

# Cultural Beliefs of Female Circumcision (nkim) and Personality Development in the Ejagham Ethnic Group of Cameroon

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to investigate how the cultural beliefs of female circumcision (Nkim) in the Ejagham ethnic group of Cameroon influence the personality of Ejagham women who have undergone female circumcision. Results from the studies on the practice of female circumcision through the use of questionnaires and interviews point to the fact that cultural beliefs promote female circumcision.

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## INTRODUCTION

The continuing practice of female circumcision (Nkim) had been receiving increasing attention from female and human rights activists, scholars and policy makers' world over in Cameroon. This concern stemmed from evidence of continuous practice due to cultural beliefs held by the Ejagham people of the south west region of Cameroon. The practitioners of nkim looked up to their culture for continuous practice in respect to their cultural norms and values. Much research had been done linking the continuous practice of female circumcision to the cultural beliefs of practising communities. The World Health Organization (2008) stated that the following reasons have been given for female circumcision. Custom and tradition, religious requirement, purification, family honour, hygiene, aesthetics, protection of virginity, increasing sexual pleasure for the husband, providing a sense of belonging to a group, enhancing fertility and increasing matrimonial opportunities.

The primary reason for the continuation of the practice was the increase in sexual pleasure that husbands allegedly experience with circumcised partners (WHO, 2010). Pemunta (2011b) asserted that nkim is a practice performed exclusively on girls and women on the cultural and traditional beliefs that the process signifies a rite of passage from girl to womanhood. It is a ritual prescribed by the traditions of the community. Ejagham people have been

practising the above rites over centuries. This implies that the cultural beliefs of the practising communities is an important factor to the continuation of female circumcision. Cultural beliefs give meaning and emphasize those qualities that make people look alike; and that distinguish psychological man from other species. It directs the personality theorists to search for those regularities among all people that define the nature of man as well as the factors that influence the course of lives.

The aim of this study was to investigate cultural beliefs of female circumcision (nkim) in the Ejagham ethnic group of Cameroon with the intention of identifying how these beliefs influence personality development. Nkim is an Ejagham word for circumcision. The study rests on two assumptions. The first is that cultural beliefs sustain female circumcision and secondly that these beliefs influence women's personality in the Ejagham ethnic group. This study was carried out because of growing concerns on the need to eradicate the practice of female circumcision in Ejagham and increasing concerns for women's health by human and female rights activists.

## The concept of cultural beliefs

Cultural beliefs is a very broad concept. Idang (2015: 105) stated that cultural beliefs can be seen as some point of view or conviction which we can live with, live by and can even

die for. This is why it seems that belief actually permeate every aspect of human life. For instance, we can rightly speak of religious, political, social, aesthetic, moral, cultural and even personal beliefs. Depending on the way we perceive things we can praise and blame, declare actions right or wrong or even declare the scene or objects before us as either beautiful or ugly. Each person, as we could see, has some sense of values and there is no society without some belief system (Idang, 2007: 4). Packer (2005:224) argued that beliefs determine attitudes about the effects of a particular behaviour. Traditional standards and inherited behaviours put social pressure on the custodians of that tradition to perform these acts. The norms on which these considerations are based are communicated by significant cultural values through socialization and social interaction and the traditional values to comply with the act.

Culture embraced a wide range of human phenomena, material achievements and norms, beliefs, feelings, manners, morals and so on. It is the patterned way of life shared by a particular group of people that claim to share a single origin or descent. Idang (2015: 97-111) viewed culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs or any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. This definition captured the exhaustive nature of culture.

Some scholars asserted that cultural beliefs can only be understood in context. That is in the cultural background or in the practising communities. Miller (1941) asserted that it is necessary to understand one's culture, ethnic identity and other factors to fully understand a person. Personalities, beliefs, attitudes and skills are learnt. Therefore, it is impossible to fully understand a person without understanding his or her culture and ethnic identity. Culture shapes, modifies and adds distinctiveness to human behaviour.

### **The concept of Personality**

The term personality had been defined in many ways, but as a psychological concept, it refers to the differences that exist between people. Thus, Personality is what makes a person unique and it is recognizable soon after birth. Personality development occurs by the on-going interaction of temperament, character, and environment. The study of personality focuses on classifying and explaining relatively stable human psychological characteristics.

Personality grows increasingly consistent with age and plateaus sometime around age 50, but never reached a period of total stability (Robert & Mroczek, 2008: 31-35). An individual's personality is a collection of emotional thought, and behavioural patterns unique to a person that is consistent over time. Large-scale longitudinal studies had demonstrated that the most active period of personality development appears to be between the ages of 20-40 (Robert et al.; 2010: 375-398). Although change is less likely later in life, individuals retain the potential for change from infancy to old age. Thus a person's personality changes as he grows from infancy throughout old age. Aspects of an individual's personality development include physical, health, mental (cognitive), emotional, social, moral, self-esteem, sexuality and spiritual. Personality embraces moods, attitudes, and opinions and is most clearly expressed in interactions with other people, it's a characteristic way of

thinking, feeling, and behaving. It includes behavioural characteristics, both inherent and acquired, that distinguish one person from another and that can be observed in people's relations to the environment and to the social group.

