

FEMALE CIRCUMCISION IN TWO CONTEXTS

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Female circumcision is a practice which is appalling to many Westerners, yet in cultures where it occurs, it is often considered only a custom. Yet the failure of repeated attempts to eliminate the practice by both Westerners and non-Westerners suggests that female circumcision is intricately interwoven into the social structure of the cultures where it occurs. It would seem that the practice has symbolic meaning and is somehow functional. This research is a comparative theoretical study of the occurrence of and the importance of female circumcision within two different cultures in Africa, the Sudanese and the Maasai.

Definitions, Physiological Effects, and Geography

Although the definitions of female genital mutilation differ among authors, it seems that these procedures can be grouped into two types. Sunna circumcision consists of the excision of the prepuce and glans of the clitoris, and sometimes the labia minora as well. Infibulation, also known as Pharaonic or Sudanese circumcision, is the removal of these areas as well as of all of the external genitalia. Infibulation can lead to many medical complications, such as urinary incontinence, pelvic infections, hemorrhage, and obstetric complications which may damage a fetus or lead to sterility. An infibulated woman must be cut open for

intercourse and childbirth, and re-infibulated after the latter. Lilian Passmore Sanderson(1981) points out that the extent of the operation often does not depend so much on what was intended, but upon the skill of the operator, the age of the child, the sharpness of the instrument, and whether or not the child holds still.

According to Anne Cloudsley (1981), some Western medical professionals deny that the lowering of sensitivity which accompanies female circumcision diminishes sexual desire. These professionals claim that such desire is produced by the endocrine organs. However, cybernetics and biological feedback mechanisms have been used in research which suggests that a reduction in peripheral sensation may affect endocrinal secretions and ultimately, sexual desire as well. Cloudsley points out that Hite (1976) reported that 90% of women achieved orgasm if they had clitoral stimulation prior to sexual intercourse, whereas only 30% achieved orgasm without clitoral stimulation. Sanderson (1981) claims that male circumcision does not destroy sexual sensation as does female circumcision, and that the foreskin and the clitoris are not analogous.

Currently, infibulation seems to occur only in African societies, primarily the Nubians of Southern Egypt, Muslims in the Northern Sudan and Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Mali. According to Cloudsley (1981), circumcision affects 30 million women in more than 26 countries in Africa, and Sanderson (1981) adds to the list the southern

part of the Arabian penninsula, Malaysia, Iran and Khoozestan. There have been no reports of the practice in Brazil, Eastern Mexico, or Peru since 1895. Female circumcison died out in Austrailia over 50 years ago and was last reported among the Russian Skoptsy by missionaries in 1885.

History

Female circumcison has had a long history, and appears to be both pre-Christian and pre-Islamic. According to Sanderson, some authors have suggested that the practice originated amongst the Hamito-Semetic inhabitants of the shores of the Red Sea. She suggests that some Kenyan peoples, such as the Maasai, might have adopted female circumcison from the Cushites, who originally came from Ethiopia. Herodotus wrote that female circumcison was practiced by Egyptians, Phoenicians, Hittites, and Ethiopians in 500 B.C.. Cloudsley claims that it had some connection with girls' dowries in 163 B.C.. Sanderson states that there are accounts of female circumcison which date back to the 16th century by explorers and researchers in West Africa, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaya, Sumatra, Java, Baluchistan, and Austrailia.

Interestingly enough, the practice is not a stranger to the Western world. In the second half of the 19th century, clitoridectomies were performed in England, Europe, and the United States. According to Sanderson, some doctors thought that it would cure sexual deviations and nymphomania. They

also thought that it would cure disorders which were believed to be caused by masturbation, such as hystaria, epilepsy, melancholia, and insanity. Over the years, the practice came into disfavor, and had died out for the most part by the 1930's. Even today, however, minor operations such as the removal of the hood of the clitoris are performed to "cure frigidity."

