



Reinterpretation of “Traditional” Bodily Modifications by Young People in Contemporary Zimbabwe

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Abstract

There is a rising critique against the dominant but negative Western discursive construction of ‘traditional’ bodily modification practices in Africa. This article takes issue with conventional representations of some African bodily modification practices as not only traditional but also disempowering. It draws on different and diverse accounts from urban middle class Shona women and men in Zimbabwe about ‘traditional’ practices of male circumcision and labia elongation. It also examines the different and complex connections people make between these gendered practices and issues of (sexual) desire, pleasure, and bodily aesthetics in relation to gendered identities. Based on my reflections of this research, the article demonstrates that the ways in which women and men make sense of their contemporary identities (in relation to these ‘traditional’ practices connected with sexuality) are embedded in a multiplicity of particular global and localised discourses on (anti)colonialism, religion, culture/tradition, modernity, and gender. In attempting to destabilise particular social categories, this article argues for the importance of engaging critically with people’s contradictory understandings and experiences of these practices in postcolonial African countries.

Résumé

Il existe une critique croissante de la construction discursive, dominante mais négative, des pratiques « traditionnelles » de transformation corporelle en Afrique. Cet article s’oppose aux représentations conventionnelles de certaines pratiques de transformation corporelle africaine, non seulement traditionnelles, mais également paralysantes. Il s’appuie sur des témoignages aussi divers que variés, de femmes et d’hommes Shona de la classe moyenne

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des villes du Zimbabwe sur les pratiques « traditionnelles » de la circoncision et de l'élongation des lèvres. Il examine également les liens variés et complexes que les personnes établissent entre ces pratiques de genre et les questions de désir (sexuel), de plaisir et d'esthétique corporelle en relation avec les identités de genre. Partant de mes réflexions sur cette recherche, l'article montre que la manière des femmes et des hommes de donner un sens à leur identité contemporaine (par rapport à ces pratiques « traditionnelles » liées à la sexualité) est intégrée dans une multiplicité de discours mondiaux et locaux sur l'(anti) colonialisme, la religion, la culture/tradition, la modernité et le genre. En tentant de déstabiliser des catégories sociales particulières, le présent article insiste sur l'importance d'aborder de manière critique les conceptions et expériences contradictoires de ces pratiques dans les nations postcoloniales africaines.

Introduction

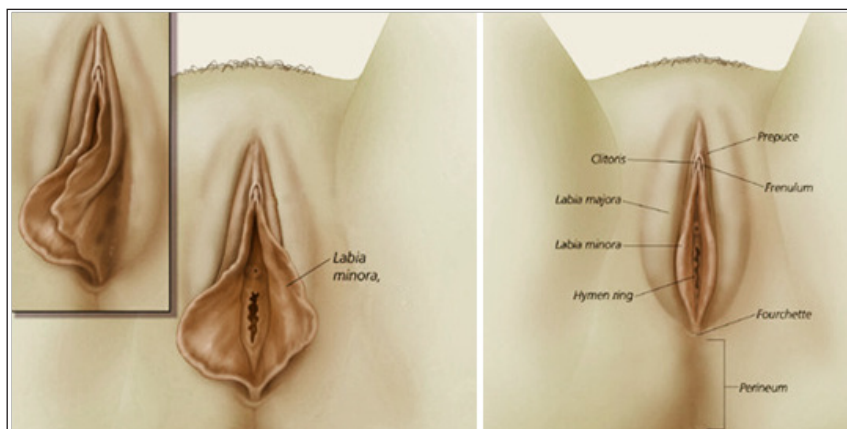
Bodily modification practices are contested globally and remain a domain through which gendered identities are constructed, expressed, and experienced (Tamale 2006; Khau 2009; Braun 2010; Arnfred 2011). In Africa, for a long time, researchers have taken a keen interest in those practices that involve modifications of the genitalia, notably male and female circumcision, as well as labia elongation. However, it is female genital modification practices that are contentious in feminist discussions. There are struggles between those critical of these practices because they stifle women's rights as well as suppress their sexuality (Wester n.d.), and those who are supportive of the practices and argue that they are an expression of women's sexuality and their cultural rights (Amadiume 2006; Tamale 2006, 2008). African feminists, in particular, question why such practices attract negative labels such as *female genital mutilation*, when women in Africa practice them, yet similar practices (labia minora reduction, vaginal tightening, and hymen reconstruction) done by white women Western countries are positively framed as *female cosmetic surgery* (Arnfred 2004; Tamale 2008). These binary representations, which pathologise Africans and their practices, perpetuate colonial and racialised interpretations of the African as inferior and backward. Furthermore, considering the dominance of Western scholarship on these practices, the categories work to name and define what is "cosmetic" and "mutilated" or "beautiful" and "ugly" only from a Eurocentric gaze (Nuttal 2006).

