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# FROM MEDICINE TO CRITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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## PAPER

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Paper Title: **Resistance to Change: FGM/C and gendered inequality in Senegal**

When reflecting on FGM/C we often take time in details about language and representations, terminologies or legal aspects, or even the “current state” of prevention and promotion of the abandonment of the practice in countries, regions or continents. We also often account on how the many approaches to it often bring us to paradoxical conclusions from where we can’t escape. The diversity of practices, and ways of practising, hidden under the acronym FGM/C, and their historicity embedded in different societies, elude clear definitions. The existing “definitions” often become political tools for a wide range of debates that are not exhausted by the “fight against FGM/C” or its «abandonment», but might include debates on «medicalization and modification», «gender violence and inequality», «social resistance and religious conservatism», and many others.

This paper is an approach to the gender question in a “national” context where FGM/C is embedded. What is presented here intends to widen the relevance of the contexts of practice of FGM/C to understand not only what practicing communities are doing, which would amount to a certain essentialization of these groups, but also how general gender and sexuality questions are dealt with in society at large.

I have divided this text into two main parts. The first one addresses wide questions of context stemming from my research, and stretching back to the beginning of my PhD. The second one tries to specifically address FGM/C as a question of «social change». This paper follows a previous communication presented in a Congress of the EASA Medical Anthropology (Lisbon July 2017), entitled ‘Bodies in Transition’ , where in the event description we could read that bodies are “transitional, mobile, itinerant and dynamic in character” and that they are embodied, rather than simply fixed entities.

This paper is also a part of an ongoing research on Sexual and Reproductive Human Rights (SRHR<sup>1</sup>) in West Africa. Why SRHR in West Africa?

First of all because being part of the discourse of Human Rights they are very specific ones. And then, because in general, there are many social dynamics in the countries in West Africa that cannot integrate the rights of individuals thought in this particular way, fact that opens a particular space for a critical perspective.

I'm not an advocate for relativism *per se*, nor for cultural rights. I'm after an explanation, to understand better the terms in which people stand, the negotiations they're

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<sup>1</sup> Because of a question of simplicity and repetition, from now on the text will refer to these rights through this acronym: SRHR.

forced into in their daily lives and how these are connected, or not, with dimensions defined in abstract by SRHR, that is: rights instead of norms, conventions and traditions. Or, put another way: politics instead of morals. It is common that the outcomes of daily negotiations don't follow an abstract definition of the individual, because the individual is a category of Western thought that is not conceptualized in the same way everywhere.

I would like to point to the definition of individual, person and human in *wolof*<sup>2</sup>, «*nit*». *Nit* is not only the one who is born and has a body. *Nit* is the one who has a social life and respects social norms, the one who has *kersa* (shame), *jom* (honour), *sago* (self-control, ponderation), *fayda* (dignity) and above all, the one who respects *sutura* (discretion) and is able to *muñ* (have patience). These values are not exclusive to *wolof* ethnic group, like Alassane Sylla would make us believe in his *La philosophie morale des wolof*<sup>3</sup>(see footnote), but these are actually highly respected values in most of societies in West Africa, and active principles of people's daily lives because they represent motivations for action. But as an example of the importance of these notions (with their local nuances) in contexts where the practice of FGM/C is held I can give the argumentation of Abdoulaye Doro Sow on the notion of «*gacce*» amidst the *Haalpulaar'en* in Mauritania and the idea that a person is a person because it has dignity (Sow, 2018). The stress on these notions, often simplified as mere questions of «honour» and «shame», points to the importance of social life, and public life, in western africa societies.

