

# Beyond Circumspection: African, Jewish, and Muslim Autobiographies Around Circumcision

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► **To cite this version:**

Chantal Zabus. Beyond Circumspection: African, Jewish, and Muslim Autobiographies Around Circumcision. *Matatu. Journal for African Culture and Society*, Brill, 2008, 37 (1), pp.99-128. 10.1163/9789042030619\_005 . hal-02427858

**HAL Id: hal-02427858**

**<https://hal-univ-paris13.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02427858>**

Submitted on 8 Sep 2021

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CHANTAL ZABUS

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‘Beyond Circumspection’

African, Jewish, and Muslim  
Autobiographies Around Circumcision

ABSTRACT

After briefly examining the discursive asymmetry in writings about excision and circumcision, I discuss four moments in the literary history of autobiographies around male circumcision: the seventeenth-century “confessions” from *conversos* in Spain and Portugal; two Kenyan ethno-autobiographies from the 1960s, Mugo Gatheru’s *Child of Two Worlds* and Karari Njama’s *Mau Mau From Within*; Jacques Derrida’s *Circumfession* (1990); and French, Syrian-born Riad Sattouf’s comic strip *My Circumcision* (2004). While establishing links between African and Jewish circumcision, I show that, whether African, Jewish or Muslim, these autobiographies delineate a move *beyond circumspection*.

‘From now on, no point going around in circles.’<sup>1</sup>

THE TERM ‘CIRCUMSPECTION’ is appropriate to a discussion of male circumcision and female excision in two respects. In the case of excision, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, African women writers first mentioned the ritual procedure *en passant* in third-

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession: Fifty-nine periods and periphrases ... (January 1989–April 1990),” in *Jacques Derrida*, tr. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993): 56.

person narratives, as in the Nigerian Flora Nwapa's eponymous novel *Efuru* (1968), or in a tentative autobiographical mode as in the short stories of the Egyptian Alifa Rifaat.<sup>2</sup> But as far as male circumcision is concerned, the term "circumspection" was used for the first time by the American neonatologist Thomas E. Wiswell in a 1997 article on "Circumcision Circumspection," in which he argues for a degree of moderation in approaching the circumcision debate. Generally, he "recommended informed decision-making."<sup>3</sup> Wiswell's cautionary tale not only reflects the general unease with which any real or potential symmetry between the two practices – excision and circumcision – is envisaged but it also explains why there is a discursive asymmetry in the way writers and, especially, autobiographers have written about the operation from the intimate realm of the 'myself'. After briefly addressing this asymmetry, I outline a move *beyond circumspection* in a modest spate of African, Jewish, and Muslim autobiographies.

The excision debate has been alive in African literary discourse since the 1960s, and outside of it, there have been noteworthy attempts to grapple with the issue in non-African, third-person narratives, such as in the Lebanese-American Evelyne Accad's *L'Excisée* (1982) and the African-American novelist Alice Walker's controversial novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992).<sup>4</sup> But it is true that first-person accounts or autobiographies touching on excision gestated for a long time before disentangling themselves from third-person narratives by both men and women as well as from the early anthropological and psychoanalytic texts in which the discourse of excision was at first confined.<sup>5</sup>

As of the 1990s, the initial circumspection about the issue of excision was dispelled and excision became the very stuff of autobiographies by African women, who had experienced the phenomenon in one form or another, including infibulation.<sup>6</sup> Such is the case with the first-person

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<sup>2</sup> Chantal Zabus, *Between Rites and Rights: Excision in Women's Experiential Texts and Human Contexts* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2007): 85–96.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas E. Wiswell, "Circumcision Circumspection," *New England Journal of Medicine* 336 (1997): 1244–45.

<sup>4</sup> Chantal Zabus, "Bouches cousues: L'autobiographie de l'excisée," in *L'animal autobiographique: Autour de Jacques Derrida*, ed. Louise Mallet (Paris: Gallilée, 1999): 331–52.

<sup>5</sup> Chantal Zabus, "Writing Women's Rites: Excision in Experiential African Literature," *Women's Studies International Forum* 24.3–4 (2001): 335–45.

<sup>6</sup> See Chantal Zabus, "Acquiring Body: Waris Dirie, Infibulation, and New African Female Self-Writing," *Thamyris* 11 (2003): 61–76.

(Somali) accounts, with or without an amanuensis, of Aman (*Aman*, 1998), Waris Dirie (*Desert Flower*, 1998; *Desert Dawn*, 2002; *Desert Children*, 2005), Nura Abdi (*Larmes de sable*, 2005), and Fadumo Korn (*Born in the Big Rains*, 2006). In addition to these, *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* (1998) by the Togolese asylum-seeker in the USA, Fauziya Kassindja, enabled excision-oriented discourse's ritual entry into the politics of exile.<sup>7</sup> Senegalese Soninke Khady in *Mutilée* (2005) also constitutes a radical departure from early yet bold attempts on the francophone African scene such as the Guinean Kesso Barry's autobiography *Kesso, princesse peule* (1987), the Senegalese Aminata Maïga Ka's *La voie du salut* (1985), and Mariama Barry's *La petite peule* (2000).

This proliferation of self-writings around excision in the 1990s is due in part to the United Nations decade for women in 1975–85, which transformed the rite (in its de-ritualized and re-ritualized forms) into a human-rights violation. Apart from the ongoing controversy in the USA around routine neonatal circumcision practised currently on 60% of the American male population (formerly 90%), there has not been a similar humanitarian impetus nor the same discursive amplification around male circumcision as there has been around excision. The debate on male circumcision has now imposed itself on the excision debate. Significantly, the work of Sami Al-deeb Abu-Sahlieh sets out to establish legal, ethical, and ontological symmetries between the two practices, as he does in this volume, while duly acknowledging the obtrusive severity of some forms of excision such as infibulation.

Compared with the panoply of experiential writings around female excision, there is but a tiny corpus in the making with respect to male circumcision – arguably disproportionate, especially if we calculate, as Sami Al-deeb Abu-Sahlieh does in this volume and elsewhere, that excision concerns some 140 million women whereas male circumcision is practised on five continents by about a billion Muslims, three hundred million Christians, sixteen million Jews, and an indeterminate number of 'animists' and atheists. A kind of discursive asymmetry has thus set in, not only in first-person accounts but also in law, medicine, and cultural anthropology.

Indeed, the statistical and emotional import of women's first-person narratives or experiential texts – Aman, Kesso Barry, Waris Dirie, Khady, Fadumo Korn, Nura Abdi, excerpts from whose texts are made available to the reader at the end of this volume – remains unmatched by male accounts of the loss of the foreskin, even if some organizations encourage men to

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<sup>7</sup> See Zabus, *Between Rites and Rights*, 163–201 and 202–45.

mourn such a loss. Indeed, NORM, the National Organization for Restoring Men, encourages circumcised men to seek “methods of replacing the lost prepuce” to remedy the now commonly held belief that “the most sensually responsive part of their penis was surgically amputated when too young, helpless to consent, refuse or resist.”<sup>8</sup> This reconstructive surgery to remedy what is now called male genital mutilation (MGM) is part of what popular magazines like the *Wall Street Journal* and *Esquire* designated in the mid-1990s as phallogomania – a cult-like obsession with the male organ, as a result of men’s attempting to lengthen their penises with everything from surgical procedures to weight-and-pulley rigs.

Billy Ray Boyd’s book *Circumcision: What It Does* (1990), later revised as *Circumcision Exposed* (1998), inspired Tim Hammond to co-found NORM and then NOHARMM, the National Organization to Halt the Abuse and Routine Mutilation of Males, which describes itself as “a non-profit, direct action men’s network organized against circumcision of healthy male infants and children.”<sup>9</sup> Active in the San Francisco Bay Area during the late 1980s, TVS or “The Victims Speak” website was founded by Boyd and some friends as a group of “men, friends, and loved ones hurt by circumcision in various ways and degrees” who sought to bring their voice to the circumcision debate through creative, non-violent action.

