

Chapter 6

Transcending Female Circumcision: A Call for Collective Unmasking

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I speak for the circumcised – my classmates, my friends, my neighbours and my relatives. All those despite the loss of the clitoris, wonder why the fuss. I speak for those who feel ashamed to say they have been cut. I speak for those that willingly, chose and choose the cut. Those that tell the rest of us, that the pain of circumcision is not necessarily a bad phenomenon, not evil. I speak for those who despite their conscience being clear about the practice, may be serving in jail for supporting the practice in one way or the other. As I theorize this chapter, my spirit dwells in the communities that upheld/uphold female circumcision as a rite of passage. In that place, the spirit finds itself in a deep valley, a dichotomous place. From the left I hear the voices of the cut and from the right, that of the uncut. Both sides are aching because the discourses on harmful cultural practices touch their already bruised nerves.

Background

This paper is informed by three theories namely standpoint theory, philosophical hermeneutics and feminist theory. Standpoint theory as advanced by Sandra Harding holds the notion that the perspectives of marginalized persons can help to create more objective accounts of the world (Harding 1991). Philosophical hermeneutics as presented by Hans George Gadamer and Wilhelm Dilthey speak of the need to cultivate the ability to understand things from the other's point of view and to appreciate the social cultural forces that may have influenced the person's experiences (Makkreel 2008). Dilthey in the essay, *The Understanding of Others and Their Manifestations of Life*, talks of the need to examine the outer manifestations of human action and levels of production and to also explore the inner meanings (Ibid.). Hence the need to understand human expressions and what is expressed, and the need to place the meanings in a historical context. As I theorize on how transition from a society that values circumcision to one that transcends and transgresses such values could be like, Sandra Harding, Hans-George Gadamer and Dilthey's ideas inform my thoughts.

In addition, feminist theory as promoted by bell hooks is also useful in the writing of this paper. In a presentation entitled *Postmodern Blackness*, hooks

(1990) reminds us that lived experience is an authority in itself. Elsewhere she reiterates that “there is no politically neutral intellectual work” (see *Killing Rage* 1995) and that we need to educate for critical consciousness (see *Sisters of the Yam* 1993). In this paper I argue that being a circumcised or an uncircumcised girl in a community that culturally holds female circumcision as a rite of passage and depending on one’s location in terms of physical and social spaces, one could be marginalized and privileged as well. I also highlight that, the state of being marginalized and privileged as a lived experience informs one’s receptivity or resistance to change when matters of female circumcision are discussed. Like Njambi I argue “... that bodies do not exist in a vacuum; they are made and negotiated through everyday rituals and performances that can be simultaneously acceptable and problematic”. (2004: 283) As intimated in the introduction, I stand sandwiched between the circumcised and the uncircumcised, the marginalised and privileged; and as I theorise ways in which we could bridge the social gap en route to post-female circumcision communities, I wonder how the two are living with the pain induced by the discourses of harmful cultural practices. I suggest dialogue is necessary between those who value the practice and the local activists against the practice. I use the term female circumcision as opposed to female genital mutilation because I believe no mother in her wisdom would want to mutilate her child.

I also draw from my lived experiences. In the last 40 years, I have monitored cultural changes taking place in Kenya in regard to the practice of female and male circumcision (see Khamasi and Maina-Chinkuyu 2005, Khamasi and Chi-Chi Undie 2008). I was born into a community where female circumcision was only whispered and spent my childhood and adolescent years in a community where female circumcision was celebrated with lots of aura to the extent that I adored my friends and schoolmates when they resumed school all glowing from enjoying the privileges of the ritual¹ that included good nutrition. They actually displayed some air of pride after ritually passing from childhood to adulthood.

In addition, I remember hearing my grandmother tell tales of the circumcision ceremonies and remember hearing songs sang in praise of the cultural practice. Brave women who never blinked during the operation were praised during the ceremonies, whereas stories of those who displayed cowardice took turns in the village. No one talked of the scars, or the loss of orgasmic senses.