Caspi & Roberts (2001: 49-66) considered personality development as relatively enduring patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour that distinguish individuals from one another. Roberts, Wood, & Caspi (2010: 375-398) further reported that personality emerges early and continues to change in meaningful ways throughout the lifespan. The lifespan perspective of personality is based on the plasticity principle, that personality traits are open systems that can be influenced by the environment at any age. This interactional model of development emphasizes the relationships between an individual and her environment, and suggests that there is dialectic between continuity and change throughout the lifespan.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative data were obtained using an unstructured interview guide (life histories of nkim initiates) and an unstructured interview guide for matrons of nkim which provided descriptive data on cultural beliefs. This study was carried out in four Ejagham villages. The selected villages were kembong, Ekok Baje and Otu. These selected villages have a population of about 14,500 inhabitants. The population of this study was made up of all women between the ages of 40 – 65 (middle adulthood) who had been circumcised and are part of the Ejagham community. The number could not be estimated and no study has been carried out so far to estimate the number of women in the study area that had taken part in the Nkim ritual or who have been circumcised.

The selection of these four Ejagham villages of the south west region of Cameroon for investigation was partly based on the fact that they have a history of continuous practice of female circumcision. Also, their accessibility to the researcher than the other practising villages. These selected villages would provide rich information for the issues under study. They were also ready and competent people in the field like chiefs, quarter heads and local translators to assist with the data collection.

A homogenous purposive sampling technique was used wherein anyone could be selected for having a shared characteristic or set of characteristics. In this study, the researcher had not got a fixed number of circumcised females when going to the field and so those one would be opportune to interview and observe in life observation would constitute the sample. Also, the accidental and snowball sampling techniques was used. Accidental sampling means that the researcher will visit the study site and try to meet the women that meet the inclusive criteria with the support of community members. This sampling technique applies when subjects of interest are rare as explained by Nana (2015). Snowball sampling is a nonprobability sampling technique where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. Thus the sample group is said to grow like a snowball. The snow-ball technique applies when the subjects of interests form a social network through which one can get

to a participant through another participant. After meeting a Nkim member, it is expected that she will link one to another initiated member and more.

The instrument used for data collection is an unstructured interview guide, one for life histories of nkim initiates and another for matrons. The unstructured guide were developed by the researcher on the cultural beliefs of Nkim. Since the focus of the study were the nkim initiates, an unstructured interview guide constructed in three parts was used to measure cultural beliefs and nkim practices of Ejagham women. The interview guide used by the researcher for the nkim initiates and matrons comprised, an introduction followed by a series of questions and demographic information which were asked by the researcher to enable her obtain some qualitative information about the nkim practice. Bryman (2012:502) held that the use of interviews by a researcher in qualitative research allows for a thorough examination of experiences, feelings or opinions. The validity of the unstructured interview guide was established through a pre-test carried out on a smaller scale of 5 circumcised females. The objective was to assess the comprehension and reaction and to ensure that the indicators of the study have been appropriately assessed. All these gave validity of the research instruments. In order to enhance content validity, the researcher subjected the instruments to the scrutiny of the thesis supervisor and the statistician, and additionally, pre-tested the instruments.

Conducting the study in the natural environment of respondents improves the internal validity and minimizes threats of false positive or false negative. Pre-testing of research instrument(s) or the pilot study would also help in identifying extraneous or confounding factors. In the context of this study, five women from the ethnic group under study were sampled in Buea. The same respondents used to ascertain content validity were re-administered the same instruments a fortnight later. The results of the two tests were compared. Through a test retest of the instruments, the degree of consistency of the instrument was very high. There was a high similarity of about 95% for each instrument. This high level of consistency meant that, the instruments were reliable and fit for administration. All the women in the four selected villages were expected to participate voluntarily. The researcher visited the selected villages, discussed her mission and obtained permission from the village authorities. The instruments of the interview guide were administered face to face by the researcher. All the questions on the interview guide were answered on the spot.

The qualitative data generated from the interviews and life histories were subjected to statistical analysis to produce descriptive and inferential statistics. As for the qualitative analysis, all the data were reviewed first in a general manner to obtain a sense of the data and emerging themes. Data was coded for analysis according to the method of qualitative data analysis. This procedure enabled a thorough and systematic search for chunks of information. Analysis were conducted to identify similarities, and differences using standardized themes when it was necessary, with prospects to reconcile findings with those of previous research. The qualitative data gathered from interviews, life histories were analysed using the process of thematic analysis whereby concepts or ideas were grouped under umbrella terms or key words. The coding was done using the traditional

approach for interviews and with a software-assisted approach using content analysis programs such as Atlas Ti 5.2 (Atlas Ti GMBH, 2006). This software easily examines huge amounts of data and a wider range of texts quickly and efficiently, once the coding is done. The final product is generally identified as conceptual diagram. In the context of this study, the major concepts or codes that emerged from the study were first of all summarized in code-grounding-quotation tables.

## RESULTS

### Socio - Demographic Characteristics

In reporting the findings, positive as well as negative responses were separated and the concepts presented on tables. The findings on cultural beliefs were identified in the interviews. Altogether, 17 women were involved in the study among which were 14 nkim initiates and 3 matrons. All of them were women of middle age (40-65years) who had undergone nkim. Their characteristics are presented on the table below.

