DAY OF ZERO TOLERANCE TO FGM SUPPLEMENT

'THE SPIRITS CHOSE ME TO PERFORM THIS DUTY'

A Sabiny Mutitet (circumciser) describes her role in a cutting season

By Frederick Womakuyu

AS we approached her house with a group of local law enforcement officers of the district, Sunday Kokop, a woman who carries out Female Genital Cutting in Bukwo District in eastern Uganda, ran for her life.

"They have come to arrest me," she cried out to her son, who was seated outside his house.

But after my interpreter, Martin Chelangat, explained to them that we had come to collect data on culture and had chosen her as one of the elders to consult, she agreed to talk to us.

"I was scared, thinking that you had come to detain me. I am an FGM 'surgeon' and recently, certain bad people have been campaigning against FGM, something that we found our forefathers practising," she says.

"Now that you have reassured me that you are collecting research about our culture, I will give you everything that is necessary. I want you to write good things about it so that people know why we practise it."

Kokop, who is locally known as *Mutitet*, meaning female circumciser, says she has been cutting girls for 25 years.

"I inherited it from my grandmother. In our family line, we had 'circumcisers', so when my grandmother died, I took over her role." She adds that for her to become a female circumciser, certain spirits were transferred from her grandmother to her.

"We were three girls in our home, but before my grandmother died, a ceremony was performed on three of us to choose who to take over the role. But the spirits chose me," she says with a smile.

She claims that during the week-long initiation process, the spirits instilled in her heart courage, never to fear or be threatened by anything when circumcising the girls. "They told me that circumcision involves shedding of blood and if someone is not courageous, they may faint. But I am brave," she says.

Kokop says when she got married, her husband wanted her to stop circumcising, but after stopping for a year, she says: "The spirits attacked me. I could hear whistles blowing in my ears. I was pregnant at the time and I ended up losing my son."

After the husband had forced her to endure and abandon it completely, another punishment from the spirits meant that Kokop would lose another child. "That is when I resumed my role."

Sunday Kokop a circumcisor

Later her husband died.

Kokop has lost count of the number of girls she has circumcised. "Many of my customers look for me voluntarily," she says adding that in 2008, she circumcised 90 girls and had just been called to initiate another 20, the next day.

"Circumcision among the Sebei is carried out to initiate a girl into adulthood. A female who is uncircumcised may not perform certain duties in the family," she says. Some of these include not milking a cow, not climbing into the family granary and at worst, they are not permitted to marry.

"Circumcision makes them mature and ready to get married. It also prepares them for the other roles," Kokop says.

She adds that her typical day begins when she is notified about the venue of the ritual, three days before. "This will help me to prepare myself mentally and spiritually. It also gives me time to buy the razorblades."

The day before the girl undergoes the operation, she is hidden in a secret hut close to the venue. "During this time, I also develop fear more than the parents of the girl. If the girl is not brave, the parents will blame me," she says. "But working with the care taker, who at this time is moving with the girl, we prepare her. I don't see her physically, but we communicate mentally."

"When the girl comes, she lies down with her legs spread wide apart. My assistant comes with a handful of yeast flour and pours it on the girl's genitals. This is to increase friction on the clitoris, for easy holding before cutting," Kokop says.

Kokop says she was born at the time her father joined the King's African Rifles to participate in the Second World War around 1939. She had no formal education, but stresses that she uses a different blade for each girl to avoid transmission of HIV/AIDS.

I also wash my hands after every operation to avoid any infections. The health workers have taught us," she says. "They have also told us that FGM is associated with some dangers to a woman like excessive bleeding, loss of sexual sensation, difficulty in giving birth and infections."

Kokop agrees, but says bleeding depends on family history.

"I have cut some girls from the same family who bleed a lot. And I have also cut some who don't," she says. "If we experience this problem, we get grass and tie it on the girl's hand. The girl immediately stops bleeding."

Kokop adds that the girls take close to a month to heal and during the recovery, they are not given any medication. "They use their own urine to treat the wound. The girl crosses her leg and initiates urine that treats the wound," she says.

But Dr. Michael Mwanga, the Bukwo director of health services says the urine does not treat the wound. "It only sterilises it. If they are lucky and have good personal hygiene, the wound may heal," he says, "but some of those women suffer silently and their wounds may never heal."

Asked whether she ever had a case of someone who did not heal, Kokop says that only happens to cutters who were not anointed by the ancestors.

"I am blessed and it has never happened to me. That is why many people in the community trust me and come for my services," she says.

About the campaign against FGM, Kokop says: "I have no problem with FGM. If other people think that it is bad, we can eliminate it," she says. "A few years ago, some NGO called Reproductive, Educative and Community Health Project (REACH), came here and educated us about the dangers of FGM. We accepted their way and in return, (they) promised us some benefits."

Kokop says the surgeons were promised heifers and iron sheets if they denounced FGM. "Our girls were promised scholarships and a girls' school. But the promises were never fulfilled. We continued to circumcise the girls, FGM is something that we depend on for everything."

Kokop says for every operation she carries out, she is given sh80,000, a goat plus a jerrycan of local brew. The fee can be higher, depending on the wealth of the girl's family.

"I have used the money to pay my children's bride price and to construct my house, which is yet to be completed," Kokop, who has three sons and two daughters, says.

Her message to people against FGM is: "If REACH and other people against FGM remember and come well with the promises, I will denounce FGM and also go to church. I have never gone to church in my life because I circumcise girls."

A mentor's testimony

By Vision Reporter

ALICE Chemusto, locally known as maturiotet (caretaker or mentor), puts the girls who have accepted to undergo FGM into the 'right' mood of the process and undertakes the first initiation steps to make sure that the girls have one thing on their mind — circumcision. Chemusto makes them 'possessed' through a local herb she administers to them. She also coaches the girls on how to sing, dance and makes sure that the girls are fearless.

Chemusto says when a girl has accepted to undergo the ritual she trains her into what is expected.

"I show her how to dance, I guide her from one relative to another to get gifts, usually in the form of money, goats or chicken for appreciation," she says. These gifts also give the girl confidence and enthusiasm to undergo FGM.

The night before the girl is circumcised is a busy one. "First, I take her to the well to cleanse her of any demons. During that night, a plant that causes itching is then administered to the girl's clitoris to make it swell for easy grasping during the cutting," she says.

When the girl has been circumcised, it is Chemusto who is supposed to look after her until she heals. "If the 'surgeon', by mistake, leaves any part that was supposed to be cut, it is me to clear it off. Any part left may hinder the girl from healing quickly."

"It is the fainthearted girl who suffers. But during my reign, all the girls have remained brave."

Chemusto adds that the girl's bravery depends on the type of caretaker. "Caretakers are chosen by the spirits and the role is inherited. If the caretaker didn't undergo this process, the girl is bound to fear or cry during the process," she says.

Chemusto inherited the role from her mother. "My mother was a caretaker and did her work very well. I admired her and since childhood, I dreamt of becoming one," she says.

Chemusto explains that just before her mother died, the village elders called a meeting and out of five girls that were presented, the spirits chose her.

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