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Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

## KNIVES OF SEBEI

Women, Ritual and Power. Sabinu Perception on  
Female Genital Mutilation and Advocacy Programs

**Ritah Nalaaki**

Thesis submitted for the Degree of  
Master of Philosophy in Indigenous Studies  
May 2014





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**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

For hundreds of years, the Sabiny have performed female circumcision as a cultural practice that initiates adolescent girls into adulthood/womanhood. However in the recent past, the community has come under sharp criticism from the Ugandan government and other concerned parties such as non-governmental organizations. The government has even gone a step further and criminalized the practice. Nevertheless, this has not deterred the Sabiny from performing female circumcision every even year.

Therefore, in this study I explore the reasons why female circumcision is continually practiced among the Sabiny despite the sensitization done by the government and different non-governmental organizations to show this community the dangers of the practice. Among the Sabiny, the practice is termed as *wonsetibik* while the WHO describes the practice as “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female genitalia whether for cultural or other therapeutic reasons”.

The research was guided by three goals which included, analysing the power dynamics behind female circumcision, examining the perception of the Sabiny towards female circumcision and finally to analyse the conflict between traditional societal structures and external forces such as the Ugandan Law and Advocacy programs. The study was carried out in May-June 2013 in Kapchorwa district in Uganda among the Sabiny residents of London Bridge. The informants included the clergy (Church leaders), advocacy programs (REACH), women, men and a focused group discussion of students from Kapchorwa PTC. The data was collected using methods like interviews, document analysis and participant observation.

In this study, I argue that indeed female circumcision is part of the Sabiny culture and it is their right to preserve it. However, given the dangers and risks that are associated with the practice, I propose that both government and the Sabiny community should come to a round table and discuss alternative cultural practices that can serve as rites of passage for the girl child without putting her life at risk, and to put into consideration the girl child’s future.

## **DEDICATION**

To my family for the enduring love, encouragement and support during my academic studies abroad.

To my Late father Ibrahim Sekabira for the great foundation he gave me, he kept on telling me “read books” I wish he was here to witness this!

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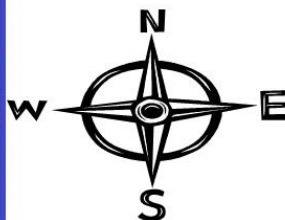
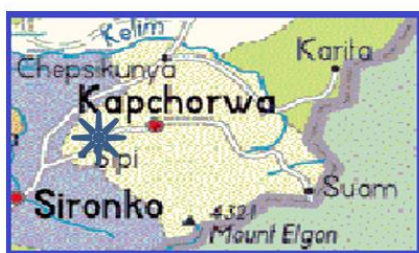


## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>AIDS</b>	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
<b>FGM</b>	Female Genital Mutilation
<b>FC</b>	Female Circumcision
<b>REACH</b>	Reproductive Educative and Community Health
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>UNPFA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>LC</b>	Local council
<b>UBOS</b>	Uganda Bureau of statistics
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UHRC</b>	Uganda Human Rights Commission
<b>HIV</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
<b>FORWARD</b>	The Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development

Figure 1:

Map of Uganda showing districts and neighbouring countries, the research was carried out in Kapchorwa district in eastern Uganda which is the area Sabinu inhabit<sup>1</sup>.



<sup>1</sup><http://www.ezilon.com/maps/images/africa/political-map-of-Uganda.gif>

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.0 Background of the Study**

Culture is an important aspect in the existence of the human being. From a cultural relativism perspective, is a doctrine that holds that(at least some) such variations are exempt from legitimate criticism by outsiders, a doctrine that is strongly supported by notions of communal autonomy and self-determination (Donnelly:1984) it is culture that shapes human beings; it provides them with values and principles which formulate their world view. Therefore, for a society to be holistic, culture becomes one of its foundational aspects. However, not all cultural practices are positive, and in time it is expected that some of these cultures evolve and become better or even they are abolished. These may include cultural practices like human sacrifice and female genital mutilation. However, this is not the case among the Sabiny who are continuing to practice female circumcision as a rite of passage for the girl child. This scenario can force one to ask: why have the Sabiny persisted with FGM and yet it has been criminalized by the government of Uganda?

In order to understand the practice of female circumcision among the Sabiny, it is essential to first understand their history as a community, their origin and why they decided to the practice female circumcision.

The Sabiny are classified as Nilo Hamites; part of the tribes in Uganda that speak a language of the Nandi cluster which is generally called Kalenjin. The Sabiny mostly live in the Eastern part of Uganda around the north and north eastern part of Mt. Elgon, in Kapchorwa district. These people also live in Kenya and Sudan. According to Lori Benintendi (2004), the Sebei are thought to have migrated to Mount Elgon from east and north about 250 years ago and occupied the entire mountain until 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Sabiny are mainly pastoralists. However some practice subsistence farming whereby they grow crops for home consumption and the surplus is taken to surrounding markets for sell. Crop farming is supplemented by other activities like rearing animals such as cows, goats, pigs and donkeys. During my fieldwork, I noticed that the Sabiny reared donkeys for the provision of transport for both people and food. Since the Sabiny live in a mountainous area, carrying heavy loads becomes a problem without the help of donkeys. Charcoal burning, peanut making, beer brewing and other retail business are part of the Sabiny's economic activities.

## **1.1 Purpose of the study**

The main purpose of this research was to find out why the Sabiny have continued to practice female circumcision in spite of the fact that the practice has been criminalised by the Ugandan government coupled with a maximum punishment of 10 years in prison if one is found guilty. I chose the Sabiny because they are described as indigenous people according to the United Nations definition and the Ugandan government. I use Martinez Cobo's UN working definition of indigenous peoples which says that;

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems<sup>2</sup>

### **Indigeneity in an African context**

The issue of indigeneity brings a lot of complication in an African setting. Those from international human rights and decisions makers come to debate with those who claim to be indigenous (Verber *et al.*, 1993:10).

The Sabiny being indigenous people they did not embrace the fact the government and other organisations were encroaching on their rights as indigenous. From the very first there was a lot of debate between parliament and among Sabiny Member of Parliament about female circumcision being stopped. If we try to analyse the history of the concept indigenous people, according to Saugestad (2000:205-234) they are defined as descendants of those who occupied a given territory that was invaded or conquered by white colonial powers. This is not so different from the Aboriginals in Australia whose land was invaded by colonisers. This also applies to the Sami who were once colonised/subjugated by the Norwegian majority. This indigeneity concept is focused on blue-water colonisation; situations where white colonisers came and settled on the land of indigenous people and made the indigenous people their

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.iwgia.org/culture-and-identity/identification-of-indigenous-peoples>

subjects. They also took all that belonged to the indigenous people and made new laws for them to follow.

In the Ugandan context, in February 1926, there were 56 indigenous communities which were recognised by the colonial government. And in the 1995 Ugandan constitution, 56 indigenous groups were also recognised. Basing on this, one can argue that the Ugandan government relies on the colonial construct of indigeneity. However, a constitution amendment Act of 2005 recognised 9 more indigenous tribes in Uganda which makes the current number of 65 indigenous tribes.

The definition of indigeneity is understood in the Ugandan law through the legal framework of the international law. Yet, bodies like the African Commission on Human and People's Rights define indigenous people as persons whose culture and ways of life differ considerably from the dominant society and their cultures are under threat in some cases to the point of extinction. The survival of their particular way of life depends on the access and rights to their traditional lands and the natural resources thereon, they suffer from society and they often live in inaccessible regions often geographically isolated and suffer various forms of marginalization both politically and socially...this discrimination domination and marginalisation violates their human rights as peoples/communities, threatens continuation of their cultures and ways of life (ACWGIP 2009:41).

Being a student of indigenous studies I wanted to link with a community which was in line with what I study i.e. indigenous people. Anaya (2009:58) refers to the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which emphasizes that "indigenous peoples are equal to all other peoples and individuals" this emphasizes the point that "indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. According to their rights, they are free to choose their political status and free to pursue their economic activities, social and cultural development". The Declaration therefore emphasizes the right for indigenous peoples to be different.

Since indigenous peoples are equal to all other peoples and individuals, it means that they have rights to determine their economic, social and cultural development in a way they want. This is based on the fact that the economic, social and cultural livelihood of indigenous peoples is much "closely linked to their particular use of land and natural resources" (Anaya, 2009:69). I felt the topic of female circumcision would be relevant considering the fact that *wonsetibik*<sup>3</sup> is a rite of passage of Sabiny women which in this case belongs to cultural

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<sup>3</sup> An indigenous name for female circumcision, a traditional custom practiced among the Sabiny

development according to Anaya. However, the practice of *wonsetibik* is problematised by the fact that the Ugandan government forbids it, while some Sabiny women are also struggling to continue with its practice. Hence, the analysis of these dynamics links it to my study.

## **1.2 Definition and choice on the concept: Female circumcision, Female genital mutilation & female genital cutting.**

Female circumcision refers to the forms of cultural practices characterised as traditional female genital surgery (Howard 1984; Gunning 1991-92, in Babatunde 1988:1). Female circumcision is also known as female genital cutting, or female genital mutilation. Female genital mutilation is defined by the World Health Organization report as “all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or injury to the female genital organs for one-medical reason (WHO 1995).

Female circumcision was prohibited by the Ugandan law that was enforced in April 2010. The 2010 Act entails prohibition of female circumcision, and outlines the offences, prosecution and punishment of the offender and protection of the victims as well as girls and women under the threat of FGM. The maximum punishment for one who is prosecuted and found guilty is 10 years of imprisonment. According to the Ugandan law, the FGM act was passed to let people know that it is a criminal offence to cut off human organs and cause any bodily harm to a fellow human being especially a minor. However, some Sabiny seem to have turned a deaf ear to the law and instead have continued to practice *wonsetibik* since they consider the practice to be their cultural tradition. *Wonsetibik* is a term used by the Sabiny to refer to female circumcision where female organs are partially removed. In this research report, the term *wonsetibik* as used by Sabiny will be used interchangeably with the term female circumcision.

## **1.3 Scope of the study**

The research was carried out from Kapchorwa district in the Eastern part of Uganda. Kapchorwa has neighboring districts such as Mbale in the west and south, Nakapiripirt in the north and borders countries like Kenya in the east and south (UBOS 2002). I mainly concentrated on London Bridge Village in Kawowo. This parish was chosen because it is considered to be the heart of the Sebei. They speak Kupsabiny<sup>4</sup> as a local language. They respect

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<sup>4</sup> Indigenous language for the Sabiny.

and cherish their culture and that is why the gate keepers of culture are still clinging to the practice.

As a result of intermarriages and migrations, the practice has spread to other neighboring areas such as Moroto, Kamuli, Pokot, Kamwenge, Bukwo, Isingiri or Isingiro. I carried out my field research for a period of two month from May 2013 to June 2013 in eastern Uganda Sebei region. The population scope included, men and women, clergy, activists, and advocates.

#### **1.4 Goals**

This research project focuses on:

- Analysing the power dynamics behind female circumcision.
- Examining the perception of the Sabiny towards female circumcision.
- Analysing conflict between traditional societal structures and external forces, such as Ugandan law.

#### **1.5 Research Question**

Female circumcision is a cultural tradition among the Sabiny. Since time immemorial young Sabiny girls have been subjected to this rite of passage. So there is need to understand why the Sabiny have continued to practise female circumcision even when the Ugandan government and some non-governmental organizations are strongly against it.

#### **1.6 Reflexivity/Ethics**

As a student, the master's course in indigenous studies helped me to learn about different indigenous communities such as the Sami and Aboriginals. This background helped me to have a comparative look at the indigenous people in Uganda. However, before going for fieldwork, I thought about the topic of female circumcision and I was against this ritualistic practice among the Sabiny. But after getting entrenched into the study, I found out that women in my tribe (Ganda) have an initiation ritual for adolescent girls even though theirs is slightly different from the Sabiny's. During fieldwork, I learnt more about the Sabiny. And after listening to their reasons why they still hold on to the practice, I started to reflect on practices in other cultures. The background information I acquired during the indigenous studies course has helped me to know the rights of indigenous people which include protecting their culture, rituals and property. The Sabiny being indigenous people means there is need of protecting

their cultural practices and rights. Hence government should have dialogue with them in order to find out if they have alternatives to Female circumcision

To the Sabinu culture, I am an outsider coming from the central part of Uganda. I am Ganda, and I belong to the Bantu cluster while the Sabinu belong to the Nilotic group of peoples. This means we do not have much in common as far as culture is concerned. Being an outsider, I was not well acquainted with their culture and with this at the back of my mind, I had to keep a low profile as I observed and studied them before carrying out my research.

As a researcher and student representing the University of Tromsø I had to keep in line with what my informants told me in terms of protecting their information. For example, I had to ask for permission before recording their information, and before taking pictures. Maurstad argues that researchers should be able to protect information provided to them by their informants because publicizing some information without their consent may turn out to be unethical. (Maurstad 2002). During my fieldwork, I had to state clearly that my research was for academic purposes. I did this by presenting to the respondents the letter I got from my University and the letter that I got from the Local Council leader permitting me to carry out the research in the London Bridge community. However, for some it was hard as it will be discussed in the next chapter three.



