

# Fearful Symmetries

Essays and Testimonies  
Around Excision and Circumcision



Edited by  
Chantal Zabus

**Matatu**



# Fearful Symmetries

# Matatu

## Journal for African Culture and Society

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## Essays and Testimonies Around Excision and Circumcision

Edited by  
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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**T**HE PRESENT VOLUME consists, in the main, of the proceedings of the colloquium held at the Fondation universitaire in Brussels on 18 December 2004 – (*A*)*symétries sexuelles: Autour de la circoncision et de l’excision / (Dis)Symmetry Embodied: Around Male and Female ‘Circumcision’*. This was realized with the collaboration of the Prospective Anthropology Department of the Catholic University of Louvain and its Head, Professor Michael Singleton; the Maison de la Laïcité Lucia De Brouckère, represented by Johannès Robyn; and with the financial support of the Communauté française de Belgique and the Belgian Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique, which graciously extended its support past the funding of the “excision” project, which I started in Louvain in 1998. I here wish to express my gratitude to these individuals and institutions.

Except for my contribution, which was considerably expanded, the original contributions by Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, Michael Singleton, who coordinated the event with me, and Anne–Marie Dauphin–Tinturier, were translated (or revised) from the French by Kevin A. Dwyer, whom I thank most warmly for his patience and competence. Tobe Levin’s paper was left as such because it was originally delivered in English. To these contributions, I have added various interviews which I carried out later, over a period of two years (2005–2006). I here wish to thank the interviewees for their willingness to share such intimate experiences with me. I also wish to thank J. Steven Svoboda, Robert Darby and Laurence Cox for rounding off this volume with their thoughtful essays.

The volume falls into four parts. The first essay under “Symmetries” stands by itself and, as such, serves as a tribute to the indefatigable Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, a Christian Palestinian and Swiss-based expert in Islamic law, who engages in a very elaborate discussion of the sociological, medical, legal, and religious justifications for the practice of male circumcision and excision or “female circumcision,” as he calls it, and the continuation thereof.

The second part is called “Anthropological Wormholes.” The notion of ‘wormholes’ is a hypothetical interconnection between widely separated regions of space–time. I owe the phrase to John Relf in his introduction to a book which is in no way connected with the subject at hand<sup>1</sup> but which nevertheless describes what these two anthropologists were attempting to do with symmetry and the lack thereof. Michael Singleton, the British-born anthropologist who studied under the aegis of Edward Evans–Pritchard, and the French anthropologist Anne–Marie Dauphin–Tinturier speak of their own experience, which they wrote up rather than down, following their fieldwork, respectively, in the then Congo in the 1960s and among the Kitwe in Northern Zambia in 1998. Their contributions are “wormholes” in that they do not directly deal with the issue of circumcision and excision. For instance, Anne–Marie Dauphin–Tinturier examines, within broader considerations around rites of passage, what could be considered to be the converse of excision: i.e. the elongation of the labia. It is in part because of these anthropological contributions that I contextualize them in an introduction on “Why Not the Earlobe?”

All of the contributors use, with some few variations, the common terminology propounded by the World Health Organization (WHO), which distinguishes among four types of operations. The first type, referred to as *sunnah*, involves partial clitoridectomy, often understood as the removal of the prepuce or hood of the clitoris. Second, excision *per se*, also called ‘clitoridectomy’, involves the removal of the said prepuce, the clitoris itself, often accompanied by partial or full labiadectomy: i.e. the cutting off of the labia minora and/or majora. Third, infibulation or ‘suturing’ consists in the complete removal of the clitoris and the whole of the labia minora and majora and in the stitching together of the two sides (the cut edges) of the vulva so as to cover the urethra and vaginal opening, leaving a very small aperture to permit the flow of urine and menstrual discharge.

Lesser-known variations are known as *introcision*, the cutting of the internal genitalia. These include *hymenectomy*; *zur-zur* cuts of the cervix, which are intended to remedy obstructed labour; and *gishiri* cuts, which involve the cutting of the vaginal wall, a procedure intended to facilitate sexual penetration in communities where child marriage is widely practised.

Despite efforts at identifying and naming excision, terminology remains unstable. In addition to collapsing several types into a single category such as female genital mutilation or FGM, infibulation is called ‘pharaonic circumcision’ in Sudan whereas the Egyptians call it ‘Sudanese circumcision’.

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<sup>1</sup> John Relf, *John Fowles, Wormholes, Essays, and Occasional Writings* (London: Vintage, 1999): viii.

Also, it is misleading to apply *sunnah* (the first type above) to refer to the obligatory excision of women. Indeed, the *sunnah* is simply the Arabic for ‘tradition’ or ‘duty’ based on the Qur’an and the Ahadith – the religious obligations or recommended practices emanating from the teachings and deeds of Muhammad the Prophet.

As Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh explains in this volume, the practice of excision or of circumcision is not attested in the Qur’an, but general Muslim (Sunni) jurisprudence deems male circumcision on the eighth day after birth to be *mustahabb* (recommended), whereas female excision is *makrumah*: i.e. ‘permissible’ or ‘recommended’ but not obligatory (*wajib*). Moreover, *sunnah* or an attenuated form of excision may have taken precedence over more severe forms such as infibulation with the rise of Islam and the Prophet’s alleged recommendation to an exciser in one Hadith (5271) not to cut too deeply. Because that type of unattested *sunnah* involves ‘only’ the cutting of the prepuce or hood of the clitoris, Shell–Duncan and Hernlund are of the view that *sunnah* is the only type “that can be construed as analogous to male circumcision.” Such practices are commonly associated with the African continent, but excision in particular is also practised in Bahrain, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Oman, Pakistan, Yemen, and other countries.<sup>2</sup> Contributors to this volume have focused on the African continent but, for the sake of establishing symmetries, we have at times gone farther afield.

Both male and ‘female circumcision’ may be labelled rituals, but, from a somewhat clinical perspective, may be irreversible amputations of human genitalia, with disastrous and at times life-long consequences for both males and females. However, scholars and activists alike have been diffident about making a case for symmetry between excision and the cutting-off of the foreskin covering the glans of the penis. This volume addresses such ‘fearful symmetries’.

The third part of the volume is entitled “On Autobiographies,” because both Tobe Levin and myself discuss autobiographical, first-person accounts of excision. I delineate an evolutionary pattern in addressing circumcision, beyond an initial, hesitant *circumspection*, and the discursive asymmetry resulting from writing in the first person about both excision and circumcision. Tobe Levin addresses infibulation in two Somali women autobio-

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<sup>2</sup> Bettina Shell–Duncan and Ylva Hernlund provide definitions and survey the geographical spread of these various practices in the introduction to their *Female “Circumcision” in Africa: Culture, Controversy and Change*, ed. Bettina Shell–Duncan & Ylva Hernlund (Boulder CO & London: Lynne Rienner, 2000): 1–14.

graphers, who emigrated to Germany, thereby projecting the issue into the literature of exile.

The fourth part, on “Testimonies,” is the outcome of four interviews I conducted in the two years following the Conference. My interview with Koffi Kwahulé was carried out in French at his Paris home on 9 February 2005 and that of Dominique Arnaud, also in French, at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France on 3 March 2006. I have translated both of these as well as Safaa Fathy’s, which was carried out at her Paris apartment on 24 November 2006 and was added to her original, informal 2004 talk. The interview with Alex Wanjala, which took place at the café “Le relais de l’Odéon” in Paris on 23 November 2006, took place in English.

Without getting into the complexities surrounding the use of ‘autobiography’ versus ‘testimony’, which I have amply addressed elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> testimony indeed requires two actors, the one who wants to know and the one with whom one is becoming acquainted, whereas autobiography involves only one. Yet, as Gayatri Spivak has argued, autobiography could also involve two players: “I and me, assumed subject assuming object. The intention of the ‘subject’ is to objectify itself without loss of subjectivity.” Spivak poetically redefines “testimony” as “the other text of selving.”<sup>4</sup> I have, however, built on Spivak’s definition of testimony as “the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other”: indeed, unlike what happens in self-consciously ‘subalternist anthropology’, the individuals here interviewed, unlike Spivak’s subalterns, who cannot proactively articulate testimony, provided their testimonies while participating in the process of editorial control and in what Spivak calls “the transcoding for an academic readership.”<sup>5</sup>

The volume is crowned by songs and experiential vignettes excerpted mainly from first-person accounts by African women writers concerning their excision or infibulation. These vignettes act as a reminder that such harrowing accounts urgently need to be supplemented by men who have undergone circumcision in one form or another in order to provide us with a properly panoramic view of both practices.




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<sup>3</sup> See Chantal Zabus, *Between Rites and Rights: Excision in Women’s Experiential Texts and Human Contexts* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2007), esp. the Introduction.

<sup>4</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and Circumfession,” in *Post-colonialism and Autobiography: Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, Opal Palmer Adisa*, ed. Alfred Hornung & Ernspteter Ruhe (Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1998): 7–22, 7, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and Circumfession,” 9.

## INTRODUCTION

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### Why Not the Earlobe?

**T**HE FLESHY AND APPARENTLY USELESS appendage that hangs from the ear – the earlobe – has never been considered an outlaw appendage or invested with symbolic significance in the way sexual organs have been. Yet, for Arnold Van Gennep, who analyzed the significance of rites in the wider context of “human transitions” and “ceremonial wholes,” male circumcision or the cutting off of the foreskin is “exactly equivalent to [...] cutting off the earlobe or perforating the earlobe or the septum, or to tattooing, scarifying, or cutting the hair in a particular fashion.”<sup>1</sup> Although Van Gennep was theorizing from France in 1908, his classification of rites endures, as shown by the recent reprint of his seminal *Rites of Passage*.

Van Gennep singled out “rites of passage” as a special category that is in turn subdivided into “rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation.”<sup>2</sup> In his forays into “transition rites” such as “initiation,” he argued that the initiated or, for our purposes, the circumcised individual, has been “removed from the common mass of humanity by a rite of separation (this is the idea behind cutting, piercing, etc.) which automatically incorporates him into a defined group.”<sup>3</sup> The severed foreskin thus functions like shorn hair or nail parings, where a portion of the previous personality resided.

Van Gennep’s notion of circumcision as a rite of separation can usefully be supplemented by Victor Turner’s concept of *liminality*, from the Latin *limin*

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1960; London & New York: Routledge, 2004): 194, 191, 72.

<sup>2</sup> Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 72.

meaning ‘threshold’ or “a crossing point in space and time such as [...] when a bride is carried across the threshold of a home symbolizing vital socio-cultural changes from unweddedness to weddedness.”<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, it follows that separation from one group: i.e. the uncircumcised, entails belonging to another group, the circumcised. It is not by chance that the decree according to which “the uncut will be ‘cut off’” is also the premise of the *berit milah* or Covenant of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 17:4–14).

The levelling of various rites undertaken by Van Gennep is disturbing, as is his conclusion that “mutilations affecting the sex organs have no sexual significance strictly speaking, as I have shown many times.”<sup>5</sup> One might object that a form of female excision like clitoridectomy, whereby the clitoris is excised or *cut out*, or male circumcision, whereby the prepuce of the glans is circumcised or *cut around*, are traditionally linked to fertility, reproduction, lineage, and, therefore, sexuality. However, Van Gennep decries any connection between, for instance, male circumcision and procreation on three counts: 1) the age ranging from the seventh day to the twentieth year; 2) the practitioners’ ignorance of the physiological basis of procreation; and 3) the lessening of sexual desire and sensitivity of the glans penis. He then reasons that the practitioners of the rite would simply “cut these organs which, like the nose or the ear, attract the eye.”<sup>6</sup> But, one wonders, does the ear “attract the eye” as much as the sexual organs?

If the earlobe, the nose, and the foreskin are similar appendages to Van Gennep, he does recognize *degrees of severity* between practices, which leave irremediable traces. He reckons that clitoridectomy or the nicking-off of the clitoris and the subincision of the penis are more serious than circumcision, which, whether African or Jewish, is a “sign of union” with, respectively, “a particular deity or a mark of membership in a single community of the faithful.”<sup>7</sup> His regret, however, is that the Jews have communed with Yahweh by cutting their foreskins rather than perforating their septum. If such were the case, he candidly asks, “how much fewer would have been the errors of ethnographic literature?”

Interestingly, in his *Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep introduces various asymmetries. The first one is that the earlobe or the septum is perforated

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Turner, “Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media,” *Religion* 15 (1985): 205. Quoted in James L. Cox, “Introduction: Ritual, Rites of Passage and the Interaction between Christian and Traditional Religions,” in *Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa*, ed. James L. Cox (Fairwater: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998): viii–xix.

<sup>5</sup> Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 170.

<sup>6</sup> *The Rites of Passage*, 73.

<sup>7</sup> Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 72.

whereas the foreskin or the clitoris or the labia or both are cut off and, in the most severe form, subjected to infibulation (what remains of the severed labia are sewn together); the second one is that, to him, clitoridectomy is “more serious” than circumcision, a phrase in which the comparative form introduces a semblance of asymmetry.

But Van Gennep’s discourse is also replete with various symmetries, the most notable being that between African and Jewish societies’ understanding and practice of circumcision. In a 1992 critical essay, “Why Not the Earlobe?,” from which I take my title, the anthropologist–rabbi Howard Eilberg–Schwartz argued that the practice of circumcision “performs the same anthropological functions and has the same meanings as in African societies that ritually circumcise young boys.” He also opposes the general contention that Israelite religion transformed “a fertility rite of ‘so-called primitive religions’ by endowing it with transcendent spiritual meanings.”<sup>8</sup> In addition to the inherent symmetry between circumcision and excision, the present volume also addresses this other symmetry, which is that between Jewish and African circumcision.

As the German philosopher Kuno Lorenz has demonstrated, the concept of symmetry, which was omnipresent in Greek antiquity, is distinctly different from the modern logical notion. In Greek, ‘being symmetrical’ in general usage is synonymous with ‘being harmonious’, and, in technical usage, as in Euclid’s *Elements*, it is synonymous with ‘commensurable’, ‘with measure’, ‘being in rational ratios’, which displays the origin of the concept of rationality in establishing a proportion.

The Greek notion of symmetry is therefore fundamentally different from our modern logical notion of symmetry: i.e. “the property of a binary (or many-placed) relation: a binary relation is symmetric if, and only if, it coincides with its converse, like ‘being identical with’ or ‘being similar to,’ but unlike ‘being heavier than’ or ‘being colder than.’”<sup>9</sup> The binarism inherent in symmetry sheds light on the practices of circumcision and excision, which, in most African societies, are designated by the same term, the most famous example being Kikuyu *irua*, immortalized by Jomo Kenyatta in *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938).

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<sup>8</sup> Howard Eilberg–Schwartz, “Why Not the Earlobe?” *Moment*, quoted in Leonard Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005): 245.

<sup>9</sup> Kuno Lorenz, “Reflections on the Concept of Symmetry,” *European Review* 13.2 (2005): 4.

The questions commonly asked regarding both practices indeed rest on our modern idea of symmetry: “But is not excision more painful than circumcision?” More irreversible? More damaging to health, to sexuality? More this, more that, less this, less that. And what about infibulation? After all, it involves clitoridectomy and labiadectomy, the cutting of the labia minora and majora, and the suturing of the edges of the vulva so as to leave an aperture for urine and menstrual discharge. Is not infibulation ‘more severe’? Is there not more being cut? Regardless of the ambiguity behind ‘cutting’, which refers to both excision and self-harming,<sup>10</sup> what comes into play is the *degree* of severity in both practices, as well as the lack of dialogue between opponents and supporters of circumcision and/or excision.

If a case can be made for symmetry between male circumcision and the first type of partial clitoridectomy, the most radical and severe form, known as *infibulation*, could at first sight be considered an exemplar of “dissymmetry embodied,” to borrow from Mieke Bal in another context.<sup>11</sup> Yet ‘male infibulation’ could be said to be similar to ‘female infibulation’, since a clasp or *fibula* was put through the foreskin, thus rendering it impossible for it to retract over the glans, thereby making erection either painful or impossible; but this dates back to Roman times and concerned singers, actors, athletes, and gladiators.<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, the ancient Jewish operation of *peri’ah*, which was used to prevent Jews from passing themselves off as uncircumcised (to escape Roman–Greek vigilance), was quite severe, since it involved the tearing and stripping-back of “the remaining inner lining of the foreskin off the glans and, with a sharpened fingernail, [the removal of] the mucous tissue and excision of the frenulum.”<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, this custom dates back to the second century CE.

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<sup>10</sup> Despite the wide-spread currency of FGC or Female Genital Cutting, the term ‘cutting’ is also associated with deliberate self-injury and self-inflicted violence on the genitalia, as in Steven Levenkron’s *Cutting: Understanding and Overcoming Self-Mutilation* (1997).

<sup>11</sup> Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in “The Book of the Judges”* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988): passim.

<sup>12</sup> Only Roman singers and actors were infibulated to preserve their vocal ability; also some athletes and gladiators underwent infibulation because sexual acts were thought to weaken them for competition. It was also prescribed to prevent illnesses thought to result from masturbation and nocturnal emissions and epilepsy. In Armando Favazza, *Bodies under Siege: Self-Mutilation and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry* (1987; Baltimore MD & London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996): 190–91.

<sup>13</sup> Sami A. Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, “Muslims’ Genitalia in the Hands of the Clergy: Religious Arguments About Male and Female Circumcision,” in *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal, and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice*, ed.

Leaving aside circumbustion: i.e. circumcision by cauterization, which Bryk documents among the Nandi of Kenya in the first decades of the twentieth century, or cauterization of the urethra with silver nitrate to cure spermatorrhoea in nineteenth-century France,<sup>14</sup> ‘penile flaying’, in which all the skin of the penis and often the skin of the pubis as far up as the navel is stripped off, certainly matches the severity of contemporary excision, since it is supported by relatively recent Yemeni and Saudi reports dating back to 1986.<sup>15</sup>

The medical consequences of penile flaying, such as urethral fistula, sepsis (the infection of tissues through harmful bacteria and toxins), and sometimes death match those for excision, but such cases are indeed rare, in proportion to the 150 million women and girls who have reportedly been excised one way or another. However, a form of male circumcision is practised on the five continents, as Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh reminds us in this volume, by about a billion Muslims, three hundred million Christians, sixteen million Jews, and an indeterminate number of ‘animists’ and atheists. A more specific taxonomy needs to be developed by the WHO to refer to the many dimensions of male circumcision, which can indeed not be reduced to neonatal routine circumcision as practised in the USA.

## Outlaw Appendages and Sacred Relics

Aside from the idea of *degree*, which makes circumcision and excision shuttle between benign and very severe, the two sexual organs that are clearly the objects of scrutiny in this volume, the penis and the clitoris, happen to have similar reputations as being disproportionately long.

Across the Sudanic ‘excision belt’, spanning an east–west axis from Yemen to Senegal, one commonly encounters tales of the clitoris being too long, in need of cutting, or endowed with the capacity to grow if not excised or to grow back, if not excised properly. Likewise, the glans has been thought

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George C. Denniston, Frederick M. Hodges & Marilyn F. Milos (New York & London: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 1999): 161.

<sup>14</sup> Felix Bryk, *Voodoo Eros: Ethnological Studies in the Sex Life of the African Aborigines*, tr. Mayne R. Sexton (*Neger-Eros: Ethnologische Studien über das Sexualleben bei Negern*, 1928; tr. 1933; Whitefish MT: Kessinger, 2001): 121; and Claude-François Lallemand, *Involuntary Seminal Losses* (1836–42), quoted in Robert Darby, “The Masturbation Taboo and the Rise of Routine Circumcision: A Review of the Historiography,” *Journal of Social History* 36.3 (Spring 2003): 739.

<sup>15</sup> See N.K. Bissada, R.R. Morcos & M. el-Senoussi, “Post-Circumcision Carcinoma of the Penis. I. Clinical Aspects,” *Journal of Urology* 135 (1986): 283–85.

to be too long, and physicians often recommended *phimosis* or foreskin constriction as a medical measure. The nineteenth-century medical label ‘phimosis’, indeed, became attached to “any foreskin that appeared too long.” J. Cooper Forster deemed it “a pathological condition arising from ‘nature having been too prolific in the supply of skin at the extremity of the penis’.”<sup>16</sup> P.C. Remondino in 1891 vilified the foreskin, at tedious length, as a malign influence and moral “outlaw.”<sup>17</sup> The subsequent rise of circumcision as a preventive, and then routine, procedure may therefore be linked to the taboo around masturbation or the ‘self-abuse’ that such a generous ‘supply of skin’ would inexorably lead to.<sup>18</sup>

Just as the clitoris is considered to be a long, tribadic appendage rivalling a man’s penis and threatening to usurp its role as penetrator of females,<sup>19</sup> the same excitable Remondino claimed in 1889 that “it is a well-known fact that the most forlorn and mouse-headed, long-nosed glans penis will, within a week or two after its liberation from its fetters of preputial bonds, assume its true shape.” He deemed the prepuce useful for protection only for naked primitive man “in a wild state” against thorny briars. He also asks us to imagine a nineteenth-century corsetted woman suffering from habitual constipation, irregular menstruation, and miscarriages, in the act of copulation with “one of the mouse-headed, corona-deficient, long-pointed glans males.”<sup>20</sup>

Not only do the foreskin and the clitoris have in common a long history of being long, they also functioned as trophies and, in some cases, fertility charms. The first famous foreskin is certainly that of the infant Jesus. As has been amply documented, many European churches and abbeys have claimed to harbour the sacred relic belonging to Jesus as a circumcised infant. Unlike

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<sup>16</sup> J. Cooper Forster, “A Few Remarks on the Surgical Diseases of Children. Part I: Congenital Phymosis,” *Medical Times and Gazette* (17 November 1855): 491–92. Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 153.

<sup>17</sup> P.C. Remondino, *History of Circumcision from the Earliest Times to the Present: Moral and Physical Reasons for Its Performance* (1851); quoted in Alex Comfort, *The Anxiety Makers: Some Curious Preoccupations of the Medical Profession* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1967): 106–107.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Darby links the two historiographies of masturbation and routine circumcision in his article “The Masturbation Taboo,” 737–51.

<sup>19</sup> Theresa Braunschneider, “The Macroclitoride, the Tribade and the Woman: Configuring Gender and Sexuality in English Anatomical Discourse,” *Textual Practice* 13.3 (1999): 509–32. See also my article “From the Tribade to the Excised Woman: Representational Avatars of the Clitoris in Women’s Texts and Male Contexts,” in *Figure della Differenza*, ed. Elena Bonelli & Paula Piccioni (Documenti di lavoro e pre-pubblicazioni 306–308; Urbino: Università di Urbino, 2001): 34–49.

<sup>20</sup> Remondino, quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 175.

the foreskin, the severed clitoris is seldom used as a relic, let alone a trophy. The micro-odyssey of the clitoral hood is thus less grand and has less talismanic power. It is thrown in the Nile (in the fiction of the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi), buried under a banana tree (by the Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala), or tossed away for ants to feast on (by the Guinean Kesso Barry). The Somali Waris Dirie returns to the rock where her genitals were left to dry; predictably, the shreds of her flesh are gone.<sup>21</sup> The vignettes strewn at the end of this volume thus act as reminders of such avatars. But, as we may have surmised, Jesus was not the first circumcised man.

### The Cult of the Phallus and the Beginning of the Universe

The circumcised phallus of the Egyptian sun-god Ra is the linchpin of Boris de Rachewiltz's argument in his *Eros noir* (1993). Taking his cue from Sigismond Zaborowsky–Moindron,<sup>22</sup> he starts out with Ra's supposed self-engendering through "masturbating or even mutilating his own sexual organs." He further contends that "this mutilation could very well be circumcision."<sup>23</sup> Circumcision therefore finds part of its origins in the cult of the phallus in pharaonic Egypt and, through a process of cultural contamination, in sub-Saharan Africa. The role of masturbation should not go unnoticed, since it often precedes circumcision among males in many African societies (Barne, Gisu, Nandi, Sabei), where its pleasure-oriented nature is tolerated because considered infantile, while circumcision signals entry into manhood. One should also recall Felix Bryk's *Voodoo Eros* (1910) and his *Circumcision of Men and Women* (1934). Besides his enthusiastic identification of eight types of genital operations which the World Health Organization seems to have shrunk to four, Bryk dwelt on the Nandi erotogenic transfer from the infantile clitoris to the mature vagina, which was to inspire Marie Bonaparte's and Sigmund Freud's theories of female sexuality, based in part on Bryk's fieldwork with the semi-Hamitic Nandi of Kenya.

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<sup>21</sup> For more detail, see my "Acquiring Body: Waris Dirie, Infibulation, and New African Female Self-Writing," in *Africa and Its Significant Others*, ed. Isabel Hoving, Frans-Willem Korsten & Ernst Van Alphen, Special issue, *Thamyris/ Intersecting Place, Sex, and Race* 11 (2003): 61–76.

<sup>22</sup> Sigismond Zaborowsky–Moindron, *Esquisses et moeurs grecques d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1911): 109, 118, 216.

<sup>23</sup> Boris de Rachewiltz, *Eros noir: Moeurs sexuelles de l'Afrique noire de la pré-histoire à nos jours* (Paris: Jean–Jacques Pauvert/Terrain vague, 1993): 131.

Ra's mutilation is also confirmed in Chapter 17 of *The Book of the Dead* and finds some echoes in Hesiod's *Theogony*, which relates how Time (Chronos) severed the genital organs of the Universe (Uranos), which then fell into abysmal space, where they fermented into a foam out of which Aphrodite was born. One should distinguish between Ra's circumcision, which is part of a cosmogonic mythologem around the creation of the universe, and the ancient phallotomy performed on vanquished warriors. Both, however, invest the phallus with power and supremacy, especially in its circumcised form.

India boasts several Hindu creation myths. In one such myth, the sexually ambivalent Śiva is the greatest creative ascetic (*tapas*), in that he carried out a most extreme form of asceticism or *tapasya*: i.e. self-castration. Brahma and Vishnu had asked Śiva to create the world; Śiva agreed, and plunged into the waters for a thousand years. When he failed to re-emerge, Vishnu endowed Brahma with the female power to create all the gods and beings. When Śiva finally re-surfaced, he saw that the universe had already been created and severed his *linga* or phallus, which had become useless, and tossed it onto the earth, which engendered the fertility cult of *linga* worship.

The burial of the Hindu divinity's severed genitals thus led to universal rather than individual fertility. This explains why ancestral and contemporary *hijras* or 'female men' (eunuchs-cum-transvestites) undergo emasculation (*nirvan*) or the removal of scrotum and testicles, and derive power, as ritual performers who can impart fertility to others, from their sexual impotence with women and from their religious devotion to the mother goddess. This further explains why the *linga* is almost always set in the *yoni*, the symbol of the female genitals.<sup>24</sup>

Jewish circumcision seems to owe its origins to an equally distant past, where it acted as a substitute for human sacrifices offered to an insatiable God. To support this thesis, the Bible (I Samuel 18:25) is often quoted: "And Saul said, Thus shall ye say to David, The King desireth not any dowry, but an hundred foreskins of the Phillistines, to be avenged of the king's enemies."<sup>25</sup> Jewish circumcision, even though practised in order to seal a Covenant between the people and its God, was originally not imposed solely on

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<sup>24</sup> Serena Nanda, "Hijras: An Alternative Sex and Gender Role in India," in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone, 1996): 373–417.

<sup>25</sup> *The Holy Bible containing The Old and New Testament. Translated out of the Original Tongues and with the Former Translations Diligently Compared and Revised by His Majesty's Special Command. Authorized King James Version* (London & New York: William Collins, 1994): 199.

Jews but on non-Jewish slaves as well, which partly explains the Jewish influence on Africa around 700 BCE. The Sabei (Semites from Southern Arabia) had left Yemen and crossed the Red Sea, penetrating into Ethiopia, which accounts for the fact that, today, Jewish people can be found in the regions of Gurage and Harari, their descendants being the Falashas or “Black Jews.”<sup>26</sup> Even though the Ethiopian Jews or Falashas practise ‘female circumcision’, ideas of kinship and symmetry between circumcision and excision are thought not to exist as such in Jewish societies, presumably because, as Shaye J.D. Cohen sarcastically explains in “Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised,” “the term ‘Jews’ means men [... and ...] only men are real Jews in all respects.”<sup>27</sup>

In North Africa, during the first centuries of the Christian era, Jewish Berbers, fleeing from persecution, sought refuge in the oasis of Touat, with some groups going as far as Sudan. A 1486 edict by the King of Portugal reports that the Jews who refused to convert to Christianity were deported to Guinea, West Africa, and mixed with the native populations, which adopted the rite of circumcision.

The symmetry between Jewish rituals and African rituals is a controversial one. Leonard Glick in *Marked in Your Flesh* (2005) comments:

imperial officers in Africa knew about male (and, vaguely, about female) genital cutting there, of course, but civilized Britons could hardly be expected to imitate the practices of ‘primitive’ tribesmen.<sup>28</sup>

Earlier, a Tsarphati (Hebrew for ‘Frenchman’), Orly Terqueur, had aimed some of his most caustic observations at circumcision. In a letter published in 1838, he remarked:

If I were to tell you that, in a certain country, there exists a population which attaches a religious importance to mutilating, to slashing, to lacerating the weak creatures as soon as they enter life, to submitting them to so painful an operation that sometimes death follows it [...] with no protest ever been raised in favor of the victims, if I let you guess the country, would not your ideas naturally point to an African

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<sup>26</sup> De Rachewiltz, *Eros noir*, 169. The first historian to report on this is Strabo, who was first translated in French. See Strabo. *Geographica*, tr. Amélie Tardieu, vol. 3 (Paris: Hachette, 1909).

<sup>27</sup> Shaye J.D. Cohen, quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 255. Cohen is also used in Tobe Levin’s essay in this volume.

<sup>28</sup> Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 157.

country, inhabited by some savage race? Such is not the case. It concerns our *patrie*, France, and a noble segment of its inhabitants.<sup>29</sup>

Jon Levenson has also endorsed this basic symmetry between the African and Jewish ritual. In *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, he suggests that male circumcision may have once functioned as a substitution ritual for child sacrifice.<sup>30</sup> And Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, in the present volume, reminds us that Egyptian girls' ritual habit of throwing their severed clitoris in the Nile may have originated from child sacrifice.

The anthropological speculation that genital alterations may have originated in child sacrifice helps us better to understand later substitutes and substitutes such as 'alternative rites'. Anthropology, which constitutes the second part of this book ("Anthropological Wormholes"), is indeed instrumental in reflecting not only on the very idea of symmetry but also on the fundamental nature of an operation such as circumcision, which Leonard Glick, at the end of his already mentioned, seminal book, understands as "a rite of sacrificial bloodshed."<sup>31</sup>

However, what these writers and theoreticians have in mind is a form of neonatal circumcision rather than a rite of passage, performed at puberty. The latter seems to be quintessentially 'African', very much unlike Muslim circumcision, which dates back to *jahilliya*, the so-called period of 'ignorance' which preceded the advent of Islam, and does not involve an initiation rite. It is also very much unlike a religiously sanctioned practice, whereby a people seals a Covenant with its God, such as in the Jewish rite. Yet, as we shall see, symmetries can be established as well.

The aim of this quintessentially African rite is to demarcate sex affiliation in the flesh, following the belief that every child is hermaphroditic at birth and has to shed its vestigial femininity, located in the boy's prepuce, or its residual masculinity, situated in the girl's clitoral hood or clitoris and labia. Circumcision therefore often exists alongside excision in the same ethnic group. But this reasoning is seldom pushed to its logical conclusion: i.e. to the removal of men's nipples. However, ablation of the male nipple is practised among, for

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 137.

<sup>30</sup> See Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> "Practices mandated or sanctioned in the Hebrew scriptures – animal sacrifice, slavery, polygamy, rite of purification – are utterly distant from Jewish American culture. Why then has circumcision proved so resistant to change? Is this one custom – in the final analysis a rite of sacrificial bloodshed – appropriate for a modern community?" (Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 281).

example, the Djangero in the high valley of the Omo Bottego in Western Ethiopia. According to Freud's disciple and friend Marie Bonaparte, the French explorer of Ethiopia, Jules Borelli, reported in 1888 that the custom was practised because "a man should not resemble a woman." Forty years later, in 1928, when Marie Bonaparte visited the area, she was given the same justification for the persistence of the rite.<sup>32</sup>

Although the Jewish rite, as we know it, is always neo-natal as opposed to the African rite, they are conjoint in their belief in the alleged androgyny of the infant, who is male-in-appearance until circumcised. Indeed, the Hebrew *yesod* refers to a circumcised phallus, previously encased in its 'demonic shell'. To gaze at the exposed *corona* or 'crown' (the female aspect of the androgynous phallus), as it is 'revealed' through the rite of circumcision, amounts to beholding *shekhinah*.<sup>33</sup> *Shekhinah* is the feminine emanation of the Divine Being, which is highly desirable and was the object of fascination in the early poetry of W.B. Yeats, among others. Yeats, however, may never have suspected that *shekhinah* as incarnated in the object of his unrequited love, Maud Gonne, was also embodied in the circumcised phallus.

Both circumcision and excision emphasize belonging to a group, to the point that uncircumcised boys and unexcised girls are cut off from the community and become the object of hypocoristic reduction. As far as unexcised girls are concerned, the Kenyan novelist Charity Waciuma's *Daughter of Mumbi* (1969) provides a harrowing description not only of rejection for the *irugu* or unexcised girls but also of exclusion from the Christian missionary schools and the girls' transfer to independent schools, away from political retaliation by the Mau Mau during the 1952–56 Emergency.<sup>34</sup>

The notion of belonging has trickled down to us in the more immediate present. When, in 1990, an article by Lisa Braver Moss appeared on the circumcised infant's pain, Esther Raul Friedman wrote a rebuttal, arguing that by not opting to circumcise their newborn infant, parents were "'condemning him to a life without *shayachut* (belonging)'.<sup>35</sup> As Rabbi Eilberg-Schwartz

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<sup>32</sup> In Cerulli, *Etiopia Occidentale*, vol. 2: 13–23, quoted in Marie Bonaparte, *Female Sexuality* (1933), tr. John Rodker (New York: International Universities, 1953): 153–54, fn 1.

<sup>33</sup> For further detail, see Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 71.

<sup>34</sup> See my discussion of Waciuma's novel in my *Between Rites and Rights: Excision in Women's Experiential Texts and Human Contexts*, ch. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 44.

put it, “‘one must have a member to be a member’.”<sup>36</sup> As with Israelites’ rites in the Biblical era, circumcision in Africa functions as a symbol of patrilinearity.

A powerful example of the patrilineal function of circumcision was provided by Maurice Bloch in *From Blessing to Violence* (1986), which details the history and ideology in the circumcision ritual among the Merina of Madagascar, where excision does not exist. Taking his cue from the Jesuit missionary Callet in the nineteenth century,<sup>37</sup> Bloch also relied on his own fieldwork in 1971 in the village of Ambatomanoïna in Imerina, where he attended circumcision rituals performed on boys between the ages of one and two.

Before the ceremony, “boys are like girls.” The ceremony dispenses blessing or *tsodrano* (literally, the blowing of water on the child), which makes “boys sexually potent.”<sup>38</sup> In the symbolism inherent in the use of plants – gourd, banana, sugarcane – in preparation for the ceremony, the need soon emerges to do violence to the natural, mother-focused power of reproduction. More broadly, “Merina ideas emphasize that natural descent is entirely matrilinear and [...] a degree of patrification is achieved only by the transformation of the progeny brought about by a degree of violence” (72).

Significantly, the ritual takes place on the doorstep or threshold of the birth-focused house, which is associated with matrilinearity and has been previously assaulted by pestle-wielding youths. After the child’s prepuce has been cut off by the circumciser and swallowed in a piece of banana by a senior relative, the male child is considered to be severed from the warm world of women, birth and dirt, heat and biology, and can then access true: i.e. not merely biological, fertility. By the same token, the child becomes part of the ancestral *deme* or undivided descent group made up of both Merina men and Merina women.

The aim of the Merina circumcision ritual is thus, in Bloch’s words, to enable a transfer “so that the power of matrilinear filiation can be turned into the power of undifferentiated asexual bilaterality” (98). A parallel transformation occurs through the purifying violence of the circumcision, from *mahery* (i.e. powerful and wild things associated with the feminine) into

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<sup>36</sup> Eilberg–Schwartz, “Why Not the Earlobe?” quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 245.

<sup>37</sup> An earlier account had been provided by W. Ellis in *The History of Madagascar*, 2 vols. (London: Fisher, 1838).

<sup>38</sup> Maurice Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986): 48–49. Further page references are in the main text.

*masina*, or holy things linked with the masculine. The circumcision thus signals a new birth, so that the child is no longer ‘of woman born’.

This transfer points to the very origins of the Merina circumcision ritual, introduced by the mythical Merina King Andriamanelo, who had to drive out the wild and uncultivated Vazimba people, over whom his mother ruled. Going back historically to the reign of King Andrianampoinimerina (1793–1810), the circumcision ritual was preceded by the cutting of the ear of a bullock on the threshold area of the house, because “like the uncut child, bulls are associated with the vitality of nature” (121). So the foreskin and the ear become associated again, as in Arnold Van Gennep’s conjectures. Bloch reads this symbolism in terms of marking and locating the individual or animal within descent, for “[the cattle’s] ears are cut in a pattern that indicates their masters’ descent group” (121).

Bloch further notes that if, from a formal point of view, the ritual has not altered greatly since the late-eighteenth century, it has changed from a functional historical point of view, since the rite grew as “a kind of primitive census, mainly for the purpose of recruiting for military and corvée service but also to mark adoption” (159), which resulted in a rise in the maximum age of the children circumcised and reinforced the allegiance to a cohesive, united kingdom through the royal circumcision ritual. The French invasion of 1896, which fostered Malagasy nationalism, caused the royal circumcision ritual to dwindle into a small-scale, familial affair. Conversely, independence from France in 1960 led to an increase in importance of the circumcision ritual, which took on anti-Christian overtones, as in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s and in Sudan, where the British forbade infibulation in 1946, only to drive it underground.

This belief in marking the symbolic death of the other sex is also held among the Dogon of Mali, whose customs were immortalized by the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule in his *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* (1956), the Malian sage, as well as in many other West African groups such as the Ijaw and the Itsekiri in Nigeria and many Bantu groups as far as South Africa, including the Kikuyu of Kenya.

According to Ogotemmêli’s elaborate explanations to the eager French anthropologist, Griaule, the clitoris features as a powerful organ that has to be excised to ensure the beginning of the universe. After Amma created the celestial bodies, he took a lump of clay and flung it from him so that the feminine “body” of clay lay prone, with “its clitoris a termite hill”:

At God’s approach the termite hill rose up, barring the passage and displaying its masculinity. It was as strong as the organ of the stranger,

and intercourse could not take place. But God was all-powerful. He cut down the termite hill, and had intercourse with the excised earth.<sup>39</sup>

Out of this defective union the jackal was born, instead of the intended twins. Yet God had further intercourse with his Earth-wife, and this time the divine seed of water was able to enter the womb of the Earth. Griaule comments: “The normal reproductive cycle resulted in the birth of twins” (18).

In a later chapter, titled “Twenty-Fourth Day: The Dual Soul and Circumcision,” Griaule recounts how, at each childbirth, the chief priest, eager to avoid the loneliness of the jackal, God’s firstborn, prays to God for the birth of twins. Since his prayers are not always answered, he thus “creates two twin souls for a single being.” Upon being delivered, the infant is attached to the Earth by “a link of blood,” which grows from the prepuce of the glans or of the clitoris and enters the soil of the delivery room. Insofar as the child retains the prepuce of the glans or the clitoris, its masculinity and femininity are equally potent. An uncircumcised boy, like an unexcised girl, is both male and female: i.e. androgynous. Excision or circumcision severs the sacrificial “link of blood” (160). Through circumcision or excision, the soul that resided in the prepuce of the glans or the clitoris departs.

The Dogon myth of creation, with its divine male violence against the female Earth, reflects an imbalance in male–female power relations. As it resulted from the initial excision rape, what existed prior to it is a primordial matriarchal state in which the clitoris “was as strong as” (i.e. ‘symmetrical’ with) the penis, and capable of erection and insurrection. Just as the God Amma in the creation myth was awed by the insurrection of the Earth’s organ, so a man who tried to mate with an unexcised woman would be frustrated by opposition from an organ claiming equality. Like other African legends that make genital ‘mutilation’ inexorably rhyme with female muteness, a sample of which was provided by A.M. Vergiat,<sup>40</sup> the Dogon creation myth intimates that, were it not for excision, gynocracy would have been engendered and, in the absence of sexual segregation, social chaos would have ensued.

Ogotemmêli’s tale is therefore very much like other creation myths that predate or are contemporaneous with Genesis, the Greek stories, or the Babylonian epic. To take only one instance, from the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*: the young warrior-god Marduk conquers Tiamat, the dragon-mother of all crea-

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<sup>39</sup> Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* (1934; London: International African Institute/Oxford UP, 1970): 155. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>40</sup> See the excised girls’ songs in A.M. Vergiat, *Les rites secrets des primitifs de l’Oubangui* (Paris: Payot, 1951).

tion, and splits her lifeless carcass to form the earth and the sky. As in the Kenyan legend of Kikuyu and Mumbi, such creation myths are based on an initial struggle and are thus markedly different from the Judaeo-Christian story, where the universe is fashioned out of nothing.

These possible origins for the contemporary rites of excision and circumcision are still nebulous; but what was originally a rite of passage or an initiation has been de-ritualized, since circumcision, like excision, can be performed on infants, on older men or women, and, in a few reported instances, on corpses. What is more, excision's most extreme form – infibulation – is nowhere attested as a rite. In this volume, Tobe Levin makes a case for infibulation as a watershed practice to which such 'fearful symmetries' no longer apply.

### The Razor and the Knife: The Demonization of the Practitioner

Another 'fearful symmetry', aside from the ritual aspect and taxonomies mentioned above, lies in the perceptions one can glean of the practitioner across the centuries. Leonard Glick gleefully mentions the rabbis "endowed with oversized 'priapic' noses" and "Jews as wielders of knives," who are part of popular parlance in the way in which the exciser equipped with her razor haunts excision accounts. For instance, in her *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980), Nawal El Saadawi portrays the *daya* or exciser as a one-eyed Cyclops searching with shaky fingers for the girl-child's clitoris.<sup>41</sup> Also, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), the African American Alice Walker portrays the exciser, M'Lissa, as a Jungian Terrible Mother, who limps as a result of her excision and vengefully uses her razor on younger females. Such relatively recent portrayals evoke nineteenth-century reports of *mohels* with rotting teeth and filthy nails. As both practitioners are depicted as bloodthirsty, their instruments are invariably caked with dried blood and carelessly used serially, a fact that can be gleaned from actual observation but which is also couched in folk-cultural discourse.

As a medical doctor, Nawal El Saadawi has highlighted the surgical incompetence of the Egyptian *daya* in *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Her vivid description of the exciser "gloating over her victim" and ignorant of human anatomy echoes the many reports of the inadequacies of the *mohels*, who

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<sup>41</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (1980), tr. & ed. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed, 1995): 33. For a detailed analysis of the 'Cyclops' episode, see my *Between Rites and Rights*, ch. 5.

were more often than not “self-appointed and medically ignorant.”<sup>42</sup> Among the long list of health hazards attendant on both practices, death by haemorrhage seems to be a recurrent one. Following the bleeding to death of a rabbi’s son’s in 1846, a conference adopted a set of resolutions, one of which required *mohels* to pass an examination in order to be licensed. Glick quotes from these resolutions – “‘permission to circumcise must be denied to any *mohel* who, because of bodily effect, such as trembling of the hands, near-sightedness, etc., is unfit to perform the operation’.”<sup>43</sup> The same applies to the harrowing accounts of circumcised males in Section 4 of this volume.

Second in severity come life-threatening infections and infectious diseases. Besides the *mohels*’ sharpened, contaminated thumbnails, applied to perform *peri’ah*, Glick also indicates the objectionable practice of *metsitsah*, whereby “mohels were sucking wounded infant penises with mouths contaminated by infected gums, ulcers, and, most egregiously, syphilis and tuberculosis.”<sup>44</sup> In 2006, the New York City Health Department drew up safety guidelines to govern the practice of *metzizah b’peh* (sucking blood from the circumcision wound) after linking the rite to additional cases of herpes in infants, one of whom suffered brain damage as a result. *The NOCIRC Annual Newsletter* (2006) reports that “others have died. While orthodox Jews consider any campaign against their dangerous practice a violation of religious freedom, US Supreme Court case law (*Prince v. Massachusetts*) states that parental religious ‘freedom’ stops where a child’s welfare is put in danger. During this conflict of “religious freedom vs. public health, certainly a crucial point, no one is mentioning the constitutional right of the child to religious freedom.”<sup>45</sup>

In both practices, the pain is indescribably excruciating. Yet victims have tried to put their experience of that pain into words. At one end of the spectrum, one circumcised man mentions the “dreadful pain and extreme suffering similar to that caused by the crushing of a finger caught in a door.”<sup>46</sup> In the African context, the Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o describes his alter ego’s numbing pain in *The River Between* (1965). Closer to us, the Jewish boy Robi Singer, in the Bulgarian György Dalos’s *The Circumcision* (2006), is not convinced by the necessity for a *Brit Milah* in Budapest in 1955, even though his sponsor, Master Balla, argues that the operation is “wholesome and

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<sup>42</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 61, and Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 143.

<sup>43</sup> Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 124.

<sup>44</sup> *Marked in Your Flesh*, 127.

<sup>45</sup> Anon., “Religious Freedom vs. Public Health,” *NOCIRC Annual Newsletter* 20 (2006): 1.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 197.

practical” and, what is more, it is “a very small incision! It only lasts for a few minutes and you will not feel anything since you will be slightly anesthetized.”<sup>47</sup> At the opposite end of the spectrum, J.H. Kellogg, whom we now associate with health-enhancing cereal, refers to “the brief pain” attendant upon the operation of circumcision to remedy masturbation, which “will have a salutary effect upon the mind, especially if it be connected with the idea of punishment.”<sup>48</sup> As one can glean from the experiential vignettes at the end of this volume, many African women autobiographers such as Waris Dirie, Saïda Hagi-Dirie Herzi, Khady, Nura Abdi, Fadumo Korn, and Kesso Barry have also attempted to describe the indelible pain resulting from excision and infibulation, always with the feeling that words cannot adequately describe such pain, both physical and psychic.

However, a focus on the child’s pain is relatively recent, especially in Jewish scholarship. As already mentioned, Lisa Braver Moss in a 1990 article focused on infant pain and Rabbi Daniel Landes and his co-author Sheryl Robin entitled their response “Gainful Pain.”<sup>49</sup> Likewise, the issue of buying “maturity with pain” was also at the core of the Kenyan Rendille women’s argument for maintaining female excision in the 1990s. As has been amply attested by Glick in the American context, what began as a Jewish ritual practice became an American hospital routine. Likewise, African excision and circumcision, which were at first rituals and then became deritualized practices, depending on the African country where it is performed, have gradually been medicalized.

Glick wonders why, in the USA, “in obvious contrast to all medical decisions, when it comes to circumcision it is *parents*, not physicians, who are expected to determine that a surgical procedure is in a child’s ‘best interests’.” Opponents of circumcision argue that “the question is not what should be called ‘mutilation’ but whether anyone has the right to authorize or perform surgery on the genitals of any child without compelling, unequivocal medical justification.”<sup>50</sup> Just as African parents are usually convinced that excising their daughters amounts to ensuring their marriageability and acting in their best interest, most American parents in the 1950s (and a smaller percentage of them today) were convinced that neo-natal circumcision for their infant sons meant protecting them. Yet, whereas the number of African deaths attribu-

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<sup>47</sup> György Dalos, *La Circoncision*, tr. Patrick Charbonneau (Arles: Actes Sud, 1992): 67, 155. My tr.

<sup>48</sup> J.H. Kellogg, quoted in Robert Darby, “The Masturbation Taboo,” 744.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 242.

<sup>50</sup> Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 213.

table to excision and circumcision in Africa is incalculable, Glick mentions two hundred American infant deaths annually that are traceable to circumcision.<sup>51</sup>

If one looks closely at the instruments used in circumcision and excision, the knife and the razor, they do look as threatening as the new instruments such as the GOMCO (Goldstein Manufacturing Company) clamp, which “converts this force into 8,000 to 20,000 lb. of hemostatic force against the prepuce.”<sup>52</sup> Conversely, instruments for excision and infibulation have not changed very much since the procedures’ ancestral beginnings, except when the blades have been furnished by compassionate humanitarian organizations.

Circumcision or excision with contaminated and non-sterile-infection instruments is, along with sexual promiscuity, one of the major causes of HIV/AIDS in Africa. Contemporary medical and legal authorities such as Howe, Svoboda, and Hodges have argued thus:

Even if the two ongoing randomised controlled trials in Africa show a protective benefit of circumcision, factors such as the unknown complication rate of the procedure, the permanent injury to the penis, human rights violations and the potential for veiled colonialism need to be taken into account.<sup>53</sup>

Yet little has changed since the California neurologist Aaron J. Fink argued in a 1985 *New York Times* article that having a foreskin meant being the ideal candidate for the AIDS virus. Circumcision continues to be recommended as prophylactic surgery. An article in the *International Herald Tribune* of March 2007 said that UN health agencies have recommended that “heterosexual men undergo circumcision because of ‘compelling’ evidence that it can reduce their chances of contracting HIV by up to 60 percent.” However, experts at the World Health Organization and the UNAIDS agency quickly added that “men must be aware that circumcision provides only partial protection against the virus and must be used with other measures.”<sup>54</sup> It is now clear that “male circumcision does not eliminate the risk of HIV for men, and the effects of male circumcision on women’s risk of HIV are not

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<sup>51</sup> *Marked in Your Flesh*, 278.

<sup>52</sup> *Marked in Your Flesh*, 197.

<sup>53</sup> Robert S. Van Howe, J. Steven Svoboda & Frederick M. Hodges, “HIV Infection and Circumcision: Cutting Through the Hyperbole,” *Journal of Research in Social Health* 125 (2006): 259–65. Quoted in “Religious Freedom vs. Public Health,” *NOCIIRC Annual Newsletter* 20 (2006): 1, 4.

<sup>54</sup> “Circumcision advised as anti-AIDS Measure,” *International Herald Tribune* (29 March 2007): 8.

known.”<sup>55</sup> Also, Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh and Glick remind us quite soberly that the USA has the largest number of circumcised adult males and one of the highest HIV infection rates in the developed world. The solution possibly lies elsewhere.

### Alternatives Rites: From Bloodlust to Bloodless

Aside from the pending eradication of the ‘ablation of the clitoris’ within the next decade (2015) in Egypt and Sudan and the other eighteen countries participating in the December 2008 Cairo summit,<sup>56</sup> Jewish and African circumcision rites are presently being ousted by alternative rites. As far as Jewish rites are concerned, the *Bris Shalom* or Covenant of Peace has, in some contexts, replaced the *Brith Milah*. Leonard Glick has referred to the call of the rabbi for the society for Humanistic Judaism, Sherwin T. Wine, for “a new kind of celebration; ‘a naming ceremony for infant girls and boys’.”<sup>57</sup> Nelly Karsenty, an immigrant who once studied in a Yeshiva in Israel, declares that “Jews and Judaism can surely survive with redesign of circumcision into a ‘bloodless’ naming ceremony.”<sup>58</sup> Yet, in *Standing Again at Sinai*, Judith Plaskow mentions authors who referred to symbolic acts, ranging from “bathing the infant’s feet to immersing her in a ritual bath (*mikveh*) and ‘breaking her hymen’,” and, to Glick’s distress, “Plaskow mentions this last proposal without comment.”<sup>59</sup> A woman rabbi, Julie Cohen, insists on the term *brit banot* (covenant of daughters), but, she adds, “perhaps because they remind some people of female circumcision, terms making use of the word *brit* are far less popular than variations on *shalom bat* (‘welcoming the daughter’).”<sup>60</sup>

As I have shown with regard to African excision, excisers have discarded their tools in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Kenya, and numerous other sub-Saharan African countries and only pretend to excise the girlchild and, in Sudan, even use mercurochrome to simulate the blood of infibulation. However, these

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<sup>55</sup> UNAIDS and WHO, AIDS, 12/05; quoted in “Religious Freedom vs. Public Health,” 1.

<sup>56</sup> Warm thanks go to Gordon Collier for drawing my attention to an article in Spanish in *La Vanguardia* (Tuesday 15 December 2008, p. 28), “Egipto y Sudán aspiran a erradicar la ablación de clítoris en diez años,” and for kindly providing an English translation as this volume was going to press.

<sup>57</sup> Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 232.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 234.

<sup>59</sup> Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 255.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 255.

same excisers still ‘do boys’ or circumcision has become medicalized, as Alex Wanjala reminds us in the last section of the present volume. Some African women such as T.M. Hinga have lamented such cultural apostasy as a reduction of excision, which used to be a ceremonial ritual involving the moral preparedness of the whole family, “to the mere bodily mutilation, the surgical element,”<sup>61</sup> and she makes a case for “a reconstruction of female puberty rites as rites of passage to facilitate the transition of the girlchild from childhood to adulthood [...] in order to insure that less problematic perceptions of sexual differentiation are inculcated in our youth.”<sup>62</sup> This finds an echo in Anne-Marie Tinturier–Dauphin’s emphasis, in her contribution to this volume, on the cultural need in Zambia to situate oneself on one or the other side of the sexual divide, and in Michael Singleton’s reminder, in his Althusserian analysis, that such rites of passage once served to increase one’s humanity in the then Congo.

Why not the earlobe, then? Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh reminds us that the Bible referred to circumcision in veiled, metaphoric terms as the “circumcision of ears” or of the heart, yet did not encourage ears to be cut off, even taking, as it does, a strong stand against the cutting of cattle’s ears, which is attributed to Satan. In short, the non-consensual, non-therapeutic bodily alteration involved in circumcising a boy or excising or infibulating a girl can be replaced by another ritual in the sense of a “repeated and symbolic dramatization” and source of transformative power, which offers “a paradigm for how the world ought to be.”<sup>63</sup> This ideal world is definitely ‘uncut’. As one character puts it in Pidgin in the Nigerian Yulisa Amadu Maddy’s 1973 novel *No Past, No Present, No Future*, “Pekin is not ears eh, eh,” implying that “unlike ears, a child grows.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Teresia Mbari Hinga, “Christianity and Female Puberty Rites in Africa: The Agikiyu Case,” in *Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa: Interaction Between Christianity and African Traditional Religions*, ed. James Cox (Fairwater: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998): 176.

<sup>62</sup> Hinga, “Christianity and Female Puberty Rites in Africa,” 169–70.

<sup>63</sup> James Cox, “Introduction” to *Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa*, ed. Cox, x.

<sup>64</sup> Yulisa Amadu Maddy, *No Past, No Present, No Future* (London, Nairobi & Ibadan: Heinemann, 1973): 6.

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- tianity and African Traditional Religions*, ed. James Cox (Fairwater: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998): 168–79.
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SECTION 1  
SYMMETRIES



SAMI A. ALDEEB ABU~SAHLIEH

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## Male Circumcision/Female Circumcision: Is There Any Difference?<sup>1</sup>

The Practice: Statistics

**A** BOUT 15 MILLION PEOPLE are circumcised annually, thirteen million boys and two million girls. With each heartbeat, a child passes under the knife.<sup>2</sup>

Male circumcision is practised on the five continents by about a billion Muslims, three hundred million Christians, sixteen million Jews and an unknown number of animists and atheists.

Female circumcision was and continues to be practised on the five continents by Muslims, Christians, Jews, animists, and atheists, but it is especially common in twenty-eight countries, mainly African and Muslim.<sup>3</sup> In Egypt,

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail, see my own full-length study, *Male and Female Circumcision Among Jews, Christians and Muslims: Religious, Medical, Social and Legal Debate* (Warren Center PA: Shangri-La, 2001). The opinions expressed in this article engage only the responsibility of the author, and in no way the responsibility of the Swiss Institute of Comparative Law.

<sup>2</sup> Ad hoc working group of international experts on genital mutilation, POB 197, Southfields, New York 10975, USA.

<sup>3</sup> *Mutilations sexuelles féminines: Dossier d'information* (Geneva: OMS, 1994).

currently in the foreground regarding female circumcision, 97% of women are circumcised: 99.5% in the countryside and 94% in urban areas.<sup>4</sup>

## Introduction

Man has always applied all kinds of markings to his own body and the bodies of others. The reasons for these practices are varied and, at times, contradictory: divine order, mortification, domination, beauty, punishment, identification, purification, to inhibit sexuality and sexual excitement, fertility, to mark offspring. It can involve castration, as with the choir boys of yore. In this survey, the discussion will be limited to male and female circumcision.

Muslims make up the principal religious group that practises male and female circumcision. The latter is in expansion in Asian Muslim countries under the impetus of the Azhar, the world-renowned Egyptian Islamic Centre, which grants scholarships to students from these countries. According to oral information, fundamentalist parties in Tunisia and Algeria are in favour of female circumcision even though the practice is unknown in these two countries.<sup>5</sup>

### *Definition of Male Circumcision*

Male circumcision consists of cutting, often without anesthesia, a smaller or larger part (up to a third) of the skin (called foreskin) of the penis located over the glans, sometimes damaging the frenulum.

Was Michelangelo's David circumcised? Among Jews, circumcision consisted initially in either cutting a minute part of skin or simply getting a drop of blood from the penis (i.e. the blood of alliance). The present-day Jewish double practice, which consists of cutting a maximum of skin (*milah*) and pulling the skin between the incision and the glans with a sharp fingernail (*periah*) was introduced in the second century by rabbis. The aim was to prevent Jewish males, faced with Greek–Roman hostility, from hiding this religious marking by pulling the skin of the penis back over the glans. In a 1997 case, rabbis demanded the re-circumcision of a young Hungarian who

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<sup>4</sup> *Egypt Demographic and Health Survey 1995*, National Population Council, Cairo, September 1996; *Le Monde*, 26 June 1997: 3.

<sup>5</sup> This information was culled from intellectuals whom I contacted, but this kind of oral information has not been verified.

converted to Judaism and wanted to emigrate to Israel, because, in their opinion, the amount of severed skin was insufficient.<sup>6</sup>

This debate is also found among Muslims. Some classical Muslim legal experts are satisfied with the cutting of a small part of the foreskin. Others think that the circumcision must involve the entire foreskin in order to clear the glans completely. If the foreskin grows again to cover the glans, or if the circumcision is not complete, some Jewish and Muslim texts recommend re-circumcision. If the child was born without foreskin, the Jewish Talmud recommends drawing blood from the glans, and some Muslims propose passing the knife over the site of the child's foreskin as a sign that divine command has been obeyed.<sup>7</sup>

Circumcision among Jews is generally performed on the eighth day. It can be delayed in case of a health problem. The child is only spared the ritual if the mother has already lost two, sometimes three, other sons due to circumcision.<sup>8</sup> Converts to Judaism must undergo circumcision even though they may be older. If the convert is already circumcised, a drop of blood is drawn from the glans.<sup>9</sup> If a Jew dies and is not circumcised, it is generally recommended to circumcise his corpse.<sup>10</sup> According to Muslims, circumcision is preferably to be performed at an early age – at the latest, before puberty. Blood will not be drawn from a circumcised man who converts to Islam. As with Jews, Muslim legal experts recommend circumcision of uncircumcised corpses.<sup>11</sup>

Circumcision among Jews is accompanied by a religious ritual. It is the father's duty, but he often delegates the task to a specialized cleric, a *mohel*, who can be a rabbi or, rarely, a physician. Among Muslims, there is less ritual, but classical Shia texts prescribe the recitation of a religious formula.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Tribune de Genève*, 14 April 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Neusner, tr. *Talmud of the Land of Israel* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1991): 459 (Shabbat 19:2, vol. 11). 'Abd-al-Salam 'Abd-al-Rahim Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad al-untha min manzur islami* (Dar al-manar: Heliopolis, 1988): 65–67.

<sup>8</sup> *Berit Mila in the Reform Context*, ed. Lewis Barth (Berit Mila Board of Reform Judaism, 1990): 164.

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Neusner, tr. *Talmud of Babylonia: an American Translation* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1993): 65–66 (Yebahot 75B, vol. XIII.C).

<sup>10</sup> Eugene J. Cohen, *Guide to Ritual Circumcision and Redemption of the First-Born Son* (New York: Ktav, 1984): 22.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 78–81.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Fadl Al-Tubrussi, *Makarim al-akhlaq* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lami, 1994): 220.

A barber, a professional, or any physician may perform the task. Among both Jews and Muslims, festivities follow upon the circumcision.

In the USA, where the rate of circumcision among men is 60%, the medical body carries out the circumcision within the first days after birth, before the infant leaves the maternity ward, often without anesthesia, religious ritual, or festivities.

The cut foreskin has many uses. Depending on the ethnic group in which the child was born, the severed foreskin is served in the soup given to circumcised children; it is swallowed between two slices of banana by the father or the uncle of the circumcised child, worn on the finger by a family member like a wedding ring, or buried under a tree whose vigour foretells the vitality of the child. In some Jewish families, it is used against infertility in women, or to ensure the love of a husband by secretly making him eat it. In other families, the foreskin is dried and is buried along with the person who performed the circumcision. In Syria, Muslims wrap it and put it in front of a shop doorway. In Egypt, it is thrown in the Nile. In modern medicine, it is used for the manufacture of hair oil, for medical research, or for skin transplants, which is a profitable market in the USA.

### *Definition of Female Circumcision*

Female circumcision consists of cutting, generally without anesthesia, partially or completely, the foreskin of the clitoris (the anatomical equivalent of the foreskin of the penis) or the clitoris itself (the anatomical equivalent of the glans of the penis). In the latter case, we use the term 'clitoridectomy' or 'excision'. Sometimes the inner and outer labia are also cut, partially or completely. In infibulation, also known as Pharaonic circumcision, the two sides of the vulva are sewn together with silk or catgut (in Sudan), suture, or thorns (in Somalia), so that the vulva is closed with the exception of a narrow opening for the passage of urine and menstrual flow.<sup>13</sup> During the wedding night, the husband should 'open up' his wife, most often with the help of a dagger. In some ethnic groups, the woman is re-sewn after giving birth, if the husband leaves for a period of time or in case of divorce.<sup>14</sup>

One often finds the expression 'Sunni circumcision' (in conformity with the tradition of Mohammed). According to some classical texts, it consists of cutting the "skin at the top of the organ, that resembles the crest of a rooster."

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<sup>13</sup> Maher Mahran, *Les risques médicaux de l'excision (circoncision médicale)*, originally published in *Bulletin Médical de l'IPPF* 15.2 (April 1981): 1.

<sup>14</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, tr. & ed. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed, 1980): 40.

One must therefore cut the protuberant epidermis, without complete ablation. This indication does not specify whether the practice is performed on the hood of the clitoris, the clitoris itself, or both.

No precise age is given for female circumcision. It can vary from a few months to sixteen years of age. In certain Muslim settings, it is recommended that a woman be circumcised when converting to Islam. A traditional midwife (like the Egyptian *daya*) or a barber generally performs the circumcision; sometimes it is carried out by a member of the medical body. Festivities rarely accompany the operation.

The severed skin of the female sex shares a fate similar, though less imaginative, to that of the male foreskin. The girl can wear it around her neck as a talisman. In Egypt, it is thrown in the Nile. Some have concluded that female circumcision derives from the ancient practice of sacrificing girls in exchange for favours from the Nile.

### *Circumcision of Hermaphrodites*

Jewish texts debate the circumcision of hermaphrodites: i.e. people born with both sexes.<sup>15</sup> Muslim texts question whether it is necessary to circumcise both organs or just the organ that urinates, or to wait until one organ predominates before circumcising it. To be on the safe side, the modern Egyptian author Al-Sukkari recommends cutting both organs in order to avoid any mistake.<sup>16</sup>

## The Religious Debate

Religious arguments serve either to legitimize or to condemn male and female circumcision, even in the USA, where male circumcision is performed under medical pretexts.

### *The Debate Among Jews*

#### – The Bible

The Bible (Old Testament) contains no discussion of female circumcision. On the other hand, it establishes the basis of the practice of male circumcision for Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Two texts govern this practice:

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<sup>15</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah, a New Translation* (New Haven CT & London: Yale UP, 1988): 202 (Shabbat 19:3).

<sup>16</sup> Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 87–89.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said to him: I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous. Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him: As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you, throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God. God said to Abraham: As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you, throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised, so shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. (Gen. 17:1–14)

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel, saying: If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days, as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days. (Lev. 12:1–5)

In the first passage, circumcision is a sign of the Covenant between God and Abraham and his offspring; circumcision in Hebrew is known as *Berit milah*, literally ‘the covenant of the cut’. The second passage, on the other hand, places circumcision among the norms related to the purification of the mother and her child. At other moments, the Bible distinguishes between those who

are circumcised and those who are not, the latter being considered unclean. For this reason, the uncircumcised are forbidden from participating in religious ceremonies (Ex 12:48) and from entering the sanctuary (Ezek 44:9) or the city of Jerusalem (Isa 52:1). The Bible sometimes makes a distinction between the physical circumcision of the foreskin and the spiritual one of the heart (Jer 4:4) and of the ears (Jer 6:10).

– Recent Debate

Some Jews have practised female circumcision.<sup>17</sup> For example, it continues to be performed by Ethiopian Jews (the Falashas),<sup>18</sup> but, to our knowledge, there is no religious debate around this practice. On the other hand, there are many Jews who fight against female circumcision while refusing to do the same for male circumcision, as in the case of Edmond Kaiser, founder of “Terre des Hommes” and “Sentinelles.”<sup>19</sup> Morality in this case is preached to Africans while Americans and Jews escape criticism. This stems from hypocrisy, cowardice, and cultural imperialism.

Male circumcision continues to be practised by a striking majority of Jews although they have abandoned numerous other Biblical edicts, e.g., the law of “an eye for an eye” (Deut 19:21) and the stoning of the adulterer (Deut 22:23). It should, however, be noted that there are some who have opposed it since ancient times. Some Jews have abandoned the practice, and some have even gone so far as to reconstruct their foreskin (I Macc 1:15; see also I Cor 7: 18), for which God may have rejected Esau, son of Jacob.<sup>20</sup> Greek and Roman authorities were certainly hostile to the practice, sometimes punishing it with death, but Jewish religious authorities were no more tolerant of those who were not circumcised. Elijah complains bitterly about those who have abandoned circumcision (I Kings 19:10). The Book of the Maccabees reports that some Jewish zealots went out of their way to circumcise by force all uncircumcised children that they found on the territory of Israel (I Mac 2:45–

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<sup>17</sup> Strabo, *Géographie de Strabon*, tr. Amédée Tardieu (Paris: Hachette, 1909), vol. 3: 367, 465.

<sup>18</sup> Wolf Leslau, *Coutumes et croyances des Falachas (Juifs d’Abyssinie)* (Paris: Institut d’Ethnographie, 195): 93; Elizabeth Gould Davis, *Egypt Demographic and Health Survey 1995* (Cairo: National Population Council, September 1996): 155.

<sup>19</sup> I was confronted with the position of Edmond Kaiser on this subject in the Swiss newspapers. See, for example, my letter in *Le Nouveau Quotidien* (8 July 1997), and the answer by Edmond Kaiser in the same newspaper (18 July 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 12th ed. 1937), vol. 5: 273.

46). Even today, those who resist the abolition of circumcision by sacrificing their lives are considered by many to be heroes.<sup>21</sup>

In modern times, the debate against male circumcision started after the French Revolution of 1789, whose goal was to create a secular society where national cohesion replaces the allegiance to religious communities. In 1842, in Frankfurt, a group of Jews proposed the suppression of circumcision and its replacement by an egalitarian religious ceremony for both boys and girls, without drawing blood.<sup>22</sup> In 1866, sixty-six Viennese Jewish physicians signed a petition against the practice of circumcision. In 1871, in Augsburg, rabbis decided that a child born of a Jewish mother and who remained uncircumcised for whatever reason still had to be considered Jewish.<sup>23</sup> One notes that the son of Alexander Herzl, the founder of Zionism, was not circumcised at birth, but later as an adolescent, at the insistence of his father's disciples.<sup>24</sup>

This debate travelled with Jewish immigrants to the USA, where, in 1892, reformed rabbis decided not to impose circumcision on new converts.<sup>25</sup> However, with the increase of births in American hospitals and the generalization of male circumcision, rabbis were confronted with a practice of circumcision that did not conform to Jewish norms – performed by physicians, in the three days that follow birth and without religious ritual. They tried to remedy this by training Jewish circumcisers. As religious marriage is recognized in the USA, rabbis tried to regain lost ground by refusing to marry those who were not circumcised.<sup>26</sup> The events of World War II reinforced the practice of circumcision among Jews. In 1979, the American Congress of Rabbis decided that circumcision was mandatory and had to be performed according to prescribed Jewish norms.<sup>27</sup>

Currently, there is a renewal of the critique against circumcision among progressive Jewish Americans, mainly based on medical arguments. Owing to the increasing hostility of the medical body towards circumcision and the dwindling rate of the latter, American Jews find themselves once more alone regarding this issue. In an atmosphere of weakening religious sentiment,

<sup>21</sup> Cohen, *Guide to Ritual Circumcision*, 4–5.

<sup>22</sup> *Berit Mila in the Reform Context*, ed. Barth, 141–44.

<sup>23</sup> *Berit Mila in the Reform Context*, ed. Barth, 146.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Wallerstein, *Circumcision: An American Fallacy* (New York: Springer, 1980): 250, note 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Berit Mila in the Reform Context*, ed. Barth, 146–47.

<sup>26</sup> *Berit Mila in the Reform Context*, 146–47.

<sup>27</sup> *Berit Mila in the Reform Context*, 147–48.

many Jews are no longer motivated to practise religious circumcision, either by refusing to circumcise their children at all or by having them circumcised in hospitals without ritual. Faced with this situation, some Jews have pleaded for the softening of the practice of circumcision, for the ritual to precede the cutting of the foreskin, for a parallel ritual for girls, and for women to be allowed to perform circumcision.<sup>28</sup> Others have opted for its suppression altogether while maintaining an egalitarian religious ritual for boys and girls. Instead of cutting the foreskin, some propose to symbolically cut a carrot. Finally, others reject both the ritual and the mutilation.<sup>29</sup>

The debate has reached Israel, where in 1997 human-rights activists created an organization to combat sexual mutilation. Dozens of parents, despite the opposition of their families, refused to circumcise their children, a practice that they consider contrary to Israeli legislation that forbids the abuse and mistreatment of children. The singer and literary critic Menachem Ben, referring to the Biblical text that speaks of the 'circumcision of the heart', claims that he had his son circumcised in this symbolic way. To those who argue for the medical benefits of circumcision, opponents reply that there are more children who die due to circumcision than of the infections against which it supposedly protects, and that simply cleaning the penis is sufficient prevention. Referring to Moses Maimonides, they further add that circumcision reduces sexual pleasure.

The chief Rabbi of Israel, Eliahu Bakshi Doron, claims that, much to his chagrin, self-hatred has taken hold of his people. The idea that anything Jewish is abominable has spread to the ritual of *Berith milah* (circumcision), as well. Even claims about possible harm caused by circumcision do not, in the rabbi's opinion, justify doubts regarding this ancient custom. "Who can decide that we are dealing with something primitive, antiquated, and painful. God be blessed, the Jewish people have lived like this already for many generations. Even if circumcision harms sexual pleasure, that is not a tragedy."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Hoffman, *A Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1996): 219.

<sup>29</sup> See such a ritual described at the end of Ronald Goldman, *Questioning Circumcision: A Jewish Perspective* (Boston: Circumcision Resource Center, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Message on Internet (30 May 1997) from Ari Zigelboim, akp@communique.net. See also London *Daily Telegraph*, 5 May 1997.

### *The Debate Among Christians*

#### – The New Testament

Jesus strongly attacked the religious authorities of his time, denouncing the *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye; Mt 5:38–39) and the stoning of adulterers (Jn 8:3–11), but he takes no concrete stand regarding circumcision. Of the four Gospels, only the Gospel of Luke reveals that Jesus was circumcised, when he was eight days old (Lk 2:21). There is another reference to circumcision in John:

Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me? The crowd answered: You have a demon. Who is trying to kill you? Jesus answered them: I performed one work, and all of you are astonished. Moses gave you circumcision – it is, of course, not from Moses, but from the patriarchs – and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives the circumcision on the Sabbath, in order that the Law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man’s whole body on the Sabbath? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with righteous judgment. (Jn 7:19–24)

Note here that Jesus does not claim that circumcision comes from God, but from the patriarchs.

The Acts of the Apostles report that when non-Jews began to become Christian, the question of circumcision raised heated debate. After Peter answered the plea of an uncircumcised Roman centurion and converted him, the circumcised Christians of Jewish origin questioned him, blaming him for having gone among uncircumcised men and eaten with them (11:2–3). Peter justified his gesture by describing a vision in which he heard a voice telling him three times: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (10:15–16 and 11:8–10). But the circumcised did not hear him this way; some people descended from Judea and taught their brothers: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (15:1). The question was addressed in a meeting of apostles and elders that took place in Jerusalem (15:2). Jacob arbitrated the debate by deciding that it is not necessary to bother those pagans who convert to God. The only thing to ask of them is to “abstain from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (15:19–20).

Paul, responsible for converting pagans, repeatedly returned to this question. Two passages summarize his position:

[...] let every one lead the life, which the Lord has assigned to him and in which God has called him. This is my rule on all the churches. Was any one at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the mark of the circumcision. Was any one at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. (I Cor 7:17–20)

You have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of his creator. Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all. (Cor. 3:10–11)

From being mandatory, circumcision thus became optional, for both theological and political reasons. One will note here that there is no reference in the texts of the Old or the New Testament evoking either the sanctity of an unwilling person's physical integrity or medical justification for circumcision, which are the main arguments used today in the discussion of male and female circumcision.

– Recent Debate

The debate about male circumcision continued in the first centuries among Christians. Origen (185–254 CE) compares the physical circumcision of Abraham to a spiritual circumcision. He adds that the circumcision required by God is one of the heart (spiritual) and not of the foreskin (physical).<sup>31</sup> For him, man must not only circumcise the foreskin but all his members, such as limbs and other body parts, by abstaining from using them and therefore commit a sin.<sup>32</sup> He treats physical circumcision as shameful, repugnant, and hideous, its mere practice and appearance making it obscene.<sup>33</sup>

This allegorical interpretation of circumcision is found again in Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria (v. 376/380–444), who blames the Jews for taking the Bible too literally. Mentioning Paul (I Col 7:19), he writes: “The real meaning of circumcision reaches its fullness not in what the flesh feels, but in the will to do what God has prescribed.”<sup>34</sup> To the religious argument, Cyril adds one about the perfection of human nature:

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<sup>31</sup> Origen, *Homélie sur la Genèse* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985): 125–27.

