

Research Articles

The Changing Concept of Adolescence in Kenya

Three Generations Speak

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Abstract

Kenya has at least 42 tribes. Each of these tribes had a unique way of marking the boundary between childhood and adulthood. It is like once pubertal signs emerged, the adolescent was said to be ready for adulthood. Traditional conceptualization of adolescence is not clearly defined, because while puberty marks the beginning of adolescence today, this was not the case in the traditional society. In the traditional society, when a girl started getting her menstrual periods, she was considered mature and arrangements for marriage were started. Modern rites of passage tend to come closer to how modern text books define adolescence. Most boys undertake circumcision after completing primary school, as they wait to join high school. Upon realizing that the hospital ceremony, unlike the traditional one, is lacking in complementary teachings, some Churches have organized teachings prior to circumcision. For girls, after circumcision for them was banned, alternative rites of passage (ARPs) are being instituted, most often targeting urban girls, but these, too, raise questions: Do alternative rites of passage fulfill the same functions for modern society that traditional ceremonies once fulfilled? And, if they do so for girls, is there reason to believe that they ought to be developed for both genders? This paper examines self-reports of Kenyans spanning three generations regarding social roles and identity-seeking among those who did (primarily older men) and did not (primarily younger men and women of all ages) participate in traditional initiation ceremonies.

Keywords: adolescence, puberty, rites of passage

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Background

Adolescence comes from the Latin word “adolescere” that means “to grow into maturity”. It is a transitional stage marked at the beginning by puberty and at the end by attainment of adult status (Kaczmarek, 2011, p. 9).

Puberty comes from the Latin “Pubertas” that refers to “age of manhood” (Witt, n.d.). The stage implies the period at which the body is capable of sexual reproduction through fertilization (Wasanga & Arasa, n.d., p. 102).

Arnett (2004, p. 4) defines adolescence as,

a period of the life course between the time puberty begins and the time adult status is approached, when young people are in the process of preparing to take on the roles and responsibilities of adulthood in their culture.

Similarly, [Reber's \(1984\)](#) Dictionary of Psychology defines adolescence as the period in human growth and development that is marked at the beginning by the onset of puberty and at the end by the attainment of physiological and psychological maturity. The "attainment of physiological and psychological maturity" is a vague marker of the end of adolescence. Is the said maturity attainment of legal status or economic independence or marriage or when a traditional ceremony to mark entry into adulthood is performed? [Balmer \(1992, p. 48\)](#) observed that the phenomenon of adolescence is complex, delicate and poorly defined. The concept continues to be more elusive with the changing societies and times.

Like so many societies in the World, Kenyan communities have broken away from the traditional setting with modernization. In the past, all relatives lived together. Children belonged to the whole society and were therefore answerable to any adult ([Omungala, 1989](#)). Adolescence in the traditional society is different from [Arnett \(2004\)](#) and [Reber's \(1984\)](#) definitions stated earlier. This is because while puberty marks the beginning of adolescence today, this was not the case in the African traditional society. In the traditional society, when a girl started getting her menstrual periods, she was considered mature and arrangements for marriage were started ([Omungala, 1989](#)). It is modernization, therefore, that is bringing adolescence closer to standard definitions stated earlier. Perhaps we did not have adolescence as such or as [Balmer \(1992\)](#) observed it was vaguely defined.

Rites of passage are the ceremonies or rituals performed to mark a change in status, in this case from childhood to adulthood ([Office on the Rights of the Child, Republic of South Africa, 2000](#); [Roufs, 2012](#)). The ceremony includes teachings of rules and taboos of the society, moral instructions and social responsibility ([Ampim, 2003](#)).

Rites of passage, therefore, marked the end and not the entry to adolescence as is the case today. For example, in most Kenyan communities, circumcision for both sexes was the landmark of entry into adulthood. Rituals to be observed and the education to be given during circumcision were well defined. Circumcision also took place at a given age during the developmental period of the child such that it was possible to talk about peer groups of a similar age group marked by circumcision.

In this era, social, political and economic changes that have taken place have broken down the extended family system as well as the close knit community system. The secular trend toward earlier reproductive maturity in a context of rapid social change poses adaptive challenges to youth. These are particularly marked in transitional societies where the end of adolescence was formerly bracketed by formal rites of passage inculcating the values and mores of the group, teaching the skills for success in the community and defining the social role of the maturing individual.

Now educational opportunities, urbanization, social mobility, and access to global media are reducing youth participation in traditional initiation and opening debate about the rites' value and relevance, particularly for girls ([Monyenye, 2004](#)). Exposed to a world of possibilities unknown to previous generations but with insufficient guidance as to how to access them, the resulting generation gap too often leaves the young unable to communicate with their grandparents, the generation traditionally charged with managing transitions to adulthood.