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.0 Introduction**

More than 130 million women worldwide have undergone female genital mutilation (Nour, 2008: 1). Female circumcision is a practice that has existed for centuries among some indigenous communities in some parts of Africa and Asia. Some scholars argue that the practice predates back to religion such as the birth of Islam whereas others claim that the origins of this practice are a mystery. In Africa, the Sabiny from eastern Uganda are among the communities that have persisted with the practice of female circumcision. In the recent past, they have come under attack because of this practice and there have been efforts from the Ugandan government and other international organisations trying to stop the Sabiny from practicing FGM. Looking at the literature available on the topic, most scholars and researchers mainly look at the danger associated with the FGM and fail to consider the cultural dynamics at play. However, those who look at these dynamics do not go that deep to understand why female circumcision is still practiced. Therefore, in this chapter I will look at the available literature on female genital mutilation<sup>5</sup> in relation to the research topic. In this I shall aim at showing the reader what the practice of female circumcision is, its history and background, and provide a theoretical understanding of the practice using two theories; cultural relativism and feminism.

### **2.1 What is female genital mutilation?**

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is also commonly referred to as female genital cutting, or cutting. It is defined by the World Health Organization<sup>6</sup> as “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female genitalia whether for cultural or other therapeutic reasons”. It is estimated by the World Health Organisation (WHO) that many African Women have undergone Female circumcision. Some scholars have attributed the practice as being a religious practice. For example Muslims adopt it as a religious requirement as Nawal Nour (2008) notes. Some literature and research however, shows that the practice transcends the borders of religions; it is more of a cultural norm than a religious practice. Therefore, it cannot be considered as a strictly religious practice. Furthermore, in the 1960s American obstetrics

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<sup>5</sup> Here in referred to as FGM

<sup>6</sup> Cutner W. Female Genital Mutilation. *Obset Gynecol Surv.*1985; 40:437-443.

performed clitoridectomies<sup>7</sup> to treat erotomania, and clitoral enlargement<sup>8</sup> meaning the practice has been around for long.

Female circumcision covers a range of procedures, but in many cases it involves the excision of the clitoris and the labia minora. At its most extreme, the procedure entails the excision of almost all the external genitalia and the stitching up of the vulva to leave a tiny opening as practiced by the Somali.<sup>9</sup> . Therefore the practice involves more than just cutting. Looking at this view of female circumcision, one wonders why and how somebody can tamper with a tradition that has evolved from a brutal practice to one that is less brutal due to evolution. As a researcher and anthropologist, I am inclined to believe that if we let the practice be, chances are that it will continue to evolve and before long, it will become a custom of the past. Gruenbaum 2000 asserts that with practices such as female circumcision which have deep cultural significances, such significances can be preserved while the actual cutting is discontinued hence resulting to change. My opinion is that if there is dialogue with the Sabiny, you may find that they have alternatives to practicing Female circumcision as an initiation rite. Therefore there is need of dialogue between the Sabiny and other stakeholders other than imposing a total ban on Female circumcision. This means that if there is application of force from government and other stakeholders, as a show of cultural resistance the Sabiny will hold onto their Female circumcision practice.

It is important to note that the Female circumcision procedure among the Sabiny in Uganda is traditionally performed by elderly women who have been spiritually ordained to be surgeons. The role of being a *wonsetibik* surgeon is hereditary within selected Sabiny families. The girls undergoing Female circumcision do not get any anesthesia among the Sabiny because it is believed that experiencing the pain and being able to withstand it, is a sign of being courageous and brave for initiation. It also shows that the girls are strong enough to withstand any challenges that they may face in their lives as women.

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<sup>7</sup> Means the [surgical](#) removal of the [clitoris](#). It is rarely needed as a therapeutic medical procedure, such as when [cancer](#) has developed in or spread to the clitoris

<sup>8</sup> Female Genital Mutilation: Integrating the Prevention and Management of the Health Complications into the Curricula of Nursing and Midwifery. Department of Gender and Women's Health: World Health Organization, Geneva.

<sup>9</sup>Nour M Nawal, Female Genital Cutting: A persisting Practice. Department of Maternal-Fetal Medicine: Harvard Medical School: Boston.2008.

The World health organization has classified female circumcision into four types. These include;

**Type 1**, also known as clitoridectomy or *suuna*, involves removing part or all of the clitoris and/or the prepuce.

**Type II**, also known as excision, involves removing part or all of the clitoris and labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora.

**Type III**, the most severe form, is also called infibulation<sup>10</sup> or *pharaonic*. It entails removing part or all of the external genitalia and narrowing the vaginal orifice by re approximating the labia and/or labia majora. This infibulated scar covers the urethra and most of the introitus, leaving a small hole for urination and menses.

**Type IV**, is the mildest form and includes any form of other harm done to genitalia by pricking, piercing, and cutting, scrapping or burning.<sup>11</sup>

The practice of female circumcision varies from one group to the next, for instance Type 1 is practiced mainly in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Kenya. Type II is performed in parts of West Africa like Benin and Gambia, while Type III is mainly practiced by women in Northern Sudan, Somalia and Djibouti. Type IV is common among the Northern Nigerians who introduce a corrosive material known as *gishiri*<sup>12</sup>. Some of the most accurate early data on Female circumcision comes from Fran Hosken<sup>3</sup> who in 1982 compiled statistics from her many years of studying Female circumcision in Africa. Between 1995 and 2002 the Demographics and Health Surveys published data compiled by questionnaire from 16 countries, but Somaliland and Somalia were not included. Countries that have had repeated data collected have shown small declines in prevalence and a trend to less severe forms of mutilation. There are a number of published studies from African countries, (not including Somaliland), in particular Nigeria, which have estimated Female circumcision prevalence, but most have involved small numbers and have only been carried out over short periods

In 1998 a national survey by the Ministry of Health in Somalia stated a 96% prevalence rate. In 1999 Care International studied Somaliland and stated that it was universal, with 91%

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<sup>10</sup> Means procedure in which the vagina is partially closed by approximating the labia major in the midline. Accessed on 20.2.2014

<sup>11</sup> Mandara M. Female genital mutilation in Nigeria. Int J Gynaecol Obstet. 2004; 84:291-298.

<sup>12</sup>Female Genital Cutting: Clinical Management of Circumcised Women. Washington, DC: The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists; 2008.

undergoing the most severe form, Type III. A Swedish study published in 1991 questioned 290 Somali women living in Sweden and found that 100% had female circumcision, with 88% being Type 3 despite a relatively high socio-economic level, and the majority was willing to perform female circumcision on their daughters due to religious reasons. These are non-practicing countries where immigrants from practicing countries live. A number of initiatives have been put in place to eradicate female circumcision among the Somali immigrants in Sweden.

The practice of female circumcision has been illegal in Sweden since 1983(WHO 1988:56). According to World Population Monitoring (2002), medical personnel and media have been used to bring awareness about the dangers of female circumcision. Somali are also found in Norway and researchers like Rachel Djesa (2004) “*så langt har vu kommer dialog rundt kninnelig omskjæring*” have researched on this topic trying to find out what the Somali in Norway think about the practice now that they are settling in a different country which has a different opinion about female circumcision.

The United Kingdom, Australia and Norway followed the footsteps of Sweden by outlawing Female circumcision in 1985, 1994 respectively. However, Packer 2005 asserts that in the United Kingdom, despite the adoption of the female circumcision Act, the British Medical Association estimates that between 3000-4000 young women willingly go to British health facilities to reduce on their genital organs every year. This is also seen as circumcision. A recent study by the WHO and UNICEF looking for the first time, into HIV prevalence also asked women about their FGM status. The study included 769 women and found that 98% had undergone Type III circumcision<sup>13</sup>.

## **2.2 History of female circumcision**

Researchers can trace the practice of female cutting to Australian Aborigines who practiced totemic genital surgery for uncounted millennia (Gallaher L. David, 2000:1). Another reason to female circumcision and main stream is the western culture from the recesses of the ancient Egypt (ibid). This trail can be traced from the Egyptians also seen in the Bible which states;

Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Genesis 17:10-11.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ednahospital.org/hospital-mission/female-genital-mutilation/>.

This was a command from God to Abraham and his descendants. Therefore, it is from male circumcision that female circumcision was begotten. However, for the female it was not meant to cut the fore skin as it is prescribed for males but rather cutting specified organs in female genitals. Gallaher 2000:189 notes that the traditions that supported female circumcision/ “genital cutting” were quite similar to the values and ideas that sustained “male circumcision” in the same tribal societies. This implies that the practice of female circumcision has been around human beings for long and it cannot be limited to cultural or religious constructs. He continues to say that female circumcision could not be described as a qualitatively different practice since the ritual is part of the girl’s dream of womanhood, father’s desire to show off with the big party and the family’s way of proving its conformity to social convention (*ibid.*).

Speaking about social convention, Jenkins states that individuals are unique and variable. He argues that selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed in the processes of primary and subsequent socialization and in the ongoing processes of social interaction where in individuals define and redefine themselves and others throughout their lives (1996:20-21).

Although there is an abundance of literature on the explanation of the practice of female circumcision among various cultures especially in Asia and Africa, there is limited information about how the practice was initiated. This has tickled the minds of scholars and researchers who have come up with a number of theories to help explain how the practice came into existence. The practice seems to have originated from southern Arabia and from there spread to Africa. For hundreds of years, these two regions, although separated by the Gulf of Aden, have had close contact. Therefore it is possible that the custom could have spread along well-established trade routes. High mountains and an almost impenetrable desert would have prevented this strange procedure from spreading into northern Arabia and the Yemen (Pieters G, Lowenfels AB 1977:6) About 28 countries practice female circumcision in Africa. According to a report by Edna University Hospital , female genital mutilation in Asia is occasionally reported to be practiced by a limited few in Oman; Saudi Arabia; United Arab Emirates; Yemen; and by even fewer communities in Indonesia; Malaysia; India and Pakistan. However, female circumcision is reported to exist in many African countries. In some it is performed on all or most women while in others it may be performed only on some women belonging to certain ethnic groups.

The countries where female circumcision is reported to be practiced with varying applications of types and different prevalence rates are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea,

Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Somaliland, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda.<sup>14</sup> In Somaliland, it has long been accepted that FGM is ubiquitous but accurate data has been lacking. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the procedure was commonly performed on girls between the ages of 4 and 11 and that 95–100% of women had undergone the procedure, the majority of whom having been subjected to the most severe form of mutilation. The study indicated that 97 % of the Somaliland women that were receiving antenatal care at Edna Adan Hospital had undergone FGM. In Somaliland the women refer to their procedure by two names, the Sunna and the Pharaonic. The Sunna correlates with Type I and II but also involves stitching of the anterior part of the genitalia to varying extent. The Pharaonic correlates with Type III.<sup>15</sup> Edna University Hospital, the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations consider FGM as a violation of human rights. As early as 1979 the WHO recommended during an international conference that the practice should be eradicated. And in 1993, the World Health Assembly called for the abolition of the practice. Consequently, most countries have strict laws forbidding female circumcision. The Hosken Report, which was published in 1979, showed the global review and countries that estimated prevalence of the practice. Some countries like Somali had an estimation of about 98% while countries like Uganda had estimated prevalence of about 5% (Skaine 2005:36-37).

Sexual slavery is also one theory that has been floated by Gerry Mackie (1996:1001) a theorist in the practice of female circumcision. He relates female circumcision to the Chinese foot binding in his book '*Ending Foot binding and Infibulation: A conventional Account*'. Foot binding used to begin at the age of six to eight among girls where a child's four smaller toes were bent facing the bottom of the foot (Mackie 1996:1000). Mackie argues that the earliest documented evidence of female circumcision indicates that it started 2,200 years ago and these were reports of infibulation in the Nubian region which covers present day Egypt and Sudan. Historically, the practice of is believed to have been in existence in ancient Egypt, Ethiopia and Greece<sup>16</sup>. This was almost certainly associated with slavery.<sup>17</sup> Traders are said to have cut their female slaves to prevent them from conceiving and thus making them more valuable. Mackie

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<sup>14</sup> [www.ednahospital.org/hospital-mission/female-genital-mutilation/](http://www.ednahospital.org/hospital-mission/female-genital-mutilation/) accessed on 7.02.2014

<sup>15</sup> [www.ednahospital.org/hospital-mission/female-genital-mutilation/](http://www.ednahospital.org/hospital-mission/female-genital-mutilation/) accessed on 7.02.2014

<sup>16</sup> [www.orchidproject.org/2011](http://www.orchidproject.org/2011) accessed on 2 January 2014

<sup>17</sup> [www.sociologyguide.com](http://www.sociologyguide.com) accessed on 2 January 2014

further notes that the practice spread out of Nubia along strong slave trade routes through sub-Saharan Africa, East to West. This might be the sole explanation as to why the custom is common among areas which are known to have had ancient slave trade links with Africa.

### **2.3 Continuance and persistence of the practice of female circumcision/*wonsetibik* among the Sabiny.**

According to Ashenafi Moges (1990), tradition plays a significant role in the justification and endorsement of the practice of female circumcision. In most cases, tradition or culture is looked at as the determinant of various aspects of how human beings carry on with their day to day activities. The following includes the social, cultural, religious and medical factors of *wonsetibik* among the Sabiny.

