Idumi & Heritage Conservation in Kenya
Reexamining the Origin and Meanings Embedded in Symbols in the Tiriki Circumcision Rituals

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Abstract
Circumcision is an ancient practice worldwide. This research article seeks to demonstrate that the rite of circumcision among the Tiriki people of Western Kenya goes beyond the surgical procedure. It is a lengthy process marked by ceremonies at various stages. This initial study investigated the origin and symbolic meaning embedded in circumcision (idumi) material culture among the Tiriki. The findings established that idumi material culture originated from the Terik, and symbolism is ascribed to all material culture utilized at every stage in the idumi. The information we gathered can guide policy on heritage conservation in order to promote the rich history of Tiriki people and for cultural tourism. The research article recommends that more study needs to be carried out in order to explain why the Tiriki do not circumcise women while the Terik still do so.

Key words: Idumi, Tiriki, Initiation, Circumcision, Symbols

Introduction
All societies, however simple or complex, manufacture material culture which are used for practical and symbolic purposes. Material culture also depicts the way of life of a community. People materialize abstract concepts and communicate with each other through the use of symbols (Hall 1997:2). Symbols are primarily instruments or tools of action, and hence, culture from which material symbols are created is more like a “tool kit” from which actors select differing pieces for constructing strategies and lines of action that paves the way for organizing action that might allow one to reach different life goals.

Just like many traditional communities, the Tiriki people of Hamisi Sub-County, Vihiga County, Kenya produce different types of material culture some of which are ritual related. The creating of a sense of identity by separating the boys from their
first love object (the mother) is a momentous change that is actualized through rituals and practices Brandt (1977). Studies from other parts of the world, for instance among certain Melanesian tribes shows that boys are taken to a sacred place where they undergo initiatory ordeal in which they are beaten with heavy sticks- all which are symbolic. Some research has been done on the traditional Tiriki history but the deep meaning of material culture associated with Idumi have not been deeply investigated. This study used functionalism theory, which postulates that material culture used in a cultural system fulfill a vital role (Malinowski 1989, Garbarino 1977 and Radcliffe 1952) for a society as a whole. It thus guided the study in getting informants’ views about the symbolic function ascribed to the rituals and material culture incorporated in idumi.

This study utilized a descriptive research methodology, which involves gathering people’s views and experiences through interviews, participant observation and in the analysis of data. The study was limited to Shaviringa and Shamakhoko Locations in Tiriki East Division and Jepkoyai and Tambua Location in Tiriki West Division which constitute spots where indigenous circumcision material culture and their custodians and where idumi ceremonies are still performed. Purposive sampling was employed because not all people are accessible to closely guarded information.

Results and Discussion

i) Origin of the Tiriki people

According to Gideon Were (1990) the Abatiriki, migrated from Uganda and settled in their present area in 1650 and is one of the eighteen sub-ethnic groups that constitute the Abaluyia, -a Bantu speaking group of Western Kenya. Recent studies, however show that the Tiriki originated from various Abaluya clans (zimbamba) and various communities non-Bantu communities like the Luo and the Kalenjin who subscribed to idumi culture (Sangale 2005:26,539). Vatirichi consist of people who settled among the Terik, and subsequently abandoned their customs in favour of the Terik culture of idumi. Terik is a Kalenjin sub-ethnic group residing in Aldai region of Nandi County. Women become Tiriki by virtual of their families subscribing to idumi customs and not the actual circumcision.

Idumi is a process that aims at strengthening cultural identity and continuity by enhancing the passing over of cultural responsibilities and ideologies from older generations to young ones as envisaged in the preparatory, circumcision, seclusion and reincorporation stages in the idumi circumcision ritual cycle. Those circumcised in hospitals are never respected among the indigenous circumcised Tiriki since they missed significant transformation education in the form of rituals and material culture incorporated at every stage in the idumi ritual cycle.