My grandmother told the tales in defiance of the wind of change that was blowing across the Central Province of Kenya in 1970s. Central Province is/ was predominantly Gikuyu in ethnicity. In the late 60s and early 70s, female circumcision in Gikuyu-land was supposedly dying because with schooling, came Christian churches who with support from the colonial government (1900–1963) advocated for the banning of the cultural practices which they considered repugnant (see *Facing Mount Kenya* by Jomo Kenyatta 1938). Whereas female circumcision was alleged to be dying in central Kenya, it was a common practice in many

1 The word ritual is used in this paper to refer to female circumcision in general.

regions including Samburu County where I spent my childhood and adolescent years. By 2009, the prevalence stood at 27 per cent nationally and 98 per cent in North Eastern region (KDHS 2008). It was in the 1990s when activists started to boldly campaign for the banning of female circumcision on a national platform. These campaigns were informed by the fact that Government of Kenya signed the CEDAW protocols in 1984 and the Beijing Platform of Action followed 11 years after in 1995. After many boardroom discussions and lobbying, in November 2001, the Kenya Parliament supported the ban of female circumcision for girls below 18 years under the Children's Act that was 17 years after ratifying the CEDAW document and 71 years since missionaries began fighting the practice in Central Kenya. In 2013, Kenya Parliament enacted the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act. The Act criminalized the practice and spelt out heavy penalties for instigators. According to the Act the practice is both child abuse and violence against girls and women.

Historically, the majority of the indigenous ethnic groups in Kenya uphold female and male circumcision as a rite of passage. Out of 45 distinct ethnic groups, only five never practiced female circumcision and only four do not circumcise male children (Khamasi and Kibui 2010). There are different types of surgical procedures performed in the name of female circumcision (PRB 2013, Whitehorn, Ayonrinde and Maingay 2002, KDHS 2008) and they differ from one ethnic group to the other but the underlying reasons as to why girls needed to undergo the surgery are similar (Bishop 2004). Culturally, female circumcision was the practice and the gaze that forced the transformation of girls into adults and therefore objects of male pleasure. During circumcision ceremonies and through song and dance, circumcised women's bodies were objectified, commodified, and marketed as clean, beautiful and mature for marriage. Thus the circumcised women/girls were culturally considered ripe for marriage and the demand for them was high (see Bishop 2012).

The social constructions of the female body mentioned above have changed over time although the changes are not uniform across Kenya. Modern education, migration, modern and liberal religions, urbanization and political pressure have contributed to cultural transformation. Each ethnic group's resilience to cultural dynamism and pace of adaptation to change speaks to the gains made towards accepting that, to be a woman of substance, a successful mother, loving wife, responsible daughter and a sister; one does not need to be circumcised.

The Ritual and the Hidden Policy

Why have communities resisted changes despite accepting modern ways of dressing, food, modern medicine and religion for example? After missionaries condemned female circumcision in Kenya as early as 1920s and created a rift between the circumcised and the uncircumcised, female circumcision transformed to a closely guarded ritual in most communities that practiced it and what I

refer to as a hidden policy was institutionalized. Only the insiders, particularly women, get to know the contents of the hidden policy. Being circumcised or not establishes what Yeatman called a “bounded community” of outsiders and insiders respectively; a “community of identity” (1993: 229). African societies that practice female circumcision have therefore nurtured communities of identity as a hidden policy. Initially every woman in these communities did not want to be excluded. It had to be cut to size. To legitimize the practice, various taboos and superstitions formed the belief systems in these communities highlighting the evils of the *thing* – at childbirth, the effect on men, and the supposedly unhygienic nature of the clitoris (Bishop 2004, Khamasi and Maina-Chinkuyu 2005). When circumcision season drew near, circumcision songs were sung in condemnation of the clitoris and all adolescent girls desired to shed off this unwanted, unbecoming, ugly “thing”. My grandmother referred to it as a shrivelled flesh, a statement that denoted its unworthiness. This attitude indicates ways in which culture can effectively embed emotional responses towards the clitoris to the point where girls regard this part of the body repugnant, and pave way for its removal.

