

Taming the Lion

**A Look at Male and Female Circumcision
in the Ancient Near East and Today**

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I. Introduction

Circumcision is a term that is often applied to a variety of genital operations. While Westerners are generally aware of circumcision's antiquity due to its attachment to the Abrahamic covenant in the Hebrew Bible, many are unaware of its origins outside of the Hebrew religion as a practice predating the figure of Abraham by nearly two millennia. The existence of female circumcision is even less well-known and has served as a topic of much controversy in recent years because of its traumatic effects upon the health of females and upon their sexuality.

Male and female circumcision operations serve many different purposes that are greatly dependent upon the community and society in which they are performed. Circumcision in its many forms is often celebrated as a religious rite and apparently has been done so for thousands of years. This paper will strive to elucidate the origins of male and female genital operations, their general purposes, how they are performed, and also how the operations on both males and females involve issues of power and control on various levels.

II. The Origins of Male Circumcision

Male circumcision as a procedure has existed for millennia, most notably stemming from various regions in the ancient Near East and typically associated with religious rites. Much speculation has been offered as to the origin of the practice, and although the procedure is tied intimately with Hebrew religion and culture, evidence suggests that it was practiced by other peoples much earlier before its Hebraic adoption.

The most popular account of male circumcision resides in the Hebrew Bible with Yahweh's promise of an everlasting covenant with Abraham. Yahweh states, "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you." (Gen 17:6). This covenant is contingent upon Abraham circumcising himself through the amputation

of the prepuce of the penis, and it is thus to be continued for all generations of his descendents by circumcising all male offspring on the eighth day of their life (Gen 17:12). The phrase “to make a covenant” (ṭrb ṭrk) in the Hebrew Bible translates literally as “to cut a covenant” (e.g. Gen 15:18; Ex 23:32; Jdg 2:2; Ps 83:6). In Abraham’s case it is significant that Yahweh’s covenant demands the cutting off of the foreskin of the males, thereby rendering this “cutting” (ṭrk) of the covenant/foreskin in a drastically literal manner by means of wordplay. “So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.” (Gen 17:13) Circumcision became a sign of the covenant between the Hebrews and Yahweh, and it came to occupy “a central place in the Hebrew sense of cultural and religious identity.”¹ This national identity also became a point of differentiation between the Hebrews and the “uncircumcised nations,” such as the Philistines (Jdg 14:3; 1 Sam 14:6), the Babylonians, and the Greeks, among others (cf. Jer 9:26; Eze 28:10). The Hebrews did not invent the practice of circumcision, but evidence suggests that origins of the practice lie elsewhere.

As early as the fifth century BCE, Herodotus expressed the claim that male circumcision originated in Egypt and from there spread north and east throughout the Levant where it was adopted by West Semites.² Although a debatable interpretation of an invocation from the Pyramid Texts may refer to circumcision³, the procedure is further attested by ancient Egyptian stele inscriptions and tomb reliefs. Dating from the First Intermediate Period, the Naga ed-Deir stele describes 120 men being circumcised in a group rite.⁴ Even earlier, a mastaba tomb relief

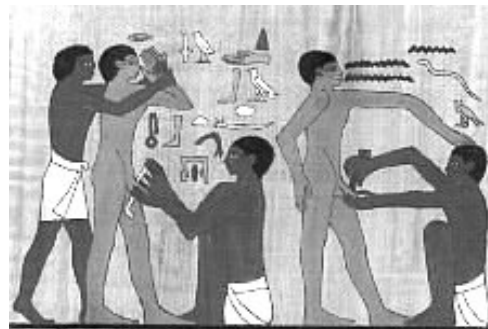
¹ Freedman, David Noel, ed., “Circumcision,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday) 1992.

² Ibid.

³ J.M. Sasson, “Circumcision in the Ancient Near East,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 no 4 (1966), 473.

⁴ James Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 326.

at Saqqara (6th dynasty) depicts men undergoing the circumcision procedure (c. 2300 BCE), which is seen below.