Billy Ray Boyd’s TVS website, along with Dutch Michael Schaap’s documentary *Mother, Why Was I Circumcised?*, which was broadcast in the Netherlands in 2004,<sup>10</sup> contains many harrowing testimonials that project us beyond the original circumspection used in what Jacques Derrida called “circumfictions” in his *Circumfession* (1990). As the title indicates, Derrida was speaking *around* his circumcision, *circumventing* the issue, and, in the process, committing quite a few *circumlocutionary* acts, yet speaking in the first person about the procedure which he underwent when he was eight days old. Yet it is telling that Derrida’s account in *Circumfession* is one of the few male experiential texts so far that speak autobiographically about what he construes as a traumatic bodily experience. Another notable exception is *Ma circoncision* (2004) by the French cartoonist of Syrian origin, Riad Sattouff. Outside of autobiographies, a novella like Bernhard Schlink’s

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<sup>8</sup> See the fact sheet on [www.eskimo.com/~gburlin/mgm/facts.html](http://www.eskimo.com/~gburlin/mgm/facts.html)

<sup>9</sup> At [www.noharrrm.org](http://www.noharrrm.org)

<sup>10</sup> For a review of Michael Schaap’s documentary, see *NOCIRC Annual Newsletter* 20 (2006): 1. MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali subsequently put questions to the Minister of Health who, in 17 December 2004, excluded circumcision of boys from the Dutch National Health Insurance.

*The Circumcision* (2000) dwells on the psychic pain resulting from an uncircumcised German man undergoing circumcision for the love of the Jewish Sarah, who fails to notice any difference after his harrowing decision has been made flesh.<sup>11</sup>

There are, however, antecedents to Derrida's *circanalysis*,<sup>12</sup> itself inspired by the *Confessions* of St Augustine, who is, coincidentally, from Souk Ahras in Algeria. More generally, there is little autobiographical documentation of male circumcision. Before looking at Derrida's and Sattouff's texts, I shall examine two early instances from the seventeenth century and two Kikuyu autobiographies from Kenya in the 1960s.

#### The Conversos: The Early 'Confessions' of Cristóbal Méndez and Estevan de Ares de Fonseca

In the context of the thirteenth-century Christian 'reconquest' of Spain, Jews were forcibly converted to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition of 1478, instituted by the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella. For those male converts or *conversos* who were forced out of Spain, the first requirement for re-admission into the Jewish community was circumcision. In the seventeenth century, one such Spanish *converso*, Cristóbal Méndez, moved to Venice and accepted Judaism. Upon his unwise return to Spain to rescue some relatives, he was arrested and tried by the Inquisition, to whom he 'confessed' that, when pressed by a rabbi and an uncle, he had undergone the operation. Méndez recalled that the pain was "so great [...] that [he] was barely aware of the benedictions. [...] After a recovery period, [he] was called up to the open ark to recite the traditional blessing for deliverance from peril. [He] had become a Jew."<sup>13</sup>

The second instance of autobiographical voicing of the experience of circumcision concerns a Portuguese *converso*, Estevan de Ares de Fonseca, who was arrested by the Spanish Inquisition for 'judaizing' and, in his 1635 trial, "provided a detailed autobiographical confession that included a de-

<sup>11</sup> Bernhard Schlink, *La circumcison*, tr. from the German by Bernard Lortolary & Robert Simon (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> After the title of Chapter 7, "Circanalysis," by Geoffrey Bennington in *Interrupting Derrida* (Warwick Studies in European Philosophy; London & New York: Routledge, 2000): 93.

<sup>13</sup> J.H. Jerushalmi, *The Re-Education of Marranos in the Seventeenth Century*, 4–5, quoted in Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 2005): 79.

scription of his experience as a newcomer to Amsterdam” and how the Jews of the Dutch city, upon his refusal to be circumcised, “excommunicated [him] from the synagogues, so that no Jew would speak to or with [him].” After several days of ostracism, de Fonseca “finally consented to be circumcised. And they circumcised [him] and gave [him] the name of David.”<sup>14</sup>

Contemplating these seventeenth-century *conversos* or crypto-Jews, Leonard Glick in his seminal *Marked in Your Flesh* (2005) wonders about their motives:

Did most [Conversos] welcome [circumcision] as the time-honored badge of entry into Judaism and the Jewish community, or did they dread the agonizing experience, accepting it only because they had no choice. I suppose the truth lies somewhere in between. No man could have welcomed the prospect of painful genital surgery, but most agreed to it because the rewards were substantial.”<sup>15</sup>

At any rate, the alleged rewards were worth ‘a pound of flesh’ or less.

The link between these *conversos* and Africa may look rather tenuous at first, but another edict, that of the King of Portugal in 1486, ordered the deportation to the coast of Guinea, West Africa, of all Jews who refused to convert to Christianity. The Hebrew influence spread through North Africa and then as far as Sudan and Ethiopia. This does not, however, mean that, as Boris de Rachewiltz remarks, the origin of all African circumcisions is Hebraic, since circumcision on the African continent dates back to Pharaonic Egypt.<sup>16</sup>

One notes that for both *conversos* pressure, either from a relative or from a religious authority, elicits a *confession*, which gives a particular coercive dimension to autobiography. Although Miriam Bodian deems de Fonseca’s narrative “of doubtful reliability,” she does concede that it is a *testimony*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Leonard Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 80. Glick is here relying on David M. Gilitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews* (Philadelphia PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1996): 235, and Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997): 189.

<sup>15</sup> Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Boris de Rachewiltz, *Eros noir: Mœurs sexuelles de l’Afrique noire de la préhistoire à nos jours* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert/Terrain vague, 1993): 169.

<sup>17</sup> Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 297, note 74.

### Kikuyu Initiation: Two Ethno-Autobiographies

The pressure allegedly exercised by the rabbis is not unlike that of the Mau Mau fighters and other 'loyalists' during the 1952–56 Emergency in Kenya, who jeered at unexcised Kikuyu girls or *iruga* and caused them to endure a stigmatization that Charity Waciama documents in her *Daughter of Mumbi* (1969). Waciama recalls how "unclean" she was considered for not having "been to the river" to undergo *irua* and how she became the laughing-stock of both excised girls and their parents: "It was believed that a girl who was unexcised would cause the death of a circumcised husband."<sup>18</sup>

The ceremony of *irua*, a term which designates both excision for girls and circumcision for boys, has been amply documented by Jomo Kenyatta in his *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938). His account of the ceremony is ethnographic or, rather, ethno-autobiographical. The latter term, first introduced by James Olney, points to the autobiographer's wavering between ethnography and autobiography in the sense in which the 'I' of the *Mu-Kikuyu* is subservient to the 'we' of the plural *A-Kikuyu*.<sup>19</sup>

References to the male circumcision ritual in African fiction abound. For instance, Adele King mentions initiation in Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir*, "such as the Kondé Diara ceremony and the circumcision ceremony as traditional initiation into society set against the modern initiation of western schooling."<sup>20</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor in his famous "Élégie des circoncis" (1964) refers to the end of childhood and the twilight world of the dawn when the blood spurts into the river: "Sang! Les flots sont couleur d'aurore."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Charity Waciama, *Daughter of Mumbi* (Nairobi: East African Publishing Company, 1969): 61.

<sup>19</sup> In James Olney, *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1973): 84. Françoise Lionnet turned that phrase on its head and introduced 'autoethnography' in relation to Zora Neale Hurston's work; see Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca NY & London: Cornell UP, 1995): 248.

