Celebrations of Masculinity
Circumcision and Male Gender Ideology in an East African Context

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CELEBRATIONS OF MANCULINITY
CIRCUMCISION AND MALE GENDER IDEOLOGY
IN AN EAST AFRICAN CONTEXT

The main subject of this paper relates to the Gisu of Uganda. Today, they number almost a million and are Bantu-speaking agriculturalists who live on the western slopes of Mount Elgon, just across the border from Kenya. They lie at one end of what is a broad circumcising belt which stretches down from Mount Elgon, south through Kenya and into Tanzania. Not every group within this belt circumcises but, where they do, it is fair to say that it is inextricably linked to both male gender identity and to ethnicity. The “tribal” world – and I use this term deliberately because, however
embarrassed it makes western scholars feel, this is the word of common currency in East Africa — is envisaged as a masculine world.¹ Ethnic divisions lead men to think of others groups as other men and other manhoods. Challenges to male identity in such circumstances, any “crisis in masculinity”, such as is produced by globalising processes and the changing nature of the economy which undercut male roles and prerogatives in the rural areas thus might be expected to carry a particular symbolic load. And it is one that I would argue development specialists need to understand if they are to grapple with the current complexities and changes occurring in gender relationships.

In this paper, I present a number of connected concerns. Firstly, I want to try to portray the power of masculine gender ideology and how it is related to the practice of male circumcision among the Gisu. Secondly, I comment on how this impacts on the relationship between the genders, in a way here that might initially seem paradoxical since this ritual which valorises masculinity in the strongest possible way — and associates it with inherent violence — does not necessarily undervalue femininity, and does not justify the use of force in relationship to women either. As is recognised, gender relations in themselves are complex constructions of ideology and practice; indeed, one might say of cross-cutting and overlapping sets of obligations and values which empower in different ways creating different arenas for the negotiation of power between men and women. With this in mind, and thirdly, I go on to discuss the Gisu in the broader context of East African societies in order to make a point about variability. While masculine ideologies throughout this region bear more than a family resemblance, they have very different implications for gendered inequality and power. This leads me to my last topic which is to return to the gendering of the tribal polity, to try to understand why the symbolic valency of circumcision as a masculine marker far from decreasing at the present time seems, in fact, to be increasing. One important point here is that rituals such as circumcision should not be considered as about an ever-receding

¹ See Lonsdale, 1992.
past, as obsolete traditions, but are very much about the contemporary moment.

Anthropology has long had a particular interest in ritual and symbolism because of the way it unites metaphysical concerns with social relationships and morality. Rituals are seen as crystallising values, endowing them in the Durkheimian tradition with coercive power because of the emotional charge they create. In my writings on Gisu circumcision, I have in addition been concerned to stress the experiential dimension, the importance of the ritual process for the creation of the self. In this case, the masculine self, as the Gisu do not practice female clitoridectomy.

The Gisu were traditionally acephalous and the practice of male circumcision — imbalu — is the only custom said to unite them as a people. It takes the form of a great national ritual which is held biennially in August. It is difficult to describe the excitement and intensity of these rites. The whole countryside swings into action for everyone is involved in the dancing, singing, feasting and rituals, each mobilising around his own candidate or candidates. The sound of the boys’ bells is everywhere, echoing though the hills. The boys themselves, aged between 18 and 25, are the heroes of the hour upon whom all hopes centre for, in standing circumcision, a Gisu youth is not only proving his own manhood, he is also validating it on behalf of everyone else. And, I do mean everyone for women as well as men identify with the identity it Bestows and play a full part in the rituals.

The operation itself takes the form of a classic-type ordeal, an explicit test of bravery, publicly witnessed. The boy stands in the compound of his father or other senior male relative and must remain absolutely still while his foreskin is cut and then stripped from around the glans penis. He is required to display total fortitude under the knife, betraying no signs of fear. Even what might be regarded as involuntary twitches and tremblings, such as the blinking of the eyes, are evaluated negatively. Success, however, is triumphantly celebrated; the watching men roar in unison while the
women rush forward ululating as they dance. The boy is then allowed to sit and the onlookers come forward one by one to call him a “man” and to thank him by presenting him with gifts.