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2 Despite *wolof* being the language used mainly by people belonging to *wolof* ethnicity, in reality it is more a national language than a language of an ethnic group. The ethnicization of "languages" is a frequent trap we fall into when considering contexts because there is an assumption that each ethnic group speaks its own language. In the case of *wolof* there are not only academic proofs of its nationalization and institutionalization, but also of its linguistic flexibility to borrow from other languages, adapt and expand. See Smith (2010). "Le modèle culturel wolof, facteur d'unification nationale, est avant tout un modèle urbain, qui n'appartient pas en propre aux «Wolof»"(Smith, 2010: 73) but "La déclinaison linguistique de l'identité nationale demeure ainsi pluraliste: la langue de l'enseignement, de la presse écrite et de l'État officiel (francophonie), la langue de la nation quotidienne, de l'espace public, de la rue et des médias (*wolof*), la langue de l'attachement culturel aux terroirs et du patriotisme local (autres langues sénégalaises)" (Smith, 2010: 74)

3 "...pour le wolof la personne émerge et s'épanouit dans et par la position et la fonction sociale.(...) Le regard de l'Autre intervient comme un appel, comme une attente, avant l'acte à accomplir, et comme une approbation ou une condamnation, après l'acte. On n'échappe pas à ce regard dans une société aussi fortement intégrée que celles des wolof.(...) Celui que le wolof appelle nit au sens fort du terme, c'est celui qui fait preuve d'une certaine maturité, de lucidité et de détermination dans ses options. (...) La personne est doc conçue comme centre de décision, comme pensée lucide, volonté libre qui n'accède à sa pleine maturité que par son auto-soumission à une ideologie morale et spirituelle" (Sylla, 1980: 235-242). See also Sarr & Thiaw (2012).

Secondly, the study of SRHR must go beyond the definition of rights. I'm particularly interested in what they define and how. SRHR constitute a language in itself, but a language speaking to a wide range of practices related to how people live their sexuality, their marital and relational choices (or lack thereof) and concerned with their social relations and their bodies. A language that tries to bring all those dimensions to the political field, because they are often marked by all sorts of arbitrary violence and discrimination: bodily violence, physical and psychological; social and cultural violence; relational violence; structural violence, etc. SRHR, ultimately send us back to our own (euroatlantic) conceptions of freedom and autonomy. Through questions of body politics we can then contrast an academic-western-centered perspective with the logics of local constructions of sex and gender, trying to consider what Oyewumi Oyeronke in her *"The Invention of Women"* alerts us to, that we have an epistemologically narrow view of sex/gender focused on the body.

Thirdly, if all this is connected to the social construction of gender and the importance of individual choice, it is also connected to religious conservatism that assumes itself as an actor on the definition of social relations, and wider social struggles in contemporary west african societies, concerned with poverty, urbanisation, youth unemployment, and migration for example.

Previously to the study of SRHR, at one point, my initial research into social relations in West Africa was marked by the idea of a growing importance of information and communication technologies in social change. What I found is that sociocultural values adapt to technical innovations, finding new ways to express old inequalities, while losing the ability to express old inequalities exactly the same way. Changes in communication have also met with a reconfiguration of patriarchal power dynamics in Senegal, alongside with a crisis in masculinities, that manifests itself as a persecution of non-normative social values and practices. It is as if in certain circles SRHR could be seen as "illegitimate innovations"<sup>4</sup> in terms of social values.

To understand that, I'm particularly interested in the warnings made by african scholars of our common misunderstandings of sociocultural importance of the body and gender. There is a now widespread idea that "social categories are literally inscribed on and into the body, which, with prescriptions about bodily fluids, cosmetics, clothing, hair style,

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4 To adapt here an expression that is often used in muslim eschatology, that sorts out what is an accepted practice and tradition and what's not.

depilation, and ornamentation, acts as a signifier of local social and moral worlds" (Lock, 1994: 135). Body and gender have been erected as all encompassing principles of life in society (see Strathern, 2016). However, according to Oyewumi "... relative to Western societies, there is a stronger need for a broader contextualization in order to make sense of the world" (Oyewumi, 2005: 14) of the Yoruba, for whom for example, seniority is "the foundations of Yoruba social intercourse is relational and dynamic; unlike gender, it is not focused on the body." (idem). What is said of Yoruba can be widened, in Ghana Serena Dankwa speaks of «female masculinity», bending the rules of sex, body and gender, emphasizing mostly that social positionality is «situational» or «relational». In Senegal, these social principles (seniority and relationality<sup>5</sup>) are also active in the establishment of one's situational social position, always changing.