Nevertheless, it is evidently clear that despite the hegemonic constructions of these African genital practices as harmful and traditional, they continue to be practised by, have meaning for, and even receive support from modern educated women and men in contemporary Africa. In order to understand why and how this is so, there have been calls to understand these practices

from the women who practice them and ‘from inside their own local environments’ (Aidoo 1998:47; see also Amadiume 2006; Tamale 2006), as a way of shifting from ideological battles towards analysis grounded in empirical research. The question is how do people in contemporary African societies make sense of these genital modification practices constructed in dominant discourse as traditional?

In this article, I focus on the significance of the ‘traditional’ practice of labia elongation and male circumcision for young adults in contemporary Zimbabwe. I draw on (mixed and single sex) focus group discussions and interviews that I conducted in two separate studies with young Shona¹ women and men in their 20s and 30s, from urban and middle-class backgrounds. The aim of the study was to understand why and how young women who identify as modern have interests in a practice that is constructed as traditional. The article examines how they speak about labia elongation and male circumcision and give them meaning in their lives. Furthermore, it interrogates how they negotiate their identities in relation to these practices.

Labia elongation is a female genital modification practice that some girls and women in Africa engage in, which involves the manipulation of the labia minora using fingers. Traditionally, girls performed labia elongation as a rite of passage to womanhood, with the belief that this would make their genitalia ‘more attractive and more effective in pleasuring their sexual partners’ particularly in marriage (Khau 2009:32). Figure 1 below illustrates the difference between a normal vagina and one with elongated labia. While I am aware of how colonial constructions of gender and sexuality have been inscribed in categories of normality and abnormality in disciplines such as psychology and psychiatry, I use this labelling as a heuristic device. The debates around female genitalia suggest that some women are born with elongated labia or develop elongated labia without pulling also known as the hypertrophy of the labia minora (Gallo *et al.* 2006) while there are also diverse forms of labia pulling. Indeed, Western biomedical conceptions of a “normal” vagina, as suggested by the picture below, become a reference point for what is “abnormal” or “elongated” in non-Western sexualities. In this article, I question and problematise the labelling of female African bodies by scholars and practitioners in ways that are dissonant with local understandings. As discussed later, participants contested understandings of what is constructed as “normal” female genitalia. For instance, most women participants constructed elongated labia as the norm, while they problematised women who did not elongate their labia as the abnormal Other.



Vagina with elongated labia

“Normal” vagina

Figure 1: An illustrative image of elongated and non-elongated labia minora²

Labia Elongation and Male Circumcision in the Zimbabwean Context

Before the article engages with my study findings, I briefly provide an overview about male circumcision and labia elongation in the Zimbabwean context. The government, through the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, introduced male circumcision in 2009 as part of its national Human Immunodeficiency Virus (henceforth, HIV) prevention strategies. This followed studies that concluded that male circumcision reduces the likelihood of HIV transmission between heterosexual partners. However, prior to this intervention, Zimbabwe was predominantly a non-circumcising country. Only ten per cent of Zimbabwean men, especially from ethnic minorities and migrant communities, practiced circumcision either as a rite of passage or for religious reasons (Peltzer *et al.* 2007).

Nevertheless, in the interviews and focus groups that I conducted with Zimbabwean men in another study (Venganai 2012), I discovered that they constructed the practice in multiple ways. On the one hand, there were those from the Shona group who were critical of the practice because they felt it had connotations of assuming particular ethnic identities. Specifically, they seemed concerned that getting circumcised (regardless of the supposed health benefits) meant that they were undermining their “Shona-ness” by associating themselves with minority ethnic groups such as the Shangaan, whom they constructed as backward and traditional. Yet, other Shona men spoke positively about male circumcision and associated it with notions of modernity. They appeared to be attracted to the positive images of a circumcised modern man who not only embodies better penile hygiene, but

is also assumed to offer better sexual pleasure to his woman. Such are the images packaged in local circumcision campaign adverts, like *Pinda musmart* (Be smart), which have connotations of being fashionable, modern, and wise. The adverts particularly feature charismatic local young male music personalities and politicians to appeal to the urban populace.