Modern circumcision in Kenya marks the entry into adolescence. Most boys undertake circumcision after completing primary school and as they wait to join high school. Unlike the traditional setting, most parents in Kenya prefer a hospital procedure under local anesthesia. Most traditional societies preferred a cold chilly morning with a cold river water acting as the anesthesia. Upon realizing that the hospital ceremony, unlike the traditional one, is lacking in complementary teachings, some Churches have organized teachings prior to circumcision and thereafter.

Parents pay a consolidated package for accommodation (usually two weeks), doctor's fee and teachings. Guest speakers are invited to prepare the graduates for adolescence, high school and adulthood.

For girls, alternative rites of passage (ARPs) are being instituted, most often targeting urban girls, but these, too, raise questions: Do alternative rites of passage fulfill the same functions for modern society that traditional ceremonies once fulfilled? And, if they do so for girls, is there reason to believe that they ought to be developed for both genders?

This paper examines self-reports of Kenyans spanning three generations regarding social roles and identity-seeking among those who did (primarily older men) and did not (primarily younger men and women of all ages) participate in traditional initiation ceremonies.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to show that the conceptualization of adolescence is not as uniform as it is defined, or as it was first documented by [G. Stanley Hall in 1904](#). The concept of adolescence is determined by a culture and also tends to change with time. The three generations interviewed here help to illustrate that the preparations for adulthood were quite different for each generation.

Method

The study was carried out between 2002 and 2009. A total of 120 respondents participated. Of these, 93 were class members who submitted written material about their own experience. The respondents came from 13 ethnic groups.

Respondents were undergraduate psychology students taking the unit 'Psychology of Human Development'. For example, during the spring 2002 semester, a class designed a semi-structured interview that covered the topics of physical maturation, family, peers education and training, ceremonies or rites of passage, and reflections about the adolescent experience with the goal of understanding how the definition of adolescence had shifted in recent history.

Each class member interviewed an elder, an adolescent between the ages of 12 and 21, and a peer. As an alternative to the 3rd interview, students had the option of writing an autobiographical reflection.

Interviewees willing to allow the authors to use their material were asked for written consent. Or, if under age 18, written assent along with written consent of a parent or guardian. Participants could also indicate whether they wished to have their real names included in any publication that might result.

As we consider the contents of these interviews today, there are several factors to keep in mind:

1. The differences in the functions and practice of traditional rites of passage in the past for males and females;
2. Whether those functions and practices are germane to Kenyans of the 21st century;
3. Whether there are additional functions that contemporary society might wish to address in new rites of passage;
4. Whether traditional rites had other negative aspects beyond exposure of initiates to unsanitary and sometimes life-threatening procedures (Put another way, are pain and fear necessary to effective rites of passage?);

5. Whether there are specific groups of adolescents who are most likely to benefit from ARPs and, if so, whether rites need be tailored to these groups.
6. Again we emphasize that his paper is not meant to answer the above questions but only to raise them.

Results

Those who expressed the most comfort with their experiences of puberty were those who were prepared for the changes that occurred in their own bodies. There were several means of preparation that “worked” in this respect. One was support from families along with observation of older siblings, extended family members and friends’ pubertal growth. Another was direct instruction by family members, in schools, and, most recently, through the public media.

Traditional rites of passage combined several modes including observation of older participants, anticipation of one’s own ceremony, songs, dances and direct instructions of the participants and support of peers. In addition, they marked changes in status that might also incorporate changes of name and residence. Among interviewees, these had the most profound effect upon males.

Traditional Rites of Passage: Male

Two participants, gave detailed descriptions of elaborate traditional age-graded Meru 3-part initiation ceremonies (the Meru people occupy the Eastern part of Kenya).

Mr. Stephen M’Ameru M’Ndegwa, age 80 in 2002, asked that his real name be used.

At birth, Mr. M’Ameru was named Muriithi after his paternal grandfather. With other small boys of his village, he tended his father’s goats and lived in his grandfather’s hut while girls lived with their grandmothers. The boys’ grandfathers told them to eat well “*so that they could be strong and brave and not cowardly like women.*” At age 12, they were initiated to big boy status. “*This was done by beatings and oath-taking in the bush and was supervised by the bigger boys...*” That same year, he was allowed to go far away to the manyatta to stay where big herds of livestock were kept and to assist the bigger boys and warriors. Muriithi was happy for his new responsibilities. He was introduced to war techniques and use of bow and arrows, spears, and swords, so he could fight off wild animals and cattle rustlers that threatened the animals.

