

Female Circumcision in Africa

By

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## Introduction

This ethnographic study defines and explains the practice of female circumcision and some of the key concepts from an emic perspective. Different types of circumcision and the importance and relevance of each are also analyzed in the context of African societies. Also examined are consequences associated with the practice.

Circumcision means “to cut around” and the action presupposes of a penis, therefore a man (Grimes, p. 296). However, clitoridectomy is used to refer to circumcision of a female. Clitoridectomy also called sunna circumcision is the removal of all or part of the clitoris (Grimes, *Deeply Into The Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage*, 2000). There are other terms used to describe female circumcision, ritual surgery, genital surgeries, genital operations, genital modification, body modification and female genital mutilation (Kratz, 1999).

## Types of Female Circumcision

There are four different types of procedures performed in various African cultures (Kratz, 1999). The first and most common type is called Type 1 (same as the *sunnac circumcision*). This procedure entails the removal of all or part of the clitoris. This is practiced by the Okiek of Kenya (Grimes, *Deeply Into The Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage*, 2000). Type 2 is called excision and it includes clitoridectomy. However, it may also consist of removal of some or all of the labia minora and all or part of the labia majora. The Kayes, Koulikoro, Segou, Sikasso, and Mopti practice Type 2 (Kratz, 1999). Type 3 is *vaginal infibulation*. This entails surgical scarification of the sides of the vulva causing them to grow together during the healing process of 2 – 6 weeks,

leaving a small hole for urination. Type 3 is also known as pharaonic circumcision, presumably due to it being practiced by ancient Egyptians. Infibulation is practiced by the Beja of Sudan and Coptic Christians or Muslims (Grimes, 2000). Infibulation and re-infibulation is most commonly practiced in Somaliland, and the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula which encompasses Eritria, Djibouti, and Ethiopia (Afar and Amhara cultures) – The Horn of Africa (Kratz, 1999). There are many reasons and myth as to why some African cultures practice re-infibulation.

In Sudan, for example, the Sudanese women may go through reinfibulation (re-sewing of the vagina to make it smaller again) after each child birth. Though Westerners feel re-infibulation is done out of devotion to the husband (to maintain his happiness) and prevention of sexual infidelity, Oboler begs to differ when she writes, “In many societies with clitoridectomy, wives’ sexual infidelity is common. So, clitoridectomy does not prevent adultery, contrary to the Western interpretation” (Oboler, 2007, p. 14).

Another type of female circumcision called Type IV entails tampering with the female vagina in any way other than for life saving surgery (i.e., piercings, pricking of clitoris/labia and scraping of tissue surrounding the vaginal walls). This may include the scraping of the tissue around the vaginal opening. Cultures that practice type IV are Hausa, Fulani, Ibo, and Tiv, located in the Northern Part of Nigeria.

Circumcision, though painful and unpleasant is looked upon as a joyous occasion. It is the rebirth of a new era and a step into adulthood for girls and boys in the African culture. For the Abagussi in Kenya, circumcision confirms the acceptance of one

into their community and “remains a key feature of their physical, social, cultural, and emotional structures” (Gwako, 1995, p. 337).

### **Ethnographic Approach to Female Circumcision**

An ethnographic approach may include use of participation observation, genealogical method, cultural consultants, in-depth interviewing, focus group discussions, and longitudinal research in order to discover local beliefs and perceptions. Ethnographic fieldwork on female circumcision requires paying attention to the daily lives of the community, and recording in a diary what is seen in detail. Participant observation is important when getting to learn a culture or community. Therefore, it is necessary to reside in a society for a long period of time. This means actually living within and participating in the community shared activities on a daily basis. This could include sharing of rituals, following all customs and guidelines of the community as well as other pertinent vices that the community may have.

Participant observation helps in grasping people’s behavior .This method requires a researcher to immerse himself or herself in a new culture. The researcher participates in people’s daily lives and records what he or she sees and hears. Through observation, anthropologists can collect data for meaningful analysis.

