

Multiple identities: gender, power and the production of anthropological knowledge

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This article discusses my “outsider within” status in terms of gender, age, nationality, race and perceived positionality and alliance with the “Whiteman” (by virtue of my western educational status) during my fieldwork. My research centered on the contentious debate over female circumcision in Southwest Cameroon. It examines the gulf between perceived anti-female circumcision activism and the quest for anthropological knowledge through ethnography. My multiple identities expose illuminating insights about the larger global context of power in which the ritual procedure is intertwined and how they may be shaping the practices on the ground, as well as on the political complexity of both theoretical and applied research.

Introduction: insider/outsider

This paper raises some of the issues that are often masked and engendered by the insider/outsider distinction. Specifically, I examine how my own multiple identities as a man, insider/outsider in Cameroon and an African studying in Europe impacted on the production of knowledge on the contentious issue of female circumcision in Southwest Cameroon and the illuminating insights that my “identity difficulties” exposed. Of primary importance is my gender, namely male, since I was a man researching a presumed “female issue” and anti-female circumcision advocacy is mostly conducted by women. Then, I was an insider/outsider (a Cameroonian from the western Grassfields region, an African studying in Europe), and like any other immigrant I was perceived as rich by local standards, a friend of the “Whiteman”, and a powerful agent of neo-colonialism by virtue of my western educational background which is perceived as my own positionality against female circumcision. My age (34) and to an extent my spare frame, however, mediated my gender, permitting me to develop rapport with various stakeholders.

My experience challenges the traditional insider/outsider distinction because it is simplistic and tends to freeze other differences such as gender, age, race, sexual orientation and class. This multiplex of identities suggests that everyone is an insider/outsider to a certain degree, which is better captured by the concept “situated knowledges” (Narayan 1993). In other words, we can only be insiders in a limited sense, not to all sectors of a community, because knowledge is relational, relative and positional and depends on one’s location within the social structure of a given community. This implies that we anthropologists should go beyond the old objectivity model which implied impartiality and distancing from one’s social characteristics: gender, class, age, ethnicity, political and ideological views, among others.

Until recently, doing fieldwork at home was paradoxically an unfashionable mode in this field of human enquiry, even though neither insider nor outsider has privileged access to anthropological knowledge, given the opportunities and constraints of either position. The advantages of being an insider, no matter how limited, have been extolled and the constraints and opportunities variously highlighted (see for instance, among others, Asad 1982, Fahim 1982, Narayan 1993). Ironically, native anthropologists were never recognised in the frames of anthropological knowledge production. Among the advantages of being an insider are the presumed high level of language proficiency, a cultural intimacy resulting from the longer period of time spent within the culture, the easy establishment of trust, and a lesser tendency for ethnographic partners to attempt to impress an insider (unlike an outsider) and to show a better portrait of themselves. For insiders, the urge to impress is less strong and they can thus get a more frank picture of the cultural field under investigation.

The same cultural intimacy can in itself be disadvantageous: insiders tend to take certain things for granted, without any question. For instance, an insider's awareness of a norm makes it even harder for him or her to discuss it with respondents because of its taken-for-granted existence. This is unlike an outsider, who can adopt the position of a novice – someone for whom every detail has to be explained. And above all, being an outsider further implies that social norms do not apply as strictly as they would when being an insider, and that informants are more likely to discuss views that would be considered offensive were it with a researcher from within the culture. Before I deal with the problems raised by my multiple identities and their illuminating impact on my fieldwork and data analysis process, I consider it necessary to set the scene for my ethnographic encounter

Background: a culture contact zone

The Ejagham people number about 200,000, and are found between the Cameroon-Nigeria frontiers with a larger segment of their population in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Such border areas, as studies demonstrate, are reputed to have a high prevalence of sexually transmissible diseases, including AIDS (Orubuloye et al 1994:87, Tierney 1990, among others), because of the presence of high-risk groups which include mobile actors such as drivers, customs agents, police, gendarmes and military officers. Although generally enclaved, the area is and has always been of strategic importance since the colonial days. It served as a slave trade route between the Western Grassfields and the coastal region, and today facilitates trade between Nigeria and Cameroon on the one hand, and the West and Central African regions on the other. The people's link to the national, regional and international economic system and their historic patterns of interaction with outsiders given their borderline location has impacted on their sexual political economy. The area is characterised by multiple flows as mobile actors are constantly passing into and out of the region spreading new ideas, values and diseases. Their location on the margins of a culture contact zone (Bizzell 1997) is the real issue for the inhabitants on the debate over female circumcision because of the multiple fields of power that surround them. Culture contact zones (Bizzell 1997) are social spaces where cultural encounters take place, and in which clashes often occur in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their effects as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.