Three or four years later, they were ready for initiation into manhood. Summoned home, they were counseled and given advice including sex education and their responsibilities to women. They were circumcised and their ears pierced. Prior to this time it was taboo to have intercourse and the few who had done it had done so with sheep or cows and had to confess as part of their initiation. Muriithi’s name was changed to M’Ameru to reflect his age set and age group, and there was a great ceremony including dancing, singing, feasting and general merrymaking.

A man of 53 wrote:

I was ... 16 ... I had already started growing some beards [and] pubic hair and had broken my voice. ...Communal ceremonies started a year before the actual day which was unknown to us. We were allowed to mix with girls of our age in night dances and it is in them that most of us got involved in sex. In case a girl got pregnant, she would be circumcised and married off because giving birth before circumcision and marriage was a taboo... The Meru copied the Maasai’s [the Maasai people occupy the southern part of

Kenya and have retained a rigid culture that rarely changes to date] style of circumcision because they were very brave people and fought all their neighbors including the Meru and took away their livestock and young girls. The Meru found out that the difference between them and the Maasai was in circumcision and that is why they copied them. The Meru also became very brave... Meru are feared even today for their bravery.

This writer continued with a detailed description of 2-days of ceremonial activities concluding:

After circumcision, we were ... each ... put in a hut [where women were not allowed] ...and confined there until ... cured and allowed to come out of the hut through other ceremonies. ... After circumcision, one was not allowed to speak to his mother for several years and could only do so after a ceremony. ...The Meru traditional circumcision was good in instilling discipline, bringing people together, making them brave and responsible...

These interviewees identify many effects of the Meru traditional rites of passage from boyhood to manhood in which the actual circumcision itself is a relatively minor and largely symbolic act. The overarching purposes include the first, separating feminine from masculine, with boys from girls being sent to live with same sex grandparents when very young and women denigrated as cowards, and initiating boys with actual and symbolical separation from women and the feminine in themselves in terms of cutting off access to their mothers and cutting off the foreskin, their female part and the second purpose, building a cadre of brave, loyal and dangerous male peers who are skilled in the use of weapons, know how to cooperate in the care and defense of livestock and each other, and who have gone through the trials of pain and separation together.

Most male participants over age 40 from ethnic groups that traditionally circumcise, expressed pleasure at being found eligible for circumcision. One called it a “*graduation*” to early adulthood. Others emphasized recognition by the community.

Community recognition, gained when others observed his parents giving him more challenging chores, was also important to a Luo interviewee whose ethnic group did not traditionally circumcise and had long since given up traditional rites of passage involving tooth-removal.

Younger men provided a picture of traditional society in transition.

A Kikuyu man (the Kikuyu occupy central Kenya and are the most populous in the country) of 37 who ought to have been circumcised between age 14 and 16 reported that at age 7 his father told him his uncle was going to take him to a movie when instead he was taken to be circumcised. As an adult, he perceived himself as twice-cheated: cheated out of the movie and out of a proper transition to adulthood.

A young man who was circumcised at a hospital reported simply being “*excited by the changes in his organ*”. Two said they were “*thrilled*” and “*proud*” of bodily and vocal changes, mentioning no rites of passage at all.

To summarize, these interviews and reminiscences confirm the functions of male initiation ceremonies found in the literature. They strongly differentiate males from females and children from adults. They provide a setting for intense male bonding and a context for instruction in sexuality and responsibility to family and community. They also provide instruction in the use of weapons for self-defense and defense of property against animal and human threats. They inform the local community regarding the status of the individual in terms of courage and seniority.

The interviews also raise the question of whether male initiation ceremonies are losing their relevance to successful assumption of adult roles, particularly for those who gain information regarding sexuality and responsibility in some other way, for those whose growth and development are remarked upon by parents and neighbors, for those who must interact with others of the opposite gender in multiple contexts, and for those whose neighborhood may be large, urban and/or multicultural such that whether or not one has gone through initiation is neither immediately apparent nor germane to one's ability to participate.

Traditional Rites of Passage: Female

Among female participants, traditional rites of passage were less often mentioned and, when they were, the focus was more often on circumcision than status change.

Two Kikuyu women, "Njeri" and "Lucy" both age 52, discussed their maturation.

Njeri was from a polygamous family with her mother being the youngest of 4 wives. Her stepmothers organized a ceremony for her and her 4 step sisters to be circumcised on the same day when they were 16. She was eager to participate and happy to become an adult. Following circumcision, the young women no longer played games or joined activities of younger siblings who now had to respect them. She said *"if one refused to be circumcised [you would remain a child forever]"* (translated from Kikuyu).

