Male Circumcision: Sharpening the Phallus, Constructing Masculinities, Some Implications for Men & Women

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Historically, justifications for male circumcision (MC) has widely varied. Some of the purported justifications for MC include religious obligation, spiritual enlightenment, mastery over sciences, avoidance of masturbation and fornication, cleanliness and avoidance of STDs. In the current paper, I go beyond the discussion of the historical reasons given for MC. Instead, I emphasize the gendered aspects of MC rituals as they contribute to masculinity and hypermasculinity. The theoretical lens I use in my analysis is informed by Bourdieu (1992; 2001), and other feminist thought. I emphasize the rank ordering, male power and supremacy aspects embedded in most ritualized practices of MC, regardless of the historical or the geographical location they may have been practiced at. I also emphasize the near universal practice of women’s symbolical or physical segregation from the rituals. In terms of the hypermasculinization aspects of some MC practices, the differentiating component is the cyclical presence of violence, often before, during and following MC. Violence aspects are discussed in relation to examples from pre-monotheistic as well as some early monotheistic cultural practices. I also provide recent examples from the Xhosa practices, and explore the negative consequences of hypermasculinization aspects of MC rituals for men and for women.

The long-term vulnerability of the human child is well-known. During nine months of gestation, and years after the birth, the human

¹ Discussions over many cups of coffee with two of my highly respected colleagues—Dr. Sheldon Ungar and Dr. Thembela Kepe—planted in my mind the initial seeds of interest in the MC literature. Although the critical feminist orientation of this paper, and other power-based assertions are mine, and not reflective of my colleagues’ points of view, I am deeply grateful to Shelly and Thembela for our many, sometimes heated discussions. Inquiries about the paper can be forwarded to A. Sev’er, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto Scarborough, 1265 Military Trail, Scarborough, ON. M1C 1A4. e-mail: sever@utsc.utoronto.ca
child needs prolonged care and nurturance if they are to reach adulthood. Societies from the most primitive to the most complex, have sensed this vulnerability and devised ways of caring for the young. A range of family formations, marriage contracts and rituals, birthing and socialization patterns have emerged to deal with the long-term dependence of infants on their care givers (mostly women). Although they may not have shared the prolonged ‘childhood’ ideals and indulgences of their modernized counterparts, even in primitive tribal arrangements, various sentiments of protectionism over the young have always been a condition of keeping the species alive (Morris 1967; Shorter 1977).

Within this historical context of protectionism, it is difficult to understand why millions of human elders would subject their precious young to painful, and from a physiological point of view, unnecessary rituals such as MC. It is also difficult to understand why some societies circumcise their older children/youth, since older males are not as malleable to painful procedures as new-borns or infants. In fact, where delayed MC initiations takes place in late teens or early adulthood, older members must devise ways to cajole/force the initiates to subject themselves to such a painful practice. Presenting ‘manhood’ as something which is more important than any other status, and associating manhood with other desirable statuses (such as attainment of knowledge, spirituality, accumulation of wealth, access to females, male camaraderie) constitute the social pressure that eventually convinces boys/men into the inevitability of their bodily sacrifice (Vincent 2008). Thus, MC is the oldest, and the most widely practiced operation in the world, claiming flesh from the phalluses of approximately 13 million male children and youth— and possibly a few adults—every year (Denniston, Hodges & Milos 2000; Gollaher, 2000; Johnson, 2010). Boyle (2000) estimates that there are over 650 million males in the world whose penises have been surgically altered. Possibly, that number is much higher by 2012. However, in the US, circumcision rates in the last decade have fallen from 79% to 55%. The rates in some Nordic countries are around 20% (Oz & Roizen, 2012).

Gollaher’s extensive research shows that MC has a 6000 year-old history. In essence, MC pre-dates Judaism, Christianity and Islam by a few millennia. Yet, in general, MC is somewhat exclusively linked to either Judaism or Islam. Despite these common misconceptions, MC practices have spanned widely, from Australian aboriginals to ancient Mesopotamians, ancient Egyptians, and sub-saharan Africans to South American natives, not to mention almost all Jewish, almost all Moslem and even a portion of Christian men (Boyle, 2000; Gollahar 2000). Why is it that different cultures, with no ancestral, racial, historical, spiritual, religious, economic or ideological association with one another, have
independently come up with the idea to create a permanent wound on the genitals of their young children or adolescents? Moreover, why is it that in historical and many modern practices alike, most MC has been performed as a painful, intrusive and even a violent ritual? How is it that a surgical procedure which has a questionable benefit to the circumcised has been treated as virtually ‘a must’ by millions of otherwise rational masses? In the face of similar questions, Denniston, Hodges and Milos (2000, p. ix) ask: “In this age of cultural, ethical, scientific and technological advancement, why does circumcision—a relic of a primitive, barbarous, and superstitious past—persist?”

There are different answers to the questions posed above. The most common answers range from the supernatural (in Judaism, MC is seen as ‘covenant’ with God), to intellectual (Ancient Egyptian priests claimed that MC helps in attainment of higher spiritual and scientific knowledge), to reproductive (some North African ethnic groups fear that a non-circumcised penis will not produce male heirs), to the Victorian phobia of autoeroticism (non-circumcised boys were feared to masturbate/fornicate), and to cleanliness (the foreskin is seen as harbouring germs, and transmitting diseases such as AIDS). Psychoanalytical traditions have interpreted circumcision as a symbolic castration, and thus an enactment of the eternal father-son rivalry (Brod 1998; Freud 1974; Gollaher 2000). More recently, justifications for MC have moved away from the supernatural, and have become shrouded with ‘scientification’. The proponents of scientification are the physicians and surgeons who economically benefit from routinely performed MCs. Supporters of each of the above-mentioned positions have written volumes to support their own claims and/or to dismantle the claims of others (see Denniston, Hodges & Milos, 2000; Gollahar 2000, and Katz, 2000 for in-depth reviews). The conclusion is that although the ‘justifications’ for performing MC have changed across historical times, the practice of MC has been exceptionally resistant to change (Katz 2000; Vincent, 2008).

