



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## Increasing HIV Awareness through Reduced Sexual Provocations: Implications for Dipo Initiation Rite among the Krobos in Ghana

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### **Abstract:**

*The study was carried out at Krobo in the Eastern Region of Ghana to investigate the Dipo initiation and create awareness of HIV and other STDs through a campaign for reduced sexual provocations in the Dipo Rite. The Descriptive (Qualitative) research approach was used to describe variables and the various stages of the research. Interviews and observation were the major data collection tools used; because most of the respondents could neither read nor write. Majority of respondents (435) who participated in the study were females while only (15) respondents were males. The Sample Population of the study in terms of numbers was pegged at (450) respondents. Past, current and new initiates were interviewed. A major finding of the study is that Dipo Rite grants premature sex instead of preserving the virginity of the initiates. This explains why the HIV/AIDS prevalent rate in the Yilo- Krobo (Somanya) District is very high. The study recommends that Dipo Rite should be transposed in order to curtail the negative effects it has on the initiates. To achieve this, it is strongly recommended that the dressing of the initiates should be modified to cover the thighs, breasts and all vital parts of their bodies. The study further recommends that Queen Mothers and Custodians of Krobo should be involved in the education of the youth against premature sex. Also, the education on HIV/AIDS and other STDs should be incorporated into the educational phase of the Dipo Rite and the age of the initiates reconsidered.*

**Keywords:** HIV/AIDS, STDs, Krobo, Dipo Rite, Initiates

### **1. Introduction**

One cannot dispute the fact that Ghana is one of the countries of Africa that can boast of her rich culture. The country, from North to South is blessed with diverse and beautiful cultures most of which are quite appealing to the international community and one of such cultures is the Dipo rite of the Krobo people in the Eastern region of Ghana. 'It is believed that 'culture of the people forms one of the basis by which they are assessed by others. However, some of our cultural practices must be taken a second look at to determine their level of decency and the richness in them'. (Ahmed Razak Ayaashie, *National Daily Graphic*, March 10 2008).

A former Minister of Trade and Tourism (1999), in a speech delivered at a durbar in Dangme speaking area, expressed his concern about the nudity of Dipo Rite.

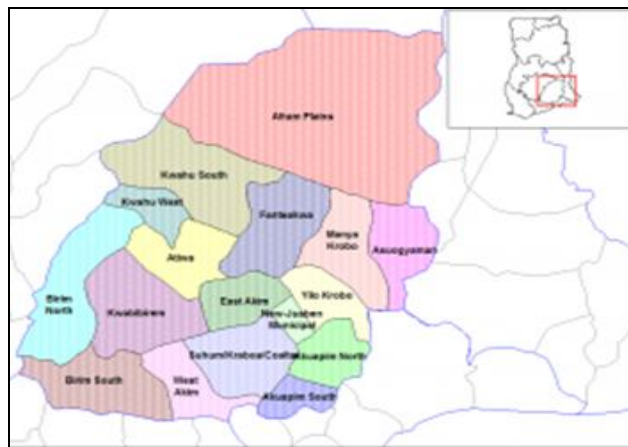
'In the past, the initiation process covered an entire year or longer, now they typically last for four days, besides there is a great disparity in the ages of the girls, those who go through the rite include girls as young as five years. If Dipo used to be about home management and protection of virginity of the girls, then it becomes difficult and strange to decipher why girls of such tender ages are now being involved.

Christians argue that Dipo Rite is not too bad, but just that the dressing of the initiates is outmoded and therefore needs some modifications. Reverend Ministers, Priests and Pastors at public gatherings regarding the nudity of Dipo regularly reported in news papers that the nude girls will present a negative, primitive image of Ghanaians and if care is not taken, this can lead to rape and immoral behaviour (Hudson 1998; Schroeder & Danquah, 2000).

Again, in an interview Professor Nketia granted to the '*The Standard*' a Ghanaian news paper in 1998, he argues that 'beads around the waist of a Ghanaian woman give a feminine shape to the figure' therefore if they are removed and replaced by a string with a single bead, the action first represents the first step of stripping the girls and it continues and in fact escalates with the shaving of the lower part of the head and reaffirmed by the wearing of the loin cloth as the only item of clothing makes the initiates to be reduced to nothing'.

This study is therefore aimed at throwing more light on the preventive measures through the evaluation of Dipo Rite and coming out with proposals to modify the Rite so as to reduce the level of nudity. This is a fact because the exposure of the breasts, thighs, abdomen and sometimes parts of the genitals of the initiates are provocative enough to predispose them to rapists, sexual exploitation, HIV/AIDS and all forms of danger. This paper therefore recommends seriously that in order to make Dipo Rite less provocative and to reduce the vulnerability of initiates to HIV/AIDS, the breasts, thighs and other vital parts of the body which are exposed during the performance of the rite should be neatly covered.