On the other hand, there is little scholarly work about labia elongation in Zimbabwe. Although some white male historians, anthropologists, and medical doctors wrote about labia elongation among the Shona during (and shortly after) the colonial era, they produced limited and unrepresentative narratives about this practice, while constructing the Shona as the homogenous Other (see for example Gelfand 1973). Current literature on this practice in Zimbabwe focuses on Ndebele women’s constructions of labia elongation (Bhebe 2014) and urban men’s understandings of this practice (Pérez *et al.* 2014). Considering the secrecy that surrounds some of these “traditional” practices, labia elongation rarely features in mainstream media. Occasionally, discussions about this practice among women (and sometimes men) appear on social media, which makes it difficult to ascertain how widespread this is in Zimbabwe. However, as this article will demonstrate, it is quite a significant practice even among young urban affluent women in Zimbabwe. In fact, most of the women who participated in my study had undergone the practice.

In the next sections of this article, I dwell on the different and complex connections that the young women and men in my study make between these two “traditional” practices in relation to gender and identity more generally, and issues of (sexual) desire, pleasure, and aesthetics in particular. It should be noted that I did not take participants’ narratives as accounts of “truth,” but rather as particular ways of displaying and negotiating certain versions of femininities and masculinities (Pattman 2001). I treat women and men who participated in this study ‘not as individualistic agents separate from the world but as beings co-implicated by others’ (Gannon & Davies 2012:72). By this, I imply that what participants said or did not say was influenced by the kinds of relations they established with each other and with myself as the interviewer, and the circulating discourses within their sociocultural context. In order to guarantee anonymity to the participants, all names that appear in this article are pseudonyms.

Marking the Boundaries of Femininity and Aesthetics

As reported in similar studies (Larsen 2010; Arnfred 2011), participants, especially women, constructed elongated labia around notions of femininity. According to some, inner labia ‘are things that girls are supposed to pull’ for

one to be considered a 'complete' woman. Others mentioned that in the past they heard stories of married women who were sent back to their parents' home to get 'sorted' once their husbands discovered that they did not have elongated labia. One of the women who spoke so highly of labia elongation, Rudo, maintained that *matinji* (elongated labia) 'makes a person to be called a woman' before asking rhetorically 'if you don't have [elongated labia], so how can one be called a woman?' Employing euphemistic language, she denigrated women who do not undergo this practice, implicitly constructing them as 'incomplete' saying:

[Elongated labia] don't like just entering an open hole. It's almost like a house without a door, would you want to sleep in such a house? That's how it is. Would you want to sleep in a house without a door?

This issue arose in another all-female, focus group, when I asked them about the purpose of elongating one's labia. Paida explained:

[Elongated labia] helps in that the man just doesn't fall in when he is inserting, it must not be as if he is entering a bucket of water (Group laughs). He must first knock and those things; make sure that entry is not very easy so that when he is thrusting, he doesn't feel as if he is thrusting a bucket.

It appears that labia elongation is a practice through which some women draw a sense of self-esteem. This was apparent in the ways that they constructed themselves as sexually superior by equating women without elongated labia to 'an open hole', 'a house without a door', or 'a bucket.' They believed the vaginal orifice had to be "closed" for better sexual experience of men who presumably preferred a tight and warm vagina during sex. In the all-male focus group, one man mentioned that elongated labia are sometimes called '*maketeni*' (curtains) and explained that 'as a woman grows older, her vagina opening widens due to childbirth, but those things close [the vagina opening].' Another woman, in a separate interview also remarked that a woman's genitalia, without stretched labia 'is not decorated.' In this regard, participants constructed elongated labia in terms of their aesthetic value. Ironically, there was another woman, Chenai, who told me that she was anxious to reveal publicly that she has elongated labia because of the usual association of the practice with rural people and 'backwardness'.

