Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research
Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter 2018)

Female Genital Mutilation, Cutting, or Circumcision? Perspectives of a Nubian Woman

Menna Agha

Like most Nubian women born in the displacement villages,[1] I underwent a clitorectomy during my first weeks on earth, one that was performed by a trained, educated, and certified doctor. Doctors in the Nubian settlements were often appointed from the north of Egypt; they were usually regarded as civilized, trustworthy, and knowledgeable, as they were one of the "modernizing" factors the state promised Nubians after resettlement. However, they voiced very little opposition against this practice. On the contrary, most of the procedures after displacement were conducted by trained medical professionals, who often made home visits to operate on newborns and young girls. As they were mostly Muslims, the doctors or nurses used to cite religious references that recommended the practice. Even though the Egyptian state and state-sponsored religious references like *Al Azhar*[2] strongly oppose the practice, the informal debate between those with and against it is still ongoing, with cringe-worthy arguments abounding from both sides.

My mother recalls that the operation almost killed me. I never feared these stories about a time I did not remember; nevertheless, I was concerned with the moment I would have to face a decision that had been made for me. The management and mitigation of that "circumcision" was my biggest fear when I first started thinking about having a sex life. So, as most millennials do, I resorted to a Google search: I wrote the words "female circumcision" in English, hoping to find sex positive information. The search results *only* yielded a description of "female genital mutilation" (FGM). And for pages on end, the content on my screen portrayed the horrors of this practice, using the same term, "FGM." I scrolled through gore and voyeuristic content that defined the "savage," only to find blanket condemnations of female genital mutilation.

The term did not describe how I felt about myself. Although I had been trained to remain disconnected from that part of my body, I did not feel mutilated. The word I had been taught and had heard over and over again growing up was the Arabic word *tahara*. It encompasses circumcision for both sexes and carries a combination of meanings (sterile, clean, and holy), with a definite religious undertone. It is the same word used for cleaning up before prayers. Unlike *khetan*,[3] a formally used term that often appears in contexts of condemnation, *tahara* is used in daily dialect, often by people among whom the practice is normalized. The English term "circumcision," a later discovery in my life, often describes the mechanics of the practice rather than carries an affective value. Yet, I adopted it for my search because I believed, back then, that the use of English would prove more effective in finding culturally open information.

LaBarbera (2009) pits the terminologies of female circumcision, genital mutilation, and cutting against each other. She finds the term "mutilation" to be counterproductive in academic research, as it is conditioned by a value judgment from a western perspective, while the term "circumcision" is often used

[1] The construction of the Aswan High Dam and its water reservoir in the 1960's has resulted in the devastating uprooting and displacement of the entirety of Nubian villages inside the Egyptian borders, in addition to a large part of Sudanese Nubia. The state resettled Nubians in "modern" settlements they called New Nubia. However, Nubians called them *tahgeer*, meaning the place of displacement.

[2] *Al Azhar* is a religious institution funded by the Egyptian state, and the largest formal authority on faith related matters in Egypt. Their influence translates into laws as well as popular content. Although this institution's historical positions fluctuated, its contemporary narratives claim centricity.

[3] Khetan (ختان) is an Arabic word that also means circumcision. It is rarely used in everyday dialect. Rather, it became the word employed by state media and official texts to mostly portray and signify an anti-circumcision context.

by practicing cultures to equate the practice to male circumcision. Genital cutting, on the other hand, is narrowly used by activists to avoid the cultural insensitivity of the term mutilation, yet still conveys the severity of the practice. The term FGM is problematic to me; it entails both a demeaning tone towards cultures that adopt this practice, and the performativity of a "civilized," superior entity that is entitled to define and identify the markers of beauty, civility, and ultimately, humanity. I believe that such dynamics are initially produced through colonial relations. Discursively, the definition of FGM stems from neo-colonial relations and their need to create victim identities.

Personally, I struggle to coin a term that describes the practice, and I alternate between medical terminologies such as clitorectomy and circumcision in English in a failed attempt at objectivity. Although descriptive and anatomical, these terms contain no objective truth: the purpose and result of the practice, conveyed by words, are not latent. As for Arabic, I tend to avoid the usage of any term at all, as they all carry an emotional burden I refuse to acknowledge, leading me to resist my academic training that pushes me towards finding and reclaiming appropriate namings. I cannot coin a term for a part of me that is there – or not there – for as long as I live. I refuse to give it a name like I did my daughter. My failure at naming doesn't prevent me from arguing against the use of the current terminology, FGM, widely prevalent in academic literature and among development agencies such as UN Women.