Given the severity of Gisu circumcision, it is by anyone’s standards a supreme test of courage, and it is one to which the Gisu attach particular meanings. In the first place, it makes a boy a full adult man. After circumcision, he has the right to inherit a portion of his father’s land and he should also be provided with the cattle he needs to marry. From this perspective, it is a rite of emancipation, freeing a man from his father’s authority. Once circumcised, in charge of his own household, he is regarded as equal to all other men and in complete control of his own affairs. Yet, the ritual can be understood to do far more than just formally bequeath a status. Undergoing the ordeal is regarded by the Gisu as having a basic effect on the personality and powers of the individual. The ritual thus has a definite ontological purpose, a psychological dimension. Most especially, it is seen to create in the boy the capacity to experience lirima, and it is this capacity which critically marks the divide between boys and men.

Lirima is pre-eminently a manly quality. Though it can be glossed as “anger”, there is no straightforward equivalent in English. The key feature is the violence of the emotion experienced and most of the ways in which the Gisu talk about it suggest that it is also experienced as overwhelming and even out-of-control. Thus lirima is spoken of as “catching” a man and as “bubbling-up” in him. While a man is in this state of possession, lirima is seen to dictate his attitudes and actions. In Western conceptions, such extreme affect, such “boiling anger”, tends to suggest the overriding of reason by passion — a lack of self-control. In contrast, for the Gisu, who do not think of reason and emotion as opposed modalities, lirima can not only be volitional but also an aspect of the control a man should assert over himself and the world — a quality or capacity to be mustered by the individual to achieve and serve his purposes. If a man can be in the grip of lirima he can use it to steel himself too. And, in the context of circumcision, lirima is the key to the com-
plete identification of the boy with the ordeal he faces. As the ordeal gets closer it is lirima which is seen to drive him on and to dominate his thoughts and feelings. It is lirima which allows him to overcome his fear.

I should say that the preliminary rites which lead up to the operation take several weeks (even months) and are elaborate. All are critically concerned with the induction of lirima – to “turn him into a very fierce person, different from others”. This is done by repeated exhortations; the boy is told over and over again of the ordeal he faces, that it is a bitter and painful thing and that success rests entirely on himself and his own attitude. This message is reinforced by a series of mortifications, which include smearing him all over with various substances – yeast, chyme and, in some areas, black swamp mud – which are again intended to rouse his lirima. This is constantly tested for the boy’s attitude and steadfastness are both seen to be manifested in the strength with which he dances. All this is taken extremely seriously because a threat of failure runs through the entire process. I should say that Gisu boys do fail and such failures not only shame the boy and his family but are taken as polluting the circumcision knife and blocking any successful life course for the boy.

The induction of lirima, then, is central to ritual of circumcision and to its transformational purpose for this is the first time that the boy is expected to display the emotion. Thereafter, the capacity to experience the emotion is as much a part of his manhood as the circumcision cuts themselves. Lirima bestows such affirmative powers that the force behind that strength of character which makes men courageous and determined gives overall poignancy to its more usual associations. In normal everyday life lirima is seen to have generally negative effects. It makes men dangerous and is associated with the violence, aggression and disorders which assail the community.

At the time that I did my original study, in the late 1960s, I have to say that this presented itself as an enormous puzzle to me. As I saw it then, one had a rite which was designed to make warriors – but the Gisu had not been to war for 50 years. They seemed to have
hitched their identity, both individual and collective, to an anachronism and one that was deeply troubling to them. The dilemma of what to do with the warriors when there is no war to fight was one for which — at that time — they seemed to have few answers. The values of daily life stressed not violence but order and respect. Clearly, had I had done my fieldwork a few years later, when, under Amin, Uganda was in turmoil, I might have found the ritual less perplexing. One of the ironies here is that, while Gisu were in the 1960s notorious for their levels of interpersonal violence and generally feared on these grounds by other peoples in East Africa, they have played no part in the civil wars which have raged through Uganda since that time. Instead, their dominant concern appears to have been to organise themselves into peoples’ militia to protect their own hillsides from the worst incursions of rival armies and marauding forces. The responsibility of men to stand up for themselves, by violence where necessary, in this context appears somewhat less anachronistic.

