



Volume 4	Issue 3	March (2025)	DOI: 10.47540/ijqr.v4i3.1710	Page: 208 – 215
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Traditional Initiation Rites: Constraints on Students' Educational Attainment in Coast Region Tanzania

Audrey Benson¹, Joyce Nemes², Festo Nguru³

¹Ridhiwani Kikwete Secondary School Chalinze District Coastal Region, Tanzania

²Department of Educational Management and Policy Studies, University of Dodoma, Tanzania

³Department of Educational Psychology and Curriculum Studies, University of Dodoma, Tanzania

Corresponding Author: Audrey Benson; Email: adrellyt@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Students' Educational Attainment, Traditional Initiation Rites.

Received : 05 November 2024

Revised : 16 March 2025

Accepted : 23 March 2025

ABSTRACT

Traditional initiation rites remain integral to cultural identity and coming-of-age practices in many African societies, significantly influencing educational outcomes. While existing literature predominantly emphasizes the negative impacts of these practices on education, limited research explores their comprehensive effects on female students' educational attainment, particularly in the coastal region of Tanzania. This study aimed to investigate how traditional initiation rites influence students' educational attainment in the Chalinze District, Coast Region, in the United Republic of Tanzania. Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the study employed a qualitative approach, collecting data through interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary reviews involving educational officers, teachers, parents, and students. The findings revealed a complex interplay between traditional practices and education, where initiation rites caused significant academic disruptions and behavioral transformations. Notably, key findings indicated that, in addition to post-initiation autonomy, ceremonial gift-giving practices and teachings from traditional instructors frequently resulted in educational challenges, including dropouts, early marriages, and teenage pregnancies. The study concludes that, while traditional rites hold cultural significance, their current implementation patterns considerably constrain educational attainment. This research contributes to understanding the cultural-educational nexus in Tanzania and recommends reforming initiation practices to align with educational goals, implementing cultural education programs, and establishing collaborative frameworks between traditional authorities and educational institutions to harmonize cultural practices with academic achievement.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development, yet its attainment faces complex challenges at the intersection of tradition and modernity. In many societies, deeply embedded cultural practices, particularly traditional initiation rituals, create significant barriers to educational achievement (Mgalula, 2017; Onyeansi, 2019). This tension between cultural preservation and educational advancement presents a critical challenge for developing nations, especially in regions where traditional practices are deeply entrenched in the social fabric.

Cross-cultural evidence reinforces these concerns. In South Sudan, Bior (2019) revealed how traditional practices, including female genital mutilation, correlate with marriages occurring between ages 12 and 17, severely compromising educational opportunities. In The Gambia, research by Lowe et al., (2020) demonstrates that even in communities without female genital mutilation, traditional practices contribute to early pregnancy rates reaching 30%, primarily due to limited alternatives to marriage and premature sexual activity.

Tanzania presents a particularly compelling case study in this global discourse. The country's

constitution and Education and Training Policy (2014, revised 2023) mandate the completion of universal secondary education, reflecting a national commitment to educational advancement. However, in coastal regions, including the Coast Region, traditional initiation rites known as *jando* and *unyago* remain mandatory for students under 18, creating direct tension between cultural obligations and educational mandates. Research in Morogoro, Tanzania, quantified this impact, documenting 41% truancy among initiated girls (Rehema et al., 2014). While male student statistics were not explicitly documented, the same study revealed significant absenteeism among boys during hibernation periods due to traditional dress requirements, suggesting broader gender implications. Barrow et al., (2022) further highlighted how these practices create complex social pressures that disproportionately affect educational continuity.

While numerous studies have examined educational attainment in Tanzania's evolving social context (Ems & Mnjokava, 2022; Kinyagu, 2020; Lianyu & Msafiri, 2022), critical gaps persist in the literature. Existing research on traditional practices is largely outdated (Mteweale, 2012; Rehema et al., 2014; Mgalula, 2017), failing to capture recent social changes and policy implementations. Furthermore, current literature disproportionately focuses on girls' experiences (Mollel & Chong, 2017; Ems & Mnjokava, 2022; Ndile, 2022), leaving male students' challenges understudied. Lastly, limited research addresses the unique coastal context of the Coast Region, where traditional practices maintain a strong influence.