In addition to its western elitist tendencies, the aesthetic connotations of "female genital mutilation" sanitize the term by dissociating the issue from its sexual nature and purpose. In my mind, the term evokes a caricaturish image of men and women in expensive suits convening in an expensive building to come out with "development" plans for people who look like me. Those white people still carry that aristocratic heritage that looks down upon sexual issues and would rather concern itself with issues of beautification. Ironically, the sanitization and purging of female sexuality is associated with genital cutting itself, which also deems female sex and pleasure to be filthy. Furthermore, the word "mutilation" renders the issue non-relatable to a person from a western context, despite its technical and ethical resemblance to practices in the west, like female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS), which Rodrigues argues is aimed at making the vagina more "useful" – as is the narrative with genital cutting.

In my early teens, I asked my mother why she had agreed to my circumcision, especially that she was considered to be an "educated" and "modernized" woman. Her reply changed throughout the years, but it often revolved around the issue of aesthetic: she said that women with large clitorises resemble men, making it a needed cosmetic procedure. She would never clarify why she found it to be a need in my case. Rather, she would remind me that we, Nubians, were advanced as we no longer performed the much more severe Pharaonic procedures.[4] Such pseudo-scientific explanation was a novelty, a negotiated narrative that stood between a mainstream culture in Egypt and a tradition that is one of the few things retained from a lost land. And it was produced by a generation of Nubian women educated within the Egyptian modern system, but who still ceded to the powers of their tradition.[5]

[4] Female genital cutting has been classified into three main operations (Kouba and Muasher, 1985).

[5] It is worth mentioning that later in life, my mother confessed to me her weakness in the face of my paternal grandmother.

The need for logical excuses and narrative framing among Nubian women – such as my mother – was initiated under the pressure of an elitist culture in Egypt, propagated in state media and educational curriculum. The novel framing is tailored to the point of aesthetics as a response to the dominant metanarratives around "female genital mutilation." These tailored narratives can clearly be detected in Fadwa Al Guindi's work about Nubian women. Her paper, "'Had This Been Your Face, Would You Leave it as Is?' Female Circumcision Among the Nubians of Egypt" (2006), is a documentation of Nubian women negotiating an acceptable narrative, one that revolves around aesthetic rights as the title depicts, to which the author grants an open mind. With this explanation, the scholar, who has the power to publish about and define Nubian womanhood, aims to avoid labels such as "barbaric."

My mother's excuse, one that is used by her generation, was a "modernized" defense of her tradition, especially when faced with the anti-circumcision campaigns on Egyptian T.V. But it is also a response to the narratives brought forth by anthropologists and scholars who had studied Nubian people since their displacement in the 1960s, alienating them with the elitist delivery of this message. The aesthetic excuse, therefore, makes use of the pseudo-scientific overtone and vocabulary of the elitist scholars. In retrospect, I would qualify my question to my mother to be a result of elitist narratives in media and academia. I was neither aware of the gravity of the burden nor did I know the extent of my circumcision, but I had seen myself in the eye of that white lady on T.V.: a second-tier human and token of ignorance, forever tainted as the circumcised peasant. Since the blame I put on my mother was not about my sexuality, her new excuse sounded acceptable then.

The novelty of these explanations about genital cutting is made obvious by the distinct claims of my grandmother, a woman who comes from a generation that did not need to debate or respond to accusations of barbarism. Her response to me came in veiled, yet clear terms: "so that you become a good girl;" "so that you have happiness with your husband;" "so that you become polite" – all of which meant, "to suppress your libido." The real purpose of circumcision is to render a female "asexual," therefore guaranteeing her virginity, and by extension, "virtue." While her interest in "filthy" acts is supposedly stripped away, she remains sexualizable and reproductive. It is one of the many techniques used in patriarchal societies to control female reproductive resources, especially sexual resources. The issue around female genital cutting is quintessentially about pleasure and the deployment of biopower in utilizing female genitals.

In my grandmother's perspective, she was not causing me harm. Rather, she was ensuring my future wealth. In her view, my "asexuality" would allow me, when grown, to trade only with my reproductive resources and family name, within a tightly governed system of kinship and matrimony in which female pleasure is trivial and male-centric values are at work. Juxtaposing my grandmother's motivations with literature and documented narratives on Nubians after displacement shows a direct correlation with institutionalized migration, due to the disposition of natural resources caused by manmade environmental interventions (e.g. dams). This disposition sent men to work in urban centers while women remained in the poor villages to carry Nubian offspring and Nubian identity.

Female genital cutting is devised to apply biopower, a power concerned with the body and organized around "power over life." It entails the surveillance, organization, and medical and psychological governance of bodies and populations (Foucault, 1990). Despite its starkly different excuses, this practice

resonates with the Foucauldian theorization of biopower, as it is designed to secure an optimization of life by subjecting female bodies to "precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Ibid, 137). From this perspective, genital cutting in an African village is analogous to a contemporary redeployment of biopower (Rodriguez, 2012), such as selective genital cosmetic surgeries in a rich western setting.