Acquired Privileges

Undergoing the ritual came with privileges, which included social status among others. The custodians of the hidden policy over the years have therefore made sure they preserve their privileged position. The insiders through the hidden policy were given access to inner circles of power that is power of adulthood as marked through circumcision; they could share powers with men, and they were privileged members though subordinate to men, there were powers of childbirth; they participated with men in community projects and ceremonies; and were also privileged custodians of family and community secrets. Hence to listen to dissent voices that do not support the practice such as the missionaries and their teachings meant losing the privileges. For example, among the Gikuyu, when missionaries and colonial government attempted to institutionalize a ban on the ritual in the 1930s, central Kenya revolted and women are said to have circumcised themselves in church compounds in defiance. A cultural revolution referred to as *mũthĩrĩgũ* was born and was marked with song and dance across central Kenya (Mwangi 2002). There have been similar incidences in the 1990s where girls circumcised themselves in defiance when parents refused for them to undergo circumcision.

From the *mũthĩrĩgũ* revolt, the missionaries in Kenya recognized that fighting female circumcision especially among the *Gikũyũ* was similar to fighting guerrilla warfare. Fighting the practice was difficult because eradicating it required complete reversal of how people viewed the female body thereby intruding on concepts of bodily integrity and beauty, all of which weave together to form notions of femininity. The constructions of gender projected through this practice then feed into dating practices, courting etiquette and marriage laws including bride price. Circumcision also marked the age of consent. The beliefs and values transmitted

through the practice impacted on women and men's self-esteem as expressed through their sexuality. Moreover, it was a mark of adulthood and without it, a woman remained a child. Men too were involved, it was a taboo for a circumcised male to have a love affair and subsequently sex with an uncircumcised girl.

As mentioned earlier, 40 out of 45 ethnic groups in Kenya practice both male and female circumcision. The groups are distributed among the Bantus, Nilotes and Cushites (Khamasi and Kibui 2010). The benefits of male circumcision illustrate that the practice has health and social benefits to society (Morris 2007, WHO/UNAIDS 2007).

It has taken more than 80 years for voices to emerge in communities that practice female circumcision in Kenya. Most of the activists against female circumcision encounter subtle resistance when they launch anti-FGM campaigns. Among the Keiyo, it is alleged that there is what I refer to as a hidden policy in that during engagement or marriage negotiations, a bride's party may have to declare whether their daughter is circumcised or not (conversation with a Keiyo colleague in 2009). This is a way of recognizing community expectations and negotiating around any deviation or perhaps ensuring it happens. Having to declare the cutting status of a daughter is another means of pressuring families to ensure that their daughters are circumcised, as it impacts on their future relations with in-laws. Phenomena like these have paved the way for alternative rites of passage as a culturally sensitive and accommodative middle ground. However, alternative rites do not seem to satisfy the requirements of the hidden policy. In 2012, a study carried out by the Women's Rights Institute reported increased cases of married women who are forced to undergo circumcision by close relatives in the North Rift region of Kenya because failure to comply results in women losing the right to inherit family property or risk divorce (*Daily Nation* 28 March 2012).

In South Rift region an increase of cases of married women undergoing voluntary circumcision along with their daughters was reported in December 2013 (*Daily Nation* 6 December 2013). These could be women whose parents who protected them from the ritual only for them to find that they suffer adversely because of their uncircumcised status. This is mainly because they were considered by the wider society as juveniles and unclean which in turn would impact on their daughters' honour. The two incidents remind us of the power of hidden social policies and the fact that centrally issued laws do not fit into the social-cultural system; they are like "square pegs in round holes, and because of this they are mostly disobeyed, ignored or conveniently forgotten" (Mwaura 2011: 14).

The Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation: Could it be a Case of Square Pegs in Round Holes?