Here, I will not resurrect either provable or disprovable older debates. Instead, I want to introduce an alternate explanation for the resistance to change of the remarkably common practice of MC. I recognize the complexity of cultural and religious reasons that have historically buttressed the MC practice, and my intention is neither to question nor offend anyone’s ethno-cultural sensitivities. I do, however, want to highlight some common strands in MC practices that have transcended time and place. The trajectory I suggest is gendered, and relates to the creation of masculinities and hypermasculinities through ritualized MC. I propose that regardless of the claims the varying practitioners have made to legitimize such an agonizing and occasionally
dangerous ritual, one historical common denominator is the creation and reinforcemengale dominance orders.

The persistence, and near universality of masculine domination forms the theoretical core of Pierre Bourdieu’s (2001) work. According to Bourdieu, masculine dominance includes: phallocentrism which sets men as the dominators in almost all aspects of life (particularly, but not exclusively in matters of sex and reproduction). Violence is also an integral part of masculine domination, where “men take joy in violence, live their sexual relations as relations of conquest, and are ultimately deeply afraid of the feminine in themselves” (2001, p. 50-52). Moreover, an astonishing aspect of male domination is in its seamless and unquestioned integration into the everyday life (habitus). This profound anchoring is the reason why domination resists change and easily replicates itself across time:

...gender domination constitutes the paradigm of all domination and is perhaps its most persistent from. It is at once the most arbitrary and the most misrecognized dimension of domination because it operates essentially via the deep, yet immediate, agreement of embodied schemata of a vision of the world with the existing structures of that world (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 132).

For Bourdieu (2001, p. 102), masculine domination is relational and establishes itself in “the whole set of social spaces and subspaces” (emphasis in original). Although Bourdieu does not address MC directly, he does underscore how the evaluative differences between girls/women versus boys/men are inscribed on their bodies. I argue that MC is a bodily inscription which differentiates boys from men, and men from other men (who are ethnoculturally or religiously different). MC is also a bodily inscription that differentiates men from women.

Many other scholars have offered insights into the workings of masculinities (Bowker 1998; Karner 1998; Toch 1998). In its relatively benign form, masculinity is associated with technical mastery, competitiveness, cognitive abilities and aggression (Kimmel & Messner, 1998). Some see masculinities and patriarchies based on masculinities as biologically determined (Goldberg 1986), thus neither questionable nor changeable. However, gender-sensitive evaluations of societies contest biological determinism, and claim that masculinities and patriarchal relations they engender are socially constructed (Bowker 1998; Epstein 1986). Stoltenberg (2003), sums up the pressures the society puts on boys/men in the following way: “as a society, we sort all kids who are born with penises and we raise them to have a lifelong panic about experiencing subjectively the feeling of being a real-enough man.... [W]e
construct the meaning of manhood socially and politically.... It does not derive from our anatomy” (p. 380). The constructionists further claim that the holders of power devise ways/rituals to preserve and legitimize existing hierarchies. The powerful create rules, enforce rules, and punish those who change rules (Epstein 1986). Stated differently, there is only a thin separation between general male aggression which sociobiologists see as natural, and the propensity to engage in violence (Epstein 1986; Kaufman 1998; Karner 1998; Toch 1998). In culturally sanctioned rituals such as MC, the boundaries between male power, aggression and violence are frequently blurred.

I start from the assumption that masculinity is socially constructed, and engender social practices that sharpen and legitimize male/female differences. Epstein (1986, p. 11) states “no society, no social group, and especially no ruling group, has ever left gender hierarchy (nor any other form of hierarchy) to nature” (parenthesis in original). Societies create many different rituals, some more blatant than others, to bestow special rights on men, to underscore the uniqueness that separates them from women (Epstein 1986). Although different cultures utilize different strategies, all male-dominated cultures subject men, boys and even infants to masculinisation rituals (Bowker 1998). Often, implied or enforced aggression is part of these rituals. The expectation (or force) to undergo pain, suffering and violence is part of the social construction of ‘manhood’ (Vincent, 2008). What is also important is the circularity of the process. Those who suffer rejection, marginalization and pain at one time are expected to inflict rejection, marginalization, pain, and suffering on others... at least, during socially sanctioned occasions.

Connell (2000) has written extensively about how masculinisation practices are incorporated into both formal and informal patterns of socialization (also see Bowker 1998; Karner 1998). In the west, the unset of gendering practices starts before birth. Selection of names, colours for rooms and clothes, and selection of toys are all gendered (Nelson, 2010). However, systemic masculinisation primarily occurs through the institutions of formal education. Of course, there is much variation, since the specific culture and the gendered regimes of schools themselves determine how rigid (or relaxed) these socialization practices will be. Conventional dress codes, uniforms, layers of authority (teachers having power over students; older boys having power over younger boys), competitive academic and/or sports related endeavours all contribute to the creation of masculinities (Sobieraj 1998). Schools that are specifically geared towards rigid masculine orders (some religious or most military schools) also practice strict gender segregation amongst their staff and students (Connell 2000). In developing societies, more
informal ‘teaching environments’ may intersect with militaristic aspirations.

Hypermasculinity denotes excessive manifestation of stereotypical male behaviour, such as an undue emphasis on strength, aggression, power, virility and sexual conquest (Karner 1998; Toch 1998). Hypermasculinities can overlap with expectations about physical attributes such as body hair, muscles, shape of the jaw and shoulders as well as penis size (Bordo 2003; Fausto-Sterling 1998). Although the term can sometimes be pejorative, gender scholars use the concept of ‘hypermasculinity’ to examine social constructions of ‘manhood’. Thus, hypermasculinity is one polar extreme on the continuum of the femininity/masculinity scale. According to Douglass (2003, p. 157), North America is obsessed with hypermasculinities: “all too many news stories—from the scandals in the military, to the epidemic of police brutality and the rapes by athletes—point to the truth that much of our [North American] culture is built upon a tolerance, even reverence for aggressive, above-the-law, bullying version of manhood”. I argue that male aggression and violence is not exclusive to North America, but is rooted in historical rituals of masculinization.