Research on Nubian women in the 60s includes discussions that are centered on pleasure. During intimate interviews with Nubian women, they opened up about how they think circumcision makes women nice and tight, with some of them undergoing an elective labiaplasty in preparation for their husbands' return from work in the city; they also antagonized urban women, whom they perceived as loose (El Guindi and Callender, 1962; El Guindi, 2006). Although aesthetic descriptions are employed, it is evident that the drive for these practices then was "pleasure," curbing those of women towards serving men's. It was a socio-economic transaction perpetuated by a patriarchal regime, in which the female body was a trading object.

Ignorance is one of the adjectives one can encounter in the various descriptions of "FGM," which I find to be entirely invalid. In fact, the practice was built on a comprehensive anatomical awareness, especially of the role of the clitoris in female pleasure, which made clitorectomy a common denominator in all the variations of genital cutting (Kouba and Muasher, 1985). The only ignorance that could count is that about power. Nubian women and women in rural Egypt did not know that there is life, access to resources, or power beyond the walls of their established regime, a regime that in return requests their giving up their sexuality to control their reproductive resources. And for some of these women, these powers do not exist to this day; they are still governed by such regimes.

Today, I am a Nubian woman with layers of privilege that were not afforded to previous generations of Nubian women, and to some women of my generation who stayed at the displacement villages. My privilege provides me with the intellectual resources to critically address female circumcision. It also aliments my sense of entitlement towards bodily pleasure, hence my Google search for resources on sexual education for circumcised women in a struggle to find allies. And to my disappointment, most resources are dedicated to neo-missionary projects that aim at "raising awareness" and criminalization. There is no denying that work on criminalization has been fruitful on some level. Yet, some scholars found the criminalization efforts, especially those with xenophobic intentions,[6] to backfire (Ogoe, 2015) and push the practice further underground. In curbing the spread of genital cutting culture, criminalization made the practice more dangerous. But one cannot help but notice the little support given to the everyday life, especially sexual life, of survivors of genital cutting.

One of the privileges I am afforded is access to information and the Internet. In an invocation of this privilege, I looked for answers about female pleasure and sexuality in cases of clitorectomy in both scholarly and general content available online. My conclusion was that science failed me. With the vast resources dedicated to the issue, most of the results took the form of condemning rhetoric. Some medical professionals offered procedures to reverse the most severe types of "circumcision." Yet, resources on

[6] For example, Ogoe (2015) finds that African immigrants in Canada face legislative language that claims to combat genital cutting. Yet, the language carries a deeply xenophobic, patronizing, and disrespectful tone regarding immigrants and culture, like text found in the *Quebec Charter of Values*.

female sexuality after the loss of the clitoris are limited. The contemporary developmental discourse that often has a higher Google search ranking[7] implies that survivors like myself are a lost cause. Moreover, sexual education for women who underwent clitorectomy still subscribes to the penetration agenda, one of the least pleasurable acts for a clitorectomy survivor.

I call on allies to critically asses their role in dealing with the issue of "circumcision," and to consider the roots and original purpose of this practice: controlling female pleasure. Regaining and reclaiming sexual pleasure for survivors is one of the hardest quests of their life, a quest many choose not to pursue altogether. I also ask those allies to further and promote efforts towards supporting living survivors, and help them answer basic questions that are left unanswered: can survivors of genital cutting experience orgasm? How can a survivor approach sex? How can we fund reversal procedures, and how to access them in the first place? To do so would be to confront a culture that suffocates female sexuality and the right to carnal pleasure through physical and psychological circumcision.

[7] Search engine optimization tools put larger and richer organizations at the top of search results to grant them more visibility.

References

Abusharaf, Rogaia Mustafa. *Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

Assaad, Marie Bassili. "Female Circumcision in Egypt: Social Implications, Current Research, and Prospects for Change." *Studies in Family Planning* 11, no. 1 (1980): 3-16.

El Guindi, Fadwa. "'Had This Been Your Face, Would You Leave It as It Is?' Female Circumcision Among Nubians of Egypt." *Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives*. Ed. by Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 27-46.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Kennedy, John G. "Circumcision and Excision in Egyptian Nubia." *Man* 5, no. 2 (1970): 175–91.

Kouba, Leonard J., and Judith Muasher. "Female Circumcision in Africa: An Overview." *African Studies Review* 28, no. 1 (1985): 95-110.

La Barbera, Maria Caterina. "Revisiting the Anti-Female Genital Mutilation Discourse Studies." *Diritto & Questioni Pubbliche: Rivista Di Filosofia Del Diritto e Cultura Giuridica* 9 (2009): 485-508.

Ogoe, Sally. *Why Does Female Genital Mutilation Persist? Examining the Failed Criminalization Strategies in Africa and Canada*. MA Thesis. The University of Manitoba, 2015.

Rodrigues, Sara. "From Vaginal Exception to Exceptional Vagina: The Biopolitics of Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery." *Sexualities* 15, no. 2 (2012): 778-794.