

## Cutting more than education in Kenya

JEWEL ANDERSON | STAFF WRITER

Because they were uncircumcised, 18 male students were sent home from Kiriani High School in Meru, Kenya. The principal's decision to send the students home started a controversy.

After the students were sent home, the education ministry stepped in to allow them readmittance, but it is unknown whether or not the students will be safe or comfortable enough to return to school after being violently intimidated by their peers in the school showers.

Since it is taboo to be uncircumcised in Kenya, there has been much speculation as to why the 18 students were not circumcised prior to beginning high school.

Traditional circumcision rituals are very expensive, so it's possible that the students' families could not afford the ritual in addition to school fees.

"A certain amount of bulls must be slaughtered and also you must pay a circumciser," said Kenyan first-year student Kevin Muhanji.

It is also a possibility that the boys were uncircumcised

because they did not want to risk losing their lives or the organ itself.

Muhanji explained some of the dangers associated with traditional circumcision in Kenya. Before the act is performed, boys and young men must walk outside together on a cold night with meat slung around their necks and chest, which can cause pneumonia.

In many traditions, several boys are circumcised on the same night, and the same knife is used on each boy, often without proper sterilization. This can transmit blood disease or AIDS. It is also common for a boy to bleed to death from the practice.

Muhanji said there have also been cases where, because of the circumciser using drugs or because of the surrounding chaos of the ceremonies, the circumciser has cut off the entire penis.

"Maybe the students, being educated, knew about the health consequences of traditional circumcision and did not want to die, but they did not have access to a hospital to have it performed there," Muhanji said.

Kenyan parents are now fre-

quently taking their sons to the hospital to be circumcised, realizing the injustice and danger of the traditional ritual, and this is becoming an increasingly acceptable option. Muhanji said it does not matter in most tribes whether boys are circumcised in the hospital or not, just as long as they are circumcised.

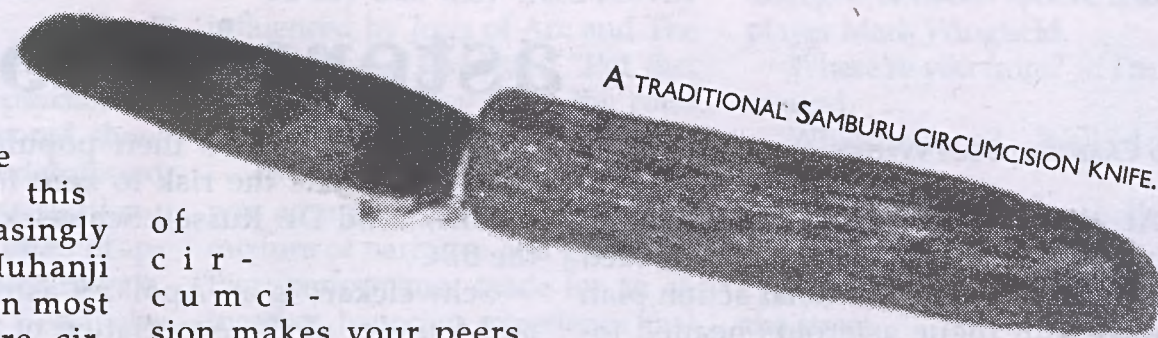
"It's what makes you a man. It makes you macho according to our traditions," said Muhanji.

So when the students of Kiriani High School discovered in the shower that a recently admitted student was uncircumcised, they intimidated him by chanting war and circumcision songs, calling him names, and demanding that he leave.

Apparently, the boy rushed to the principal's office and was followed by 17 other uncircumcised students who had also been recently admitted. The 18 students spent the night in the boardroom in fear.

After this, the principal decided to send the boys home.

"Not observing the tradition



A TRADITIONAL SAMBURU CIRCUMCISION KNIFE.

of  
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s i o n makes your peers feel like you're not following tradition. It's like betrayal," said Muhanji. "But then on the other side, it's not fair to chase the students from school just because they're not circumcised."

Some local elders have said that they agree with the principal's decision.

One elder, George Njagi, said to the BBC, "Uncircumcised and circumcised boys are not allowed to bathe together, share towels, and on some occasions sit together to discuss issues."

Another elder, Titus Munde, expressed that he agreed with the principal's decision.

Munde said to the BBC, "The principal is very right, because it is very risky to mix the boys."

However, the ministry of education has condemned the principal's decision to make the uncircumcised students

leave.

