Introduction

What lies between a woman's thighs has always haunted the male psyche, presumably because it is a point of origin, the preconscious chaos of the womb. More particularly, man's horrified fascination with female sexual organs as an abysmal and yet tentacular site of darkness is legendary and supported by many texts and contexts. The bottomless, sulfurous pit, dear to King Lear, continues to incense the imagination, daunting as the (w)hole is, because of the alleged absence of a phallus.

In the post-Freudian era, that absence has been further compounded with nonexistence, since the fact that a woman's genitalia can be partly or completely removed through various forms of declitorization was brought to worldwide attention, well beyond the confines of early European anthropology. A void was therefore created that can be likened to the apparent absence of the vagina in a mermaid and can therefore be filled with numerous significations and interpretations.

Western gazing at this non-Western void was, at first, local and unabashedly voyeuristic—for example, a British report of a 1762 expedition to Egypt during which the travelers "expressed a wish to see a circumcised

woman" (quoted in Widstrand 1964, 95). This resulted in an eighteen-year-old village girl being brought out to display her genitalia—or rather the lack thereof—while the expedition artist created a sketch of her sewn pudendum. In the fourth edition of her famous *Hosken Report* (1994), Fran Hosken quoted a letter dated September 9, 1992, from a tourist who paid a substantial fee to witness an excision in Paris, in order to support her suspicion of a pornographic film industry around the excision of African girls in France (302–3). In 2004, one episode from the popular Television series *Nip/Tuck* shows a surgeon having sex with a patient who has undergone the surgical reconstruction of the clitoris to test whether the operation was successful.

Occasionally, the gaze has become touch. In June 1941, Marie Bonaparte, the princess of Greece and follower of Sigmund Freud, was evacuated, following the German occupation, to Egypt. There she got in touch with Mahfouz Pasha, gynecologist to the Coptic Hospital in Cairo, who showed her two excised women who had just delivered. Bonaparte reports in her *Female Sexuality* ([1933] 1953): "In one, the excised *labia minora* were welded together over the stump of the clitoris, which he made me externally palpate" (194). Beyond the admittedly narrow domain of Bonaparte's pseudomedical, palpating touch of a woman's sutured vulva, the gaze is now overwhelmingly international, and Western moral scrutiny has lately been grafted onto it.

As local concern became global, terminologies shifted, and a 'traditional practice' became a 'human rights violation.' The UN decade for women (1975–85) brought the issue to international attention and identified the practice of "female circumcision" as female genital mutilation (FGM). The infamous acronym—FGM—was then ousted by FGC, or female genital cutting, because the word *mutilation* was "thought to preempt moral judgment about such operations" (James 1994, 5–6). Therefore, as of the 1970s, women's rites or rituals started clashing with human rights or "(w)human rights," as Lebanese American Evelyn Accad (1992) put it, euphonically retrieving "woman" into "human."

Over the last two decades of the twentieth century, the body of literary representations of female circumcision or what I call "excision" has grown considerably. But it still constitutes a little explored corpus that fails to rival both the mass of information available from activist organizations and media networks and the research carried out in law, sociology, and cultural anthropology. In their seminal volume *Female "Circumcision" in Africa* (2000), editors Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hernlund rightly locate the excision debate at the heart of "emotionally charged debates around cultural

relativism, international human rights, racism and Western imperialism, medicalization, sexuality, and the patriarchal oppression of women, resulting in an onslaught of discussion and writing on the topic" (1). Significantly, "writing on the topic" does not include literature. Yet literature remains a privileged place where women's voices are heard, all the more so in women's first-person accounts, or what I call "experiential texts."

The label *voice* is a familiar metaphor in feminist scholarship and has often been abused, but it still best represents, in the words of Kathy Davis (1994), "what women really feel and know as opposed to what they are supposed to feel and know under patriarchal relations of power."[1] Also, "voicing" acquires its full dimension when the Western-illiterate teller recounts her experience of excision to a Western amanuensis.[2] For African women writers to voice their experience of excision in the first person is also crucial in redressing erroneous Western perceptions of female African self-representation. A case in point is the African American Alice Walker who, in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* ([1992] 1993), contests African women's authority to represent their own cultural realities and indignantly asks why "African women writers . . . are not speaking out against a tradition that so maims them and their sisters" (quoted in Gourdinne 1996, 242). Not only have African women writers spoken about the rite of excision, but they have also written about it and, in doing so, even inspired Walker with some elements of her plot.