Nevertheless, other aspects of my analysis which relate to the particular moral world of the Gisu remain intact. It is one where the onus of moral responsibility lies with men because of the violence with which they are attributed. That male violence is both lauded and feared is commonplace in discourses on masculinity, its normative roots seen as easily perverted into transgressive and destructive forms. Operating in a situation which recognises little authority, either indigenous or imposed, I have argued that Gisu ethics addresses the problem of social control through the necessity for self-control (see especially, Heald 1998, 1999a). Self-assertion as the defining character of all men is thus coupled with restraint as the mark of the social self. The “good” man was one who was in control of his lirima. Further, men who are seen as failing to control their violence easily gain reputations as troublemakers, particularly, as thieves or as witches — and then, as now, are liable to be killed, with this justified as a service to the community.
I should make clear that only men are attributed with the capacity to feel *lirima*; women and children may experience only the far weaker emotional arousal of *libuba*. And, the categorical nature of this attribution comes over clearly in the denial, for example, that women are, or could ever be, thieves. This is not to say that women did not steal. Of course they did, but this did not make them “thieves”, because it lacked the element of danger that was associated with such a designation for the Gisu. And, because of that, a man is held never to have reason to fear a woman, with the partial exception of a woman who was believed to be a witch. This has particular ramifications for the way violence against women was judged. In fact violence against women was, in the context of East African societies, rare.² Only 15% of the homicide court cases I analysed in the 1960s were cases where men killed women and the majority of these occurred in situations where a man claimed he had killed accidentally – that she got in the way of a blow meant for another, for example. Interestingly too, the only cases where murder was followed by suicide were four cases where men killed their wives. To kill a wife is regarded as an act of social suicide. Nor was wife beating tolerated and women in such circumstances could take such cases to local courts and demand compensation. Or, and more seriously for the husband, they could initiate a divorce.

This takes me to the issue of gender relationships and to the way in which the obvious inference may often lead us astray. The violence of Gisu men did not give them licence to use it against women nor did it read off as total power and dominance over them. Rather, the reverse. The Gisu moral world problematise relationships among men, rather than those between men and women. This relates to the

² See for example, Bohannan (ed.) 1960 and Vincent (1988). Talking of the neighbouring Teso of Uganda and also of the 1960s, Vincent found that marital beatings were common and almost one third of all homicide cases investigated by the Police involved gender violence, with wife killings being common.
political economy of the region as well as to the ideological constructs of masculinity in play. In effect, circumcision only half makes a man for to be truly autonomous he must also be in command of his own independent household. Circumcision gives him the right to citizenship (and no grown man can continue to live in Bugisu without having undergone it) and to the economic resources that go with it – but these latter remain to be won. And gaining resources, both land and wives, was not easy in a situation which, even in the 1960s, was characterised by intense land pressure. Densities rose to over 2000 people to the square mile in many of the more fertile mountain regions. This situation effectively disinherited many men, invalidating the very independence upon which the idea of manhood depended. Controlling “anger” was indeed a problem and a focus for moral concern.

Competition for basic resources set brother against brother and father against son but not men against women. Indeed, here, women — mothers, sisters, wives — were crucial not as competitors but as the essential mediators. As in many of the patrilineal societies of Africa, men in Bugisu gained rights to inheritance through women. Gisu men are bound closely to their mothers from whom they inherit land through the house property complex; to their sisters whose bridewealth they use in turn to marry; and to their wives without whom they cannot establish an independent household. Throughout, then, the practical politics of Gisu life stresses the reliance of men upon women. True women gained rights to the resources — particularly land — they needed to support themselves and their families only through men — but they were always less committed than men to developing a particular family estate. Women, especially in the early years of marriage, could and frequently did leave their husbands, usually to remarry elsewhere. As their sons approached adulthood, they might tolerate an unsatisfactory marriage in order to protect their sons’ rights. But, they were still free to divorce. It should be noted that the marriage market in Bugisu very clearly favoured women who did not lose rights to their
children on divorce and never had any difficulty in finding another husband. A deserted husband, however, was in a wholly unenviable position. In such cases, he had the right to have all his bridewealth returned. But, such repayments were usually tardy and dependent upon the new husband firstly finding the means. Meanwhile, however temporarily, he was reduced to the status of bachelor, and stigmatised for being unable to effectively maintain a home and household.

