing through the abandonment of the practice, as isolates which still have the practice and the associated schools (e.g. the Bantu speakers in the area running along the southern Uganda-Kenya border) surely did not spontaneously develop such similar institutions and specific identities with Southern African and southwestern Angolan institutions. The Bantu-speaking Ugandan-Kenyan border groups with the practice are taken here to be relic areas of once more widespread practices.

Two general patterns account for most of the groups which did not have the practice at the time of European description. One is prehistoric and no cultural motive or analysis for loss will be suggested in the present work. This is the apparent abandonment of circumcision, initiation schools and, apparently, age grades from the Intralacustrine area south to Malawi, Mozambique and much of Zambia and Zimbabwe before the arrival of Europeans. The second is a more-or-less well understood abandonment in southern Zimbabwe and parts of South Africa which occurred during the Zulu wars. Shaka, or Chaka, the great Zulu king, simply ordered his people to abandon the practice and they did. This is normally said to be due to the difficulties of holding the schools at a time of continuous warfare. Many groups in Southern Africa which were drawn into those wars are also said to have abandoned the schools and circumcision at that time (early 1800s) because of continuous fighting. But many of them returned to the practice after or between wars and there is a general shifting of traditions and adopting other groups' styles and formats after long periods of abandonment.

Other patterns to be found in the literature are given in Tables 1, 2 and 3. A local pattern observed in coastal Tanzania is one in which there are said to be male initiation schools but no circumcision or that circumcision at the time of description occurred because of reintroduction of the practice after a period of abandonment. These groups are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Groups with male initiation schools but specifically said not to circumcise

Name	Location	Source
Zaramo	Central Tanzania coast	Beidelman (1967:20) (discusses influence of Islam, says circ. not traditional). Swantz (1970:164-171) gives extensive background. See text below.
Luguru	Inland east central Tanzania	Beidelman (1967:32-33). Schools said to be traditional but circumcision said to have been introduced by Sagara (inland neighbours) in 1910.
Sagara	Inland of the Luguru, east central Tanzania	Beidelman (1967:52). Says flatly that they did not formerly circumcise but do so now.
Vidunda	East central Tanzania.	Beidelman (1967:56-57). 'Most Vidunda did not practice circumcision traditionally...; however, most Vidunda claim that they have always circumcised'.

Bali	Northeastern Zaire near border with Uganda	van Geluwe (1960:64-67). Circumcision said to have been abandoned. Related groups to the west in Zaire said to continue the practice but adjacent groups to the east a part of the non-circumcision belt..
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Swantz (1970:164-171) gives some background concerning the notion of loss and reintroduction involving the Tanzanian groups. She asserts that 'circumcision has spread very quickly in the whole of the coastal area of Tanzania' (1970:164). This echoes Beidelman (1967:20, 32-33), and the basis for those statements seems to be local oral histories as apparently is the observation¹⁸ (Swantz 1970:165-166) that a circumcision ceremonial complex known as *jando*¹⁹ spread through the area and did so 'along the coastal belt and on both sides of the Luguru mountains during this century'. Swantz (1970:167) mentions the history of speculation about the 'Semitic' versus 'Maasai' origins of male circumcision around East Africa and notes that much of it is better understood in terms of practices which are simply common to many Bantu groups, a point with which I think we must agree.

The age at circumcision seems more variable and commonly lower through the area than it is inland owing to Moslem influences and this is true for non-Moslem groups and families as well, the general pattern being one in which circumcision constitutes one set of ceremonies and male initiation schools another, occurring when the boys are older. I can only imagine that the situation along the Kenyan coast may be similarly variable but I encountered no relevant sources other than Roscoe (1921:24-25) who, for Bantu groups around Usagara on the Kenyan coast, describes male adolescent initiation schools in which circumcision occurs much in the fashion of what is here argued to be an ancient Bantu pattern. Some inland groups closely related to those Tanzanian societies mentioned above and near to them geographically appear to have had no interruption in the common Bantu pattern of circumcision, or of circumcision occurring in the context of initiation schools (e.g. Beidelman 1967:48-49 in reference to the Kaguru and 1967:65 in reference to the Ngulu) so the losses reported in oral traditions or historical observations of the coastal groups need to be understood as local developments and not applicable to the area as a whole.