Participant observation produces detailed descriptions of what anthropologists see and hear in their sites. The researcher’s interpretations and analysis are also an important part of the data. In addition, anthropologists obtain the data they need through photographs and/or sketches, audio-tapes of people talking and/or telling stories, video-

tapes of people's activities, such as cooking, participating in ceremonies, transcriptions of questions that researchers ask, and records of their own feelings and insights.

Participant observation help an anthropologist formulate effective questions for people living within the culture being studied. By experiencing people's daily lives, the researcher can learn common knowledge shared among the people about ritual practices such as female circumcision. This knowledge enables the researcher to ask appropriate questions that make sense to the people. An anthropologist can develop intuitive understanding of culture through participant observation. The more the researcher becomes familiar with people's lives, the more he or she can effectively interpret the meanings of the data collected. This ability leads the anthropologist to draw contextualized conclusions.

It is important to respect the social norms of the community being studied. This helps to secure rapport. If this is not established the subjects will not feel comfortable enough to share rituals or secrets about circumcision. Conversation on a daily basis helps build rapport with the community and it engulfs one in the language, customs and shared day to day activities. Being able to understand the true meaning of the words within a culture gives a better understanding of the customs and ritual of female circumcision. The transition into a community and gaining an emic perspective of female circumcision can also be made easier with the help of knowledgeable cultural consultants.

At the onset of the fieldwork it may be necessary to obtain key consultants, i.e., people who are knowledgeable about the community and the practice of female

circumcision. These resource persons could also explain the relevance of the ritual, give an inside view on the values of the community, explain the ties of kinship, marriage, family descent, the social organization of the community and how it operates, etc. This data may give insights into why female circumcision is deemed necessary. All of the above aspects are important and necessary in aiding someone in understanding the relevance of female circumcision. Finally, in-depth interviewing is necessary in understanding why a culture chooses to participate in the female rite of passage. Interviews give meaning and explanation to the relevance behind female circumcision and allow for personal accounts of participants engaging in the ritual.

Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own culture is superior to all others and is the standard by which all other cultures should be measured. Ethnocentrism leads us to make false assumptions about cultural differences. We are ethnocentric when we use our cultural norms to make generalizations about other peoples' cultures and customs. Such generalizations— often made without a conscious awareness that we've used our culture as a means to measure others— can be way off base and cause us to misjudge other cultures. Ethnocentrism can lead to cultural misinterpretation (such as the way westerners view female circumcision). Therefore, an ethnocentric approach should not be taken when outsiders engage in studying female circumcision or any ethnic culture other than their own. Anthropologists must seek an understanding of female circumcision within its own context. Comprehending a society's rationale for a particular ritual enhances outsiders' understanding of the African cultural practices. It also enables outsiders' to if not agree, then to at least understand the relative emic meanings of the practice within that particular African society without judging it.

Application of cultural relativism in fieldwork provides an open door to understanding the key elements and concepts in answering “why” female circumcision is accepted and practiced in one culture and not another. The point of field study is to gain an understanding and respect of the culture and its practices (Dakowski, 1990). Also, the point of cultural relativism in regards to female circumcision is that, what is practiced in one culture does not mean it has to be implemented and practiced in another culture. The practice is relative to that culture. Therefore, it is not the role of an anthropologist or anyone seeking to understand the ritual of female circumcision to speak of female circumcision as being right or wrong. Most anthropologists also adhere to the principle of relativism, which holds that one must at least temporarily suspend judgment and comprehend behavior from the perspective of the people studied to fight against human tendencies toward ethnocentrism and naïve realism—the view that, at root, everyone views the world in a similar manner. However, it is the responsibility of the anthropologist to dispense with naïve realism. Through shared ethnographic studies we can further understand female circumcision as we uncover the deep structural connections between the disparate aspects of traditional life in a holistic manner.