#### Gender

Monenkim was essentially made of women and that is why only women could meet the inclusive criteria of the study.

#### Age

The Monenkim women were aged 46-55 years for 28.6% (4) of them while the rest making 71.4% (10) were aged 56-65 years.

#### Village or community of origin

The Monenkim women involved in the study were from four communities with history of Nkim practice. Four of them were from Kembong making 28.6%, 3 from Ekok (21.4%), 3 from Baje (21.4%) and 4 from Otu (28.6%).

#### Residence/ Settlement

The Monenkim women involved in the study had migrated from their villages and settled in town. Seven were from Mamfe (50.0%), 4 from Kumba (28.6%) and 3 from Buea (21.4%).

#### Occupation

The monenkim women involved in this study were 2 farmers (14.3%), 5 traders (35.7%), 6 housewives (42.9%) and 1 tailor (7.1%).

#### Level of education

The Monenkim women involved in the study had no formal education. All 14 had never been to school.

#### Marital status

The Monenkim women involved in the study were 8 married (57.1%) and 6 Widowed (42.9%).

#### Marriage regime

The Monenkim women involved in the study were 5 monogamous (35.7%) and 9 polygamous (64.3%).

#### Ages of circumcision

The monenkim women involved in this study were circumcised at these ages: three of 9-12 (21.4), 6 of 13-16 (42.9), 4 of 17-19 (28.6) and 1 of 28 (7.1).

#### Presentation of Matrons

The matrons were three in number and aged 56, 57 and 62 years.

They were from Ekok, Kembong and Otu.

All of them had never been to school and had no formal education.

All of them were widows, one having her husband killed during the on-going socio-political crisis in the region.

**Table1: Socio-demographic characteristics of nkim initiates**

Indicator	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	14	100.0
Age	46-55	04	28.6
	56-65	10	71.4
Village or community of origin	Kembong	04	28.6
	Ekok	03	21.4
	Baje	03	21.4
	Otu	04	28.6
Residence/ Settlement	Mamfe	07	50.0
	Kumba	04	28.6
	Buea	03	21.4
Occupation	Farmers	02	14.3
	Traders	05	35.7
	Housewife	06	42.9
	Tailor	01	7.1
Level of education.	No education	14	100.0
Marital status	Single	0	0.0
	Married	08	57.1
	Widowed	06	42.9
Marriage regime:	Monogamy	05	35.7
	Polygamy	09	64.3
Ages of circumcision	9-12	03	21.4
	13-16	06	42.9
	17-19	04	28.6
	28	1	7.1

Nsamenang 2005 in his theory of human ontogenesis, categorised the ages of 9-12 as the fourth social stage which is puberty. It is a stage where children adjust to changes and participate in rites of passage. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) referred to the ages of 6-12 years as the latency stage; a stage where sexual energy is repressed or is latent. To Freud, at this stage, sexual recede is important as a child becomes more preoccupied with developing skills and other activities. The main developmental task at this stage is to sublimate sexual energy by achieving skill mastery. To Erik Erikson, this stage is the period of crisis of industry versus inferiority. It's the industrial age wherein children in all cultures are trained in a variety of basic skills (Nsamenang 2005, pp.90-94).

To Nsamenang, the ages of 13-16years and 17-19years are the fifth social stages of early and late adolescence. A stage of probation and 'socialized' internship. The child has received complete training and is poised for adult roles. Erikson posited that the age of adolescence ties with the stage of identity versus role confusion. At this stage, most young people match themselves against the social roles parents and the culture offer. Freud calls this stage, the genital stage where a re-emergence of sexual urges motivates heterosexual attraction and sometimes masturbation, a period of complete personality organisation. The adolescent seeks relationships with the opposite sex to satisfy sexual feelings. Erikson sees the ages of 20-40 as the stage of intimacy versus isolation and refers to the stage as young adulthood where adults are committed to intimate relationships. To Nsamenang, it is at the sixth social stage of adulthood where marriage, responsible parenthood, productivity and societal reproduction occurs.

Nkim is done at puberty to suppress a sexual urge that can result from the irritation of the clitoris at puberty. This can cause a girl to misbehave by searching for boys to help her suppress this desire. This can lead to unwanted pregnancy and shame to her family and community. Nkim is believed to suppress these desires and make a girls responsible and of good behaviour in the Ejagham community.

