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At the intersection of Place, Gender, and Ethnicity: Changes in Female Circumcision among Kenyan Maasai

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Using an ethnographic approach that combines participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study describes ongoing changes in the social norm and practice of female circumcision among the Maasai community of Loita Hills, Kenya. This article highlights the importance of place in shaping social relations, by showing how in Loita's negotiations around female circumcision attention to the intersection of gender, culture, ethnicity and place – and in particular the ongoing effects of colonialism – is pivotal to successful efforts to change the tradition. By taking into account the effects of colonialism in Loita, as well as Maasai's position at the margins of decision-making on female circumcision, the nongovernmental organisation SAFE Maa developed a successful approach to challenge the social norm on female circumcision. The four key elements of this approach – non-judgemental, community-led, intersectional, and showcasing wider change – can inspire other actors working on female circumcision. This research responds to the paucity of attention to place in intersectional studies and contributes to the growing body of literature that considers female genital cutting as a social norm.

Keywords: female circumcision, intersectionality, culture, East Africa, Maasai

Introduction

5 February 2019. It is the eve of a public declaration during which the Maasai community of the Loita Hills in Kenya will declare an end to female circumcision. The project manager of the nongovernmental organisation SAFE Maa[1] organising the public declaration tells me the event is also a way of reclaiming space for Maasai to decide about the future of female genital cutting (FGC) in their community: *'People think of Maasai as isolated and ignorant.*

[1] S.A.F.E. (Sponsored Arts for Education) has been working in Kenya since 2002, using the performing arts and follow up community programmes to provide education and social change. SAFE Maa is the Maasai team of S.A.F.E. and addresses HIV and FGC in the Loita Hills.

But our community knows what is going on in Kenya and globally. We are part of this world. We have our own experiences and insights and want to contribute to the debates on female genital cutting.' He addresses the role of place in the community's negotiations around FGC. On one level, he refers to how Maasai are seen as isolated and ignorant of national and international debates. Here, he hints at discourses in which place, ethnicity, and gender intersect to link Africa, rurality, Maasai ethnicity, and womanhood to ignorance (Fanon 1952; Mohanty 1984; Hodgson 2001). On another level, he refers to how this presumed ignorance places Maasai at the margins of spaces where debates are held on how to change FGC (see also Mollett and Faria 2018, 567).

This attention to the role of place in efforts to end FGC is rare, yet important. Doreen Massey argues that 'identities/entities, the relations "between" them and the spatiality which is part of them, are all co-constitutive' (Massey 2005, 10). This is unequivocally true for pastoralist communities in Africa – like the Maasai of Loita – who are influenced by a double spatial division; the division between the global South and global North and between rural/margins and urban/centre (see also Hughes 2005). The influence of this spatial division is overlooked by many FGC activists and theorists who mainly focus on gender and culture. Yet it is tangible to people living in pastoralist communities and shapes how they experience efforts to eradicate the practice. Because place affects how knowledge is produced and diffused (Monk 1994; see also Johnston 2018), starting an analysis of FGC from the experiences of people living in Loita offers insight into how the intersection of place, gender, culture, and ethnicity influences struggles around FGC.

This article, based on ethnographic research with Maasai of Olmesutie in Loita Hills in Kenya's Great Rift Valley, uses a social norm perspective on FGC and contributes to the growing body of literature on FGC and social norms (i.a. Mackie 1996; Cislaghi and Heise 2017), by describing how social norm change is intertwined with identity, doubt, and hope

within a space where gender, place, ethnicity, and culture interlock. It responds to the call of feminist geographers Rodó-de-Zarate and Baylina (2018, 551) 'to contribute to intersectionality studies with a deeper approach to place,' one that brings together 'both the legacies of critical geographers on place and the feminist and postcolonial theorists on intersectionality studies.' In doing so, the article shows how attention to the intersection of gender, culture, ethnicity, and place – and in particular to the 'ongoing effects of settler colonialism' (Radcliffe 2017) – in negotiations around FGC has been pivotal to successful efforts to change the social norm on FGC in Loita. SAFE Maa is successful because, one, its *non-judgemental* approach leaves space for people to voice their fears and doubts honestly; two, its *community-led approach* brings Maasai from the margins to the centre in deciding on the future of female circumcision in their community; three, its *intersectional approach* addresses fears around ending FGC in a place that is shaped by the ongoing effects of colonialism (Winterbottom, Koomen, and Burford 2009; see also Hughes 2005); and finally, by showcasing change, SAFE Maa invites Maasai, as a historically marginalised group, to be part of a wider movement.

Female circumcision at the intersection of gender, place, culture, and ethnicity

The first attempts to bring female circumcision to an end in Kenya were led by missionaries and colonial officials in the early 1900s (Thomas 2003). Since the 1990s efforts to end FGC worldwide have intensified. Kenya has known a steady decrease in national prevalence from 32 per cent in 2003 to 21 per cent in 2014 (DHS 2014). The practice has been illegal in Kenya since the 2011 Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act (Kenya 2011).