Precisely because it is controversial, there is not a more suitable object for cultural analysis and the voicing of the lived body in literature, with an urgency in the present, than the excision ritual. Moreover, when relating women's texts to the human contexts that produced them, the category 'woman' and, perforce, the female body, often emerges as a site of contest between (often male) factions but also as a site of liminality between disembodied subject and agent, consent and dissent, custom and human rights. The present study examines the liminal position of women *between rites and rights* in African experiential texts.

Looking at women's experiential texts also has the merit of breaking down the insider/outsider debate and of dwarfing the clash of Titans such as 'universalism' and 'cultural relativism' by forcing us to address the ethics of conflict. The anxious need to "choose sides" often imbues debates about excision around African custom and international human rights, between the West and "the rest of us," female victims and male perpetrators, for or against excision, while one can instead imaginatively enter the space of other women's experience via the texts they wrote. In aiming to assess how

excision contributes to the cultural construction of gender, and in its focus on women's attempt at translating 'international feminism' across spaces, cultures, and belief systems, the present book calls for a politics of touch and intimacy with otherness.

The study comprises texts written over four decades (from the 1960s to 2006), with occasional incursions into 1920s colonial Africa, sixteenth-century European medical discourse, and as far back as classical antiquity. It covers a broad geographical spectrum; its authors are from Senegal, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Togo, Egypt, Somalia, and Kenya, and there are occasional references to the Maghreb, Sudan, and the Middle East. The study also covers writings in English, French, and Arabic (in English translation) and shows, in chronological fashion, how women have broken away from male discourses such as early anthropology and have disentangled themselves from culture, religion, and patriarchy to voice their *experience* of excision in the autobiographical mode. The book's three-tiered structure outlines African excised women's flight from cultural surveillance (Part I); their flight from religious and patriarchal surveillance (Part II); and their concurrent physical flight through self-imposed exile or asylum in the West, crowned at times by the return 'home,' where they seek empowerment (Part III).[3]

Before women writers who have undergone excision in one form or another took the pen to relay their experience, the literary representation of excision had been fathered by men who were, however, sympathetic to the abolition of the rite. While the study does take some male accounts of excision in its purview (Chapter 10), its main goal is to trace the emergence of the female autobiographical impulse (Chapter 3) as it wrenches itself from male anthropology, both Western and African (Chapters 1 and 2). In the process, the study also documents the shift from excision as rite to excision as mutilation, which is coincidental with the shift from the third-person narrative, where excision is mentioned "in passing" (see Chapter 4), to the autobiographical mode. The autobiographical impulse is at first confined to the vignette embedded in a sociological treatise (Chapter 5) or to "spoken autobiographical acts" (Chapter 6) and mainly concerns Kenyan, Nigerian, and Egyptian texts around excision in the postindependence era, that is, as of the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Autobiographical texts, principally from Somalia, dealing with the more severe form of excision, that is, infibulation, emerge from the late 1980s onward (Chapters 7 and 8). As of the last decade of the twentieth century, other experiential texts from Ivory Coast, Sierra

Leone, Togo, and Senegal start wrestling with the law and human rights (Chapter 9) while propelling the practice into the postcolonial context of dislocation and exile. Finally, Chapter 10 is devoted to the exciser, who still has to write her own subjectivity into the excision debate.

"THROUGH A WOMAN'S 'I'"

The multiple terminological instabilities surrounding the term *autobiography* are legion: for example, "autofiction" (Doubrovsky 1988), "surfiction" (Federman 1975), "postmodern autobiography" (Sukenick 1988), "global novel" (Kingston 1977), "nouvelle autobiographie" (Robbe-Grillet 1984), "biomythography" (Lorde 1982), "gynography" (Brée 1978), or even "fiction autobiographique post-coloniale" (Boudjedra 1989).[4] I have nonetheless retained the term, along with *self-writing* and *experiential text*, to refer to the writing emanating from the lived body and the intimate realm of the 'myself' (woman) compounded by a spectral but creative 'we' (women). I have also expanded the somewhat scriptocentric definition of *autobiography* to include what Harold Rosen, in *Speaking from Memory* (1998), has called "spoken autobiographical acts" (see Chapter 6).