Informants disclosed that, idumi symbols do not only express and communicate the meaning and ideas ascribed to every stage in the idumi ritual process but also transmit and sustains beliefs, customs and values attached to idumi. Hall study in (1997:2) concurs that people materialize abstract concepts and communicate with each other through the use of symbols because symbols represent “social modes of thought. Further, informants reported that, idumi symbols are not only cultural items made and rituals performed to “mediate” and convey the meaning of the various stages of the idumi ritual cycle, but also serve as instruments used to execute the cultural process of transforming the Tiriki boys into men. One can understand the embedded meaning in idumi symbols only by observing the nature of symbolic material culture used and rituals performed at every stage in the idumi ritual.

ii) The origin of Tiriki circumcision (idumi) and the symbols associated with it.

The origin of idumi among the Tiriki remains a mystery not only to scholars, but also to the Tiriki themselves. Informants however, reported that, idumi and the material culture associated with it owes its origin to the Terik (varwa) among whom their ancestors, Lukhova and Ambalavu lived. Informants noted that, since the Tiriki trace the source of idumi from their ancestral link to Lukhova and Ambalavu who got circumcised by the Terik, they all have the ancestral spirit of circumcision (musambwa wa idumi) in them. All Tiriki males undergo circumcision to appease this spirit in order not to abrogate the promise of continuing with circumcision, which, Lukhova and Ambalavu gave to the Terik ancestors.

Lukhova and his son Ambalavu were circumcised and initiated into the Terik age group by the Terik. Later, when Ambalavu established his own circumcision grove (kavunyonce) and a sacred grove (ikavukolosi), the Terik gave him a rod of authority called Inanjirwa and skin cloth (shisero-ismadi) which, comprise vital material symbols of idumi among the Tiriki. Boyd &Richerson (2005:328) agree that, the Tiriki adapted Age sets and male circumcision from the Terik. Owing to the importance ascribed to idumi material culture such as the skin cloth (ismadi) and the rod of authority (Inanjirwa) which the
Terik gave to Ambalavu, the Tiriki have continued the use of *idumi* material culture at every stage in the *idumi* ritual process when “transforming” the initiates into men.

### iii) Symbolism associated with initiation artefacts

The symbols used during *idumi* among the Tiriki have various meanings enshrined in them. The Tiriki assign symbolic meaning to every specific material culture and rituals performed at every stage of *idumi*, namely: preparatory, circumcision, seclusion and reincorporation stage. The findings disclosed that, in the preparatory stage, a ritual involving the strangling and slaughtering of a male sheep (*limiko*), with no defect is usually performed in the circumcision groves to launch the *idumi* season. Sangree (1966:51) agrees with this as indicated in his work that, 'the initiation elders' (*vasakhulu vi idumi*) usually sacrifice a “white” male goat (*imburi indavu ikhole*) in the sacred grove (*kavukolosi*) to inaugurate the circumcision season which they announce by singing a special *idumi* song. However, informants differed on the kind of animal used for the ritual. While the informants insisted on a spotless male sheep (*limiko*) that has no defect preferably of one colour -“red” (*limuchi*) or “black” (*limwamu*), Sangree (1966) mentioned a “white” male goat (*imburi indavu ikhole*).

However, regardless of the differences arising from the type of the animal used for the ritual sacrifice, informants reported that, the sacrifice performed in the circumcision grove (*kavunyonje*) or sacred grove (*kavukolosi*) does not only symbolize “cleansing” but also symbolize purifying *idumi* season from bad spirits. The sacrifice symbolically appeases *idumi* spirits and invites them to come and “witness” as well bless the *idumi* season. A “white” spotless male sheep symbolizes purity. Further, informants disclosed that, the absence of blisters on the outer surface of the stomach of the sacrificed animal symbolize that *idumi* would be without problems, and thereafter, elders announced the anticipated success of the *idumi* season by singing a special *idumi* song that symbolizes the fighting of the “enemy” fearlessly. In this case the “enemy” of boyhood has come, but with *idumi* the initiates would be safe. This concurs with what Mary Douglas (1957) who found that among the Lele people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo performs the ritual of killing and eating a pangolin in their initiation ceremony.