<sup>32</sup> *Homélie sur la Genèse*, 135–37.

<sup>33</sup> *Homélie sur la Genèse*, 139.

<sup>34</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Lettres festales* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1991): 373–75.

You consider [...] the circumcision of the flesh as something of importance and as the most suitable element of the cult [...]. Let us examine the use of circumcision and what favours the Legislator will bring us thereby. Indeed, to inflict circumcision on the parts of the body which Nature uses to beget, unless you have one of the most beautiful reasons to do so, is not without ridicule; furthermore, it amounts to blaming the art of the Creator, as if he had overloaded the shape of the body with useless growths. However, if this should indeed be the case and if we take what has been said in this sense, how can one avoid concluding that the Divine Intelligence is mistaken about what is fitting? Because, if circumcision is the best way to conform to physical Nature, why was it not better and preferable from the beginning? Tell me, then, if someone says that infallible and intact Nature is mistaken, does this not look like unreason?<sup>35</sup>

[...] God who is above all things created thousand of races of living beings devoid of reason. However, it appears that in their constitution, oriented toward the most exact beauty, there is nothing either imperfect or superfluous. They are quite free of these two lies and escaped this double accusation. How could God, the supreme artist, who paid such attention to the smallest things, make a mistake in the most precious of all? And when he introduced into the world the one who is made after his image, would he have made him uglier than beings devoid of reason, if it is true that in them there is no flaw, whereas there is one here?<sup>36</sup>

Circumcision continues to be practised in the Christian communities of the Middle East in contact with Muslims, as is notably the case with the Copts of Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, who practise both male and female circumcision. In my discussions with the Copts of Egypt, I noted that they use the same arguments as Muslims, based on the circumcision of Abraham and Jesus. They are unaware of other views, as expressed in the Acts of the Apostles or the Epistles of St. Paul. As for Coptic religious leaders, they claim that baptism has replaced circumcision for Christians. Referring to St. Paul, Anba Gregorius, bishop of al-Qays, repeats that circumcision is insignificant, viewing it as a custom or an optional hygienic measure. The Christian who wants to be circumcised must, however, do so before baptism; if he does so later, he commits a great sin.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Lettres festales*, 365.

<sup>36</sup> *Lettres festales*, 367.

<sup>37</sup> Anba Gregorius, *Al-khitān fil-massihiyyah* (Faggalah, 1988): 20–27.

Maurice As'ad, the Secretary of the Middle-East Council of Churches, said that God created man and woman in a splendid form and that no one has the right to cut a part of his/her body. For As'ad, female circumcision is forbidden because it consists in cutting a part of the sexual organ, whereas male circumcision is optional because one touches the sexual organ only in a superficial manner.<sup>38</sup>

In our century, the religious debate around male circumcision started again in earnest among Christians, notably Protestant fundamentalists in the USA, who put forward scientific arguments to justify the Old Testament, and not only with regard to circumcision.

First published in 1963, and currently in its fifteenth edition,<sup>39</sup> the book *None of These Diseases* by the Christian physician S.I. McMillen has sold over a million copies. The title of this book comes from a passage in Exodus quoted in the foreword:

If you listen to the voice of the Lord your God and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to his commandments and observe all of his laws, I will put none of these diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer. (Ex 15:26)

McMillen claims that the promise contained in this verse remains applicable even in the twentieth century and he devotes an entire chapter to the wisdom of circumcision.<sup>40</sup> Recounting a case of death by cancer of the penis, he says:

What makes his death even more tragic is the fact that medical science has now proven that cancer of the penis is almost entirely preventable by following an instruction God gave to Abraham over four thousand years ago.<sup>41</sup>

He incorrectly states that Jews rarely suffer from cancer of the penis, because of circumcision instituted by God.<sup>42</sup> He goes on to claim that circumcision must be performed as prescribed by God on the eighth day for medical

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<sup>38</sup> Maurice As'ad, *Khitan al-banat min manzur massihi* (Cairo, nd): 6.

<sup>39</sup> S.I. McMillen, *None of These Diseases*, revised, updated and expanded by David E. Stern (Grand Rapids MI: Revell, 1995).

<sup>40</sup> McMillen, *None of These Diseases*, 15, 87–96 under the title “Circumventing Cancer with Circumspect Circumcision.” The title of the first edition was *Science Arrives Four Thousand Years Later*.

<sup>41</sup> *None of These Diseases*, 88.

<sup>42</sup> *None of These Diseases*, 38.

reasons: vitamin K matures, namely, on the eighth day. If the operation is performed before this, it will bring about a haemorrhage; performed later, it traumatizes the child.<sup>43</sup>

In his pamphlet entitled *Lo, children... our inheritance from God*,<sup>44</sup> inspired by Psalm 127:3 (“It is the inheritance of the Lord that rewards the sons”), pastor Dan Gayman depicts circumcision as a guideline not only for male health but also for morality and spirituality. Circumcision was given to Abraham and must be practised by all his descendants on the eighth day, including Christians. It helps to maintain purity by keeping sexual urges in check and by fending off numerous illnesses. Those who disobey divine injunctions must expect to suffer ominous consequences.<sup>45</sup> The American TV evangelist Pat Robertson, presidential candidate in 1988, said: “If God gave instructions for His people to be circumcised, it certainly would be in good judgment as God is perfect in wisdom and knowledge.”<sup>46</sup>

Pastor Jim Bigelow opposes this misuse of the Bible. If it is true that circumcision as prescribed by God to the Jews is good, then it is also necessary to consider as beneficial all Biblical prohibitions such as those concerning, among others, the purification of women and kosher food. The Bible states:

You will not eat the flesh of a dead animal. You will give it to the stranger who resides in your home, or sell it to a stranger on the outside. Are you indeed a people dedicated to the Lord your God. (Deut 14:21)

How can God forbid some to eat the flesh of a dead animal yet allow others to do so? Bigelow adds that circumcision as practised today differs from the symbolic circumcision indicated in the Bible. One could therefore not bestow it with all the benefits claimed by scientists. And if God considered that circumcision on the eighth day was necessary for health, why would he have let his people wander in the desert for forty years without circumcision?<sup>47</sup> Similarly, it would be inconceivable for the New Testament to consider circumcision as insignificant (I Cor 7:19). Would God expose his followers to danger

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<sup>43</sup> McMillen, *None of These Diseases*, 92–94.

<sup>44</sup> Dan Gayman, *Lo, children... our heritage from God* (Schell City MO: Church of Israel, 1991).

<sup>45</sup> Gayman, *Lo, children*, 14–17.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Jim Bigelow, *The Joy of Uncircumcising: Restore Your Birthright and Maximize Sexual Pleasure* (Aptos CA: Hourglass, 2nd ed. 1995): 84–85.

<sup>47</sup> Bigelow, *The Joy of Uncircumcising*, 86.

for two thousand years, if circumcision were really useful? However, it is the Holy Spirit that inspires the texts of the New Testament. That is why, Bigelow concludes,

Logically, you cannot pick and choose at will. Old Testament law handed down by an all wise God is either all good medicine or it is altogether something else! In looking over just those ordinances we've discussed in this chapter, it seems quite justifiable to conclude that God's intent and purpose was not to reveal medical knowledge in the law but to fashion a unique people upon the earth.<sup>48</sup>

Rosemary Romberg, a Christian nurse married to a Jew, and the author of a polemic against circumcision, explains that Christian parents, while knowing that circumcision is not right from a medical viewpoint, reckon that circumcision is good, since it is prescribed by the Bible. In disagreement with this position, she wrote a short, dissuasive six-page document in which she argues the following. First, certain practices prescribed by the Bible are no longer accepted in our times, such as burning birds and animals. Second, for Christians, the New Testament has settled the question of circumcision by considering it to be insignificant. Third, the Bible did not prescribe circumcision for hygienic reasons. Besides, it talks of it in metaphoric terms – circumcision of the heart, of the ears. Fourth, although Jesus was circumcised, Marie and Joseph were Jewish and did not have the choice at that time. St Ambrose explains: Since the price has been paid for all by the suffering of Christ, there is no need to draw blood through circumcision anymore. And last, by making children suffer, circumcision is in opposition to two principles of the New Testament: ‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control’ (Ga 5:22–23) and ‘Everything that you want men to do for you, do it for them’ (Mt 7:12).<sup>49</sup>

### *The Debate Among Muslims*

– The Qur'an and the Sunnah

The Qur'an, the primary source of Muslim law, mentions neither male circumcision nor female circumcision. However, some Muslim texts find justification for male circumcision in verse 2:124: “... when his Lord tried

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<sup>48</sup> Bigelow, *The Joy of Uncircumcising*, 87.

<sup>49</sup> This is a summary of Rosemary Romberg, “Circumcision and the Christian Parent” (photocopied material, nd), available at: [www.noharm.org/christianparent.htm](http://www.noharm.org/christianparent.htm)

Abraham with His commands (*kalimat*), and he fulfilled them. He said: Lo! I have appointed thee a leader for mankind.”

Referring to certain statements by Mohammed, both classical and modern Muslim thinkers interpret the term ‘commands’ to refer to the circumcision of Abraham as reported in the Bible. However, as Abraham is a model for Muslims, they must act as he acted: “We have then revealed to you: follow the religion of Abraham, a true believer” (16:123).

For lack of a Qur’anic reference, both classical and modern Muslim authors resort to Mohammed. Here are some examples of writings by contemporary Arabic authors. In one version, Mohammed asked a “circumciser” whether she continued to practise her profession. She answered in the affirmative, while adding: “unless it is forbidden and you do not order me to cease this practice.” Mohammed replied to her: “But yes, it is permitted. Come closer to me so that I can teach you: If you cut, do not go too far, because it gives more glow to the face and it is more pleasant for the husband.”<sup>50</sup> According to other reports, he may have told her: “Cut slightly and do not exaggerate, because it is more pleasant for the woman and better for the husband.” The Shiites mention Al-Sadiq as the reporter of this account.<sup>51</sup>

In another version, Mohammed said: “Circumcision is *sunnah* for men and *makrumah* for women.”<sup>52</sup> The term *sunnah* means here that it either accommodates the tradition of Mohammed or was simply a custom in the days of Mohammed. The term *makrumah* means ‘meritorious action or noble deed’, which implies that it is preferable to practice female circumcision. Shiites invoke the interpretation of the major Shia legal expert Imam Al-Sadiq (d. 765): Female circumcision is *makrumah*; is there anything better than *makrumah*?<sup>53</sup> In yet another version, Mohammed said: “The one who becomes a Muslim must let himself be circumcised even though he is older.”<sup>54</sup> Or, Mohammed was asked if an uncircumcised man could make the pilgrimage to Mecca. He answered: “No, not as long as he is uncircumcised.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Ali Gad-al-Haq, *Al-fatawi al-islamiyyah min dar al-ifta’ al-masriyyah* (Cairo: Wazarat al-awqaf, 1983), vol. 9: 3121; Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 84.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Abd-al-Amir Mansur Al-Gamri, *Al-mar’ah fi zil al-islam* (Beirut: Dar al-hilal, 4th ed. 1986): 170–71.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 59.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Gamri, *Al-mar’ah fi zil al-islam*, 170–71.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 50.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Abu-Bakr Abd-al-Raziq, *Al-khitan, ra’y al-din wal-‘ilm fi khitan al-awlad wal-banat* (Cairo: Dar Al-i’tissam, 1989): 71.

Another possibility is that Mohammed said: “Five [norms] belong to the *fitrah*: the shaving of the pubis, circumcision, the cutting of mustaches, the shaving of armpits and the clipping of nails.”<sup>56</sup> The term *fitrah* points to practices that God taught his creation. The one who seeks perfection must conform to these practices; these are not mandatory but simply suggested.<sup>57</sup> Yet another possibility is that Mohammed said: “If the two circumcised parts meet or if they touch each other, it is necessary to perform an ablution for the prayer.”<sup>58</sup> This is an indication that both women and men were circumcised in Mohammed’s time. And, last, Mohammed said: “The earth becomes impure for forty days by the urine of an uncircumcised person.”<sup>59</sup> This account is reported in Shia texts.

Classical Muslim authors also relate that Sarah, jealous of Hagar, argued with her and swore to maim her. Abraham protested. Sarah answered that she could not recant. Then Abraham told Sarah to circumcise her, so that circumcision became a norm among women.<sup>60</sup>

#### – Recent Debate on Male Circumcision

Male circumcision does not seem to have always been practised by Muslims. Classical texts are not unanimous regarding the circumcision of Mohammed. Some think that he was born circumcised and others believe that he was circumcised by an angel or by his grandfather.<sup>61</sup> Having learned of the death of old men who had been ordered by a governor to be circumcised after their conversion, Hassan Al-Basri, a companion of Mohammed’s, was indignant. He said that many people belonging to different races became Muslim in the days of Mohammed and no one looked under their clothes to see if they were circumcised – and they were indeed not circumcised.<sup>62</sup>

Ibn-Hanbal recounts in his *Al-musnad* compilation that Uthman Ibn Abi-al-As was invited to a circumcision but declined the invitation. Asked why, he

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 55.

<sup>57</sup> Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 55–56.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 51.

<sup>59</sup> Al-Fadl Al-Tubrussi, *Makarim al-akhlaq*, 220.

<sup>60</sup> *The History of the Conquest of Egypt, North Africa and Spain, known as the Futuḥ Misr*, ed. Charles C. Torrey (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 1922): 11–12. See also Muhammad Al-Tabari, *Tarikh Al-Tabari* (Beirut: ‘Iz-ad-Din, 3rd ed. 1992), vol. 1: 130.

<sup>61</sup> Ahmad Al-Asbahani, *Kitab dala’il al-nubuwwah* (Riyadh: ‘Alam al-kutub, 1988): 99–105. See also Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 67–68.

<sup>62</sup> Ibn-Qudamah, *Al-Mughni* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Riyad al-hadithah, nd), vol. 1: 85.

replied: “In the days of Mohammed we did not practise circumcision and we were not invited.”<sup>63</sup>

Closer to our times, some have rejected the interpretation that is made of the above verse (2:124), which, Muhammad Abdou claims, Jews use to ridicule Islam.<sup>64</sup> Imam Mahmoud Shaltout also says that this interpretation is excessive (*israf fil-istidal*).<sup>65</sup> The latter, relying on the authority of Imam Al-Shawkani, adds that texts regarding male and female circumcision are neither clear nor authentic.<sup>66</sup> Despite this fact, the overwhelming majority of modern Muslim authors maintain that male circumcision is mandatory.

According to Saudi religious authorities, a man who converts to Islam must become circumcised, but, to avoid his refusing to convert to Islam for fear of this operation, this requirement can be delayed until the faith is consolidated in his heart.<sup>67</sup> Al-Sukkari grants the woman the right to dissolve her marriage if the husband is not circumcised, because the foreskin could be a vector of disease and could provoke disgust that would prevent the realization of the goals of marriage, presumably love and good understanding between the couple. The woman, he says, has the right to marry a man who is handsome and clean, Islam being the religion of cleanliness and purity.<sup>68</sup> In 1950, the famous Egyptian historian and thinker Ahmad Amin reported that when a Sudanese ‘tribe’ wanted to convert to Islam, its chief wrote to a scholar at the Al-Azhar university in Cairo, asking him what he ought to do. The scholar sent him a list of stipulations, placing circumcision as a top priority. The ‘tribe’ then refused to become Muslim.<sup>69</sup>

We have, however, found five modern Muslim thinkers who dispute the practice of male circumcision. First, in 1971 the Egyptian thinker Issam-al-Dine Hafni Nassif translated the work of Joseph Lewis, *In the Name of Humanity* (1956), with the subtitle *Circumcision Is a Harmful Jewish Mistake* (1971). In a foreword, which is longer than the text itself, Nassif asks that an

<sup>63</sup> Ibn-Hanbal, *Al-Musnad Ahmad Ibn-Hanbal* (np, nd), vol. 4: 217.

<sup>64</sup> Muhammad Abdou, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-karim (Tafsir al-manar)* (Beirut: Dar al-ma’rifah, 2nd ed. 1980), vol. 1: 373–74.

<sup>65</sup> Mahmud Shaltout, *Al-fatawi* (Cairo & Beirut: Dar al-shourouq, 10th ed. 1980): 332.

<sup>66</sup> Shaltout, *Al-fatawi*, 331.

<sup>67</sup> See the two Saudi *fatwas* (religious decrees) in the periodical *Magallat al-buhuth al-islamiyyah* (Riyadh) 20 (1987): 161, and 25 (1989): 62.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 70–77.

<sup>69</sup> Ahmad Amin, *Qamus al-’adat wal-taqalid wal-ta’abir al-masriyyah* (Cairo: Maktabat al-nahdah al-masriyyah, 1992): 187.

end be put to male circumcision, which he considers a barbaric practice introduced by Jews into Muslim society. Second, the sarcastic journalist Muhammad Afifi published, in the Cairo magazine *Al-Hilal* (April 1971), a long report on the above work translated by Nassif, in which he does not conceal his hostility to male circumcision.

Third, the Libyan judge Mustafa Kamal Al-Mahdawi regards male circumcision as a Jewish custom – Jews believe that God only recognizes them if they carry the mark of circumcision or if they mark their doors with blood. He is referring here to God’s command to the Jews to smear their door-frames with the blood of a sacrificed animal when He intended to strike the first-born sons of Egypt (Ex 12:7–13). Al-Mahdawi adds that the Qur’an does not contain such smooth logic. God does not jest in this manner, just as he did not create the foreskin solely as a superficial membrane to be cut. In support of this, he mentions the verse “Our Lord, you have not created all this in vain! Glory to you! Protect us from the punishment of the fire” (3:191).<sup>70</sup> Fourth, Gamal Al-Banna, Imam Hassan Al-Banna’s younger brother (the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement), invoking the verse “Yes, we created Man in the most perfect form” (95:4), argues that male and female circumcision are not part of the Muslim religion, since they are not present in the Qur’an.<sup>71</sup> And, fifth, the Turkish author Edip Yuksel, the representative of a Muslim group in the USA founded by the Egyptian Rashad Khalifa, who rejects all references to Mohammed’s *sunnah*, claimed in a release on the Internet:

One must ask how a merciful God could commend such pain and injustice to children [...]. For all true scholars of the Koran, the answer is clear. God, in his infinite mercy, cannot accept such a cruel ritual. This act is not mentioned at all in the Koran. It is only in recent inventions (*hadiths*), the work of men, that one can find such laws and cruel rituals [...]. Let us put an end to this crime against our children dating back many centuries.

This release refers readers to my 1995 article on the Internet, entitled “To mutilate in the name of Jehovah or Allah.”<sup>72</sup> Contacted by e-mail, Yuksel

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<sup>70</sup> Mustafa Kamal Al-Mahdawi, *Al-Bayan bil-Qur’an* (Casablanca: Al-dar al-gamahiriyyah, Misratah & Dar al-afaq al-gadidah, 1990), vol. 1: 348–50.

<sup>71</sup> In Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *Khitan al-dhukur wal-inath ind al-yahud wal-masihiyyin wal-muslimin, al-jadal al-dini* (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes, 2000), appendix 23.

<sup>72</sup> See <http://www.quran.org/khatne.htm> (accessed 21 November 2005).

confided to me that the article in question opened his eyes and those of his friends.<sup>73</sup>

Let us also consider that the Qur'an speaks in some ten verses about the perfection of human nature.<sup>74</sup> One verse reads as follows:

I [Satan] will surely take of Your servants an appointed portion, and I will surely lead them to perversity, and I will stir whims in them, and I will enjoin them and they will cut off the cattle's ears; and I will enjoy them and they shall alter God's creation. But whoever takes Satan for patron, apart from God, shall surely suffer a plain perdition. (4:118–119)

The latter verse equates changing God's creation with obedience to the Devil. Therefore, the silence of the Qur'an with regard to male circumcision must be interpreted as opposition to this practice.

#### – Recent Debate on Female Circumcision

Although many Muslim texts can be found that condemn female circumcision, the majority of these texts, including those valid in countries that do not support this practice, maintain that it is *makrumah*, based on Mohammed's words. The debate is especially heated in Egypt, where 97% of women are excised. In that country, the Fatwa Committee pronounced three *fatwas*. On 28 May 1949, it announced that the abandonment of female circumcision does not constitute a sin.<sup>75</sup> On 23 June 1951, it decreed that it is desirable to practise female circumcision because it restrains nature. Medical opinions regarding purported detrimental effects should not be taken into consideration.<sup>76</sup> And on 29 January 1981, it decreed that it is not possible to abandon the teachings of Mohammed in favour of the teaching of another, even a doctor, because medicine evolves and is not constant. The responsibility for the girl's circumcision befalls the parents and those in charge of her. The Fatwa continues thus: "If the people of a region refuse to practise male and female circumcision, the chief of the state can declare war on them."<sup>77</sup> Gad-al-Haq, who later

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<sup>73</sup> E-mail received February 10, 1997 from Edip Yuksel (ey61525@goodnet.com).

<sup>74</sup> See the Qur'an 3:191; 13:8; 25:2; 30:30; 32:7; 38:27; 40:64; 54:49; 64:3; 95:4.

<sup>75</sup> Hassanayn Muhammad Makhloof, *Hukm al-khitan*, in *Al-fatawi al-islamiyyah min dar al-ifta' al-masriyyah* (Cairo: Wazarat al-awqaf, 1981), vol. 2: 449.

<sup>76</sup> 'Allam Nassar, *Khitan al-banat*, in *Al-fatawi al-islamiyyah min dar al-ifta' al-masriyyah* (Cairo: Wazarat al-awqaf, 1982), vol. 6: 1986.

<sup>77</sup> 'Ali Gad-al-Haq, *Al-fatawi al-islamiyyah min dar al-ifta' al-masriyyah*, 3119–25.

became Sheik of Al-Azhar, reiterated this position in another *fatwa* in October 1994, in which he repeats three times the sentence relating to the declaration of war against those who abandon male and female circumcision.<sup>78</sup>

Muslims who practise female circumcision regard it as part of their religion. Not being circumcised has serious social consequences. In certain countries, an uncircumcised girl is unmarriageable and people will speak of her as of a person of loose morals, possessed by the Devil. In the Egyptian countryside, the matron who practises female circumcision must provide a certificate of marriageability.<sup>79</sup> A famous Egyptian author in favour of women's rights, Youssef El-Masry, relates the words of an Egyptian midwife who had circumcised over a thousand girls. According to her, fathers who oppose the excision of their daughters should be lynched, because these fathers have, in a way, accepted that their girls should become prostitutes.<sup>80</sup>

Numerous organizations in Muslim countries where female circumcision is practised try to oppose it. They recall that the Qur'an affirms the perfection of God's creation. Dr Nawal El-Saadawi, an Egyptian activist and author, herself an excised woman, writes:

If religion comes from God, how can it order man to cut off an organ created by Him as long as that organ is not diseased or deformed? God did not create the organs of the body haphazardly without a plan. It is not possible that He should have created the clitoris in a woman's body only in order that it be cut off at an early stage in life.<sup>81</sup>

Likewise, the President of the Egyptian Family Planning Association in Cairo, Aziza Kamel, contends: "Excision is a distortion of what God created, whereas God is satisfied with his creation."<sup>82</sup>

Opponents to female circumcision add that texts assigned to Mohammed are of little credibility. This is the opinion of Imam Shaltout,<sup>83</sup> and of Sheik

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<sup>78</sup> 'Ali Gad-al-Haq, *Al-khitan*, annex of Al-Azhar, October 1994, quoted in Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *Khitan al-dhukur wal-inath ind al-yahud wal-masihyyin wal-muslimin*, appendix 6.

<sup>79</sup> Wedad Zenie-Ziegler, *La face voilée des femmes d'Egypte* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1985): 66–67.

<sup>80</sup> Youssef El-Masry, *Le drame sexuel de la femme dans l'Orient arabe* (Paris: Laffont, 1962): 3.

<sup>81</sup> El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 42.

<sup>82</sup> Aziza Kamel, *Rapport sur les pratiques traditionnelles* (Addis Abeba, 1987): 83.

<sup>83</sup> Shaltout, *Al-fatawi*, 331.

Mohammad Al-Tantawi,<sup>84</sup> who argues that, in the absence of evidence in the Qur'an and Mohammed's *sunnah*, it is the considered opinion of physicians that should prevail in matters of law.

## Development of the Medical Debate

The Bible does not provide any medical justification for circumcision. The Qur'an says: "No one interrogates Him on what He does, but men will be interrogated" (21:23). There is, however, a recent tendency among Jews, Christians, and Muslims to want to justify the religious norms *post facto*, by attributing medical benefits to them.

### *Benefits of Male Circumcision*

Muslim authors quickly dismiss any discussion of male circumcision, for they only see benefits in it. Male non-circumcision, affirms Dr Al-Hadidi, causes infection of the penis when drops of urine are caught by the foreskin. It can lead to cancer, requiring the amputation of the entire penis.<sup>85</sup> Circumcision might prevent cancer for the partner as well, a benefit noted by Dr Al-Fangari, who adds that it helps to prolong intercourse by exposing the glans of the penis.<sup>86</sup>

Imam Shaltout does not see any basis for either male or female circumcision, neither in the Qur'an nor in the *sunnah* of Mohammed. It must therefore be judged according to general Islamic principles, which forbid harming anyone, unless it proves to be beneficial and the advantage outweighs any disadvantage. For boys, Shaltout says, circumcision is beneficial, because it suppresses the foreskin, which retains impurities, thereby promoting cancer and other diseases. It is therefore a preventive and protective measure, which explains its mandatory nature in Muslim law.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *Al-Ahram*, 9 October 1994: 8.

<sup>85</sup> Muhammad Sa'id Al-Hadidi, "Khitan al-awlad bayn al-tib wal-islam," in *Majallat al-shabab al-muslimin* 1.12 (1952), quoted in Abu-Bakr Abd-al-Raziq, *Al-khitan, ra'y al-din wal-'ilm fi khitan al-awlad wal-banat* (Cairo: Dar Al-i'tissam, 1989): 65–66. See also Muhammad Ibn-Ahmad Al-Salih, *Al-tifl fil-shari'ah al-islamiyyah* (Cairo: Matba'at nahdat Masr, 1980): 84–85.

<sup>86</sup> Ahmad Shawqi Al-Fangari, *Al-tib al-wiqa'i fil-islam* (Cairo: Al-hay'ah al-masriyyah al-'ammah lil-kitab, 1980): 143.

<sup>87</sup> Shaltout, *Al-fatawi*, 333–34.

These Muslim authors have only repeated summary arguments used by both Jewish and Christian scholars in the Western world.<sup>88</sup> They see circumcision (male and female) as a way of preventing masturbation, which was previously regarded as a social curse responsible for more losses in human life than wars. In addition, circumcision is supposed to heal a vast number of illnesses, among them hysteria, epilepsy, pain in the joints, stiffness of the back, and incontinence. In the USA, between 1890 and 1920, the Orificial Surgical Society “bought slaves” (men and women) who were dying or who refused to work and practised all kinds of medical experiments on their genitals.<sup>89</sup> Their findings attributed cancer and venereal illnesses to a lack of hygiene. Smegma, the natural penile secretion, was found to be the perfect culprit. It was considered to be a carcinogen that one could eliminate only by cutting the foreskin that contained it.

Previously, circumcision was seen as a way of limiting masturbation and sexual pleasure. Today, it is seen as a means to increase pleasure. By cutting the very sensitive foreskin, premature ejaculation is prevented, and pleasure is heightened. In Germany, one group, while rehashing the arguments about cancer, cleanliness, and AIDS, also believes that the circumcised penis is more aesthetic and gives more pleasure.<sup>90</sup> With regard to this last argument, a scientific article maintains that circumcised men are 1.7 to 8.2 times less likely to be exposed to the AIDS virus than uncircumcised men.<sup>91</sup> A popular Swiss magazine concludes that circumcised men are eight times less exposed than others are.<sup>92</sup> This theory has been lauded by Dr Peter Piot, who works for WHO in the UNAIDS programme, the United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS.<sup>93</sup>

### *Disadvantages of Male Circumcision*

Considered as a threat to physical integrity and as child abuse, male circumcision is encountering increasing opposition in the USA from various organizations – to mention a few: NOCIRC (National Organization of Circum-

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<sup>88</sup> See Bigelow, *The Joy of Uncircumcising*, 29–45.

<sup>89</sup> See Wallerstein, *Circumcision: An American Fallacy*, 38.

<sup>90</sup> Szene Hamburg, 8/96InfoCirc, Kennwort SH, Postfach 10 04 05, D-46524 Dinslaken.

<sup>91</sup> Rachel A. Royce, “Sexual transmission of HIV,” *New England Journal of Medicine* (10 April 1997): 1075.

<sup>92</sup> Philippe Barraud, “Échec au préservatif chimique,” *Hebdo* (Lausanne; 24 April 1997).

<sup>93</sup> Information distributed by Winnipeg Free Press, 23 July 1995.

cision Information Resource Centers);<sup>94</sup> Nurses for the Rights of the Child;<sup>95</sup> DOC (Doctors Opposing Circumcision);<sup>96</sup> and NOHARMM (National Organization to Halt the Abuse and Routine Mutilation of Males).<sup>97</sup>

Rare are those who oppose this practice in Western Europe: foremost among them is Dr Gérard Zwang of Paris, who sees no benefits in male circumcision, and points only to the harm it causes. He writes:

Great scepticism is required when ‘griots’ [travelling poet–historians, but here understood as charlatans] and ‘féticheuses’ [female soothsayers] try to irrefutably legitimize ritual sexual mutilation (unless one is affiliated with the school of incurably naive anthropologists). Sole heirs of an extra-European culture often influenced by scientific thought, and contributing often to its work, it is from the [New Jews] that the supposedly logical arguments in favour of circumcision emanate.<sup>98</sup>

After exposing the errors of scientific arguments in favour of circumcision, Zwang explains how the foreskin serves as a prophylactic for the child, protecting the glans from irritation and inflammation when in contact with clothes and diapers soaked in urine. He maintains that circumcision at birth is almost always responsible for the inflammatory shrinkage of the urethra. This protection of the glans and the shaft continues in the sexual act. Zwang also upholds the emotional benefits of the foreskin during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.<sup>99</sup>

Zwang concludes that “there is no [medical] reason to systematically deprive infants, small boys or adults of an integral part of the normal human anatomy.” Even for the diseased foreskin, he cautions against circumcision and prefers a simple surgical intervention designed to protect the foreskin. He recommends that plastic surgeons study the technical possibility of reconstituting the foreskin for circumcised men suffering from ‘balanic peeling’, a

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<sup>94</sup> Address: National organization of circumcision information resource centers (NOCIRC), P.O.Box 2512, San Anselmo CA 94979-2512, USA.

<sup>95</sup> Address: 369 Montezuma #354, Santa Fe NM 87501, USA.

<sup>96</sup> Address: 2442 NW Market St, Suite 42, Seattle WA 98107, USA.

<sup>97</sup> Address: O.Box 460795, San Francisco 94146, USA.

<sup>98</sup> Gérard Zwang, *La fonction érotique* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 3rd ed. 1978): 271. (Note that, almost thirty years later, Zwang is of the same opinion, as relayed by Dominique Arnaud in his film *Silence, on coupe!* Ed.).

<sup>99</sup> Zwang, *La fonction érotique*, 275–77.

condition caused by circumcision.<sup>100</sup> He further argues that a surgeon asked to practise circumcision should refuse to perform it. If an adult requests it, the surgeon has the right to make the same argument of conscience that some use, in all freedom, not to perform abortions. If the parents bring in a normal child, the surgeon can argue that he is not permitted to commit assault on a minor, and can recommend waiting until the child reaches maturity.<sup>101</sup>

With regard to protection against AIDS, I have shared this information in Europe with Marilyn Milos, the chairwoman of NOCIRC. This is her response:

[...] it is not a foreskin that causes AIDS, a virus does. The virus is transmitted by unsafe sex. Cutting off foreskins has not proven useful in the USA, where most AIDS victims are circumcised.

The medical reasons used to justify and perpetuate genital mutilation in the western world have been consistent with the ongoing dreaded disease of the period. For instance, during the mid-1800s, it was the fear of “self-abuse” (masturbation); in the early 1900s, when germ theory was introduced, hygiene became the excuse; in the mid-1900s, cancer was the reason, both penile and cervical. Today, AIDS is used as a scare tactics to rationalize a cruel and barbaric practice. For those of us who recognize surgical genital alteration without consent for what it is – child abuse – it is easy to see through the excuses. Shame on those who use them!<sup>102</sup>

As for NOHARMM, its founder, Tim Hammond, claims that circumcision clearly provides no protection from AIDS. To suggest as much sends a dangerous message to circumcised males that they can ignore safer-sex guidelines and lower their guard. He adds that if circumcision prevented AIDS, it would also be necessary to practise it on adult men and women alike.<sup>103</sup>

In addition to medical considerations, opponents have also concluded that the circumcised child suffers a trauma that affects his relations with his mother and society and harms his psychological faculties, following the well-known principle of ‘what you do to a child, the child gives back to society’. Circumcision could therefore be one of the reasons for heightened levels of

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<sup>100</sup> *La fonction érotique*, 277–79.

<sup>101</sup> *La fonction érotique*, 279.

<sup>102</sup> Letter, 1 September 1995.

<sup>103</sup> Letter, 30 August 1995.

violence in the USA.<sup>104</sup> Research in this domain is only beginning. Could there also be a relationship between circumcision and drug use? We will see that female circumcision is thought to encourage the use of drugs. Only further research can answer these questions.

It must be mentioned that there are American organizations, with branches in Europe and in Australia,<sup>105</sup> that help, free of cost, to limit the negative consequences of this practice through the non-surgical restoration of the foreskin, a method that already existed in the Greek and Roman empires (between 323–30 BCE and 140 CE). This method consists of stretching the skin of the penis to compensate for the part cut off by circumcision. The skin of the penis is first pulled and taped down before metallic objects of a certain weight are attached with gauze. After fifteen months, the skin of the penis recovers the length that it would have had prior to circumcision. This method is described extensively in a paper by the pastor and psychologist Jim Bigelow, who himself underwent it.<sup>106</sup>

### *Benefits of Female Circumcision According to the Sunnah*

Many of the same arguments used in the West for male circumcision have been used to justify female circumcision.<sup>107</sup> Physicians have notably claimed that it can prevent masturbation, which was seen as the cause of numerous illnesses. The work of an Egyptian physician at the end of the last century echoes this debate: the extreme sensitivity of the clitoris, radiating through the nervous system, can generate a variety of threatening diseases. This radiance, he adds, can provoke infertility, congestion, pulmonary infections, nervous palpitations, indigestion, lack of appetite, vomiting, and dyspepsia. Sometimes it reaches the brain and causes neuroses such as lunacy, epilepsy,

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<sup>104</sup> See Ronald Goldman, *Circumcision, the Hidden Trauma: How an American Cultural Practice Affects Infants and Ultimately Us All* (Boston MA: Vanguard, 1997).

<sup>105</sup> For instance, NORM (National Organization for Restoring Men): R. Wayne Griffiths, 3205 Northwood Drive, Suite 209, Concord CA 94520-4506, USA; UNCIRC (Uncircumcising Information and Resources Center): Jim Bigelow, P.O. Box 52138, Pacific Grove CA 93950, USA. In Europe and Australia, see, for instance, NORM-U.K.: Dr John P. Warren, 3 Watlington Road, Harlow, Essex, UK; UNCIRC SA: John M. Aldous, P.O. Box 8106, PO Hindley Street, Adelaide SA, Australia 5000; Trefpunkt Zelfhulp vzw: Peter Gielen, p/a Sociologisch Onderzoeksinstituut, Van Evenstraat 2c, 3000 Leuven, Belgium.

<sup>106</sup> Bigelow, *The Joy of Uncircumcising*. Information about this restoration can be found on the Internet.

<sup>107</sup> See Wallerstein, *Circumcision: An American Fallacy*, 164–90.

hysteria, and, if it reaches the sympathetic nerve, exhaustion, which can result in death.<sup>108</sup> Even today, female circumcision is performed in the West to prevent masturbation. In the USA, female genital organs undergo different kinds of mutilation to augment sexual pleasure.<sup>109</sup>

Muslim religious milieux use scientific arguments to justify female circumcision in compliance with the *sunnah*. The first argument is that it promotes cleanliness: unpleasant odours in a woman can only be suppressed by cutting off the clitoris and the labia minora.<sup>110</sup> Second, it prevents illness: among circumcised women there are fewer cases of nymphomania. This illness can also infect the husband and even kill him.<sup>111</sup> Female circumcision prevents cancer of the vagina<sup>112</sup> and the swelling of the clitoris that promotes masturbation or homosexual relationships.<sup>113</sup> Third, it lends quietness and radiance to the face, according to the already-mentioned text of Mohammed: Circumcision is *makrumah* for women and gives them a beaming face.<sup>114</sup> Circumcision endows a girl with good health and beauty, and protects her morals, her chastity, and her honour while maintaining the proper level of sexual sensitivity.<sup>115</sup> Fourth, it keeps a couple together and prevents the use of drugs: female circumcision reduces the sexual urge in a woman, which is considered an advantage. With age, the man's sexual urges diminish. The husband's circumcised wife will thus be at the same level of sexual urge at that moment. If she is not circumcised, the husband will not be able to satisfy her, which would prompt her to resort to drugs for stimulation.<sup>116</sup> Fifth, it dampens temptation: this is the argument most often heard. Al-'Adawi, professor at Al-Azhar, says that a girl's circumcision is *makrumah*, which means that it helps her to preserve her modesty and protects her from leanings that excite her sexual instinct. In the very hot climates of the Orient, circumcision prevents girls,

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<sup>108</sup> Saleh Soubhy, *Pèlerinage à la Mecque et à Médine* (Cairo: Imprimerie nationale, June 1894): 128.

<sup>109</sup> Wallerstein, *Circumcision: An American Fallacy*, 164, 178.

<sup>110</sup> Hamid Al-Ghawwabi, "Khitan al-banat bayn al-tib wal-islam," *Majallat liwa al-islam*, 7, 8 & 11 (1951), quoted in Abu-Bakr Abd-al-Raziq, *Al-khitan*, 55.

<sup>111</sup> Al-Ghawwabi, "Khitan al-banat bayn al-tib wal-islam," 57.

<sup>112</sup> Al-Salih, *Al-tifl fil-shari'ah al-islamiyyah*, 85–85.

<sup>113</sup> Muhammad Ibrahim Salim, *Khitan al-banat*, in Abd-al-Raziq, *Al-khitan*, 81–82.

<sup>114</sup> Al-Ghawwabi, "Khitan al-banat bayn al-tib wal-islam," 51; Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 64. See also Mahmoud Shaltout, *Khitan al-banat*, in Abd-al-Raziq, *Al-khitan*, 89–90.

<sup>115</sup> Salim, in Abd-al-Raziq, *Al-khitan*, 81–82.

<sup>116</sup> Al-Ghawwabi, "Khitan al-banat bayn al-tib wal-islam," 57.

except those upon whom God has been merciful, from having a very active sexual instinct that would reduce their modesty and render them more prone to respond to their sexual instincts.<sup>117</sup> Gad-al-Haq, the Great Sheik of Al-Azhar, adds that female circumcision is required in our times because of the increased interaction between men and women. If the girl is not circumcised, she exposes herself to the numerous excitations that impel her towards vice and perdition in a society lacking moral safeguards.<sup>118</sup>

Last but not least, female circumcision protects against AIDS. After the annulment of the decree of the Egyptian Minister of Health by a court in Cairo (see below), Sheik Al-Badri declared:

It is our religion. We pray, we fast, and we circumcise. Ever since the fourteenth century our mothers and our grandmothers have practised circumcision. Those who are not circumcised get AIDS more easily.<sup>119</sup>

On the front page of the Egyptian newspaper *Sawt al-ummah*, the following headline appeared: "Circumcision Protects Women against AIDS!" The article mentions an Egyptian professor in the Faculty of Medicine at Mounoufiyyah who repeats this argument while referring to Western medical science and the findings of an American university.<sup>120</sup>

### *Disadvantages of All Forms of Female Circumcision*

Opponents of female circumcision reject it because of the varying degrees of harm caused, according to the form practised. The arguments usually put forward are the following. First, it is harmful to physical and psychological health, as female circumcision causes the following complications. Among the immediate complications are shock, pain, bleeding, infection, urinary complications, and accidental lesions of the surrounding organs. The subsequent complications are painful scars, formation of scar tissue, labial adhesions, clitoral cysts, mutilation of the vulva, vaginal stones, and infertility. Among the psycho-sexual complications feature, for the woman: a feeling of reduced femininity, lowering of sexual desire, reduced frequency of coitus, absence of orgasm, depression and psychosis, and elevated divorce rate; and

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<sup>117</sup> 'Abd-al-Rahman Al-'Adawi, *Khitan al-banat*, in Abd-al-Raziq, *Al-khitan*, 97–98.

<sup>118</sup> 'Ali Gad-al-Haq, *Al-khitan*, 3124.

<sup>119</sup> E-mail sent from owner-intact-1@cirp.org June 25, 1997, text signed by Miral Fahmy.

<sup>120</sup> *Sawt al-ummah*, 9 September 1997: 4.

for the man: impotence and premature ejaculation, and polygamy. One should not forget obstetric complications.<sup>121</sup>

Proponents of female circumcision do not deny these complications, but they blame them on the manner in which circumcision is practised, notably on the fact that the norms prescribed by Muslim law are not respected.<sup>122</sup>

Second, it encourages drug use:<sup>123</sup> female circumcision warps sexual relationships. The man, often at his wife's urging, has recourse to narcotics in order to be sexually satisfied. Excision causes the woman to lose sensitivity, and the man is forced to take narcotics to be able to last out the course.<sup>124</sup> In its 20 August 1957 issue, the Cairo magazine *Al-Tahrir* reached the following conclusion: If you want to fight narcotics, outlaw excision.<sup>125</sup>

Third, it causes family troubles: unable to satisfy her sexual instincts, the circumcised woman becomes rebellious and neurotic, and instead of protecting her morality, female circumcision compels her to look for sexual satisfaction at all costs and outside of the conjugal setting. It has consequently led to the belief in diabolic obsession (*zar*), which exists only in Egypt, as if the devil had no other country of residence but Egypt.<sup>126</sup> And, finally, it offers no protection from illness: for Dr Al-Hadidi, unlike male circumcision, there is no medical advantage in female circumcision, since the woman does not have a foreskin, which retains harmful bacteria.<sup>127</sup> Dr Nawal El-Saadawi also denies that female circumcision reduces the number of cases of genital cancer.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> See Maher Mahran, *Les risques médicaux de l'excision*, 1–2.

<sup>122</sup> Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 106.

<sup>123</sup> On the relation between female circumcision and drugs, see Ahmad Amin, *Qamus al-'adat wal-taqalid wal-ta'abir al-masriyyah*, 188; Al-Hadidi, "Khitan al-awlad bayn al-tib wal-islam," 67–70; and Soheir A. Morsy, "Sex Differences and Folk Illness in an Egyptian Village," in *Women in the Muslim World* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard UP, 1978): 611.

<sup>124</sup> El-Masry, *Le drame sexuel de la femme dans l'Orient arabe*, 56–59.

<sup>125</sup> *Le drame sexuel de la femme dans l'Orient arabe*, 30; Al-Fangari, *Al-tib al-wiqa'i fil-islam*, 144; Mahran, *Les risques médicaux de l'excision*, 2.

<sup>126</sup> Al-Hadidi, "Khitan al-awlad bayn al-tib wal-islam," 67–70.

<sup>127</sup> Al-Hadidi, "Khitan al-awlad bayn al-tib wal-islam," 67–70.

<sup>128</sup> El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 38.

## Taboo, Culture, Law, and Education

### *Taboo Around Male Circumcision*

United Nations documents and the European Convention of Human Rights do not mention the principle of physical integrity. Article 24, paragraph 3 of the Convention for the Rights of the Child states that: “States shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of the children.” But no definition is given for the notion of traditional practices that damage the health of children. Therefore it is up to the good will of nation-states.

Numerous international and regional organizations fight against female circumcision, without ever mentioning male circumcision. Why does this gap exist? Geneviève Giudicelli–Delage writes:

Without doubt, the consequences of male circumcision are less serious than is the case with female circumcision (although milder forms of female circumcision are practically the equivalent of male circumcision). In any case, however, to think only of the consequences would be a mistake. The main thing is not the act but the culture that sanctions it. If a family from Mali can, in France, have the son circumcised but cannot have the daughter excised, perhaps it is because male circumcision is part of the Judeo-Christian order that is the crucible of our culture, and that this order has never known excision.<sup>129</sup>

For Dr Gérard Zwang, the reason for the distinction between these two types of circumcision is simple: most sex therapists and people responsible for the diffusion of information are themselves circumcised and thus hinder all debate on male circumcision.<sup>130</sup> At the conference of the Fourth International Symposium on Sexual Mutilations, Zwang said:

The movement against female sexual mutilations must begin with the eradication of ritual or routine male circumcision in our own countries. This is a difficult struggle, one that is contrary to many prejudices, many habits, and, indeed, one that must confront many organized lobbies, such as the circumcision lobby in the USA. This is not, however, a reason to be discouraged.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Geneviève Giudicelli–Delage, “Excision et droit pénal,” *Droit et culture* 20 (1990): 203.

<sup>130</sup> Phone interview, 7 January 1993.

<sup>131</sup> Gérard Zwang, “Functional and Erotic Consequences of Sexual Mutilations,” in *Sexual Mutilations: A Human Tragedy* (New York & London: Plenum, 1997): 75.

The fear of talking about male circumcision is apparent in the one-sided struggle of the WHO and the UN, whose preparatory Works for the Convention of the Rights of the Child mentions the circumcision of girls, but not the circumcision of boys.<sup>132</sup>

At a UN seminar in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, most participants agreed that justifications for female circumcision drawn from cosmogony and religious beliefs must be denounced as superstition, since neither the Bible nor the Qur'an prescribes the excision of women. They recommended dissociating male circumcision, a mere hygienic measure, from excision, which has serious consequences for the woman's physical integrity.<sup>133</sup> This reasoning is without foundation and very dangerous. If female circumcision were in the Bible or in the Qur'an, would it then be authorized? And if one applies everything prescribed in the Bible or the Qur'an, should not the *lex talionis* also be applied?

Correspondence between this author and the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities reveals the following:

Certain universities are beginning to take a closer look at the problem. In early January 1997, a lecturer from the Swiss Institute of Comparative Law sent the Special Reporter a questionnaire that was to serve as the basis for a book on male and female circumcision. In her reply, the Special Reporter made a point of mentioning that the circumcision of male children did not concern the United Nations, as only female circumcision was deemed a harmful practice, to be eradicated. Consequently, it would seem inappropriate to consider equivalency between female circumcision, which is harmful to health, and male circumcision, which has no undesirable effect and is even considered to be beneficial.<sup>134</sup>

This position is the result of the ignorance and arrogance not only of the United Nations but also of Western nations. Laws are being adopted that forbid and punish female circumcision, but nothing is said about male circumcision.

In Muslim countries, the only punitive measures being taken concern male circumcision and are aimed at taking barbers and midwives to account for malpractice. An Egyptian court condemned a barber whose carrying-out of

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<sup>132</sup> *The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 351.

<sup>133</sup> *Rapport du Séminaire des Nations Unies relatif aux pratiques traditionnelles*, 9.

<sup>134</sup> E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/10, 25 June 1997, paragraph 18.

circumcision resulted in a boy's death. The verdict claimed that, unlike physicians, the law does not protect a barber if his actions result in death or infirmity. The charitable intent of the barber and the absence of criminal intent were not taken into consideration.<sup>135</sup> In another judgment, the Court of Appeal affirmed that a midwife did not have the right to perform circumcision, which is an operation reserved only for physicians as described in Article 1 of Law 415/1954. It added that all harm to physical integrity, except in case of necessity prescribed by law, is criminal, except when carried out by a physician. The midwife in question had circumcised a boy in an erroneous manner by cutting the glans, causing an infirmity estimated by the court at 25%.<sup>136</sup>

### *Culture and Universalism*

In an article entitled "Circumcision, Excision and Racism," Michel Erlich attempts to demonstrate that criticism of male and female circumcision is often motivated by antisemitism and racism. He makes a clear distinction between male and female circumcision; the latter, he says, cannot be promoted in the name of cultural difference.<sup>137</sup>

According to the Egyptian professor Al-Sukkari, attempts to suppress female circumcision demonstrate that the West has succeeded in imposing its materialistic lay views on traditional sciences, customs, and arts.<sup>138</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, the late president of Kenya, said: "Excision and infibulation keep us together; they are the marks of our fertility."<sup>139</sup> Pierre Leulliette's response to this was:

Millions of children from two to fourteen years old are frightfully tortured in a collective atmosphere of hysteria, in contempt of their sex, in contempt of their bodies, in contempt of their lives [...]. Are not native cultures in this case the basest demonstration of omnipresent,

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<sup>135</sup> *Magmu'at al-qawa'id al-qanuniyyah 1931–1955*, Criminal division, 28.2 (March 1938): 824.

<sup>136</sup> *Qararat Mahkamat al-naqd*, Criminal division, 25.11 (March 1974): 263.

<sup>137</sup> Michel Erlich, "Circoncision, excision et racisme," *Nouvelle revue d'ethnopsychiatrie* 18 (1991): 136.

<sup>138</sup> Al-Sukkari, *Khitan al-dhakar wa-khifad*, 41.

<sup>139</sup> Quoted in Attilio Gaudio & Renée Pelletier, *Femmes d'Islam ou le sexe interdit* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1980): 59. See Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu* (1938; London: Heinemann, 1985): 96–110.

unlimited machismo? Are these mutilations not an act of hatred and secret fear of men towards women?<sup>140</sup>

The problem of cultural difference can be found within international organizations. On 10 July 1958, the UN Economic and Social Council invited the WHO to “undertake a study of the persistence of customs which subject girls to ritual operations and of the measures adopted or planned for putting a stop to such practices.”<sup>141</sup> The answer of the WHO on 28 May 1959 was clear: “The Twelfth World Health Assembly [...] considers that the ritual operations in question are based on social and cultural backgrounds, the study of which is outside the competence of the World Health Organization.”<sup>142</sup>

In an announcement concerning female excision on 23 September 1980, UNICEF explained that its approach towards the eradication of a practice founded on 2,000-year-old cultural and traditional models is based on consciousness-raising. This can be done through the education of the public, by members of the medical profession and traditional healers, and through the involvement of local communities and their organizers.<sup>143</sup>

In 1984, the Inter-African Committee (with headquarters in Geneva) recommended that, for understandable psychological reasons, the last word in this domain should be granted to women. It asked, on grounds of efficiency, for an end to the virulent and questionable reaction of the West in denouncing these mutilations.<sup>144</sup> It warned against inappropriate rashness which would lead to hasty legislative measures that would never be applied.<sup>145</sup> With regard to health professionals, it condemned the medicalization and modernization of the practice of female excision, for not being in compliance with medical ethics, and recommended forbidding all medical and paramedical personnel from practising excision for the same reason.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Quoted in Gaudio & Pelletier, *Femmes d’Islam ou le sexe interdit*, 60.

<sup>141</sup> United Nations, 26th session of the ECOSOC, 1029th plenary meeting, 10 July 1958.

<sup>142</sup> WHO, Eleventh plenary meeting, 28 May 1959.

<sup>143</sup> UNICEF, Service d’information, Position de l’Unicef sur l’excision féminine, 23 September 1980: 1.

<sup>144</sup> *Rapport sur les pratiques traditionnelles* (Dakar, 1984): 67.

<sup>145</sup> *Rapport sur les pratiques traditionnelles*, 71.

<sup>146</sup> *Rapport sur les pratiques traditionnelles*, 7.

### *Passing Laws*

The debate on the right to cultural difference has been chosen over the right to the physical integrity of girls (and not of boys).

The WHO has abandoned the above-mentioned reservations laid out in 1959. In 1977 it campaigned for the creation of the first Working Group on female circumcision. In February 1979, in Khartoum, Sudan, its regional office in the Eastern Mediterranean organized the first international seminar on traditional practices affecting the health of women and children. This seminar recommended the adoption of precise national policies for the abolition of female circumcision.<sup>147</sup> In June 1982, the WHO submitted to the United Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities' Working Group on Slavery a formal statement opposing female circumcision. It approved the recommendations formulated at the Khartoum seminar, adding:

WHO has consistently and unequivocally advised that female genital mutilation, in any form, should not be practised by any health professional in any setting – including hospitals or other health establishments.

In 1989, the regional Committee of the WHO for Africa passed a resolution recommending that member States adopt policies and suitable strategies in view of eliminating female circumcision, prohibiting its medicalization, and discouraging health personnel from performing this operation.<sup>148</sup>

An about-face has also been noted in the position of the Inter-African Committee. Whereas in 1984 it warned against laws forbidding female circumcision, it demanded in 1987 the enactment of such laws because research and campaigning were having little impact.<sup>149</sup> Three years later, it reinforced its position by asking for the enactment of a specific law forbidding the practice of female genital mutilation and sexual abuse, and providing for penalties against all people guilty of such acts. The proposed law would severely punish health professionals who perform excision.<sup>150</sup>

Some Western countries have timidly followed the above-mentioned organizations. In 1981, France adopted Article 312 Sec. 3 of the Penal Code:

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<sup>147</sup> *Traditional practices affecting the health of women and children* (1979), 4.

<sup>148</sup> WHO, Resolution of the Regional Committee for Africa, Thirty-Ninth Session, AFR/RC39/R9, 13 September 1989.

<sup>149</sup> *Rapport sur les pratiques traditionnelles*, 77.

<sup>150</sup> *Rapport sur les pratiques traditionnelles*, 8–9.

Where violence or deprivation have usually been practised, the prescribed punishment will be as follows: a life term if mutilation, amputation or loss of the use of a limb, blindness, the loss of an eye or other permanent infirmities or death results, even if the harm was caused without intent.

This article is now applied to female circumcision, even though the term is not used as such. In Sweden, a 1982 law forbids any alterations to the external organs that are destined to mutilate them or to occasion a definitive change, whether consent was given or not.<sup>151</sup> Great Britain did the same in 1985.<sup>152</sup> In Switzerland, the central Commission of Medical Ethics of the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences took a clear position in 1983 against female circumcision and its practice by medical personnel.<sup>153</sup>

This one-sided attitude is condemned by organizations that are combatting male and female circumcision alike. During the 3rd International Symposium on Sexual Mutilations (Maryland, 1994), the majority of participants, with the exception of the Jewish ones, were of the view that it was necessary to pass a law covering both male and female circumcision. It should be noted that if such a law were to be adopted, the USA would be the first to be able to implement it, because of its unconditional support of Israel. It is the only country that can run no risk of being called antisemitic, and it is in this country that the opposition to circumcision is best organized.

### *Distinction Between Various Forms of Female Circumcision*

An erroneous distinction has been made in the law and people's minds between the harm caused by male circumcision, which is generally tolerated, and female circumcision, which is generally condemned. International and regional organizations as well as Western countries could have logically distinguished between the different forms of female circumcision, in that benign female circumcision is similar to male circumcision. However, this is not the case, since all forms of genital mutilation of women are condemned.

Muslim law does not share this attitude. It distinguishes between the so-called *sunnah* form of female circumcision, which is authorized, and other forms which, although extensively practised, are condemned by religious

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<sup>151</sup> Law No. 316 of 27 May 1982 forbidding female circumcision, in *Recueil international de la Législation sanitaire* (1982): 770.

<sup>152</sup> Law of 16 July 1985 forbidding female circumcision, in *Recueil international de la Législation sanitaire* (1985): 1043–44.

<sup>153</sup> In *Bulletin des médecins suisses* 64/34 (24 August 1983): 1275.

authorities.<sup>154</sup> This problem is particularly pertinent to Egypt, where a 1959 ministerial decree on female circumcision forbade doctors to perform female circumcision, although a partial circumcision can be performed. It also forbade operations resulting in female circumcision in the facilities of the Ministry of Health. And it removed the rights of licensed midwives to perform any form of surgery, including female circumcision.

On 7 September 1994, during the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, CNN broadcast a film showing the circumcision of a ten-year-old girl by a barber in Cairo. The Egyptian authorities arrested the producer of the movie, the girl's father, the circumciser, and his assistant. The father informed the police that, as a Muslim, he believed he acted rightfully.<sup>155</sup>

In response, on 19 October 1994 the Ministry of Health passed a decree aimed at medicalizing the procedure by designating a number of hospitals authorized to carry out the operation for 10 EL (about \$US 3).<sup>156</sup> Invoking the absence of a religious basis for performing the procedure and its potential dangers for the woman's health, the Ministry of Health recommended the following measures: a) a ban on circumcision by non-physicians and in places not equipped for it in public hospitals and the application of the law relating to the medical profession, including legal sanctions against offenders; b) every public, central or academic hospital must designate two days per week for male circumcision and one day for female circumcision; c) prior to each circumcision, a commission composed of gynaecologists, anaesthesiologists, social workers, nurses, and clerics will brief families on the potential harm to physical and psychological health caused by the operation. It should not be a hasty decision, and all measures should be taken to progressively limit the expansion of this practice with a view to its ultimate eradication.

On 7 October 1995, under pressure from the Egyptian government and NGOs, the Minister of Health strengthened the 1994 decree in a memo addressed to health directors, forbidding all state hospitals from practising circumcision:

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<sup>154</sup> Zakariyya Al-Birri, "Ma hukm khitan al-bint wa-hal huwa daruri?" in *Jaridat al-akhbar* (16 September 1979, in Abu-Bakr Abd-al-Rziq. *Al-khitan*, 81–82.

<sup>155</sup> *TIME* (26 September 1994): 65; *Middle East Times* (18–24 September 1994): 1, 16.

<sup>156</sup> "Women's action," *Equality Now* 8.1 (March 1995); *Akhbar al-yom* (29 October 1994): 13.

Following the decree of 19 October 1994 relating to female circumcision, with regard to the encouraging results reported by the district governors, public health directors, and civic organisations, that show a decline in female circumcision, and, following the efforts of different departments within the health ministry, and the resulting consequences and bodily hazards for the sanitary, psychic and social well-being of women, the family, and society, female circumcision will no longer be practised in public and central hospitals. The role of gynaecology, obstetrics, maternity, and paediatric wards in these hospitals will be limited to education in view of having this practice eradicated.

Although the ban was confirmed in 1996 by ministerial decree No. 261, it was later declared invalid, on 24 June 1997, by an administrative court in Cairo following complaints by Islamic authorities. The court held that the Ministry had exceeded its authority by passing a decree, which only the legislative branch can do. This decree, surprisingly, considers physicians as liable to sanction, according to Article 66 of the Constitution, which prescribes that there is neither a crime nor a sanction without a law. It infringes on a right that some consider controlled by Islamic law, which is contrary to the following two articles of the Penal Code:

Art. 7 – In no case will transactions of the present code affect individual rights as designated by Muslim law.

Art. 60 – Amendments of the penal code do not apply to acts perpetrated in good faith in virtue of the recognized rights of Muslim law.

The court also blamed the Minister for treating female circumcision and male circumcision differently, whereas both practices constitute medical operations. It held that this decree would have been valid if it had limited itself to forbidding the practice of female circumcision by non-physicians.

After the judgment, Sheik Youssef Al-Badri declared: “God bless, we have won and we are going to apply the laws of Islam.”<sup>157</sup> A veiled Muslim woman declared: “Circumcision is Islamic. The Court says that the ban violates religious law. There is nothing that says that circumcision is a crime but an Egyptian said that Islam is a crime. It is a disaster,”<sup>158</sup>

The Minister of Health appealed the administrative court’s ruling. According to him, the decree remains applicable until it has been invalidated. Others

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<sup>157</sup> *Le Monde* (26 June 1997): 3.

<sup>158</sup> E-mail from owner-intact-1@cirp.org, 25 June 1997, signed by Miral Fahmy.

believe that the decree is not applicable unless the judgment of the court is invalidated by a decision of the administrative Supreme Court.<sup>159</sup>

In October 1997, another court in Cairo rejected the case instigated by a fundamentalist lawyer against CNN, demanding 500 million dollars in damages for having defamed Egypt in the above-mentioned film. The court ruled that the lawyer did not have a direct interest in the case and that the girl's father consented to the shooting of the scene. At the same time, the judge also attacked female circumcision. He argued that it was impossible to deduce from texts attributed to Mohammed that female circumcision was an obligation. He went on to say that female circumcision should not be tolerated, because it harms women's physical and psychic health, weakens the sexual drive, harms conjugal relationships, and can lead to sterility.<sup>160</sup> On 28 December 1997, the Supreme Administrative Court decided that the Health Minister had the right to issue a decree forbidding female circumcision, as this practice has no basis either in the Qur'an or in the Hadith.

Currently, female circumcision has become a battlefield where judges, religious authorities, non-governmental organizations, and the government are at loggerheads. The American Department of State itself was involved by demanding that the Egyptian government revoke the decision that annulled the ministerial decree. The Sheik of Al-Azhar considered it to constitute interference in Egyptian internal affairs, arguing that female circumcision does not involve judges but, rather, physicians.<sup>161</sup>

### *Medicalization*

It is generally accepted that legal measures alone will not suffice to abolish female circumcision. It is necessary to understand the reasons for this practice and to educate the people involved. In the meantime, would it not be better to try to avoid the worst by permitting female circumcision, temporarily, in a moderate form and in hospital surroundings?

As seen above, the WHO, the Inter-African Committee, and the Swiss Academy of Medical Science have rejected this position as being contrary to medical ethics. They even recommend stern punishment of medical personnel who practise female circumcision.

This stance should not be condoned. A severe legal ban will only encourage clandestine circumcision by unskilled practitioners, which can further en-

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<sup>159</sup> *Al-Mussawwir* (4 July 1997): 56–60.

<sup>160</sup> *Akhbar al-yom*, 6 September 1997.

<sup>161</sup> *Al-Mussawwir* (25 July 1997): 38–39.

danger women's health. A representative from Senegal raised this problem during the drafting of the Convention for the Rights of the Child.<sup>162</sup>

The French legal expert Dominique Vernier thinks that it is necessary to accept the medicalization of female circumcision as it is practised among the urban intellectual elite in some countries of Africa and in certain hospitals in Italy, despite the hostility of physicians. She proposes, as a substitution for actual excision, a symbolic excision as in Guinea. In this country, the circumciser makes a simple cut in order to draw blood. It is a way of preserving the ritual without mutilating the child.<sup>163</sup>

Medicalization might, however, become a way of legitimizing female circumcision and perpetuating it, notably for its economic rewards. At the UN seminar in Ouagadougou, some participants declared that medical personnel, essentially for pecuniary motives, tended to act as substitutes for the matrons and 'cutters' who traditionally perform the procedure. These health workers not only profit from the practice, but they perpetuate it while reducing the minimum risks. Motivated by greed, they ignore the deliberately sinister side of sexual mutilation. They not only knowingly abuse the confidence and innocence of parents but also give the custom an air of legitimacy, which, according to participants in the seminar, should be strenuously resisted.<sup>164</sup>

In a July 1997 report, Marie As'ad, spokesperson of the Egyptian group against female circumcision, rejected the idea that the first step in eradicating the practice is to leave it in the hands of physicians. It is a delusion to think that circumcision is a medical procedure and that it is a necessity when there is none.

This brings us to the question of adult circumcision. The Egyptian activist Dr Seham Abdel-Salam does not agree that a doctor should circumcise an adult man or a woman, because she considers that adults are not free decision-makers, and because it is against medical ethics. The physician's function is to heal, and circumcision is an intervention on a healthy organ. Therefore, anyone who wants to be circumcised should cut his penis or her clitoris himself.<sup>165</sup> The President of NOCIRC holds the same position.

Without a doubt, this position is the only one that conforms to medical ethics. But to avoid medical complications, I argue that it is necessary to give the physician the right to practise male and female circumcision on adults

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<sup>162</sup> *The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, a guide*, 351.

<sup>163</sup> Dominique Vernier, "Le traitement pénal de l'excision en France: Historique," *Droit et culture* 20 (1990): 198–99.

<sup>164</sup> *Rapport du Séminaire des Nations Unies relatif aux pratiques traditionnelles*, 7, 10.

<sup>165</sup> Letter, 15 June 1996, and discussion in Cairo with Seham Abdel-Salam.

over eighteen, while hoping that at this age these people will be intelligent enough not to want to mutilate themselves. Moreover, this is the proposition used to combat female circumcision among the Sabinu people of Uganda.<sup>166</sup>

### *Understanding the Perpetuation of the Practice*

The legal repression and medicalization of circumcision are not enough to put an end to an age-old practice. It is also necessary to understand the reasons behind it.

Nawal El-Saadawi, an excised woman herself, maintains that the perpetuation of female circumcision in Arab societies has to do with men's domination of women:

The importance given to virginity and to an intact hymen in these societies is the reason why female circumcision still remains a very widespread practice despite a growing tendency, especially in urban Egypt, to do away with it as something outdated and harmful. Behind circumcision lies the belief that, by removing parts of girls' external genital organs, sexual desire is minimized. This permits a female who has reached the dangerous age of puberty and adolescence to protect her virginity, and therefore her honor, with greater ease. Chastity was imposed on male attendants in the female harem by castration, which turned them into inoffensive eunuchs. Similarly, female circumcision is meant to preserve the chastity of young girls by reducing their desire for sexual intercourse.<sup>167</sup>

She adds that female circumcision is a means of dominating women, especially in a patriarchal society in which a man can have several wives. Excision is but one of the many ways to subject women sexually to only one man and to control whom the children belong to.<sup>168</sup>

This will to dominate women is found throughout classical texts. The famous Islamic legal expert Ibn-Taymiyyah (d. 1328) notes that an uncircumcised woman looks at men more than a circumcised one does.<sup>169</sup> Al-Qarrafi

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<sup>166</sup> *Populi: Revue du fonds des Nations Unies pour la population, FNUAP* (March 1966): 15.

<sup>167</sup> El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 33.

<sup>168</sup> *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 40–41.

<sup>169</sup> Ibn-Taymiyyah, *Fatawi al-nissa'* (Beirut: Dar al-qalam, 1987): 17.

recommends circumcising the woman slave if he wants to keep her. But if he plans to re-sell her, he does not have to circumcise her.<sup>170</sup>

For Dr Gérard Zwang, male and female circumcision is motivated by metaphysical guilt, which is the incentive for all sexual mutilations that humans inflict upon themselves and each other, ever since they invented knives of stone or metal. Out of metaphysical guilt, most human beings have sacrificed earthly pleasures, carnal joys, and organs intended for pleasure with the goal of pleasing the gods and spirits in order to be treated favourably in the after-life. This would explain such phenomena as fasting, Ramadan, alimentary taboos, sexual taboos, chastity, and various genital organ mutilations such as circumcision, excision, infibulation, subincision, hemi-castration, and the like.<sup>171</sup>

Economic interests can also explain the persistence of male and female circumcision, as in the example above concerning circumcision in hospital surroundings. It is the same in traditional surroundings where midwives, who benefit financially from their trade, are not prepared to renounce circumcision.<sup>172</sup> In certain regions, the profession of *exciseuse* is transmitted from mother to daughter, and the family's survival depends on it. The eradication of the practice of excision would result in the removal of the only source of income for the family. In this regard, some recommend a system of re-training in order to make midwives out of *exciseuses*, allowing them to abandon excision for another type of employment.<sup>173</sup> Economic interests also play a role with regard to male circumcision, which is in regression in Canada because insurance companies have begun to refuse to pay for the procedure.<sup>174</sup>

It must also be mentioned that virginity has monetary value: a girl's dowry is higher when she is a virgin at the time of marriage. This often explains the vehemence of those who defend the practice of infibulation.<sup>175</sup>

### *Educating*

After understanding the reasons behind both practices, it is necessary to convince the numerous actors involved in male and female circumcision:

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<sup>170</sup> Shihab-al-Din Al-Qarrafi, *Al-dhakhirah* (Beirut: Dar al-gharb al-islami, 1994), vol. 13: 278–79.

<sup>171</sup> Gérard Zwang, *La fonction érotique*, 275.

<sup>172</sup> El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 41.

<sup>173</sup> *Rapport du Séminaire des Nations Unies relatif aux pratiques traditionnelles*, 10–11.

<sup>174</sup> *NOCIRC Newsletter* 5.2 (1991): 3.

<sup>175</sup> *Rapport du Séminaire des Nations Unies relatif aux pratiques traditionnelles*, 9.

victims, parents, physicians, nurses, insurance companies, and religious authorities.

To convince, it is especially necessary to avoid errors in logic. Following the judgment in Cairo that annulled the decree of the health minister, when Dr Seham Abdel-Salam expressed her anger to the media she was bombarded with such arguments as “Why do you complain about the circumcision of girls? We also circumcise our boys!” In the minds of many, the two practices are one and the same. How can one convince an Egyptian father that he must stop circumcising his daughter when he is allowed to circumcise his son?

Perspectives must also be taken into consideration. Those who practise circumcision for medical reasons must justify their acts on medical grounds. But when circumcision is practised for religious reasons, it is the religious arguments that must be undermined first. In September 1994, Dr Shimon Glick, director of the Center for Medical Education at the Ben-Gurion University in Negev, sent me an article about the relation between non-circumcision and AIDS, with the following note: “If God commands an action it cannot be harmful. Even in academia, the irrational wrings the neck of the rational!”

How can religious arguments be undermined? There is certainly little chance that religious authorities will change their doctrines, especially when they are vested with the monopoly on religious interpretation and when people blindly follow them. It is therefore necessary to open people’s eyes and to move them away from the harmful influence of religious authorities and the sacred texts on which they rely. Humorous and sarcastic arguments can prove to be very efficient in leading a person away from taboos, resorting to reason, and encouraging the questioning of what is sacred.

For example, Voltaire, with his intelligent sarcasm, contributed extensively to freeing Europe from the religious dark ages. But neither Muslims nor Jews will easily accept Voltaire, who is a Western philosopher. For this reason, Eastern philosophers capable of chipping away at the bark of religion in order to get to the individual’s cerebral faculties must be found. Mohammed Ibn Zakariyya Al-Razi (in Latin, Rhazes; c.854–925/935 CE), director of the hospital at Baghdad, is the most important philosopher to rely upon. His medical works were taught in European universities until the sixteenth century. He wrote many philosophical treatises, few of which, unfortunately, have been published. Researchers must be pressured to take an interest in publishing his manuscripts, where they still exist. Of the few available, this philosopher is considered the most liberal thinker in the Muslim world. He believes in God but rejects all revelation. By lending less credence to the importance of reve-

lation and sacred texts, people can begin to think in a rational manner and reject the barbaric practice of male and female circumcision.<sup>176</sup>

## Conclusion: Some Fundamental Points

### The Principle of Physical Integrity

One cannot be against female circumcision and in favour of male circumcision. This will only lead to erroneous arguments turning on cultural, religious, and sexual superiority.

There is a principle that must be either accepted wholesale or rejected outright: the right to physical integrity. If accepted, it must be applied to all, whatever their religion, their race, their colour, their sex, or their culture. I accept this principle, and I consider male circumcision to be as criminal as female circumcision, an act that must be punished when practised against a non-consenting person in the absence of any cogent and serious medical grounds. For this reason, I consider all legislation (Western or other) that condemns female circumcision but accepts male circumcision to be immoral.

### Differences

Admittedly, female circumcision (notably Pharaonic circumcision) is more harmful than male circumcision. By the same token, the amputation of the little finger is more serious than the amputation of the hand. Such a difference does not give us any more right to cut the small finger without consent or any effective and serious medical reasons.

### Medical Advantages

In very rare cases, male circumcision and female circumcision are practised, like any type of amputation, for medical reasons. However, those who speak of medical advantages in order to generalize the practice are only trying to justify the barbaric act *post facto*. Although I am not a physician, it seems highly improbable that nature made a mistake requiring surgical intervention on such a large scale.

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<sup>176</sup> See, for example, the sarcastic article of Muhammad Afifi, "Murshid al-hayran fi amaliyyat al-khitan," *Majallat al-hilal* (April 1971): 120–26, repr. as appendix 21 of Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *Khitan al-dhukur wal-inath ind al-yahud wal-masihyyin wal-muslimin*, and Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *Khitan al-dhukur wal-inath ind al-yahud wal-masihyyin wal-muslimin*, 58–59.

### Respect for the Will of Others

According to the Bible, when Abraham supposedly received from God the order to circumcise himself, he was 99 years old (80 or 120 years according to Islamic sources)! For me, a God that asks his followers to mark their genitals as one marks livestock is a God of dubious morality, unless we assume that Abraham was not in his right mind at that age, and that God never gave such an order. In either case, Abraham and his strange story can be disregarded. For those who do not accept such liberal interpretations of the Bible, it must nonetheless be acknowledged that Abraham was an adult when he circumcised himself. If we respect our children, we must leave them whole, at least until the age of eighteen, when they can decide for themselves if they want to mutilate their penis or not. At that age, they can even choose to cut off their ears, if they so desire.

– Translated from the French by the author and Kevin A. Dwyer

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## SECTION 2

# ANTHROPOLOGICAL WORMHOLES



MICHAEL SINGLETON

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Homo Hierarchicus versus Mulier Aequalis  
(Un)acceptable Asymmetry?

ABSTRACT

Taking my cue from Louis Dumont's *Homo hierarchicus versus Homo aequalis*, I reflect on the notion of symmetry among the Wakanongo of south-central Tanzania, in a region subjected to enforced circumcision by East African Muslims towards the close of the nineteenth century. And where, as a Catholic missionary-cum-anthropologist, I carried out my fieldwork from 1969 to 1972. Here I address myself to the rights and wrongs of women and to the wrongs sometimes done by women to themselves. My Habermas-style plea is for an anthropology of *asymmetrical acceptability*, in that it could be more acceptable both philosophically and practically than the excessively ethnocentric proposition of an *essential equality*.