The phrase "through a woman's 'I'" is the title Patricia K. Addis gave her 1983 annotated bibliography of American women's autobiographies, which, along with other works by historians and bibliographers, unearthed American women's personal writing. The first forays into the theorizing of Western female autobiography indeed date back to the 1980s, with, for example, Estelle C. Jelinek's 1980 study. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's 1998 reader *Women, Autobiography, Theory* has been instrumental in outlining such an emergence.

If such cultural excavation was needed after centuries of gyno-less autobiographies, it has become a matter of urgency in the still little explored realm of African women's autobiography or self-writing,[5] which emerged in the 1970s, along with feminisms of African manufacture. By focusing on the body's materiality and the trauma of excision, African women's experiential texts represent a new movement in the history of African female self-writing. As we shall see in Chapter 8, such history reads like a nuptial sheet or "blank page," after Karen Blixen's (1957) short-story title, awaiting the blood-ink of defloration before scripting its own pain.

Female self-invention on African soil is, admittedly, a later phenomenon than its male counterpart because of educational practices that delayed

or limited women's schooling. In Senegal, for instance, the first male autobiography, the *tirailleur sénégalais* (Senegalese sharpshooter) Bakary Diallo's *Force-Bonté*, dates back to 1926, whereas women's texts marked by an autobiographical impulse only appear in the 1980s. Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (1980), Nafissatou Diallo's *De Tilène au Plateau, une enfance dakaroise* (1975), and Ken Bugul's *Le baobab fou* (1982) are often identified as "autobiographical," albeit with some reservations.[6] Such first-person narratives were often prompted by a crisis such as the death of a husband or exile.

A decade earlier, Western women writers had started writing increasingly in the first person as the result of a confluence of factors, such as Euro-American second-wave feminisms; the removal of decision making from individuals through technology; high postmodernism and its varied critiques of representation, including the recognition of the fluid boundaries of 'the subject' in poststructuralist Lacanian theories; and "the death of the novel."[7] The crisis these autobiographers evoked was the death or departure of a lover, as in American Kate Millett's *Sita* (1977) and German Judith Offenbach's *Sonja* (1980), or the fascist horror of Nazi Germany in Christa Wolf's *A Model Childhood* (1984). But oftentimes the crisis was an illness, such as crippling neurosis in Algerian-born French writer Marie Cardinal's *The Words to Say It* ([1980] 1983) or cancer in African American writer Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* (1980).

These autobiographies around illness or pathographies foreground the role of pain as one of the most powerful aids to mnemonics and render traumatic memory into literary discourse. Likewise, African women have emphasized the role of pain in the creation of self-writing out of trauma. The "wound"—implicit in the Greek etymology of *trauma*—is double, both physical and psychic, and self-writing flows from that double wound. These women autobiographers confirm the status of autobiography as a cure and a consolation while propelling the genre into multicultural modes of self-representation, with its questioning of ethnic, racial, and gender representations.[8] This critical thrust disproves Bernd Neumann's statement in the 1970s that autobiography is "a purely European genre," "a creation of Western culture" (Neumann 1970, 109). More significantly, the 'I' writes his/her autobiography when the cohesion of that 'I' is most uncertain.

This double move toward encompassing women's pathographies and multiculturalism breaks with a long tradition of theorizing autobiography as a male, white, Western, bourgeois mode—from the self-staging of Augustine

of Hippo on to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's drama of the self. Examples are French Georges Gusdorf in his well-known 1956 essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (1980) and German Georg Misch in his earlier *History of Autobiography* ([1907] 1950).[9] In his groundbreaking *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975), Philippe Lejeune postulated that the autobiographical pact between author and reader was predicated on a single identity shared between a real person, the narrator, and the object of narration. His often-quoted definition read thus: "[An autobiography is] a retrospective narrative in prose that a real person makes of his own existence when he emphasizes his individual life, especially the story of his personality" (139).[10] Lejeune later revisited his stance by acknowledging the many (dis)simulations in "miming" such a contract and, perforce, identity (Lejeune 1983, 416–34). The 1970s were therefore a decade that raised questions about identity, subjectivity, and gender in autobiography.

ACQUIRING BODY

If by the late 1970s African women had reached the point where they were clearly "getting personal" (Miller 1991), by the early 1990s they were getting corporeal. They dwelled on the paradoxical "joys of motherhood" as well as on barrenness, defloration, menarche, lactation, and menopause. Their writings also contained critiques of patriarchal practices (crystallized in the UN Decade for Women [1975–85]) as they broached issues of polygamy, rape, domestic violence, prostitution, and the patronymic extension of male identity through its ownership of the female body in the larger African libidinal economies.

