

Clitoris Enthusiasts

A little town in Kenya is leading the way in the battle against the circumcision of young girls. In Mosocho, it is even the men who are pushing the campaign ahead.

Author: Andrea Strunk

It was really more of a coincidence that almost at the same time as the celebration in the Christian region of Mosocho in Kenya, influential sheiks in Islamic Egypt were deciding that there is no connection between female circumcision and the Koran. The Egyptian daily newspaper Al-Ahram called it a milestone, hoping this would lead to a triumphant procession throughout all of Africa. The residents of Mosocho have already marked their own milestone. As a long day of celebration comes to an end – a day of jubilation dedicated to the bodily integrity of young girls – Robert Nhambega Akuma, teacher and heartthrob, takes the opportunity to reemphasize the motto of the yearlong efforts. "We have called this day 'A new Growth in our Culture?' That sounds good, but I say, 'Let the clitoris stay with the owner and the owner with the clitoris.'" The other men laugh while the women applaud.

In Mosocho, a Division in the District of Kisii in Kenya, about 60 kilometers from Lake Victoria, making an explicit reference to female sexual organs is free of taboo. Even the clan elders from the Kisii community, honorable men with exquisite faces like rumpled leather, are able to produce exact drawings of the female anatomy and to celebrate its wonderment in poetry. Robert Akuma's enthusiasm about the clitoris is anything but half-hearted. For years, "as a result of pure ignorance" the 30-year old was unable to explain his wife's disinterest in sexuality. For generations the men of Mosocho, indeed the men of the whole of Kenya, had no idea what female circumcision was really about. Boys were circumcised, so were girls. This was simply the accepted custom. "Nobody understood that it actually robbed the women of their sexuality. We knew nothing of their pains or their loss of sensitivity." Akuma was aware of the conflict: the man wanted it, but the woman didn't.

But now a new age has dawned in Mosocho and other regions in northwest Kenya, possibly in all of the country and across the continent of Africa. "A New Growth in our Culture" can be seen on gigantic posters hung on the arch at Cardinal Otunga High School in Mosocho. It expresses: We the Kisii have ceased our practice of female genital mutilation. At Otunga High School the seventh big celebration in a single month takes part, wherein uncircumcised girls are initiated as full members into the Kisii community. It is a colorful, jubilant recognition of the

girls' integrity. Although 500 were expected today, more than 700 girls have appeared. For the girls, the celebration is a source of great excitement. They receive orange t-shirts printed with the symbol of the movement – a stylized clitoris – and a certificate confirming confirming to them an uncircumcised life and to be 'Omoiseke' from now on. They walk into the sports complex in a long line, accompanied by their parents, teachers, clan elders and local politicians. To honor the girls there are dances and choirs. There is Coca Cola for every girl along with a half loaf of bread. The torture that the girls have escaped can only be known by their mothers. Especially those are often holding fast to the tradition of female circumcision. In any case, Robert Akuma needed a bit of time before he could convince his wife that their daughter's health has to be protected. "She's afraid that the girl will not be able to find a husband. In Kenya it is not normal for a woman to purchase land. With no land and no man, that means no earnings. She's afraid that the girl will starve to death."

Claudia Wegener is an educator in the project sponsored and implemented by the NGO "Vivid Com" ("Lebendige Kommunikation"). For her and her German and Kenyan female and male team-members, a long path has led up to each day of celebration in Mosocho – perhaps a long way has yet to be traveled. Since 2002 the organization, having its roots in the University of Applied Sciences, Fulda in Germany has worked together with local women-groups to convince the Kisii community of the damage caused by female genital mutilation.

Successful or not : the ups and downs of providing development aid, which they say is none but wants to be understood as imparting of knowledge, have been experienced by all German and Kenyan members of the staff.

The "New Growth in our Culture" also has its opponents. Those who perform the circumcisions and make their living from the ritual have come out against the new developments and many men, according to Robert Akuma, would rather see their wives mutilated in order to make sure they remain faithful. That even those who themselves were circumcised and can remember the terrible pains and loss of a sense of trust in their own mothers, that such women could subject their own daughters to such a torture is difficult to imagine. Claudia Wegener explains that, "It is this being very deeply rooted in the community. They are afraid to be pushed to the fringe, or even out of the



FOTO: ANDREA STRUNK

community altogether. For Africans this is very, very traumatic. Beside this mothers are worried about the respectability and the possibility for their daughters to marry."