The aim of my research in Southwest Cameroon among Ejagham tribes was to document transformations in the practice and institution of female circumcision in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the interaction of powerful local, national and global stakeholders occupying different power fields in the anti-female circumcision and HIV/AIDS fight.

Until the turn of the last century, female circumcision was the precondition for membership into the Moninkim female ritual society. This exclusively female socialisation institution, whose values are publicly enacted and re-enacted through the dancing of the NKIM dance (a ritual dance whose initiation procedure includes female circumcision, seclusion, indoctrination and an elaborate outdoor ceremony), is believed to be the repository of gendered knowledge and feminine personhood. For centuries, Moninkimhood was the exclusive preserve and monopoly of Ejagham upper class families, although so-called “slave families” (families descended from slaves) gradually came to adopt the institution for purposes of identification with the mainstream. Despite transformations in the meaning of the performances from ritual to spectacle, its meaning and saliency as a marker of gendered personhood and ethnic identity has remained. This is because not only the initiates and their families, but also members of their extended kinship network, achieved prominence due to their association with the initiate.

The advent of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has given rise to deep intergenerational conflicts. On the one hand, conservatives are insisting that female circumcision provides a useful moral check against inordinate sexuality and the ravages of the pandemic because it is presumed to make women reserved, thereby turning the case against AIDS for the case for female circumcision. On the other hand, progressives among the people, civil society activists and the government are opting for the eradication of the violent ritual cutting practices because of the harmful and traumatic effects, including the bloodletting which can lead to the transmission of HIV to participants. Both ardent traditionalists and modernists are all elaborating discourses on women’s bodies and their sexuality within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The former, who are advocating for the continuation of female circumcision as a mechanism of control over women, maintain that by sapping women’s sexual enjoyment it provides a moral check and “native” antidote against the pandemic and is therefore functional. The latter are against it, while another group maintains an ambivalent attitude. When faced with the dangers of the ritual cuttings and its likelihood of transmitting HIV, some advocate the medicalisation of the ritual procedures. Faced with NGOs bringing gifts to lure them away from the ritual practice, some have opted to collect the gifts and thereafter to continue with the ritual practices within the private sphere of their households. This debate therefore pits western rational science/medicine and knowledge systems, represented by the Cameroonian state and NGOs in the anti-circumcision campaigns and local knowledge, culture and tradition against various internal actors (segments) of Ejagham society. There is, however, a lack of concrete scientific evidence to back up the claim of biomedical actors, which seems to hinge on cultural practices as cast in stone and static whereas such practices are constantly changing in the light of new circumstances. In other words, practices are open to modernisation and rationalisation over time.

In the face of the ensuing ferocious debate, the obligation of circumcision was waived in the 1990s for some members of the Moninkim cult, probably due to intercultural contact, the anti-female circumcision, anti-HIV/AIDS advocacy championed by local

NGOs such as ABEMO, the Inter-African Committee Against Harmful Traditional Practices and the Association for the Fight Against Female Genital Mutilation among others, and their external allies. But equally or more important is the ageing of the initial group of initiatees. Ironically, the movement against the ritual cutting practices has produced a backlash marked by outright resistance, ambivalence, simultaneous acceptance and contestation of the anti-circumcision campaign messages. Although the level of resistance varies across socio-economic classes, the practices are increasingly being visited on younger girls at tender ages so as to stifle resistance. "Children should not grow up and start resisting the cuttings under the influence of the 'Whiteman'," one informant told me in June 2007. The "Whiteman" is used here in a rather paradoxical sense among the older and the younger generation. To the former, it represents anything believed to be both disruptive and repugnant: the contestation of traditional value systems such as female circumcision, modern religion, the critical spirit acquired from formal education, claims over children and individual rights, television and pornographic films which display men and women kissing and making love, seductive dressing styles among females and in fact chaos and disorder, a contrast between traditional ideals and actual behavioural practices among the youths, and so on. But to the latter, it is a shorthand for modernity, epitomised by freedom to question everything, to make personal decisions and choices, and to be free from the shackles of tradition as an aberrant past.