<sup>20</sup> Adele King, *Rereading Camara Laye* (Lincoln & London: U of Nebraska P, 2002): 50. The reference is to Laye's *L'enfant noir* (Paris: Plon, 1953), edited with notes in English by Joyce Hutchinson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966); tr. by James Kirkup as *The African Child* (London: Collins, 1955); also as *The Dark Child*, American edition, intro. Philippe Thoby-Marcelin (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1955).

<sup>21</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Élégie des circoncis," in Senghor, *Nocturnes, poèmes* (Paris: Seuil, 1964): 97.



Yet one has to wait until the 1960s to gain access to the more resolutely autobiographical vignettes in, for example, Mugo Gatheru's *Child of Two Worlds* (1964) and Karari Njama's *Mau Mau from Within: Autobiography and Analysis of Kenya's Peasant Revolt* (1966), even though Njama is a contributor to the very circumscribed history of Mau Mau, the nationalist movement which led to Kenya's independence in 1960. Significantly, both Gatheru and Njama were christianized before undergoing *irua*.

Being a Christian, the twelve-year-old Karari Njama asked some church elders to organize the feast in lieu of his deceased father. Unlike Christian children, who used to go to hospital for circumcision and therefore created doubts about whether the operation had truly been performed, Njama chooses to remove such doubts and, on 17 August 1944 at 6 a.m., "*decide[s]* to be circumcised in the public's presence."<sup>22</sup> His decision, however, is motivated by the desire to enlist his people's ocular recognition of himself as a fully grown man. He reminisces:

I went down to the Gura River and bathed in that cold, almost freezing, water. Hundreds of people, men, women and children, watched me being circumcised. As all other boys and girls had been circumcised a week before we closed the school, I was the only one remaining. With many cheers for my bravery, I returned home escorted by men and dancing women. Women danced wildly until midday. For a month I was to be fed with the best food available so that I could become strong. The last billy goat which my father left and which was fattened in my step-mother's hut was killed for me. The whole month was eat and play with other circumcised youths. I was very fat and strong when I returned to school.<sup>23</sup>

Njama focuses on the festive aspect of the ceremony and the obvious care that was lavished on him as a newly circumcised boy, but the actual operation passes without comment. Even Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *The River Between* (1965), who may be ventriloquizing his own experience of circumcision through the character Waiyaki, is more detailed when describing his "going to the river":

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<sup>22</sup> Donald Barnett & Karari Njama, *Mau Mau from Within: Autobiography and Analysis of Kenya's Peasant Revolt* (Letchworth & London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1966): 95.

<sup>23</sup> Barnett & Njama, *Mau Mau From Within*, 95.

[Waiyaki] was holding his penis with blood dripping on to his fingers, falling to the ground, while a white calico sheet covered him. ...a-a-a ...the numbness was wearing away ... the skin alive again... pain ... Waiyaki could not move, the pain was eating through him ... the pain again, biting like ants into his flesh ...<sup>24</sup>

Waiyaki's circumcision covers a range of sensations from the numbing of his muscles by the river's cold water, through the "thick sharp pain" resulting from the knife sawing through his prepuce, to his communion with the earth through this propitiatory 'blood sacrifice.' The difference between Ngũgĩ and Njama is that the former is writing a novel<sup>25</sup> whereas the latter aims to write an ethno-autobiography, in which the self is subsumed under the broader, communal-spirited Kikuyu society or *A-Kikuyu*.

Njama's reluctance to dwell on the actual operation may also have to do with the obtrusiveness of the tape-recorder, which the well-meaning Donald Barnett used in Nairobi to record Njama's life-history and which Njama later confessed was indeed inhibiting. He thus "preferred to write his story in longhand"<sup>26</sup> and unguardedly speak of the Mau Mau, of his role in the Movement, and the two years he had spent as a guerrilla leader. The experience of *irua* is for him thus a decisive yet tiny episode compared with what he claims to be recounting: i.e. the "peasant revolt" and "the history of the revolution ever since his release from detention camps in December 1958."<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to this Kenyattaesque ethno-autobiography, Mugo Gatheru in *Child of Two Worlds*, published two years before *Mau Mau From Within*, is more concerned with the private realm of the 'myself' in relation to his people, the Kikuyu. He is also eager to locate the *irua* ceremony in the broader context of puberty rites and, in so doing, he shows that it differs from the ancient Jewish rite: "The Kikuyu do not circumcise at birth as do the Jews. They do it at puberty as do many other tribal peoples throughout the world."<sup>28</sup> As remarked in the introduction – "Why Not the Earlobe?" – circumcision as a rite of passage performed at puberty seems to be quintessentially African, quite unlike Muslim circumcision, which dates back to *Jahilliya*, the so-called period of 'ignorance' which preceded the advent of

<sup>24</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *The River Between* (London, Ibadan & Nairobi: Heinemann, 1965): 53.

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed analysis of Ngũgĩ's novel, see my *Between Rites and Rights*, 35–58.

<sup>26</sup> Barnett & Njama, *Mau Mau From Within*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Mau Mau From Within*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Mugo Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds* (London, Ibadan & Nairobi: Heinemann, 1964): 56.

Islam, and does not involve any initiation rite. It is also very much unlike a religiously sanctioned practice, whereby a people seals a covenant with its god, as in the Jewish rite. Gatheru further notes that, in Kikuyu society, whereas boys undergo the ceremony “between fifteen and nineteen years of age,” girls are excised earlier “so that they do not menstruate before the circumcision” (57), thereby avoiding *thahu*, a type of ceremonial uncleanness that requires purification.

Accordingly, before proceeding further with his primary-school education, the sixteen-year-old Mugo heads for Fort Hall “to be initiated or circumcised,”<sup>29</sup> a necessary prelude to achieving full manhood. In the fourth of seventeen chapters, duly labelled “Becoming a Kikuyu,” Gatheru pays tribute to Jomo Kenyatta’s *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), as if acknowledging the spirit of an ancestor, then turns to his *decision* to undergo the ceremony. Yet, as is often the case (and this is also confirmed by the Paris-based Ivorian writer Koffi Kwahulé in this volume), a young man’s decision to be circumcised is predicated on the ‘harassment’ that he is subjected to by his peers:

Usually boys entering primary schools uncircumcised had a hard time with the men who were circumcised. They were harassed in the same way that ‘freshmen’ are in American colleges or new ‘fraternity brothers.’ Hence six of us in my neighbourhood decided to get circumcised.<sup>30</sup>

Of interest is Gatheru’s hindsight assessment of the ritual in American cultural terms, since he later became “an American ‘collegian’” in Daytona and Michigan before enrolling in a New York postgraduate programme in psychoanalysis, which ties him to his own Kikuyu beginnings as Mugo Gatheru, the son of a *Mugo* or medicine man. He conjures up American “fraternities and sororities” again in a later chapter<sup>31</sup> – “I Became a Member of the Age Grade ‘40’” – where he recounts how his being circumcised in 1940, which signals his belonging to the *riika ria forty* or the “age-grade of 1940,” allowed him to participate in exclusive meetings, for which other, younger men had to pay certain dues. Gatheru also compares the historical function of the age-grade system in recording events, when the Kikuyu had

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<sup>29</sup> Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds*, 56.

<sup>30</sup> *Child of Two Worlds*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> *Child of Two Worlds*, 63.

no written record, to “a network or web,”<sup>32</sup> in an inevitable process of cultural contamination.

However, at the time of the actual ceremony, the collectivity he evokes is not a global network but that of his peers:

Now my turn was coming. I was both happy and excited – and a little bit afraid. Five boys of my age were circumcised on Friday, August 16th 1940. Their homes were near Kahuti Elementary School. I was circumcised on Wednesday, August 21st 1940, near Karanja [his uncle]'s home. I remember the date very well. Our circumcision rituals were not complicated because being Christian boys we were not supposed to go through those very complicated processes to which the 'primitive' or 'un-Christian' boys were subjected. Although there was an established ceremony Christians were exempted and, therefore, could depart from it without being looked down upon by the non-Christian Kikuyu. [...]