Actors working on FGC mostly approach the practice as a 'backward' cultural tradition that violates women's rights.[2] Women undergoing the practice are constructed as passive victims of their culture (Mohanty 1984; Harcourt 2009), especially in pastoralist societies (Hodgson 2001). In a context of 'long and complicated and highly politicised interactions with local, national, and international organizations that seek to promote "civilization,"' anti-FGC initiatives that use this framing can have unanticipated consequences (Winterbottom, Koomen, and Burford 2009, 50). Koomen (2014, 255) explains that such initiatives can 'counterproductively politicize diverse practices of excision as reified markers of "insider" cultural identity', resulting in 'outcomes antithetical to their stated goals of reducing practices of genital cutting.' Indeed, insensitive external interventions caused Tanzanian Maasai to view female circumcision also as a form of 'resistance to outsiders' attempts to abandon FGC' (Van Bavel, Coene, and Leye 2017, 13).

Much of the anthropological research on FGC adopts a cultural relativist approach, which condemns interference in cultures that are not one's own. It is important to differentiate between coercion by outsiders and interaction with outside influences. Cultural relativism can risk romanticising cultures as static entities cut off from national and global processes. However, the alternative to cultural imposition does not have to be cultural isolation; culture is constantly reimagined and transformed, both from within and in interaction with outside influences[3] (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Van Bavel, Coene, and Leye 2017). Indeed, Koomen

[2] In the context of extensive focus ion female circumcision, it is remarkable that male circumcision remains largely uncontested. Community members in Loita said that this is because male circumcision instead of negative effects, has the benefit of reducing the chance of HIV infection. Their response reflects the Kenyan and also international discourse that constructs FGC as inherently harmful versus male circumcision as inherently beneficial. This double standard has been challenged by scholars (i.a. Earp 2017).

[3] Female genital cutting is not the only socio-cultural practice that is changing. Maasai are faced with extensive changes in the broader organisation of socio-cultural life. Other examples include increased access to formal education and its influence on the falling number of Ilmurran (Maasai warriors), the older age of marriage for girls, and a drop in the number of children herding livestock. Like with female circumcision, these changes take place against a backdrop of local encounters with national and international influences, fuelling fears of cultural erosion and ethnic marginalisation. Further research could explore said encounters.

(2014, 247) states that the 'politics of female excision is invariably embroiled in struggles – including anti-colonial resistance and the efforts of marginalized communities to defend their land and autonomy – which cannot be straightforwardly characterized as local.' Yet, few FGC activists take into account how place and space intersect with gender, culture, and ethnicity in shaping struggles around FGC.

Intersectionality refers to the fact that multiple oppressions – based on gender, race, socio-economic status, etc. – occur simultaneously, creating a combined oppression experience that cannot be understood from one axis alone. The term 'intersectionality' was proposed by Kimberle Crenshaw, but other African American feminists before her have addressed experiences of 'simultaneous' or 'interlocking oppression,' *inter alia* Sojourner Truth (McKissack 1992), the Combahee River Collective (Einstein 1978), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990). Intersectional thinkers criticised 'white feminism' for prioritising gender-based oppression at the expense of other axes of oppression.

Feminist geographers Rodó-de-Zarate and Baylina (2018, 551) argue that there is not enough attention to place in intersectional studies. This is true for activist and theoretical approaches to FGC. This article responds to that paucity by showing, first, how place, ethnicity, culture, and gender interlock and shape people's experiences of the changing practice and, second, how attention to this intersection is pivotal to changing the social norm on FGC.

Methodology

This study used an ethnographic approach that combines participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Data collection took place in Loita Hills between July and

August 2018; at a workshop of cultural leaders and activists working on FGC in Maasai communities organised by Orchid Project[4] and SAFE Maa in March 2018; at Kenya's first National Anti-FGM Conference (February 2018) and The Girl Generation Youth Summit in Nairobi (May 2018); and in the London Orchid Project office between June and September 2017. Ten months of previous ethnographic research among Tanzanian Maasai made me familiar with Maasai culture and, as it turned out, with some Loitans who I had met some years earlier at the market on the Tanzanian side of the border. My previous experience and relationships allowed me to intensively immerse myself in events and conversations right from the beginning. It is this intensity of excursions into people's lives, rather than the length of the researcher's physical presence in a certain space, that allows for good ethnography (Pink and Morgan 2013, 352).

35 in-depth interviews carried out in Loita were recorded and transcribed. Interviews and informal conversations were done with girls, boys, women, men, and elders of the community; church leaders; cultural leaders; government officials; health care professionals; teachers and a school principal; and international and local NGO staff. Questions were asked in English and translated to Maa by a trained female research assistant. Research findings were discussed with key informants and the feedback was included in this final article.

Participant observation in Loita Hills included living in Olmesutie and sharing in the daily activities of the community: shopping at the market; attending ceremonies; participating in a *emanyata*[5]; joining the women for laundry at the river; trekking through the forest with *Ilmurran*[6]; drinking chai with the elders; playing with the children, and so on. Conversations

[4] Orchid Project is a London-based charity working to end FGC worldwide and a S.A.F.E. donor. Orchid Project partners with SAFE Maa to deliver knowledge sharing workshops on FGC abandonment.
[5] Emanyata refers to the coming together of the community for the graduation of a certain age set from one life stage to the next. Every Maasai man moves through the boys emanyata, the Ilmurran emanyata, the junior elder emanyata, and finally the senior elder emanyata.
[6] Ilmurran (singular: Ormurrani) are young, unmarried men who form the warriors of the Maasai.

took place in *Kiswahili* and basic *Maa*. My previous experience with living in Maasai communities and my knowledge of Kiswahili and Maa facilitated trust and friendship.