Let me summarise, we have here a good – perhaps classic – form of hegemonic masculinity, in the sense of a dominant model, defined, in terms that apparently brook no contradiction, all the way to the grave. Yet it did not imply a devaluation of women and, interestingly, despite the fusing of masculinity with violence, it operated not to legitimate violence against women but in the opposite direction. Indeed, to put it colloquially, in order to keep his wife a man had to treat her well. It did, however, imply an intolerance towards men who failed to live up to the standards expected.

The idea of hegemonic masculinity has, in the literature, operated to focus attention not only on the power dimension in gender relationships but on other, alternative forms of male identity (Brod, 1987; Connell, 1995; Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994). In any society, there are men who, through temperament or circumstance, find it difficult to identify totally with the dominant norm. Certainly, these could be identified among the Gisu and the attitude towards such men depended very largely on whether they were perceived as

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3 Nor did men lose their rights to the children they had fathered on divorce for children belong to their genitors. The obligation to return bridewealth, thus, did not decline with the number of children born nor indeed with the duration of the marriage. If a man dismissed his wife for any reason, he forfeited all his bridewealth. A man divorcing his wife was thus all-but unknown. If the wife left, on the other hand, all had to be repaid, except in the case of the death of the husband when she could choose to stay on living on the land allocated to her sons or to be inherited by one of his relatives or to leave to remarry elsewhere.
general “dangers” Vulnerable, here, as I have already mentioned, were those who were unable to maintain themselves independently and who easily gained reputations for anti-social troublemaking. Such men fell into a recognisable pattern since the most precarious points of the adult life cycle were at its two extreme ends: thus, with young men attempting to win their inheritance from reluctant fathers and with older men who, given the terms of the Gisu inheritance system, effectively impoverished themselves through the disbursement of their estate to their sons. The former tended to gain reputations for theft, the latter for witchcraft. As I have written extensively about this elsewhere, (Heald, 1998, 1986 and 1999a chapter 5) I will thus say little more, except that the idealisation of a male identity here played an evident political role, justifying exclusion – even to death – of those men who failed to live up to its terms. One could say that the single standard operated as part of a ruthless elimination contest in a situation of extreme ecological stress. For many men, then, circumcision was not empowering, however well they had withstood the ordeal.

By contrast, there was a tolerance of both transsexuality and of homosexuality. Indeed, Gisu had their own form of the North American berdache. These were men who were permanently accepted as transsexuals, donning women’s clothes and classifying as “women”. I became aware of them at funerals where they acted as the funeral drummers, a role said to be the preserve of women. The explanation given to me was invariably pragmatic and given with a grin; I was told that having a female identity was one way of avoiding paying one’s taxes. Similarly with homosexuality, such men were often described as “spolit” and it was considered shameful for the men who took the “female role”, but was it treated with amused contempt, rather than shock, horror and sanction. One could say, perhaps, that it was not an issue for such men were not considered violent and did not as a consequence gain reputations as dangerous deviants, as did those whose frustrations with their position led them to direct retribution against those that they held to blame for their misfortunes.
Nevertheless, this tolerance of sexual deviation demands a little further comment for it is an aspect of the valorisation of masculinity in the Gisu case that allows not for a sharply dichotomised gender division, but introduces a third term, an identity, stigmatised to be sure, but livable. Further, circumcision itself does not act to totally oppose the genders for women share in its ritual and its valour. Indeed, in many ways, it can be regarded as a rite of passage for girls as well, as they stand by their brothers during the climacteric of the last three days and are cleansed together with him by the circumciser after the operation. Further, the power dimension, whilst formally favouring men, as I have described, in practical terms, favours women — allowing them to be seen ideologically as benevolent and compassionate — whilst also giving them considerable freedom in negotiating their relationships with men. (I have to say that while working with the Gisu, I never had any doubt which gender I would have preferred to be — and this cannot solely be put down to my unreconstructed, pre-feminist self.)