The final group in Table 1, the Bali, was the only fair example I found of a group on the western edge of the non-circumcision belt that practises male adolescent initiation but not circumcision. To the west are groups that do both and to the east are groups that do neither.

Table 2 gives groups that circumcise, but not in the context of initiation schools (which they also hold). The first is part of the coastal Tanzanian groups discussed immediately above. The second and third are Southern African groups adjacent to each other and appear to be a local development.

Table 2
Groups with male circumcision and schools who do not circumcise in the context of the schools

Name	Location	Source
Zigula	Eastern Tanzania	Beidelman (1967:70). Some Moslems circumcise boys according to Islamic practice but later send them to the schools (where the other boys are circumcised).
Sotho (Basuto)	South Africa inland of the	Sheddick (1953:41-42). Schools described but circumcision not mentioned. But Krige (1946:103) mentions that

¹⁸Swantz spent a good deal of time trekking about the countryside with the circumcisors themselves.

¹⁹'The word *jando* has an Indian origin, according to Jan Knappert, London' (Swantz 1970:footnote 3). Many Indians along that coast are Moslem.

	Zulu	amongst the Northern Sotho the school is held a year or more after circumcision.
Pedi	South Africa north of the Sotho	Krige (1946:103). Schools occur as much as four or five years after circumcision.

Finally, there are the two groups in Table 3 which seem to have no schools but practise circumcision. The first is part of the coastal Tanzanian situation discussed above. The second, the Kuria, are generally classed with the Gusii in language and culture but the description of circumcision (Tobisson 1986:156-158) is curious in that initiation schools are not mentioned. The age of circumcision is said to have traditionally been in the late teens or early twenties and conferred warrior status. Now circumcision is said to be at the age of twelve or thirteen. As the source is a recent ethnography, it is possible that formal schools once existed but were abandoned in the historical period. Reference to the neighbouring Gusii (LeVine and LeVine 1966:176-184) reveals a pattern amongst them more like the Kikuyu (which are of the same Bantu subgroup) where circumcision and the associated schools occur at the age of eight or nine. The Gusii had initiation schools at the time of that description which included the common Bantu toughening and hazing of initiates, so possibly the Kuria once did or still do, but it was not central to the topics being covered by the source. The early age of circumcision amongst these groups may be associated to some extent with the status of their fathers, who do not attain the status of 'elder' until their oldest son is circumcised.

Table 3
Groups without male initiation schools who circumcise

Name	Location	Source
Kwere	Coast of Tanzania near present day Dar-Es-Salaam	Beidelman (1967:25). Boys said to be 'circumcized in the bush at the ages of five to seven' (No mention of schools except that 'Grandparents instruct persons in sexual relations'.)
Kuria	Tanzania at border with Kenya on Lake Victoria	Tobisson (1986:156-158). Describes circumcision, its social significance and a kind of one-day (?) ceremony but does not mention any kind of initiation school.

I have found no reports of groups that conducted initiation schools but did not circumcise except along coastal Tanzania as described above²⁰. A final pattern, circumcision without schools or with reduced or perfunctory schools, is a pattern seen today. Philip Setel (personal communication), for instance, reports that Chagga men now typically go to the hospital with one or two friends when in their late teens and they all get circumcised. Another pattern is one in which the schools continue and circumcision occurs when the boys are trucked from the schools into town and the hospital in groups (David N. Suggs, personal communication concerning a group in Botswana). Reports for groups around Lake Victoria (Bukusu and Bagesu, for instance) suggest a great tenacity in retaining both the schools and circumcision, and there may have been a long culture of this for those groups as they have retained both practices for so long in the context of neighbouring groups which have neither. Robert Bailey (personal communication), for instance, relates contemporary reports of uncircumcised Gisu men being abducted and hauled off from the cities to the initiation schools for circumcision.