The concept of holism as it relates to female circumcision underscores the idea that all aspects of society cannot be determined or explained by the sum of its component parts. Instead, the society as a whole determines how each individual behaves for the betterment of the whole. Therefore, an anthropologist’s task is to take a holistic approach to encompass and integrate multiple layers of meaning and experience rather than defining human possibilities and experiences narrowly.

Anthropologists use comparative approach to help in determining and understanding cultural similarities and differences. Initially anthropologists may compare their own culture to that of the culture they are studying but overall that personal view becomes irrelevant when taking an emic perspective. The ultimate goal is to arrive at a pattern of similarities and differences between the two societies, and then to isolate more or less well-defined factors that determine these differences. Once this is done, anthropologist can begin to understand the history behind each comparative group as it relates to circumcision and then explain why each group chooses to continue the ritual in its own context. Rites of passage done to women may be beneficial to a given culture's social life. It may affect the relationship between individuals making it intimate by connecting individual members of a society through multiple bonds. Female circumcision may promote an understanding, confidence and closeness within the community.

An anthropologist engaged in fieldwork may intermittently experience culture shock. It is the feeling of not knowing what to do or how to do things in a new environment, and not knowing what is appropriate or inappropriate. It can also be described as the physical and emotional discomfort one suffers when coming to live in another culture. However, this can be looked at as a positive opportunity for redefining one's knowledge, experience and translation of the other culture. It affords the anthropologist a great opportunity for learning and acquiring new perspectives. Culture shock can make one develop a better understanding of oneself and stimulate personal creativity. It can also help others to understand from first-hand knowledge that though



things do appear different it does not mean that things are wrong, but just different, such as in the case of female circumcision.

### **Emic Rationale for Female Circumcision**

In many African societies such as Okiek, Kikuyu, Yoruba, Meru, Igbo, Kailahun, Kenuzi, Kuria, Nandi and the Abagusii cultures, circumcision is viewed as normality in their circle of life. In some African, female circumcision leads to marriage and fertility. “It is the way things are done; you have to do it, there is no option; the authorities say so. If you don’t, no one will marry you” (Grimes, 2000, p. 297). For the Okiek women, being able to have this ritual rite performed brings prestige, honor and resources not to the individual but to the community as a whole. For women, fertility may be seen as central to the survival of the group and when the rituals of female circumcision is not performed, the whole culture will be undermined (Grimes, 2000). Circumcision is a communal venture for some African women and it unifies them within their culture. Among the Okiek, girls’ initiation includes excision serving as “the primary context in which women come together as a group, constituting a ritual community and a forum for social critique...” (Grimes, 2000, p. 297).

For the Kikuyu culture, clitoridectomy is a symbol for the “pure” or true Kikuyu. It marks a girl's transition from childhood to womanhood. Along with this ritual rite comes the lifting of the taboo on pregnancy, and usually marriage soon to follow (Shaw, 1997)

One of the main reasons the Yoruba of Nigeria feel it necessary to practice female circumcision deals with preserving the next generation. The Yoruba feel if a

child, at birth touches the mother's clitoris it will result in the child's death (Orubuloye, 2003). Holistically, life for many African cultures is built on women having children. Because men cannot give birth to children, women are held accountable for this action. Women and children are needed for cultivation. Positive production for a man is necessary in gaining prestige and status in his society (Babatunde, 1998).

Female circumcision is both a sexual and social act in the Meru culture marking a woman's assumption of her female identity, allowing her both to procreate, and to take part in traditional rituals and traditional governing councils. It is also the time when initiates are instructed in the rules and regulations of their society, and their responsibilities within it. The Meru of Kenya felt that being circumcised transformed girls into women, and mothers of initiates into figures of authority within the community (Thomas, 1997).

“For the Sudanese female circumcision [clitoridectomy and infibulation] is not merely a residual traditional practice, but is rather an important marker of privileged ethnic group status, used ideologically to exclude aspiring lower status groups, who are in turn tempted to adopt it as part of the cultural assimilation necessary to upward mobility” (Shaw, 1997, pp. 65-66).

