

Circumcision and Initiation in Western Kenya and Eastern Uganda:

Historical Reconstructions and Ethnographic Evidence

Abstract. — *The distributional technique of analysis of ethnographic data can provide evidence for historical developments which are not covered by written documents or oral traditions. One of the reasons for neglecting this method may be the racial prejudice on which for instance the "Hamitic hypothesis" was based. Thus the similarity between the male initiation rites with circumcision of the Kalenjin tribes (then known as Nilo-Hamites) and adjacent Bantu tribes in western Kenya and eastern Uganda was readily interpreted as an example of borrowing by Bantu from their neighbours.—A descriptive account is given of these rituals among six Bantu and six Kalenjin tribes with a quantitative analysis. Absence or presence of about one hundred different traits formed the basis of a systematic comparison of each tribe with all other tribes. This resulted in two different matrices of dissimilarity, depending on the choice of measure of association. It is clear that the circumcision ceremonies of the Bantu show a significantly greater differentiation than those of the Kalenjin. This suggests an earlier adoption of these ceremonies by the ancestors of the Bantu than by those of the Kalenjin. This would be consistent with Kalenjin borrowing of many agricultural practises from Bantu speakers, for which there is strong linguistic evidence. [East Africa, Nilotic and Bantu Tribes, Initiation Rites, Circumcision, Culture Relations, "Hamitic Hypothesis"]*

1. Introduction

An interesting feature of the post-colonial era in Africa is the growth of historical studies of the pre-colonial past. Research on oral traditions extended our knowledge several centuries beyond the earliest written documents.

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