Very often, the African female body is textually under siege. Women's texts throng with young, fattened bodies sacrificed on the altar of matrimony; prostituted bodies in the greedy grips of pimps; exhausted, pregnant bodies with pendulous breasts oozing with the inevitable milk; virginal bodies searched by invasive, matronly fingers during the infamous 'virginity test'; excised pudenda or infibulated vulvae. In the Cameroonian, Paris-based Calixthe Beyala's *Seul Dieu le savait* (1990), the protagonist Bertha clamors: "I want my body back." This reclaiming gesture could in fact be extended to the whole corpus of female African writing and self-writing. African women writers are indeed keen to wrest their flesh and bodies back from various nexuses of power and to partake of the

contemporary feminocentric urge to perceive the lived body as a source of experiential narrative.

At times, the female body can be so alienated that it seeks solace in prostitution, often regarded as the ultimate form of female autonomy. For instance, Tanga in Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (1988) wants to escape the corporeal logic of the male consumption of female bodies by transforming hers into "stony flesh" (30–31). Another prostitute, Ekassi, in Beyala's *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* (1987), willfully de-eroticizes her body, spews out her clients' "useless semen," and successfully keeps "her belly absent" (62). The prostitute Firdaus in the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* ([1975] 1983) unleashes her wrath against the patriarchal establishment by stabbing her pimp.

The 1990s saw two tendencies. On the one hand, there is a neotraditional backlash, best exemplified by Senegalese Ken Bugul's (pen name of Mariety Mbaye) *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (1999). In this fictional autobiography, she describes her return to the village of her birth, where she becomes sensually fulfilled as the twenty-ninth wife of the all-powerful *serigne* (chief ruler) and praises the virtues of polygamy and the stimulating rivalry of co-wives (180). This is in the same spirit as the American-born Fuambai Ahmadu's (2000) autobiographical vignette on her decision to have herself excised in Sierra Leone (see Chapter 9). On the other hand, the second trend comprises unprecedented representations of ailments traditionally thought to be of Western provenance such as, for example, anorexia nervosa, central to Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and South African Jenefer Shute's *Life-Size* (1993). Controversial issues such as contraception and abortion surface in novels such as Cameroonian Philomène M. Bassek's telltale *La tache de sang* (1990). Throughout the novel, women's associations are featured at all levels—from the informal, local tontines to the more academic venues—and the same issues crop up with depressing regularity: "teenage or forced marriages, polygamy, close confinement, excision and infibulation" (100).

In Western theorizing of autobiography, male is often to female what 'individualistic' is to 'relational.' As a result of women having allegedly fluid ego boundaries, women's self-writing is considered to be more relational, holistic, and other oriented than male self-writing in that it negotiates between the obvious 'I' of 'I-dentity' and the 'we' of feminist "communal identity."[11] Feminists have been eager to disentangle female self-invention from received, endemically Western and individualistic models of selfhood.[12]

Positing "confession" as a type of "autobiographical writing which signals its intention to foreground the most personal and intimate details of the author's life," Rita Felski (1989) has used the phrase "feminist confession" to exemplify "the intersection between the autobiographical imperative to communicate the truth of unique individuality, and the feminist concern with the representative and intersubjective elements of women's experience" (84).

Communal experientiality is clearly part of women's relationality. As woman shares identity with other women, the female autobiographer selects those aspects of her experience that will have a bearing on other women's experience—hence the dichotomous 'relationality' in female autobiography, as opposed to 'individual' subjectivity in male (bourgeois) autobiography. In the case of African women's autobiographies, the almost sacrosanct "relational versus individual" grid is further complicated by relational male African subjectivity versus individual Western subjectivity.[13] African women would therefore be doubly relational—or relational squared.

