Njambi’s article raises a number of very pertinent points about the discourses surrounding the range of what is referred to as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), particularly about the historical, colonial and gendered discourses of Otherness and the Cartesian thought on bodies. Njambi is to a large extent successful in disrupting the myths, placing in context and teasing out alternative readings by those involved in the practice of female circumcision/genital mutilation. Njambi is right to challenge both the type of intervention and the hypocrisy of those in the West about male circumcision, and other forms of bodily modification, which has not typically been viewed as mutilation. However, throughout this article, I find myself saying ‘YES, BUT…’.

I cannot escape the feeling reading this article that YES, although culturally such practices exist for women across Africa and elsewhere, it is hardly an appropriate justification. BUT, I would be reticent to place my concerns within the somewhat simplistic yet rigid pigeon-hole of the anti-FGM discourse as outlined by Njambi.

Referring first to the notion of culture, I am concerned that it is used as a justification for harmful practices. I believe that culture cannot be seen as a static or homogenous phenomenon. It is dynamic, it is multi-facettened, it is contextualised, collectively and individually, and it can simultaneously and contradictorily be both symbolic and real. In this regard, the ‘rite of passage as culturally determined’ argument for female circumcision/genital mutilation is an interesting one, as many presume if offers a justification and should not be interfered with by those outside of a given culture, but this belies the very nature of culture itself – which never stays the same for the individual or the collective and it means different things to individuals and communities despite claims to the contrary. Clearly, subtle and more explicit changes to signify the passage to adulthood have been and will continue to change over time, even if in some societies this occurs at a snail’s pace. At the same time, as Njambi’s article points out, it is wrong to presume that all factors associated with these ritual acts are barbaric. Describing her own story of 'Irua Ria Atumia' (female circumcision), Njambi reveals in this article, an intriguing insider perspective and uncovers the importance of ritual female sexuality through the

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supplementary experience of ‘Njoki’ in Kenya and the parallel – ‘okukalira enskio’ or ‘visiting the forest’ in Uganda. Both these descriptions offer alternative and contested readings, which contextualise the act of female circumcision as a pathway to enjoyable adult sexuality despite the disapproval of missionaries. In addition, the article does raise valid questions about the double standard of the West when looking at its own contradictory cultural practices such as male circumcision\(^3\), and other forms of bodily modification, which perhaps should be referred to as ‘mutilation’ too, such as piercings, tattooing, cosmetic and gender re-assignment surgeries\(^4\). In addition, I take on board recent debates about embodiment and concur that bodies are not necessarily ‘normal’ at birth but are in some way also socially constructed\(^5\). However, I cannot get away from the practical desire to eradicate practices which cause bodily or other harm to non-consenting children/adults. In this regard, the idea of basic ‘universal’ human rights, is one in which I feel the issue of female circumcision/genital mutilation can at least begin to be tackled\(^6\). This in itself is problematic due to the universal nature of such ideas, but it can serve as a useful starting point.

My response as ‘BUT’ then, appears when I read more about the physical (and related psychological) act of female circumcision/genital mutilation in the article and elsewhere. Personally, there is a gut response as it is hard to view such specific acts of clitoridectomy to infibulation as acceptable. Is this due to my own position as an outsider? Am I importing my beliefs? Yes, at some level, probably, but it is also about making a stand somewhere – a stand that I would make with similar non-consensual practices here in the ‘developed’ West too. Trying to understand these positions, ethically, intellectually and politically is a challenge, which to her credit, Njambi’s article provides a useful vehicle for.

However, in the article, Njambi crudely points to two types of argument in the anti-FGM discourse – ‘hardline’ or ‘softline’, which in my opinion, are far too simplistic and do not take into account the range of complexities, contradictions and tensions that lie within such discourses. Such typologies do nothing to allow for the realities and the possibilities that can and do exist between and within anti-FGM positions. Njambi’s discussion of the anti-FGM discourse starts off promisingly, but I feel the article does at times collapse

\(^3\) It is curious to note that the WHO and AMA have images of a circumcised penis as normal and totally inappropriate that it should only be white, but I would view circumcision in males as a Jewish rather than a Judeo-Christian tradition as stated. Refer to NOHARM website: [http://www.noharmm.org/](http://www.noharmm.org/) last date accessed: 7/6/04


discussions into ‘one homogenous rubric’, despite her attempts to do otherwise. This raises questions about ‘essentialism’ and ‘authenticity’ – concepts, which I seek to disrupt.

Through my own doctoral thesis on the multiplicity (or polyvocal) of Black female subjectivities in Britain, I maintain that there must be a way of embracing theoretically and empirically the heterogeneous nature of difference and diversity, in ways which move beyond dichotomous notions of Otherness.

Traditional discourses of Otherness reflected in anti-FGM positions as outlined in the article then, clearly fail to fully appreciate the multiple nuances that exist. From my somewhat privileged and yet ‘minority’ position as a Black British feminist, I view the anti-FGM discourse as one of concern, but also one of necessity. It is a paradox, in which perhaps we all share. The issue is to find appropriate places from which we can speak as outsiders or insiders. Surely it is possible to speak about issues from outside one’s sphere of reference? Isn’t the critical point to insist that a voice or discourse must not simplistically speak from a position of power and privilege in ways that silence or indeed, deafen? Similarly, it is important to remember that speaking from within one’s sphere of reference should not advance essentialised notions of authenticity, but rather should open up the possibilities and realities of what I have termed ‘polyvocal spaces’.