Participation in the National Anti-FGM Conference and the Girl Generation Youth Summit provided new networks and insights in general FGC trends in Kenya that proved important when people mentioned how 'those in Nairobi' talk about Maasai culture and circumcision. Finally, participant observation among Orchid Project as research intern allowed developing a deep understanding of anti-FGC efforts in Loita Hills.

Information obtained through participant observation and informal conversations was recorded in daily field notes. Field notes and interview transcripts were analysed together and coded inductively following the principle of grounded theory to allow the data to speak rather than imposing pre-set expectations (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Context of female circumcision among the Maasai of Loita Hills

Prevalence and type

Activists and academics use the term 'female genital mutilation/cutting' to refer to a wide variety of female genital surgeries performed in different ways, different contexts, and for different reasons. With 78%, the Maasai were in 2014 the ethnic group with the fourth highest prevalence in Kenya (Somali 94%, Samburu 86%, Kisii 84%). The prevalence of FGC in Loita is estimated at 62% (Orchid Project 2019).

The 2014 DHS does not have data on the type of cut for Maasai women. Respondents mentioned two types: *Maasai/kimila*[7]*/olkuak*[8] and *kisasa*[9], or traditional and modern. Key informants (i.a. circumcisers) described the traditional form as 'removing the clitoris and the labia minora until you reach the bone.' *Kisasa* refers to cutting the prepuce, the whole external clitoris, or 'only the tip' (a part of the prepuce, and part of the clitoris), 'but without going deep.'

Reasons for female circumcision

For Maasai, circumcision of boys and girls functions as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood (Spencer 1988). 60% of Maasai women in 2014 had been circumcised between 10-14 years old (DHS 2014, 201). Social responsibilities and expectations change after circumcision. Traditionally, boys would become *Ilmurran* or warriors, and girls would be ready for marriage and childbearing (Talle 2007). An uncircumcised man or woman, regardless of their age, would be considered a child, without access to marriage and other privileges that come with adulthood. Furthermore, traditional belief says that an uncircumcised mother will die on the day of her son's circumcision, or that a baby whose head touches the mother's clitoris during birth will be mentally or physically disabled (Van Bavel, Coene, and Leye 2017, 8).

With increasing access to schools in Loita, more boys and girls continue education after being circumcised instead of becoming Ilmurran or getting married. None of the participants still believed that remaining uncircumcised poses a risk to the child's or mother's life or health. Nor did people believe that circumcision is necessary for physical growth or for giving birth.

[7] Kiswahili adjective, meaning 'traditional.'
[8] Maa noun, meaning 'tradition.'
[9] Kiswahili adjective, meaning 'modern.'

The 2018 survey found that the reasons for FGC given in Loita, in order of most frequently mentioned, were: culture (60%), rite of passage (38%), marriage (37%), purity and virginity (29%), health and hygiene (11%), religion (6%) and sexual control (1%) (Orchid Project 2019). These reasons are interlinked. In order to be married, men and women need to be circumcised. Circumcision initiates children into adulthood. It also functions as purification. The blood of an uncircumcised girl is considered impure and women may refuse to assist her during childbirth for fear of the impure blood bringing harm. Culture, rite of passage, purity[10], and marriage all are interlaced.

Female circumcision as social norm in Loita

A growing body of literature suggests approaching FGC as a social norm (Gerry Mackie 1996; G. Mackie and LeJeune 2009; UNFPA and UNICEF 2011). Social norms are 'behavioural rules shared by people in a given society or group; they define what is considered "normal" and appropriate behaviour for that group' (Cislaghi and Heise 2017, 4). Cislaghi and Heise (2017, 5), drawing from social norm theorists Gerry Mackie (2015) and Cristina Bicchieri (2005), summarise a social norm as 'a preference to do X that people hold because; (1) they believe that others do X *(empirical expectations)*; (2) they believe that others think they should also do X *(normative expectations)*; and (3) they believe that if they comply with X others will

[10] Readers could mistakenly understand the 29% score on 'purity and virginity' in Orchid Project's survey as suggesting that both terms have a similar meaning and that Maasai circumcise girls to preserve virginity. This assumption reflects a discourse popularised by 1970s Western feminists that equates female circumcision with female sexual control (James 2002). While this equation is true for certain ethnic groups, it is less appropriate to understand female circumcision among Loitan Maasai. Virginity and sexual control were never mentioned as a reason for circumcision during my research and only 1% mentioned 'sexual control' in the survey by Orchid Project. Participants who mentioned 'purity' as reason for circumcision explained this to be the purifying of one's blood through circumcision, rather than sexual purity or virginity, which are not expectations or requirements for Maasai boys or girls.

sanction them positively (approve), and that if they do not comply with X others will sanction them negatively (disapprove).' Social norms apply within *reference groups*: what is considered normal in one group, might not be seen so in another.