Not only were women without elongated labia presented as sexually inferior and sexually unattractive, they were also presented as sexually ignorant and incompetent. This emerged during the mixed-group discussion, from Sekai, who apparently did not undergo elongation. She was responding to my question on the value of elongating one's labia, when she mentioned that, 'some have this belief that one who has [elongated labia]

knows, ... she knows how to handle a guy, and then they go like one who doesn't have [elongated labia] is an amateur, she doesn't know anything...' *How to handle a guy* here connotes sexual expertise. In a study about female circumcision in Southern Senegal, Dellenborg (2004:85) reported the belief that 'an excised girl knows something a non-excised girl does not ... [because] excision is connected to knowledge' in circumcising communities. In this regard, it seems that undergoing such practices is an important component of initiation into adulthood, involving impartation of sexual knowledge. When I asked women without elongated labia to respond to derogatory comments that they were "inadequate" and "inferior," they were quite dismissive. Tanya, a pastor's wife said:

When people say a woman without *matinji* is incomplete, it doesn't bother me exactly, but I see them as uncivilised, not open-minded, or judgemental 'coz personally I think it's ok if they have them [elongated labia] but not to think that I am inferior because I don't have [them]. I just view us as two different women and it doesn't mean one is better than the other, it jus[t] means we are different, not a measuring stick of superiority or inferiority.

Another woman said it did not bother her since no man has ever complained about this. 'Maybe we would get worried if [my] boyfriend says it, but I've never come across a guy like that.' The third woman, Cynthia, was critical of other women's notions of the "complete woman". She felt it was rather limiting when a woman's "completeness" was reduced to the presence or absence of extended labia. Instead, she argued that a 'real woman' must be defined not according to 'her anatomy' but the 'tangible things' she does economically for her own success and that of her family.

Interestingly, while women without elongated labia seemed indifferent to how they were ridiculed, a closer analysis of their responses demonstrated that they sometimes experience feelings of inadequacy. Firstly, they all had, at different times, sought their boyfriends or husbands' opinion about labia elongation. Cynthia told me that even though she and her husband never discussed labia elongation when they were dating, she raised the issue with him after they got married after hearing about it 'a lot'. Her husband discouraged her from pulling her labia because he felt it was unnecessary as they were already enjoying their sex life. She decided not to pull when her husband asked her 'what if we do it and we don't like it?' Secondly, these women challenged the derogatory remarks only when I spoke to them individually, not in a group context. Tanya, for example, did not reveal to the group that she has not undergone the practice. When I asked her about this in a separate interview, she said she first has 'to read between the lines to see if they are judgemental or not to people without [Elongated labia] because I don't want anyone to judge

me for the choice that I made in not having them'. She added that she would only reveal her labial status if she was speaking to 'open-minded people'.

Responding to others' construction of elongated labia as enhancing sexual attractiveness, women without elongated labia and some men spoke on the contrary. Expressing signs of disgust, Maidei said 'the sight of them doesn't go well with me' because they are 'dangling' and added that 'the vagina should look ... appetising and all that'. Some men also suggested that what makes elongated labia unattractive is the 'protruding flesh [which is] stretched and folded inside [the vagina]'. Another man claimed to have overheard some women saying that 'nurses consider *matinji* to be disgusting. They don't want to see those things, they disgust them, they find you repulsive, they don't give you attention as a pregnant woman.' Many women, including those who underwent elongation, suggested that elongated labia might be a 'source of dirt' because they produce and retain 'foul smelling fluids' when they become too long and are not washed thoroughly.

Is it About Ethnic Identity?

Previous research on labia elongation has largely framed it as a marker of femininity and a rite of passage within specific ethnicities and cultures (Tamale 2006; Larsen 2010; Arnfred 2011). I wanted to explore whether my participants made similar associations, and specifically how they constructed labia elongation in relation to ethnicity. Despite many women in my research indicating that they had undergone the practice and the men's wide knowledge about it, only a few said it was an "authentic" Shona cultural practice. Among these, was a woman who glorified the practice and urged other urban women to take part in it for the sake of 'our culture'. Most, however, claimed that labia elongation was a not part of 'Shona culture' or even that of their sub-ethnicities. They insisted this practice was a 'foreign adoption', and they 'only hear [about it] from others', hence, those doing it were 'running away from our Shona culture.' Instead, they associated the practice with certain minority ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, for example, the Remba, the Shangaan, the Venda, and those of Malawian and Mozambican origin, whom they said do it 'for culture'.

When I asked why labia elongation appeared common among the Shona, despite their claims that it was not part of that 'culture', participants cited peer pressure and family tradition (not ethnic tradition) as the main reasons behind the existence and spread of this practice. They said girls whose mothers or aunts underwent the practice were likely to be pressured into doing it. This was confirmed in many of their narratives, while those who had not yet elongated theirs were dismissive of the practice because 'no-one from my family told me about it.' Yet other women in the study elongated their labia,

even when their own mothers did not. Miranda shared a personal story of how her mother exclaimed in shock after seeing her elongated labia when they bathed together. What shocked Miranda’s mother was that she herself had not elongated hers, and she wondered how her daughter ended up pulling.