**E**VEN THOUGH, on anthropological subjects such as circumcision and excision, I have unfortunately little to say arising directly from my own field experiences, I here wish to make a few remarks about the notion of symmetry in Tanzania. My chosen people, the Wakanongo of south-central Tanzania, no longer held initiation rites in which, in any case, circumcision had not been practised. An elderly chief, however, once allowed me to transcribe half a dozen pages in Swahili from an exercise book in which there was, enigmatically, the question of crusading circumcisers, of the imposition by an indigenous group on incoming strangers of their custom of 'cutting the penis' (*kukataa mboo*). Whether this took place in pre-Islamic times or around 1900 is still unclear to me. Ousted, in any case, by the arrival

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of German imperialists and French missionaries, towards the close of the nineteenth century, from their socio-economic sinecures and culturally privileged positions, the Muslims upcountry in East Africa, convinced that the end of the world was nigh, had taken to circumcising by force local males (Christian catechumens included), persuaded that they were doing everyone a favour, as the Mahdi on his imminent return would circumcise the infidel with a wooden knife.<sup>1</sup>

During the couple of months I spent in Nguruka, a largely Muslim settlement and half-way halt on the railway line between Tabora and Kigoma, I took such an active part in Islamic affairs that my parishioners (I was a Catholic missionary at the time) denounced me to the Bishop as being a crypto-Muslim ... despite there being no physical evidence to prove it. As for excision, it seemed unknown in the area even among the Swahili (a blanket term for 'native' Muslims). Elsewhere in Africa, and for over half a century, I have done fieldwork in most corners of the continent, but I have never been closely concerned with the issue. Indeed, genital mutilations apart,<sup>2</sup> Africans on the whole appear to have seriously toned down, if not entirely got rid of, their tampering with physical integrity – no more filing of the teeth or scarification of the cheeks.

For the anthropologist, the etymology of his discipline (*anthropos* 'man' and *logos* 'logic/word') allows him to address himself not only downstream to the ethnographic evidence but upstream to human logic as such. What is the logic (if any) underlying the manipulation and especially the mutilation of the human body, with particular reference to its sexual organs? Let us speak of the male as well as of the female body. For, as Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh has massively (and, to at least some, convincingly) shown, there is little or no reason to make light of male circumcision and to excoriate female excision exclusively.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, however, in terms of wholly unjustified attacks

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<sup>1</sup> See my own "Muslims, Missionaries and the Millennium in Upcountry Tanzania," *Cultures et Développement* 9.2 (1977): 247–314; and "Conversion to Islam in 19th Century Tanzania as seen by a Native Christian," *Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam* 4 (2002): 147–66.

<sup>2</sup> Without wanting to smother their specificity, circumcision and excision must be seen in the broader context of an anthropology of the body and of the fact that not even the most "naked of savages," the closest to Nature of *Naturvölkern*, ever left their body entirely alone in its purely natural state. There is even a thesis that prehistoric women took to smearing their bodies with ochre to confuse men about their state of sexual readiness.

<sup>3</sup> The latest in a long series of publications dedicated to the subject being Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *Circumcision: Le complot du silence* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003).

on the right to physical integrity, the latter often appears as the only just cause worth dissenting for. Hence I will principally address here the rights and wrongs of women<sup>4</sup> and the wrongs done by women to themselves.

Under feminist fire for seeming to condone the intrinsically intolerable, for trying to make sense not only of incest and cannibalism but even of excision, the anthropologist can be accused of throwing away not only the baby with the bathwater but even the tub itself. Whether this case can be made generally, I protest that it is not mine in particular. Having not only written about women's rights but also literally saved African women from potentially lethal accusations of witchcraft and shared in their spirit-induced rites of emancipatory possession,<sup>5</sup> I hope that my plea for asymmetrical acceptability will be dismissed outright as that of a macho-fascist conservative (not to say, male chauvinist pig). Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, I am neither an absolute relativist nor an unconditional defender of the (ig)noble savage, nor a self-proclaimed protector of primitivism, adverse to any form of humanitarian interference. I am merely wondering about the success-rate of blatantly militant tactics: blundering in like a bull (or a cow, for that matter) into a china shop not only tends to make a mess of the wares on display but often convinces the shopkeepers to go underground, and to remove what is left of their livelihood to the basement for safe-keeping. Think of the unintended side-effects of Prohibition in the USA. Frontal attack can be self-defeating.

Nonetheless, let there be no mistake: my thesis is about alternative substance and not about different strategies. What I propose is not a mere change of tactics but a radical revision of theory. Tactics, good or bad, imply an absolutely just war, rightfully to be won, no matter what the cost. But I am not absolutely convinced that the anthropological cause behind much of the fight against excision is the only or even the right one. If, as is commonly held, there is nothing more eminently practical than an excellent theory, then the

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<sup>4</sup> An echo of one of my earliest ventures in the feminist field is to be found in "The Rights and Wrongs of African Women," *Pro Mundi Vita* (October 1979): 1–36.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Singleton, "Obsession with Possession," *Pro Mundi Vita* 67 (July 1977): 1–35. Expatriate nuns, pioneering feminists, told me I should be doing something about and for my Wakonongo women slaving away night and day at the beck and call of their fathers-in-law, husbands, and children. I intervened, introducing a winding mechanism to speed up the daily drudgery of drawing water from the well by hand... only to find that the young women (un)consciously sabotaged my initiative, as it prevented them from 'wasting' the only time of the day they could spend together. Under the leadership of a remarkable woman, Wakamando, and under the cover of spirit possession, they were able to make more socio-economic room for themselves than any dispensary, school, or fish pond would have done.

cause of human, let alone women's, rights could be in need of a less equivocally ethnocentric frame of reference and of a more philosophically plausible paradigm than those currently culminating in claims for *essential equality*, especially regarding the right to one's natural integrity.

The italics of the expression *essential equality* are crucial to our case. If we make an abstraction of an impossible 'essential identity' which, as Wittgenstein said (*Tractatus* 5.5303), in the case of one thing is useless and in the case of two things nonsense, our quarrel is more with essence than with equality. Provided 'legal' equality is construed as conventionally constructed for a cause that a given culture at a given time considers credible and creditable, then the anthropologist cannot but consent. To avoid any return to the horrors of Dachau and to eradicate Somali-style infibulation, the legal fiction of equal rights before the law for members of a particular community, if not of humanity as such, must be promoted and maintained. When the cheek turned is one's own, for mystic or masochistic motives it can be proffered indefinitely. But when the downtrodden are being sadistically stomped upon by their 'superiors', a muscular intervention to turn the tide or reverse the tables can be anthropologically justified. This is not even a question of the "prudential"<sup>6</sup> application of abstract principles about a just war, but sheer common sense. No matter what his motives, conscious or unconscious, and independent of the fact that highway robbery could answer to a lack of distributive justice, it is difficult to fault the Samaritan for doing what he spontaneously did. "Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die!" to echo Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade," could be the motto of urgent, humanitarian intervention.

Having, I hope, made it clear where I stand, what remains to be clarified is where this puts me in terms of conceptual credibility. Few would doubt that by getting things right speculatively one can contribute to putting them right concretely. But airy speculation far removed from ethnographic evidence

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<sup>6</sup> Of late, moralists have restored prudence (the Greek *phronesis*) to its crucial role: the taking decisively into account (eventually and ideally thanks to Habermas-style discussion) of the irreducible singularity of successive situations – casuistics at its best, since each case is judged on its own merits and not decided in the light of abstract principles. What this means for the morality or immorality of genital mutilation would also merit further investigation, but one cannot envisage everything satisfactorily in the scope of such a limited contribution as this. 'Habermas-style' is here used to refer to the contemporary German moral philosopher Jürgen Habermas, according to whom ethics should ideally result from consensus arising from democratic discussion rather than authoritative enforcement. See, *inter alii*, Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, tr. Christian Lenhardt & Shierry Weber Nicholsen (*Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln*, 1983; Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1990).

does not enjoy that degree of phenomenological plausibility to which the anthropologist as a fieldworker feels obliged. Back then, not to the ‘facts’, which, at least etymologically speaking, can only represent an end result, but to the data.

As a true son of May ’68 (I was then Sir Edward Evans–Pritchard’s penultimate assistant at Oxford), I left for Tanzania and the field in 1969 not only imbued, as befits a Christian missionary, with high hopes of evangelical equality (had not the founding father of our faith forbidden any follower to be called “Father” and his first lieutenant abolished the difference between male and female?) but also hell-bent on making Maoist and Marcusian ends meet in African-style socialism. And though I did end up founding an *ujamaa* village, my first encounters were anything but promising. The Wakonongo who welcomed me as a son were not exactly the most egalitarian of peoples.

In the first place, it took me the best part of a month to persuade the patriarch of the extended family, initially providing me with food and lodging, that, rather than eat alone in splendid isolation as former chiefs had, I would much prefer to partake of my meals with everyone else. When I was finally admitted to the *banza* (an open-sided shed which, though occasionally functioning as a forge, served as a kind of canteen, men’s club, village hall, and even court room), I found my fellow-diners were all males, mostly adults. The women (sometimes the patriarch’s wife but usually his daughters-in-law) would silently deposit the food at our feet, then withdraw, without receiving a word of thanks, to their respective homesteads to await, with their children, what their men folk would leave behind ... not that they had not already put aside a fair share for themselves and their offspring or even nibbled at the choice pieces of meat or fish reserved in principle for the elders, their betters and breadwinners. Appearances of dissymmetry can be deceiving, especially to the fleeting nutritionists militating for a more equitable sharing of food-resources at family level, but who fail to notice that African women, albeit unemancipated, are not among the most emaciated in the world or that their children manage quite well for themselves (either eating when and with whom they see fit, hunting and cooking small game or simply helping themselves to the odd corn-cob and manioc root growing in the fields).

When I remarked on the absence of adolescents and, especially, children in Church, the elders said that religion was too important a matter to involve such distracted and distracting elements. This affirmation of apartness could be taken to mean that, despite subscription to a fundamental *essential equality*, some kind of superficial, socio-psychological selectivity is inevitable – after all, we forbid certain films to the under-sixteen, who do not take kindly to adult presence at their parties. But let us not forget that even where a notion

of human nature existed, as in Aristotle's democratic city, it did not include women, let alone slaves. In the absence of any such metaphysics and faced with attitudes towards the very young (selective infanticide) or complete strangers (seen as intrinsically inimical), I would even be tempted to deduce that, for the Wakonongo (at least of yesteryear), a male became gradually more human as he advanced in age until the fullness of years was reached. This meant, to all practical intents if not philosophical purposes, that children in general were not yet quite human. Women, in particular, only became fully human when, in their postmenopausal stage, they were considered more or less as men.

This gradual 'hominization' of actors is most apparent in societies based on age groups,<sup>7</sup> where every ritualized step across a critical threshold (between, for instance, childhood and adulthood and between this latter and eldership) increases one's humanity, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Acceptable or otherwise, it must be realized that, beyond the pale of Indo-European languages (with their dichotomy between solid subjects – nouns – and accessory activities – verbs<sup>8</sup>), perennial philosophy (with its natural essences), and evangelical egalitarianism (all humans, from their conception to their demise, are identically children of God), asymmetry is not limited to accidental variations on a substantial sameness but implies radical otherness – an insistence on irreducible, constantly changing singularities with which even a nominalist born and bred in the West<sup>9</sup> can sympathize speculatively.

When I returned for the first time from the regional capital Tabora with such oddities as white chocolate and ageing camembert (Indian traders, in socialist times they deemed dire, had to make do with whatever got through the loopholes in Julius Nyerere's tight control over imported luxury goods) so

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<sup>7</sup> For references to the literature on this subject, see my own "Classes d'âge en Afrique: Raisons d'être et de naître," *Sociologie des populations*, ed. Hubert Gérard & Victor Piché (Montreal: PUM/AUPELF-UREF, 1995): 433–61.

<sup>8</sup> A Hopi Indian of North America, for instance, can no more speak of 'rain raining' than he can of 'man evolving' but only of 'pluviation' and 'hominization' – a substantial disadvantage, the perennial philosopher would be spontaneously inclined to feel – a feeling a process philosopher might not share, as this 'primitive' way of speaking and thinking can be seen as a close parallel to the phenomenal order of things.

<sup>9</sup> The whole of Indo-European philosophers divide 'neatly' into two camps: those who swear that the really real is beyond appearances (natural substances, eternal essences); and those who, including myself, claim that, behind singularly situated entities and events (designated by proper names – *nomina sed non natura*), there is nothing if not mere conventional categories of convenient generalities (such as human vs animal natures).

as to let the children and adolescents of my village sample Western delicacies, the elders, somewhat piqued, protested, rather peevisly to my mind, that I should have let them have the first taste. Likewise, whenever I took a group photo, the old men sat in the front row, their adult sons standing behind and their grandchildren in the wings. My adolescent ‘cook’ and companion once requested that I photograph him *kibossi*. Having searched in vain for the term in the Swahili dictionary, it was only when he seated himself behind a table, trilby hat on his head and with dark spectacles, his girlfriend standing behind him, demurely but without showing the slightest sign of reluctant resignation, that I realized the expression was a neologism for ‘like a boss’!

Every evening in the afore-mentioned *banza*, neighbourhood elders or *wazee* would come and sit in the company of Jakobo Kasalama, my host and unofficial head of the locality. Treated myself, despite my youth, as an honorary *mzee*, I participated in the debates, slowly adopting the sententious style and the pontificating phraseology of my betters. My mind is still full of the topics commonly discussed: the past and how times had changed,<sup>10</sup> current village affairs and curiosity about the Western world and its ways – the anthropologist often finds himself being anthropologized. More importantly, my notebooks record many of the conflicts brought before or even summoned to the *banza*, for it functioned regularly as an informal neighbourhood court. Two features of ‘primitive justice’ struck me then and even more so now. First, that the elders, as the final court of appeal, proposed and, on occasion, imposed a solution which, if it restored a minimum of operative harmony in the interests of all concerned (and the whole community as much as the individuals immediately involved was concerned), often seemed to me, at the time, to fall short of fully respecting what I had been pre-programmed to consider as fundamental human rights. Secondly, and even more surprisingly in my eyes, those who had been manifestly wronged seemed reasonably content with an authoritative decision (not to say, authoritarian diktat) which would have immediately sent their European equivalents on to a higher court of appeal, if not to an attempt to right their wrongs personally.

One instance struck me particularly. A son-in-law of Jakobo was denounced to the *banza* for conjugal violence. After a lengthy palaver, which his wife attended, he was merely exhorted by Jakobo himself not to hit so hard the next time. To my astonished indignation, the woman seemed sufficiently

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<sup>10</sup> As shifting agriculturalists and thus, paradoxically, true nomads heading ever on and almost unwittingly so, heedless of where they had come from and even less concerned about where they would end up, the Wakonongo, living in and for the present, were not unconditional *laudatores temporis peracti*.

satisfied with this surprising verdict. I remember thinking to myself: ‘what a bunch of conciliatory or cynical Chamberlains! “Appeasement in our times, no matter what the cost, so that we can carry on business as usual”.’

Towards the end of my stay, however, I had come not to condone but to realize that this type of fragile community, desperately relying on everyone pulling their weight and in the same direction, could not yet afford the absolute respect for universal individual rights which our ‘civilized’, Christian society had at last put itself in a position to act upon. But, as of now, I am not even certain that this apologetic concession, resting on a supposed time-lag, sufficiently fits the bill. For, on the one hand, I am not so sure that our modern understanding of individual rights represents a *nec plus ultra* and, on the other, I am almost sure that the price<sup>11</sup> for our individualism is being partly if not largely paid for by *les damnés de la terre*, by the deprived masses of the Third World.

But more on this score later. For the moment, suffice it to say that I could continue almost indefinitely exemplifying not so much the top-heavy (demographically, the over-sixties were few and far between) as the top-down structure of Konongo culture. Although the Wakonongo, converted en masse to Catholicism in the 1920s and 1930s, had relinquished (to all appearances willingly and without qualms) the outward trappings of ancestor-worship, as the weeks went by my worst suspicions were confirmed: the young and even the not so young, male or female, were completely under the thumb of a few overpowering elders. “Power to the people” had been the rallying-call of the independence movement, but what had the people gained when a couple of gerontocrats ruled the local roost?

It took me a while to fit the other parts of the local puzzle together and come up with a view of the whole, in which a *sui-generis* form of gerontocracy could, sociologically speaking, be seen as synonymous with an apposite aristocracy. For, to my surprise, the elders, far from being obstreperously overbearing, arrogantly aggressive or downright demanding, were, on the contrary, reservedly dignified, relatively retiring, and unselfish to a fault. These traits were explicitly summarized in their professed ideal of the perfect gentleman, *mtu mpole sana na mwema kabisa*, ‘a kind and equanimous person’. But what made the penny finally drop was my elderly host saying to me after a couple of months: “You are the first white man I have been able to teach and give something, as to a son, for all the others, even the youngest of them, treated us like stupid and superstitious savages.” And in fact, having decided to live like a native, if not exactly go bush, I had had to learn every-

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<sup>11</sup> And here economic ‘freedom’ or independence is of the essence.

thing from scratch like a new-born baby: how to hoe furrows, how to cut down trees without chopping off my fingers, how to deal with quarrelsome neighbours, how to cope with witches.... What, from start to finish, was crystal clear to everyone else in the community suddenly dawned on me: if our very survival depended on the fittest, these latter, by force of circumstance, were the best our kind of village society had produced: an exiguous elite of gerontocratic aristocrats. Without the material know-how of the elders (the location of the most fertile soils, the whereabouts of game in the bush), without their moral shrewdness (how to cope with conflict, to profit from joy or sorrow) and mystical wisdom (being close to the ‘departed’ and thus able to negotiate with them the granting of ancestral resources such as the rains or game), life in all its local human forms would have been impossible.

At the time, I gave little theoretical thought to the matter, since it did not seem to matter: as young and old, men and women, took it for granted that, though the Konongo world was perhaps not the best, it could have been far worse, what point was there in my going beyond the basic, self-evident fact of rural life – that patriarchal hierarchy pays? It often takes a crisis for an issue to become problematical. In 1986, during a short field-trip to the [Democratic Republic of the] Congo in the region of Kikwit, I was made aware of the fact that acceptable and accepted asymmetry in human relations could, owing to a change in circumstances, become (and sometimes with radical rapidity) unacceptable and unaccepted. When a society finds itself ajar, elders can feel out on a limb. When this happens in Africa, the smouldering forces of witchcraft, held in abeyance in less turbulent times, tend to burst into flame. The younger generation in the area I visited, having travelled and gone to school, were *de facto* more in a position to profit from modernity than their elders, who, unfortunately, were not prepared to recognize this fact. Knowledge and thus, in theory, power and privilege had shifted to youth away from the aged but, in practice, the latter clung on bitterly to rights no longer rooted reasonably in empirical reality. ‘Ancestor worship’ (in fact, seniority symbolized<sup>12</sup>), from being an integrative institution, had become a pathogenetic structure, inducing cultural absurdity and social anomaly.<sup>13</sup> Faced with the anthropophagous appetites of their elders, young people, when they could, fled to the capital.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Singleton, “Du culte des ancêtres à la rentabilité des seniors: Une anthropologie réaliste des (r)apports du troisième âge,” in *Jeunes, vieilles, démographies et sociétés*, ed. Francis Gendreau, Dominique Tabutin & Maud Poupard (Paris & Louvain-la-Neuve: L’Harmattan/Academia, 2002): 61–81.

<sup>13</sup> A pathogenetic structure is the opposite of an integrating one: i.e. an institution or ideology which, from inducing a healthy social situation, degenerates into absurdity

Elsewhere in the world and especially in the West (but for how long?), pension schemes enable redundant and increasingly irrelevant senior citizens to survive, at least materially, to the bitter end. Embitterment in Africa, in the absence of anything resembling social security, be it funded by the State or privately, splinters the social whole. The ideal solution, humanely speaking, to the emergence of a pathogenetic structure due to dysfunctional dissymmetry is surely not the elimination of the 'offending' element but, rather, a conciliatory readjustment of the incriminated asymmetry. One possibility is to take a leaf from the ethnologist's notebook dealing with the unenviable lot of aged, weakened baboons or lions: the euthanasia, virtual or real, of age-weary humans, in order to enable their young to profit personally from their rightful gains. But mankind could, one hopes, invent less inhuman ways of coming to grips with intergenerational asymmetry. The point, in any case, being that, to be acceptable, asymmetry must not be too far removed from other aspects of reality.

From a purely ethnographic point of view, then, not only does a relatively absolute asymmetry exist but a circumstantial case can be made for its being more acceptable and accepted than its contrary, *essential equality*. It is important to realize that this affirmation answers to an uncalled-for experience which contradicted my Christian calling and 'civilized' convictions. I had been sent in God's name to politely propose (but, in principle, with the right to eventually impose) the Good News of human equality (specifically Revealed but also preeminently Reasonable), thus countering the Bad News of intrinsic inequality, hastening heaven on earth before humanity's removal to Eternal Bliss. Whether s/he is militating for monotheistic Revelation or for monolithic Reason, the missionary cannot but be a monomaniac – s/he is not crusading for one cause among many but for the One and Only Cause possible. As such, the missionary is manichaeian: to be saved, one must choose between God and Mammon, there can be no middle ground between Pôrto Alegre and Davos, physical integrity is good, mutilation evil, he (but it can also be a she) who is not for feminism is against. The Western missionary, religious or lay, tends, moreover, towards messianic millennialism – under the inspired leadership of Jesus Christ and/or José Bové,<sup>14</sup> the Kingdom is nigh, a Celestial Kindergarten for the Children of God where even marriage, and probably sex, will happily be a thing of an iniquitously unequal past or a Para-

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and anomaly, as when, respect for elders no longer being realistically due, the elderly are turned into rapacious sorcerers and the young into their (un)conscious prey.

<sup>14</sup> The (in)famous leader of the French peasants, often imprisoned for beating up McDonalds, and the moving force behind the World Social Forum.

dise on Earth, from which every McDonald's or Monsanto will have been forever banished for the greatest happiness of the uncircumcised of both sexes.

Far be it from me to caricature the good faith of those convinced they are fighting the good fight. I simply want to suggest that those on the receiving end can be forgiven for thinking that, between supernatural and natural militancy, there is not much to choose, no matter what the militants might think of the greater justness of their respective causes – to the sinners, it might seem all the same, whether it is their body rather than their soul that the missionary feels obliged to save.<sup>15</sup>

The 'pagans' tending to convert me rather than the contrary, my missionary days are long over, as indeed, for want of vocations, is the religious apostolate as such. But to my surprise, no doubt because Culture abhors a vacuum even more than Nature, the South is still subject to 'evangelical' harassment by a myriad of lay missionaries from the North. The Good News is no longer inspired by Divine Revelation but instigated by Predestined Reason. For some reason or other (more to do, one suspects, with feelings of White Supremacy than sheer chance), the secularized West sees itself as the first culture in history to have hit the natural nail fairly and squarely on its head. Wherever one travels in the non-Western world, for instance, one meets with Western politicians imposing parliamentary democracy with even more intransigence than the most intolerant of Inquisitors. Bush, Blair, Berlusconi & Co. are but the more egregious evangelists proclaiming all dictators, even the more enlightened, to be Emperors of Evil. Everywhere, too, one comes across its scientifically trained doctors (with or without frontiers), who, after promising health for all in the year 2000, have now slightly prolonged the best-before date, as once did the Prophets of Doom when the eschatological curtain failed to fall on the day predicted. From Outer Mongolia to Lower Patagonia, the natives have to put up with the excoriations of enthusiastic expatriate humanists, waging war on every savage superstition, which contradicts the universal and univocal Charter of Human Rights – "no matter what your colour or creed, your socio-economic condition or idiosyncratic character, quite independently of your age or sex, you, we are all essentially equal, with identically the same fundamental rights – anathema in particular, on any unwilling, indeed unwitting, violation of physical integrity."

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<sup>15</sup> For instances of philanthropic harassment, see Sandrine Aumercier, "Le SAMU social: De l'urgence à l'inclusion globale," *MAUSS* 23 (2004): 116–32, and Michael Singleton, *Le souci d'autrui: De la charité cannibale à l'altruisme anthropophage* (Cahiers du CIDEP 10, 1991); repr. in *Critique de l'ethnocentrisme* (Paris: Parangon, 2004): 48–63.

In no way do I seek to imply, even surreptitiously, that the West is *absolutely* wrong and the rest of the world *absolutely* right. Since ‘beyond culture’ (*extra ecclesiam!*) there can be nothing, it is the absolute as such which is (absolutely!) absurd in the anthropologist’s eyes. There is all the difference in the world, both in theory and in practice, between the absolutely absolute, the absolutely relative, and the relatively absolute – the relatively relative being too enigmatic for words. The first, except as a limiting concept<sup>16</sup> if not Infinite reality,<sup>17</sup> simply cannot be. As the early Wittgenstein would have put it, the totally cut off (*ab-solutus*) can be said but not thought. The second is self-contradictory, since there would be at least one absolute: namely, ‘that everything is relative’. The reader must credit the anthropologist with that minimum of speculative sense, which makes him/her realize that out-and-out relativism is quite untenable. The third is a simple fact of life. Every living individual is born not so much into a family as into a group.<sup>18</sup> Every group at any given moment has fixed its paradigmatic ceiling. For the modern mind, for instance, little credible meaning is to be had beyond the horizons established by Darwin, Freud, Marx, Einstein *e tutti i quanti*. Hence, for any particular person at any point in historical time and social space, certain values and visions cannot but be relatively absolute: i.e. relative to him or her, *hic et nunc*; it is not possible, in the last analysis, to subscribe to contradictory ‘facts’ – no one can believe at the same moment that the earth is both flat and round, or that spirit-possession rather than a split personality is responsible for schizophrenia. When the last cards are down, bilocation, let alone multilocation, is simply not one: one and the same individual at one and the same time cannot be a (white) man and a (black) woman, an elderly Belgian and a young Bolivian.

This irreducible multiplicity of milieux and mentalities does not mean that presently prevailing plurality is here to stay. On the contrary, people and places are constantly on the move – more so today than ever before. But here and now, those who find themselves presently at point ‘A’ have every right to explain themselves to interlocutors actually occupying site ‘B’, and reciprocally.

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<sup>16</sup> The truly transcendent seems, to many a modern mind since Kant, quite out of the question. See Piergiorgio Odifreddi, *Il diavolo in cattedra: La logica da Aristotele a Gödel* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003): 220.

<sup>17</sup> As Emmanuel Lévinas would have it in his *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l’extériorité* (1961; Paris: Livre de poche, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Godelier has recently shown that group existence rather than the family as such is at the origin of human society. See Godelier, *La métamorphose de la parenté* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

cally. To this ideally Habermasian style of intercultural dialogue or dialectical and dynamic confrontation of *Weltanschauungen*, there can be but three possible outcomes. Either 'B' converts itself to 'A' or vice versa, or, hopefully, 'A' and 'B' abandon their respective safe havens and move on together to pastures new. It being understood that any such transforming transfer is not a move in the right sense, in the direction of Reality, as it really is or should be but, at best, answers to a shared persuasion that theoretical plausibility and practical prudence can be found more convincingly further on down the road. Somewhat surprisingly in view of their professed openness, this kind of *realistic relativism* and readiness to move on to some philosophy and practice of the world radically other than the ones presently prevailing is far from congenial to the modern mind and to its missionaries at home or abroad. The West is convinced that the truths it holds are not merely relatively better than others but absolutely true. What, 'culturally', can come after Democracy and Human Rights? what could 'naturally' replace Science and Technology? Concretely, something like excision, for instance, is not just contrary to the Western understanding of the human, but a crime against humanity as such. If child abuse and torture are absolutely wrong, there is no reason why genital mutilation could be relatively right. Once again, at the risk of repeating myself *ad nauseam*, I am not saying that the other side is right but only that it is worthwhile, on our side of the fence, to listen to what has been said and done elsewhere (*aude alteram partem*).

Conveniently, the two halves to the question can be formulated in terms of Louis Dumont's classics on Indian and Western anthropo-logies, *homo hierarchicus* versus *homo aequalis*. Though they have respectively appeared as attainable ideals to actors in these cultures, we take them here as Weberian ideal types. According to this definition, each pole is exclusive of the other and each induces unforeseen side-effects, some of which can be good, others bad.

Since they are all too familiar, we will not dwell on the positive results achieved in the name of *homo aequalis* but simply on some of the unintended consequences of crusading for *essentially construed equality*:

1) The aspersions cast on modern individualism are no closer to the truth than the clichés about individuality being crushed by the primitive horde. Nevertheless and despite his/her explicit rejection of evolutionary stages, today's contemporary, secularized citizen sees his/her inalienable, intrinsic individual rights as the definitive end-product of an historical process, which begins with man being fettered to the family, subservient to the State, and bound to God. Once s/he is finally free, it never crosses the individual's mind that his/her identity might represent, philosophically and practically, a bridge too

far. Profane but not profanatory, s/he willingly recognizes that his/her fundamental right to his/her own bodily health is the secularized version of that personalized piety and claim to individual salvation which the Church, on its death-bed, had bequeathed to its members. At the utmost, the Vatican tolerates mass manifestations (pilgrimages and processions) and pious associations (church choirs and Children of Mary), provided it be clearly understood that the ultimate aim of both is the solipsistic saving of the subject's spiritual soul: unlike in the Muslim (male-centred) Paradise, no collective (and in particular carnal) activities being foreseen in Heaven, why should Christians form groups on Earth, especially (God forbid!) of a contentious character such as clerical trade unions or lobbies in favour of female ordination?

As of late, Development has replaced Salvation as the Goal of Humanity, but its global masters believe and behave no differently than the *monsignor* of Rome. The managers of our worldwide market economy prefer by far to deal with individualized consumers and promote public events (Formula One racing, World Cup football) when there is profit to be made and all danger of subversion (World Social Forum) excluded or crushed (G8 in Genoa). Globalization flourishes best when it has to do (business) with isolated individuals, with anonymous, atomized actors. “La mondialisation est une monadisation”; “globalization is granular.” Whatever the merits, then, moral or metaphysical, of our Western understandings of individual identity, they perversely play into the Invisible Hand of Globalization. From Rousseau to Rawls via Renan, the presently prevailing (neo)liberal philosophy reduces the social to a simple question of contractual convenience.<sup>19</sup> The individual (your typically intelligent adult) could have managed to make ends meet on his/her own but, somewhat self-centredly if not selfishly, realized it was in his/her interest to profit from the services others could contractually render. Hence the marriage contract (someone has to do the washing-up and change the diapers, preferably, from the man's point of view, a woman) – a pact to be as freely renounced as it was liberally announced, once one or other of the contracting partners fails to deliver the goods initially bartered for. The free

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<sup>19</sup> It is a fact of modern life that, as Henry Sumner Maine would have put it, quantitatively speaking 90 percent of our relations with other people (storekeepers, bus drivers, and even doctors or professors) are polarized by considerations of a contractual nature, whereas, in former times (and still too in rural Africa), status determined a similar percentage of human activity (e.g., parenthood, chieftancy, conjugality). Maine is a mid-nineteenth-century Victorian lawyer and imperial administrator of India, author of *Ancient Law*, a founding classic of legal anthropology. The recently deceased John Rawls was the leading moral philosopher behind moderate neoliberalism and author of the hugely famous *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1971).

individual is one who freely joins or refuses to join with others according to whether it is in his/her interest or not to do so. *Homo aequalis* – everyone equally free to do as he or she feels or sees fit within the law – hence, in the eyes of *homo hierarchicus*, such aberrations as the right of the Self to dispose substantially of its body (e.g., surrogate motherhood, IVG,<sup>20</sup> euthanasia, monoparentality), only taking the Other into account accidentally, or such absurdities as the universal individual allocation, which might make sense economically, but, sociologically speaking, is ‘totally’ or holistically nonsensical.

The anthropologist has neither to condemn nor condone but simply put his/her finger on the phenomena which, whether the idealist wills it or not, come with the price of his/her ideal, such as the incredibly high rates of suicide and depression in the Western world. Mere teething troubles, says *Homo aequalis*, as once were, in the opinion of *Homo liberalis*, children in the mines. But since children are still being put to work all around the world with the exception of the First World, the anthropologist can be forgiven for wondering whether such are, albeit unintended, the inevitable hidden costs of a free-market economy, costs to which *homo aequalis*, through his insistence on individual rights at all costs, is an unwitting accomplice.

2) When equality is taken as an objective ideal, independent of any socio-historical situation, then (as recently happened when Belgium claimed its courts of law to be universally competent to try human-rights violations<sup>21</sup>), an intolerance as intransigent as that of any Inquisitor is, in the last analysis, not only unavoidable but obligatory. Defending divine Revelation rather than any

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<sup>20</sup> Thanks to the biotechnological control of procreation, abortion as the elimination of unwanted children could one day, if not soon, become a thing of the past. But as it is now practised, therapeutic necessity apart, and reasoning sociologically not theologically, IVG as the individual woman’s absolute right to decide on her fate can no more escape the ‘law’ of unintended side-effects than any other human activity. The right of every woman to have her child or get rid of it could answer not so much to human rights as to an individualistic anthropology peculiar to contemporary Western society. It is not a question of (im)morality and even less of sin, mortal or venial, but simply the possibility of short-term cultural choices amounting in the long run to structural weaknesses bordering on the pathogenic, and which, in the foreseeable future, can weaken whole societies if not, in the end, the species as such. On these issues seen from an anthropological angle, see Dominique Memmi, *Faire vivre et laisser mourir: Le gouvernement contemporain de la naissance et de la mort* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> See Michael Singleton, “De l’incompétence universelle,” *Politique* 23 (February 2002): 33–38.

individual inspiration, the Inquisition sincerely believed it had the Divine Right to burn heretics – as much for their own as for the common good. When Reason is similarly taken to be an Absolute, it, too, gives the Reasonable the unconditional right to condemn the objectively wrong – not only Israeli politicians but also African excisers. If we are all supposed to be going in the same direction, then there can logically be only ‘one best way’.<sup>22</sup>

3) One of the fundamental drawbacks of *essential equality* is that, if extended identically to every human being, it stops abruptly below and above humanity. An intelligent chimpanzee is essentially unequal to the most mentally handicapped of children and, no matter how low its celestial ranking, an angel is substantially other than the most spiritual of saints. *Homo hierarchicus*, on the other hand, can not only become an animal (as I discovered when dealing with lion-men), but even the highest of spirits not only behaves humanly but was probably human in origin.<sup>23</sup>

4) Finally, *ad hominem*, convinced that equality is of the essence, *homo aequalis*, in his eagerness to convince others, not only tends to explain away as accidental failings at home which could be essential but abroad is so intent on removing the speck of dust from his interlocutor’s eye that he fails to see the beam in his own. *Aequalis* or *hierarchicus*, basic human psychology allows no one to concentrate equally on each and every item potentially in his ken. Even paying attention to objects in the foreground, we can only take into account a limited number – fixed by some specialists even lower than the proverbial seven. But it can happen that the Whole is more important than the parts or that some of the parts treated as an empirical residue prove to be crucial.

Focusing on excision to the detriment of circumcision is already equivocal but forgetting that both are often minor parts of a fundamentally healthy whole can be even more deleterious. African doctors working devotedly in the bush have had occasion to wonder ironically why the West was suddenly so concerned about AIDS when millions more were dying from malaria – could it be because HIV was more of a direct threat to them than the *plasmodium falciparum*?

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<sup>22</sup> For an incisive critique of this conviction, see Michel Crozier & Erhard Friedberg, *L’acteur et le système* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).

<sup>23</sup> See Michael Singleton, “Mazombwe l’Homme-lion: De la métamorphose magique à la manipulation génétique,” *Cahiers du CIDEP* 2 (1989): 34–43. Many Africanists opine that, though their humanity has been forgotten by the local population, even spirits which appear a cut above the ancestors were once human.

Likewise, in discussing excision with African friends, they have also politely insinuated that Africa was more respectful of the unborn than Europe and that before rushing in to save from septicemia the hundreds of the badly excised annually we should perhaps be thinking of finding a solution to the thousands of adolescents massacred weekly on our highways.

Coming now to an alternative to *essential equality*: namely, the anthropology of *acceptable asymmetry* (represented by the technical term but not the Hindu theory of *Homo hierarchicus*), we will begin by saying what, to our way of thinking, it does not stand for:

1) In no way does it imply the making permanent of the *status quo* prevailing anywhere in the world at the present time. The asymmetries between old and young, men and women, North and South, humans and animals, the living and the non-living, etc., as they have stood or now stand, do not represent Reality but, at the most and/or the best, merely answer to a given socio-historical situation; the fact that some of these situations have lasted for centuries says nothing for sure about their future fate.

2) Asymmetry rarely affects Wholes but, in most instances, only some of their parts; the authority that I (am at least supposed to) enjoy (and I speak of and for myself) as a parent does not extend to the management and manipulation of computers, a field in which, being almost powerless, I must rely on my two sons, one a fully fledged computer technician, the other a budding electronics engineer; though I sometimes tokenly cook, I am not an authority in the field and willingly yield to the supremacy of my wife – a superiority which does not make me feel particularly inferior. Having not only had a maternal grandfather carpenter (to be more exact, undertaker) but having also worked for him, I can manage DIY jobs involving woodwork but call in a plumber and an electrician when things go wrong with the waterworks or electricity – without my being able to equal their expertise, leaving me downhearted or downtrodden. The more one thinks of one's numerous interrelations, from the insignificant to the momentous, which involve acceptable and accepted authority, the more one is likely to realize that the typical Western approach to human relationships in terms of alienating power is too ideologically biased synchronically and too utopianly unrealistic in its goal of eliminating all exploitation.

Authority and power are not abstract absolutes which receive accidental colouring when concretized. While some societies only answer to power (the Pope's individual infallibility answering to divine omnipotence), there are societies without power who only recognize authority. Among hunter-gatherers, for instance, no one has the power to order any other member of the band to do something but it is in everyone's interest to follow the lead (which

is not to say, the leadership) of the more skilled. Though both involve asymmetry, domination is not necessarily dominant, nor is profiting from other people's experience of exploitation. In fact, one is tempted to apply to asymmetrical relations the findings of the recent renewal of interest in the theme of gift relationships<sup>24</sup> – namely, that normality is as asymmetrical as it is gratuitous and that equality, as much as economics, is the exception rather than the rule. Gratuitous generosity could or should be of the essence and legalized equality reserved for extreme cases.

3) The acceptance and acceptability of authentic forms of asymmetry lies at a far deeper level than that where clichés seek (desperately in the final unacceptable or dissymmetric phases) to rationalize unjustifiable domination in terms, for instance, of complementarity (90 percent *animus* versus *anima*) or services rendered (by late-medieval feudalism versus emerging bourgeois cities) – any given acceptable has its best-before limits.

4) It is at this deeper level that asymmetry must be theoretically construed and practically assumed; determining the critical threshold between the acceptable and the unacceptable at any given moment or place, while not unimportant, tends to be so complex and concrete that it escapes *a priori* prescriptions – such as the precise percentage of domestic tasks or public functions that must be equitably performed before male or female ascendancy appears acceptable to most of those concerned. While no doubt more politically correct, fixing quotas in advance of the credibility gap's being concretely narrowed is not without its foreseeable drawbacks – tokenism on the part of those making concessions, and misgivings on the part of those accepting them, as failure to come up to scratch often only makes things dissymmetrically worse.

Among the factors and features positively entailed by *asymmetrical acceptability*, the following can be listed:

1) The effort to respect and respond 'prudently' to singular situations rather than apply casuistically axioms deemed universally valid: it is relatively easy, thanks to the classical distinction between objectively wrong and subjectively right, to assume, on the one hand, that abortion and excision are intrinsically evil but that, on the other, one must make allowances concretely for extenuating circumstances, incorrigible ignorance or weakness of character; it is far more challenging to engage in a Habermassian dialogue about the individual merits of each and every case as it arises, being prepared to accept that, for instance, despite the general principle 'respect innocent life', abortion, in this

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<sup>24</sup> Associated in particular with the review *MAUSS*; see the recent issue 23 on "De la reconnaissance: Don, identité et estime de soi," (2004).

instance, is legitimate, or that accepting some kind of token excision is not making a virtue out of necessity by temporally turning a blind eye to an intrinsically intolerable practice, but instead is the recognition of the dystopian accents attendant upon integral physical integrity. Put otherwise, the anthropology of asymmetry answers more closely than its essentialist equivalent to the irreducible thickness and ever-changing complexity of the phenomenal Flow of Life. This Flow of Life is a *panta rhei*, which can never be substantially honed down or essentially ironed out by one or the other of such supposedly universal and univocal concept as that of (in)equality.

2) Our species has survived until now on difference, on a fundamental positive pluralism rather than on a sameness or oneness, which tolerates merely accidental variations on a substantial underlying identical theme.

3) The fact that gift relations (by definition, asymmetrical), despite appearances and what critics have to say about the creeping commercialization of human relationship ('everything has its price'), are qualitatively and quantitatively far more present even in modern society than contractual equality; that the evangelical ideal of brotherhood among all God's children never seems to be achieved, even within the Church, or that even Marxists (if not especially Marxist) revolutions merely change but never get rid of the powers that be – this often blinds Christian and Communist alike to the fact that the alternative to alienation is not anarchic egalitarianism but credible and creditable authority.

4) The recognition that alienating appearances can be self-deceptive, insofar as those most involved are either not aware of them or manage sufficiently well with them; thus seen by the Parisian existentialist from his Marxist left bank, the lot of rural women, isolated and exploited, seemed intolerably alienating and in need of immediate revolution, whereas, experienced from within, the women in question had neither the desire nor the need for radical, rapid change.<sup>25</sup>

Likewise, in the two African countries, Tanzania and Senegal, where I lived at length and at grassroots level, while sympathizing with the causes of Western and westernized militants, I felt obliged by the facts of local life to make a couple of pointed remarks. In the first place, many of these causes,

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<sup>25</sup> Yvonne Verdier, *Façons de dire, façons de faire: La laveuse, la couturière, la cuisinière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979): 338. "Les différents statuts féminins reproduisent entre eux, se gagnent entre femmes. L'univers féminin se définit donc non pas négativement par rapport au monde des hommes, mais de l'intérieur et par lui-même comme un univers organisé et régi par ses propres lois, lieu de souveraineté et d'autonomie des femmes elles-mêmes."

while no doubt just, were as intrinsically unrelated to the outlook and aspirations of local cultures as had been, *in illo tempore*, the offer of the Gospel in its Western trappings. This does not outlaw conscientization but, in view of the fact that the locals are not without their own consciousness, it does make of it a crusading apostolate. Spreading the good news of physical integrity is as much a mission as was announcing the Gospel.

In the second place, had I been a woman in my Tanzanian village, while not refusing Western NGO offers of development projects such as a maternity ward or chicken farm (since they were usually on offer for free, it would have been stupid to ignore them), I would have stuck to spirit-possession, since this home-grown initiative was also the most apposite way of making more free space for women in need. At the 'lowest' level, the spirits empowered women to smoke in public or obtain dresses from their recalcitrant husbands. At a 'higher' level, they restored peace between quarrelsome wives in a polygamous household or enabled adolescent girls to escape enforced marriages. Had the women in question, on the one hand, chosen to smoke of their own accord, they would have been castigated as vulgar or worse and, on the other, had they confronted their husbands face to face they would in all probability have jeopardized what was left of their couplehood.

Likewise, in Senegal, had I been an ordinary Muslim, I would have seriously envisaged joining a marabout-led farming community (despite its seemingly exploitative organization), since this would have been the only sure way of obtaining a wife or remaining in good health. This is not just a question of biding one's time or of recognizing that, though we are all in the same world, we are not all contemporaries (as the Germans say, *gleichzeitige Ungleichzeitigkeit*). It is a question of wondering whether my anthropo-logic is absolutely the best. Personally, I have often found that it pays to empower local freedom fighters to determine their combat in their own good time and with weapons of their choice.<sup>26</sup> Otherwise, as happened to some of the *zemetcha* or young Marxist warriors Mengistu unleashed on unsuspecting villagers (and whom I accompanied on their scientifically socialist mission at the height of the 1976 Revolution), you can end up more dead than alive: having more than mocked local rainmakers in the name of technical cloud-seeding, two of the students were burnt at the stake: were they martyrs of modernity or foolhardy fanatics?

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<sup>26</sup> An extreme case being that of Godelier's Baruya women, who, manifestly among the world's most ideologically alienated, resort to infanticide to re-establish their rights over life. In *La métamorphose de la parenté*, 76.

5) But above all, *homo hierarchicus* is intrinsically relational where *homo aequalis* is just as intrinsically isolationist. Since Socrates' 'know thyself' and his illustrious followers focusing on democratic and republican citizenship, since Jesus' rejection of all 'natural' forms of togetherness (the family, the State, the Church) and concentration on saving the individual sinner, since St Augustine's self-centred autobiography and the City of God, since Descartes' subjectivist solipsism and Kant's individualistic idealism, since Rousseau's and Rawls' reducing the social to egocentric interest, the West has only been able to relate its elemental ego to other equally atomized humans and the world at large in a purely secondary and superficial fashion. *Homo hierarchicus*, on the other hand, whether he be pre, para or postmodern, sees himself as radically relational.<sup>27</sup> 'Being' for him is not only from the outset 'becoming' but a 'growing together'. Whereas Western man's monistic monadism and substantial solipsism<sup>28</sup> mean that anything else appears accidental and artificial, non-Western man's primordial dualism and intentional identity make everything else an original and organic part of himself. The former, at most, sees himself as another,<sup>29</sup> the latter accepts that the other is himself – the absolute autonomy of *homo aequalis* versus the relative dependency of *homo hierarchicus*.

When all is said and done, as *homo hierarchicus* has said and done it, *homo aequalis* might feel inclined to retort: "much theoretical ado about practically nothing, since you and I are both concretely against unjustifiable dissymmetry, among the most unacceptable of which is unwarranted modifications of the human body in general and genital mutilations in particular." And, indeed, as I have sought to make clear throughout this essay, opting for *acceptable asymmetry* rather than *essential equality* in no way prevents mili-

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<sup>27</sup> Without being aware of the fact, a leading phenomenologist's insistence on the primordial duality of being – Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997): 441–42 – answers belatedly to the awareness of the 'primitive' that individuation involves taking otherness into ontological account, as the real is relational. See Maurice Leenhardt, *Do Kamo, la personne et le mythe dans le monde mélanésien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971): 177–78: Melanesians are "un peuple qui, dans sa mentalité, ne ramène pas tout à la notion d'unité, d'un... un, chez ces peuples, n'a pas la qualité d'unité. Sa caractéristique est d'être l'autre... la paire, la dualité jouent dans toutes les constructions de l'esprit du Canaque, le rôle d'unité de base."

<sup>28</sup> For Aristotle (misunderstood on this score by the Scholastics), a substance was the ultimate singular ground for accidental relations.

<sup>29</sup> To plagiarize the title of Paul Ricoeur's effort to relate ego to other than itself. In Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

tating against abuse. There is, however, all the difference in the world, both in fact and in theory, between the two *anthropo-logies*.

There can be nothing beyond *essential equality* but accessory accidentals, which is why certain forms of feminism tend to level out all but the most unavoidable and unobjectionable of sexually based differences – although, up till now, men (no matter how hard they try) cannot give birth, the popular press delights in notching up the fall of the few remaining male bastions; there are now heavy-weight female boxers and bull-fighters, with, hopefully one day soon, a Pope Joan II. On the other hand, there is always something beyond acquired or actual asymmetries, and if that something can only be another asymmetry, making sure revolutionary upturns of hierarchical hegemones are realistically acceptable to, and consequently accepted by, as many people as possible (including those overturned) constitutes the very ‘essence’ of being and becoming humanly (albeit hierarchically) together.

– Translation from the French and revised by Kevin A. Dwyer

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ANNE–MARIE DAUPHIN–TINTURIER



## Pleasure and Body Adaptation An Approach to Gender in Northern Zambia

### ABSTRACT

In order to contextualize the practice of ‘sexual mutilation’, it is necessary to provide the ethno-linguistic and anthropological contexts of such customs. I here address a sexual manipulation – the elongation of the labia – as a condition to ensure the marriageability of Bemba girls in the plateau region of northern Zambia. Although there is no equivalent for the boy, he is involved, like the girl, in a ‘marriage ritual’ that may last up to ten years, and he is symbolically circumcised on the wedding night. In my analysis of four myths pertaining to sexuality, I provide insights into the conditions which might be required to prepare effective laws in the domain of ‘sexual mutilation’.

**A**T A TIME WHEN the practice of sexual mutilation (circumcision and excision) is increasingly questioned and repressive laws are being introduced in certain countries, it is relevant to evoke the ethno-linguistic and anthropological contexts of such customs. As a rule, such practices seek to integrate a person within the group by clearly confirming his/her belonging to one or the other gender.

The example analyzed below is not in fact a ‘sexual mutilation’, but, rather, a sexual manipulation with pleasure as its prize. To the extent that, at first sight, there is no trauma comparable to what is observed in circumcision or excision, it might be easier to reflect on the relation between this practice and the culture that hosts such a practice. In so doing, I aim to provide

insights into the conditions which might be required to prepare effective laws in the domain of sexual mutilation.

Unfortunately, during my stays in Zambia, I did not undertake any specific research on sexual manipulation, and the data I could gather do not allow me to go beyond suggesting research directions and hypotheses which would need testing in the regions of Africa where such manipulations exist. Nevertheless, this study led me to rediscover several myths related to sexuality and to revisit the notions of gender in the plateau region of northern Zambia.

This region<sup>1</sup> is characterized by a common language, Cibemba, which, despite some dialectal variations, attests to a broad cultural unity that justifies the analysis of the various myths found in the plateau as belonging to a common corpus. During the last millennium, the various groups which form the current population came to settle from a unique centre, Kola, now on the border between Congo and Angola, and pushed part of the former inhabitants, possibly related to the 'Khoisan'<sup>2</sup> of Southern Africa, towards the periphery of the region.<sup>3</sup>

As early as the fifteenth century, a system of clans was established over the Northern part of Zambia and Southern Congo, featuring lineages mostly with matrilineal transmission and, in particular, uxorilocal marriage during the first years of common life.<sup>4</sup> In the sixteenth century, the migrations intensified and

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<sup>1</sup> The area, which has a relatively sparse population (7–8 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>), comprises the Tanganyika plateau and the Lwapula valley, and includes the following administrative units: Lwapula Province, Northern Province, the Serenje District of the Central Province, and part of the Copperbelt Province along the Congo border, facing Katanga.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'khoisan' is here understood as the first inhabitants of the region. See Andrew D. Roberts, *A History of the Bemba: Political Growth and Change in North-Eastern Zambia before 1900* (London: Longman, 1973), and Édouard Labrecque, "La tribu des Babemba, I: Les origines des Babemba," *Anthropos* 18.5–6 (1933): 633–48, as well as his "La religion du Noir Infidèle: Coutumes matrimoniales chez les Babemba," in *Bemba Cultural Data Part I*, ed. Père Louis Oger (Ilondola: Language Centre, 1934).

<sup>3</sup> There may exist some remnants of that culture – in particular, rock engravings.

<sup>4</sup> The main characteristics of the system (*umukowa\_imikowa*) in Zambia are as follows: matrilineal transmission; exogamy with uxorilocal marriage; hospitality due to any member of the same clan (in particular, a woman may feed any man from her clan); clans associated in pairs (in particular, the associated clan carries out funeral rites). About forty different clans appear to exist. For further detail, see Ian Cunlison, *The Luapula Peoples of Northern Rhodesia* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1959): 64–82.

each time a ‘tribe’ or ethnic group<sup>5</sup> was formed, whose administrative organization, still alive to some extent, features a two-tiered system of chiefs, which was traditionally accessible to women.<sup>6</sup> At the higher level, the paramount chiefs,<sup>7</sup> of matrilineal descent, reign over a ritual unit, to which the couple of the chief and his first spouse confer a sacral dimension, a function they delegate to lesser chiefs at the lower levels, down to that of ‘village headmen’.<sup>8</sup>

### The Practice

In 1934, Father Labrecque described what he called “the matrimonial customs of the Babemba.” His text was intended for young priests newly arrived in the country, to prepare them to hear confessions. Among these customs is the *kukusha umubili*, which he translates as “adapting the body” and also calls “the Hottentot apron.”

Toutes les jeunes filles babemba, dès qu’elles atteignent l’âge de dix ans environ (*amabele yali yanono* [ayant les mamelles petites]) jusqu’au moment où elles deviennent nubiles, pratiquent la coutume invétérée [...], appelée *kukusha umubili*. Cette coutume consiste à se grossir les organes génitaux. Le but est d’obtenir une somme de

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<sup>5</sup> According to George Kay, the ‘tribe’ or ethnic group (*umutundu\_imitundu*) is a community characterized by a social and political organization, a common culture and distinct language, and a common history. It is possibly attached to a territory (*icaalo\_ifyialo*), which may be geographically scattered, as is the case in the Lwapula Valley, where belonging to a ‘tribe’ or ethnic group is perceived more in the type of activity practised (hunting or fishing, for instance) than in residence in a particular village. See Kay, *A Social Geography of Zambia* (London: U of London P, 1967): 47.

<sup>6</sup> See Roberts, *A History of the Bemba*.

<sup>7</sup> The power of the *mfumu* is, in some sense, of divine origin, though limited by a body of hereditary advisors (*babakilo*), who deliberate secretly, adapting ancient customs to modern conditions. Formerly, they could determine the death of the chief; now they retain only some ritual functions. The importance of a *mfumu* is not linked to the size of the area over which he rules but to that of the population which recognizes him as chief.

<sup>8</sup> The village headman (*mwine mushi* or ‘village owner’) used to be chosen by the *mfumu*. The headmen are now selected or elected by the more influential village inhabitants and retain control over the village.

jouissances charnelles plus considérable au temps des relations matrimoniales.<sup>9</sup>

This introduction is followed by a description, provided, he says, by a “serious catechist,” of the various techniques, including the know-how and the required plants, as well as the corresponding vocabulary. He also adds that the practice existed in neighbouring ethnic groups, was stopped upon marriage, but was sometimes resumed by young widows. He insists that all relatives pressed the girls to go to the bush and “prepare their bodies”; if they did not, they would be considered stupid and could not be married. He concludes by quoting what the future bridegroom had to say:

Aussi un des premiers soucis du prétendant sera de s’assurer si “l’honneur” [*mucinshi*] de sa future est bien à point (*nga mubili wakwe wakula, wakuluka* [si ses organes sont grands, s’ils ont grossi]). S’il est satisfait, il dira de sa fiancée: ‘*Aba no mucinshi sana, ancindika nganshi*’ [elle a du respect à mon égard, elle me fait honneur]. Si non, il la dédaignera: ‘*Taba no mucinshi, ni cepelelo*’ [elle n’a pas de respect, elle n’a pas grandi].<sup>10</sup>

Father Labrecque also adds that there was no special preparation for boys, no circumcision, although their virility would be tested during the wedding night.

In a different version, Labrecque mentions that this practice might help women have children, and reports discussions he had with doctors to verify if the practice could entail such benefits. Other missionaries obtained similar confirmations from doctors and also came to accept the custom and recognize its value. By contrast, neither Audrey Richards<sup>11</sup> on the Bemba nor Ian Cun-

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<sup>9</sup> “All Babemba girls, when they turn about ten years old (*amabele yali yanono* [having small breasts]) and until they become fertile, practise the ancient custom [...], called *kukusha umubili*. This custom consists in enlarging the genitals. The aim is to obtain considerable carnal pleasure when the time of matrimonial relationships duly comes” (my tr.). Édouard Labrecque, “La religion du Noir Infidèle,” 27.

<sup>10</sup> “Therefore one of the main concerns of the bridegroom will be to make sure that the ‘honour’ of his future spouse is well developed (*nga mubili wakwe wakula, wakuluka* [if her genitals are big, if they have increased]). If satisfied, he will say of her: ‘*aba no mucinshi sana, ancindika nganshi*’ [she has respect for me, she honours me]. Otherwise he will look down on her: ‘*taba no mucinshi, ni cipelelo*’ [she has no respect, she has not grown bigger]” (my tr.). Labrecque, “La religion du Noir Infidèle,” 27.

<sup>11</sup> She might have made a reference to it in her field notes, which I could not verify, but it is likely, since she used the same White Fathers’ documents I have used.

nisson on the Lunda of Kazembe has, I believe, made any reference to this custom in his writings. The practice, however, still existed in the 1970s, but I have no direct confirmation that it persists today.

### What Do the Texts Say?

The expression *kukusha umubili* is formed of the verb *kukusha* ('to grow, to increase', also 'to make grow') and the phrase *umubili imibili*, which means 'body' but which is often used to represent a part of the body with a symbolic value, such as 'heart' in English. Here, used in the singular, it is a euphemism for a woman's genitals, thereby indicating their positive valuation.

The objective of the practice is indeed to induce the 'enlargement of certain sexual organs', which Father Labrecque translates as "adapting the body." He then becomes more explicit, referring to the enlargement of the genitals in a general way, and he goes into the specifics when he describes at some length the various techniques. This is where a comparison with the 'Hottentot apron' practice might be ventured. It must be added that girls perform this procedure, over a number of years, on an individual basis or in a group. This is not a one-time operation, nor does an adult inflict the procedure upon the girl, as is the case with the typical sexual mutilations under scrutiny in this volume. The girl takes responsibility for it herself.

Secondly, Father Labrecque refers to "pleasure during marital intercourse." Such a comment is rare enough in ethnographic literature as to make us wonder why the married couple is expected to seek pleasure, rather than the male only, as is often implicit in male-dominated cultures. It is acknowledged that, as a priest, he could not envisage a different context from that of marriage, otherwise he would have had to condemn carnal excesses as sins; he is thus led to look for the grounding of the practice, the justification of which he culls from physicians. But it is also of interest to examine what adultery means in the culture, since this is of paramount concern, as is shown in the following summary of Myth 1:

Following repeated mistakes, several sons of the Lunda King Mukulumpu are expelled from the court of their father. Regretting leaving behind one of his sisters, Tshilufya–Mulenga, one of the sons, Tshiti, who leads the eastwards migration with his brother Nkole, sends members of the royal clan to fetch her. During the return trip, Kapasa,

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However, the practice is referred to neither in her analysis of marriage nor in her account of girls' initiations.

Tshiti's half-brother, sleeps with the young woman, who only reveals the name of her seducer six months later. The culprit is banished from the court and the royal clan; Tshiti retains his sister with him and chooses his nephew as his heir, thus instituting a matrilineal succession. The migrants pursue their route eastwards and reach Chief Nsenga, who welcomes them. However, his wife, Tshilimbulu, seduces Tshiti and the couple spends three days by a river. The husband discovers them and kills Tshiti with a poisoned arrow that pierces his arm. Nkole orders the mummification of his brother and the return of the migrants, after he has defeated the Nsenga, killed the chief and Tshilimbulu, and kept the skin of her belly. Some time later, he organizes the funeral of his brother and the burning of the Nsenga chief and his wife. The smoke is such that Nkole suffocates and dies. As expected, it is his six-year-old nephew, the son of his incestuous sister, who succeeds him.<sup>12</sup>

The myth shows that the feud between Nsenga and Bemba is due to the adulterous relationship between the tribal chief's wife and the leader of the migrant group, Tshiti. In other words, not only is adultery responsible for both the failure of the eastward migration (hence their settlement on the plateau) and for the successive death of its first two leaders, but it also leads to a change in the inheritance system. Adultery thus constitutes a founding motive, and justifies prohibition in order to safeguard society.

Another important point is that the families urge the girls to prepare themselves. The terms used to designate girls who would refuse to prepare their body are disparaging and connote celibacy and a separation from society in the form of a social ban. Similarly, the suitor's words indicate the importance that men attach to this practice. Referring to *mucinshi*, Labrecque initially renders the term as "honour," perhaps giving the word a Mediterranean meaning, whereas the real idea, as he later acknowledges, is, rather, that of 'politeness, respect', which evokes a successful education, in a more balanced gender relation.

Last but not least, Labrecque makes the point that if there is a girl's initiation, there is no equivalent for the boys, at least not in any ritualized way. However, the various stages in the marriage, which can span over more than ten years, may be seen for the man as a long period of personal transformation, which leads from boyhood to the status of a mature man fully integrated into society.

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<sup>12</sup> Father Labrecque's transcription is used here, for he was the first to translate this myth (1933).

## The Marriage Ritual

To understand the workings of the society at the time of Labrecque's writings, one must recall the sequence of events that led young men to the position of being married, and, if they wished, independent adults.

### The First Years

Traditionally, after two families concluded an agreement,<sup>13</sup> the boy, about fifteen years old, left his parents and often his village to live with his fiancée, then about ten years old, and his life was transformed. From then on, he was not allowed to speak with his future mother-in-law, and could only have a conversation with her husband and other relatives about his work. However, he could speak freely with the girl and her grandmother. His first task was to build the frame of his house, which would later be completed by females of either his or the girl's clan. Then, under the tutelage of his future father-in-law, he learned how to cut trees, hunt, and fish, and to prepare the fields before women burnt them. This would last two to three years.

During the same period, he also had to work in the fields of his future mother-in-law, preparing the fields and participating in the weeding but not in the harvest. Under the more gentle supervision of the grandmother, he would start to share the life of his fiancée, eating together and playing sexual games; intercourse was allowed until the girl reached puberty, but pregnancy before the girl's initiation was to be absolutely avoided.

In this way, the young man was slowly integrated in the group of men in the village. Indeed, the map of a traditional village<sup>14</sup> reveals a series of boundaries which assigned the men to the centre of the village.<sup>15</sup> They only had limited space for their daily activities, restricting them to the houses of their wives (or future wives) at night, and allowing them to leave the village only to

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<sup>13</sup> The agreement is characterized by the transfer of small gifts and a modest amount of money to the girl's family, which will remain with them, and may be concluded without family intervention if the boy can afford these himself. Audrey I. Richards, *Bemba Marriage and Present Economic Conditions* (Rhodes–Livingstone Papers, no. 4; Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia: Rhodes–Livingstone Institute, 1940): 47.

<sup>14</sup> The village is built around a central shed where the men work during the day, and surrounded by a belt of gardens and of fields, the whole being within a larger territory divided by lanes and rivers.

<sup>15</sup> See *Représentations de l'espace en littérature orale: Approche textuelle et ethno-linguistique*, ed. Ursula Baumgardt & Paulette Roulon–Doko (Paris: Karthala, forthcoming 2009).

work in the fields or for hunting and fishing. Hence newcomers felt a deep sense of confinement when they moved to the village of their future wife.

#### Cisungu, the Girl's Initiation<sup>16</sup>

The marriage process begins with the girl's first periods, followed by rituals for the first menstruation, the girls' initiation *per se*, the wedding night, and the birth of the first child.

The ritual for the first menses<sup>17</sup> introduces the girl to the dogma of purity, stressing the concepts of a hot world and a cold world, while showing the necessity for the initiation.<sup>18</sup> The *cisungu* or girls' initiation, which has all but totally disappeared, was above all a ritual to settle the girls in their new life. It was long and stressful not only for the novitiates but also for the other participants, who were responsible for their future. The young girl, leaving her mother to enter a hierarchy of women, under the guidance of an initiation mistress or *nacimbusa*,<sup>19</sup> was then treated like a plant that would grow from the

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<sup>16</sup> The following is based partly on the description by Audrey Richards of a ritual she witnessed in 1931, but published only in 1956, and again in 1982, and partly on my own observations in 1989 at Kopa, a hamlet on the Bisa/Bemba border and in 1998 in Kitwe, the second largest town in the Copperbelt. See, respectively, Anne-Marie Dauphin-Tinturier, "La femme, le lion et le prêtre: Les trois fonctions de la femme dans le nord de la Zambie," *Cahiers de Littérature Orale INALCO* 34 (1993): 177–221, and "Cisungu à nouveau: Initiation des femmes et structure sociale (bemba, Zambie)," *L'Homme* 167–168 (July–December 2003): 187–207.

<sup>17</sup> This ritual has several names: *ukusolwela* 'remove from the fire' or *ukumufisho peshiko* 'put her to lay on the ground, in the forest' or *ukumulanga umulilo* 'show the fire'. Under the responsibility of the initiation mistress, the women put her through various tests, such as preparing a new fire and cooking grains, all the while praising her. Upon her return, she is blessed by the wife of the headman and then allowed to re-enter the village and await her initiation.

<sup>18</sup> For more detail, see Audrey Richards, *Chisungu: a Girls' Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Zambia* (London & New York: Tavistock, 1982): 54.

<sup>19</sup> To some extent, as the equivalent of the village headman, the initiation mistress, or *nacimbusa*: i.e. 'mother of the *mbusa*', 'mother of what is transmitted', operates as a sort of stage manager. She pushes the novices to go beyond their limits, invites the participants to prepare the *mbusa* – a set of natural or man-made objects, paintings, models, potteries, depicting gestures, dances and songs – and gathers the women and sometimes the men as well to participate in the rituals. At the end of the session, she expresses her vision of life in a speech addressed to the novitiates, their paternal aunt, and a few additional people she chooses herself. Later, should a young woman face a difficult situation, the mistress might ask some of the elder women to help and remind

knowledge she would slowly absorb during the multiple rituals she was to participate in.

Traditionally, the ritual consisted of two major phases.<sup>20</sup> During a first sequence lasting several days, sometimes several months, the group of women would explain certain concepts, teach the proper use of words, and provide technical teaching on agriculture, food preparation, sexuality, pregnancy, and child delivery. At the same time, the matrons would indicate the proper, socially condoned attitudes for various circumstances of life. In particular, they would teach the value of tradition, the prohibition on brother/sister incest, respect for the clan and the chiefdom, as well as the need to be part of the world of women. Such teachings were to ensure the survival and education of the future generations, the acceptance of a degree of male domination to retain genitors until menopause, and the risk for young children, in particular for those born as a result of adultery. They also taught techniques normally practised only by men, such as hunting and tree-felling, so as to be able to survive if men were to leave the village. The second sequence summarized all the teachings received, through a final ceremony which could last up to twenty-four hours, first in the forest, then close to a source of running water, then in front of, and finally inside, the initiation house.

The *cisungu* involved boys as well. In the first part of the ritual, during which the bridegroom could arrange to be replaced by a sister or a cousin, he would bring objects symbolizing his temporary status, such as a bundle of firewood, or some of his duties (salt or game); but on the last day he was required to come in person and shoot an arrow with his bow, to claim his rights. He was also to bring presents such as loincloths for the various female performers and offer small amounts of money before each rite intended for him.

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her of the teaching given during the initiation through carefully selected songs and dances.

<sup>20</sup> To better understand what is at stake, it is useful to remember the three functions of Bemba women. These are *cibinda wa nghanda* [creator of the house], *kabumba wa mapepo* [potter of prayers], and *nacimbusa wa cisungu* [mothers of what is transmitted]. The initiation mistress is bearer of the third function, while the teaching of the first phase of the initiation corresponds to the acquisition of the first two functions. To complete their training, the young women had to participate in the initiation of their younger siblings and were fully trained only with the *cisungu* of their elder daughter. See Hugo Hinfelaar, *Religious Change among Bemba-Speaking Women of Zambia* (Boston Spa, Wetherby, West Yorkshire: British Library Document Supply Centre, University of London, 1989): 7–12.

The boys' participation can be put in perspective through a well-known tale:<sup>21</sup>

A girl starts to refuse all the suitors offered to her, to finally marry a lion temporarily changed into a man. She follows him to the forest, and with the help of her brother returns, carrying with her the riches of civilization, ready to enter the village with the lion, now fully human.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the analysis of the rites regarding men, which has been so aptly described by Audrey Richards, shows a transformation of the man from a “wild animal” symbolized by the lion, when joining the village, to a “half-domesticated animal” represented by the rat,<sup>23</sup> during the engagement. The man is then changed into the “domesticated animal,” symbolized by the chicken, at the end of the initiation.<sup>24</sup> At this stage, the term used is generic, has no gender; the sacrifice of the animal will give it its sex. The character of the lion that can change into a man is also present in the myth of the origin of man (Myth 2), obtained among one of the first ethnic groups to settle on the plateau:

In the beginning, the god Lesa lived in heaven with his wife and their children (three sons and several daughters), and they liked to come down to earth from time to time. The eldest son, Lucele, usually lived in the region of the rising sun, bringing happiness and often replacing his father. The second, Mulenga, occupied the region of the setting sun, and brought on plagues and calamities. The third one, the lion, who married one of his sisters, moving between the two others along the North-South axis, dreamed and attempted to equal his father.

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<sup>21</sup> Two versions were obtained in 1972 in the Luapula Valley and in Mansa; only the conclusions differ, whether told to a boy or to a girl. In the version for girls, presented here, the tale provides the recurrent motif of the initiation, and may reproduce an episode of a myth on the origins of man.

<sup>22</sup> In Dauphin-Tinturier, “Les filles difficiles aushi et lunda (Zambie),” in *La fille difficile*, ed. Veronika Görög-Karady & Christiane Seydou (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2001): 54–71.

<sup>23</sup> The lion-to-rat transformation is attested among the Twa, the first inhabitants (according to Cunissson), and corresponds to the domestication of the chief. In A.F. Robert, “Perfect Lions, Perfect Leaders,” *Journal des Africanistes* 53.1–2 (1983): 95. In a similar way, the young male is in some way himself domesticated.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, according to the songs reported by Audrey Richards, the chicken was seen as an avatar of the lion and likened to the new husband with whom the young woman would ‘play’ = *ukwangala* [a euphemism for making love] during the wedding night.

Displeased, Lesa refused to talk to him and forced him to stay on earth. The wife of the lion was a mediator between son and father, and changed her husband into a human being, who slowly colonized the earth.<sup>25</sup>

The process of transformation from a wild animal such as a lion into a human being,<sup>26</sup> through the mediation of a woman, is also seen in various other myths and tales that describe creation processes. Myth 3 concerns the creation of the house from the frame, inside of which live the lion and his wife, in the forest; the creation of the hearth; the sharing of food; the necessity to initiate the girls, the need for uxori-local marriage. Generally, these myths recount how a woman transforms a rather primitive man into a less rudimentary, somewhat more sophisticated being, in the same way in which a house is built progressively, starting with the frame.

Beyond these performative aspects, which essentially describe a way of life, and moral injunctions for the married couple, initiation had another function: above all, it was a preparation for the fundamental rite of purification, which would thereafter determine the future of the couple. The *Bemba* dogma of purity was based on the notions of heat and cold. Every time, for one reason or another, a person happened to reach the hot world, it was necessary, in order to return to the cold world, to undergo purification rites, which only women or chiefs, with the help of their wife, could perform. The central question was that of sexual intercourse, which led to the hot and impure world of the *mpanga*, the 'forest', which had to be left behind in order to return to the cold and pure world of the *mushi* or 'village'. To remain in the state of impurity implied, in particular, the impossibility of approaching a fire without polluting it; any food cooked on that fire would become dangerous and provoke diseases or other calamities. Also, there was the risk of *macho*, which could render the parents or their children insane, if no proper purification had been performed after sexual intercourse.

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<sup>25</sup> In the 1930s, Munday was lucky enough to record a version of the myth of the origins of man among the Lala. Because of the great cultural homogeneity, myths of the same type probably existed in other parts of the plateau. See J.T. Munday, "The Creation Myth Amongst the Lala of Northern Rhodesia," *African Studies* 1 (1942): 47–54.

<sup>26</sup> In a general way, the man/animal metamorphosis is often described; the man is then referred to as *cisanguka-bacisanguka* (human being seen as a transformed item); in June 1973, Chief Kasumpa explained to me the various techniques used to achieve this transformation.

The Wedding Night or Ubwinga<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the young couple was left alone in the house built by the boy when he first joined the village. This is where his virility was to be tested. The guests, ready to celebrate the wedding night, waited for one of the two protagonists to come out first. If the girl appeared first, this meant that the couple was unable to have sexual intercourse three times in a row. In this case of (relative) impotence, the marriage was deemed not to have taken place, the young man returned to his family, and might subsequently encounter difficulties in finding another bride. However, if the boy came out first and threw charcoal, the wedding was completed and the feast could start.

The couple then went back into the house, and the young woman received from her paternal aunt a small pot made especially for this occasion.<sup>28</sup> The aunt boiled water in the pot and explained how to carry out the purification by washing the hands and genitals of her husband and her own as well.

At the end of the initiation ritual, the young woman took a bath in clean water,<sup>29</sup> which purified her after the sacrifice of the chicken. During the wedding night, the purification was performed as instructed by the aunt. Each act of sexual intercourse corresponded to a passage from – and return to – the village/cold world to the forest/hot world, which had to be managed through a repetitive ritual reproducing the initial sacrifice followed by a purification rite.<sup>30</sup> Each sexual act recalls the sacrifice of the chicken. The woman then becomes a priest, who can enact the purification mechanism through the cleansing ritual with the pot.

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<sup>27</sup> Several descriptions are available in Louis Étienne, *Bemba Customs* (Iondola: Language Centre, 1950); Nicolas Garrec, *Croyances et coutumes religieuses et sociales des Babemba Chilongo* (Rome: Archives des Pères Blancs, 1916); Édouard Labrecque, “La religion du Noir Infidèle”; Joseph Ragoen, “Coutumes indigènes,” in *Bemba Cultural Data Part II*, ed. Père L. Oger (Iondola: Language Centre, 1922): 1–56; and Audrey Richards, *Bemba Marriage*.

<sup>28</sup> A few days before, the aunt (*nasenge\_banasenge*) had scratched bits of her own pot (*akanweno\_utunweno*), mixing them with clay and several medicinal plants to make a new pot, which she then cooked like any other kitchen pot.

<sup>29</sup> Clean water is a characteristic of the world of the dead. For more detail, see Anne-Marie Dauphin-Tinturier, “Piège pour un lion: Etude ethnolinguistique de contes bemba (Zambie)” (thèse de 3ème cycle, Paris V, 1983).

<sup>30</sup> For more detail, see Luc de Heusch, *Le sacrifice dans les religions africaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

The End of Serving Time and the *Kwingisha* Ritual

In case of adultery, the ritual of the small pot cannot be carried out, and this brings on all possible dangers. Man and wife thus have an obligation to live together faithfully during the whole period of ‘serving’ for the family of the bride, which normally ceases only after the third child is born.

The first pregnancy is an extension of the initiation process<sup>31</sup> and only with the birth of her child is the mother considered an adult. By contrast, the young husband has to continue his education under the supervision of his father-in-law and is considered an adult only after the birth of the third child. During that period, his wife’s parents regularly offer him presents to show their gratitude and help him endure his situation until his serving period is completed.