**To appraise how the cultural beliefs of Nkim ritual influence personality development among Ejagham women.**

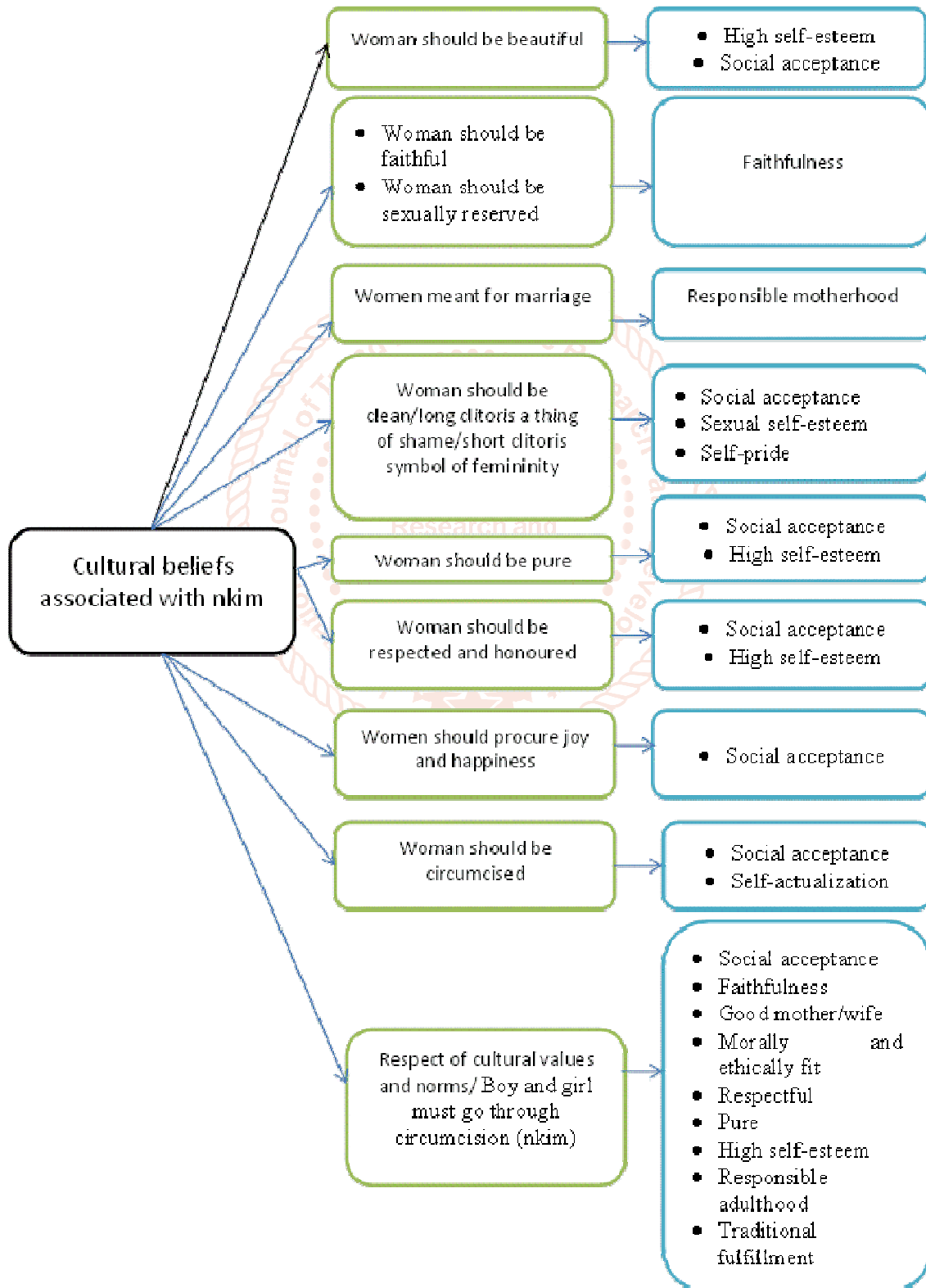
Cultural beliefs refer to the learned behaviours that are the people's firm opinion in their communities which are passed on from parents to children. There are specific cultural beliefs that are associated to nkim practice which may influence the lives of women that have been initiated through nkim. These include their perception of a well brought up girl or woman and their perception of marriage. The cultural beliefs associated with nkim and how they influence initiates would unfold empirically through the data collected in the context of this study. The data would be detailed, analysed and presented in the thematic table below.



**Table2: Thematic analysis depicting the relationship between cultural beliefs of Nkim ritual and personality development among Ejagham women.**