It was against this backdrop of contestation, resistance and debates that I entered the field with all hopes of "getting it easy" since I am a black African, a Cameroonian national, and have worked in the area as an HIV/AIDS educator, during which time I noticed the stark disagreements between modern medicine and traditional practices.

As I will show, the influence of my "multiplex identities" on my fieldwork shows that the people's diverse reactions reflect the larger global context of power in which the contentious cultural practice of female circumcision is enmeshed. This power nucleus may be shaping the practices on the ground. This is evidenced by the ambiguous and often shifting positions of internal stakeholders, especially when faced with the global network of local, national and international NGOs calling for eradication of the ritual procedures. However, it will be germane that I first highlight the problems encountered during this dialogue with my ethnographic partners so as to provide for contextual understanding, before examining the influence of my multiple identities and their impact and how I dealt with the problems that ensued.

From enthusiasm to problems

My flight from Budapest, Hungary landed in Douala, Cameroon on February 11th, 2006. Boiling with enthusiasm, I headed straight for Ejagham land, hardly predicting any obstacles on my way given my earlier familiarity with the region as an HIV/AIDS educator and my kinship ties to some of the people living there. As a national with firsthand acquaintance of the local lingua franca, pidgin English and the English language, which are the vehicles for social communication, I felt I would have an "easy ride".

However, I quickly encountered a good number of problems. In the following sections I will reflect on how I had to grapple with these, one of which rather served as a useful window through which to understand the society, the power play going on at various levels, between generations, between internal and external actors and the

issues under investigation in disguise. In other words, I deal here with how these problems illuminated my perspective and the data analysis process. These conundrums included the geographical distances between various clans and villages, the poor and seasonal access roads, and the presumed “bad faith” of some researchers of the area who were described as exploiting the people and departing without a trace after their studies, without any apparent benefits of the latter accruing to the people. And most important of all was my perceived identity as an international student and “bush faller” (returned immigrant) studying at a European university, a friend to the Whiteman and therefore an accessory of neo-colonialism.

My perceived poverty

My perceived “poverty” was unexpected and embarrassing when compared to other returned migrants who were openly and ostentatiously displaying wealth through status symbols. My problems with mobility seemed to be a clear sign of my less than affluent status. The various Ejagham clans are far away from each other. The interior villages are both enclaved and underdeveloped. This implies that I constantly had to cover very long distances on foot, trekking at times for as much as 10 hours through mosquito and “black fly” infested equatorial forest. This was the case from Babong where the newly constructed road network ends to the hinterland villages of the Lower Ekwe region on the Cameroon-Nigeria border (like Babi, Mbofong, Okuri, and Ekoneman–Awa), where there are still very strong sentiments in favour of female circumcision. I was trapped by heavy downpour in some villages for several days. This greatly disrupted my initial schedule. However, the people at times sympathised with my covering such long distances on foot paths only to come and talk with them and were consequently receptive to what they described as my “foolish” questions.

This inaccessibility of the study sites highlights the spatial geography and limitations of most rural development interventions including the anti-female circumcision and HIV/AIDS fight. NGOs are usually concentrated in urban areas where there are roads and hardly go into the hinterlands which are the very hub of resistance. Ejagham people in the hinterland villages constantly cast their resistance against female circumcision in terms of state negligence and marginalisation in the sharing of the national cake. They are symbolic citizens as they pay taxes but have no roads, no pipe-borne water, and are strangers to electricity and other basic social amenities. They are known only during electoral campaigns, and although they never vote, others – usually their kith and kin within the top brass of the centralised administrative system – usually rig the elections and write motions of support to the powers that be on their behalf.

I further kept my clothing simple by local standards to avoid being associated with wealth, and also partly as a response to the harsh weather conditions in the area. Most people were rather surprised that I was going about in bathing shoes and with a T-shirt like any ordinary villager socialising with them over palm wine. I constantly had to make offerings of palm wine so as to enter into conversation with people, particularly during the first few weeks after my arrival in the locality. To those who knew where I was attending school, it was a surprise, but on my part, it was a mere adaptation strategy. The tropical sun made life almost impossible for me as the heat was too intense (though at the same time a native researcher from Holland was going about in his suit every day).