Connell (2000) uses ‘rugged masculinities’ to refer to the same extreme. What differentiates the ‘rugged’ from other forms of masculinities is the emphasis on physicality. In Connell’s work, ‘rugged masculinities’ are linked with militaristic cultures, and most specifically with colonization practices (also Karner 1998). Initiation rites, hazing, physical punishment or endurance of pain as a rite of passage, long-term exposure to Spartan living conditions, and even ‘fagging’ form the problematic matrix of ‘rugged’ masculinisation (Connell 2000). ‘Fagging’ is effeminized degradation of men by men during hazing rituals, which may include forced body markings, forced cross-dressing, forced nudity, forced sexual activity, sexual harassment and even homosexual rape. The attainment of masculine power after being subjugated to these practices is the flipside of dehumanizing, degrading and inflicting pain on others. In this vicious cycle, it is obvious that those who overcome victimization ordeals at point A, often become the perpetrators of similar acts on others at point B. So, hypermasculinity cannot exist without cyclical rituals (Connel 2000; Karner 1009; Toch, 1998).

In this paper, I define hypermasculinity as the triangulation of beliefs about male power, male supremacy and legitimacy of aggression and violence. Almost all cultures have idiosyncratic rituals/practices to initiate boys/men to partake in this power/supremacy/violence triangulation. Although Connell (2000) and Karner (1998) exclusively associate hypermasculinities with militaristic/colonizing cultures, I argue that construction of hypermasculinities is more widespread. Although militarism or colonialism may exasperate the pattern, they are
not prerequisites of hypermasculinization. In contrast, some of the social construction of hypermasculinities has been seamlessly infused into the unquestioned aspects of daily life, and thus, may have attained respectability and legitimacy in their own right (Bourdieu, 2001). The socially constructed aspects often disguise the preoccupation with male power, supremacy, force, and violence that underlies the practices.

In the feminist literature, hypermasculinities are seen as constructions to differentiate men from men. However, feminist literature also insists that the real goal of hypermasculinities is to create inequalities between men and women (Caputi 1993; Stanko 1993). Kimmel (2008) states “...gender is about difference and also about inequality, about power... at the level of gender relations, gender is about the power that men as a group have over women as a group, and it is also about the power that some men have over other men (p. 105). Part of the social matrix is violence that targets women (O'Sullivan 1998; Sev'er, 2005). As Karner (1998, p. 230) observes, once men find themselves “suspended in a state of hypermasculinity” their propensity for aggression and violence follows them wherever they go. In this paper, I will review the widespread practice of MC as one of many ‘legitimized’ paths to the construction of masculinities. Depending on the militarism of the cultures and the age of initiation, MC rituals may even serve as a tool in creating hypermasculinities. First, I will briefly review the literature on MC in pre-monotheistic cultures. Although ancient rituals were widely varied, I will show undeniable similarities in these historical practices. For analytical purposes, the similarities will be summarized under the recurring patterns of 1) establishment of male camaraderie, 2) isolation of boys/men from girls/women, 3) presence of aggression/violence.

I will then provide examples of MC practices within monotheistic religions. Some of the examples are drawn from early religious texts, others from anthropological observations. I will also provide examples from the Ottomans, modern Turks and the Xhosa of South Eastern Cape. These examples are chosen on the basis of convenience; I make no claims about their generalizability to all other MC practices. I invite other researchers to apply the hypermasculinization concept to other MC practices of their own choosing, and test its fit.

**Examples of MC & Hypermasculinization in Ancient Societies**

Documentations about MC go back for millennia. Ancient Egyptians carved detailed images of priests cutting the genitals of adolescent males on the walls of their renown temples (Doyle 2005; Gollahar 2000). Archaeologists and social anthropologists have gathered MC data from other remote sites, some from Mesopotamia. From these
findings/observations, a number of generalizations have emerged. For one, MC usually followed a forced separation of young boys from their families, especially, from women/girls (Gollahar 2000). If the initiates were infants, the separation was symbolic and temporary. However, pre-monotheistic MC initiates were older adolescents. For initiates passed the age of puberty, the enforced separation was often geographic, as well as of a longer duration. A group of boys were quarantined on a mountain/forest/desert/temple for numerous weeks or even months. Usually, the isolated youngsters were stripped of their clothes, painted in colours, and covered with plant materials, mud or dung that had meaning for their respective tribes/social group. Acts of heroism were expected of them (such as killing wild animals, playing war-games), and/or they were purposely frightened to death by loud noises, drums, whispers in the night, by adult men wearing frightening masks of totemic/mythical creatures (Gollahar 2000). Initiates were often forced to sleep on leaves or on the bare earth, they may also be deprived of food or water. They may be exposed to noxious substances, mind-altering drugs, and they were subjected to psychological brain-washing, by whispers/noises/chants. Some kind of a feast, possibly an animal sacrifice accompanied or followed the ritual. There were rituals for both the blood of the sacrificial animals and the MC blood.

Pre-monotheistic societies have also developed rituals for the severed foreskin. Some covered the foreskin in leaves meaningful for the tribe, some buried or burned the foreskin, and yet others made selected family members eat it (the priest, father, the mother or the initiate himself). Eating the foreskin was associated with increased virility of men, and fertility of women. Gollahar (2000, p. 65) states that tribes which practiced ritualistic MC “[hold] the foreskin in talismatic esteem”. Although aspects of the ritual may change (for example, the duration of separation, the types of music/noise used, the colouring of the body, the type of masks worn, the tools used to cut the foreskin, whether the fresh wound is sucked by the circumscriber or allowed to bleed freely, what is done with the foreskin, etc.), what is constant is the phallocentrism of the ritual. These rituals are performed by men and for men, as a keystone in masculinisation of one of their own.

