

*Review*

## **An Appraisal of Female Genital Mutilation Practice in Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria**

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**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), previously referred to as female circumcision or Female Genital Cutting (FGC) was a major traditional practice in some towns in Nigeria. The Yoruba, among other cultures placed so much regards to this cultural practice thus they attach a lot of superstitious beliefs, to this practice. Religion also played a pivotal role in entrenching this practice into the life of some of the practitioners. Although FGM has been outlawed in Nigeria, but some practitioners in Oyo town are still practicing it clandestinely. The study therefore, critically examined the practice of FGM in Oyo town. It examined the nature and dynamics of female genital mutilation in the modern Oyo. To achieve this aim, this study adopted both historical and multi-disciplinary approach. Therefore, relevant information was drawn from history and sociology to enhance the quality of the study research. The findings of this study showed that although there is a significant reduction in the number of people who engage in this practice, nonetheless, a few have decided not to let go of this cultural practice as they have decided to secretly engage in the practice.**

**Key Words:** Circumcision, Culture, Religion

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The practice of FGM in Nigeria has been a significant issue of concern to stakeholders in various governmental and non-governmental organizations. Government effort towards the eradication of the practice has reached appreciable considerable height. It is quite glaring that laws abolishing the practice have been passed at various levels of government legislation. However, eradicating this practice seems almost impossible.

A review of extant literatures has exposed the fact that the practice happens to be more prevalent in Oyo, thus the premise for the choice for the study area. The study takes a critical look at the practice of FGM in Oyo with the aim of bringing to the fore, reasons behind the continual practice of FGM in the community. In the bid to eradicate the obnoxious act, the study made recommendations on possible way of reducing the prevalence of this practice or eradicating it totally in the area.

## Overview of Oyo and its Geographical Location

Oyo is one of the towns in Oyo State, Nigeria. The state is located in the South-West geopolitical zone of Nigeria and it was one of the three States carved out of the former Western State of Nigeria in 1976. Oyo State consists of 33 Local Governments and 29 Local Council Development Areas. Local Government Areas are: Afijio, Akinyele, Atiba, Atisbo, Egbeda, Ibadan North, Ibadan North-East, Ibadan North-West, Ibadan South-East, Ibadan South West, Ibarapa Central, Ibarapa East, Ibarapa North, Ido, Irepo, Iseyin, Itesiwaju, Iwajowa, Kajola, Lagelu, Ogbomoso North, Ogbomoso South, Ogo-Oluwa, Olorunsogo, Oluyole, Ona-Ara, Oorelope, Oriire, Oyo East, Oyo West, Saki East, Saki West and Surulere. The Local Council Development Areas (LCDAs) are: Aare Latosa, Afijio West, Ajorosun, Akinyele East, Akinyele South, Akinyele West, Akorede, Araromi, Atisbo South, Ibadan East, Ibadan South East, Ibadan West, Ibarapa North-East, Ibarapa North-West, Ifeloju, Iganna, Inukan, Irepodun, Iseyin South, Iwa, Lagelu North, Ogbomoso Central, Ogbomoso South-West, Ogo-oluwa West, Oke'badan, Omi Apata, Surulere North, Surulere South, Wewe.

The state covers a total of 28,454 square kilometres of land mass and it is bounded in the south by Ogun State, in the north, by Kwara State and in the west it is partly bounded by Ogun State and partly by the Republic of Benin, while in the East, by Osun State. The landscape consists of old hard rocks and dome shaped hills, which rise gently from about 500 meters in the southern part and reaching a height of about 1,219 metres above sea level in the northern part.

