

“I Would Be Married Now If I Had Cut It....” The Lived Experiences of Women With no Genital Modifications among the Pokot on the Uganda-Kenya Border

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Abstract

This article explores the lived experiences of women who have not undergone female genital modifications (traditionally known as “*Mutat*”) as a symbol of marriage worthiness among the Pokot of the North-eastern part of the Uganda-Kenya border. Using inductive and content analysis, the article coalesces its synthesis around the dilemma of mama Chemket, a woman in her twenties who lamented her earlier decision not to undergo female genital modifications (FGM) in one of the ethnographic group discussions (EGDs). This synthesis is reinforced by corroboratory evidence from another EGD with FGM surgeons, seven ethnographic interviews (Ethno-Ints) and hermeneutics conducted at the same border. Evidence explored associates the lived experiences of women that have not undergone “*mutal*” in Pokot with rare marriage prospects, great pain from lack of trust on their fidelity by spouses and ridicule and ostracism they are subjected to by their co-wives, if married. The article locates the source of these experiences on the Pokot notion of “*mutal*” as a symbol of marriage worthiness and it’s supporting beliefs that leave non-“*mutal*” women with no or rare prospects for marriage.

Key words: Mutat, FGM, marriage worthiness, beliefs, lived experiences

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Introduction and Background

The World Health Organisation (WHO) takes all forms of female genital alterations as female mutilation/cutting/circumcision (FGM/C)-a practice it defines as “the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organ for non-medical reasons” (WHO 2008:1). Accordingly, WHO classifies FGM into four typologies. Clitoridectomy, involving partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce, classified as FGM Type I. Excision, involving partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora, classified as FGM Type II. While infibulation, which involves the narrowing of the vaginal orifice with the creation of a covering seal by cutting and appositioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris, is classified as FGM Type III. And lastly, unclassified FGM, which involves any other alterations to the genitalia for non-medical purposes including pricking, piercing, incising, scraping, stretching, and cauterization, all regarded as Type IV (WHO 2008). Unlike classifications I-III, which specifically involve cutting, typology four is practiced in multiple forms, with some forms, especially, genital elongation being expansive in nature (Grassivora & Busatta 2009, Pérez & Namulondo 2011, Namulondo 2009). Since the forms of FGM

Type IV do not necessarily involve cutting, mutilation or circumcision, this article considers, erroneous the blanket labelling by WHO of all genital alterations as female genital mutilation/cutting/circumcision. To be culturally sensitive, inclusive, neutral and relative, it has alternatively addressed them as female genital modifications (FGM). It is also critical of the WHO definition not only as judgemental but also as limited to the reductive typologies of FGM (i.e. I-III). To offer a deeper insight therefore, it operationally defines FGM as any human induced alteration to the female genitalia for any reason that is not medical.

With a total FGM global burden of over 200 million cases, three million new cases of reductive forms of FGM are reported annually (UNICEF 2013). And representing a region with the largest burden, Africa alone with over half of its member states (28 states) practicing reductive FGM accounts for more than 102 million FGM cases (UNICEF 2013, Berhe 2014). Being one of the 28 FGM countries in the region, over half of the Ugandan women population is estimated to have undergone one type or the other of the four types identified by World Health Organisation (WHO). The Bantu and Hamite groups, such as the Baganda, Banyankole, Bakiga, Bahororo, Banyoro, Batoro, Banyarwanda and many others, practice FGM Type IV and in particular, prepuce elongation (Koster & Price 2008, Grassivora & Busatta 2009, Guillermo &

Namulondo 2010) and account for almost all expansive FGM cases in the country. Unfortunately, this form of FGM has no official statistics and can only be roughly estimated. This is because it is not captured in the Uganda Demographic and Health Surveys as a form of FGM and is promoted for enhancement of sexual pleasure of both men and women (Martínez Pérez & Namulondo 2011, Grassivora & Busatta 2009). While less prevalent therefore, reductive forms of FGM types (I-III) are the only typologies on the spotlight and with official statistics for they are considered harmful. Currently, the national average prevalence rate of these typologies officially stands at 1.4 per cent but varies by region, -with regions like Karamoja, sharing international borders with higher FGM prevalence countries like Kenya having the highest rate in the country of nearly five per cent (UNICEF 2013, UBOS 2011, 28 Too Many 2013). This explains why other than the Somali and Ethiopian refugee communities with what this article considers “net imported” FGM, the Pokot, Kadamas, and Tepeth astride the Uganda-Kenya border in the Karamoja region are the only local communities with nearly universal reductive FGM rates in the country.⁹⁵ FGM has social, economic, physical and psychological effects on those that undergo it including haemorrhage and

death. Aware of these effects, right from the colonial time, unsuccessful attempts have been made to ban FGM (Lynn 2003). The most recent include the 2010 and 2011 FGM Acts passed and enforced in Uganda and Kenya respectively (Parliament of the Republic of Uganda 2010, Kenya National Council for Law Reporting 2011).

A snap shot of the people: Who are the Pokot?