Circumcision is a painful thing, but a candidate is not supposed to show any feeling of pain while his foreskin is being cut off. He is also not supposed to watch the circumciser. A crowd of men and women gather around the candidate or candidates. Women stand in front of the candidates, while the men stand at the back. People joke and say that the women take an interest in watching boys' penises! When boys and girls are being circumcised on the same field or spot, the boys usually line up on the upper side, while the girls line up in front of the boys.<sup>33</sup>

Although both girls and boys benefit from “helpers” or “aides,” which Gatheru compares to “best men or maidens in weddings,” the boys are expected to put up a show of bravery whereas the “girls must be supported by two aides since they are considered delicate and may perhaps collapse if they are left alone like boys.” At no point does Gatheru mention that the asymmetry that surfaces here may be due to the higher degree of severity in the girls' excision. It is assumed that girls are inherently weaker and more fragile than boys and therefore more likely to faint. Yet he also admits that his flesh is likewise “delicate.” Gatheru recalls that he spent a sleepless night before the day of circumcision, in a passage that I quote here at length for the brilliance of its self-sufficiency:

I lay there wondering how a circumcision's knife would feel upon my delicate flesh. One of Karanja's brothers was to be my aide. He went

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<sup>32</sup> Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds*, 63.

<sup>33</sup> *Child of Two Worlds*, 57.

out at 5 a.m. to get a circumciser named Macharia wa Muriu to come and circumcise me. At about 6 a.m. I saw my aide and Macharia coming across Kayahwe River. I felt like a soldier just before he is given his orders and is ready to go to the front to face the enemy.

After they had arrived at Karanja's home I was asked to go and wash myself in the Itare River on the western side of Karanja's home about half a mile away. It is usual for candidates to wash their bodies, and especially the penis, that there may be no offensive dirt thereon. It is also considered a bad thing if one should engage in sexual relations before the day of circumcision. So Muchaba, my aide, followed me to the river. Along with him were fifteen or twenty women and girls. I did not want to be followed by a large number of people like that who might later on see me naked! However, I could not help it. *I was very embarrassed.*

After I had washed myself Muchaba advised me not to wear anything again. So we walked to Karanja's home where I was to be circumcised. I was naked and followed by a large number of women who were happy – singing, dancing, and shrilling. *I felt even more embarrassed.*

These songs were consolation, advice, and encouragement to dispel any fear that I might have had. They told me that 'we of the Ethoga clan have never cried, do not cry, and shall never cry when we are initiated, or show any *sign of fear*. Those who may do so are only the children whose mothers were not wedded when they had them, but were wedded afterwards.

'Be firm, our Mugo, be firm and brave, so that you may encourage the young ones who will be circumcised after you. Be firm.'

As we approached Karanja's home, I saw Karanja with a crowd of people forming a circle and waiting for me.

The circumciser was in the crowd. As soon as I arrived I was told to go to the centre of the crowd. Muchaba, my aide, was very close beside me! My heart was pumping fast! I sat down in the centre of the crowd. *But now I was completely fearless.* Muchaba was about nine feet from me holding a white sheet which was to be put on me after circumcision. Beside me was Karanja holding a fried chicken and a kettle of chicken soup to be given to me after circumcision.

The crowd was very silent, waiting perhaps to detect whether I would show a sense or *feeling of fear*. I was aware of them and their expectations. After I had sat down, I folded my two fists like a boxer and put them on the right side of my neck. I then turned my face towards the Aderdare Mountain on the western side of the Kikuyu country. I was now ready for the knife!

In a few seconds I heard the circumciser approaching me from the right side. I was not supposed to look at him so I kept on looking on

the left side. He held my penis, pulled the foreskin back and cut it off. *It was very, very painful!* But I did not show any *feeling of fear* or even act as if I were being cut. No medical aid was applied first or later, and *this made it extremely painful.* (my emphases)

This autobiographical narrative is insistent about the “feeling of fear” (repeated three times in this passage) which Mugo has to shed, along with behaviour coded as infantile or feminine, such as crying. We also note the careful recording by degree of the experience – “I was very embarrassed,” “I felt even more embarrassed” – and the sudden turning-point – “but now I was completely fearless” – that signals the psychic passage, before circumcision *per se*, from boyhood to adulthood.

The Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru people of central Kenya prefer to leave “the ‘small skin’ hanging under [the] penis” hanging. Jomo Kenyatta in Chapter 8 of *Facing Mount Kenya* argues that *ngwati* is to be left intact on biological grounds. Gatheru’s uncle Karanja insists that *ngwati* be removed because this is in conformity with Christian practice. And so Gatheru is cut a second time, for, were it not for that “second cut,” he would have been identified as “a ‘primitive’ Kikuyu boy.” This *recircumcision* establishes that he is “a grown-up Christian Kikuyu, circumcised but without *ngwati*,” the dubious embodiment of syncretism. He concludes:

I was a man. Muchaba, my aide, came to me and put a sheet around me. I was now allowed to look down at the handiwork of the circumciser and see what had been done to me. Blood was streaming.<sup>34</sup>

*Looking down* signals the inexorable badge of passage. Likewise, among the Teda, the circumciser tells the initiate: “Boy, look up,” and, after cutting the prepuce, “Man, look down.”<sup>35</sup>

It is undeniable that Gatheru, more so than Njama, conveys an emotionality and subjectivity that make his Kenyattaesque ethno-autobiography gravitate towards the autoethnography, a genre that Charity Waciuma was to fully embrace half a decade later.

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<sup>34</sup> Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds*, 57–58.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Boris de Rachewiltz, *Eros noir*, 181.

### Jacques Derrida's *Circumfession*

An increasing number of scholars dealing with circumcision have themselves been involved somewhat autobiographically in their own circumcision or that of their sons and relatives. In an interview I carried out with Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh in Lausanne in 2002, he, as a Christian Palestinian, told me that he had heard the shrill screaming of an infant in the process of being circumcised at a neighbour's house in Palestine and this prompted him to enquire about the *raison d'être* of circumcision.

Leonard Glick also 'speaks from memory' in his preface to *Marked in Your Flesh* as a cultural anthropologist and a college professor with a medical degree but also as the father of circumcised sons. He recalls:

Our own three sons were circumcised [...] not ritually but in hospitals soon after birth. I accepted this without a second (or even a first) thought, assuming that it was not only medically advisable but appropriate for Jewish boys. Later, because their mother is not Jewish, all three underwent a ritual circumcision as part of a conversion. We took them to a Jewish urologist, who donned a skullcap, recited appropriate liturgy, and drew a few drops of blood from each juvenile foreskin remnant. Those sons are now mature men. Had I known at their births what I know now, they would never have been circumcised.<sup>36</sup>

Besides Glick's own autobiographical involvement in the *materia* of his scholarly monograph, he is also keen on determining other scholars' deeper motivation in tackling the vexed issue of circumcision. He provides detailed surveys of Rabbi Jacob Neusner's *The Enchantments of Judaism* (1987) and Rabbi Daniel Gordis's *Becoming a Jewish Parent* (1999). About the first, Glick argues that "this highly accomplished scholar seems to offer readers little more than acknowledgment of the profound anxiety he himself experienced when his own son was circumcised." About the second author, Glick argues that this rabbi, "who had attended innumerable circumcisions, finally realized (apparently for the first time) why parents are so 'conflicted' about submitting their newborn sons to genital surgery."<sup>37</sup> Not only is Leonard Glick hinting at the fact that these men's scholarship around circumcision functions as a cathartic device to express anxieties about the circumcision of their own sons but he also frames the issue against the background of father-son filiation.