The hidden policy enshrined in female circumcision as a cultural practice privileged the circumcised. Through the *Children's Act 2001* the Government of

Kenya banned female circumcision for girls under the age of 18 years. It was later realised that the Children's Act has loopholes because women could opt for circumcision after their 18th birthday. By 2011, Kenya banned circumcision for all females regardless of age through *The Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act* that was approved in October 2011. Both Acts have increased the intervention of the state in the arena of sexuality and privilege the voices of the uncircumcised. Unfortunately the Acts reinforce otherness and remind us of what Yeatman refers to as "the wrongs of exclusion generated by policy". (1993: 229) Yeatman tells us that a reformed policy could change the established political community's identity and thus highlight the distinction between insiders and outsiders, often generated by policy. In the communities that need to stop female circumcision, the uncircumcised are the minority and in others where anti-FGM campaigns have taken root for more than three decades, the circumcised could be a minority. This fact is evident in that the national prevalence of female circumcision in 2010 stood at 35 per cent for ages 35–39 and 15 per cent for ages 15–19 (Population Reference Bureau 2010). To this end, this is an indication that Kenya is in transition into an uncircumcised nation unlike 50 years ago. The transition into a post FGM nation needs to take a proactive role as opposed to a re-active one.

Need for Arbitration within the Politics of Difference

In societies where female circumcision is upheld as a cultural practice, it is the female parents who perpetuate the practice because they are the custodians of the hidden policy, indigenous knowledge and education which gives them power. Men are the beneficiaries of the impact of indigenous education whose graduates are said to be submissive and obedient to men.

The anti-female circumcision groups and those working to perpetuate the practice form "bounded communities" and "communities of identity" (Yeatman 1993) within their social-cultural and political boundaries, a difference that has led to negative outcomes such as futile efforts to stop the practice. For example, in some communities in Kenya, circumcision venues shift from the stereotyped traditional huts where circumcisers are said to use rusty knives to undisclosed locations. In other cases, families have changed the season (*Daily Nation* 28 March 2012, Njeng'ere 2013, Kimani 2013) and approach. Instead of celebrations, they carry out the practice secretly. So what was supposed to be a carnival has changed to secret movements that only the insiders are notified of, making it difficult for the Government to monitor. It is important to note that governance at the local level is by officers mostly from the particular region. In such a case it would be naive to expect the officers to abandon their beliefs and practices overnight in support of "top down" imposed policies.

Because the practice is culturally entrenched, there is need for continued culturally sensitive dialogue between anti-female circumcision activists and supporters. The dialogue should be informed by the fact that the two Acts are

positive developments and their implementation and monitoring need a proactive approach. The groups in the involved communities need to dialogue until a time when change will be eminent. A similar initiative took place in Senegal in what is referred to as the Tostan experience (Easton, Monkman and Miles 2003). The dialogue proposed here should be geared towards facilitating the transition from “cut” to “uncut” community and where each side is heard and equally represented in the re-formation process. None should be taken as evil and the other as good in the eyes of the society. Such an intervention can offer ethical criteria as to what difference is acceptable and what is not. For example, alternative rites of passage are examples of what is happening in communities where anti-female circumcision campaigns faced resistance in the 1980s and 90s (see Reaves 1997, Munoz 2003, Nzwili 2003). Instead of talking about eradicating the practice, a middle ground is being advocated and a number of parents send their daughters to such ceremonies across the country.

The Role of Women in Facilitating the Transformation

The current campaigns against female circumcision in Kenya need to educate key players for critical consciousness bearing in mind that female circumcision is deeply entrenched in the communities that we argue are causing harm to their girls and women and therefore need intervention. It is evident that institutions that perpetuate, regulate and control the dynamics and myths around rites of passage and female circumcision inform gender inequalities in the society. A sustainable way of eradicating the practice is to search for ways of transforming the institutions that nurture the practices. This involves organizing politically to change society at large, coupled with efforts to transform ourselves as women; the key actors and for our benefit. This paper advocates the need for women in communities that upheld female circumcision as a cultural value and related indigenous knowledge to transform the practice in ways that would promote sexual and reproductive health.