This study therefore addresses these critical gaps by exploring how traditional initiation rituals affect secondary school students' educational attainment in the Coast region. The research promises several significant contributions: For educational policymakers, the study provides evidence-based insights regarding specific intervention points for educational authorities and contributes to the development of culturally sensitive educational policies. In terms of theoretical understanding, the study expands knowledge of how traditional practices influence modern education. These findings have proven valuable not only in Tanzania but also in other regions globally struggling to balance cultural preservation with educational advancement. For that

reason, this paper attempts to answer one primary question, that is, what traditional initiation rituals constrain secondary school students in the Coast Region and thus offers unique insights into how traditional practices interact with modern educational objectives in an evolving social context.

METHODS

The study employed a qualitative approach along with the case study design in view of the fact that it allows researchers to gain insights into the subjective experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions of students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders, shedding light on the underlying reasons for students' dropout to investigate the influence of cultural practices on students' dropout (Creswell, 2018). The study examined people's beliefs, practices, teachings, opinions, behaviors, and attitudes centered on the lived experiences, perceptions, and emotions of participants aiming at understanding their interactions. Henceforth, the qualitative approach along with the case study design is well-suited for examining social, cultural, and contextual factors, making it ideal for understanding the unique characteristics of different educational settings, communities, and cultures and how these factors interact with students' decisions to drop out of selected government secondary schools in Chalinze district.

The study was conducted in the Chalinze district one among nine administrative districts in the Coast region in Tanzania. The study was conducted in three government secondary schools located in three different wards. The selection of Chalinze district among the nine districts was influenced by several factors, including its recent establishment in 2016, its high enrolment rate, and its strategic location being at the junction of the major road (Chalinze, Dar es Salaam, Segera junction, and Msata, Bagamoyo, Segera junction) which have contributed to a diverse population and cultural practices.

The study comprised 50 participants including 1 head of secondary school division (HoSED), 4 heads of schools (HoS), 8 class teachers (CT), and 3 ward educational officers (WEO), who were selected purposively as they have rich relevant and diverse information regarding the study at hand. Then 30 students and 4 parents were selected

conveniently due to their availability and willingness.

Creswell (2018) contends that to have more profound information on the problem it is suitable to use different data collection methods, hence semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and documentary reviews were used. The researcher employed semi-structured interviews for HoSED, HoS, WCs, WEOs, CTs as well as parents which took about 30 to 50 minutes while heterogeneous focus group discussions were employed to students who were grouped into 5 FGDs of 10 students each from different classes and the FGDs took about 45 minutes. The researcher also employed documentary reviews whereby duty books, attendance registers as well as meeting minutes from the office of HoSED were used to obtain secondary data. The study revealed different themes using field notes from interviews, documentary reviews, and focus group talks during school visits. The data analysis was separated into thematic analysis and content analysis whereby detecting, analyzing, and reporting on themes within data were taken into account. Likewise, in the content analysis process, the researcher first defined the research question and selected relevant documents. Next, categories were developed to organize data, followed by coding specific segments. Patterns were analyzed, and findings were interpreted to draw connections between the data and the impact of traditional initiation rites on educational attainment results conducted successfully, Saldana (2015). Content analysis was also used to comply with collective suggestions and strategies discussed by groups as well as documentary reviews which involved content analysis of existing policies and programs to identify effective strategies and areas for improvement.

The study ensured compliance with research ethics by obtaining ethical approval from the University of Dodoma through the office of the Vice-Chancellor and seeking permission for data collection from the office of the Regional Administration Secretary of the Coast Region, as well as the District Executive Director of Chalinze District. The researcher maintained the confidentiality of respondents and institutions by assigning pseudonyms, such as schools 'C', 'A', 'M', 'H', and wards 'I', 'K', and 'J' respectively.