Theoretical Background

There have been a number of different theories proposed by Western social scientists which attempt to explain female genital mutilation, as well as the menarcheal ceremonies which sometimes accompany it. According to Karen and Jeffery Paige (1981), a female in menarch is at a time when her marriage potential must be guarded against accusations of promiscuity which would decrease her value, and infibualtion is considered to be a way to prove her virginity and to ensure her husband's paternity. On the other hand, Arnold Van Gennep (1960) sees no relationship between the circumcision of men and women, marriage, or procreation. Its function is to help incorporate young people into adult society; it is a mark of social rather than biological maturity. Also, the excision of the clitoris is an attempt to remove the appendage by which the female most resembles the male; therefore, it can be considered a rite of sexual differentiation, much like the assigning of sex appropriate tools and clothing.

Bruno Bettelheim (1962) suggests that the dual nature of female sexuality, consisting of an early phallic-clitoral sexuality that later becomes vaginal, is not backed up by strong physiological evidence. "Psychoanalysts have suggested that the purpose of removing the clitoris is to eliminate clitoridean sexuality."¹ He also contests the psychoanalytic theory that fathers impose circumcision on their daughters to curb their own incestuous desires or to control their daughter's sexuality. However, Bettelheim does say that, in general, the mutilation of women's genital region by men is destructive and motivated by fear and envy. In most groups, circumcision is forced upon girls, and if they desire the operation, it is only because it is a necessary precondition of marriage and/or because it will bring them higher status.

Bruce Lincoln (1981) sees clitoridectomy as the culminating act of female initiation, which is the means by which society confers gender identity. He claims that circumcision is an act which cultures practice in order to eliminate the androgynous state of children. Bodily mutilation implies that the body is the very locus of a person's identity. The body is treated as though it is inseparable from the inner self, and thus, by transforming the body, one is transforming the whole self. He points out, however, that in most societies, the status of a woman is a reflection of some male relative, and that women's political power usually does not extend beyond the confines of the household. Initiation ceremonies do not usually challenge

the status quo; they do not offer women new social-political power or prestige. However, such ceremonies often do stress the cosmic realm and, according to Lincoln, offer a "religious compensation for a sociopolitical deprivation" and serve as an "opiate for an oppressed class."² A woman is, in initiation, placed on a pedestal and assimilated to the goddess in order to prepare her for her chores.

On a more pragmatic level, Sanderson claims that men in many cultures believe that female circumcision prevents sexual license which would lead to social instability and illegitimacy. Also, it is common belief in some societies that unutilated women will be sterile, physically weak, unable to give birth to a son, or will have difficult childbirths. According to some Western writers, female circumcision may have been a substitute for human sacrifice. The Skoptsy, a small Russian sect, considered circumcision an offering to God which ensured for some of their women a perpetual state of virginity. They quoted St. Matthew: "There are Eunuchs, which made themselves Eunuchs for the kingdom of Heaven's sake."³

Islamic Justifications of Infibulation

It seems that to understand something about female circumcision in the Sudan, one must also know something about the religion of Islam, in that the former is frequently justified by the latter. The practice does have a long history in the Islamic world, and there are many references to it in Islamic religious texts, as well as in

oral tradition. Ironically, according to Naila Minai (1918), female circumcision was not mentioned in the Qur'an, the religious text which is considered to be the "word of God" by most Moslems. The practice is thought by some scholars to have been adopted by Moslems and to have spread with the religion. According to Cloudsley (1981), pre-Islamic Arabs believed that one of their gods, the Moon, would partially circumcise an uncircumcised male by causing the foreskin to contract. There appears to be disagreement among scholars about whether Muhammad approved of the practice or not, and thus, circumcision is not a religious mandate for females as it is for males. However, in much Islamic literature, there is an emphasis on the desirability of female sexual submissiveness and abundant fertility. There is also what Minai refers to as a male preoccupation with female premarital virginity. Female circumcision is thought to help assure chastity, abort sexual awakening until after marriage, and preserve fidelity during marriage.

