

Wounded Bodies, Recovered Bodies: Discourses around female sexual mutilations

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Introduction

Unanimity is far from immediate on how to take account of cultural practices, insofar as it is difficult to impose a viewpoint in the name of a presumed universality, human rights for instance, without offending sensitivities. As the historian Penda Mbow (1999: 75) puts it in other words: “How can we reconcile respect for human rights with the affirmation of cultures?” Because it is ways of life, beliefs, an interpretation of the world and relations between male and female that are involved. Furthermore, is it possible to know cultural peculiarities from the outside? Can they be pronounced upon in the name of the idea of universality? The many discourses around excision are confronted by these questions, which each view attempts to answer. Whatever their opinion, in people’s minds the practice of excision reinforces sexual differentiation and the hierarchy of the sexes. Indeed the interpretation of the facts, the symbolic systems and the beliefs that underlie the injury in question are very different when we move from male to female. But what are we talking about? Can we know what excision actually is? The imprecision of the words used to designate this violence, which is truly a “wound” inflicted on a woman’s body in the most intimate, personal and hidden area (“down there”, as some languages have it), which makes her not only a concrete individual but also a human being of the female sex, sets us on the path towards an analysis in terms of the body’s integrity and of individual freedom and not only sexual equality. “The wish to purify, to preserve a woman’s chastity and dignity by controlling her sexuality is truly a form of violence done to a woman’s freedom, body and psychology” (Mbow 1999: 72). The wound says that there is not only physical, psychological, moral violence but also a relationship of force and domination between male and female, even though endogenous discourses justifying that violence speak rather of complementarity. Who does a woman’s body belong to? This question contains within it the issues around excision

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and what it represents in a given society. And it leads us to the methods for combating this age-old practice.

1. Aristotle and Marcel Griaule: From amorphous incomplete woman to knocking down the termite-hill

Philosophy has played an important part in spreading the idea of “difference” and not only “inequality” between the sexes. With regard to the biological and metaphysical conception of the female body and being, we cannot ignore Aristotle’s biological works: *History of Animals*, *Parts of Animals*, *Reproduction in Animals* . . . In the last-mentioned treatise devoted to reproduction in living creatures, the philosopher from Stagira tells us what a mutilation, or rather a “defect” in the strong sense of the word, consists of. In fact “man begets man”, an assertion the philosopher repeats in his works. From a metaphysical viewpoint the genesis of being comes from its essence, the true cause being the end and form of the being (for example man, a superior animal capable of movement), but there may be exceptions that confirm this general rule. The birth of a female including the *human female* is the result of an accident in nature’s process. This disaster is a misfortune that is necessary for perpetuation of the human race. The male sex organ, probably the only one that deserves to be so called (ὄργανον: instrument) enters into contact with this necessary evil, this amorphous matter (ἴλη), the female genitals. “We could reasonably postulate male and female, the male possessing the motor, generating principle, the female the material principle” (*Reproduction in Animals* I, 2: 716a, 4). An incomplete being because she is naturally mutilated, woman is the site (τόπος) where a form acts that is actually found in another being of the same kind, man, whose organ is active, possessing movement. A metaphysics of quality and spatial positions surrounds the conception of the male organ – situated on the right, above and hot in nature. The female genitals occupy the position of an efficient cause, whereas the true cause is both formal and final, the one giving a meaning and reasons for being to man, a complete being in the order of the sublunar world. Indeed it happens that nature departs from itself: “. . . someone who does not resemble his parents is already in some respects a monster; for in this case nature has to a certain extent departed from the generic type. The very first departure is the birth of a female instead of a male” (*Reproduction in Animals* IV, 2: 762b, 9). If Aristotle also practises teratology – the science that studies monsters (τέρατα) – we might be tempted to say that woman – a specific case in the human species – is analogous to a monster, that living being which, compared with the one with the “organ”, is incomplete in its sex, living with something lacking. Philosophical analysis of the reproductive function thus leads Aristotle to differentiate radically between the male and female sexes, the latter being naturally lacking in an essential part.

