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# Beyond the snip: Filipino male circumcision tradition stands strong

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ROMMEL REBOLLIDO



*Who offers greater pleasure, the circumcised or the uncircumcised? The verdict remains open, and the age-old question lingers: to cut or not to cut?*

GENERAL SANTOS, Philippines – Male circumcision endures as a Filipino tradition intricately woven into identity and driven by folk beliefs, exerting influence over decisions intertwined with medical discourse.

While folklore promotes its advantages, opinions diverge on matters of hygiene, individual preference, and sexual function.

The methods range from guava leaves to contemporary techniques, spotlighted through community initiatives. Beyond the medical sphere, discussions delve into its necessity and extol the advantages of foreskin.

For many Filipinos, it is a rite of passage into manhood, transforming a boy into a man. The practice continues despite the fact that the Philippines remains among the few countries that continue what is seen in other nations as “inhumane penile mutilation.”

Circumcision, as far as many Filipino males are concerned, serves as a shield from the ridicule associated with being referred to as “pisot” or “supot” (uncircumcised).



*CUT WALK. Newly circumcised boys in oversized sandos and shirts walk slowly while an amused man looks on in General Santos City. Rommel Rebolledo/Rappler*

Hannah Sales, a mother of three sons, said her children willingly chose circumcision to avoid teasing both at school and among their peers. She also added, “It contributes to their hygiene.”

Jaime Lim, a family driver, said that for most Filipino males, circumcision boosts self-confidence and adds to their being “macho,” a view that raises eyebrows among medical professionals.

“The fact is, circumcision does not impact sexual function,” asserted Dr. Daniel Galang in an interview with Rappler on Wednesday, August 16.

From a health perspective, Galang said male circumcision plays a role in maintaining penile hygiene and preventing various ailments, including infections and even cancer.

But Galang stressed the importance of respecting individual preferences and pointed out that circumcision should not be imposed on those unwilling to undergo the procedure due to personal, cultural, or religious reasons.

Delving into the realm of folk beliefs, experts contend that the societal stigma attached to being uncircumcised has strengthened Filipino beliefs in the merits of circumcision, embedding the practice deep within the collective consciousness.

One prevailing folk belief suggests that circumcision contributes to increased height or enhances the size of a boy’s genitalia, something debunked by Galang as a myth. He said height is primarily influenced by genetics and nutritional factors and that a person’s development takes place with or without circumcision.

Galang also frowned upon the belief, often the driving force behind circumcision decisions, that the procedure enhances penis size. He reiterated that genetics, rather than foreskin removal, determines this, and even if a boy undergoes multiple circumcisions, it would be futile if his lineage lacks the desired trait.

The circumcision period, also referred to as the “cutting season,” is primarily performed during school breaks, allowing sufficient time for boys, typically aged between nine and 12, to undergo the procedure.

In rural communities, circumcisions involve a unique practice: boys are asked to chew guava leaves and then apply the extracted fluid onto the incision as an antiseptic.

Urban areas, however, have adopted modern techniques, rendering the process nearly painless through the use of anesthetics and appropriate surgical instruments, overseen by medical practitioners for a fee.

Interestingly, various organizations, including governmental bodies and politicians, have incorporated mass circumcision into their outreach initiatives, offering this service free of charge to children in disadvantaged communities.

The practice of circumcision appears to trace back to the Stone Age, as suggested by discovered tools and artifacts. Scant documentation exists in the Philippines regarding the introduction and evolution of this practice.

In 1686, an English navigator who came to Mindanao witnessed the island’s robust circumcision tradition, noting its association with rituals and celebrations.

In his travel accounts, William Dampier described the locals, whom he called Mohammedans, who conducted elaborate ceremonies and festivities to mark the circumcision of the sons of a sultan and rajah.

Beyond considerations of hygiene, an ongoing debate revolves around the merits of continuing circumcision, with dissenting voices asserting the foreskin’s role as an essential component of male anatomy.

A midwife, requesting anonymity, said, “The foreskin is far from useless; it’s not merely extraneous skin.” She explained that it contributes to lubrication during intercourse, safeguards the glans from abrasions and infections, and enhances pleasure for both partners.

This raises yet another question in the ongoing discourse: Who offers greater pleasure, the circumcised or the uncircumcised? The verdict remains open, and the age-old question lingers: to cut or not to cut? – **Rappler.com**

[OPINION]

## Arguments against male circumcision

MAY 13, 2021 12:34 PM PHT

LOIS ENGELBRECHT



*'[T]he rationale that removing the foreskin is for health reasons is no different than the rationale to preemptively remove everyone's tonsils, wisdom teeth, and appendix'*

I recently watched a Youtube video of a young man from Italy whose Filipina mother had him circumcised when he was 8 years old. This young man shared how traumatic the event and his recovery were. While describing what happened, he was unable to even use the word “penis,” and instead referred to it as “down there.” He ended, however, by stating that circumcision is “really better” and was thus happy to have gone through the trauma.

I shared this piece with a human rights advocate in the US who is part of the group Doctors Opposing Circumcision. Mr. Geisheker expressed his opinion that the change in the young man's stance about what happened is a symptom of Stockholm syndrome. Stockholm syndrome is a grooming process wherein hostages develop a psychological bond with their captors, in that the captive identifies with the captor's goals and demands. Stockholm syndrome is not a mental health diagnosis, but instead is a coping mechanism.

Are our boys captive, and are our socio-cultural demands their captors? To better answer this question, it is time for us to critically examine the expectations we place on our boys by asking what, why, when, and how.

