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FGM/C: From Medicine to Critical Anthropology

## CHAPTER 6

### ***Gukuna*: a paradoxical rwandan female genital “mutilation”**

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#### *Premise*

Many years ago, when I took up the subject of what is called Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), I had no notion about *gukuna* and even less did I think that I would one day study it in the field. Gradually, however, I learned that this modification of female genitalia was part of a long social apprenticeship which enabled girls to become women, an apprenticeship, more or less lengthy, entailing the interiorization (in the anthropological sense of incorporation) of the means necessary to institute gender. Thus, despite the pain caused by some interventions on the genitals, the social actresses can desire, not so much the modification as such, but the access it provides to a certain world (Fusaschi, 2003; 2011; 2013).

I therefore understood that these interventions, taken together, do not aim so much at the modification per se but at the social effect that it produces. In practice, only after having undergone a specific operation the social actress is considered fully a woman. Society consequently recognizes a new status in her. At one time, this status meant that of future wife and mother; but now, even if the overall situation remains one of inequality, the status may also be that of an autonomous and authoritative woman, in some instances a “feminist”, as I will try to demonstrate below in discussing the Rwandese context.

I began field research in the 1990s with the intention of constructing the ethnic identity that led to the genocide of 1994, concentrating then on the socio-cultural reality of the period after the genocide (Fusaschi, 2000; 2009; 2013). In the course of this rather long period, I also embarked on a study, in the context of gender, on the social construction of the body, a progressive and unexpected process that had as its most interesting consequences an analysis of *gukuna* (Fusaschi, 2008, 2011, 2013).

This practice, categorized in the international language of “humanitarian reason” (Fassin, 2010) as a «harmful practice» violating women’s human rights [WHO 2008], falls under the type IV classification of so-called FGM, considered as a less common form of mutilation. From an emic point of view, however, that of the social actresses, it will be seen that *gukuna* is not only not a mutilation but that, in the Rwandese context, it assumes meanings in dialectical contrast with the vulgata of gender mainstreaming, in contrast, that is, with the gender-based violence (GBV) where all forms

of FGM are normally included (Fusaschi, 2011).

In studying *gukuna*, I started from a “classical” anthropological interpretation, which I later revised, according to which Rwandese women would take on the social roles defined as “mute” in contrast with the “speaking” male ones. In fact, an attitude of silence and the keeping of secrets would circumscribe the idea of a femininity which is fully realized in marriage and maternity. The literature thus has it that «the Rwandese woman» remains silent, reclusive, lowering her eyes, speaking «solely in a low voice, shows herself to be discreet and modest, does not take part in male debates, since the power of the word, the affirmation and exaltation of oneself, authority, aggression, the active management of the culture, are properly signs of the masculine sphere. It is through these carefully measured and controlled restrictions that the Rwandese woman can in fact elicit veneration and have a remarkably profound influence» capable of altering male thought (Smith, 1979, p. 39). In my work, this attitude of silence and reserve, synonymous with being wise and (*kwitonda*), a quality related to *ubwenge*<sup>1</sup> intelligence, (sometimes is represented through new forms as a mode of agency – resistance – above all in the case of survivors of the genocide, Fusaschi, 2013). As Tamale points out: «In the dominant Western tradition voice is valorized and silence constructed as a total blank, while in many African cultures silence can be as powerful and as empowering as speech» (Tamale, 2005). This attitude of reserve has not prevented women from coming out of the merely domestic sphere to participate personally both in post-genocide politics and in a more “active” social life in general, in a form of empowerment (Fusaschi, 2018). Focusing on the realm of the private, which once was the realm of “secrets”, I would like to bring out here how women have progressively appropriated speech not so much to share secrets with other women they see as “equals” (me first as wife and as researcher only afterwards), as to share experiences, which undermines this classical view.