Parents who continue with this practice have compassion and love for their culture. They also believe that they are protecting their daughters from harm. Kakenya, from Kenya notes that,

It's a tradition and rite of passage to womanhood it's done at puberty at age 12 to prepare a girl for marriage and if not done the society would look at you as a curse or stigmatised in the society. It's the parent's responsibility to make sure the child has gone through the ritual to avoid conflicts with the elders<sup>18</sup>

This means that the tradition has been in place for so long and helps to bring about harmony and socialisation.

The tradition has been defended by its practitioners, who have given various reasons why they continue with female circumcision in spite of all the criticism that it has attracted. In the course of carrying out this study, the researcher found that the reasons why female circumcision is still practiced among the Sabiny are the same reasons that cut across all the other cultures that are continuing to practice it.

I hope my research on female circumcision will pave the way and give me an opportunity to develop new approaches about women's position in the society. Oware argues that different participants from diverse cultural backgrounds meet and decide to eradicate other people's old traditions without prior study of the customs (1994:181).

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<sup>18</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/kakenya\\_ntaiya\\_a\\_girl\\_who\\_demanded\\_school.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/kakenya_ntaiya_a_girl_who_demanded_school.html)

One of the Organisations called *Maendereo ya Wanawake* literally meaning development for women found in Meru district, Kenya, have come up with alternative ways to female circumcision which they termed as “*ntanira na mugamba*” meaning circumcision through words (Gruenbaum 2001:195; Muteshi, *J et al.*, 2005:27-29). With this new approach, girls who have reached the puberty stage are gathered and taught about sex education in regards to tradition. This includes their role as women in the society, how to care for their husbands and knowledge about parenthood. They are also taught about health and hygiene, reproductive issues, self-esteem among other issues. As they celebrate their initiation rite, there is a feast accompanied with traditional songs and dances to confirm the initiation of the girls and their readiness to take on the new responsibilities as women.

My research will hopefully help others to understand the Sabiny customs and I believe that the findings will help me bring new perspectives on Female circumcision practices. I hope the Sabiny will find an alternative way of maintaining their culture and marriage rituals and the knowledge that comes along with them (sex education) other than practising female circumcision.

#### **2.4 Reasons for Sabiny female circumcision.**

The Sabiny are not different from any of the other cultures that practice female circumcision in terms of the reasons why they continue to practice and hold it so dearly. During the course of my research, I found out that the reasons that were given mostly revolved around it being a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood. This means that a girl was ready for marriage and the ritual also ensures that her virginity is kept intact. However, the reasons for female circumcision are diverse and often bewildering to outsiders. They also strongly conflict with modern Western medical practices and knowledge. The justifications for the practice are deeply inscribed in the belief systems of those cultural groups that practice it (Forward, 2002:3).

According to Momoh (2005:9-10), female circumcision has a number of cultural elements. According to her, these elements include beliefs, rituals, customs, and behavioural norms, and social hierarchies, religious, political and economic systems. In this case, female circumcision is a tradition that has been supported by centuries of traditions; deep culturally rooted practices that were started by the Sabiny ancestors that have strong customs attached to them. During my research I noticed that most of my informants said that female circumcision has been in existence since time immemorial and was practiced by their ancestors. In other words, it is a deep rooted practice which cannot be erased easily. To the Sabiny, it is a mind-



set. The Sabin people practice it because it is in their cultural mind-set and it seems difficult to change such a mind-set. This was confirmed by the interviews I had with some women who often said “we found the ritual being practiced so being the Sabinys, it is carried on”.

One of informants named Kamron explained the reason why female circumcision seems not to fade away. This is because there are criticisms levelled against female circumcision which are not well thought about and which some people take as a means of intervention. Those who oppose female circumcision refer to the practice as being out dated, un-civilized, primitive, and barbaric and as a punishment subjected to women. This pushed the gate keepers of culture into resistance so as to preserve their culture due to fear of it being destroyed by colonialism and foreigners whom they thought had come to destroy everything that they were left with including their culture. Chilisa notes that indigenous knowledge rituals and belief take shape around the culture’s unique understanding of the social and physical world (Chilisa, 2012:87). Therefore there’s need to understand people’s beliefs and customs other than judging them in order to help the captive mind. This process involves stripping the formerly colonised and historically marginalised groups of their ancestral culture (*ibid*, 2012:7-8).

The continued existence of pro-culture groups accompanied with fear to lose self-identity. It is through female circumcision that one is seen as a true Sabin. Different tribes in Uganda have different initiation rites. In the tribe where I come from called Ganda tribe, when a girl reaches puberty stage she is taken to a paternal aunt who teaches her about sex education which includes how to look after her husband when she gets married. A ritual is performed where her labia minora is elongated to a desired length using local herbs called *entengo teng*. This is somehow different from the Sabin, for them they cut the labia minora yet the Baganda elongate it by pulling.

While at her aunt, the girl is taught other duties done by a woman such as cooking, kneeling down as a sign of respect to elders in the society and many more. By doing this they are preparing her to be a good woman. Babatunde (1988:45) notes that these rituals are used to institute a change in social positions. When such a woman gets married, marriage would last longer compared to this generation where sex education has been ignored. Therefore, the Sabin have continued to practice female circumcision because they believe once it is destroyed, it means losing their identity.

Fear of social isolation for example during festivals, community meetings and other community celebrations. Once a girl was not circumcised she was denied many of the social

benefits. For instance she would be the last to draw water from the well. The Centre for Reproductive Rights notes that female circumcision is a requirement to social acceptance hence leading to the continuous practice (2003:8). According to the WHO, FGM qualifies one for adulthood because it is a “rite of passage from childhood to adulthood”. The significance of the practice is seen to be preservation of chastity and to ensure marriage of the girl child. The practice is deep rooted and becomes a mind-set to the individual’s psychology; a sense of loyalty to belief in a value system.

There is also a belief that “as long as you’re not circumcised, you’re still a ‘girl’ even if you’re married with children” (WHO, 1988:2) hence continuity, this was also approved by some of the informants.

Reduce on immorality in the community, if one was not found a virgin at circumcision she would be cursed by the community and given severe punishments. For example, if one was found to have lost her virginity, the elders would get her an elderly man for marriage around the village who had failed to get a wife. This was important because it helped to keep girls from immoral behaviour like indulging in underage sex. Therefore, female circumcision being an enhancement of women’s femininity by excising masculine traits, the marking of ethnic boundaries; the limitation of women’s excessive sexual desires and purity women, “readying” them for their overwhelmingly important reproductive role notes Tamar Wilson in *Ni Mhordha* (2007:7).

Gallaher (2000:198) asserts that the reasons for practicing female circumcision are closely related to perceived benefits that circumcision comes with for example, the uncircumcised woman was denied doing some duties like smearing or decorating the house with dung or fetching it from the kraal, and was not allowed to milk the cows. It was believed she would set off a curse for the animals and they would die mysteriously. Among the Sabiny, cow dung is used as cement to smoothen the house walls. It also helps to keep away insects like termites from damaging the house and this was done by women while men went to graze cattle. Since much of the domestic work was done by only the circumcised women, this helped in sustaining the necessity of female Circumcision. Furthermore, an uncircumcised woman was denied picking food from the granary. It is only the woman who had undergone circumcision that was allowed to climb the granary to pick food. If an uncircumcised woman climbed the granary, it was believed she would be a disgrace, cause drought, famine and low yields from crops.

Female circumcision is done to appease the spirits. According to the Sabiny, the Sabiny ancestral spirits tell them to be circumcised since it is a ritual that has been in place for so long. If they are not circumcised, they believe they would be haunted and would not have peace till they settle the debt; which in this case is being circumcised. Scholars like Light-Klein (1991:38) argue that the custom of having the penalty for not practicing which is total ostracism, make up reasons for female circumcision. Adds that most African societies are based on myth and that is why the Sabiny practice female circumcision. In this case we ought to respect people's cultures.

Female circumcision brings a sense of belongingness and togetherness. Once one goes through female circumcision she feels being part of the society and earns respect from the community as she's described as being part of it.

Funding from fellow Sabiny members who want the ritual to continue on the expense of others; there are Sabiny who want the ritual to continue. These may include those away from home, and there are those who are educated but support others to continue with the tradition so as not to fade away. These can be people already informed about the consequences of female circumcision but like to offer financial support towards the ritual celebration. These include drinks like beer which is locally brewed, food and other materials so that others can perform the ritual. Parker (2005:224-225) notes that female circumcision is a socio-cultural norm which means that where a person lives affects his/her behavior and the person's decision making process. In Africa, the social and cultural norms remain strongly in favor of female circumcision and the family and community are the most significant transmitters and guardians of norms. It is through the family that the practice of female circumcision is maintained and upheld as a tradition.

According to the Sabiny, female circumcision is an income generating activity especially to those who carry out the ritual (female surgeons). Like I indicated earlier on, this ritual is carried out by special families and not every family among the Sabiny can exercise the "cutting". The procedure is traditionally carried out by elderly women who have been spiritually ordained to be surgeons and it runs in specified families. This is backed by Momoh (2005:10) who says that the ritual is a source of employment for women in communities. They practice female circumcision because there are limited jobs, thus it acts as an alternative to the jobless.

Other reasons include; a woman who was circumcised fetched more dowries for the family. Another important factor is interference of other cultures through intermarriages and migrations. Therefore one had to be circumcised in order to be identified as a true Sabin.

## **2.5. Consequences**

The ritual of female circumcision has both positive and negative impacts although there is little documentation on the social contribution, psychological and psycho-sexual effects of the practice. However, existing research has shown that the practice affects the lives of women adversely.

According to Population Reference Bureau (2001:16), female circumcision can cause harmful health effects for women including haemorrhage, infectious disease like HIV/AIDS; and this is because one instrument is used on all candidates without sterilisation. Female circumcision can also cause pain, over bleeding, fever, psychological torture, shock and sometimes death. Although no study has been undertaken on the death rate, it is just assumed that death can occur as a result over bleeding. Other consequences include; urine retention, injury of the neighbouring organs, painful menstruation, painful sexual intercourse and complication in labour and delivery because of the fact that elasticity of the organ is lost (WHO 1997b:2, *ibid.*1998:28-30, *ibid.* 2008a, *ibid.* 2008b:11). Toubia asserts the female cutting is a man-made problem that causes grave damage to women (1995:13-14).

Reproductive Education And Community Health (REACH) Programme which is under the United Nations Population Fund an Organisation helping to fight female circumcision among the Sabin identifies some of the long term effects of female circumcision such as micturition, labial adhesions, recurrent urinary tract infections, chronic pelvis infections, infertility, vulva abscess, clitoral cysts, neuroma keloid scars, dermoid cysts, calculus formation, fistulae and other gynaecological and obstetric complications (2012:3).

### **3.0 CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I present the methodological aspects that I used in attaining my research objectives. It highlights the area of study, sampling, equipment, data collection procedure and challenges encountered during the study. I used a qualitative approach to collect the primary data needed for my research. Among these included; interviews, participant-observation, focused group discussions and document analysis and photography. In this research on female circumcision I used both etic and emic perspectives whereby I was an outsider learning about the Sebei practice of female circumcision which is totally different from that of my community. I studied the Sabiny culture from inside because I travelled to Kapchorwa and experienced what takes place there using Allan Barnad's distinction between emic and etic which was relevant. An emic model is one which explains the ideology or behaviour of a culture according to indigenous definitions. An etic model is one which is based on criteria from outside a particular culture (Allan Bernard 2000). While in the field, the data and interviews were carried out both in English and *Kupsabiny* especially for my respondents who were not comfortable using English. It was an interactive study and I will try to describe in-depth the culture of female circumcision among the Sabiny of Kapchorwa.

#### **3.2 The area of study.**

The research was carried out in Eastern Uganda in Kapchorwa district. Kapchorwa is located in the east along the slopes of mountain Elgon and the people occupying the place are called Sabiny. Sebei-speaking people (Sabaot) once occupied the whole of Mount Elgon, separated into a half dozen tribes. The Bantu-speaking people called Gisu pushed them out of the southwest sector of this circle in the mid-nineteenth century and the colonial boundary between Kenya and Uganda effectively cut the southern group off from the northern. They are composed of three tribes: (the mbai, the Sor and the Sapin from which the modern name Sebei derives). The three tribes occupying the north slope of the mountain and some of the plains below effectively amalgamated into what we now call the Sebei (Goldschmidt 1986:3)

Modern Sebei are independent but closely interrelated tribes living on the northern and north western slopes of Mount Elgon and the plains below in eastern Uganda. The term Sebei has come into use in modern administrative parlance and the descents of these three identify themselves as Sebei. Etymologically, Sebei (variously Sabei and Sapei) is a corruption of the

Sapin the name of the one of the tribes. The other 2 tribes are the Mbai and Sor. Their territory was curtailed by the drawing of the Kenya-Uganda boarder for Sapin formerly extended into modern Kenya on the eastern side of the mountain and onto the Uasin-Gishu plateau (Goldshmidt, 1976:11).