What is striking about this interview compared with those of the Meru men is that the change in status from child to adult is the only aspect of the transition that is mentioned—no celebration, no gender solidarity, no new skills. Compare her sense of transition then to that of her Kikuyu agemate, Lucy, who experienced puberty while in boarding school but had no ceremonies to mark the changes as her parents were staunch Christians and viewed Kikuyu ceremonies as *"satanic."*

Lucy thought of herself as lucky because her secondary school had teachers, a social worker, and clergy who gave her all the information she needed about the physical changes she could expect. The social worker "was keen in teaching her sex education" and emphasized that if Lucy protected and safeguarded her virginity, then her marriage would last till death. If not, her marriage would break somewhere along the way. When the pubertal changes came her friends noticed and they shared discussions of the changes happily. Her status in the school community changed and adult women welcomed her to "the world of women."

Lucy's acceptance came from being a member of a peer group that shared the same experience, in that way having more resemblance to the lengthier and more intense traditional experience of the Meru males than the traditional experience of her age mate Njeri.

Transition From Tradition to Variation — By the decade following Njeri and Lucy's entry into womanhood, rejection of traditional female initiation rites involving circumcision appeared to be increasing among the Kikuyu, often, as for Lucy, due to opposition from Christian congregations. For example, a woman of 44 who had seen her older sister mature and go through circumcision expected the same. However, when her father was released from several years detention at her time, he had become a devout Christian and forbade it.

Christianity was not the only factor impelling change. A Kikuyu woman, age 32, gave this account of what happened in her family and community.

“Most of my friends came from poor backgrounds and had uneducated parents. Circumcision... was prominent. The issue had been discussed at home in advance. And my mum had managed to convince me that there was no need of circumcision especially since I was a teacher’s daughter. But the minute I met my friends, they told me that if I don’t get a ‘cut’ as they were planning to do, I’d not get a husband. I went back to my mum telling her my fears... [She], who had vowed that no daughter of hers will get circumcised, did not give up on me. She kept telling me that I need not get a husband from my locality. She gave me dreams of meeting [a] man at the University who [is] as educated as myself. This convinced me and I started telling my friends how important it is to go to university and get a man who doesn’t care whether you are circumcised or not.

My grandmother was also a problem... [Especially] since I was named after [her], she kept insisting that I ‘cannot leave [for secondary boarding school] without a cut’. When I refused, she became my mum’s enemy.

After [some] time, all my cousins [also] refused to get circumcised and a trend started in the village. All uncircumcised girls were ... good at school and they ended up in boarding schools. There developed a rift between the circumcised girls and uncircumcised. We all walked together depending on which side one was. The uncircumcised girls were regarded as very proud and, since we were in boarding school where such things were unheard of, we felt quite proud”

Here we see the influence of education and socio-economic status. Moreover, secondary school was providing a reference group and being a member of one gave girls a sense of community. The knowledge that they had multiple options for work and marriage that did not tie them to their natal village was the prime reason for this particular rite of passage to become irrelevant to women who received an education.

Generally, female interviewees younger than 30 like their male counterparts did not refer to circumcision or other rites of passage at all. For women, the issues surrounding maturation were problems of self-consciousness, dysmenorrhea, conflict between them and their parents due to dressing and dating, becoming the center of sexual attention from older boys, men and, worst of all, teachers and, for late maturing girls, fear of being abnormal. Most were prepared for puberty by their mothers, older sisters, home science classes, peers who matured earlier, sanitary pad companies as they marketed their products, and aunties. In essence, except for the amount of sexual harassment from teachers, one might have been reading data from the U.S.

Summary

The function of initiation for girls as related in this small sample was both less elaborate and narrower than that for boys. It centered upon eligibility for marriage with apparently limited information provided about sexuality and the demands of raising a family, the latter having already been inculcated as girls gradually grew into more and more household responsibility well before puberty.

For those girls who did not experience a traditional initiation ceremony, the importance of their mothers in preparing them for puberty and transition into adult life cannot be over emphasized. Mothers’ special effort to recognize their daughters’ maturation were spoken of with particular warmth, although some of the respondents had not been prepared at all but the mother still came in handy.

Menarche for Lijo happened on her way from school,

I felt something was wrong. It was as if I had gone for a short call and not used tissue. On reaching home I visited the toilet only to find my panty covered with blood. I thought I had hurt myself but could not explain how it happened. When mom arrived I told her. She reassured me, gave me sanitary towels and showed me how to use them. I was worried that people could notice I was wearing it [a pad] and kept checking from a mirror whether one could notice.