To clarify the androcentricism in MC rituals, I defer to Maurice Bloch who has extensively studied the Merina of the Madagascar (in Gollaher 2000). Since Merina circumcised their boys at an early age, the gender-based separation was mostly between the adult males and adult females of the immediate and extended kin. Amongst the Merina, the ritual followed many hours of exuberance, celebration, dancing, music and feasts. Throughout the celebrations, female relatives were confined to the house, whereas male relatives, and other tribal men circled the house. Part of the ritual involved already circumcised boys to force
themselves into the house of the initiate, and perform a mock-battle with (female) relatives. Eventually, boys with a living father and mother were selected, and given hollowed-out gourds to carry clean water from a designated source. The chosen boys rushed away in a frenzy. Their journey to the water, as well as the journey back were executed as mock-war-games, where some boys attacked the carriers of water with spears, in order to steal the water. The carriers, in turn, attacked their attackers to safeguard the water. The competition was fierce. At the end, the first gourd of water that reached the house was poured over the penis of the initiate. The actual cutting was done ‘outside’ of the house where men congregated, excluding all women who were confined to the house. The man who operated on the child was known as the ‘father’, although he often had no relationship with the initiate. The mother waited at the window. Mothers were forbidden to receive an uncircumcised son. When the family could afford it, a full-grown bull was sacrificed. The severed foreskin was sandwiched between banana slices, and eaten by an elder male (Gollaher 2000). Merina have also developed rituals around the gourd which was used to carry the water. Villagers treated the gourd with reverence, and took small pieces home. These pieces were expected to increase the reproductive powers of couples.

Gollaher (2000, p. 59), describes MC rituals amongst Australian aboriginals as “often, elaborately prolonged and gory to the point of being Wagnerian”. Amongst the Kukata tribe, elders decided the timing of the procedure (around age 12) and assigned brothers or ‘designated brothers’ to catch the boys off guard. The boys were then spirited away, into a pre-assigned outpost. The goal was to keep them “confined and closely guarded to prevent contact with other people, especially girls and women” (p. 59, emphasis added). Adult men who guarded the boys day and night adorned themselves with paints, plants and feathers, and sang, danced and chanted around huge bonfires. Initiates were smeared with garish paints, and whispered tribal secrets. They were warned that revealing these secrets to the uninitiated will bring death to them and to their families. Eventually, the chanting, singing and dancing reached frenzied proportions, and the boys were flung on to the ground. Several men sat on their legs and chest to pin them down. In addition to their bewilderment and shock, they were gagged with a clump of hair. Both the cutting and the blood it generated had special significance. Initiates were closely watched until their wounds healed, and were then presented with special warrior’s spears, and fur tassels to adorn their altered penises. Upon their return, their mothers, sisters and aunts “wail, tearing their hair and pricking their bodies in sympathy for the suffering [their sons have] endured” (Gollaher 2000, p. 62).

One of the most intriguing practices of MC is found in Ancient Egypt. As early as 4000 BC, Ancient Egypt enshrined circumcision as a
religious as well as a social practice, and “the ritual entailed admittance into divine mysteries—secrets revealed only to the initiated” (Gollaher 2000, p. 3). In Ancient Egypt, the line between science (including medical sciences) and religion was blurred, and both science and religion centered on the idea of social hierarchy. In its beginnings, circumcision was reserved primarily for the priests, starting from the pharaohs as high-priests. The procedure was intended “to produce a noble, sacred wound. The surgery itself, dauntingly bloody and painful, was central to a temple ceremony rich with cultural over-tones... [since temples were] the seats of power, [both] secular and divine” (Gollaher 2000, p. 5).

Because of MC’s early association with spiritual/scientific enlightenment, Egyptian priests performed the operation on young men. The practice may have been extremely bloody and painful for the initiates, but it was not necessarily dangerous. After all, Egyptians were light-years ahead of their time in terms of cleanliness, purification and healing sciences (Gallahar 2000). Aside from the priests and the royalty, who else had access to MC is not clear. It is possible that commoners may have tried to emulate the highly regarded practice by offering their sons to the priests.

Thus, the historical role of MC in the creation of masculinities, power/prestige rankings, and the frequent use of aggression is clear. From reliefs found in ancient tombs, there are numerous inscriptions about mastery over pain by not shouting, fainting or running away (Gallahar 2000). Just in case the young men may take flight, different societies had also developed ways of pinning them down (like Merina and Kukata), or holding them upright (Egyptians). The link of MC to the creation of gender hierarchies requires a closer look. It exists in the exclusive male groupings, and in the exclusive monopoly of spiritual or cultural secrets by men. The gender ranking also exists in the creation of heroic identities (such as being able to withstand pain and suffering, sacrificing a portion of bodies), which are exclusive to men.2

**MC in Early Monotheistic Belief Systems**

*The Old Testament*

More than any other culture or religion, MC is Judaism’s defining ritual. Interestingly, this association has not started with Moses, although Moses has led his people’s escape from Egypt, and has put in place the fundamentals of laws and rituals of the Jews. However, he was never circumcised. The command of MC as the single-most important

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2 In a previous paper, I argued that female genital mutilation (FGM), although extremely painful and often dangerous, does not confer superiority or heroism on the girls/women who undergo the process. Neither does FGM create hyperfemininities or female-dominated power hierarchies. These differences are important, but they fall outside of the masculinisation arguments I develop here.
ritual for all Jewish men has awaited God’s instructions to Abraham. Abraham was offered a great nation on the condition that he showed absolute obedience, observance and sacrifice:

> Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, for generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of covenant between me and you. For the generations to come, every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner — those who are not your offspring...”

(Genesis 17: 9-13).

Across the ages, the Jewish practice of MC on the 8th day has become one of the most routine, most unquestionable, and across time, possibly the safest way of performing the ritual. Across millennia, Jews have indeed managed to gentrify a practice with historic ties to blood rituals (Gollahar, 2000). However, in its beginnings, MC ritual was closely associated with masculinization, rank-ordering and power. The expected rank ordering also hinted at repercussions, as indicated in God’s spoken words to Abraham: "My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant “ (Genesis 17:13-14).