The above discussion reveals that *idumi* is a religious ceremony since it involves appeasing the ancestral spirits through ritual sacrifices. Furthermore, this spirit is evoked through songs, and hence all the rituals performed and material culture used in the preparatory stage are symbolic. Plate 1 is an illustration of counselors’ (*vadiri*) skinning a male sheep (*limikho*) sacrificed to purify the *Kavunyonje* during the period of this research article.

**Plate 1:** Elders (counselors’ or *vadiri*) skinning a male sheep (*limikho*) to purify the *Kavunyonje*.

![Plate 1: Elders skinning a male sheep to purify the Kavunyonje.](image-url)

Further, elders make a ritual fire (*vwali*) on which the carcasses of the sacrificial animal is roasted and consumed. The carcasses of the sacrificial animal is roasted and consumed to symbolize “bonding” with the spirit of *idumi* (*musambwa kwi idumi*) and the blood of the sacrificial animal symbolically binds the living community and the ancestors. Informants reported that, the ritual fire (*vwali*) on which the carcasses of the sacrificial animal is roasted does not only symbolize the “warm spirit...
of idumi" (musambwa kwi idumi), but also symbolizes an ‘alter’ where vasakhulu vi idumi offer sacrifices to evoke the idumi spirit (Musambwakwi idumi) to “come” and “activate” idumi.

The views articulated above show that, the idumi process does not only involve the living members of the community but also the ancestors whose active presence is symbolized in the ritual fire and consumption of the sacrificial meat. Reunion with the spirit of idumi is obligatory to ensure the success of idumi process among the Tiriki who indigenously circumcise.

Idumi preparatory stage involves song and dance. The afternoon preceding circumcision is usually crowned with idumi song and dance (vukhulu) in which idumi candidates holding a fast-thriving periploca linear folia (isenende) on their head by the left hand dance naked (shihekhenye) with their penises exposed to the public. Sangree (1966:53) and Turner (1967:95). Johnson (1974) also notes the inevitable role of the circumcision songs in the right of passage rite among the Shangana-Tsonga people who live on the boundary between Mozambique and South Africa. Informants further disclosed that, dancing naked (shihekhenye) symbolizes insignificant social status from which the candidates are to be transformed to become people of value to the society.

The investigation revealed that, uninitiated boys among the Tiriki are called "vasoleli", a term symbolizing inferior status less, and hence the real moment to reveal the "inferior status" is when they dance nude (shihekhenye) holding isenende on their head. The above discussion reveals that the initiates dancing naked in public symbolizes their unrecognized social status of boyhood from which they are to be transformed into a higher social status of manhood. Dancing naked symbolizes that the uncircumcised have no status among the Tiriki. Plate 2 shows initiates dancing naked (shihekhenye) with isenende held with the left hand on the head in 2015.

Plate 2: idumi candidates dancing naked in 2015

The next stage in idumi ritual cycle is performed in the circumcision grove (Kavunyonje). Informants reported that, early in the morning after the final preparatory ritual, men and women escorted initiates to the circumcision grove. They also carried sticks made from Elgon tree (Lusuyi).The bark of these sticks are/were peeled off and tied on the circumcision grove by elders. They also carry/carry a bundle of various grasses (limuli) tied on a stick of an Elgon tree. Sangale (2005:130-131,150) found that, the circumcision grove (kavunyonje) is not only a place where circumcision rituals take/took place, but it is also a place where idumi oaths are administered. The initiates were/are led into the kavunyonje by Mudiri (sponsor) carrying Limuli accompanied by youth carrying sticks whose bark had/has been peeled off. Victor Turner (1969: 232) found a similar scenario from his study among the Ndembu of Zambia.