Regional education director Beatrice Adu said to the BBC, "Circumcision is not a requirement for one to be admitted to high school."

Adu told the BBC that public institutions should not be run according to certain cultures and that the principal was to be reprimanded, but did not say what his reprimand would entail.

Despite the ministry of education's involvement, if the students do not wish to become circumcised, it is possible that they will not return to high school because of the power that circumcision holds in Kenya as a cultural norm.

"If you are uncircumcised, you will be looked down upon forever. It's so crucial," said Muhanji. "Men simply have to do it."

## Ghana celebrates 50th anniversary

KATIE YOW | CONTRIBUTING WRITER

"Ghana at 50!" has been a nearly omnipresent theme during the first two months of our stay in Cape Coast. The fact of Ghana's upcoming birthday is clear, but the implications and realities of Ghana at 50 are complex. I have been an observer in this place, trying to listen and learn as much as I can, but still I cannot sum up the meaning of Ghana's 50th anniversary of independence.

"Ghana at 50!" is not only exclaimed in celebration, but it's a very common expression used to sum up the dissatisfaction or frustration with the state of things. Watching the news at night, my host mother Gifty shakes her head at stories about maternal mortality, water and electricity shortages, disease and poverty, and says, "Oh, Ghana at 50!"

Common worries concern the current economic position of Ghana and the lasting effects of colonial oppression that some feel compromises the idea of independence.

But despite the significant challenges that are currently facing Ghana, there is a lot to celebrate. Ghana's independence in March 1957 marks it as the first sub-Saharan African country to overthrow colonial rule, precipitating the numerous African independence movements of the 1960s and beyond.

The Gold Coast Colony came through a history of European exploi-

tation of resources, the horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, wars to suppress indigenous power, and generations of foreign rule to become a self-governed Ghana (named after an ancient African kingdom) under the leadership of the infamous pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah. Ousted by a coup in 1966, Nkrumah died in exile, but is now revered as a national hero.

Ghana is known as the "Black Star" of Africa, seen as the hope of Africa because of its relative stability and prosperity. While troubled by serious poverty and other problems of so-called developing countries, Ghana has avoided the kinds of violence and civil war that have plagued other countries on the continent. This fact is prominent in the dialogue about Ghana's successes as a country.

On March 5, Chantal, Rachel and I join Akwasi, the assistant to Professor Owusu-Ansah, the coordinator of the program here, to travel to Accra, Ghana's capital, to witness the events of Ghana's 50th anniversary.

Arriving in Accra, we find the city

covered in the red, gold and green of Ghana's flag.

Accra is like most big cities I've visited — busy, bustling, a collage of different kinds of people and cultural influences. In the midst of all the jubilant activities and mood, we still see the obvious signs of poverty everywhere we turn, contrasted with great wealth that exists nowhere else in Ghana.

We go to the area around Nkrumah's mausoleum. His tomb is housed inside

**Gifty shakes her head at stories about maternal mortality, water and electricity shortages, disease and poverty, and says, "Oh, Ghana at 50!"**

a huge marble structure, designed to represent the trunk of a tree, built on the spot where he declared Ghana's independence. A reenactment of Nkrumah's independence speech is happening in the mausoleum park — "Ghana, your beloved country, is free forever."

There is a concert featuring high life (a kind of Ghanaian popular music), reggae, and hip life (a blend of hip hop and high life) musicians, many of the most prominent in Ghana. The long avenue is one huge dance party. We stay until 4 a.m., and as we leave

the party continues unabated behind us.

In the morning, Chantal and I turn on the TV in our hotel room. President Kufuor is looking on at marching lines of armed forces and school children as they parade through Independence Square.

At the parade, Kufuor steps up to light the "Perpetual Flame," and the newscaster's voice comes over the air again. "This flame is not just for Ghana, but for the whole of Africa, to say that we have come of age. We have come of age."

We take a car as close as we can get to Independence Square and walk down a street packed with people, hawkers, women carrying babies at their backs, groups of drummers and musicians, almost all wearing patriotic colors. Many people have their faces painted.

We talk to a young couple with two children. The mother tells me that she has lived in Accra all her life, but never been to Independence Square before. I tell her today seems like a pretty fitting first occasion. She smiles and says, "This is a memorable day." Looking at her children she adds, "They are very small, but this will still be a memory for them."

For more coverage of Ghana's independence celebrations go to [allafrica.com](http://allafrica.com).