The Sebei who are also known as Sabiny are a group of indigenous people as defined by United Nations and recognized by the Ugandan government. They are found in the Eastern part of Uganda around Mt. Elgon in Kapchorwa district. These people are also found in Kenya and Sudan. The Sabiny occupy the North and North western slopes of Mount Elgon in Eastern Uganda. Kapchorwa has other surrounding districts like Bukwo where female circumcision is still practiced. I mainly concentrated on London Bridge village in Kawowo parish as it was chosen to represent other villages because it's the heart of Sebei.

By building rapport and genuinely explaining the major objective of my research the respondents' cooperation was secured. I was able to work with the Local Council leader (LC) who gave me permission to conduct my research in his village. I also had a field guide (Tina) who was my local contact. The local contacts were important because they eased my work in the field and contributed to the success of the research.

### **3.3 Sample size**

The sampling frame consisted of men and women, activists among others. They were all considered with the help of my field guide Tina. Tina is a Sabiny who was well acquainted with the place and people in the area. I interviewed 18 people in total, and these comprised of both men and women. I also conducted a focus group discussion with 6 students. I spoke to 2 circumcised women and three church leaders. In the same vein, I also interacted with seven other individuals who included administrators from advocacy programs. This was to enable me get different views of people and to know what they thought about the practice of female circumcision.

### **3.4 Data collection methods**

#### **3.4.1 Interviews**

The interviews were structured around open ended questions that gave the respondents the freedom to express their views. Interviewing was an important tool in seeking in-depth qualitative data about the ritual. It involved asking several questions developed in line with the

objective of the study. With permission from the interviewees, the interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. Recording helped me to avoid misquoting and misunderstanding what my respondents were saying. It also made it easy for me to playback the recordings and analyse the data later on.

Interviewing was appropriate for probing and observing the body language of the respondents. The interviews also helped in collecting first hand data. It was during one of my interviews that I also learnt that Kapchorwa; the name of the district has symbolic meaning: “*chorwa*” in Sabiny means friend and “*ka*” stands for a place. Kapchorwa means a place of friends. Sebei is a community where Sabiny are found. Meaning Sabiny are the people found in Sebei community.

**Figure 2:** shows me and my informant during an interview



Source: Photo taken by researcher during fieldwork

### **3.4.2 Participant observation**

I lived among the Sabiny and engaged in their day to day activities. In particular, I stayed with Tina's family for the entire duration of my fieldwork and this enabled me to understand the daily life of people in London Bridge Village. With Tina's help, I was able to connect with my informants. The respondents were free and shared information with me owing to the close relationship I had established with them during my stay.

With permission from my respondents, I took photographs of some of the issues and events that I observed. I used a camera following the famous adage that a picture is worth a

thousand words. I was able to get a few photographs of features like the location of the study, structures and the daily and economic activities done in the area. This gave my work more meaning and it makes it more credible.

### **3.4.3 Document analysis**

This involved reading documents containing relevant information to the study before setting off for fieldwork. I was reliably informed by a friend David about an organization called United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) found in Kampala. David told me that the offices dealt with gender issues and that FGM offices were found within. I visited the offices and later I was forwarded to Esther Cheropu who was dealing with female circumcision. I introduced myself and why I had come to her. She then provided me with more details about Sabiny culture in relation to fieldwork. This helped me to get prior knowledge about the Sabiny peoples and their way of life thus paving a way for my fieldwork. When I reached Kapchorwa, I met Mr. Kamron who I took as my key informant. He lent me some books namely; *Culture and Behavior of the Sebei* and *The Sebei Adaptation and the Sebei Law*. He wanted me to read them and understand Sabiny culture a week before I interviewed him.

In addition to the above, and as part of document analysis, I also did some library research to help me gather secondary data. The libraries I used included the library of Tromsø University in Norway, Makerere University library in Uganda, Official government reports on Sabiny female circumcision in Uganda and I also read Newspapers.

### **3.4.4 Focus group discussion**

In order to get more reliable information about the topic, I had an opportunity to interview a group of students from Kapchorwa Teachers College. For the focus group discussion, I selected six people and these were three boys and three girls. I involved the boys because I wanted to find out their views about the practice of female circumcision since they were all in school. I asked the group a number of questions and their answers helped me to verify some of the answers I had received from others informants. It was through my interaction with this group that I learned that once a girl is circumcised it is hard for her to continue with school.

## **3.5 Challenges of the study**



In this section, I discuss some of the challenges that I encountered during the course of fieldwork. I encountered a number of limitations which made my work more complicated than I had anticipated.

As a young female researcher, going for fieldwork and doing research on a sensitive topic was a bit terrifying. This initial feeling was based on the fact that I was going to carry out research in foreign land; amongst people who were different from me in terms of culture and tradition.

The second challenge was convincing people that I was doing my masters. Everybody seemed to doubt saying that I was too young to do a master's degree. They thought I was in high school! After finding out that I was studying a master's degree at Tromso University they were surprised. Tina too was amazed that I was at that level and she told me that she had not enrolled for her masters yet. It was during this time that she asked me if I would help her in applying for a scholarship in Norway which I accepted.

I expected to find *wonsetibik* being performed. I expected to talk to the candidates and to take part in the ritual celebration and know more about the dos and don'ts of the ritual. Unfortunately, given that it was not an even year, there was no ritual to observe. In hindsight, as a researcher I probably should have investigated more to find out when the practice takes place. However, much as I didn't take first hand pictures of the ritual, this didn't deter me from finding out more about the practice since I interviewed some informants who were circumcised some years ago and they shared with me their experience and some important information. Besides, it was a blessing in disguise that it was not a year for female circumcision because it gave me an opportunity to talk to my respondents in a calm environment away from the excitement that comes with the ritual. It also gave me an opportunity to interact with members of advocacy programs such as REACH<sup>19</sup>.

Language was another barrier that I encountered. This was because some informants especially elders who were knowledgeable and well acquainted with the culture did not know any of the languages that I used with other informants. Tina (the field guide) had to translate to Kupsabiny which is the local language. However, there were still some words that were not easy to translate from Kupsabiny to English which made it difficult to bring out the point well and this sometimes led to cutting the conversation short.

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<sup>19</sup> Reproductive educative and community health, it's a programme against female circumcision in Sebei

Another challenge I encountered while in the field is that some of the intended informants would shy away from being interviewed given the sensitivity of the topic. And those who agreed to be interviewed sometimes did not give detailed information which consequently affected the research.

Furthermore, there was the un-willingness to participate and absenteeism from office at the time of calling in. Some informants, after making appointments with them, I think got second thoughts and called me giving excuses as to why they couldnot make it for the scheduled appointment. Such people requested me to reschedule my interviews with them. This too affected the research since I had to also reschedule appointments with other informants which were a bit inconveniencing.

### **3.6 Theoretical perspective of female circumcision: Cultural Relativism Versus Feminism and Gender.**

My project falls under both anthropological and historical perspective whereby anthropology deals with peoples and the culture. In anthropology culture is defined as a set of shared beliefs, values, ideas, concepts and rules of behavior that allow a social group to function and perpetuate itself. Historically, female circumcision is a traditional custom that has been practiced by the Sabiny over the years and they have beliefs attached to it. Cultural relativism is a perspective on research whereby different cultures or societies are analysed objectively without using the values of one culture to judge the worth of another. According to the relativists, the meaning and functions of cultural traits are relative to its cultural setting. Cultural relativism is often assumed to adhere to this static perspective. Several intellectual forces have contributed to this understanding, but none had a stronger impact recently than the development of feminist anthropology. The anthropological understanding includes cultural construction of human sexuality, fertility and reproduction personhood and the relationship between personhood and gender identity (Lutkehaus, 1995:5).

This discussion can also rise from Babatunde's view of the traditionalist and the abolitionists as projected in his book *Women Rite versus Women Right*, where the traditionalists perceive female circumcision as crucial to the maintenance of traditional culture. They further argue that any attempt to abolish it will undermine the total fabric of traditional culture.

On the other hand, the abolitionists assert that female circumcision is a practice that dehumanizes the female and that it should be abolished since the human rights of the female supersede the cultural impositions placed on her in the female rites (Babatunde, 1988:3).

For the cultural relativists, female circumcision can be exercised for various reasons. One of the reasons why female circumcision is rooted in traditions for example, is that in order for a girl to get married she needs to be 'pure' and for some people who are still practicing female circumcision in African, purity can only be guaranteed through undergoing the practice of female circumcision (Ahan, 2012).

The issues highlighted by Babatunde (1988) and Ahan (2012) were observed while I was carrying out my research. Most of the respondents said that female circumcision helped in the preservation of culture and helped in preparing a girl for marriage. And if it was discovered that she was not a virgin, the consequences she faced were severe.

From a feminist perspective, some feminists like Merrilee H Salmon (1997) argue that anthropologists should work to eliminate the practice of FGM. They argue that FGM violates the rights of women on whom it is performed. However much as the feminists condemn the act, other scholars like Elliot Skinner (1995) have come up to disagree with the feminists accusing them of being ethnocentric. Skinner states that African women themselves want to participate in the practice. However, I disagree with Skinner. Basing on my fieldwork experience, I noticed that some woman only practice female circumcision because of the pressure from home, fear to be haunted by the Sabinu sprits, husbands, in-laws and their peers. And in order to be accepted and fit in the society, they succumb to the pressure and they are circumcised. So in essence some Sabinu women are being psychologically forced to do something that they do not want to do. This was confirmed by several informants I interviewed.

I understand feminism as a theory that helps to uplift women and their works. In this study, I use feminism as a theory that will help the Sabinu to know their value. However, this may contradict with their practice of female circumcision. Nevertheless, feminism may help to elevate their status not be subjected to the pain they go through in order to qualify for adulthood.

Sabinu women have been subjected to the practice of female circumcision and even have gender based cultural strings attached to it for example the belief that if one was not circumcised she would not be married. This can be interpreted as a situation where a woman has a low status. This is reflected in the number of informants where men are the majority and dominate despite the topic being related to females. This shows the kind of superiority that men have. Woman still feel inferior and shy thinking that men have better ideas. As a young female scholar, I see there is need to help women and that is why I find feminism theory important for this topic.

Feminist scholars have analyzed the male bias in social sciences and are beginning to make distinctive contribution to the long-standing debates about the theory (Acker 1983:423). With the wave of feminist activism developed in the United States and Europe during the 1960s and 1970s, gender began to be recognized as a fundamental element in individual and group identity (Lutkehaus 1995:3). Feminism's initial influence was on the anthropological study of "sex roles" and the "status" of women. This led to cross-cultural analyses of male-female relations, of women's social positions vis-à-vis men's and variation in culturally appropriate masculine and feminine behavior (Reiter 1975a; Rubin 1975 in Lutkehaus 1995:4). Feminist anthropologists also contributed to the development of our understanding of gender as a culturally and historically specific category<sup>20</sup>. The concept of the cultural construction of gender has opened new ways of thinking about the broad functions of the categories male, female and reproduction in different societies.

During the course of my fieldwork interviews, I observed that some women would shy away letting their husbands to speak or take over the discussion. Even some men would interrupt the interviews. This can be interpreted by saying that women still feel inferior and subordinate to men. This is also an indication that even when Sabiny women are circumcised, an act that in part purportedly aims at giving them power as adults, they still feel inferior in the Sabiny society. Even some women fear to express themselves and all this shows the gender and power dynamics among the Sabiny. This is where feminism and a gender perspective come in to help in empowering women thereby making a feminist and gender perspective relevant to this study.

It was through the focus group discussion that I conducted which involved students that I was told that once a girl is circumcised, it is hard for her to continue with school. To the Sabiny, female circumcision means that a girl is ready for marriage. Due to fear of being undermined by others, and the bullying that other students would direct towards her, a potential man pays bride price to a girl's parents and she is married off. Many candidates after circumcision do not continue with school, but end up in marriage.

Basing on the foregoing predicament of the girl child, that is why the feminist tenets and perspectives become important in the discussions about ending female circumcision in order to empower girls to continue with studies. The theory of feminism in this case, can be

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<sup>20</sup> MacCormack and Strathern 1980; Ortner 1974; Ortner and Whitehead 1981

seen as an empowering tool which can contribute to women's liberation through generating knowledge that can be used by the Sabin women and that why as I earlier on indicated, this theory is relevant in this study, and affirmative ways of ending FGM.

The studies of male initiation have revealed that the initiation rituals constitute a powerful locus for the reproduction of cultural beliefs and practices concerned with gender roles and sexuality<sup>21</sup> while gradually the notion of the cultural construction of gender has been extended to include male(Herdt 1984) and female sexuality as well (Herdt and Stoller 1990 in Lutkehaus 1995:4) the feminist empowers women with skills like managing workers more effectively, dealing with civil disorder and encouraging women to enter or leave the work force in accordance with the changing economic conditions where women are largely absent from the world, the female domain of production and reproduction that provide necessary infrastructure for the male world despite its importance being invisible and uninteresting.(J Acker,K. Barry and J Esseveld, 1983:424).

Developments about FGM on feminist theory arise in the realms of kinship and gender. This has led to a new understanding of the broader articulation of initiation rites. An examination and analysis of some outstanding concepts is made with respect to ritual practices pertaining to circumcision with other aspects of society such as age set systems, symbolism, economic and political organization. For example an uncircumcised woman gets no leadership position in the society. These few insights have been applied to the analysis of female initiation (*ibid.*) the concepts in initiation rituals such as female circumcision also illustrates the mutuality of influences among the Sabin.