The Pokot belong to the Kalenjin cluster⁹⁶ who live in the North-eastern part of the Kenya-Uganda border. They practice both male genital modifications as a rite of passage to manhood (*sapana*) and female genital modifications as a rite of passage to womanhood (*mutat*). While they borrowed the *sapana*⁹⁷ tradition from their Karimojong neighbours (Robbins 2010), “*mutat*” is a Kalenjini-wide rite of passage they borrowed from their cousins, the Marakwet in the late 1800s following the Ptoyo declaration by a council of elders (Kim 2007, Robbins 2010). About 75 per cent of the Pokot who straddle the Uganda-Kenya border, are “*pipa tich*”, the people of cattle, in the lowlands-making livestock keeping their most important source of livelihood. The remaining proportion of the people are “*pipa pagh*”, the people of the fields, whose main

⁹⁵ They are followed by the Sabiny, their cousins in the Bukwo, Kapchorwa and Kween districts on the Uganda -Kenya border, where the prevalence rate is about 50 per cent among girls and women (UNFPA 2011, 28 Too Many 2013).

⁹⁶ Other members of the Kalenjini include the Marakwet, Keiyo, Kipsigis, Nandi, Teri, Tugen and the Sabaot/Sabin in Kenya (Sabiny or Sebei in Uganda).

⁹⁷ “*Sapana*” is a rite of passage to manhood in the entire Karamoja. It comes from a Ngakarimojong word, “*ng’asapan*”, meaning, the process of becoming youthful.

source of livelihood is crop farming. Given their cattle complex, the “pipatich” accord cattle a status nearly similar to that of human beings, they are prepared to die for them and for their “primitive accumulation” they have a cattle raiding tradition (Novelli 1988).

The Rationale of this Article

While FGM and especially, the experiences of those that undergo it have dominated debate in global development and the academic arena, experiences of women that do not undergo it in settings where it is not only a universal rite of passage to womanhood but also a symbol of marriage worthiness and readiness remain less documented and less understood. To contribute to the current corpus of knowledge in this area this article, therefore, explores the lived experiences of such women with a worldview on FGM⁹⁸ as a symbol of marriage worthiness and readiness in Pokot, the epicenter of FGM not only in Uganda but the entire East African region with about ninety five per cent of females infibulated (UNICEF 2013, 28 Too Many 2013, & UBOS 2011). To effectively explore these experiences, this article is synthesised around the dilemma of mama Chemket, a Pokot woman in her twenties that did not undergo FGM and has failed to marry.

⁹⁸ Lived experiences in the context of this article refer to the practical realities: emotional, physiological, spiritual, mental, objective or subjective that for an entire lifespan interface with a woman who did not undergo “*mutat*” in puberty as a rite of passage among the Pokot.

Methodology and Findings

This article is extracted from study site-validated findings of a larger ethnographic research project conducted between February 2015 and January 2016 among the Pokot of the Karamoja cluster Uganda-Kenya border. The lived experiences it presents are based on inductive and content analysis of the dilemma of mama Chemket, a non-“*mutat* woman” that attributed her failure to marry an eligible Pokot man to her earlier decision not to undergo FGM.⁹⁹ This account is corroborated with evidence from another EGD with ex-surgeons,¹⁰⁰ seven ethnographic interviews (Etno_Ints)¹⁰¹ and Pokot hermeneutics. Interpretation of these experiences, in the article, was guided by phenomenology, a theoretical approach which is premised on the thinking that reality consists of objects and events (phenomena) as they are perceived, experienced or understood in the human consciousness and as relived with an emic perspective (Giddens 1984, Rose 1999) that Weber termed “*verstehen*”.

⁹⁹ EGD with mama Chemket and Bruno (EGD: Kar: NMW & NMM: 1).

¹⁰⁰ EGD with an elderly excision surgeon (Josephine), her daughter and a traditional birth attendant (EGD: Chep: ex-Surgeons: 1).

¹⁰¹ 1 with Chepto, a “*mutat*” woman (IDI: Nam: MW: 1), 1 with Christine, a non *mutat* woman (IDI: Nam: NMW: 2), 1 with Pauline, a non-*mutat* Pokot midwife in Karita HC III (IDI: Kar HC III: 2), 1 with Joseph, a Pokot elder who is also an FGM Monitor and a Catechist (IDI: Kar: PokEld: 1), 1 with a Nakapiripirit Magistrate Court Officer (IDI: Nakap: Court: 1), 1 with Thomas, a polygynous man with a non-*mutat* wife (IDI: Chep: Polyg-man-with NMW: 1) and lastly, 1 with Nayar, a school pupil rescued from FGM (IDI: Amud_sch_Pup_FGM_Surv: 1).