Cultural belief		Personality development	
Code/Concept	Quotation	Code/Concept	Quotation
Woman should be beautiful		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ High self-esteem</li> <li>➤ Fulfilment</li> <li>➤ Social acceptance</li> </ul>	"I am proud of myself" "I looked very beautiful in my Monenkim attire and the body paintings"
Woman should be faithful	"A woman should be faithful to her husband"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Faithfulness</li> <li>➤ Ethical and moral fitness</li> </ul>	"I was raised to be a good, faithful and obedient wife to my husband"
Long clitoris is a thing of shame		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Social acceptance</li> <li>➤ High self-esteem</li> <li>➤ Self-pride</li> </ul>	"Long clitoris is a thing of shame"
Woman should be sexually reserved	"Controls women sexuality because the clitoris will not excite her, she has no appetite for extra marital sex"	Faithfulness Social perception	"A good wife should enjoy sex only with her husband and should have no appetite for extramarital sex"
Women meant for marriage	"Girls were raised up for marriage. Girls didn't go to school but boys did"	Responsible motherhood	"I was trained to be good wife, mother" "No girl of my time went to school" "Nkim prepares a woman for marriage"
Woman should be clean	"For cleanliness and pride"	Social acceptance Sexual self-esteem	
Woman should be pure	"A woman should be clean and pure"	Social acceptance High self-esteem	
Woman should be respected and honoured		Social acceptance High self-esteem	"People show me so much love and respect" "A type of silver iron beads (amanima) was put on my wrist by my father to signify my greatness. Amanima signifies greatness and authority and identifies you as a great woman"
Women should procure joy and happiness	"I brought joy, pride and honour to my family"	Social acceptance	"I was trained to be a good singer and dancer" "I was fed and taught to sing and dance for six months"
Woman should be circumcised (reduction of clitoris) to be perceived as a complete woman	"A circumcised woman is complete because she has done everything that the tradition demands" "Long clitoris is a thing of shame as you and your family receive insults from villagers. "When you undergoNkim, you are a complete woman". "Any woman who hasn't done nkim is considered a man"	Self-fulfilment Social acceptance Self-actualization	"I am now a complete woman"
Respect of cultural values and norms		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Social acceptance</li> <li>➤ Faithfulness</li> <li>➤ Good mother/wife</li> <li>➤ Morally and ethically fit</li> <li>➤ Respectful</li> <li>➤ Pure</li> <li>➤ High self-esteem</li> </ul>	"My father and family are highly respected in the community because of the pride, respect and joy my circumcision brought to the family" "People show me love and respect and my family was full of pride" "It makes a woman to behave well in the society and respect the norms and values of the community" "nkim is a cultural practice of my people"

A woman should behave well in her community		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Morally and ethically fit</li> <li>➤ Social acceptance</li> </ul>	“It makes a woman to behave well in the society and respect the norms and values of the community”
Boy and girl must go through circumcision (nkim)	Boys and girls must go through nkim to be respected in their community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Social acceptance</li> <li>➤ Pure</li> <li>➤ Maturity/responsible adulthood</li> <li>➤ Traditional fulfilment</li> </ul>	“Boy and girl must go through circumcision (nkim)” “A circumcised person is complete because she or he has done everything that the tradition demands” “Nkim prepares a person for responsible adulthood”



**Figure1: Conceptual diagram depicting how the cultural beliefs of Nkim ritual influence personality development among Ejagham women.**

There were many cultural beliefs attached to the Nkim practice which were perceived to have important impact on the personality development of the initiates. These cultural beliefs were myths that helps in the sustenance of the practice in the Ejagham community. They include:

#### **The perception that a woman should be beautiful.**

To the Ejagham, a beautiful woman is one who has undergone nkim. Nkim is very relevant in the upbringing of a girl. It is done on all girls and as early as the age of eight years to make them look beautiful and to control their sexuality as prescribed by the Ejagham tradition. They also believe that it is appropriate for a girl to undergo nkim as early as possible because it would be less painful compared to when it is done at puberty or adolescence. This could explain why these woman after the initiation and when leaving the fattening room looked very beautiful and they themselves were conscious of it as expressed by some of them "I am proud of myself"; "I looked very beautiful in my monenkim attire and the body paintings". From these statements, we can perceive the expressions of fulfilment and high self-esteem from these women and their beauty will deliberately enhance their social acceptance. In the Ejagham community, a beautiful woman is a round, plump and robust woman who has gone through all the stages of nkim.

#### **The perception that a woman should be faithful**

The Ejagham believe that through nkim, women are initiated into motherhood and marriage and there's also the initiation of marital values through the acts. Nkim helps girls to marry early and to the best men in the community. It also helps the girls to control any sexual urge, stay faithful in marriage and to make good children for their husbands. Nkim helps to reduce the sexual urge of the woman since the organ responsible for the irritation has been removed. Nkim is done to maintain tradition, for faithfulness of the Ejagham girls to their husbands, to keep the institution of marriage and maintain family and community honour. Girls who have not undergone nkim are noted to easily divorce their husbands. This could be explained from the women's statements that "A woman should be faithful to her husband"; "I was raised to be a good, faithful and obedient wife to my husband". From these statements we can perceive that the idea of faithfulness, ethical and moral fitness were values upheld by the Ejagham community. A well brought up Ejagham girl is a respectable one who lives according to the norms and values of her community; who tries not to bring shame to her family and her people by misbehaving of disrespecting her family and leaders.

#### **The perception that a long clitoris is a thing of shame.**

The Ejagham belief that a long clitoris is a thing of shame as it competes with the male's penis during sexual intercourse. Nkim makes a woman look feminine. There is the traditional myth that if the clitoris is not removed, it can grow to the size of a man's penis. One woman explains that a "long clitoris is a thing of shame". A girl who has undergone nkim has high self-esteem, self-pride and experiences social acceptance in her community. Women who have not undergone nkim are seen as ugly and there's a myth that the clitoris of uncircumcised women might grow longer and dangle between their legs thus making sex uncomfortable for their husbands. Uncircumcised women are seen as men because they have long clitoris like men's penis.