Many expressed that elongated labia had nothing to do with ethnicity, because ‘all ladies, particularly black ladies, are entitled to do it because every woman is expected to have them’. In the following excerpt, extracted from one of the all-female focus groups, Mary mentioned that even white women also elongate their labia:

Interviewer: In another group, we were discussing . . . whether this issue of pulling is just a Shona thing. Is it about the Shona culture or what? What’s your take?

Mary: What do you mean Shona?

Interviewer: To say that it’s only Shona women who pull their labia, what’s your take?

Miranda: Where did it originate from?

Mary: But some white women also pull.

Tanya: Uhhh, this is the first time that I am hearing that whites do it too (**Shuvai:** It’s passed down generations)

Mary: I have two of my [white] friends, I have actually seen that they have them.

Interviewers: From where did they say they got them?

Mary: Aah, they just said they also pull, saying you think we don’t know, we also know

Miranda: Who told them about it?

Mary: I don’t know. They said it’s not about black people only.

Maidei: So, I think it’s everywhere, they [people] love sex. The moment people discover there is something that makes you enjoy [it] more, they just start experimenting (**Mary:** And try it).

By mentioning that even white women do it, Mary is constructing labia elongation as a gendered practice that transcends ethnicity and even race. Towards the end of this group discussion, Mary reiterated that ‘if white ladies do it, why can’t we?’. Race also emerged in my conversation with Rudo, who also refused to link elongated labia to a particular ethnic group:

It is not about this or that group because if even a white man goes after a black person because of that . . . *dinji* [elongated labium] is very important, it’s sought after. If it was for sale, it would be valued at several thousands, if it could be sold (laughs), I would be having a lot of money by now, I might even be owning 100 million [dollars].

Most significant in both Mary and Rudo’s accounts is how they evoked whiteness, and the implication of this. By encouraging black women to engage in labia elongation because white women also do it, and because

white men go after black women with elongated labia, Rudo and Mary are symbolically constructing whiteness as superior. In fact, it was apparent that several participants associated white people with class, value, and ultimately superiority. For instance, some women told me how they were hoping to get white boyfriends or husbands because they believed they were from ‘an upper class’ and would treat them as an ‘equal’ as opposed to black men who are “controlling” because they are too much into ‘Shona culture’.

‘Why do you go to the gym – if you were Created Perfect?’

This provocative question was posed in a group conversation with men. This was after I asked them about their perception about labia elongation. Two men said that all women ‘must have’ elongated labia. In response to this remark, one man, Masimba who identified as Christian and spoke passionately against elongated labia repeatedly calling them ‘useless,’ remarked that ‘if a person [woman] was created normal, there is nothing to add or subtract.’ Masimba’s comment sparked a debate among the men, most of whom were his gym partners. Those who opposed him argued there was nothing unusual for a woman to enhance her genitalia by pulling their labia, just like him who goes to the gym to lift weights to enhance his physique or those men who circumcised for ‘hygiene’ purposes. In my 2012 study on how young Shona people in urban Harare perceive male circumcision as an HIV prevention measure, Christianity was one of the contentious issues. Those who identified as Christians during interviews expressed negative perceptions about male circumcision health intervention because they saw it as indirectly promoting promiscuity, thus going against their religious values (Venganai 2012). Yet, in these interviews, some men shared stories of church pastors who underwent male circumcision, not so much for HIV prevention, but to enhance their own their partners’ sexual pleasure (*ibid.*).

Women in interviews and group discussions also raised these contradictory views of whether God in Christianity discourses approves of this practice. This was usually in response to my question on why some women choose not to undergo elongation. Some said, ‘why were they [labia] created small? If they were necessary, they should have been created big like some [other] body parts.’ Others, however, challenged this view, for example Chido, another self-identifying Christian:

...the issue is, it’s not all about that God created me without them, if it was like that, people would not be applying those Black Opal³, people would not be trimming their eyebrows ... God created you with all those eyebrows, so why are you removing them? But it’s all about what people are encountering in their day-to-day lives.