Findings: The Lived Experiences of Non-“*Mutat*” Women among the Pokot

Seven months into fieldwork, Chris,¹⁰² remained home alone with mama Chemket¹⁰³, a helper at his host family. When she started washing clothes, he also pulled out his and joined her. Soon, Bruno, a son to a neighbour, who spent time with them frequently, arrived. After building rapport, Chris asked: “Mama Chemket, you are a pretty woman and you are in your twenties but you are not married, why?” She sighed and responded:

Pokot men are crazy about brides that have undergone “*mutat*”. They are the ones seen as marriage worth and ready. Every (Pokot) woman on the other hand, dreams of marrying a Pokot man, especially, a warrior; for a man is a man with a kraal. The beliefs surrounding “*mutat*” and marriageability make it absolutely difficult for a Pokot man especially, a warrior, to marry me who has not undergone “*mutat*”. They for example believe that a non-“*mutat* woman” is unclean. A man who sleeps with or marries such a woman also becomes unclean. ... As such, on “*kipunal*”, the graduation day of “*mirar*”, the brides that have completed the FGM ritual, while all age-grade members of the “*mirar*’s” mother are invited sat together and entertained as guests, the names of all non-“*mutat*” women in the village are called out and

ridiculed by initiated men hiding on top of trees and everyone in the audience must laugh. In labour, no midwife will assist a non-“*mutat*” woman for, it is believed, she (the midwife) would become blind unless she (the non-*mutat* woman) agrees to genital modification prior to the process. ...It is the pressures associated with these beliefs that force women like me to accept “*mutat*”.

I could have cut but I didn’t. When my peers asked me to join them while in school in Kenya my boyfriend threatened not to marry me if I cut. I wanted him to marry me so I abandoned the idea. I know he refused it because of his education level and family background. They are very wealthy and educated. When I declined, my friends told me that my “*Maragwe*”, “bean” (euphemism for prepuce/clitoris), would grow into seven branches if I did not cut it. I have waited however, but I have only three branches and that is normal. They also said that the sight of the “*Maragwe*” is ugly but mine is not. We bathe in groups at the river but even if I bend my peers cannot see it. I have a big bum which hides it. For small girls, the “*maragwe*” is seen, when they bend. It is true, when seen, it looks ugly. The one which has been cut is smooth. You completely see nothing. It can’t release even any water if she admires a man. For me, a mere touch from a man makes me squirt. To be honest, if my boyfriend didn’t stop me, I would have cut. Of course, I didn’t want to grow seven branches and I wanted to marry. I would be married now to a Pokot man if I had cut it. I would even be a mother of three children by now. But because I am not cut, a Pokot man cannot marry me. May be a

¹⁰² Author number one

¹⁰³ Note: For confidentiality purposes, all participants are referred to with pseudo names

very old one. If he did, he would be quarrelling every day for he would not trust in my fidelity. He would also get another woman. Cutting is even more in areas without water like Namareyon. There, water sources can be as far as 25 kms. The people are also very poor. A household has only one (1) water vessel, a Jerry can and women take even a month without bathing. A woman who is not cut if she takes only two days without bathing does not need to be told that she is smelling. She will also feel it herself. But I tell you, a cut woman can take a week without showering and she will not smell. This is why “*mutat*” is higher in areas without water such as Namareyon.

Chris tried to find out if mama Chemket could undergo *mutat* today if a Pokot man she loves very much asked her to do it as a condition for marriage. An opportunity presented when a group of girls Chris lived with including mama Chemket, asked him, if he could go to Karita, a cross border stream flowing from Kenya with them to collect firewood He jumped at the chance. While collecting firewood, Chris followed up her earlier statement. He asked: “When we were doing laundry earlier today, you said, you would be married to a Pokot man by now, if you had undergone *mutat*. Tell me, would you undergo “*mutat*” if a Pokot man you love very much asked you to do it as a condition to marry him?” After dispelling her fear of arrest, given the ban on FGM since 2010, she replied: “If I really love him, yes, I will do it. But I am worried of course about labour complications that are

associated with it. I would have to be cut four times to allow the baby to come out.”

The title of this article is extracted from this dialogue for it highlights the dilemma and unique nature of lived experiences women who do not undergo *mutat* in contexts with nearly universal prevalence such as the Pokot face. This narrative demonstrates rare marriage prospects and if lucky to be married, great pain one suffers under suspicion of infidelity by spouses; and ridicule and ostracism from co-wives as the day-to-day experiences of “*mutat* women.”. Since they do not marry, songs such as “Asorangotich” are also composed to name, shame and ostracise women in the village that have not married because of failure to undergo “*mutat*.” Chepto, a “*mutat* woman” in Namodo for example, corroborated mama Chemket’s account during an ethnographic interview that:

We sang some songs, particularly, “Asorangotich” (meaning, we have non-FGM girls and they have not married), not only to ostracise those girls that had not undergone *mutat* but also to expose our young audience of girls to the marital benefits of fulfilling the *mutat* obligations of a Pokot girl.