It is also suggested that in early practices, the inductees were young or adult men rather than 8-day-old babies, and the ritual was undertaken within large male groups, as a collective act of spilling of blood (Gollahar 2000). For example, grown men were called upon to circumcise themselves, on the Hill of Foreskins (Joshua 5: 2-3), which attests to both the public and male-centered nature of the early practices.

Within the Old Testament, there are at least two associations of MC to masculinization and even to hypermasculinization. In Genesis (34: 1-25), the story of Dinah’s rape by a Hivite prince named Shechem is narrated. Regretting his sexual transgression, Shechem proposes marriage to Dinah. Yet, her brothers Simeon and Levi are more interested in revenge than the marriage of their ‘defiled’ sister. They tell the Hivites that neither their sister’s nor any other Jewish woman’s marriage is possible to uncircumcised men. Upon this pronouncement, all male Hivites circumcise themselves as a good-faith gesture to end the hostilities. Simeon and Levi wait till the Hivite men are weakened and sick with the newly performed MC, and kill them all. Rather than condemning both acts of violence (rape on one side, and premeditated
murder on the other), the Old Testament gives the impression that the violence inflicted on the Hivites was justified. The MC obligation serves as the backdrop for this ancient example of male on male violence.

The Old Testament also describes another hypermasculinization incident related to MC. King Saul, as the bride-price condition of his daughter’s marriage, demands the foreskins of a hundred Philistines. Saul considers this request as a clever way of dissuading David from pursuing his daughter’s hand. However, David doubles the quota, and brings 200 foreskins. He “brought their foreskins and counted them out to the king in order to be accepted as his son-in-law” (Samuel 18: 24-29). It is not very likely that the 200 Philistines volunteered for the MC operation to enable David’s marriage. It is equally unlikely that David’s troops carefully harvested the foreskins.

In these ancient examples, the role of MC as a sacred agreement between men and God is clear, with a clear rank ordering (who gives the order, who follows). It is also clear that the ritual is used (and occasionally distorted) to rank-order men. We also see the absence of women. By implication, they are symbolically excluded from covenant with their God, since they have no foreskin to sacrifice. Gollahar (2000, p. 18) states: “There is no evidence that before modern times rabbinic Judaism ever considered a covenant ritual for females.” In other cases, women’s bodies may have been violated or used in the creation or retention of male hierarchies, in terms of demarcating who is worthy who is not, who is eligible who is not, who should survive and who should be killed.

Thus, the Old Testament defines the MC ritual as a moral and spiritual obligation for men. The demanded servitude to a monotheistic God through the ritual has given MC an unquestionable moral significance in Judaism (Gollahar 2000). Despite its increasing gentrification across time, the earliest examples of MC were linked with ranking, power, male supremacy and even violence.

**MC in Islam: The Ottomans**

The Qur’an claims that Islam is the last of the three major monotheistic religions. As such, the Qur’an builds on many insights and practices brought forth by the Old and the New Testaments that have predated it by many centuries. Thus, it is ironic that the Qur’an is totally silent on the issue of MC, although Prophet Mohammed and his Khalifs 3 The Qur’an’s silence on sünnet (circumcision) is only in terms of its reference to the removal of the foreskin. In contrast, there are about 15 references in the Qur’an to “God’s Sünnet” which refers to the way/path/method that Allah has set which are unalterable—like the force of gravity (Öztürk, 1998). Across time, Moslem’s have also followed ways/paths/methods the Prophet Mohammad has set through his words or deeds, which are also referred to as “sünnet”. The latter
were surely aware of the cultural and religious significance of MC in Judaism. The mystery of the Qur’an’s silence on the topic becomes even more intriguing given the fact that almost all Moslem males are circumcised since the inception of Islam. So the questions I will address here are how Islam in general views MC, and how the Ottomans, as the largest and the most powerful Islamic Empire in human history have practiced this ritual.

The Qur’an explicitly commends Moslems to “[F]ollow the religion of Ibrahim [Abraham], the upright in Faith” (Qur’an 16: 123). In other words, Moslem men are indirectly obliged to MC, by being directly told to emulate Ibrahim’s ways. Moreover, MC has been more directly addressed by Prophet Mohammed as a ‘fitrah’ or the “innate disposition and natural character and instinct” of being men so that “they [will] attain a high degree of respectability and dignity” (MissionIslam, ND). Other Fuqaha (Islamic Jurists) argue that Mohammed was born without his foreskin, therefore making MC a kind of an obligation for Moslem men (MissionIslam, ND).

Some Islamic scholars (Ulemâ) attach the obligatory nature of MC for Moslems to Mohammed’s council to “Remove the harm from him” after birth. It is claimed that like washing off the blood, cutting the umbilical cord and shaving the baby’s hair (which Mohammed advised), the removal of the prepuce is considered to be for the good of the male infant. Similar to Judaism, the early Islamic practice may have required MC within the first few days of life. It is rumoured that Mohammed himself performed ‘Aqiqah’ on his own grandsons al-Hasan and al-Hussein on the 7th day of their respective lives (MissionIslam, ND). Aqiqah is the sum-total of all social welfare acts Moslems are invited to perform after childbirth, especially if the child is a son (Hidaya Foundation, 2010).