The Islamic preoccupation with women, in Fazlur Rahman's opinion (1983), has led to a number of detailed rules concerning polygamous relationships, as well as the obligations between co-wives. In a Hadith in the Hilyat, the Prophet gives orders concerning the days, times, places and manner of sexual intercourse. If a man violates these prohibitions, there will be no devastating consequences. A violating woman, on the other hand, is subject to blindness, mental retardation, leprosy, and a host of other ailments. According to one Hadith, a woman should wear perfume and her

best clothes, and offer herself to her husband every morning and night, so that if he has sexual desire, he will be enticed by her. "A woman should not intentionally lengthen her prayer in order to avoid sexual intercourse, for if her husband falls asleep due to her delaying tactics, angels will curse her until he wakes up."⁴

It seems that such rules about sexual relations are related to Islamic conceptions of gender and philosophy. In the world, there are thought to be two complementary forces, passion and reason, and through Islam one can learn to control passion, and live in the way that God intended. According to Dale Eickelman (1981), although women are thought to possess reason, they cannot control themselves in the way that men can, and thus, it is necessary to control them and to keep them from creating social disorder. Women are considered to be incapable of controlling their enormous sexual desires. It is said that "a woman by herself is like a turkish bath without water; because she is always hot and without a man she has no way to slake the fire."⁵

The Sudanese

Male circumcision in the Sudan may take place at anytime from the first week of birth to puberty, according to Cloudsley. Without going into a lengthy description of a male circumcision ceremony, suffice it to say that traditionally the event included a religious service and a mock raid in which the novice served as a king. The circumcision itself was witnessed by the community, and the

boy was praised for his brave endurance of the pain. Thus, the traditional circumcision ceremony was an opportunity for the initiate to display his bravery, to be assimilated to royalty, and to be celebrated by the entire village.

Female circumcision in the Sudan appears to share none of these characteristics. Infibulation has been illegal there since 1946 when the government led a massive campaign against it. Yet, in 1981, Cloudsley estimated that 99% of females were infibulated in the northern two-thirds of the Sudan. Cloudsley describes an infibulation she witnessed: The midwife sterilized the instruments, and placed the seven-year-old girl on a string angereeb, so the girl could tuck her heels through the strings. One woman held the upper body, the mother held one knee, and a third woman held the other knee. The midwife cleaned the girl's vulva with spirit-soaked cotton, and injected novacain into the clitoris and labia majora.

The girl tried her utmost to struggle free, but the women had her relentlessly in a vice from the first moment. They were experienced, in readiness, and worked as a team. There were shrieks and screams, but very quickly the novicaine took effect, and the girl became quieter.⁶

According to Cloudsley, the tip of the girl's clitoris was grasped with forceps and the structure was removed with a scalpel. The labia minora was pared off, and the adjacent medial parts of the labia majora were likewise removed. Stitches were inserted and penicillin powder applied. The girl was lifted into a specially-prepared string angereeb and

covered with her mother's bridal shawl. Later, the mother called in some children who sang a wedding song and danced the pigeon dance. According to Janice Boddy (1982), this dance is often performed by young, single girls at wedding parties, and is named after a bird which is thought to be pure (tahir) in Sudanese society. Later, the girl was dressed in a new, red satin dress, and wore jewelery which was meant to protect her from hemorrhage and the evil eye.

It would appear that Sudanese female circumcision is devoid of the grandiose and communal attributes which are present in male circumcision rituals. Therefore, why does the practice persist in the Sudan despite repeated attempts to eliminate it? Cloudsley witnessed a Sunna circumcision in a hospital, where the doctor also removed the girl's labia minora, for fear that the mother would otherwise take her daughter to a midwife for a complete infibulation. Sudanese women claim that it is shameful and improper to not be infibulated, and without it, they would not be able to find or keep a husband. They also say that it increases a man's sexual satisfaction by narrowing the vaginal orifice, and to make the rape of virgins impossible. In the ancient codes of practice, the demand that a girl be a virgin was comparable to the demand that cattle and other goods be without flaw; the absence of virginity was a denial of the husband's property rights. According to Cloudsley, few women see female circumcision as a form of sexual mutilation or oppression.