Egyptian circumcision (6th dynasty)

The examination of the mummified remains of ancient Egyptian males also provides evidence for the surgical practice during this time period. The details of the procedure appear to vary from the West Semitic method of completely amputating the foreskin, but this issue will be discussed later.

Aside from the evidence thus far illustrating the antiquity of the practice of male circumcision, the discovery of figures of circumcised men in the Amuq region of Syria appears to even predate its practice in Egypt.⁵ These Syrian figurines represent the oldest known occurrence of male circumcision and have been dated to c. 3200 BCE. These findings now call for a revision of Herodotus' understanding of how the practice of male circumcision migrated throughout the ancient Near East. In light of this, it seems more probable that the surgical procedure was first practiced by West Semites in Syria, and as it spread outward to neighboring regions, it was eventually adopted by the Egyptians in the late third millennium BCE. As the Hebrews moved into Palestine in the mid-second millennium, it seems that they also adopted the practice as well and implemented the procedure as a religious rite. Judging from the scant evidence of circumcision in Mesopotamia, the procedure, either as a religious rite or rite of

⁵ Sasson, 475-76.

passage, was perhaps never introduced to the populace or did not gain such a broad appeal as it did in Egypt and Syro-Palestine.⁶

III. Female Circumcision in Antiquity?

The origins of female circumcision are much more obscured in the annals of history than its male counterpart. As a caveat, it must be stated that although “circumcision” is a term used here to refer to surgical procedures on both males and females, due to obvious physiological differences between the two sexes, the procedures are in actuality very different, but they are nonetheless associated together under the designation of “genital operations.” Many scholars refer to female circumcision (or sometimes only its most extreme forms) as “female genital mutilation” for reasons that will be discussed later, but at this point, moral judgments concerning the practice will be withheld and will thus be rendered with the general term of “circumcision” for purposes here.

In modern times circumcision is practiced primarily on the continent of Africa, most notably in Nubian Egypt and the Sudan.⁷ Although medical observations by physicians in the past century have greatly increased our knowledge of female genital operations, literature concerning the procedures in the Arab world is still very scant.⁸ Female circumcision is thought to have a long history, but its function as an ancient Near Eastern rite is still debatable despite some indirect evidence.

The procedure called pharaonic circumcision, which is most prevalent in Nubian Egypt and the Sudan and is referred to by some as female genital mutilation,⁹ is attributed in folk

⁶ Ibid., 476.

⁷ Daniel Gordon, “Female Circumcision and Genital Operations in Egypt and the Sudan: A Dilemma for Medical Anthropology,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 1991), 3-14.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Mary Nyangweso, “Christ’s Salvific Message and the Nandi Ritual of Female Circumcision,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002), 579-80.

legend of having its origins in ancient pharaonic Egypt, hence its name.¹⁰ E. Strouhal has suggested that some Egyptian texts refer to “uncircumcised” virgins, which would denote the presence of circumcised females and thus suggests the possibility of female circumcision during that time period.¹¹ Other potential evidence of female genital operations in ancient Egypt is briefly mentioned by the Roman writer Strabo, who is of interest to students of classical literature and to historians of Rome. Despite these claims and from the lack of physical evidence found on mummified females,¹² the practice of female circumcision in the ancient Near East cannot be substantiated by any direct evidence.

IV. Male Circumcision Operations

The term “circumcision” functions, albeit inadequately, as an umbrella in popular speech that represents varying genital surgical procedures for both males and females. Variations among the operations are directly dependent upon the community in which they are performed as well as the time period. These procedures often exist as part of an initiation rite or rite of passage and thus remain intact as part of a community’s religio-cultural traditions.

For males, the Hebrew form of circumcision, which has been continually practiced in the Judeo-Christian world for millennia (and also by Muslims since the inception of Islam), is also very similar, if not identical, to the procedure performed by the ancient Syrians as noted earlier concerning the figurines from the Amuq region of Syria (c. 3200 BCE). As the oldest-known genital operation, this type of circumcision includes the complete amputation of the foreskin, which totally exposes the corona of the penis and the glans penis.¹³ Evidence of the operation is easily noticeable upon inspection, and it has proven to be problematic for Jews as they were

¹⁰ Gordon, 5.