### Guca imyeyo: *let's go cut the brooms*

It was in the hills of the Eastern Province near Kibungo that I first undertook field work, thanks to the help of some mostly older women, who gave me access to that which in a normal woman's life is *guca imyeyo*, literally «to go cut brooms». This is the expression used by Rwandese women to refer to the practice of *gukuna*, a modification of the genital organ. The expression evokes female intimacy linked to a particular physical and symbolic space, where young women gather to cut brooms and weave mats.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Iliaria Buscaglia, 2012, *Non solo pioggia. Dopo la tempesta: donne, Stato, governamentalità in Rwanda*, PHD dissertation, Scuola di dottorato L'Interpretazione. Sezione Antropologia, Etnologia e studi culturali, Univ. Siena.

<sup>2</sup> This continues even now, although the practice can be executed elsewhere: in a bedroom above all, in the city, or in the dormitories of village schools.

As I have often had occasion to note, Catherine was the first to reveal to me one day the elements of the practice when she took the edge of her *pagne* (Fusaschi, 2013) with the middle finger and thumb of her hand and drew it up to her genital organ. She then took my hand and rubbed the skin between my thumb and index finger, saying «see, this is how it is done». She continued, explaining that the vagina’s labia are «soft as plastic today» and that when they are long, they are much appreciated by the husband in marriage (meaning in sexual relations). In fact, they help make *amazi*, literally water, which in turn «makes making children better».

This was how my older friend summed up *gukuna* (or *gukuna imishino*); an entirely female practice which, in the eyes of the protagonists, should in no way be confused or identified with the so-called FGM. The challenge now is to recover, through ethnographic study, an understanding of how the woman’s body is culturally modeled, even without removing anything (as is the case of excision, for example), and to understand this in the context of rich semantic fields like sexuality, marriage, procreation, relations between genders and generations.

In the field, I encouraged my interlocutors verbal and non-verbal desires by talking of *gukuna* in solitary places shielded from indiscreet views, as though we had been friends for a long time and were talking confidentially about married life, because, at least for the older women, *gukuna* is marriage. It can be understood otherwise by younger Rwandese women, as is suggested by the documentary *Sacred Water of Olivier Jourdain* (2016); they see it as a way to know one’s own body and also as a possible means of seduction (Fusaschi, 2011; 2012).

In any case, this knowledge is scrupulously protected and managed by women. It is not to be spoken of in public except through metaphors, avoiding doing so in the presence of men – even though men are clear points of reference. Women take it all for granted, and this is probably the reason it is not much spoken of except among closest friends. *Gukuna* is seen as a necessary and indispensable step towards a girl’s full social life. Progressively incorporating the sign, they naturalize it and thus become Rwandese women ready for marriage and maternity, according to a so-called traditional view, or, in the case of younger generations, they become women fully aware of their bodies and of the “facts of love”. They thus reinterpret and reinvent the tradition in a feminist “Rwandese” manner.

### *Moralization of customs in the colonial period*

The first historical notice of *gukuna* in literature concerned the «colonial situation» (Balandier, 1951) when a moralization of Rwandese sexuality took place under Belgian rule (beginning in 1916). *Gukuna* was a specific target of the Catholic church. In 1946, Monsignor Deprimoz, apostolic vicar of Rwanda, published a document in which he asked priests to question the faithful in the course of their confessions to discover traditional sexual practices, with the goal of “uprooting them”.