This takes me to my third topic which touches on the particular construction of Gisu gender divisions and sexuality. This is now at the forefront of academic writing, with the discourses of sexuality seen as deeply imbricated with power. Many years after my fieldwork among the Gisu, I heard in Kenya the striking metaphor of the “sharpened spear”, used specifically of the circumcised penis, carrying with it the idea that the penis was forged and fashioned not only for use against men in battle but against women in sexual combat. The powerfulness of the idea is clear enough, catching in one image the nature of masculinity in male conquest and female defeat, supremacy and subordination, and the agonis of gender relationships. Women here can never be “on top” — and this is reinforced by a cultural behaviour set which ensures that women are always literally lower than men, whether ducking in their presence or sitting on the ground while the men claim the chairs.

The extent to which the sexual act is rendered culturally as an act of aggression undoubtedly varies. In East Africa, it reaches its most extreme expression possibly among the Gusii of Kenya, for whom
LeVine (1959) wrote that all sexual intercourse was played as rape, with the woman even in marriage expected to resist. He wrote this in response to the persistently high incidence of reported rape in the area, stretching back through the colonial period. More recently, in July 1991, the Kenyan public was stunned by the boys’ rape of the girls at a boarding school in another district in Kenya, that of Meru, which resulted in the death of nineteen girls. The horror of this event prompted calls – especially by women’s organisations – for public debate on gender violence and the general harassment and inequality suffered by Kenyan women. It was a call that was only partially heard for, although newspapers and magazines carried articles, the Government authorities seem to have acted to suppress the affair. There was no public inquest and only two of the many boys involved were ever charged and then only with rape. Rioting in schools, itself, is commonplace and it seems as if boys’ dissatisfactions with their school authorities are easily transposed onto the girls. If the tragedy in Meru was a singular event, the attitudes which led up to it are much more widespread. In such a context, the metaphor of the “sharpened spear” is anything but innocent.

That manhood had two linked attributes among the Gusii – warriorhood and sexuality – I had realised; that they might be joined together in such a way, I had not. My immediate response was to think that I might have overlooked this aspect and I rushed back to my fieldnotes to see if they provided any evidence of such an explicit sexual dimension. I couldn’t find it. Indeed, the lack of overt sexual symbolism is a feature that I have taken up independently as it is one that almost forces a psychoanalytic perspective (Heald, 1994 and 1999a). Now that I have worked in Kenya, I am even more sharply aware of the differences, for the attitudes that LeVine talks of for the Gusii of forty years ago might pass for a description of their neighbours the Kuria, among whom I have been working, today. I say this in order to say that, on balance, I think that I got it “right”: in Bugisu it is the military role of circumcision that is stressed and the element of sexual dominance is played down. Sex here was not “played” – to use an East African idiom – in a way that assumes that men alone emerge as victors.
I came across no evidence in Bugisu of the kind of gender antagonism that such a metaphor implies. As I have described, men’s control over their wives was more formal than real. Gisu women were not powerless. They were not, as they were among the Gusii or the Kuria, “stranger” wives, incorporated into three generational homesteads and dependent upon the goodwill of husband and mother-in-law. Usually, Gisu wives came from neighbouring families, with a good contingent of brothers and fathers to keep a watchful eye on their affairs – and they expected to be the immediate mistresses of their own house, not a subservient members of a large ones. Further, as I have outlined, Gisu women were relatively free to divorce and remarry and thus, despite a jural situation which appeared to deny them rights – for women could not own either land or cattle in their own right – in practice they had a strong bargaining hand in relationship to their husbands. One was far more aware of men’s fears about the loyalty of their wives than of women mercilessly exploited by brutal husbands.

The opposite I am afraid holds for the Kuria where many women and children are subject to regular, and often ruthless, beatings by their husband for which they have no form of redress.4 Beating here is indeed part of the marital contract. I was told of one funeral where a man was handed a switch and forced to beat his wife’s corpse because he had never beaten her during her life. Indeed, bridewealth here transfers such absolute rights of “ownership” over a woman and any children born to her, that her death at the hands of her husband was not an issue for which her family could claim any compensation in the past. Divorce, likewise, was almost impossible for a Kurian woman and, once children have been born to a marriage, this is effectively still true today. Comparing the two systems, the Gisu and the Kuria, it is this feature that I would pick out as critical in assessing the nature of gender relationships and gender inequality.