¹¹ E. Strouhal, *Life in Ancient Egypt*. (Cambridge, 1992), 28-9.

¹² Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, “Circumcision,” *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 65.

¹³ Sasson, 474.

targeted in the Hellenistic and Roman periods during public bathing and competitions in sports events, which required one to be naked and thus expose oneself to uncircumcised peoples.

Unlike the Jews, the Greeks and Romans placed a high value on the prepuce.¹⁴

Evidence suggests that the ancient Egyptians implemented a different surgical method for circumcision. Egyptian male circumcision “consisted of a dorsal incision upon the foreskin which liberated the glans penis.”¹⁵ The prepuce was not amputated in this case as was practiced by the Hebrews. The Egyptians performed this procedure as either part of a ritual, such as a rite of passage, or as a means to promote hygiene.¹⁶

One problematic account regarding circumcision that has baffled biblical scholars is the narrative of Joshua 5.

At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites a second time."... Although all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people born on the journey through the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised. ... So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way.
(Josh 5:2-7 NRSV)

This enigmatic pericope seems to call for a *second* circumcision that the Israelites must endure, but how can one be circumcised twice? It has been postulated that perhaps the male Israelite children retained their foreskin while in the wilderness but were circumcised at Gilgal so they could participate in the Passover meal (cf. Ex 12:44-48). Another theory purports that the issue here is an ideological one. Since the Israelites in Joshua had disobeyed God and were forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years, the author(s)/redactors of the book of Joshua might

¹⁴ F.M Hodges, “The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to Lipodermos, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the Kynodesme.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 2001 Fall, 75 (3), 375-405.

¹⁵ Sasson, 474, which cites Jonckheere, *Centaurus*, 1 (1951), 228, and is also accepted by Gustave Lefèbvre in his book *Essai sur la médecine égyptienne de l'époque pharonique*.

¹⁶ Donald B. Redford, ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*. “Hygiene.” Vol. 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 135.

have understood the Israelites as being “uncircumcised” in their hearts, which is a notion found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Dt 10:16; Lev 26:41; Jer 4:4).¹⁷ However, Sasson’s illumination of the distinction between Hebrew and Egyptian circumcision may be the key.¹⁸ The Israelites in Joshua 5 may have been circumcised, but only in the Egyptian manner. Thus it is more likely that the text speaks of an injunction for the Israelites to go through the procedure of thoroughly removing the foreskin since it had not been completely done in the traditional Hebrew manner.

V. Types of Female Genital Operations

Although plenty of evidence exists concerning the presence of male genital operations from the fourth millennium BCE until the present, the provenance and history of female circumcision is much more obscure. Because of this, knowledge of the female genital operations described here derives from a contemporary corpus of literature that is no older than a century. While moral judgments concerning female genital operations will not be asserted in this section, the procedures will thus be referred to as “circumcision” rather than “mutilation” in an attempt to more uniformly analyze this phenomenon for both sexes.

According to D. Gordon, female circumcision may be roughly divided into three different categories. The first is the least mutilating and is called “literal circumcision,” which is often referred to as *sunna* (meaning “duty” in Arabic) because it is thought to be commanded or perhaps recommended by Islam.¹⁹ However, there is some ambiguity concerning the procedure’s attachment to Islam or to other African religions. Literal circumcision involves the

¹⁷ ABD, “Circumcision.”

¹⁸ Sasson, 474.