Bridging the gender divide: age and gender as mediating factors

My letter of introduction, which only a few administrative authorities were curious to read as part of the procedure of entering the field, framed my research as “gender and social changes in women’s life in Ejagham land”. This implied that I was doing a study on “women”, but men’s perspectives were also required, given the relationship between the two. Partly because of this some people nicknamed me “women’s friend”, while the women called me “our husband” given my omnipresence around them during social gatherings at which I was unobtrusively observing, taking photographs or identifying and having appointments with potential informants. The point is that given the sensitive nature of the topic, I had to start with less threatening topics. Women’s problems and issues of development provided an entry point. Most often, my female respondents insisted that I drink or eat with them, and at times I hesitantly accepted, so as to maintain a good relationship and to develop rapport.

Although I cannot speculate about what the obstacles would have been if a woman were conducting this study, or a non-African, it is obvious that my age mediated the encounter and to some extent dissolved the gender divide. Elderly people often addressed me as their son and I reciprocated with “Papa” or “Mami” depending on gender. In most African societies, this is a type of symbolic kinship and a sign of respect. It implies that they could equally have given birth to me in a narrow sense. In a larger context, a child belongs to the whole community, and his/her upbringing is the responsibility of each and every member of the community. In this regard, I often cast my fieldwork as a learning encounter for posterity and most elderly people were always very willing to address issues frankly. They knew that they were teaching me since my age (34) and outsider status gave me the leverage to ask even very intimate questions, a thing an insider might have been unable to do.

The activists target women and tend to give the impression that female circumcision is strictly women’s business, done on and by women. I was therefore seen as breaking gender roles and some men were quick to tell me that only women are well placed to discuss the issue of female circumcision. As a man of small frame, I look like a boy, a physical characteristic that made it possible for me to be able to interact with and to interview young women. To avoid suspicion, most of these interviews in the course of which I probed into intergenerational conflicts, sexual and reproductive health matters and contestation over values took place at the homes of these young women, at times under the passive watchful gaze of their parents/guardians. Some, however, were suspicious – as one man asked me: “Why are you so much interested in our women? You must be women’s friend? Female circumcision is women’s business”.

While conventional fieldwork dictates that we interview each sex separately from the other, I did not stick to this rigid norm. Everybody was either enthusiastic to be part of the discussion or to know what others felt about the ritual cuttings. Interviews where both women and men were present proved to be very instrumental and productive, especially as women and men sometimes debated the issue and openly clashed, thereby bringing different perspectives to the fore and raising critical issues for eventual follow up. Their debates often provided useful insights which segregated interviews would likely not have provided. This was especially the case with the thorny issue of circumcised women’s presumed inability for sexual response, one of the key arguments of the anti-female circumcision advocacy camp. An initiate, Atabe, stated for instance that:

It has affected my life in no way because first of all, we are reasoning today that if you are circumcised, if you are not careful, you cannot give birth to children. But I was circumcised before I ever saw my menses. I have since then continued to see my menses, given birth to my three children. I see nothing disturbing me. I have continued to have nice and enjoyable sex with my husband, very good for sixteen years at this material moment, if my husband says oya, [laughs], let us go [and have sex], we will. [Laughter.] I see no good reason in it. I felt that it was lack of circumcision that made a woman to have interest in sex but now, the thing or not [meaning circumcision or no circumcision], you still want to have sex, do what you are supposed to do. [Laughter.] (Atabe, interview with others present, 20/03/06)

The monetisation of female circumcision

Although I thought my position as insider would make my research easier, it was actually my position as an outsider that permitted me to ask and be told as much as I wanted to hear – except in instances where people insisted that I pay them for the information they provided. Although most people spoke generously about “women’s problems”, which was the general topic of my research, once the discussion shifted to female circumcision, they expected payment. Intervening NGOs have unwittingly made them realize that “female circumcision is money”. This has been done partly through the lavish entertainments that often characterise anti-female circumcision activism.

Anti-female circumcision NGOs usually share food and drinks at the end of every campaign session, workshop or conference. The impression often created by these events – which are often orchestrated to lure people to come out in great numbers so that photographs can be taken and presented to funders to attract more funds – is that female circumcision is closely associated with money. When some circumcisers who had pledged to give up the trade five years before at a public conference in Yaounde were questioned as to why they were still in active service, they pointed out that actually honouring this pledge would have meant forsaking the treasured privilege of being invited to “eat and drink” at various anti-female circumcision gatherings.

This NGO attitude further led some individuals within the study population to make unrealistic demands on me.