In 1954, in *L’enfant au Ruanda-Urundi*, Marc Vincent, a government doctor, in

the chapter entitled *Le sexe* wrote this about girls: parents «do not worry about their sexual conduct before puberty [...] at that age, the girl begins to think of marriage [...] her friends are of the same sex and, in the company of the older girls, they go to “cut the brooms” for the purpose of undertaking the elongation of the labia minora [...] indispensable, so they believe, for the husband’s pleasure» (1954, p. 168). At the same time he noted how Christianity, which was then already dominant even though it had not changed old customs, had extensively affected the indigenous world by introducing a classical sense of guilt among the young people who frequented the missions. From the Church’s point of view, *gukuna* was considered a form of onanism, and the practice was therefore a perversion. In my talks with an older Rwandese priest, the main problem was considered to be this: as a manipulation among women, *gukuna* might lead them to find pleasure. He also told me how female sexuality was described during his education as a seminary student in Zaza in 1960. To speak of women and their bodies, and especially of sexuality, the missionaries showed slides where the woman was represented through images of the sex of an animal, usually a cat or a rabbit. These slides, which he called “terrible and disturbing”, demonstrated how Christian morality identified women’s ancestral inferiority with the animal world. For them women were forever prey to uncontrolled instincts, touching one other from an early age, a fact demonstrated precisely by *gukuna*. It is no surprise to find all this in missionary ethnological literature and other writings of the period. In the work of Pierre Erny, *gukuna* was viewed as an exclusively female practice undertaken for the pleasure of husbands, who in turn considered it indispensable for increasing their sexual pleasure but equally useful for enlarging the female genital organ, and consequently to facilitate giving birth (Erny, 1972, p. 91). A precious ethnographic source is *Imihango yo mu Rwanda* (1964), literally *The Traditions of Rwanda*, of particular worth for the history of the Rwandese church, written in *kinjarwanda* by Aloysius Bigirumwami, the bishop of Nyundo. The bishop was firmly convinced that ethnographic studies served pastoral purposes, because they provided a new way to record and transmit traditions earlier expressed only orally. Some time later, Anicet Kashamura, a Congolese journalist who had been Lumumba’s minister of culture, went further: «*U kukuna* is young girls’ initiation to sexual life [...] it is essentially for bringing young women to marriage who are both sensual and informed. The initiation consists in elongating the labia minora but also the clitoris (*imishimo*) so that unlike women subjected to excision, the ones who possess developed labia and clitoris are considered to be sensual and rarely frigid; on the other hand, through a whole series of exercises, the young women entertain one another mutually to learn love moves and to participate actively in the sexual act, thus reaching orgasm more easily» (Kashamura, 1973, p. 6).

#### *Caring for one’s body or making sure not to be naked*

The term *gukuna* refers to the massage which produces an elongation of the labia

minora; with the singular, the word *kwisuuura* is used both to express “making sure not to be naked” as well as “caring for one’s own body”. The idea of a “dressed” genital organ, one that is covered, corresponds to a model of corporeality in which the naturally nude female genital organ is considered unacceptable, even visually.<sup>3</sup> This concept concerns the male organ as well, but in a diametrically opposite manner: the penis is not circumcised, except recently and above all in cities, as an appropriation of the American model, because the penis is considered to be naturally dressed. Which is to say that Nature supplies man with what woman can obtain only through Culture, establishing a difference and an inequality of no small significance, with the female body coming fully into social life only after it is worked and modeled, while the masculine body is ready in and of itself.<sup>4</sup>

According to my women interlocutors, massage begins when girls are around 10 or 11 years old, before the menses, and adolescence. It is considered important to begin then to avoid painful menstruation, and one that, with reference to the sexual act, is potentially corrosive. According to Sylvia Tamale, the same is true in Uganda: “Between the age of nine and twelve, before experiencing menarche (first menstruation), a Muganda girl would be guided by her Ssenga to prepare her genitals for future sex. This was done through a procedure that involved elongating the labia minora. Known as *okukyalira ensiko* (visiting the bush), this rite was traditionally performed in a clearing among bushes where the herbs (for example, *mukasa*, *entengotengo*, and *oluwoko*) used for the procedure were found. Pubescent girls would “visit the bush” for a few hours every day over a period of about two weeks» (2008, p. 26). In the past, they say that young girls could begin around the age of five, even if «in families where the observance of this custom was strict, the girl could not undertake *gukuna* too early because she might risk kidney ailments» (Musabyimana, 2006, p. 16). Generally speaking, the age to begin corresponds to the time when the younger girls are able to follow the older ones in carrying water or gathering firewood in what remains of the forest, or when in fact they go to cut broom. The girls, in numbers that can range from four to ten, practice massaging in couples, in solitary areas or in any cases in places which are considered to be exclusively for females, like the *urubohero*, (from the verb *kubóha* which means to weave), where they gather to weave straw or broom but where once they danced together.<sup>5</sup> The young girls both learn a technique and experience an intimate solidarity, thanks to which at least two companions for