Feminist scholarship has also given impetus to a new anthropological focus on women's bodies and reproductive experiences as sources of power as well as subordination. Significantly ethnographic studies from New Guinea are singled out as providing cases in which "nurturance and reproduction are broadly defined and high value is placed on the roles of both men and women in growing up the next generation" (Ginsburg and Rapp, 1991:328 in Lutkehaus and Roscoe, 1995:5).

From a gender perspective, female circumcision can be seen as oppression and robbing of women's dignity. It involves tampering with female reproductive organs which are sensitive parts of a human being. I believe this research will be helpful to in sensitizing Sebei women

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<sup>21</sup> Godelier 1986; Herdt 1982a, 1982b, 1989; schmid and koncher-schmid 1992.

about the importance of preserving their dignity or finding other means rather than practicing female circumcision since culture is dynamic.

However, using these theories in this project raises a lot of questions. For example one may ask the following questions: what lenses do some scholars use to conclude that female circumcision is wrong? And what lenses should be used to come up with a solution that works for both human rights and the Sabiny without imposing on them other cultures' moralistic perspectives. I back Chilisa's view that indigenous knowledge rituals and beliefs take shape around the culture's unique understanding of the social and physical world (Chilisa, 2012:87). Chilisa, a female scholar asserts that there is need to understand people's beliefs and customs rather than judging them in order to help the captive mind. However, some non-governmental organizations and advocacy programs are involved in stripping the formerly colonized and historically marginalized groups of their ancestral culture and replacing it with euro-western culture (Chilisa, 2012:7-8).

The theories are helpful for my research about female circumcision because theory explains the purpose of the phenomenon. Feminism and gender as a theory explains why female circumcision should be abandoned because the ritual robs the woman's happiness and it is against human rights whereas cultural relativism believes that cultures should not be judged, what is important for other people for example the Sabiny and female circumcision may not be good to others. In this sense, to the outsiders female circumcision may be termed as torture, horrible, dehumanizing and against human rights while to the Sabiny it describes their identity and distinguishes them from other tribes in Uganda thus it is part of who they are.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: Wonsebitik in Sebei (Female circumcision among the Sabiny)**

### **4.0 Trip to the Sebei community**

On 4<sup>th</sup> June 2013 I started my journey to the Sebei<sup>22</sup> land. It was a hazardous trip. 3<sup>rd</sup> June being a Uganda Martyr's Day, Christians go to a place where the Uganda martyrs were burnt called Namugongo. This is a special and memorable day celebrated yearly by Christians in the country. Almost all vehicles are used to transport people to Namugongo for the pilgrimage. I had to travel on the 4<sup>th</sup> so as to find convenient means of transport to the place of my fieldwork. On my way to the bus station, I received a call from Esther Cheropu one of my local contacts informing me where to get the bus going direct to Kapchorwa where my fieldwork was to be carried out. Esther Cheropu was one of my local contacts I found in Kampala. She is a National Program Officer - Gender for United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). UNFPA is a non-governmental organisation helping to stop female circumcision. My topic being gender related, Esther connected me to a family in Kapchorwa where I stayed while carrying out my research. This family too connected me to the community.

While heading to the bus park our car was hit by another vehicle which was trying to overtake our car. Fortunately, no one was injured. It took us 3 hours to get the damaged part repaired so as to hit the dusty road again. Reaching the bus station, I was told by drivers of other buses that the buses to Kapchorwa had left early morning. I was advised to take a taxi which would drop me to the next city called Mbale. Mbale is a small town located in eastern Uganda a 2 hours' drive to Kapchorwa. From Mbale I could find another bus going direct to Kapchorwa. I took their advice and boarded a mini bus to Mbale. The bus was licenced to transport 24 passengers. But since cars were scarce, we were told to squeeze ourselves and 30 passengers occupied the bus. This means the bus was overloading and it is a bit dangerous, but all this seemed normal to other people.

It was a shiny day, with about 38 degrees Celsius. The trip took 5 hours. I spent the night in Mbale where I met with my friend Robert who had a family there. They offered me a place to sleep and food; I rested and continued my trip to Kapchorwa the following day. Robert directed me to Mbale bus station where I found cars going to Kapchorwa. In the car to Kapchorwa we were packed like sacks of potatoes!!! In this car too we exceeded the number of authorized passengers and some had to be carried on others laps, others were told to sit in the

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<sup>22</sup> Place in Kapchorwa where the Sabiny stay.

car trunk. This was a crazy act but I could not help nor complain since I wanted to reach my destination. Later on I was told that it is normal for them to go packed in such a manner since the cars travelling to Kapchorwa are scarce and yet people travel frequently.

Kapchorwa is a small town of about 90,000 people, it is located in eastern Uganda and it is 9 hours' drive from Kampala. Many economic activities take place like trading, farming, animal rearing, cinemas, etc. Uganda has 2 types of seasons, the rainy (wet) season and dry season. The rainy season starts in March to May and the dry season starts from June to October. Minimal rain can be received due to the fact that there is some change in November and December though not often. The dry season is also harvesting season. Farmers harvest and dry their crops which they then keep in granaries<sup>23</sup>. In Sebei, subsistence farming is carried out where by some of the harvest is for home consumption and the surplus is taken to markets for sale. People sell their products to the market every Saturday. Farming is supplemented by other activities like animal rearing, charcoal burning, peanut making and other small retail business.

During my journey to Kapchorwa<sup>24</sup> I got to know some three Sabiny men. We were travelling in the same car which carried 10 people including the one who sat in the car trunk. It was a white Toyota car assigned to take 5 passengers but we were ten passengers that day. However, to these people it seemed normal to take excess since it is the daily routine and if one is caught by traffic officers, the officers are given "kitu kidogo"<sup>25</sup>. In the car I sat in the seat behind the driver because all seats had been occupied. They had to fix me in the middle of some men since I was smaller than them and men were made to sit beside the doors since they were strong they would protect me from falling out. This position helped me to communicate to both people behind me and those who were in front seated near the driver. The men I interacted with were Walter, Frank, Twala and Musanya was the driver. After introducing myself and what I had come to do in Kapchorwa, they became a bit curious and wanted to know how I was able to fly to Europe. I narrated to them my terrible experiences and how it feels to be in a cold country with winter if one grew up in a hot country in Africa and our conversation started.

They were friendly while interacting with me and they told stories about the Sabiny. For example how the Sabiny came into existence, and how the geographical setting is important to the lives of the Sabiny. Sebei the place is surrounded by hills and huge rocks which are

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<sup>23</sup> Food store.

<sup>24</sup> A district in eastern Uganda where Sabiny are found where I carried out my research.

<sup>25</sup> Some small money to cover up (corruption)



mined. Stone quarrying is an economic activity among the Sabiny from which they earn a living. These rocks and stones when mined are sold to construction companies and used in construction. It was from our conversation that I got to know the difference between the words “Sebei” and “Sabiny”. Sabiny are people, whereas Sebei is a place where Sabiny are found.

It was during the trip that I was able to overcome my personal fears about fieldwork and ask a question that had taken me too long. I had to face my own fears and challenges related to this topic. While in the car different conversations were going on, some *Lingala* music was being played in the background to keep passengers relaxed. It took me great courage to ask the gentlemen a question related to a sensitive topic, because I did not know who they were and since I was a stranger in that locality, and the fact that it was my first time to travel to Kapchorwa, I thought would raise suspicion about me as a researcher. In addition I was the only woman who had travelled in the car and I thought I was going to offend them. But when we spotted bulls that were ploughing, their conversation turned on these bulls when it comes to mating. They talked about the way bulls are shameless mating in public. I went silent wondering why they came up with such a conversation. This made me uncomfortable and I did not engage in their conversation. However, this strange conversation about the bulls led to my research topic though I was a little bit insecure.

My heart started racing... I kept on thinking how I was going to table the topic before these strangers that I was traveling with. I wanted to have both male and female perspectives on female circumcision. Later, I gained courage to introduce this topic to the strangers. Luckily, it was through the conversation about bulls that I got my cue to start asking questions on female circumcision because they seemed comfortable discussing about the bulls mating hence it would link to my topic since circumcision is also done on women’s sexual parts. I asked them if female circumcision was still being practiced among the Sabiny and why? One of them spontaneously replied that the women in Sebei do it because it is their culture. This made me to reflect on the women’s position in the society which is connected to my topic as I also thought of how to bring out another question.

I continued out of curiosity to ask if they supported the practice. Another man asked me which tribe in Uganda I came from. I told them that I was a Muganda. This made me think Sabiny women are treated differently considering the question I was asked. This conversation made me to ask more questions for better understanding and draw a link to my topic. I asked if they supported the practice. The first one then answered me that he supported the practice. He explained further that a Sabiny woman is not seen as woman until she is circumcised, even if

she gave birth to children without circumcision she is still seen as a girl. They inquired about my background, and they asked about the part of Buganda where I was from and if the Buganda did not circumcise. In my reaction it felt a bit strange and I got offended though I did not show this to them. I simply answered “ohhhh no, we do not, I come from the central part in Masaka”. However they were surprised making an assumption that I should have known about the Sabiny customs. With my answer, I confirmed that people from my culture do not circumcise, this brought a little silence and later I thought I was not going to get clear answers so I changed the topic. After a while, one of them started speaking in Kupsabiny; their mother tongue which I could not understand. I sensed at this moment that may be they felt curious and uncomfortable speaking to me knowing that my tribe did not practice female circumcision.

#### **4.1 Initiation rite among the Ganda**

I belong to the Bantu, and in particular I am from the Ganda tribe and speak Luganda as a mother tongue. The Ganda are the majority tribe in Uganda and occupy the central region. In this tribe unlike the Sabiny, girls do not circumcise but instead when they reach puberty they are taken to their paternal aunts “*senga*” to be taught sex education. Sex education includes managing their family when they get married, how to handle marriage, how to be a good wife in order to avoid marriage breakups and elopement, how to take care of their husband and children, and they are taught how to cook, taught sex duties for example how to please a man while in bed or having sex.

A woman is supposed to be clean before pleasing her man in bed and is expected not to lie still but boost the morale of her man. This is done through wriggling her waist and softly singing songs that praise her man when having sex. She is taught how to clean her man after sex with a special small towel given to her by her *senga* called *enkumbi*. They also have a saying that ‘a man is a king and he is not supposed to be denied sex when he asks’. All this is done to prepare a girl for her future husband. This also shows that she is an adult who should take on duties of a real woman not a girl. Such sex education kept most marriages intact. Even though long ago marriages were more polygamous, a woman who was taught well by her aunt was the favorite among her husband’s other wives. If a girl missed such education men would know hence they would say that “*teyayitako wa senga*” meaning that she did not go to her aunt for sex education.

Another ritual among the Ganda (Baganda) which is done at puberty is pulling of the labia minora which is also called *okukyalira ensiko* in the local language. Unlike the Sabiny's cutting, the Baganda pull the labia minora using traditional herbs like *sere, mukasa and roasted entengo tengo*. Girls at puberty are sent to their *Senga* in holidays after school has closed to be taught how to pull. *Senga* ensures that the girl undergoes the ritual where the labia minora is pulled up to a certain length using a middle finger as measurement. It does not take much time for the labia to elongate depending on how serious a girl is. After she has gone through the ritual successfully she is sent back to her parents.

It is believed among the Baganda that once the labia minora is pulled, it helps the girls in case they are attacked by a rapist. In this case the long labia act as a block in order to avoid forceful penetration. The pulled labia minora is also sensitive which brings excitement and helps the girl to have orgasm if one plays with it well. It also acts as a lubricant hence it helps her to enjoy sex with the partner. The similarity between these two rituals among the Baganda and Sabiny is that they are both done at puberty and the main purpose is to prepare the girls for marriage.

While in the car, I had many things which were running in my mind. What these men thought I was? Maybe they thought I was representing an advocacy programme or I was a government servant sent to spy on them since I had not shown them the letter from the university. With all this in my mind I changed the topic of the conversation because I wanted to earn their trust and avoid being suspicious to them.

The conversation helped me to get a clue for my interviews in Sebei after knowing that women were still circumcised. Following this conversation I had to carry out interviews to confirm what was said. The conversation was also useful in that it gave me a starting point for my research. I got some ideas and knowledge about the ritual that we will look at later in this chapter.

After a long journey spent travelling, at 1:30 in the afternoon I arrived in Sebei town. I was welcomed by Tina Cheptoyek my local contact in Kapchorwa. Tina lived in Kapchorwa with her husband and children. She is a diocese co-ordinator of the Sebei community. She graduated from Makerere University with a bachelor's degree in social sciences. She introduced me to other members of the family and to the local leaders and the following day we proceeded to the community. Tina was my field-guide and through her; I got a chance to meet the Bishop of the Sebei Diocese and had a conversation with him about my studies and my research on female circumcision. As a church leader, he explained to me how hard it was for him to stop

female circumcision which is perceived as a people's custom. Some people say that Christianity was brought by missionaries and colonizers who only came with an intention of robbing people's cultures and this brings us to my topic of Knives of the Sebei Women, Ritual and Power. Sabiny Perception on female genital mutilation and advocacy programs. I want to examine the perspectives of both sides i.e. the cultural keepers and advocates.