The mythical discourse reported in 1948 by Marcel Griaule in *Dieu d’eau* talks of the resistance of the untamed sex when faced with God’s desire. In her 1975 preface Geneviève Calame-Griaule emphasizes the deliberately “non-scientific” method of presentation and literary style of Marcel Griaule, who wished to communicate to the lay readership work normally aimed at “scholars”. The intention probably echoes that

of other contemporary researchers (Bellas Cabane 2008: 44). In his attempt to understand another world Griaule thinks he has faithfully transcribed the Dogon discourse on the order of the world. The researcher questions Ogotemmêli, a blind hunter and fount of knowledge. The conversations are arranged in “days” as in an initiation ritual. The differentiation of the sexes, the function of each and the role of male and female are dealt with. According to Dogon myth (Griaule 1948: 24) the female body is a supine plot of land and the clitoris a termite-hill. The idea of the female genitals as over-large is clearly expressed here. This is the cause of disorder insofar as God cannot unite with this inert body because the erectile part (its maleness) resists domination. So this wild abnormal sex has to be domesticated. It is then that all-powerful God knocks down the termite-hill in the middle of the female genitals and “unites with the excised land”. Thus the myth justifies the original wound, cutting away the excess body which could blur the border between male and female. The order of the world requires the two sexes to be different to make their union possible. The female genitals that are suitable for union with the male are wounded and castrated, silent and inert, with their reproductive function stressed here. Philosophical discourse, as we have seen with Aristotle, had already blazed this trail.

From philosophy to myth and from one millennium to another the imaginary of the representation of the female genitals shifts from the inert amorphous place to the excessive size of the wild sex that must be subdued to the laws of civilization, which includes in first place the primal scene of excision. If nature is the cause of the primal mutilation according to the Greek philosopher, in Dogon myth mutilation-excision is an element of culture that indicates that man and woman enter history and civilization through the founding wound.

2. Female sexual mutilation between religion and politics

The discourses around the representation of the female genitals, their natural incompleteness or their cultural mutilation vary from one period to another, one place to another, one discipline to another. They are sometimes contradictory even though there are constants around the female body and its reproductive function. Some authoritative texts refer to invariants as regards the hierarchical relations (Héritier 2002) between male and female. The female sex is seen not only as weak or inferior to its male counterpart but also as “strange”, “amorphous”, “ugly”, “dirty”, “soiled”, “incomplete”, “impure”. The beauty of the genitals matters as much as their cleanliness and respectability. But clearly the female genitals do not appear to partake of that original beauty that men might have expected of their partner’s genitals, a strange organ that is as terrifying as it is attractive. We are aware of Freud’s writing on the topic, but the aesthetic and moral viewpoint connects with religious considerations, since religions – whether revealed or “traditional” – are sometimes appealed to as justification for female sexual mutilation. However, most of the Persian Gulf states, where Islam is the dominant religion, do not practise excision (Herzberger-Fofana 2000: 5), which was not abolished officially in Egypt until recently. Nawal El Saadawi’s account in *The Hidden Face of Eve* demonstrates that women in the Arab-Muslim world, and Egypt particularly, were cut over a long