4 Kuria lies on the Kanyan/Tanzania border near Lake Victoria, with two thirds of the population on the Tanzanian side. For more detail on the Kenyan Kuria, see Ruel, 1959, Heald 1991, 1999b, 2000.
Concepts of masculinity, as displayed in great rituals such as circumcision, give one an insight into the patterning of gender ideologies, but clearly they do not in themselves tell us everything there is to know about the nature of gendered power. Ideologies of masculinity cannot be disentangled from the institutional arrangements that directly govern social relationships, marriage and the organisation of production and reproduction. Indeed, the idea of hegemonic masculinity rests upon the idea that the norm is so strongly supported by its social components that it is put beyond social criticism by its very “naturalness”.

It is relevant to mention here a long-running debate in the 1960s in anthropology about whether cattle transfers at marriage should be regarded as a “purchase” or simply as a form of compensation, a jural recognition of a woman’s change of status, legitimising the marriage and any children born to it (for example, Gray, 1968). Liberal opinion favoured the second and this has become the orthodoxy in the discipline. But, it is not a question of either/or; there are huge variations in the meaning of bridewealth as Comaroff, 1980, Parkin, 1980, Parkin and Nyamwaya (eds.) 1985 and others have shown from one system to another. Here, to simplify, one might think of the Gisu as standing near one end of the scale (where bridewealth primarily transfers rights only over the person of the wife) and the Kuria (with bridewealth transferring rights both over the wife’s person and over all children born to her) at the other. Kurian women who have borne children but who find their marriages intolerable might flee but they can never remarry and so they lose any claim to respect in the community and any security they might otherwise have had. They have no choice but to become runaways, the loose women of current African (male) fears.

Let me, in conclusion, return to the question of the gendering of the tribal polity. Twenty or more years ago, feminist scholarship gave new meaning to the term androgyny, using it to expose the unthinking assumption of social orders as male orders. What then is one to make of the explicit way the tribal world is seen in terms of masculinity? The common Kenyan (indeed African) expression that
“women have no tribe” refers at its most evident to the fact that “tribe” is no barrier to marriage as a woman takes on her husband’s tribal affiliation. In this perception of tribal orders as male orders women are deemed irrelevant. It clearly does not mean, however, that the “tribe” does not claim them — or rather that particular men do not — for if men have tribes, a large part of the rights it bestows are over women. And the idea of women without tribes, takes on another ring in the modern age as women seek and earn new freedoms outside the tribal enclaves, posing an evident threat to male power and control. In this context, one is tempted to ask whether the symbolic value of rituals such as circumcision for men have not gained in valency over the course of this century for this reason. This is the impression that one gets in Kenya where circumcision seems critical to male identity and where men from previously non-circumcising groups are now often opting for it. Tribal rites can translate into tribal rights.

La Fontaine (1977) memorably argued that Gisu *imbalu* can be seen to be about the “power of rights” and, given this viewpoint, it is relevant to ask how far circumcision now has to do double duty in defining manhood, as men have lost their former military role and their control over women becomes increasingly tenuous. How far, then, has circumcision gained significance due both to the loss of men’s warrior status and the emancipation of their women? Just as women’s liberties have evident consequential effects on men’s, so do the changes in the political economy, which have undermined male autonomy in the rural areas, forcing more and more of them into the marginal worlds of the city to scrape a living in increasingly hard economic times. If men retreat into “tribe” as the source of rights, then maybe this can only be asserted through a stress on initiation and thereafter in an exercise of their “manhood” for which control over women remains for many the tangible sign.

But, as everywhere, the institutional features — the features which differ from locality to locality — are as important as the overall cultural or economic factors which shape the regional scene. Here, I return to the Gisu and reiterate the fact that the uncompromising
nature of Gisu manhood comes to the fore in direct competition among men for control over resources. These resources, both land and women, in the Gisu context pit men against men and not men against women. It is no sign of masculinity in the Bugisu hills for men to rape or even beat women. In this, as I have indicated, they contrast with many other East African cultures. And again, as an anthropologist, let me stress the long historical precedence for this, and the importance of understanding locality, as a source not only for the power of rights but for its limitations and permutations over time.

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