#### **The perception that woman should be sexually reserved.**

The Ejagham belief that a good woman is a sexually reserved woman. It was an abomination for young girls to become pregnant before marital age and for a daughter to give birth to a child in her father's house. It brings shame not only to her family but the community as a whole. It shows that they have failed in their role of raising the girl to be a responsible woman. The nkim practice have been going on for generations and through it, many young girls have been successfully initiated into womanhood. One woman explains that nkim "Controls women sexuality because the clitoris will not excite her, she has no appetite for extra marital sex"; "A good wife should enjoy sex only with her husband and should have no appetite for extramarital sex". From these statements we can perceive that the idea of faithfulness in marriage and social perception were values upheld by the Ejagham community. There is the myth that nkim would control the sexually sensitive genital tissues of girls as it would curb their sexual drives. This would help preserve their chastity before marriage, thus increasing their importance to potential suitors and the value of their bride price. Also, nkim would cause the girl not seek pleasure outside the marital home since she can control herself.

#### **The perception that women are meant for marriage**

The Ejagham girls were raised for marriage while the boys went to school. The girls stayed at home with their mothers while their fathers were away to learn household chores and principles of responsible womanhood and motherhood. Girls who had not undergone nkim are noted to easily divorce their husbands. Initiation allows the girls to be more cultured and well behaved as wives. In the "fattening period", girls are schooled and trained on the importance of keeping their marriages by remaining faithful to their husbands; not to attract curses from their ancestors upon themselves. The girl who has undergone nkim is visited constantly by the best bachelors with the hope of marriage. This is not the case with those who have not done nkim. To avoid the stigmatization of not getting married and making their parents and community proud, girls choose to undergo nkim. Girls who have refuse nkim find it difficult to marry within the Ejagham community. They and their families are shamed and ostracised from the village. They end up marrying from different tribes and never return to their villages. A girl who has undergone nkim earns respect from her husband's family. She's showing to the family of her fiancée that she had not known any man before her marriage because of her circumcision. This can be confirmed from the statements of some women that "Girls were raised up for marriage. Girls didn't go to school but boys did". This cultural predisposition prepares the girl for good motherhood as testified by some of the monenkim women that "I was trained to be good wife, mother". This also explains why girls by then were not going to school as testified by this quotation "No girl of my time went to school".

The Ejagham belief that nkim will make the woman more valuable in the eyes of men. The status of her husband is guaranteed because no other man has touched his woman before him. Nkim is concerned with the girl's virginity before marriage and her faithfulness during the marriage. It is believed that marriages of women who have undergone nkim last longer than those of women who have not done nkim.

### **The perception that women should be clean**

To the Ejagham, a clean woman is a circumcised woman. Nkim brings honour to the girl's family name and a girl can attain womanhood in the Ejagham community only when she undergoes nkim. Girls who have undergone nkim are considered clean, beautiful and sweet for their husbands. A girl who has not done nkim will not be able to control her sexual urges and protect herself from sexually transmitted diseases. This woman explains that nkim is done "For cleanliness and pride" and "A woman should be clean and pure". This is what makes the monenkim to experience social acceptance and have high sexual self-esteem. This makes the monenkim even in performance to feel superior to all others.

### **The perception that women should be pure**

To the Ejagham, a pure woman is a circumcised woman. They believe that a girl should undergo nkim to be pure. There's the myth that the reason why some babies take longer time to walk is due to the fact that the baby's head touched the uncircumcised clitoris during delivery. The Ejagham perceive the practice as being part of their tradition and believe it is the gods of their ancestors who prescribed it to avoid promiscuity in women. It is also a spiritual connection between the people and their ancestors. The women believe that "A woman should be clean and pure" for her to experience social acceptance and high self-esteem. The Ejagham belief that nkim ritual makes the woman's vagina to look good, clean, pure and desirable by the husband.

### **The perception that women should be respected and honoured**

Nkim makes a woman respectful and honoured in the community. It gives the woman and her family a voice in her community. Women feel complete only after undergoing all the stages of nkim and feeling great and fulfilled. Their families feel proud of them for not putting the family name to shame and for respecting the norms and values of the Ejagham people. She can only be eligible to sit in the council of notables after she has undergone nkim. This is explained by a woman who says that "People show me so much love and respect"; "A type of silver iron beads (amanima) was put on my wrist by my father to signify my greatness". Amanima signifies greatness and authority and identifies you as a great woman. Nkim helps a woman to experience social acceptance and have a high self-esteem. A woman is worthless if she has not undergone nkim.

Women play a great traditional role within the Ejagham community to uphold their family's honour and family name. The young Ejagham girls are expected to be sexually pure and not to desire men till after marriage. The sexual desires of girls need to be controlled early enough to prevent immorality, deviant sexual behaviour and to ensure marital fidelity. Nkim gives a woman a status and a voice in her community.

### **The perception that women should procure joy and happiness**

The Ejagham believe that the girl child should procure joy and happiness to her family by undergoing nkim. Any girl who refuses to undergo nkim is a shame to herself, her family name and her community. The Ejagham believe that many women today abandon their husbands for other men because they lack the beauty, cleanliness and self-control

from nkim. Women should be able to sing, dance to entertain men and showcase their beauty in the community. The women's statements that: "I brought joy, pride and honour to my family"; "I was trained to be a good singer and dancer"; "I was fed and taught to sing and dance for six months". From the above quotations it's clear that to experience social acceptance, a woman must go through all the different stages of nkim successfully and show to the community that she's ripe for adult roles.