period, though religious texts did not require female sexual mutilation. But Islam has adapted to cultural factors it finds convenient and which it tolerates. As far as this toleration is concerned some religious authorities are making their opinion known: "Sharia does not command excision but recognizes its value. From a social viewpoint it confers a mark of honour on women. No verse of the Koran recommends or requires excision. Those who practise it are not following a 'hadith' precept or a 'sunna' commandment, simply a tradition. So we understand how it was that Sheikh Tantawi, the grand imam of al-Azhar (Egypt), could reveal that his daughter had not been excised" (Herzberger-Fofana 2000: 5). Nevertheless the discourse of religious toleration with regard to the practice of excision is gradually changing. Some Senegalese and Egyptian imams condemn female sexual mutilation (Bangré 2004c and 2006c). During an international meeting in Abidjan in 2007 religious leaders of all confessions stated their determination to combat this violence inflicted on women's bodies (Panapress published on afrik.com 26 October 2007). In addition researchers and scholars studying Islam are re-reading ancient historians and religious texts to justify the use of "Tradition" with a capital T. This refers to the Way, "Sunna, the Practice of the Prophet" (Kandji 1999: 54). The same word in the plural and with a capital indicates "all the practices reputed to be Islamic" (Kandji 1999: 54). Reference to the Prophet's sayings, actions and gestures is a method for understanding excision better, though, as the same author admits, the phrase "pharaonic excision", which indicates one of the "traditional" forms of female sexual mutilation and means just "cutting off a small piece of it" (Kandji: 1999: 48), appears in Greek historians of antiquity. Looking at this from a historical perspective he quotes as support for his argument the Egyptologist Cheikh Anta Diop, a great reader of the Greek historians: "Both Strabo and Herodotus use one and the same word: circumcision, to refer to the operation that is the same for boy and girl, for the Egyptians, the Jews, the Palestinian Syrians, the Phoenicians and the Colchi . . . (Kandji 1999: 45). Is it a similar operation? The similarity is supposedly based on the boy's and girl's initial androgyny. In this sense "pharaonic excision" would be the equivalent of circumcision. This ancient form is thought of here as the "right" one, whereas clitoridectomy of Semite origin is the wrong one: "Excision is the Semites' version of traditional, universally attested Negro-Egyptian circumcision" (Kandji 1999: 49). But the deviant practice of excision as clitoridectomy was introduced into Africa. That is why it is advisable to go back to the origin of the straightforward practice that was the same for everyone, man and woman. Saliou Kandji tries to resolve a number of ambiguities. Nonetheless we might wonder whether the equality he talks about fits within the human rights framework.

It is noteworthy that the vocabulary used for this form of violence is fluctuating and imprecise, from one view to another, maybe even from one language to another, from English to French for instance. What in English is called "female circumcision" is commonly labelled "excision" in French. But the word "circumcision" is not used by chance, it is an integral part of a vocabulary referring to another kind of wound, to the male genitals, which belongs to that traditional practice mentioned by Kandji, earlier than Christianity and Islam and attested by Greek historians (Herodotus 1973). On the other hand researchers had already noted that circumcision and excision are two very different cultural practices. In a study published in 1977 Nicole Sindzingre,

situating her analysis of excision in the context of “rites of passage”, demonstrated that there was no equivalence between the two types of wound: “Though circumcision and excision have features in common which most authors have focused on exclusively, the asymmetry and non-equivalence of the two operations appear at once. Granted, circumcising and excising mean, in both cases, cutting off part of the human body and leaving an indelible mark (of an absence and an event) that will not be forgotten . . .” (Sindzingre 1977: 65). The two operations are dissimilar because from an anatomical viewpoint the male and female organs are not alike. And the operation performed increases sexual sensitivity for the man, whereas it lessens it for the woman. Nor does the term “clitoridectomy”, which refers to the idea of “cutting” the clitoris, the external female organ, allow an understanding of all the practices involved.

The history of the struggle for the integrity of the female body also includes the part played by the Protestant churches and missionaries in Nigeria and Kenya in the first half of the 20th century. That struggle was often obstructed by political discourses. For example in 1930 Jomo Kenyatta, the Kenyan politician who became head of state in the 1960s, spoke on the topic in the House of Commons in London during a debate on excision. One of his sentences became famous: “No Kikuyu worthy of the name wishes to marry a non-excised woman and vice versa” (Kenyatta 1979). When churchmen fight against customs they deem harmful, local politicians take the opposite tack. Mbow (1999: 74) shows that Kenyatta’s stand is not an isolated case, since the story could be repeated in the same places and around the same issues. She recounts that in 1997 a woman stood as a candidate in the presidential election, but her opponent did not let slip the chance to raise a scandal, arguing that Kenyans could not elect a woman who had not been excised. As we see, female sexual mutilation serves every kind of cause, be it religious or political. Fortunately, in many West African countries, the political authorities let NGOs and associations do their work. In the last 15 years or so laws have been passed to punish excision. In this context religious or political discourses attempting to defend such customs have little impact. But the essential point is always elsewhere from the viewpoint of the imagination of individuals who have to make up their own minds. Epistemological obstacles create barriers that prevent people from both getting to know about customary practices and acknowledging them as a crime and an attack on the integrity of women’s bodies.