This ordeal follows non-“*mutat*” women across physical borders more so, in the rural areas where beliefs about “*mutat*” are strong. The ordeal that Christine, a non-“*mutat* woman” experienced when she left Makutano (an urban area) for Chepukat (a rural

area) corroborates this. She relived this ordeal, during an ethnographic interview thus:

In Makutano trading centre, nobody told me about FGM but when I went to Chepukat, my peers laughed at me. They asked me why I am not cut. They told me that I am useless. "Is your mind okay?" my cousins asked? Boys (loosely meaning, the unmarried men) also told me that if I was looking for marriage in that place I should forget about it because I am not cut. You cannot marry here if you are not cut and we will sing for you insulting songs on Kipunat, the graduation day. The Karachuna (youths) will climb trees on Kipunat to loudly mock all the non-*"mutat"* women and all of us in the audience will laugh. Your name will be on the list. For not ensuring you are cut, your parents will also be ridiculed for bringing shame to the clan.

This corroborated discussion with mama Chemket, Chepto and Christine all illuminate a Pokot worldview of FGM as the only symbol of marriage worthiness and readiness that guarantees FGM women nearly universal marriage prospects while rendering those of their non-FGM counterparts rare. To unpack this worldview, we found six key Pokot beliefs that perpetuate it namely, that non-*"mutat"* women are: not socialised into good wifehood, unclean (not pure), un-aesthetic, children, do not enjoy great sexual and reproductive health and that a man that marries a non-*"mutat"* woman also acquires her uncleanness. To digest them adequately, the article focusses only on the first five beliefs.

Non *"mutat"* women are not socialised into good wifehood

This belief is based on the knowledge of the curriculum of Köpö Chemerin, a seclusion hut where Chemerin, the neophytes, are not only healed and fattened but also taught the ethos of true Pokot wifehood. Demonstrating this, Chepto, an initiated woman, observed during an ethnographic interview: "As a school for deliberate socialisation into womanhood, we were taught wide-ranging subjects from sex, marriage, good wifehood to looking after elders and children." After this education, therefore, a neophyte upon graduation becomes a bride (*mirar*) and is held in high esteem as one who has completed a rigorous three months socialisation curriculum on how to be a good housewife. This explains why *"mutat* brides" command higher bride wealth than their *"non-mutat"* counterparts. In Karapokot (Ugandan part of Pokot) where most wealthy warriors prefer to live, given its easy access to the vast Pian-Upe grazing ranges, a *"mutat* bride" commands up to about thirty (30) cows. In Kenya however, where land pressure has rendered cattle ownership limited, she could fetch up to ten (10) cows, an elderly non-*"mutat"* Pokot midwife in Karita HC III added: "The belief that *"mutat"* women are socialized for Pokot wifehood also explains why *"mutat* brides" especially, those that demonstrate bravery by not crying before the blade are married off the

same day they undergo FGM while their non “*mutal*” counterparts have extremely rare marriage prospects.” Those that are lucky to marry, command only a paltry three to five cows for they missed this kind of socialization in the “Köpö Chemerin” as mama Chemket illuminated in her narrative. Joseph, an elder from across the border in Ptoyo in Kenya, now living in Karita, for example, associated marriage to non-“*mutal*” women with high rates of domestic violence and divorce since they do not undergo this kind of socialization. Recollecting from his personal experience and observation to demonstrate this, he re-lived in an ethnographic interview that:

A cut woman is trained to manage matters of the home. She will rightfully complain to your parents or friends rather than go to incite her parents. Reporting to her family after a fight with the husband implies she is seeking reinforcement to overpower the husband. I lived with my wife next to her parents. She was not cut. I gave her an order but she shouted at me. She also reported to my in-laws and they chased me. I called the elders and she was counselled. She was told to report to her father and mother in law to defend her if we have a fight for she now belonged to that clan. “You are a family member and since you are giving them grandchildren they will defend you, she was counselled. Should you repeat we will organize Kokwa,” a Pokot village based council of elders, “to chase you for quarrelling

and indiscipline.” This was in Ptoyo in Kenya in 1999.

In a related case, a non-cut woman fought with her husband. She ran to their home for three weeks and forgot her mistakes. The second time it happened she called her family and since they were drunk they beat him. He called elders, his and her relatives. A “*Kokwa*” sat and he put his case before them. He noted, “I have called you my elders, relatives and in-laws because I have no peace. I married this woman but when we have petty quarrels she runs to their home. It is like she has not yet been integrated into this family. Since I have one child with her, I want half of my bride wealth back as tradition commands. Give me my cows and she will be free to marry another man”. Chesokoyon brought Sokoy – a very sacred herb used in taking oaths. He tied long grass on their necks and pronounced: “From today you are separated. Look for another husband. You, look for another wife.” Once this happens, there is no more discussion for it is a final traditional step to divorce and the cows (bride wealth) were brought back.