You have come from the Whiteman’s country with money. We have already vibrated too much. Whatever we have consumed here has evaporated ... Give us wine to drink. What we have already given you [on female circumcision] is too much. We can only promote your cultural absorption if you give us what we want. Give us what we want so that we can encourage others to come out. (James, focus group discussion, 26/06/06, Ekoneman-Awa)

In the eyes of most of the local population, anything to do with female circumcision has the potential to generate money. While this suggests that the persistence of this custom is partly tied to vested interests and to the economic aspects of the procedures, it seems simplistic to reduce the whole procedure to economics or health alone, as NGOs have been doing in the area. Mindful that female circumcision is a polythetic cultural category, I will rather argue that change in the ritual procedures can only come about through the wholesale transformation of the sexual political economy of the Ejaghams.

Accessory of neo-colonialism and power

The people's responses to the monetisation of female circumcision ties in to larger issues that have to do with the global context. In fact, the most important obstacle that I encountered had to do with my affiliation to a foreign academic institution, the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. By virtue of this, I was seen and represented by some respondents as a "Whiteman's" agent, an accessory of neo-colonialism, who had been given much money but who was hoarding all that money for himself in an anonymous foreign bank account. It is common knowledge all over Cameroon that all returning immigrants are rich and should generously share their largesse with the local population (by buying them drinks, for instance). This is partly fostered by the lavish consumerist public culture most returning immigrants indulge in, as well as their inordinate display of wealth such as riding in fanciful cars and wearing the most fashionable and expensive clothing in the market. This attitude, in the eyes of the local population, is reminiscent of European/American living standards.

As described in the section above, there is general awareness of the commodification of women's bodies, their genitals and sexuality by NGOs, who in the eyes of the local population represent the Whiteman since most of the funding comes from western institutions. Since I came from such an institution, I must be a friend of the "Whiteman". Without the commendable efforts of some of my former students, my field guides and some educated individuals in the area, it would have been a daunting task convincing the population that the work was meant for academic purposes and posterity and that their own children may one day come to read it. Despite this eloquent entreaty, some still argued that I would sell the finished product to their own children at an unsympathetic price. And that I should "dip my hands deep into my pockets". George for instance advised me that:

With some of our parents, to get something [information] from them, you must give them drinks. They transmit culture in the course of drinking. We have a saying here that "Keep your hands open and I will show you herbs". This means that be generous to us by giving us drinks, snuff, kola nuts etc. When we have taken it and it climbs to our brains, then we can reveal secrets to you. (George, informal discussion, 03/03/06)

When I presented my letter of introduction, the local General Practitioner warned me to avoid showing it to people, because he thought that once people realized that I was from Europe, they would insist that I pay them. From that moment, I told people merely that I had come from "the University" to do research. Instead of saying I was from a European university, I simply told some people that I was from "the University", and that I wished to interview them to write my thesis. This made sense because students from various Cameroonian universities and institutions of higher learning have always been coming and going.

The above obstacles notwithstanding, most respondents in focus group discussion sessions, informally and in formal interview sessions were very enthusiastic about the topic, given the heated debates among the people themselves. They were always willing to share their meal or drink with the researcher partly as a sign of gratitude for the long distance covered to reach them to get their opinions and, at times, in expectation of a gift. And most expressed the willingness to be quoted in my final report verbatim, probably as a mark of confidence in whatever they had told me about the cultural field under investigation.

My international student (which many knew of) and returned immigrant statuses were also interpreted as being with the anti-circumcision camp. During one focus group discussion session, the participants expressed the view that the Western attempt to outlaw female circumcision is an aspect of neo-colonialism. They thus resolved to resist this invasion by hanging on to their culture with female circumcision inclusive. In other words, they were giving me a message for my “friend” “the Whiteman”, given my identity as his friend.

There is clearly an anthropological dilemma between the creation of knowledge for understanding and for activism, although the knowledge we create ends up being used for purposes for which we did not intend it and cannot control. In keeping with conventional fieldwork ethics, I had to bracket my own impressions and ethical values so as to maintain a listening stance. Despite my methodological relativism, respondents sometimes bombarded me with questions about my feelings with regards to the ritual procedures. At times, I took a contrary point of view from theirs so as to better elicit their multiple and ambivalent positions on the issue. Public and private voices often co-exist simultaneously. When faced with NGOs bringing gifts and financial enticements for exchange to end the ritual cuttings, for instance, there is always public condemnation and declarations against circumcision practices, showing the juxtaposition between morality and exchange and the chasm between public declarations and actual practices. As D’Andrade (1995) has argued, we can be moral and still maintain a listening stance without compromising our sense of morality. This same sense of morality and interaction with others may explain the vacillating positions of stakeholders within Ejagham society on the contentious issue of female circumcision, particularly the distinction between lived reality, what people say they do, and what they are actually observed doing.