However, the MC procedure was delayed during the Ottoman Empire’s reign (1271-1923). As acting Khalifs, Ottoman Sultans set the standards for all Moslem men of their time. Usually, MC was performed as a public event, close to one of many royal palaces. The grounds were carefully prepared and decorated. The public festivities and jubilance closely followed the MC of one or more of the ruling Sultan’s sons (Veliiaht). Since the Ottoman Sultans had large harems, a constant supply of prince(s) reached MC age (around 7-10 years). There were weeks or even months of festivities, including music, street dancers, acrobats, fireworks, and an abundance of food. The ceremonies lasted 10-15 days, and even 50-55 days in exceptional cases (Verit 2003). The Janissaries (Sultan’s royal army) played war games to entertain the prince(s), and thousands of other boys awaiting their operation.

can neither be contradictory to, nor as binding as the Qur’an.
The crown prince’s (or numerous princes’) surgical procedure was immediately followed by operations on thousands of other boys from poorer families. All of these boys were provided with food, special clothes and tastefully decorated cots to sleep on for the duration of the ceremonies. At the height of the Empire, the poor families who allowed their sons to accompany the MC of the Sultan’s sons were given gifts, new clothes to wear for the occasion and real gold coins. Verit (2003) estimates the number of boys who were circumcised at the same time and in the same place with the sons of the ruling Sultan to range from 3,000 to 10,000. Special surgeons (sünnetçi) were trained to perform these operations on large masses of children, starting from the crown prince. Ottomans had no qualms about hiring Jewish mohels to help with the workload.

Ceremonies, lavish gifts and free food to a side, what is important for the hypermasculinization argument are three things. The first point is obvious, and is related to the performance of war games by the Janissaries. In fact, in the militaristic/expansionist culture of the Ottomans, MC is clearly linked to the masculinization process. The food for the masses also came from the flesh of animals ‘sacrificed’ for the occasion. All sacrificial animals were males (bulls and camels in affluent families, and goats and cocks amongst poorer families). No one would even dream of slaughtering a cow or a hen during the MC of a son. The second point is less obvious, and needs highlighting. Thousands of poorer boys who have shared the MC experience at the same time (and often in the same place) with the prince were expected to become loyal ‘subjects’ of the prince for the duration of his reign. In a way, the mass MC ritual served to create a militaristic male-bonding through the mutual experience of fear, pain and sacrifice—not to mention the exposure to the blood and gore from the slaughtered animals. What is also noteworthy is that although hyper-militaristic Ottomans conquered many lands and established military/economic/state dominance over them, they never forced MC on the conquered populations. They did, however, force a tax on non-Moslem business owners, which may have induced a few conversions.

The third point is poignant in its absence: Women were either absent, or acted as distant and marginal observers in these elaborate events. Even the mothers of the crown princes whose sons were the vortex of these MC ceremonies were confined (physically as well as symbolically) to the harems of the Sultans. What also needs underscoring is the near absence of religious symbolism in the ceremonies, although Ottoman rulers were devout Moslems—and designated Khalifs after the conquest of Egypt. A religious leader may have delivered a prayer for the reigning Sultan and his sons, but the import of these ceremonies were on the Sultan’s power, glory, military might, and male
camaraderie. These ceremonies also assured that all power and ranking will pass on to the next generation of boys/men, in a rank-ordered fashion.

From the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey arose as a secular Republic in 1923. Despite political upheavals in its relatively young history, Turkey has managed to remain secular, with clear demarcation between politics/education/law versus religion. Yet, over 99% of the population is Moslem, and Islam continues to play an important role in the lives of close to 80 million Turks. Not surprisingly, almost all Turkish boys/men over the ages of 10-12 are already circumcised.

What is important for this paper is that the hypermasculinization process continues. Despite its claims for modernity, the MC practices in Turkey still mirror the Ottoman lavishness, albeit in a subdued way. Except the highly educated urbanites who may prefer hospital-based MCs, most surgeries are still done in public rather than in medical facilities. Frenzied activities of music, dancing, clowns, firecrackers, and food still accompany MC. Like the Ottomans, affluent families still invite (and pay for) the MC expenses of boys from poorer families. Although not reaching thousands like in Ottoman times, it is still common for 20-30 children to undergo MC at the same time/location. Like in the Ottoman times, the poorer boys who share the fear, pain and bodily sacrifice along with their richer counterparts are expected to be loyal friends of the latter. Many rich, educated populations as well as their rural, less-well-off counterparts prefer the ‘communal’ male-bonding opportunity to the sterility and isolation of a hospital (Verit 2003).

What is also noteworthy is that, starting a month before the procedure, initiates marked to undergo MC are dressed in very special clothes, and are paraded around the city/town they live in. Family and friends pin real or fake gold coins to their MC outfits. Eventually, the boys end up looking like decorated war generals. The clothes they wear are also designed to look like a prince/Sultan/general, with billowing sateen capes, feathers, cummerbunds, gilded insignia and turban/crown like hats. Initiates usually carry an ornamental sward or a mace which is gilded. According to the affluence of their fathers, initiates may be paraded in an open Rolls Royce, or an open truck, or a decorated horse cart, always with other boys who are about to share their fate. In poorer areas, they may get a ride at the back of the family’s old donkey, but a special ride they will get. The point is that the boys, rich or poor, are given immense importance and social attention, as well as are made to feel superior and powerful as boys (thus the swords, mace, feathers, gilded clothes, crown-like hats, rides). Moreover, even as a single child, the boy will enjoy the company of male-peers throughout the long celebrations. There are no comparable social rituals of power and
superiority for any of the life passages of Turkish girls. There are also no rituals that openly foster female bonding.

Unlike their Ottoman counterparts, Turkish women are no longer confined to harems or secluded areas. Especially in urban celebrations, female family members are very much a part of singing, dancing and enjoyment of the MC feast. Yet, the meanings surrounding MC are for boys and for men, as a path to masculinization. The man who holds the boy’s arms as he is operated on becomes something like a godfather to him. The initiate turns to this man in times of difficulty, and this man goes out of his way to provide help throughout his life. So, although in Islam, MC is not a form of ‘covenant’ with God, it is a ritual of covenant of men. Women form the distant fringes of the festivities, even as mothers, sisters and other female relatives of their heroic boys. Initiates understand once and for all that their ‘biology’ makes them special, because the culture bestows significance to their biological difference.