<sup>3</sup> When a woman is standing, she must not let anything be glimpsed; the expression used is *umubiunda-káli*, from the verb *kubiunda*, which means to hide or to take a great quantity of water into the mouth and hold it there.

<sup>4</sup> In a vision different from that found by anthropologists elsewhere, cf. Mathieu, 1973, p. 101-113.

<sup>5</sup> In some urban places, in addition to the *urubohero*, the practice can be undertaken in solitude within the house, but always far from male eyes. In the past, girls who had not yet reached full sexual maturity were allowed to look on during the practice and also sometimes to simulate “love games”, which with adolescence were then strictly forbidden.

a long time will be able, without shame, to undertake the action mutually, creating a link that will last throughout their lives. Before beginning the massage sessions, it is necessary to choose the place and prepare the substances for the stretching, substances for which my interlocutors used the term *amavuta y'inka*, literally cow butter, obtained by separating the fat, rhythmically shaking the milk poured into a calabash, a dried gourd called *igicumá*. The *amavuta y'inka*, in this case, refers to the first butter extracted, which is considered more appropriate for softening the skin. It can be used alone but often other ingredients of vegetal or animal origin are added, obtaining them through some sort of cooking. Bigirumwami had recorded more than two hundred ingredients including, along with plants and herbs, little insects and dried and powdered animal matter like, just to name a few, bat wings, a symbol of elasticity, and snail slime, which can be likened to the female genital organ and vaginal secretions. In a study undertaken in the northeastern part of the country, Marian Koster and Lisa Leimar Price identified two medicinal plants used in the preparation which have beneficial bioactive components, *solanum aculeastrum dunal*, rich in saponins, and *bidens pilosa*, which stimulates blood circulation (2008, pp. 197-200).<sup>6</sup>

The girls who gather in the *urubohero* often express the desire “to be like the others” – women to all intents and purposes, in a form of same-sex equity. Once there, with the help of large leaves and other vegetal elements, they define and adapt the space where they then sit opposite one another. They then proceed to undress, allowing the *pagne* around their bodies to fall to the ground at the exact same moment, so as to avoid shame and the intervention of powers considered to be negative and malefic. Once they are naked they sit in couples, one in front of the other, with legs slightly bent and crossed. They then begin a reciprocal massage, using the pomades prepared earlier, with the containers placed between their legs and at their side, a technique that they learn by imitation. The massage takes place by energetically pinching and stretching the labia minora (Fusaschi, 2012).<sup>7</sup> This position will be assumed again later, according to so-called tradition, during the real sexual act with their husbands, starting with the wedding night, so as to ritualize a sexual technique spread throughout the region of the great lakes, which we will speak of below. At the beginning this manipulation is rather painful, according to what those who have undergone it say, but the pain tends to diminish in proportion to the acquisition of manipulative ability, and therefore with what we could define as the genuine incorporation. Once the session is ended, the materials used, from the leaves to what remains of the *amavuta y'inka*, must be carefully buried. It is absolutely forbidden to re-use the

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<sup>6</sup> In my research I discovered that the use of these two plants is no longer exclusive, because nowadays cow butter can be the sole ingredient.