¹⁹ Gordon, 4.

removal of the clitoral foreskin by means of razor, knife, or even a smoldering stone, and it more closely corresponds to male circumcision in this respect.²⁰

The second type, called “excision” or “clitoridectomy,” is the most common form currently found in Egypt. This procedure entails cutting out the entire clitoris and also parts, if not all, of the labia minora. A procedure similar to this is practiced in the Sudan and is termed “intermediate circumcision,” which in addition also involves the removal of slices of the labia majora. El Dareer believes that this procedure to have been invented by Sudanese midwives after British legislation prohibited the most extreme forms in 1946.²¹

The third category of female genital operations is termed “pharaonic circumcision” (*tahara farowniyya* in Arabic). As stated earlier, it is thought to be oldest form of the operation and having its origins in the time of the Egyptian pharaohs. It is often called “infibulation” and is the most radical of the three procedures. It involves the “complete removal of the clitoris, labia minora and majora, with the two sides of the wound then stitched together, leaving a small pinhole opening for the drop by drop passage of urine and menstrual blood.”²² The operation is performed in different ways, all of which depends on where and by whom it is performed. El Dareer notes that a girl’s legs are often bound together for up to forty days after the operation in order to help produce the “desired tightly scarred aperture.”²³ Ostensibly, a more “desirable” scar can produce a higher bride-price for when the girl is married, which is economically beneficial for her family.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Asma El Dareer, *Women, Why Do You Weep?* (London: Zed Press, 1982), 4.

²² Gordon, 5.

²³ Ibid., which cites El Dareer, 1-20.

²⁴ El Dareer, 41.

VI. The Purposes of Male and Female Circumcision

There are a variety of explanations for why circumcision has been performed among males and females throughout the centuries. While they do differ in their intent, each is not mutually exclusive as a possible basis for the procedure itself. Most of the explanations delineated below apply to male circumcision rather than to female procedures due to the extensive historical evidence regarding the practice on males.

Circumcision can symbolize a covenant that has been entered into by two parties. In the Hebrew Bible male circumcision ultimately signifies the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham's descendents (Gen 17). Through circumcision, Yahwah has literally "cut a covenant" into Abram's flesh promising to provide him with offspring and innumerable descendents. Scholars have long noted the patriarchal slant that the Hebrew Bible asserts and how it appears that Yahweh's covenant involves females only as secondary participants and solely through their connections to Hebrew males, such as their husbands or fathers. While this point is well-taken, the issue stands ultimately outside the scope of this paper.

Male circumcision may also be understood as a marriage or fertility rite. It comes to the forefront as a possible marriage rite in Genesis 37. Jacob informs Hamor and his son Shechem that their people may not marry Hebrew women unless they are first circumcised ("Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male among you be circumcised." Gen 34:15 NRSV). Also, Exodus 4:24-26 applies the enigmatic phrase "bloody bride-groom" to Moses (or possibly his son), and although the phrase's original meaning has been obscured in the text, it nevertheless implies a connection to marriage.²⁵ Circumcision may also be interpreted as a fertility rite in light of Genesis 17. Sarah/Sarai, who is ninety years old

²⁵ Hans Kosmala, "The 'Bloody Husband,'" *Vetus Testamentum* 12 no 1 (Jan 1962), 14.

with a barren womb, is only able to birth a child after Abraham/Abram has performed the procedure on himself.

Returning to the “Bloody Bridegroom” narrative in Exodus 4, male circumcision may be considered an apotropaic rite, which is a rite implemented in order to ward off evil. For unknown reasons Yahweh attempts to kill Moses (or perhaps Moses’ son, according to some interpretations). However, when Zipporah circumcises her son with a flint knife (Ex 4:25), the threat from Yahweh is ostensibly absolved. In another relevant text, a Phoenician myth dispels how the god El escapes the clutches of danger by sacrificing his son and then circumcising himself and his men, which may imply that such an act was performed to turn evil away.²⁶ The practice in Egypt in the Late Period appears to have been implemented for ritual purification and was required for Egyptian priests in order to fulfill their temple duties.²⁷

Circumcision has also been thought to serve hygienic purposes. From extant sources, it appears that hygiene was very important for ancient Egyptians, at least among the more privileged. The Greek historian Herodotus claimed that the Egyptians “set cleanliness over seemliness.”²⁸ While the prepuce of the penis was not amputated in Egyptian circumcision as it was with the Hebrews, it did liberate the glans penis to the extent that seemed hygienically suitable for the Egyptians. Regarding male circumcision, the issue of hygiene has long been debated in modern times, and in 1971 the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a statement that “[t]here are no valid medical indications for circumcision in the neonatal

²⁶ Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 1.10.33, 44, as noted in ABD, “Circumcision” (cf. D. Flusser and S. Safrai, “Who Sanctified the Beloved in the Womb?” *Immanuel* 11 (1980), 46–55.)