A person's life in the Mandingo, Fula or Jola culture is marked by a series of rites of passage. Their initiatory rite is a ritual marking the change of social or sexual status of an individual, most generally puberty but also for other events like the birth or the menopause. The rites of passage make it possible to bind the individual to the group, but also to structure the life of the individual in precise stages which allow an alleviating

perception of the individual compared to his temporality and to its mortality. This ritual rite has an important stake for the individual, the relation between the individual and the group, and for the cohesion of the group as a whole.

In the Igbo culture of Nigeria, female circumcision is seen as a sure cure for sexual promiscuity among women. As told through ancient folklore female genital surgery helps to ward off certain kinds of diseases in women. The Igbo believe that women who are not circumcised make love to spirits in their sleep who, in turn, cause unhealthy appetite for sexual intercourse. The Igbo also believe that if a woman is not circumcised she will give birth to Ogbanje (Abiku) – a wicked child who is born and then dies only to re-enter its mother's womb over and over again (Achebe, 1994). Therefore, out of fear and possible stigmatization, most mothers make sure they circumcise their daughters.

In Sierra Leone, the Kailahun women feel that female circumcision as a rite of passage is a valuable part of their culture and it makes them better wives, and helps to maintain their cultural balance. One woman says, "We have inherited this culture over 100 years ago and it has made us women be responsible housewives to our husbands." Still another woman, a teacher, said: "We love [FC] as a culture in the past, today and tomorrow" (Alexander, 2010).

The Hausa- Fulani in Mayerno, West Africa has preserved their continued traditional practices of female circumcision. As in most African cultures, female circumcision is an event through which girls are inducted into womanhood and prepared for marriage. Also, after the delivery of a child, re-infibulation is expected. If a woman is

not “tight” in this culture she is considered to be slacking and not meticulous when it comes to taking care of herself. This can lead to her husband leaving her for another woman. Therefore, a woman who undergoes circumcision and re-infibulation is honored by her female relatives and is looked upon in high regards.

In the Central African Republic, the Sango, Gbanzili, and Ngbaka cultures practice female circumcision. Like the cultures listed above, the reasons for this tradition include the beliefs that it is a "good tradition", it is a religious requirement, or a necessary rite of passage into womanhood; that it ensures cleanliness or better marriage prospects, prevents promiscuity and excessive clitoral growth, preserves virginity, and facilitates childbirth by widening the birth canal.

The Kenuzi Nubians, maintain a very strict control over their females' sexuality. In order to guarantee female virginity, girls from age three or four are infibulated. Once married, females are only allowed to have sex with their husbands. However, on long absences away from home, the husband can insist their wives be re-sewn in an attempt in preventing extramarital affairs (Pasternak, Ember, Ember, 1997, p. 26).

In Kenya, the Kuria not only believe that circumcision brings a young girl into womanhood, but it is also done to “ensure virginity, to enhance fertility and fecundity, and to promote cleanliness” (Gwako, 1995, p. 333). Also, due to the increase of cash crops and available land female labor is in high demand. Therefore, it is essential to maintain a larger homestead of women and children. In the Kuria society, fathers find it necessary to impose clitoridectomy earlier on young girls. This is brought about because girls must be circumcised before marriage and fathers need their daughters'

bridesweath for more wives, making the need for earlier circumcision more prevalent (Gwako, 1995).

Female circumcision for the Abagusii symbolizes the cleansing of childish ways. It is believed to remove ignorance making the female more knowledgeable. After circumcision a female is seen as an active member who is able to obtain status and recognition as an adult in the community. She also becomes “fully bonded to the ancestral world as well as the group’s living and unborn members. Circumcision revitalizes the spirit of togetherness, reinforces the groups’ social solidarity and allows girls to become marriageable young women” (Gwako, 1995, p. 335). During this rite of passage young girls are taught about sex, how to dress and act as respectable women and what their behavior should be (Gwako, 1995). Gwako’s emic perspective of the Abagusii culture reveals that:

“Indeed, it is widely believed that the blood shed binds each of the novices to the ethnic group’s past, present, and future; the departed ancestor, the living, and the unborn” (Gwako, 1995, p. 335).