**Xhosa Practices in Eastern Cape**

Today, ethnic groups in Africa are scattered across historically fluctuating state borders, although many preserve their cultural rituals and identity. Ethnic groups such as the Sotho, Tsonga, Lemba, Bantu and Xhosa practice MC. Some like the Xhosa have accepted Christianity, others like the Lemba affiliate themselves with Judaism, and yet others like the Bantu practice Islam. Native belief systems also colour many of the rituals. The Lemba insist on their Jewish origins, and claim that they are one of the lost tribes of the Diaspora (Doyle 2005). The Lemba practice adolescent circumcision carried out by razor-blades. Before the cutting, boys who have come of age go into seclusion, learn songs and sacred rituals about becoming men, and are encouraged to strive for endogamous marriages (to girls who are also Lemba). During the seclusion and the healing period after MC, they are not allowed contact with women or girls.

One of the largest ethnic groups that practice MC in the Eastern Cape is the Xhosa. Because of the unfortunate MC related deaths, the MC practices of the Xhosa has been receiving a lot of media and academic attention (Kepe, 2010; Feni 2006; Gangsterism 2010; Mavundala et al., 2010; Scores of initiates 2006; The sacred path 2010; Vincent 2008). Beyond the tragedy of dozens of young lives that are lost annually, the Xhosa practices of MC are important since they provide one of the clearest examples of the hypermasculinization argument I developed here. Numerous other observers are concerned about the link between hypermasculinized MC practices and the high rates of male on male crimes, and male on female rapes by initiates (Feni 2006; Gangsterism 2010; The sacred path 2010; Vincent 2008).
Hypermasculinization clearly intersects with MC in some recorded practices (Doyle 2005; Hunter ND; Taylor 1995). The Xhosa call MC ‘Abakwetha’ which generally translates into ‘group learning’ (Hunter, ND). ‘Umkhweta’ are the initiates/learners (Vincent 2018). After isolation, and under quite adverse conditions, what is learned in the group is ‘manhood’ (Feni 2006; Hunter ND; The sacred path 2010). Most observers of the MC practices amongst the Xhosa unite in the view that centuries of imposed segregation, apartheid, lack of education, lack of employment opportunities and resulting abject poverty have dismantled some of the positive cultural norms surrounding MC. Instead of the proclaimed goals of creating responsible people, responsible leaders for the communities, and responsible husbands/fathers, many recent MC rituals have been transformed into machismo and misogyny that is devoid of cultural meaning (Vincent 2008). There is also an alarming link between what is considered to be the attainment of ‘manhood’ and expected/encouraged violence against girls/women (Feni, 2006; Gangsterism 2010; The sacred path 2010).

Hunter (ND), as an anthropological observer rather than a critical social analyst, summarizes the MC rituals amongst the Xhosa. Numerous youths between the ages of 17-20 are forced into seclusion for up to three months. They are given minimal food or water, no access to meat, and allowed only a thin blanket to cover their naked bodies. Boys in seclusion are not allowed any contact with girls or women. Their heads are shaved, and often, the hair is preserved. The actual operation is done by a witchdoctor who uses a spear. At the moment of the cutting, the boy shouts ‘Ndiyindoda’ which translates as ‘I am a man’ (Hunter ND). No other expression of pain and suffering is allowed, and the use of medicines or pain killers are strictly banned. In fact, seeking medical help is seen as a weakness, and may expose the youth to social rejection, harassment even violence (Taylor 1995; Vincent 2008).

From a critical perspective, some MC rituals amongst the Xhosa are riddled with hypermasculinization problems. Macho expectations, frugal living conditions, banning medication, and unsafe cutting instruments juxtaposed over expected bravado from the initiates have led to hundreds of deaths over the years (Kepe, 2010; Scores of initiates 2006; The sacred path 2010; Vincent 2008). Aside from the life and death debates, there are other socially problematic aspects of these rituals. Xhosa rituals erect ranks amongst men in a number of ways. Some of the differentiations may be benign. For example, the uncut youth wear gourds (calabashes) to cover their penises whereas the circumcised youth wear goat-skin pouches called ‘sidle’ (Hunter, ND); the uncut youths are smeared with mud, and are painted with white paint, whereas the circumcised youth are allowed to wash in rivers, and are painted with red paint; the uncut youth are not allowed to eat meat,
whilst the circumcised youth participate in a roast (jisa), and are allowed to consume meat (Hunter, ND). Other ranking and hypermasculinization aspects of the Xhosa rituals are more problematic: For example, the uninitiated report extreme abuse from the initiated, ranging from being called degrading names to physical beatings. The most common derogatory taunts are ‘dogs’ or ‘bats’ or ‘baboons’ (Mavundla et al., 2010; Mothibeli 1994; Vincent 2008). Other discriminatory practices are not being allowed to sit or eat at the same table with circumcised men. As a matter of fact, some uninitiated youth report being treated like dogs, by being reduced to eating bones and scraps of food thrown to the floor by circumcised men (Gangsterism 2010; The sacred path 2010; Vincent 2008).

Perhaps the most concerning aspect of the hypermasculinized Xhosa rituals is the schism they engender between boys/men and girls/women (Mavundla et al., 2010). The uncircumcised boys are routinely shunned, and delegated to cleaning and cooking duties generally associated with women’s work (Vincent 2008). Yet, the practices often go beyond symbolic forms of demasculinization. Vincent (2008) argues that “initiation has come to be viewed as a permit for sex” (p. 437), and at many circumcision schools the instruction itself backed up with a regime of violence and brutality [reinforces] one of the most problematic features of dominant masculinity in South Africa” (p. 437-8, emphasis added). Vincent (2008) reports that “men see sex as their right and forced sex as legitimate... and that masculinity is largely defined by numbers of sexual partners and the ability to control sexual partners” (p. 437). Girls who challenge or refuse male—circumcised male—proprietary behaviour may “routinely anticipate and experience violent consequences” (p. 437). Moreover, circumcised men control access to women, sometimes by violently interfering in intimacy attempts by uncircumcised men. “...They stopped us and attempted to take the girl away from me... They beat me up causing gross bodily injuries” (quoted in Vincent, 2008, p. 442).