During my stay in Kapchorwa, during my free time, I used to take a walk around the town. Saturday was a special market day in a week; it was the day when farmers in the suburbs came to sell their products. A week after my arrival, I went to the Saturday market. Farmers were loaded with heaps of food stuffs all camped on one side; some had other merchandise, while others were flocking the place as if there was a political rally going on. Young strong men were offloading heavy sacks on their heads and shoulders from some stationed cars. Elderly women in *bitengi* and *gomesi*<sup>26</sup> were selling different items such as fabrics, shoes, fish tomatoes, matooke, avocado, bananas and vegetables from their different small stalls. Under the scorching tropical sun, both men and women were sweating as they advertised their products on top of their voices to attract customers. Everybody seemed busy on Saturday in Sebei.

Through my field guide Tina, I got to know a man called Kamron Peter who gave me detailed information about the practice of female circumcision and how it was adopted by the Sabiny. Kamron Peter was 70 years old. These stories of how and why the practice was adopted by the Sabiny were told to him by his grandparents. Kamron Peter was a development worker and political scientist who was working with Kapchorwa Civil Society Organizations Alliance. The organization is aided by UNFPA, an organization that is helping in stopping female circumcision which is located in Kampala the capital of Uganda. Kamron Peter is respected as an educated man and a cultural advisor in Sebei. Kamron narrated to me the story that was told to him by his grandparents about the history of circumcision among the Sabiny. He started by presenting the history of the Sabiny. And when this history is compared to cases in other countries where female circumcision is practiced as discussed in the literature review, there is a slight similarity and connection and one may think that female circumcision practices descended from the Sabiny. Kamron was a useful informant because he narrated to me traditional stories about the history of female circumcision among the Sabiny.

According to his account, the Sabiny were descendants of the Kalenjin who are found in Kenya. Tarik, Nandi Tugen, Pakot, Gipsi people, also found today in central and northern

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<sup>26</sup> Long dress worn by women.

Tanzania. The Sabiny are about 10 million. They lived originally in the Middle-East, in Mesopotamia. They moved to Canaan also known as Palestine. They came to Egypt and from there to Ethiopia and later on to East Africa where they are evenly distributed. Therefore the Sabiny are found in Kenya Tanzania and Uganda.

From his story, we observe that the countries mentioned above, where the Sabiny are said to have originated from practice female circumcision. This forced me to ask whether the people living in those countries could be of Sabiny origin. Kamron further explained that the Sabiny have mythical stories that are similar to those in the bible for example the story of Abraham and his son Isaac, the story about Moses, the Israelites, and about the origin of circumcision. This gives us an understanding that circumcision has existed since time immemorial and some scholars like Gallaher noted that the traditions of female circumcision that supported “genital cutting” were quite similar to the values and ideas that sustained “male circumcision” in the same tribal societies (Gallaher 2000:189). Due to migrations, the Sabiny crossed over Ethiopia and came to East Africa while the rest of the group went back to Canaan.

### **4.3 The origin of male circumcision**

He narrated the mythology about the origin of male circumcision which ultimately linked to female circumcision. Once upon a time the male organ was attacked by a disease and it was almost rotting. The infected organ was painful that it could not enable a man to perform his sexual duties. Community leaders summoned a community meeting to raise the problem and discuss the remedy since it was spreading to the whole community. They resorted to consulting the medicine men. During that time there were neither hospitals nor doctors. The medicine men found out that it was the fore skin causing the problem to the whole organ. The Sabiny used to move from one place to another because water was scarce and they could not shower often or keep clean. They were advised to cut the fore skin off so as to get rid of the disease. When this was done, the male organ was saved and hence the tradition was carried on up to this day. This problem of scarcity of water did not only affect men but also the women and they also had issues with their organs. These are the 3 reasons Kamron gave explaining why the Sabiny adopted female circumcision.

#### **4.3.1 Mythology 1, -Controlling sexual urge / immorality.**

Sabiny men used to go for raids or long expeditions and could not return. There was no kind of communication with the people at home till when they saw them back. Some were

unlucky and could not make it back and died during the expedition. The few who eventually returned usually found that their wives had been impregnated by village men who had stayed at home. This became a community concern and called for a meeting to be discussed in order to find a remedy. When the women were asked why they got pregnant they said their men went for so long and they had no hopes of seeing them again. When they were asked what could be done unto them, the women replied that there were some parts on the female organ that was giving them hard time “stubborn clitoris” and if they could cut part of it, they would perhaps be okay hence control their sex libido. When this was done, the Sabinian women started managing the situation hence female circumcision was adopted.

#### **4.3.2 Mythology 2-Health reason.**

Mythology 2 presented a woman who suffered from a chronic disease and emaciated. Later, she was taken to a medicine woman for treatment. The medicine woman tried all medication but she could not heal. Later the medicine woman said to them that if the infected woman was an animal for example a cow, she would be cut (have little cuttings) on the whole body so as to let the infected blood out. Now this was the only remaining alternative to heal her since they had tried other means and failed. They looked for a place to cut on the woman’s body but thought the scars would be many and visible on her body. They later thought of a hidden part on her body and they resorted to cutting part of the clitoris in order to let out the bad/infected blood in order to heal her. After cutting her, she was healed hence the Sabinian female circumcision.

#### **4.3.3 Mythology 3 unhygienic situation.**

The Sabinian ancestors lived in places with scarcity of water. The women were not taking their baths regularly and their bodies started giving out an offensive smell. This led to women being shunned by their husbands. The women discussed between themselves what they could do in order to stop smelling. Some women proposed that they cut a bit of the clitoris which produced fluids which gave them an ugly smell. When they did this, the fluids stopped and so did the smell.

Kamron said that this story was told by his grandparent Cheptobot Burkeyeywo while he was still young. His grandmother told him that the “clitoris” was a stubborn and sensitive thing that disturbed women often so it needed some discipline hence the development of female circumcision.

**Figure 3:** is Kamron illustrating the origin of circumcision



Source: Photo taken by researcher during fieldwork.

Consequently in the course of my research, I discovered that the Sabinu have 3 reasons why they adopted the practice of female circumcision and different people told me the same stories when I carried out my interviews. First it was to stop immorality through controlling their sexual urge, secondly, it was used as a preferred method of treatment/medication and lastly because of the unhygienic situation. The Sabinu therefore came up with songs, norms dances, taboos and a code of conduct in order to strengthen the ritual and candidates in order to instill confidence in the women to carry on with the ritual.

#### **4.4 Procedure of the ritual**

The Sabinu refer to the practice as *wonsetibik* the local term used to describe female circumcision. In spite of the condemnation of female circumcision, some Sabinu women have remained resistant that it is part of their culture.

One of the Sabinu women who underwent female circumcision was one of my informants that Tina introduced me to while carrying out my research. While carrying out my interview with her, I spotted some 4 scars on her left hand. I was curious and asked her why she had those scars. She told me that they are 4 marks which are a significant symbol that she

underwent female circumcision. It was a symbol that differentiated the circumcised from the uncircumcised.

**Figure 4:** Photo showing the marks that a girl who is circumcised receives among the Sabiny.



Source: Photo taken by researcher during fieldwork.

During the interview, she spoke in her mother tongue Kupsabiny<sup>27</sup> and it was translated to me in English. This is the translation by Tina my field guide who spoke several languages including English. The interview took 1 hour it was conducted at her place of residence where we had agreed to meet her in the evening after a day's work. The environment was quiet however we were interrupted by a goat that had given birth to 2 kids and was separated from them. It cried many times for the little goats. Some children were feeding the new born goats. The interview was interrupted by sounds from the goats, phone calls to Tina and also chasing the children to go away as they did not want them to hear what was being discussed. This informant provided me with unique insights into the circumcision procedure.

The informant was free though she was a bit shy at a certain point, she did not want to talk about the ritual that takes place after 2 weeks of circumcision because it is believed that once you say it in public or tell it to people from different cultures like I was, one would attract curses/misfortunes towards herself for example she could get mad or if not one gets barren.

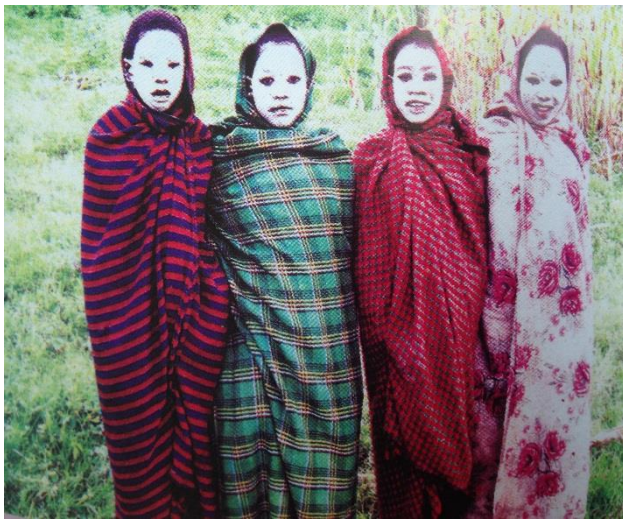
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<sup>27</sup> Local language for the Sabiny.



*Wonsetibik* was a big ceremony done in even years in December. It is almost like a wedding ceremony. Many baskets of food, corn, beans, vegetables and local beer prepared for the ceremony are served. All girls willing to be circumcised even those that were not of age, but were willing would gather. Around 4:00pm they are smeared with *mondet* (clay) and they are decorated in the face, hands and legs because they are considered as brides.

**Figure 5:** A group of girls who have been smeared with Madet in preparation for the main ceremony of circumcision.



Source: adapted from the community dialogue magazine (2009:10)

The girls started singing the whole night with in intervals. Songs are sung in the local language called *Kupsabiny*. The songs are meant to appease the spirits and encourage the ones going to be circumcised to be strong. However, some of the songs are meant to mock those who have not undergone circumcision to gain courage and go for it.

The following morning at 6:00Am, all the girls are taken to a particular river that has been chosen by the spirits for cleansing. It is believed that the spirits show the chosen river to the surgeon in the middle of the night. This river *Kapchwaut*<sup>28</sup> (the spirits reveal) to the female surgeon *chesyet-tap-tum*<sup>29</sup> who carries out the cutting. After that they are brought to the circumcision ground and smeared with *yeyandet*<sup>30</sup>. This inner dung makes them unconscious and senseless so that they do not feel any pain. They are told to sleep upwards while facing the sunrise. Between 7-8pm in the evening the operation starts, a sharp curved knife made by a

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<sup>28</sup> Cleansing river

<sup>29</sup> Female surgeon

<sup>30</sup> sheep's inner dung

blacksmith called *roto* is used. It is done by the female surgeon and local herbs are put on the wound for quick healing.

**Figure 6:** A group of girls singing, before the ceremony is performed. The main purpose of doing this is to boost their morale and also mock those who have reached the circumcision age but are not yet circumcised



Source: adapted from Goldschmidt (1986:268)

During the process, girls are supposed to be brave and are not supposed to cry. Crying proves that one is a coward and not brave enough. During circumcision, when a girl is found to have lost her virginity, she is given punishments for example walking while kneeling. Virgin girls are seen during circumcision whereby the surgeon takes a keen look before the operation. While the circumcised virgins sleep with the legs apart, those found to have lost their virginity are watched over and must sleep while crossing the legs. All this was done to prevent other girls from losing their virginity. But most of all, it was meant to prevent immorality like having sex before marriage or incest in the society. The non-virgins were also isolated in the community and everybody during the ceremony would spit on them. They would also find for them elderly men in the villages to marry them. Or else, they were given to those men who had failed to get wives to marry. All this was done as a punishment to those who had lost their virginity before circumcision.

After circumcision girls were taken to an open banana plantation where they were made to relax and get some fresh air. *Rotin* a place prepared for those circumcised is marked with a white sheet and sheltered. After the ceremony they are well fed to replace the lost energy and blood. This is done also to present them to their husbands to be when they are healthy and good looking. They are not supposed to shower for 3 days, when the 3 days elapse they are bathed

with local medicine and some of which they drink. The *matririyotet*<sup>31</sup> spits on them some local beer and then they stay at home till their wounds get healed.

After 2 weeks, they are given the marks on their left hand to show that they went through the ritual successfully. It is believed that the tiger puts on the marks on the hand. Marking is a ritual done after two weeks from circumcision. The mentors, surgeons and those circumcised are the only ones invited in a bush where a small tent is built. Outsiders are not allowed there. It is believed that once you are caught spying yet you do not fall in the categories above. One is cursed by the gods and can either run mad or get barren.

While in the bush, some rituals are performed in order to invite the tiger. It is believed that the shaman talks to it in their local language and briefs the tiger on what it is supposed to do. Later meat and local brew is offered to it as it is believed to be guided by the Sabiny spirits. The Sabiny believe that their great ancestors manifest in the image of the tiger and possess power to do the work not to harm. Those who underwent circumcision go to the tiger and offer the left hand for marking. This tiger is possessed by Sabiny ancestral spirits and cannot hurt them.