Unlike Westerners, African men and women are thought to be culturally grounded and connected to family, community, and extended geocentric kinship networks. In the texts under scrutiny, female autobiographers go to great lengths to define themselves by ethnic, national, or cultural affiliation. For instance, Togolese Fauziya Kassindja is Koussountou; Guinean Kesso Barry is Peuhl; Somali Waris Dirie is Majeerteen/Darood. But they are also members of several interlaced collectivities so that, as John Brenkman (1988) put it in another context, "their social identities are formed by and their discursive participation occurs within several potentially conflicting cultural practices/traditions at once" (24). For instance, Waris Dirie is Majeerteen, Somali, *and* Muslim; Kassindja is Kossountou, Togolese, *and* Muslim; Kenyan Charity Waciuma is Kikuyu, Kenyan, *and* Christian. A singular, unified, self-defining African 'community' is therefore as much of a myth as the fiction of a singular, unified, self-constructed African subject. As is clear from the texts under scrutiny, African individuals all have exercised individuality in the African context while carrying out traditional cultural practices. For instance, Fauziya Kassindja's father decides not to have his daughter excised while remaining mindful of tradition and Islam's tenets. Fattuma Ahmed Ben helps her daughter Waris Dirie flee from her autocratic father and an arranged marriage but is complicit in having her daughter excised.

Along the same lines, the female autobiographers covered in this book all exercise female agency to some extent by relating their experience of excision

and by maneuvering between autobiographical and politicocultural texts, between 'I' and various forms of 'we.' Excision, therefore, is never seen as an isolated, unique experience but as a practice that, whether ritualized, deritualized, or reritualized, is endlessly repeated. It has been experienced by countless women before the girl-child experiencer, of whom the text tells; it is being experienced by a sibling or a peer contiguously with her; and it will be experienced by countless others after the operation is performed. Hence the sister motif and the "continuum of pain," after Alice Walker's phrase, are often at work in the experiential texts analyzed here.

The story of the excised woman's selfhood is indeed inseparable from her sense of community so that the original, tentative, tiny weeness of we becomes an assertive *us*. Speaking of black women, Bernice Johnson Reagan (1982) wrote: "We are, at the base of our identities, nationalists. We are people builders, carriers of cultural traditions, key to the formation and continuance of culture" (81). However, as we shall see, if women are originally the cultural gatekeepers of a practice like excision, they can also be instrumental in intervening within the cult of culture and in helping eradicate the rite. In other words, women can exercise agency to discontinue culture while negotiating with religion and patriarchy. As these negotiations culminate in self-creation, female African autobiography acquires body and ventures into new realms of corporeality while increasingly featuring excision in all its forms.

NAMING EXCISION

Excision does not exist. Neither does *infibulation*. Indeed, words like *excision*, *circumcision*, and *infibulation* are derived from Latin and do not exist as such in the societies where the practice is performed. Excision ranges from "having a bath" (in Igbo, *Isa aru* or *Iwu aru*) to *bolo koli*, meaning "the washing of one's hands" in Bambara, on to *salinde*, connoting "cleansing in order to access prayer" in Soninke or Sarakole. Naming the practice in Latin-derived words and circulating such linguistic fabrications in and outside the West are typical Western ways of appropriating non-Western practices as exotic forms of body modification. Words such as *mutilation*, yet another Latin-derived word with a legal and moral import, as in "female genital mutilation," are thus on a par with words like *deformation*, to refer to bound feet, elongated earlobes, stretched necks, split lips, deformed

skulls, and shrunken heads. As Frances Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe remark in *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation and Adornment* (1992), "such 'exotic' practices are newly interesting; they no longer serve as bizarre extremes against which we [Westerners] construct our naturalness, but rather to denaturalize the Western body" (1–2).

Armando Favazza (1996) has pushed the parallel even further by linking Western practices such as body piercing, tattooing, branding, and other forms of body modification to acts of self-mutilation such as skin cutting, self-castration, and eye enucleation, which are conventionally associated with mental illness. In some cases, the cultural context is evoked to explain practices far removed from contemporary societies, such as this Supreme Court judge's ruling that Melanesian "cannibalism per se was neither improper nor indecent but rather must be understood within a cultural context" (73). But the cannibalistic act was that of a psychotic father in Papua New Guinea who ate his own son. In this case, cannibalism may have been passed off as culturally determined, but it is also the result of severe psychosis, which Favazza has observed in Western contexts as well. Through the alchemy of cultural contamination, phrases like "excision" or "female circumcision" or "FGM" are now widely in use on the African continent.