Before the interviews and FGDs, participants were informed about the goals of the study and the protection of their personal information and their consent was obtained. The participants willingly engaged in the study by signing the informed consent forms provided by the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the influence of traditional initiation rites on students' academic attainment. Generally, the study found that the traditional initiation rites in the Coast region have a significant influence on the disruption of academic attainment. The themes that emerged from the study include disruption of academic progress, post-initiation behavioral changes, sociocultural pressures and expectations, material inducements and their consequences, and gender-specific initiation content.

Disruption of Academic Progress

The research revealed significant disruption to academic continuity due to initiation rites ceremonies. This was particularly evidenced by the WEO from ward 'J' observation: "Frankly speaking, rituals of initiation often times disrupt regular school attendance, in the view of the fact that they coincide with important academic periods or examinations. Unless educational stakeholders are not serious enough, students are not required to be absent from school for the extended time of about (90) ninety days...".

The student's extended absence from school for approximately 90 days leads to a substantial interruption in students' academic progression, creating significant gaps in learning continuity. Findings obtained from a documentary review in the HoSED's office indicate that quite a good number of students who are dropping out of school is still alarming. It was evidently depicted that, until August 2023 at least 711 students from 25 government secondary schools in Chalinze district dropped out of schools.

These study findings align strongly with existing literature, particularly the study by Daka (2020) in Zambia, which documented similar disruptions to school attendance as a result of initiation ceremonies. Studies across Eastern and Southern Africa demonstrate significant academic disruptions caused by traditional initiation rites. In Tanzania, Mbaruku and Otieno (2022) carried out a

study in Longido District, Arusha which found that 96% of students identified night traditional dances ('esoto') as a primary factor in student absenteeism. In Zambia, Daka (2021) documented quite a good number of cases where learners missed three weeks of school during the *Nkolola* sexual rites initiation ceremony. Similarly, Schroeder et al. (2022) revealed that, in Southern Tanzania, girls as young as five years old were being detracted from classroom instruction due to initiation rituals, with training content remaining unchanged despite the reduced age of participation. The extended absence period identified in the Coast Region exceeded typical ceremonial timeframes documented in other regions, suggesting a particularly intensive form of traditional practice. Through the lens of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these interruptions represent more than just physical absence but rather constitute a competing form of social learning that actively displaces formal education. The theory's emphasis on the role of social context in learning helps to explain why such extended separations from the school environment proved particularly detrimental to educational continuity.

Post-Initiation Behavioral Changes

The research documented significant behavioral transformations following initiation ceremonies, particularly regarding students' attitudes toward authority. This was captured in a striking statement from the students' FGD, a student from school 'C': "In our tribe when you pass through initiation rites you are considered as a grown-up person since it is a preparation of young boys and girls to adulthood and thus you have right to decide whatever you want. Besides, it is very difficult for any woman, whether a teacher or someone else to punish a boy who has already passed in initiation rite stage. That is insubordination of manhood".

This was also highlighted in a compelling remark from the students' FGD; a female student from school 'M' stated: "It transformed my self-perception and the way I engage with adults, to such an extent that now I'm grown up and hence I can share with adult men".

In this tribe, initiation ceremonies represent a crucial shift to maturity, providing students with greater autonomy and decision-making capacity. The ceremonies appear to give a status that renders it culturally improper for women, especially female

instructors, to chastise boys who have passed and completed the stage successfully. Maintaining school discipline and authority may be challenging, especially for female educators. Dropout rates may increase if students believe they have little influence over the educational system thereafter. These behavioral changes are closely paralleled to the study finding by Rehema et al. (2014) regarding post-initiation attitude shifts.

The study findings concur with the study by Mweela (2018) who contends that the initiation ceremony entails the isolation of the *namwali*, or initiate, the informal learning process during which older and more experienced women, *aphungu* pass on lessons to young girls about what it means to be a woman in the society, whereby girls are taught on how to handle sexual affairs to make a man faithful to one woman and thus not being a womanizer.