To establish whether female circumcision was a social norm in the past (which, in turn, makes it possible to look at changes over time), I interviewed mothers and grandmothers about their own experience with female circumcision when they were younger. This memory of a 35-year-old mother whom I interviewed in her home is representative of the experience of her peers:

> *I have known about circumcision since childhood. Everyone in my society needed to be circumcised, men and women. I remember when my closest girlfriend was circumcised. I had to wait because my father wanted my little sister and me to be circumcised at the same time, so he could do one ceremony for the two of us. I remember I actually begged him to circumcise me earlier.* [Why?] *Because I saw all my age mates go through it, and I knew my mother and my grandmothers had gone through it, so I wanted it too. When it was our time, I was very excited. I would finally join my friends who had already become women. I would make my family proud by following the Maasai tradition. I would be given a cow by my father. Of course, I was scared of the pain, but the excitement of becoming a woman was much bigger.* (married woman, 35 years old, no formal education)

Her narrative confirms the *empirical expectation* that others circumcise girls (all her age mates, mother, and grandmothers were circumcised), the *normative expectation* that others think that she should be circumcised too (everyone in my society *needs* to be circumcised), and the *positive sanctioning* for complying with circumcision (social inclusion, adulthood and

associated privileges, family's pride, a cow). When asked what would have happened if a girl would have refused to be circumcised, all women's answers reflected *negative sanctions*, like social exclusion:

> *She would bring shame to her family. No man would agree to marry her, because she would still be considered a child, even though she would be 40 years old. And even if she would find a husband – which woman would help her during childbirth?* (married woman, 67 years old, no formal education)

The strength of the social norm for their generation appears strong. Participants said they did not know any Loitan woman above 30 years old who had not been circumcised.

Social norm change

Today the social norm and the practice of FGC are changing. Social norm change was measured using a tool provided by CARE (2016 in Cislaghi and Heise 2017) that suggests that a social norm is changing if there are changes in *empirical expectations*, *normative expectations*, *sanctions*, *sensitivity to sanctions*, and *exceptions*.

People's opinions on whether others are circumcising *(empirical expectations)* vary. Most think that the majority nowadays does the 'kisasa' circumcision (type I), less do Maasai circumcision (type II), and only a few do an alternative rite of passage [ARP] in which the whole ceremony except the cut is performed. Others believe that many are now doing the ARP, with few doing kisasa, and no one doing the traditional type. A 2018 survey showed that 73% of participants identified kisasa, and 23% traditional, as the most common type of cut being practiced amongst families that continue to cut (Orchid Project 2019). Every single research

participant said that they have noticed clear changes in FGC-related behaviour of others and that the traditional version is disappearing. The different perceptions of what people think others are doing, the perceived change in the behaviour of others, and the decreasing conformity in Loita communities when it comes to FGC suggest a change in *empirical expectations* related to FGC (Cislaghi and Heise 2017, 36).

The *normative expectations* (what I should do according to others) are changing too. All respondents mentioned that some community members want FGC to be abandoned. Yet, people feel that other community members expect them to continue, and that (some) *Ilmurran* would not marry their daughters if they were not circumcised. People are unsure about what is expected of them and are looking at each other for direction.

Sanctions related to FGC are changing too. Approval for complying with the social norm of being circumcised is no longer uniform. Celebrations are often left out to ensure secrecy. Families know they risk judgement and prosecution. On the other hand, sanctions for non-compliance are interpreted differently by different people. Some think that men are still unwilling to marry uncircumcised girls and that uncut girls will still face social exclusion. Others think that men are now willing to marry uncircumcised girls, but that the women of the husband's family will exclude her because she hasn't been purified. Some people gave the example of a *emanyata* where men with uncircumcised wives were told to keep them away because other men did not want to receive meat from 'girls.' Some believe that an uncircumcised woman will be accepted as any other woman and gave examples of the few uncircumcised women who are married in the community and accepted as full members.

People's *sensitivity to sanctions* varies. Whereas for some people the fact that *Ilmurran* might not want to marry their daughters is a reason for them to circumcise, other parents said that they would just find an educated man for their daughter 'who understands the importance of not cutting.'

Finally, there is also a change in the *number of exceptions*. All participants said they knew uncircumcised women who were well-respected community members. Some added that, where at first these individuals were abused for not complying, with the changing climate on FGC, they were no longer stigmatised.

Participants' responses suggest heterogeneity in community members' behaviour and uncertainty about what others expect them to do. The described changes in empirical expectations, normative expectations, sanctions, sensitivity to sanctions, and exceptions suggest that the social norm related to FGC is transitioning. To be able to speak of a new social norm, these changes need to be adopted by more community members. In what follows, I describe, first, what is influencing change, and second, how change diffuses through the community.

Change leaders

When asked where the change related to FGC is coming from, people mentioned SAFE Maa and the church, and when probed, the government and Tasaru. SAFE Maa is a community-led NGO that started community education on HIV/aids through song and dance performances and workshops in 2006. Experiencing SAFE's success in making a previously taboo topic discussable, the female project manager lobbied to apply the same strategy to FGC. She had almost died of haemorrhaging after her own circumcision and wanted to protect her daughter and other girls from undergoing the same. Over the years, the importance of a community-led and respectful approach to FGC would become even more clear, as more actors with aggressive approaches to FGC would appear.