Curiously, what we know about excision at the dawn of the twenty-first century has been mediated via early European cultural anthropology and ethnopsychiatry. German Felix Bryk's enthused identification of eight types of genital operations in *Neger Eros* (1910), based in part on his fieldwork with the Nandi of Kenya, has been reduced by the World Health Organization (WHO) to four types of ritual operations involving the alteration of female genitalia. I will, however, refer to the first three types, leaving out the lesser-known variations.[14] The first type, referred to as *sunnah*, involves a partial clitoridectomy, often understood as the removal of the prepuce or hood of the clitoris. Second, *excision* per se, also called clitoridectomy, involves the removal of the said prepuce and the clitoris itself and is often accompanied by partial or full labiadectomy. Third, *infibulation*, or "suturing," consists of the complete removal of the clitoris, the labia minora, and the labia majora and the stitching together of the two sides (the cut edges) of the vulva so as to cover the urethra and vaginal opening, leaving a very small aperture to permit the flow of urine and menstrual discharge.[15]

I will use *excision* throughout the book to refer to all three types unless I specifically discuss infibulation. Despite the widespread currency of FGC, or female genital cutting, I have avoided using *cutting* whenever possible be-

cause of its association with deliberate self-harm and self-inflicted violence on the genitalia, as in Steven Levenkron's *Cutting: Understanding and Overcoming Self-Mutilation* (1998).[16] Whereas Germaine Greer has argued in *The Whole Woman* (1999) that the difference between "self-harming" and "genital cutting" is most tenuous (96), Favazza has attempted to weld "self-mutilation" with the more general concept of mutilation directed against others. As a result, the phrase "female genital mutilation" has been used to refer to the case of a thirty-eight-year-old American housewife hospitalized for intractable binge eating and self-induced vomiting who, after a marital argument, slashed her genital area with a razor blade.[17] Yet there is a marked difference between a woman performing genital mutilation on herself as a result of schizophrenia, known as Caenis syndrome, or to avert suicide[18] and a woman writer voicing her dissent with the way her culture is invoked to modify her body irreversibly. Also, I have not used the phrase "genital surgeries" (Gunning 1992) because, except for the rare cases of medicalized excision in women's experiential narratives, there is no "surgery" involved, in the sense of the medical treatment of the body by incision or manipulation, usually with instruments. Even though incisive instruments such as a knife or a razor are used, it is not in a medical context, and the pretext of injuries or disorders of the body inherent in surgery is, whenever the rite or practice is performed, largely absent.

As a purification rite, excision posits an original hermaphroditism and aims at removing the allegedly vestigial masculinity of the clitoris, the way male circumcision removes the vestigial femininity of the foreskin. But this reasoning is seldom pushed to its logical conclusion, that is, the removal of men's nipples. However, ablation of the male nipple is practiced among, for example, the Djangero in the high Valley of the Omo Bottego in western Ethiopia. According to Freud's disciple and friend Marie Bonaparte, Jules Borelli, a French explorer of Ethiopia, reported in 1888 that the custom is practiced because "a man should not resemble a woman" (Bonaparte [1933] 1953, 153n1). Forty years later, when Bonaparte visited the area, she was given the same justification for the continuation of the rite.

The term *rite* to refer to excision has been tagged with various phrases. In *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), renowned philosopher John Mbiti equates "initiation" with "puberty rites" (121–33) when in fact circumcision and excision are acts of social rather than physiological significance and social puberty often precedes physiological puberty.[19] Emmanuel Babatunde (1998) in his anthropological study of the Ketu Yoruba speaks of "fertility

rites" (140–74). The phrase "nubility rites" is also common parlance. The excision ritual was indeed, and still is, a rite of passage whose origins are yet to be elucidated, mostly performed on women and by women in sub-Saharan Africa, the Mashriq, and various other countries, regardless of the women's social rank or religious allegiance. By "various other countries," I mean, in alphabetical order, Bahrain, Benin, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, and Yemen. To this already impressive list we can add reported cases via anecdotal rather than factual information in Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Algeria, Libya, and Malawi.[20] On the African continent, excision in all of its forms is distributed more or less contiguously along two axes—an east-west axis from Yemen to Senegal and a north-south axis from Egypt to Tanzania, which both intersect in Sudan. I will go into more detail into the reasons for such a geographical spread in Chapter 7.

The excision rite marks the initiation of the girl child, between ages four and fifteen, into adulthood. But it can also be performed on infants, on older women, and on female corpses. The fact that female infants also undergo excision indicates that the practice is no longer linked only to initiation into adulthood. In other words, excision is, in some cases, no longer a puberty rite and functions as a deritualized practice.[21] What is more, the third type—infibulation—is nowhere attested as a rite.