### **The perception that women should be circumcised**

A well brought up and complete woman in the Ejagham community is a circumcised woman. A woman should be circumcised, that is a reduction of clitoris to be perceived as a complete woman. A woman who is not circumcised is considered dirty and promiscuous. She's believed to be disease infested and morally unhealthy. She is a disgrace to her family and the community as she can become pregnant out of wedlock thus bringing shame to her family and the clan. She's looked upon as a man and not fit to be called a woman or a mother. From the women's statements that "A circumcised woman is complete because she has done everything that the tradition demands"; a "long clitoris is a thing of shame as you and your family receive insults from villagers". "When you undergo nkim, you are a complete woman" and "Any woman who has not done nkim is considered a man". It is evident that for a woman to feel complete, have self-fulfilment, social acceptance and self-actualization, she must undergo nkim. Nkim is culturally prescribed for all children in the Ejagham community. Anyone child who refuses to undergo nkim is showing disrespect to the traditions, the norms, customs and values of the community. They are always punished alongside their families.

### **The perception that women should respect cultural norms and values**

Nkim is done to promote the traditional and ancestral heritage of the people since girls are raised up within the traditional norms of the Ejagham culture. Nkim helps in the initiation good behaviour and marital values. During nkim, girls receive training to become good mothers and wives. Through the ritual monenkim traditional dances performed by circumcised women, they also learn to become responsible future wives and mothers. The ability to dance the prestigious monenkim dance symbolizes that a woman has attained a particular class, status and power. Nkim is a generational practice that tests and portrays the strength and resilience of a woman and any woman who cries during nkim is considered a weakling. Motivations of nkim are respect for ancestral spirits and cultural norms and values. The Ejagham circumcisers want nkim to continue after their reign because it is their culture and people should respect and obey cultural norms and values handed down by their ancestors. This woman explains that "My father and family are highly respected in the community because of the pride, respect and joy my circumcision brought to the family"; "nkim is a cultural practice of my people" "People show me love and respect and my family was full of pride". It is clear from the women's statements about nkim that "It makes a woman to behave well in the society and respect the norms and values of the community". For a woman to experience social acceptance, be considered faithful, a good mother/wife who is morally and ethically fit, respectful, pure and have a



high self-esteem, she must undergo nkim. Only nkim gives a woman honour in the Ejagham community.

#### **A woman should behave well in her community**

In the Ejagham community, a well brought up woman is one who has undergone all the stages of the nkim practice. Only nkim keeps a woman as a virgin for her future husband, controls a woman's sexuality and stops her from misbehaving in the community. Through nkim, she is seen as a respected woman who can take care of a home, look after her husband and care for a family. A woman's statement about nkim proves that "It makes a woman to behave well in the society and respect the norms and values of the community". In the Ejagham community a woman must undergo nkim for her to be respected, considered morally and ethically fit and also to experience social acceptance.

#### **Boy and girl must go through circumcision (nkim):**

Nkim is culturally prescribed in the Ejagham community for boys and girls if they must move from childhood to adulthood. Nkim prepares boys and girls for adult roles immediately after they undergo the practice. Nkim for the boys end after healing and no boy is considered a man when he has not undergone nkim. No boy can marry if he has not been circumcised. A boy with a foreskin is a thing of shame to his family and the community. Boys should undergo nkim to be considered clean and ready for procreation and adult roles. Only girls are kept in the fattening room wherein they receive more informal training on responsible motherhood and adulthood. This is clear from the statements of these matrons that "Boy and girl must go through nkim (circumcision); "A circumcised person is complete because she or he has done everything that the tradition demands"; "Nkim prepares a person for responsible adulthood". This explains the fact that boys and girls must go through nkim to be respected in their community. Nkim makes boys and girls to be pure, experience social acceptance, maturity, responsible adulthood and traditional fulfilment. Girls and boys are trained to protect their culture and so do not get involved in social and sexual activities especially with the opposite sexes of their ages.

What children grow up to become depend on the role of their parents and education in socialisation. Today's children have moved from tabula rasa to the discovery of childhood where children are having rights to educational beliefs and practices of the contemporary world. The child is no longer seen as a mind neutral and ready to be filled by experience in the course of development. Training and experience fills the child's mind with facts, ideas and concepts while parenting, education and socialisation shape the child. The human nature is inherently considered to be good and free but society restrains and corrupts it. Cultures train their children to be of value to themselves and society but the supremacy and weight of christian religion coloured and overwhelmed views on childhood. Despite the strong cultural beliefs of the Ejagham people in the superiority of the gods of their clan, christianity forcefully upholds the fact that only baptism endows a child with an immortal soul. This is contrary to the views or traditional beliefs and the Ejagham conception of childhood. Modernisation has made child development and education to change over historical time and across cultures. Globalisation and post modernism presupposes inclusiveness of all patterns of human behaviour but this is far from reality as western perspectives dominate the world.