Historically, the town could be traced to the old Oyo Empire which was founded in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is known to its people as 'New Oyo' (Oyo Atiba) to distinguish it from the former capital to the north, 'Old Oyo' (Oyo-Ile). The inhabitants of the area are mostly Yoruba people and the ruler is the *Alaafin* of Oyo who is the Permanent Chairman of Council of Obas in Oyo State. Oyo shares boundaries with Igboho in the north, and boundaries with Ago-Are in the northwest, Ogbomosho in the northeast, Iseyin southwest, Awe in the southeast and Ibadan in the south. The geographical location of Oyo town lies between latitudes 7° 27' 48.30" and 8° 40' 47.40" north of the Equator and between longitudes 3° 52' 31.35" and 4° 9' 38.23" east of the Greenwich Meridian.

According to the 2006 population census in Nigeria, Oyo town has a population of 429,784 people with three local governments which are Oyo West, Oyo East and Atiba. It is located in the southwestern geo-political zone of Nigeria. Oyo town has a rugged terrain which ranges between 850m to 1050m above the mean sea level. The predominant occupations of the Oyo people are farming, trading and cassava processing activities. Some markets

where economic activities take place in Oyo periodically include Ajegunle market, Irepo market, Sabo market and Obada International market which came on board early in 2017.

**Population of Oyo as at 2015 and 2016**

	2006	2016
<b>Atiba</b>	<b>168, 246</b>	<b>236,400</b>
<b>Oyo East</b>	<b>124,095</b>	<b>174,300</b>
<b>Oyo West</b>	<b>136,457</b>	<b>191,700</b>

**Source:** National Population Commission of Nigeria.

## The Practice of FGM among the Oyo People

Female circumcision was one of the most important traditional practices in Yorubaland in the past but now, its importance is fading as a result of modernization. For instance among the Igbomina people of Kwara State, Egba in Ogun State, Oyo people in Oyo State, people from Osogbo in Osun State, Yoruba from Ekiti State among others were involved in the practice in the past. Female circumcision is generally referred to as *idabe* or *ikola* in different areas in Yoruba land. The practice intertwined people of different religion such as Christianity, Islam and the traditionalists in Nigeria and most especially the Yoruba's. Till the 1980s, the procedure was generally referred to as female circumcision (FC) (*Sunday Tribune*, February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Hence, apt understanding of the practice and realization of its negative effect by feminists and women's rights activists brought about the change in the use of term to "female genital cut" or "female genital mutilation".

In Oyo town, mothers willingly present their daughters for circumcision because they see it as a virtuous and an honorable part of their culture that prevents the girl-child from being promiscuous (Mrs Alawode 2018). Most of the time, the practitioners promote the practice of FGM because of the economic benefits. Usually, a local village practitioner or a mid-wife is engaged for a fee to perform the procedure which is done without anesthesia. The procedure takes place at different times depending on the parents of the girl, it could be done after the naming ceremony of a child, when a child is grown or before she becomes a mother. Most of the time, the mother of the child according to an anonymous respondent, the circumciser is invited to do the procedure. However, is sometimes the child/victim of FTM is taken to the local practitioner's compound (*Oloola's* compound). The process, according to Ogungbade 2019, takes place very early in the morning and requires about ten minutes to be carried out.

In Oyo town, the practitioners are referred to as 'Oloola'. Most time they are native doctors or traditional birth attendants who run the trade in their families and pass it on to other generations, and this makes the skill hereditary. The practitioners are both male and female whose responsibility is to circumcise both male and female children in the community. Akinsunbola (2015:377-378) opined that the circumcisers acquired their skills through long period of apprenticeship with their parents or other people who were themselves circumcisers.

In most communities, female circumcisers outnumber the males. Nevertheless in Oyo, male circumcisers outnumber the female circumciser because the Oyo people prefer a male circumciser usually called "Oloola" he is an elderly man and more experienced. They believe that men are very careful when it comes to issues of women. For the practitioners, there is no mentioned age range because it is usually a family means of livelihood. They are usually paid for their services and such families in Oyo are "ileoloola" (house of the circumciser). The cognomen of the *ileoloola* compound reflects their pre-occupation.