3. Female sexual mutilation and respect for human rights

Since the United Nations decade for women (1976–85) a number of speeches have been made in favour of equality between the sexes and against violence towards women. Among the books published during that decade the one by Awa Thiam, *La Parole aux Nègresses*, with a preface by Benoît Groult, was one of the first to tackle the excision issue head-on and using first-hand experience. Its publication caused a heated controversy in Africa, even if it was comparatively well received by French feminists, as the preface indicates. Another book, *The Hidden Face of Eve* by Nawal El Saadawi (French translation 1982), is an autobiography in which the author talks

about her own excision and the experience of women in the Arab world, and explores the ancestral origins of the practice.

From the 80s and 90s, with high-profile court cases, in France for example, such as the one involving Hawa Gréou – a practitioner of excision who was given an eight-year prison sentence (Henry & Weil-Curiel 2007) – we saw a return of the cultural argument and inflation of the discourse around the issue of excision.

And so it was apposite that in 1999 the journal *Présence Africaine* invited specialists to present their views. The conflict between interpretations was already very lively and that was for other reasons, which Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana clearly explains. In a study published online in 2000 she deals with the question of excision from a threefold perspective, historical, sociological and literary, and in passing emphasizes a point where western and African feminists disagree: “African women’s movements acknowledge any act of solidarity from the northern countries but they are unanimous in distancing themselves from any interference with racist or grandstanding overtones which gives pride of place to shocking images and an aggressive voice” (Herzberger-Fofana 2000: 6). To support her analysis she points out how difficult it is to initiate a dialogue around the practice of excision: “At the International Women’s Conference in Copenhagen in 1980 a group of activists took the initiative of publishing on the front page some photos showing excised African women in their homes without consulting the women involved. That attitude was seen as a lack of sensitivity towards African women’s movements who felt they were being patronized. Women from the south were hurt by that possessive attitude, which they interpreted as wrongly motivated. So dialogue reached an impasse on both sides. The African women attending the conference felt they were being ridiculed, personally attacked and they formed a united front to express their dissatisfaction. Though they did not defend the custom of excision, they did attack most strongly the European and North American women” (Herzberger-Fofana 2000: 4).

With regard to the difficult dialogue around customary and traditional practices, Françoise Héritier (2002) notes that this is an illustration of the way the cultural argument works when it means to limit or refuse “external right to oversight and judgement” if actions are seen as “colonialist, expressive of a contemptuous lack of understanding, inappropriate and clumsy”. A position that demands non-interference in others’ cultures ends up as a refusal to acknowledge that “the issue of sexual mutilation is a matter that concerns the universal rights of human beings, since it comes down to saying: it’s our problem not yours; it’s their problem not ours” (Héritier 2002: 168).

In the various discourses the difficulty surrounding the naming and definition of the subject of the debate is raised together with the issue of the cultural argument, which is also expressed in terms of non-interference in others’ cultures.

4. Naming cultural practices and refining strategies to combat them

Since the last quarter of the 20th century and from one decade to the next the practices we are talking about have been referred to by the phrases “female genital mutilation” and “female sexual mutilation”, abbreviated to fgm and fsm, in the discourse

of international organizations backed up by NGOs defending women's rights. The shift from one phrase to another has to do with a wish to name accurately cultural practices that are hard to define. Surveys have been carried out based on statistical data but without ignoring personal narratives, which, on their own, can bear witness to the intensity of the dramas experienced. In order for cultural events to be punished by laws, in the name of human dignity, it is essential to understand what is involved. And so firm positions seem to be wavering because a definition and approach are now being proposed by the World Health Organization and its position appears to be widely shared, as is demonstrated by the 2008 joint declaration in which other organizations under the United Nations umbrella are involved (OHCHR, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNECA, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM). The declaration acts as a reference point for a better understanding of a practice that affects the identities and dignity of the people concerned. The definition proposed is as follows: "The phrase 'female sexual mutilation' (also referred to as 'excision' and 'female genital mutilation/excision') designates all procedures involving partial or total removal of a woman's external genital organs and/or any other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons" (WHO 2008).