Despite efforts at identifying and naming excision, terminologies remain unstable. As Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hernlund (2000) have remarked, the first two types recognized by WHO often grade into each other and are commonly collapsed into a single category. In addition, infibulation is called "pharaonic circumcision" in Sudan (which I distinguish from "the Sudan"),[22] whereas the Egyptians call it "Sudanese circumcision" (Dorkenoo 1994, 33). Also, use of the first type—that is, sunnah—to refer to the obligatory excision of women is misleading. Indeed, the term *sunnah* is Arabic for "tradition" or the "duty" of Muhammad the Prophet, based on the Qur'an and the Ahadith, that is, the religious obligations or recommended practices emanating from Muhammad's teachings and deeds. According to the sunnah, and therefore general Muslim (Sunnite) jurisprudence, male circumcision on the seventh day after birth is *mustahabb* (recommended), and female excision is *makrumah*, that is, desirable, permissible, or commendable but not obligatory (*wajib*). As we shall see in Chapter 5, sunnah or an attenuated form of excision may have taken precedence over more severe

forms such as infibulation with the rise of Islam and the Prophet's alleged recommendation to an exciser in a hadith not to cut too deeply.

FEARFUL SYMMETRY

In her *Prisoners of Ritual* (1989), Hanny Lightfoot-Klein gives an example from Sudan where a *sunna kashfa* (uncovered sunnah) involves the cutting of "only top or half of the clitoris" (33). Yet Susan Izett and Nahid Toubia (1999) claim that, in actuality, no medical reports document the existence of the procedure (17). Because that type of unattested sunnah involves "only" the cutting of the prepuce or hood of the clitoris, Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000) reckon that sunnah is the only type "that can be construed as analogous to male circumcision." Both male and female circumcision may be labeled rituals and, from a rather clinical perspective, irreversible amputations of human genitalia, with disastrous and at times lifelong consequences for both males and females. However, scholars and activists alike have been diffident about making a case for symmetry between excision and the cutting off of the foreskin covering the glans of the penis, which, admittedly, is only one type of male circumcision. The phrase "female circumcision" has generally been abandoned, but a recent collection of essays edited by Obioma Nnaemeka bears the title *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge* (2005).[23]

Even if a case can be made for symmetry between male circumcision and the first type of partial clitoridectomy, the most radical and severe form, infibulation, clearly establishes dissymmetry and even provides an exemplar of "dissymmetry embodied" (Bal 1988). "Male infibulation" could be said to be similar to "female infibulation," since a clasp, or fibula, was put through the foreskin, thus making it impossible for it to retract over the glans and making erection either painful or impossible, but this dates back to Roman times and concerned singers, actors, athletes, and gladiators.[24] Likewise, the ancient Jewish operation *peri'ah* ("opening" or "uncovering" [Glick 2005, 45]), which was used to prevent Jews from passing themselves off as uncircumcised males, was quite severe, as it involved the tearing and stripping back of "the remaining inner lining of the foreskin off the glans and, with a sharpened fingernail, [the removal of] the mucous tissue and excision of the frenulum" (Abu-Sahlieh 1999, 61). But admittedly this custom dates back to the second century C.E., that is, at the onset of what historians of Judaism

call the Rabbinic period. "Penile flaying," in which all the skin of the penis and often the skin of the pubis as far up as the navel is stripped off, certainly matches the severity of contemporary excision since it is supported by relatively recent Yemeni and Saudi reports dating back to 1986.[25] The medical consequences of penile flaying—such as urethral fistula, sepsis, and sometimes death—match those for excision, but such cases are indeed rare, especially in proportion to the 140 million women and girls who have reportedly been excised one way or another. Yet, Sami Al-Deeb Abu-Sahlieh's lucid and informed pleas for symmetry between male and female practices force us to consider the untold story of what could be labeled the male genital mutilation of boys at the rate of one per heartbeat.

However, I am here interested in the discursive aspect of that dissymmetry. Indeed, the statistical and emotional import of women's first-person narratives remains, thus far, unmatched by male accounts around the loss of the foreskin, even if some societies encourage men to mourn such a loss, and support groups exist for the circumcised. If Jacques Derrida's *Circumfession* (1993) reads like a "Jewish autobiography" by "the last of the Jews," *around* the *circum*cision he underwent when he was eight days old (9), there are few male autobiographical texts that speak experientially or even with circumspection from the private realm of the "myself" about this traumatic bodily experience. This discursive dissymmetry, however, does not discount a deeply entrenched dualism that rests, in some African societies, on the bipolar category of man versus woman and is inscribed in the flesh.