To demonstrate the influence of this belief, in February 2014, three girls in Lochengenge village, picked razorblades and modified their genitals in turns. With the FGM law in effect, the trio was arrested and prosecuted together with their mothers. Explaining what happened during the court proceedings, an official at the Nakapiripirit court during ethnographic interviews

observed: “When asked why they did it, they said that traditional surgeons feared to be arrested and prosecuted, so they had refused to modify them, yet the risk of them losing their fiancés was increasing the longer they took without undergoing “*mutat*”. The trio and their mothers were however, all released with caution since they were all children and given that their mothers had not helped them procure FGM. This strategy was also used by the Meru of Central Kenya following the ban of FGM by the colonial state in 1956 in Kenya (Lynn 2003). With the surgeons fearing state arrests, prosecution, imprisonment and punishment, the young girls got razorblades, modified their genitals in turns and reported to detention centres where they provided hard labour until their parents paid fines either in cash or livestock to ransom them. To disguise the process further, they abandoned initial rites in the initiation process including the stomach tattoos and the piercing of large earholes as symbols of initiation. Given the lack of experience, their modifications just like their peer-child FGM surgeries in Pokot were not done conventionally, making the traditionalists question the authenticity of their initiation rites by labelling them “*Ngaitana*”, meaning, “I will circumcise myself” (Lynn 2003). In response, the “*Ngaitana*” neophytes composed and sang songs that validated their initiation rites as authentic even if they had not used the traditional Meru triangular modification blades

known as “*irunya*” and even though the modifications did not conform to tradition. To exonerate them from legal implications even where elderly surgeons performed these modifications, the neophytes claimed to have done the modifications themselves. Aware of their legal immunity as children, attempt by young girls in Pokot to modify themselves or to claim self-modification is therefore, either copycat or reminiscent of the “*Ngaitana*” movement strategy of the Meru. This experience validates the argument by Rezaee (2012) in the social theory of FGM on the decisions individuals take to undergo the procedure, that FGM beliefs, their dissemination, sanctions that follow deviance and compliance as well as the immediate social context have a strong influence not only on the experiences of FGM and women that do not undergo it but also on the survival of the practice.

Non-“*Mutat*” women are not clean and pure

Furthermore, a non-“*mutat* woman” among the Pokot is believed not to be worth marrying for her prepuce makes her unclean and provokes the wrath of ancestors and “*Tororut*”, the Pokot deity of creation. Because of this provocation, marrying a non-“*mutat* woman” is recipe for twelve (12) catastrophes. For instance, if such a woman enters a kraal or crosses its gate, cattle may not produce any more milk. *Tororut* will also strike them with death for they will lose their resilience to drought and disease. Being the key

source of food, this eventually, would result in human starvation and death. In addition, if men in “*Apiri*”, a fire place in the middle of the home and adjacent to the kraal, which serves as the security high command for the family, eat her food or drink her water, they will suffer dementia. If she enters a water source for livestock, “*Tororut*” will strike it dry. Even the animals that drink from it will stop producing milk and die. And since cows are the main source of food: milk, blood and cow dung, the community would subsequently die of starvation. Furthermore, if such a woman fetches water from a community water source the source will become unclean. Similarly, if she fetches food from a granary, the food will be contaminated by her uncleanness. In addition, if such a woman, desecrates a granary, crops will not only lose resilience to drought and pests but people would also starve to death. To illustrate how this belief is upheld in reality, Thomas, a polygynous man with a non-“*mutat* wife” recollected during an ethnographic interview how his wife suffered:

In Chepareria, she could not be allowed to get near the granary or to enter the kraal to pick cow dung for she is considered unclean. You know the Pokot that are very conservative say these will make the crops and livestock to lose resilience, hence causing disaster.

Similarly, because she is believed to be unclean, if she is prohibited from passing through a neighbour’s home

in the morning before taking a shower after sex because if her shadow were to cross a baby, it is believed that the baby will immediately become incurably ill unless a healing ritual is performed. In the same way, a midwife that helps such a woman to deliver, it was believed, will become blind as a punishment from “*Tororut*” for looking at unclean genitalia. This explains why such women deliver without assistance from traditional birth attendants or accept genital modification prior to being helped to deliver. If a man also marries a non-“*mutat* woman” and joins a raiding band, the entire group will be wiped out by the enemy unless he carries a goat rib bone in his hand. While firing his rifle he must hold the rib firmly with his teeth or else no group member shall survive in the raid, if it fell down from his mouth. Lastly, if such a woman were to attend “*kipuno*”, the graduation ceremony of neophytes after seclusion (or any other public ceremony), the graduands would become unclean and will be in danger of death when giving birth unless the culprit brings a black he-goat for “*kitse*”, a cleansing ritual of the home, herself and the graduands for they came in contact with an unclean “child.¹⁰⁴” To attest this again, Thomas recollected from his wife’s experience of thus:

She is not also allowed to attend *Kipumat*, the *mirar* (brides)

¹⁰⁴ Note: “*Kitse*” is no substitute for “*mutat*”. Undergoing it does not therefore, mean the un-initiated woman has become unclean. For this reason, whenever she breaks the norm by coming in contact with “*mutat*” women, it has to be done for risk aversion.

graduation day. Coming from Uganda where culture is a bit dilute, she attended *Kipunat* in Kenya when she was pregnant with our first child and I had to pay a fine, a black he-goat before she was set free. Chime (the raw excreta in the offal) from this goat was then sprinkled everywhere in the home and door. It had to be smeared on her face and (around her) heart too and then she had to pass through the door for *kitse*, the cleansing ritual. All Chemerin (initiands) also had to go through this cleansing process for they had come in contact with an unclean child.