²⁷ Shaw and Nicholson, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt.*, 65.

²⁸ Redford, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, 134.

period."²⁹ On a similar note, in 1975 the Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) also took a position claiming that circumcision is medically unnecessary.³⁰

Circumcision for both females and males may also be understood as a rite of passage or initiation rite. Although many have argued for its hygienic purposes in ancient Egypt, male circumcision has come to be understood by many scholars as an Egyptian rite that entailed a boy transitioning into adulthood, especially among royalty and nobility.^{31,32} Male circumcision may have later become more accessible to the non-elite in Late Period Egypt, but there is no certainty concerning how widespread the practice was at a given time or if it was obligatory at some point. Female circumcision, especially in modern Sudan and Egypt, may be correctly understood as a rite of passage where a girl is transformed into an eligible woman awaiting marriage. This practice is one part of a long-standing cultural and/or religious tradition,³³ and it is typically performed on girls ranging from ages 5-9, which may be understood in many of the communities as a “social puberty.”³⁴ The ritual involving the female circumcision procedure often takes the form and symbolism of a wedding, which is appropriate considering that the ritual prepares the girl for marriage, and in the style of a bride, the girl is adorned with henna and gold.³⁵

²⁹ David L. Gollaher, “From ritual to science: The medical transformation of circumcision in America,” *Journal of Social History*. Vol 28 No 1 (Fall 1994), 5-36.

³⁰ *Canadian Paediatric Society News Bulletin Supplement*. Vol 8 No 2 (1975), 1-2.

³¹ Shaw and Nicholson, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 65.

³² If this operation was indeed practiced among young boys as a rite of passage, the Naga ed-Deir stele depicting 120 “men” becomes problematic. However, considering the many differing purposes of circumcision throughout the ancient Near East and today, it is plausible that the practice of circumcision as a ritual did not remain static during Egypt’s history but rather may have been performed on males of varying ages depending upon the time period.

³³ While Muslim female adherents to the practice of circumcision almost reflexively acknowledge its purpose as fulfilling a religious duty (as do the names of the practices, such as *sunna*), Henry H. Hansen, “Clitoridectomy: Circumcision in Egypt,” *Folk* 14-15 (1972/73), 18, claims that its influence may stem from the *Hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammed), or more likely from other African religions, which also perform the same surgical procedures.

³⁴ Gordon, 9.

³⁵ J.G. Kennedy, “Circumcision and Excision in Egyptian Nubia,” *Man*. 5 (1970), 179.

VII. Medical Complications

As with most surgical procedures, complications can and do occur from male and female genital operations. The differing physiologies of males and females dictate how these complications come to affect the person. Williams and Kapila have estimated that the incident of complications for neonatal circumcision in males ranges between 2% and 10%.³⁶ Immediate and long-term consequences of male circumcision are as follows: sepsis, hemorrhaging, complete or near-transection of the glans penis, urethra transection, penile amputation, and even death (typically caused by sepsis and hemorrhaging).³⁷ From one particular perspective, it has been argued that since the male prepuce is in fact a genital sensory organ, the actual complication rate will thus always be 100%.³⁸ Of course, such a claim is debatable.