That period is marked by a family ritual, the *kwingisha* ‘to let into the house’, a pivotal stage in the life of people and in social dynamics. The son-in-law comes into the house of his mother-in-law for the first time and is invited to share a meal with his father-in-law.<sup>32</sup> The reciprocal prohibition is lifted. The wife ceases to be a go-between for her husband and parents. The couple can then decide upon its own future, and the two sides of the lineage would then accept their decision; they can either stay in the village or decide to leave it. They can also decide to break up, in which case the husband would leave alone.

If the marriage is maintained and reinforced by further births and if the couple shows leadership qualities, both man and wife can assume a dominant role in the village as village headman and initiation mistress, respectively. If the couple decides to break up, subsequent unions are made and broken at the will of the protagonists. It is enough for the woman to let the village know that she fed a certain man and that they lived together. No ritual is needed; the

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<sup>31</sup> From the fourth month onward, the foetus is seen as a human being. Until the end of the gestation period, the young mother is greeted with formal tokens of high respect. If possible, the birth should occur outside the village, under the responsibility of the initiation mistress, who directed the girl’s *cisungu*. When the mother returns to the village with her baby, and the baby’s fire is lit, the young woman is declared an adult and takes a new name, made up of her child’s name preceded by the suffix *na*.

<sup>32</sup> Until then, the son-in-law could only eat alone or with other boys of the same age-group. During that meal, the father-in-law takes a ball from the meal, soaks it in the sauce and feeds it to his son-in-law as he would with a child. The son-in-law reciprocates. From then on, he is allowed to share meals with his elders. See Labrecque, “La religion du Noir Infidèle,” 56.

woman's word is sufficient, and she retains the purification function<sup>33</sup> that she acquired at her first wedding. Polygyny is rare and involves serious difficulties,<sup>34</sup> the approval of the first wife being needed before the man can contemplate taking a second wife.

### How Can this Practice be Understood in the Symbolic System?

As indicated earlier, in the Bemba symbolic system, adultery is considered as particularly dangerous; the protective apparatus against adultery is highly restrictive and applies only to couples during the marriage trial-period, the real marriage being achieved only after *kwingisha*, if consent is reached. The prevention of adultery is obtained by fostering strong couples during the extended trial-period, during which much could happen. The parents-in-law (and the final decision belongs to the mother-in-law) can expel the boy if they find him too lazy or too selfish. But this rarely happened, as boys were needed, both as genitors and workers. But it did happen that the boy might not stand the situation and decided to leave the village. It was therefore important to help man and wife to live happily together, including through pleasurable sexual experience. Even if there was no passion, particularly at the time when parents chose the partner, sexual satisfaction could strengthen the marriage and ensure that the couple would stay in the village and establish a line of descendants, the ultimate and highly valued goal.

Such a conclusion is in some way functional. It is relatively easy to understand the role of enhancing circumstances to ease the life of the couple and retain them in the village. However, it is also possible to see a symbolic aspect here. According to Hinfelaar, the god *Lesa* is double-gendered and represents the ideal combination of man and woman as parents. In the myth of the origin of sexuality<sup>35</sup> (Myth 4), he organizes the distribution of his bisexuality as follows:

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<sup>33</sup> In fact, the woman could use it as she saw fit, hence a degree of polyandry (*nsangi*), which missionaries saw as prostitution, while this should, rather, be seen as a succession of husbands.

<sup>34</sup> Polygyny was mostly restricted to chiefs. After sexual intercourse, the man cannot be purified by a second wife. However, if this is a first marriage for the woman, and even if the wedding ritual was performed with the polygamist, she can purify herself, but cannot purify her husband, unless she has the authorization of the first wife and participates in a particular ritual. See Labrecque, "La religion du Noir Infidèle," 71, 76.

<sup>35</sup> After Edwin W. Smith, *Knowing the African* (London: Lutterworth, 1946): 120; Léon Verbeek, *Mythe et culte de Kipimpi* (Budundu, Zaïre: CEEBA, 1982): 39;

In the beginning, there were two human beings, who had no sex; the god Lesa gave them two parcels, one with male sexual attributes, the other with female attributes. After a time, one of the parcels begins to smell; the one who carries it throws it away and opens the other one. He then acquires the male attributes and becomes a man. His new sexuality leads him to desire the second person, who does not know what to do, but realizes that this condition may have to do with the second parcel. That person returns to Lesa, who gives the second parcel; and thus she becomes a woman.<sup>36</sup>

It should be noted that the first sex to appear is the male one. However, it is not operative on its own. As with most other previous myths, the woman is in relation with the god Lesa and she makes the gift operational by asking for the second sex, which had been rejected by the other person, who was to become a man.<sup>37</sup>

It can be further noted that the organs composed of the clitoris and the labiae minora are called 'the clitoral hood' (in French: *capuchon clitoridien*) by anatomists and are considered the equivalent of the male foreskin.<sup>38</sup> One is perhaps justified in wondering whether covering the clitoris through the artificial stretching of the labiae is not a way of expressing the existence of an internal male sex and thus implying the bisexual character of woman. The assertion of woman's bisexuality could be explained in two different ways: her particular relation with Lesa, on the one hand, and her particular role in society, on the other.

With regard to the woman's particular relation with Lesa, it is useful to return to the creation myth in which the lion (the god Lesa's third male child) is banished and sent to Earth for attempting to become his equal. The myth that introduces sexuality explains why this cannot happen: the son would also bear both sexes. However, Lesa then requests that the lion's wife, who is one

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Johannes Fabian, *Jamaa, a Charismatic Movement in Katanga* (London & Evanston IL: Northwestern UP, 1971): 137; and Johannes Fabian, "Man and Woman in the Teaching of the Yamaa Movement," in *The New Religions of Africa*, ed. Benetta Jules-Rosette (Norwood NY: Ablex, 1979): 175.

<sup>36</sup> Hugo Hinfelaar, *Religious Change*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> In a similar way, the myth of the origin of death shows how death is finally introduced by woman, and the means to overcome death is to have children, considered as Lesa's gift. See Labrecque, "La religion du Noir Infidèle," 4.

<sup>38</sup> See Dimitri Karadimas, "Le petit chaperon rouge: Comment dire le corps sans le nommer," in *Corps et affects*, ed. Françoise Héritier & Margarita Xantharou (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004): 129.

of his daughters, serve as intermediary between him and human beings. This is a religious role which women traditionally assume, and by so doing, they represent the god on Earth, which may explain their quest for the second sex.

As to their role in society, the progression of the marriage ritual indicates a well-organized world of women, built around the initiation mistresses. The latter control the life of all women, as well as that of young men, and even that of chiefs, since all rituals in which the chiefs had to perform required the presence of their first wife. Each ritual included sexual intercourse, and through the purification of her husband, the wife validated the ritual. In fact, the women's world tended to be self-sufficient. As indicated earlier, during the initiation, the novitiates were repeatedly warned that they should be capable of performing all tasks required for the survival of the community. In particular, they learned how to cut down trees and to hunt, and, with the blessing of the initiation mistress, some women, once children were born, did not hesitate to reject their husbands if they were lazy.

While women were in a dominant position, there was no evidence of any tendency to perform castration. In fact, a tale shows that the contrary is true: the search for a 'good husband' is the fundamental aim of the initiation. A castrated man is a dead man, and this is not what the community needs. To understand what happens in terms of potential castration, let us turn to the sacrifice of the chicken and the purification ritual of the wedding night.

At the end of the initiation, just after the mistress has delivered her message on life ethics, two songs accompany the sacrifice of the chicken. The first one invites the (genderless) chicken to 'play' (a euphemism for sexual intercourse). The second song recalls how dangerous the lion is, once partly domesticated; in this condition, the chicken can eat the *cisungu*, which refers to menstruation and how the wedding can stop menstruation through pregnancy.

There are three documented variants in the way the chicken is put to death, and these refer to three different attitudes in the women's groups. In the older rituals, the senior women would successively sit on the head of the chicken and would then give it to the female novitiate, who would twist its neck to separate the head – here the women expressed a right to control the bride's relations with her future husband.<sup>39</sup> In the 1931 ritual observed by Audrey Richards, the female novitiate was given the live chicken and twisted its head until the neck was broken – here the novitiate assumed total control of her relationship with her husband.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See Nicolas Garrec, *Croyances et Coutumes religieuses*.

<sup>40</sup> See Audrey Richards, *Chisungu*, 107–109.

In the ritual I observed in 1998 in Kitwe, the head of the chicken was brought close to the vagina of each novice. Then the initiation mistress severed the head of the chicken with a knife, and the novices stopped touching the chicken – here the women themselves chose the future husband, as the mistress had indicated in her teaching. In the three variants, the chicken was then cooked and eaten by the novice(s) and the senior women. Eating the lion would be out of the question; the rat would hardly be more acceptable, but the chicken is a highly prized meal. The women's group dominates the young husband, but his value is recognized. He has to be a complete man, and the separation of the head from the chest corresponds to a symbolic circumcision, which is accomplished during the wedding night, when he has to prove three times that he was able to have satisfactory intercourse with his wife.

### In Conclusion: The Current Situation

The third example of the sacrifice of the chicken shows the initiation mistresses expressing their right to decide who the husband will be and of no longer accepting a trial marriage. This new attitude corresponds to the outbreak of the HIV virus and the dramatic spread of AIDS. Controlling the sexuality of the young is the way initiation mistresses have chosen to fight the disease and preserve their society. Perhaps we could also see this as a new expression of their bisexuality, in a context where men have failed to behave responsibly.

As I indicated in the introduction, these are only working hypotheses, but I have endeavoured to anchor them in their cultural context. Such an approach should be the rule. I believe that any work on sexual mutilation should refer to the cultural context. The aim is not to conserve practices as traditionally performed but, rather, to help the performers understand what they are doing, and perhaps, if the practice is so important to them, to seek a benign substitute. Such cultural rooting is a condition for preventive laws to be understood and enforced, particularly, I believe, in the case of sexual mutilation.

– Translation from the French and revised by Kevin A. Dwyer

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## SECTION 3

### ON AUTOBIOGRAPHIES



CHANTAL ZABUS

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‘Beyond Circumspection’  
African, Jewish, and Muslim  
Autobiographies Around Circumcision

ABSTRACT

After briefly examining the discursive asymmetry in writings about excision and circumcision, I discuss four moments in the literary history of autobiographies around male circumcision: the seventeenth-century “confessions” from *conversos* in Spain and Portugal; two Kenyan ethno-autobiographies from the 1960s, Mugo Gatheru’s *Child of Two Worlds* and Karari Njama’s *Mau Mau From Within*; Jacques Derrida’s *Circumfession* (1990); and French, Syrian-born Riad Sattouf’s comic strip *My Circumcision* (2004). While establishing links between African and Jewish circumcision, I show that, whether African, Jewish or Muslim, these autobiographies delineate a move *beyond circumspection*.

‘From now on, no point going around in circles.’<sup>1</sup>

**T**HE TERM ‘CIRCUMSPECTION’ is appropriate to a discussion of male circumcision and female excision in two respects. In the case of excision, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, African women writers first mentioned the ritual procedure *en passant* in third-

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession: Fifty-nine periods and periphrases ... (January 1989–April 1990),” in *Jacques Derrida*, tr. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993): 56.

person narratives, as in the Nigerian Flora Nwapa's eponymous novel *Efuru* (1968), or in a tentative autobiographical mode as in the short stories of the Egyptian Alifa Rifaat.<sup>2</sup> But as far as male circumcision is concerned, the term "circumspection" was used for the first time by the American neonatologist Thomas E. Wiswell in a 1997 article on "Circumcision Circumspection," in which he argues for a degree of moderation in approaching the circumcision debate. Generally, he "recommended informed decision-making."<sup>3</sup> Wiswell's cautionary tale not only reflects the general unease with which any real or potential symmetry between the two practices – excision and circumcision – is envisaged but it also explains why there is a discursive asymmetry in the way writers and, especially, autobiographers have written about the operation from the intimate realm of the 'myself'. After briefly addressing this asymmetry, I outline a move *beyond circumspection* in a modest spate of African, Jewish, and Muslim autobiographies.

The excision debate has been alive in African literary discourse since the 1960s, and outside of it, there have been noteworthy attempts to grapple with the issue in non-African, third-person narratives, such as in the Lebanese-American Evelyne Accad's *L'Excisée* (1982) and the African-American novelist Alice Walker's controversial novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992).<sup>4</sup> But it is true that first-person accounts or autobiographies touching on excision gestated for a long time before disentangling themselves from third-person narratives by both men and women as well as from the early anthropological and psychoanalytic texts in which the discourse of excision was at first confined.<sup>5</sup>

As of the 1990s, the initial circumspection about the issue of excision was dispelled and excision became the very stuff of autobiographies by African women, who had experienced the phenomenon in one form or another, including infibulation.<sup>6</sup> Such is the case with the first-person

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<sup>2</sup> Chantal Zabus, *Between Rites and Rights: Excision in Women's Experiential Texts and Human Contexts* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2007): 85–96.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas E. Wiswell, "Circumcision Circumspection," *New England Journal of Medicine* 336 (1997): 1244–45.

<sup>4</sup> Chantal Zabus, "Bouches cousues: L'autobiographie de l'excisée," in *L'animal autobiographique: Autour de Jacques Derrida*, ed. Louise Mallet (Paris: Gallilée, 1999): 331–52.

<sup>5</sup> Chantal Zabus, "Writing Women's Rites: Excision in Experiential African Literature," *Women's Studies International Forum* 24.3–4 (2001): 335–45.

<sup>6</sup> See Chantal Zabus, "Acquiring Body: Waris Dirie, Infibulation, and New African Female Self-Writing," *Thamyris* 11 (2003): 61–76.

(Somali) accounts, with or without an amanuensis, of Aman (*Aman*, 1998), Waris Dirie (*Desert Flower*, 1998; *Desert Dawn*, 2002; *Desert Children*, 2005), Nura Abdi (*Larmes de sable*, 2005), and Fadumo Korn (*Born in the Big Rains*, 2006). In addition to these, *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* (1998) by the Togolese asylum-seeker in the USA, Fauziya Kassindja, enabled excision-oriented discourse's ritual entry into the politics of exile.<sup>7</sup> Senegalese Soninke Khady in *Mutilée* (2005) also constitutes a radical departure from early yet bold attempts on the francophone African scene such as the Guinean Kesso Barry's autobiography *Kesso, princesse peule* (1987), the Senegalese Aminata Maïga Ka's *La voie du salut* (1985), and Mariama Barry's *La petite peule* (2000).

This proliferation of self-writings around excision in the 1990s is due in part to the United Nations decade for women in 1975–85, which transformed the rite (in its de-ritualized and re-ritualized forms) into a human-rights violation. Apart from the ongoing controversy in the USA around routine neonatal circumcision practised currently on 60% of the American male population (formerly 90%), there has not been a similar humanitarian impetus nor the same discursive amplification around male circumcision as there has been around excision. The debate on male circumcision has now imposed itself on the excision debate. Significantly, the work of Sami Al-deeb Abu-Sahlieh sets out to establish legal, ethical, and ontological symmetries between the two practices, as he does in this volume, while duly acknowledging the obtrusive severity of some forms of excision such as infibulation.

Compared with the panoply of experiential writings around female excision, there is but a tiny corpus in the making with respect to male circumcision – arguably disproportionate, especially if we calculate, as Sami Al-deeb Abu-Sahlieh does in this volume and elsewhere, that excision concerns some 140 million women whereas male circumcision is practised on five continents by about a billion Muslims, three hundred million Christians, sixteen million Jews, and an indeterminate number of 'animists' and atheists. A kind of discursive asymmetry has thus set in, not only in first-person accounts but also in law, medicine, and cultural anthropology.

Indeed, the statistical and emotional import of women's first-person narratives or experiential texts – Aman, Kesso Barry, Waris Dirie, Khady, Fadumo Korn, Nura Abdi, excerpts from whose texts are made available to the reader at the end of this volume – remains unmatched by male accounts of the loss of the foreskin, even if some organizations encourage men to

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<sup>7</sup> See Zabus, *Between Rites and Rights*, 163–201 and 202–45.

mourn such a loss. Indeed, NORM, the National Organization for Restoring Men, encourages circumcised men to seek “methods of replacing the lost prepuce” to remedy the now commonly held belief that “the most sensually responsive part of their penis was surgically amputated when too young, helpless to consent, refuse or resist.”<sup>8</sup> This reconstructive surgery to remedy what is now called male genital mutilation (MGM) is part of what popular magazines like the *Wall Street Journal* and *Esquire* designated in the mid-1990s as phallomania – a cult-like obsession with the male organ, as a result of men’s attempting to lengthen their penises with everything from surgical procedures to weight-and-pulley rigs.

Billy Ray Boyd’s book *Circumcision: What It Does* (1990), later revised as *Circumcision Exposed* (1998), inspired Tim Hammond to co-found NORM and then NOHARMM, the National Organization to Halt the Abuse and Routine Mutilation of Males, which describes itself as “a non-profit, direct action men’s network organized against circumcision of healthy male infants and children.”<sup>9</sup> Active in the San Francisco Bay Area during the late 1980s, TVS or “The Victims Speak” website was founded by Boyd and some friends as a group of “men, friends, and loved ones hurt by circumcision in various ways and degrees” who sought to bring their voice to the circumcision debate through creative, non-violent action.

Billy Ray Boyd’s TVS website, along with Dutch Michael Schaap’s documentary *Mother, Why Was I Circumcised?*, which was broadcast in the Netherlands in 2004,<sup>10</sup> contains many harrowing testimonials that project us beyond the original circumspection used in what Jacques Derrida called “circumfictions” in his *Circumfession* (1990). As the title indicates, Derrida was speaking *around* his circumcision, *circumventing* the issue, and, in the process, committing quite a few *circumlocutionary* acts, yet speaking in the first person about the procedure which he underwent when he was eight days old. Yet it is telling that Derrida’s account in *Circumfession* is one of the few male experiential texts so far that speak autobiographically about what he construes as a traumatic bodily experience. Another notable exception is *Ma circoncision* (2004) by the French cartoonist of Syrian origin, Riad Sattouff. Outside of autobiographies, a novella like Bernhard Schlink’s

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<sup>8</sup> See the fact sheet on [www.eskimo.com/~gburlin/mgm/facts.html](http://www.eskimo.com/~gburlin/mgm/facts.html)

<sup>9</sup> At [www.noharrrm.org](http://www.noharrrm.org)

<sup>10</sup> For a review of Michael Schaap’s documentary, see *NOCIRC Annual Newsletter* 20 (2006): 1. MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali subsequently put questions to the Minister of Health who, in 17 December 2004, excluded circumcision of boys from the Dutch National Health Insurance.

*The Circumcision* (2000) dwells on the psychic pain resulting from an uncircumcised German man undergoing circumcision for the love of the Jewish Sarah, who fails to notice any difference after his harrowing decision has been made flesh.<sup>11</sup>

There are, however, antecedents to Derrida's *circanalysis*,<sup>12</sup> itself inspired by the *Confessions* of St Augustine, who is, coincidentally, from Souk Ahras in Algeria. More generally, there is little autobiographical documentation of male circumcision. Before looking at Derrida's and Sattouff's texts, I shall examine two early instances from the seventeenth century and two Kikuyu autobiographies from Kenya in the 1960s.

### The Conversos: The Early 'Confessions' of Cristóbal Méndez and Estevan de Ares de Fonseca

In the context of the thirteenth-century Christian 'reconquest' of Spain, Jews were forcibly converted to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition of 1478, instituted by the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella. For those male converts or *conversos* who were forced out of Spain, the first requirement for re-admission into the Jewish community was circumcision. In the seventeenth century, one such Spanish *converso*, Cristóbal Méndez, moved to Venice and accepted Judaism. Upon his unwise return to Spain to rescue some relatives, he was arrested and tried by the Inquisition, to whom he 'confessed' that, when pressed by a rabbi and an uncle, he had undergone the operation. Méndez recalled that the pain was "so great [...] that [he] was barely aware of the benedictions. [...] After a recovery period, [he] was called up to the open ark to recite the traditional blessing for deliverance from peril. [He] had become a Jew."<sup>13</sup>

The second instance of autobiographical voicing of the experience of circumcision concerns a Portuguese *converso*, Estevan de Ares de Fonseca, who was arrested by the Spanish Inquisition for 'judaizing' and, in his 1635 trial, "provided a detailed autobiographical confession that included a de-

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<sup>11</sup> Bernhard Schlink, *La circumcison*, tr. from the German by Bernard Lortolary & Robert Simon (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> After the title of Chapter 7, "Circanalysis," by Geoffrey Bennington in *Interrupting Derrida* (Warwick Studies in European Philosophy; London & New York: Routledge, 2000): 93.

<sup>13</sup> J.H. Jerushalmi, *The Re-Education of Marranos in the Seventeenth Century*, 4–5, quoted in Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 2005): 79.

scription of his experience as a newcomer to Amsterdam” and how the Jews of the Dutch city, upon his refusal to be circumcised, “excommunicated [him] from the synagogues, so that no Jew would speak to or with [him].” After several days of ostracism, de Fonseca “finally consented to be circumcised. And they circumcised [him] and gave [him] the name of David.”<sup>14</sup>

Contemplating these seventeenth-century *conversos* or crypto-Jews, Leonard Glick in his seminal *Marked in Your Flesh* (2005) wonders about their motives:

Did most [Conversos] welcome [circumcision] as the time-honored badge of entry into Judaism and the Jewish community, or did they dread the agonizing experience, accepting it only because they had no choice. I suppose the truth lies somewhere in between. No man could have welcomed the prospect of painful genital surgery, but most agreed to it because the rewards were substantial.”<sup>15</sup>

At any rate, the alleged rewards were worth ‘a pound of flesh’ or less.

The link between these *conversos* and Africa may look rather tenuous at first, but another edict, that of the King of Portugal in 1486, ordered the deportation to the coast of Guinea, West Africa, of all Jews who refused to convert to Christianity. The Hebrew influence spread through North Africa and then as far as Sudan and Ethiopia. This does not, however, mean that, as Boris de Rachewiltz remarks, the origin of all African circumcisions is Hebraic, since circumcision on the African continent dates back to Pharaonic Egypt.<sup>16</sup>

One notes that for both *conversos* pressure, either from a relative or from a religious authority, elicits a *confession*, which gives a particular coercive dimension to autobiography. Although Miriam Bodian deems de Fonseca’s narrative “of doubtful reliability,” she does concede that it is a *testimony*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Leonard Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 80. Glick is here relying on David M. Gilitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews* (Philadelphia PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1996): 235, and Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997): 189.

<sup>15</sup> Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Boris de Rachewiltz, *Eros noir: Mœurs sexuelles de l’Afrique noire de la préhistoire à nos jours* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert/Terrain vague, 1993): 169.

<sup>17</sup> Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 297, note 74.

### Kikuyu Initiation: Two Ethno-Autobiographies

The pressure allegedly exercised by the rabbis is not unlike that of the Mau Mau fighters and other 'loyalists' during the 1952–56 Emergency in Kenya, who jeered at unexcised Kikuyu girls or *irugu* and caused them to endure a stigmatization that Charity Waciuma documents in her *Daughter of Mumbi* (1969). Waciuma recalls how "unclean" she was considered for not having "'been to the river'" to undergo *irua* and how she became the laughing-stock of both excised girls and their parents: "It was believed that a girl who was uncircumcised would cause the death of a circumcised husband."<sup>18</sup>

The ceremony of *irua*, a term which designates both excision for girls and circumcision for boys, has been amply documented by Jomo Kenyatta in his *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938). His account of the ceremony is ethnographic or, rather, ethno-autobiographical. The latter term, first introduced by James Olney, points to the autobiographer's wavering between ethnography and autobiography in the sense in which the 'I' of the *Mu-Kikuyu* is subservient to the 'we' of the plural *A-Kikuyu*.<sup>19</sup>

References to the male circumcision ritual in African fiction abound. For instance, Adele King mentions initiation in Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir*, "such as the Kondé Diara ceremony and the circumcision ceremony as traditional initiation into society set against the modern initiation of western schooling."<sup>20</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor in his famous "Élégie des circoncis" (1964) refers to the end of childhood and the twilight world of the dawn when the blood spurts into the river: "Sang! Les flots sont couleur d'aurore."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Charity Waciuma, *Daughter of Mumbi* (Nairobi: East African Publishing Company, 1969): 61.

<sup>19</sup> In James Olney, *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1973): 84. Françoise Lionnet turned that phrase on its head and introduced 'autoethnography' in relation to Zora Neale Hurston's work; see Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca NY & London: Cornell UP, 1995): 248.

<sup>20</sup> Adele King, *Rereading Camara Laye* (Lincoln & London: U of Nebraska P, 2002): 50. The reference is to Laye's *L'enfant noir* (Paris: Plon, 1953), edited with notes in English by Joyce Hutchinson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966); tr. by James Kirkup as *The African Child* (London: Collins, 1955); also as *The Dark Child*, American edition, intro. Philippe Thoby-Marcelin (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1955).

<sup>21</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Élégie des circoncis," in Senghor, *Nocturnes, poèmes* (Paris: Seuil, 1964): 97.

Yet one has to wait until the 1960s to gain access to the more resolutely autobiographical vignettes in, for example, Mugo Gatheru's *Child of Two Worlds* (1964) and Karari Njama's *Mau Mau from Within: Autobiography and Analysis of Kenya's Peasant Revolt* (1966), even though Njama is a contributor to the very circumscribed history of Mau Mau, the nationalist movement which led to Kenya's independence in 1960. Significantly, both Gatheru and Njama were christianized before undergoing *irua*.

Being a Christian, the twelve-year-old Karari Njama asked some church elders to organize the feast in lieu of his deceased father. Unlike Christian children, who used to go to hospital for circumcision and therefore created doubts about whether the operation had truly been performed, Njama chooses to remove such doubts and, on 17 August 1944 at 6 a.m., "*decide[s]* to be circumcised in the public's presence."<sup>22</sup> His decision, however, is motivated by the desire to enlist his people's ocular recognition of himself as a fully grown man. He reminisces:

I went down to the Gura River and bathed in that cold, almost freezing, water. Hundreds of people, men, women and children, watched me being circumcised. As all other boys and girls had been circumcised a week before we closed the school, I was the only one remaining. With many cheers for my bravery, I returned home escorted by men and dancing women. Women danced wildly until midday. For a month I was to be fed with the best food available so that I could become strong. The last billy goat which my father left and which was fattened in my step-mother's hut was killed for me. The whole month was eat and play with other circumcised youths. I was very fat and strong when I returned to school.<sup>23</sup>

Njama focuses on the festive aspect of the ceremony and the obvious care that was lavished on him as a newly circumcised boy, but the actual operation passes without comment. Even Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *The River Between* (1965), who may be ventriloquizing his own experience of circumcision through the character Waiyaki, is more detailed when describing his "going to the river":

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<sup>22</sup> Donald Barnett & Karari Njama, *Mau Mau from Within: Autobiography and Analysis of Kenya's Peasant Revolt* (Letchworth & London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1966): 95.

<sup>23</sup> Barnett & Njama, *Mau Mau From Within*, 95.

[Waiyaki] was holding his penis with blood dripping on to his fingers, falling to the ground, while a white calico sheet covered him. ...a-a-a ...the numbness was wearing away ... the skin alive again... pain ... Waiyaki could not move, the pain was eating through him ... the pain again, biting like ants into his flesh ...<sup>24</sup>

Waiyaki's circumcision covers a range of sensations from the numbing of his muscles by the river's cold water, through the "thick sharp pain" resulting from the knife sawing through his prepuce, to his communion with the earth through this propitiatory 'blood sacrifice.' The difference between Ngũgĩ and Njama is that the former is writing a novel<sup>25</sup> whereas the latter aims to write an ethno-autobiography, in which the self is subsumed under the broader, communal-spirited Kikuyu society or *A-Kikuyu*.

Njama's reluctance to dwell on the actual operation may also have to do with the obtrusiveness of the tape-recorder, which the well-meaning Donald Barnett used in Nairobi to record Njama's life-history and which Njama later confessed was indeed inhibiting. He thus "preferred to write his story in longhand"<sup>26</sup> and unguardedly speak of the Mau Mau, of his role in the Movement, and the two years he had spent as a guerrilla leader. The experience of *irua* is for him thus a decisive yet tiny episode compared with what he claims to be recounting: i.e. the "peasant revolt" and "the history of the revolution ever since his release from detention camps in December 1958."<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to this Kenyattaesque ethno-autobiography, Mugo Gatheru in *Child of Two Worlds*, published two years before *Mau Mau From Within*, is more concerned with the private realm of the 'myself' in relation to his people, the Kikuyu. He is also eager to locate the *irua* ceremony in the broader context of puberty rites and, in so doing, he shows that it differs from the ancient Jewish rite: "The Kikuyu do not circumcise at birth as do the Jews. They do it at puberty as do many other tribal peoples throughout the world."<sup>28</sup> As remarked in the introduction – "Why Not the Earlobe?" – circumcision as a rite of passage performed at puberty seems to be quintessentially African, quite unlike Muslim circumcision, which dates back to *Jahilliya*, the so-called period of 'ignorance' which preceded the advent of

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<sup>24</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *The River Between* (London, Ibadan & Nairobi: Heinemann, 1965): 53.

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed analysis of Ngũgĩ's novel, see my *Between Rites and Rights*, 35–58.

<sup>26</sup> Barnett & Njama, *Mau Mau From Within*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Mau Mau From Within*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Mugo Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds* (London, Ibadan & Nairobi: Heinemann, 1964): 56.

Islam, and does not involve any initiation rite. It is also very much unlike a religiously sanctioned practice, whereby a people seals a covenant with its god, as in the Jewish rite. Gatheru further notes that, in Kikuyu society, whereas boys undergo the ceremony “between fifteen and nineteen years of age,” girls are excised earlier “so that they do not menstruate before the circumcision” (57), thereby avoiding *thahu*, a type of ceremonial uncleanness that requires purification.

Accordingly, before proceeding further with his primary-school education, the sixteen-year-old Mugo heads for Fort Hall “to be initiated or circumcised,”<sup>29</sup> a necessary prelude to achieving full manhood. In the fourth of seventeen chapters, duly labelled “Becoming a Kikuyu,” Gatheru pays tribute to Jomo Kenyatta’s *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), as if acknowledging the spirit of an ancestor, then turns to his *decision* to undergo the ceremony. Yet, as is often the case (and this is also confirmed by the Paris-based Ivorian writer Koffi Kwahulé in this volume), a young man’s decision to be circumcised is predicated on the ‘harassment’ that he is subjected to by his peers:

Usually boys entering primary schools uncircumcised had a hard time with the men who were circumcised. They were harassed in the same way that ‘freshmen’ are in American colleges or new ‘fraternity brothers.’ Hence six of us in my neighbourhood decided to get circumcised.<sup>30</sup>

Of interest is Gatheru’s hindsight assessment of the ritual in American cultural terms, since he later became “an American ‘collegian’” in Daytona and Michigan before enrolling in a New York postgraduate programme in psychoanalysis, which ties him to his own Kikuyu beginnings as Mugo Gatheru, the son of a *Mugo* or medicine man. He conjures up American “fraternities and sororities” again in a later chapter<sup>31</sup> – “I Became a Member of the Age Grade ‘40’” – where he recounts how his being circumcised in 1940, which signals his belonging to the *riika ria forty* or the “age-grade of 1940,” allowed him to participate in exclusive meetings, for which other, younger men had to pay certain dues. Gatheru also compares the historical function of the age-grade system in recording events, when the Kikuyu had

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<sup>29</sup> Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds*, 56.

<sup>30</sup> *Child of Two Worlds*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> *Child of Two Worlds*, 63.

no written record, to “a network or web,”<sup>32</sup> in an inevitable process of cultural contamination.

However, at the time of the actual ceremony, the collectivity he evokes is not a global network but that of his peers:

Now my turn was coming. I was both happy and excited – and a little bit afraid. Five boys of my age were circumcised on Friday, August 16th 1940. Their homes were near Kahuti Elementary School. I was circumcised on Wednesday, August 21st 1940, near Karanja [his uncle]'s home. I remember the date very well. Our circumcision rituals were not complicated because being Christian boys we were not supposed to go through those very complicated processes to which the 'primitive' or 'un-Christian' boys were subjected. Although there was an established ceremony Christians were exempted and, therefore, could depart from it without being looked down upon by the non-Christian Kikuyu. [...]

Circumcision is a painful thing, but a candidate is not supposed to show any feeling of pain while his foreskin is being cut off. He is also not supposed to watch the circumciser. A crowd of men and women gather around the candidate or candidates. Women stand in front of the candidates, while the men stand at the back. People joke and say that the women take an interest in watching boys' penises! When boys and girls are being circumcised on the same field or spot, the boys usually line up on the upper side, while the girls line up in front of the boys.<sup>33</sup>

Although both girls and boys benefit from “helpers” or “aides,” which Gatheru compares to “best men or maidens in weddings,” the boys are expected to put up a show of bravery whereas the “girls must be supported by two aides since they are considered delicate and may perhaps collapse if they are left alone like boys.” At no point does Gatheru mention that the asymmetry that surfaces here may be due to the higher degree of severity in the girls' excision. It is assumed that girls are inherently weaker and more fragile than boys and therefore more likely to faint. Yet he also admits that his flesh is likewise “delicate.” Gatheru recalls that he spent a sleepless night before the day of circumcision, in a passage that I quote here at length for the brilliance of its self-sufficiency:

I lay there wondering how a circumcision's knife would feel upon my delicate flesh. One of Karanja's brothers was to be my aide. He went

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<sup>32</sup> Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds*, 63.

<sup>33</sup> *Child of Two Worlds*, 57.

out at 5 a.m. to get a circumciser named Macharia wa Muriu to come and circumcise me. At about 6 a.m. I saw my aide and Macharia coming across Kayahwe River. I felt like a soldier just before he is given his orders and is ready to go to the front to face the enemy.

After they had arrived at Karanja's home I was asked to go and wash myself in the Itare River on the western side of Karanja's home about half a mile away. It is usual for candidates to wash their bodies, and especially the penis, that there may be no offensive dirt thereon. It is also considered a bad thing if one should engage in sexual relations before the day of circumcision. So Muchaba, my aide, followed me to the river. Along with him were fifteen or twenty women and girls. I did not want to be followed by a large number of people like that who might later on see me naked! However, I could not help it. *I was very embarrassed.*

After I had washed myself Muchaba advised me not to wear anything again. So we walked to Karanja's home where I was to be circumcised. I was naked and followed by a large number of women who were happy – singing, dancing, and shrilling. *I felt even more embarrassed.*

These songs were consolation, advice, and encouragement to dispel any fear that I might have had. They told me that 'we of the Ethoga clan have never cried, do not cry, and shall never cry when we are initiated, or show any *sign of fear*. Those who may do so are only the children whose mothers were not wedded when they had them, but were wedded afterwards.

'Be firm, our Mugo, be firm and brave, so that you may encourage the young ones who will be circumcised after you. Be firm.'

As we approached Karanja's home, I saw Karanja with a crowd of people forming a circle and waiting for me.

The circumciser was in the crowd. As soon as I arrived I was told to go to the centre of the crowd. Muchaba, my aide, was very close beside me! My heart was pumping fast! I sat down in the centre of the crowd. *But now I was completely fearless.* Muchaba was about nine feet from me holding a white sheet which was to be put on me after circumcision. Beside me was Karanja holding a fried chicken and a kettle of chicken soup to be given to me after circumcision.

The crowd was very silent, waiting perhaps to detect whether I would show a sense or *feeling of fear*. I was aware of them and their expectations. After I had sat down, I folded my two fists like a boxer and put them on the right side of my neck. I then turned my face towards the Aderdare Mountain on the western side of the Kikuyu country. I was now ready for the knife!

In a few seconds I heard the circumciser approaching me from the right side. I was not supposed to look at him so I kept on looking on

the left side. He held my penis, pulled the foreskin back and cut it off. *It was very, very painful!* But I did not show any *feeling of fear* or even act as if I were being cut. No medical aid was applied first or later, and *this made it extremely painful.* (my emphases)

This autobiographical narrative is insistent about the “feeling of fear” (repeated three times in this passage) which Mugo has to shed, along with behaviour coded as infantile or feminine, such as crying. We also note the careful recording by degree of the experience – “I was very embarrassed,” “I felt even more embarrassed” – and the sudden turning-point – “but now I was completely fearless” – that signals the psychic passage, before circumcision *per se*, from boyhood to adulthood.

The Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru people of central Kenya prefer to leave “the ‘small skin’ hanging under [the] penis” hanging. Jomo Kenyatta in Chapter 8 of *Facing Mount Kenya* argues that *ngwati* is to be left intact on biological grounds. Gatheru’s uncle Karanja insists that *ngwati* be removed because this is in conformity with Christian practice. And so Gatheru is cut a second time, for, were it not for that “second cut,” he would have been identified as “a ‘primitive’ Kikuyu boy.” This *recircumcision* establishes that he is “a grown-up Christian Kikuyu, circumcised but without *ngwati*,” the dubious embodiment of syncretism. He concludes:

I was a man. Muchaba, my aide, came to me and put a sheet around me. I was now allowed to look down at the handiwork of the circumciser and see what had been done to me. Blood was streaming.<sup>34</sup>

*Looking down* signals the inexorable badge of passage. Likewise, among the Teda, the circumciser tells the initiate: “Boy, look up,” and, after cutting the prepuce, “Man, look down.”<sup>35</sup>

It is undeniable that Gatheru, more so than Njama, conveys an emotionality and subjectivity that make his Kenyattaesque ethno-autobiography gravitate towards the autoethnography, a genre that Charity Waciuma was to fully embrace half a decade later.

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<sup>34</sup> Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds*, 57–58.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Boris de Rachewiltz, *Eros noir*, 181.

### Jacques Derrida's *Circumfession*

An increasing number of scholars dealing with circumcision have themselves been involved somewhat autobiographically in their own circumcision or that of their sons and relatives. In an interview I carried out with Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh in Lausanne in 2002, he, as a Christian Palestinian, told me that he had heard the shrill screaming of an infant in the process of being circumcised at a neighbour's house in Palestine and this prompted him to enquire about the *raison d'être* of circumcision.

Leonard Glick also 'speaks from memory' in his preface to *Marked in Your Flesh* as a cultural anthropologist and a college professor with a medical degree but also as the father of circumcised sons. He recalls:

Our own three sons were circumcised [...] not ritually but in hospitals soon after birth. I accepted this without a second (or even a first) thought, assuming that it was not only medically advisable but appropriate for Jewish boys. Later, because their mother is not Jewish, all three underwent a ritual circumcision as part of a conversion. We took them to a Jewish urologist, who donned a skullcap, recited appropriate liturgy, and drew a few drops of blood from each juvenile foreskin remnant. Those sons are now mature men. Had I known at their births what I know now, they would never have been circumcised.<sup>36</sup>

Besides Glick's own autobiographical involvement in the *materia* of his scholarly monograph, he is also keen on determining other scholars' deeper motivation in tackling the vexed issue of circumcision. He provides detailed surveys of Rabbi Jacob Neusner's *The Enchantments of Judaism* (1987) and Rabbi Daniel Gordis's *Becoming a Jewish Parent* (1999). About the first, Glick argues that "this highly accomplished scholar seems to offer readers little more than acknowledgment of the profound anxiety he himself experienced when his own son was circumcised." About the second author, Glick argues that this rabbi, "who had attended innumerable circumcisions, finally realized (apparently for the first time) why parents are so 'conflicted' about submitting their newborn sons to genital surgery."<sup>37</sup> Not only is Leonard Glick hinting at the fact that these men's scholarship around circumcision functions as a cathartic device to express anxieties about the circumcision of their own sons but he also frames the issue against the background of father-son filiation.

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<sup>36</sup> Leonard Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, viii.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 237, 238.

For Jacques Derrida, however, the circumcision ceremony is linked with the mother-figure and, more broadly, with the feminine, more so than with the *mohel* (in Hebrew, the one who circumcises). In El Biar, Algeria, where Derrida was born in 1930, he reports that one did not use the Hebrew word *milah* from *berit milah* (the alliance through cutting, or Covenant of the Cut)<sup>38</sup> to refer to circumcision but rather 'baptism' (Fr: *baptême*) out of an "affadissement par peur," a euphemistic word used out of fear, but at the same time, a translation, since Christian baptism was an 'alternative rite' replacing circumcision.

Derrida also 'confesses' that he does not even know how to say 'circumcision' in any other language apart from French ("je ne sais pas comment dire 'circoncision' dans une langue autre que la française"). In the French adjective and past participle *circoncis*, he even reads the dotted "i" of *cir-con-cis* as the prepuce covering the tip of the glans of an intact penis. He also provides his own 'hauntology'<sup>39</sup> in acknowledging the fact that his philosophical œuvre is traversed and ontologically haunted by his own circumcision: "Circoncision; je n'ai jamais parlé que de ça: *Éperons, Glas, Carte Postale*: la chose y est nommée"; the very thing is named.<sup>40</sup>

In *Tourner les mots: Au bord d'un film*, the book co-authored by Derrida and the Egyptian poet and film-maker Safaa Fathy, on Fathy's film *D'Ailleurs Derrida* (2000), Fathy describes Derrida's ritual entry into film as "an initiation." And Derrida, a.k.a the Actor, sees the editing process as the act of "selecting ... excluding, circumscribing, one could almost say circumcising ... if one wished ... to sew back together this moment with all these other passages on circumcision and excision, at the core of the film."<sup>41</sup> In

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<sup>38</sup> *Berit milah* is the Covenant of the Cut, referring to the Covenant between God and Abraham in Genesis 17:1–14. The latter is often invoked to justify circumcision; it prescribes that "an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my Covenant." The second text is Leviticus 12:1–5, in which the Lord says to Moses that "on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." The Qur'an does not refer to either circumcision or excision.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, tr. Peggy Kamuf, intro. Bernd Magnus & Stephen Cullenberg (New York & London: Routledge, 1994): 4, 10. Originally as *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida & Geoffrey Bennington, *Circumfession*: 110. *Circumfession* (the reading by Jacques Derrida of his own diary) is also available on tape at the Audio-Visual Centre at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida & Safaa Fathy, *Tourner les mots*, 16. My tr. See also Safaa Fathy's "Cutting and Film Cutting/Ashes" in the present volume.

this volume, Safaa Fathy also relates her own experience of excision to film editing and ‘cutting’.

In his *Circonfession*, Derrida takes his own circumcision back to the Latin *circum-cido*: “péritomie, coupure du pourtour.” Being dis-membered, writing helps him re-member in the private, confessional act, which is simultaneously public. He goes so far as to state that “le désir de littérature est la circoncision.”<sup>42</sup> Desire for/in literature stems from circumcision, for it links ink with blood. Derrida usurps the traditional role of the *mohel* by dipping the blade-like pen in ink to make the book bleed.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, the well-known Egyptian novelist Nawal El Saadawi, who is also a medical doctor and one of the first women writers to draw public attention to excision, links the latter with the incisive act of writing-as-dissection.<sup>44</sup>

### *Zipporah, Esther and Mezizah*

Besides usurping the role of the *mohel*, Derrida returns to Moses’s wife, Zipporah, the alleged first circumciser. The role of woman as first circumciser is also observed among sub-Saharan African groups like the Nmasi and the Pape. The Nmasi legend sees circumcision as resulting from a little boy’s awkwardness. The young son of a hairdresser was playing with a small stick one day and somehow tore the skin of his penis with it. In order to provide relief, his mother removed the skin that remained with the same small stick and cleaned the wound. Once her son was healed, she showed him to her husband, who then showed off his operated son to all the men of the village, who all wanted to initiate him in their turn.<sup>45</sup> Even though this relatively recent tale is said to make up for a lost ancestral tradition, it remains the case that it has undeniably Hebrew overtones, especially in relation to the story of Zipporah.

Deemed one of the most obscure and disquieting passages in the Torah, Zipporah’s gesture of circumcising one of her sons has been variously construed. Jon D. Levenson in *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (1993) considers it to be a redemptive sacrifice – but on her husband’s behalf, not the child’s.

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<sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Circonfession*, 110.

<sup>43</sup> See also Jill Robbins, “Circumcising Confession: Derrida, Autobiography, Judaism,” *Diacritics* 25.4 (Winter 1995): 20–38.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. Margot Badran & Miriam Cooke (London: Virago, 1999): 397.

<sup>45</sup> For further detail, see Boris de Rachewiltz, *Eros noir*, 181.

This mysterious episode [...] takes place when Moses, his wife Zipporah, and their young sons are journeying to Egypt. The lord had commanded Moses to return to Egypt for the confrontation with Pharaoh and the ensuing divine punishments on the Egyptians. Suddenly, inserted into the text without preamble or explanation, we find a circumcision narrative: "At a night encampment on the way, the lord encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs [read the Biblical euphemism for 'penis'] with it, saying, 'You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!' And when He let him alone, she added, 'A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision'."<sup>46</sup>

Zipporah allegedly touched Moses's feet (or genitals, *raglayim*) with their son's bloody foreskin to avert Yahweh's anger at her husband's reluctance to confront Pharaoh.<sup>47</sup>

Because Zipporah circumcised one of her sons in a redemptive but unexplained sacrifice, Derrida assimilates Zipporah to his own mother, whom he implicitly accuses of silent complicity with the *mohel's* action. Likewise, many of the African women autobiographers who have experienced excision from its most benign to its most severe form (i.e. infibulation), such as Waris Dirie, have often accused the mother of being an 'anti-mom', the very opposite of the caring, nurturing mother.<sup>48</sup>

Derrida designates his mother, Georgette Sultana Esther, as the culprit, despite her etymological antecedents, since the Jewish name – Esther – recalls the woman who used her influence with the Persian king Ahasuerus to save the Israelites in captivity from persecution. This shift from Zipporah to Derrida's mother via Esther also haunts all of Derrida's philosophical works, much as the German word *Mutter* haunted Kafka's writings.<sup>49</sup> When

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<sup>46</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 1993): 50. Levenson is here referring to Exodus 4:24–26 in *JPS Hebrew–English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1999): 120.

<sup>47</sup> In Bernard P. Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus IV," *Vetus Testamentum* 36.4 (1986): 447–61. Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 23.

<sup>48</sup> See my *Between Rites and Rights*, 163–202.

<sup>49</sup> Kafka had a similarly torturous relationship with his mother; he once wrote in his diary that the German language prevented him from loving his mother as he should have, for the Jewish mother is not a *Mutter*. In *La Carte Postale*, Derrida has Tancred wonder how one should love in French, the so-called *mother tongue*: "Comment veux-

pronounced in French—“est-ce taire ?”— as Hélène Cixous argues in her *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*<sup>50</sup> — the mother’s questioning name augurs what Derrida has called elsewhere “an amplified rhetoric of the sewn mouth”<sup>51</sup> and, in *Glas*, “the gaping-mouth effect.”<sup>52</sup>

In Period 14 of *Circumfession*, Derrida writes:

the restrained confession will not have been my fault but hers, as though the daughter of Zipporah had not only committed the crime of my circumcision but one more still, later, the first playing the kickoff, the original sin against me.

Cixous comments that Esther is thus Derrida’s *recircumcision*, here understood in its symbolic sense, unlike Njama’s “second cut.” “For his circumcision, he wasn’t around. For his *recircumcision*, she’s the one who’s not there, that’s what cuts it again for him.”<sup>53</sup> The second circumcision, we surmise, is the re-enactment of the initial procedure through the incisive act of writing. It is customary for Cixous to over-evaluate, here and in all of her writings, the role of the (often biological) mother as “the time of the origin of sexual life, and the time of the end: we all live because the mother inscribes the beginning and the end for us.”<sup>54</sup> But she is right in this case. It is as though Derrida’s mother were the father and the *mohel* in one, the one who authorized his circumcision: “Circumcised without his consent, before any word, before passivity even.”<sup>55</sup>

Unlike the beloved Esther, Derrida’s father, *Aimé*, which renders euphonically in French the Hebrew “Haim” (meaning ‘life’), is anything but

tu l’épouser? Et la faire chanter?” [How does one wed it? Or make it sing?]; Derrida, *La Carte Postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Flammarion/Aubier, 1980): 75.

<sup>50</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*, tr. Beverley Bie Brahic (*Portrait de Jacques Derrida en Jeune Saint Juif*; New York: Columbia UP, 2004): 52. This reading owes much to Derrida’s work on the ‘ear of the other’. See *L’oreille de l’autre: Otobiographies: Transferts, traductions; textes et débats avec Jacques Derrida*, ed. Claude Lévesque & Christie V. McDonald (Montreal: VLB, 1982).

<sup>51</sup> “une immense rhétorique de la bouche cousue,” in Micaëla Henich & Jacques Derrida, *Lignées*, 53.

<sup>52</sup> “l’effet de bouche bée,” in Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974): 55.

<sup>53</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida*, 38.

<sup>54</sup> Cixous, *Portrait*, 54.

<sup>55</sup> Cixous, *Portrait*, 65.

'loved' (Fr. *aimé*), and is put under erasure. This is significant insofar as circumcision is, as the anthropologist-rabbi Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has argued, a "symbol of patrilineality" and a "guarantee of abundantly fertile male lineages."<sup>56</sup> The purpose of circumcision being to symbolically release the male child from his mother's impure blood, Derrida practises a reverse circumcision and rehabilitates his mother's "filthy," "contaminating" blood.<sup>57</sup> In the process, the father-figure is erased or, better, ghosted. In "Otobiographies" (1985), Derrida wrote: "Inasmuch as I am and follow after my father, I am the dead man and I am death. Inasmuch as I am and follow after my mother, I am life that perseveres, I am the living and the living feminine."<sup>58</sup> Significantly, Derrida's *Circumfession* was written while his mother was dying.

His "wound" is not sutured yet, he argues in the same diary entry. He calls it in French *escarre*, which evokes the English *scar*, the German *schar*, and the Greek *eskharā*, which means 'foyer', 'false foci', as if the wound should not have been on his genitals but possibly elsewhere. He claims to remember his circumcision, his "open wound," when he was eight days old, and claims he has been flaunting it like a badge since "the *mohel*'s suction": "circumcision, cutting of the circumference; *meziza*, 'suction of the blood'," a practice that was abolished in Paris in 1843.<sup>59</sup>

In the Judaic context, the *mohel*, who technically replaces the father in his role as circumciser and is not necessarily a rabbi or a doctor, has been in the hot seat. Lawrence Hoffman in his *Blood Covenant* (1996) argues that the original Covenant between God and Abraham was the *berit damin* or 'Blood Covenant', which consisted in the symbolic shedding of a drop of blood from the prepuce. This practice was then discarded in favour of the *berit milah* through a rabbinical backlash based on, among others, Genesis 17:13 and Exodus 4:26 and dating back to 140 CE.<sup>60</sup> To these two practices

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<sup>56</sup> Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "Why Not the Earlobe?" *Moment* (1992): np. Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 245.

<sup>57</sup> "His blood is clean, unifying and symbolic of God's covenant. His mother's is filthy, socially disruptive and contaminating"; Eilberg-Schwartz, "Why Not the Earlobe?" quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 245.

<sup>58</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name," in *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie V. McDonald (New York: Schocken, 1985): 14, 15.

<sup>59</sup> Jacques Derrida & Geoffrey Bennington, *Circumfession*, 115.

<sup>60</sup> Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1996): 100–104. See also Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *Circoncision masculine, circoncision féminine* (Paris: L'Harmattan,

rabbis added *mezizah* during the period of the Mishnah, between 70 and 200 CE.

*Mezizah* consisted not only in circumcising the prepuce but in the rabbi's taking a mouthful of wine, sucking the blood off the wounded glans, and then spitting it into a receptacle. *Halakha* or Judaic jurisprudence stipulates that the *mohel* should do so in order to avoid any risk of infection, but, following cases of children contracting venereal diseases through the *mohel*'s actions, a small tube was substituted for direct sucking with the mouth.<sup>61</sup> This halakhic innovation has, however, been distrusted by traditional *mohels* and, as Henri C. Romberg has amply demonstrated, *mezizah* has now been revived in some contexts.<sup>62</sup>

Abu-Sahlieh goes some way towards castigating the revival of *mezizah* by locating it in the broader Western context of sadism, vampirism, and, in the interview I conducted with him in Lausanne in 2002, paedophilia. Without delving unduly into the reasons behind this revival, what strikes us is that it is not only male circumcision *per se* that is being questioned but also the practitioner of circumcision and the economics underlying the rite. Likewise, in the case of excision, the original culprits such as 'tradition' and 'culture' have been displaced by the 'exciser'.<sup>63</sup>

If Derrida mentions *mezizah* with so much harrowing trepidation, it is not so much because of the "mohel's suction" that he had to endure at eight days old, but, as Gayatri Spivak has surmised, because of "the possibility that the mother sucked off the blood on the child's little penis."<sup>64</sup> This

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2001): 87–88, who refers to the *Talmud of the Land of Israel* (Shabbat 19:2), vol. 11: 458, and the *Talmud of Jerusalem*, vol. 8: 188. Genesis 17:13 refers to 'circumcision' in the singular in the Hebrew *hamol yemol yeled* and Exodus 4:26, which uses the plural form of 'circumcision' in *khatma damin li-molot*.

<sup>61</sup> See, among others, Alan Unterman, *Dictionary of Judaism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997): 202. For an analysis of the debate in Israel, see Avshalom Zoosmann–Diskin & Raphi Blustein, "Challenges to Circumcision in Israel: The Israeli Association against Genital Mutilation," in *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal, and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice*, ed. George C. Denniston, Frederick M. Hodges & Marilyn F. Milos (New York & London: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 1999): 344.

<sup>62</sup> See Henri C. Romberg, *Bris Milah*, 57–58.

<sup>63</sup> See my *Between Rites and Rights*, 246–64.

<sup>64</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and Circumfession," in *Postcolonialism and Autobiography: Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, Opal Palmer Adisa*, ed. Alfred Hornung & Ernstpeter Ruhe (Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1998): 13.

feminine version of *mezizah* binds Derrida, Zipporah, and his mother Esther together in a perverse *religio*, adding incest to injury.

### *Elie and Jackie*

Circumcision finds its discursive corollary in the receding of *milah* and its replacement by 'baptism' in the Derrida family in El Biar but also in the erasure of Derrida's middle name, which augurs other excisions. If his father's name Haim/Aimé is erased, so is Elie, which is Derrida's other name, after his paternal uncle, Eugène Eliahou Derrida, as he puts it in his *Circonfession* (entry for 23 December 1976). Elie is the 'guardian of circumcision', the one who 'carries the newly born on his knees before the unnameable'.<sup>65</sup> Unlike Elie, Derrida refused to be the guardian of circumcision and did not have his sons circumcised.<sup>66</sup>

If, like *milah*, Derrida's Hebrew name has been excised, Cixous argues in her *Portrait* that *élie* resurfaces in the elisions that are perceptible solely to the francophone reader in "dé-lire, oub-lire, et les commandements s'y référant: tu liras, tu délireras" – in the English translation: "You shall read [*liras*] languages right to the bone and you shall unread [*délireras*] them to the point of delirium."<sup>67</sup> In addition to this typical semantic dissemination, "Eliahou" also disappears from Derrida's birth certificate and from his *nom propre* or "proper family name."<sup>68</sup> However, it is on account of his being Jewish that he is banned from the Lycée Ben Aknoun (today's lycée Mouk-rani) at the age of twelve.

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<sup>65</sup> In French: "[celui] qui porte le nouveau-né sur ses genoux avant l'innommable," *Circonfession*, 140.

<sup>66</sup> Personal communication with Jacques Derrida, Cerisy, France, 15 July 1997.

<sup>67</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida*, 13.

<sup>68</sup> On the "nom propre," see *Circonfession*: 100–10. Such is also the case with the disappearance of Edward Said's last name, where, during a colloquium held in Said's honour in Paris 7 in September 2004, his *nom propre* was pronounced Said (as in 'that is not what he would have said'), when in fact, Said renders the Arabic – *Sa'id* – which means 'happy' and where one could also possibly hear *Sayyid*: i.e. "Sir." Like "Elie" in Derrida, *Wadie* in Edward W. Said, which reveals Said's Arab (Palestinian and Egyptian) origins, is lost in translation. Yet the 'w' survives by way of the 'middle initial'. Since Said's Arabic name *Idwâr Sa'id* does not contain the letter 'w' unless one spells out "Wadie" as a middle name, the 'w' here acts as a trace from his exile in the USA. See my article, co-written with Marie-Dominique Garnier, "Derrida, De-Reader: L'anglais anglé," in *Travaux et Documents de l'Université de Paris 8*, ed. Claire Joubert (Paris: Presses de Vincennes–Saint Denis, 2007): 15–31.

In both Safaa Fathy's *Tourner les mots* and H el ene Cixous's *Portrait of Derrida*, the name Jackie, which, like Elie, has a feminine ending, is associated with a poster of Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan, starring in the 1921 Chaplin film, *The Kid*, which was hanging above the piano at the Derridas' on the then rue d'Aurelles de Paladines in El Biar. Whereas Safaa Fathy imagines that the young Mrs Derrida "may have adored the star to the point of naming her son after him,"<sup>69</sup> Cixous conjectures that Jackie is a "period name, the period when Algeria's Jewish families, naive, native, were infatuated with foreign names, especially the Anglo-American ones. They just loved Jack, William, Pete, and the vocables conjured up by fantasies of a promised land other than France, longed-for but increasingly openly hostile." Cixous continues in her customary echoic dissemination:

So he was elected Jackie, as my grandfather named his Oran hat shop Highlife pronounced 'Iglif,' Jackie like Jackie Koogan the Kid, Jackiderrida, that's him all right, take a gander not everyone sees him. Jackid in his outsize cap, always ready to pick a fight. Jackie like *j'acquis* get it? and *jacqui* get who? with *a* and *i* he notes in period 8 [of *Circumfession*].<sup>70</sup>

Between his Nostalgeria and his Jewerrance, between Jacques and Jackie, which reflect the two promised lands beyond El-Biar – France and the USA – Derrida resolutely becomes "the last of the Jews." *Circumfession* then reads like a "Jewish autobiography," as he himself acknowledged.<sup>71</sup>

Cixous calls the day of Derrida's "blind" circumcision the "Day of amputation" and "Day of judgment and execution" for the eight-year-old infant whose "sight is not yet hatched"; its executors are also blinded: i.e. "deprived of the scope of their action by millennia of obedience."<sup>72</sup> Swiftly, Cixous moves on to consider the fact that she did not experience circumcision in the flesh, concluding that she does not have the moral authority to talk about it but can nevertheless, "with all due *circumciseption*, speak about it "from the sidelines as sister and daughter of sometimes-circumcised sometimes-not Jews ...." Yet she is aware that she has transgressed, and she finds herself

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<sup>69</sup> Jacques Derrida & Safaa Fathy, *Tourner les mots* (Paris: Galil e & ARTE, 2000): 39–40. My tr.

<sup>70</sup> Cixous, *Portrait*, 24.

<sup>71</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession*, 190.

<sup>72</sup> Cixous, *Portrait*, 68.

cut off, barred, stopped, tortured with questions, racked with in-decision mine and that of my sons father brother, all of us who turn very diversely and each in turn to each his torments around this blow in the dark this most ancient of oft-told tales, this operation, this action, this catastrophe, this thing of the body which is of the mind, this incarnation of the capital Verb on the member of a small one, this mythical invention whose *tenacity* rivals with genetic transmission this violence, says my son, 'the supposed crime that I call circumcision' he says, the crime par excellence.<sup>73</sup>

The Sudanese feminist anthropologist Rogaia Abusharaf likewise speaks of the "terrible tenacity" of infibulation, especially after the British banned the practice in 1946 and drove it underground.<sup>74</sup> This *reactance*, as sociologists call this phenomenon, traverses all periods, all countries of the Sudanic belt; and, as I have shown elsewhere, only a counter-movement from within, with the collaboration of men and practitioners alike, can abate this "tenacity" and help eradicate the practice.<sup>75</sup> In Cixous's account, the "terrible tenacity" of circumcision is passed on from father to son in a violent yet unquestioned continuum of pain.

### Riad Sattouf's Anti-Circumcision Strip

Discursive asymmetry between excision and circumcision can also be observed in the realm of humour. Whereas there is even a genre that could be called "circumcision humour," there is no such humour attached to the issue of female excision. Indeed, one could not imagine a joke about the severed clitoris or the exciser, the way jokes circulate around the rabbi or *mohel*. For instance, "why does the rabbi have such a good income? Because he gets all the tips."<sup>76</sup> Glick observes that circumcision humour

almost always plays on the theme of cutting or 'clipping', and always focuses on the Jewish version. More noteworthy than the jokes themselves is the very existence of feeble humor about a supposedly sacred religious practice. An occasional joke depends on identifica-

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<sup>73</sup> Cixous, *Portrait*, 68, 69.

<sup>74</sup> Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, "Unmasking Tradition: A Sudanese Anthropologist Confronts Female Circumcision and Its Terrible Tenacity," *The Sciences* 38 (1998): 22–28.

<sup>75</sup> See my *Between Rites and Rights*, 246–64.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 271.

tion of the excised foreskin with the entire penis. [...] It seems that no amount of joking and banter obscures the simple fact that circumcision means cutting away part of the penis. Some jokes touch on the circumcision-equals-castration fantasy, implying that more than foreskin is removed.<sup>77</sup>

Recent medical and psychological assessments circulated on elaborate, authoritative websites confirm that more is indeed at stake.<sup>78</sup>

Along these lines, the cover of Riad Sattouf's comic-strip book for children from twelve years of age displays three boys peeing side by side, with their backs turned to the reader, holding sticks that are supposed to be symbolic extensions of their penises, the way swords used to be warriors' epic accomplices. While signalling the book's glib but caustic humour, it does not stifle the serious anti-circumcision message that Sattouf wants to convey to the French and to francophone youth. As a note to "the readers, circumcised or not," Sattouf writes:

- This book tells a true story, located in a country where the totalitarian regime programmes children into a single mode of thought.
- This book is frankly against circumcision;
- This book is not an incitement to racial hatred but, rather, a testimony to the way in which a society fabricates racial hatred.

To people interpreting this in any other way, we suggest they re-read the book and recall, if need be, that racism and antisemitism do not constitute an opinion but an offence.<sup>79</sup>

Born in a small village, Ter Maaleh, in Syria, the young Riad plays Conan the Barbarian with his cousins, Amin and Majid, and they swear by Crom, the God of the Cimmerians, Conan's tribe. While peeing side by side one day, Majid remarks that, unlike them, Riad has not turned the big wheel like

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<sup>77</sup> Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 271.

<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, the fact sheet on infant male circumcision at [www.eskimo/~gburlin/mgm/facts.html](http://www.eskimo/~gburlin/mgm/facts.html)

<sup>79</sup> Riad Sattouf, "Note aux lecteurs," in *Ma Circoncision* (Rosny-sous-Bois: Bréal Jeunesse, 2004). My tr. In French, it reads thus: "Ce livre raconte une histoire vraie, située dans un pays dont le régime totalitaire formate les enfants à un seul mode de pensée. – Ce livre est franchement contre la circoncision. – Ce livre n'est pas une incitation à la haine raciale mais plutôt un témoignage sur la façon dont une société fabrique la haine raciale. Aux personnes l'interprétant autrement, on suggérera de relire le livre et on rappellera, si besoin en est, que le racisme et l'antisémitisme ne constituent pas une opinion, mais un délit."

Conan the Barbarian, which is a euphemistic way of saying that he has not undergone the circumcision ritual. The cousins also note that Riad's penis is like an elephant's trunk, to which Riad retorts that theirs look like mushrooms. Accused of being an enemy (in Syrian Muslim parlance, an Israeli), Riad is excluded from this group of self-appointed "Cimmerians" and Conan-worshippers.

Sattouf probably has in mind the American pulp-fiction writer Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian*, which appeared in the 1930s and was adapted for the screen by John Milius in 1982. Patterned, by Howard's own account, after "prize fighters, gunmen, bootleggers, oil field bullies, gamblers and honest workmen,"<sup>80</sup> Conan is a Cimmerian child, whose parents were killed in a raid by the warlord and semi-god Thulsa Doom. The orphan is sent to a slave camp, where he is made to turn the big wheel. As the years pass, he develops into a powerfully built man (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Milius film), whom his master uses in fights, until one day he is set free. Conan then learns that Thulsa Doom, who initially aimed to solve the riddle of steel, is head of a mysterious snake-cult, because, in Doom's own words, "flesh is more precious than steel." Conan eventually kills the warlord and thus avenges his parents' death. The apt juxtaposition of steel and flesh provides Sattouf's youths with a powerful reasoning kit to comprehend circumcision, while "turning the big wheel" is presented as an inexorable rite of passage, necessary to achieve manhood.

In this children's book about a Muslim youth, who is an autobiographical projection of Sattouf himself, the child is confronted with scornful depictions of Israeli. Invariably, the latter have sardonic smiles and cruel eyes; they drink the sweat of their enemies and sleep with their mothers. On account of his blondness, Riad starts thinking that he is different from the average dark-haired Syrian and thus an Israeli. His fears are confirmed when, one day in class, the teacher presents France, and Europe generally, as allies of the "Jews" and the "Israelis." Riad concludes that he must be either adopted or an illegitimate child, half-Cimmerian, half-Israeli. This alleged illegitimacy does not surprise Riad's cousins, for whom women fall into two categories: their own mothers, whom they will marry some day; and the others, whom they call "whores" to designate "women who do what they want." Riad therefore reasons that, being a 'bastard', no Cimmerian woman will ever want him and that he is therefore destined to marry a prostitute.

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<sup>80</sup> Robert E. Howard, quoted in "Personal Quotes," Internet Movie Database (accessed 26 November 2006).

At school, corporal punishment prevails. The *'Atli* or thrashing consists in having the child's naked feet beaten by a wooden stick in public at the end of the school year. There are reports of child abuse at home; one child is burnt with scalding hot water. Scenes of public hangings for being thought "spies for the Israeli" are common. Corruption is also rampant – Riad's father, who is a professor of history at the University of Damascus, accepts bribes from students.

One day, Riad's father tells him of his decision to have him circumcised and to schedule the operation in three months' time. After many fearful deliberations, the boy agrees on condition that his father gives him a giant plastic puppet, which looks like his idol, Conan the Barbarian. It turns out that the gift which he thought his father had promised him in exchange for his circumcision, and had kept hidden in a closet, is a double-barrelled gun for his father's winter hunting trip.

As the day of circumcision approaches, Riad is haunted by the pending loss of his prepuce. Two hours before the ceremony, men fill the living room (women are excluded). He is then grabbed by four men, who immobilize his arms and legs. With a razor, the circumciser, who suddenly looks like Conan the Barbarian, cuts the prepuce. A spectacular squirt of blood spurts out, splattering the white handkerchief. Riad then stays in bed for several days with a bandaged penis. Urinating and getting an erection are excruciatingly painful. As the wound is still bleeding after a month, he goes to the village doctor, who determines that the operation has not been properly performed. Riad becomes introverted and regresses, playing with toys for smaller children. When, in an awkward conversation with his father, he brings up the long-awaited gift of the plastic action doll in exchange for his circumcision, his father dismisses him with an insult. The father's dismissal and betrayal further isolate Riad.

After two months, the bandage is removed by the village doctor, who jokingly mimics cutting his penis with a pair of scissors. Riad can now pee, but in three streams. He, who was convinced that the Israelis were not circumcised, learns that they are indeed; hence, a Cimmerian cannot be distinguished from the Israeli enemy. More significantly, he learns that, without consciously articulating it, both of these monotheistic, Abrahamic belief-systems – Judaism and Islam – practise male circumcision.

The book closes with Riad wondering where his prepuce is: "since that experience, one thing really gets me: I wonder where the hell is the bit they cut, the prepuce, and what has happened to it." Among the possibilities, we find that "it was eaten by a mouse!"; "The circumciser collects them"; "there's a secret cemetery of prepuces"; "It has disintegrated"; "it's waiting

under a rock.” This comic speculation confirms the humorous import of the book, at the same time as it reveals the deep anxieties resulting from a youth’s childhood trauma, such as prepubescent circumcision.

Syria, with its complex history – a centre of Islamic civilization from the seventh century onward, a province of the Ottoman empire in 1516, a country mandated to France in the First World War, then united with Egypt as the United Arab Republic until 1961 – practises Muslim circumcision, which is recommended (*mustahhab*) but not obligatory (*wajib*). In the context of Riad Sattouf’s Syrian childhood, it has become de-ritualized. There is no ceremony, religious or otherwise, Islam is not evoked (at least not in the child’s recollection of the event), and there is no celebration afterwards.

Riad Sattouf speaks from memory about an experience that is traumatic enough to warrant an autobiographical narrative, as in Derrida’s *Circumfession*. While emanating from two writers with, respectively, a Jewish and a Muslim background, both *circumfictions* are imbued with barely restrained anger about the practice itself and the person who authorized the operation – the father in Sattouf’s account, the mother in Derrida’s ‘confession.’



In all four examples – the *conversos*’ ‘Confessions,’ the Kikuyu ethno-autobiographies, Jacques Derrida’s *Circumfession*, and Riad Sattouf’s transmutation of autobiography into youth literature – we sense a growing detachment from religious and cultural justifications for the practice and the general *circumspection* with which the issue was originally (and is still) tackled.

These autobiographies still constitute a tiny literary corpus compared to the growing body of autobiographies around excision, which culminates in Waris Dirie’s *Desert Children* (2005), the Paris-based Senegalese Khady’s *Mutilée* (2005), and the German-based Somali Nura Abdi’s *Desert Tears* (2005) and Fadumo Korn’s *Born in the Big Rains* (2006). If, as I have shown elsewhere, such first-person accounts by women signal “the limits of autobiography,”<sup>81</sup> it seems that, in matters of male circumcision, whether African, Jewish, or Muslim, the tale still needs to be told and the discursive asymmetry redressed – like a rite gone wrong.

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<sup>81</sup> See my *Between Rites and Rights*, 202–45.

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TOBE LEVIN

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Nura Abdi, Fadumo Korn:  
No More ‘Pudenda Desecration’\*

ABSTRACT

Taking my cue from a fictitious scene in E.M. Broner’s *A Weave of Women* involving a girl’s ‘hymenotomy’, the supposed equivalent of Jewish male circumcision, I set out to survey the reasons for the absence of circumcision for Jewish women and for the existence of circumcision for Jewish males in the works of early Talmudic scholars and later thinkers such as Samson Raphael Hirsch, founder of modern Orthodoxy. In light of these reflections, I then examine the autobiographies of two recent immigrant women from Somalia, Nura Abdi’s *Tränen im Sand* (2003, tr. *Desert Tears*) and Fadumo Korn’s *Geboren in Großen Regen* (2004, tr. *Born in the Big Rains*), which signal an unequivocal seizure of parity.

**I**N E.M. BRONER’S 1978 NOVEL *A Weave of Women*, Simha announces: “‘Here am I acting upon the command that is not yet written that the daughter of eight days shall be pierced.’”<sup>1</sup> “What should it be called?” one of the women gathered in Jerusalem asks about the innovative, not-yet-denominated ceremony. The new word, they feel, should define what is done: “‘just a poke ... with something sharp ... [to] pierce it’.”<sup>2</sup> “‘Hymen-

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\* Thanks to Natalie Angier for this provocative wording.

<sup>1</sup> E.M. Broner, *A Weave of Women* (1978; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985): 22.

<sup>2</sup> Broner, *A Weave of Women*, 24.

ectomy’,” someone suggests. “‘No. That sounds like an appendectomy.’” (Someone else jokes about getting rid of your Uncle Hyman...) They agree on “‘hymenotomy,’” despite its resemblance to ‘lobotomy’, and, as People of the Book, justify their nomenclature by appeal to etymology: “*tomy* [is] a cutting of tissue,” and also “*tome* [...] a cutting from a larger paper, one [in ...] several volumes,”<sup>3</sup>

The ritual aims, therefore, seemingly like circumcision performed on an infant boy, to bring the new-born into a pre-existing system, as, metonymically, babies become books inscribed by a pointed tool:

Gerda says, “... [the] thin membrane that separates the outside from the inside of the vagina [...] is a vestigial structure.”

“Cut it,” says Terry, against all vestigial structures, social, physical.

Antoinette’s voice rises. “*Dichotomy, anatomy.*”

Gerda is swift. The hymeneal membrane is pierced. She has poked easily through the hymeneal ring.

There is a loud sigh from the group.

Tova says, “Now you are one of us.”<sup>4</sup>

This inventive – and emphatically fictional – rite, cynical yet serious, answers the perceived dissymmetry in the Hebrew circumcision ceremony, explained by Rabbi Marc–Alain Ouaknin as arising precisely from the “dichotomy” in “anatomy” conjured here. Explaining the *Brit Milah*, Ouaknin confirms conventional wisdom: “Circumcision is a sign of the covenant [sic] between God and the Hebrew people,”<sup>5</sup> preserved in a chiselled tongue:

The word *Milah* [...] derived from both the Hebrew verb ‘to cut’ and the verb ‘to be face to face’ [...] may also be connected to the root of the Hebrew verb ‘to speak’. Circumcision is [therefore] a way of introducing language into the body and bringing the body of the infant into the sphere of language....<sup>6</sup>

How does this work?

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<sup>3</sup> E.M. Broner, *A Weave of Women*, 21 & p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Broner, *A Weave of Women*, 24–25.

<sup>5</sup> In *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (2005), Shaye J.D. Cohen cites Jewish authorities writing over a 2,000-year period debating whether or not circumcision is necessary to belong to the Jewish people. The weight of argument suggests not, therefore making the non-circumcision of women a non-issue; even though uncircumcised, females are fully valued Jews.

<sup>6</sup> Marc–Alain Ouaknin, *Symbols of Judaism* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003): 110.

... the incompleteness rendered by circumcision enables human beings to enter into [discourse]. Circumcision removes a part of the man so that he will experience a sense of loss [... which] leads him to reconstruct and reinvent himself.<sup>7</sup>

Now, Ouaknin anticipates our asking what females undergo. His Freudian answer: "In the dialectical relationship between man and woman, the woman already carries this loss which inscribes her in the dynamic of desire. [No] need [therefore to] circumcise...."<sup>8</sup>

Earlier, Talmudic scholars had also seen women as diminished, yet argued that removal of the foreskin served to humble men, bringing them down to a certain somatic level but up to a higher spiritual one. In *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (2005), Shaye J.D. Cohen cites Maimonides (1135/38–1204, in Shlomo Pines' translation):

... with regard to circumcision, one of the reasons for it is, in my opinion, the wish to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question, so that this activity be diminished and the organ be in as quiet a state as possible.<sup>9</sup>

Should there be humane objections to the cutting, the arguments are countered by presumed agreement on sexuality's evil and desire for the sublime. Because it is known, Maimonides asserts, "'how useful the foreskin is for that member'," tampering with God's faultless creation is certainly suspect, he concedes. However, the aim is to "perfect" what is defective morally."<sup>10</sup> Maimonides goes on:

The bodily pain caused to that member is the real purpose of circumcision. None of the activities necessary for the preservation of the individual is harmed thereby, nor is procreation rendered impossible, but violent concupiscence and lust that goes beyond what is needed are diminished.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Symbols of Judaism*, 110.

