

*A Dangerous Cut: A Solo Performance about Traditional  
Circumcision Practices in Kenya*

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Abstract

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*A Dangerous Cut* is a solo performance piece from the perspective and experience of a Kenyan mother dealing with the loss of her son due to cultural and traditional circumcision practises. This piece provides a closer look at the involvement of the church as well as the community structures that allow for traditional circumcision methods to continue in Kenya.

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Graduate Thesis – *A Dangerous Cut*

Jeffrey Fracé

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For many years, Kenyan boys have undergone a rite of passage ceremony that involves traditional male circumcision practices. While some have used medical professionals, many still choose to go the traditional route. The cultural practices vary across different ethnic communities; however, the main aspects of concern are similar. That is, the tools and skill levels of those carrying out the procedure are inadequate. Though many boys are seemingly unscathed, there continues to be a significant number of hospitalizations, serious complications and even deaths that result from traditional circumcisions. Initially, I wanted to use this opportunity to follow the life of a girl who had undergone Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), but the recent events in Kenya caused me to change my story to one that needs just as much attention.

Acting has always been about more than the pleasure I get from being on stage. I have always wanted to be a voice for people who cannot express themselves. I hope to use my performing arts skills to educate, inspire change in policies and laws, and change perspectives. The solo performance of *A Dangerous Cut* follows the experience of a Kenyan mother who has chosen to speak out against traditional circumcision. Given her experience with Female Genital Mutilation as a young girl, she continues to witness and experience the torture of traditional practices through her son. I wanted to highlight a voice that is rarely heard regarding traditional male circumcision. News reports often include the adult male perspective which is one of pride, excitement, and

encouragement to bravely face the experience. Therefore, to effectively tell this story, I needed to embody the various characters that were crucial in the telling of this story.

The first aspect of my training that supported my ability to step into these characters was the Archetype work done with Bridget Connors. The song at the beginning was birthed from the exploration of the Huntress and the Warrior. The desperate cry in the face of loss and the call to action was essential for commencing the piece. This helped to draw the attention of listeners and hopefully stirred up their feelings of connectedness to the character on stage. What started as a war cry evolved into a call to others to join the main character's cause in protesting traditional male circumcision practices. Working on the archetypal Huntress and Warrior outside further allowed me to connect with the landscape and world of the piece.

My exploration of the archetypes continued into the archetypal mother. I specifically drew upon her connectedness to conception, growth and death. Her nurturing spirit, powerful voice and softness in the face of her offspring supported my work in various aspects of the solo performance. I found a power in my voice in the face of destructive characters and my grounding in her stride and movement on stage. The archetypal mother is sure about herself and is ready to protect her people and environment. The majority of my character was expressed through this archetype. Conversely, despite not having a formal archetype to assist the work of the male perspective, I felt it necessary to explore what I consider the archetypal Kenyan man. To fully recount the events, his views, mannerisms, and manner of speech needed to be incorporated as a strong opposing view to the mother's.

The Alexander Technique training I received in the MFA program was essential to telling this story. I am telling this story with the hope that there can be some real change in Kenya concerning people's attitudes towards traditional circumcision. Additionally, I hope to empower women to speak up against practices that continue to affect their bodies and their children's bodies. I call my whole self to coordinate as I invite my future audience, so that I can tell the story of a mother who has lost her child, so that I can encourage women to stand up for themselves in what is typically a male chauvinist society.

With the development of a vocal component to the piece, I used my training learned in the Acting through Song course as an added layer to the storytelling. It was vital that the world and environment remained clear to fulfil my objective: to get more people on my side in the fight against traditional male circumcision practices. The final moments of the piece where I jumped between spoken text and singing were especially challenging as I did not want there to be a difference in intention as I switched back and forth. The singing and the spoken text remained a continuous stream of thought as I remained connected to my invisible scene partner.

I hope this show will bring tangible change in Kenya from all levels: government, community, and family. These changes will include implementing policies that restrict such practices, enforcing these policies at the community levels and promoting the use of medical professionals. I hope conversations will open up and women will begin to stand up for what they believe to be right.

# A Dangerous Out

By Esther Okech

*(On stage, we see a stage box with a knife, a razor blade and cloth with blood on it. In the darkness, a voice begins to sing and the lights slowly fade in.)*

*Kama mnanisikia  
Kujeni Mnifuate  
Eh heh eh heh*

*(Lights fade in)*

*Our children are dying  
Our hopes and dreams in the grave  
It's time to stop denying  
To tradition we are slaves X2*

*To Tradition we are slaves ... (trails off)*

**\*Lights up\***

Mama Njeri, will you help me? *(Pause)*  
Mama Njeri, we have to talk.  
You asked me what to do about your son, James.  
My son, as you know, has been lying in the ICU for two weeks now wilting away.