For females the most typical complication from the genital procedure is infection, which often goes untreated in some communities where it is practiced. Primarily in Egypt and the Sudan where pharaonic circumcision is performed, the practice is illegal, and receiving treatment for such a complication may result in legal punishment to the family or to the *daya*. The *daya*, the most prestigious position for a female in these communities, is the midwife in the community who performs the procedure on the girls. Girls will “often remain quiet because of the known illegality of the operation and the shame attached to endangering one’s *daya*.”³⁹

Fatalities can and do occur from female circumcision operations. The primary cause of death is hemorrhagic shock, which is immediate. The secondary is childbirth (occurring after infibulation), which is due to vaginal obstruction and excessive scar tissue. It is often the case

³⁶ N. Williams and L. Kapila, “Complications of circumcision.” *British Journal of Surgery*. Vol 80 (Oct 1993), 1231-6.

³⁷ “Circumcision Information and Resource Pages” (CIRP), *Tilted Media Group, Inc.* <<http://www.cirp.org/library/complications/>> [accessed April 2nd, 2005].

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Gordon, 6, which cites El Dareer, 28.

that a woman who has received pharaonic circumcision must be cut open in order to allow sexual intercourse because of the amount of scar tissue. The most immediate complications are pain due to lack of anesthesia and hemorrhaging. Other complications include urinary tract infections and pelvic inflammatory disease, which can lead to infertility.⁴⁰

VIII. Incidence of Circumcision

Jews, Muslims, and some Christians practice the rite of male circumcision. Although it is not requisite according to most Christian denominations that their males undergo the procedure for religious reasons, many medical explanations have been given in order to encourage neo-natal circumcision. However, in recent decades male circumcision has been declared to have no medical value.⁴¹ Outside of countries that are predominantly Muslim or Jewish, higher incidences of male circumcision are found in English-speaking countries, predominantly in the United States. The incidence rate is much lower for other English-speaking countries, and for non-English-speaking nations that usually do not practice non-religious non-therapeutic circumcision of children, the rates approach zero.⁴² Between 1940 and 1990 in the U.S., the incidence of neo-natal circumcisions for a given year remained above 60%. It steadily increased until the mid-1980s, peaking at 85%.⁴³ Following the American Academy of Pediatrics' statement concerning circumcision's lack of medical value in 1971 and the further dissemination of this medical knowledge in the early 1980s, the incidence of neo-natal circumcision in the United States dropped and presently continues to decrease.⁴⁴

Information concerning the circumcision of females in the past century is scant. A significant majority of these genital procedures are practiced on the continent of Africa. From

⁴⁰ Gordon, 6-7.

⁴¹ See Gollaher, 5-36. (cf. *Canadian Paediatric Society News Bulletin Supplement*. Vol 8 No 2 (1975), 1-2.)

⁴² CIRP, <<http://www.cirp.org/library/statistics/>> [accessed April 2nd, 2005].

⁴³ Jim Bigelow, *The Joy of Uncircumcising!* (Aptos, CA: Hourglass, 1992), 19.

⁴⁴ Gollaher, 5-36.

1977 until 1981, Dr. Asma El Dareer conducted a survey that incorporated the input of thousands of women in Egypt and the Sudan.⁴⁵ Among 3200 Sudanese women surveyed, 98% had undergone some form of circumcision (83% with the pharaonic procedure, 12% with “intermediate,” and 3% with *sunna*).⁴⁶ Surveys conducted in Egypt by others are less extensive than El Dareer’s in the Sudan, but they suggest a much lower incidence of female genital operations. For all circumcision procedures, the incidence rate in Egypt ranged from one-third⁴⁷ to one-half,⁴⁸ and the incidences of pharaonic circumcision were scant and only found in the Nubian south.

IX. Inequality in Circumcision

Although it has long been argued by all sides as to whether the removal of the male foreskin reduces sexual pleasure, the medical community has persistently noted that the male prepuce is distinguished for its sensory pleasure⁴⁹ and is a specific erogenous zone because it is heavily innervated.⁵⁰ Therefore, male circumcision diminishes sexual sensation.⁵¹ While male sexual pleasure is indeed diminished, the extent to which this occurs is still under debate. Nevertheless, it is important to note here that sexual sensations are not completely lost, only reduced.