Among the Mandinka, excision is said to remove masculinity from a girl, her male twin “head” (or penis), and the parallel male circumcision is supposed to remove a boy’s female twin, “soul” (or vulva/flesh) (Ahmadu, 2006).

Female circumcision is a customary operation for the Nandi women of Africa. As Oboler states, “...the ritual that includes clitoridectomy is usually an important focus of women’s solidarity that may not be replaced easily” (2007, p. 14). As the rite of passage

for men bonds that particular group together for life, the same holds true for women undergoing female circumcision. It grants women a status of honor and pride and it bonds women together as a unit and not as individuals. Female circumcision bonds young girls together as women in the continuation of building a strong and prosperous community. Circumcision is a way of “marking the beginning of “adult status and ethnic identity” (Oboler, 2007, p. 14).

In communities practicing female circumcision there is truly no place for a woman who has not undergone the ritual. Most African societies have norms governing the need and relevance for female circumcision and it is the responsibility of the woman’s relatives to enforce compliance. This act is not done primarily for the individual women – though it does transition her from childhood to womanhood— but it also connects and bonds communities together, in their quest for extensions in kinship. This can aid communities in becoming stronger in numbers and it helps in maintaining kinship ties in some African cultures.

### **Voices against Female Circumcision**

Taking an emic approach to female circumcision helps us to understand, interpret and explain the reasons within a culture. It allows for a holistic understanding of how female circumcision binds a community together, as well as brings African women closer together. Shaw states, that “In Africa, female circumcision is used to bind a local group together; it is also used to draw lines between groups and to cross lines between groups” (Shaw, 1997, p. 66). However, Despite anthropologists attempts in explaining the emic and ethnographic relevance of female circumcision, Westerners still

have many reasons why female circumcision should be banned. Some reasons fall under categories of gender relations, public health, and cultural reconstruction of human identity (Babatunde, 1998).

Health risks are a major concern of female circumcision. Because of the “natural” way it is practiced in some remote areas, female circumcision can cause an array of disturbing medical problems. As Gwako points out, “shock, pain, risk of tetanus, urinary retention, walking difficulties, blood poisoning, delayed wound healing, death, prolonged bleeding and infection, possibility of contracting the HIV virus and dying later from AIDS” are some of the after effects of female circumcision (Gwako, 1995, p. 336).

Also, after infibulation heavy scarring begins to form covering the vaginal and urinary openings. Because of this inappropriate healing, women suffer with “Keloid scars, vulvar cysts, retention of urine or menses, painful menstruation, difficulty urinating and chronic pelvic infections” (Kratz, 1999, pp. 736-737). The scars obtained from circumcision also make it even more painful for women during childbirth” (Kratz, 1999, p. 737).

Female circumcision can complicate childbirth, leading to higher mortality among infants. Scars forming around the wound could cause an obstruction, prolonging labor, “which increases the risk of caesarean section, heavy bleeding, distress in the infant and stillbirth” (WHO, 2006). Also, Thomas (1997) suggests that along with male circumcision, “female circumcision” should be abandoned entirely as it results in complications during childbirth.

From a human rights perspective female circumcision denies a woman the full pleasure of experiencing a heightened orgasm; a pleasurable act that women are meant

to experience. Also, removal of the clitoris is meant to control the female's sexuality, leaving her void of feeling, thereby a lesser chance of promiscuity. Human rights activists and feminist medical doctors Nawal El Saadawi and Asma El Dareer, agree "female circumcision is intended, among other things, to control female sexuality" (Thomas, 1997, p. 17).