The 32 year old who was the first in her village to refuse circumcision, described the ways her mother let her know she was appreciated and respected as a grown up, reassuring her of her attractiveness when she developed her first crush and giving her more adult responsibilities and praise when she accomplished them. It was even more meaningful when these duties were open to community observation. *“Every time anyone indicated that I am a grown-up,”* she said, *“it added to my morale and drove me to look grown up.”*

Another preparation that “worked,” for girls in the past and may continue to do so, was provided by schools. There, if teachers were open to questions, discussed puberty and menstruation, and provided guidelines regarding expectations for adult behavior in their relationships with men and the world of adults at home, at work and in the community, they knew what to expect, felt prepared and ready to be accepted as adults. According to Loisa,

at class seven, the school had sex education. Boys and girls were separated. They explained that our bodies would be changing. I was 14 [at menarche]. I did not therefore panic because I knew what was happening.

Discussion of Results

It might appear that for the educated, for those who did not expect to remain in their natal communities, and for those with close relationships with mothers and sisters, traditional rites of passage were no longer necessary.

New answers raise new questions:

1. Can aspects of traditional ceremonies be integrated into contemporary demands placed upon today’s youth of both genders and regardless of ethnicity so as to promote secure adult identity, pro-social behaviors, and recognition of young adults by the larger community? (And can they do so without depending upon denigration of those whose gender and/or ethnicity have formerly cast them in the role of lesser “other”?)
2. Is the hope that aspects of traditional ceremonies can be adapted to serve a therapeutic purpose in which special populations might become integrated into the larger community realistic? (Examples might include young people whose childhood and/or adolescence have been distorted by hardship and violence including victims of extreme poverty, child abuse or rape, survivors of conflict situations who have suffered torture, acted as torturers, or become accidental witnesses to repeated episodes sustained conflict).

This paper has provided examples that support speculation about the first of these questions, but not about the second. Unfortunately, any of the interviewees does not fit in one of these categories. Some references to the literature allow us to begin such a search.

First, there is the question of whether Kenya, to be specific, has a population of young people requiring such intervention. The answer is an unequivocal “Yes”. As Kariuki (2000) movingly wrote, far too many of Kenya’s children are growing up on a hostile environment where poverty, violence, AIDS, and educational decline are direct sources of harm and lack of resources has cut a deep swath in yet another traditional practice—support of and by the extended family. Since that writing, severe post-election violence, drought and famine (now moderating perhaps) have been added to the list. Kenya also houses numerous immigrants and refugees fleeing worse conditions

among her neighbors. Street children, children of poverty who have been unable to complete primary school let alone pursue secondary education, AIDS patients and AIDS orphans, victims of physical and sexual abuse, refugees, individuals with physical and mental disabilities who are not accepted into the broader community are all potential candidates for remediation through ARP. For which of these might it be helpful?

In terms of the aspect of ARP relevant to sexuality and appropriate sexual behavior, Gupta and Mahy (2003) found that at least some secondary education, access to media, urban residence, knowledge of modern contraception and ways of preventing HIV were all associated with later sexual initiation for Kenyan girls and all except access to media were associated with later sexual initiation for boys. By contrast, where girls received financial support in return for sex, earlier sex was likely. There was an interaction between educational level and financial support in return for sex as, they surmised, educated girls had higher expectations and greater earning potential, thus being less dependent upon men for financial support. In conditions of family poverty, then, it is unlikely that ARP would be effective unless coupled with some form of material support as well as access to technical training and job placement.

For refugees and immigrants fleeing violence as well as those severed from the family by death, rejection, or exposure to and/or participation in violence, Wessells (2009) warns, appearing to favor miscreants and outcasts with programming that is perceived to be more desirable than that available to “deserving” locals can backfire, engendering hostility to the very people one wishes assist. By a similar rationale, programming for street children that surpassed programming available to children of the families barely eking out a living, might simply produce more street children hoping to take advantage of them.

In short, the problem of providing young people with an alternative to traditional rites of passage is complex, necessary, and all too often grounded in practical problems. One problem is that adolescence does not happen at the same time for everyone. In the current sample, menarche ranged from nine to 17 years. For boys realization of entering a new stage happened between 10 to 13 years. A similar complication is that for some puberty happened at primary school while for others it happened at high school. This brings us to the challenge of when initiation should be done and who to do it. In the current study initiation to adolescence if done at all, was done by peers, parents, teachers, siblings, aunties and sanitary pad companies.

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