Let's start with the what. Circumcision is the removal of the foreskin from the human penis. In the most common procedure, the foreskin is opened, adhesions are removed, and the foreskin is separated from the glans. After that, a circumcision device may be placed, and then the foreskin is cut off.

Why do we circumcise our boys? There is no medical reason for non-therapeutic circumcision. Rationales based on health, cleanliness, and better sex are widely considered as myths. Yet, these reasons were embraced by the men that academic Romeo Lee (2006) [interviewed in a study](#). In addition, the pressure to go through with the painful procedure is manifested in the way uncircumcised boys are called cowards. They are supposedly not "real men" because they were not brave enough to undergo the procedure.

As with any organ in our body, future problems are possible. Yet the rationale that removing the foreskin is for health reasons is no different than the rationale to preemptively remove everyone's tonsils, wisdom teeth, and appendix (organs considered no longer needed) in case of future problems.

The strongest reason for why the Philippines continues with the practice of circumcision is to follow the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, which we share through the Old Testament:

"This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised." (Gen. 17:10)

St. Paul, however, stated in the New Testament that a relationship with God is not dependent on circumcision:

"Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God." (1 Corinthians 7:19)

"Behold, I, Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing." (Galatians 5:2-11)

Even Italy, which houses the Vatican, does not circumcise their boys except for therapeutic reasons.

If we wish to continue in a tradition that follows Jesus' circumcision, on which religious tradition could be built, we need to acknowledge that Jesus was an infant:

"And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants." (Gen. 17:12-13)

Yet many of our boys are circumcised around the time they turn 13. Which leads us to the next critical question of when we circumcise our boys.

There are some valid reasons so many boys are not circumcised until age 13. For example, historically, babies were born at home with the help of midwives. Circumcision thus became a rite of passage for males at adolescence, performed by those trained to do so. At present, some boys are circumcised at birth, more are circumcised at age 8, and those at the cusp of adolescence and manhood are provided free circumcisions each summer.

If we critically examine the what, why, and when and still decide to continue the practice of circumcising our boys, the next and perhaps most important question is how we perform circumcision. Many circumcisions, which are always painful, are done in the hospital with or without anesthetic. Others are done in public, without anesthetic, and often include picture-taking. These documents show trauma, including instances when a cloth is placed in the boy's mouth to stifle his screams.

Child participation is a common requirement for international social services. Before we set up any service on behalf of children, donors require that we base our work on their voices. We work to educate them on their choices. But do we give our boys a choice on circumcision? Or is this a form of Stockholm syndrome, like the young man born in Italy who eventually embraced the myths told to him?

We refer to the practice of female circumcision in parts of Africa as female genital mutilation. But we insist that what we do to our boys is not male genital mutilation. It is time to critically examine why the Philippines willingly, and often without question, circumcises almost all of its males, and often in a way that is public, demeaning, painful, and creates trauma.

Why do we put our boys through this trauma without even thinking? Should we not give our boys, as we do our girls, the right to intact genitals? – **Rappler.com**

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<https://www.rappler.com/philippines/199286-foreskin-restoration-circumcision-philippines/>

## Foreskin restoration being done in PH, says doctor

Mar 31, 2018 3:15 PM PHT Frank Cimatú



*Dr Ulysses Quanico says the most common reason for seeking decircumcision or foreskin restoration is an uncomfortable erection.*

BAGUIO, Philippines – Black Saturday, observed this year on March 31, is the traditional time when young men undergo that rite of passage known as *pagtutuli* (circumcision).

In the provinces, these young men would gather along the riverbanks or seashore, masticate guava leaves and fall in line as a man wielding a *labaha* (razor) would cut the foreskin of the sexual organ. Then the boys would spit the guava on their penises and bathe on the river or sea.

In the cities, barangays or health centers would organize their circumcision programs on Black Saturday with the surgical procedure done by nurses or doctors.

All Filipinos are expected to go through circumcision as those who refuse to do so would be stigmatized and ridiculed by their peers.

Patients remain among the most fundamental stakeholders in mental health policymaking, yet their perspectives are often overlooked

A 2002 study published by the *New England Journal of Medicine*, penned by Dr Xavier Castellsague et al, stated that 93% of all Filipino men were circumcised with 42% of them having undergone the procedure before they were 10 years old, and 52% from 10 to 14 years old.

While the tradition remains strong in the country, there are some who have opted to seek a reversal of their circumcision.

Philippine urologist Ulysses Quanico, during a recent forum organized by Forum on Family Planning and Development in Cebu, said that he had patients who availed of “uncircumcision” or foreskin restoration.

Foreskin restoration involves recreating the skin on the penis that had been lost to circumcision or injury. Quanico said that he had performed foreskin restoration on at least two of his patients.

Quanico, who is an officer of Health Information Network, did not specify his patients’ reasons for foreskin restoration, but said the most common reason cited is an uncomfortable erection.

Quanico also said that common penile restoration procedures he did among Filipinos were taking out *bolitas* or penile implants.

*Bolitas* are traditionally made of ivory, jade, or metal balls but some Filipinos have experimented on plastic bolitas by melting spoons, toothbrushes, deodorant ballers and even rosary beads.

Unsanitary placement of *bolitas* could cause infection, inflammation or worse on the male organ, Quanico said.

While foreskin restoration is not widely availed of in the Philippines, the procedure is said to be as old as the practice of circumcision. – **Rappler.com**

[Images](#) of a traditional Filipino “tuli” ritual (graphic content) were not part of the Rappler articles, but are provided to the reader for context.