Fear of these catastrophes befalling those that defy these beliefs by marrying non-“*mutat* brides” partly explains why FGM has survived to this day. This observation is supported by Douglas’ (1966) conviction that outcasts on the margins of tradition are usually secluded because of the need to avert danger. Driven by fear of risk, enforcement of these beliefs is therefore what largely makes the lived experiences of a non- “*mutat* woman” miserable with a plethora of sanctions. Like garden work or house construction and kitchen work, for example, milking and collection of cow dung for hut smearing is a responsibility of a woman. Restriction from milking means therefore that no man would be willing to marry a woman of that kind for it is equivalent to marrying a woman with permanent disability. Who will milk his cows? If she cooks or milks, who will eat her food or enjoy her milk? Practically, he would have no visitors for his wife

is unclean. On this, Thomas again explained: “Only people who have gone to Church eat her food. The rest do not. Even when they come here they tell me, ‘if you want us to eat your food first bring your woman to Kenya and we clean her with *mutat*.’”

The growing cases of obstetric FGM today with the FGM law in place are therefore explained by pressures associated with these beliefs. In Amudat Hospital, for example, we encountered, a woman in February 2015, who had crossed the border from Alele, Kenya, where she had accepted to undergo FGM during labour. Her mother and a surgeon had brought her to the hospital because they had failed to deliver her at home having lost much blood in their attempt to modify her genitalia before aiding her to deliver as required by tradition. Unfortunately, she died because they delayed to reach the hospital.

These beliefs are not exclusive to the Pokot. They have also been observed among other cross border communities such as the Kuria of Kenya and the Somali. Very much like the Pokot, without FGM a woman cannot be part of their social life events, such as communal feasts or burials (Berhe 2014, Rezaee 2013). They are also not allowed to handle food and water or to fetch water from a water source before those that have undergone genital modification, for the water source would run dry, it is held. The reality however, is that because the clitoris is seen as unclean, it is believed to have the potential

to contaminate water if it drips. But while this is not true, this article locates the intention of this myth on the need to make life as hard as possible for such a woman to coerce her to undergo FGM. The experiences of such women also serve to provide collective deterrence so that young girls will undergo “mutat” and avoid the lifelong pain of evading it. And like the Pokot, among the Sabiny, such women are not allowed to host guests (Namulondo 2009). Their husbands (if lucky to be married) are also ashamed to introduce them to people. The inference, this article draws henceforth, is that a number of FGM cleansing beliefs are not only powerful but also borderless. This is why in some communities popular terms for FGM are synonymous with purification. Tahara in Egypt and tahir in Sudan are for example, some of the key concepts used to refer to the purity associated with undergoing FGM while nejasa on the other hand is used to refer to impurity and uncleanness associated with not undergoing FGM (Berhe 2014, Caldwell, Orubuloye & Caldwell 1997).

Non-“mutat” women are un-aesthetic

A prepuce is believed to be naturally not only ugly and unsightly among the Pokot but also to make a woman un-aesthetic. To demonstrate marriage worthiness therefore, a woman must modify it as mama Chemket observed in her narrative. The belief that non-

“mutat” women are unclean, the belief that the prepuce is naturally not only ugly and unsightly but also to make a woman un-aesthetic explain why no Pokot woman therefore wants to be called “*chapchakaurat*”, a woman carrying a big clitoris. No child also wants to be called a child or daughter of “*chapchakaurat*” because of these beliefs. To signify their cross border nature, these beliefs have also been observed in many other cross border communities in Somalia, Sudan, and Kenya where calling a woman uncircumcised or calling a man a son of a non-FGM mother is an unforgivable insult because of the sentiments associated with such an abomination (Shweder 2000, Slack 1988). Among the Masaai of Kenya or their cousins across the border in Tanzania, for example, a non-FGM woman can be called anything else but “mother”, even if she has children, on account of this belief. This is also true among the Kuria of Kenya where such a woman addressed is given the derogatory word: “*kunene*”, meaning, a woman with a prepuce (Berhe 2014).

A non-“mutat” woman is a child (moning)

“*Mutat*” is also a rite of passage to adulthood among the Pokot. As such, a Pokot woman becomes an adult, who is marriageable and respected only after undergoing “*mutat*”. The initiates for this rite of passage in particular include girls in the age bracket of 10-14 years. This explains why the life experience of

a non-“*mutat* woman” such as mama Chemket is for this matter, other than having rare marriage prospects, is that of everyday seclusion, ostracism and ridicule. Both non-“*mutat*” women and ex-surgeons validated this belief as recounted by mama Chemket. During ethnographic interviews, for example, Christine, a non-“*mutat* woman”, lucky to be the last wife to a polygynous old man in Namodo observed: “... When I sit with children, they call all of us “moneghi,” children, (singular “moning”) since I am not cut.”