*(Pause)*

Aiii, Mama Njeri, are you actually walking away?

*(Calling after her)*

Ehe, you think I am mad too, eh?

*(Pause. Pulls out her phone to call Baba Tom.)*

Hello? Baba Tom, we need to talk...  
Yes, he is still in the hospital...  
Yes, we are praying very hard, AND I was wondering...  
I need a male voice to join in my campaign. Given what happened to my son Mike...

*(Pause)*

What! You dare call it bad luck?  
You must be joking Baba Tom.  
My son Mike lies in a hospital bed, fighting for his life and you call it 'bad luck'? *(scoffs)*  
You know what... NEVER MIND.

*(Hangs up the phone, thinks about who to call next, calls Pastor Steve)*

Ah, Hello? Pastor Steve, yes, praise the Lord... Yes, we are still in the hospital...

*(Pause)*

Pastor Steve, I need you to join me.

I know you are a rational man.

I am sure after what happened to Mike, you would be willing to support my campaign.

We must take our boys to hospitals...

*(Desperately rummages through bag)*

Right now, I am looking at the poster from the church advertising the boys to Men camp.

My son Mike lies in a hospital bed fighting for his life because of this very camp.

I have been working on these posters and I need you to... no? You're not going to help...?

*(Puts phone down)*

HEH! Are you kidding me!? No one is willing to help?

So, this is what it means to be part of an African community?

Oh...oh...wait! I'm sorry, Africa is not a country.

This is what it means to be part of a Kenyan community?

So, we're all willing to turn a blind eye to even murder, I mean... unless it touches our family or our household...

Kwani...? Aren't you people tired?

My son Mike lies in that hospital bed fighting for his life. And why...Because he MUST become a man!

I should have run away from this community with my son when I began to feel uneasy about this whole exercise.

I should have listened to my motherly instinct.

I would have saved Mike from this torment.

But instead... Instead, I listened to my husband, Baba Mike.

Like a good wife I listened to him.

Him and every other man around here, all the same! (scoffs)

*(Mockingly)*

"My son must become a man. He must undergo the full ceremony. That is our tradition. The single most important tradition that signifies his transition into manhood. His blood must trickle down to the ground as a spiritual offering to our ancestors. This is the only way for him to be recognized and given a place within the society. I went through it and so did my father and his father before him. Did we die? My son cannot bring shame to the family by dishonoring the ancestors. And woman, you have no business in this matter!

*(Gets an idea)* Look, it's all very simple! All we need to do is get the government to make some sort of... law! Some sort of way of banning these people from these traditional practices!

*(Thinking...gets an idea)*

We could hold a protest!

I mean every night, I have been working on these pos... (*notices the "Boys to Men" posters*) are you kidding me? Someone has taken them down again?

Every time my posters are replaced by these "boys to men posters".

I hang up my posters in town *hoping and praying* somebody will join my cause.

I have no idea who has been destroying my posters.

I imagine it must be the village men!

Ha! To think that this (*mockingly*) sacred, life changing event could be gone forever.

Nobody said you can't... oh... I don't know... GO TO A HOSPITAL!

First, it's the separation. They take the boys away to someplace where nobody can find them.

(*Reading a letter*) "...Toothbrush, toothpaste, one roll of toilet paper, washcloth, soap, socks, t-shirts, less, one pair of underwear for his return."

I imagine that is all he needs on this transformation journey to becoming a man. No comforts of any kind...

"Everything will be provided at the camp. The boys will remain at the camp until they have healed at which point, they will return to their families as full adults."

I have tried everything to get my son, Mike, out of this:

"Baba Mike, he is sick, let him stay home for a while. " In comes Mike looking healthy as an ox.

"Baba Mike, he has school next week, he can't miss classes for this" - (in Mike's voice)

"Mommy, schools have been closed next week!" I mean, how many more lies can I tell!? So, I am forced to send him to the camp.

The men in the village aren't any better. Baba Tom, my husband Baba Mike...they're all brainwashed.

(*She begins steps on the block with the knife and begins to mock the men*)

(*In a man's voice*):

"It is a rite of passage and a test for endurance, of how courageous a man can be in his life.

He is not a man if he doesn't do this.

It is important and people are happy because the child has left his mother and has now joined the line of his father.

He must display his strength and readiness to become a man.

Afterwards, you will not find him sitting with his mother.

Once he is healed, you will find him sitting with his father.

(*Puts on a man's coat*) He is now wearing his father's clothes."

(*Snaps out of it*)

WHAT GOOD ARE YOUR CLOTHES IF HE IS DEAD?

(*She starts to pace back and forth*)

One week goes by, no word on how the boys are doing.