Furthermore, the body, its sexuality, its gender and its reproduction is not thought of in the realm of politics, and thus its regulation cannot legitimately be prescribed by the State. This is particularly important when it comes to FGM/C. If gender is socially constructed, so are individual rights. For us to understand where (not just how) to discuss certain subjects, we have to be aware where can certain approaches to certain subjects take place, and what type of social dynamics can follow. I'm thinking particularly of the «abandonment of FGM/C» and the way it has been defined both in theory and in practice, in West Africa, but also about the correlated subjects of «marriage», «sexuality», «pleasure», that belong not only to SRHR discourse but also to discourse of justification of FGM/C, making them categories for which there is a battle for representations, meaning that different actors claim the right to conceptualize and determine social relations, in spite of their competing and at times antagonistic fields. When it comes to the body, morals and politics don't always sanction plurality as a value.

But before trying to briefly discuss the question of «social change» I'd like to state that my research has shifted to gender questions during my long-term fieldwork in Senegal and would later develop into an analysis of the ambiguity of femininity, trapped between the attribution of an ideological central role to culture and cultural heritage, and a tangible social discrimination and negative social image.

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5 For example what is locally know as «*kal*» relationships, or joking relationships (*cousinage à plaisanterie* in French), but also in the wider spectrum of kinship.

In my PhD I have focused on how ICTs have come to disrupt the social construction of gender, tapping into everyday definitions of “regulated spaces”, like the house, the village, introducing small spaces of autonomy for individuals, particularly important for women (Falcão, 2016).

However, despite that positive outlook brought about new instruments for which younger generations are better equipped than their parents, also due to an important increase in schooling, a perspective exclusively focused on potential positive aspects of the appropriation of ICTs wouldn't do justice to the reconfiguration of social forces around “newer” liberties conceded to individuals. What the many contradictions in the appropriation of technologies have shown to me is that, in Senegal, both masculinities and femininities and gendered identities in general are being questioned in practice more than discursively, ICT's providing with new spaces of autonomy for new forms of relational experience.

To a certain extent, embodied change is already going on in Senegal concerning sexuality, new relational categories like love (*bëggel*) and pleasure (*baneex*) are today recognized as being important to sustain relationships. "In Senegal the salience of romantic love in marriage is evident in music, in the tabloid press, and in the passion many women have for Latin American telenovelas." (Kringelbach, 2016:159). A new demand for “companionship” and a failure to meet the expectations by Senegalese men might be at the heart of senegalese women's choice of “marrying out” (*genn xeet*<sup>6</sup>)” (cf. Kringelbach, 2016)

Despite new gendered demands for love, pleasure and companionship, discourse is probably at its most conservative, with numerous anti-western reactions focusing the new sociocultural dynamics as externalized and giving way to a generalized moral panic focusing on the bodily lives of women and youth. This discourse is widely shared through media, attesting not only to the power of socioreligious discourse on subjectivities but also to the strength of this discourse on the public sphere and in morality in general. Sexuality is conceptualized discursively inside the framework of marriage (see Eerdjwijk, 2009).

Gendered forms of power govern discourse in West Africa. Assitan Diallo, in a paper about the paradoxes of female sexuality in Mali, tells us that “there are currently more exceptions to the rule than compliance with the normative sexual abstinence before

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6 Literally *genn xeet* means, in wolof, to leave one's group of belonging.

marriage (...). Interestingly, the ascribed codes of conduct persist despite extreme changes in individual sexual behaviour". (Diallo, 2004: 174)".

The normalisation and control of social relations involves hierarchical conceptualizations of men over women (gendered) in marriage, adults over youth (seniority), marabouts over talibé (religious), and also those relations based on status and caste.