*Omo oni ikoyi*

*Iro ikoyi*

*Omo agbon tu beleija*

*Omogbon rin omogbon rin omogbongbon ti odimo esin leyin*

*Orun ti koje ki esin oni koyi oleje oko*

Ogungbade and Agboola testify that these practitioners as well all their male children too are practitioners. This is a profession parents hand over to their children. In the case of both practitioners (Ogungbade and Agboola) they are in their early 70's and they still engage in male and female circumcision. As at the time of this interview, Ogungbade confirmed that he still circumcised a set of twins the previous day.

The instrument employed for the procedure included snail or engine oil (to stop the bleeding), bowl of water (to wash the vagina and the instruments used), the cutting instrument which is usually a special knife or blade, which is locally fabricated (to cut the clitoris), and black soap (for cleaning). The operation tools in Oyo can be categorized into three; *abeabaja* this is used for both male and female circumcision including tribal marks, *abeifinra* used for the beautification of the body (tattoo) and *abeilapa* usually used for the Alaafin lineage to give them tribal marks as this is hereditary and a family custom. (Mr Ogungbade 2019). The *abeilapa* is used for beautification like designing the hands and legs of members of the royal family. Ogungbade further emphasized how the tools are sterilized locally with the use of stone (*okuta iponri*). This local stone is used to sharpen the knives both for circumcision and tribal marks.

During the process of sharpening, they believe the tools are sterilised. The local stone is gotten from Miners who breaks rock and the practitioners look for the smooth stone to serve as their sharpener.

It is also the belief of the Oyo people that during the process of circumcision, a child can never contact HIV/AIDS, or any deadly disease. This is because it is believed the stone used as sterilizer can also get rid of dangerous virus or bacteria on the cutting object (knife or blade). During the procedure, (Alabede, 2019) argued that they normally trace the three lines on the vagina before they cut the clitoris. He also stated that bleeding can occur when the practitioner mistakenly cut another part of the vagina and this can only happen if the child or the girl is not patient, or even at times when the women holding the child is afraid and fails to hold her well. If such a mistake happens, it is remedied by silently chanting certain incantations (prayer) which people around will not hear. After which they either add snail water or engine oil to stop the bleeding. Traditional circumcisers also believe that the procedure should stop at noon because it could cause extreme bleeding as a result of dilation in the afternoon. The Yoruba don't believe that a child could die through circumcision, hence a saying *omo tuntun ki i ti owo onikola ku*, and if death occurs, that means such child is destined not to live. (Adekemi 2017)

Traditionally, the parents of the child hand over all the requirements to the circumciser who will then prepare it for the procedure. During the operation, the child is held down to avoid being injured in the process. The bottom of the snail will be smashed with a stone, and then emptied into a flat plate, a concoction will be added to it and it will be used after the process. In most cases the pain and wound of circumcision can last for a period of four days and maximum of nine days depending on the child and in case of a child who was wrongly cut the wound can stay longer before it heals. (Alabede, 2018)

In another interview with Jimoh Ogungbade 2019, requirement for the process are black soap and snail. Eulogy will be said before and after the procedure. The snail water is perceived to be very useful in clotting the blood, although in modern times engine oil is now used. Water is used to clean the blood during the operation which usually lasts for about ten minutes. According to Ogungbade, clitoris (*pure*) are not just cut but a particular line on the vagina must be followed in other to appropriately do the cutting, or else the injury will take more time to heal. Meanwhile there is no fixed price for the operation, at times, the practitioners might charge strangers or outsiders within the range of one thousand naira (#1000.00) or one thousand five hundred naira only (#1,500.00) while for close relations, they might be charged five hundred naira (#500.00) or it might be free. This is how circumcisers make their money they and they can have five to ten clients in a day depending on how fast the circumciser is.

After the procedure, a cultural ceremony (*eniabe*) is held with women and children that wish to be cut, the cut could be on their hand, leg or anywhere they wish to have it. They refer to it as sharing in the pain of the circumcised child. (Agboola, 2018). There is a belief that when they are cut along-side with the circumcised child, the FGM pain will not have much effect on the child. During this celebration, they rub charcoal powder on their bodies which is symbolic with such celebrations. The belief underpinning other women and children being cut is that they will use it to remind the circumcised girl the day she was cut and how they shared in her pain.