However, in this now accepted approach the phrase "for non-medical reasons", which could cause confusion, deserves to be stressed. Throughout history, and according to cultures, treatment by removal of the clitoris could be carried out and we are justified in asking if those cases, which might be repeated today, are to be classified as female sexual mutilation or not. Some studies mention medical interpretations of excision, whether therapeutic or not. "In this connection we should remember that in Europe and the USA excision was used up to the 1960s in psychiatric hospitals to treat hysterical women! [. . .] It is unacceptable nowadays that doctors, who are supposed to save life, should learn to mutilate children's bodies. Even in Britain a number of foreign doctors (. . .) are suspected of practising excision and infibulation" (Amlak 1999: 106). In the study quoted earlier (2000) Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana reminds us that clitoridectomy was an integral part of European medicine, in the 19th century for instance, and that Dr Isaac Baker Brown (1812–73) was prominent among the doctors who treated specifically female ailments. He went further and proposed a treatment method involving removal of the clitoris: "Isaac Baker Brown, who studied at Guy's Hospital in London, became a renowned gynecologist and specialist in the treatment of ovarian cysts [. . .]. In 1865 he was appointed president of the Medical Society of London and member of several national and international scholarly societies. At the height of his career he published the book *On the Curability of Certain Forms of Insanity, Epilepsy, Catalepsy and Hysteria in Females* (1865), in which he recommended clitoridectomy as a surgical procedure for treating the conditions mentioned in his essay" (Herzberger-Fofana 2000: 2).

The definition proposed by the WHO is followed by an estimate of the number of girls and women worldwide undergoing excision (100–140 million – a number that is likely to increase by 3 million a year) and an indication of the geographical area involved: "The practice exists all over the world but is most common in western, eastern and north-eastern regions of Africa, in some countries in Asia and the Middle East and among certain immigrant communities in North America and Europe" (WHO 2008: cf. Fig. 1).

Annex 3: Countries where female genital mutilation has been documented

Listed below are countries in which female genital mutilation of Types I, II, III and 'nicking' Type IV has been documented as a traditional practice. For countries without an asterisk the prevalence

is derived from national survey data (the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) published by Macro, or the Multiple Cluster Indicator Surveys (MICS), published by UNICEF).



Country	Year	Estimated prevalence of female genital mutilation in girls and women 15 – 49 years (%)
Benin	2001	16.8
Burkina Faso	2005	72.5
Cameroon	2004	1.4
Central African Republic	2005	25.7
Chad	2004	44.9
Côte d'Ivoire	2005	41.7
Djibouti	2006	93.1
Egypt	2005	95.8
Eritrea	2002	88.7
Ethiopia	2005	74.3
Gambia	2005	78.3
Ghana	2005	3.8
Guinea	2005	95.6
Guinea-Bissau	2005	44.5
Kenya	2003	32.2
Liberia*		45.0
Mali	2001	91.6
Mauritania	2001	71.3
Niger	2006	2.2
Nigeria	2003	19.0
Senegal	2005	28.2
Sierra Leone	2005	94.0
Somalia	2005	97.9
Sudan, northern (approximately 80% of total population in survey)	2000	90.0
Togo	2005	5.8
Uganda	2006	0.6
United Republic of Tanzania	2004	14.6
Yemen	1997	22.6

* The estimate is derived from a variety of local and sub-national studies (Yoder and Khan, 2007).

Fig. 1 Estimation of prevalence of fgm in girls and women between 15 and 49 in Africa (from *Eliminating female genital mutilation. Interagency statement*, WHO 2008)

In order to combat these practices effectively the WHO and other UN bodies have classified the types of female sexual mutilation. First there is clitoridectomy, “partial or total removal of the clitoris (a small, sensitive and erectile part of the female genitals) and, in very rare cases, also the prepuce (the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris)”; then excision consists of “partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (which surround the vagina)”. The third category is infibulation: “narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal formed by cutting and repositioning the inner, and sometimes outer, labia, with or without removal of the clitoris”. The final category consists of “all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, e.g. pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing the genital area” (WHO 2008).