Despite the hierarchical principles of senegalese society, one other idea that I have gathered is that the female body is the object of an excess of scrutiny and is always at the heart of socialities. Social commentary is not the only space where the female body is scrutinized in order to normalize it. Academic and development discourses also have focused on women's bodies precisely through SRHR. Women are overly represented, but not always well represented, nor in every social dimension. As Michael Taussig would say, we are in face of representations under siege (Taussig, 1992: 10). Who is sieging the representations of women?

Some sixty years after independence we are today facing contradictory tendencies. If in practice certain youth seems ready to question norms the same can hardly be said of discourses. Youth has no "social legitimacy" to have a voice, and as much as this is a clear cut statement it is also a common enough experience. On the other hand, if in practice we see signs that social control is more a matter of rhetoric than a reality, we assist, paradoxically, to an increase in conservatism, actively promoted from within certain circles linked to religion.

It is for a me a curiosity that, and this point still needs historical confirmation, that a seemingly mounting conservatism in countries like Senegal is mirroring conservatism mounting all around the world, from USA to Phillipines, from Finland to Hungary, from France to Holland, Brazil and others. For certain authors, especially focusing in Africa, this speaks of a disenchantment with the project of modernity. Ferran Iniesta considers that

"La véritable cause majeure des actuelles nuances dans le discours progressiste et farouchement antitraditionnel il faut la chercher, de façon preferente, dans les successifs désastres de toutes les solutions modernes qu'on a appliqué, pendant quarante ans, dans l'Afrique postcoloniale. (...) On peut tenter, néanmoins, une autre lecture, complémentaire de la première: les conceptions traditionnelles



restent si puissantes, si populaires, qu'elles ont amené à la paralysie les stratégies modernisantes étatiques et internationales, et, cela faisant, ont laissé à un le tragique divorce entre la majorité sociale et la minorité occidentalisée." (Iniesta, 2002)

This disenchantment I don't mean it as a general interpretation of African societies which are plural, but as a gendered one. Male heteronormativity is behind the «reaction» to the definitions of SRHR as rights and behind religious conservatism.

This conservatism, can be considered through an adage frequently cited "*Bo xamul fo jem delul fanga jogge wone*" (If you don't know where you are going, go back to where you came from), which in this case often means a return to *Cosaan* (tradition), and an active resistance to new social forms seen as socially and culturally illegitimate, especially those where individual rights are concerned.

This first part serves a twofold purpose. On one side, it shifts the focus from FGM/C into societal questions of «social change», in a society where FGM/C is practiced. On the other side, it stresses how the reconfiguration of gendered relations is important to understand conflicting dynamics going back and forth and how these are in dialogue with the practice of FGM/C.

### **Social Change and FGM/C: campaigning for change.**

The question of Social Change is at the heart of the project of abandonment of the practice of FGM/C. I will not question this project but I hope to introduce some nuances. At the center of this project is the female body. First of all we should bear in mind the question of why have twenty years of campaigning been only marginally effective?

What does Change mean in this context? In a philosophical sense, change is about difference, in so much as sticking to the same is identity. When we talk about abandonment we are talking about absolute difference, not just marginal difference. We can account for many changes introduced ever since a focus has landed on the subject but not one that has conduced to this absolute difference, or abandonment. For there to be change in the realm

of the body, change has to be embodied, it's not enough to state or assert that change will happen sometime in the future or pledge to it.

As you might know FGM/C has been targeted for change since the nineties, as a 'harmful tradition'. Since 1999 it has been criminalized in Senegal.

When it comes to FGM/C, Change is frequently conceptualized as: social change; behavioural change; convention change or change in societal norms. All these have different formal implications because they are developed amidst different theoretical models, but I won't be exploring that here.

For these «changes» to occur the actors campaigning for the abandonment<sup>7</sup> of FGM/C use operational models. And when they don't use a linear model they use a Cyclical Model, where the same steps are repeated in an incremental way:

*Information → Awareness → Actors Engagement → Actions against a Practice → Change*

In both cyclical and linear models the «actors campaigning for abandonment of FGM/C» seek to coopt «actors in practicing communities», for example so-called "women champions" and other "stakeholders"; or other people holding relevant social capital like "men".