For females the story is very much different. While the health risks for women undergoing the procedure are much greater than that of men, the degree to which the procedure affects females in the long run is also much more substantial. El Dareer’s survey of Sudanese

⁴⁵ El Dareer, 1982, which also states that 95% of the sample population responded to the questionnaire.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁷ Fran P. Hosken, “Epidemiology of Female Genital Mutilation,” *Tropical Doctor*. Vol 8 (1978), 152.

⁴⁸ Andrea Rugh, *Family in Contemporary Egypt*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 160.

⁴⁹ R.J.L. Darby, “Medical history and medical practice: persistent myths about the foreskin,” *Medical Journal of Australia*. Vol 178 No 4 (2003), 178-179.

⁵⁰ R.K. Winkelmann, “The erogenous zones: their nerve supply and significance,” *Mayo Clin Proc* Vol 34 No 2 (1959), 39-47.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, and also W.K.C. Morgan, “The rape of the phallus,” *JAMA* 193 (1965),123-4, among a vast among of other related literature.

women indicates that 75% of the women reported to having never experienced sexual pleasure or were completely indifferent to the notion.⁵² It must also be noted that there appears to be a direct relationship between the extremity of the genital procedure (e.g. *sunna* as less extreme, pharaonic as most extreme) and the loss of sexual pleasure.

Up to this point the genital surgical procedures discussed have been elucidated under the designation of “circumcision” for the purpose of comparing various facets of the operations for both sexes. From what has been discussed, it now appears from that not all circumcisions are created equal. Due to the variations of the procedure for each sex and the physiological distinctions between males and females, it no longer seems appropriate to classify this large range of genital operations under the pleasant umbrella of “circumcision.” Perhaps new terminology may be implemented at this point.

Since all forms of male genital procedures (contemporary and ancient) involve the prepuce solely, they may thus be referred to as “circumcision.” This label may also be applied to the *sunna* procedure for females in which the clitoral prepuce is removed. Both of these operations reduce the amount of sexual pleasure for each sex, and because both involve the removal of the genital foreskin, the term “circumcision” seems appropriate for both. For females only, the other remaining procedures may be broken down into three types of genital operations: clitoridectomy (complete removal of the clitoris), labial excision (which varies depending on amounts of labia majora and labia minora excised, which may also be conjoined with clitoridectomy), and female genital mutilation (replacing the term “pharaonic circumcision,” a popular name which draws upon possibly unhistorical folklore). The term “mutilation,” though extreme and invoking a moralistic judgments upon the procedure, is warranted because of its unquestionable effect upon a female’s health and upon her ability to experience sexual pleasure

⁵² El Dareer, 48.

in her adult life. Due to the extensive effects of all three operations, many have suggested that the term “female genital mutilation” be applied to all forms of female genital operations.

X. Genital Operations as Control Mechanisms

The manifestation and endurance of male power in ancient and contemporary societies has been widely discussed while addressing a manifold spectrum of issues. Genital operations also appear to stem from the male need to control and monitor the female sphere, especially with regard to female sexuality. It appears that genital operations for both sexes may have always involved the issue of power. In Genesis 17 Abraham was required to circumcise himself in order to enter the covenant with Yahweh. Such an act may be viewed as Abraham relinquishing part of his genitals (and thus relinquishing his power over them) as an offering before God. By sacrificing part of himself in that way, Abraham has granted Yahweh power over reproduction, which is illustrated in Yahweh granting Abraham and Sarah a child. Male circumcision in the Hebrew tradition (and thus in Muslim and Christian traditions) may therefore be understood as a surrender of power to the deity concerning the sexual or reproductive aspect of a male’s life.

Although female genital operations are not a religious imperative in Judaism or Christianity, they appear to be obligatory in many African tribal religions and in some Muslim communities, most notably in Egypt and Sudan. Since these procedures are not practiced in 80% of the Muslim world (e.g. Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan),⁵³ it is thought that their origins lie among indigenous African communities and were adopted by Islam after its conquest of Egypt.⁵⁴ The distinct origins of the operations are unclear, but scholars have posed several sociological arguments as to how they might have developed and evolved.