These details can be used as pointers when analysing and describing a particular cultural practice in terms of respect for women’s rights and the integrity of their bodies. Other types of discourse, increasing in number, can be cited as regards consciousness-raising and fighting against excision. That fight is making use of the normative instruments in force internationally and consciousness-raising can be done with words and music, as performed by Tiken Jah Fakoly, the famous reggae singer (*Non à l’excision*, 2007). There may be images, for example documentary films such as Anne-Laure Folly’s – *Déposez les lames* (1999) – or Zarah Yacouba’s – *Dilemme au féminin* (1997) – or fictional ones, among them Cheikh Oumar Sissoko’s *Finzan* (1989) and Sembène Ousmane’s *Molaade* (2002). The language of the theatre is yet another way to raise awareness about the problems around excision. These discourses speak, show, relate, stage but sometimes ask few questions.

5. Bodies represented, bodies mutilated: discourses of the social and human sciences

Let us turn to discourses in the human and social sciences which analyse and interpret the wounding and mutilation of the female body that have long remained taboo subjects in African societies. As if to echo the cultural argument mentioned earlier Françoise Couchard (2003), placing herself in a historical perspective in the first chapter of her study of excision, shows how Europeans, over centuries past, carried a number of ideological or racial prejudices. From the era of the pharaohs, during which Greek historians such as Herodotus compared circumcision and excision, to the discovery of other cultures by 18th-century travellers or missionaries and colonizers, each person witnessed “the disturbing strangeness of other people’s sex” (Couchard 2003: 7). Soranos, a doctor who was born in Ephesus, practised in Rome in the first century AD and wrote a book in several volumes entitled *Gynecology*, favoured the notion that woman is “sick by her very nature” (ibid. 15).

This determination both to differentiate the male and female sexes and to establish a distinction between same and other, familiar and strange, wild and civilized, is not a recent phenomenon. From the 18th century, with the discovery of new worlds, women living elsewhere embodied radical alterity. In the early 20th century the story of the Hottentot Venus is a clear example of ideological construction around the

deformed or strange body and genitalia of the other (Serbin 2004: 259). Thus it is easy to jump from considering the other's genitalia (the deformed female genitals) to the other's being, which could be the missing link between animality and humanity (Boni 2008: 141). The other's presumed deformity connects with ancient myths (Couchard 2003: 30) and beliefs invoked to justify female sexual mutilation.

Persistence of an imaginary redolent of prejudices about black women is one of the reasons why western researchers carrying out field studies are determined to combat derogatory opinions of the cultures studied. Sometimes this intention is tinged with generosity as if everything from "tradition" had to be protected. From that perspective the researcher's work involves understanding ways of life rather than explaining facts. In a recent essay entitled *La Coupure. L'excision ou les identités douloureuses*, published in 2008, Christine Bellas Cabane asks questions about the universality of human rights in its relationship with the relativity of values: "Raised with the idea of the universality of human rights based on a group of apparently unquestionable values everywhere on earth, I found it very difficult to admit that what was good here could be bad there. But the people I talked to were not primitive beings, lacking in judgement and education, as defenders of excision may be seen in the west" (Bellas Cabane 2008: 44). This discourse from an anthropologist and doctor who is trying to understand the way of life and social relations between the sexes in Mali, where she is doing her fieldwork, is certainly generous, but it is not without ambiguity. After all this may be how anthropological discourse admits its own limits when faced with the object of study, but without suggesting a framework for reading it in order to avoid distortion. The words connected with practices of circumcision and excision attract the researcher's attention, for instance the Bambara word *bilakoro* (Bellas Cabane 2008: 43). *Bilakoro* is a word used in several West African countries from Mali (where this research was conducted) to the Ivory Coast. It indicates a condition or state whose characteristics might be analysed together with what this implies in a given society as regards social relations and speaking conventions for individuals. Being uncircumcised for the boy, or not excised for the girl, does that not mean living on the margins of the immediate environment, being an eternal child until majority is attained through the wound and, where appropriate, the rituals that go with it? But are there not some differences in the state indicated by the word *bilakoro*, for example psychological barriers and prejudices, when the non-excised girl's day-to-day life is compared to the uncircumcised boy's? The researcher inquires and relates. She stops for a moment at the word before moving on to other stories which are not without interest. She wishes to show the "complexity of an issue that is too often simplified" because, she says again, "I have tried to involve readers in an anthropological approach that would enable them to create their own hypotheses, in a to-and-fro between discourse and reality, their own values and those of the society being studied" (Bellas Cabane 2008: 19).