The Tiriki believed that, a bundle of various grasses (limuli) carried by Mudiri symbolize the “power” to guard against natural forces, and also power against witchcraft (lilokho). It has/had “power” to protect the initiates from dangerous spiritual and human forces which can disrupt the idumi process of transforming the boys into manhood.
Furthermore, the study disclosed that, the sticks of Elgon tree (Lusuyi) with numerous branches carried by women symbolize peace and good luck. Further, informants reported that, the circumcision grove (kavunyonje) does not only symbolize a sacred cultural site, but also symbolizes a “high” place where members of the community, idumi candidates, ancestral spirits associated with idumi (misambwa kye idumi) converge on the occasion of transforming the boys from boyhood to manhood.

Besides this, Kavunyonje symbolizes a shrine where all trees are not only considered special but are also totally protected by customs (miima) which sanction death (likhutsa) to anyone who cut and ferry’s them from the circumcision grove. The kavunyonje remains sacred and its value is enforced by customs prohibiting felling and carrying trees out of the kavunyonje.

At the kavunyonje the circumciser (mujesi/ mudiri wu khumatsi), the “man maker” uses a ritually prepared circumcision knife (injeso) to transform the initiates from boyhood to manhood (Oral interview with an informer and Sangale (2005:158) who concurs that, the circumciser uses injeso or shivyato to circumcise the initiates. Additionally, idumi is likened to second birth, and hence mujesi/ mudiri wu khumatsi gives birth to the boy which is symbolized by “cutting off his foreskin” using injeso to facilitate his “birth” into the new status of manhood, and hence, injeso symbolizes an idumi tool that facilitates the “delivery” of the initiate from ritually unclean childhood status into ritually clean adulthood status to which manhood responsibilities are ascribed.
The views discussed above show that, injeso symbolizes a tool used by mujesi or mudiri wu khumatsi to “make men” by transforming boys from boyhood to manhood by “cutting” the foreskin.

**Plate 5: Indigenous circumcision knife injeso—singular, tsincheso plur)**

The circumcisers’ (vajesi / vadiri vu khumatsi) usually wear copper bracelet (mkasa) on their left hands during the circumcision operation. Informants reported that, the copper bracelet (mkasa) worn on the left hand by mudiri wu khumatsi does not only symbolize authority to shed blood by ‘cutting’ the foreskin from the penis, but it’s also a symbol that differentiates those who have been ritually cleansed (kwisavitswa), empowered, authorized and commissioned as circumcisers from other custodians of idumi material culture. The views presented above reveal that, the mkasa worn by mudiri wu khumatsi is a significant symbol that confirms that mujesi/ mudiri wu khumatsi has been ritually empowered, ordained and cleansed (kwisavitswa) to perform the circumcision rite.

**Plate 6 shows a circumciser’s hand (mudiri wukhumatsi) with a copper bracelet (mkasa) on the left hand as a symbol of authority to circumcise (kusheva)**

The field results indicate that the Tiriki initiates dress in an indigenous short skin (shivambo) before leaving the circumcision grove (kavunyonje). Shivambo symbolize an ambiguous state of a lesser status because the initiate (mukhulu) bleeds like a menstruating woman and wore a skirt—an attire the Tiriki designate for women, and yet, he also has the attributes of men. The above views reveal that, shivambo symbolizes undefined transitional state from which the initiate passes enroute to the new status of adulthood.