#### **4.5 Female circumcision attached to duties**

Gallaher (2000:198) asserts that the reasons for female circumcision are closely related to perceived benefits that circumcision comes with. For example, the uncircumcised woman was denied doing some duties like smearing or decorating the house with dung. She is not supposed to get cow dung or milk from the cowshed (*kraal*). All these duties describe women in the society. The customs attached to the ritual of female circumcision helps to describe who Sabiny are. As a researcher this helps me not to look at female circumcision only, but also at the hidden ideas/ cultural philosophies that keep the Sabiny holding onto this ritual which is the WHY part in my research. As earlier noted, among the Sabiny cow dung is used as cement to neat the house. It also helps to keep away insects like termites from damaging the house since houses are made out of wood, reeds and soil. Cow dung is also used to decorate or make the house look nice on the walls. Building of the house was done by women while men went to graze cattle and hunt. This implies that in Sabiny society there was division of labour; men had their duties to perform which were different from those of women and children. Male children escorted their fathers and girls their mothers in order to be trained in their respective societal

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<sup>31</sup> Circumcision mentor

gendered roles leading to the topic, women, Ritual and Power. Sabinian Perception on Female Genital Mutilation and Advocacy Programs. We ought to know about people's cultures before we come to our own conclusions.

I interviewed a wife of a senior clergy who also happened to be a midwife aged 50. The interview took place in the kitchen as she was making breakfast for her family. She said that during their time female circumcision was respected.

Girls who underwent through the ritual together in the same year are called age sets, it was important for one to undergo through the ritual in order to get age sets. Age sets are the people you invite when you're getting married or having a circumcision ceremony of your sons. Having many age sets at a ceremony was a sign of pride to the woman but if one did not undergo through circumcision nobody would attend her ceremony.

Every even year in December people gathered to feast and merry almost a week prior to the ritual. Many animals were slaughtered and food and beer for people to eat and celebrate were in plenty. After circumcision the man paid bride price amounting to 7 cows or goats and then he was allowed to take the wife home. In the earlier days, there was no time for courtship and teenage pregnancies were not rampant like it is today. Sabinian girls respected the culture and were brought up well. I was forced to ask her to tell me more about female circumcision since she was a midwife. She told me that female circumcision helped the girls to keep their virginity and in those years if a girl lost her virginity she was cursed for example, during circumcision everybody would spit on her.

As a midwife, she told me that some people give false information about female circumcision. Some say that it leads to difficulty during labour or that it blocks the baby during delivery which seems not to be true. As a midwife, she said that all women both the circumcised and uncircumcised among the Sabinian face difficulty in delivery and go through caesarean section so it is not the circumcised only.

Out of curiosity I asked her if she was circumcised since she was a midwife, educated and a wife to a church leader. "Hmmm..." she responded, "my daughter why do you want to know that?" Her response was bit confusing. Then I immediately looked at her arms to check if I would see some marks, but I was not able because she was putting on a dress that covered half of the arm. I had to cut the conversation short so as not to push her since she had refused to record her but only allowed to take pictures.

#### **4.6 Taboos associated with female circumcision among the Sabinu**

As I indicated elsewhere, the uncircumcised woman is not allowed to milk cows because it is believed she would cause bad omen to animals and they would die mysteriously. The uncircumcised woman was denied picking food from the granary. The granary is made of sisal material, reeds, grass and cow dung, every homestead owns one to keep in their harvest. The granary was mainly managed by the women since they were the ones staying home to cook for the family. However, some are getting away from the old fashioned granaries to modern granaries which are made out of strong timber and iron sheets.

The modern granary is raised high it is made in form of a house with strong poles which are galvanized to prevent pests from destroying it and thieves from picking out the food. It is also raised to prevent the food from getting spoilt by running water brought by rain and sometimes evening and morning dew which can lead to rotting. In order to pick food from the granary one must climb up using a ladder because it is built in such a way that it is raised so that young children too cannot access it. Among the Sabinu, access to the granary was limited to the woman who had undergone circumcision. They are the only ones with permission to climb the granary to pick food. If an uncircumcised woman did get access to the granary, it was believed that she would not only be a disgrace to her family, but they also believed that such an action would lead to drought, famine and low yields from crops.

**Figure 7:** Shown is an example of a granary among the Sabinu.



Source: Photo taken by researcher during fieldwork

## **CHAPTER FIVE: The Role Played by Government and Advocacy Programs towards Female Circumcision**

### **5.0 Introduction: An Overview of the Ugandan Laws**

In 1989 there was a total ban on female circumcision by the Ugandan government in Kapchorwa District. This was given a deaf ear and it was not recognised at the national level. In 2008 another by-law was passed abolishing the act of female circumcision in the district; however this was looked at as a remedy in eliminating the practice. This by-law was later adopted by the Ugandan Parliament. But according to the New Vision newspaper of January 20<sup>th</sup> 2009, the law was discussed and it faced criticism from some members of parliament during that time. For example, honourable Johnson Toskin, a Member of Parliament for Kongosis County argued that coming up with this law was useless since female circumcision is a cultural fulfilment and nobody forces the women to undergo the circumcision (New vision January 20<sup>th</sup> 2009).

The government of Uganda passed a law against female circumcision in 2010. ACT 5 in Act supplement 3 interprets female circumcision as an offence and this is indicated in part II called the offence of female genital mutilation. The section states that “carrying out female genital mutilation on oneself is an offense, attempt to carry out female genital mutilation, procuring female genital mutilation, or if anybody is found participating in an event leading to female genital mutilation, parents, guardians husbands or person having authority or control, culture and religion cannot act as defence of the practice of female genital mutilation” (Acts of supplement3:1).

According to the Ugandan Constitution protecting and promoting the fundamental human rights especially for children and women is important.

Act 5 states the need of protecting the women who have not undergone female genital mutilation. The law also protects the persons whose wives, daughters, or relatives have not undergone female genital mutilation. The Ugandan government has played a number of roles trying to eradicate the practice. The Ugandan law in Article 32(2) of the Constitution prohibits customs and the traditions that are against the dignity, welfare or interests of women. Yet Article 44(a) prohibits any derogation of the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment.

In 1985, Uganda ratified the United Nation's Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990. These Conventions call upon the protection of rights. The ratification of these 2 international conventions was seen as the first step for the Ugandan government to eliminate harmful traditions and coming up with national legislations.

### **5.1 Government institutions in helping in eradicating female circumcision**

The government of Uganda has a number of institutions helping in eradicating female circumcision. The Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) is one of the institutions that have joined hands to help in abolishing female circumcision in Kapchorwa district. UHRC has helped in sensitising the Sabinu community on the dangers and consequences of female circumcision. They also state that female circumcision is a violation of human rights. This sensitisation is done through posters and seminars held in the community. By doing this they are helping young girls and those being forced to circumcise to know their rights.

**Figure 8:** Placard on a building indicating that FGM is a human rights violation. Such initiatives are also supported by the Netherlands Embassy.



Source: Photo taken by researcher during fieldwork.

Children's rights are seen as vital in the Ugandan government. The Children Statute is an important legislation which was put in place in 1996 to fight for children's rights. The age of consent in Uganda is 18 years. Yet female circumcision is done on adolescent girls who are younger than that meaning that FGM in this case is seen as infringing on a child's rights especially the girl child who is forced into circumcision before the age of making her own

decisions. The ritual is done without her consent and this is a criminal offence because the Ugandan law states that the child has a right to be protected from any social or customary practices that are dangerous to the child's health. In addition, Article 34 in the Ugandan Constitution provides children with rights. In this Article 34:1 it is stated that laws enacted in the children's best interest, care of the child by his or her parents or those entitled to her by law is paramount. That is how the power of the state law comes into conflict with peoples cultural practices like the Sabiny.

Another institution is the Ministry of Gender and Social Development. This institution with in the Ugandan government helps to eradicate the practice of female circumcision among the Sabiny. This has been done in two ways both indirect and direct. By this I mean they use some programmes which are already established in Kapchorwa, like REACH. These programmes receive funding in order to help carry out sensitisation programmes within the Sabiny communities. This also calls for the involvement of officials taking part in the activity.

Equally important is the government of Uganda and other officials who get together to celebrate the annual Sabiny cultural day in Kapchorwa. This was done as a campaign to stop the practice of female circumcision. It was introduced so as to remind people that female circumcision is not the only way to celebrate culture. In 1998 the president of Uganda together with the vice president attended the ceremony in order to support the initiative. They addressed the Sabiny telling them that female circumcision can be eliminated since it causes pain to women and deprives a woman of her rights. This was a motivation to other institutions that were against the ritual. If the government could come up with more ways similar to this, I believe female circumcision can be replaced with other cultural alternatives other than coming up with forceful means for its eradication. These cultural celebrations can act as a mediatory platform between the government and the Sabiny in order to find peaceful remedies for the socio-cultural and socio-political standoff.

Additionally, schools too can be seen as tools which are helping in eradicating the practice of female circumcision. Schools are used as a remedy for stopping female circumcision in that once a girl is in school it is hard for her to drop out and go for circumcision. This is different from a situation when a girls not in school because after circumcision she would go in for marriage. It is hard for her to go back to school. For schools in Kapchorwa education is for free which is called universal education. This is aimed at keeping the girl child in school and it is aided by the Ugandan government.



In the focus group discussion I conducted involving some students from Kapchorwa PTC; it was revealed that they are taught about their rights as women. In the same vein, they are also informed that practicing female circumcision is against human rights. Also taught are the dangers and consequences of female circumcision. The students are also taught how to fight for their rights; especially the girls are taught how to make independent decisions that will not affect their future life in relation to cultural practices.

## **5.2 Advocacy programmes**

The advocacy programs can be considered as one of the projects that have helped to uplift Sabinu women in relation to the practice of female circumcision.

The role of sensitising communities about FGM is supported by programs and advocacy groups both nationally and internationally. Newman and Weissbrodt (1996:3) for example argue that a number of treaties have been signed in order to recognise the rights of women. These include the eradication of female circumcision by the Ugandan government. Recognising such rights means the Sabinu should abandon the practice of female circumcision. Examples of international advocacy tools are Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (WHO: 1988:51).

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was formed to promote women's rights and it is against traditional practices that encroach on women's rights (WHO 1988:51). According to this section, it encourages modification or abolishing the existing customs and practices which support discrimination against women. CEDAW Article 5 states that there should be modification of the social and cultural patterns of men and women, by doing this they are eliminating prejudice and other forms of discrimination which are based on inferiority and superiority of sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women. This brings us to my view that the Sabinu should look for alternative ways of celebrating initiation that will not cause harm to the women. By doing this they are eliminating those forms which are causing inferiority to women.

CEDAW Article 10, states that women should have "access to specific educational information to help to ensure the health and well-being of families". Article 12 encourages states to "take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care". This means that eliminating female circumcision among the Sabinu can be a means of improving women's health because of the fact that some face consequences like over breeding which leads to death.

CRC Article 19 protects children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation. This article also applies to female circumcision on a girl child. Article 24:3 also stipulates that states should take effective measures with a view of abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.

Equally important are the efforts of Law and Advocacy for Women in Uganda which published a simple booklet on *Harmful Traditional Practices* (2008:18-20 in Namulondo 2009). It states that the penal code Act Prohibits the infliction of unlawful grievous harm upon persons, the unlawful wounding of another by making an incision that pierces any exterior membrane of the body and the commission of negligent acts that are likely to spread infectious diseases. This includes using items like a razor blade or knife to cut more than one woman a practice that puts the victims at risk. The booklet contains several provisions that render female circumcision as a criminal offence. Section 219 states that any person who does grievous harms to another commits a felony and is liable to imprisonment for 7 years. In addition, section 222 says that any person who unlawfully wounds another commits a misdemeanour and is liable to imprisonment for 3 years. While another section 236 says any person who commits an assault accessioning actual bodily harm commits misdemeanour and is liable to 5 year imprisonment.

Section 226 states that consent by a person to the causing of his or her maim doesn't affect the criminal responsibility of the person by whom such maim is caused (2008:18-20) meaning that it doesn't matter if someone has given a go head to be circumcised, the female surgeon will always be blamed and penalised.

The practice is illegal according to different countries' National Constitutions. The Constitution in Ethiopia in 1994 prohibited harmful traditions that include oppressing women and cause them physical or mental harm. Other countries that have constitutions like Uganda's which prohibits the practice of female circumcision include Ghana, Guinea, Chad, Mali and Niger. They all perceive female circumcision as an injury and criminal act (UNICEF 2005:29).

According to the WHO (1998:56), female circumcision is an illegal act that causes bodily injury. And once there is lack to apply such interpretations to the criminal code, this makes it applicable to female circumcision which drives many to call for specific laws to prohibit the practice (ibid). The first African country to embrace the law against female circumcision was Ghana and Sudan too introduced specific legislations to address female circumcision but for only infibulations.

The bottleneck in spite of the present legislations is the implementation of the law of female circumcision as well as lack of political will as seen in the research carried out in some African countries (Bentzen and Talle 2007:11). According to Packer (2005:234) the legislation for prohibiting female circumcision as a strategy to stop the ritual is often not sufficient. She asserts that in Egypt the practice still continues despite all what is prescribed, the doctors defying the law will be imprisoned and their license taken.