When I asked Chido to clarify what she meant. She explained that married women must make certain sacrifices in order to deal with their husbands’ infidelity. Since there was a belief that a man was likely to cheat on his wife if she did not have elongated labia, some women ended up undergoing the practice in order to ‘keep’ their marriages. Nevertheless, most agreed that the presence of elongated labia does not make a man less promiscuous. Tanya, the pastor’s wife said she was not sure whether labia elongation was ‘satanic’ or ‘godly’, but added that:

...it wouldn’t be sinful to do it, [because according to the] bible, the woman is commanded to respect and submit to the husband, so if the husband thinks that he wants them [elongated labia] on his wife, the wife can go out of her way to have them.

Here, Tanya is emphasising that a good Christian wife must always do what the husband ‘wants’; a point reiterated by other women in different interviews. As Machingura and Nyakuhwa (2015:95) asserted, ‘in some cases the Bible is unfortunately evoked to support the superiority of men and the subordination of women’. What is ironic is how Tanya, as a woman, is invoking the bible not only to support labia elongation, but also to reinforce rather than challenge female subordination.

Comparing Male Circumcision and Labia Elongation: Promiscuity and Sexual Pleasure

In this section, I address Viviani’s (2015:21) proposition that ‘the symbolic meanings associated to the genitalia and their modifications ... appear to be a sort of sacrifice’. Viviani, who conducted research on genital modification practices such as labia elongation and male circumcision in South Africa, reflected that the notion of sacrifice ‘is connected to the idea of exchange’ (*ibid.*). In the context of my study on labia elongation, women constructed labia elongation as a female sacrifice and positioned themselves as sacrificial wives who *naturally* put their husbands’ interests, ahead of theirs. In other words, there appeared to be no immediate, physical benefit for women who engage in this practice. *They* do not enjoy sex more after pulling; it is, apparently, their husbands that do. Women do not pull to ensure that *they* do not cheat; they pull so that their husbands might not cheat. Consequently, this is a female practice done for the benefit of males, hence, it being called a female sacrifice.

While participants spoke significantly about labia elongation as female sacrifice, some men raised male circumcision as a male sacrifice equivalent to labia elongation. They gave the impression that they were willing to

circumcise should their partners ask them to. One of the men in the mixed-gender focus group said, 'it's rather selfish to expect her to do that [pull her labia], and when she asks you to circumcise you say no, so it's a two-way street.' Another also said he was more than willing to get circumcised. 'If she asks that I should get circumcised, then yah, we talk about it then, I will be more than glad to go get circumcised,' he explained.

Whereas these men constructed their love relationships as characterised by negotiations and mutual sexual sacrifices, women in this study did not agree with how these men were constructing themselves, and even called them 'selfish'. They felt that men undergo circumcision out of personal 'choice' rather than out of concern for their partners' desires. They expressed frustration that men are not considerate of women's sexual demands and needs. In the excerpt below, Shuvai, clearly emotional, told me that she tried without success to get her husband to circumcise, because she believed it would improve her own sexual enjoyment:

He didn't [circumcise]. he [asked] am I impotent? I tried my best to talk to him nicely, but he insisted that he was not impotent... [He asked] why should I get circumcised at my age? Then I said I am discovering the advantages of circumcision ...and he said it didn't matter. I realised I was not going to win ... he said I won't get circumcised. Why should I get circumcised? For what?

When I asked her why she wanted her husband to get circumcised, she said she wanted to 'taste' a circumcised penis. She was convinced that she would 'enjoy it, plus health wise [it demonstrates] smartness'. While Shuvai's response partly feeds into health discourses of male circumcision which presently associate it with better hygiene, it also expresses her desires and sexual fantasies of 'tasting' a circumcised penis, which she associated with sexual enjoyment. Other women also shared the belief that a circumcised penis was more hygienic so it was, therefore, not discouraging to perform oral sex. On the other hand, male sexuality, as depicted by Shuvai's husband's reaction, is not constructed in relation to giving sexual pleasure to women. Rather, it is constructed around notions of virility which Biri (2011) argued is characteristic of the Shona's version of masculinities.

Associations of labia elongation with enhanced sexual pleasure was a very significant theme in this study. Nevertheless, most of the men I spoke with claimed there was no difference in terms of sexual pleasure experienced in sleeping with a woman with or without elongated labia because for them, sex was all 'in the mind.' One man euphemistically remarked that 'at the end of the day, what a man just wants is a pot ... a pot, with handles or without,

a pot remains a pot’ which drew loud laughter from the group. Here, a ‘pot with handles or without’ implies a vagina with or without elongated labia. Other men claimed the only ‘[sexual] sensation that’s strikingly different’ is when they sleep with a virgin. They also said sex enhancing medicines and herbs could also enhance their sexual experience, and not labia elongation.

