A Call for The Epistemic Fluidity of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting

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The historically Eurocentric discourse on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) has often framed the practice as morally unacceptable. This conceptualization of FGM/C continues to thrive through dualist and positivist analyses of FGM/C, portraying human rights and culture as mutually exclusive, and separating African women's bodies from their various contexts and ignoring profound linguistic differences. In this article, we advocate for an equitable way to approach epistemic difference through linguistic anthropology. According to the World Health Organization, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting refers to the complete or partial ablation of external female genitals, often practiced as a rite of passage to womanhood in many countries all over the world (Jirovsky, 2010).

Though its origins are still unclear, a few scholars believe the practice originated from ancient Egypt (current Sudan), due to the discovery of fifth century BC circumcised mummies (Llamas, 2017:2; Knight, 2001). While scholars like Andro and Lesclingand (2016) suggest that FGM/C began in the Middle East and spread through Arab merchants, in Africa records of FGM/C can be found in European explorers' accounts such as Gollaher (2000: 190), who presents an early seventeenth century excerpt from a German explorer's report on FGM/C:

The girls also have their special circumcision; for when they reach their tenth or eleventh year, they insert a stick, to which they have attached ants, into their genitories, to bite away the flesh. Indeed, in order that all the more be bitten away, they sometimes add fresh ants.

Such quintessential narratives fit in the primitive and savage picture of African people portrayed in Joseph Conrad's famous book, Heart of Darkness (Achebe, 2010; Conrad, 1902). At the time, practices such as Female Genital Cutting were portrayed as "a violation of the colonizers' notion of good Christian morals and values, contrary to progress, civilization, and modernity"(Kratz, 1994). It is hence fair to conclude that early ethnographies capturing FGM/C were deeply rooted in a Eurocentric, positivist epistemology. The Eurocentric framings of FGM/C continue to underpin current discourses concerning the practice. Currently, the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) classify the practice as a violence against human rights, due to its "severe impact on women's reproductive health" (Refaei *et al.*, 2016; Miller and Moneti, 2008; Almroth et al., 2005). Dwelling on the context of South Africa, Robins (2008) explains that human rights are often seen as opposed to traditional culture in postcolonial contexts. Yet, contrasting rights and traditional culture could be problematic, as it implies that the two terms are mutually exclusive. According to Morreira (2016), rights are by-products of a cultural context at a specific time in history. Thus, rights and traditional culture, as juxtaposed in many discourses, are interchangeable since their encounter simply represents an epistemic difference. As a matter of fact, development theorists such as Ferguson (1990) argue that many post colonies are governed by a Western hegemonic discourse of rights, informed by a specific socioeconomic and cultural context. The overlap of this narrative with feminist discourses has led to a discursive debate. Unlike Western liberal feminists and many international organizations who contend that Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting reinforces men's power over women by controlling their sexual agency, a post-colonial feminist analysis of the issue offers a more nuanced opinion on the practice since the post-colonial analytic lens requires that African woman's rights ought to be adjusted to each specific circumstance (Diop et al., 2017; Oyekan, 2014).

On the one hand, there is a homogenous discussion around FGM/C which is dovetailed by the singular corporeal

Africa that is abject and immutable. This renders the women discussed as passive subjects with no agency and this is a problematic framing. Attending to this paradox, Njambi (2004) specifically stresses that the homogeneity of FGM/C discourses characterized by the demonization of culture overshadows many African women's voices and FGM/C experiences. Dwelling on her own experience, she explains that she was the one who insisted on getting cut as she wanted to be included in the "grownups" conversations. She also recalls that during her operation, her clitoris' hood was "cut through its apex, which caused the hood to split open and the clitoris to be completely exposed, an exposure that has been associated with sexual pleasure" (Njambi, 2004: 294). African feminism supports the claim that most narratives discuss the African woman's FGM/C experience whilst ignoring social locations, ethnicities, and other important variables that contribute to the intersectionality and complexity of an African woman's experience (Diop et al., 2017). This separation of the African woman's body and experience from its context could be due to the universalization of the female body by Western liberal feminists and international organizations. There is a need for nuance in understanding what FGM/C means to different contexts and across cultures as well, as this will not 'other' women who believe in the practice. The main question is how do we establish an ethical space of listening and what do we do with marginalised voices of women who are demonised for believing in the practice?

On the other hand, the universalisation and policing of the female body occurs on different levels. To elaborate the issue at hand, Njambi (2004) explores and criticizes the dualism between female body representations and cultural contexts by cross examining whether it can be separated from cultural context. By critically analysing Western liberal feminisms portrayal of the female body and culture, she concludes that the female body and culture are far from being mutually exclusive and stresses that female bodies should be represented within their cultural contexts for their heterogeneity to be understood. One could argue that this separation is because of the hegemonic representations of the female body. The roots of this hegemony can be traced back to colonization and neo-colonization (Smith, 2011:1). Just as other cultural practices like foot binding in China, FGM/C is often judged as a violation of Western notions of good morals and values as well as a hindrance to development (Kratz, 1994). Yet, Merry (2013) points out that "In the United States, domestic violence, rape in wartime, and stalking are not labeled as harmful cultural practices nor are forms of violence against women's bodies such as cosmetic surgery, dieting and the wearing of high heels."