The explicit challenge to female teachers' authority highlights a specific manifestation of the broader behavioral changes documented in the literature. Viewed through Vygotsky's theoretical framework, these behavioral transformations demonstrate how cultural practices mediate psychological development, fundamentally altering students' perception of their social role and status. The theory's emphasis on social learning helps to explain why these ceremonies profoundly influence students' subsequent behavior in educational settings.

Socio-cultural Pressures and Expectations

The research uncovered intense social pressures that create complex hierarchies and expectations within the community. Students who have not undergone initiation face significant marginalization in society, thus creating strong incentives to persuade them to participate in traditional practices regardless of educational consequences. During an interview, WEO from ward 'I' emphasized that: "Any girl or any boy who has not undergone initiation stage is known as *kimosi* which means she or he is still under the care of his/her parents in such a way that is not allowed to rent a house and even participate in traditional dances. Hence whatever he/she wants to do should ask for permission which is quite different from the one who has passed initiation rites. This situation compels many of our students to force their parents to pass in initiation to create a loophole for them to decide whether to continue schooling or not".

Commenting on this during FGD with students of school 'H' one among the participants added: "In our tradition, once you have undergone initiation rite, there are domestic chores like fetching water, cleaning the home compound and alike are not done by us but rather being left for girls and young ones. For that reason, it is a bit difficult for girls to concentrate and pay attention fully in educational matters, as a result, hinders their capability to successfully study hard thereafter they automatically drop out of school".

These findings resonated with Mollel and Chong's (2017) research on sociocultural barriers to education in Tanzania. In Rwanda, Idahemuka and Kayirangwa (2023) identified how cultural norms including early marriage, gender disparity, and domestic chores, significantly impact girls' academic performance. In Morogoro, Tanzania, Malipula (2022) found that initiation training emphasizes maternal and marital responsibilities that neither reinforce school curricula nor provide necessary modern developmental competencies. The social marginalization of uninitiated students exemplified the powerful cultural mechanisms that Vygotsky's theory identified as crucial to human development. The research revealed how these pressures create a form of forced choice between social acceptance and educational achievement, a dynamic not fully captured in previous studies of the region.

Material Inducements and Their Consequences

The research identified material gifts as significant catalysts for school dropout, as articulated by the Head of School from school 'A': "Presents and gifts given to girls during traditional ceremonies are of great influence for them to drop from school. Girls are given things like beds, mattresses, dressing tables, shoes, and clothes. All of a sudden, these girls are allowed to rent houses whereby they start being absentees and finally drop out of school".

From the quotation above material things in the form of gifts given to girls from their parents, neighbors, aunties, siblings, and friends especially those already passed in traditional initiation rites, during traditional ceremonies imply a shift to adulthood, leading them to undertake adult tasks prematurely. Having these items insinuates that, they are ready to set up their own houses while on the other hand, the new-found independence can

oftentimes lead to increased absenteeism, and thereafter students drop out of school automatically. This practice while culturally substantial seems to deliberately push students out of the educational system. During a discussion with some parents from ward 'I', one of them emphasized that: "During initiation rituals, parents give their youngsters various presents and gifts. We occasionally give them phones, especially smartphones which have become a weapon for harming our children in such a way that they lead students to lack of concentration and attention in their studies and thus deliberate focus on social media, gaming, gambling and being exposed to unsuitable information which has significant negative emotional and psychological repercussions".

The study findings are in line with the study by Ndile (2022) by highlights how material things in the form of presents and gifts serve as both symbolic and practical tools for relocating girls away from education. Studies highlight how material aspects of initiation ceremonies influence educational outcomes. In Zimbabwe, Moyo and Matanda (2020) observed that the *chinamwari* initiation rite, while providing some positive cultural education, often leads to school dropouts and early marriages. The practice of gift-giving during ceremonies has been linked to increased dropout rates and early marriages, particularly in coastal regions of Tanzania as well. Phiri, et al., (2023) conducted the study to examine how individual and community-level factors contribute to early marriage in Zambia, highlighting the role of cultural practices, including gift-giving during traditional ceremonies, which can encourage early marriage and disrupt educational attainment among girls. Through Vygotsky's theoretical lens, these material items in the form of gifts, function as cultural artifacts that mediate the transition of girls and boys from being students to adulthood. The practice of allowing initiated girls to rent houses represents a particularly concrete manifestation of how material inducements facilitated educational disengagement.