To complete my discussion of the hypermasculinization practices, I will now highlight more blatant expressions of violence they have occasionally produced. As in many other historical belief systems, the Xhosa have also incorporated the polarity of the sacred and profane into their MC practices. Properly circumcised men—they who complete rituals without the benefit of medical intervention, Taylor, 1995—fall under the category of clean and sacred. Uncircumcised youth/men, everything young men have owned before proper MC, and girls/women fall under the ‘other’ category. So, the initiates are expected

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4 I am using the sacred/profane categories Dukheim (1976) developed. In the literature about the Xhosa practices, ‘dirt’ versus ‘clean’ terms are used.
to serve a period of segregation in straw huts, wearing nothing but thin blankets. These straw huts and blankets are burned immediately after the completion of MC rituals (Hunter ND). The white chalk which is applied to the bodies is also washed off, and replaced by red paint. Along with the symbolic distinctions between the sacred and profane, more problematic forms are also reported. Examples can be found in calling the uninitiated with derogatory names—like dogs, bats, baboons—and forcing them to eat scraps from the floor (Gangsterism 2010; Mavundala et al., 2010; Vincent 2008). Yet, reactions to the ‘dirt’ associated with the uncircumcised can be more violent. Gangs of new initiates have been reported to kidnap one or more uncircumcised youth, and either operate on them on the spot (Taylor 1995), or hold them captive for weeks against their will (Mothibeli 1994). In these cases, victims’ lives were also threatened.

The division between the sacred associated with circumcised men and the profane associated with girls/women who are not closely affiliated with them also may engender violence. Interviews with new initiates have shown that, some of the youth are given the impression that MC leaves residual ‘dirt’ on their bodies, which requires cleansing. Some youths come out of the initiation thinking that the residual ‘dirt’ should be ‘deposited’ on ‘something else’ (Gangsterism 2010). That ‘something else’ happens to be a girl/woman who is not an intimate. “There’s a perception that when you come back from esuthwini, you are carrying dirt. So you have to deposit the dirt somewhere else. Otherwise if you test [circumcised penis] on your girlfriend, that relationship is not going to last” (quoted in Gangsterism 2010). These beliefs instilled during at least some Xhosa MC rituals are instigations for male on female rapes. All women are vulnerable, since someone’s intimate can be some other person’s ‘depository of dirt’. Although most Xhosa initiates may resist violent behaviour, many others may find a permission to commit violence against uninitiated men or women (Feni, 2006; Gangsterism 2010; Vincent 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I tried to stay away from the theological or the biomedical importance of MC. Those are extremely important aspects that need to be addressed by theologians or medical experts. Instead, I confined my analysis to the feminist lens of power, rank-ordering, masculinisation and hypermasculinization. The ancient, the historical as well as some more current MC examples I discussed provide support to my arguments. How the masculinisation thesis applies to practices from other parts of the world awaits further research.
The masculinisation/hypermasculinization of MC rituals from the examples I included can be summed up as the following:

1. The practice is widely varied. It is closely tied to religious practices in some, but not in all cultures where MC was/is prevalent.
2. The majority of the reviewed MC practices are gendered. Rituals engender male camaraderie, and create hierarchies between men. They also rank order men and women, giving supremacy to men.
3. Ancient MC rituals go beyond simple masculinisation, and subsume militarism, power, social ranking and even violence (Merina, Kukata, and the two stories from the Old Testament). Other MC rituals show attenuated versions of power, dominance but still imply or include violence dimensions (Ancient Egypt, Ottomans).
4. Some cultures have managed to substantially dilute or mostly eliminate the hypermasculinization from their MC practices (possibly, modern Jewish practices, MC carried out at medical settings, and to a lesser degree, modern Turkish practices). What is unique in these attenuated examples is the early initiation age (8th day amongst the Jews, early in medical settings, and 5-10 year range amongst the Turks).
5. Amongst those reviewed, the clearest example of hypermasculinization is found in the Xhosa practices. Factors behind why the Xhosa rituals may be particularly problematic are many. Some scholars point out to the tensions between the state and the traditional leaders (Kepe, 2010). Others emphasize the continuing negative effects of forced segregation and apartheid, and the resultant disadvantages suffered by Black South Africans. Severe disadvantages in education, income, standard of living, social mobility, and health-care, in turn, may have corroded the indigenous codes of morality and behaviour, especially amongst the disadvantaged. For example, traditional initiation rituals which were overseen by the highly regarded members of the original communities and highly trained cutters (ingcibi), are now carried out by men who may be less than exemplary in the community, who may be uneducated or unemployed, who even may have had conflicts with the law (Vincent 2018). So, in a traditionally valued teaching environment, what is now being taught is anyone’s guess.
6. What is also relevant for the masculinisation hypothesis is the initiation age. Sacrificing a part of a vital organ is one thing when the initiates are very young. However, initiation may require extensive social and cultural cajoling when the initiates are older males. It is possible that the name calling, intense forms of marginalization of the uninitiated, and the promises of improved social relations and sexual access are tools to break down resistance against the practice as we saw amongst the Xhosa. Of course, the danger lies in blurring the line between social pressure and instigations to violence.
As stated in the introduction, there are close to 700 million men in the world whose penises have been surgically altered, and about 13 million men/boys are annually added to their ranks. So, MC is part of many cultures, many historic belief systems, and is not likely to disappear, despite the grumblings from some Western groups (Boyle 2000; Johnson 2010; Male circumcision, 2008; Ogilvie, 2010). With a few exceptions, most societies that practice MC have also established safeguards to protect the physical health of the initiates. Although more needs to be done in assuring the safety in operating on a vital organ, that aspect is best left for medical debates. The religious significance of MC for a few belief systems is also immense, and is best left to theologians. Instead, what I underscored here are the links between some practices of MC and its problematic links to social rank-orderings among initiated/uninitiated men, and among men and women. What I also emphasized is that sometimes the power and rank-ordering exigencies blur into dominance and violence within hypermasculinization rituals. It is only on these socially-constructed, inequality oriented, and gender-based aspects of MC, I invite more sober and more unifying discussions that bridge varying belief, cultural and gender systems.

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