6. Personal stories: is it possible to recover a wounded body's wholeness?

What relationship is there between a defect that is congenital, natural according to Aristotle in the 4th century BC, and a cultural practice involving wounding, removing, cutting and sometimes sewing back a woman's genitalia? I am attempting to clarify the plausible reasons for a practice that persists despite the legal mechanisms for punishing it both at a local level and through conventions and statements on an international level. The practices are resistant even in an era of globalization: and they follow the flow of migrants. So we need to go beyond recognizing the facts and take account of ideologies that surround the conception of the human body as well as representations of the female body, that body's functions and the systems it enters into, the exchanges, including economic ones, which the human body – and the female body in particular – gives rise to. In addition we must follow a side road through another kind of discourse to hear the voices of excised women, whose words confirm or contradict the other discourses.

Indeed one of the problems encountered around this plethora of discourses is the silence of those women. They do not speak. It is other people who speak for them if need be, who observe the facts and try to interpret them. As noted by Monique Ilboudo, women's rights activist and today an ambassador for Burkina Faso, the reason for this silence has to do with the victims' age at the time of the event; but we have to go further because, whatever her age, a woman is always considered to be a child, a minor figure who does not speak: "When we realize the disastrous consequences of excision for many women's health and the cases of death as a result of the procedure, it is amazing that no victim or relative has ever brought a complaint in the Burkina Faso courts" (Ilboudo 2006: 46). Thus the difficult task of discovering the precise facts arises from this silence; breaking it means confronting social, moral and psychological barriers. The words to tell about the experience cannot be spoken easily because they are policed by a rule of the arcane surrounding them. Furthermore the women who have undergone the practice, which they repress, are injured and traumatized for life. So it is not by chance that today written evidence generally comes from women who are quite well-known in their country and internationally: for example top models, politicians, writers, those who have already learnt to be free in themselves, in body and mind. Their status both exposes them to and protects them against threats coming from their own culture.

But whatever their nature these discourses do not tell the whole story because they remain less than reality. Personal stories cannot say it all either, because of the silence surrounding excised women, who have been injured in their bodies and suffer continually despite all the laws that have been introduced. Such a wound does not heal, it is part of a woman's memory. And the system that conceives such an act, far from being "barbarous", is strictly speaking ingenious because the individual taken up is no longer alone, she is a dependant of the group, integrated into her milieu. It is probably the feeling of being enclosed within the group that gives her the courage to recover her freedom. This is illustrated by Waris Dirie's story in *Desert Flower* (1998). Originally from Somalia, she was for many years a top model, maybe in order to recover her body, which had been injured by infibulation performed in the traditional way, at a distance from habitation and in conditions

where death is always possible. She was forced to flee from a world where choice was impossible for a girl, since the family and the father's wishes were law. And so we can understand why today, having been muse to some great couturiers and UN ambassador against female sexual mutilation, she heads her own foundation in Austria. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who is also from Somalia and became a politician and Muslim women's rights activist in the Netherlands, recounts her excision in minute detail, setting the scene within the framework of ancestral beliefs and traditions. Apparently children get used to the idea of the transition from one state to the other, a transition they do not choose and which is normal since no child, girl or boy, can avoid it. The representation of the clitoris as a monstrous organ is current here too: 'We're going to take away that long *kintir*, and then you and your sister will be pure' (Hirsi Ali 2008). The representation of the ugly over-large organ that might be as big as a penis haunts the imagination of the grandmother and the women and men carrying out the excision. Here it is a peripatetic man who has made it his job. And neither father nor mother gave their consent. Nor did they have the option of deciding for their children, who were taken over by the group. Moving away helped Hirsi Ali speak out and fight against the violence done to women's bodies.