<sup>8</sup> Ouaknin, *Symbols of Judaism*, 110.

<sup>9</sup> Shaye J.D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005): 147.

<sup>10</sup> Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 147.

<sup>11</sup> *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 147.

Behind this point of view stands an image of women as less libido-driven than men, so that later thinkers such as Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–88), founder of Modern Orthodoxy, can conclude that “the non-circumcision of women demonstrates the natural moral superiority of women over men.”<sup>12</sup> E.M. Broner’s indisputably mutilating if pre-emptive act protests against both this assumption of *significant* difference, including better *and* worse, and the resultant excuse for excluding women from communal religious authority, often based on an over-investment in the covenantal value of male rites as bonding for power. The hymenotomy symbolizes a seizure of parity: if you cut, we cut. Yet a paradox remains. Key to all mutilating behaviour is an assumption that sex is evil; and patriarchy projects that seduction onto women, who embody an unalterable anatomical distinction. Discrimination therefore results from a social system that devalues what women do, reducing them to what they are. In defiance, “Dahlia says, ‘May [Hava] not be delivered intact to her bridegroom or judged by her hymen [but honored for the] energ[y] [invested in her] life’.”<sup>13</sup>

These reflections cast an oblique but illuminating light on two recent immigrant autobiographers from Somalia, Nura Abdi (and Leo Linder, *Tränen im Sand* [Desert Tears], 2003) and Fadumo Korn (with Sabine Eichhorst, *Geboren im Großen Regen: Mein Leben zwischen Afrika und Deutschland*. [tr. 2006 as *Born in the Big Rains: A Memoir of Somalia and Survival*], 2004).<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, wherever genital mutilation of girls takes place, (male) circumcision does, too.<sup>15</sup> Among Somali in particular, both men and women will tell you that they cut at the deity’s command:

As in Judaism, Islamic men circumcise because all the prophets from Abraham on down performed the rite. And not only must all Islamic men be circumcised; those not Somali who marry Somali women must be also. The women demand it. And as for the women, even if in error, they believe religion requires *gudniin*, for in both sexes, cleanliness as purity results.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Shaye J.D. Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 165.

<sup>13</sup> E.M. Broner, *A Weave of Women*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> At the time of writing, Abdi has not yet been translated from the German although chapters can be read in English in *Feminist Europa: Review of Books*, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~tlevin>. Fadumo Korn will have appeared in a translation by Tobe Levin (See Works Cited.)

<sup>15</sup> Clearly, as the Jewish example suggests, the reverse is not true: male circumcision takes place often in the absence of a female ritual.

<sup>16</sup> Barre–Dirie email (12 December 2004).

Surgery on girls in Somalia, however, proceeds more brutally than that on boys, embedded in a discourse of torture and cruelty showcased by representative Somali activists.<sup>17</sup> Yet, in tandem with the rationale behind Jewish women's exemption from cutting – recall the paradox of impotence and honour– there appears to be a form of awe in the male for the female in Somali culture, captured in a foundational myth. Charlotte Beck–Karrer, who interviewed dozens of Somali refugees in Switzerland, passes on the story of Arrawelo, once a powerful queen of gigantic proportions. The first thing she did upon gaining power was to castrate all males in order to cement her reign. But her daughter, married to the only masculine survivor, bears a grandson who, as you might have guessed, later murders his “horrible” grandmother, thereby re-establishing the natural order of things, male hegemony.<sup>18</sup>

According to the anthropologist Anke van der Kwaak, this grand-matriicide, which cannot be duplicated, is replaced by infibulation, for immediately after the matriarch's demise, it is said, the men whom she ruled began mutilating women for revenge.<sup>19</sup> This reprisal can then be experienced by many husbands as brutal pleasure. ““Infibulation promotes the development of sadistic behaviour [...] in men,” who, because forced to apply torture in repeated attempts at penetration of too small an opening, develop a “conditioned reflex,” enabling them to ignore their wife's agonized cries or, worse, even to enjoy them.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I am thinking here specifically of Abdi and Korn, but Waris Dirie, in a famous interview with Barbara Walters, stated: “They butcher you. That's the word. That's the word I only can put it. They just butcher – they just whack you up” (“Healing Journey,” transcript, 20 June 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Charlotte Beck–Karrer, *Löwinnen sind sie: Gespräche mit somalischen Frauen und Männern über Frauenbeschneidung* (Bern: eFeF, 1996): 110.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Beck–Karrer, *Löwinnen sind sie*, 111.

<sup>20</sup> Beck–Karrer, *Löwinnen sind sie*, 88. From an academic standpoint, given the figure of 98 percent for infibulation's victims among Somali, the basically ‘common-sense’ conclusion drawn here risks over-generalizing male motive and behaviour. It should therefore be balanced by the contradictory but nonetheless convincing exculpation of the sensitive man. To do this, I borrow the impassioned words of Comfort Ottah responding to an article taking for granted the symmetry between the cutting of boys and girls: “How can [the journalist] compare male circumcision to Female Genital Mutilation? Does she know how many men go out to satisfy their sexual needs because it is impossible with their wives? Does she know how many women are abandoned by their husbands because they shrink away due to pain each time the husbands come near them for sexual relationship? Does she know how many broken marriages there are due to lack of sexual relationship between the man and his wife?”

Thus, Somali women and men would appear to benefit from an original symmetry, at least in terms of agency, strength, and intelligence, yet the repeated overthrow of female power becomes the palimpsest making explicable a *no-longer-similar* genital assault.

Waris Dirie, in *Desert Flower*, intended her ‘confession’ to encourage protest, and two memoirs penned by Somali immigrants in Germany follow her inspirational model, explicitly opposing genital cutting. Chantal Zabus asks, “Quelle femme oserait (d)écrire l’excision et l’ablation de ses organes génitaux? Dans quelle confession, quelle autobiographie?” (331). Here are two courageous ones. Although the African-American Alice Walker may be the first to honour the vulva with a book, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Abdi dedicates her story “To all the world’s women, victims and non-victims of FGM (Female Genital Mutilation),” the English “FGM” in the German text, and invites us to “reach out to one another to spare coming generations the torture that continues to threaten girls today.”<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, Fadumo Korn devotes her concluding chapters to engagement in FORWARD–Germany, a non-profit association unique in Germany for mandating an African majority on the board and insisting on an anti-racist discourse. In both cases, as well, activism issues not from impotence but from strength. In *Tränen im Sand* [Desert Tears], Nura Abdi’s complex, self-confident protagonist, proud of a multi-faceted culture, does not remain a victim. For, despite genital torment, Abdi emerges with the tenacity to which Waris Dirie refers in an interview in *Kulturreport*: “Once you’ve gone through that, you can face anything.” Nor is Fadumo Korn rendered powerless despite her visible handicap. For Fadumo, the operation and subsequent infections triggered, at age eight, an exceedingly painful and contorting form of degenerative rheumatism which, ironically, by bringing her to Germany for treatment before regime collapse, saved her life. In the meantime she has become FORWARD–Germany’s most effective spokeswoman.

Fadumo’s leadership qualities surface early in a striking passage that suggests parallels with, but also distinctions from, male circumcision: similarity in the rite’s community-building function as well as the aesthetic rationale;

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*Does she know how many men have become impotent simply because each time they approach their wives, they weep with agony? How can you be hurting the woman you love? they ask*” (emphasis mine); quoted in Tobe Levin, “Female Genital Mutilation and Human Rights,” *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 1.3 (2003): 305.

<sup>21</sup> Nura Abdi & Leo Linder, *Tränen im Sand* [Desert Tears] (Bergisch-Gladbach: Lübbe, 2003): np.

difference in the intended and, for the most part realized, effect on sexuality and health. The scene is a party at Fadumo's uncle's Mogadishu residence. (Another uncle, by the way, was the deposed dictator Siad-Barre.) "Outside on the terrace the grown-ups were drinking tea. [...] From time to time the wind wafted their voices through the open windows.<sup>22</sup> The girls are all Somali except for two Spanish diplomats' children,<sup>23</sup> who have clearly annoyed the narrator. Fadumo throws them the gauntlet when she shouts "'You stink'," making the little adversary cry. The big one, however, retorts,

"We were circumcised, too! ... a long time ago."

"I don't believe it," I said.

"It's true."

"Then show me!" I was the smallest but also the oldest – that was why all the girls followed my lead. We danced around the two Spanish kids. [...]

"You're dirty. Ugh!" I made a face and bent down toward the younger girl. "You dribble. You're going to hell." The little one looked up, her lips trembling.

The older sister wiped her tears. "We're circumcised just like you."

"Prove it," I commanded with the self-assurance of a born leader.

"Come on. Let's go upstairs." [...] They stalled.

"Show us! Show us!" came the chorus.

It was a show-down ...<sup>24</sup>

This reversal highlights for Western readers the pressure to conform and the social construction of value. Male circumcision builds community; so does the girls', for desire to be included, to escape being mocked, drives this scene, which also reveals an aesthetic rationale. The unaltered vagina is wet; it drips. Its effluvium emits an unpleasant smell. It must be erased. The Somali, then, are obviously, by their own lights, in the right.

Taunted by the older sister, who tells Fadumo, "You're chicken," the ring-leader plunges into action, "undo[ing] the button and unzip[ping her] jeans."

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<sup>22</sup> Fadumo Korn with Sabine Eichhorst, *Geboren im Großen Regen: Mein Leben zwischen Afrika und Deutschland* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2004); *Born in the Big Rains: A Memoir of Somalia and Survival*, tr. & afterword by Tobe Levin (New York: Feminist Press, 2006): 76.

<sup>23</sup> Really another ambassador's daughters, Fadumo told me on 11 February 2005 at her reading in Frankfurt am Main. The memoir's rare change of nationality is intended to protect privacy.

<sup>24</sup> Fadumo Korn, *Born in the Big Rains*, 76.

[I] hesitated for a fraction of a second, then down went the pants over my bottom and I pulled aside my panty crotch, not for long but long enough for everyone to see. One after the other all the girls did the same.<sup>25</sup>

Still reluctant, the Spanish sisters provoke increased hostility.

“You stinking drooling girl!” I shouted. “You’re chicken. Or even worse: you’re *not* circumcised. I’m going to tell the whole school. Tomorrow everybody’s going to know you’re filthy.” The little one whimpered, the snot running out of her nose.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the older sister’s insistence – “I already told you our parents had us done. We look exactly like you” – they are not believed. Assault follows.

“Get ‘em. Let’s look for ourselves!” As if waiting for my command, all stormed the two sisters, threw them on the bed, pressed them into the cushions, and held their arms and legs while we pulled their panties down. “I knew it,” I cried. “Look at them! How wrinkled they are, how shriveled, how ugly. Yuck!”<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, standing alone in a corner, Fadumo’s cousin Khadija hides rather than reveals her ‘good fortune’ at the unimaginable, her having been spared the knife.

Let us briefly unpack this scene. First, note that the attackers have themselves at one time all been seized, had their legs forced apart, and been constrained by a regiment of women. This, then, is learned behaviour. Peers exert an inexorable force – on the Spanish girls here; or in the headline story “Kenya shock at mutilation death,” about a fifteen-year-old who performed clitoridectomy on herself, unable to stand being called “mukenye,” a popular taunt. Second, the aim, to possess a genital free from ambiguity, protrusions, and aromas, is unequivocally supported. And third, the assault conveys a point with which any discussion of the issue should start.

Not only is *FGM normal* to those whose ethnicity mandates it as a condition of gender identity and group membership (which, in contrast to many other nations, is nearly universal for Somalia) but the result is, where infibulation is concerned, beauty, and cleanliness, which in turn give a sense of

<sup>25</sup> Fadumo Korn, *Born in the Big Rains*, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Korn, *Born in the Big Rains*, 77.

<sup>27</sup> *Born in the Big Rains*, 77.

fulfilment, as the girls have longed for the 'event': i.e. to change status and become 'women'. Genital erasure signals beauty, cleanliness – as it does for men as well – and belonging.

In the drama above, Fadumo's reversal of expectation uncovers the strength of the practice's emotional appeal and its motor in peer pressure. To become a 'positive deviant', then, means making a 180-degree turn, abandoning pride, feeling shame, and then moving on to emotionally neutral knowledge from which oppositional action may follow. But this is a fraught psychological manoeuvre, finds no parallel in male contingencies, and requires *extraordinary* courage.

Nura Abdi understands the challenge, and urges campaigners to anticipate and neutralize the worst of an ignorant public's response. The following excerpt – lengthy in English because, at present, the memoir is available only in German – gives us Nura's mirror-image of Fadumo's experience. Nura has taken refuge in Germany only a few weeks before the events narrated, in the early 1990s. Her chapter is called "Am I even a woman?"

To be separated from my family, to have nothing to do but wait [for an asylum decision] in those first few weeks in Düsseldorf, as German autumn gradually gave way to winter, was bad enough. But nothing rocked me as much as learning that not all women in the world are circumcised.<sup>28</sup>

Living in a home for asylum-seekers, Abdi at first just accepts, though shocked, that young women would not only allow men to stay overnight in their rooms but would brag about it the next day.

Not one of the women here, married or single, made a fuss over adventures with men [...]. I couldn't believe my ears and found these conversations perverse and embarrassing. How could they actually brag to me about their shame? [...] For a Somali, monstrous things were happening. Making love takes place at home within marriage and one's own four walls, in secret, and no one talks about it. But here? Above all, the Yugoslavians necked and kissed before my very eyes [...].

At first, I could only explain it to myself in terms of these people having no culture. That they came from countries without traditions....<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Nura Abdi & Leo Linder, *Tränen im Sand*, 260.

<sup>29</sup> Abdi & Linder, *Tränen im Sand*, 260.

Of course, Nura has admirers. But she sends them all home at night.

Four weeks passed, and the rumor had spread that I was the only one who wouldn't sleep around.

"What's the matter with you? Why don't you have a boyfriend?" Hanna wanted to know. ... Then she looked at me as though a light had turned on and said, "Oh, right, you're Somali." I was taken aback. "What do you mean by that?" "You're circumcised," she said. An awful premonition shook me. "And you're not?" I asked, doubt in my voice. ...

And I learned that there are two kinds of women.<sup>30</sup>

Soon everybody was talking about me. Hanna shouted the news, "She's circumcised, everybody. Our Somali is circumcised. Her sex is spoiled and sewn up!" – and from that point on, people talked about nothing else.<sup>31</sup>

The asylum colony, composed of prefabricated 'containers', houses newly-arrived Afghanis, Africans from all over the continent, Yugoslavs, and Iraqis, but despite the language barrier, the news spreads like wildfire.

And from all sides I was met by shocked, disbelieving, pitying glances. Above all the Yugoslavian women couldn't contain themselves. "How can anyone do such a thing to such a pretty girl?" they wailed, shook their heads and felt obliged to offer comfort. As for me, I'd fallen into a nightmare. It appeared that not even the Afghan women had been circumcised! O.K., Ethiopians are Christian, I thought, so that might be a reason. But Afghanis are Moslems like me, and they don't do it? I felt myself hurled into hell.

But the worst of it was, they appeared to consider me a cripple, half a woman incapable of any feeling. They behaved as though I had been the victim of a crime, as though it were shameful to be circumcised – whereas I had always believed, circumcision made me clean!

I wasn't going to stand for that. It came to verbal blows between Hanna and me. "You're running around with all your filth," I hammered into her, "and proud of it?! Maybe you think it's better to stink like the uncircumcised? At least I'm clean. I don't smell!" I was angry. "Aren't you ashamed to be like a whore down there?"

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<sup>30</sup> Nura Abdi & Leo Linder, *Tränen im Sand*, 261.

<sup>31</sup> Abdi & Linder, *Tränen im Sand*, 261–62.

Nura's retort is understandable: "We're going to go on circumcising our girls for all eternity," she declares, thinking, "Who did this Ethiopian think she was, spewing poison all over our culture! Didn't I *have* to defend myself?"

But to tell the truth, [Nura goes on], I didn't know what I was talking about. As a matter of fact, I knew nothing at all. Nothing about my body and nothing about love. I'd wound up in a situation that I could never have imagined in my worst nightmares. In Somalia you talked about *gudniin* in lovely language, as you would about good fortune. Yet here I was, surrounded by people who reacted to it with horror. I put two and two together and came to the same conclusion as everyone else: There was something wrong with me. I became foreign to myself.<sup>32</sup>

Like Fadumo, Nura brings to exile her pride in purity – a rationale said to be shared by men – only to discover that what she prized was scorned, and what she scorned is praised. Fortunate to meet a gynaecologist informed about and sensitive to the infibulated woman's needs – only after having first experienced an older man who, on examining her, shrieked and fled the room – she is coached in getting to know her own flesh. Her mentor tells her, "What you've suffered affects not only your body, but also your soul,"<sup>33</sup> and she accepts his counsel. After long delays, she seeks defibulation and, like Fadumo Korn, recovers a kind of wholeness.<sup>34</sup> Abdi concludes: "Circumcision is barbarity, mutilation without anaesthesia, and we should put an end to it. Of course, not in my wildest dreams did I ever think I'd write a book about it. But I often thought I'd someday want to help other women [prey to the practice]. For as long as I lived with it, it tortured me ...."<sup>35</sup>

What had happened to Nura? Here, of course, whatever symmetry might have initially governed dissolves, for the following experience is not like that of boys. "Right after the holidays began, [her] older sisters Fatma and Yurop and [she] would be circumcised, even though [Nura] wasn't yet five and was

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<sup>32</sup> Nura Abdi & Leo Linder, *Tränen im Sand*, 262–63.

<sup>33</sup> Abdi & Linder, *Tränen im Sand*, 299.

<sup>34</sup> In addition to the opening operations that both Fadumo and Nura enjoy, urologist Pierre Foldes, practising in France, pioneered a means of clitoral reconstitution using a procedure developed in Burkina Faso to repair fistula. See Hubert Prolongeau, *Victoire sur L'Excision: Pierre Foldes, le chirurgien qui redonne l'espoir aux femmes mutilées* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Abdi & Linder, *Tränen im Sand*, 347.

really much too young.”<sup>36</sup> Nura writes in her chapter titled “*Who’ll be most courageous?*”

... Before the *halaleiso* had even touched her, Yurop cried out. At once, one of the women slapped her face. The general consensus held that this was no time for forbearance. And maybe this advice wasn’t so far off the mark, but in Yurop’s case it didn’t quiet her down. She went right on screaming, so they stuffed the gag in her mouth, ready for that purpose. I remember, I thought it was funny. I still hadn’t understood a thing. And anyway, there were enough girls in line ahead of me. I wasn’t next, so I could just keep on sniggering. But as the queue shrank, laughter stuck in my throat.

From Yurop came nothing but groans by now, and a couple of minutes later a woman came out holding a narrow band of cloth. This she wrapped around Yurop from her hips to her big toe, so tightly that she couldn’t move her legs. Then two women carried her gingerly into the room with mats on the floor.

I hadn’t been able to take in very much of it. Once they’d gagged her, I sort of took off. Because there were so many women pulling on her and standing around, I couldn’t have seen much anyway.<sup>37</sup> Now it was Ifra’s turn, and like all the others, she lit out of there screaming her throat out. So first the women had to catch her and, with fanatical violence, threw her onto the box. Then, repeat performance: Ifra screamed and tried to free herself, and again the women fought and gagged her. And so it went with Fatma, Muna, Suleiha, and Nasra. All

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<sup>36</sup> Nura Abdi & Leo Linder, *Tränen im Sand*, 60.

<sup>37</sup> Compare Fadumo:

‘Sit down’, [the excisor] murmured and gestured with her thumb toward the tub ... upside down in the sand.

‘Sit on it,’ my mother said.

My heart was racing. My mouth was dry and not a word came out. I sat on the tub. My mother squatted behind me and held me tight. A hand shoved my skirt up. ... Hands touched my body, everywhere, a horde of hands, pressing, tearing, pulling. A voice said: ‘Hold her tight!’ A hand gagged my mouth.

The first cut was ice cold.

... deep blue ...

A lightning bolt to the head.

...

I bucked under an all consuming, devouring pain.

A shriek to the ends of the world wanted to escape but stuck in my throat. It couldn’t get out.

The world stopped spinning. Everything went numb.

— Fadumo Korn, *Born in the Big Rains*, 38.

shrieked, all were gagged, the *halaleiso* never slowed down. Between girls she wiped blood off the box and with her foot kicked sand over the puddle on the floor. And now there was only one left, and that was me.

When my turn came, I burst into tears. I was scared but couldn't run away. I screamed as they approached me; I shrieked, "I don't want to!" That didn't help at all. They grabbed me, dragged me to the box that had once held oranges, sat me down on it, and held me on all sides. Not one of the women made the slightest move to help. One of them reminded me that yesterday I had promised to be the bravest of them all. I sat there in the arena, a circle of women around me. They imprisoned me, tossed my skirt aside, pulled my legs apart, and ... cut.

There was a sound like sharp scratching or ripping, like knifing burlap or a heavy-meshed towel. Now the women competed in shouting. They screamed across each other while pulling on my arms and legs and nearly squeezing the breath out of me. "Yes, yes, that side's good!" "But there, there you've forgotten something!" "So, that's it!" "Done already! Done!"

A witches' cauldron. But louder than their screeching was the scratching, the razoring of flesh. I was in such shock that no scream emerged. No matter what they cut, each time, that horrendous scratching hammered in my ear, louder than all their screams.

But the worst was yet to come.

The worst is when they sew you up.

... In the meantime it had grown warm. The sun had wandered in over the courtyard and blinded me. I was nauseous and had the feeling I was going to throw up. And between my legs someone was busy with a needle in an open wound. It was as if with all my senses, wholly conscious, I was being slaughtered. I tried to defend myself, but against six grown-up women, what can a four-year-old do? Maybe I moaned, maybe I gasped for breath. But I didn't scream, for I was spared the gag. And then I fainted.

Before they began to bind me, I came to. It was a new pain this time, the *halaleiso* rubbing herbs on the fresh wound ... to speed up healing. It felt like being held over an open fire.

Again I fainted.

While conscious, I hadn't looked. I couldn't while they were slicing me up. But I remember: when they carried me away, I opened my eyes to spy blood on the floor and those parts that had been hacked off swimming in a bowl. What had been sawed off all of us, including the other girls. .... Later I learned that someone had dug a hole and buried them somewhere in the courtyard. Exactly where we were

never to learn. “What do you need to know for?” was all they would say. “It’s long gone to where it belongs. Under the earth.”<sup>38</sup>

The emotions released here – anger, resentment, accusation, defamation – have little in common with the pride men convey when facing the knife. The scene is also driven by pre-emptive need: should mothers *not* arrange for genital closure, they would feel derelict in their parental duties, and daughters come to understand this.

In *Die Drei Wünsche der Sharifa: Bei den Kunama in Eritrea* [Sharifa’s Three Wishes: With the Kunama in Eritrea], for instance, social pressure on unwilling parents is clearly the decisive factor. The documentary shows how, even in a matrilineal society with power invested in female hands, the dead queen’s insistence that girls continue to be cut prevents a mother who wishes her daughter spared from taking any effective action. She cannot risk what another mother of freshly operated daughters in an Ogaden village told Dr Asili Barre–Dirie: although aware of the risk to health, she fears far more to be labeled “the clitoris clan.”<sup>39</sup>

As the character Eve notes in *Bailey’s Café*, “It’s the law of the Blue Nile [...] And along these shores [...] no woman in her right mind – Jew or Muslim – [...] would want her daughter to grow up a whore.”<sup>40</sup> Since there are no male whores, no ontological degradation of males as a result of sexual experience, all alleged symmetry ends here.<sup>41</sup>

As Natalie Angier suggests, given that what females undergo is “more akin to penile amputation,” we might well dispense with “the courtesy of the comparison.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, despite a growing movement against male genital mutila-

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<sup>38</sup> Nura Abdi & Leo Linder, *Tränen im Sand*, 65–68.

<sup>39</sup> Asili Barr–Dirie, personal communication, Fall 2001.

<sup>40</sup> Gloria Naylor, *Bailey’s Café* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992): 50.

<sup>41</sup> Marielouise Janssen–Jurreit, in *Sexismus: Über die Abtreibung der Frauenfrage* (1976) [Sexism: Concerning the Abortion of the Woman Question], compares male and female ‘circumcision’ and finds that the difference lies not necessarily in the degree of pain or celebration welcoming initiates into the community but, rather, “in the [rite’s] social aim. [Unlike boys’], girls’ initiation isn’t intended to make them confident in their own abilities, rather the reverse: her will is to be broken, her independence limited, her obedience guaranteed. Identity as a woman is the result of personal-ity reduction in exchange for the promise of male attention and maternity” (543; my tr.). That Somali women remain independent and defiant pays homage to the resilience of human character, and to the specific tribal pride instilled in all Somalis.

<sup>42</sup> Natalie Angier, *Woman: An Intimate Geography* (Garden City NY: Anchor, 1999): 86.

tion emphasizing risks, FGM is the far more serious operation, as a groundbreaking *Lancet* study shows.<sup>43</sup> Released on 2 June 2006, it finally offers irrefutable evidence gathered from an important statistical sample in six African countries that FGM reduces fertility, harms infants, and causes severe health damage to victims. Still, how can we account for the testimony of some African women who have undergone clitoridectomies and even infibulation? They “describe themselves as erotic beings who enjoy sex and experience orgasm – very fierce orgasms, they add.”<sup>44</sup> This, I, think, is human resilience, a pliability that certainly does not justify but makes more intelligible the ferocity and strength in those wearing “warrior marks” while doing battle against these rites.

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<sup>43</sup> “Female genital mutilation and obstetric outcome: WHO collaborative prospective study in six African countries,” *The Lancet* 367/9525 (3 June 2006): 1835–41.

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ROBERT DARBY AND LAURENCE COX

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Objections of a Sentimental Character:  
The Subjective Dimensions of Foreskin Loss

ABSTRACT

Proponents of routine circumcision of male minors tend to downplay or ignore the adverse effects of circumcision on male sexual experience and to assert that only an insignificant minority of circumcised men are unhappy about their condition. We present evidence dating back to the nineteenth century that significant numbers of men have been sufficiently concerned to complain, and we particularly consider three attitude surveys carried out in Britain, the USA and Australia in the 1990s. We argue for the relevance of ethical, biological and subjective factors in decision-making about routine circumcision of minors, and conclude with a discussion of the implications of these considerations for medical policy.

Horace [the local coroner doing a post-mortem on a fisherman] felt a familiar envy stirring and despite himself noted the girth and heft of Carl Hein's sexual organs. The fisherman had not been circumcised ...

— David Guterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars*

The things that other men do – and get away with! And with never a second thought! To inflict a wound upon a defenceless person makes them smile ... gives a little lift to their day! ... The indifference! The total moral indifference!

— Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*

An objection to circumcision of wholly sentimental character [is] not the less worthy of practical consideration.

— Herbert Snow, *The Barbarity of Circumcision*

**F**OR MUCH OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, enthusiasts for routine circumcision have echoed the sentiments of William Acton:

Although it is possible that it [the foreskin] may increase the pleasure derived from the act of sexual congress, there is no evidence that Jews, and those who have undergone circumcision, do not enjoy as much pleasure in the copulatory act as the uncircumcised; – at any rate, the former do not complain.<sup>1</sup>

The claims are clear: first, that circumcision makes no difference to a male's experience of sex; second, that even if it did men do not complain about what they are missing. An obvious point to note is that Acton's first assertion directly contradicts the medical knowledge of his own day; throughout history and up to the end of the nineteenth century it was generally held by authorities on medical and sexual matters that the foreskin made a significant contribution to the sexual pleasure of both men and their partners. Far from there being "no evidence," there is so much that the problem becomes one of selection: from many possible sources we may cite the early-eighteenth-century surgeon John Marten, as representing the orthodox position:

This Nut is [...] cover'd with the preputium or Fore-skin, which is of a loose texture, for the better covering of the Nut, and furling itself up behind the Ring or Hoop, to uncover it; therefore serves as a Cap to the Nut, and to enlarge the pleasure that attends Enjoyment, for in the act of Coition it flips backwards and forwards, being tied together with a membranous String call'd the Fraenum or Bridle, and causes the greater pleasure thereby, both to the Man and the Woman [...]. The cutting of this Preputium or Fore-skin, is done by the Jews, and call'd Circumcision; by having of which taken away, 'tis said those People lose much of the pleasure in the act of Copulation.<sup>2</sup>

Acton's statement is even inconsistent with the medical wisdom of the Victorian period, since it was precisely the erotic significance of the foreskin that

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<sup>1</sup> William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age and Advanced Life* (Philadelphia PA: Lindsay & Blakiston, 3rd ed. 1865): 22.

<sup>2</sup> J. Marten, *Gonosologium Novum: Or, a New System of All the Secret Infirmities and Diseases Natural, Accidental and Venereal in Men and Women* (1709; New York: Garland, 1985): 12.

led the physicians of that “anti-sensual age” to urge its removal.<sup>3</sup> As the prominent surgeon Jonathan Hutchinson expressed it,

The only function which the prepuce can be supposed to have is that of maintaining the penis in a condition susceptible of more acute sensation than would otherwise exist. It may be supposed to increase the pleasure of coition and the impulse to it. These are advantages, however, which in the present state of society can well be spared, and if in their loss some degree of increased sexual control should result, one should be thankful.<sup>4</sup>

Acton himself acknowledged the contribution of the foreskin to sexual pleasure when he denounced it as “a source of serious mischief” and a constant threat to the strict continence he regarded as essential to both morals and health.<sup>5</sup>

In the twentieth century, the Puritanism of the Victorians gradually softened, and sexual pleasure came to be seen as a good thing, even a human right, rather than a menace to health and virtue.<sup>6</sup> Advocates of routine circumcision thus found it necessary to minimize the adverse effects of such surgery on sexuality and to focus strictly on its benefits for health. Accordingly, we find numerous statements to the effect that circumcision “makes no difference” to sexual performance or experience, a claim often backed up by a deeply flawed (and entirely irrelevant) piece of research by Masters and Johnson in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ornella Moscucci, “Clitoridectomy, Circumcision and the Politics of Sexual Pleasure in Mid-Victorian Britain,” in *Sexualities in Victorian Britain*, ed. Andrew H. Miller & James Eli Adams (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996): 60–78.

<sup>4</sup> J. Hutchinson, “The Advantages of Circumcision,” *Medical Review* 3 (1900): 642.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Darby, *A Surgical Temptation: The Demonization of the Foreskin and the Rise of Circumcision in Britain* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005): ch. 6.

<sup>6</sup> See Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex and Contraception, 1800–1975* (London: Oxford UP, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> W.E. Masters & V.E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Boston MA: Little, Brown, 1966): 190. For critiques, see: John M. Foley, *The Practice of Circumcision: A Reevaluation* (New York: Materia Medica, 1966): 8; Frederick M. Hodges & Paul Fleiss, “Letter,” *Pediatrics* 105.3, Part 1 (2000): 683–84; the searching demolition by Hugh Young at <http://www.circumstitions.com/Sexuality.html> (accessed 6 December 2007); and Morris L. Sorrells, James L. Snyder, Mark D. Reiss et al., “Fine-Touch Pressure Thresholds in the Adult Penis,” *BJU International* 99 (2007): 864–69.

In his own discussion of this question, Brian Morris, Australia's leading intellectual champion of routine neonatal circumcision, also relies heavily on a survey of 79 men and 101 women carried out by "James Badger" (pen-name of Guy Cox, another tireless champion of routine circumcision),<sup>8</sup> and published in *Australian Forum*, a somewhat racy women's magazine, in 1989. On the basis of Badger's results, Morris claimed that circumcision made no difference to sexual performance or pleasure, or maybe made sex better, and that women "generally preferred" circumcised partners. He noted with satisfaction that a fifth of the uncircumcised men reported that they would prefer to be circumcised, but also admitted that an equal number of the circumcised men wished they had not been. Morris also cites what he describes as "independent clinical and neurological testing" to affirm that circumcision makes no difference to "penile sensitivity," though when his references are checked this "independent testing" turns out to be two articles by his friend Thomas Wiswell on urinary-tract infections that have nothing to do with sexual function at all.<sup>9</sup> Even though Professor Morris has declared that the Victorians "were right" about the evils of the foreskin, it comes as a shock to find him describing the genital fondling in which infants and children naturally engage as "excessive attention to a penis," and even more surprising to find him agreeing with Acton et al. that such deplorable behaviour was a response to the "irritation" provoked by the build-up of smegma<sup>10</sup> (a much vilified but entirely innocent substance).<sup>11</sup> In a later article, Morris and colleagues dismiss the issue of sexual function as largely irrelevant to the circumcision debate, yet make the bizarre comment that one desirable effect of circumcision was to prevent "docking," a form of (fairly safe) sexual pleasure in which one man places the glans of his penis inside the foreskin of another. Although this contradicts their claim that circumcision makes no difference to a man's capacity for sexual enjoyment, they regard such denial as yet another advantage of

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<sup>8</sup> G. Cox, "Circumcision for Phimosis and Other Medical Indications in Western Australian Boys," *Medical Journal of Australia* 178.11 (2003): 588.

<sup>9</sup> Brian J. Morris, *In Favour of Circumcision* (Sydney: New South Wales UP, 1999): 52–53.

<sup>10</sup> Morris, *In Favour of Circumcision*, 57.

<sup>11</sup> A recent paper on sub-preputial moisture establishes that smegma is an entirely harmless (and probably beneficial) substance that does not cause irritation. See Robert S. Van Howe & Frederick M. Hodges, "The Carcinogenicity of Smegma: Debunking a Myth," *Journal of the European Academy of Dermatology and Venereology* 20 (2006): 1046–54.

circumcision; it is certainly one of which the Victorians would have approved.<sup>12</sup>

Sexual pleasure is a highly subjective thing, and it is doubtful whether it will ever be possible to measure it scientifically. The numerous attempts of the last few years have left such a confusing picture that it is unlikely that a consensus will ever emerge, and inconceivable that the pro- and anti-circumcision forces will ever reach agreement on what are naively called “the facts.”<sup>13</sup> What is clear, however, is that the second of Acton’s claims has been vigorously challenged by circumcised men, many of whom have complained loudly about what was done to them. The protests began in Acton’s own lifetime; when A.E. Housman and his brothers were circumcised in the 1870s, their sister recalled that they were not happy about it:

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<sup>12</sup> Brian J. Morris, S.A. Bailis, X. Castellsague, T.E. Wiswell & D.T. Halperin, “RACP’s Policy Statement on Male Circumcision is Ill-Conceived,” *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 30 (2006): 16–22.

<sup>13</sup> A recent sample might include: Kenneth S. Fink, Culley C. Carson & Robert F. DeVellis, “Adult Circumcision Outcomes Study: Effect on Erectile Function, Penile Sensitivity, Sexual Activity and Satisfaction,” *Journal of Urology* 167.5 (2002): 2113–16; Gregory J. Boyle, Ronald Goldman, J. Steven Svoboda & Ephrem Fernandez, “Male Circumcision: Pain, Trauma and Psychosexual Sequelae,” *Journal of Health Psychology* 7.3 (2002): 329–43; Clifford B. Bleustein, Haftan Eckholdt, Joseph C. Arezzo & Arnold Melman, “Quantitative Somatosensory Testing of the Penis: Optimizing the Clinical Neurological Examination,” *Journal of Urology* 169.6 (2003): 2266–69; and Shikohe Masood, H.R.H. Patel, R.C. Himpson et al., “Penile Sensitivity and Sexual Satisfaction after Circumcision: Are We Informing Men Correctly?” *Urologia Internationalis* 75.1 (2005): 62–65. A Korean-based prospective study found circumcised men significantly more dissatisfied with their condition: “There was a decrease in masturbatory pleasure and sexual enjoyment after circumcision, indicating that adult circumcision adversely affects sexual function in many men”; Dai Sik Kim & Myung-Geol Pang, “The Effect of Male Circumcision on Sexuality,” *BJU International* 99.3 (March 2007): 619–22. In the USA, Sorrells et al., using a light-touch test, concluded that a circumcised penis is markedly less sensitive than one with its foreskin in place. See Morris L. Sorrells, James L. Snyder, Mark D. Reiss et al., “Fine-Touch Pressure Thresholds in the Adult Penis,” *BJU International* 99 (2007): 864–69. Jon Willis reports that the extreme penile mutilations (entailing subincision as well as circumcision) practised by the Pitjantjatjara people of the central Australian desert have severely inhibiting effects on the men’s sex lives. See Willis, “Heteronormativity and the Deflection of Male Same-Sex Attraction among the Pitjantjatjara people of Australia’s Western Desert,” *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 5.2 (2003): 137–51.

It was severe treatment, mentally and physically, for well-grown boys, and a great mystery at the time to the younger ones who made open complaint, with a mixture of importance and resentment, of the ill-treatment which had befallen them.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever Mr Acton might claim, it is evident that some men have voiced objections to their circumcised condition, including such prominent figures as the poet W.H. Auden and the surgeon Sir Geoffrey Keynes, who told the biographer of his brother Maynard that he could never forgive his parents for what they did to him.<sup>15</sup> An early critic of circumcision from within the medical profession commented that there could be “little doubt what would be the verdict – could they only give it utterance – upon the immediate results of the operation returned by these inarticulate (if far from mute) victims of hygienic orthodoxy.”<sup>16</sup>

In more recent times, the disappearance of routine circumcision in Britain and its decline in the USA and Australia has increased the opportunities for circumcised men to compare their penises with those of their natural peers; resentment has flared to the point where significant protest movements have emerged, and numbers have sought to recover what was taken. In 1996, the *British Medical Journal* published a letter from twenty men who believed that “we have been harmed by circumcision carried out in childhood.” They argued that it “cannot be ethical for a doctor to amputate normal tissue from a normal child” and suggested that circumcision without informed consent was a violation of agreed principles of human rights:

The European charter for children in hospital states that every child must be protected from unnecessary medical treatment. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have rights to self-determination, dignity, respect, integrity, and non-interference and the right to make informed personal decisions. Unnecessary circumcision of boys violates these rights.

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Perceval Graves, *A.E. Housman: The Scholar Poet* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979): 21–22.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert Darby, *A Surgical Temptation*, 298–99.

<sup>16</sup> See Herbert Snow, *The Barbarity of Circumcision as a Remedy for Congenital Abnormality* (London: Churchill, 1890): 22.

The authors emphasize that, if circumcision is to be a personal choice, it must be the decision of the person who is to bear the lifelong consequences: "The possible future wishes of the patient should be considered."<sup>17</sup>

In the USA, the persistence of widespread neonatal circumcision has produced correspondingly more vigorous protest movements. One such organization distributed questionnaires on the effects of circumcision to some 546 men between 1993 and 1996 and published the findings from the first 313 respondents.<sup>18</sup> Among the most significant physical consequences reported were prominent scarring (33%), insufficient penile skin for comfortable erection (27%), erectile curvature from uneven skin loss (16%), pain and bleeding upon erection/manipulation (17%), painful skin bridges (12%), and others such as bevelling deformities of the glans, meatal stenosis, and recurrent non-specific urethritis (20%).

Reported consequences for sexual function included progressive sensory deficit in the preputial remnant and glans (61%), causing sexual dysfunction (erectile problems, ejaculatory difficulties, and/or anorgasmia); extraordinary stimulation required for orgasm (40%), with many respondents reporting that vaginal sex offered inadequate stimulation for pleasure and/or orgasm; and sexual dysfunction resulting from emotional distress. These findings concur with those of Money and Davidson about the erotogenic consequences of adult circumcision, including loss of proprioceptive stretch receptors of the prepuce and frenulum, diminished eroto-sexual response, increased penile pain, and changes in masturbatory technique.<sup>19</sup>

Psychological consequences included emotional distress, manifesting as intrusive thoughts about one's circumcision, included feelings of mutilation (60%), low self-esteem/inferiority to intact men (50%), genital dysmorphia (55%), rage (52%), resentment/depression (59%), violation (46%), or parental betrayal (30%). Many respondents (41%) reported that their physical/emotional suffering impeded emotional intimacy with partner(s), resulting in sexual dysfunction. For some, lack of compassion from parents, siblings or friends fostered bitter interpersonal conflict or alienation. Almost a third of respondents (29%) reported dependence on substances or behaviours to relieve their suffering (tobacco, alcohol, drugs, food and/or sexual compul-

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<sup>17</sup> John Warren et al., "Circumcision of Children," *British Medical Journal* 312 (1996): 377.

<sup>18</sup> Tim Hammond, "A Preliminary Poll of Men Circumcised in Infancy or Childhood," *BJU International* 83 (Supplement 1; 1999): 85–92.

<sup>19</sup> John Money & Jackie Davison, "Adult Penile Circumcision: Erotosexual and Cosmetic Sequelae," *Journal of Sex Research* 19 (1983): 289–92.

sivity). Few men were able to find an acceptable outlet for serious feelings about circumcision, and 54% of respondents had not sought help. The reasons given included: thinking no recourse was available (43%); embarrassment (19%); fear of ridicule (17%); and mistrust of doctors (11%).

Nor is evidence lacking from Australia. In the mid-1990s, as news of this increasingly anti-circumcision mood reached our shores, Laurence Cox (using the pen name Peter Lawrence) established an informal foreskin-restoration support group in Sydney. His aim was to assist circumcised men undertake the various non-surgical foreskin restoration methods that had been devised in the USA and Britain; to help men deal with the anger and distress that many of them felt; and to compile data on the physically and emotionally harmful effects of routine (i.e. medically unnecessary and non-elective) circumcision. To these ends, he placed several small advertisements in the Community Notices section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* Metro supplement (Fridays) in March–June 1994:

Foreskin Restoration Program (Non-surgical). Volunteer organization for circumcised men. Approved in principle by the NSW Men's Movement. Meetings and telephone support. Details: P.O. Box 938, Lane Cove, 2066.

In addition, Cox was able to get small articles published in several men's magazines, and on 24 December 1994 he was interviewed on the ABC's "Health Matters" programme by Norman Swan.

In response to this publicity, Cox received approximately a hundred letters from men either eager to restore their foreskin or interested enough to want information about the methods involved. Some of these were bare expressions of interest, but quite a few volunteered details about the writer's experience and feelings (when circumcised, why he hated it, etc.), and some could be described as explosions of rage and misery. In addition to instructions about foreskin-restoration procedures, respondents were sent a questionnaire seeking their views on various aspects of circumcision, particularly their perceptions of how it had affected their life. Fifty of these were returned. The small number of responses suggests that relatively few circumcised men are unhappy enough about their condition to be interested in taking action to reverse the procedure, and perhaps confirms William Acton's cynical remark that lack of complaint signifies acquiescence. On the other hand, the comments in some of the letters and questionnaires show that a significant minority are bitterly angry about their situation and consider themselves either physically injured (mutilated) or psychologically/emotionally damaged, or both.

While the numerical paucity of the responses means that the survey results do not lend themselves to quantitative analysis, the comments volunteered in many of the letters offer a fascinating and disturbing glimpse into the qualitative and subjective dimensions of the issue, revealing just how strongly some men feel about what was done to them, and confirming the results of larger surveys conducted in the USA. Of particular interest are letters from two men who had voluntarily sought circumcision as adults but found themselves so displeased with the results that they wanted their foreskins back. One of these (born 1958, Australia) was circumcised at age twenty-six for “phimosis,” but was still keen to restore his foreskin because he disliked the resulting scars and “loss of sensitivity”. The other had himself circumcised as an adult because he believed that the procedure would cause his glans to enlarge. It did not get significantly bigger, however, and he found that he missed his foreskin (Kingswood, NSW, letter n.d.)

The questionnaires were analyzed to bring out the following information:

1. Age and year of birth
2. Place of birth
3. Age at circumcision:
  - under 6 months
  - 6 months to 3 years
  - 3 years to 6 years
  - over 6 years
4. Whether restoration attempted.
5. Type of adverse effect experienced:
  - 5.1 Physical damage
    - appearance of body
    - pain/discomfort
    - loss of sexual performance/satisfaction
  - 5.2 Psychological/emotional damage
    - poor body image and self-esteem
    - resentment at violation of autonomy
    - difficulty with relationships
    - psychological problems

Illustrative comments from questionnaires and letters sent to Dr Cox (including some letters originally sent to Dr George Williams, who had founded NOCIRC Australia in 1993 as an anti-routine circumcision lobby group) are included in the Appendix.

## Summary of Results

### 1. Year of birth

The ages of the respondents pretty much spanned the history of routine circumcision in Australia, the eldest being born in 1923 and the youngest in 1978, some seven years after the Australian Paediatric Association had stated that boys should not be routinely circumcised. Grouped by decade, the years of birth were as follows:

1921–30	2
1931–40	8
1941–50	15
1951–60	13
1961–70	9
1970 and after	3

### 2. Place of birth

Most of the respondents were born in Australia, with five in the UK, three in South Africa, and one each in Singapore and New Zealand.

### 3. Age at circumcision

The vast majority were circumcised aged under 6 months, mostly at or soon after birth:

under 6 months	42
6 months to 3 years	2
3 to 6 years	4
over 6 years	2

### 4. Whether restoration attempted

Although 29 men reported that they had attempted restoration and 21 that they had not, most of the Noes commented that they were very interested and wanted to try it. One respondent said that he had no faith in restoration and wanted to focus his energies on protecting others from his fate.

### 5. 1 Physical damage

All respondents reported some physical damage: appearance of the body was mentioned by 27; pain/discomfort by 10; and loss of sexual performance or diminished sexual satisfaction by 41. Many made revealing comments, a selection of which is printed in the appendix.

Note that these figures are our interpretation of comments and responses. References to mutilation, incompleteness, lack of wholeness or integrity, or to

an unusual or ugly appearance of the penis were included in “Appearance.” References to discomfort or abrasion from clothing, especially pain arising from chafing on the exposed glans, were included in “Pain.” References to lack of sensitivity, problems obtaining sexual satisfaction, excessive tightness of erections, and difficulty manipulating penis or reaching orgasm were included in “Loss of sexual performance.”

### 5.2 Psychological/emotional damage

Interestingly, there were as many reports of psychological/emotional problems as of physical damage, with 20 mentioning poor body image and self-esteem; 18 resentment at the violation of personal autonomy; 34 difficulty with relationships; and 5 psychological problems (some severe enough to have persuaded them to seek counselling or psychiatric help).

The response to these developments from committed advocates of routine circumcision, such as Brian Morris, has been to deny that they constitute any evidence that men have been harmed by circumcision, to dismiss people involved in or sympathetic to organizations such as NOHARMM or NOCIRC as deluded cranks and sickos,<sup>20</sup> and to label anybody doubting that circumcision was a necessary measure of public health as “anti-circumcision activists”<sup>21</sup> – pests who, by definition, are not entitled to be heard. Morris, who also urges circumcision as a cosmetic beautification of the penis,<sup>22</sup> has even condemned foreskin restoration as “a form of genital mutilation.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, by insisting on *neonatal* circumcision, even he acknowledges that boys might prefer to keep their foreskin, for he admits that if the choice were left to them, many of them would make the “wrong” decision. “Parental responsibility must override arguments based on the rights of the child,” he writes: “parents have the legal right to authorize surgical procedures in the best interests of their children.” When they are old enough to give legal consent, males “are reluctant to confront such issues” and are neither “mature nor well-informed enough” to make the right decision for themselves. In other words, Morris concedes that if doctors waited until boys were old enough to make up their own mind, most would not consent to the operation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Brian Morris, *In Favour of Circumcision*, 62–72.

<sup>21</sup> As Professor Basil Donovan ruefully complained in his critical review of Morris’s book in *Venereology* 12 (1999): 68–69.

<sup>22</sup> Morris, *In Favour of Circumcision*, 87–88.

<sup>23</sup> As quoted in A. Turner, “The Unkindest Cut,” *Men’s Health* (North Sydney; July 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Morris, *In Favour of Circumcision*, 61–62.

The reaction of responsible medical authorities has been far more positive, though not entirely consistent. In 1996 the Australian Association of Paediatric Surgeons issued a position statement in which it declared its opposition to routine circumcision of neonates: not only was there no medical justification for such an intervention, but there was also the distinct possibility that the boy would regret losing his foreskin:

We do not support the removal of a normal part of the body, unless there are definite indications to justify the complications and risks which may arise. In particular, we are opposed to male children being subjected to a procedure, which had they been old enough to consider the advantages and disadvantages, may well have opted to reject the operation and retain their prepuce.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, in the absence of any urgent medical necessity, it was unethical and cruel to deprive a boy of a normal body part he might later appreciate. The argument, it will be noted, was quite independent of any “health” considerations, since it assumed that an individual has the right to manage his own health and to make his own decisions about the appropriate balance of risks and pleasures.

The AAPS’s position was in line with modern thinking about medical ethics and the rights of minors,<sup>26</sup> and one might have expected the principles it embodies to have been developed further when the Royal Australasian College of Physicians issued its own lengthy position statement in 2002. This document does indeed state that there is “no medical indication” for circumcision in the neonatal period, but it reaches this conclusion on the basis of a very narrow calculus of benefits and complications: since the danger of harm balances the promise of reduced risk of (rare, curable or avoidable) diseases, it is better not to perform the operation. The statement does raise the question of ethics, but Section 7, “Legal and Bioethical Issues,” is too brief to give serious attention to these problems, collapses ethical into legal issues, and seems to be tailored more to reassure adult members of religious/cultural

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<sup>25</sup> The Australasian Association of Paediatric Surgeons, *Guidelines for Circumcision* (1996), text available at [www.circinfo.org/previous\\_statements.html](http://www.circinfo.org/previous_statements.html)

<sup>26</sup> J.P.H. Shield & J.D. Baum, “Children’s Consent to Treatment,” *British Medical Journal* 308 (1994): 1182–83; Jacqueline Smith, “Male Circumcision and the Rights of the Child,” in *To Baehr In Our Minds: Essays in Human Rights from the Heart of the Netherlands*, ed. Mielle Bulterman, Aart Hendriks & Jacqueline Smith (SIM Special No. 21; Netherlands Institute of Human Rights, University of Utrecht, 1998): 465–98.

minorities than to protect the “best interests” of the vast majority of the Australian and New Zealand population.

Completely absent from the policy is any awareness of the functions of the foreskin itself, and thus of the possibility that any medical benefit must be set against the disadvantages of not having one, as well as the preferences of the boy himself. By narrowly focusing their survey on Pub-Med data, the RACP sought to tread warily in this contentious area and produce a document that they could claim as objective, but the sad truth is that, on a question so deeply influenced by emotion and cultural commitment,<sup>27</sup> objectivity is not attained that easily. Quite apart from the American bias of Pub-Med and the problem that a great deal of what gets published in medical journals turns out to be exaggerated or wrong,<sup>28</sup> the problem with confining one’s perspective to narrowly conceived studies of “health benefits” vs. “complications” is that it leaves out equally important dimensions of the issue. These include: medical ethics (what a doctor may legitimately do); human rights (the sort of respect and consideration to which an individual is entitled); the physiological and biological (the role of the foreskin in the bodily system, both physical and mental); and the purely subjective (the feelings and preferences of the boy). Objectivity on such a contentious question as circumcision is difficult, but achieving it will not be made easier by refusal to consider relevant evidence. Bias can emerge from omission as much as inclusion, and unless the four

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<sup>27</sup> Sarah Waldeck, “Using Circumcision to Understand Social Norms as Multipliers,” *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 72 (2003): 455–526.

<sup>28</sup> See J.P.A. Ioannidis, “Why Most Published Research Findings Are False,” *Plos Medicine* 8 (2005): online at <http://medicine.plosjournals.org/perlserv/?request=getdocument&doi=10.1371/journal.pmed.0020124>. The American journal *Pediatrics*, for many years a safe haven for the pro-circumcision forces within the American Association of Pediatrics (whose moderately anti-circumcision policy the journal has consistently sought to undermine), published an article by David Fergusson et al. purporting to show that circumcision reduced the risk of STIs by 50 percent and suggesting that neonatal circumcision was thus a wise measure of public policy. Following a number of critical responses posted on the *Pediatrics* website, Fergusson was forced to retract his claims. The news services which picked up his breathless media release have not reported the backdown, however, and *Pediatrics* has neither published the responses in its print edition nor formally withdrawn the original article. David M. Fergusson, Joseph M. Boden & L. John Horwood, “Circumcision Status and Risk of Sexually Transmitted Infection in Young Adult Males: An Analysis of a Longitudinal Birth Cohort,” *Pediatrics* 118 (2006): 1971–77. For the critiques and Fergusson’s response, see: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/eletters/118/5/1971>

areas just mentioned receive due weight, no policy on routine circumcision can claim to be either objective or comprehensive.

The point of publicizing the reactions and feelings of circumcised men is to emphasize the need to focus on more than just the medical evidence. It is significant that although most of the men in Laurence Cox's survey grew up in a society where most of their peers were also circumcised, they still came to resent their condition and to envy those boys who had been left alone. It might be expected that in a closed, monocultural society, where all boys were circumcised before they had become aware of their body (and thus where nobody had any knowledge of an uncut penis), the likelihood of dissatisfaction with the result would be minimized. This is certainly one reason why advocates of routine circumcision are so insistent that the procedure be done neonatally and universally. But in our multicultural, diverse and increasingly interdependent world, such a tribalist–totalitarian outcome is unlikely.

Despite Acton's cynical assurance that men cannot miss what they have never known, the human population will always consist of a mixture of natural and circumcised men (to the great benefit of researchers eager to conduct comparative studies, as well as people seeking acceptable sexual partners), so the potential for members of one group to envy those of the other will not disappear. The situation is not, however, symmetrical: an uncircumcised man can always have the operation if that is what he wants, but (the efforts of foreskin restorers notwithstanding) once the foreskin is excised there is no putting it back. Since penile preference is so tied up with personal aesthetics and body image, it seems both logical and fair to leave the choice of cavalier or roundhead to the owner of the organ, thus avoiding the sort of life-long pain expressed in a comment like this:

I remember waking up, after the general anaesthetic had worn off, and looking down. My beloved penis had been replaced with wrinkled skin, a collar of thorns – the black stitches – and an ugly great dome on top. I experienced shock at first, later deep anger and resentment. The stitches disappeared, but the mutilation did not. My father said, "I didn't think it would look like that."<sup>29</sup>

If even an American urologist can warn that routine circumcision is "a cosmetic procedure," and agree that "the health 'benefits' and risks of circumcision

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<sup>29</sup> D. John, quoted in Richard Johnson, "Sore Point," *Guardian* (29 October 2005), online: [www.circinfo.org/GuardianSore%20point.htm](http://www.circinfo.org/GuardianSore%20point.htm)

are evenly balanced by the advantages and ‘risks’ of being uncircumcised,”<sup>30</sup> then the decision about whether to undergo such emotionally significant and irreversible surgery will be based on non-medical considerations, such as ethics and sexual biology, and on subjective considerations, such as aesthetic taste and personal preference. If these are to be the deciding factors (assuming normal anatomy and no urgent medical problem), the appropriate person to make the choice must be the owner of the penis, and the case against routine circumcision of infants and boys (i.e. circumcision without the subject’s informed consent) becomes overwhelming.



## Appendix

### Comments from the questionnaires and letters

#### *Appearance of Body*

I am upset man because I don’t have a foreskin, so if you please help me by sending me any information on restoring my foreskin I will be very happy man.  
(Osborne Park, Western Australia)

I was very severely upset emotionally as a boy by my infancy circumcision (this turned into extreme lifelong anger). I so envied boys who had been “left alone.” I felt it a gross insult not to have been given any choice.  
(No details)

#### *Pain, Discomfort*

I had a first-timer perform my circumcision (according to my father). So there is nothing left of my foreskin. It was completely removed, not the fold-back method etc. This doctor also managed to remove and leave a nasty scar in place of the frenulum. Several days after this my parents found me in a cot full of blood, that is, I nearly died, and was appropriately rushed to hospital.  
(Age 31, circumcised at 8 months, letter to George Williams, 16 February 1995)

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<sup>30</sup> J.S. Elder, “Circumcision: Are You With Us Or Against Us,” editorial, *Journal of Urology* 176 (2006): 1911.

Physical problems included: premature ejaculation, irritation of glans from soap and condoms.

(Toowong, Queensland, letter, 23 August 1994)

I was circumcised at the age of three [years] and have been left with no more than 2 cm of hairless skin proximal to the glans on the underside of an erect penis. I reckon it must have been done by a medical student distantly related to Lorena Bobbit!

Each of my few sexual partners was understanding, but said that my hair in their vagina is irritant. I think this is because of the sheer amount of hair on my penis, plus the circumcision scarring and resultant acute angles that the hair grows. With that high in my mind, I tended to uncouple quickly after her orgasm, often whether or not I had come too. Condoms were a painful alternative because they invariably rolled back, catching the hairs. And I think that because of so little sensitive skin left anyway I very rarely came inside my partner when wearing a condom.

(Ivanhoe, Victoria, letter n.d. [1996])

As to why some men are restoring: Most I think just want to have normal sex organs. Sex IS better with a foreskin. [...] I am qualified to comment, having experienced both sides of the coin. COMFORT is another big plus (no constant rubbing of glans on clothes). This aspect I used to find really annoying.

(Malanda, Queensland, letter, 19 February 1999, successfully restored)

I am 35 years old and was circumcised back in the good old bad days. Ever since I was a teenager with normal development I became aware that something was wrong and not quite right with my penis. (It was not until I was 22 that I saw a foreskin.) The skin on the shaft cracks, and as I get older the discomfort and irritation caused by clothes abrasion can be extremely uncomfortable. There is also some loss of sensitivity of the glans caused by keratinisation. [...] I approached doctors but did not find suitable help or a sympathetic ear.

(No details)

### *Loss of sexual performance/satisfaction*

Sexual mutilation and child abuse. Denies complete sexual functions (and sensitivity) as nature intended.

(Born 1947, Australia)

I have very little sensitivity, can't masturbate without ample lubricant, can't even wear loose clothing without feeling abrasion etc. The damage done to

me is disruptive to sex and makes sex difficult (it takes ages to come to orgasm, for example).

(Born 1969, South Africa)

Disadvantages of circumcision: Very great – physical dulling and mental dismay at being less than whole.

(Born 1938, Australia)

And I think that because of so little sensitive skin left anyway I very rarely came inside my partner when wearing a condom.

(Ivanhoe, Victoria, letter n.d. [1996])

### *Poor Body Image and Self-Esteem*

I was circumcised as an infant and have felt uncomplete [sic] to the extent of being distressed and angry all my sexually active life. [At school experienced] curiosity and envy of those boys that had something extra that I didn't.

(Middle Park, Victoria, letter, 25 January 1995)

My father was not circumcised, and as a child when I saw my father's penis I thought that something was wrong with me. My father brushed off my concerns gently, but nevertheless I wondered why I had to be different. Similarly, I always thought I was missing out on something when I saw other boys who were not circumcised. I didn't know what I was missing out on, but felt cheated. Later I considered that I had been violated, and still resent the assumption of someone who thought that this was a good thing for me.

(Born 1951, Australia)

Also, there is a sense of inferiority. I'm mutilated, while partners are usually intact and really enjoy sex.

(Born 1969, South Africa)

I remember seeing my father when I was a youngster and wondering why the hell I wasn't the same – before I found out that most of my generation were done – one schoolmate I recall we teased because he looked so rough we reckoned he'd been done by pinking shears that women use in dress-making! I still feel mutilated, exposed, vulnerable, raw and wounded, and I've often thought that if it had happened by accident people would say it's a terrible injury to undergo.

(Annandale, New South Wales, letter, 12 May 1994)

*Resentment at violation of autonomy*

I have always considered the procedure of my circumcision to be an unauthorized mutilation and intrusion of my person, as well as a total violation of human rights.

(Age 26, Darlinghurst, New South Wales, letter to NOCIRC Australia, 10 June 1994)

I was adopted at the age of 6 months, and was circumcised at the age of 8 months. I am not very comfortable with the term, as it invokes quite horrendous feelings, ranging from unworthiness through to a sick feeling in the stomach. [...] I think it is the indignation of someone else making decisions for my body that pisses me off the most.

(Age 31, Cottesloe, Western Australia, letter to George Williams, 16 February 1995)

I always find it incredibly difficult to even think about it – a kind of denial or something; similar to when I have heard interviews with people who have been abused. [...] I feel a victim's role – a kind of commodity or chattel to be done with whatever they felt like – complete loss of respect for me – don't even bother to ask if I want the end of my penis cut off or not. Difficult to trust people – if a person's body is not theirs to control, what is?

(Born June 1953, Australia)

I am keen and eager to eventually reclaim what was forcibly and brutally taken from my very important organ without my knowledge or consent.

(Bomaderry New South Wales, letter, 31 December 1997)

I'm 24 and was circumcised at birth. I only recently had a sudden rage and bitterness at the thought of having been circumcised. [...] More and more I read and hear of sexual and manipulative differences, and have become highly concerned. [...] I'm finding myself jealous of other men and boys at the thought of them being uncut. [...] I'm very concerned and still very upset and a bit starved of information. It may sound over-dramatic, but I suddenly feel violated, deformed and deadened since my recent deep consideration of the topic.

(Age 24, Duncraig Western Australia, letter to NOCIRC Australia, 14 September 1993)

Having been a child born after the Second World War I am unnecessarily scarred with a circumcision of my penis. I have always remained angry and

frustrated that this procedure was done to me without my consent and done for the only reason of “to look like your dad,” and “to be one of the many.”

(Age 40, Caulfield, East Victoria, letter, 11 March 1995)

Feel I'm missing an important part of me. I felt that God gave us a complete penis for a reason, and men have no right to cut a boy because they feel like it, and it should be made law not to cut before the youth can say yes or no.

(Age 62, Heywood, Victoria, letter, 13 November 1995)

I am 75 years old and was circumcised in 1926 at 3 years old. [...] I came to Australia 40 years ago. Circumcision is the worst thing that has ever been done to me in my life. [...] My childhood was shocking. A horrible aunt, “a real bitch,” told my parents to have me circumcised. So at 3 years of age I became a victim of this barbaric amputation. Words can't tell of how much I hate being circumcised. [...] The skin hardens and about 60 per cent of the thrill is lost.

(Born 1923, UK, letter, n.d. [c. April 1998])

Circumcision has harmed my performance as a whole man. I feel so disgusted that it was done, an incredible invasion of a baby boy's body. I was 5 years old when done, the memory is vivid.

(Born 1955, Australia)

I feel a great loss of both choice and control in relation to my circumcision, as I was circumcised as a baby.

(Born 1963, Australia)

I can't talk about the emotional side of how I feel affected by my circumcision. It's like a block, a secret – an atrocity. I've lost the right to self-direction and decision.

(Toowong, Queensland, letter, 23 August 1994)

When I found out what damage circumcision had done to me and others I was shocked. A part of my body was stolen from me without my knowledge or consent in the past and against my will now. It grieves me to think that a healthy part of my body was discarded and is now dirt somewhere.

(No details)

Circumcision, my damage and mutilation continually fuel anger.

(Born 1969, South Africa)

*Difficulty with relationships*

Really never trusted or respected adoptive parents or medicos.

(Born 1953)

[Had experienced some success with restoration and as a result] feel much more relaxed, feel less threatened with my glans covered. And yes it has changed the whole way I carry myself – how close I get to people (closer) and how close I let them get to me (closer). I somehow don't feel exposed, more natural, clothed, covered, protected.

(Annandale, New South Wales, letter, n.d. [c. February 1996])

*Psychological problems*

I was feeling violated and raped. [Experienced disadvantages of circumcision as] psycho-active sexual desire disorder, sexual pain disorder, chronic pain disorder, male orgasmic disorder, paranoia, outrage, erection disorder, penile erectile dysfunction, interpersonal sexual development disorder, sexual aversion disorder, penile disfigurement, physiological dysfunction.

King's Cross, New South Wales, letter, 1 March 1998)

Undergoing therapy with a psychologist. During recent sessions a great deal of subconscious trauma has been uncovered, concerning me being circumcised, soon after birth. As this seemingly harmless occurrence is significant in relation to other issues I am dealing with, I will defer from going into too much detail in relation to my treatment. I should indicate that it is connected with anger towards my parents (for authorizing the procedure) and the doctor who performed it.

Age 26, Darlinghurst, New South Wales, letter to NOCIRC Australia, 10 June 1994)

*General comments*

I have emerging impotence problems at age 51, despite being healthy and fairly fit according to a recent gym assessment. I have had recent medicals, including blood pressure, blood tests for diabetes, thyroid, liver function, hormonal balance and cholesterol, penis Doppler blood flow and vein valve leakage, and ultrasound. All tests came within range for my age or better, and I have no reason to believe that I have contributory physical or mental problems for the impotence.

I took a short injection therapy course which allowed me to study my arousal sources without the stress of trying to keep erect. I discovered that only

traces of feeling remained in my penis, no matter its state, my arousal level, foreplay or other. [...] The doctor claimed my problems were psychological! Fantasy and foreplay are nice, but you must have coital feelings to keep it going and achieve a climax. I believe I had only lasted this long because I was able to fantasize enough to cover low penis sensitivity.

As other factors were eliminated it left insensitivity as the end result of circumcision as my problem. [...]

I approached an impotence clinic as my local doctor seemed out of his depth, but also asked a couple of my intact friends of my age about their arousal sources. One proved a good choice, as he knew impotence but overcame it, so was very helpful. His problem was basically late nights, grog, cigarettes, no caressing or real love to generate arousal. He came good once he established a real relationship. I don't believe I ever had any of those problems. Penis sensitivity was never an issue with him.

I asked questions, being careful not to beg answers, and found it curious they didn't know their sensation origins. (I always have, as I had to concentrate hard on each just to get and keep aroused.) I asked them to experiment and report back in a few weeks. Their answers were a confirmation of my suspicions and were rather upsetting for me.

They never thought about penis sensations, as they were always strong and available. They cannot use soap or have a shower play on their exposed glans, and they were adamant that their glans is not as sensitive as their inner foreskin. Glans sensitivity increases with arousal and cannot be touched. They were not sure whether that increase applied to foreskin feelings. Their pleasure and orgasm was mainly derived from foreskin rolling sensations during thrusting, rather than from any glans sensitivity. [...] To them, orgasm means arousal such that they may yell with pleasure, is involuntary, involves rigidity, spasms and nearly unbearable pressure and supreme pleasure. Both have full foreskin coverage when not erect. [...]

It seems that few understand an intact penis, most especially those who are cut. Even my wife who for years was the charge sister at Queen Victoria Hospital maternity section and saw hundreds of circumcisions did not realize the mechanism of a foreskin, how it inverts to form the bulk of the shaft skin when [the penis is] erect, or how inches of sensitive inside tissue are exposed and allowed thrusting without stress.

(Wheeler's Hill, Victoria, letter, 23 March 1997)

I get angry that people knew and still know so little about the foreskin and its normal functions and are prepared to sacrifice them. There is no reason why any child at all should be damaged or killed by circumcision or its effects. You cannot weigh the fact that this occurs against any of the supposed bene-

fits. The thought that boys in future may feel as I do makes me firmly anti this destructive and harmful procedure. We rightly condemn the “circumcision” of girls and yet encourage it for boys. It is carried out on helpless infants and is one situation where boys and men really are victims.

(No details)

It was awful! The effects of anaesthesia and the after-effects – urinating out of a wound in the side of the penis, plus PAIN. I have felt inferior sexually inadequate ever since – felt withdrawn and have been afraid of sex ever since. I can’t feel anything and have trouble ejaculating. I sank into despair and tried suicide at age 18 years old. It has caused me depression, and I have avoided relationships. I thought I was homosexual because of my difficulties – the women I have had relationship with get frustrated and eventually leave for someone else. I can’t tell them or anyone about the problem. No-one understands. I am now 44 years old and have never married or had children.

(Age 44, Mt Stuart, Tasmania, letter, 30 December 1994; circumcised at age 12, on account of “my mother’s fears about male puberty”)

If this is what sex is like with a surrogate foreskin, what must sex be like with the real thing, I ask you?

(Age 51, Sydney, following successful foreskin restoration using techniques developed by Jim Bigelow)

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## SECTION 4

### INTERVIEWS AND TESTIMONIES



## KOFFI KWAHULÉ

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### Men's Business

#### An Interview with Chantal Zabus

**T**HIS INTERVIEW TOOK PLACE on 9 February 2005 in Koffi Kwahulé's Parisian apartment, 2, rue de la Folie Méricourt, Paris. The interviewer is Chantal Zabus (hereafter CZ) and the interviewee, Koffi Kwahulé (hereafter KK).

*CZ: Koffi Kwahulé, you wrote Bintou, a play originally called Et son petit ami s'appelait Samiagamal,<sup>1</sup> after the Egyptian singer. What year was that?*

*KK: In 1996. The play was then staged by Gabriel Garran in 1997 at the TILF, the International French-Language Theatre in Paris. After that, the play was performed in Europe and Africa, up to its most recent production by Rosa Gasquet at the Théâtre Océan Nord in Brussels.*

*CZ: And, of course, you talk in your play about the excision of the eponymous Bintou, an adolescent of African descent from the Paris suburbs. Is it an excision that was forcibly imposed?*

*KK: Yes, this excision takes place in Europe, so not in Africa. And because it does take place in Europe, where things are differently perceived, it is per*

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<sup>1</sup> ... *Et son petit ami s'appelait Samiagamal* (Paris & Arles: Éditions Actes Sud-Papiers, 1996). This play was the (first) shorter version of *Bintou*.

force imposed; this is the case with all excisions that are performed in the West. It is partly what the play is about. At the time I was writing the play, France was beleaguered by trials around excision.

*CZ: Do you mean the Bobigny trials?*<sup>2</sup>

KK: Yes, I do. But not only in Bobigny .... even in the centre of Paris, in the suburbs. France was seething with trials, as if to attest to the fact that the practice of excision did exist. We were then witnessing a hiatus between the high-tech French world and the archaic practice of excision. How could two apparently irreconcilable, even antagonistic phenomena eventually converge?

*CZ: The practice of excision therefore becomes part of the context of exile, since you evoke these African families that have immigrated to Paris. But in Africa, more particularly in Ivory Coast, are excision and circumcision the same on the level of ritual?*

KK: Yes, definitely, on the level of ritual, there are, because they are both initiatory rites of passage. One moves on to the adult world, the world of masculinity or femininity, into some sort of fulfilment. Excision and circumcision first and foremost play that role. At the same time, I must mention that not all peoples from Ivory Coast practised excision or even circumcision. I am Baoule and, among the Baoule, the practice of excision does not exist, nor does circumcision. That does not mean that there are no circumcised Baoule; however, it is almost impossible to find Baoule excised women.

*CZ: How do you explain that some undergo the procedure and others do not? Is it no longer linked to one's ethnic group?*

KK: No, no, today circumcision is practised by all ethnic groups in Ivory Coast that did not practise it before. As to excision, it remains confined to some ethnic groups that have been practising it since times immemorial.

*CZ: So, as a Baoule, you are not circumcised.*

KK: Yes, I am! But it was a personal choice.

*CZ: Oh! So you chose to do it?*

KK: It is not a choice predicated upon my belonging to one ethnic group or another. It is a personal decision.

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<sup>2</sup> Bobigny is a Northern suburb of Paris.

*CZ: How old were you when you made that decision?*

KK: I must have been thirteen or fourteen years old. Yes, because ... it remains nevertheless an initiation. It means taking upon oneself the responsibility for one's initiation and confronting something, a kind of pain. According to what I had been told, it was the apex of pain. I wanted to experience that and reckon whether I would be able to endure it. Compared with my friends who belonged to ethnic groups where the practice existed, I wanted to know whether I myself was able to go through it.

*CZ: Were you circumcised with boys of your age-group?*

KK: I was supposed to do it along with friends.

*CZ: Don't tell me they gave up on you! Did they?* [laughter]

KK: Yes, they did... [laughter]. On the day it was to take place, they did go along; but then they pulled out and I went by myself. In fact, it could have turned out to be a disaster because it is a dangerous operation. The fact of going by myself, seeing the circumciser... If anything had happened to me... with hindsight, I realize that it was indeed dangerous.

*CZ: To which ethnic group did the circumciser belong?*

KK: He was Hausa, originally from Niger. Since in my ethnic group there are no circumcisers, I had to find someone willing to do that kind of work. And it is work, because you pay him in exchange for the operation. But, when I look back on it all, I tell myself that if anything had gone wrong that day... I went there by myself...nobody knew where I was since... it was a secret between him and me. I mean that here was some risk involved...But thank God, it all went well.

*CZ: So the operation took place between you and the circumciser?*

KK: Yes, as I told you. There were actually three of us, my brother and a friend, but they pulled out at the last minute... [laughter]

*CZ: And was there any ceremony... were you under the impression of having undergone an operation that could have been... surgical?*

KK: Well... hmm [hesitating] I do not know how to say this.... Yes, it was a surgical operation, but I had the impression of having *faced* something. Now, in Africa, excision and circumcision are no longer done with the ritual. The individual goes to the circumciser or the exciser or they come to you... it depends. Even in societies where the practice was performed in those days,

there is, to my knowledge, less and less ritual involved for circumcision. However, as far as excision is concerned, I have seen, right in the city of Abidjan, ethnic groups celebrating newly excised girls, just like back in the village! What I witnessed was always accompanied by a ritual, whereas, for circumcision, the ritual tends to peter out, possibly because it remains a sort of ... yes, that's it, a kind of surgical operation. I did not know why I was doing it. All that I knew was that there must have been something in it... And then, afterwards, I realized that it was necessary for hygienic reasons, for health reasons, against certain diseases. But I did not consider that at the time; it was a matter between me and myself.

*CZ: It was a personal ritual, in a way. Was there any pressure exerted on your friends, those who let you down at the last minute (laughter).*

KK: No, no, not at all... It's just that they did not come, that's all. [laughter]

*CZ: Did they undergo the circumcision afterwards, by following your example?*

KK: Of course! They did do it later because I had done it. All of a sudden, I appeared as the most courageous, when, in fact, I was the youngest and the least courageous of the three of us. They then said: "If he of all people did it, then there is no reason why we shouldn't."