“Have you heard from them? Is Mike doing ok?” Nothing.  
Another week goes by. Silence... “why don't you call one of your friends at the camp. They can give us an update on how Mike is?” - I am warned to stop interfering in the affairs of men.  
“He's not coming back. Something isn't right, I know it. I can feel it. He is my only child. A mother knows these things...”

*(Phone rings)*

Now, who is this?  
Hello...? Yes, it is... What!? I am on my way!

*(News headline plays in the background)*

### **Initiation/Transformation**

*(The phone rings, she answers it)* Hello? Hello? ...Yes, Mama Njeri, I am at the hospital... yes... I am just waiting for them to bring him back. They were doing tests on him...  
He was unresponsive when he arrived.  
Yes... the lord is my shepherd... I will not want *(she begins to break down and straightens up)*  
... Yes... I will let you know.

God... Mungu wangu... why have you forsaken me?

*(She notices Pastor Steve approaching)* Pastor Steve, what are you doing here? I am going to ask you politely to leave. Do I need to call the officer to come remove you? - OFFICER!!  
REMOVE THIS MAN FROM HERE!!

*(reading)* This is your poster, isn't it? “Boys to Men camp???”

*(Continues to read)* ...A church camp you hosted for our boys with the promise that they would RETURN HOME!!!! Does this look like my home?

no... NO!!! Don't you dare shut me up. You think I don't know we are in a hospital? You think I don't know my son needs quiet to heal? GET OUT!!

Don't walk in here with your fake prayers and pretense about God - I see right through you.  
Since when was the church a part of Mila? Cultural traditions!?  
I shouldn't have let you people take my son away from me.  
I heard whispering and rumblings in the village of women who had lost their children.  
People speaking in hushed tones not really wanting to say what happened.  
Why isn't anyone talking about it?

I have seen it! I watched it! Yes!!!  
I snuck down to the river and witnessed it.  
I had to hide behind trees and bushes but I witnessed this sacred ceremony of yours that is killing our boys.  
Look me in the eye!  
It is killing our boys...

These *men* you are entrusting our boys to... drunk and hurling insults at our boys... what happened to the church elders you promised us (*points to the poster*)?

Smearing mud on their bodies? Do you support that? What about these ugly, unclean, unsterilized, and filthy blades they are using... Do you endorse that too?

It's... it's...the drunkenness and the river and the mud...and the blood, SO much blood!!!!  
His legs are swollen... diarrhea. vomiting. sepsis shock is what they are saying.

WHY WASN'T I CALLED WHEN YOU REALIZED SOMETHING WAS WRONG?!

Wake up, Mike...Wake up, mtoto wangu...WAKE UP!!!

*(Trails off in tears)*

*(Headlines play in the background)*

**Return:** *(as if speaking to a fellow mother - Mama Njeri)*

*Lala mtoto lala*

*Mummy anakuja na maziwa*

*Sleep baby sleep*

*On the other side you'll find peace*

*On the other side there's relief*

*No one to cause grief*

*Lala mtoto lala*

*Mummy anakuja na maziwa*

Mama Njeri, thank you for joining me here... you are a sister in the Lord. Maybe if I shared my story with you, it would give you an answer about what to do with James?

I was just starting to notice boys and their effect on me... I would see one walk by me and feel a slight flutter in my stomach, a shortness of breath and... a tingle... right (*looks down at her pelvic area*). That's all I can truly remember from my encounter with boys. That innate sensation of attraction and longing for pleasure - now a distant memory. A memory flooded and swallowed whole, replaced by one of the searing pains I experienced when my clitoris was sliced off my body. (*She narrates the experience*) My mother behind me, pinning me down as I struggled to escape, 5 other women surrounding me humming chants of courage and blessing over me and an old woman with grubby hands and a rusty knife approaching me, undressing me from the waist down, pinning my legs down under her weight and... (silence. Then lets out a blood curdling scream) inch by inch... the knife slicing through my body cutting away parts I never even knew I had....

"Mama, tell her to stop! MAMA!!"

The chanting intensified until she was done. Heh... they left me there, crying, bleeding and confused. She flung my flesh across the room like a piece of trash and walked away. I was now a woman. I was now clean.

This knife was used on my son and strangely enough, there's no difference between this and the one used on me years ago.

It's hard to imagine that after an experience like this, that I would ever let my child go through anything like it. And yet, here I stand, at the grave of my only child. Because of what? Circumcision? He didn't return home like I was promised. I sent him to his death. Mama Njeri: our children are dying... don't let him go to the camp, take him to the hospital... our hopes and dreams in the grave... these men don't know what they are talking about... it's time to stop denying... I know they will talk about you in the village but at least you will have your son... to tradition we are slaves... don't do it mama Njeri. Don't do it.

**Blackout**