Parents and activists desiring to change a society that values female circumcision as an avenue to womanhood need to be self-actualized. I say this in recognition that most women know what their problems are, yet there are barriers that hinder transformation. For example, women lack time for body politics because the pressing needs are those of livelihood and not sexuality. The campaign against female circumcision needs to be understood as one seeking to transform communities in various ways. Secondly, women do not critically look at the cultural institutions that exist to the detriment of female personality development. In this regard, most see themselves through the patriarchal lens and therefore when the patriarchal vision of women is blurred, the latter believe they are the ones at fault. Thus the tools for representing and objectifying ones experiences in order to deal with it, culture, is so saturated with the patriarchal bias that women almost never have a chance to see themselves culturally through their own eyes.

A common statement often heard from anti-female circumcision advocates is that circumcised women do not enjoy sex. This statement is judgmental and a myth given that no two sexual experiences are similar, circumcised or not.

Lastly, for most women their self-awareness of their own body comes post-circumcision. By this I simply mean they do not know what would be different if they had the clitoris since they did not have sexual intercourse prior to circumcision. The majority of circumcised women were raised in communities where premarital sex is not encouraged until after circumcision. It is important to note that circumcision in most communities gives the initiates the licence to seek sexual pleasure because it is a rite of passage. In this regard, the only sexual experience worth talking about occurs after. So when anti-female circumcision advocates tell such women that there is a better sexual experience than the one they know, they have no way of comparing or even trusting this view so the message against female circumcision is lost. The perception created also widens the “us/them”, and the “insider/outsider” gap. In what ways can young adult women re-empower themselves without creating an impression that self-actualization is similar to “looking modern, sophisticated and lost?” (hooks 1993). What strategies could women use to heal their pain – the circumcised and the uncircumcised? In some communities, the circumcised are the majority whereas in others they are the minority. With the anti-female circumcision messages increasing as an effort to publicize the Children’s Act and the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act and with advocacy materials i.e., posters hanging in public spaces, women and girls who have undergone circumcision may feel victimized. The men in intimate relationships with circumcised women might also be feeling the blunt edge of othering. On the other hand, there are subtle messages passed in the pro-female circumcision communities and directed at the uncircumcised. In such communities, the word for uncircumcised woman is very demeaning. These contexts create feelings of othering. For the circumcised, the scars will remain but there is a need to facilitate emotional healing. Women need to engage in different ways of knowing themselves, understanding their bodies and use that knowledge to transform communities. Sentiments such as these are articulated in the first chapters of this book; there is need to shift from seeing women as mere victims of patriarchy to that of agents of their lives.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The civil society organizations including the media have consistently sustained the female circumcision debate in the last three decades. Even though the colonial and postcolonial campaigns to stop the practice have significantly contributed to the attitudinal changes and therefore reduced prevalence of female circumcision in various communities in Kenya, there are traces of resistance that cannot be ignored. As noted above, for example, in December 2013 in Bomet County, leaders reported rising cases of married adult women opting to be circumcised.

In order for the communities to transcend the barriers, I suggest three strategies – conversation *with* each other and *on* the practice, dedication to truth, and unmasking by individuals working towards this cause.

Conversation with Each Other and on the Practice

Perhaps more than any other issue, female genital mutilation or cutting has taught us that change cannot be imposed from outside; it must come from within. (Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director, UNFPA, February 6th 2006)

Since the ratification of CEDAW protocols by various governments, the debate on female circumcision has grown exponentially locally, nationally and globally. However, the agents are audible at the national and global levels rather than at the grassroots. When the debate reaches the grassroots, it has tended to become *a talking at* the parents and circumcisers instead of *with them*. To eradicate female circumcision, the anti-female circumcision groups and proponents need to talk *with* each other not *at* each other. Both ordinarily target the same clients and are convinced that their actions are beneficial to society at large. In the conversations they need to name the pain, the joy, label the scars and map out ways towards emotional healing. Participatory action research methods could nurture this process, reduce “otherness” and “othering” tendencies, and move the participants from “*I will*” to “*I can*” standpoints.