*CZ: And when did this take place?*

KK: It must have been around the beginning of 1970.

*CZ: Would a circumcision today take place in such circumstances or would it, rather, take place in a hospital?*

KK: In those days, when I had it done, I could also have it done in a hospital.

*CZ: Oh, so you had that option? You could have gone to the hospital rather than go to the circumciser?*

KK: Yes.

*CZ: So what made you decide to have it done by the circumciser? Was it because there was a spiritual dimension to it?*

KK: Definitely, because at the hospital that would have been done through a medical act. Yet I am not ill. A hospital is a place where you get healed. Going to the hospital would have entailed undergoing an operation, actually, an ablation. No! In my own logic, circumcision does not take anything away

from me; it is the very opposite, it is as if something had been added to me. At the hospital, I would have been harmed... Of course, I was an adolescent or a pre-adolescent; so I did not necessarily make that kind of analysis. But, as far as I was concerned, I could not go to the hospital.

*CZ: Did the circumciser use a ritual knife?*

KK: I was frightened out of my wits, you know. On top of that, I had my eyes closed; I had to close them. So I don't really know what he did it with. Would I have done it if... I am aware I took incalculable risks. I didn't see what he was doing... hmm... I don't know what he did. But I am certain that, for him, it was a ritual because he had been doing that for ever. As for me, I don't insist on the ritual aspect. At the end of the day, it does not interest me. But, as a Hausa, the circumciser is culturally predisposed to it. His ritual does not interest me. The only thing that interested me was for him to do that one thing; the rest is his own business.

*CZ: This Hausa circumciser was islamized, I imagine? Did he invoke Islam when he proceeded with the operation?*

KK: No, I did not hear any Sura or anything. He told me: "Sit down there." By the time I closed my eyes, it was already done. He was not alone; there were two of them... The other one was there to hold me.

*CZ: Were you standing up, reclining or seated?*

KK: Seated. I was sitting.

*CZ: Was there anyone holding you by the shoulders?*

KK: Yes, somebody was there holding me that way. If I moved too much, it could have caused the operation to fall through. But the person who was in charge of keeping me steady could see that there was no point in him doing that because I did not struggle... Also, experience has shown that most people, as soon as they see a bit of blood, when they first experience the slightest pain, well... [laughter].

*CZ: Since you are mentioning pain, was it the apex of pain that you described earlier?*

KK: Ah! I still remember it. In that sense, I do remember... It was a particular pain. That is, the kinds of pain that I later experienced in my life, I don't recall them with any degree of accuracy. I only remember that, at that particular time, it would hurt terribly but I didn't keep a memory of it, I would say, *in*

*my flesh.* Whereas, during my circumcision, it is not so much that it hurt more than anything else – I do not think so,– as much as I could recognize *that* pain.

*CZ: It is a psychic pain, as well.*

KK: Yes, that's it, I can recognize it. I know where it is. *That* pain is there, whereas the others would fade away. As if the other pains were without memory. And that pain had a memory, maybe because it would not be done to me again. Possibly, for that reason.

*CZ: It is a "symbolic wound"?*<sup>3</sup>

KK: Without a doubt. And I know that that pain is very much there. I know what it feels like but, in absolute terms, it does not hurt more than ... Of course, it is pain, that's obvious. But I had thought of something that would have been so much grander ... On the spot, I believe I didn't even cry. I remember having bitten into the trousers of the one who was holding me tight, so that I couldn't ... precisely because it is also part of the whole show: "Would I be able to stand the pain without crying, without screaming and the like?" One of my brothers, who had undergone the procedure, had told me: "It is a pain that feels like iron cutting through iron." Sure enough, after the procedure, I could see what he meant, but at the same time, you can see it is an initiation, whatever you might say to the contrary, because it is a pain that cannot be repeated. It is not like fire: with fire, everybody can get burnt. I could get burnt tomorrow and so forth... even so, it is difficult to describe the pain but, in the case of circumcision, one cannot describe it: either you have done it or you haven't. At the same time, it is something that is very much there, with you...

*CZ: One is inhabited by that pain.*

KK: Indeed, if I were to experience another pain, I would know it is not *that* one, that's for sure. Precisely because it cannot ever happen again.

*CZ: One only experiences the pain once?*

KK: Exactly, only that one time.

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<sup>3</sup> After Bruno Bettelheim's book *Les blessures symboliques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

*CZ: Was the operation followed by a period of convalescence?*

KK: Yes, of course. Because you have to take care of the wound, and it does take a long time to heal. We celebrated, in a group; because my other two mates made up their minds a few days later. So we did take care of our wounds together. Convalescence is thus this period during which you have to dress the wound, which is in itself particular. After the circumcision, the circumciser gave me some home remedy to help heal the wound. I did not know what it was; it was some type of chewed bark. Then, when I ran out, I bought some medication at the pharmacy.

*CZ: What was this home remedy?*

KK: It was a type of bark, because each time we dressed the wound, we would use hot water, we would then place the bark around and, I remember, the remedy would really sting my skin, like an antiseptic, I suppose...

*CZ: Were you alone in taking care of that wound... Could you have asked your mother to help?*

KK: No, no, especially not my mother. In any case, no woman would have accepted such a thing, because at that time, we were all thirteen and older...

*CZ: You were already a man.*

KK: That's it. According to tradition, I no longer had the right to sleep in the same room as my mother.

*CZ: Did the circumcision change your sexual life? Did the circumciser initiate you into sexuality? Did he give you advice?*

KK: No, no.

*CZ: You had to learn by yourself?*

KK: Yes, just like everybody else, in an empirical way...

*CZ: There was no...*

KK: ...users' guide? No [laughter]. But in what I would call traditional society, young men stay for a period of time in the Sacred Grove, where they are initiated to sexuality, oratory skills, conversational turn-taking, the basics of life – everything that makes them into adults.

*CZ: Would you have liked to be initiated in the traditional way?*

KK: Well... I was born in the city, I grew up in the city; I only know the city. Maybe later, as an adult, there were things that I would have liked to learn in that traditional setting, but, in any case, circumcision does not exist in my ethnic group.

*CZ: Did your parents voice any objections? Did they respect your decision?*

KK: Yes, they did.

*CZ: Did you believe that, because you were circumcised, you had gained access to a certain type of masculinity?*

KK: No, I did not live the experience in that way at all. Even after the whole thing, I still saw myself as an adolescent. It was a reckoning of sorts with myself... Besides, I remember that most girls really held dearly onto circumcision....

*CZ: Baoule girls?*

KK: Yes! Baoule girls wanted circumcised men... when in fact circumcision did not exist in their own traditions.

*CZ: Were there any insults about uncircumcised males?*

KK: Yes, of course, there were.

*CZ: What type of insults? And what were the connotations of such insults?*

KK: The insult was *Floco*...In Baoule, it designates the place where one would put a gun... like a sheath. The sheath is empty and limp.

*CZ: Like the vagina of a woman? Is there any allusion to women's sexual organs?*

KK: No, not at all. This is, rather, more like the idea of incompleteness... in relation to the idea of completeness [Fr: *complétude*]. So that *floco* means 'still naive', 'a bit stupid'.

*CZ: After the initiation, do attitudes change?*

KK: Yes, afterwards, of course, they do... You feel complete. You are like the others on that count. To put it in a nutshell, you are beyond reproach. You are part of the same group. It is true that an uncircumcised man was poorly regarded by the girls.

*CZ: Was it more the women who exerted pressure?*

KK: Yes, it was. I remember that it would get on my nerves....

*CZ: Were these girls excised?*

KK: No, since, in my ethnic group, excision does not exist.

*CZ: But who would indulge in such mockery, then?*

KK: The girls did!

*CZ: Are you talking about non-Baoule girls?*

KK: No, I am talking about Baoule girls! [laughter, giggles].

*CZ: Well... tell me more [laughter].*

KK: That's the whole point. They were for circumcision because they imagined the guts that it takes to do it. That's what they wanted to see in a man.

*CZ: Couldn't the boys talk back at these Baoule girls by saying: "Why should I be circumcised if you are not excised yourselves?"*

KK: No, it would never occur to a boy to say: "Go and get yourself excised!" Circumcision is men's business, that's all there is to it.

*CZ: Were there, to your knowledge, Baoule girls who, like you, decided to get excised, who decided of their own volition to go to the exciser?*

KK: Oh, that's an impossibility; I have never seen that. That simply does not exist.

*CZ: Could, then, one talk, in this instance, of dissymmetry?*

KK: Yes, definitely. Yes, because men and women did not practise it at all. However, under pressure from the women, men started to have themselves circumcised. But the men did not exert any pressure on women to have them excised; that's simply not true. That is to say, circumcision is men's business.

*CZ: What about the girls? What was in it for them? They wanted men who 'had balls', who were "virile"?*

KK: That's it! Because a circumcised man has proven something. I believe that in most women's minds – as in men's, by the way – the uncircumcised male is to some extent like a woman.

*CZ: This is exactly what I was hinting at when I mentioned the woman's vagina, because in Latin, vagina means exactly that – a sheath. And when you described the unfinished aspect of the uncircumcised member, which is ill-defined, incomplete, I immediately thought of the wrinkled aspect of women's genitals.*

KK: And, on top of it, I believe that a circumcised member has no particular smell, whereas the uncircumcised man's member recalls a woman's vulva. I disliked that smell before circumcision.

*CZ: It was a genital odour, I suppose...*

KK: Indeed... Since my circumcision, I no longer have that smell with me, and it's better that way. There no longer was that ... confusion... out of which arose this odorous smell, like that of a woman.

*CZ: Does the cutting of the prepuce of the glans affect, for instance, sexual intercourse?*

KK: I was too young at the time to have experienced sexual intercourse [laughter], but if I can trust people who had a sexual life before they were circumcised, they thought it was better once they had been circumcised.

*CZ: To come back to your play, Bintou – do you think that your experience as a circumcised man helped you gain insight into the world of Bintou and that of Moussoba, the exciser, who practises the craft of excision. Is there a link between your play on excision and your experience of circumcision?*

KK: No, if I had not been circumcised, I would have asked myself the same question. When you live in Africa, you don't think of the issue; the question surfaces once you are in contact with Europe, with the concepts of bodily integrity, of women's rights, and the like. In Africa, even though there were conscience-raising individuals who did not agree with the practice, it was not really a main preoccupation. One has to locate the issue in a purely European or europeanized context. In my Africa, today, those who protest against the practice are literate. As far as I am concerned, when I was in Africa, the issue was not on my mind, but as soon as I discovered that the practice truly existed, I took a stand, not as an African – even though that plays a part in it – nor as someone who has been circumcised. I simply asked myself: "Do people agree to be circumcised?" I have not yet met a circumcised man who denounced the practice of circumcision and accused the circumciser of having caused him 'harm'. However, I have known excised girls who suffered from the experience. So, perforce, I asked myself questions. Logically, there should be symmetry but, on closer scrutiny, you find that something is amiss.

*CZ: Could there possibly be a certain silence around men's operations that miscarry?*

KK: Do you mean if people die from circumcision and the like? Like bleeding, botched cauterizations... But there is no such thing, or at least people don't talk about it. But even if you did talk about it, it still wouldn't be the same as excision, because excision touches on the issue of pleasure. With excision, you have the idea of surveillance, of controlling something outside of the ritual. One should not forget that both practices exist in patriarchal societies, regardless of the fact that these societies are governed by men and that these men seek to retain control of their society by whatever means. To control a society amounts to controlling the Other, the one who is across from you... and that Other is woman. Excision must be inscribed in those contexts and one should stop envisaging it from the surgical point of view. In addition, it has not been proven that excision is a medical act. Whereas, before becoming a ritual, circumcision was first and foremost, whether in Jewish or other societies, a medical act. It is much later that the decorum, the ritual, was grafted onto it – but it was first a medical act, which is not the case with excision – I may be wrong – but, to my knowledge, it is not a preventive act in any way. However, circumcision prevents many a disease – in particular, cancer in men.... I believe one should not put both practices on the same plane.

*CZ: But when you raise the question of hygiene, arguing that a circumcised male child is less likely to have health problems... what if you were told that this was not medically verifiable?*

KK: It's possible that it is not verifiable. The question remains, though: "Who controls who?" I speak from the point of a view of a society ruled by men. So the act that men inflict upon themselves is an act that, in a certain way, 'embellishes', but the act that they inflict upon the Other, upon woman, is a form of coercion. So, whether it's good or bad, excision reflects, in my view, the effort that a masculine social formation makes to entrench the feminine dimension of the world.

*CZ: In African traditions generally, there is an implicit symmetry in the sense in which – for instance, among the Dogon of Mali, who fascinated the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule so much – excision and circumcision are predicated on immutably separate notions of masculinity and femininity. The*

*male and the female body are truly inscribed, etched into the structure of the village, in a symmetrical manner.*<sup>4</sup>

KK: I agree with you that, *a priori*, there is symmetry. But if I go further into the analysis of society, I cannot dissociate human practices from politics. The ritual is a disguise. What does the ritual hide? That men should be circumcised and women excised, okay, but, at the end of the day, who decides what? And in whose name? I use as my point of departure the fact that societies are controlled by men and that, behind apparently parallel, equivalent, symmetrical practices, if you will, lurks men's need to control someone, and women are excised so that they can be controlled.

CZ: *I am going to play the devil's advocate for a little while, if you'll allow me. There is circumcision as you have experienced it; there is also routine circumcision, as it is practised on 60% of eight-day-old infants in the USA, but there is also per'riah, an ancient Jewish practice, which involved the cutting of the frenulum but also some form of penile flaying. It was rather harmful, I imagine. Circumcision can have consequences for the sexual life of a child. So, in those cases when circumcision takes on a more severe form and hampers the physical and emotional development of the child, couldn't one then speak of symmetry between the two practices?*

KK: There is no symmetry, inasmuch as excision is a traumatizing practice that diminishes the sense of self. I resorted to the circumciser to test my own limits, to assert something, to confirm the – possibly false and illusory – idea of what a man ought to be. When you put circumcision side by side with excision, you hear things like: “One man's circumciser is another woman's exciser. Why such a fuss about excision?” But the answer is: “Because circumcision has nothing to do with controlling the other's body.” One tries instead – and I guess I'm repeating myself here – to affirm something to oneself.

CZ: *But the child who is circumcised within the Jewish faith or in an American hospital is only a few days old.*

KK: Granted, but one cannot justify the practice of excision merely by virtue of the existence of circumcision. At the end of the day, I notice that the one who has been circumcised has not experienced that moment as a traumatic event, whereas excised women – maybe not all of them, but those I have encountered – have experienced the operation as an irremediable ablation, a gap

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<sup>4</sup> This is a reference to Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* (1965; London: International African Institute/Oxford UP, 1970).

forever in their lives. *That* I have never encountered among circumcised men. How could there be symmetry, equivalence, when one half lives through it very badly whereas the other half experiences it as a practice that embellishes him more than it deprives him of something? I start from there.

*CZ: So, if there is any dissymmetry, it is more of a discursive kind, because presumably men do not speak about the trauma or do not recognize the experience as traumatic.*

*KK: Because, fundamentally, there is none.*

*CZ: Jacques Derrida once said to me that he had suffered from his circumcision even though it took place when he was only eight days old. I had told him; "but you are too young to remember." He then replied; "If you believe in the unconscious, you can suffer from it." That's the reason why he wrote Circumfession – about [the implications of] his own circumcision.*

*KK: Maybe, in his case, he suffered when it did take place. But with excision, one suffers on the spot, at that very moment, but you also suffer a long time after the operation is over. You suffer more than just physically, if you see what I mean. You carry this wound within yourself, enduring suffering and trauma forever. One must, then, add to all of this some sort of realization of this act in relation to one's femininity.*

*CZ: But circumcision also takes away the feminine, since it often purports to eliminate the vestigial femininity of the prepuce.*

*KK: Yes, but circumcision does not take away masculinity. I am not saying that it's a good thing, but simply that the act of circumcision marks the body by removing in principle something feminine in you. But it is first and foremost a symbolic act. Everything that creates confusion between male and female in you is ended; now you are a fully-fledged man; you are *that* and nothing else. Conversely, what made a woman also a man is ended; you are a woman and nothing else. But with excision, at the moment when your femininity is affirmed, what then happens denies that in the same movement. Excision denies masculinity, that's something we agree upon; but it also denies femininity.*

*CZ: But that is exactly my point: human beings are far more complex than that. Do you feel that this tradition brings about segregation by sex, which aims precisely at removing any possible 'confusion' in human beings such as homosexuality, bisexuality, cross-gender identification, transvestitism, and*

*transgender? Might African traditions be more rigid, less receptive to the in-between twilight zones?*

KK: If I refer to my own ethnic group, neither circumcision nor excision exists. In the end, there are few African societies that practise circumcision *per se*. It was not very widespread. The African peoples who practise circumcision have, for the most part, been influenced by Islam, such as the peoples from the Sahel. I am not talking about excision, because that's too complicated.

*CZ: Were there other rites of passage?*

KK: Of course, that's obvious. There existed other rites of passage that have nothing to do with the cutting of a bit of your genitals. ... There is what we call "The Sacred Grove," where a few young men are gathered, far from the village, and where they are tested in various ways. But one still remains in the symbolic. But I was born in the city; I am a bit of a city product. I do not know village life well. My birthplace, Abengourou, is the fifth-largest city in Ivory Coast. I never underwent any initiation of any kind: the only initiation I went through was self-imposed circumcision, which, you will recall, is not practised in my ethnic group. I am a city guy; I've put together my own little thing, I've made myself; I've invented my own ritual; that's all there is to it. [laughter].

*CZ: Have you heard of what happens in the Sacred Grove?*

KK: No, I don't know, except that the initiates are gathered in the Sacred Grove. But, by definition, an initiation is not meant to be articulated; it is not told; it is a unique experience. It is like the taste of an apple. Someone who has never tasted an apple – you can describe its taste in any way you want, that person will only understand it through experience. Initiation is an event, in the Biblical sense, that steeps you in another world, not a revolutionary world but, rather, a *revelationary* one. The experience is indeed a revelation: it happens only once and it can't happen again; you had to be there that one time...

*CZ: It marks and demarcates one...*

KK: Precisely. It is not an experience that one shares through narrative, through description. In this case, "it happened that way" loses all meaning. The narrative is the envelope.

*CZ: You have a daughter.... If you had had a son, would you have chosen to have him circumcised?*

KK: Yes, definitely. Because it is an initiation, because I think it is better, that's all. In fact, I don't know why, but when I see the picture of an un-circumcised male organ... I always have the impression ... that he is a coward... [laughter]. I question his morality.... I know that ethics has nothing to do with it but I tell myself that a guy who is not circumcised, who has not 'proven' anything, hosts within himself, in one way or another, a personality without substance. Yet I know that's not true and that maybe that guy, on an ethical level and otherwise, I can't hold a candle to him. But my first reflex is that... he's no good. While I recognize at the same time that I am wrong...

*CZ: To come back to Bintou, would you have written a play about circumcision?*

KK: No, definitely not, because there would be nothing to say about it. Because I find circumcision 'normal'. The act of having myself circumcised is the affirmation of culture. Maybe that was what prompted me to do it. It results from the impact I make on nature; how, as a human being, I intervene in nature, and I constrain it as well so as to make space for culture. As a consequence, if I had a male child, I would have him circumcised. But to act on nature is not necessarily a positive act. One can very well want to act on nature and destroy it. For me, that is what excision does.

*CZ: Is Moussoba, the exciser in Bintou, complicit with patriarchy? Possibly without knowing it?*

KK: Of course, because she has internalized the patriarchal discourse and gaze; she believes that she is the one who acts, when in fact she is *acted upon* by something she has been dragging with her from Africa and in which she believes. Undoubtedly just like me, who believe that circumcision is normal, she believes that excision is normal, in a symmetrical way, that it happens between women. Even though excisions are also done by men, but that's not very often. Even if excision takes place between women, a man is 'gazing', as it were; he is 'present' in some subtle way. It is under his surveillance that the act of excision is perpetrated. As far as Moussoba is concerned, she has internalized men's discourse so much that she will do it her whole life long. She fails to understand why some voices are protesting against the act, and she is sincere in that lack of understanding. But the harm she inflicts on Bintou – she does it to Bintou *for* men and in their name.

*CZ: Bintou could have been a nice girl living at her mother's in a sheltered milieu. Instead, she is the leader of an urban gang; she doesn't wear any underwear; she is aggressive and is armed with a flick-knife....*

KK: Yes, indeed. When the play was produced by Gabriel Garran, I had an argument with an association of excised women who had seen the play in Paris... and who were truly scandalized. To them, there was nothing positive about Bintou. I asked them the following question: "Do you think that most excised women in the world were like Bintou? No, they weren't. It was the very opposite: they were kind, quiet girls who would never raise their voices. And they were excised all the same; some of them died from the operation." In other words, it is not because Bintou is the way she is that she deserves what happened to her; this is precisely why I chose a girl like Bintou who had *a priori* nothing going for her, a girl whom we cannot excuse. So, even with a girl like Bintou, nothing justifies the excision that is forced upon her. But, that very point these women [from the Association] did not understand. To them, Bintou should have been a nice, quiet girl so as to better show how unjust it was to excise her. But that's just bullshit! Before they were excised, were these women in any way like Bintou? No, they were not. And yet they were excised. Excision does not take place because you are good or bad; it has nothing to do with it, it is not a question of morals! There are African societies where people think that excision comes from the fact that an unexcised woman experiences the sexual act twelve times more than a man does. So excision takes place to control that excess. Twelve times, that's much too much! [laughter]. But these are the hidden, subterranean reasons for excision. How can one negotiate this bottomless womanly pleasure that I, as a man who seeks to assert my power through my 'manhood', will never be able to satisfy? If one posits woman as a site of pleasure, how can one 'jugulate' that pleasure to better satisfy my own – in other words, to dominate her? There's the rub! [laughter]

*CZ: Did the excised women who were part of the audience accept your explanation?*

KK: They were part of an association against excision. One of them, the boss, had been excised... and her name was Bintou, which is somewhat odd. The question always comes round to that. These are people who fight (who are activists) but they think that... recently, I wrote a play, *Jaz*,<sup>5</sup> which was staged in Poitiers. A group of feminists were among the audience. Even before

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<sup>5</sup> *Jaz* (Paris: Éditions théâtrales, 1998); it is a monologue that recounts the rape of Jaz.

seeing my play, they came to meet the stage manager to tell her how much they were against the play.... However, by the end of the play, they were quieter; but they were still resentful. To Karen Fichelson, the stage manager, they said that they were angry at the thought that a man could have 'understood' that.... In a way, I understand these women, their bitterness. If I draw a parallel with the Black question, I recognize the reason for their indignation. How can a black man posit himself in relation to a white issue, even a positive one? I understand that very well. These groups are structured in this way: "I only have the right to speak about that; why should he be speaking about that?" I say that in a caricatured way. But apparently some did not expect a man to address such an issue as rape.

*CZ: Were they trying to tell you that you did not have the moral authority to speak about it?*

*KK: I believe so. Deep down, they had this idea that it was not up to me to speak about it.*

*CZ: Whose role is it, then?*

*KK: According to them, it is up to women to speak about it; that is, I can speak about it only insofar as it gives women the opportunity to say the extent to which men are truly horrible. That would be a discourse they would understand better. However, when faced with a discourse upon which they do not have a hold to feed their own discourse, then a certain frustration sets in. Some feminists – and I believe they are right to be feminists – often use a discourse that one has to go through when one belongs to a minority. When you think about it, women are not a minority – they, rather, make up a minorized majority. There are some discursive rites of passage, which consists in some sort of excessive discourse, which is sometimes necessary in order to clarify things. This is an attitude I understand because I myself, as a black individual, at some point, I had stopped reading works by a white person who writes about blacks. I would tell myself: "In any case, whites who say even good things about blacks still speaks about whites, not blacks...." I therefore fully understand where these women are coming from. And I'm not a feminist who has experienced such emotions, women's issues, or, say, the abysmal predicament of excised women; I only speak about women from a man's point of view, regardless. I try to understand these women; I put myself in their shoes even if it's only on the level of discourse. One could, of course, answer back: "But what do *you* know about women?" And it is indeed true, *in fine*, as one says in academic parlance, it's about men that I speak. In *Bintou*, I speak*

about men, how they react when faced with the girl who has all of a sudden become a woman....

*CZ: Maybe ... I am thinking of the knife that Bintou uses against herself at the end of the play. It belongs to Manu, her boyfriend. We could argue that this episode reeks of a masculine sensibility. Could you come back to the way in which you see that act of self-mutilation?*

KK: The play addresses the outburst of sexual desire in a thirteen-year-old girl. Sexuality is present, but as we are steeped in the world of metaphors, of symbols, I wanted the sex act to go through some sort of transfer, an object which would propel Bintou into action. It is for this very reason that Manu gives her the flick-knife and for that reason as well that, at the end, Bintou unconsciously claims that knife for the excision. If there is to be pain, she would like that pain to be conveyed through what she has herself decided, through the sexual organ of her boyfriend. Bintou asserts her power throughout on the boys and on Manu. At one point, Manu gives her his knife, his power, so, in other words, he has given her his phallus.... At the very moment it dawns on her that she is going to be excised, that this thing is going to take place, Bintou claims the knife, so that, in an illusory way, she is in a position to amortize the ‘rape’. I could have shown the two kids having sex, but, to me, that’s not interesting at all. I played around with the transfer, which accounts for Bintou’s taking the knife. In any case, for fighting, she keeps it in her pants – that is, she puts the weapon and her genitalia in enforced proximity.

*CZ: The play does provide an insider’s perspective. Maybe that is what disturbs – that a man should have penetrated the feminine world?*

KK: The incident I related about those women giving me a hard time happened only once. As a rule, women can cope with the stage. In any case, I don’t spend my time thinking about that. I know there are people who make a fuss – “This is not your business” – but there’s that side of me, that’s all there is to it! [*laughter*].

*CZ: Doesn’t the artist have a rightful claim?*

KK: Even if I were not an artist, I would feel entitled. I don’t need to be an artist to have the right to do that [*laughter*]. I would keep on doing it because I position myself in a space of protest. I try to summon up emotions, and it seems to me that the woman is a character precisely because I don’t know what [that character] is about, because it is unfathomable, and therefore richer. I can do anything I want. I don’t know where a woman starts and where she finishes. And if what I write allows one to talk about women’s

issues, so much the better, even though I know from experience that women are intelligent enough to defend themselves. In any case, I am but a maker of emotions via literary material that I intend to be – and that I would fight for – feminine.

*CZ: It is possibly this feminine part – the world of women, the feminine world-view – that you try to recuperate through your writing because it has been removed from you through your circumcision [laughter].*

*KK: I never thought about that, but you may have a point... I grew up in Africa but not in a world of women. Well, in fact, we all grow up in a world of women, but once you are in contact with the West – not physically, because at the time I was still in Ivory Coast, but with school you are already in the West – I felt that this world of women was no longer there... This world of women – I did not find in France. It was like black and white, in the photographic sense: everything was reversed. At home, it was women who had humour and men who didn't have any. This does not mean that men lack humour entirely, but, deep down, humour is the business of women. My mother was very, very funny. But when my father laughed, well, it was thin. It is like Christians – when they laugh, it isn't serious [laughter]. In France, curiously, humour is the monopoly of men, and women are very serious. So, already mentally, it was in school that I moved away from this world of women I was familiar with. Then, once, I came to France, I discovered another way of being to the world that was unfamiliar to me. I rediscovered that humour among gay men, strangely enough. Gay men in France have the same kind of humour that women had back home in Africa, when I was a teenager. But in France, when you ask women what kind of husband they would like to have, they invariably reply: "I would like to marry a man who is wealthy, handsome, and funny." So there! "Funny." [laughter]. Humour here is always men's business. To write about women, therefore, may be a way of recovering that world. Some people try to reclaim their childhood though writing. As far as I am concerned, I try to recover that world of women which has been – 'snatched' is not the right word – but, rather, removed from me through the order of things, by the circumstances of life, thanks to my schooling, I would say, through my coming out into the world. The further I would penetrate the Western world, the further that world of women would recede and the more I would long to recover it, possibly, in my writing. In a way, my coming to the West coincided with my coming out of the Garden. Most writers seek their childhood; I seek that women's world [laughter].*

*CZ: We can conclude now, because that last statement comes full circle with this other coming into the world, which is your circumcision. Thank you, Koffi Kwahulé...*

KK: Thank you for coming...

— Transcribed from the French by Fatiha Zanoune and Chantal Zabus

— Translated into English by Chantal Zabus and revised by Kevin Dwyer



ALEX WANJALA

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After the Kenyan Harvest  
An Interview with Chantal Zabus

**T**HIS INTERVIEW TOOK PLACE on 23 November 2006 at a café, the Relais de l'Odéon in Paris. The interviewer is Chantal Zabus (hereafter CZ) and the interviewee, Alex Wanjala (hereafter AW).

*CZ: Alex Wanjala, you told me that you underwent circumcision in a hospital environment. First of all, could you tell me what your ethnic group is and what they practise as a rite?*

*AW: I come from the Bukusu tribe, which is part of a larger group, called the Abaluhya, which is to be found in the Western part of Kenya. Now, for the Bukusu, the circumcision ritual is a very important ritual and it takes place every two years. Apparently, they have been practising it over the last three centuries, when the first reported rite of a circumcision took place and there is a long narrative about how it started, which probably can be found in the oral tales by *griots*,<sup>1</sup> and these oral narratives keep the Bukusu tradition alive. The *griot* called Joseph Manguliechi is still alive, right now in Western Kenya; he is the custodian of our rites. As for the circumcision rituals for the Bukusu*

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<sup>1</sup> *Griot* is a French word, presumably of Portuguese provenance (*criaudo*) to designate travelling poets who record events and genealogies orally. The word is in current use in francophone West Africa but it has spread to many other parts of the African continent.

people, I do not know exactly the story behind it, but how he is the custodian of our rites and some research on that would yield more information about when the rite exactly started for the Bukusu people.

*CZ: And I understand that you had a Christian education?*

AW: Oh yes, I did. I was brought up in a Christian home. My parents received a Western education and they lived pretty much like a normal, middle-class, Western family. But, apart from all that, of course, there are still traditions that have to – sort of – be followed in a certain manner. Probably circumcision was one of them, but it was de-ritualized because the process has to be undergone, but now it is done in a modern way.

*CZ: And by “modern way,” do you mean in a hospital?*

AW: Yes, in a modern way, I mean in a hospital, because what happened is when I got to the age when my age-mates are supposed to get circumcised and at the same period in time, because the circumcision ritual for the Bukusu people takes place in August. So, at the same period in time, I underwent circumcision at the age of twelve. But, rather than going to the village and joining my age-mates, I simply checked into a hospital and I had it surgically done.

*CZ: You mentioned your age-mates, your age-grade.... In Kikuyu, I seem to recall that it is called riika and that it is quite binding. Did you feel that, because you went to hospital, this binding, this sense of belonging to your age-group, was lost?*

AW: Hmm... not really, because by that point in time, I guess I did not feel any binding to any ethnic group. I did not feel any ties to anyone. So, that was just a thing that was done at that point in time. It did not make me feel that I had any sense of belonging to an ethnic group. It simply was a step for me; it was just a step showing that I had grown up and that I had become a man. That was the significance of the ritual for me.

*CZ: You said you were twelve. Of course, when you are twelve years old, the memory is quite shaped. You must have some recollection of the event. Would you care to tell me what you remember as a young boy being suddenly taken to the hospital? Had you ever been to a hospital before?*

AW: Actually, the only time I was admitted to a hospital before was when I was very young – I was about three to five years of age – that was the first time I was admitted to a hospital and treated in a hospital for any form of

surgery. Hmm...This time, yeah, I went to a hospital. ... Of course, it was [chuckles] a bit scary, the whole process of preparing for surgery and all that.

*CZ: What hospital was this?*

AW: It is called Avenue Nursing Home. It is located in the Parklands area of Nairobi. Yeah. And I remember the surgery being carried out by a – this could actually show the cosmopolitanism of such practices ... because it was carried out by a man of Asian origin. The cultural aspect probably loses meaning in that case, you know.

*CZ: Was the man who performed the circumcision and was of Asian origin, as you said, part of the medical staff?*

AW: Yes, he was actually a doctor. He was a surgeon, I believe. He is a doctor. I think there are surgeons who carry out ... it is a simple operation, surgically speaking. Every surgeon is equipped with the knowledge, I believe, but I am not so sure.

*CZ: Were anesthetics used locally? What do you recall about that experience?*

AW: Yes, I think anesthetics was supposed to be used locally but mine kicked in much later after the operation. [giggle] because [giggle] I remember, during the process, it was quite a painful experience, actually. Thereafter, I guess ... I got another injection because I lost consciousness for a while and woke up an hour later, I believe.

*CZ: Would you say that this memory is a painful one?*

AW: Not really. Not in that aspect ... the pain is the same as the kind of pain that you experience when you have a tooth removed or something like that. In a way, it is painful. But it is something that you have to get done – yeah.

*CZ: And what was the reason invoked for it being done?*

AW: The reason for the operation ... hmm...

*CZ: I mean, did you parents explain to you the absolute necessity of it?*

AW: It is – kind of – something that you look forward to, as a boy, I believe .... You see, before I underwent the ritual, the circumcision ritual, or whatever you want to call it, I had elder brothers who had undergone the operation, and obviously I was looking up to them and hoping that I would be like them in the future.... It was something I was actually looking forward to. It is a nor-

mal rite of passage. You know that, once you are born, you have to go through with it. It is not something that you are told every day; it is something that you know will inevitably happen, and I guess you kind of look forward to it. It is probably like the Jewish *Bar Mitzvah* ceremony or something like that, something you look forward to, a rite of passage. I guess that it is the only significance, importance, I attached to it at that point in time.

*CZ: And in that hospital, did you see any circumcised boys of the same age? Were you in a ward especially for that, or were you just admitted for clinical surgery, just as you would have been for any kind of surgery?*

AW: I was just admitted for clinical surgery.... Now, the thing about the nursing home was that, when I went to the ward, there were people who had been admitted for different reasons. I did not actually meet anyone who had come in for circumcision, because the practice normally would be that, after circumcision, one would go home. Because that is what most people do, for one reason or another. What happened was that I stayed in hospital for changing bandages and all that.... But I did not meet any other ‘initiates’, if you want to call them that. Another reason is that the Bukusu group in Nairobi is relatively small. For most of the others, they normally carry out circumcision during the December holidays, because these are much longer. But because of custom that dictates that the procedure should start in the eighth month of the year – after harvest, I guess – I had to do it at that particular point in time in the absence of other initiates.

*CZ: So there is still a residual ritual aspect, since the operation is performed at a specific time?*

AW: Yes, I guess there is. I guess: at that particular time and at that particular age; that aspect still remains. That’s the only thing that we retain from the traditional practices, although I must say that, among the Bukusu, the ceremony still goes on. There are many people still getting circumcised in the village. In fact, the last circumcision ceremony took place in August of this year (2006). So, the next one will take place two years from now. The time factor is very important.

*CZ: Would you say the practices of excision and cirumcision are symmetrical among the Bukusu, your ethnic group? Are girls excised at approximately the same time? Or are they not excised at all?*

AW: Now, excision is something I came to learn of only recently. I never knew it existed, actually. Believe it or not, I come from Kenya and I did not know that happened. I have been trying to find out whether it is a practice

carried out by my ethnic group, but I found no evidence of such a practice among the women. So I believe that excision in my part of the country is something that actually is not practised; although I might not know. But from all the knowledge I now have about excision, I believe it is not practised by my ethnic group, although, even if you went right now and asked a young Kikuyu person whether they practice excision, ninety per cent would tell you that they have never heard of the practice. So I guess that when it comes to my generation, it is probably something that was obliterated from memory. Although, I don't know; someone who has lived at that time, in the rural areas, might have a better idea.

*CZ: And back to the hospital, did you notice any girls in the ward, or was it sex-segregated, if I may say?*

AW: There weren't any girls in the ward. At that time, the hospital was quite small. That is why it was called a nursing home rather than a hospital. There were only two wards, and mine was exclusively for males. I did not see any girls.

*CZ: And did you know of girls going to the hospital to be excised?*

AW: No; as I said, that is something that I learned two or three years ago – that it actually existed... reading novels by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and that sort of thing. But at that point in time, that thought had never crossed my mind – that excision was done for girls. That is why that thing about being a man, the ritual is so strong that I never knew [it] happened to women. In any case, in my community, the badge of being circumcised shows that you are a man. It shows your manhood. Excision... the thought never crossed my mind in terms of female excision.

*CZ: And after convalescing in the hospital, you went home. What happened to you after that? Were you expected to feel a man and to act as a man, whatever that entails?*

AW: Yes; actually, I was expected to go through a seclusion period. For three months, between the months of August and December, I had to stay in my own room because I was – you know – in seclusion. I could not use certain utensils or mix mine with other people's utensils. So I guess that was part of the ritual, but it was not explained to me exactly why this happened. You can imagine that it is a traditional practice carried out in an urban area. So the significance is probably lost, totally lost. Because in September I had to go back to school, and you can imagine that, at twelve, of course, despite the fact that it is supposed to be a rite of passage to become a man, you are pretty

much a young boy, an adolescent. The same behaviour applies to everything, as in other rituals in life. The traditional rituals always mix with 'modern' ways. For example, in the marriage ritual one is expected to pay bride price to the girl's family, and then later one goes to have a church wedding. Really, nothing changes. In December, after the seclusion period, there is not really anything ... but okay, you are told that you have become a man, that you should shed childlike behaviour and all that, but that is something that is done because it has to be done but I think you really have to ... but nobody ever came to me and told me how to carry myself as a man, no. You have done that, you have become a man.

*CZ: Would you say that it is a rite of puberty, that it concerns basically the pubescent boy?*

AW: Yeah, probably. It does concern the pubescent boy, but that doesn't mean that it is timed with the biological period exactly... you can imagine that at the age of twelve, you are still a boy; and thereafter, your voice starts changing and all that... although I must say that for my ethnic community, it is carried out when you are a bit younger, compared to the Kikuyu, who carry out the ritual when they are about sixteen or sometimes fourteen, or even eighteen.

*CZ: So, in your particular group – the Bukusu – it is not a puberty rite. It is a rite of passage, a passage to manhood, but at a very early age. How do you explain that?*

AW: I suppose that in the early days, men carried out 'manly duties' much earlier in life than they do today. And the life-expectancy might have been shorter, although that is not very different from now. Probably, by the age of sixteen, seventeen, you were expected to get married, found a family and all that. I suspect that it is why the rite is carried out this early, but as I said before, I do not have concrete evidence on that.

*CZ: After the operation, were you imparted with sexual knowledge? Did your parents or any relative take in charge your sexual education, if I may say, which is part of being a man, too?*

AW: No, that did not happen. I guess that is where Christianity steps in. My parents had to hold on to that Christian education at that particular point in time. I believe that my parents were trying to shield me from going deeply traditional because ... hmm ... nobody from the village, nobody came to tell me anything. I believe I was shielded; there was no sexual education imparted at any point.

*CZ: Of course, you know about the 1929–1931 excision controversy in Kenya, when excision was banned by the Protestant missionaries – it is too complicated to go into details now – but do you feel that the controversy over excision is now having an impact on the circumcision of young males?*

AW: I don't think so. I don't think that the controversy over excision is having any effect on the circumcision of young men because... If you walk around the streets in Kenya and if you happened... if a man of about eighteen to twenty years of age, who is walking the street or something, and his mate discovers that he is not circumcised, sometimes their wives would even go and tell on them, you know – “my husband is not circumcised.” So that if the circumcision ritual has not taken place, he would be forcibly circumcised. That has generated a lot of debate. I watched on the news about three months ago, in August 2006, where a member of a certain community in Eldoret in the Rift Valley... he belonged to a community, I believe, it is called the Saboat, but I am not so sure of the community. They do not circumcise, but he is in an area where circumcision is carried out and his colleagues, actually, went to his house very early in the morning, waylaid him, and had him circumcised. So the District Officer of this place appeared on the news, asking for cultural tolerance, that people should tolerate those who do not carry out the practice and let them be. And he said that he had to actually go back to his home area and be fined, for going against his tribal norms, probably by slaughtering a bull for the elders, or a goat. So you can see that circumcision for now is still the norm; it is not the exception, because there is a kind of stigma for those men who are not circumcised. It is something that is deeply entrenched in the society, although an educated man has learned to tolerate these cultural differences; but the man on the street would not respect those people, even a presidential candidate can be told off simply if he hasn't been circumcised. How could he lead the country if he is an uncircumcised man? So, as you can see, it is the norm rather than the exception. So, the debate about female excision has had no impact whatsoever on those communities that carry out male circumcision.

*CZ: Well, to come back to you, Alex Wanjala, and to conclude, after the operation, did you, between then and now, undergo any other ritual?*

AW: No, I haven't undergone any other ritual, none whatsoever.

*CZ: So you are a full-grown man now? [Laughter]*

AW: Yes, [laughter] I am a full-grown man, of course. Now I have to get married, that is the next step.

*CZ: Can you explain that to me? Is there pressure on you to get married?*

AW: Not really, I guess a wife would have been found for me ages ago. I am just talking about the rituals or rites of passage... [these] traditionally would be birth, circumcision, and marriage... with marriage, you would be allowed to be an elder in the community. So I guess I am in-between stages right now. [giggles]

*CZ: And would you be expected to marry an excised woman? Or, because, you are a member of the Bukusu, would you be expected to marry an unexcised woman?*

AW: As I said before, that question of excision does not come into play in my ethnic group. In fact, what would be considered strange would be to marry an excised woman. [laughter] That would be the strange thing – but that does not come into play.

*CZ: If you were to marry and have, say, a son, would you have him circumcised?*

AW: Yeah, he has to be part of the family, too, you know.

*CZ: Well, Alex Wanjala, if it is indeed your wish, I hope you do get married [laughter], and thank you again for joining me and agreeing to answer questions that touch on such deep, intimate experiences. Thank you.*

AW: Thank you very much.



DOMINIQUE ARNAUD

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Will the Third Millennium Be Circumcised?  
An Interview with Chantal Zabus

**T**HIS INTERVIEW TOOK PLACE on 3 March 2006 at the French National Library, the Bibliothèque François Mitterand in Paris. The interviewer is Chantal Zabus (hereafter CZ) and the interviewee Dominique Arnaud (hereafter DA).

*CZ: You are the author of the film Silence, on coupe! / Cut! (2006). But if you will allow me, I will take as my point of departure the interview I conducted with Koffi Kwahulé, the Paris-based Ivorian playwright and novelist, in which he told me that he decided, at age thirteen, to have himself circumcised when in fact circumcision was not practised in his ethnic group. He talked [in this volume] of the jeering attitude of peers in Ivory Coast. He supposedly experienced some pressure or suasion that made him somehow wish to rid himself of this remnant of femininity, which lies in the prepuce, according to him and the beliefs that he had absorbed. After his circumcision, he felt he had got rid of this feminine element, this odour that recalled the female sex.... Was this boy, according to you, able to make such a decision?*

DA: This triggers off several ways of responding. First of all, a thirteen-year-old child does not appear to me capable of making such a decision. Next, although it does not apply to the person you referred to, what you told me conjures up the perception that circumcised men have of women. In countries where circumcision is practised around seven or eight years of age, respect,

togetherness, and love do not seem to be the main values that the couple adheres to. No wonder, then, that their progeny, who are in their turn circumcised in awful circumstances, despite the cakes, the dances, and the cheering, blow themselves up in the marketplace. Without wishing to mix things up in a dubious way, I notice that, in France, these same furious adolescents beat up their teachers, set fires in the open, disfigure girlfriends who do not yield to their advances.... As to the “odour,” we here get into the realm of intimacy, of sexuality. To speak of love involves the flesh and the soul, its depths and its meanders. When one loves, one loves completely. The human body must be appreciated for what it is. In a state of nature! It is in that way that it is most moving. Hygiene is a personal thing, a question of individual propriety. I do not think that a circumcised man dispenses with daily grooming unless he thinks of himself as clean because he is circumcised.

*CZ: So, if a thirteen-year-old boy, according to you, cannot make this decision, a newborn baby is even more helpless when faced with the neonatal circumcision that is practised routinely in the USA on 60% of newborn babies?*

DA: I think that American grandeur owes a lot to the dynamics of its origins, the fervour of its first settlers, originally British, then Scandinavian and Germanic, rough adventurers from Europe, uncircumcised – that goes without saying. Through them, American history was marked by Western thought, that of the Enlightenment, which is the very foundation of the American Constitution. Then, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Jewish migrants fleeing from the antisemitic pogroms in Russia and Central Europe and, as of the 1920s, from the rise of Nazism, settled there in their turn. Among them, we count many influential individuals – medical doctors, intellectuals, scientists, or wealthy businessmen, with enough resources to settle across the Atlantic. This population, which was persecuted on the European continent, quickly integrated into Protestant American society, itself an assiduous reader of the Bible, which recommends circumcision on the eighth day for every baby boy. This is how reformed Christians and Jews who were very keen on observing the Covenant could practise the God-fearing operation in common accord. And that is exactly what happened; a general frenzy; the shift from superstitions dating back to times immemorial to the hospital; a ritual erected as a health issue. This is how the American doctor became a sorcerer.... Today, in the USA, because of the strong demographic pressure from Hispanics and Asians, the practice is regressing. It actually went from 95% of newborn babies operated on in the 1960s down to 60% today. This is the inverse of what is happening in France, and in Belgium for that matter,

where the circumcision rate is going up, especially since the independence of countries from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. Electronic data indicate that 60,000 circumcisions take place in France every year in a hospital: that is, 20 % of boys from the same age group, to which one should add illicit circumcisions taking place at home or upon returning to the home country. On the other hand, we do not have figures concerning the mutilation of girls, where the circumcisers are today liable to punitive sanctions that are seldom implemented.

You were talking to me about Africa and the USA. Shall I dare establish this parallel? Is it improper to intimate that an African-American lobby has failed to promote excision in the way others have been able to, more adroitly, promote circumcision? It is highly probable that circumcision would have been reformed ages ago if, like excision, it had only been an African practice.

*CZ: Indeed, I am thinking of Kenya, in the 1930s, when British Protestant missionaries came with the Bible. They considered excision as barbaric among the Kikuyu, the Nandi, and neighbouring groups; on the other hand, they did not forbid circumcision. So, in a way, they introduced a dissymmetry from the beginning, and the parties concerned did not understand how excision could be deemed uncouth when circumcision was not – in a very asymmetrical way, since the two practices were designated with the same term.*

DA: And for a very good reason. Circumcision featured quite prominently in the Bible brandished by the missionaries. But beyond that simple fact, one has to realize that wherever there is excision, there is also circumcision. And it is no longer a question of asymmetry but, rather, of perfect symmetry. I think that the issue of sexual mutilations, whether they are male or female, was sidestepped by missionaries, who were more often than not guilty of non-commitment in that respect. Neither excision nor circumcision was the object of eradication. One can say that, from that point of view, both pagan rituals were tolerated; they benefitted from the same treatment. One should recall that the Protestant and Catholic African missionaries were not circumcised. That was a good reason for not dwelling on a subject that disqualified them with regard to the Biblical canon. What, indeed, is the purpose of giving a stick to your flock that they could use to beat you?

*CZ: Since we are talking about the sacred texts or, as the Swiss specialist in comparative law, Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, put it, those “damned texts” (Fr. sacrés textes), mocking thereby the very authority of textual sacredness, do you think, as he does, that one should revise one’s perceptions of sacred texts? And if so, isn’t that dangerous, in the sense in which this questions the*

*very foundation of all religious belief-systems, which rest on rites that are inscribed in the very texture of these sacred texts? Doesn't that amount to a questioning of religion itself?*

DA: It is above all to a questioning of circumcision itself that one should turn, while attempting to avoid ruffling people's sensibilities; and there is a lot of work ahead. With this kind of pseudo-hygienic, pseudo-religious circumcision, trance becomes a substitute for reason; one sinks in irrational mire, magic, fanaticism. Now, to ransack in the name of emancipation, one must think seriously about this. Yes to the improvement of attitudes; no to chaos! The world looks at times like an inverted asylum; the madmen wear a white coat and the medical staff the straitjacket – a veritable nightmare!

*CZ: Since we mentioned Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, who was given considerable narrative time in your film Silence, on coupe!, do you think, as he does, that there is "a conspiracy of silence" (Fr. le complot du silence) around male circumcision, which is actually the subtitle of his book Circoncision, published by L'Harmattan in 2003?*

DA: Yes, if I am to judge by the ups and downs I experienced during the making of my film. Not a single personality who was purposefully solicited agreed to be interviewed on circumcision, being more vocal on female mutilation. I had to be as sly as a fox and climb the ramparts with a hand-held camera. I had to carry out man-on-the-street interviews, lurk in the headquarters of institutions, conference centres, fairs, demonstrations in order to get spontaneous reactions from opinion leaders or ordinary citizens.<sup>1</sup> Then, when

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<sup>1</sup> In order of appearance: Prof. Roger Henrion of the French Academy of Medicine; Jean Leonetti, medical doctor, U.M.P. [Union pour un Mouvement Populaire] or right-wing majority representative; Prof. Jean-Paul Escande, dermatologist; Dr Sami A. Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, legal expert, Siné, cartoonist; student in a rabbinical school; André Glucksmann, philosopher; Jean-Thomas Nordmann, European Member of Parliament; Kabbaj Mohamed El Mustapha of the Royal Moroccan Academy; Linda Weil-Curiel, lawyer; Malek Chebel, anthropologist and psychoanalyst; Père Georges Morand, Canon of Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral; Nadeije Laneyrie-Dagen, professor of Art History at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris; Alain Soral, writer and columnist; Hedi Labidi, an active member of A.I.M.E. (Association d'Ailleurs ou d'Ici Mais Ensemble); Dr Emmanuelle Piet, medical doctor, *département de protection maternelle infantile*, Paris; Hubert Reeves, astrophysician; Huguette Bouchardeau, former Minister; Michel Serres, philosopher; Christian Bourgois, publisher; Jean d'Ormesson, writer and member of the French Academy; Michel Quint, writer; François Fejtő, journalist and writer; Dr Jean-Dominique Doublet, surgeon and urologist; Patrick Labaune, U.M.P. representative; Dr Gérard Zwang, surgeon and urologist; Dr

you actually ask questions, one has to put up with replies such as “I am not competent in this matter.” People are generally more eager to venture an opinion on the price of bread or the colour of the sky than on this kind of topic.

I am baffled by the fact that one plays down this phenomenon to such an extent, since it concerns one out of five young Frenchmen, it violates people’s rights, it encourages small-mindedness, and it signals a setback in the foundational values of French society. To question circumcision amounts to risking crucifixion. Indeed, I think that there is a ‘conspiracy of silence’; the topic is definitely taboo. Also, when an author like Sami Aldeeb criticizes circumcision in his book *Circoncision, le complot du silence*, he is publishing from his own pocket, whereas Malek Chebel can publish *Histoire de la circoncision* without any personal defrayment. The thing is, that we are engaged in an undeclared, disguised war, if you will; for how much longer, I wonder...

*CZ: I had, in fact, asked Malek Chebel to speak at a conference that I was organizing on the subject of circumcision and excision, but he didn’t respond. But I did notice that you had interviewed him in your documentary. Does that mean that he recanted his earlier stance?*

DA: The man is prepossessing, but his book is not neutral. He is in favour of circumcision, but cunningly so. I am vain enough to think that our exchanges changed him. That is, at any rate, what appears from the sequences that I kept, in which he is more nuanced in his expression; and I thank myself for that.

*CZ: What about the presence in your documentary of the famous lawyer, Linda Curriel–Weil, who has defended worthy causes, who has fought against excision, and who, in the meantime, has endorsed Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh’s other book on Male and Female Circumcision? Does that mean that she backs*

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Patrick Pelloux, emergency-room doctor; Dr Dominique Egasse, surgeon and dermatologist; Frédéric Encel, ecopolitical scientist; stewards from Air Tahiti Nui; Mr. X, legal expert; Oussama Ksila, member of A.I.M.E.; anonymous high-school girls; Sarra Ghorbal, member of A.I.M.E.; Houda Khammari, member A.I.M.E.; Michel Field, journalist; François Sauvadet, U.D.F. [Union pour la Démocratie française] or centre-right representative; Michel Onfray, philosopher; Stéphanie le Roy, lawyer; Julien Dray, socialist member of Parliament; Cyrine Saïeb, lawyer; Jean–Paul Fitoussi, professor at the École Supérieure de Political Science in Paris; Waji, student; Alain Bauer, Freemason Association, *Grand Orient de France*; Maxime Gremetz, Communist Member of Parliament; Charles–Élie Couture, singer; Prof. Pierre Guichard, Université Lyon II; young Muslim woman; Eric P. Ingala, electrician and poet; Riad Sattouf, cartoonist; Roland Madura, former hostage.

*your project as well? In fact, few feminists discuss circumcision at all. Could one go so far as to say that it enfeebles the debate?*

DA: Again, I would not wish to flatter myself too much by claiming that I broadened the debate. But in *Silence, on coupe!*, circumcision plays a major part in the fight against infantile genital mutilation. Feminists must not dissociate circumcision from excision if they do not wish to be suspected of pursuing an illusory goal: the quest for the lost phallus. Even though the consequences of these two practices could not be reasonably compared, the fight against them should rest on principles, and in that regard this is no longer a simple matter that boils down to the degree of severity.

*CZ: Is there an autobiographical investment on your part in your documentary? How did you come to approach such a topic? Was it the result of a long personal journey? Are you circumcised yourself?*

DA: It has been a long-term commitment. I have been working on this for several years. Between the onset of the project and the end result, a good ten years went by. I was born into a family of teachers who were little concerned with these practices. Dogmas about what is below the waist left us undisturbed. I lived in a peaceful cultural and family environment. We were happy and comfortable with our bodies; but that's all I am prepared to say about my anatomy....

*CZ: I know that with your film you aim to go much further. Do you inscribe your work in a larger movement that is in dialogue with organizations such as NOCIRC, NO HARMM, DOC and the like?*

DA: I would, of course, be delighted if my film marked an epoch, if it got talked about, as much on the level of NGOs as with distributors, exhibitors, and TV channels. Whatever will allow this film to exist, to be watched, discussed, even reviled, would make me very happy. Film has, indeed, two functions: to entertain and to repel barbarity. In that respect, I think that *Silence, on coupe!* has its place.

*CZ: There are some rather violent scenes that could offend a larger public. You have scenes featuring the excision and circumcision of children, but you also have an extract where a man is having his throat cut. Could you comment on this scene of uncommon violence?*

DA: Yes, indeed; I downloaded this sequence from the Internet. It shows the decapitation of a Japanese traveller filmed by his jailers somewhere in Iraq. He is surrounded by armed, hooded men, against a background of Qur'anic verses. These *jihad* murderers relentlessly assault this innocent man with

extreme violence. The victim is butchered like a sheep during the festival of Aïd el Kebir, without any apparent aversion, without the slightest conscience, without the slightest regard for humanity. Yes, for me, throat-slitting, like beheading, is not so remotely distant from the trauma caused by the circumcision of young Muslims, most often committed without anesthetics and at a relatively older age. Malek Chebel makes a most felicitous link, evoking “the settling of accounts.” That is why I thought it useful and pedagogically appropriate to superimpose, in a voiceover, the statements made by a psychoanalyst and an anthropologist on images which look like they do not belong but which, in my view, are wholly relevant to the debate. These shots, which set your adrenaline going, rouse to indignation those who refuse to make a connection. Without wishing to tax all circumcised men with such odious behaviour, I am convinced I went to the heart of the matter.

*CZ: Some very concrete cases come to me, such as that of Fauziya Kassindja, this young Togolese woman who fled from excision, or what is called kakia in Northern Togo, and, who, as an asylum seeker, ended up in the USA, locked up in a jail. The American media finally paid attention to her case in 1996. She even wrote an autobiography, Do They Hear You When You Cry? (1998). She was eventually granted asylum and this stirred up a lot of debate. Would you consider granting asylum to someone who fled from circumcision in his ethnic group or his country, like that young Turk who deserted from the army in Turkey because circumcision was required, and was granted asylum in Germany? I am referring to the example that Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh provides in his book. Where do you stand on this issue?*

*DA: The situation would be a laughable matter if it were not pregnant with meaning. I indeed believe that, starting from the principle according to which circumcision is a violation of the inalienable right to use one’s body as one sees fit, any individual threatened in his/her bodily integrity should have the right to claim asylum. Why should it be any other way if they believe, with reason, that they are being persecuted in their own country on account of traditions? The argument stands on its own. It remains to be seen how such measures could be implemented. Who could have access to these? How would one deal with individuals who have already undergone the procedure? Should a bill be adopted beforehand? All this seems unrealistic to me, all the more so in France, the homeland of liberty, where I fail to hear voices raised against the violation of these basic freedoms. Are they being stifled? It would be more charitable to advise the applicants to go home and campaign from their base while trying to convince them that a generously endowed, albeit circumcised, male member is worth more than a tiny willy that is uncircum-*

cised... [laughter]. Would we like to see all those, in the world, who are compelled to undergo circumcision, knocking on the doors of Europe, and give the right of asylum to all the circumcised or, rather, to those who would not wish to renounce that right... can you imagine...?! I suggest we examine such cases one at a time.

*CZ: That is what is happening in the USA; they judge one case at a time. I feel that an ideology lurks behind your documentary. Do you wish to set yourself off from other documentaries on circumcision – in particular, the film that Nurith Aviv made for ARTE in 2000, which I have seen but where the stance is somewhat different. Did you see her documentary?*

DA: Yes, I did, and from what I remember, I have had lukewarm feelings about it. It is true that to criticize circumcision amounts to exposing oneself to the vindictiveness of society. The risk one runs is to be accused of anti-semitism, of anti-this and anti-that. Yet defending children's rights should transcend all these cleavages, whether they are religious, ideological, or political. With *Silence, on coupe!*, I felt I was working from a basic premise. It is, however, the interpretation of the film one undertakes that is ideological. The role of the author should ideally be confined to laying the foundations of debate in all objectivity, without being compromised. But to come back to Nurith Aviv's documentary: I found it was consensual, eager not to disturb. In it, you can see a circumcision performed by a rabbi, where the crying of the abused child has been covered over in the editing by a sweet melody. To me, that amounts to manipulation. In short, I found this film more proselytizing than talented. One should keep in mind that the Franco-German channel ARTE showed it in 2001 with, if I remember correctly, an audience rating of 7.5%: that is, 3.3 million viewers, which is a major feat for a programme that should not have been shown, let alone repeated.

*CZ: I recently saw Nurith Aviv's film again, and she does not address the issue of alternative rites, which is a relatively recent phenomenon in Africa and in American Jewish milieux, where the berit shalom replaces the berit milah and entails a rite of peace without cutting. Have you thought of the option of the alternative rite so as not to remove ritual observance from the community, so as to enable that community to survive?*

DA: Why not cut a carrot or a banana and be merry, on a day off ... [giggles]

*CZ: When one talks of circumcision, one generally talks about the circumcision of a child, of the newborn, but there are also circumcisions that serve as rites of passage for the adolescent, for those in puberty. I remember talking*

*to older teenagers and young adults at Hunter College in New York, where I was teaching a seminar on excision, and they told me they were in favour of putting an end to the rite, but they were worried about the lack of rites of passage for adolescence in our societies, where one invariably learns about sex almost by chance. Does an adolescent need rites? Couldn't the absence of rites, in Africa but also elsewhere, be responsible for the hollowing-out of the adolescent's identity apparatus?*

DA: Commemorations always leave you with good memories; you need them, including those that delineate great steps in organic life: the first teeth, the first pubic hairs, the very first emotions, and what not.... Existence is studded with these memorable events, these grand moments of being. Some correspond to the ticking of our biological clock, others to the calendar of our history, but a selection is imperative. Those who believe that our identity is circumscribed by these rites are credulous indeed. On the contrary, I am convinced that the human personality can only blossom in the freedom to break away from the weight of traditions. One only has to consider, albeit with a lot of benevolence but without any complacency, those men and women who are slow in revealing their genius, their superior skills at helping found stable and hospitable societies – I am thinking particularly of the African continent, but also of the Middle East and Central Asia. It is through the renunciation of these bygone practices that we will together build a universal, pacific civilization. Our intellectuals would do well to promote the identity of the uncircumcised European peoples with as much zeal as they do that of diasporic cultures. But is it politically correct today to denigrate former colonial powers whose portals are crowded with asylum seekers? Thus, little by little, we see populations settling in France that reproduce their old ways of life, the very cause of their failure and then of their exile. How can one imagine that people who are dysfunctional at home can adapt in this country without mending their ways? Experience shows that the cohabitation of populations that pro-pound circumcision with people who ignore the practice is a source of public disorder: Bosnia, Kashmir, Cyprus, Chechnya, Lebanon, Serbia, Timor, let alone the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust. Once the territorial dispute between Israel and Palestine is settled, will we see circumcised Americans, Turks, Israelis, and Arabs side by side with the rest of this ungodly (in other words, uncircumcised) world?

*CZ: Would you therefore go so far as to argue that the fact that 60 percent of the American population is circumcised would explain American violence?*

DA: That a superpower like the USA is capable, when the war was nearly won, to drop the atomic bomb within a few days' interval on two Japanese

cities seems to me unworthy of such a developed nation. I indeed consider that barbarity is not alien to a certain American reality.

*CZ: So, when it comes to circumcision today, you deem it necessary, if I read you correctly, to broaden the debate by giving it an international edge through holy wars and the power relations between empires ... [chuckling]*

DA: I do think that some situations have within them the seeds of war, of conflicts with no hope of reconciliation, without any truce. And there is such a thing as wars for the sake of conquest, such as World War I, which stem from a certain balefulness codified by convention. The Second World War already signals a major step. Was circumcision an aggravating factor in the extermination of Jewish communities in Europe? I would be tempted to say so.

*CZ: I would like, by way of conclusion, to return to the issue of rites. There is a resurgence of body markings in post-industrial, Western societies, in urban centres, among young people, especially what we call 'modern primitives', who use markings in order to set themselves off from others. I am thinking not only of tattooing but also of body markings such as piercing and skin implants that can be quite extreme. Do you see a possible connection between the progressive 'disappearance' of excision and of circumcision and the resurgence of these urban rites?*

DA: I do not see any roll-back of the practice, since excision continues to prosper and circumcision is spreading in our society. Conversely, one talks with increasing respect for the Other, but isn't that a case of not seeing the wood for the trees? I do prefer the wisdom of those who observe the indispensable code of bodily integrity to the seemingly respectful attitude of circumcisers. Piercing, tattooing, implants, and other body markings show that in fact the body is less and less respected. It is devalued to the rank of a prototype, a bit like a car's bodywork covered with stickers. It has become a mere badge that promises communal belonging. The body is besieged in the name of social conformity but, paradoxically, these practices are more about exclusion than about sharing. The problem resides in the imbalance between the strength of conviction of those who submit to such practices and the numbing silence of the others. Our appearance is a bit like "the bottom that resurfaces," as Victor Hugo once put it. The magicians of the blade inspire me with distrust and pity.

*CZ: Wouldn't the imminent danger be that we are moving towards a globalization of mores? We all want to be perfect and intact?*

DA: Just as diversity in biology is threatened in the long term by interbreeding, identities are threatened by the cross-pollination of cultures (Fr: *métissage des cultures*). This is what is at stake in the third millennium.

CZ: *I think we have come to a close – unless you want to add something?*

DA: If my film raises a lot of questions and provides tentative answers, I would like to emphasize the fact that it is first and foremost about the rights of the child.

CZ: *Very well. I wish to thank you, Dominique Arnaud, for coming to the Bibliothèque Nationale in order to tackle the rivetting topic of circumcision, which, according to you, has an international dimension. In that sense, I look forward to seeing your next project after Silence, on coupe! Again, I thank you very much.*

DA: It is I who thank you.

— Translated from the French by Chantal Zabus





JERRY K. BRAYTON



## My Circumcision Story

As Told to J. Steven Svoboda

**I**T IS A GREAT RELIEF to be able to talk about my circumcision. No other single event in my life has so strongly affected me as this mutilation of my body that occurred in the first days of my life. And there is no other event about which I am anywhere near as angry, sad, and depressed as my circumcision. Nevertheless, I have never until today sat down and actually recounted all the different emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical effects it has had on my life.

I was born in 1960. Unfortunately for me, while my circumcision was not what my doctor would have called a “botch” (although all circumcisions are, by definition, botches), my circumcision was quite tight and extensive. My frenulum was entirely removed.

I was relatively ‘lucky’ with my circumcision. My penis was not inadvertently amputated, as happens to some boys. Nor was the operation performed so unskillfully that my penis points to the side when erect, as is true of some men I know. I was not overly lucky, though, since a relatively large amount of skin was removed.

Like most men, I do not consciously remember my circumcision. However, in August 1994, I did do a particular powerful form of breathwork in a workshop, during which I accessed body memories of the event. I felt the pain and concretely re-experienced what it was like to be circumcised, although with dramatically less vivid feelings of pain than I must have suffered as an infant.

In early adolescence, I learned about sexuality mostly through some well-written books, such as Wardell Pomeroy’s *Boys and Sex*. My family was quite

repressed about sexuality. I do not remember my parents ever being physically affectionate beyond goodnight kisses, nor were they very affectionate with us. Their only attempt to discuss sexuality with me was quite pathetic. When I was seventeen and already had a girlfriend, my father came into my room and made some incredibly lame and embarrassing attempts to discuss the subject. I felt sorry for my dad and grief at my own lack of sexual initiation.

As a child, I believe I heard about circumcision from time to time. I grew up in the suburbs, where nearly all my fellow boys were also circumcised. Like many boys of my era, I assumed that I had not been circumcised; my penis looked like everyone else's and it seemed that everything that was supposed to be there was there. I remember feeling glad that this mysterious, horrible thing had not happened to me.

As I got older and became a young adult, however, I began to learn some information that suggested to me that I was in fact circumcised. I don't remember the exact sequence of events, but sometime around 1985 I must have realized that I actually had been surgically cut in my genital area.

I spent several years in denial about the pain and loss this represented. I attempted many rationalizations; this seemed easier than accepting that I had lost something so integral to my own identity and self. In 1987, I began attending men's events that focused on support and personal growth. Some of these events even included workshops on circumcision. In 1989, I began more consciously to acknowledge my unhappiness and anger that this had been done to me. The following summer, I attended a support meeting organized by the National Organization of Restoring Men (NORM) (then known as RECAP) to provide emotional support for men involved in non-surgical foreskin restoration.

Foreskin restoration is a technique that entails slow stretching of the skin that remains on the penis, in order eventually to create enough skin to cover the glans as the foreskin does on intact men. The lost nerve-endings from the foreskin can never be regained, of course. But restoration is still reported by most men who have the perseverance to see it through as a very valuable process that significantly enhances sexual sensation.

Since that 1990 encounter with restoration, I have made several attempts at foreskin restoration. NORM founder Wayne Griffiths generously and kindly kept in touch with me for several years after I returned to Boston, where I was then living. More recently, other restoring men have helped me to attempt to restore.

However, I have not had much success with restoration. I find the use of various devices to stretch my skin emotionally very draining, as it serves to remind me graphically of the extent of my loss. I also encountered practical

difficulties involving urination, soreness from taping, etc. Owing to my relatively tight circumcision, I also have more work to do to achieve a given degree of restoration than do men who were left more skin by their circumcisers. My longest period of attempting restoration was probably two to three months in 1994. Currently, I am not restoring. I would like to do so, but am not sure when I will have the resolve and determination I will need to be able to carry through on this emotionally and at times physically demanding course.

And I would rather not think about my loss. My inability to restore feels like another form of projecting my fears onto women, another form of holding back. I am shell-shocked and a post-traumatic-stress survivor. I am proud that I survived. But I hurt. I have always been careful not to talk to my lovers about why intact men are better lovers, for fear they would leave me to experience the other side.

In December 1992, I had my first conversation about circumcision with my mother. I had a second conversation with her a month later, in January 1993. Before both discussions, I was quite terrified to raise the issue with her. I was sure that she would shame me or refuse to discuss the matter.

However, my mother has grown in a lot of ways over the past thirty years, particularly since the death of my father. She was able to listen to what I had to say and even to acknowledge that she understood that I was in pain and why I was in pain. Although she did not say so, it was clear that she regretted that she had allowed me and my brother to be circumcised. She told me, as I expected, that at the time she had devoted virtually no thought to the matter. The doctor had advised her that it was “cleaner” to do the circumcision, and that information satisfied her and my father.

I learned in a third discussion I had with my mother, in October 1996, that my father had been circumcised. This surprised me, since he was born in the 1920s in Nebraska, which I do not believe was a hotbed of circumcision at that time. Nevertheless, it no doubt provided additional justification in my parents’ minds for performing the procedure on me and my brother. I learned in August 1995, the last time I saw my grandfather alive, that he had not been circumcised. This information did not surprise me, since he was born in Oklahoma in the first decade of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, I must admit I felt sadness and also envy of him for his genital integrity.

One paradoxical feature of my ‘circumcision experience’ is my questioning whether my knowledge of the damage I endured hasn’t decreased my enjoyment of life. To this day, I must admit that I often wonder if I wouldn’t be a much happier man if I had never realized the extent of my loss. Of course, this wish is somewhat like asking oneself what it would be like to be a

fish. That is, it's irrelevant; I did in fact come to understand that my circumcision had removed significant, irreplaceable sexual pleasure from my life and placed it forever beyond my grasp.

For me, this is really the core of my upset about circumcision. I don't have huge issues about the appearance of my circumcised penis. I do know that I have lost a tremendous amount of sexual enjoyment because of the amputation of functional, integral portions of my genital anatomy.

I happen to have a sexual history that in some ways has played into my turmoil over this issue. I was a very 'late bloomer' in my mid-twenties before I developed enough self-confidence and worked through the sexuality issues I had from my childhood sufficiently to begin enjoying a fairly normal, healthy sexual life. So my grief at losing the great pleasure a foreskin and frenulum can provide is compounded for me by my loss of roughly a decade of potential sexual activity and enjoyment.

Before I learned that there were other men who felt unhappy about being circumcised and had started a movement to stop the procedure, in my own mind I had already analogized the procedure with rape. I concluded that rape was clearly the less serious offence. My thinking was that rape occurs once and while significant work has to be done to process the feelings of shame and rage and live an ordinary life again, circumcision creates a loss that I re-experience many times every day of my life. I am not so sure any more that this reasoning can withstand scrutiny, since, after all, circumcision only happens once, too. But such was my emotional distress about my circumcision that this was my thinking.

One critical element of my 'circumcision experience' is my constant re-exposure to this torturous event. Every time I urinate, or am sexual, or dress, or undress, or take a shower, or even walk down the street, I am reminded of my circumcision. Many times every day, I am reminded through the painful, irritating physical contact of my glans with my clothing that I lack a foreskin. Bicycling is the worst, because my glans often touches my pants on each cycle of my legs. I also remember that since childhood I wondered why it was that the head of my penis was the first place I felt pain due to the cold.

Like many men thirty years or older, every day I rediscover firsthand the horror of this procedure. I have noticed a dramatic and heartbreaking loss of sensitivity over the last few years. This is, of course, owing to the continual buildup of layers of keratin over the mucous-membrane tissue that remains on our penises after the foreskin is removed.

My 'circumcision experience', by its very omnipresence in my life, has fuelled my commitment to the struggle for true gender equality in our society. My circumcision always serves as a reminder that I am not crazy in thinking

that men are also oppressed by society. This is not yet the conventional belief, and may not be for a long time. However, circumcision more generally reminds me that many of our ideas come from cultural prejudices and blindnesses, and reconfirms the importance of thinking for oneself and not trusting received ideas.

If they can do this to us with impunity, they can do anything, and they do. Taking a knife to a baby's genitals, with no rational medical reason, without anaesthetic, and deafening ourselves to the baby's screams. What a powerful metaphor for our blindness in general to men's suffering – our shorter life-spans, our dramatically higher suicide rates, the lack of educational attention being paid (before the last few years) to boys' needs, even as boys fall further behind girls academically. I feel that circumcision is the primal wound for males; it was for many of us our first sexual experience. For men, pain and pleasure can have a complicated relationship in the sexual arena.

It hurts and angers me that society has such great compassion for women and children and so little relative concern for the struggles of men. The signs of this are all around us, if only we will open our eyes and see: the passage of a Violence Against Women Act in a society where three-fourths of all victims of violence are male. Domestic violence occurs roughly equally between the sexes, and yet the disparities in available support are shocking. Men around the world are systematically compelled to give their bodies and their lives in armed conflict. We are also economically compelled to give our bodies and our lives in the workplace; 94 percent of all American workplace deaths occur to men.

I have come to believe that the numbness in our penises resulting from circumcision here in the USA parallels the emotional numbness which those in power need for us to have so we will continue to fulfil our roles as producers. As men, we are encouraged to be emotionally and physically numb.

I would probably give everything I own to have my foreskin back, how it was meant to be, pre-operation, so that my body would be natural and healthy and whole.

Circumcision without the consent of the circumcised, irrespective of the parents' wishes or alleged religious reasons, should definitely be outlawed.

I feel much more anger toward my circumciser than I do toward my parents. In the demographic, geographical, and temporal niche where I was born, my parents would have had to be unusual people who questioned authority in order to have saved my body from the knife. Actually, they were very typical people for that place and time, who yearned to fit in by doing as their neighbours and friends did and would never have resisted a doctor's instruction that

circumcision was good for the baby. Given the kind of people they were, I had no hope of avoiding being cut.

I am somewhat angry at them for not having questioned this terrible violation of their firstborn child's bodily integrity, but I feel significantly more angry with the physician who should have, and perhaps did on some unconscious level, know better. It is criminal that he was advising thousands of parents to take the knife to their newborn, perfect baby boys.

I definitely believe that my would-be circumciser should have been stopped by force. I am aware that numerous babies have died as a result of their foreskin amputation, and numerous other babies have suffered the entire loss of their penis and been further genitally altered so that society can pretend that they are girls and treat them as such. This strikes me as utterly outrageous.