S.A.F.E's female staff supported her immediately because they too had experienced health issues themselves or witnessed issues among relatives or friends. SAFE started including

messages on FGC in their songs and organising workshops on the topic in 2010. Initially, it was hard, in particular for the men, to speak out against FGC publicly. When I asked her about the early beginnings of their FGC related work, a female staff member of SAFE recalled:

> *People would say: 'Look at him saying this! We know his father, we know his mother, we know his family; all of them are circumcised. So how can he tell us not to circumcise?'* (female staff SAFE Maa, married, 32 years old, form 4)

But the stories of the women in their environment – about health consequences and the impact on their sexual experience – convinced them of the importance of discussing the topic. Over the last four years, FGC has gone from a taboo topic to one that is openly discussed by all groups of the community. Participants said this is because of SAFE Maa.

Tasaru Ntomonok Initiative is a rescue centred based in Narok town, a 4-hour drive from Olmesutie. Tasaru offers shelter to girls who have run away from home to avoid FGC and/or early marriage. Because this often means a rupture with the family, the centre also supports runaway girls with school fees to enable them to finish their education. Tasaru was founded by Agnes Pareyio, a Maasai woman who, after having been circumcised against her will, vowed to protect other girls from the cut.

The Kenyan government outlawed all types of FGC with the Ant FGM Act of 2011. In an in-depth interview, former Member of Parliament Linah J.B. Kilimo explained how her own painful experience of social exclusion after evading the cut made her commit to passing the Act.

What SAFE Maa, Tasaru Ntomonok Initiative, and the Anti-FGM Act have in common is that the initiative to tackle FGC came from women from FGC practicing communities, their lived experiences as well as what they witnessed among friends and family. While present-day

church leaders in Loita might partly oppose FGC because of their own lived experiences, opposition is also simply a requirement for every church member. The church's anti-FGC stance stems back from when colonial missionaries arrived on the African continent. Colonial documents of the 1920s and 30s show that while the colonial government aimed for 'moderation' of the practice (clitoridectomy instead of excision), missionaries always applied a total abolition policy (Thomas 2003). It was a woman of the Church of Scotland Mission in Kenya who, in 1929, first suggested the term 'sexual mutilation of women,' reflecting the colonial discourse that described female circumcision as 'repugnant to civilisation and health' and a practice of 'barbarous supersitians'[11]. Much of that discourse is continued today, with Protestant churches discouraging members from attending 'heathen' (i.e. traditional Maasai) ceremonies or accepting food from 'impure' people (i.e. non-Christians).

The diffusion of change

Law

The Anti-FGM Act describes FGM as a human rights violation and makes the practice a criminal offense punishable with imprisonment. Research shows that legal measures can create an enabling environment and discourage the practice, but they can also send the practice underground and discourage health-seeking behaviour (Johansen et al. 2013, 6). This is also the case in Loita. The law helps those opposing FGC to build their case for the abandonment of FGC. It also discourages some from practicing. For example, people believe that local

[11] Church of Scotland, Memorandum prepared by the Kikuyu Mission Council on Female Circumcision, 1st December 1931, CO 533/418/2 (page 4), The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

government representatives do not cut because the cost of being discovered would be too high. A neighbour of the village chief, who knows him and his family intimately, said:

> *[The village chief] is very traditional and really loves the culture. But because he works for the government, he is not circumcising his daughters, even though in his heart he might want to. If he would do it, and he would be caught, it would cost him his job.* (married woman, 26 years old, higher education)

But the fear of prosecution has also caused the practice to go underground: families who want to circumcise their daughter do so at night. Many of the traditional aspects, like the learnings about being an adult woman, are lost, adding to a shared fear of cultural erosion. Some also said that the shift from traditional (type II) to kisasa (type I) circumcision is because type I heals quicker and is thus more easily hidden (see also Van Bavel, Coene, and Leye 2017). This change is also attributed to a growing awareness about harmful health consequences resulting from government and NGO awareness raising. Finally, the law makes people more reluctant to go to the hospital when they face complications for fear of prosecution.

Outlawing the practice thus results in behavioural changes meant to avoid punishment, rather than attitudinal changes. Except among a small subgroup of local government authorities, the behavioural change is not the desired change, as people cut less or secretly, rather than abandon the cut. A woman I spoke to during a circumcision ceremony explained why, according to her, the law has not worked:

> *The government uses force without explaining why we need to stop. For the Maasai, circumcision has always been a good practice, so we don't understand why they say that it is bad and we need to stop it. From one day to the other, we were told we would*

be jailed for doing something we have done for as long as the Maasai have existed!

(married woman, 41 years old, primary education)

Church

The discourse on FGC used by the churches is, in its softest form, that the practice goes in against Christian values, and, in its most radical form, that the practice is backward and practitioners impure. In Loita, Protestants form a separate *reference group* with their own social norms regarding FGC and other traditional Maasai practices. Protestant participants said they think that most other Protestants do not practice *(empirical expectations)* and think that they should not practice either *(normative expectations).* Within the Protestant *reference group*, non-practitioners receive *positive sanctioning* (e.g. they are considered 'good' protestants), while practitioners receive *negative sanctioning* (exclusion, impure, not a 'real' protestant). The Protestant church thus contributes to a change in the practice (abandonment) and in the meaning: whereas traditionally not circumcising was associated with impurity, for Protestant Maasai circumcising is now considered impure.

