

Wyndham Robertson Library Undergraduate Research Award

First Year/Sophomore Finalist 2020

[The Practice of Clitoridectomies: Its Influence on the Gikuyu Tribe, Kenyan National Identity, Cultural Nationalism, and British Powers](#)

by Savannah Scott

Recommended by Associate Professor [Rachel Nunez](#)



What are you most proud of when it comes to this project?

Being a Public Health major, I have a love and passion for women's health, especially maternal health. In addition, I am an advocate for female sexual liberation and women's right to autonomy so writing about a practice that explicitly oppressed women and stripped their rights to femininity, sexual expression, and free speech was challenging. However, I am proud of my ability to shine light on such a difficult topic without subjecting my own biases and opinions. I was able to solely narrate through the eyes of a community who supported the practice to expose their perspective and learn why the practice was implemented and continued for so many years.

What about this topic made you want to find out more?

In my future, I plan to open an OB/GYN clinic in Africa with programs and policies designed to lower the rates of maternal mortality as African countries accumulate the highest rates in the world. Understanding the cultural and historical influences and practices that contribute to these rates is vital to solving this epidemic. I chose to focus on the practice of clitoridectomies as it's infamous for its associations with infertility, hemorrhaging, and irreversible scar tissue; all complications that affect the fertility and life of mothers. Within my essay, I wanted to know why an unethical practice that exhibited clear signs of physical and emotional pain and scarring was encouraged by the tribes and communities. I wanted to learn how history and culture of Kenyan tribes, European colonialism and imperialism, and Kenyan nationalism contributed to the continuation of clitoridectomies. I wanted to understand, through the eyes of the indigenous people, why the practice was heavily guarded and protected. My desire to learn about the maternal health history in Africa lead me to research a taboo topic on clitoridectomies and get to the root of why African tribes and countries held the practice so sacred.

Having completed a project like this, if you could advise other students working on a research project, what would you tell them?

My advice for upcoming students interested in research is to not be afraid to study a topic that they may be uncomfortable with. Initially, I was hesitant to conduct my research as the topic is very sensitive, political, and does not align with my perspective or beliefs. It is okay to be out of your comfort zone when you conduct research as that is when the journey of growth and understanding begins.

Judges' Comments:

"I applaud this student for taking on a controversial topic and doing a good job of explaining why it is a culturally relevant/important practice."

"The student demonstrated a willingness to explore the nuances of a possibly challenging topic. In discussing the importance of the irua ceremony for the Gikuyu tribe in Kenya, the student thoughtfully considered ways the practice of clitoridectomies can be part of a group's national identity. In doing so, the consequences of British imperialism on Kenya's society are tactful and well laid out. I appreciate the clear topic sentences and idiomatic writing style."