Some campaigns target these "mediators" and some others work straightforwardly with communities. Interesting models have been implemented everywhere. Its theoretical perfection contrasts with reality though. In theory, engagement of communities entails efforts and actions developed to end FGM/C. But can this work in a context where gender inequality is overarching, like in Senegal? These models and interventions obey to a rationale, as much as FGM/C also obeys a rationale where inequality is gendered and contingency plays a role. The biggest contingency to FGM/C is inequality, that is openly stated as natural, ontologically inscribed into society and religious discourse. But the rationale behind intervention and the claim for change is much wider than FGM/C and it also targets other practices and social perceptions of: FGM/C; Forced Marriage; Child Marriage; Polygamy; Levirate; Sororate; Homosexuality; Family Planning; and other 'cultural practices'.

Interventions of all sorts target the same populations through different angles, we can subsume in the expression Sexual and Reproductive Human Rights (rights with an historicity

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<sup>7</sup> I won't be addressing who those actors are in this text.

of its own). This list though, points to the fact that the claims for Change touch a widespread number of issues that have at their heart questions of “gender” and “sexuality”, and let’s also add there “family” and “violence”. If we step back from the focus on FGM/C and the communities that practice it, these elements constitute day to day life in the whole region, and most of them pose an economic, political and social challenge that has to be engaged as a whole. Interventions for «abandonment of FGM/C» don’t exist in a vacuum and are parallel to other interventions on other cultural practices. So, in general «interventions» aim at an absolute structural change. How is the cultural element resolved?

A rather schematic view of change as abandonment doesn’t contribute to ground new practices in society, and the complexity of social dynamics at play is often blurred. For example, Sarah O’Neill has shown with her work in Futa Toro that “non-governmental movement and the opposition to the law are both tied up with political and economic interests and motivations. (...) people joined the ‘abandonment movement’ or NGO sensitisation out of economic interests, without losing their personal convictions or beliefs about the benefits of excision. (O’Neill, 2011:143)

A different example is given by Maire Ni Mhórdha with her critical ethnography of TOSTAN, that shows us how “

“Tostan’s game theory-inspired pedagogy attempts to use ideas of scientific knowledge, rationality and personhood, manifested within the international human rights doctrine, as value-free tools for ‘social change,’ particularly in relation to FGC practices. In this discourse, people suffer as a result of their lack of correct knowledge, whilst scientific and human rights knowledge leads to their enlightenment. Rationality and social progress (in the liberal sense) are the philosophical underpinnings of the intervention, and the vision of change communicated is one based on a positivist, ‘rational actor’ approach to a reified and homogenised idea of ‘community ...” (Mhórdha, 2014: 84)

We could go on quoting examples of how complexity stays out of the «abandonment movement» or the «game-theory pedagogy», by addressing the questions of transborder dynamics, inter-ethnic relations, or history and politics in the areas where FGM/C is practiced, like the rebellion in the South since the 1970s, or a fatwa in favor of FGM/C in the north in the nineties, or today the rampant radicalisation in the Sahel region.

In the case of FGM/C change cannot be conceptualized simply as abandonment. Strategies can't be conceptualized simplistically as: modernization, compensation of the cutters, alternative initiation rites, medicalization or propaganda and prohibition, to follow a grid proposed by Gerry Mackie. Without considering the reception of the conceptualization of the «abandonment» we will not fully understand what is being perceived.

The focus cannot just be on the message but, especially in senegambian societies, it also has to be on the messenger. Because there many active resistances. Why and how is a question that should concern us. There is a widespread mistrust of discourses seen as originating from outside, as pointed out earlier in the beginning of this paper. This mistrust is not limited only to FGM/C but to the promotion of Sexual and Reproductive Rights. Despite the local promoters of new cultural approaches to these Rights, "gender" and "sexuality" are subjects that are discussed in the realm of morals, not of politics. To shift these subjects from morals to politics will take more than raising awareness or criminalization.