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<sup>36</sup> Leonard Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, viii.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 237, 238.

For Jacques Derrida, however, the circumcision ceremony is linked with the mother-figure and, more broadly, with the feminine, more so than with the *mohel* (in Hebrew, the one who circumcises). In El Biar, Algeria, where Derrida was born in 1930, he reports that one did not use the Hebrew word *milah* from *berit milah* (the alliance through cutting, or Covenant of the Cut)<sup>38</sup> to refer to circumcision but rather 'baptism' (Fr: *baptême*) out of an "affadissement par peur," a euphemistic word used out of fear, but at the same time, a translation, since Christian baptism was an 'alternative rite' replacing circumcision.

Derrida also 'confesses' that he does not even know how to say 'circumcision' in any other language apart from French ("je ne sais pas comment dire 'circoncision' dans une langue autre que la française"). In the French adjective and past participle *circoncis*, he even reads the dotted "i" of *cir-con-cis* as the prepuce covering the tip of the glans of an intact penis. He also provides his own 'hauntology'<sup>39</sup> in acknowledging the fact that his philosophical œuvre is traversed and ontologically haunted by his own circumcision: "Circoncision; je n'ai jamais parlé que de ça: *Éperons, Glas, Carte Postale*: la chose y est nommée"; the very thing is named.<sup>40</sup>

In *Tourner les mots: Au bord d'un film*, the book co-authored by Derrida and the Egyptian poet and film-maker Safaa Fathy, on Fathy's film *D'Ailleurs Derrida* (2000), Fathy describes Derrida's ritual entry into film as "an initiation." And Derrida, a.k.a the Actor, sees the editing process as the act of "selecting ... excluding, circumscribing, one could almost say circumcising ... if one wished ... to sew back together this moment with all these other passages on circumcision and excision, at the core of the film."<sup>41</sup> In

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<sup>38</sup> *Berit milah* is the Covenant of the Cut, referring to the Covenant between God and Abraham in Genesis 17:1–14. The latter is often invoked to justify circumcision; it prescribes that "an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my Covenant." The second text is Leviticus 12:1–5, in which the Lord says to Moses that "on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." The Qur'an does not refer to either circumcision or excision.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, tr. Peggy Kamuf, intro. Bernd Magnus & Stephen Cullenberg (New York & London: Routledge, 1994): 4, 10. Originally as *Spec-tres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida & Geoffrey Bennington, *Circumfession*: 110. *Circumfession* (the reading by Jacques Derrida of his own diary) is also available on tape at the Audio-Visual Centre at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida & Safaa Fathy, *Tourner les mots*, 16. My tr. See also Safaa Fathy's "Cutting and Film Cutting/Ashes" in the present volume.



this volume, Safaa Fathy also relates her own experience of excision to film editing and ‘cutting’.

In his *Circonfession*, Derrida takes his own circumcision back to the Latin *circum-cido*: “péritomie, coupure du pourtour.” Being dis-membered, writing helps him re-member in the private, confessional act, which is simultaneously public. He goes so far as to state that “le désir de littérature est la circoncision.”<sup>42</sup> Desire for/in literature stems from circumcision, for it links ink with blood. Derrida usurps the traditional role of the *mohel* by dipping the blade-like pen in ink to make the book bleed.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, the well-known Egyptian novelist Nawal El Saadawi, who is also a medical doctor and one of the first women writers to draw public attention to excision, links the latter with the incisive act of writing-as-dissection.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Zipporah, Esther and Mezizah*

Besides usurping the role of the *mohel*, Derrida returns to Moses’s wife, Zipporah, the alleged first circumciser. The role of woman as first circumciser is also observed among sub-Saharan African groups like the N ماشي and the Pape. The N ماشي legend sees circumcision as resulting from a little boy’s awkwardness. The young son of a hairdresser was playing with a small stick one day and somehow tore the skin of his penis with it. In order to provide relief, his mother removed the skin that remained with the same small stick and cleaned the wound. Once her son was healed, she showed him to her husband, who then showed off his operated son to all the men of the village, who all wanted to initiate him in their turn.<sup>45</sup> Even though this relatively recent tale is said to make up for a lost ancestral tradition, it remains the case that it has undeniably Hebrew overtones, especially in relation to the story of Zipporah.

Deemed one of the most obscure and disquieting passages in the Torah, Zipporah’s gesture of circumcising one of her sons has been variously construed. Jon D. Levenson in *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (1993) considers it to be a redemptive sacrifice – but on her husband’s behalf, not the child’s.

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<sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Circonfession*, 110.

<sup>43</sup> See also Jill Robbins, “Circumcising Confession: Derrida, Autobiography, Judaism,” *Diacritics* 25.4 (Winter 1995): 20–38.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. Margot Badran & Miriam Cooke (London: Virago, 1999): 397.

<sup>45</sup> For further detail, see Boris de Rachewiltz, *Eros noir*, 181.

This mysterious episode [...] takes place when Moses, his wife Zipporah, and their young sons are journeying to Egypt. The lord had commanded Moses to return to Egypt for the confrontation with Pharaoh and the ensuing divine punishments on the Egyptians. Suddenly, inserted into the text without preamble or explanation, we find a circumcision narrative: "At a night encampment on the way, the lord encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs [read the Biblical euphemism for 'penis'] with it, saying, 'You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!' And when He let him alone, she added, 'A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision'."<sup>46</sup>

Zipporah allegedly touched Moses's feet (or genitals, *raglayim*) with their son's bloody foreskin to avert Yahweh's anger at her husband's reluctance to confront Pharaoh.<sup>47</sup>

Because Zipporah circumcised one of her sons in a redemptive but unexplained sacrifice, Derrida assimilates Zipporah to his own mother, whom he implicitly accuses of silent complicity with the *mohel's* action. Likewise, many of the African women autobiographers who have experienced excision from its most benign to its most severe form (i.e. infibulation), such as Waris Dirie, have often accused the mother of being an 'anti-mom', the very opposite of the caring, nurturing mother.<sup>48</sup>

Derrida designates his mother, Georgette Sultana Esther, as the culprit, despite her etymological antecedents, since the Jewish name – Esther – recalls the woman who used her influence with the Persian king Ahasuerus to save the Israelites in captivity from persecution. This shift from Zipporah to Derrida's mother via Esther also haunts all of Derrida's philosophical works, much as the German word *Mutter* haunted Kafka's writings.<sup>49</sup> When

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<sup>46</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 1993): 50. Levenson is here referring to Exodus 4:24–26 in *JPS Hebrew–English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1999): 120.

<sup>47</sup> In Bernard P. Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus IV," *Vetus Testamentum* 36.4 (1986): 447–61. Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 23.

<sup>48</sup> See my *Between Rites and Rights*, 163–202.

<sup>49</sup> Kafka had a similarly torturous relationship with his mother; he once wrote in his diary that the German language prevented him from loving his mother as he should have, for the Jewish mother is not a *Mutter*. In *La Carte Postale*, Derrida has Tancred wonder how one should love in French, the so-called *mother tongue*: "Comment veu-

pronounced in French—“est-ce taire ?”— as Hélène Cixous argues in her *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*<sup>50</sup> — the mother’s questioning name augurs what Derrida has called elsewhere “an amplified rhetoric of the sewn mouth”<sup>51</sup> and, in *Glas*, “the gaping-mouth effect.”<sup>52</sup>

In Period 14 of *Circumfession*, Derrida writes:

the restrained confession will not have been my fault but hers, as though the daughter of Zipporah had not only committed the crime of my circumcision but one more still, later, the first playing the kickoff, the original sin against me.