⁵³ Gordon, 8.

⁵⁴ Henry H. Hansen, “Clitoridectomy: Circumcision in Egypt,” *Folk* 14-15 (1972/73), 18.

The male interest in controlling women and their sexuality has been at the heart of many such arguments. By religiously mandating that women undergo these operations, sexual stimulation for females are reduced, thus curbing their sexual appetite. It attempts to totally divorce a woman's sexuality from reproduction, separating the mechanism (sexuality) from its effect (children who guarantee one's descent).⁵⁵ This fear of female sexuality has also been argued as a product of Arab concern for patrilineal purity.⁵⁶ With family and lineage being of great importance in the Arab world, female genital operations "can serve as a means for protecting lineage purity and, by extension, the honor of the woman's agnatic group."⁵⁷ It may also be argued that the genital operations may have sprung from male sexual insecurities. Such may include the interpretation of the clitoris as a threat and rival to the penis, or it may possibly stem from male anxieties of impotence or fears of sexual competition by other men. Such explanations are plausible, yet speculative.

The ability of humans to reason in a logical capacity has often been viewed as a unique advantage that homo sapiens possess over other species of animals. Because of reason, humans arguably do not have to rely completely (but only partially) on instincts to thrive and survive as animals do. Through this line of reasoning, the human instinct to reproduce could be understood as an uncontrollable, "animalistic" passion which defies logical rationales. Since genital operations specifically target human erogenous zones, the operations may have originated as an attempt to curb sexual passion and thus provide more stability (or the illusion of stability) in a community. Such an argument is highly speculative, however.

⁵⁵ Peggy McGarahan, "The Violence in Female Circumcision," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series, Vol 5 No 3 (Sept 1991), 269.

⁵⁶ Luis Beck and Nikkie Keddie, eds. *Women in the Muslim World*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 8.

⁵⁷ Gordon, 10, which cites Beck and Keddie, 1980.

In summary, male circumcision in the three major monotheistic religions may be understood as an attempt to sexually “stabilize” a community or as a means of relinquishing male sexual and reproductive control to the deity for the benefit of both parties. Female genital operations have been justified in the same way but with the addition of also surrendering control of their sexuality over to males. This also establishes a hierarchical power scheme that is typical of theistic patriarchal societies: deity (at the top), then male, then female (at the bottom).

XI. Conclusion

Circumcision as a singular term is inadequate for describing the various genital operations that are generally placed under such terminology. Among males, the term seems appropriate for the genital procedure because only the male foreskin is involved. For females, on the other hand, the difference between the procedures seems far too vast to fall under one specific label. The terms “circumcision,” “labial excision,” “clitoridectomy,” and “female genital mutilation” have been offered as more appropriate and specific references to the genital operations performed on females.

The effect of these operations upon the sexual sensitivity of males and females has been justly acknowledged, but the more extreme versions of the procedure on females proves to be the most devastating with regard to sexual pleasure. Since these procedures specifically target erogenous organs, it may be argued that genital operations seek to curb uncontrollable sexual passion in humans. Since many view the human capacity to reason as a singular advantage over other species on the planet, removing human erogenous zones thus eliminates “irrational,” “animalistic” tendencies. Laws in societies provide stability, but not without some compromise. Although laws may protect an individual’s rights, they can sometimes constrict a person’s freedom as well for the greater good of the community. Genital operations, especially for

females, may thus have arisen out of some need to create communal stability by attempting to tame that which may have seemed unstable and uncontrollable, that is, sexual passion. Ancient peoples no doubt revered the power of nature and its many wondrous aspects, and likewise they acknowledged the mystical power of the genitals and of the sexual act, which produces life. By involving the genitals in a religious rite in this manner, in a sense it allows one to harness the powers of nature (e.g. fertility, warding off evil, providing good health and hygiene, the ability to transform child into adult). By controlling the natural forces of the world, one has tamed the untamable lion. It is power in the most basic sense.

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