However, the approach of the Protestant church has not influenced non-Protestants to abandon FGC. In some cases, the Protestant church's approach to Maasai culture has caused conflict between adherents and non-adherents, because the latter feel looked down upon by Protestants who see them as 'backward' for practicing their culture. Research has shown how judgmental approaches cause people to become defensive and FGC to become an identity marker, both during the colonial period (Thomas 2003) and more recently (Winterbottom, Koomen, and Burford 2009; Van Bavel, Coene, and Leye 2017). Some participants indeed mentioned that abandoning FGC is 'something for church people, but not for us.'

Tasaru Ntomonok Initiative

Tasaru Ntomonok Initiative has a shelter in Narok town for girls who run away from home to avoid circumcision and/or early marriage. Tasaru does not do outreach work in the communities. Girls who have run to Tasaru usually heard about the centre from and/or were assisted to get there by a school teacher. Participants only knew of a few girls who had gone there. When asked for their opinion on Tasaru's approach, most community members appreciate that they help girls through paying for their education but condemn the conflict caused between girls and their families. During an interview in his home, a father to 5 daughters, who struggles with the question to cut his younger daughters or not, said:

> *Girls run there without the permission of their parents. The people of Tasaru will tell her her parents are bad for wanting to circumcise her. They tell her that, if she comes to visit the family, they will force her to be cut, and that is not true! We cannot force girls. The parents cannot go and visit her either, because if they arrive at the centre, they will get arrested. So the girl and her family will have a bad relationship!* (married man, 56 years old, no formal education)

For many girls, a troubled relationship with family and community is too steep a price to pay.

Tasaru's discourse echoes the global human rights discourse of female genital mutilation as a women's rights violation. The organisation contributes to changing the practice by helping some girls to evade the cut. It also changes the meaning for the girls in the shelter from a rite of passage done to ensure a daughter's future to a human rights violation inflicted by ignorant parents. Abandonment and the alternative meaning for FGC reach only a minority of the community, however. For the majority of the community, Tasaru's judgement of the

community as backward causes backlash, potentially strengthening the meaning of FGC as identity marker for Maasai.

SAFE Maa

There is a strong agreement among community members that SAFE Maa has done the most for the community when it comes to FGC. Community members explained that the law pushes the practice underground; the church only reaches church members and treats others with contempt; and Tasaru causes conflict by removing girls from the community. SAFE Maa, on the other hand, is successful in its endeavour because they respect Maasai culture; take the time to explain why they advise ending FGC; and they come to people's homes in remote areas.

Because SAFE Maa's staff have all lived in the community since birth, they understand the culture, the changes that are happening, and the insecurities that these changes cause. Insecurities related to social status, culture, and ethnicity are influenced by the ongoing effects of colonialism and post-Independence marginalisation. SAFE Maa constantly adapts its approach to address these insecurities and to ensure the community feels heard.

With regards to social status, SAFE Maa understands the importance of marriage in establishing the social relations that are vital in a context where continuous marginalisation by colonial and post-Independence governments translate into low socio-economic opportunities and social protection. In this context, risking one's daughter's chance to marry by not performing circumcision is risking her future. In response, SAFE started involving Ilmurran in their performances. Ilmurran are the girls' future husbands and are perceived as 'guardians of the culture': their acceptance to marry uncircumcised women removes the negative sanction of not finding a husband for uncut women. To bring the Ilmurran on board, SAFE had to help them reimagine themselves through changing the discourse on what it means to be a Ormurrani:

> *We used to be the warriors and we used to raid cattle. But there are no more fights and cattle raiding, so we need a new role in society. We have always protected our people from harm, so I see talking about HIV and female circumcision now as a way of protecting our people. Some say: how can a Ormurrani talk about stopping female circumcision? But I see it as exactly the work for a Ormurrani; I am caring for the wellbeing of my society.* (SAFE Moran Ormurrani, unmarried, 16 years old, no formal education)

Regarding culture, SAFE simultaneously addresses the community's fear for prosecution and for cultural erosion by positioning themselves between the government and the community. SAFE was invited to speak about FGC in a emanyata, the ultimate space of celebration of culture. A government official took the floor first and said: 'FGM is forbidden by Kenyan law. We will arrest every girl who undergoes it, as well as the parents and circumcisers!' The audience looked serious. A drunk old man yelled: '*Ati*?! Abandon female circumcision?' followed by a disapproving spit. When SAFE's project manager spoke, he told the audience that SAFE is there to protect the community from harm, and was answered with applause:

> *We stand between the government and the community. We don't believe in forcing you to stop female circumcision. Because then you get responses like what the old man just said. SAFE doesn't arrest or judge the community. We respect the culture and the people, and we have only come to give advice and education on why more and more people are saying it is better to leave circumcision of girls behind. Then you can make up your own mind.*