It is widely believed in Oyo, that circumcised girls are usually not promiscuous, when a well-known circumcised girl turns out to become promiscuous, it is believed that dogs must have eaten her removed clitoris. (*Aja gbe idore lo*) i.e. dog must have eaten her removed clitoris. (Bello 2019). The clitoris that was removed during the procedure was kept by the practitioners, although it is not used for anything but they have this believe that if they drop the clitoris carelessly on the floor, and somebody matches on it, the circumcised child will continue to have pains and the virginal will not heal on time.

Also, there is this believe that a chicken or a dog must not carry or eat the removed clitoris as this may lead to the child being promiscuous. These are the reasons why the practitioners keep the clitoris jealously and they don't just give it out to the parents so that they will not be careless with it. (Ogungbade, 2019).

In another interview with (Sherif Alabede Bello 2019) justifies the practice of FGM because he believes that tradition demands that the clitoris of a woman must not touch the head of the child during childbirth. He opined that it can lead to still birth or the death of the baby. He also portrayed the facts that although FGM is customary not all families engage in it, however, those who share the belief engage in it vehemently. Alabede also affirms that, FGM originated from Oyo town, because in Yoruba cosmology, Oyo and Ile-Ife played significant roles as the custodians of the ancient Yoruba culture and most customs and traditions of the race are expectedly traced to these two towns where they are jealously preserved. As a result of this the eradication of the practice is difficult in the area. He also stressed that, the *Ooolas* who are seen in almost every Yoruba community performing FGM all originated from Oyo.

In his own submission, Olaleye (2019) posits that circumcision first started with slaves before other people bought into the idea for their biological children. He maintained that people subscribed to it because of the evil attached to the clitoris a forbidden item that should touch the new baby's head. Hence, he said whenever an uncircumcised person would give birth; a rope would be tied to their clitoris to prevent the baby's head from touching it. Lastly, he explained that as the premise for circumcision before marriage for those who escaped it at

birth.

Although, Oyo, Egba and other Yoruba communities practiced FGM, oral source from Adeniyi (2019) states that the Ijebu condemned the practice and then did not participate in it. In some parts of Oyo and most Yoruba communities, there is always a payment for the act; some practitioners take their payment in cash, some take theirs through items such as yam, fowl, kolanut which are used to pray for the well-being of the circumcised child. According to Abogunde (2019), after the clitoris has been cut, a tribal mark called "*ondo*" which signifies that the child has been circumcised and is not a bastard is given to the child.

From the study and oral sources, the practice of FGM is just a cultural practice which exists among the Yoruba, and in order to sustain the practice some superstitious beliefs were attached to it. Some of the reasons which most interviewees gave for the practice were that it helps to maintain peace, especially if a family should betroth their daughters to a man and the man notices that the woman has been circumcised, he would gladly take her in for a wife with the view that the circumcision would not have allowed her to be wayward. Also, they believe that it tames promiscuousness which if reverse is the case would necessitate the man to send the woman back to her parents and that in turn would affect the existing peace between the two families.

Abogunde, and Akintoye (2019) see circumcision as a ritual which must be performed for the woman to be initiated her into womanhood. They perceive an uncircumcised woman has someone who has an evil feature attached to her since they see the clitoris as an evil part of the woman's body which must not touch the innocent child and which if touches the child will lead to the death. Also the practice is justified because they believe that the clitoris makes the female vagina smell and when it enlarges, it looks like manhood in a woman's private part and therefore needs to be removed to make her vagina area look neat and attractive to her man.

From the information gathered, Agboola, Ogungbade and Alabede (2019) all gave reasons why FGM is been done in Oyo town. The major reasons according to them are cultural, cleanliness, prevention from promiscuity, difficult labor, contact with the clitoris during delivery, and still birth. They further assert that FGM is important because once the clitoris is removed, the girl will be less responsive to men, and her sexuality will be moderated, which means FGM controls women sexuality so that it would reduce her chances of having sex outside marriage. They also believe that FGM reduces women's sexual demand on her husband, thus allowing the husband to have many wives. This also helps in promoting women's virginity and protecting marital fidelity.

