

When deliberate killing of infants is justified: Reflections on Infanticides among the Ngoni of Tanzania from late Pre-colonial to German Colonial Period

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Introduction

This study is a part of the on-going historical studies on disease, gender and demographic in African studies. It focuses on infanticide practices among the Ngoni of Southern Tanzania from pre-colonial periods (from the 1860s) to independence. Infanticide refers to an intentional killing or any behavior/practice leading to death of a baby below the age of one year.¹ Its forms and motives have been of different faces depending on forms of consciousness developed by society amongst whom infanticide was practiced.² Infanticide has been a global practice in some societies at every level of cultural complexity. Just like ancient Europe and Asian,³ Africans practiced infanticide at different historical eras for various reasons.⁴ The Ngoni of Tanzania is one of the African bantho ethnic groups that justified infanticide practices. Preliminary study from Tanzania National Archive (TNA) and oral reminiscences from Ungoni suggest that, reasons for infanticide ranged from divine and witchcraft to economic, gender preference, Eugenics, enforcement of moral values and military reasons. It is further suggest that, the main victims of the practice were infants with multiple births, those born with physical defects, those that appeared feet first, feet appeared first at time of birth, born prematurely, those born with albinism and those that appeared incisors. It is further suggested that, Ngoni also killed and sacrificed healthy and good looking babies to *Chapanga* “Chief God” for expiation. Baby girls also are said to have been customary victim of infanticides because Ngoni’s patriarchal system.

However, most of scholars led by travelers, anthropologists sociologists and missionaries who documented on the prevalence of infanticide in Ungoni have associated it with indigenous’

¹ A. Cossin, *Female Criminality Infanticide, Moral Panics and The Female Body*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 5 25-44; Shurlee Swain, “Infanticide, Savagery and Civilization: The Australian Experience, in Brigitte H. Bechtold and Donna Cooper Graves (eds.) *Killing Infants: Studies in the Worldwide Practice of Infanticide*. (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006)” 85-106.

³ W L. Langer, “Infanticide: A Historical Survey,” *History of Childhood Quarterly* 1(1974), p. 353, 355; K. L. Moseley, “The History of Infanticide in Western Society,” *Issues of Law and Medicine*, 1 (1986): 346–357

⁴ Stephen Wilson. “Infanticide, Child Abandonment and Female Honour in Nineteenth-Century Corsica,” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* , 30:4, 1998, 762-783.

barbarism.⁵ Similar scholars have appreciated colonial officials and missionaries especially UMCA and Benedictines as solely heroes who energetically intervened to stop infanticides. Such conclusion had to be critically analyzed as it largely contradicts with local histories which suggest that although infanticide was done as survival strategies; some indigenous people were against. Secondly, German colonial wars of conquest like Maji Maji war (1905-07) created fertile environment for more killing of infants. Colonial population data on death toll due to Maji Maji war suggest Ungoni had lost nearly sixty thousand people in which twenty per cent were infants.⁶ This means within two years German colonial government had directly or indirectly killed around twelve thousand infants. This figure does not include children killed during First World War (1914-18) when Songea was turned into battle field between Germans and allied powers. Children killed under influence of Christian teachings which stressed on Mosaic Laws (killing of babies born out of wedlock) also had to be critically examined.

Statement of the problem

Preliminary research showed that infanticide in Ungoni/Songea could best be understood if approached historically. This is because understanding of how various clans and the entire community assumed and handled the threats to infant well-being is crucial part of human life which requires historical analysis. This is necessary because population growth and generational continuities of African societies depend on the wellbeing and survival of the infants into elders. While some of the recent scholars admitted on the prevalence of infanticide in Ungoni, they did not take a serious attempt at answering questions as why infanticide evolved, what were the forms of infanticide and how it was practiced over time. Equally important the question on why and how some African individuals, the missionaries and the colonial states intervened on infanticide remained unexplored. This study therefore, aims at addressing these scholarly gaps in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of infanticide and its impacts from the 1860s to 1918 in Songea by using Ngoni as a case of analysis. Importantly, considering the contemporary prevalence of infanticide in Tanzania, this study will bring to light a new dimension in the study

⁵ TNA, Acc. No. 155/12-16. Benedictine missionaries documented in History during Germany Regime. 1890/1916, J. Komba. "God and Man; Religious Elements of the Ngoni of South-west Tanganyika Viewed in the Light of Christian Faith". (PhD Dissertation, University of Urbana, 1958), p. 113-14

⁶ J. P. Moffett, (ed), Handbook of Tanganyika, (Dar es salaam, 1958), p 76

of infanticide by providing deeper understanding of the manner and extent to which the changing socio-economic and political forces influenced infanticide over time.