Njambi’s own personal narrative offers a way into exploring these polyvocal spaces. Her own account serves as an example of how the practice of female circumcision can be negotiated and interpreted. In addition and in contrast, Waris Dirie’s biography graphically depicts a different and more coercive experience of female circumcision and the case of Fauziya Kasinga poses a vivid example of the complex interplay of experience, victim-hood and of the assumptions made by the Western media and others. Thus, all of these different accounts need to be embraced as part of a deeper, multi-layered reading of difference – one that requires more sophisticated forms of analysis so that all of these women’s voices can be fully heard.

Reading and reflecting on this highly emotive topic of female circumcision/genital mutilation - I am conscious of the imperialistic connotations which continue to demonise Black, and all those deemed as Other’s cultures. I am also acutely aware of the highly gendered nature of such discourses, which reinforce both a sense of ‘erotic voyeurism’ and the need to curb Black women’s agency and position. Furthermore, I am aware of my own Western intellectual tradition, which is shaped through pervasive discourses, that has implicitly and explicitly viewed knowledge other than its own as inferior. However, I

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11 In this regard, I welcome Njambi’s reference to Sarah Baartmann as a valid case in point.
am also deeply concerned about any practices, cultural or otherwise, which are non-consensual and directly involve bodily harm against women (or men), and specifically children. I cannot simply ignore the physical realities of the range of actions attributed to female circumcision/genital mutilation. Yes, on many levels, my own intervention comes from a variety of contradictory and privileged positions, but these should not prevent my ability to speak. I would not presume though to speak for all, for some or for a few. I assert that there are many interpretations about female circumcision/genital mutilation from those within and outside of the range of such practices, and all of these are valid and point to the complex nature of the social. However, at times, certain forms of intervention are required - thus I advocate a multi-faceted human rights framework be advanced, which offers a ‘universal standard’ but which is also grounded within national, collective and individual levels.

I believe that there are ways beyond Western interventions that demonise other cultures that must include those within the community/culture in ways that allow for agency and empowerment. There must be a framework for theory and action, which does facilitate a sound appreciation of culture without resorting to the physical even ritualistic harm of women’s bodies. For example, I am heartened by recent comments from authors such as Toubia, Dorkenoo, Sompo-Cessay and others who pointed out that FGM is just one of many harmful practices affecting women in traditional societies and that wider social, economic and political factors are also significant. This recognition has contributed to grass-roots movements for the abolition of FGM. One successful programme is the introduction of ‘initiation without mutilation’ in the Gambia. Another is the ‘Circumcision Through Words’ programme in Kenya – Maendeleo ya Wanawake (MYWO) a Kenyan national women’s group, committed to the elimination of Female Genital Cutting (FGC) through acknowledging and emphasising the social rite of puberty as opposed to the dangers of clitoridectomy. I also recognise the work undertaken to find appropriate


See also RAINBO website at: http://www.rainbo.org/, an African led international non-governmental organisation that aims to enhance global efforts to eliminate the practice of Female Circumcision / Female Genital Mutilation (FC/FGM) through facilitating women's self-empowerment and accelerating social change - Last date accessed: 7/6/04. Caroline Scherf, ‘Women in Africa have many other problems besides genital mutilation’, in the British Medical Journal (2000), Vol 321: 7260, p570 http://bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/321/7260/570/a last accessed June 7/04.

13 Y Sompo-Ceesay, BAFROW (Foundation for Research on Women's Health, Productivity and Development), Gambia, personal communication with Scherf

14 Through the use of a video – Secret and Sacred, the dangers of female circumcision are highlighted and the emphasis is placed upon acknowledging the rite of puberty as a form of social seclusion for girls/women. During a period of a week, girls/women are taught about their social roles which are then celebrated through the rituals of dance and song. The Programme is supported by through the Programme for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) based in Seattle, Washington, USA. Refer to James Stanlie M, ‘Listening to Other(ed) Voices: Reflections around Female Genital Cutting’, in (Eds) James Stanlie M and Robertson Claire C,
terminology and frameworks to attempt to explore this emotive area in context and without judgement. As Njambi points out there are in fact specific practices from diverse locations, which are often ‘forced’ into the term - ‘female circumcision’ or ‘female genital mutilation’ and this needs to be unpacked. Thus, moves to refer to such practices as ‘female genital cutting’ (FGC) are welcomed as they offer a way out of traditional assumptions or what Gunning calls, ‘arrogant perception’ to allow for deeper and richer readings of a highly complex area.

I would not therefore advocate the anti-FGM discourse as outlined by Njambi, but I would position myself as someone who would seek to understand the context, gendered, colonial and otherwise, and would seek to remove any form of coerced non-consensual harm from cultural or other acts such as rites of passage.

I strongly concur with Njambi’s position of the fact that oppressed women have more complex stories to offer, that we have agency and subjectivity from which we are able to filter and resist rather than merely being passive victims/objects. Further, that clumsy attempts to equate the position of women in all contexts as one solely of patriarchal oppression are grossly inadequate. There are many sites of oppression for women deemed as Other and these need to be acknowledged by Western feminists. Neither should attempts be made to essentialise the varying positions of Black and other women deemed as Other.

The article certainly attempts in the latter stages at least, to examine the ambiguities, complexity, contradictions and negotiations of FGC. In fact, the article promotes a much-needed dialogue, which attempts to looks at difference without objectifying the Other and to find sites of subversion and resistance. Thus, as Njambi concludes, her article may not be about female circumcision as such, but is perhaps better read as a much-needed questioning of the assumption of ‘normality’, and the ‘right’ of the West to gaze and intervene at the expense of those defined and excluded as Other. In this regard, this article has true merit and demands further dialogue and action.

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