FGM is seen as a cultural practice which the Oyo people see as an important aspect of their life that must

not die. The practice predates the introduction of Christianity, and Islam in Africa. Hence, in Oyo, FGM is practiced among all religious people—the Christians, Muslims, as well as Indigenous religious groups. The people see FGM as what they must do.

According to the Women Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC) in a document submitted to the UNICEF in Lagos (2016) the following reasons for the prevalence of FGM in Nigeria are the following; babies of uncircumcised mothers stand to die if the child's head touches the clitoris, the fear that uncircumcised women harbor evil spirits, female circumcision serves as a source of income or symbol of status to the operators particularly in Ondo and Oyo states, for prevention of promiscuity among women, as it was believed that clitoris enhances women's libido and the clitoris and the labia are perceived to be ugly unless trimmed.

### The Prevalence of FGM Practice in Oyo

Female Genital Mutilation is one of the prevalent cultural practices among different ethnic groups in Nigeria. In Oyo town, FGM is an age long cultural practice which is performed on women and girls mainly for cultural reasons. According to the practitioners in Oyo, they referred to it as *ila* or *idabe*. This practice is prevalent in Oyo because they believe that the practice in Oyo has its own uniqueness from FGM practiced in other areas. There is always a eulogy before and after the process of circumcision. However, the ideological justification for carrying out the Some of them believe that a woman who is circumcised will not have to go through a caesarean section (CS) to give birth, and also it makes the female genitalia to be neat. In summary, the perceived benefits of FGM by the Oyo people according to Ogungbade are: rest of mind in one's husband's house, to avoid still birth, to avoid being promiscuous and safe delivery.

For them, the penalty for not passing through the process of circumcision is having a still birth and the uncircumcised woman will be seen as a woman without vagina (Ojuara). However, they also agree to the fact that a girl cannot contract infection during the process as a result of different substances applied to the affected area. Also in most cases, there is severe bleeding but they have incantations which they say to stop the bleeding. It can be rightly stated that the cultural values attached to the practice of FGM is responsible for its prevalence and thus, that is the reason why eradicating the practice has become a great challenge in Oyo town. However, with the reduction in the number of people practicing this tradition, there is hope for a total eradication.

### Dynamics of Female Genital Mutilation in Oyo Community

The study concentrates on Oyo community because available data picture Oyo as one of the towns with the highest rate of prevalence in Nigeria. According to a report from *premium times*, (July 1, 2019) despite the outcry by local and international organizations on the harmful effect of the FGM practice, the incident is still ongoing in Oyo State in places like Oyo town, Ibadan North-east, Ibadan North, Ibadan, Akinleye and Afijio local government areas of the state. (Adebowale & Olufemi 2019). Those who hide their children or even run away to avoid this act in some situations are compelled to bring them back sometimes through diabolical means.

According to *Premium Times Report* (July 1, 2019), most people from Oyo west, Orelope and Kajola Local Government made public declarations against the practice in December 2018 but went back to do it secretly (Adebowale & Olufemi 2019). According to the report, in Aroro Village, Idi Obi, a lady, Adeagbo Adebimpe, said she was tricked into coming home from the Northern part of Nigeria to see her ailing mother with her two daughters and the girls were forcefully mutilated without her knowledge and consent. Some explained that the act was carried out on them with the consent of their ignorant father and it was after that it was later established that FGM is still being secretly carried out with or without the consent of parents.

### Efforts Aimed at Eradicating FGM practice in Oyo

In Nigeria, for instance, it was reported that there was prevalence of FGM in women aged 15–49 is 24.8%. Thus, about 20 million women and girls in Nigeria have undergone FGM. This represents 10% of the global total. The highest prevalence is in South East and South West Zones. (Thomson 2018) the report further states that 82% of women aged 15-49 who have undergone FGM were cut before the age of five. Therefore the government has put in place domestic legal framework to eradicate this practice.