**Plate 7 shows an initiate dressed in short skin apron (shivambo)**
Furthermore, research work revealed that in the seclusion stage, Tiriki initiates (vakhulu) are usually secluded from the public in a hut (irhumbi) after undergoing the circumcision operation. Kuper (1978: 118) and Towles (1993:32) concur with what others have seen elsewhere for example among the Ndebele where initiates are usually secluded after undergoing circumcision. Informants disclosed that, the initiates’ status after circumcision is not fully defined, and hence, society secludes them from the defined realms to a seclusion hut (irhumbi), a place symbolizing death. Since the initiates’ acquire unclean status caused by circumcision blood that renders them ritually “dead” after undergoing the circumcision rite, this unclean status is symbolized by confining the initiates in irhumbi. Turner(1982: 98) agrees with this research as shown in his work that, the newly circumcised are deemed to be ritually unclean and polluted, and hence secluded from the realm of culturally defined state. Informants disclosed that, irhumbi does not only symbolize a place set aside for the ritually contaminated, but also a place where those who are considered ritually “dead” or unclean such as the newly initiated boys are confined to limit their interaction with “living” people as they wait for purification (khulavitsa) from the “shadow of death” as well as the contamination caused by fresh blood before reintegrating them back into the society. The above discussion reveals that, irhumbi does not only symbolize a place for the ritually contaminated, but also a special place where those circumcised hitherto considered ritually unclean are confined to safeguard the public from ritual contamination.

Informants reported that, the initiates groups are obliged to dress in skin cloths (isumadi) and the head mask (ingolole) whenever they move outside the seclusion hut (irhumbi). Sangree (1966:57) agrees with this as he confirms that indeed initiates wear leather cloaks (tsisumadi) and initiation masks (tsingolole) when they leave their seclusion huts (tsirhumbi) into the public to perform idumi song and dance (vukhulu). The Tiriki initiates dress in a full skin dress that covers the whole body while hunting while Eiselen (1932:32) noted the same behavior among the Bapedi ba Masemola initiates (badikane) who dress in a small skin around their loins while out hunting by day. Additionally, informants disclosed that, isumadi does not only symbolize a place set aside for the ritually contaminated, but also a place where those who are considered ritually “dead” or unclean such as the newly initiated boys are confined to limit their interaction with “living” people as they wait for purification (khulavitsa) from the “shadow of death” as well as the contamination caused by fresh blood before reintegrating them back into the society. The above discussion reveals that, irhumbi does not only symbolize a place for the ritually contaminated, but also a special place where those circumcised hitherto considered ritually unclean are confined to safeguard the public from ritual contamination.

The authority of manhood was given to the initiated son by the father and this was symbolized by the new skin dressing (isumadi) preferably made from the skin of a young bull. Furthermore, informants reported that, the initiates (vakhulu) dressing in isumadi empowered them to be “full” men. Dressing the initiates in the “indigenous skin cloth” symbolizes giving them the “key” to engage in matters pertaining to manhood, and whoever “enters” manhood is officially dressed in isumadi which is adored and valued as an indigenous attire of adulthood.

Further, informants disclosed that, ingolole symbolizes the ancestral totem (shimanyinyiro sha vakhuka) from which the spirit of circumcision (musambwa kwi idumi) comes and links the Tiriki to their idumi customs, and hence symbolizes the totem which overtly holds the spirit of circumcision and covertly the spiritual sacredness of idumi. Wearing ingolole by vakhulu during seclusion symbolizes their connection to the spiritual world (shivala shi misambwa) from which they are to navigate carefully for the successful completion of the idumi process. The above views reveal that, ingolole symbolizes the spirit of idumi and that is why the Tiriki holds it in high esteem.
The above discussion reveals that, “putting” vakhulu in the cloth of manhood” does not only symbolize the evolution of the initiates (vakhulu) into “men” that give them obligations of manhood but also symbolize they are now “full” men.

Plate 9: The initiates (vakhulu) wearing Ingolole and dressed in skin cloth (isumadi).

The final stage of the idumi ritual cycle is the reincorporation stage which is the ritual of burning the items used during seclusion. This was not restricted to the Tiriki. Towless (1993:152) by found that, the Mbo of the Democratic Republic of Congo burn their circumcision lodges and whatever is inside to ashes before leaving the seclusion site for reintegration in society. Khamalwa (2004: 102) recorded similar practice among the Bagisu of Uganda by stating that “each initiate burns the dry banana leaves (kamasanza) on which he slept before departing to his father’s home”.