### **5.3 Sensitisation programme**

In Senegal there is TOSTAN, an international non-governmental organisation which specialises in non-formal education that has developed and formed an approach which based on the promotion of human rights (Skaine 2005:209-214). In Burkina Faso, the non-governmental organisation Mwangaza action has adapted and applied the Tostan community empowerment programme in 23 villages (Tostan programme 2007:2 frontiers final report Washington DC population council 2007:25 in Namulondo Joan 2009) to help stop the practice of female circumcision.

In Uganda, the UNFPA continues to support programmes like REACH to help in the eradication of female circumcision through educational programmes. The REACH programme has received strong back up and support from the government, church leaders as well as support from some Sabiny locals who are against the practice in Kapchwora. This has helped to curb the rate at which female circumcision was practiced. In Sebei female circumcision is at the low rate and those who practice it now do it secretly. Even though in some surrounding areas like Bukwo female circumcision is still rampant. This is done by people in remote villages where they are not exposed to such sensitisation programmes provided by REACH.

REACH is a community based programme sponsored by UNFPA. The organisation's goal is to sensitise the Sabiny about the dangers of female circumcision. It is also a human right to say no to female circumcision and other rituals that can cause harm or pain to their bodies. This is done to promote good health among the Sabiny women. Boyle (2005:243) notes that in Senegal the Tostan project has spread to about 174 villages. These villages have renounced the practice of female circumcision and this has been achieved through sensitisation programs. More programs such as Tostan should be extended and implemented to assist Sabiny women. Martin Cherukutu, the leader of REACH noted that the programme faced obstacles and resistance from the community when it started its sensitisation activities since female

circumcision was/is a deep rooted practice. However, it picked up since it was backed by the Ugandan government in fighting the practice.

#### **5.4 The Role of the clergy (Church)**

Church leaders relate the practice of female circumcision to violation of God's work and destruction of what God created in his image. They believe God created man in his own image and there is no way fellow human beings would change that. "God created human beings in his own image making them to be like himself. He created both male and female and blessed them..." Gen1:27-28. Despite the fact that they are church leaders, they love their culture too.

Another Church leader, whose name means local herbs, also corroborated the three mythological stories that explain the origin of female circumcision among the Sabiny. He later argued that since now everything is in place and that the Sabiny no longer face scarcity of water as it was before, no longer live that life where their husbands used to go for raids, there is no need for the Sabiny to continue with the practice. He said that as church leaders they urge the Sabiny to look for alternative ways of cultural practice. He added that the church has helped in sensitisation through bible preaching and fellowships. However, the church faces challenges because some non-governmental organisations are supporting the practice of female circumcision instead of stopping it. They encourage the practice in order to get more aid. This is due to fear that once the Sabiny stop practicing female circumcision, many of them will not be employed. Therefore some non-governmental organisations indirectly encourage circumcision in order to keep projects running and maintain jobs.

Due to the church's work, most of the children of the clergy have not been circumcised. Such people who have been groomed by the church are now helping in the sensitisation programs in the community and forming community organisations to help stop female circumcision. He emphasized that there should be no harsh punishments like those stipulated by the government. That is because severe punishments lead the Sabiny to practice female circumcision secretly in the night which is more dangerous because a person may be injured whereby nerves are cut as a result of panic since it is done in the dark. Since culture is dynamic, the Sabiny will change with time and therefore the government should concentrate on sensitisation and not punishment.

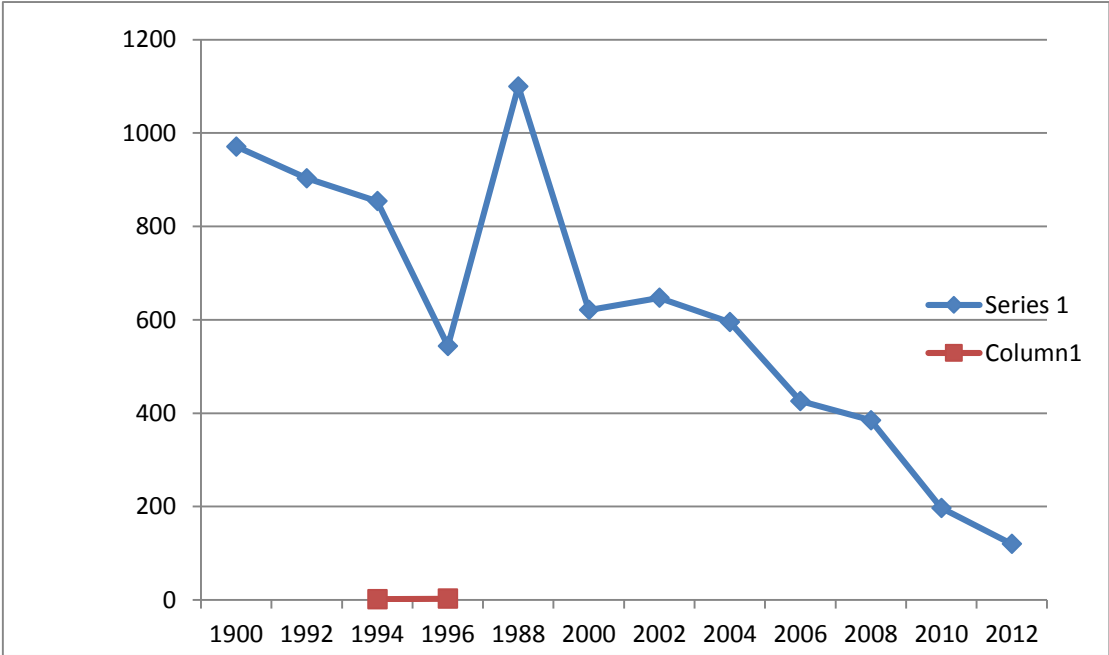
He said that nowadays circumcision has no age limit because many of them go for circumcision when they are old that is it depends on one's choice. A member from the church

was circumcised a few weeks before my arrival. She was an adult and she was not forced so this proves that some people do it voluntarily.

He acknowledged that there is a need for the Sabiny to come up with a new rite of passage to qualify one to adulthood. He argued that the education of the girl child in the process of eliminating female circumcision was important because through education they would learn not to withhold on the old traditions because some believe that since it was done by their grandparents, they should also hold onto it. In his opinion, this should be done hence the practice will be out logged among the Sabiny.

Men and boys too should not be left behind in the sensitisation process. It is through this that they will learn to appreciate the uncircumcised women after learning about the dangers of female circumcision. With this knowledge, it will change the men’s mind-set towards the uncircumcised women. This will also encourage girls not to go for circumcision since they would qualify for marriage without being circumcised.

**Below are Graphs, by REACH programme showing the rate at which female circumcision has declined due to the sensitisation programmes in Bukwo, Kweb and Kapchorwa**



<b>District</b>	<b>Numbers cut</b>	<b>Numbers saved</b>
<b>Kapchorwa</b>	50	225
<b>Bukwo</b>	24	165
<b>Kweeb</b>	46	58
<b>Total</b>	120	448

## CHAPTER SIX: Conclusions and Recommendations

In this chapter I state the conclusions generated by the study and also make recommendations basing on the study's findings.

The study set out to analyse the power dynamics where government uses its policies and laws as power instruments in order to stop the Sabiny from practicing female circumcision. It also entailed examining the perception and philosophies of the Sabiny about female circumcision as a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood. In this study I also set out to analyse the antagonistic existence between traditional societal structures and external forces such as the Ugandan law and human right advocates.

It should be noted that as the world continues to evolve into a global village, more and more indigenous practices are brought to an end especially those that are deemed to be detrimental to the well-being of those practicing them. Female circumcision is one of such practices. Those practicing female circumcision like the Sabiny are forced to abandon their 'harmful' cultural practices. However some adamantly continue to guard their cultural heritage which leads to conflict between such communities and the state and other anti-FGM advocacy groups.

It was observed that female circumcision is currently prohibited by the Ugandan government and other advocacy organisations are helping the state in the fight against female circumcision. In pursuit of its anti-FGM drive for instance, the Uganda government passed a law which has a penalty of imprisonment for ten years for those found guilty of practicing female circumcision. This has forced the Sabiny to abandon the tradition in fear of being imprisoned if they are apprehended by authorities. In collaboration with the Ugandan government are advocacy programs by NGOs and churches which are sensitising and educating the Sabiny communities about the dangers associated with *wonsetibik*.

During the course of the research, I discovered that despite the fact that the Sabinys from the older generations still held on to the practice, the younger generation is slowly abandoning the practice. The rate of the Sabiny's practice of female circumcision is reducing. This was because most of the youthful women I interviewed where not circumcised and did not support its continuity. And some of my interviewees were already married to husbands who had no problem with uncircumcised women. More evidence is the research carried out by the REACH program as indicated in the graph in Chapter Five. Furthermore, the Uganda

government's penalty of imprisonment for ten years for those practicing female circumcision has also forced the Sabiny to abandon the tradition in fear of serving the severe punishment.

Advocacy programs by non-governmental organisations and churches have also done a commendable job in sensitising the Sabiny about the dangers of practicing female circumcision which has deterred many from practicing it. Through this, the Sabiny have partially let go of the old tradition. I found out that many of the things that uncircumcised women were exempted from in the past such as getting married and not taking part in community meetings were actually being done. While visiting the local council leaders, I found a meeting taking place so I was tempted to sit and listen with Tina. I found out that actually women were allowed to sit in such meetings and air out their views and participate regardless of whether they were circumcised or not which was not the case before. Tina confirmed that some of the women in the meeting were her friends and they grew up in the same locality and were not circumcised.

The men's change of perception/attitude too has led to the practice to reduce because they are no longer strict about the tradition. This has encouraged women to stop female circumcision since they can get married which was one factor that influenced them to circumcise. However, some still do it secretly and willingly in order to hold onto the old tradition. This was in communities neighbouring Sebei like Bukwo. Concludingly, the tradition of female circumcision among the Sabiny has reduced, but it has not totally ceased.

## **Recommendations**

I recommend that both government; the symbol of political power and the Sabiny the cultural actors should come to a round table and negotiate whether the Sabiny can find alternative cultural practices that can serve as rites of passage for the girl child so as not to miss the sex education that comes along with the rite. This will be of help since culture is dynamic. And sometimes, without putting a woman's life at risk, culture can provide her with a bright future without losing her identity as a Sabiny.

The government should continue to support the church and non-governmental organisations which are helping in the sensitisation process against female circumcision. However there is need to evaluate the activities of some NGOs which I was told are encouraging the continuation of female circumcision in order to keep themselves relevant in the Sabiny communities and in a hypocritical way attract donor funds.



The government should continue supporting educational activities in Sebei since through education the girl child can be equipped with information and knowledge for self-empowerment and liberation. Educating a girl child in such communities can be one strong mode of affirmative action.

I also recommend that the sensitisation process against female circumcision should be gender balanced. The men should not be left out of the sensitisation campaigns because it is because of the need of being accepted for marriage that most women go for circumcision. This means that if men continue changing their attitude/perception about uncircumcised women by accepting to marry them, then the rate of practicing female circumcision will greatly reduce. Therefore, the fight against female circumcision needs a balanced gender approach.

I hope my thesis will help the government of Uganda to find better ways of educating and negotiating with the Sabiny people rather than eroding their cultural norms. I support Kendrick's argument that the knowledge from indigenous peoples such as their myths, rituals, riddles, idioms and secret knowledge has often been ignored. However, such knowledge may not be scientifically proven and has no hypothesis, still it can only be proved by indigenous societies. Such separation of social and ecological systems does not make sense (Kendrick 2003: 241-269). In other words, the government should consider finding ways to educate the Sabiny people in a culturally appropriate way rather than putting a total ban on their traditional customs. Therefore, more needs to be done to understand the cultural background and philosophies behind the practice of female circumcision among the Sabiny as I tried to do in this study. The background and cultural philosophies can help in explaining why some Sabiny are still practicing female circumcision. Basing on such an informed background, then all stakeholders can try to talk to the Sabiny to find mutually acceptable alternatives to female circumcision that are not harmful.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1: Interview guides to informants**

#### **Background information**

Name of the informant

Age

Sex

Position, title or occupation

#### **Research questions**

1. Why have the Sabiny continued practicing female circumcision?
2. When is it done and who performs it?
3. Is female circumcision essential to the Sabiny in terms of physical beauty?
4. What type of circumcision is practiced?
5. What are the consequences for those who have not undergone female circumcision?
6. What problems/challenges do those who have practiced it face?
7. What are the benefits of female circumcision to the Sabiny?
8. What is your opinion about the practice of female circumcision?

## **Appendix 2: Interview guide for local organisations**

Name of organisation

Name of contact person and tittle

### **Research questions**

What does the organisation do?

What is female genital mutilation, why is it practiced by Sabiny?

How is the practice perceived by the Sabiny community?

Has the organisation/program faced any challenges from the community in regards to the practice?

What is the government policy on female circumcision?

What programs/projects/activities is it involved in?

What are the goals of the program?

### **Appendix 3: List of people interviewed**

#### **Names of informants**

Martin cherukutu

Chebet Eunice

Robert Cheptoek

Tinah Cheptoyek

Titus Sokuton

Lydia Chemayek

David Chesakit

David Siwa

Irene chemutal

sylvia cheptoek

Peter kumron

Salimo Zelda

#### **Focussed group discussion**

Kapchebai viola

Yeko olive

Masaba borniface

Chelimo mooses

Chekwemol lynet

Chebet Claire