Truth Telling

Through participatory action research approaches, the conversations should nurture women to women talk and create an atmosphere where life histories is the subject and therefore what is reflected on. The plan should also involve men at some point. With this proposal although I recognize that truth is not universal, in *The Road Less Travelled* M.S Peck emphasizes the link between “dedication to truth and our capacity to be well”. Peck says that “... one of the roots of mental illness is invariably an interlocking system of lies we have been told and lies we have told ourselves”. (in: hooks 1993: 19–20) With the banning of female circumcision in Kenya, the anti-female circumcision activists are the most vocal because they bear the legal voice, and continually remind their audience of the “long arm of the law”. But as to how many of their audience believe what they hear is yet to be researched. Unfortunately the proponents of female circumcision and their sympathizers hardly appear on the media, which makes it difficult to measure the levels of resistance to change. It is critical therefore to acknowledge that when dealing with an outlawed culture such as the practice of female circumcision, both the supporters and the anti-female circumcision campaigners have to work towards countering the shame felt by their constituents. For example, those who believe in “saying no to female circumcision” messages and benefit from the subsequent legal and material support such as leaving home to rescue centres have to live

with the fate of possible rejection by their families or by the rescue centres if they change their mind.

Alternatively, those who agree to be circumcised through their own volition or through coercion, have to live with that as a secret since it is against the law. Whether circumcised or not, one is liable to experience rejection and/or shame depending on the prevalence of female circumcision practices in her community of origin especially if she lives in a rural residence. One way of countering shame and rejection is to be able to speak the truth to one another when the situation avails itself. Alternatively, a conscious effort could be undertaken to mobilize women who feel victimized in this regard to come together to address their pain and/or joy. This is possible when one accepts the “truth” and hence the reality of their lives. If the reality is that she was circumcised and made to believe that the rite of passage made her an important member of the community, that belief could be nurtured and sustained in the light of today’s discussion around rites and rights. The discussions should offer avenues of countering shame and otherness. The life history approach would nurture the process of truth telling especially if dialogue is carried out by women in the same community. Such women share a common history and possibly lineage.

Removing of Masks

“... collective unmasking is an important act of resistance ... when women claim the right to speak the truth of their reality” (hooks 1993: 26)

Speaking the truth includes removing of masks. In real life situations, masks are worn in various circumstances and for various reasons but the most obvious one is the need to camouflage, to change appearance and to signify that which is not. In some cases it is meant to fool others. The reasons given as to why communities should stop circumcising the girls are many. Most give medical reasons that cause difficulties during childbirth and sexual intercourse. Some of these difficulties are not unique to circumcised women only and the supporters of the practice are aware of that contradiction. Others argue that it is a form of violence and child abuse, which impacts negatively on one’s bodily integrity. Unfortunately the debate on female circumcision is conducted by what I refer to as observers or referees; these are mainly scholars, including myself, and activists. The “insiders” to the practice hardly engage in public debate and those who have recently spoken, talk of alternative rites that take place in a limited number of communities in Kenya. Alternative rites ceremonies are community specific where social cultural beliefs and indigenous sexuality education and HIV/AIDS education form part of the curriculum. It offers alternative ways of marking entry into womanhood for the communities and individuals. Communities such as the Ameru of Eastern Kenya and Keiyos of the Elgeyo Marakwet region have to some extent accepted alternative rites and there is need for research as to what exactly they prefer and

how that is changing their ways of thinking about sexuality and women and subsequently transforming the hidden policy.

The providers of alternative rites formal or non-formal curriculum need to envision the long term gains; that of transforming a community's social institutions and above all, communities' understanding of sexuality whether they are circumcised or not. With the banning of female circumcision in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the transition could be speeded up through dialogue culminating to what bell hooks (1993: 26) calls "collective unmasking"; this could heal the bruised nerves.

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