The study was carried out in the Yilo- Krobo (Somanya) District of the Eastern Region of Ghana.



The second mark was inscribed on the girls belly (Fomi Bo) after thorough examination by Nana Kloweki to verify that the girl was fully developed for both marriage and child bearing. This mark signified maturity and readiness for child bearing. The essence of the Fomi Bo was to make sure that only mature and certified girls were accepted as ready physically to have children. This was also a check on teenage pregnancy. The third mark was made at the back of the waist. It was a taboo to let any man except her husband touch or hold her waist. The essence of this mark was to prevent promiscuity, adultery, and premarital sex.

### 2.3. Stages of Dipo

The Dipo Rites involve many activities divided into stages. The first stage involves replacing the normal waist beads with a single string with only one reddish bead tied to it. A very large red lion cloth is then affixed to the string both in front and at the back of the girl to cover her genital organ. A guide then leads each girl to stand on a sacred antelope skin in a room saying to her, “ine nene dze wakasi-mi peehe ha mo, ne opee klo-yo” meaning, “I am performing our traditional rite for you, that you may become a Krobo woman.”

This is followed by the guide helping the girls to grind millet. The essence of this ritual is to introduce the girls to one of the most important duties of a Krobo woman, that is, grinding of millet for the household.

On Saturday, the girls are sent to a stream where they are cleansed and dressed up. Goats presented by their parents are sacrificed with merry making. The blood of the goat is believed to wash away any evil thing that may be harmful to the healthy development of the girls toward mature womanhood and motherhood.



Plate 1: Dipo Initiates



Plate 2: Initiates undergoing shaving with razor blade



Plate 3: Initiates Lined-Up for the final rites

### 2.4. Target Population

The Target Population was limited to indigenes of Krobo made up of chiefs, queen mothers, young girls, middle aged women and older women who had some knowledge about Dipo Rite. In terms of number, the Target Population was pegged at 1500 people.

### 2.5. Sample Population

Considering the heterogeneity of the Target Population and the scanty resources available for this study, the Random Sampling Technique was adopted to arrive at a Sample Size of 450. This Population was considered to be manageable for the research. It was made up of young girls, chiefs, older men, queen mothers, middle aged women and older women.

### 2.6. Data Collection

The Data Collection was based mainly on verbal interviews and observations because, most of the respondents could neither read nor write. The results indicate that most of the respondents were females. This is indicative of the fact that Dipo Rite is mostly a concern for females.

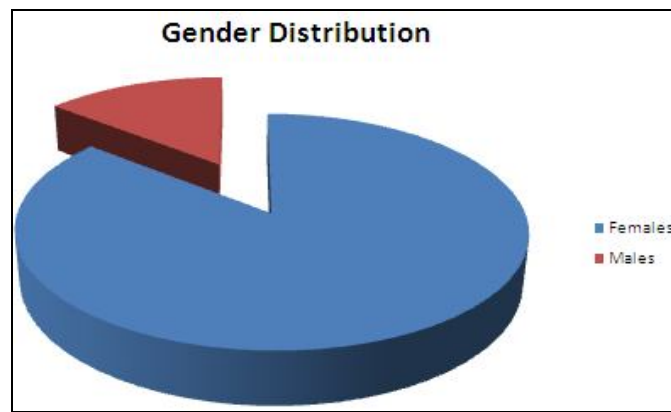


Chart 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Respondents	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Chiefs	5	1.1
Older Men	10	2.2
Queen Mothers	8	1.8
Young Girls Above 18 yrs	290	64.4
Middle Aged Women	37	8.2
Older Women	100	22.3
Total	450	100

Table 1: Interview Distribution

### 3. Discussion of Data

*In an interview with Naki a candidate in April 2008 during my visit to Krobo to witness the Dipo rite, she had this to say:*

'I faced a lot of embarrassment and ridicules when I went through this rite, the elders and our Queen Mothers should ask for our views before asking us to go through the rite, they just forced us and I don't think it is good for them to decide for us' it's too shameful'..

*Ekua, April 2008,*

'I went through psychological trauma of undergoing the burden and ordeals of this initiation. I was stripped naked with force because, I refused to expose myself for people to see my naked body, it is unfair'.

*Nana, April 2008,*

'How can this be' in this modern Ghana that I should expose my whole body for the world to see? They use Dipo photographs for souvenirs, cards, jewelries and the rest. Our people better think twice about this embarrassing situation, the clothing is shameful. I will never go to Krobo village again in my life because all the men have seen my nakedness and I will never allow any of them to approach me to take me for a wife'. 'Normally, when it is time for Dipo in the village, I become happy because I don't know how shameful it was until I went through it myself. In my group, all the older girls including myself felt reluctant to remove our clothes because we were shy until we were told the libation and dedication for the rite had already been offered to Nana Kloweki and if we refuse to go through the ritual, there will be chaos in the village and this will bring curse in our lives, this however, put fear in us. I went through it with a heavy heart because I was completely naked, against my wish since I don't have a choice.