<sup>7</sup> In 2008, Cécile, who was eighteen years old at the time, informed me that she had been taught to involve the clitoris as well. She was clearly embarrassed and anxious, because in a year's time she was to become a nun.

butter, because the women believe that butter from a preceding day will hinder an adequate increase. The labia minora must be treated until they reach a length considered proper: for Ancelle and others, women of about seventy, that measure is the one obtained when the thumb is placed on the second phalanx of the middle finger. To fail to arrive at this length, by excess or by defect, could be a cause of scorn on the part of the others<sup>8</sup> and even, in the past, of repudiation by the husband. Today young women are not so strict regarding the measurement, nor are men. The expression *imijabamabyi*, «vagina whose labia have been excessively stretched», is metaphorically translated as «labia which hang into excrement», to connote a woman who is so careless about her body that her labia are like *ibiziriko*, «cords one can hang on», so long that they come too close to the anus, an area always considered dirty. On the other hand, those considered “too short” may be so little appreciated that they are compared to the milky droplets that come out slowly from euphorbiaceae plants. Up until colonial times, the failure to reach the correct measurement could have extreme consequences, including the refusal of the marriage by the patrilineage of the future husband. In this case, as when the future bride was found to be not a virgin, she was sent directly back to her own family with an empty recipient into which was inserted a straw as a testimony to her body’s “inadequacy”. The full realization of *gukuna* was, and in rural area still is, verified through the attestation of the measurement performed by an older woman who is never the biological mother but the *maasenge*, the paternal aunt (sister of the father). She is also the one who decides on the interruption of the elongation, decreeing the adequacy of the organ as a symbol of real womanhood achieved. It is under her feared and authoritative supervision that gender is instituted; it is her prerogative to consecrate the woman, because she is the key figure in this practice but also in the fullness of the social life of young Rwandese females and males. For men, the father’s aunt constitutes the figure of reference; she is the womanly embodiment of the patrilineage, and a male knows that throughout his life she will remain an authority with enormous powers. Faustin, an older man, explains that even after he was married his *maasenge* was the fixed point of reference in the family for all that concerned decisions relative to engagements, marriage, and “the important matters” in family life. Young men have great respect for the *maasenge*, recognizing fully her authority. As for girls, the *maasenge* supervises their education, including their sex education, and she is the most competent counselor because she is the eldest in the patrilineage. It is she who gives newborn babies their name. The *maasenge* constructs the women and limits the power of the men, even within the social inequality of male domination, which she thus perpetuates, all the while working to maintain some form of difficult balance.

<sup>8</sup> «You can destroy the circle of your relations but not ours» goes an old saying uttered by the husband’s female relatives, as was reported by D. de Lame, 1999, p. 46.

*Sexuality and the life of couples*

*Gukuna*, in its classical interpretation, could be viewed and understood from within the bond of marriage, both in terms of the sexual sphere and of the whole of Rwandese cosmology. But today it can concern an unmarried couple as well. In the past, when the patrilineage would determine whom the son would take as his wife – this is no longer the custom in cities and not even always in the countryside (Buscaglia, 2009, p. 116-135) – a successful *gukuna* made it possible to number the girl in the category of women and future good wives and mothers. In effect «the bride between the lineage of her father and that of her husband, possesses nothing other than her capacity for work in submission, her capacity to reproduce, and eventually the prestige of her birth» (de Lame 1999, p. 45).