Abolitionist say female circumcision dehumanizes women and it is "an unnecessary and cruel deprivation" against women. "Since cultural rites such as female genital surgery dehumanizes females, the argument alleges, such rites encroach on women's natural ability to achieve complete self-enhancement and full personal realization", which is against human rights (Babatunde, 1998, p. 4).

Another objection against female circumcision is categorized under "gendered violence." Assuming that society is a hegemonic women are being recreated for the benefit of men; which male-oriented socialization process imposes on them. Therefore, feminists feel, female circumcision should be abolished, because, "Human rights supersede cultural rites that try to recreate women to satisfy men's preferences (Babatunde, 1998).

From a religious perspective there are debates as to the "meaning and worth of the practice." Is circumcision really for religious purposes or more for cosmetic purposes? Grimes writes, "some doctors and insurance companies have declared circumcision medically unnecessary..." (Grimes, 2000, p. 298).

From a Western perspective, Africa is viewed as a "dark continent" that has nothing positive to offer and needs to be "saved". Christian missionaries and Westerners alike,



view clitoridectomy as a “barbaric, primitive custom hazardous to women’s health...” (Oboler, 2007, p. 14).

Some people argued that clitoridectomy is done to keep women faithful by not having orgasms. However, in many of the interviews taken by Ahmadu she found that women did not have a problem with enjoying sex and for as many women who were cited having issues due to circumcision, there were just as many women uncircumcised who shared the same “voided” experience as well. Here, Ahmadu feels, “In Western countries, many women with intact clitorides reportedly do not experience any type of orgasm in their lifetime, and complaints about sexual dysfunction or loss of sexual desire abounds” (Ahmadu, 2007, p. 307).

In their pursuit to abolish female circumcision, Westerners are pressuring the United Nations to ban circumcision on the basis that it, “...denies them [women] sexual pleasure” (Oboler, 2007, p. 14)

## **Conclusion**

Female circumcision is known to have existed for several thousand years in more than 28 African countries. It is a cultural practice informed by many considerations. Some African cultures don’t view it as an act of individualism, male domination or female mutilation. It introduces girls into the status afforded them by womanhood, as well as prepares them for marriage. To some Africans, female circumcision aids in fertility which preserves life for the next generation and bonds and connects kinship ties for the benefit and social welfare of their cultures.

There are three distinguishable types of female surgeries practiced within the African cultures. They are: sunnac circumcision (removal of the clitoris), excision or clitoridectomy (removal of some or all of the labia minora and all or part of the labia majora), and vaginal infibulation or pharaonic circumcision (sewing up and scarification of the vagina). There is also Type IV (tampering with the female vagina in any way other than for life saving surgery) which was added by the World Health Organization.

Abolitionist refuse to look at female circumcision from an emic perspective and therefore, continue to remain oblivious to the relevance and importance of this African rite of passage. It is also unfortunate that due to the lack of contextualized emic understanding and misinformation being generated against female circumcision – by Western viewers - both health and feminist organizations are continuing their fight against it. Stating that female circumcision is barbaric, painful, unnecessary and against women's rights. Not negating the fact that in some instances circumcision results in some medical complications, it still does not afford Westerners the right to infringe upon the cultural rights of some Africans. Global cries from Westerners have no just cause for taking an ethnocentric stance in promoting eradication of female circumcision. The ultimate choice of abolishment should lie on the shoulders of Africans without judgment of Western idealisms.

Suffice to say, it is not the intention of this essay to pass judgment on the ritual practices of African cultures. Nor, is it my intention to say that female circumcision is right or wrong. However, in examining the rationale from an emic perspective and the ramifications from a Western point of view, it is my hope that this paper enriches and expands the mind of those who will read it. Therefore, showing the relevance and

importance of female circumcision as it relates and exists in the African cultures those reading are able to perceive the practice in a more positive light as it relates to the practitioners.

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