Power and ethnographic politics

The main problem dealt with in this article is my multiple identities as an insider/outsider in the country, continent and community, and how these impacted on the study. It is an acknowledged fact that the way our informants see us influences the way we are going to generate data, what we will be told, their silences and concerns, and how we might in turn interpret processes of interaction in the field and eventually, our data:

The personality of [the] fieldworker influences the way they are able to conduct their research, how the informants are going to view them, and how the researchers might understand what is happening in the field. ... It is possible to become aware of these processes and trace their implications. (Fetcher 2003:1)

While culture remains a contested field of practice and praxis, the people’s multiple and shifting reactions to female circumcision within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic mirrors the larger global context of power in which the ritual cutting is enmeshed and how such a local-global power nexus may be shaping the practices on the ground. As a practice celebrated by the community, it is threatened by the practices and rhetoric of global powers – be they local, national, regional or transnational, global NGOs, individual feminists or humanitarians – who tend to frame the issue in terms of violence and the violation of human rights, whereas some individuals within practising communities frame it in terms of cultural authenticity and community rights. The different attitudes are a reaction against the perceived

normative superiority of the West and therefore simultaneously reflect the various ways in which the hierarchical communities to which my educational background links me, embody, reproduce and maintain a particular hierarchy in which some gain power over others. This interview excerpt from an interview with a local man highlight this point of view:

The World Health Organisation came here with a story at one time that Female Genital Mutilation is not wanted again. We were trying to accept with them, and accepting it, means that the Moninkim has to start dying out. But pertaining to areas and personalities, this thing came as some sort of, "when you give, I give". My neighbour has circumcised his/her own daughter and due to that aspect, there was a lot of personality conflict with that family. Now that I have my own daughter, so as to acquire pride, I will circumcise her. Now, WHO came and we were trying to listen to them with one eye and one ear, putting another ear to village and family personality [relationships]. Now, coming back again, we were looking at its action to be the political aspect of it. So, we decided that we should not die out from our own culture, only to follow WHO, whose headquarters could only be in America [actually in Switzerland] while we in Africa, are diminishing our own culture. Then, we were doing that as some sort of stealing aspect. Now as of the year 2000, we were not listening to them again because looking at them there, they were still following their own culture, and keeping their own cultural tradition intact. While pushing our own children to inculcate their values and culture, inculcate western lifestyles. That is why we want to believe that if my own neighbour is doing this [circumcision], having the priority in our area, I should also do it. That is why we don't want to fall out with the Moninkim tradition. (Interview with Bessong, 34 years old, 12/06/06)

In the interview excerpt above, Bessong frames their resistance against female circumcision in terms of unequal power relationships between the West and Africa, in which case the former is perceived as imposing supposedly strange cultural values and health concepts meant to uproot them from their cultural anchors through the WHO. He further highlights the social dimension of female circumcision as being intertwined with local networks of reciprocity, pride and as a celebration of communal values. His statement usefully suggests that female circumcision is not only a health issue *per se*, rather, it is intertwined with other aspects of the local culture.

Although I eventually came to establish long term relationships of sympathy and empathy with particular stakeholders within the community under study, which gradually allowed me to move much more deeper than the customary opposition (which the people are already aware of) between seeing the situation in terms of celebrating or eradicating female circumcision, being for or against it was not an easy task. To go beyond this dichotomy, I was constantly trying to bracket my own impressions, so as to become immersed in the lived and often contradictory experiences of the people and their specific social system of cultural meanings and practices, local power structures and relationships, and how people reconcile the different lived truths that are mirrored and amplified by diverse theoretical positions in the literature: relativism/anti-relativism, feminism, oppression, human rights violations and risk, among others.