Corroborating this, Josephine, an elderly woman who serves as a traditional FGM surgeon observed in an ethnographic group discussion that:

“If a quarrel breaks up between women, the modified woman will ridicule one not modified as a child. She can say, look at you child, should you say a word again, even if I am not a surgeon I will modify you myself.”

One of the key reasons why non-“*mutat*” women among the Pokot have limited marriage prospects is, therefore, that without undergoing “*mutat*” as a rite of passage to womanhood one remains a child (*moning*) yet marriage is reserved for women¹⁰⁵ only, the initiated. This belief has also limited marriage prospects of non-*mutat* women in other FGM communities across Africa, particularly among the Coniagui, Kuranko, Kono, Mandinga

¹⁰⁵ Since FGM (*mutat*) is a rite of passage to womanhood, regardless of biological age, one is only a woman in Pokot if she is initiated through FGM.

of West Africa, the Kikuyu, Okiek, Meru, Embu, Maasai of Kenya and Sabiny of Uganda where FGM marks the coming-of-age. Very much like among the Pokot, non-initiated women in these communities are considered children (Kenyatta 1938; Slack 1988), ridiculed and shamed (Berhe 2014). The belief of FGM as a rite of passage, is therefore, what partly, renders low, the marriage prospects of non-initiated women in all the communities where it exists. The probable explanation is that traditions such as FGM as a rite of passage are not always native but acculturated. This is particularly, true about the Pokot that only initiated FGM in the late 1800s to address infidelity among their wives after learning of it from their Kalenjin cluster cousins, the Marakwet (Kiptiony 2008).

Non-“*mutat*” women do not have good sexual and reproductive health

Lastly, the Pokot also associate “*mutat*” with good sexual and reproductive health. Without undergoing it, therefore, a woman is not considered marriage worthy because of the three beliefs associated with her sexual and reproductive health.

First, is the belief that a non-“*mutat*” woman has an undesirably high sexual libido making it difficult for her to preserve her virginity before marriage and the need for fidelity in marriage. To illustrate this point, Joseph, during an ethnographic interview reflected thus:

A non-cut woman is not trusted because if caressed by a man her temperature will immediately go up and adultery is not impossible. Look at that uncut woman there, her husband is a soldier. He is in Somalia but her temperature is high. She is sleeping with her customers at night after drinking. A cut woman cannot do that.

To demonstrate faith in this belief, before excision, candidates will sing the song of the “very hot vagina” (*Kiwerwerin sei*) in every FGM season. In this song, the female genitalia is hailed as a source of wealth (cattle). As a source of wealth, however, since men do not have sexual control, this song counsels a girl to undergo excision to make her genitalia not only enticingly “very hot” but also to gain sexual control that a woman must have. This is to be able to withhold sex from the groom until he is coerced by his lack of sexual control to promise her his prized spotted bull or cow, such as the one with horns twisted upwards (*kamartin*) or downwards (*kamultin*). Rather than enhancing sexual pleasure with her therefore, a “*mutat*” woman’s ability to withhold sex from a man is what makes the limited opportunities he gets to have sexual intercourse with her psychologically and emotionally exciting, priceless, valued and memorable. These rare experiences thus, are what give a “*mutat*” woman’s vagina a description of being “enticingly very hot” even when this is objectively averse to reality. Manifestly, this description is crafted to entrap girls to embrace FGM and entice men to marry only

“*mutat*” women. To reinforce this intention, sexual encounters with non-“*mutat*” women is a taboo that if broken attracts taboos addressed under the theme of “non-‘*mutat*’ women are not clean and pure”. The thorn apple fruits (*lopotwa*) the song mentions, also symbolise the wealth a woman will get after excision through sexual control and the promises the groom will make to will her his prized cow or bull in exchange for sexual pleasure. The purpose of this song thus is to rationalise FGM as a source of wealth and sexual control as Chepto, a “*mutat* woman” and her peers documented it.

Kiwerwerin sei (Pokoot Version)
Very hot vagina (English version)

Kuröt Chorus

Stop/Avoid:

Kiwerwerin sei
Very hot vagina
Lopotwa, perit a kuka
Lopotwa fruit, penis of Ancient Father
Kadongut seiyo koku
Large cowbell, vagina of Ancient Mother

Kuri Verses

Tiomba lowan tich nyo kilowun kamartin
Its purpose is to get cattle, to get kamartin
Tiomba lowan tich nyo kilowun kamultin
Its purpose is to get cattle, to get kamultin
This belief also exists among the Orma and Wardei communities in the Tana River County of Kenya and among the Rendille of Northern

Kenya. Like the Pokot, Rendille women undergo FGM to manage high sexual desire and promiscuity that are appropriate only for men and animals. This belief is driven by the dominant patriarchal ideology in these communities that affords man sexual freedom but subjects it to control in women. They also perform FGM to empower women to withhold sex until a man accepts their terms and conditions, for men cannot do without sex for long (Einstein 2008, Abusharaf 2001). Because of this belief, the Rendille see FGM as the only thing that separates animals and civilised humans. And like the Pokot, therefore, they practice FGM to help them acquire an admirable feminine and civilised self-controlling identity (Shell-Duncan 2001). The implication is that some FGM beliefs, though not universal, are shared across ethnic boundaries. Since they serve similar purposes, they also subject women to similar experiences, with non-“*mutat*” women less likely to be married.