Gender-Specific Initiation Content

The research revealed highly gendered content in initiation teachings, as illustrated in the FGD with students from school 'M': "During initiation rites, women merge together to instill girls with knowledge on how to behave in front of adult, body

cleanness, hardworking and to be faithful to their husbands and how to handle them as well as taking care of their families. This knowledge is provided by one among women specifically known as *kungwi*.

The role of traditional instructors (*kungwi*) has emerged and particularly being problematic, as one parent noted: “These young girls we often times choose to teach our daughters, normally being called as *kungwi* are the ones misleading our children by teaching the immoral behaviors, such as sometimes introducing them to sex education and looking for them boyfriends and finally leading into pregnancy which in turn leads to school dropout”.

The remark implies that the so-called *kungwi*, or young women who have chosen to instruct the girls who are still schooling in secondary schools found in the Chalinze district during or through initiation, may unintentionally lead girls astray. They can instill undesirable behaviors, such as fostering partnerships that might lead to pregnancy. The training by *Kungwi* eventually leads girls to drop out of school, as they take on duties and obligations that interfere with their studies.

The study findings are in the same vein as the study by Fumpa-Makano (2019) who researched how initiation ceremonies socialize girls toward traditional roles. Research reveals distinct gender biases in initiation content. On the other hand, Schroeder et al. (2022) found that many initiation rites contain strong gender role components designed to maintain traditional power dynamics - socializing boys for leadership roles while encouraging passivity among girls. The study recommended that there is a need for restructuring initiation content into two phases: pre-puberty training, focusing on adolescent development and self-efficacy, and post-18 training for family life preparation. In Tanzania, Morogoro District, in particular, Malipula (2022) discovered that initiation rites are subjected to early sexual knowledge and gender stereotypes that work against girls' academic performance. Elizabeth et al., (2022) conducted a study on the impact of adolescent initiation rites in East and Southern Africa. The research indicated that various cultures have rituals and practices to prepare young people for adulthood. However, some initiation practices may negatively damage teenagers' physical, emotional, and psychological well-being especially when the

youth are being taught by their fellow young people.

The specific role of *kungwi* as “more knowledgeable others” (in Vygotsky's terms) highlights how traditional instruction systems can in one way or another actively undermine formal education. This study has revealed a more complex dynamic than previously documented, where traditional instructors sometimes actively facilitated behaviors leading to school dropout.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the influence of traditional initiation rites on damsel students' educational attainment in Tanzania, the Coast Region in particular. The findings revealed a complex web of interactions where traditional practices significantly impact education through academic disruptions, behavioral transformations, and social pressures. Specifically, the study found that post-initiation autonomy, ceremonial gift-giving practices, and the teachings of traditional instructors (*kungwi*) often lead to educational challenges, including dropouts, early marriages, and teenage pregnancies. From a theoretical perspective, while Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides valuable insights into the relationship between cultural practices and learning development, the research highlighted limitations in the existing frameworks when addressing competing educational-cultural systems. The study's practical implications emphasize the need for reformed initiation practices, integrated cultural education, and trained traditional instructors who support educational goals.

However, the research was limited by its geographic focus on the Coast Region and its reliance on qualitative data. Future research should consider comparative regional studies, mixed-method approaches, and longitudinal investigations of modified initiation practices. The study recommends establishing collaborative frameworks between educational institutions and cultural authorities, developing culturally sensitive education programs, and implementing policies that protect students' educational rights while preserving cultural heritage. These findings contribute significantly to understanding the delicate balance between preserving traditional practices and promoting educational attainment in Tanzania.

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