#### **DISCUSSION**

#### **To appraise how the cultural beliefs of nkim ritual influence personality development among Ejagham women.**

The results of this study prove that cultural beliefs of nkim ritual influence personality development among Ejagham women. The cultural belief that a woman should be clean, pure, beautiful, faithful, sexually reserved, honoured, circumcised, procure joy, marriageable, respect cultural norms and values and be respected and honoured. All the respondents agreed that cultural beliefs of nkim influence their personality. it gives them high self-esteem, social acceptance, responsible motherhood, sexual self-esteem, self-actualisation and makes them ethically and morally fit. This could be seen from their cited responses.

Previous research studies showed that cultural beliefs of nkim influence personality. Pemunta (2011) wrote that the Ejagham of Cameroon believe that a girl who is not circumcised is unclean and as such poses a problem for her future husband because a man's penis is supposed not to touch a girl or his wife's clitoris during sexual intercourse. the perception of nkim as necessary to raise a girl properly and prepare her for adulthood and marriage; the assumption that nkim reduces women's sexual desire thereby preserves premarital virginity and prevents promiscuity; the association of nkim with ideas of cleanliness (hygienic, aesthetic and moral), including the belief that, left uncut, the clitoris would grow excessively; women's belief, in some rare cases, that nkim improves male sexual pleasure and virility and, in even rarer cases, that nkim facilitates childbirth by improving a women's ability to tolerate the pain of childbirth through the pain of nkim; that nkim is supported or mandated by religion, or that it facilitates living up to religious expectations of sexual constraint; and the notion that nkim is an important cultural tradition that should not be questioned or stopped, especially not by people from outside the community. Such beliefs may affect the personality of the Ejagham females.

Research studies from Mernissi (2001) stated that FGC is presumed by advocates to be one way of maintaining restraint over women and girls so as to ensure control, assure social and biological reproduction through marriage. The Ejagham believe that women have revolting sexual energy inside their bodies as represented by the presence of the clitoris on the female body. Although in extreme pain, girls feel 'happy' and 'proud' to be circumcised (Chalmers & Hashni, 2000: 227-234). Girls go through circumcision with their peer group, which may be a protective influence on their mental health. The circumcised genitalia is considered beautiful (Abdulcadir et al 2011: 140; **Utz-Billing et al. 2008: 225-229**). Thus in cultures where circumcision is customary, being uncircumcised might lead a woman to think that she is dirty, has unsightly genitalia, and is considered inferior. Without circumcision, a woman may not be eligible for marriage, which may be the only way to ensure an economically viable future (Cook et al. 2002: 281-287). Lack of circumcision brought shame upon the whole family (Baron & Denmark. 2006: 339-355). These outcomes might cause an uncircumcised woman considerable worry. Baron & Denmark (2006: 339-355) stated that uncircumcised women also experience severe exclusion and are ranked lowest in the social hierarchy and are forbidden to speak at gatherings.

The findings in this study are consistent with Mackie (2008) who stated that female circumcision is largely founded in traditional beliefs and societal pressure to conform. Families, communities and cultures in which Female circumcision is performed have different reasons for doing so. The traditional ritual of female circumcision states how women should behave. Circumcision is expected to make women submissive to men. A major motivation is that the practice is believed to ensure the girl conforms to key social norms, such as those related to sexual restraint, femininity, respectability and maturity. These are most frequently cited as tradition, culture, and religious beliefs. The first reason given is hygiene; the external female genitals are thought to be dirty, and their removal is believed to ensure cleanliness (Mackie 2008). Secondly, the pursuance of aesthetic appeal; it is believed that the similarities between the clitoris and the male penis make the female genitals aesthetically repulsive; a smooth surface is preferred (Mackie, 2008). Thirdly, female circumcision is believed to prevent stillbirths in initial pregnancies; consequently, uncircumcised women are believed to kill their new born babies due to contact with the head of their clitoris. This belief explains why some cultures like the Ejagham perform circumcision on uncircumcised women during their labour.

Additional reasons are centred on the concept of womanhood and marriage ability. Another reason given for female circumcision is the need for social acceptance that the perceived coming of age rituals offer the women who undergo it. FC is believed to prevent promiscuity; if the clitoris and other sensitive tissues are eliminated, then this will result in a decrease in female sexual desire, giving the female incentive to remain a virgin and to remain monogamous once a female is married. As a result, many believe female circumcision provides for increase in a woman's marriage ability due to the increased likelihood of the woman's virginity that circumcision offers. In addition, nkim is cited to provide enhancement of fertility, although there is no evidence to support this belief. Sometimes myths about female genitalia (e.g., that an uncut clitoris will grow to the size of a penis, or that FC will enhance fertility or promote child survival) perpetuate the practice. Lastly, FC is cited to support increased male sexual pleasure; the manufactured size of the vaginal orifice, in conjunction with the elimination of female orgasm as a feasible priority in sexual activity, allows the husband to dominate the sexual encounter and engage purely for his own gratification (Mackie, 2008).

### Conclusion

This study investigated the cultural beliefs of female circumcision (nkim) in the Ejagham ethnic group of Cameroon. It found that cultural beliefs of nkim influence personality development positively as seen from the statements of the women interviewed. From the results obtained in the study, it is clear that nkim as a cultural practice can only be better appraised if studies are carried out objectively, paying attention to the reasons for the practice and the factors that sustain them in the Ejagham ethnic group of Cameroon.

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