Sources and Research Methods

This study is qualitative research and it involves a systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings. In an attempt to meet research objectives and to narrow the gap in understanding infanticide practices among the Ngoni, the study relies upon various sources that provide primary and secondary data. The primary sources are of three types. Firstly, archival materials like secretariat files, anthropological and ethnographic works, district annual reports and Songea district book from already visited archives like National Archives of Tanzania (TNA), East Africana section of the University of Dar es Salaam Library and Benedictine missionary archive of Songea. UMCA archive in Likoma Island-Malawi was visited for the same. The study also used oral sources which comprised oral testimonies and traditions where eye-witness accounts, local narratives, oral traditions and life histories from Ungoni in order to generate the indigenous-centered understanding and interpretation of infanticides.

Additionally the study also used secondary sources whereby relevant information will be gathered from published and unpublished documents, such as electronic and printed materials such as theses/dissertations research reports, periodicals and colonial newspapers. These sources supplemented weaknesses that appeared while using some of primary sources by providing a researcher with vital insights on what other scholars have previously done in relation to infanticides in the rest of Tanzania and Africa at large. Information from respondents was analyzed using a qualitative content analysis technique. This kind of analysis involves a systematic examination and interpretation of sources in order to identify intended themes.

Findings/Results

Prior to the arrival of the Ngoni (1840s) the classless and communal based communities had infanticides in practices also. There are evidences from written and oral sources that pre-Ngoni clans like the Nambalema clans practiced infanticides through babies' sacrifice as religious ritual

at Ngoroworo Mountain.⁷ The coming of feudal Ngoni Songea district seeking refuge following Shake Zulu's desire to conquer weak clans in KwaZulu Natal⁸ increased a gravity of infanticide in the region. This was due to the complexity of their social formation and the level of advancement they had reached. Their reasons behind the infanticide practices ranged from means of population control, sexism, economy, moral values, traditional beliefs and Eugenics and militarism. Twins/triplets, babies that appeared feet first at time of birth and all babies born with physical defects were victims of the infanticides. The coming of Europeans did very little to practically put infanticide practices to an end. In steady their presences increase the gravity of the practice. In other words, despite German colonial officials and missionary initiative to stop infanticides, it was during the German colonialism that the Ngoni experienced more killing of infants in the history of the region.

Conclusion

Infanticides Ungoni was done as one of the local survival strategy against all sorts of physical and psychological threats. This initiative however was received by its own people with divided views. While some supported it some were against it. Those that opposed it were the first to have initiated campaign against infanticides. Europeans and missionaries were not the first as some scholars who are direct victims of euro-centric perception have penned down. What Europeans did was to join hands with indigenous people in fighting infanticides through colonial education, western medical services, colonial laws against infanticides and evangelical works which were carried by Christian missionaries. Unfortunately, Europeans did not only paint Africans with grim picture by branding them uncivilized and barbaric, they also came with know it all attitudes in which African methods of fighting infanticides were seen as outdated if not early stone age tactics. As the result, quality of colonial initiatives against infanticides was compromised as Africans distanced themselves from all colonial campaigns against infanticides. It is not surprising that until the end of German colonial rule (1918), infanticides continued in Ungoni.

⁷ C. Geho, *Songea kabla ya Uvamizi wa Wangoni*. (Songea, Peramiho Printing Press. 1963), p. 14

⁸ P.H. Gulliver, 'A History of the Songea Ngoni', *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, 41, (1955), 16-29. E. Ebner, OBS, *The History of the Wangoni and their Origin in the Southern African Bantu Tribes*. (Benedictine Publications Ndanda-Peramiho, 1987) also C. Hamilton. *The Mfecane Aftermath: Reconstructive Debates in Southern African History*. (Natal. University of Natal Press: 1995), J.B Peires, (ed), *Before and After Shaka: Papers in Nguni History*. Institute of Social and Economic Research, (Grahams Town, Rhodes University:1983).