Concerning ethnicity, SAFE addresses the ethnic marginalisation Maasai experience. Participants said they were happy to listen to SAFE because the organisation always uses a respectful approach. On one of our walks through the hills of Loita, an Ormuranni explained to me:

> *It all depends on who is your adviser. If they are patient and respectful, they can start changing your mind. We usually walk in groups of Ilmurran because we are not allowed to drink alone. When we walk together, someone like [SAFE Moran] can tell us more about why they are saying to stop it. And that's how I changed my mind. (Ormurrani, 16 years old, no formal education)*

When SAFE Maa partnered with Orchid Project to host a workshop with other local organisations, SAFE's project managers decided to only invite Maasai staff. They explained that FGC is a community issue and that members of the community are best equipped to tackle it. The importance of ethnicity became central to the workshop. All participants easily gave examples of how Maasai and other FGC practicing communities are often portrayed in derogative terms: 'backward', 'retrogressive,' and even 'barbaric.' They discussed how it made them feel: 'insulted,' 'sad,' 'defensive,' and 'unwilling to listen to what the person has to say.' Some organisations' had used judgmental approaches in the past and people had indeed refused to listen or to receive them again at later moments. A cultural leader who attended the workshop, when asked what he had most remembered from the workshop 5 months later, said:

> *If you use force, people will answer with force. They will hide, they will lie, and they will find ways of doing what they want to do - they might even do it on purpose out of resistance. That's why it is important to use respectful and non-judgmental approaches;*

> *you talk kindly and try to understand their perspective, and then share yours. It takes patience and time, but my experience taught me that in the end, you will come to an agreement.* (cultural leader, married, 59 years old, no formal education)

At the end of the workshop, the participants invited journalists to spread the message that FGC interventions must be respectful to the communities they target. The resulting article in Narok's *County Dispatch*, titled *'NGOs advocate approach change on fight against FGM,'* summarises the conclusion of the activists: local solutions by Maasai instead of 'outsiders,' non-judgmental approaches, and education instead of legal measures (Kenya News Agency 2018). A similar message was broadcasted on local and national radio and television. It is unclear what the reach was outside of Loita Hills. Within Loita, however, it reached a large number of people, either directly via the radio or through oral diffusion. It reinforced and strengthened SAFE's credibility in the community.

> *We heard them say that same message on the radio, and even on television. In the whole of Kenya! It proved that what they had always told us is true: they are really on the side of the community. They are not even afraid to tell that to the whole country, and even to the government!* (unmarried man, 25 years old, secondary education)

The emphasis on community-led approaches brings Maasai from the margins to the centre of spaces where discussions about their community, and FGC specifically, are held.

SAFE's approach has strategic advantages. When I asked community members whose approach they liked best, the answer was unanimously SAFE Maa because of the respectful approach they are seen to use. An external evaluation done of SAFE's programme says that

90% of the community attributes the FGC related change in the first place to SAFE (Belewa 2017, 5).

But SAFE's approach does not just serve the strategic purpose of convincing people. It is also born out of SAFE's – and in particular, the project manager's – sincere love for and deep understanding of their community. He sees it as his personal responsibility to ensure mutual respect between SAFE and the community. Grassroots organisations often struggle to address community needs in appropriate ways because of their dependence on external donors who come with their own discourses and agendas (Wendoh and Wallace 2005; Moser and Moser 2005; Jasor 2016). For SAFE, however, the relationship with the community is more important than anything, including funding:

> *Some organisations might do things in the community that won't work or that can even be insulting, just because the donor wants it to be done that way. They don't tell the donors that it is actually wrong because they fear losing funding. I rather lose funding but keep the community's respect, than the other way around. […] Outsiders can just leave once their programmes are done. But we cannot. This is and will always be our community. If we do something wrong, we will carry the responsibilities for our lives, and even our children will carry that reputation. And that is why we choose what we think is right over money.*

The project's manager refers to the whole team in this quote. But he has his own unique reason to be committed to respecting the culture:

> *My late father was a cultural leader and until this day he remains very respected. It is always very important to me to feel that I am doing what he would want me to do; that*

> *I am advising our community in the right and honest way, and that I am not disrespecting the culture.*

Instead of *fighting against* the culture, SAFE *works with* the culture, in this case by invoking his father's reputation and his own status as the son of a cultural leader. SAFE sees culture as a source for change, rather than a tool of oppression. It refuses racist and colonial discourses that portray African pastoralists as backward and ignorant, or female circumcision as intentional harm. The importance of their alternative discourse cannot be underestimated in a context where Maasai, as an often marginalized ethnic group, experience anti-FGM campaigns as yet another attack on their identity and culture (Hodgson 2001, 2011). Whereas many development organisations solely focus on gender, SAFE simultaneously opposes gender oppression, as well as colonialism, racism, and ethnic discrimination. It is this deep understanding of fear for cultural erosion and loss of identity, together with respect for the community and insistence that change has to be community-led, that makes SAFE Maa so successful.

Continuation, abandonment, and doubt

A minority of participants, mainly women, said they would rather continue FGC. When asked why, they replied that they simply wanted to follow the culture:

> *My mother is cut. My grandmothers are cut. My sisters are. So why not me?* (girl, 16 years old, secondary education)

Another minority has already abandoned the cut. This group consists mostly of church members and formally educated Maasai who have access to an alternative reference group where the social norm is not cutting, and who do not feel strongly about giving up a part of Maasai culture.

