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**FLUID IDENTITIES: CONTEXTUALISING  
GENITAL RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGERY  
AFTER FEMALE CIRCUMCISION IN  
BURKINA FASO**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Social Anthropology**

**at  
Massey University,  
Auckland, New Zealand**

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**2016**

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## ABSTRACT

Female circumcision procedures were traditionally performed on many girls and women in Burkina Faso. These practices were outlawed in 1996, and are now termed ‘female genital mutilation’ by the government and activists trying to stop them. About thirty-five years ago, Pierre Foldès, a French urologist who was on a humanitarian mission to West Africa, developed a surgical procedure to alleviate health problems associated with these practices. He later refined his procedure and started using it to also restore clitoral anatomy and function. This surgery, which is presented as two distinct procedures in Burkina Faso, is now performed by some indigenous doctors in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso.

In this ethnographic study, I explore the reasons motivating some Burkinabe women to seek genital reconstructive surgery, the impact this surgery has on them and societal attitudes towards this surgery and these women. I discuss concepts of gender and embodiment in relation to Burkinabe girls’ and women’s health and sexuality by considering their understanding of what is normal, healthy, natural, complete, sexually attractive and feminine. I also consider the manner in which the meanings of these notions are changing depending on the prevailing discourse.

I argue that the salience of the discourse promoted by the Burkinabe government and activists working to end female circumcision in the urban areas of Burkina Faso is compounding the harm associated with this practice. It has led some circumcised women to view themselves, and to be viewed by others, as unhealthy and sexually defective, and to believe that they need genital reconstructive surgery. Yet, limited information about this surgery, its cost and taboos associated with sex and sexuality limit women’s access to the surgery. I further argue that that some Burkinabe women in the Raëlian Movement are co-opting the discourse that paints circumcised women as victims to create spaces where they can remodel typical Burkinabe values, but also exercise those which are particular to their religion. They have thus embraced genital reconstructive surgery to reconstruct not just their bodies, but also their identity as healthy and sensual women.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the result of a long, sometimes arduous, but highly gratifying journey. I have had the support of a number of exceptional people along the way.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to my parents, Timothy Nyarango and Prisca Moraa, who first realised that the world is currently ordered in a way that makes ‘Western education’ important. They sparked my interest in it, funded my early studies, and accepted and supported the decisions I made about doing a PhD. I thank them and my siblings, Ivy and Robert, and my niece, Arielle, for their prayers and financial and moral support.

I most sincerely thank Dr David Pratten and Dr H el ene Neveu-Kringelbach (University of Oxford) and Dr Edward Ontita (University of Nairobi) for facilitating my entry into doctoral research and the attainment of a scholarship to fund my study. I thank the New Zealand International Doctoral Research Scholarship Committee for funding the first 36 months of this research project. I gratefully acknowledge my supervisor, Prof Kathryn Rountree, for diligently guiding me through the research process, reading my thesis chapters in a timely manner and providing constructive feedback, particularly, in the first 36 months of this project. My heartfelt appreciation also goes to Dr Graeme MacRae for his support and the opportunities he provided to help me grow as a scholar even as I did this project. I equally thank Dr Jenny Lawn for guiding me through the examination process.

I gratefully acknowledge my research participants and all the other people who facilitated my stay in ‘the land of upright men’. They took me in and opened their hearts and minds to me. Without them, this piece of work would not have seen the light of day. If I do not acknowledge them by name here, it is just so that I can honour my word about keeping their identities confidential. I thank the Embassy of France in Wellington, New Zealand, for providing an easy entry into Burkina Faso. I also thank the members of the Massey University Ethics Committee (Northern) who approved this research project, provided many useful suggestions during the approval process and even followed up my progress beyond the fieldwork stage.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Johann van den Berg for very patiently working with me as I sought a safe and stable place from which to write my thesis. In many ways, he made the many pains of being an international student bearable and facilitated the completion

of this project. I equally thank Peter Powell for going out of his way to smooth the way so that I could get to the point of doing this research. My sincere thanks also go to Ken of Wellington and his noble colleagues in the United Kingdom and Ireland for their generosity of spirit and their insightful perspectives regarding life and living.

Writing this thesis, and indeed my stay in New Zealand, would have been extremely difficult without the support of my very dear friends in Kenya, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. I thank Dr Lilian Magonya, Lillian Njoki, Ariadne, Parisa and René for listening, caring, sharing, supporting and encouraging. In many different ways, they took care of me so that I could concentrate on writing my thesis. Thanks too to my friends and/or colleagues Peter L., Reuben, Eunsook, Vitri, Louisa, Pippa and Emma for support given in various forms which enabled me to have a productive candidature. I also thank the folk at St Andrew's First Church, Auckland, especially Rev Dr Murray Gow, Vishal and Abraham, and Barry for their openheartedness.

Indeed, there are many other people I have not mentioned here but whose support I greatly treasure and will always be grateful for. May God – in whatever form that takes for you – richly bless you all.

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