This goes to show how relative the concept of violence against women's body is. In her research, Smith (2011) features the significance of understanding social contexts in the standardization of sex-based body modification. She discusses the transnational view of sex-based body changes in Senegal, utilizing the example of FGM in the USA, and breast implants in Senegal. At the end of the study, it was concluded that both the Senegalese and American women found the practice they were new to absolutely unjustifiable and unethical. Women who underwent FGM/C favourably in Senegal thought breast implants were a terrible idea as they wondered how one would breastfeed without any issue. Similarly, women in USA were horrified at the "brutality" of FGM/C (Smith, 2011). This confirmed that equivalent discourses are very hard to accomplish in contexts where disparities between cultural understandings exist. Collectively, the above scholars highlight the need for a nuance and a critical examination of FGM/C as deploying it from the human rights angle that frames the practice as a backward practice falls into the trap of dualisms that [re]create the 'other' and at the bare minimum, reproduces a saviour syndrome mentality that uses feminism and human rights as a springboard.

As mentioned above, the homogenization and criminalization of FGM/C on the African continent has both facilitated the erasure of many women's experiences and hindered an equitable cultural dialogue in the face of epistemic difference. In considering the practice's conceptual and linguistic heterogeneity, there may be room for noting potentially profound linguistic differences between post-colonial official languages and local terms of FGM/C. Although the term "Female Genital Cutting" was introduced by the United Nations in the 1990s for fear of demonizing cultures, religions and communities, many people in the international community still refer to the practice as Female Genital Mutilation (Miller and Moneti, 2008). In the Bambara context of Mali however, it may be argued that the English and French terminologies were coined, not with the aim of translating from one language to another, but rather, to describe the practice based on Eurocentric ways of knowing and being. This is supported by the fact that the word mutilation, for example has nothing to do with Boloko (the Bambara language term used for FGM/C in Mali and Burkina Faso), which translates to "Handwashing", suggesting an act of purification. While there have been scholarly attempts to understand the Bambara speakers' take on Boloko, it was often from an FGM/C linguistic

epistemology, hence reproducing the existing hegemony around FGM/C discourse (Munir, 2014; Mespl *et al.*, 2015; Akinsulure-Smith, Chu and Krivitsky, 2018). Truly, there has been little attempt in the literature to explore the linguistic anthropological implications of this paradox between Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, and Boloko. Furthermore, in the Maasai and Wolof languages FGM/C are "Emurata" and "Djongal" which literally translate to "circumcision", rather than "mutilation". In such contexts, it could be useful to consider Frantz Boas' theory of linguistic relativity, the thesis that the grammar of the particular language we speak affects the way we think about reality, suggests that each language has to be studied in and for itself (Haas, 1977).

In a linguistics study, Lucy (1992) uses linguistic relativism hypothesis to study the epistemic differences of English and Yucatec Maya, an indigenous language spoken in southeastern Mexico. The author's hypothesis was that "English speakers should attend relatively more to the shape of objects and Yucatec speakers should attend relatively more to the material composition of objects in other cognitive activities" (ibid, 1992:182). To test the hypothesis, the study focused on a series of activities where the number of objects and substances varied. At the end, different patterns of thinking related to the contrasts between the two dialects were observed. It was found that English speakers tend to group objects in terms of shape, whereas Yucatec speakers grouped objects in terms of substance. This example highlights how language potentially plays an important role in the way individuals interact with and make sense of their environment. Therefore, the cultural linguistic paradox between Boloko and FGM/C could potentially lead to insightful implications for human rights and gender-based violence discourse and programs on the continent and elsewhere.

There is a need to not only address this linguistic gap often found in FGM/C research, but to equally make knowledge about African women's FGM/C experiences, not in a manner that romanticizes, or exoticizes otherness, but in an authentic way. Every researcher in geographical locations overshadowed by a hegemonic epistemology should be encouraged to carry out research that takes local epistemologies into account and challenges metanarratives (Mususa, 2012). In the case of FGM/C, the aim would be to expand and promote different ways of knowing in order to bring people to the consciousness that FGM/C exists, and that Boloko exists too. As such, it is our opinion that research on FGM/C terminiologies in languages such as Bambara, Wolof, or Maasai FGM/C might provide more insights on the practice. This will directly address the urgent need to explore the present linguistic and epistemic differences between native and foreign terminologies of FGM/C, leading to a more equitable debate on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting.

In conclusion, current discourses around the practice of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting on the African continent need to be more nuanced in order to include marginalized narratives. As such, an FGM/C epistemological reform would help take into account profound differences in the ways of engaging with the practice on the continent and beyond.

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