The majority, however, is unsure about which direction to take. This doubt is inspired by fear of cultural erosion on the one hand, and fear of negative sanctions for not adhering to the social norm of the majority reference group on the other hand.

Cultural erosion

A common fear among Loitans is that abandoning FGC means furthering cultural erosion. By arguing that the Maasai cultural ceremony is disappearing because people try to hide the cut from law enforcers, SAFE constructs a new 'real Maasai' identity; one that ensures the culture continues by opting for an alternative rite of passage that involves all the traditional rituals but without the cut. This discourse that celebrates Maasai identity and addresses people's fear of cultural erosion resonates with many Loitans. These findings are in line with Koomen (2014, 255) who states that 'these appeals to cultural survival [are] much more persuasive and meaningful to [Maasai] than the "foreign" language of rights.'

The game theory dilemma

Many Loitans prefer to leave the cut behind but are scared of the consequences. Consequences can relate to marriage prospects and one's social status in the community:

> *I don't think the cut has any relevance anymore, but I will still do it, just because men don't want to marry uncircumcised girls.* (Married woman, 30 years old, no formal education)

Or even circumcision at a later moment:

> *I would like to stop, but I think I will do* kisasa*. If I don't cut my daughter now and her husband's female relatives find out she is uncut, they might cut her while she is giving birth! I don't want her to go through that double pain.* (Married woman, 40 years old, primary education)

These examples show that, while the social norm to cut is shifting, it is still experienced as strong by some. Not having easy access to an alternative reference group where the norm of not cutting girls is present (e.g. the church or the formally educated) makes people vulnerable to the negative sanctions of not cutting and thus more likely to doubt giving up FGC. These doubters continue because of the consequences of non-compliance, rather than out of conviction of the importance of FGC. They expressed the hope that the social norm would continue shifting:

> *If my daughter was old enough today, I would circumcise her. But I hope things will have continued changing by the time she reaches that age, so we don't have to circumcise her.* (married woman, 28 years old, no formal education)

Remarkably, a significant number of participants said that they would follow whichever direction the community would pursue. The sentiment that many share is that 'change is

coming, and we do not want to be left behind.' Some said they have no particular preference and would follow the majority. Others said they preferred either abandoning or continuing, but would, in the end, follow the majority.

This finding reinforces the theory of interdependent action or game theory, which states that in a larger group the choice of each individual depends on the choice of all (Gerry Mackie et al. 2015, 19). Understanding this principle, S.A.F.E organised a public declaration on the 6th of February 2019 – the International Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation – in which cultural leaders blessed the alternative rite of passage. The aim of this public event was to reassure community members that the whole community accepts the new norm of not cutting and that uncut women can no longer be excluded. Public declarations have been used by the NGO Tostan in Senegal. Following social norm theory, Tostan believes that public declarations help to affirm to the whole community that the social norm has indeed changed, a strategy that is listed as one of the six elements for abandonment of FGC by UNICEF (2008a, 22). An evaluation of Tostan by UNICEF (2008b) shows that 10 years later FGC prevalence had decreased with more than half in the villages that participated in the public declaration. Follow-up research will examine whether and how the public declaration influences the ongoing change in Loita.

Discussion

The practice of female circumcision in the Loita Hills of Kenya functions as a social norm linked to marriageability. Not circumcising your daughter means risking her future. In societies such as among the Loita, where social ties, marriage, and childbearing are vital, many perceive the social risk of not circumcising as more threatening than the physical risk of circumcising.

But the social norm is shifting, and community members attribute the positive change to SAFE Maa. Four key elements make SAFE's approach successful; it is non-judgemental, community-led, intersectional, and showcases wider change. Whereas aggressive approaches and prosecution drive the practice underground, SAFE's *non-judgemental* approach is non-threatening and welcomes people to share their honest sentiments about the ongoing change. Its *community-led approach* brings Maasai from the margins to the centre in deciding on the future of female circumcision in their community. Its *intersectional approach* recognises that negotiations around FGC occur in a place shaped by the ongoing effects of colonialism, where concerns around gender are bound up with concerns about social status, ethnic marginalisation, and cultural survival. Finally, by *showcasing* change in the community, in Kenya, and globally, SAFE responds to Loita's sentiment of wanting to be part of a changing world rather than remaining in the margins. Attention to place (how Loita is shaped by the ongoing effects of colonialism) and space (how Maasai are often kept at the margins of decision making) was crucial for SAFE's success. Loita's case-study shows the importance of the role of place in negotiations around social norm change and, as such, responds to a paucity in intersectional studies that look at place in shaping intersectional relations.

The findings challenge the widely held belief that female circumcision is a static requisite of a certain locality. Rather, female circumcision is constantly contested and reimagined, in interaction with historical, local, national, and international influences. The study contributes to the literature that addresses FGC as a social norm by showing how social norm change is intertwined with identity, doubt, and hope within a space where gender, place, ethnicity, and culture interlock. Finally, Loita's example shows the transformative potential of approaches that empower people to have their own debates and make their own decisions about the future they want for their community.

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