Resisting Change is, in a general sense, resisting an external power dictating a rearrangement of local society, and by saying this I'm not "analysing" but stating a certain "subjectivity" very easily found at all levels of society, from youth to elders.

This active Resistance is a part of daily life. Reinforcing gender inequality through gender violence can be seen by certain people as an act of Identity, of sticking to cultural values. An elder once told me that "they have ruined Senegal when they passed a law against gender based violence in 1999" because now patriarchs couldn't exert their "guiding" rule. This resistance creates a constitutive difficulty of addressing all issues concerning Sexual and Reproductive Human rights, because changing practices is changing status quo of groups of people, and changing one practice will not help attain the objective of betterment of people's lives, or only in a marginal way.

Also, the veil over questions of gender and sexuality obliges those wanting to counter hegemonic masculinity to use subversive moral economies, for example women becoming proxies of communication between men and their offspring; youth sexuality; *mbaraan* or multipartnership.

Interventions have thus also made use of proxies to try to be more inclusive. Proxy interventions and proxy languages have been, and are, employed to tackle social and cultural issues of gender inequality, gender violence or sexuality.

HIV is probably the most prominent example of ambiguity. If on the one side the fight against HIV infection has allowed for preventive strategies, these have targeted specific social groups. Christophe Broqua shows for example how the conservative association *Jamra & Mbañ Gacce* has used HIV campaigning to pass on a homophobic agenda, instrumentalizing external funding, ill prepared to understand how these local actors were working within the discourse of human rights with an agenda of its own. As we saw above, Sarah O’Neill also found links between campaigning against FGM/C and economic and political issues.

These «proxy interventions», or at least let me call them that way, are most of the times captured between «discretion» (*sutura*) and visibility (*léér*), by trying to aim at specific sensitive cultural issues these proxies are subject to sociopolitical appropriation of discourse and funds.

In Senegal, Religion and Nation are gendered. These are transversal to communities and ethnic groups, and characterize the post-colonial State.

A State that has criminalized FGM/C and ratified most of the Conventions and Treaties there are, but continues to produce coloniality<sup>8</sup> through its institutions and is thus seen as an illegitimate actor in dictating what cultural values and practices should be, despite of it trying for example, in 1972, to make “traditions” and “modernity” converge with non-secular Family Code.

To get a more converging view with this “post-colonial” State we have to use a generational perspective and also take into consideration access and use of media.

In fact, the management of issues such as FGM/C, Forced Marriage, Child Marriage, and other cultural practices is a mixmash between connivence with perpetrators and formal declarations on the part of the State to pursue the abandonment of such cultural practices.

One should question who are the State’s real interlocutors when state agents are conivent?

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8 «Producing coloniality» would be considering an extractive State that gives very little back; the arbitrariness of its institutions and its relations to people and corruption.

In theory, or in Law, Equality is a guiding principle of the country's Administration. But in practice, Equality is considered as a foreign concept.

Nationhood, that is, the sense of «senegaleseness», and religious culture, or muslimhood, continually reinforce gender difference and silence gender inequality and violence with discourses on gendered morality.

Gender Equality is therefore an abstraction contradicted by the tangible lives of bodies. These bodies, despite being today produced in new forms, especially in urban areas, and in media representations, are still captured by an imagination that reinstates morality as the guiding principle, instead of citizenship.

In such a scenario it seems to me that most of the fight against FGM/C and other cultural practices remains a foreign construction that despite having found openness in society to discuss the issue and mobilize around it, it has not engaged enough of people's lives to be successful in deroot and denaturalize the practice. Actors opposing a wider discourse on SRHR often play the identity card on a wide range of practices. Actors promoting the abandonment of FGM/C must be aware of sociopolitical manipulation and have a much deeper knowledge of how local societies think change for themselves. Otherwise, programmes risk becoming caricatures of themselves, fulfilling their objectives in a mechanical way, without truly engaging the people they are targetting and achieving the embodiment of the principles of defense of human rights they want to instill.

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