Boddy (1982) demonstrates how infibulation is dramatically interwoven into Sudanese social structure. In the Sudan, virginity is a social, rather than a physical category, and once a woman has been secluded and re-infibulated after childbirth, she is presented to her husband once again as a bride. Infibulation is an assertion of a woman's indispensability in the reproductive realm, and is thought to enhance her fertility. Status is derived from being the mother of sons, and the cofounder of a lineage. It is also derived from being less like men socially, physically, and sexually. Infibulation is said to make girls pure, clean, and smooth.

Boddy (1982) points out that in Sudanese culture, there is an association of heat and pain with acts of female purification, such as circumcision, and in the pre-marriage rituals of hair removal and the traditional smoke bath. There is also the belief that body orifices are dangerous places where "djinn" (malevolent spirits) may hide. Pain and illness are assumed to be caused by things coming apart, and treatment consists of fusing them back together. Boddy explains that in the hosh (house), women have their own door which leads into the women's quarters, and that this door and the house itself are a metaphor for the vagina and womb. The house is thought to protect a man's descendants, and the womb, which has been enclosed and purified by infibulation, protects a woman's fertility.

Female Circumcision Among the Maasai

The Maasai of Kenya also practice female circumcision, yet Maasai culture is quite different than that of the Sudanese. Maasai culture discriminates age categories. Among women there are two such categories, "girlhood" and "womanhood". Among males, there are three age categories, "boyhood", "moranhooood", and "elderhood". According to Melissa Llewelyn Davies (1981), each group of males has certain rights and obligations to the other groups. Elders have rights to the sexuality and fertility of circumcised women. Moran are warriors who have rights to the sexuality and labor power of uncircumcised girls. Boys have rights of sexual access to no one. Married awomen are the property of elders, and are off-limits to moran.

A second vital element of Maasai culture is the division of property, in which the rights to livestock, inanimate objects, and human beings are owned. According to Davies, a violation of these rights, such as a lazy son or an adulturous wife, allows the owner of these rights to physically chastise the violator, who has effectively denied "ownership" through his or her disobedience. Women are inherently dependent, and their rights to cattle and children are always contingent, unlike the boys who will eventually become elders and own property. The payment of bridewealth is considered to be an act in which the husband buys the wife from the father. Therefore, Davies asserts

that the status of Maasai women is inferior to the status of men.

Both male and female circumcision mark the separation from early life, and are said to "remove the dirt of childhood." Soloman ole Saibull and Rachel Carr (1981) report that boys are recruited into youth camps for five years of intensive training before they are circumcised. Around the age of 15, the elaborate circumcision ritual begins, which includes the removal of body hair and rites of purification. He spends months in seclusion after his circumcision, his hair is braided, and he wears the clothes of warriors. H. A. Fosbrooke (1948) considers circumcision the visible sign of full admission to the tribe. It allows the boy, rather than the paternal uncle, to inherit the father's cattle, wives, and other property should the father die.

Female circumcision usually occurs shortly after the breasts have begun to develop. It involves the excision of the clitoris and the labia minora, and is performed by skilled, elderly women. Since females are thought to have less self control than males, they are not shamed even if they cry out or try to run away. Alfred Claud Hollis (1905) reports that on the day that a girl was to be circumcised, a sheep or a bullock was slaughtered, and the animal was thought to have caused her to be taken out from among the girls. An informant of Saibull and Carr describes her circumcision as having been extremely frightening and painful.

Her body was shaven, and no anesthetic was given. After the surgery, her mother applied herbs to stop the hemorrhage and prevent infection. The girl was secluded in her mother's home and branches of olive tree were hung over the door. She wore a leather skirt smeared with oil and black ash until she recovered and her seclusion ended.