Esther Ogeto, 40, and her husband, a school principal, decided several years ago against circumcising their daughters. "As the couple traveled one day to Nairobi on business, grandparents and aunts took the opportunity to make Edna and Alisa, then seven and nine years old, "proper girls." The parents had no other choice but to rush the girls to a hospital in order to avoid any further health problems.

In 2001 the Kenyan government issued a ban on circumcision, which had little effect on the Kenyan communities that had been practicing clitoral mutilation. Since he has been working with the project, Richard Aninga Nyakundi tells the men to "let the flowers grow." Nyakundi is the senior chief of the Mosocho Division. He hopes that the age of FGM (female genital mutilation) is nearing an end. "The day will come,"

he said to those present at the celebration, "when you will tell the tales of your fight against FGM. And your daughters and granddaughters will ask you 'What is that? Why did they have such a tradition?'"

A men's choir is also present at the festivities. Inspired by the mothers' worries about the ability of their daughters to find husbands, the men have rewritten on old folk song. "Malaika," an antiphony between a boy who wants to marry an uncircumcised girl and the father whose acceptance he requests, becomes an anthem for the new approach to their culture. One hundred, perhaps 150 boys, men and elders sing out, "You are an angel. We will marry you, cut or uncut. Girl. My angel!"

"For all these years it was so important to us, not to tell the people they have to do something else, that they can't do what they want. This is no kind of help. The people have to make the decision for themselves, then they will tell others, then they become ambassadors,"

explained Wegener about the enthusiasm for the festival in Mosocho. The methods of "Vivid Com" ("Lebendige Kommunikation") could become an example of good practice in the context of development work, at least in terms of how resources are used. Since 2002, the year in which Wegener decided to move to Mosocho after several weeklong working periods, she has refrained from personal luxuries and resides on the property of an African family in a self-made clay home. In the meantime she and the team from Kenya have been making multipliers out of teachers from 70 different schools.

Families trusted her to such a great extent that some newborn babies were given the name Claudia. The hardest nut to crack were clan elders. The fact that she was able to do this - to win the clan elders - is surely due to the fact that Mrs. Wegener established her integrity and earned the respect of the local culture in which she was a guest. "When an elder in Africa say no, everyone in his clan expects this as an ultimate no. We absolutely needed the agreement of the elders."

A special moment: In Mosocho their bodily integrity is celebrated. For the girls, who during the celebration are announced as full grown-up members of the Kisii community, this most of all is a source of great excitement.

Project „Overcoming Female Circumcision“

Since 1986, the non-profit organization Vivid Com (Lebendige Kommunikation) from Germany has been involved with "Psychosocial, health-promoting work for and with girls and women - overcoming female circumcision to stop FGM. The project was initiated - and is supervised - by Dr. Muthgard Hinkelmann-Toewe, professor for social pedagogy of the University of Applied Sciences, Fulda, Germany. She learned about the problem of female circumcision from a Kenyan woman during the UN's world conference on women in Nairobi.

Since then she has been developing and administering projects with "Women in Kenya", which involve both clan elders and schools. The **Fulda-Mosocho Project** is funded in part by the European Union (EU) and Kindernothilfe, (children's crisis assistance) which has dedicated special attention to the rights of girls and women in Africa this year. Donations to the project can be made to the following German account: 435 102 03 at Sparkasse Fulda (Bank code 530 501 90). Siru Kenya: Barclays Bank of Kenya, LTD Kisii, P O Box 99, Kisii Kenya, account No: 3867 434

In any case, Robert Akuma is happy to be a part of the "New Growth in the Kisii Culture". He is more than ready to tell other men that the program against genital mutilation changed his relationship with his wife. He says he now understands how to give joy to his wife, and talks as openly about sexuality as he does about helping with household chores and the necessity of respecting both the body and the soul of every woman.