Cixous comments that Esther is thus Derrida’s *recircumcision*, here understood in its symbolic sense, unlike Njama’s “second cut.” “For his circumcision, he wasn’t around. For his *recircumcision*, she’s the one who’s not there, that’s what cuts it again for him.”<sup>53</sup> The second circumcision, we surmise, is the re-enactment of the initial procedure through the incisive act of writing. It is customary for Cixous to over-evaluate, here and in all of her writings, the role of the (often biological) mother as “the time of the origin of sexual life, and the time of the end: we all live because the mother inscribes the beginning and the end for us.”<sup>54</sup> But she is right in this case. It is as though Derrida’s mother were the father and the *mohel* in one, the one who authorized his circumcision: “Circumcised without his consent, before any word, before passivity even.”<sup>55</sup>

Unlike the beloved Esther, Derrida’s father, *Aimé*, which renders euphonically in French the Hebrew “Haim” (meaning ‘life’), is anything but

tu l’épouser? Et la faire chanter?” [How does one wed it? Or make it sing?]; Derrida, *La Carte Postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Flammarion/Aubier, 1980): 75.

<sup>50</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*, tr. Beverley Bie Brahic (*Portrait de Jacques Derrida en Jeune Saint Juif*; New York: Columbia UP, 2004): 52. This reading owes much to Derrida’s work on the ‘ear of the other’. See *L’oreille de l’autre: Otobiographies: Transferts, traductions; textes et débats avec Jacques Derrida*, ed. Claude Lévesque & Christie V. McDonald (Montreal: VLB, 1982).

<sup>51</sup> “une immense rhétorique de la bouche cousue,” in Micaëla Henich & Jacques Derrida, *Lignées*, 53.

<sup>52</sup> “l’effet de bouche bée,” in Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974): 55.

<sup>53</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida*, 38.

<sup>54</sup> Cixous, *Portrait*, 54.

<sup>55</sup> Cixous, *Portrait*, 65.

'loved' (Fr. *aimé*), and is put under erasure. This is significant insofar as circumcision is, as the anthropologist-rabbi Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has argued, a "symbol of patrilineality" and a "guarantee of abundantly fertile male lineages."<sup>56</sup> The purpose of circumcision being to symbolically release the male child from his mother's impure blood, Derrida practises a reverse circumcision and rehabilitates his mother's "filthy," "contaminating" blood.<sup>57</sup> In the process, the father-figure is erased or, better, ghosted. In "Otobiographies" (1985), Derrida wrote: "Inasmuch as I am and follow after my father, I am the dead man and I am death. Inasmuch as I am and follow after my mother, I am life that perseveres, I am the living and the living feminine."<sup>58</sup> Significantly, Derrida's *Circumfession* was written while his mother was dying.

His "wound" is not sutured yet, he argues in the same diary entry. He calls it in French *escarre*, which evokes the English *scar*, the German *schar*, and the Greek *eskhara*, which means 'foyer', 'false foci', as if the wound should not have been on his genitals but possibly elsewhere. He claims to remember his circumcision, his "open wound," when he was eight days old, and claims he has been flaunting it like a badge since "the *mohel*'s suction": "circumcision, cutting of the circumference; *meziza*, 'suction of the blood'," a practice that was abolished in Paris in 1843.<sup>59</sup>

In the Judaic context, the *mohel*, who technically replaces the father in his role as circumciser and is not necessarily a rabbi or a doctor, has been in the hot seat. Lawrence Hoffman in his *Blood Covenant* (1996) argues that the original Covenant between God and Abraham was the *berit damin* or 'Blood Covenant', which consisted in the symbolic shedding of a drop of blood from the prepuce. This practice was then discarded in favour of the *berit milah* through a rabbinical backlash based on, among others, Genesis 17:13 and Exodus 4:26 and dating back to 140 CE.<sup>60</sup> To these two practices

<sup>56</sup> Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "Why Not the Earlobe?" *Moment* (1992): np. Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 245.

<sup>57</sup> "His blood is clean, unifying and symbolic of God's covenant. His mother's is filthy, socially disruptive and contaminating"; Eilberg-Schwartz, "Why Not the Earlobe?" quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 245.

<sup>58</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name," in *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie V. McDonald (New York: Schocken, 1985): 14, 15.

<sup>59</sup> Jacques Derrida & Geoffrey Bennington, *Circumfession*, 115.

<sup>60</sup> Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1996): 100–104. See also Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *Circoncision masculine, circoncision féminine* (Paris: L'Harmattan,

rabbis added *mezizah* during the period of the Mishnah, between 70 and 200 CE.

*Mezizah* consisted not only in circumcising the prepuce but in the rabbi's taking a mouthful of wine, sucking the blood off the wounded glans, and then spitting it into a receptacle. *Halakha* or Judaic jurisprudence stipulates that the *mohel* should do so in order to avoid any risk of infection, but, following cases of children contracting venereal diseases through the *mohel*'s actions, a small tube was substituted for direct sucking with the mouth.<sup>61</sup> This halakhic innovation has, however, been distrusted by traditional *mohels* and, as Henri C. Romberg has amply demonstrated, *mezizah* has now been revived in some contexts.<sup>62</sup>

Abu-Sahlieh goes some way towards castigating the revival of *mezizah* by locating it in the broader Western context of sadism, vampirism, and, in the interview I conducted with him in Lausanne in 2002, paedophilia. Without delving unduly into the reasons behind this revival, what strikes us is that it is not only male circumcision *per se* that is being questioned but also the practitioner of circumcision and the economics underlying the rite. Likewise, in the case of excision, the original culprits such as 'tradition' and 'culture' have been displaced by the 'exciser'.<sup>63</sup>

If Derrida mentions *mezizah* with so much harrowing trepidation, it is not so much because of the "mohel's suction" that he had to endure at eight days old, but, as Gayatri Spivak has surmised, because of "the possibility that the mother sucked off the blood on the child's little penis."<sup>64</sup> This

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2001): 87–88, who refers to the *Talmud of the Land of Israel* (Shabbat 19:2), vol. 11: 458, and the *Talmud of Jerusalem*, vol. 8: 188. Genesis 17:13 refers to 'circumcision' in the singular in the Hebrew *hamol yemol yeled* and Exodus 4:26, which uses the plural form of 'circumcision' in *khatna damin li-molot*.

<sup>61</sup> See, among others, Alan Unterman, *Dictionary of Judaism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997): 202. For an analysis of the debate in Israel, see Avshalom Zoosmann–Diskin & Raphi Blustein, "Challenges to Circumcision in Israel: The Israeli Association against Genital Mutilation," in *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal, and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice*, ed. George C. Denniston, Frederick M. Hodges & Marilyn F. Milos (New York & London: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 1999): 344.

<sup>62</sup> See Henri C. Romberg, *Bris Milah*, 57–58.

<sup>63</sup> See my *Between Rites and Rights*, 246–64.

<sup>64</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and Circumfession," in *Postcolonialism and Autobiography: Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, Opal Palmer Adisa*, ed. Alfred Hornung & Ernstpeter Ruhe (Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1998): 13.

feminine version of *mezizah* binds Derrida, Zipporah, and his mother Esther together in a perverse *religio*, adding incest to injury.

### *Elie and Jackie*

Circumcision finds its discursive corollary in the receding of *milah* and its replacement by 'baptism' in the Derrida family in El Biar but also in the erasure of Derrida's middle name, which augurs other excisions. If his father's name Haim/Aimé is erased, so is Elie, which is Derrida's other name, after his paternal uncle, Eugène Eliahou Derrida, as he puts it in his *Circonfession* (entry for 23 December 1976). Elie is the 'guardian of circumcision', the one who 'carries the newly born on his knees before the unnameable'.<sup>65</sup> Unlike Elie, Derrida refused to be the guardian of circumcision and did not have his sons circumcised.<sup>66</sup>

If, like *milah*, Derrida's Hebrew name has been excised, Cixous argues in her *Portrait* that *élie* resurfaces in the elisions that are perceptible solely to the francophone reader in "dé-lire, oub-lire, et les commandements s'y référant: tu liras, tu délireras" – in the English translation: "You shall read [*liras*] languages right to the bone and you shall unread [*délireras*] them to the point of delirium."<sup>67</sup> In addition to this typical semantic dissemination, "Eliahou" also disappears from Derrida's birth certificate and from his *nom propre* or "proper family name."<sup>68</sup> However, it is on account of his being Jewish that he is banned from the Lycée Ben Aknoun (today's lycée Mouk-rani) at the age of twelve.