In this sense, a woman has a power which derives from the prestige of her father's lineage and from her capacity to be a good administrator of all the assets which her husband, and he alone, owns. Land is the asset par excellence, one that is fundamental for all Rwandese, and it is to land that practically all the symbols connected to life, beginning with fertility and prosperity, are related. Liquids like *amazi* (water), *amata* (milk), *urugwagwa* (beer) and *ubuki* (honey), without doubt circumscribe the sense of Rwandese sociality and they constitute the principal symbols because they make possible production and, at the same time, a social reproduction of the relations between the natural world around them and the socio-cultural collective one (Taylor 1988, pp. 1343-1348; Id. 1992). Beer for men, and milk for both sexes, in fact represent social fluidity, making it possible to relate to friends and visitors, even in official occasions like marriage. If *amata*, cow's milk, is the basic element in the "traditional" diet (especially in the form of *igivuguto*, fermented milk); maternal milk, *amashereka*, is the element transmitted from the mother to her children<sup>9</sup>, as water in the form of rain brings fertility to the soil. At the same time, as was noted by Catherine above, water, *amazi*, in the form of the abundant vaginal secretions before and during sexual relations as a consequence of *gukuna*, constitutes the guarantee of a good marriage for the Rwandese. The lack of vaginal secretions can be seen as a sickness, *ifumbi*, as a worm in the maternal belly which would block liquids from coming out and which causes backache (Buscaglia, 2009).

In the matter of gender differentiation, sexual relations are conceived in connection to marriage and progeny also through a ritualization inherent in the techniques for which *gukuna*, along with virginity, is the indispensable condition. Even though virginity is not today a condition sine qua non of marriage, social actors, especially men, consider that in any event it has a social value. A young woman who wants to

<sup>9</sup> A woman who remains without milk after giving birth is called *igihama*, which also indicates a woman who does not have vaginal secretions during sexual relations. The term *igihama* derives from the verb *guhaama* which may be translated «to cultivate a field hardened by the sun», which is likened to a woman without secretions during the sexual act.

become a wife should present herself to the patrilineage of her future husband and thus to the husband himself in a doubly adequate bodily condition: as a virgin, and one whose genital organ has been properly modified. *Gukuna* thus is seen as that prerogative of the female body thanks to which, during the sexual act, through a male technique that is called *kunyaza*, *kunyara* becomes possible. This verb literally signifies “to urinate” but in sexuality it indicates *amavaangiingo*, which means «to produce abundant vaginal secretions during coitus». In the words of my women sources, *kunyaza* as a male technique and *gukuna* as a female modification make it possible «to reach the destination». (For men the expression used is *gusohora*). This literal meaning of finishing or terminating signifies to have an orgasm. This aspect of pleasure is more characteristic of young couples, married or unmarried, for whom *gukunal kunyaza* are reinterpreted within a freer sexuality, as the use of social networks demonstrates. Rwandese sexuality is based on a series of acts that are highly codified. These might be defined as preliminaries: the two partners sit one in front of the other with their legs crossed and intertwined as happened among the girls when they were practicing *gukuna*. This position of the partners makes it possible for the man to put *kunyaza* into practice, a technique for stimulating the clitoris through a through a tapping on it and a circular rubbing on the female’s organ by the erect penis, held in two fingers. The origin of these movements has a legendary source, according to which a neophyte in matters of love was so intimidated by the female organ at the outset that his hand trembled near the clitoris, and this turned into a technique appreciated as much by men as by women. *Kunyaza* is conducted with rhythmic delicate movements between the clitoris and the labia minora, making possible what the Rwandese women refer to as «making much water» (*amazi*), abundant vaginal secretions. As a proverb has it: *umunyaazi wa cyaane yiiraga abaswéezi*, which literally means that «she who produces many vaginal humors enjoys the prodigy» and in fact only when the woman has reached this state of excitation will she be able to lie back so that the sexual relation can proceed with proper penetration. According to the doctor Nsekuye Bizimana, *kunyaza* constitutes a traditional sexual technique thanks to which the unleashing of the female orgasm is a male prerogative, in the sense that this technique alone will suffice. We would say this is a somewhat macho view, in which the woman’s involvement is practically marginal (Bizimana, 2010, pp. 186-191): *Gukuna* is not mentioned, yet my experience in the field suggests that this particular form of “incorporation of gender” enables women not only to make a modification “for men” but at the same time to learn to know their own bodies fully. Learning *gukuna*, “to do as two” becomes a way of creating long-lasting sisterhood. In fact, the two girls learn techniques through genital massages that will be “useful” and “used” in their relations with men. Thus, according to my female informants, the female technique, along with the male one of *kunyaza*, result in the achievement of pleasure, often rather rapidly. According to what some men report, if the performance of *kunyaza* is not sufficiently pleasing to his partner, she can feel authorized to mock her man, even shaming him, and his whole family will be blamed for having