This observation, however, contradicts the experiences of coastal West African societies, where varying degrees of permissiveness with regard to premarital female sexuality are exhibited despite FGM (Slack 1988, Shweder 2000). This contradiction may however, be an outcome of experiences with the type of FGM practiced among the Pokot, embracing infibulation, which WHO considers the most severe form of FGM (WHO 2008). On this basis, it is possible to argue that the extent to which FGM interferes with ones

libido is determined by the nature of FGM undergone. This explains why low libido interference has also been reported in some Bangladesh communities that only prick the prepuce while higher libido is reported in those communities that stretch the labia, such as some Bantu and Hamite groups in Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and other Central African countries (Grassivora 2009, Guillermo & Namulondo 2010, Bizimana 2010).

Secondly, the Pokot believe that a non-“*mutat* woman” has a higher risk of developing nasty genital features particularly keloids and “*piria*”, the prolapsing of the uterus, making its tip collapse through the cervix and interfere with her sexual life. This article however, considers this belief a myth. The two cases of “*piria*” that we observed, for example, involved “*mutat*” women especially, those that had given many births. This is because FGM scars render the birth canal less elastic, making it necessary for a “*mutat*” mother to use more force to push the baby and for a longer period than their non-“*mutat*” counterparts. The interpretation of this belief is supported by findings made by Uganda’s MoH (2008) and MoGLSD (2007) studies that have also scientifically found that FGM women have a higher risk of serious sexual and reproductive health challenges including the development of genital features particularly, keloids and excision scars.

Thirdly, a “non-*mutat*” woman is believed to generate foul smell from the secretions that come from her prepuce. As mama Chemket observed in our discussion, “*mutat*” women are therefore, preferred for marriage and in the service of adult men that have gone through “*sapana*” for they are believed not to generate any smell even if they take a week without bathing. This is one of the pioneer arguments presented in the big fire emergency meeting of the council of elders in the late 1800s that commissioned universal FGM among the Pokot as a decree in Ptoyo. Using a bio-medical perspective, however, Pauline, a Pokot midwife in Karita HC III¹⁰⁶ who also remains unmarried due to her earlier decision not to undergo “*mutat*” attributed this smell to the reality that while women that have not undergone FGM are easily stimulated, women that have undergone FGM do not release much fluids. Further, their genitals are likely to be less lubricated even when men attempt to seduce them. Association of bad smell with women that have not undergone FGM is even stronger in more water stressed areas where it is normal for women to go without a bath for a week or so, as mama Chemket observed in the narrative. Association of bad hygiene with the prepuce (clitoris or foreskin) has also been used to justify traditional male circumcision in many other societies including Bugisu and Bukusu in Uganda and Kenya respectively.

National safe male circumcision

¹⁰⁶ Ethno-Int: Kar: HC III/FGM Mon: 1

campaigns have also carried similar sentiments across the world. Caldwell, Orubuloye and Caldwell (1997) also made a similar association between the prepuce and foul smell especially, in places with high levels of genital diseases lending credence thus to this world view that has not only driven FGM among the Pokot but also the world view that non-FGM women are not worthy of marriage. This belief however, is critically moderated by water stress, personal hygiene and genital infections. As Orubuloye and Caldwell (1997) corroborate, this explains why areas with high genital infection risks and water stress are more likely, to support pro-FGM world views.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of non-“*mutat*” women among the Pokot can therefore, be described as “marriage-less” and if lucky to be married, ridicule and pain full. As the evidence analysed demonstrates these experiences are perpetuated by the notion of “*mutat*” as a symbol of marriage worthiness and its six supporting beliefs that are responsible for the lamentations of such women after failure to get married or while suffering a life of ridicule and ostracism in their rare marriages. This notion is a repercussion of the elders’ intention in the Ptoyo declaration of the late 1800s to tame sexual libido that was accused of driving infidelity among women in marriage. It also explains the rewarding nature of the social life that “*mutat*” women

considered marriage worthy enjoy, on the other hand. To avoid a life of pain and suffering and enjoy socially determined rewards, the only choice a woman has, therefore, is to embrace “*mutat*”. This argument is validated by the three key basic assumptions individuals make to undergo FGM as fronted by Packer Corinne (2005) and Rezaee Ahan Farnoosh (Rezaee, 2012, 2013) as basis for their social theory of FGM. As hinted on earlier, these assumptions are that individuals embrace FGM because the community beliefs about its benefits and consequences that shape aggregate perceptions and attitudes towards it are supportive. Secondly, that these decisions are actualised by the normative consideration of social pressures and sanctions that follow those that undergo or evade FGM. And lastly, that the norms that inform these considerations are transmitted through socialization and social interaction (Rezaee, 2012, 2013).

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