Evidently, some of these legal frameworks are found in the constitution. The Nigeria Constitution holds that “the state shall protect, preserve and promote the Nigeria cultures which enhance human dignity and are consistent with the fundamental objectives as provided.” (Nigeria Constitution, 1999). Although the constitution does not specifically refer to FGM and violence against women, Articles 15(2) and 17(2) prohibit discrimination and set out equality of rights respectively, and Article 34(1) provides that every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of their person and, accordingly, no one ‘shall be subject to torture, or to inhuman or degrading treatment.

Apart from the constitutional provisions on the human right, other legislations have been made to eliminate

gender based violence. Among them is the Violence against Persons Prohibition Act, 2015 (VAPP Act). This act came to force in May 2015 and it is known as the first federal law which made an attempt on the prohibition of FGM across the country. The VAPP Act aims to eliminate gender-based violence in private and public life by criminalizing and setting out the punishment for acts including rape (but not spousal rape), incest, domestic violence, stalking, harmful traditional practices and FGM.

The VAPP Act, as a federal law, is only effective in the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja, and, as such, the remaining states must pass mirroring legislation to prohibit FGM across the country. However, Prior to the VAPP Act, several states had already enacted state laws dealing with child abuse, child protection issues, violence against women and girls and criminalizing the practice of FGM. The **VAPP Act** does not provide a clear definition of FGM;

- **Section 6(1)** of the law opens with the simple statement, 'the circumcision or genital mutilation of the girl child or woman is hereby prohibited.'
- **Section 6(2)** criminalizes and punishes anyone who performs, or engages another to perform, female circumcision or genital mutilation.
- **Section 6(3)** criminalizes and punishes anyone who attempts to perform, or engage another to perform, the practice.
- Finally, **Section 6(4)** criminalizes and punishes those who incite, aid, abet or counsel another to perform or attempt to perform FGM.
- The **VAPP Act** does not expressly criminalize failure to report FGM that has taken place or is due to take place.

As at 2018, the VAPP Act has not yet been implemented across all states of Nigeria and only 13 (mainly southern) states have put in place some form of law banning FGM. In some northern areas of the country, the Sharia Penal Codes of states including Zamfara, Kano, Kebbi, Kaduna and Sokoto are in place to protect children against various forms of physical and psychological violence. (Thompson 2018)

Although section 6 of the VAPP act outlines penalties for anyone who engages in FGM within Nigeria, it has no provision for protection of Nigerian citizen who have to undergo FGM in another country, however the penalty for violating the VAPP act are as follows;

- The performance of FGM or engagement of another to perform FGM carries a punishment of imprisonment not exceeding four years or a fine not exceeding 200,000.00 Naira (US\$554.808), or both.
- Attempting to perform FGM or engaging another

to perform FGM carries a punishment of imprisonment not exceeding two years or to a fine not exceeding 100,000.00 Naira (US\$277.309), or both.

- Anyone who incites, aids, abets, or counsels another person to perform FGM or engage another to perform FGM is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment not exceeding two years or to a fine not exceeding 100,000.00 Naira (US\$277.30), or both.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the efforts of government and non-governmental organizations at eradicating the FGM practice, the practice has not been totally eradicated. The major reason this paper hypothesizes for this continual practice is the inability of some states to join efforts with the federal government to ensure the complete eradication of this practice. Studies have shown that out of the thirty six states in Nigeria, only about six states have made domestic legislations to support that of the federal government in ensuring complete eradication of the practice. Another reason is one deduced from oral source that government and its agencies in Oyo town do not really combat this practice aggressively within the area.

From the foregoing, this study recommends that concerted efforts should be made by government and other agencies to ensure that the residents of the town and practitioners are aware of the dangers associated with the continual practice of FGM.

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