In a study by Decosas, and Oppong (1998), there are many reasons necessitating a second look at Dipo. Principal among those reasons is the open display of the candidates' physique which offends the sense of dignity of women in this 21st century. Similarly in a *Case study to modify Dipo*, the National Commission on Culture maintains that any country wanting to project its rich culture in this globalized world must first transform its traditions and practices to acceptable standards without conflicting their core values. Culture of the people forms one of the bases by which they are assessed by others. However, some cultures must be taken a second look at to see if there is any decency and richness in them (Ahmed Razak Ayaashie, *National Daily Graphic*, March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

In an editorial of the weekly news paper *People and Places* (P&P - October 8-14, 1998), the dressing of some Ghanaian women was characterized as going against Ghanaian traditions as 'no serious man would take such a woman as a wife' it is a shame to see our women semi-naked in their dressing with their breast and abdomen showing.

According to a reverend minister in the Krobo community, Teyegaga (1985), while Dipo remains an important step in the life of a Krobo woman, some of the components are conflicting with the religious values that are at the center of the Ghanaian society. Many churches and parents have over recent years opposed to the requirement for Dipo initiates which shows their breasts in the course of the ceremony.



(Olivier Asselin – Ghanaian Photo journalist Bright Boateng, internet in reference to Dipo) ‘In reference to Dipo’ I do respect our culture but I believe we have to be proactive in innovating our cultural practices and to create new social models that will not continue to hinder our progress, ‘culture is valuable but needs to be revised or polished, something must be done about the nudity.

Professor Nketia, in an interview to the ‘*The standard*’ 1998 argues that ‘beads around the waist of a Ghanaian woman give a feminine shape to the figure’ therefore if they are removed and replaced by a string with a single bead, the action first represents the first step of stripping the girls of their dignity. This is followed by the shaving of the lower part of the head and the wearing of the loin cloth as the only item of clothing thereby reducing the girls to ‘nothing’. Displaying the half naked girls in the name of Dipo amounts to taking puberty rites out of the context. Dipo should not be pandered to the taste of foreigners and tourists by displaying virtually nude girls.

#### 4. Findings

The findings of this study show that Dipo grants premature sex instead of preserving girls’ virginity. The main idea behind Dipo was to help the girls preserve their virginity till they are ready to marry hence the age to go through the rite was 18-21years. Now there is a kind of perversion in that it is done earlier below 18years. Now girls as young as 3-5years of age undergo the process as it is arguably less shocking for a young child to walk around naked than it is for a teenage girl, giving the girls the license to have sex at an early stage because nobody holds them responsible for sex again after they went through the rite. Early Dipo means early sex, thereby making the girls more vulnerable to HIV and STDs.

Schroeder and Danquah in 2006 quoted Sabaa on *BBC News Nov 4 1995* saying

‘the girls think they are of age after the rite and some travel to the neighboring countries to seek greener pastures and come back with HIV/AIDS, it was estimated that more than 50% of the commercial sex workers in Abidjan were Ghanaians, many coming from Krobo tribe in the Eastern Region. Almost all the Ghanaian prostitutes in Cote D’voir returned home with HIV. This is one of the reasons why the Eastern Region of Ghana has the highest prevalence rate and is regarded as the ‘epicenter’ for the spread of HIV/AIDS. In case of the HIV, not only the life of the girls are at stake but also the impact of the disease on the society, families and the nation as a whole may be too unbearable.’

Government spending on health care and treatment of HIV patients will rise accordingly.

When HIV strikes at people who are economically productive, there will be a decline in the country’s labour force. The following may be recorded:

- In schools, a fall in teachers and lecturers.
- The productivity and growth levels are also likely to decline.
- It will result in increased personal spending on health care.
- Reduces personal savings of infected persons who may resort to seek support from friends and relatives, borrow or even sell their properties in order to meet their health care expenses.
- Children of infected parents may discontinue schooling since their parents cannot afford to pay their school fees.

#### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research shows that Ghanaians are not in favour of portraying nude girls during the initiation as this makes the initiates and womanhood lack dignity. Also the early initiation exposes the girls into premature sex making them more vulnerable to HIV and STDs and in case of diseases, not only the individual suffers but the nation as a whole, however, it is recommended that

- The Dipo Rite must be transposed to curtail the negative effects on the rite.
- This can be done by modifying the dressing of the initiates.
- HIV and STDs must be incorporated into the educational phase of the Dipo Rite.
- Queen Mothers and other custodians of Krobo should be seen at the forefront promoting education on the abstinence from premature sex.
- Government should also step up actions on the enactment of legislatures to modify Dipo.
- There must be more concentration on preventive medicine than curative medicine.
- By so doing, a lot of money will be saved by the state.

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