The ritual of burning the items used during seclusion does not only symbolize “disposing off” of all the filth associated with boyhood but also is as giving “birth” to the newly circumcised into society. It also symbolizes the breaking from the ritually contaminated mukhulu and a rebirth of vakhulu into the status of newly circumcised men referred to as “brides” (viiha). It also symbolizes the “hatching” of the initiate to the new society.

Plate 10 illustrates the burning of the items used during seclusion to pave way for the end of the seclusion period (shalukhu).

Additionally, informants reported that in the reintegration stage, and before reuniting and interacting with family members on the occasion of shalukhu, the newly circumcised boys among the partially and the mainstream Tiriki circumcision groups must pass through an archway (shilivwa) constructed using lusyola branches, isenende and other assorted idumi material (Sangree 1966:63 and my personal observation). Makwa (2010: 65) concurs with this work when he says that male children are likened to a tree known as lusoola. The tree is not only associated with good luck (tsingabi), but its bark and branches are used in the performance of rituals such as circumcision (imbalu). It is also considered an ancestral tree (Musaala ku lusambwa), and hence the shilivwa symbolize the presence of the ancestral shrine as well as the ancestors whose “presence” to “witness” reintegration of the “brides” in society on the occasion of shalukhu is important. Informants disclosed that, passing through the shilivwa by the newly circumcised on the occasion of shalukhu symbolizes the conclusion of the
seclusion period and its associated restrictions. It also symbolizes that, the newly circumcised boy returning home from seclusion after circumcision is a bonafide son of the father with entitlement to property inheritance and that is why the shilivwa is not constructed for the boys who are not paternally related (personal communication with elders).

**Plate 11** illustrates the newly circumcised “brides” (viiha) passing through the shilivwa.

The discussion above shows that, the archway (shilivwa) is not an ordinary gate but symbolizes a sacred shrine through which the newly circumcised pass in order to be in communion with the ancestors as well as to attract blessings before rejoining society.

The final stages of reintegrating the newly circumcised in society among the Tiriki involve performing the final rituals to end seclusion. As initiates passed through shirivwa on shalukhu, they perform purification (khulavitsa) ritual involving dipping their fingers in a container containing indigenous herbs mixed with milk and honey (field observation). Before the newly circumcised (Viiha) start using their fingers to eat food, an elder washes their hands with milk and honey. Informants disclosed that, the dipping of fingers by the newly circumcised in a container containing indigenous herbs mixed with milk and honey symbolize “cleansing” to remove ritual impurity (vusekhu) caused by circumcision blood so as to become clean before using their fingers to eat food upon ending the seclusion period (Sangale 2005:15,218). Furthermore, it symbolically meant the end of prohibition by “cleansing” (khulavitsa) the hands from the pollution (vusekhu) caused by circumcision blood and the ritually unclean status of mukhulu.

**Plate 12** is an illustration of the newly circumcised “brides” (viiha) dipping their fingers in a bowl containing a mixture of herbs and honey.
Conclusion
The study investigated the origin and meanings imbedded in symbols used during circumcision (idumi) among the Tiriki. The findings has shown the origin of idumi and the material culture associated with it. Based on the findings, the study made the following conclusions:

1. The origin of Circumcision (idumi) among the Tiriki and the symbolic material culture associated with it is closely linked to the Terik among whom the Tiriki ancestors settled. This was confirmed by informants who opined that, all Tiriki circumcision age set names such as Kapelach, Koimet, Ngolongolo, and also idumi songs such as Hoyo he, have Terik intonation.

2. Idumi rituals and material culture play a symbolic role at every stage in the process of transformation of Tiriki boys into manhood. The transformation is achieved through the initiates interaction with, rituals, material cultural objects and ideas, including values and attitudes that are symbolically transmitted through the rituals and material culture used at every stage in the idumi ritual cycle. The indumi ceremonies, symbolizes the end at once childhood status and emergence of one's new status as a man. Therefore, from the above exposition, we conclude that idumi rituals and material culture play an important symbolic role in the transformation of Tiriki boys into men.

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