

Marginalisation of an Age Old Culture. The Case of Female Cultural Initiation in Some South African Cultural Groups

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Abstract : Accounts exist of circumcision-anchored cultural initiation in central Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, North Africa, and West Africa -straddling states like Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Senegal, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. This attests to the continent-wide spread of this cultural practice. In this paper, the writer relates the cultural aspect of circumcision-subsuming initiation among black African cultural groups across the continent to the notion that African cultures are varied yet subscribe to a common central concept. The premise of the paper is that the common practice of initiation for both male and female children that have to be initiated by adults to the tradition and customs of a people coincides with such a central concept. The practice of traditional initiation is as broad as to encompass aspects of spirituality, morality, and social organisation, in the nature of the central concept of which it is a trans-sectional part. Cultural initiation, sometimes referred to as traditional circumcision, constitutes culture-determined rites of passage for the initiates. The study's aim, the findings of which are presented in this paper, was to probe gender equality in the development and promotion of the cultural practice of initiation. The researcher intended to demonstrate how in South Africa, female circumcision is treated equally or marginalised in efforts of the democratic government to regulate and strengthen the practice of circumcision as part of its broader liberation programme meant to reverse politico-cultural bondage experienced during apartheid rule that the present black regime helped bring to an end. It is argued that the failure to regard female circumcision as equal to its male counterpart is a travesty of the black government's legislation and policies espousing equality and the protection and empowerment of vulnerable and previously marginalised population groups that include black women. The writer did a desk-top study of the history and characteristics of female circumcision among the black Northern Sotho, VaTsonga, and VhaVenda cultural groups of the Limpopo Province, stretching north to the border of South Africa with Zimbabwe, as well as literature on how political and other authorities exert efforts to preserve and empower the practice. The findings were that male initiation is foregrounded and totalised to represent the practice of initiation as a whole, at the expense of its female counterpart facing marginalisation and unequal regard. It is outlined in this paper how such impoverishment of an otherwise woman-empowering cultural practice deprives hitherto black cultures that suffered brutal repression during apartheid of a fuller recovery much needed in the democratic era. The writer applies some aspects of postcolonial theory and some tropes of feminism in the discussion of an uneven status of cultural circumcision at the hands of present day powers that be.

Keywords : African cultures, female circumcision, gender equality, women empowerment

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