<sup>65</sup> In French: "[celui] qui porte le nouveau-né sur ses genoux avant l'innommable," *Circonfession*, 140.

<sup>66</sup> Personal communication with Jacques Derrida, Cerisy, France, 15 July 1997.

<sup>67</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida*, 13.

<sup>68</sup> On the "nom propre," see *Circonfession*: 100–10. Such is also the case with the disappearance of Edward Said's last name, where, during a colloquium held in Said's honour in Paris 7 in September 2004, his *nom propre* was pronounced Said (as in 'that is not what he would have said'), when in fact, Said renders the Arabic – *Sa'id* – which means 'happy' and where one could also possibly hear *Sayyid*: i.e. "Sir." Like "Elie" in Derrida, *Wadie* in Edward W. Said, which reveals Said's Arab (Palestinian and Egyptian) origins, is lost in translation. Yet the 'w' survives by way of the 'middle initial'. Since Said's Arabic name *Idwâr Sa'id* does not contain the letter 'w' unless one spells out "Wadie" as a middle name, the 'w' here acts as a trace from his exile in the USA. See my article, co-written with Marie-Dominique Garnier, "Derrida, De-Reader: L'anglais anglé," in *Travaux et Documents de l'Université de Paris 8*, ed. Claire Joubert (Paris: Presses de Vincennes–Saint Denis, 2007): 15–31.

In both Safaa Fathy's *Tourner les mots* and Hélène Cixous's *Portrait of Derrida*, the name Jackie, which, like Elie, has a feminine ending, is associated with a poster of Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan, starring in the 1921 Chaplin film, *The Kid*, which was hanging above the piano at the Derridas' on the then rue d'Aurelles de Paladines in El Biar. Whereas Safaa Fathy imagines that the young Mrs Derrida "may have adored the star to the point of naming her son after him,"<sup>69</sup> Cixous conjectures that Jackie is a "period name, the period when Algeria's Jewish families, naive, native, were infatuated with foreign names, especially the Anglo-American ones. They just loved Jack, William, Pete, and the vocables conjured up by fantasies of a promised land other than France, longed-for but increasingly openly hostile." Cixous continues in her customary echoic dissemination:

So he was elected Jackie, as my grandfather named his Oran hat shop Highlife pronounced 'Iglif,' Jackie like Jackie Koogan the Kid, Jackiderrida, that's him all right, take a gander not everyone sees him. Jackid in his outsize cap, always ready to pick a fight. Jackie like *j'acquis* get it? and *jacqui* get who? with *a* and *i* he notes in period 8 [of *Circumfession*].<sup>70</sup>

Between his Nostalgeria and his Jewerrance, between Jacques and Jackie, which reflect the two promised lands beyond El-Biar – France and the USA – Derrida resolutely becomes "the last of the Jews." *Circumfession* then reads like a "Jewish autobiography," as he himself acknowledged.<sup>71</sup>

Cixous calls the day of Derrida's "blind" circumcision the "Day of amputation" and "Day of judgment and execution" for the eight-year-old infant whose "sight is not yet hatched"; its executors are also blinded: i.e. "deprived of the scope of their action by millennia of obedience."<sup>72</sup> Swiftly, Cixous moves on to consider the fact that she did not experience circumcision in the flesh, concluding that she does not have the moral authority to talk about it but can nevertheless, "with all due *circumcisppection*, speak about it "from the sidelines as sister and daughter of sometimes-circumcised sometimes-not Jews ...." Yet she is aware that she has transgressed, and she finds herself

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<sup>69</sup> Jacques Derrida & Safaa Fathy, *Tourner les mots* (Paris: Galilée & ARTE, 2000): 39–40. My tr.

<sup>70</sup> Cixous, *Portrait*, 24.

<sup>71</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession*, 190.

<sup>72</sup> Cixous, *Portrait*, 68.

cut off, barred, stopped, tortured with questions, racked with indecision mine and that of my sons father brother, all of us who turn very diversely and each in turn to each his torments around this blow in the dark this most ancient of oft-told tales, this operation, this action, this catastrophe, this thing of the body which is of the mind, this incarnation of the capital Verb on the member of a small one, this mythical invention whose *tenacity* rivals with genetic transmission this violence, says my son, 'the supposed crime that I call circumcision' he says, the crime par excellence.<sup>73</sup>

The Sudanese feminist anthropologist Rogaia Abusharaf likewise speaks of the "terrible tenacity" of infibulation, especially after the British banned the practice in 1946 and drove it underground.<sup>74</sup> This *reactance*, as sociologists call this phenomenon, traverses all periods, all countries of the Sudanic belt; and, as I have shown elsewhere, only a counter-movement from within, with the collaboration of men and practitioners alike, can abate this "tenacity" and help eradicate the practice.<sup>75</sup> In Cixous's account, the "terrible tenacity" of circumcision is passed on from father to son in a violent yet unquestioned continuum of pain.

### Riad Sattouf's Anti-Circumcision Strip

Discursive asymmetry between excision and circumcision can also be observed in the realm of humour. Whereas there is even a genre that could be called "circumcision humour," there is no such humour attached to the issue of female excision. Indeed, one could not imagine a joke about the severed clitoris or the exciser, the way jokes circulate around the rabbi or *mohel*. For instance, "why does the rabbi have such a good income? Because he gets all the tips."<sup>76</sup> Glick observes that circumcision humour

almost always plays on the theme of cutting or 'clipping', and always focuses on the Jewish version. More noteworthy than the jokes themselves is the very existence of feeble humor about a supposedly sacred religious practice. An occasional joke depends on identifica-

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<sup>73</sup> Cixous, *Portrait*, 68, 69.

<sup>74</sup> Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, "Unmasking Tradition: A Sudanese Anthropologist Confronts Female Circumcision and Its Terrible Tenacity," *The Sciences* 38 (1998): 22–28.

<sup>75</sup> See my *Between Rites and Rights*, 246–64.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 271.



tion of the excised foreskin with the entire penis. [...] It seems that no amount of joking and banter obscures the simple fact that circumcision means cutting away part of the penis. Some jokes touch on the circumcision-equals-castration fantasy, implying that more than foreskin is removed.<sup>77</sup>

Recent medical and psychological assessments circulated on elaborate, authoritative websites confirm that more is indeed at stake.<sup>78</sup>

Along these lines, the cover of Riad Sattouf's comic-strip book for children from twelve years of age displays three boys peeing side by side, with their backs turned to the reader, holding sticks that are supposed to be symbolic extensions of their penises, the way swords used to be warriors' epic accomplices. While signalling the book's glib but caustic humour, it does not stifle the serious anti-circumcision message that Sattouf wants to convey to the French and to francophone youth. As a note to "the readers, circumcised or not," Sattouf writes:

- This book tells a true story, located in a country where the totalitarian regime programmes children into a single mode of thought.
- This book is frankly against circumcision;
- This book is not an incitement to racial hatred but, rather, a testimony to the way in which a society fabricates racial hatred.

To people interpreting this in any other way, we suggest they re-read the book and recall, if need be, that racism and antisemitism do not constitute an opinion but an offence.<sup>79</sup>

Born in a small village, Ter Maaleh, in Syria, the young Riad plays Conan the Barbarian with his cousins, Amin and Majid, and they swear by Crom, the God of the Cimmerians, Conan's tribe. While peeing side by side one day, Majid remarks that, unlike them, Riad has not turned the big wheel like

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<sup>77</sup> Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 271.

