



Elaborate passage into manhood

Story by SIMBI KUSIMBA

During the final week of the school term at the end of last month, while many of his classmates were still learning, 12-year-old Masika Makokha was already at home in Kimilili division in Bungoma District. He spent those days criss-crossing the area, accompanied by a huge group of singing and dancing people, inviting relatives and friends to his forthcoming circumcision.

The ceremony would take place at his grandfather's home in Nasianda village, near Naitiri High School. For the week that he went around inviting people, Makokha wore a monkeyskin headgear called *ekutwa*, a band of beads across his bare chest, and a set of bells - *chinyimba* - that announced his approach everywhere he went.

Three days before the operation, he underwent *khuchukhila*, a ceremony involving a trip to the river to fetch a pot of water and returning home without tripping or looking back. He was accompanied by an uncle. The water from the river was then poured into a larger pot containing *kamalwa kamakhalange*, which is used to brew busaa, or *kamalwa kamakoye*.

On the eve of the ceremony, which took place on August 1, Makokha set off to his maternal uncles' homes in Kaptola, several kilometres away, with a large escort party.

As is customary, he found a grand reception organised by his uncles, George, Edward, Amos and James Nandabi, awaiting him. A bull had been slaughtered and after a sumptuous meal, a special chunk of meat called *luliki* was fitted snugly around his neck. He took the *luliki* back home with him to Nasianda, where it was removed in readiness for the elaborate, overnight partying.

The home was a beehive of activity, and Makokha's grandmother, Dorcas Nabangala, keenly supervised everything to make sure nothing went wrong. There were scores of guests, for whom lots of traditional liquor had been brewed and a large variety of foods prepared. Guests had come for the ceremony from far and wide, and most of them braved the cold and sat in groups sipping beer, singing and dancing until morning.

Shortly after nightfall, Makokha's father, Jacob Makokha, fitted him with a stinking piece of a bull's rumen, which he wore overnight, in a ceremony called *khufwala likoni*. The ritual ended with a chant called *sioyaoya*, normally reserved for the final trip home from the river before an initiate is circumcised.

Thereafter, Makokha joined in the merrymaking, whistling, singing and dancing to the tune of throbbing drums. After a few hours' sleep, he was woken up early the next morning as the festivities reached fever-pitch in readiness for the actual rite.

Makokha was shepherded out of the home to a nearby stream, with a large crowd following. Here, closely watched by his paternal and maternal uncles, he removed his shorts and *ekutwa* and was then led to a selected spot, where his body was covered with *khulonga* (mud) by his uncle Edward, who extolled the virtues of bravery as he urged the boy to face the knife with courage. Placed on Makokha's head was a mound of mud with a tuft of grass, *lunyasi lwa ututu*, and bright flower petals.

Then he was led back home on the final leg of his journey to manhood, with the crowd chanting the *sioyaoya* with renewed vigour. At home, he was received by his two uncles and his father, who led him to a prepared spot, around which the crowd of onlookers waited with bated breath. Makokha strutted around and then stood still, arms akimbo.

Suddenly, a circumciser emerged from the crowd, flashing a traditional knife, *leukaemia*, with two aides in tow. He completed the operation in one swift move before stepping back to allow elders to examine his work. When they pronounced it well done, ululations rent the air as a new round of celebrations began. Makokha raised his right fist to acknowledge the cheers from onlookers, friends and the relatives he had done proud. The crowd mobbed him singing *Oh khwera omurwa, yaya khwera omurwa!*, which means, "the job is done".

Makokha is just one of the many hundreds of youngsters - estimated at 20,000 this season - who will have undergone the rite by the end of this month. Among the Bukusu, who live in Bungoma, Trans Nzoia, parts of Mt Elgon, Lugari and Teso districts in western Kenya, circumcision still marks a very important rite of passage and those who shun it are looked down upon. The ceremony is held in August every two years.

After an *omusinde* (uncircumcised boy) undergoes the rite, he becomes an *omufulu*, before graduating to an *omusani* three months later.

Those undergoing the rite now belong to the second batch of the Bakolongolo age group. Before them was the Basawa age-group that underwent the rite between 1998 and 2000.

Although still highly valued among the Bukusu, circumcision is an expensive exercise, with estimates putting the minimum cost at Sh30,000. To make it more affordable - and safer - a church based in Kimilili town launched a campaign in 2002 to have the operation done in hospital. In the initial year, when it targeted 400 initiates, Dreamland Hospital in Kaptola ended up circumcising 2,776 boys.

At that time, 40 boys were discovered to have abnormalities, which were corrected through surgery.

The International Christian Fellowship Evangelical Mission (IcFEM) director Solomon Nabie says that centres were now operational at Chebukaka, Chesikaki, Miu, Mukhe, Sinoko, Bokoli, Mukuyuni, Naitiri, Nzoia, Luanda and Ambichi, where the operation is done for Sh200. Each centre has 15 staff members, including two volunteer circumcisers and four nurses. By last week 1,670 boys had been circumcised there.

Although IcFEM planned to cater for 10,000 boys this year, Nabie expressed fears that its resources would be overstretched due to increased demand for their services. In its campaign, the church points out that the traditional ceremony poses serious health risks, and that it is too lavish and expensive to be afforded by the area's residents, most of whom are poor.

"We target the candidates and their parents in our campaign to change attitudes because the hospital option is safer and accords the boys better health care and education. We also give them spiritual nourishment and counselling services, besides detecting and correcting abnormalities as well as treating those who have sexually transmitted diseases, which traditionalists have no way of detecting," Nabie explained.

This year, Moi Teaching Hospital and Referral Hospital in Eldoret has offered to provide corrective surgery for candidates with abnormalities.

Nabie said IcFEM's Sh6 million campaign was worthwhile since it would save the local community up to Sh1.2 billion, adding that it would continue up to 2006 throughout Bungoma because the adoption rate is extremely low.

"Circumcision is not an illness but a luxury, and I am perplexed that even medics in the public health sector do not seem to realise that. Its originator is God but people have borrowed to make it expensive and dangerous— we can do without the extra expenses. We must minimise its cost to the community and channel resources elsewhere to improve the quality of life," he reasoned.

But his organisation has an uphill task, given the opposition it is facing from the Bukusu Cultural Heritage Association and its 2,000 affiliate traditional circumcisers, who say the church should keep off the community's affairs.