Paradoxical as it may seem, in this system that justifies the practice of radical injury, people defend women's dignity, their place in society, in the "home". But very often the body is forgotten once the girl has become a woman and she has entered the circuit of social exchanges and the cycle of procreation. However a woman's genitalia are neither an object to be exchanged nor a natural inert element like earth, nor hideous like Medusa's head (Couchard 2003: 34), but an essential part of a living body possessing consciousness and intelligence. As personal stories show, excised women are not free to say no to mutilation, because when the day comes they are helpless. Katoucha Niane from Guinea tells the story in her autobiography (*Dans ma chair*, 2007). Her account shows how the girl has no say and no opinion to give. She thought she was going to the cinema with her mother and she experienced a 'horror film'. Wounded in her very flesh, it was only as a fulfilled 40-year-old woman that she was offered the chance finally to express herself in words, when she had always focused on her feminine appearance as an international model. But dressing up for a fashion show, displaying yourself in a flattering light, does not mean you recover that body which was wounded in its most intimate area without your knowledge or almost. Her story also criticizes the weakness of arguments saying that educating African women would be an undeniable advantage in reducing harmful customary practices. Katoucha is with her mother, a woman who was educated and brought up in a western school; in addition she is the daughter of a university teacher and renowned historian. And excision is carried out by one of her aunts. We may be surprised by the respect the writer gives to her mother, who came with her to her practitioner aunt. This enables us to understand that there are several types of excision and that the mother who gives the delicate task to a trained aunt is saving her daughter from a more catastrophic scenario. The excision is carried out in acceptably hygienic conditions and the family's honour and dignity remain intact. Finally this text, in which the silence is broken, today appears to be the penultimate episode in the tragic life of a determined woman with a chequered career who always cared

about her body – the body that was fished out of the Seine in February 2008, six months after the book was published.

Other women keep silent out of “dignity”. We might wonder what that pre-conceived dignity is that is proclaimed in the name of excised women. Whatever supporters of culturalism may say, female sexual mutilation jeopardizes women’s freedom to protect the integrity of their bodies and be in possession of all their faculties. They bear for their whole lives the memory of the irreparable wound, as witnessed by the wish expressed nowadays to have “the clitoris repaired” by gynecological surgeons, whose discourse is humanitarian or something like it, for example Dr Foldès, well known in France for more than 20 years (Bangré 2004a; Prolongeau 2006). Thus reconstructive genital surgery comes as the last link in the chain of injury repeating pain after pain in search of the happiness of a whole body recovered. Associations fighting against female sexual mutilation seem to believe in the effectiveness of repair. But can a body injured in that way be artificially repaired? That question leads on to another level, that of the dignity of the human being, which has to do with fabricating bodies. Sometimes repair may be experienced as a “cultural dilemma” (Bangré 2008). Occasionally, in discussion forums devoted to the subject, in the midst of a large number of opinions in favour, some lone voices wonder about the surgery’s effectiveness and the happiness it promises.

Female sexual mutilation is still being practised despite the introduction of legal measures both internationally and locally. But the more it is recognized in the context of violence and discrimination towards women, the more other questions come up that sometimes remain unanswered. What should be punished if a whole system of representing women, their bodies and their social roles, is being challenged? Who should be punished? Those who practise excision? Close relatives? And how can you recover your body and your sexuality after you have been injured in your very flesh?

Conclusion

Human dignity is not a given. It has to be constructed around unshakeable principles over and above the relativity of cultures. Because the notion of ‘women’s dignity’ varies from one custom to another and might be confused with the idea of the honour of a family or a husband for whom she must be virgin, chaste and faithful, laws can help to construct women’s dignity as human beings and have it recognized. This dignity – which is not to be confused with the one accepted by custom – refers to a superior quality of positive law, it is positioned with obligation as Simone Weil conceives it (1949) when she talks about taking root. But how should it take root today and where should it put down its many roots? In this era of globalization migration is an inevitable reality. How should we access the whole of our moral, spiritual and intellectual life with a wounded body we are aware of, or with an intact body rejected by the social milieu we come from? In the 21st century thousands of women worldwide are facing this dilemma. Simone Weil says in substance: “Rights always seem to be linked to conditions. Obligation alone can be unconditioned. [. . .] The object of obligation, in the area of the human, is always the human being as

such. There is obligation to all human beings, from the very fact that they are human beings, without any other condition needing to intervene, and even though they might not recognize any" (Weil 1949: 10–11).

Only the duty to protect and respect the dignity of the human person, over and above the multiplicity of discourses and laws, can give us permission to work unceasingly for the abolition of all forms of female sexual mutilation.

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