produced a male considered incompetent, almost impotent. The Rwandese sexual act is therefore centered on what the social actors, above all the younger men, assert to be a search for mutual pleasure. They believe this is possible not only because of *kunyaza*, which they are proud of, but also thanks to *gukuna* which is its premise, as the cultural modification of the female body which facilitates abundant secretions which are directly connected to maternity, but today are also considered simply a capacity for seduction. If a woman does not manage to ejaculate abundantly, she is considered a very bad mother, men say. In the regions farther north, her daughters will be called *mukagatare* and her sons *gatare*, that is like wide flat stones, symbols of impenetrable maternity, dry and hard like an unwelcoming and sterile rock, the opposite of a field that has been rained on.

Woman is considered fertile, exactly like the earth that has been bathed by rainwater, if, thanks to *gukuna* and along with her husband, she is able to exchange abundant fluids that make her fertile.<sup>10</sup> Adapted finally to provide the patrilineage with those children, hopefully male, who in turn will guarantee the transmittal of that most precious asset which is the land itself: «social harmony is maintained through a continuous exchange of fluids, including those of the body» (Koster and Leimar Price, 2008, p. 194).

### Conclusion

In this patrilineal society, before the reform of family law in the 1990s, land was exclusively the property of men, to the point that women could not inherit it even as widows. The woman, as wife and mother, was in some manner like the land, “property of the husband”, yet at the same time she was the only one to insure perpetuation of the patrilineage.

On the wedding night, sexual contact takes the form of a “struggle” between the partners. In this battle, the bride, until completely exhausted, will do her best not to be overcome by her partner, thus demonstrating her virginity. The husband then ascertains this by inserting a finger into her genital organ and subsequently by an incomplete sexual penetration. When the hymen’s rupture causes some drops of blood to appear on the nuptial mat, the husband is obliged to shoot sperm onto them as a testimony to the exchange of fluids taking place in his house, where they bride has come to live. Only in the following days will the newlyweds be able to have complete sexual relations. The female body is the supreme symbol of land, the embodiment of the house as well as of the terrain around it. There is no doubt then that bodily fluids – the woman’s secretions and the sperm, like rainwater – must necessarily circulate

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<sup>10</sup> As noted also by Buscaglia, op. cit. p. 122 and ff., today this belief is highly varied according to the person speaking, and depends greatly not only on gender but also by the level of education and also by the degree of participation in social life.

in adequate quantities to insure lasting fertility to the land, as to the whole of the patrilineage.

It is certainly not by chance that *umugabo* is the term designating the husband; the term’s root comes from the verb *kugaba*, which refers to command, but which also signifies «to give gratuitously»: husbands donate their sperm in marriage, serve milk to guests, even as they transmit the land to their male sons. At the same time, they rule over their wives, who work the land made fertile by water, the wives who breastfeed their offspring to increase the power, symbolically and otherwise, of the entire parental group. It may well be true that the men possess (possessed) the land, even as they still today possess their wives, but the wives, who have become women through *gukuna*, finally are nothing other than the land itself. Men, husbands, cannot do anything without both of them.