This further suggests that whether we are aware of it or not, our personality counts in the power game of ethnographic encounters and might be interpreted as our own positionality even when we claim to be doing social science research using empirical

methods and subscribing only to methodological relativism. One of my study participants readily observed that:

It is the Whiteman who has come to say circumcision should stop. Whites and Western educated people like you say it is not good. Circumcision causes no harm in any way. Whether a woman was circumcised or not made no difference except that while in the fattening room, they were given special foods to eat ... Women being confined made them reserved but today, a child just jumps out of the house into the streets trying to make life with other children. (Interview with Pa Etah, educator, 56 years old, 13/03/06)

In the above cited ethnographic excerpt, the respondent lumps the researcher with the anti-female circumcision activists, activists, championed by the “Whiteman”, who are at the same time responsible for the perceived moral and cultural dislocation of their culture and the hyper-sexuality of the youths today unlike in the “glorious past” when female circumcision made girls reserved. The respondent’s statement further shows the gulf between local and global knowledges, in the fields of scientific knowledge, science/medicine, and moral values.

Playing on my own identity

In the face of difficult situations, I always invoked the most salient or beneficial aspect of my identity. To those who knew I came from Europe, I constantly told them that Hungary is on the periphery of the world’s economy and therefore they should not expect me to be as rich as those from the real “West”. I was a student and not a worker, and this was the reason why I had not shipped any cars. Bringing a car or several cars home is always a sign of prestige and success for a returned migrant while the contrary is at times seen as an indication of failure. To some people, I was a frustrated migrant who had returned home pretending to be doing research.

As a man, the various women I interviewed were rather enthusiastic in recounting their experiences or those of their close relatives and friends with female circumcision to me. My age, I am sure, greatly mediated in this because it is rare for the elderly to talk about sex with others who are not of their age group or mature. This same silence over sexuality punctuates relationships between parents and children in the study area. Fathers expect mothers to talk to their daughters in matters of sexual and reproductive health. Nobody ends up addressing the issue and the girls mostly learn about sex only from peer groups, pornographic films or through experimentation. The end result has been a high incidence of unwanted pregnancies, abortions, incidences of sexually transmissible diseases and HIV/AIDS in the area. These were critical issues for my research and served my purposes as they permitted me to gain a feel for various intergenerational conflicts and debates going on between various groups of people and stakeholders in the community. They also tended to illuminate larger issues, particularly the power relationship between the global North and the global South, the contest between “modernity” and “tradition”, local and global knowledge, the old and new generation and how this may be shaping the intervention with regards to female circumcision. Even the notion of “community”, as a mobilising symbol for unity, when and where it acts as a unifying factor, as a coherent whole, and when and under what circumstances it was contested became apparent from the debates surrounding ritual female circumcision. All the above issues seem to be summarised by the expression “Whiteman”.

Conclusion: the global context

Two of the major findings that emerge from my study may be summarised as follows: Female circumcision is a multiform phenomenon. It is not just about health or economics per se. Rather, it is intertwined with local networks of reciprocity and the political economy of sexuality, which means that wholesale transformation will be necessary for change initiatives to be successful. Interventions have produced a backlash marked by simultaneous contestation and practice as evidenced by the increasing visitation of the ritual procedures on younger girls within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, an institutional framework that has turned the case against into fodder for the case for female circumcision. This shows that it is increasingly becoming a human rights, gender and development issue.

What we learn from the interplay between my multiple identities, and the perception that I must belong to the anti-female circumcision advocacy camp by virtue of studying at a Whiteman's university, is the gulf between perceived activism and positionality and its impact on the production of anthropological knowledge. The people's resistance to change might be interpreted as a reaction against the Western dominance in the production and dissemination of knowledge about cultural "others". While affiliation to an NGO has been used by some researchers to gain entry into certain communities, it has its constraints, and for this reason I chose to interview the staff of intervening NGOs mostly at their headquarters. While in the field, I observed only their activities and anti-female circumcision campaigns, while soliciting reactions from members of the communities under investigation. Their association with western funding tends to present them as agencies of neo-colonialism, conspirators who are assisting the Whiteman to produce and disseminate certain types of "dangerous" knowledges about local cultural practices.

The people's reactions to my insider/outsider status to an extent mirrors the larger global context of the power to construct social reality and how this power nexus may be shaping female circumcision practices on the ground. The location of my institution in Europe is associated with power, money and a particular position vis-a-vis the object of research. Since interventions from outside are actually shaping and reshaping the debates on anti-female circumcision activism and the production of knowledge, by extension the political complexity between theoretical and applied research is positioned squarely within this global political context.

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