²⁰The disassociation between the time of circumcision and schools is a common West African pattern.

Culture history correlates

The immediate, obvious correlates between Bantu groups which do not circumcise males and any other conspicuous social or cultural feature is the clear association with certain subgrouping of Bantu languages and an absence of initiation schools and, apparently, age-grades for all those non-circumcising groups except those furthest south.

Culture area generalizations for Africa have been difficult to achieve and the environments of the present study area, except for the dramatic drop from the eastern highlands into the Congo basin, tend to grade into one other in such a way that there are not often the kinds of abrupt ecological boundaries that often result in distinctive lifeways on either side. In a sense, 'tribal' and 'language' names are sometimes just labels applied to ethnographies, dictionaries and grammars because they must have labels. And the labels are variable in the African literature. The present project was daunting for the outsider²¹ in many ways, not the least of which was coming to grips with the many names applied to the same groups over time, the wider and narrower designations that float through the literature and how they differ between the anthropological and linguistic literature.

It is also the case that the 'tribes' and 'languages' of Africa in general have not always the kind of fixed identities or boundaries sometimes assumed. As Giles-Vernick (1996) puts it:

Equatorial African history has a peculiar way of raising questions about assumptions that shape the writing of African histories and ethnographies.²² Just why it has been able to do so speaks to the enormous fluidity in social relations in equatorial African history, which calls into question social scientists' deeply held assumptions about processes of social formation in Africa.

On the other hand, the correlation of abandonment with certain contiguous Bantu subgroups is quite striking (Map 5) and the distribution of the non-circumcising groups is generally continuous, suggesting loss under influence of neighbours or possibly, through the central portions of the distribution, shared ancestry²³ and subsequent diffusion of loss outward from those groups.

The earliest comprehensive lower-order subgrouping of Bantu which has enjoyed a central place in subsequent literature was accomplished by Guthrie (1967-71) and was intended, to some extent, to show where certain linguistic features tended to occur without specifically purporting to be a diagnostic 'genetic' classification. By 'genetic', linguists mean, for example, the method of stripping away the French, Scandinavian and other borrowed elements from English and working back through formal procedures to a point in time whereupon it becomes clear that English originally emerged onto the British Isles with ancient Frisian speakers from what is now the northwest Netherlands. The development of such findings represents a kind of ultimate elegance in historical and comparative linguistics.

None of the higher-order subgroupings of Bantu are presently accepted as diagnostic in the 'genetic' sense. Those that have been proposed exist for various purposes and have been accomplished by various methods (cf. Nurse 1995). A definitive genetic subgrouping of Bantu based upon diagnostic methods has yet to be accomplished for lack of data. Although this cannot presently be accomplished for the internal subgrouping of Bantu, such classifications

²¹The author is an Austronesianist linguist and culture historian.

²²Guyer and Belinga 1995.

²³Common loss in some more-or-less geographically localized ancestral culture before dispersal and local differentiation into the modern societies.

as Guthrie's often give us a picture of how languages held together after their establishment in an area and it is with some of Guthrie's subgroups, modified subsequently by others, that I have found certain identities with the distribution of non-circumcising Bantu groups.