According to Davies, female circumcision marks the acquisition of fertility, which is transactable as soon as it is acquired, while male circumcision transforms boys into adults and allows for the acquisition of the fullest rights in his person. However, Sanderson reports that Maasai girls used to look forward to their surgeries, for it meant that they had reached marriageable age without becoming pregnant. As stated before, it is mandatory that an uncircumcised girl have sexual relations with moran, but if she should become pregnant as a result, great shame would be brought upon her family. In past years, according to Saibull and Carr, an uncircumcised girl who was pregnant was laid at a cross road, with a goat skin covering her lower body. Pegs were driven through her palms and legs, and she was killed. In more recent years, the severity of the punishment has lessened, but she must still go through an ordeal and will not be allowed to have a marriage ceremony. The moran who fathered the child simply pays seven head of cattle to the girl's father.

Thus, it appears that it is the female who pays the most severe consequences when this norm is violated in

Maasai culture. Likewise, it seems that circumcision bestows more privileges upon males than upon females. According to Davies, Maasai women deny that circumcised or uncircumcised women are capable of achieving orgasm as men can, and therefore, circumcision does not alter capacity for sexual satisfaction. Circumcision is important in that it transforms a girl into an adult who may marry and bear children.

To the Maasai, personality traits associated with women, such as gracefulness and sexual attractiveness, are not those personality traits which are the most culturally-esteemed, such as braveness and ownership, which are associated with males. Likewise, it appears that female fertility is directly associated with female inferiority. An origin myth states that women, once equals with men, were opened up with bows by their former male hunting partners. Once they had acquired vaginas in this manner, the men married them and the women lost their vaginas to the creativity of men.

Unfortunately, what little is known about the traditional religion of the Maasai has been subject of great disagreement among scholars, although most agree that they were monotheistic. It does appear that aspects of traditional circumcision rituals were imbued with sacred meaning. According to John G. Galaty (1983), the slaughtered ox was positioned so that the head pointed southward and the tail pointed northward, in the directions from which the Maasai people were said to have migrated. The left side of the ox faced west, and the right side faced east, in the

directions of the sunrise and the sunset, which are symbolic of life and death. Thus, in this context, the ox symbolised the Maasai people iconically.

Besides conveying sacred meaning, there are several other cultural explanations of female circumcision. Davies claims that girls are thought to be unable to develop physically until "the path has been opened up" by moran through sexual intercourse. They must be further opened up by circumcision before they can legitimately bear children. Davies suggests that the denial of the naturalness of female fertility is associated with the fact that it is "ownable." It has also been said that the barren woman is pitied by the Maasai, and that her life would be "unbearable." Meritz Merker (1910) claims that the Maasai believe that female circumcision restrains passion in women, and that this has great advantages for the suckling child.

Interpretation

The study of female circumcision is important in the development of a thorough understanding of both Sudanese and Maasai culture. This research has been an attempt to pull together and integrate many different theories about the meaning of female circumcision. A survey of these sources would suggest that the motivation for and meaning of female circumcision is multi-faceted in both Maasai and Sudanese culture. It is thought by informants to have originated with traditional religion, and is currently rationalized in this way. However, Islamic religious literature is highly

codified, while the Maasai have no such literature. Although one may hypothesize that there have been sacred aspects to the female circumcision ritual in both cultures, the cosmic realm is not explicitly emphasized. Thus, Lincoln's argument that women are elevated to the level of goddess to cosmically justify their labor is not pertinent in either context. This is not to discount the importance of symbolic constructs of genital mutilation, for there does appear to be an association between female circumcision and purity in Sudanese culture, as well as a metaphorical relationship between this practice and other objects and concepts in the culture. This suggests that the elimination of female genital mutilation might necessitate a complete reinterpretation of gender roles and female sexuality.