One unfortunate effect of my circumcision is the anger I have at society for our refusal to recognize male pain and male suffering. These feelings have spilled over into my personal friendships and romantic relationships and have definitely at times made it more difficult for me to sustain certain connections. When a potential friend or lover does not recognize or acknowledge the horrors of circumcision and/or the other forms of oppression and pain which men must endure in our society, I can at times become quite emotional, sometimes to the detriment of the friendship or relationship. Once I became conscious of the full effects of my circumcision, this result was in a sense inevitable. And yet it marks another form of harm and damage caused to me by the procedure, albeit indirectly.

Once I had a discussion about circumcision with a friend of mine who is a Jewish mother of a boy who was, as most Jewish boys are, circumcised. She was surprisingly open-minded about the subject, for which I was very grateful. I am sure that due to my own storm of feelings surrounding this issue, I did not present my point of view as effectively and calmly as I might have.

Nevertheless, as I mentioned to her, I do feel extremely frustrated that even today, in a developed country, we have to spend time and energy even discussing this issue. Do we spend time discussing why babies' arms and legs should not be cut off? Do we spend time weighing the medical advantages and disadvantages of amputating women's breasts? It is only because of our peculiar cultural history of practising circumcision for a century that the ghastly procedure is even an issue. In a truly civilized world such discussions would not even be necessary.

Over a decade has passed since I wrote most of these words. As I get older, I notice the loss of sensation more and more. Yet, paradoxically, I could never have written this story today, as so much of this has receded into memory and faded in vividness. As most powerful feelings do eventually, my turmoil over

this barbaric procedure has ebbed. I have self-medicated, in a sense, smoothing out the former upset. I feel much less anger over my circumcision and have reached a level of resignation to the situation. Now I am married (to a Jewish woman) and have children. My wife and I have talked openly about my feelings about circumcision. Although she is Jewish, she is supportive of my sentiments. Our son was left intact and we had no problems with her side of the family protesting our decision.

But my commitment to educating people about circumcision continues. And so it is that I decided to share my story with all of you. Thank you for going along for the ride.





SAFAA FATHY

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## Cutting and Film Cutting/Ashes

An Interview with Chantal Zabus

**T**HIS INTERVIEW TOOK PLACE on 23 September 2006 at Safaa Fathy's Apartment on rue St Maur in Paris. The interviewer is Chantal Zabus (hereafter CZ) and the interviewee, Safaa Fathy (hereafter SF). The interview with Safaa Fathy is, however, preceded by a text that she had prepared and read to the interviewer just before the interview took place.

## Cutting and Film Cutting

Find the vein.  
— Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession*

**I**F I HAD TO TALK ABOUT EXCISION, I would not know where to start. "Find the vein" would lead one to compose a sentence, to writing. Yet, since that day at the end of a summer, I have learnt to be silent. Not to be able to say in the first person. Say something about that inaugural, conscious experience, remembered in all its theatricality and in its affect, for ever inscribed in it. And the body as well.

I would not be able to write on excision if I circumvented this affect through an anthropological or learned approach. Excision forbids me to do so. And I would never be able to write on excision in my native tongue, Arabic. In any

© *Fearful Symmetries: Essays and Testimonies Around Excision and Circumcision*, ed. Chantal Zabus (*Matatu* 37; Amsterdam & New York NY: Editions Rodopi, 2008).

case, I have never done it. I would attempt to say in a nutshell that it is difficult for me to think that experience. Or this event in my life.

But if I had to designate, on the stage of such an operation, actors, a story, an aesthetic, a producer, I would find myself, despite myself, in almost all of these roles. I am an actress who must, through physical constraints, play a part which she refused to prepare for and who, through her resisting, indomitable will, built a dam against the secret sense of this obligatory initiation rite which is called excision. And when the event becomes a memory liable to be told, we do not talk about it any more. In their conversation, women in the place I hail from never mention excision. Nobody speaks about it. The experience is an internal one and is more intimate than defloration during the wedding night or even delivery. These are blood experiences. They play a part in the women's tales; they find a place in their lives, except for that one, that is, excision. I have absolutely no idea who has been excised among my friends or my schoolmates. Each one of them hides her secret like a shame, like a scandal. For there is such a thing as lips in excision. The small ones and the big ones. It is therefore linked to speech.

I know that written testimonies exist. But on the Egyptian literary scene, there is a striking absence. To my knowledge, no Egyptian poet ever poeticized excision. Even though such an event is cultural, it becomes in everybody's eyes essentialist, as well. One of the female characters in *Hidden Faces*, a film which I made at the beginning of the 1990s, says it all. "I thought that it was like that. That all the girls had to go through it," says one of the young women in the film. It was thus just as necessary as water. This necessity, however, never appeared as such to me. I have transgressed in resisting. Resisting what had to be as natural as menstruation or getting breasts was unthinkable. Resisting also casts a shadow on the one who resists. In the spaces provided for resistance in women's culture in Egypt, for there is such a thing, there is none possible for a girl who opposes her own excision. A mother can. But for the daughter, the only possible resistance lies in suicide.

In Egypt, daughters are excised at the end of childhood. Towards the end, because if it is later, then it becomes dangerous, they say, and when it is too early, as well. In high Egypt in the countryside, the practitioners are midwives. The tools are: the strong hands of women, a copious breakfast, a razor, betadine, and a handful of ashes to help heal the wound.

One needs another language than that of the midwife or of the mother to be able to say it. One also needs time, years of silence to say something at long last of this inaugural event, which is intrinsically aporetic, since it takes place

at the very site of the most intimate of intimacies and of phenomenal culture. In order to speak about it, one has to endure this aporia. Needless to say, speaking about it raises a suspicion of betrayal of one's culture, one's family, indeed one's native land. It is a betrayal to write about one's own excision. An air of embarrassment, of awkwardness, of inelegance goes along with it, as well as with the confession and the affect it entails. Or, more exactly, the affect complex that it brings along. Indignation (for those who are for and those against), shame, fear, disgust, compassion, hatred, shock, indifference, debate, suspicion....

When the women in my film speak about it, they laugh about it. Because laughter goes hand in glove with the theatricality of excision. In high Egypt, the protagonists laugh about the excised girl. The mother hides in the wings. The aunts take it into their own hands to bring the girl to the front stage of her life.

Montage, editing of an individual.

This means that, in a documentary film, the materials are carefully selected, searched, cut, and then put back together in order to constitute a plot and a meaning. Preparing for the reading. And, after all, the story of a woman's life follows its biological, cultural itinerary: breasts, menstruation, marriage, defloration, delivery, menopause, osteoporosis.

The genealogy of becoming a woman is traced that way. The date of the operation is generally held secret. The girl is taken by surprise. The scene unfolds at first in the wings. The appointment with the midwife has been made well in advance. The men are kept away. But they pull the strings at a distance. They wait for the news to drop. The fathers, the uncles, the brothers appear only once the play has ended and the girl then enters the long, healing process or, rather, the never-ending healing process. Besides the psychic wound, there is the physical wound that never heals completely. A ghostly pain, which is at times real, always hovers around that zone.

Why?

An almost unbelievable aporia. One must remember this all life long but one needs to forget about it as well. The secret must be kept to the point of becoming almost unconscious. Finitude governs the experience of excision. A death reminder which haunts the body each time the libidinal pleasuring [Fr: *jouissance*] is awakened. I would not say that excision forbids any kind of pleasure but, rather, that excision helps subject pleasure to the work of memory. It can only take place through the male supplement. The so-called

vaginal pleasure, which is internal, secretive, is almost in mourning on account of this lack or absence. “One feels something somehow,” said a Sudanese friend of mine one day.

No experience of excision is translatable from one person to the next. Even if it takes place the same day. Generally, several girls are regrouped in order to be operated on. Cousins, siblings. It seems to me that it eases the strain on trauma but also inscribes it in another space. The space of repetition. More than one excision immediately engenders essentiality. The mothers, the aunts, the midwife have all been excised but it remains a secret for the one who has to go through it. What is not a secret, however, is the crying and the blood of her cousin or her sister who had accompanied her in the ordeal, in the montage and edification of her new psyche.

To cut in order to constitute. Undo ties, all family ties, indeed, in order to seal them anew from a scar that never heals. For the girl to move from childhood to adulthood, she must learn to renounce the absoluteness of motherly love.

Incision in one’s very memory. The future perfect takes over. Can one speak of a sort of symbolic death of the child? It is indeed possible that it should be so. Any future is determined by an event in the past, by a singular event, the setting and effect of which are still to come.

Every surgical operation attempts to heal, through cutting and incising the body, an evil that pre-exists, that existed before the operation. As to excision, it is destined to do long-lasting physical harm in view of a symbolic healing of the sexed individual into a gendered individual. The man, male penetration, would thus become part of the woman-to-be. Auto-affection is relegated to the antechamber, to the crypt of the living body of the daughter who is to become a woman like her mother. Life is articulated around that moment of suspension, as it is dictated by a law that no one can really explain or cite. In any case, no mother, no aunt, no midwife can name it. We are here dealing with a sovereign law that one cannot put into form.

In the testimonies of the protagonists in my film *Hidden Faces* and amidst their laughter, one can hear that excision exists in order to embellish the girl’s sexual organs or to differentiate them from their male counterpart, for the latter “hangs,” or to heighten the pleasure of the future woman. Opponents to excision among that group of women then speak about a kind of “mutilation” or – I quote from one of them – of “genocide.”

What matters here is to be able to disentangle the testimonial from the affect. It is forbidden to film an excision. Several years ago, the filming of an ex-

cision in Egypt was broadcast on a foreign television channel. This raised a general outcry and an indignation that had more impact than the bombing of Lebanon. The secret of secrets had been unveiled.



## Ashes

*CZ: Safaa, when you read your text around excision, I was struck by one thing you said: namely, the impossibility of speaking about excision in Arabic, which is your mother tongue. Yet you would feel more comfortable talking about it in English or in French. Why do you think that is?*

SF: Hmmm... How can I put it? There is something in the trauma of excision, the scene, the theatricality of it, and the pain ... which has a relationship, an affiliation, which is completely inseparable from the language, from the mother tongue. I tried a long time ago to write a poem about ashes – they use ashes to heal the wound – and I couldn't write it in Arabic. Although I only write poetry in Arabic, I couldn't, there is no way. As I said, to my knowledge, there is no such thing as writing like poetry that can deal with this subject. I don't know of any text. An Egyptian woman called Wudha put it in a kind of poetic form although other things have been treated, but this has something to do with the fact that, you know, it is language itself that cannot be translated into the mother tongue. It has to be a separate language, kept aside from any kind of sublimation to speech.

*CZ: You talked about the wound that never healed, of the ashes that are used to heal the wound topically.... I suppose that if there is a wound, which is the translation of [the Greek] trauma, then wouldn't writing be a kind of healing?*

SF: In a certain way, yes. I would talk about *treatment* ...

*CZ: Like in film?*

SF: Like in film, like in a literary text. There is a treatment. And the treatment that you are terribly lacking at the time of the wound, it is as if it had been kept to an ulterior moment when it can have an outlet, if you will, into an organized form; you are still somehow an actor in you own life, in the events

of your own life. Somehow, we are never actors in the events of our lives but ... more or less....

*CZ: And when you made the film Hidden Faces, which takes place in Egypt and, as you say, you filmed women talking about excision and laughing about it – and laughter, of course, has a cathartic function – you were not an actor, you were the author of the film. Did you feel some sort of kinship with these women, did you feel that the filming of that scene was necessary, that it helped you?*

SF: I mean, helping is not really the word, because I felt, after the film had been made, that I had committed a crime, that I had made them talk about it and ... given the reaction in Egypt to the film, the more I thought about it, the more I thought that I had committed a crime ... because there was a hostile reaction to the film in Egypt.... It was a terrible, terrible, terrible reaction. And my mother's picture was published in the papers. And they said: "Who paid this woman to talk about this?" And my mother obviously was so upset ... and I felt very upset to have made them speak about it. The moment we did it, we did it as if there were no cameras, because they did not realize there was a camera and also, I had forgotten about the camera, because it had been a subject we used to raise among us, with my aunt. The moment I was excised – I never knew how to insult, but the moment I was excised, I started knowing how to insult, but I insulted the midwife. I found all the available words to insult this woman.... One of my aunts, a real, fervent advocate of excision, who speaks in that film, invented a song for me which made me cry and shout, and she would laugh and she would still sing the song again, and even recently she would still say: "Oh we cut you, Oh my dear one...." And she would laugh. And I would say: "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" And the scene, you know, became a sort of family archive of excision in general, because I was so resistant to it without knowing why... because I had seen an excision before, that's why.

*CZ: You were an eye witness...*

SF: [*Impassioned*] I was an eye witness to the excision of the maid who worked in our house. I was there and I didn't know what it was and I saw how it was happening....

*CZ: And how old was she?*

SF: She was probably ten or something... she was older than me and two years later, they decided to excise me. So I'd known what an excision looks like.

CZ: *You saw it...*

SF: [*Raising her voice*] I saw it! I saw the blood, I saw the cutting, I saw everything. And I can even recall it to myself when I am alone.

CZ: *And is it 'normal' (quote-unquote) that you saw it?*

SF: [*Indignant*] No, it is not normal! It is not normal that a young girl would have to see that.

CZ: *How do you explain it?*

SF: I think I explain it by the fact that my father thought he was not going to excise his daughters. So he didn't think that, you know, we would have to be excised. I remember this discussion with my mother and father, where my father said: "I don't want my daughters to be excised" and my mother would say: "No, it is not possible, because this is the tradition in our family. We cannot be outcasts." I overheard the discussion and I had seen the excision. And I said that this was not going to happen to me and that if it did, I would kill myself if it happened to me. And my father, at this moment, decided that, because of my resistance, maybe I should be excised.

CZ: *It was a way of –*

SF: – making me shut up....

CZ: *... quenching the rebelliousness...*

SF: Yes, quenching the rebelliousness. He saw immediately that I did not want to have it, as if I knew what it was.... When I intervened, I was only reacting to the barbarity of it.

CZ: *And you learned a new language. After your excision, you learned how to insult. You shifted registers. You moved to another language... within Arabic.*

SF: Yes, I learned how to insult....

CZ: *It is not appropriate for a girl, is it?*

SF: No, it was not appropriate! For ... I was going to be excised with a cousin of mine and she cried all the time while I cried and I insulted and shouted all the time. And that was the first time. I was only eight. And I was a very calm girl who wouldn't say anything, who never shouted, who never insulted ... no.... At the beginning, I was a very calm person and from this point on-

wards, I knew how to insult. I remember trying to find the word that could be the most ... abusive, to say to this woman, to tell her how much I hated her...

*CZ: Words were inadequate...*

SF: Words were inadequate, completely inadequate, completely inadequate. You know, I just ... I wished I had something to kill her with. I was so in a kind of ... I was so violently rebellious, you know.

*CZ: And did poetry and film become these languages in which you could vent some of these "frustrations"? Is that linked in any way?*

SF: It is linked in a sense.... It gives me at least the liberty to think that I ... will not feel guilty – well, obviously, I still feel guilty but, eh....

*CZ: Guilty, what do you mean by "guilty"? Obviously, you had nothing to do with the decision.*

SF: No [*firmly*], but like anything that you are a victim of, you always think that it is your fault. That ... if it happened to me, it is my fault. And I feel there is a sort of process of making the girls feel guilty, which traps them into consent. And some of those girls, they are really trapped into consent because they feel guilty of something....

*CZ: What about the boys? Did you have brothers?*

SF: Yes, I had a brother who was circumcised very young at a big party, to which we invited a lot of people.... He was circumcised when he was six or something, because, for boys, it is possible to do it when you are very young. And also for girls.... At the time, I was totally anorexic; actually, I was so thin that I had to take medicine all my life because I was extremely weak. I was a very sickly, kind of anorexic girl who was, more or less, running around like boys in the streets and playing and what not ... and all of a sudden, I found out that I was not a boy, I was a girl, and I remember asking "where is the party?" And I remember they laughed at me and said: "There is no party." For girls, we don't make parties.

*CZ: And there was a lot of celebration for your brother?*

SF: Oh, huge ... a huge celebration. For days on end. We invited the family; it is a large family from the countryside, from where we were living at the time. And I remember my father holding the prepuce in his hand and looking at it like this....

*CZ: Like a trophy?*

SF: Like a trophy. And my mother being completely devastated. For me, she was not devastated at all.

*CZ: Do you ever talk to your brother about his circumcision?*

SF: No, no, never... I never talked even to my sister about circumcision....

*CZ: Do you think that your brother suffered?*

SF: He suffered, of course, he suffered. He suffered but... eh....

*CZ: He never talked about it? And you never talked about your excision with your sister?*

SF: No, until I had these medical complications years ago and two years ago. I had to go through various operations. I had five operations. It was like ... it was terrifying ... absolutely terrifying.

*CZ: It was an operation to stop the infection?*

SF: Yes, because I was ... the healing, in fact ... my wound did not heal, literally, it did not heal. So, in fact, it created a cyst and it started getting infected and infecting my kidneys and also leaving me with some horrible pain at the bottom of my tummy ... well, nobody knew why. Until, at one moment, I was seeing this gynaecologist and I said to him: "Please, do something, please ... because I am excised." And he reexamined me and said: "Oh! It is badly healed." I was in my forties; it was like five years ago, not even five years ago, three years ago.... It was at the moment of the Cerisy Conference, not when we met, but the second one.... I went through the last two operations when I was filming there. I was filming there and came back here to Paris. I saw a doctor called Paneil in Creteil and, obviously, I was under morphine and all sorts of things. What is really strange is that there is no medicine for that, for healing, even here... So I had to use a kind of cream for the eyes... they give you some kind of – yeah – *pommade*.

*CZ: You said that excision cannot be poeticized; it cannot be written about ...*

SF: Well, it is difficult to write about it unless it is ... like the way we are talking about it just now. If you are excised and write about it, it is really difficult to avoid the testimonial aspect of it. And poetry is not about testimony.

*CZ: Someone like Nawal El Saadawi – you are seen in Hidden Faces quoting from her The Hidden Face of Eve – has written about it. And you said that you had fainted reading her autobiographical vignette embedded in that treatise. And she has written quite amply about excision elsewhere. Would you say that that kind of writing has to be supplemented? Do you feel that there is something missing in that account?*

SF: There is something missing.... The more violence there is, the least words you can use to describe it. For instance, I have been thinking about that for a long time; it is that certain experiences cannot be approached literally ... it is the literality of it... It has to be approached from a different angle. And that is why it has proven extremely difficult for me to write, even if I try to put some philosophy in it, or if I approach it as a deconstruction, as a testimonial, or questioning the autobiographical – anything you like. But certain experiences are greater than words....

*CZ: And would film, then, be a better medium?*

SF: Yes, a better medium....

*CZ: And if you were to make a film about that issue, where you would be the author – but you could also be an actor filming your own testimony.... How do you see a film about your experience of excision where you are the author and the central actor? Could you imagine such a film?*

SF: No, but if I had to imagine something like that, it would not be about excision.... I would not describe it; it would not be a narrative of it; it would be something else. I would try to metaphorize it or metonymize it, in a way. I would try to go through another way. Actually, I am thinking of going into writing a book where I would treat, I would try to kind of ... go *around* it: some poetry, testimony, ellipses, dissertation – you know ...

*CZ: A bit like Jacques Derrida did in Circumfession? Circumvent it?*

SF: Exactly, try to go around it because it is difficult to try to just, you know, describe it. I would not do something descriptive or literal about it. It is difficult...

*CZ: Just now, as we are talking, I am remembering your reading with Jacques Derrida, from your text Ordalie – for me, it was also a special moment because, as I realized afterwards, it was the last time I would see Jacques alive – but seeing the two of you speaking about Ordalie was not only very moving but also intellectually quite gripping. We traced “ordalie” back to ordeal and the*

*idea of decapitation, the fact that the head still feels and can comprehend what is happening around “it,” while being severed from the body. Decapitation, juxtaposed with Jacques Derrida’s discourse around circumcision and yours about excision, I felt that decapitation was somehow linked with excision and circumcision, because you do cut off a feeling part from the body. Did you feel that there was a connection in your work with that experience?*

SF: Autobiographically speaking, cutting – excision – has always been accompanied by a kind of constant menace: “If you do something, they will cut your head off.” That is like being decapitated. It is something almost every girl knows – in my background in any case – not necessarily the happy few like intellectual girls who come from intellectual backgrounds. Otherwise, excision is always linked to the loss of virginity, pregnancy outside marriage, which inevitably will lead to the girl being slaughtered ... in what we call an honour crime. And excision, in our phantasmatic world, was completely related to decapitation.

*CZ: Did the boys not experience the loss of the prepuce as a decapitation?*

SF: No .... They are not subjected to crimes of honour.

*CZ: There is a kind of asymmetry there, definitely. But in other societies in, say, West Africa, in the horn of Africa, in Kenya, there is a kind of ‘symmetry’, if you will, between excision and circumcision, in the sense that the prepuce is thought to be the vestige of femininity and, conversely, the clitoris is read as a vestige of phallic masculinity, which is to be severed in order to access full femininity. Has this argument ever been put forward in the southern part of Egypt where you come from?*

SF: No, it has been said.... For instance, one of my aunts said: “Would we like to be like silk? Otherwise, there is a part that hangs like in a boy; if we were not excised, it would be like two boys touching each other. There have to be differences. A boy has to look like this and a girl has to look like that.” They look at it aesthetically, as if it looked nicer...

*CZ: When women are together, trading secrets, do they talk about issues of sexuality, sexual pleasure before and after excision?*

SF: What they talk about.... My aunt is obviously a married woman, and among married women there is always a trading of sexual practices: what do they do in bed, what happens, how many times, and which positions, all this in great fits of laughter. I have had a lot of conversations around these sub-

jects with my aunt and my cousin. We would gather in a room and start talking, and each one would tell the others her story of what happened in bed.

*CZ: And did they talk about the very basic, fleshy, yet cerebral fact of pleasure?*

SF: No ... I remember that I asked my aunt, the one who made up that song for me on the occasion of my excision, and I asked her whether excision stopped one from experiencing pleasure after excision and she said to me: "but I have it every day and I have pleasure." "I have it everyday." You know, she had sexual intercourse with her husband every day... and she used to be extremely proud of that.

*CZ: Do you feel that pleasure is in the head or does it need to be mediated through the clitoris even when the clitoris is no longer there?*

SF: Of course, there is the possibility of pleasure even if there is no clitoris. Of course, you must be familiar with the psychoanalytical discourse on that subject, you know – that the pleasure of the clitoris is superficial and inferior while the vagina's pleasure is greater. I remember reading Françoise Dolto on that subject and I talked to a friend-psychoanalyst and I screamed at her and I wanted to know: what does that mean, to have a deeper experience, a deeper pleasure? As you know, in psychoanalytical discourse, the clitoral pleasure is subordinated to the vaginal pleasure and they also say that clitoral pleasure is inferior and one of the features of the hysterical woman.

*CZ: If you push that reasoning a little bit further, would you go so far as to argue that the clitoris is useless?*

SF: No, I wouldn't say that. Of course not. I am just saying that the clitoris is extremely important in auto-affection, the possibility of sexual autonomy in a woman who is not going to be dependent all her life on penetration, as with a man.... I would say that excision, the operation of excision itself, is almost a byproduct of it. It is traumatic; that trauma is far, far more, deeper, more constitutional than the mere fact of losing pleasure.

*CZ: What do you feel you have lost?*

SF: I will answer you with an anecdote. My two nieces – every woman of my family in the second generation all escaped excision except for the daughters of my brother. And he wanted to get them excised and we had lots of discussion about it. I was opposing it as much as I could and his wife, the mother of these two girls, who is also a friend of mine, she was also against the excision.

We were trying to do everything to stop it from happening. At one moment, he wanted to take them to the countryside and get them excised by a midwife. But his wife opposed that violently and said: "If they have to be excised, they will have to be by a doctor under general anesthetic." She talked to a gynaecologist and came up with a story and told my brother that "in fact they did not have a clitoris." You know, she invented something. "They don't have a clitoris, so in fact they don't need to be excised." [*Laughter*] "At the moment," she said, "they don't; maybe when they get older..." So he was not going to do anything about it, he was not going to look at the girls to find out whether they had a clitoris or not. And he could not speak with the gynecologist, because the mother was with him. But later, I talked to my sister and I asked what had happened to my nieces – I go to Egypt every year, you know. You can go to the country to have it done – and the girls arrived and I looked into their eyes, and I found out that they had been excised. I saw it in their eyes. There is something that breaks you completely. What happens at the moment of excision just sets you on a completely different path for your life. There is an after and a before. Before you are somebody intact...

*CZ: There is a turning point?*

SF: Yes, there is a turning point, which is based on the trauma, on the treason ... treason, because ... even Nawal El Saadawi said it: "I cried for my mother for help and my mother did not help me."

*CZ: To return to your brother who took your nieces forcibly [to be excised] – does he have the legal right to do that?*

SF: Of course he does. He has the legal right, of course; they are his daughters.

*CZ: You also said that your father also made that decision because he thought you were a little bit feistier and somehow he wanted to have you tamed. Do you feel that is also a betrayal?*

SF: It is a betrayal.... I remember he said to my mother – and that is why I had these problems later – it is because he said to do it partly only. They left me a little bit. He suggested that it should be done but halfway. ....

*CZ: So he met the requirements halfway?*

SF: Yes, halfway. He could see that by the fact that I was so much intervening in the discussion, shouting, when I said that I would kill myself, he could see that I needed to be tamed.

*CZ: If a boy is a bit cheeky and daring, would such a boy be “tamed” in the same way? Would circumcision have been used as a threat?*

SF: No, it is because ... circumcision is elevated, elevated in the sense that he is ... he is a hero. He becomes a hero of his own life. It is a passage into ... his crowning as a man.

*CZ: Whereas you feel that the girl does not gain access to womanhood in the same way? Do you feel something has been taken away from her?*

SF: Well, I have seen all the excisions that took place but I have the memory of my two sisters, the maid, and myself, and my cousin.... I have seen enough to say that, for women, it is completely inaccessible to knowledge. Women don't know why. I don't know why. Until now, I don't know why. There are a lot of discourses about the reason why – tradition, religion.... But we never knew why.

*CZ: Were you ever told – which would be wrong – that the Qur'an said it? They never quoted a Hadith or any other document to back up excision?*

SF: No, of course the Qur'an does not say that. They say it is a biological necessity.

*CZ: And did your mother hold that kind of discourse?*

SF: For my mother, it was very much related to culture, because she is not from the city; she is from the countryside, and she married a man who was educated and came from outside the family circle. For my mother, it was a way of healing her sense of belonging to her family. “My daughter would be excised like my family wanted her to be.”

*CZ: Do you feel that it is passed on from mother to daughter without male intervention?*

SF: Well, as you see, my father did intervene....

*CZ: But is that specific to your family or is it widespread?*

SF: No, it is common, because I had a friend who was half-French and half-Egyptian and she comes from a bourgeois, intellectual background from Cairo, and she said that her aunt insisted that her daughters had to be excised even if the father did not want to. Normally, it is the mother who does not agree, as in the case of my sister. The mother will arrange; she will do something to avert it.

*CZ: Do you feel that things are changing now in Egypt?*

SF: It is changing a little bit, because I could see, in a large family in the countryside, that is not even a topic, but at least in the part where my family moved and where girls are now educated, it has stopped. And in our generation, in my generation, from that branch of the family, it was not the case. I remember speaking to my sister once, who had two boys and a daughter, she did not want to have her cut. So one day, when I looked after the baby daughter, I saw – and I had forgotten what it looks like.

*CZ: I see, the memory of an intact vulva.*

SF: And an intact body. I had forgotten what it looked like. Until now, I don't know what kind of excision my sister had, whether it was a light one like the one I had or a full clitoridectomy, I don't know.

*CZ: Do you now feel the need to write about it?*

SF: I am still trying to approach it, you know – the guilt, even talking about it. I am speaking to you, and at the same time I am thinking that probably I would not want to have it published, because I do not want to hurt my family again... But the guilt ... I am questioning the guilt that I feel, that everybody feels... There are girls who haven't been excised, and even they have that guilt speaking about it. I remember the case of this girl at the American University of Cairo and her excision was filmed at some family's or something. I can't remember how it was broadcast, but I remember the film and I remember the outcry, the upheaval ... and she was lynched; she had to go into hiding for talking about it. And also the fact that we sell ourselves to the West by talking about it; it is a betrayal, you see, a betrayal of family values, a betrayal of your mothers and fathers, the betrayal of a secret, something that we should not speak about....

*CZ: Do you feel that Western discourse and the humanitarian, health approach to the issue has contributed to helping spread the practice, as a reaction against it?*

SF: No, I don't think so. I feel there is more knowledge about, at least, the health problems that are provoked by excision than before. There is more awareness. I think it is good and necessary to know that this problem never stops in a certain way and that this has consequences for the woman's body. But it is not satisfying for me. I still want to understand. This is not the reason why I am opposing ... I mean, I understand, I suffered myself in my own

body for years and years and years. But, you know, they cut everything from me. But that is not enough. I still want to know why mothers do this to their daughters. I really want to know. And I cannot separate excision from infanticide. There is something to do with infanticide in there. We used to kill girl-children and girls are still killed, in India, in China. It has something to do ...

*CZ: ... with the Medea myth?*

SF: Yes, it has to do with the Medea myth. Excision is a symbolic murder. That is why it is a castration. Phantasmatically for them, too, you know, any excised girl is also someone who has a phantasmatic fear of decapitation. And I want to know why this is happening. To access womanhood? What is womanhood? And what is maternity?

*CZ: I am thinking of Carl Jung and his idea of the Terrible Mother, who is the castrator of young females. So possibly mothers 'castrate', 'decapitate', excise their daughters so that they do not access a world that was denied them.*

SF: Possibly. Of course, there is something to that. But I remember, for example, an event which is incredible. In my family, I was excised much earlier than my sister, and when it happened, my mother was extremely calm – cold, cold-blooded kind of, cynical, violent. I remember we used to live in this big building – and my mother was from the countryside—and we lived on the fourth floor. There was a terrace, and we were eating and living up there, and sleeping was on the second floor. We would lock the fourth floor and go to the second floor to sleep because the bedroom was on the second floor. What happened is that they excised us and locked us in (!) on the fourth floor. So during the night these two girls were lying down, bleeding, and they used to lock the doors and go down there to sleep and my mother wouldn't come to bring us something to drink or eat. And we would wait to see if anybody would wake up at any moment and we waited a long time to go upstairs and get something to eat and drink. The second time there was an excision, they didn't do it on the fourth floor; they did it in a clean place on the third floor, and that is where my uncles were living, in a flat, you know. So they did it on the third floor with clean beds and clean sheets. And at the moment it was happening, my mother was extremely upset and crying and I remember sitting there, waiting for my sister, and I looked at her and I said: "But you were not so devastated when I was excised. Why is that?" And she looked at me and she said: "I don't know." I remember her look; she was extremely surprised, as if it had something to do with being the first daughter. You know, with the first daughter, one should look into the psychoanalytical background ... probably something to do with the father, you know, the absent father in this case.

I don't know; nothing is clear to me. It may have to do with age difference; between me and my sister, there was two and a half years. I must have been quite young then when I spoke to my mother about it. And I could see very clearly that she was not devastated. I was excised, and she was not afraid that I would die. I was anorexic; I was locked up on the fourth floor and they went down to sleep on the bedroom floor. We were left with my cousin in a filthy bed with, on it, some kind of plastic sheet, for the blood, not to stain the mattress. And then we had no one to look after us and we had to wait for somebody to come in the morning to give us a drop of water. And it was not the case with my sister: there was food, clean sheets, people around. And my mother – there she was. That is why I want to understand [*chuckle*], and I wouldn't say that my mother does not like me or does not love me in the literal sense of the word. Why did she do that? I don't know.

*CZ: Do you feel you have to forgive your mother?*

SF: Well, I had to go through a process of forgiveness, because for me it was unforgivable. After that these other operations, that were just as barbaric in a way too – and one was done under local anesthetic ... I was in bed for weeks, I was bleeding ... at one moment, I just picked up the phone and just insulted her again. It was so bad, I was bleeding, in pain, unable to move and all that. At that one moment, I just picked up the phone and asked my mother: "What did you do to me?" "Why did you do that to me?"

*CZ: Did she answer?*

SF: No, she put down the phone. She hung up. And that brings me back to the discussion with my father, the question "Why did you do that?" "My father was against it and yet he did it. Why did he do it?" She said: "I cannot come back to these discussions now." And I said: "You have to come back now. I have had five operations because of what you did to me. Come on, tell me! Or you are going to put some ashes on me again?" I recalled the ashes again. "You are going to put ashes on me again?" And she hung up. At one moment, later, my brother – Mustapha, who excised his daughters finally – called, and I explained to him that I had five operations and each time they open the wound in exactly the same way as at the time of my excision. So I had to go back and see her again. Every time they cut more so that I would heal differently. But I wouldn't heal differently, I would heal the same way.

*CZ: So you had to re-live, re-enact each time...?*

SF: Each time, five times, five times. I was bleeding and I had to go to the gynaecologist every day. But even so, they used a kind of wire inside the

clitoral hood, like that, so that it would heal and close up and it was extremely painful. So they had to use local anesthetic to do it. And so they would close the hole again [*chuckles*], and finally I had to go and see this Doctor Paniel, who is a specialist and a wonderful gynaecologist. I went. and he had a look at me. and he gave me an urgent appointment for an operation. And then I was really looked after. In the operation room, they gave me a morphine inhaler, which I had to press to relieve the pain. But the wound never healed....

*CZ: That is what you mean by the never-healing wound... psychically but also literally*

SF: Literally....



## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VIGNETTES

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I WAS SIX YEARS OLD THAT NIGHT when I lay in my bed, warm and peaceful in that pleasurable state which lies half way between wakefulness and sleep, with the rosy dreams of childhood flitting by, like gentle fairies in quiet succession. I felt something move under the blankets, something like a huge hand, cold and rough, fumbling over my body, as though looking for something. Almost simultaneously, another hand, as cold and rough and as big as the first one, was clapped over my mouth, to prevent me from screaming....

They carried me to bed. I saw them catch hold of my sister, who was two years younger, *in exactly the same way* they had caught hold of me a few minutes earlier. I cried out with all my might; No! No! I could see my sister's face held between the big rough hands. It had a deathly pallor and her wide black eyes met mine for a split second, a glance of dark terror, which I can never forget. A moment later and she was gone, behind the door of the bathroom where I had just been. The look we exchanged seemed to say: "Now we know what it is. Now we know where lies our tragedy. We were born of a special sex, the female sex. We are destined in advance to taste of misery, and to have a part of our body torn away by cold, unfeeling cruel hands."<sup>1</sup>

— Nawal El Saadawi (Egypt)



I felt the rough hand rub me. I saw the razor blade flash after they spilled alcohol on it. She lit it. Hajja wiped it with clean cotton. I saw it coming near me. I screamed. I screamed, and my shouts sounded like the shrieks of a

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<sup>1</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, tr. & ed. Sherif Hetata (1980; London: Zed, 1995): 6–7.

slaughtered baby rabbit. I screamed as it burned and tore through my flesh. I screamed for mercy as Hajja poured alcohol on my wound and turned it into a raging fire.<sup>2</sup>

— Alifa Rifaat (Egypt)



We were standing there, and one of us said, “What are they going to do to her?” So the women told us to get out of the room, to go fetch something or other. I felt faint. I was shaking, then I heard her scream. My cousin wailed the loudest. Then the next girl was taken in and the next and the next. It was my turn. They locked each girl in a room away from the rest and left her to cry there. We asked why she was crying, and they said, “It’s nothing. She’s a little coward. She’s just afraid. She’s badly brought up,” and words of that nature.<sup>3</sup>

— Anonymous, in Nayra Atiya (Egypt)



My cousin Zahra sat first. I heard her cry out. I was a little frightened then. I said: “I don’t want to be circumcised.” So they got hold of me, and my maternal uncle’s wife sat behind me and held my legs apart. I was sitting on the floor on a piece of rug. The barber stood in front of me and did the operation. I cried out once, then they made a bandage of cotton and gauze and placed it between the “sisters” [labia] and said, “Don’t bring your legs together or the wound will heal over.”<sup>4</sup>

— Anonymous, in Nayra Atiya (Egypt)



[The exciser] sliced the top of my big lips, and then she took thorns like needles and put them in crossways, across my vagina, to close it up. She put in seven thorns, and each time she put one in she tightened them together with string. When she was finished, she put on some black paste to stop the bleeding and make the wound dry up fast, and then some egg yolk to make it feel

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<sup>2</sup> Alifa Rifaat, “Who Will Be the Man?” in *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. Margot Badran & Miriam Cooke (London: Virago, 1990): 75.

<sup>3</sup> Nayra Atiya, *Khul-Khaal: Five Egyptian Women Tell Their Stories* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse UP, 1982): 80.

<sup>4</sup> Nayra Atiya, *Khul-Khaal*, 11–12.

cool. Then she took some cloth and wrapped it around my legs, from my ankles to my hips. And they wrapped me up in my cloth again and carried me inside to the room they had ready for us. And that's what they did to the other girls.<sup>5</sup>

— Aman (Somalia)



The next thing I felt was my flesh, my genitals, being cut away. I heard the sound of the dull blade sawing back and forth through my skin. When I think back, I honestly can't believe that this happened to me. I feel as if I were talking about somebody else. There's no way in the world I can explain what it feels like. It's like somebody is slicing through the meat of your thigh, or cutting off your arm, except this is the most sensitive part of your body. However, I didn't move an inch, because I remembered Aman and knew there was no escape. And I wanted Mama to be proud of me. I just sat there as if I were made of stone, telling myself the more I moved around, the longer the torture would take. Unfortunately, my legs began to quiver of their own accord, and shake uncontrollably, and I prayed, Please, God, let it be over quickly. Soon it was, because I passed out.<sup>6</sup>

— Waris Dirie (Somalia)



Then she must have passed out, for she remembered nothing further of the operation in which all the outer parts of her small genitals were cut off, lips, clitoris and all, and the mutilated opening stitched up with a thorn, leaving a passage the size of a grain of sorghum.<sup>7</sup>

— Saïda Hagi-Dirie Herzi (Somalia)




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<sup>5</sup> Aman, *Aman, the Story of a Somali Girl: As Told to Virginia Lee Barnes and Janice Boddy* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994): 57.

<sup>6</sup> Waris Dirie, with Cathleen Miller, *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Life of a Desert Nomad* (1998; London: Virago, 1999): 45.

<sup>7</sup> Saïda Hagi-Dirie Herzi, "Against the Pleasure Principle" (1990), in *Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writings by Women of African Descent from the Ancient Egyptians to the Present*, ed. Margaret Busby (London: Vintage, 1992): 779.

And between my legs someone was busy with a needle in an open wound. It was as if with all my senses, wholly conscious, I was being slaughtered. I tried to defend myself, but what can a four-year-old do against six grown-up women? Maybe I moaned, maybe I gasped for breath. But I didn't scream, for I was spared the gag. And then I fainted.

Before they began to bind me up, I came to. It was a new pain this time, the *halaleiso* [the exciser] rubbing herbs on the fresh wound: these herbs are supposed to speed up healing. It felt like I was being held over an open fire.

Again I fainted.<sup>8</sup>

— Nura Abdi (Somalia)



Salt water washed the wound. The old woman took a fistful of thorns, sharpened them with her blade so they'd pierce the skin more easily, and began to sew me. I tried to defend myself but strong hands still pressed me down.

"Hold still. It will soon be over," my mother said. "you're not the first to go through this."

I cried. I could hear the thorns squeal as the old woman pushed them through my skin. One broke off and she spent an eternity trying to dig out the end caught in my flesh.

I became the agony, the cold ice agony, in my spine.<sup>9</sup>

— Fadumo Korn (Somalia)



I was hoisted up by four or five of these stocky women. I looked down: a large leaf had been laid on the ground directly underneath my buttocks. I looked up again. Terror finally overcame me as the women's faces, now dozens, now hundreds, moved in closer all around my near naked body suspended in mid-air. They grabbed my legs and arms apart. The women's screams, the sounds of drums, and then a sharp blade cut deep into my flesh on one side and then on the other. As I cried out in unimaginable agony, I felt

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<sup>8</sup> Nura Abdi & Leo G. Linder, *Tränen im Sand* (Bergisch-Gladbach: Lübbe, 2003); *Larmes de sable*, tr. Gerald Messadié (Paris: L'Archipel, 2005). Warm thanks go to Tobe Levin for providing the English translation in progress.

<sup>9</sup> Fadumo Korn, with Sabine Eichhorst, *Born in the Big Rains: A Memoir of Somalia and Survival*, tr. Tobe Levin (New York: Feminist Press/CUNY, 2006): 40.

warm blood ooze down between my thighs. Perhaps for the first time since I was an infant, I vomited.<sup>10</sup>

— Fuambai Ahmadu (Sierra Leone)



I am five years old again and I am sitting on a rock back at home in Somalia. It is early in the morning. I am afraid. I'm sitting sort of in my mother's lap – her legs are encircling me – and she puts a bit of broken-off root in my mouth to stop me biting off my tongue with the pain. “Waris,” she says, “you know I won't be able to hold you still. I'm on my own here with you. So be good, my little one. Be brave, for my sake, then it'll soon be over.” [...]

My mother blindfolds me. Then I feel my own flesh being cut, my genitals being sliced away. I have never been able to describe what this felt like. There are no words which can give me the measure of the pain. I can hear the sound of the blunt blade hacking away again and again at my skin. [...] I hear myself calling out prayers to heaven. Finally, I fall into a faint. When I come round my first thought is that it's over now, at least. The blindfold has slipped off. I can see her clearly, the old butcher-woman, and I can see the pile of acacia thorns at her side. When she starts to push them through my flesh the pain is excruciating. She threads white cotton through the puncture holes she has made, sewing me up. My legs go dead. The pain is driving me mad. I have only one thought in my mind: I want to die. [...]

Each time it seems like it happened to somebody else, some other little girl. As if that little Waris was somebody else.<sup>11</sup>

— Waris Dirie (Somalia)



[It] was going to take me years to realize that excision is a mutilation and that, if the practice is indeed the domain of women, men are actually the ones who, surreptitiously, see to it that it is done, in the name of their sacrosanct male principles. Men hold on to this practice; they know very well why our

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<sup>10</sup> Fuambai Ahmadu, “Rites and Wrongs: An Insider/Outsider Reflects on Power and Excision,” in *Female “Circumcision” in Africa: Culture, Controversy and Change*, ed. Bettina Shell-Duncan & Ylva Hernlund (Boulder CO & London: Lynne Rienner, 2000): 293.

<sup>11</sup> Waris Dirie, with Corinna Milborn, *Desert Children* (London: Virago, 2005): 8–9.

clitorises are removed, and it is not by chance that they keep quiet, even if their silence is draped in the folds of dignity and of tradition.<sup>12</sup>

— Kesso Barry (Guinea)



Circumcision is like being branded. It's forcing you to belong to a community. They stamp you with circumcision and you're part of the community. We attack LePen when he stigmatizes us because we adhere to a community. When it's LePen we condemn him as racist and antisemitic. But when we are the ones who practise it, we tolerate it. If we look at the really sensitive topics like circumcision or the veil, it is normal to eat kosher or hallal at the university cafeteria? For me it's not normal at all. I can understand if someone doesn't eat pork at school, it's not like circumcision, there is no physical mark. I am circumcised. It was not my choice, but I have to live with it.<sup>13</sup>

— Waji (Paris, France)



[Circumcision] is a very strange question. It's a very ambiguous question. I find it necessary. It is a link and it's irrevocable. I am embarrassed to answer because I chose to get circumcised at forty years of age.<sup>14</sup>

— Charles-Élie Couture, Paris, France



I was circumcised at the age of eight in a Muslim village. My father was Muslim. When you've been the victim of violence as a child, you are ready to have others go through it too. It's out of the question to have my children circumcised. It's a sort of symbolic castration that says we are capable of removing part of your body; if you rebel against us, we can remove the rest. I think it's a type of symbolic act.<sup>15</sup>

— Riad Sattouf, Paris, France




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<sup>12</sup> Kesso Barry, *Kesso, princesse peuhle* (Paris: Seghers/Mémoire vive, 1987): 111–12.

<sup>13</sup> Waji in Dominique Arnaud's film *Silence, on coupe!* (2006). Tr. Kevin Dwyer.

<sup>14</sup> The artist Charles-Élie Couture, in Dominique Arnaud's film *Silence, on coupe!* (2006). Tr. Kevin Dwyer.

<sup>15</sup> Cartoonist Riad Sattouf, author of *Ma Circoncision* (2005), in Dominique Arnaud's film *Silence, on coupe!* (2006). Tr. Kevin Dwyer.

## MALIAN SONGS AGAINST EXCISION

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THE FOLLOWING MALIAN SONGS from the album *Stop Excision: For the Dignity of Women* were gathered by the members of the committee for the project: Amadou Gano, director S13; Ibrihim Diombana “Barbu,” Professor of Music, Issa Coulibaly (Bafing Coul), musician; Aly Traoré, manager and promoter, Mohamed Sanous Diakite, producer; Susan McLucas aka Mariam Sacko, coordinator and initiator.

### Song Against Excision #1

“*It’s Bad*” (“*O Magni*”), written and sung by Amy Koita

Let’s do what’s good. Let’s not do what isn’t good.  
Ever since the beginning of time it’s been normal and acceptable to  
circumcise men.  
That’s good. Let’s keep doing it. But excision of women has never been an  
obligation.

There are African countries which don’t excise because they prioritize their  
health.

Excision gives us problems in childbirth, troubles in married life, health  
problems.

It can even kill people.

Let’s not do what’s bad. Let’s do what is good.

Africans have spoken. Television has spoken. The radio has spoken.

The media have spoken. Doctors have spoken.

Everyone says that excision isn’t an obligation for women.

It’s not good. Let’s not do it. It’s not good. Let’s not do it.

## Song Against Excision #2

*“Excision” (“Tukore”), in Senoufo, written and sung by Neba Solo*

The world evolves like a chameleon.  
 A day can be far away and it will still come.  
 That’s what we have to know.  
 It isn’t serious to commit a mistake without knowing it.  
 But making the mistake when you’ve been told about it is serious.  
 We didn’t used to know, but now we do.  
 Excision is a bad thing.  
 Whether or not we have a child depends on God. But excision can cause  
 sterility.  
 Listen to me, brothers and sisters.  
 An excised girl has less affection for her husband.  
 Furthermore, we now know that many illnesses of women come from  
 excision.  
 Experts have proven that excision isn’t good.  
 It causes lots of troubles in women.  
 There can be a hemorrhage. There can be death.  
 It can spread AIDS. It can spread tetanus.  
 That’s what Burkina Faso understood and put into practice.  
 That’s what Egypt understood and put into practice.  
 ... Benin, ... Ivory Coast, ... Kenya, ... Liberia, ... Guinea, ... Senegal, ...  
 Nigeria, ... Cameroon...  
 The person who understands tomorrow can get ready for it.  
 Let’s get ready for the future and stop excising.



## Song Against Excision # 3

*“Let’s Decide to Say ‘No’” (“An Ka Fo ‘Ante’”) by Kandia Kouyaté & Susan  
 McLucas, sung by Kandia Kouyaté*

Oh, Mother! Oh Father! This woman has a knife, the knife of excision.  
 I don’t want to get near her.

It’s hard to make it rain. It is hard to control the heat.  
 We can’t avoid lots of bad things. But we can avoid a lot of pain.

If we stop excising our daughters.  
This would make girls' lives easier, and no more girls will die for no reason.  
Don't our bodies belong to us?  
Women's bodies hide many marvels. So don't hurt them.  
Nothing is gained by hurting us. So let's say "No, we refuse! We refuse!"  
Excision is the cause of many health problems.  
It makes childbirth harder and more dangerous because of the loss of blood.  
Let's say "No, we refuse!" because of the incredible pain.  
Let's say "No, we refuse!" because of the risk of AIDS.  
Let's say "No, we refuse!" All together, let's say "No, we refuse."



#### Song Against Excision #4

*"Let's Never Be the Last" ("Bural"), in Pulaar, written and sung by Aly Baba Cissé*

Dear parents, excuse me. I want to talk about something that might offend someone.  
If it does, I'm very sorry. Stop excising your daughters.  
Doctors and midwives have told us that excision isn't good.  
Girls lose lots of blood when they are excised. Sometimes they even die.  
Those who reach the age to be married have troubles with their husbands.  
In the course of childbirth, we lose many young mothers because of excision.  
Please, put a stop to this social blight. Look at Senegal, Guinea and the Ivory Coast.  
They are harvesting the fruit of the trees they planted when they decided that excision was to be outlawed.  
Look at Ghana, Togo, and Benin.  
They are harvesting the fruit of the trees they planted when they decided that excision was to be outlawed.  
Look at Burkina Faso, Nigeria and the Central African Republic.  
They are harvesting the fruit of the trees they planted when they decided that excision was to be outlawed.  
Look at Egypt and Kenya. They are harvesting the fruit of the trees they planted when they decided that excision is a grave violation.  
In the course of childbirth we have lost many young mothers.

“Every individual has the right to life and to the integrity of his/her body”  
 (from the Malian Constitution).  
 Let’s never be the last (to stop excising).



### Song Against Excision # 5

(“Sariya”) *“The Law,”* written by Mohamed Sanous Diakité, sung by the Zotto Boys and Madina N’Daye

Leave her alone. Leave the girl alone.  
 (*women’s voices*) It makes childbirth hard.  
 Excision should be stopped.  
 Let the fathers understand. Let the mothers understand.  
 Let the children, the old people listen.  
 Let the old people try to understand. Let the children also try to understand.  
 It can cause death.

That it is time to stop excision. Let the old people listen and understand,  
 That it is time to stop excision.  
     It makes childbirth hard.

We beg the old people, we call on them,  
 Togo, Benin, also Egypt, Kenya and Liberia, the Ivory Coast, Guinea,  
     Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Cameroon, all have laws against excising.  
 The women of Malicounda mobilized themselves in Senegal. So that excision  
     would be stopped.

Let the old people try to understand why. Let the children also try to  
     understand why.  
 It is time to stop excising.  
     It can make childbirth hard.  
 Oh, Father, explains Kadia. Oh, Mother, explains Fanta. Oh Mom, explains  
     Oumou.  
 Let all Malian women rise up.  
     It can cause marital problems.  
 Let all Malian women rise up. Malian women, the authorities support you.  
 Rise up, Malian women. The Zotto boys follow your lead, as well,  
     It makes the childbirth hard.

The women of Malicounda rose up in Senegal  
To stop excision for all time.  
It can cause many problems.  
Let Malian women follow their lead.  
Malian women, I tell you to rise up.  
We, the Zotto Boys, support you.  
Let's make a law, against excision now!



### Song Against Excision # 6

*“Excision Isn’t Good” (“Aranoïn Edula”), in Dogon, written and sung by Aly Bodel*

Hello. Good evening. Our elders have had their time.  
What they saw, we don't see it.  
Family members, listen to me.  
I am going to tell you something that I learned with the researchers.  
We really should listen to them and follow their advice because these words  
will benefit our future and the future of our children.

Let's stop excising. If we stop it, we will have our health.  
If we stop it, we will avoid risks. Lots of them, not just one risk.

This is the news that I have to tell you.  
Excision can cause hemorrhage. It can cause infections. It makes childbirth  
harder.  
It causes bad scarification. It diminishes love. It is traumatizing.

Hello. Good evening. Look, listen. Old elders of long ago didn't practice  
excision.  
Let's follow their example.  
Let's stop excising. Everybody, listen.  
All the regions of Mali, let's stop excising.



## Song Against Excision # 7

*“My Body” (“N’Farikolo”) by Maurice Boyd, sung by Fantani Touré & chorus of girls*

A woman’s body is a mystery. My body is beautiful. A women’s body is important.

Don’t excise me.

I have a right to life. I have a right to health. I have a right to protection. Don’t cut me.

My body is strong. My body is complete.

Excision makes childbirth harder. It can even kill.

It makes the life of the couple harder. Don’t cut me!

Let’s have pity on our girls. Let’s protect our children, brothers and sisters.

A woman’s body is a mystery. My body is beautiful.

A woman’s body is important to God. Don’t cut me.

My body is complete. My body is healthy. My body is beautiful.



## Song Against Excision # 8

*“Excision” (“Takhoundi”), in Sarakolé, written and sung by Naynini Koné*

Mothers. Be smart and listen.

Stop excising. Stop excising your daughters.

Excision can spread AIDS. Don’t excise your daughters.

If you excise your daughter, it will make childbirth harder for her.

If you excise your daughter, it may cause problems in her marriage.

Pulaar people, stop excising your daughters! Soninké people, stop excising!

Kassonké people, stop excising! Bambara people, stop excising! Moors, stop excising.

All the women of the world, stop excising!

Women of Africa, be good and smart!

All the women of the world, stop excising.





## AFTERWORD

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J. STEVEN SVOBODA AND ROBERT DARBY

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### A Rose By Any Other Name?

Symmetry and Assymetry in  
Male and Female Genital Cutting<sup>1</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

The essay offers a critical examination of the tendency to segregate discussion of surgical alterations to the male and female genitals into separate compartments – the first known as circumcision, the second as genital mutilation. It is argued that this fundamental problem of definition underlies the considerable controversy surrounding these procedures when carried out on minors, and that it hinders objective discussion of the alleged benefits, harms and risks. The variable effects of male and female genital surgeries are explored, and a scale of damage for male circumcision to complement the World Health Organization's categorization of female genital mutilation is proposed. The origins of the double standard identified are placed in historical perspective, and a brief conclusion makes a plea for greater gender neutrality in the approach to this contentious issue.

“By this it appears how necessary it is for any man that aspires to true Knowledge, to examine the Definitions of former Authors; and either

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and substantially expanded version of the article originally published as “A Rose by any other Name: Rethinking the Similarities and Differences between Male and Female Genital Cutting,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 21 (September 2007). We are grateful to the editors and publishers, Blackwell Publishing, for permission to reprint.

to correct them, where they are negligently set down; or to make them himselfe. For the errors of Definitions multiply themselves, according as the reckoning proceeds; and lead men into absurdities, which at last they see, but cannot avoyd, without reckoning anew from the beginning; in which lyes the foundation of their errors.”

— Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

“The cutting of healthy genital organs for non-medical reasons is at its essence a basic violation of girls’ and women’s right to physical integrity. This is true regardless of the degree of cutting or the extent of the complications that may or may not ensue.”

— Anika Rahman & Nahid Toubia, *Female Genital Mutilation: A Guide to Worldwide Laws and Policies*

“Some of you have seen what they did at Bolvangar. And that was horrible, but it is not the only such place, not the only practice. Sisters, you know only the north: I have travelled in the south lands. There are churches there, believe me, that cut their children too, as the people of Bolvangar did – not in the same way, but just as horribly – they cut their sexual organs, yes, both boys and girls – they cut them with knives so that they shan’t feel. That is what the church does, and every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling.”

— Philip Pullman, *The Subtle Knife*

## Introduction

**T**HE HUMAN BODY, and the genitals specifically, are characterized by bilateral symmetry; both male and female sets develop from the same embryonic tissue, and the male genitals are anatomically homologous with the female: glans penis, foreskin, scrotum, and testicles correspond to clitoris, clitoral hood, labia, and ovaries. This biological symmetry is not, however, reflected in Western cultural discourses on the genitals, which tend to be extremely asymmetrical, regarding and evaluating the male genitals (especially the part of the penis known as the foreskin) very differently from the female genitals. The asymmetry is most strikingly expressed in the contrasting discourses on surgical alterations to these organs that have evolved since the mid-nineteenth century. In this article, we make a critical examination of the tendency to segregate discussion of such genital modifications into separate compartments – the first known as male circumcision, the second as female genital mutilation. It is argued that this fundamental problem of definition underlies the considerable controversy surrounding these procedures, especially when carried out on minors, and that it hinders objective discussion of the alleged benefits, harms, and risks. The variable effects

of male genital cutting (MGC)<sup>2</sup> and female genital cutting (FGC) are explored, and a scale of damage for MGC to complement the World Health Organization's categorization of FGC is proposed. The origins of the double standard identified are placed in historical perspective, and there is a discussion of the respective roles of science and culture in promoting or discouraging these practices. We conclude by urging greater gender neutrality in the approach to this contentious issue.

### An Odious Comparison?

'Comparisons are odious', says the proverb, and these days none more so than efforts to compare male and female genital cutting. Only recently has it become possible to speak in the same breath about such surgeries. Until the 1990s, it was generally assumed, at least in Anglo-American societies, that MGC was so trivial and FGC (sometimes called 'female genital mutilation') so horrific that any attempt to compare the two was offensive. When the Canadian ethicist Margaret Somerville began speaking out against circumcision of infant boys, she was attacked by feminists who accused her of "detracting from the horror of female genital mutilation and weakening the case against it by speaking about it and infant male circumcision in the same context and pointing out that the same ethical and legal principles applied to both."<sup>3</sup> The anthropologist Kirsten Bell similarly found that, when she drew comparisons between the two surgeries for her American college students, the reaction was "immediate and hostile":

How dare I mention these two entirely different operations in the same breath! How dare I compare the innocuous and beneficial removal of the foreskin with the extreme mutilations enacted against females in other societies!<sup>4</sup>

Both these groups would appear to be in agreement with Doriane Coleman, who has argued that any analogy between MGC and FGC "has been rejected

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, unless the context implies otherwise, MGC or male circumcision refers to medically unnecessary circumcision of minors at the behest of parents or other guardian.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Somerville, "Altering Baby Boys' Bodies: The Ethics of Infant Male Circumcision," in *The Ethical Canary: Science, Society and the Human Spirit* (Toronto: Viking, 2000): 211.

<sup>4</sup> Kirsten Bell, "Genital Cutting and Western Discourses on Sexuality," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 19.2 (2005): 125.

as specious and disingenuous [since] traditional forms of FGM are as different from male circumcision in terms of procedures, physical ramifications and motivations as ear piercing is to a penilectomy.”<sup>5</sup> There we have the conventional American view: MGC is no worse than ear piercing, while any form of FGC is the equivalent of penis amputation.

Despite this discouragement, a number of scholars have essayed such dangerous comparisons and, in the process, have done more to extend a sense of the horror of FGC to MGC than to trivialize the former with the alleged mildness of the latter. Jacqueline Smith (1998) has criticized the inconsistencies in the policy of the Netherlands government when dealing with the customs of Middle Eastern and African immigrants: on the one hand taking strong legal and educational action to stamp out any form of FGC, while encouraging MGC by subsidizing the training of traditional circumcisers. After an exhaustive review of the legal and human rights issues, she concludes that the degree of harm arising from the procedures is not relevant, and that circumcision of male minors is as much a “traditional practice prejudicial to health” as defined in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child as any form of FGC. “By condemning one practice and not the other, another basic human right, namely the right to freedom from discrimination, is at stake. Regardless of whether a child is a boy or a girl, neither should be subject to a harmful traditional practice,” she writes.<sup>6</sup> Sirkuu Hellsten has argued that “male geni-

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<sup>5</sup> Doriane Coleman, “The Seattle Compromise: Multicultural Sensitivity and Americanization,” *Duke Law Journal* 47 (1998): 736.

<sup>6</sup> Jacqueline Smith, “Male Circumcision and the Rights of the Child,” in *To Baehr In Our Minds: Essays in Human Rights from the Heart of the Netherlands*, ed. Miëlle Bulterman, Aart Hendriks & Jacqueline Smith (SIM Special No. 21; Utrecht: Netherlands Institute of Human Rights, 1998): 465–98. Available on-line at [www.cirp.org/library/legal/smith/](http://www.cirp.org/library/legal/smith/)

The Dutch national health insurance service then covered circumcision of males, but coverage was withdrawn in 2004 when it was realized that 90 percent of the procedures were done for religious rather than health reasons ([www.cirp.org/news/canadianpress12-17-04](http://www.cirp.org/news/canadianpress12-17-04)). At the same time, the Dutch government rejected a call from MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali (herself a Somalian refugee and a victim of FGC) to make male circumcision illegal. The Justice Minister Piet Hein Donner explained that there was a clear difference between the two operations: with male circumcision the foreskin was removed for religious, hygienic or medical reasons and was not a traumatic procedure. Female circumcision, on the other hand, was a form of genital mutilation with serious physical and psychological consequences and could therefore be classified as an abuse (Radio Netherlands, Hilversum, 7 October 2004; seen at [www.cirp.org/news/radionetherlands10-07-04](http://www.cirp.org/news/radionetherlands10-07-04)). Presumably, if it were shown that male circumcision was

tal mutilation should not be considered in isolation from female genital mutilation,” She observes that campaigns against the former have not been as vigorous or well supported as those against the latter, and she attributes this to the perception that FGC is “a more violent and socially suppressive practice,” with “more serious and damaging physical, as well as psychological or social, implications.” Since FGC, at least in contemporary Western societies, is not considered to confer any health benefits, it lacks the most compelling rationale in our health-conscious age. MGC, on the other hand, with its ever-changing panoply of advantages, has not only been tolerated as “a minor harm” but frequently encouraged “as part of a particular religious or cultural tradition, or as a measure promoting individual or public health.” Hellsten concludes that, “from a human rights perspective, both male and female genital mutilation, particularly when performed on infants or defenseless small children [...] can be clearly condemned as a violation of children’s rights,”<sup>7</sup>

Writing from an anthropological rather than an ethical perspective, Kirsten Bell provides a searching critique of the dominant discourses on MGC and FGC and argues that the terms in which the latter is condemned by international agencies require review, and that this scrutiny “must be accompanied by a similar willingness to scrutinize male circumcision and recognition that perceptions of one are fundamentally implicated in understandings of the other.” Bell particularly notes the contradictory policies of international health organizations, “which seek to medicalize male circumcision on the one hand, oppose the medicalization of female circumcision on the other, while simultaneously basing their opposition to female operations on grounds that could legitimately be used to condemn the male operations.”<sup>8</sup> A similar argument is put forward by R. Charli Carpenter in a brief critique of the double standard inherent in the United Nations’ approach to “harmful traditional practices,” which, while claiming to be concerned with children, focus exclusively on women and girls and ignore “the most obvious one of all – the genital mutilation of infant boys, euphemistically known as [...] circumcision.”<sup>9</sup>

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also “a traumatic procedure” with “serious physical and psychological consequences” it would also be classified as ‘abuse’.

<sup>7</sup> Sirkuu Hellsten, “Rationalising Circumcision: From Tradition to Fashion, from Public Health to Individual Freedom – Critical Notes on the Cultural Persistence of the Practice of Genital Mutilation,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 30 (2004): 248–49, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Kirsten Bell, “Genital Cutting and Western Discourses on Sexuality,” 140, 131.

<sup>9</sup> R. Charli Carpenter, “A Response to Bronwyn Winter, Denise Thompson and Sheila Jeffreys, ‘The UN Approach to Harmful Traditional Practices: Some Conceptual Problems’: Some Other Conceptual Problems,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6.2 (2004): 309.

Working along similar lines, but from a legal standpoint, Christine Mason has explored the paradox whereby an adult female (in Australia) cannot elect mutilating forms of cosmetic genital surgery for herself yet has the legal right to alter the penis of her son. She argues that “changes are required to educate against both male and female infant genital surgery whilst also amending the existing legislation in order to permit adult consent to such procedures” and concludes that this would both protect children and allow freedom of minority practices when a person is old enough to give informed consent.<sup>10</sup> Marie Fox and Michael Thomson have addressed what they see as the “problem” of MGC – itself a provocative approach, since most medical discourse on the subject has traditionally pictured the foreskin as the problem and circumcision as the solution. They argue that the reluctance to characterize medically unwarranted MGC as a legal or ethical problem is largely attributable to the way in which it has been defined in contrast to FGC, with the result that FGC of any kind is constructed as morally and legally unacceptable within a civilized society, while MGC is characterized as a standard or even benign medical intervention. As they point out, this dichotomy goes back to the debates over the propriety of genital surgeries as a response to nervous and behavioural problems in the mid-nineteenth century, when “both male and female circumcision were justified in terms of managing sexuality; yet while clitoridectomies soon declined, with other forms of female genital mutilation becoming a focus for domestic and international outrage, male circumcision became routinized.”<sup>11</sup>

Central to Fox and Thomson’s argument is the concept of the “harm/benefit assessment which lies at the heart of the male circumcision debate,” and they suggest that the permissive attitude of legal and ethical authorities derives from traditional constructions of male bodies as resistant to harm or even in need of being tested by painful ordeals, and of female bodies, by contrast, as highly vulnerable and thus in need of greater protection. They criticize the fortress-like separation of MGC from FGC and suggest that the real issue in the debate is child protection: “whether we should be subjecting any children to [...] procedures involving the excision of healthy tissue.”<sup>12</sup> In a further paper, Fox and Thomson develop these arguments and criticize

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<sup>10</sup> Christine Mason, “Exorcising Excision: Medico-Legal Issues Arising from Male and Female Genital Surgery in Australia,” *Journal of Law and Medicine* 9 (2001): 67.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Fox & Michael Thomson, “A Covenant with the Status Quo: Male Circumcision and the New BMA Guidance to Doctors,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 31 (2005): 464.

<sup>12</sup> Fox & Thomson, “A Covenant with the Status Quo,” 463, 467.

medical and legal authorities for neglecting the rights of children and failing to undertake a full cost–benefit analysis of the harmful effects that routine circumcision have on males.<sup>13</sup> Oddly enough – and demonstrating the pervasive power of the ‘tough male’ stereotype – although Fox and Thomson emphasize that MGC is always risky surgery, with a high proportion of adverse outcomes relative to its needfulness, they neglect the most obvious and universally experienced harm of all: the harm of being deprived of an integral, visually prominent, and erotically significant feature of the penis.

### A Definitional Issue

Part of the reason for the hostility encountered by Somerville and Bell is related to the problems of definition that hinder objective discussion of surgical modifications – whether forcible or voluntary – to the male and female genitals. This difficulty is vividly expressed in the fact that alterations to the genitals of girls or women are usually referred to as female genital mutilation, while comparable alterations to the genitals of boys and men are designated as circumcision – which sounds, and is evidently meant to sound, far less serious. As we have seen, many of those who deplore operations on women as FGC have no objection to similar surgery on boys. In the traditional African societies that practise these forms of initiations, however, FGC has cultural significance similar to the meanings ascribed to MGC of boys.<sup>14</sup> As Hellsten observes, “all forms of genital alteration” are derived from ideas of the place of human sexuality in society, are intended to alter sexual function in some way, and are performed in the belief that the procedure – no matter how physically injurious – will in some way improve the subject’s life.<sup>15</sup> From an ethical perspective, the procedures look even more similar, for, as Bell comments, “each operation involves an unnecessary bodily violation that entails the removal of healthy tissue without the informed consent of the person involved.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as ritual forms of MGC are medicalized under the influence of Western health agencies and educational institutions, defenders of

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Fox & Michael Thomson, “Short Changed? The Law and Ethics of Male Circumcision,” *International Journal of Children’s Rights* 13 (2005): 161–81.

<sup>14</sup> T.O. Beidelman, *The Cool Knife: Imagery of Gender, Sexuality and Moral Education in Kaguru Initiation Ritual* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), and Philip W. Setel, *A Plague of Paradoxes: AIDS, Culture and Demography in Northern Tanzania* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999), ch. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Sirkuu Hellsten, “Rationalising Circumcision,” 249–50.

<sup>16</sup> Kirsten Bell, “Genital Cutting and Western Discourses on Sexuality,” 130.

male circumcision justify the procedure with medical rationales that are strikingly similar to those used to support excision of female genitalia.

Several countries where excision is common have, under Western pressure, banned the practice, but diehard supporters are now as likely to defend it as a valid measure of health promotion as a cultural necessity. In the Gambia, women have demonstrated in favor of mothers' right to circumcise their daughters, declaring that "female circumcision is our culture"<sup>17</sup> while in Egypt Muslim doctors have stated that the health benefits of female circumcision include reduced sexual desire, lower risk of vaginal cancer and AIDS, less nervous anxiety, fewer infections "from microbes gathering under the hood of the clitoris," and protection against herpes and genital ulcers.<sup>18</sup> Less committed observers point out that proven sequelae include clitoral cysts, labial adhesions, urinary tract infections, kidney dysfunction, sterility, and loss of sexual feeling, but defenders of FGC are claiming no more than what advocates of MGC have asserted for decades.

Considering the similarities between the male and female genitals, the nature of the surgery, the justifications offered, and the support (in Western societies) for the principle that the genders should be treated equally, it may at first seem surprising that male and female circumcision enjoy such strikingly different reputations, at least in anglophone countries. The first is regarded as a mild and harmless adjustment that should be tolerated, if not actively promoted, the second as a cruel abomination that must be stopped by law, no matter how culturally significant to its practitioners. Although the term 'genital cutting' has been introduced in the hope of calming the debate, and while some culture-focused feminist critics have sought to "challenge western polemics,"<sup>19</sup> it is still generally true that not to call circumcision of women or girls female genital mutilation results in accusations of trivializing the offence, but to call circumcision of boys male genital mutilation is likely to elicit accusations of emotionalism, even by those who agree that routine circumcision of males is unnecessary and should generally not be performed.<sup>20</sup> While the World Health Organization (WHO) and other international agencies devote substantial resources on programmes to eradicate FGC, they have

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<sup>17</sup> *Daily Observer* (2002).

<sup>18</sup> David Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000): 193, 195, 199.

<sup>19</sup> *Genital Cutting and Transnational Sisterhood: Disputing U.S. Polemics*, ed. Stanlie M. James & Claire C. Robertson (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Nye, "Review of Robert Darby, *A Surgical Temptation*," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 294 (7 December 2005): 2771–72.

been conspicuously silent about the circumcision of boys. It is only in the current decade that male circumcision has been raised as a human rights issue at the United Nations, and to date no serious discussion of the topic has occurred, let alone any action.<sup>21</sup>

It might be thought that the reason for this double standard lies in the greater physical severity of FGC, but this is to confuse cause with effect. On the contrary, it is the tolerant or positive attitude toward male circumcision and the rarity of female circumcision in Western societies that promote the illusion that the operation is necessarily more sexually disabling, and without benefit to health, when performed on girls or women. A second reason for the double standard is that, while circumcision of males is mistakenly thought to designate a single surgical procedure, the term 'female circumcision' is expansive, referring to any one or more of several different procedures. These have been defined by the WHO (1996) as follows:

Type 1: Excision of the prepuce with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris;

Type 2: Excision of the clitoris together with partial or total excision of the labia minora;

Type 3: Excision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening (infibulation);

Type 4: Unclassified (includes a wide variety of mutilations not falling into Types 1 through 3).

The severity of female circumcision depends on which of, as well as how crudely, these operations are performed, and it is true that the most extreme forms (involving the amputation of the external genitalia, with or without infibulation) are significantly worse than even the most radical foreskin amputation. But it should be remembered that the most extreme forms of female circumcision are comparatively rare, and that male circumcision in general is far more common on a world scale than female: about 13 million boys, compared

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<sup>21</sup> See J. Steven Svoboda, "Male Circumcision," paper submitted to the Sub-Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 9 August 2001, United Nations Document No. E/CN.4/Sub.2/2002/1 (23 March 2002), and Svoboda, "Educating the United Nations About Male Circumcision," in *Flesh and Blood: Perspectives on the Problem of Circumcision in Contemporary Society*, ed. George C. Denniston, Marilyn F. Milos & Frederick M. Hodges (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2004).

with two million girls annually.<sup>22</sup> Quantity is not the whole story, but the vigorous efforts to protect the two million girls contrast sharply with the absence of interest in protecting the larger number of boys.

But the effects of MGC are also highly unpredictable, depending on how much penile tissue is removed, on the skill of the surgeon, on the precise configuration of penile blood vessels and nerve networks, on the genetically determined length of the foreskin, and on the eventual size attained by the penis at puberty and maturity. The more tissue excised, the greater the damage to the penis and the greater the effect on sexual functioning and capability. Although equivalent quantities of tissue may be lost, outcomes will be worse in cases where the penis grows larger in maturity, where the infant or boy has only a short foreskin, or where the unpredictable locations of blood vessels and nerves mean that important connections are severed. Because the slack ('redundant') surface tissue is needed to accommodate the enlarged penis when tumescent, a severe circumcision will render erections painful or even impossible.<sup>23</sup> A further common outcome among boys circumcised in infancy, especially when the operation excises a large quantity of penile shaft skin (as is the American norm, particularly when the Gomco clamp is used), is that scrotal skin gets pulled up onto the penis shaft as the wound heals, and even more when the penis enlarges at puberty. Such men often present both sebaceous glands and pubic hair on their penis, sometimes growing as far up as the line of the former frenulum.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> George C. Denniston, Frederick M. Hodges & Marilyn F. Milos, "Introduction" to *Understanding Circumcision: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to a Multi-Dimensional Problem*, ed. Denniston, Hodges & Milos (London: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2001): v. Since accurate statistics on circumcision are not kept, these figures are the roughest of estimates, though it can be said that the vast majority of these boys are from Muslim families, most of whom probably undergo the operation between the ages of four and eight.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory J. Boyle, Ronald Goldman & J. Steven Svoboda, "Male Circumcision: Pain, Trauma and Psychosexual Sequelae," *Journal of Health Psychology* 7.3 (2002): 329–43; Tim Hammond, "A Preliminary Poll of Men Circumcised in Infancy or Childhood," *BJU International* 83 (Supplement 1; January 1999): 85–92; Shane Peterson, "Assaulted and Mutilated: A Personal Account of Circumcision Trauma," in *Understanding Circumcision*, ed. Denniston, Hodges & Milos, 271–90; John Warren et al., "Circumcision of Children," *British Medical Journal* 312 (1996): 37; and N. Williams & L. Kapila, "Complications of Circumcision," *British Journal of Surgery* 80 (1993): 1231–36.

<sup>24</sup> Such men experience further discomfort with erections and find particular difficulty using condoms. The hair can also inflict abrasion and discomfort on sexual part-

### Is It Possible to Classify the Types of Male Genital Cutting?

Selecting appropriate terminology to discuss genital alteration may at first appear a straightforward task, but, while much effort has gone into categorizing the types of female genital alteration, surgeries on the penis are classified by a single term. Because MGC, even when non-therapeutic, is construed as harmless, there have been few efforts to provide male circumcision with a classification system similar to that constructed for female circumcision; yet in principle such a project should be no more difficult than devising a scale to measure damage to female genitals. Some attempts have already been made: Hanny Lightfoot-Klein has set out the similarities,<sup>25</sup> and the Swiss/Palestinian authority, Dr Sami Aldeeb, has offered the following:

Type 1: This type consists of cutting away in part or in totality the skin of the penis that extends beyond the glans. This skin is called foreskin or prepuce.