All the women, on the contrary, associated elongated labia with male sexual pleasure. This was evident in the way they frequently called them ‘daddy’s toys’ or *zvidhori* (dolls), because ‘men play with them’ during foreplay, while during intercourse, they helped in ‘caressing’ and ‘gripping’ the penis, while stopping it from ‘coming out.’ This is what women are told by other older women, notably sisters, aunts, and grandmothers (Khou 2009). In most of the participants’ narratives, female sexual pleasure was taken for granted, as they rarely raised the issue of women’s sexual pleasure. In one of the women’s focus group discussions, when two women (including one who had not elongated) questioned whether labia elongation also benefits women sexually, one woman, Mary, immediately chided them and told them that ‘the first person you must please is your husband’. In other words, Mary and others constructed labia elongation as a marital sacrifice. That sacrifice included relinquishing their own sexual desires and pleasures as married women. However, some women and men, although few, suggested that elongated labia enhances women’s own sexual pleasure, because when they are caressed they become ‘too sensitive’.

Although this should represent a positive view of the practice in relation to women’s sexuality, there were concerns that elongated labia might lead to women developing an excessive sex drive, especially if they pull their labia beyond normal length. While they could not agree on what they considered ‘normal’ size of labia, with others saying they should be the ‘size of a matchstick’, or the length of the index finger, they repeatedly said they must not be ‘too long’. Paidā emphasised that ‘once they are too long it becomes a problem [because] they bring a lot of [sexual] feelings ... that is why they don’t recommend young girls to pull them beyond the normal size’. In the mixed-gender group discussion, one woman shared a story of a man who presumably cut off his wife’s pulled labia when she became promiscuous after undergoing the practice. These narratives only emerged to problematise women’s promiscuity and heightened sex drive, but never in relation to men. While most female participants argued that it was in men’s nature to be promiscuous, they took very moralistic positions in condemning women who may cheat on their husbands for lack of sexual satisfaction.

Negotiating Identities, Gender, and Sexuality

From these accounts, labia elongation emerged as a practice through which women construct their identities in relation to gender and sexuality. Whereas men are simply the recipients of the assumed sexual consequences of the practice, for women, it is a sacrifice through which women attempt to conform to feminine sexual ideals. This resonates with Foucault-inspired feminist positions which view femininity as ‘a disciplinary regime ... achieved through a long process of labour to force the body into compliance with a feminine ideal...’ (Mills 2003:93). However, this ideal femininity is never unitary as its meaning shifts according to context and sometimes contradictory discourses and subjectivities. As my findings demonstrate, elongated labia can, on the one hand, signify a ‘good’ woman when done to please her husband, but, on the other hand, the practice represents a ‘bad’ woman if they are pulled too long or done with the intention of fulfilling her own sexual desires and pleasures. At the same time, labia elongation connotes superior status in some contexts, while it denotes inferiority in others. This relates to how people evoke discourses of modernity, culture and ethnicity, Christianity, desire, etc. Women in particular find themselves negotiating their identities in relation to these symbolic constructions. As Weedon (1987: 86-87) noted, ‘many women acknowledge the feeling of being a different person in different social situations which call for different qualities and modes of femininity.’ This was evident, for instance, in the way some women with no elongated labia expressed their anxiety about revealing their labial status in a context where they felt they might be denigrated. Nonetheless, shifting within these versions of femininity also demonstrates women’s agency.

The issue of agency was even more significant in the way some participants (as Christians) contested and reinterpreted Christian discourses in order to justify these traditional cultural practices, which have, since colonialism, been constructed by missionaries as pagan. At the same time, I argue that participants’ efforts to construct labia elongation not as a ‘cultural’ or ‘traditional’ practice, but as a social and gendered practice that transcends ethnic and racial identities was to affirm their ‘middle-class’ identities which they associate with modernity. Paradoxically, by sometimes evoking culture, emphasising that ‘we must go back to our culture’, they seemed ‘attracted to the notion of an essential or traditional [Shona] culture because having such a ‘culture’ affirmed the identities of black Zimbabweans as independent beings’ (Pattman 2001: 236) who have not been engulfed by westernisation.

Existing research on women’s vaginal practices concludes that they are an ‘expression of women’s power over their bodies and their sexual relationships’

(Bagnol and Mariano 2011:238). Labia elongation, in particular, is seen as a source of ‘empowerment and pride’ for African women who practice it (Tamale 2008). Most women’s narratives in my study, on the contrary, demonstrated how labia elongation is implicated in gendered power relations, not only between women and men, but also among women themselves.