We would call this interpretation classically anthropological. But during my research some young women spoke of *gukuna* as a form of sexual liberation, a possibility for «modern young women» (Vestine, Kigali, 2009) within and outside of marriage to find themselves in a position to give and procure pleasure, «plaisir à deux, croisés» (Fusasch, 2012). In this sense, they stress that there is a certain degree of power and autonomy in the sexual arena, especially if the man is not capable of “doing *kunyaza* well”, suggesting a sort of re-appropriation of the so-called tradition on a path that seems emancipating. Viewed this way, «Sexuality is a site for the production of hegemonic gender discourse, presenting both constraints and opportunities for empowerment. In many African contexts, the relationship of women to their own bodies is often different from the disembodied, negative relations rooted in the legacy of colonialism» (Tamale, 2008, p. 31). At other times, in the context of women’s associations and in the wake of the global discourse on gender mainstreaming, some women do not at all accept this interpretation and they indicate the very idea of the modification contrariwise as an obstacle to emancipation: «those are things that our grandmothers did, in the stone age» (Agathe, Kigali, 2009). As such, it must be refused today.

Still other women, practicing Catholics, refer to the practice in terms of sin or amoral contact, obviously because of the act of touching oneself.

I also found women in the course of my fieldwork who affirmed openly that they had never experienced *gukuna*, considering it barbarian and violent – only to discover then that they had performed it alone in solitude. I learned later that some of these women had participated in training courses concerning gender and gender violence, a participation for which they had received compensation.

Here women’s silence, their “mute role” evoked at the beginning of this article, became a protective pose strategically assumed so as to be in sync with the dominant trend in women’s human rights – and so as not to risk losing that compensation.

Still others, older women, criticized the younger ones who boasted that *gukuna* was a form of bodily autonomy; they claimed that these girls did it only «to have fun with the boys» (Donate, Sakara, 2010). The criticism was offered so that I would understand that this practice by now was a prerogative of «poorly educated and dirty»

young women, using the association of *gukuna* with dirt metaphorically to assert that such young women use the practice for seduction, in the interest of obtaining benefits in the form of money or references for jobs. It is interesting to note that these girls whom the elders criticized were the same ones who considered *gukuna* in the light of a possibility of female autonomy, an aspect of a free sexuality that had no relation to what Paola Tabet would consider a sexual/economic exchange.

Finally, I can affirm that we cannot speak of a univocal interpretation in the case of *gukuna*.

In fact, it is possible to elaborate some «moral» interpretations of the female body that are in opposition one to another. On the one hand, there is the morality of the so-called tradition according to which a woman is not truly a woman if she has not practiced *gukuna*, versus the Catholic notion which considers a woman's behavior completely immoral if she does, in line with the colonial idea that the practice was a form of female perversion. For others, *gukuna* should be firmly placed outside of any morality and be seen as a form of re-appropriation of the female body as such. This classically feminist view of self-determination can be contrasted or also harmonized, depending on the situation, with training projects' genderized "moral economies" theories, for which *gukuna* is to all intents and purposes a "mutilation", a wicked practice that harms the body and women's rights, and which should not be considered a form of self-determination.

Interpretations of *gukuna* in Rwanda are thus polymorphous and various, the fruit of reinterpretations of a local concept of culture which, in a purely anthropological and therefore dynamic sense, become both a possibility and an impossibility and also a probability, an impossibility and a probability both on a personal and a political level, for the way gender is newly categorized in the projects of NGOs, in consideration of the fact that in this small African country gender has replaced the theme of ethnicity in almost all the policy of these last few years (Fusaschi, 2018).

To conclude, we can say that despite the inequality of power and the contextual male domination/female submission dynamic, *gukuna* clearly creates a sort of ecology of the couple. Not only within the couple itself, but outside it as well, the practice establishes norms or anti-norms, dynamics that are manifested through a continuous exchange of body fluids in which women are and remain the absolute protagonists. I hope that this brief anthropological analysis may serve to open a debate, along with the other voices and positions which should be noted, so that the different subjective viewpoints in various contexts may be confronted, not the least being that of the WHO and EIGE. The aim is that *gukuna*, along with analogous practices that in no way hurt health nor infringe on human rights, may finally be eliminated from practices included as FGM. As a Rwandese proverb puts it: *Abagiye imana irabasanga*: Those who compare their points of view obtain divine grace.

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