Type 2: This type is practiced mainly by Jews. The circumciser takes a firm grip of the foreskin with his left hand. Having determined the amount to be removed, he clamps a shield on it to protect the glans from injury. The knife is then taken in the right hand and the foreskin is amputated with one sweep along the shield. This part of the operation is called the *milah*. It reveals the mucous membrane (inner lining of the foreskin), the edge of which is then grasped firmly between the thumbnail and index finger of each hand, and is torn down the center

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ners. For graphic illustrations of just how much damage routinely circumcised penises commonly sustain, and how different they look from uncircumcised penises, see the images at [www.circumstitions.com/Botched1.html](http://www.circumstitions.com/Botched1.html) and [www.circumstitions.com/comparison.html](http://www.circumstitions.com/comparison.html). If a man presented at his General Practitioner with these sorts of injuries – scarring, granulated tissue, skin bridges where raw tissue surfaces have fused, distortion – on any part of his body other than his penis, he would be referred, urgently, to a plastic surgeon. But so normal are these results that many of the images have been taken from pornographic magazines and personal ads on sexual contact websites. See Christopher J. Cold & John R. Taylor, “The Prepuce,” *BJU International* 83 (Supplement 1, January 1999): 34–44, John Money & Jackie Davison, “Adult Penile Circumcision: Erotosexual and Cosmetic Sequelae,” *Journal of Sex Research* 19 (1983): 289–92, John R. Taylor, A.P. Lockwood & A.J. Taylor, “The Prepuce: Specialized Mucosa of the Penis and Its Loss to Circumcision,” *British Journal of Urology* 7 (1996): 291–95, and Gérard Zwang, “Functional and Erotic Consequences of Sexual Mutilations,” in *Sexual Mutilations: A Human Tragedy*, ed. George C. Denniston & Marilyn F. Milos (New York: Plenum, 1997): 77–84.

<sup>25</sup> Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa* (New York: Harrington, 1989).

as far as the corona. This second part of the operation is called *periah*. It is traditionally performed by the circumciser with his sharpened fingernails.

Type 3: This type involves completely peeling the skin of the penis and sometimes the skin of the scrotum and pubis. It existed (and probably continues to exist) among some tribes of South Arabia. Jacques Lantier describes a similar practice in black Africa, in the Namshi tribe.

Type 4: This type consists in a slitting open of the urinary tube from the scrotum to the glans, creating in this way an opening that looks like the female vagina. Called subincision, this type of circumcision is still performed by the Australian aborigines.<sup>26</sup>

Dr. Aldeeb deserves credit for venturing into terra incognita, but such a mixture of broad and specific categories fails to include the full range and variety of circumcision procedures, yet also identifies operations that are vanishingly rare. The vast majority of circumcision procedures today, especially those performed in hospitals and clinics, fall under none of these headings, while Types 3 and 4 are confined to a very few traditional (tribal) societies and are little more than anthropological curiosities. If the intention was to include all types of penile mutilation, mention should have been made of infibulation, piercing, and the various ‘enhancements’ found in Southeast Asia.<sup>27</sup> The classification also leaves out the relatively mild forms of penile mutilation, such as slitting of the foreskin without excision of tissue, that are

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<sup>26</sup> Sami A. Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *Male and Female Circumcision among Jews, Christians and Muslims: Religious, Medical, Social and Legal Debate* (Warren Center PA: Shangri-La, 2001): 9.

<sup>27</sup> See Terence Hull & Meiwita Budiharsana, “Male Circumcision and Penis Enhancement in Southeast Asia: Matters of Pain and Pleasure,” *Reproductive Health Matters* 9 (2001): 60–67. It is an interesting sidelight on anglophone attitudes that, while anthropologists have devoted much time and ink to the origins and meaning of genital cutting rites, they have neglected the equally (and possibly more) numerous societies that practised various forms of foreskin elongation or otherwise sought to conceal rather than uncover the glans – anything from the penis sheaths and gourds of New Guinea and Melanesia to the infibulation of slaves in classical Rome and the modesty-preserving *kynodesme* in ancient Greece. See Eric Dingwall, *Male Infibulation* (London: John Bale, 1925), and Frederick M. Hodges, “The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and their Relation to Lipodermos, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration and the Kinodesme,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75 (2001): 375–405.

(or were) found in the Philippines<sup>28</sup> and certain Pacific islands, such as Samoa and Fiji. We write “were found” because as these procedures are medicalized (no longer performed as a traditional rite, but as minor surgery in a clinic by trained medical personnel), it is apparent that they are becoming more severe: no longer a mere dorsal slit, but a full-scale foreskin amputation on the US model – that is, tearing or otherwise separating the foreskin from the glans, stretching it to a lesser or greater degree, and cutting roughly at the line of the corona. Although the setting may be more hygienic and complications such as bleeding and infection reduced, the effect of medicalization is a more damaging surgical outcome. In the developed world, the great diversity in surgical outcomes is the result of the differing techniques applied, the instruments used, and the preferences of the surgeon or other operator.

More seriously, Aldeeb’s classification neglects the vital fact that there is no precise definition of the foreskin and thus no precise definition of what is removed by MGC. The foreskin is not a discrete organ like a finger or pancreas, but a double-layered extension of the surface tissue of the penis; where the foreskin starts and the rest of the penis ends is a matter for judgement. The foreskin is generally described as a cap that fits over the glans, but the foreskin often extends beyond the glans (it always does so in juveniles), and the point at which the doubling of the tissue begins can be anywhere along the penis shaft and shifts according to the degree of tumescence. On average, the doubling of tissue begins well beyond the corona of the glans, as the position of the circumcision scar on cut men (usually seen at about half an inch to an inch below the glans) testifies. Moreover, the length of the foreskin varies enormously from one individual to another, meaning that the same ‘standard’ cut will be more severe on a boy with a short foreskin than on one who had more tissue to begin with. Since the severity and harm of the surgery depends primarily on how much of the loose penile tissue is removed, and whether it is mainly the outer (skin) layer or the inner (mucous membrane) layer, MGC Types 1 and 2 listed above can easily be broken down into an indefinite number of divisions (10, 20, 30 percent, etc., of the foreskin), with both the visible damage and the impact on sexual sensation and sexual function increasing at each step.

The severity of the operation is also affected by whether it removes the frenulum, the sensitive ‘bridle’ on the underside of the penis, adjoining the cleft in the glans. This is now known as the frenular delta and is understood to

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<sup>28</sup> Romeo B. Lee, “Filipino Experience of Ritual Male Circumcision: Knowledge and Insights for Anti-Circumcision Advocacy,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 8.3 (2006): 225–34.

support one of the body's densest concentrations of fine-touch nerve receptors, whose specific function is to detect and transmit pleasurable touch.<sup>29</sup> Because the ridged band is also uniquely ridged or corrugated, retraction and stretching of this accordion-like structure may play an important role in penile reflexes, including urination, erection, and ejaculation.<sup>30</sup> Where the foreskin is still adherent, as it is in nearly all infants and commonly in boys up to the age of about eight, forcibly tearing it from the glans adds a further dimension of both pain and injury (including skin bridges and adhesions). The damage often extends to the parts of the penis that remain, and the pain is severe.<sup>31</sup> Nor is it just a matter of losing nerve-endings: the destruction of the sliding mechanism of the foreskin back and forth over the glans, and thus of the stimulation and lubrication it affords, is another serious effect of MGC. Yet it is a harm that cannot be picked up by the sort of 'sensitivity studies' that have appeared in the wake of Masters and Johnson's much cited but deeply flawed study (1966).<sup>32</sup>

In order to assist the development of an objective measuring stick for MGC damage we suggest the following provisional five-point scale:

Type 1: A nick to or slitting of the foreskin; or premature or forcible separation of the prepuce from the glans, without amputation of tissue.

Type 2: Amputation of the portion of the foreskin extending beyond the glans.

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<sup>29</sup> See Christopher J. Cold & John R. Taylor, "The Prepuce," *BJU International* 83 (Supplement 1, January 1999): 34–44, Kenneth A. McGrath, "The Frenular Delta: A New Preputial Structure," in *Understanding Circumcision*, ed. Denniston, Hodges & Milos, 199–206, and John R. Taylor, A.P. Lockwood & A.J. Taylor, "The Prepuce: Specialized Mucosa of the Penis and Its Loss to Circumcision," *British Journal of Urology* 7 (1996): 291–95.

<sup>30</sup> See John R. Taylor, "The Forgotten Foreskin and its Ridged Band," *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 4.5 (September 2007): 1516.

<sup>31</sup> See Anna Taddio, Joel Katz, A. Lane Ilersich & Gideon Koren, "Effect of Neonatal Circumcision on Pain Response During Subsequent Routine Vaccination," *Lancet* 349/9052 (1997): 599–603.

<sup>32</sup> For critiques of Masters and Johnson, see John M. Foley, *The Practice of Circumcision: A Reevaluation* (New York: Materia Medica, 1966); Frederick M. Hodges & Paul Fleiss, "Letter," *Pediatrics* 105.3, Part 1 (2000): 683–84; Morris L. Sorrells, James L. Snyder, Mark D. Reiss et al., "Fine-Touch Pressure Thresholds in the Adult Penis," *BJU International* 99 (2007): 864–69, and the incisive deconstruction by Hugh Young, "Like Being Hugged by the Venus de Milo: The Foreskin, Circumcision and Sexuality," online: [www.circumstitions.com/Sexuality.html](http://www.circumstitions.com/Sexuality.html) (accessed 6 July 2006).

Type 3: Amputation of the foreskin at a point partway along the glans; some foreskin and all of the frenulum left; some sliding functionality retained.

Type 4: Amputation of the foreskin at or below the corona of the glans.

Type 5: Other forms of penis mutilation, including meatotomy, sub-incision, infibulation, piercing and implants.

Type 2 corresponds to the original Judaic operation of *bris* (before the institution of *periah* – tearing the foreskin from the glans – in the Hellenic period),<sup>33</sup> most of the foreskin and all of the frenulum left; a fair degree of sliding functionality retained. When this procedure is performed after infancy, after separation of prepuce from glans, more of the preputial tissue and some of the frenular tissue tends to be cut.

Because there is no agreed understanding of circumcision and the results are highly variable, depending on the quantity of tissue removed, the degree to which the foreskin is stretched during the operation, and the instruments used, it is useful to break Type 4 into three subtypes.

Type 4A: Amputation of the foreskin at the corona of the glans, leaving glans fully exposed, but retaining frenulum; little or no sliding functionality; frenular nerves retained.

Type 4B: Amputation of the foreskin at the corona of the glans, also excising frenulum; little or no sliding functionality; no frenular nerves left.

Type 4C: Amputation of the foreskin beyond the corona of the glans, at any point along the penis shaft; all foreskin and variable quantities of shaft skin excised; all frenular nerves lost; zero sliding functionality; high risk of insufficient slack tissue for accommodating tumescence.

It would be interesting to know the proportion of MGC operations falling into each of these categories. The vast majority would probably be the most severe, Type 4, and possibly Types 4B and 4C, particularly in the USA, where the ‘high and tight’ look is favoured by the obstetricians and urologists who perform most of the procedures, and whose preference is facilitated by

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<sup>33</sup> See Leonard Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005): 31, 43–45.

the infamous Gomco clamp, a device that ensures maximum loss of tissue, as well as a slow and painful operation.<sup>34</sup>

With respect to FGC, it is also possible to break the WHO's definition down more precisely into at least seven procedures: a nick to the clitoris; separation of the clitoral hood or prepuce, without amputation of tissue; removal of the clitoral hood; excision of part or all of the labia minora; excision of part or all of the labia majora; excision of part or all of the clitoris; stitching up the vaginal orifice.

The main difference between female and male genital cutting can now be seen to consist in the fact that the severity of FGC increases as the number of procedures rises, thus bringing more parts of the genitals under the knife; while the severity of MGC primarily depends on how much of a single element of the genitals is amputated. It is the variety of the procedures constituting FGC, in contrast to the unitary nature of MGC, which promotes the illusion that the first is a cruel and injurious form of torture called mutilation, while the second is a mild surgical adjustment called circumcision.

### Effects on Sexual Function

The effects of female circumcision and male circumcision on sexual function are variable and uncertain. It is commonly said by opponents of female circumcision that the operation, especially in its extreme forms, destroys all sexual sensation and can even reduce or eliminate sexual desire. The dominant view would still be that of Ruth Macklin: "Most (but not all) women permanently lose the ability to achieve sexual pleasure."<sup>35</sup> This assertion was originally questioned by Lightfoot-Klein, and her doubts have been confirmed by others.<sup>36</sup> Lightfoot-Klein has documented that many infibulated

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<sup>34</sup> See Leonard Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 196–97, R.L. Miller & D.C. Snyder, "Immediate Circumcision of the Newborn Male," *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 65 (1953): 1–11, and Julian Wan, "Gomco Circumcision Clamp: An Enduring and Unexpected Success," *Urology* 59 (2002): 790–94.

<sup>35</sup> Ruth Macklin, *Against Relativism: Cultural Diversity and the Search for Universals in Medicine* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999): 67.

<sup>36</sup> Lightfoot-Klein, *Prisoners of Ritual* (1989). See, for example, I.O. Orubuloye, Pat Caldwell & John C. Caldwell, "Female 'Circumcision' Among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria: The Beginning of Change," in *Female "Circumcision" in Africa: Culture, Controversy, and Change*, ed. Bettina Shell-Duncan & Ylva Hernlund (Boulder CO & London: Lynne Rienner, 2000): 73–107; Bettina Shell-Duncan, W.O. Obiero & L.A. Muruli, "Women Without Choices: The Debate Over Medicalization of

women (i.e. women who have had the most severe form of FGC performed on them) retain a significant capacity for sexual pleasure.<sup>37</sup> In the case of FGC, some Kenyan Rendille women insisted that sex was actually better after being circumcised; among the Rendille<sup>38</sup> and the Yoruba of Nigeria,<sup>39</sup> few women believed their capacity for enjoyment had been reduced.

A study by F.E. Okonofua and colleagues (2002) in Nigeria examined 1836 women who had been subjected to FGC of type 1 (71 percent) or type 2 (24 percent). They found no significant differences between cut and uncut women in the frequency of reports of sexual intercourse in the preceding week or month, the frequency of reports of early arousal during intercourse, and the proportions reporting experience of orgasm during intercourse. There was also no difference between cut and uncut women in their reported ages of menarche, first intercourse, or first marriage in the multivariate models controlling for the effects of socio-economic factors. The authors accordingly concluded that female genital cutting did not attenuate sexual feelings, though the practice could render women more vulnerable to adverse health outcomes, particularly reproductive-tract infections. The final conclusion – that “female genital cutting cannot be justified by arguments that suggest that it reduces sexual activity in women and prevents adverse outcomes of sexuality”<sup>40</sup> – will probably seem curious to Western readers. Okonofua and colleagues are saying that arguments in favour of female circumcision on the grounds that it curtails sexual activity and inhibits the inclination to promiscuity are invalid, because female circumcision does not have these effects. It must be assumed that, although their article was ultimately published in a British medical journal, they were primarily addressing a Nigerian audience who believe that female sexual activity should be restricted and that FGC is an efficient means to this end. The contrast between this perspective and Western discourse is striking: Articles in American medical journals or mass media that find or

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Female Genital Cutting and Its Impact on a Northern Kenyan Community,” in *Female “Circumcision” in Africa* (2000), ed. Shell-Duncan & Hernlund, 109–28; F.E. Okonofua et al., “The Association Between Female Genital Cutting and Correlates of Sexual and Gynaecological Morbidity in Edo State, Nigeria,” *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 109.10 (October 2002): 1089–96.

<sup>37</sup> Lightfoot-Klein, *Prisoners of Ritual*, 80–102.

<sup>38</sup> Shell-Duncan, Obiero & Muruli, “Women Without Choices,” 118.

<sup>39</sup> Orubuloye, Caldwell & Caldwell, “Female ‘Circumcision’ Among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria,” 84.

<sup>40</sup> F.E. Okonofua et al., “The Association Between Female Genital Cutting and Correlates of Sexual and Gynaecological Morbidity in Edo State, Nigeria,” 1089.

report that circumcision makes little or no difference to male sexual activity often present this as a positive reason why the procedure should be performed.

There is even evidence that female genital cutting may sometimes have ‘health benefits’. A study of immigrant Somalian and Ethiopian women in Sweden found that women who had undergone severe FGC (excision of clitoris, labia minora, and parts of the labia majora, followed by infibulation) had significantly shorter labour times than an uncircumcised control group.<sup>41</sup> A culture that wanted to promote female circumcision for religious or other customary reasons could claim this result as proof of a health benefit from circumcision, and thus as a medical or even ‘scientific’ reason why it should be performed. The authors’ conclusion, that “prolonged labour does not seem to be associated with female genital circumcision in affluent societies with high standards of obstetric care,” emphasizes the point that these women were giving birth in a modern Western maternity hospital and had been de-infibulated before delivery. It would no doubt be a different story in their home village.

In contrast to the conventional view of the sexually ‘blinding’ effects of FGC, advocates of male circumcision insist that the procedure has no meaningful impact on sexual sensation, or even that it improves a male’s sex life.<sup>42</sup> Much of the latter argument is based (by analogy with the clitoris) on the anatomically erroneous assumption that the most intense innervation of the penis is in the glans. It is now known that the densest concentrations of blood vessels and nerves is found in the foreskin itself, while the glans is relatively insensitive and equipped mainly to detect discomfort and pain – as Henry Head and colleagues discovered nearly a century ago:

The glans penis is an organ endowed with protopathic and deep sensibility only. It is not sensitive to cutaneous tactile stimuli [...]. Sensations of pain evoked by cutaneous stimulation are diffuse and more unpleasant than over normal parts.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Birgitta Essén et al., “No Association Between Female Circumcision and Prolonged Labour: A Case Control Study of Immigrant Women Giving Birth in Sweden,” *European Journal of Obstetric and Gynecological Reproductive Biology* 121 (2005): 182–85.

<sup>42</sup> It can, in certain rare cases, such as severe tightness or shortness of the frenulum, though less drastic or even nonsurgical methods of treating these problems are now readily available.

<sup>43</sup> See Henry Head et al., *Studies in Neurology* (London: Oxford UP, 1920): 274–77.

Head also found that the sensitivity of the glans was not significantly affected by MGC, a finding that largely nullifies many of the studies since Masters and Johnson, most of which have sought to do no more than this.<sup>44</sup>

The overwhelming consensus from ancient times until the eighteenth century, however, has been that the foreskin makes a major contribution to sexual sensation and function.<sup>45</sup> In fact, it is precisely the erotic significance of the foreskin that explains the determination of nineteenth-century doctors to remove it in order to discourage unauthorized forms of sexual activity, such as masturbation. Observing that boys masturbated by manipulating their foreskin and girls by stimulating their clitoris, the physicians concluded that male circumcision and clitoridectomy were the appropriate responses to stop these forms of behaviour. Sander Gilman has noted that the late-nineteenth-century German authority Hermann Rohleder advocated circumcision for male masturbators and burning of the clitoris with acid for female; Gilman comments that “circumcision and clitoridectomy were seen as analogous medical proce-

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<sup>44</sup> For a sample of recent research, see Kenneth S. Fink, Culley C. Carson & Robert F. DeVellis, “Adult Circumcision Outcomes Study: Effect on Erectile Function, Penile Sensitivity, Sexual Activity and Satisfaction,” *Journal of Urology* 167.5 (May 2002): 2113–16, Clifford B. Bleustein, Haftan Eckholdt, Joseph C. Arezzo & Arnold Melman, “Quantitative Somatosensory Testing of the Penis: Optimizing the Clinical Neurological Examination,” *Journal of Urology* 169.6 (June 2003): 2266–69, and Shikohe Masood, H.R.H. Patel, R.C. Himpson et al., “Penile Sensitivity and Sexual Satisfaction after Circumcision: Are We Informing Men Correctly?” *Urologia Internationalis* 75.1 (2005): 62–65. It will be noted that most of these studies refer to circumcision in adulthood, the effects of which cannot necessarily be extrapolated to circumcision in infancy or childhood, when neuronal pathways that depend on nervous stimulation are not developed; Ronald S. Immerman & Wade C. Mackey, “A Biocultural Analysis of Circumcision,” *Social Biology* 44 (1997): 265–75, and “A Proposed Relationship Between Circumcision and Neural Reorganisation,” *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 159 (1998): 367–78. Given the minuteness of the parts in infancy, and the adherence of foreskin to glans, the operation is both riskier and more damaging the earlier it is done; M. Machmouchi & A. Alkhotani, “Is Neonatal Circumcision Judicious?” *European Journal of Pediatric Surgery* 17 (2007): 266–69. Circumcision in the Philippines was traditionally done at any age from nine to sixteen, but never before the foreskin was found to be fully separated and retractable – see Samuel Ramos & Gregory J. Boyle, “Ritual and Medical Circumcision Among Filipino Boys: Evidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (2001), in *Understanding Circumcision*, ed. Denniston, Hodges & Milos, 253–70. In this requirement, tradition showed far better medical sense and humane consideration than ‘scientific’ medicine.

<sup>45</sup> See Robert Darby, *A Surgical Temptation: The Demonization of the Foreskin and the Rise of Circumcision in Britain* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005): ch. 2.

dures.”<sup>46</sup> The inescapable conclusion is that, while the glans/clitoris and foreskin/clitoral prepuce may be anatomically analogous, the correct analogy in functional or physiological terms is foreskin/clitoris.

It is stretching common sense and ignoring all we know about biological form and function to propose that circumcision does not affect sexual functionality. As Sorrells et al. have shown,<sup>47</sup> circumcised men have significantly reduced fine-touch sensitivity compared with intact men. Male circumcision will usually reduce the pleasure of fine touch and gentle manipulation by excising the relevant nerves, found only in the part of the penis that circumcision removes – the foreskin. Sexual pleasure is a highly subjective experience, and it is proving very difficult to measure it any quantitative way, but it seems reasonable to conclude that MGC, like FGC, does not typically eliminate the capacity for sexual pleasure, and that in most cases it does not inhibit erection or ejaculation, though a severe operation will result in these outcomes. These points are sometimes presented as a positive reason for male circumcision, but much the same can of course be said of female circumcision.

### Toward Gender Equity?

Given the respective numbers affected and the fact that some male circumcision outcomes are worse than some instances of female circumcision, there is no justification for perpetuating the gender discrimination that has characterized discussion of these issues. Indeed, a female victim of forced circumcision during a ‘holy war’ by Islamic extremists in Indonesia commented afterwards that what was done to the men was worse than what the women suffered:

I know the men suffered more than us women. The circumcision hurt them more than it did to us because their scars could not heal fast. Several of the men I knew got serious infections after suffering from severe bleeding.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Sander Gilman, *Freud, Race and Gender* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1993): 65.

<sup>47</sup> Sorrells, Snyder, Reiss et al., “Fine-Touch Pressure Thresholds in the Adult Penis.”

<sup>48</sup> The men experienced greater harm – the women suffered only nicks to their clitoris, while the men had their entire foreskin amputated. See Lindsay Murdoch, “Victims Tell Harrowing Tales of Forced Circumcision in the Growing Holy War in Indonesia’s Maluku Islands,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (27 January 2001).

Such a statement would come as a shock to Kirsten Bell's students, who "did not think that carving up male genitalia had any damaging effects on male sexuality so long as [...] the man retained the ability to ejaculate"; the only procedure they considered at all equivalent to any form of FGC was amputation of the penis.<sup>49</sup>

Since male circumcision is amputation of part of the penis, such an attitude is possible only if the foreskin and the rest of the penis are regarded as separate entities. Before the nineteenth century, the penis was seen as a unitary structure consisting of an erectile and a non-erectile element, corresponding to the corpus cavernosa and the foreskin respectively. The first element penetrated, the second conveyed the pleasurable sensations that preceded orgasm. By the end of the nineteenth century, with the rise of male circumcision, the penis was seen as consisting only of the erectile portion, and the foreskin as an extraneous and redundant accretion.<sup>50</sup> As Juliet Richters points out,<sup>51</sup> this figurative circumcision was facilitated by the conceptualization of the penis as a battering ram only (something rock-hard and actively 'masculine'), not an organ that was expected to receive pleasurable sensation (implying something suspiciously soft and passively 'feminine'). In this way, 'scientific' medicine converged with the mythology of tribal societies such as the Dogon of Mali, who regard male circumcision and clitoridectomy as necessary measures to destroy femininity in the male and masculinity in the female.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, in Western discourse even the slightest interference with the female genitals is likely to be regarded as disabling, or at least as an intolerable violation, as illustrated by a revealing episode in Seattle in the early 1990s. Confronted by demands from African immigrants to circumcise their little girls, the Harborview Medical Center sought to demonstrate both its cultural sensitivity and its concern for child welfare by finding a middle course, and a group of doctors agreed to consider making a nick in the clitoral hood, without removing any tissue. But even this mild compromise proved unacceptable to the local community: After being flooded with protests, the hospital abandoned its plan.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Kirsten Bell, "Genital Cutting and Western Discourses on Sexuality," 127.

<sup>50</sup> See Robert Darby, *A Surgical Temptation*, 67, 167–72, 324 n.78.

<sup>51</sup> Juliet Richters, "Circumcision and the Socially Imagined Sexual Body," *Health Sociology Review* 15 (2006): 248–57.

<sup>52</sup> See David Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000): 70.

<sup>53</sup> Ruth Macklin, "Ethical Relativism in a Multicultural Society," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 8 (1998): 14.

Boys have often been treated with less solicitude. If, as Fox and Thomson argue, the male body in general is regarded as less susceptible to injury than the female, the penis seems to be the most invulnerable part of all, nearly any injury to which (short of amputation) is construed as harmless. The authors report a British legal case from 1974 in which a Nigerian woman was convicted of assault occasioning actual bodily harm for having scarred her two sons (aged fourteen and nine) by making incisions with a razor on their cheeks in accordance with the scarification custom of the Yoruba tribe to which she belonged. The court held that this practice carried the potential for serious injury to the eyes if the boys had moved their heads, and suggested that it was this risk that distinguished the practice from the ritual male circumcision also practised by the tribe, which it accepted as perfectly lawful.<sup>54</sup> Yet there are many reported cases in which a boy undergoing MGC has not merely faced the potential of losing his penis but really has lost it, either by amputation during the surgery or from subsequent infection.<sup>55</sup> On the basis of the court's reasoning, MGC should thus be considered at least as unlawful as the slashing of cheeks, assuming that loss of a penis is at least as harmful as reduced vision.

### The Lessons of History

To compare female and male circumcision is not to trivialize the enormity of the first, as some feminists seem to fear, but to recognize that the physical similarities between the two are real and that they share a similar cultural logic – so much so that they deserve equally rigorous ethical scrutiny. Since

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<sup>54</sup> Mary Fox & Michael Thomson, "Short Changed? The Law and Ethics of Male Circumcision," *International Journal of Children's Rights* 13 (2005): 178 n.12.

<sup>55</sup> See John Colapinto, *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2001). In South Africa, ritual circumcision among the Xhosa is responsible for dozens of deaths each year, as well as for hundreds of horrific penile injuries, leading to a plea from the South African Medical Association for action "to halt the carnage" (South African Medical Association 2003). See also Pat Sidley, "Botched Circumcisions Kill 14 Boys in a Month," *British Medical Journal* 333 (8 July 2006): 62. Willis reports that the extreme penile mutilations (entailing subincision as well as circumcision) practised by the Pitjantjatjara people of the central Australian desert have severely inhibiting effects on the men's sex lives. The frequent bloodletting required must also pose grave risks of infection. See Jon Willis, "Heteronormativity and the Deflection of Male Same-Sex Attraction Among the Pitjantjatjara People of Australia's Western Desert," *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 5.2 (2003): 137–51.

many feminists come from countries where male circumcision is tolerated or even the norm, such as the USA, campaigners against female circumcision are inclined to stress how much worse it is than male circumcision, and in the process they tend to excuse or even affirm the latter.<sup>56</sup>

It is remarkable how closely the terms of the current discussion re-create debates surrounding Isaac Baker Brown, the mid-Victorian exponent of clitoridectomy as a cure for masturbation and nervous complaints. Brown's opponents similarly chose to isolate the case against clitoridectomy from the case for male circumcision, playing up the harm of the former while minimizing the impact of the latter; as the *Medical Times and Gazette* editorialized, clitoridectomy was infinitely worse than male circumcision because "Instead of taking away a loose fold of skin it removes a rudimentary organ of exquisite sensitiveness, well supplied with blood vessels and nerves, and the operation is [...] occasionally attended with serious bleeding; in these respects it differs widely from circumcision."<sup>57</sup>

Nobody today would agree with Brown's insistence that clitoridectomy was no more than circumcision of the female, but his assertion that "as certainly as that no man has been injured in his natural functions, so it is equally certain that no woman who has undergone the operation of excision of the clitoris has lost one particle of the natural function of her organs" shows that he was at least consistent: so long as a male or female remained capable of impregnating or conceiving, neither had been mutilated. The *Medical Times and Gazette* did not, however, produce a very convincing argument for the distinction between male circumcision and clitoridectomy: the foreskin is also an organ endowed with "exquisite sensitiveness, well supplied with blood vessels and nerves," and MGC, too, is "occasionally attended with serious bleeding," sometimes resulting in death, even today. Because the debate over clitoridectomy was conducted in terms of its difference from or similarity to male circumcision, the medical profession's rejection of the former cleared the way for the widespread adoption of the latter. The result has been a double

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<sup>56</sup> We support the efforts of feminists to combat FGC, and we appreciate that FGC holds its prominent place in feminist discourse because it has become the symbol par excellence of patriarchy and the cruellest instance of male power over and violence toward women. But we would point out that in patriarchal societies it is not only the women who are oppressed, but also the young men, who can attain adult (oppressor) status and access to women only by completing arduous and often painful initiation ordeals. This is the main reason why young men in societies that practise circumcision around puberty look forward to the rite.

<sup>57</sup> "Editorial: Clitoridectomy and Medical Ethics," *Medical Times and Gazette* (13 April 1867): 391.

standard on genital alteration that has endured to this day.<sup>58</sup> So persistent has it been that we now find the WHO conducting two quite separate research projects: one to find evidence for the harm of female circumcision, another to find evidence for the benefits of male circumcision. Naturally, each comes up with the goods, since the result is guaranteed by the starting assumption.

This is the fundamental reason why Western agencies like the United Nations and the WHO have defined FGC as an atrocity that must be stopped, while ignoring the comparable operation on boys. The answer is historical, relating to our comfort with the familiar, the example of the Jewish people, and the relentless devaluation of the foreskin as a body part. Millennia of Semitic custom and a century of routine MGC in English-speaking countries have desensitized us into seeing the procedure as a mild adjustment and the result as acceptably normal. It took decades for pro-circumcision doctors to institutionalize MGC, but it was always easier to win acceptance for that procedure than for similar operations on females because it was mentioned in the Old Testament. While the Jews were seen as proto-Christians, and (both in the USA and Britain) increasingly admired as exemplars of sanitary wisdom as the nineteenth century advanced,<sup>59</sup> circumcision of girls was perceived as an outlandish rite, performed by obscure barbarians whose example did not warrant emulation. This was despite the fact that some Victorian authorities condemned masturbation by girls nearly as vigorously as among boys, and a variety of genital surgeries was recommended and sometimes performed.<sup>60</sup> By the 1890s, however, a British enthusiast was reluctantly forced to conclude that these remedies had been found “ineffectual and unsatisfactory” (Yellowlees 1892). In the USA, by contrast, doctors performed a variety of operations on the female genitals to cure nervous and other complaints until the 1950s,<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See Ornella Moscucci, “Clitoridectomy, Circumcision and the Politics of Sexual Pleasure in Mid-Victorian Britain,” in *Sexualities in Victorian Britain*, ed. Andrew H. Miller & James Eli Adams (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996): 60–78, Robert Darby, “The Benefits of Psychological Surgery: John Scoffern’s Satire on Isaac Baker Brown,” *Medical History* 51 (2007): 527–44, and Darby, *A Surgical Temptation*, ch. 7.

<sup>59</sup> See Leonard Glick, *Marked in the Flesh*, ch. 6.

<sup>60</sup> See Frederick M. Hodges, “A Short History of the Institutionalization of Involuntary Sexual Mutilation in the United States,” in *Sexual Mutilations: A Human Tragedy*, ed. George C. Denniston & Marilyn F. Milos (New York: Plenum, 1997): 17–40.

<sup>61</sup> For example, Benjamin E. Dawson, “Circumcision in the Female: Its Necessity and How to Perform It,” *American Journal of Clinical Medicine* 22.6 (1915): 520–23, Belle C. Eskridge, “Why Not Circumcise the Girl as Well as the Boy?” *Texas State Journal of Medicine* 14 (May 1918): 17–19, C.F. McDonald, “Circumcision of the Female,” *General Practitioner* 18.3 (September 1958): 98–99, and W.G. Rathmann,

while as late as the mid-1970s female circumcision (here meaning excision of the clitoral hood) was being recommended as an enhancement by some medical journals<sup>62</sup> and popular magazines.<sup>63</sup>

Changing attitudes to the body also played a role in promoting MGC. Where the foreskin (at least up until the mid-nineteenth century) had been valued as “the best of your property,”<sup>64</sup> Victorian doctors succeeded in “re-configuring the phallus,”<sup>65</sup> thereby demonizing it as a source of moral and physical decay. They fully appreciated the importance of the mobility of the loose penile tissue (foreskin) for sexual functionality.<sup>66</sup> The clitoris, by contrast, was so highly regarded that many obstetricians considered it part of their duty to enlighten women as to its importance: Regretting that so few women seemed alive to its potential, one of Baker Brown’s opponents commented:

I am sorry that females have not as much knowledge of the clitoris as we have, for if that were the case I am sure there were very few who would consent to part with it, and when questioned about it afterwards say, “Oh, I have only had a little knot removed,” verily they know not the nature of that little “knot.”

He thus thought it perfectly proper for doctors to educate patients about the sexual function of body parts about whose potential they were ignorant or misinformed.<sup>67</sup> The case of the foreskin is rather different. Although there is an increasing body of medical literature attesting to its anatomical and physio-

“Female Circumcision: Indications and a New Technique,” *General Practitioner* 20.3 (September 1959): 115–20. Even in recent times, there are cases of girls being subjected to trimming operations in the interests of parental concepts of genital normality; for a disturbing personal account, see Patricia Robinett, *The Rape of Innocence: One Woman’s Story of Female Genital Mutilation in the U.S.A.* (Eugene OR: Aesculapius, 2006).

<sup>62</sup> L. Wollman, “Female Circumcision,” *Journal of the American Society of Psychosomatic Dental Medicine* 20.3–4 (1973): 130–31.

<sup>63</sup> S. Isenberg & L.M. Elting, “A Guide to Sexual Surgery,” *Cosmopolitan* 181.5 (1976): 104, 108, 110, 164.

<sup>64</sup> Darby, *A Surgical Temptation*, ch. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Geoffrey Miller, “Circumcision: Cultural-Legal Analysis,” *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and the Law* 9 (2002): 497–585.

<sup>66</sup> Edgar Spratling, “Masturbation in the Adult,” *Medical Record* 48 (1895): 442–43; D. Yellowlees, “Masturbation,” in *A Dictionary of Psychological Medicine*, ed. D. Hack Tuke (London: Churchill, 1892): 784–86.

<sup>67</sup> Harry Gage Moore, “Clitoridectomy,” *Lancet* I (23 June 1866): 699.

logical significance,<sup>68</sup> Margaret Somerville is surely right to remark that, while we would be horrified at the suggestion that girls' breasts should be removed as a precaution against later breast cancer, we scarcely blink at the suggestion of removing the foreskin as a prophylactic against cancer of the penis or HIV. The reason is simply that "we value breasts – we see it as a serious harm to women to lose them – and we do not value foreskins, in fact they are often devalued – spoken of as ugly, unaesthetic and unclean. Yet both are part of the intact human body, and both have sexual and other functions."<sup>69</sup>

A trace of this attitude may be detected even in such effective critics of MGC as Fox and Thomson, who touch only lightly upon the most basic human rights consideration of all in the MGC debate: All mammals have foreskins; males are what they are because that is how they have evolved. The objective of some circumcision evangelists seems to be nothing short of trying to reconstruct human anatomy, perhaps secretly hoping that, if they circumcise enough newborns, future generations will be born prepuce-free. Evolution, however, appears to be favouring ever-longer foreskins in males,<sup>70</sup> suggesting that they improve survival chances and reproductive health rather than the reverse. Instead of trying to rewrite nature, the medical profession could more usefully examine how males can best protect their health and enjoy their sexuality with the standard equipment nature has given them. When

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<sup>68</sup> Generally, Taylor, Lockwood & Taylor, "The Prepuce: Specialized Mucosa of the Penis and Its Loss to Circumcision" (1996) and Cold & Taylor, "The Prepuce" (1999). More recently, Kim and Pang found significantly reduced sexual satisfaction after circumcision, while Sorrells et al., using a light-touch test, concluded that a circumcised penis is markedly less sensitive than one with its foreskin in place. Dai Sik Kim & Myung-Geol Pang. "The Effect of Male Circumcision on Sexuality," *BJU International* 99.3 (March 2007): 619–22; Sorrells, Snyder, Reiss et al., "Fine-Touch Pressure Thresholds in the Adult Penis" (2007).

<sup>69</sup> Margaret Somerville, "Altering Baby Boys' Bodies," 204. For a discussion of the logic and ethics of prophylactic breast removal compared with prophylactic foreskin removal, see Frederick M. Hodges, J. Steven Svoboda & Robert S. Van Howe, "Prophylactic Interventions on Children: Balancing Human Rights with Public Health," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 28 (2002): 10–16.

<sup>70</sup> Christopher J. Cold & Kenneth A. McGrath, "Anatomy and Histology of the Penile and Clitoral Prepuce in Primates: Evolutionary Perspective of Specialised Sensory Tissue in the External Genitalia," in *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice*, ed. George C. Denniston, Frederick M. Hodges & Marilyn F. Milos (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 1999): 19–29.

we accept the fact that foreskins are as integral to males as breasts are to females, and that males have as much right to a complete penis as women to their clitoris or labia, then we can formulate strategies to combat sexually transmitted and other diseases that are both effective and ethically based. Violating the genital integrity of a child or poorly informed adult as a prophylactic against avoidable diseases is, at best, putting the cart before the horse, and at worst a breach of human rights.

### The Problem with Double Standards

Despite what some activists claim, refusal to confront male circumcision actually makes the task of eradicating female circumcision more difficult. Supporters of female circumcision in cultures that still practice it are quick to identify the double standard in the attitude of Western agencies that seek to eradicate female circumcision while tolerating, or even promoting, male circumcision. They point out that “American parents circumcise their newborns so that the sons will look like the fathers [...]. What, they ask, gives Americans the right to apply a different standard to African women?”<sup>71</sup> As Peter Clark remarks, the arguments used to justify culturally-motivated circumcision of boys can just as easily be applied to culturally-motivated FGC.<sup>72</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) opposes all forms of female circumcision as examples of genital mutilation that members are advised they should refuse to perform and should actively discourage.<sup>73</sup> This position contrasts sharply with the AAP’s equivocating disapproval of the equivalent procedure on boys. The remote possibility of a potential health benefit to male circumcision is regarded by the AAP as sufficient to justify categorizing the operation as a medical precaution rather than a culturally mandated mutilation.<sup>74</sup> In its 1999 policy statement, the AAP acknowledged that MGC was

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<sup>71</sup> David Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World’s Most Controversial Surgery*, 200.

<sup>72</sup> Peter A. Clark, “To Circumcise or Not to Circumcise?” *Health Progress* 87.5 (2006): 30–39.

<sup>73</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics, Task Force on Circumcision, “Committee on Bioethics, Female Genital Mutilation, Part I,” *Pediatrics* 102 (July 1998): 153–56.

<sup>74</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics, Task Force on Circumcision, “Committee on Bioethics, Female Genital Mutilation, Part II” *Pediatrics* 102 (July 1998): 172–73, 200, and Lawrence Dritsas, “Below the Belt: Doctors, Debate and the Ongoing American Discussion of Routine Neonatal Male Circumcision,” *Bulletin of Science and Technology* 21 (2001): 297–311.

“not essential to the child’s well being,” but went on to say that it was “legitimate for parents to take into account cultural, religious and ethnic traditions [...] when making this decision,” Objecting to this concession, Dr Thomas Bartman drew attention to the AAP’s policy on female circumcision, issued by its Committee on Bioethics in 1998, and commented:

Although female genital mutilation (FGM) exists in many horrendous variations, that statement clearly included within its definition of FGM “excision of the skin surrounding the clitoris” [paragraph 6]. In that report the Committee also clearly stated that pediatricians should “decline performing all medically unnecessary procedures to alter female genitalia” [paragraph 41]. Furthermore, under the heading “Cultural and Ethical Issues” the Committee stated that the parents’ cultural, societal, and religious beliefs do not give them the right to consent to a medically unnecessary procedure for their child.<sup>75</sup>

In reply, the chair of the Circumcision Task Force, Dr Carole Lannon, stated: “The critical distinction between female genital mutilation and male circumcision is the potential medical benefits of male circumcision. These potential benefits warrant a parental role in decision making about this procedure.”

No other medical association that has issued a policy on MGC has found sufficient “potential benefits” to justify the procedure. Where Americans call neonatal circumcision “not essential” for health, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (2004) states that “there is no medical indication for routine male circumcision”; the Canadian Paediatric Society (1982, 1989, 1996) has called it a “mutilative” and “obsolete” operation; and the British Medical Association (2006) points out that there is rarely any clinical need for circumcision, and that “parental preference alone is not sufficient justification for performing a surgical procedure on a child.” It warns that “to circumcise for therapeutic reasons where medical research has shown other techniques to be at least as effective and less invasive would be unethical and inappropriate,” and suggests that, if it were shown that MGC without clinical need was prejudicial to a child’s well-being, it is likely that a legal challenge on human-rights grounds would be successful.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Thomas Bartman, “Letter,” *Pediatrics* 105.3 (2000): 681.

<sup>76</sup> Note that the BMA doubts the validity of therapeutic circumcision of minors (to correct a problem); it does not even consider the possibility of circumcision as a prophylactic against conceivable future problems. See also Finland Central Union for Child Welfare, *Position Statement on the Circumcision of Boys* (Helsinki, 2003), online: [www.cirp.org/library/statements](http://www.cirp.org/library/statements) (accessed 6 July 2006). Past and current poli-

Considering these judgments, it is difficult to know what to make of this extraordinary leap from cultural imperative to speculative (“potential”) health advantage. Dr Lannon states that it is the possibility of a “medical benefit” that authorizes submission to parental wishes in the case of boys, and that it is the absence of any such possibility that forbids any surgical procedure on the genitals of girls, no matter how significant it may be to the cultures that have traditionally practised such rites. But one wonders whether it is culture or medical science that is really in the driver’s seat here. The evidence thought to show a “potential health benefit” for MGC may in fact be an artifact of its cultural acceptability and long history in American society. As Miller (2002) and Waldeck (2003) have eloquently argued,<sup>77</sup> MGC in the USA, despite the medicalized setting, is more often a cultural ritual than a health precaution; most parents who seek or agree to the operation do so out of habit: because other people do it; because they are used to the appearance of the circumcised penis; because they do not want their boys to look different. By the same token, the absence of any culturally conditioned demand for female circumcision has discouraged researchers from seeking evidence of the potential advantages of such surgery.<sup>78</sup> It is the cultural demand for male circumcision that generates the research which appears to implicate the foreskin in whatever disease is holding the public’s attention.<sup>79</sup> In a culture that values science, medical (usually miscalled scientific) justifications for cultural rituals must be found, hence the numerous horror stories about the terrible risks of

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cy statements of most organizations that have issued policies on routine circumcision are conveniently collected at [www.cirp.org/library/statements/](http://www.cirp.org/library/statements/)

<sup>77</sup> Geoffrey Miller, “Circumcision: Cultural-Legal Analysis” (2002), and Sarah Waldeck, “Using Circumcision to Understand Social Norms as Multipliers,” *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 72 (2003): 455–526.

<sup>78</sup> There is, in fact, evidence that female circumcision reduces the risk of HIV infection in women – see Rebecca Y. Stallings & Emilian Karugendo, “Female Circumcision and HIV Infection in Tanzania: For Better or for Worse?” Abstract of paper given at the Third International AIDS Society Conference on HIV Pathogenesis and Treatment, Rio de Janeiro, July 25–27, 2005. Given Western cultural preferences, however, it is unlikely that there will ever be clinical trials to test the possibility. See next section.

<sup>79</sup> See Ronald Goldman, “Circumcision Policy: A Psychosocial Perspective,” *Paediatrics and Child Health* (Canada) 9 (2004): 630–33.

retaining normal human anatomy.<sup>80</sup> As Lawrence Dritisas has eloquently argued, the cultural tail would appear to be wagging the scientific dog.

### Science in the Service of Culture

Today the most striking asymmetries between male and female genital cutting lie in the fact that powerful international agencies are promoting the first as a “scientifically proven” health precaution while campaigning against the latter as a significant threat to health. In this scenario, if male circumcision is conceived of as harmful, it is harm only to genital sensation, sexual pleasure, and body image; but when female circumcision is conceived as harmful, it is harm to the reproductive and urinary functions, which are seen as far more important than mere happiness. US organizations such as the US Agency for International Development have been at the forefront of efforts to conceptualize MGC as an aspect of reproductive health, and thus as a routine measure that should be built into foreign aid programmes and health advice.

Alongside this development we find an asymmetry in the justifications offered for circumcision. Where it is defended at all, female circumcision is likely to be argued for in terms of tradition (by insiders) or cultural relativism (by Western commentators). Whether the original rationale is medical or cultural, the defence of male circumcision is now most often cast in terms of improved health and increased resistance to feared diseases. Say something critical of male circumcision these days and you are likely to be floored with one magic word: AIDS.

It might be thought, and it is often asserted, that mass circumcision as a strategy for AIDS control is a straightforward instance of applying the discoveries of modern science to human betterment, like clean water for the prevention of cholera. If only the genitals were as culturally neutral as the stomach! As David Hume pointed out, however, “reason is [...] the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them”;<sup>81</sup> by this he means that science cannot determine the ends to which it may be applied – these come from outside scientific discourse, from politics, ethics, religion, aesthetics and other cultural discourses. Often facts that are not mentioned are as critical as those that are introduced into a debate. The

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<sup>80</sup> Robert S. Van Howe, J. Steven Svoboda & Frederick M. Hodges, “HIV Infection and Circumcision: Cutting Through the Hyperbole,” *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health* 125 (2005): 259–65.

<sup>81</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest Mossner (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1985), Book II, Section iii: 462.

UNAIDS and WHO have failed to acknowledge the well-established fact that rates of new HIV infection have been declining for over a decade as the disease comes under increased control. AIDS is not, and never will be, a critical public health problem in developed countries, where the disease remains largely confined to the traditional sub-cultures: gay men and intravenous-drug users.<sup>82</sup> For those able to afford the needed medications or able to negotiate donated or subsidized products from the drug companies, AIDS is no longer the death sentence it once was. It may be true that human genital mucosa is vulnerable to penetration by HIV, and hence that reducing its surface area by excising the foreskin lowers a man's risk of getting AIDS. But to slide from such a biological fact (if fact it be) to the proposition that MGC is therefore desirable, necessary or mandatory is a non sequitur.

There are many possible responses to such news, and the response will be determined not by science, but by the values of the individuals and societies in question. Health itself is a cultural construct, and a preference for (say) longevity over fun or good looks is itself a culturally determined priority. Reporting the practice of self-circumcision among the many bizarre customs of ancient Egyptian priests, Herodotus observed disapprovingly that they valued "cleanliness over comeliness."<sup>83</sup> With their strong sense of bodily aesthetics and faith in self-control, the Greeks would never have endorsed circumcision for one moment, no matter how 'compelling' the medical evidence. In anglophone societies, where the foreskin has already endured a century of demonization, the news from Africa is likely to be interpreted as yet another reason to get rid of it. In societies that value the body unaltered, the response is likely to be to seek other means by which men can be protected, including such proven measures as safe sex and reduced promiscuity.

The evidence strongly suggests that the push for mass male circumcision as the answer to AIDS is driven more by culture than by science – or rather, by science in the service of culture. If the genital mucosa is the Trojan horse for HIV and its reduction by various forms of pre-emptive excision decreases a person's risk of becoming infected, it follows that the genital mucosa of the female (on the clitoral hood and labia, for example) might be as vulnerable as the male foreskin, and thus that certain forms of female circumcision might protect women in the same way as posthectomy is thought to protect men. There is, in fact, evidence that female circumcision does reduce the risk of

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<sup>82</sup> See James Chin, *The Aids Pandemic: The Collision of Epidemiology with Political Correctness* (Oxford: Radcliffe, 2007).

<sup>83</sup> Frederick M. Hodges, "The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome," 385.

HIV infection in women,<sup>84</sup> and at least one other study suggests that female circumcision can also *indirectly* protect women from HIV infection.<sup>85</sup> But so strong is the revulsion from any form of female genital surgery among the Western researchers and agencies that control AIDS policy that it is not considered proper even to ask the question, let alone conduct research into the possibility.

Like the obstetricians who shouted Baker Brown down, modern health policy makers prefer female genitals intact, no matter what health advantages might accrue from surgical intervention. If the male genitals were regarded with the same respect as the female, MGC would be held in the same abhorrence as FGC, and experiments involving foreskin removal would be unthinkable.

The sudden resurgence of demands for routine circumcision of boys as a health precaution in some developed countries (notably the USA and Australia) has a similarly cultural explanation. Paradoxically, it can be traced back to developments in the 1980s that sought to improve the legal mechanisms for child protection and reduce all forms of child abuse. These were expressed most dramatically in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 24 (3) of which required parties to take “all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.” This looked promising, but a startling procedural fact that Svoboda (2004) unearthed shows that it did not take long for “children” to mean “girls only.” As late as 25 June 1997, one document pertaining to the UN’s work on traditional practices referred to the responsible official, known as “Special Rapporteur on traditional practices affecting the health of women and children.”<sup>86</sup> But by the time the pertinent meeting was nearing its conclusion and had issued its report on the session, the special rapporteur’s mandate had been changed to cover “traditional practices affecting

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<sup>84</sup> See Rebecca Y. Stallings & Emilian Karugendo, “Female Circumcision and HIV Infection in Tanzania: For Better or for Worse?” Abstract of paper given at the Third International AIDS Society Conference on HIV Pathogenesis and Treatment, Rio de Janeiro, July 25–27, 2005.

<sup>85</sup> Kathryn M. Yount & Bisrat K. Abraham, “Female Genital Cutting and HIV/AIDS Among Kenyan Women,” *Studies in Family Planning* 38.2 (2007): 73–88.

<sup>86</sup> *United Nations Commission on Human Rights*, Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Forty-Ninth Session, provisional agenda item 5(a): The implementation of the human rights of women – traditional practices affecting the health of women and children – Follow-up report of the Special Rapporteur on traditional practices affecting the health of women and children, Mrs. Halima Embarek Warzazi. UN Doc. No. E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/10 (25 June 1997).

the health of women and the girl child.”<sup>87</sup> There had never been any substantive discussion of this highly significant change, which excluded all male children at the stroke of a pen, nor was the change of title ever alluded to in any known UN document.

Other pertinent child-protection developments include the rise of a vocal intact-rights (anti-circumcision) movement in the only Western country where routine MGC remained common (the USA); a hesitant but visible tendency for secular and reforming Jews to question the necessity for the rite; and, in places where MGC was unusual and abhorred (such as Scandinavia), measures to regulate ritual circumcision as performed by ethnic and religious minorities. Given that the wording of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child protected all children without discrimination, it is curious but symptomatic of assumptions about gender and sexuality that many governments passed legislation to make all forms of FGC unlawful, but none prohibited any form of MGC. Although some jurisdictions (such as the Australian States of South Australia and Queensland) looked seriously into the question of whether circumcision of boys should also be restricted, no current government has moved far in this direction. Sweden has placed mild restrictions on the practice, and the South Africa’s Children’s Act 2007 makes the circumcision of male children under the age of sixteen unlawful except for religious or medical reasons – which are, of course, the two principal categories of justification for the practice. As Jacqueline Smith found,<sup>88</sup> however, the Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly referred to genital mutilation of children, without discrimination on the basis of gender, and there could be no valid or effective response, in terms of human rights or medical ethics, to the argument that circumcision of minors was a violation of accepted principles of human rights and medical ethics.

Since all the arguments deployed against FGC applied just as strongly to MGC,<sup>89</sup> the persistence of the practice was an anomaly that demanded atten-

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<sup>87</sup> *United Nations Commission on Human Rights*, Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Forty-Ninth Session. Report of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities on its forty-ninth session. UN Doc. No. E/CN.4/1998/2, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/50 (29 August 1997).

<sup>88</sup> Jacqueline Smith, “Male Circumcision and the Rights of the Child.”

<sup>89</sup> See Elisabeth McDonald, “Circumcision and the Criminal Law: The Challenge for a Multicultural State,” *New Zealand Universities Law Review* 21 (2004): 233–67, Suzanne Bouclin, “An Examination of Legal and Ethical Issues Surrounding Male Circumcision: The Canadian Context,” *International Journal of Men’s Health* 4.3 (2005): 205–22, and Ranipal Narulla, “Circumscribing Circumcision: Traversing the

tion. But the Convention left a loophole in its reference to “practices prejudicial to health”: i.e. *harmful* practices – if MGC could be shown to be not harmful or, even better, beneficial in some way, then Article 24 would not apply to MGC, and those who wanted to continue the practice, whether for traditional or for medical reasons, could continue doing so with a clear conscience and little fear of restriction. It was the imperative to save MGC from the human-rights experts, lawyers, and ethicists that inspired the resurgence of research and advocacy, not only into the benefits of the procedure (old ones dusted up, new ones found), but a whole new research agenda, defying common sense and the consensus of the ages, aimed at proving that deleting the most densely innervated parts of the penis makes no difference to sexual experience.<sup>90</sup> This research flies in the face of results such as those obtained by Sorrells et al.<sup>91</sup>

To defend a customary practice with the discoveries or rhetoric of science is not a new strategy. Back in Roman times, the Jewish philosopher Philo sought to discourage his co-religionists from abandoning male circumcision (as some were doing, in the interests of integration) with several arguments, prominent among which was the claim that it conferred immunity against a kind of carbuncle on the penis that he called anthrax.<sup>92</sup> In mid-nineteenth-century Germany, a strong movement among reforming Jews sought to drop male circumcision along with many other oppressive observances; their campaign was defeated by the conservative rabbis, who cited new medical evidence from Britain and the USA that male circumcision was an effective defence against syphilis, masturbation, and other problems, and thus an example of modern science, not an ancient superstition at all.<sup>93</sup> But it was in the USA just before World War I that the strategy had its finest flowering.

Confronted with evidence that ritual circumcision was infecting babies with serious diseases (including diphtheria, tuberculosis, and syphilis), and

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Moral and Legal Ground Around a Hidden Human Rights Violation,” *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 12 (2007): 89–118.

<sup>90</sup> Brian Morris, *In Favour of Circumcision* (Sydney: New South Wales UP, 1999), and Brian Morris et al., “RACP’s Policy Statement on Male Circumcision is Ill-Conceived,” *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 30 (2006): 16–22.

<sup>91</sup> Morris L. Sorrells, James L. Snyder, Mark D. Reiss et al., “Fine-Touch Pressure Thresholds in the Adult Penis,” *BJU International* 99 (2007): 864–69.

<sup>92</sup> Robert Darby, “Where Doctors Differ: The Debate on Circumcision as a Protection Against Syphilis, 1855–1914,” *Social History of Medicine* 16 (2003): 57.

<sup>93</sup> See John Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews* (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 2001): 189, and Leonard Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, ch. 5 and 6.

with a consequent campaign by paediatricians to ban or at least regulate the procedure,<sup>94</sup> the physician Abraham Wolbarst had the genius to perceive that the surest way to preserve male circumcision as a religious rite within the Jewish community was to generalize it throughout the whole of society as a necessary health precaution. Accordingly, he did not try to justify it on the culturally relativist ground of ethnic particularity, but on the modern, scientific ground that it was a valid measure of preventive health that should be imposed on every male. Far from spreading syphilis, Wolbarst asserted (and produced statistics showing) that male circumcision conferred high resistance, if not immunity, to syphilis, as well as curing or preventing a great many other problems, including herpes, cancer, and masturbation. He understood that a modern society that respected science needed modern arguments in defence of ancient customs.<sup>95</sup>

Although the rise of multiculturalism in recent times has permitted justification of rites such as circumcision (male or female) on the basis of cultural relativism, it is still the case that defenders of male circumcision are more likely to cite the alleged health benefits than its cultural significance. This was apparent in the submissions from Jewish and Muslim organizations to the inquiry conducted by the Queensland Law Reform Commission (1993) about whether circumcision of boys should be legally restricted, along with any form of FGC. A similar phenomenon is evident in the galloping medicalization of ritual male circumcision in many parts of the contemporary world.

Examples abound. In Africa, routine MGC is being called for as a panic response to AIDS. In Turkey and central Asia, the Turkish army carries out mass circumcisions of boys with no ceremony or ritual of any kind, but a high incidence of “complications.”<sup>96</sup> In Britain, Muslims demand that circumcision be provided in public hospitals under the National Health Service, and some local health authorities provide the procedure free of charge in order to avoid the butchery that arises from kitchen-table jobs. In Thailand, village circumcision of Muslim boys, previously carried out by traditional practitioners, is

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<sup>94</sup> See L. Emmet Holt, “Tuberculosis Acquired Through Ritual Circumcision,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 61.2 (1913): 99–102.

<sup>95</sup> Abraham Wolbarst, “Universal Circumcision as a Sanitary Measure,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 62 (1914): 92–97, and Robert Darby, “Where Doctors Differ,” 57–78. Wolbarst is no mere historical curiosity. His opinion piece on circumcision as necessary to prevent cancer, published in the *Lancet* in 1932, is still regularly cited by circumcision advocates such as Brian Morris (*In Favour of Circumcision* [1999]: 41).

<sup>96</sup> See Emir Özdemir, “Significantly Increased Complication and Risks with Mass Circumcisions,” *British Journal of Urology* 80 (1997): 136–39.

being replaced with group circumcisions under medical supervision. Group circumcision was the idea of a local doctor, concerned at the high incidence of infections, injury and other “complications” arising from the traditional method; “we have to find ways to integrate traditional beliefs with modern medical practices to keep villagers from illnesses,” the doctor explained (*Bangkok Post*, 18 March 2006). He evidently did not think that MGC required any justification; it was simply something Muslims did.

There is evidence that mild forms of FGC are being medicalized in some places, such as Indonesia,<sup>97</sup> but on present indications the tendency is for asymmetry to intensify: the Western medical model will be applied to boys, locking generations of men into the circumcising habit;<sup>98</sup> while the Western human-rights model will be applied to girls and women, thus saving them from “harmful traditional practices.”

### Culture a One-Way Street?

A further instance of asymmetry lies in Western policies with respect to non-circumcising cultures. While it is regarded as quite wrong (unthinkable) to encourage them to adopt FGC, it is seen as perfectly okay to encourage and even pressure them to adopt MGC. This trend is most apparent in Africa and some other developing regions dependent on Western aid, where MGC is being foisted on non-circumcising cultures as the magic bullet against AIDS. It is also apparent in developed countries, where doctors tend to show exaggerated respect for the traditions of circumcising cultures and (in the USA at least) insufficient respect for the traditions of immigrants that do not practise MGC. Even medical personnel who regard MGC as unnecessary or harmful show little hesitation in cutting boys from traditionally circumcising cultures (mostly Islamic, these days) at the request of their parents.

The claims of culture are taken very seriously in this age of globalization, but the problem with this particular claim is that it is applied inconsistently. First, there is discrimination based on gender. No matter how important circumcision of girls may be to the cultural/ethnic/religious groups that practise it, world opinion has determined that girls’ bodies are more important than tradition, and that any cutting of the female genitals is Female Genital Mutilation, now banned by law. Under the reigning paradigm, discrimination

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<sup>97</sup> See Sarah Corbett, “A Cutting Tradition,” *New York Times Magazine* (20 January 2008): 44, 50.

<sup>98</sup> See Gregory J. Boyle, “Issues Associated with the Introduction of Circumcision into a Non-Circumcising Society,” *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 79 (2003): 427–28.

against men is regarded far less seriously than discrimination against women. Despite a blatant violation of the equal protection principles enshrined in the United States Constitution and human rights treaties, courts are reluctant to affirm claims of equal treatment not yet socially approved. A movement brought primarily or exclusively on behalf of males seems to cause discomfort to individuals, institutions, and society.<sup>99</sup>

Additionally, the issues raised by genital cutting are embarrassingly sexual in nature, all the more so with circumcision of men or boys, which requires references to the penis; there is always the danger that any discussion of the issues that is explicit enough to reveal the realities will be seen as pornography rather than ethics or science. Since circumcision is tied up with three of the most powerful discourses in modern society – science, medicine, and religion – genital integrity partakes of sex, religion, psychological denial, medical procedures, parental authority, and a variety of other uncomfortable, controversial and deeply emotional issues. No wonder there is so much argument.

Moreover, the cultural argument seems to be a one-way street, particularly in the USA. When faced by immigrant parents from circumcising cultures, doctors say they must respect their traditions and accede to their wishes, at least in relation to boys. But when it comes to non-circumcising cultures (the great majority), the argument is suddenly reversed: instead of enjoying automatic respect for their traditions, parents from non-circumcising cultures are pressured to conform to the American norm and to consent to have their sons circumcised, so that they will be ‘like other boys’. Here it is not the traditional culture or the condition of the father’s penis that matters, but American custom and medical ideology, to which the immigrants are expected to conform; and it is not unknown for them to be coerced into doing so.

When discussing this issue, defenders of children’s rights have argued that doctors should not be cultural brokers, but this formulation does not quite grasp the complexity of the situation. What is really meant is that medical personnel should not enforce the rules of a given subculture against its members, particularly when the issue is one of conformity or outdated rituals. Concerns with identity are important in the traditional, monocultural societies where practices such as male and female circumcision originated; in such tribal situations, genital cutting functions as an age card and passport. But such rituals are unnecessary, and certainly do not need to be nurtured, in the

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<sup>99</sup> See J. Steven Svoboda, “Genital Integrity and Gender Equity,” in *Bodily Integrity and the Politics of Circumcision: Culture, Controversy, and Change*, ed. George C. Denniston, Grassivaro Gallo, Frederick M. Hodges, Marilyn F. Milos & Franco Viviani (New York: Springer, 2006): 149–64.

modern, multicultural societies to which these people have relocated, where identity and entitlements are registered in other ways. Immigrants from traditional societies do not expect to retain all their village customs when seeking to improve their condition in the industrialized world. In their new home, rituals such as genital cutting have no cultural significance; the main reason genital cutting, alone of many customs, tends to be retained is that those with power (the parents and other adults) would not personally benefit from dropping it, while those who would enjoy the benefit are only helpless children, who lack the power to voice, much less enforce, their opinion.

In practice, it is inevitable that doctors and other providers of professional services will act as cultural brokers when dealing with families from immigrant cultures, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. It is actually quite appropriate that they should help people from collectivist cultures (in which the rights of children as individuals and citizens are not recognized) to negotiate the transition to a culture based on the autonomy of the individual and respect for personal rights. The problem is not that doctors act as cultural brokers, but that they do so in an inconsistent and discriminatory manner, respecting the traditions of the circumcisers but not the traditions of non-circumcising cultures – American Indian, Hispanic, Catholic, Greek and Russian Orthodox, and other Christian, European, South American and most Asian, to name a few.

Circumcising cultures are a small minority: Islamic, some Africans, Jewish, and some Pacific islanders.<sup>100</sup> You might think that the one of the first acts of cultural retrieval performed by American Indian peoples, none of which ever practised genital cutting, would be to revive such historic traditions. If the ‘respect for culture’ policy were applied consistently, the vast majority of American immigrants and ethnic subcultures would not be circumcised, and half-drugged mothers would not be obliged to fight off the advances of scalpel-happy ob-gyns in maternity wards.

## Conclusion

It is perhaps inevitable that one’s opinions about male and female circumcision will be conditioned by one’s own socialization and culture. In one study of five childhood mutilations (artificial cranial deformation, Chinese foot binding, female infanticide in nineteenth-century India, female genital cutting, and male genital cutting, both in North America and in developing

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<sup>100</sup> In New Zealand, and Australia to a lesser extent, the issue arises with immigrants from some of the Pacific islands, notably Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa.

countries), surprising similarities were found in the reasons for these practices. Although it was claimed that they were intended to benefit the child, they resulted in overall harm to the child; the actual or imagined benefits are only for others: parents, surgeons, midwives, and/or 'society'.<sup>101</sup> Western observers have little difficulty in labelling the other four practices as violent human-rights violations, yet they have trouble objectively analyzing their own practice, male genital cutting. This form of cultural blindness is understandable. All over the world, as Richard Shweder has commented, people recoil and say "yuck" to each other's childhood body-mutilation practices while justifying their own practices and saying "yuck" to cultures that have *not* adopted their customs.<sup>102</sup>

Just how difficult it is to escape from cultural assumptions is revealed in an exchange between Ruth Macklin and Robert Baker that further highlights the problems inherent in claiming universal human rights as a basis for stopping female circumcision while ignoring the problem of male circumcision. Macklin sought to ground her critique of ethical relativism in an appeal to universally held standards of human rights – or, at least, rights that she believed ought to be universally held – and on this basis condemned female circumcision because it was harmful to the child and violated her integrity as a person. Her argument was trumped by Robert Baker, a self-proclaimed cultural relativist, who criticized her for focusing exclusively on 'female genital mutilation' while ignoring 'male genital mutilation'. He observes that female circumcision may take a variety of forms and male circumcision usually only one, but points out that circumcision (male or female) traditionally "occurs in societies that emphasize the reproductive aspects of sexuality while repressing eroticism" and, further, that "the feature common to both forms of circumcision is that the operation desensitizes responses to sexual stimulation." As Baker aptly concludes, "once one appreciates that cultures that circumcise females typically circumcise males as well, the claim that circumcision is discriminatory, or anti-female, becomes questionable."<sup>103</sup> In her reply, Macklin

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<sup>101</sup> See J. Steven Svoboda, "The Limits of the Law: Comparative Analysis of Legal and Extralegal Methods to Control Child Body Mutilation Practices," in *Bodily Integrity and the Politics of Circumcision*, ed. Denniston et al., 297–365.

<sup>102</sup> Richard Shweder, "What About Female Genital Mutilation? and Why Understanding Culture Matters in the First Place," in *Engaging Cultural Differences: The Multicultural Challenge in Liberal Democracies*, ed. Richard A. Shweder, Hazel Rose Markus & Martha Minow (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002): 216–51.

<sup>103</sup> Robert Baker, "Negotiating International Bioethics: A Response to Tom Beauchamp and Ruth Macklin," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 8 (1998): 442–43.

tellingly criticizes Baker for misidentifying human rights as pertaining to a culture or society rather than to individuals, but she seems not to have heeded his call for consistency in the application of human-rights principles: Continuing to focus on the harm of female circumcision, she makes no mention of male circumcision at all.<sup>104</sup>

The way forward, in our opinion, is not to abandon the concept of universal human rights, as argued by Baker, but to attempt to apply them consistently, without discrimination on the basis of gender. If surgery to reduce the extent of vulnerable genital mucosa has such great prophylactic value against disease, why should women and girls be denied its benefits? If genital mutilation is as harmful and (when inflicted on minors, or on adults without fully informed consent) as ethically wrong as many claim, why should men and boys be denied protection from it?

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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SAMI ALDEEB ABU-SAHLIEH, a Doctor in Law and a graduate in Political Science, is Legal Adviser responsible for Arab and Islamic law at the Swiss Institute of Comparative Law, Lausanne. See a list of some of his publications at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sami/>. He is the author of *Male and Female Circumcision Among Jews, Christians and Muslims: Religious, Medical, Social and Legal Debate* (2001).

DOMINIQUE ARNAUD was born in 1951 in Sfax, Tunisia. A former student of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Geneva, Switzerland, he did his civil service in Polynesia. He has since then devoted himself entirely to cinema: *Silence, on coupe!* (90 min., 2003–2006); *Sable Noir* (inspired by German movie-maker Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau; 1997–98); the co-authored documentary *Tabu Dernier Voyage* (90 & 52 min.; ARTE, France 2, France 3, R.F.O., R.T.B.S., 1996); *Cannabis Tahiti Paradis* (26 min., R.F.O., 1993); *Papa Penu Mama Roro* (based on Marc Tevane's works; sitcom 20x13 min., diffusion R.F.O., 1991); *Polynésie Sauvage* (3x26 min.: *Week end à Arutua, Marquises Terre des Hommes, Les Oranges sauvages de Tahiti*, Océane Production/Office territorial d'Action culturelle, O.T.A.C./Air France, 1989); *Hono (The Link)* (80 min.; selected at the Fourth Arts Festival of the South Pacific, R.F.O., 1985); *Moemoea (The Dream)*, 85 min.; short version: 52 min.; selected Caméra d'Or at the 33rd Cannes Festival/Douarnenez Festival, 1980). Among his co-productions feature *Le Château*, with Jean Lothe (production A2); *Marae*, with Henri Hiro (Territoire de Polynésie française), *Mataïva*, with Jariv Nathan (production N.B. Hamburg). He has also collaborated on an experimental production of *Arii Paea Vahine* (52 min.) and helped create the *Unité de Production Cinématographique Matarau* in Tahiti in 1977–78 as well as the first Tahitian movie-producing company, Hitimarama Films (No. 5917; 1979). He has also worked closely with the New Zealand T.V. Broadcast Corporation and Greenpeace.

JERRY K. BRAYTON is the pseudonym of a man born in the USA who was circumcised as an infant and who, beyond the information contained in his article, prefers to keep his personal details private.

LAURENCE COX (Ph.D., M.Med.Sc., B.Ed., Dip.Teach.) is a former biomedical scientist and is currently an adjunct lecturer in Health Sciences at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia. In the mid-1990s he became interested in men's feelings about and attitudes towards circumcision, a practice that had been common in Australia from the 1920s to the 1980s. After reading Jim Bigelow's book *The Joy of Uncircumcising*, Laurence resolved to restore his own foreskin, and he went on to establish an informal support and education network for other men with the same aim. Laurence is the author of "Boys' Safety and Health," a report to the New South Wales Minister for Health, and "Men Against Sexual Assault" (both 1995) under the pen name Peter Lawrence. Dr Cox has devoted much of his spare time as a 'barefoot activist' working to educate medical doctors, the media, parents, politicians, sexual counsellors and others about the importance of the health, safety, and integrity of a child's body, including the integrity of his or her genitals. Laurence is still proactive in this area of health education.

ROBERT DARBY is an independent historian and freelance writer, with an interest in many aspects of cultural, medical, and sexual history. He is the author of articles in such journals as *Social History of Medicine*, *Journal of Social History*, *Eighteenth Century Life*, *Medical History*, *War and History*, the *Medical Journal of Australia*, *Quadrant*, and others. His most recent books are *A Surgical Temptation: The Demonization of the Foreskin and the Rise of Circumcision in Britain* (2005) and *Round the Red Lamp* (2007), an edited collection of Arthur Conan Doyle's medical writings. Dr Darby has degrees from La Trobe University, the Australian National University, and the University of New South Wales, and he is currently reviews editor for H-Histsex, one of the on-line humanities discussion lists hosted by H-Net at the University of Michigan. He lives in Canberra, Australia. Further information and a full bibliography can be found on his website: [www.historyofcircumcision.net](http://www.historyofcircumcision.net).

A former student of the Ecole Normale Supérieure de l'Enseignement Technique, ANNE-MARIE DAUPHIN-TINTURIER has collected and analyzed a large corpus of tales in the Bemba-speaking region of Zambia and took a particular interest in the girls' initiation ritual. For the past ten years, she has participated in research projects with LLACAN (Langues, Langages et Cultures en Afrique Noire), a CNRS [French National Centre for Scientific Research] Research Centre. She is also a member of the Board of ISOLA (International Society for Oral Literature in Africa). She is the author of "Piège pour un lion: Étude ethnolinguistique de contes bemba (Zambie)" (thèse de 3ème cycle, Paris V, 1983); *La femme, le lion et le prêtre: Les trois fonctions de la femme dans le nord de la Zambie* (1993); *AIDS and Girls Initiation in Northern Zambia* (2001); and *Cisungu à nouveau: Initiation des*

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KEVIN DWYER teaches American history and cultural studies at the Université catholique de Lille in France. Apart from translations, and academic publications on film, he is also the author of short stories and film scripts.

SAFAA FATHY is a well-known Egyptian, Paris-based poet, theoretician, and movie-maker. Her Arabic-language poems are collected in *Poems* (1988), *...and One Night* (1996), and *The Little Wooden Dolls* (1998). Her poems have been translated into French and English and have appeared in collections such as *Les Poèmes arabes modernes* (1999), *Poèmes* (1999); *Poésie 98* (1999), and the *Anthology of Contemporary Arab Women Poets* (2000). She is also the author of plays such as *Terreur* (2000) and films: *Hidden Faces* (1991), *Doisneau* (1993), *Ghazela, Danseuses d'Égypte* (1993), *Maxime Rodinson*; *L'athée des dieux* (1996), *Le Silence* (1997). *D'ailleurs, Derrida* (France/Germany, ARTE, 2000) inspired her book, co-authored with Jacques Derrida, *Tourner les mots: Au bord d'un film* (2000).

KOFFI KWAHULÉ was born in Abengourou, Ivory Coast. In 1992, he received the Grand prix International des dramaturgies du Monde (RFI/ACCT) with *Cette vieille magie noire* (1993). Among the plays he has recently had staged: *Jaz* (1998); *Bintou* (1997); *P'tite-Souillure* (2000); *La Dame du café d'en face* (SACD-RFI Prize 1994; 1998); *Big Shoot* (2005); and *Il nous faut l'Amérique!* (2005). His debut novel *Babyface* was published in 2006 and he is also the author of short stories – *La Jeune fille au gousset* (1998), *Veillée d'armes* (2002), and *Western* (2003).

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