Guthrie's (1967-71) maps are schematic but Bastin (1978) and others (cf. Nurse 1995:77-81) have revised and mapped Guthrie's subgroups according to real scales and locations of languages. There, clearly, can be seen a great deal in common with the boundaries defined for the non-circumcising belt by Moses et al. (1990) from Murdock (1981). Groups J, F, M and N constitute the Bantu core of the non-circumcision belt in Central, East and Southern Africa as seen in Map 5. The only circumcising groups of which I am aware that fall within these subgroups are those Ugandan and Kenyan groups (all from Group J) such as the Bagesu (Gisu) and Bukusu which have been previously argued on typological grounds to be relic areas in terms of the practices concerned. Otherwise Groups J, F, M and N represent the general centre of the non-circumcising belt amongst Bantu speakers and define many of its margins. The non-circumcising area of the coast and inland Mozambique, for instance, is the area in which Guthrie's Group N protrudes from the interior. The western border of the Bantu non-circumcising area in the north is essentially coterminous with Group J and a few of its immediate neighbours in Group D. The western boundary of the non-circumcising area continues south just beyond the western border of Group F and then M. In Zambia the western border of the non-circumcising area drifts west of the western edge of Group M into Groups L and K. The non-circumcising area extends into parts of Group S in the south and encroaches somewhat into the territories of Groups P and G in the east. I shall mention three main kinds of possible explanations for this distribution.

The first is that groups J, F, M and N have some special but yet to be discovered linguistic and cultural relationship and that abandonment of circumcision occurred in their common history before divergence into separate groups. This model would imply a homeland in a Group J that was already internally diverse, or require other elaborations to account for the practice amongst Group J speakers along the Ugandan-Kenyan border.

The second explanation is that abandonment occurred *in situ* but at some time depth when language and other cultural differences were less pronounced. Identity and cultural emblems would have been shared over a larger area in the past, or more difficult to define in local terms as there would have been fewer cultural and linguistic differences, owing to the relative youth of these societies in relation to their emergence from their common ancestors (including Proto-Bantu if there were no others).

The third is that abandonment occurred relatively recently but within the specific groups concerned because there are unrecognized features of general cultural alignment that have not been identified (and that the modified Guthrie linguistic groups capture culture areas that have yet to be properly understood in their own terms). Absence of initiation schools and age groups are the immediate correlates.

Conclusion

Here we have asked how male circumcision has come to have its particular distribution amongst Bantu-speaking peoples. The result has been the suggestion that male circumcision was an ancient practice amongst the Bantu and that non-circumcising Bantu groups have abandoned the practice. The abandonment of initiation schools and age-grades is also implied by this model. These observations may come to be of significance in isolating other cultural variables that distinguish some of the non-circumcising Bantu groups, or groups of such groups.

While this may be of interest in AIDS intervention strategies, I hold little hope that it will result in the identification of different risk behaviours between circumcising and non-circumcising groups. Lack of male circumcision amongst Bantu speakers is an areal

phenomenon: at the time of the earliest relevant European description, the non-circumcising Bantu groups had abandoned the practice through a continuous area. In an ultimate sense they had abandoned it because their neighbours had, and differences in sexual risk behaviour for HIV transmission cannot be expected to sort according to those same boundaries. Still, there may be some hope of isolating significant differences when it is observed that the core area of non-circumcision specifically consists of the speakers of certain Bantu subgroups which have also abandoned male adolescent rites of initiation and, except in the south, age-grades. But these are a kind of 'package' of interrelated institutions and cannot presently be shown to have anything to do with differences in heterosexual risk behaviour.

The only material seen in the present work to suggest different risk behaviour between circumcised and uncircumcised persons was for *individuals* within the same *group* and concerned men leaving their traditional lands for wage labour in cities or at mines before they were of an age to be circumcised, including men who specifically left for such employment to avoid circumcision. Then, commonly, the uncircumcised men had wages to avail themselves of prostitutes while those who remained in traditional lands were circumcised and availed themselves of prostitutes less frequently or not at all.

In general, male circumcision amongst Bantu speakers defined a change in status at the time of earliest European description. This involved a clear break between a childlike status, elevation to warrior status (except in Group E) and the generally toughening or hardening of boys to men. The model proposed here suggests that the tendency through Bantu-speaking areas in prehistory was for more and more groups to abandon the practice. Presumably this is accelerating, especially along the fringes of the non-circumcising areas, as male circumcision is now sometimes simply emblematic or traditional, although still signifying adult status, and commonly lacks the wider social significance it once had.

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