There are also other explanations of female circumcision by informants and Western scholars. The Sudanese claim that the practice increases a man's sexual satisfaction, and the Maasai claim that it is not significant in terms of women's sexual fulfillment. Theories concerning clitoral-phallic sexuality and bi-sexuality might be seen as attempts to impose Western psychological categories onto non-Western peoples. Although it might indeed be possible that circumcision does serve to differentiate the sexes, one cannot help but wonder why such drastic measures would be necessary in such highly sexually-segregated societies. The psychoanalytic theory that fathers impose circumcision on their daughters to curb their own incestuous desires is perhaps more of the same ethnocentrism. First of all, in

neither culture do fathers directly impose the operation; it is performed by women and males hardly acknowledge its existence. Secondly, this explanation is never offered by informants.

More impressive are the explanations concerning social structure and the ways in which circumcision facilitates and marks status changes. Certainly, female circumcision is a rite of passage in a Van Gennepian sense. Yet, it seems significant that female circumcision rituals are so much less glamorous and public than those of males. This is perhaps related to the fact that circumcision does not immediately secure adult status for women; it only bestows the right to marry and bear children. Women in both cultures do not achieve a significant status change until they bear sons, and even then they can never hope to obtain the status available to males. Women's rights more closely resemble the rights of children than the rights of men in the sense that they have limited claims to children and property, and that they are always dependent on some male relative for status and for economic survival. Furthermore, a single, childless woman is a source of shame and a burden to her family in both cultures. Since circumcision is thought to be a necessary prerequisite for marriage and childbearing, it is essential for women to be circumcised in order to be spared public humiliation and to achieve the highest status available.

Also, it appears that female circumcision helps to define categories of women, and to protect men's rights as

property owners. However, this seems to work differently within the two cultures. In Maasai culture, female circumcision defines to whom a woman is sexually available; uncircumcised female "belong" to moran, and circumcised females "belong" to elders. In Sudanese culture, unmarried girls are the property of their fathers, and married women are the property of their husbands. In both situations, it is circumcision which permits the marriages which will ultimately transfer ownership from one group of males to another. However, in the Sudan, circumcision is thought to ensure virginity, which is highly valued. The Maasai, on the other hand, do not value virginity; it is mandatory that Maasai girls engage in sexual activity with moran. Yet, it is interesting to note that a Sudanese female who engages in sexual intercourse prior to marriage and an unwed Maasai girl who becomes pregnant before her circumcision both suffer physical punishment and ostracism, and in the past, the threat of death. This suggests that while norms concerning sexual behavior differ between the two cultures, what is ultimately being threatened is male control of women's sexuality. It is interesting to note, however, that cross-culturally, men employ a number of methods in an attempt to control women's sexuality. Why female circumcision is part of the repertoire in Sudanese and Maasai culture is a subject worthy of further study.

Yet, it seems that circumcision does fulfill an important role in these two cultures. Although women in both

cultures are seen as lacking the positive traits that men possess, only they can reproduce society. Children are important in that they bring a man status and security. Female circumcision in the Sudan is thought to guarantee a woman's virginity, reduce sexual desire, and make it less likely that she will indulge in extramarital affairs, thus assuring her husband's paternity of any children she might bear. Among the Maasai, female circumcision marks a change of status which legitimatizes childbearing, and prohibits sexual relations between married women and moran, who cannot claim paternity of their children. There seems to be an assumption here that women left to their own devices could or would not control their sexual behavior, and the result would be illegitimacy, which robs men of essential resources and threatens to reek havoc throughout society. Circumcision, therefore, can be seen as an attempt to control women's sexuality and reproductive potential in order to avoid illicit sexual behavior which would be detrimental to men.

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NOTES

- 1 Bettelheim, Bruno. P. 139
- 2 Lincoln, Bruce. P. 105
- 3 Sanderson, Lilian Passmore. P. 45
- 4 Rahman, Fazlur. P. 63
- 5 Eickelman, Dale F. P. 155
- 6 Cloudsley, Anne. P. 88