While much of what participants did in the interviews was to construct labia elongation and male circumcision in particular ways using particular discourses, they also demonstrated that these are also embodied (and erotic) practices which some of them underwent. These findings seem consistent with Butler’s argument that ‘discourses do not circulate in abstract realms but reach into the very “matter” of bodies, shaping desires and intimate bodies of being in the world’ (Butler 1993 cited in Gannon and Davies 2012:74). Such findings are crucial as they trouble the usual representations of discourse as distinct from the material world, a critique raised by Spronk (2014:4) against Foucault and poststructuralist feminists’ work. For instance, she argues that their theoretical approaches are limited in ‘studying erotic practices’ and ‘sexual experience’ because their analytic focus is on discourse and identities.

Far from confirming the portrayal of women in patriarchal discourses as asexual beings, the women I spoke with were expressing their sexual desires and fantasies, for example, of sleeping with circumcised men, whom they perceived to offer better sexual satisfaction. Some men, too, were fantasising about having sex with women who have elongated their labia. Other scholars have written about young men from female circumcising communities in Senegal and Kenya, who express desire to marry uncircumcised women because they believe such women ‘take more pleasure in sex’ than circumcised women (Dellenborg 2004:87).

The Shona participants, as evidenced from my two studies, are now reconstructing the practice of male circumcision beyond ethnicity. Although, as highlighted earlier, this practice was almost non-existent in this ethnic group, they appear to have now embraced it mainly because of the perceived hygienic and sexual benefits and to a lesser extent wanting to be protected from HIV transmission.

Conclusion

This article focused on how young urban, Zimbabwean women and men from middle class backgrounds construct and make sense of genital modification practices of labia elongation and male circumcision, which are framed as “traditional”. Labia elongation and male circumcision emerged both as a material practices and as a symbolic markers through which young urban middle class adults negotiate identifications as gendered and sexual

actors in a post-colonial African context. But, rather than reproducing the communities of belonging usually associated with cultural practices as reflected in most literature – such as symbolising ethnic pride and/or ethnic identity – labia elongation and male circumcision, as constructed and experienced by participants in my study, produces other modes of identifications than the ones more readily recognized or assumed.

As my research findings demonstrate, labia elongation, at least in the Zimbabwean context, is no longer a practice which simply reflects ethnic and rural-urban demarcations or about women's strategy to hold on to their men. Rather, it is constructed significantly just as a practice for women, which they sometimes associate with their own pleasure. This raises questions about the Othering of particular categories of women, because how participants defined labia elongation in relation to personhood was not determined by categories of ethnicity, modern-traditional, or rural-urban, even though at times it appeared to be so. In thinking about what this practice serves in urban contemporary Zimbabwe, ideas about womanhood and the sacrifices that come with it are at the centre of women's (and men's) concerns, as reflected in notions of "completeness". The idea of a "normal" vagina as one without elongated labia is questioned, while having elongated labia is normalised especially by female participants in the different interview contexts.

Furthermore, Western paradigms of thinking – reflected in narratives by international institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) – that interpret female genital modification practices in Africa as harmful, dangerous, and unhealthy are implicitly questioned in this article. The limitations of these biomedical interpretations of African sexualities and cultural practices are quite evident in my study in which people rarely spoke about the "dangers" of labia elongation. Instead, we get a sense that for many women, this is an empowering practice, which improves their self-esteem as sexual beings, as Tamale (2008) also reports about Baganda women. However, I depart slightly from these conclusions and argue that feelings that derive from notions of being "complete" are contextual, contentious, and contradictory, such that at times they do not entail women's positive perceptions of themselves. As the article illustrates, although women who elongate their labia construct themselves as "complete" women in relation to those who do not, and labia elongation as a practice that binds marriages together, they also experience "incompleteness" as they fail to control their men's infidelity.

Nonetheless, the article demonstrated that Shona women (and men) are heterogeneous and do not operate with a fixed idea of what constitutes a traditional or modern custom. Rather, they provide their own explanatory (and highly contested) frameworks through which they define their

personhood and construct their identities in relation to labia elongation or male circumcision specifically and in relation to particular (dominant or marginal) discourse sexuality, tradition, custom, and ethnicity more broadly. They redefine these so called “traditional” practices in complex ways, and in the process redefine themselves as particular postcolonial urban, middle class African subjects.

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