<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, the fact sheet on infant male circumcision at [www.eskimo/~gburlin/mgm/facts.html](http://www.eskimo/~gburlin/mgm/facts.html)

<sup>79</sup> Riad Sattouf, "Note aux lecteurs," in *Ma Circoncision* (Rosny-sous-Bois: Bréal Jeunesse, 2004). My tr. In French, it reads thus: "Ce livre raconte une histoire vraie, située dans un pays dont le régime totalitaire formate les enfants à un seul mode de pensée. – Ce livre est franchement contre la circoncision. – Ce livre n'est pas une incitation à la haine raciale mais plutôt un témoignage sur la façon dont une société fabrique la haine raciale. Aux personnes l'interprétant autrement, on suggérera de relire le livre et on rappellera, si besoin en est, que le racisme et l'antisémitisme ne constituent pas une opinion, mais un délit."

Conan the Barbarian, which is a euphemistic way of saying that he has not undergone the circumcision ritual. The cousins also note that Riad's penis is like an elephant's trunk, to which Riad retorts that theirs look like mushrooms. Accused of being an enemy (in Syrian Muslim parlance, an Israeli), Riad is excluded from this group of self-appointed "Cimmerians" and Conan-worshippers.

Sattouf probably has in mind the American pulp-fiction writer Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian*, which appeared in the 1930s and was adapted for the screen by John Milius in 1982. Patterned, by Howard's own account, after "prize fighters, gunmen, bootleggers, oil field bullies, gamblers and honest workmen,"<sup>80</sup> Conan is a Cimmerian child, whose parents were killed in a raid by the warlord and semi-god Thulsa Doom. The orphan is sent to a slave camp, where he is made to turn the big wheel. As the years pass, he develops into a powerfully built man (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Milius film), whom his master uses in fights, until one day he is set free. Conan then learns that Thulsa Doom, who initially aimed to solve the riddle of steel, is head of a mysterious snake-cult, because, in Doom's own words, "flesh is more precious than steel." Conan eventually kills the warlord and thus avenges his parents' death. The apt juxtaposition of steel and flesh provides Sattouf's youths with a powerful reasoning kit to comprehend circumcision, while "turning the big wheel" is presented as an inexorable rite of passage, necessary to achieve manhood.

In this children's book about a Muslim youth, who is an autobiographical projection of Sattouf himself, the child is confronted with scornful depictions of Israeli. Invariably, the latter have sardonic smiles and cruel eyes; they drink the sweat of their enemies and sleep with their mothers. On account of his blondness, Riad starts thinking that he is different from the average dark-haired Syrian and thus an Israeli. His fears are confirmed when, one day in class, the teacher presents France, and Europe generally, as allies of the "Jews" and the "Israelis." Riad concludes that he must be either adopted or an illegitimate child, half-Cimmerian, half-Israeli. This alleged illegitimacy does not surprise Riad's cousins, for whom women fall into two categories: their own mothers, whom they will marry some day; and the others, whom they call "whores" to designate "women who do what they want." Riad therefore reasons that, being a 'bastard', no Cimmerian woman will ever want him and that he is therefore destined to marry a prostitute.

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<sup>80</sup> Robert E. Howard, quoted in "Personal Quotes," Internet Movie Database (accessed 26 November 2006).

At school, corporal punishment prevails. The *'Atli* or thrashing consists in having the child's naked feet beaten by a wooden stick in public at the end of the school year. There are reports of child abuse at home; one child is burnt with scalding hot water. Scenes of public hangings for being thought "spies for the Israeli" are common. Corruption is also rampant – Riad's father, who is a professor of history at the University of Damascus, accepts bribes from students.

One day, Riad's father tells him of his decision to have him circumcised and to schedule the operation in three months' time. After many fearful deliberations, the boy agrees on condition that his father gives him a giant plastic puppet, which looks like his idol, Conan the Barbarian. It turns out that the gift which he thought his father had promised him in exchange for his circumcision, and had kept hidden in a closet, is a double-barrelled gun for his father's winter hunting trip.

As the day of circumcision approaches, Riad is haunted by the pending loss of his prepuce. Two hours before the ceremony, men fill the living room (women are excluded). He is then grabbed by four men, who immobilize his arms and legs. With a razor, the circumciser, who suddenly looks like Conan the Barbarian, cuts the prepuce. A spectacular squirt of blood spurts out, splattering the white handkerchief. Riad then stays in bed for several days with a bandaged penis. Urinating and getting an erection are excruciatingly painful. As the wound is still bleeding after a month, he goes to the village doctor, who determines that the operation has not been properly performed. Riad becomes introverted and regresses, playing with toys for smaller children. When, in an awkward conversation with his father, he brings up the long-awaited gift of the plastic action doll in exchange for his circumcision, his father dismisses him with an insult. The father's dismissal and betrayal further isolate Riad.

After two months, the bandage is removed by the village doctor, who jokingly mimics cutting his penis with a pair of scissors. Riad can now pee, but in three streams. He, who was convinced that the Israelis were not circumcised, learns that they are indeed; hence, a Cimmerian cannot be distinguished from the Israeli enemy. More significantly, he learns that, without consciously articulating it, both of these monotheistic, Abrahamic belief-systems – Judaism and Islam – practise male circumcision.

The book closes with Riad wondering where his prepuce is: "since that experience, one thing really gets me: I wonder where the hell is the bit they cut, the prepuce, and what has happened to it." Among the possibilities, we find that "it was eaten by a mouse!"; "The circumciser collects them"; "there's a secret cemetery of prepuces"; "It has disintegrated"; "it's waiting

under a rock.” This comic speculation confirms the humorous import of the book, at the same time as it reveals the deep anxieties resulting from a youth’s childhood trauma, such as prepubescent circumcision.

Syria, with its complex history – a centre of Islamic civilization from the seventh century onward, a province of the Ottoman empire in 1516, a country mandated to France in the First World War, then united with Egypt as the United Arab Republic until 1961 – practises Muslim circumcision, which is recommended (*mustahhab*) but not obligatory (*wajib*). In the context of Riad Sattouf’s Syrian childhood, it has become de-ritualized. There is no ceremony, religious or otherwise, Islam is not evoked (at least not in the child’s recollection of the event), and there is no celebration afterwards.

Riad Sattouf speaks from memory about an experience that is traumatic enough to warrant an autobiographical narrative, as in Derrida’s *Circumfession*. While emanating from two writers with, respectively, a Jewish and a Muslim background, both *circumfictions* are imbued with barely restrained anger about the practice itself and the person who authorized the operation – the father in Sattouf’s account, the mother in Derrida’s ‘confession.’



In all four examples – the *conversos*’ ‘Confessions,’ the Kikuyu ethno-autobiographies, Jacques Derrida’s *Circumfession*, and Riad Sattouf’s transmutation of autobiography into youth literature – we sense a growing detachment from religious and cultural justifications for the practice and the general *circumspection* with which the issue was originally (and is still) tackled.

These autobiographies still constitute a tiny literary corpus compared to the growing body of autobiographies around excision, which culminates in Waris Dirie’s *Desert Children* (2005), the Paris-based Senegalese Khady’s *Mutilée* (2005), and the German-based Somali Nura Abdi’s *Desert Tears* (2005) and Fadumo Korn’s *Born in the Big Rains* (2006). If, as I have shown elsewhere, such first-person accounts by women signal “the limits of autobiography,”<sup>81</sup> it seems that, in matters of male circumcision, whether African, Jewish, or Muslim, the tale still needs to be told and the discursive asymmetry redressed – like a rite gone wrong.

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<sup>81</sup> See my *Between Rites and Rights*, 202–45.

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