

Chapter 1

CIRCUMCISION AS A MEMEPLEX

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Abstract: The real reason or reasons for circumcision remain mysterious. Part of the explanation is that circumcision is a memeplex, a cluster of related and interconnecting cultural units that are transmitted by imitation (memes), as well as by language. This paper considers the interrelationship and transmission of the constituent memes of circumcision, especially that of male infants, in the context of sexual selection and altruism.

The term “meme” was coined by Richard Dawkins, who defined it as “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*.”¹ The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “an element of a culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means, esp. imitation.”² Susan Blackmore says it is “whatever it is that is passed on by imitation.”³ Memetics is the study of memes. Common examples of memes are “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.”⁴

Unlike genes, only human, and possibly some other primate, and electronic brains carry memes. Like genes, memes endure and copy themselves with variations, which are naturally selected, and thereby evolve. Like genes, they are “selfish,” or rather, their function is the promotion of their own survival.

...all that counts in the life of a meme is whether or not it survives and replicates. ... we must remember that [saying that memes ‘want,’ ‘need,’ or ‘try to do’ something] is only shorthand for saying that the ‘something’ will improve the chances of the meme’s being copied. Memes do not have conscious intentions; nor do they actually strive to do anything at all. They are simply (by definition) capable of being copied, and all their apparent striving and intentionality comes from this.⁵

A good analogy for a meme today is a computer virus. In fact, a computer virus, being merely information stored in, and transmitted between, information processing systems, is more like a meme than it is like a biological virus, which is a self-contained physical entity that actually moves between organisms, carrying genetic information with it.

Richard Dawkins, in his preface to Blackmore's book, writes:

As with genes, we track memes through populations by their phenotypes [ways of being physically expressed]. ...the phenotypes of genes are normally parts of living bodies. Meme phenotypes seldom are.

But it can happen. ...[A] Martian geneticist, visiting [my] school during the morning cold bath ritual, would have unhesitatingly diagnosed an 'obvious' genetic polymorphism. About 50 percent of the boys were circumcised and 50 percent were not. ...It is, of course, not a genetic but a memetic polymorphism. But the Martian's mistake is completely understandable; the morphological discontinuity is of exactly the kind that one normally expects to find produced by genes.

[T]hrough most of history circumcision has been longitudinally transmitted as a badge of religion (of parents' religion I hasten to point out, for the unfortunate child is normally too young to *know* his own religious mind). Where circumcision is religiously or traditionally based (the barbaric custom of female circumcision always is), the transmission will follow a longitudinal pattern of heredity, very similar to the pattern for true genetic transmission, and often persisting for many generations. Our Martian geneticist would have to work quite hard to discover that no genes are involved in the genesis of the roundhead [circumcised] phenotype.⁶

Dawkins errs in saying only *female* genital mutilation is "barbaric" or that it is always religiously or traditionally based: in Egypt, FGM is defended on medical as well as traditional grounds.

Dawkins says that a meme survives and spreads if it has "longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity."⁷

Longevity: the individual circumcision lasts a lifetime (*pace* foreskin restoration), and the custom, as its proponents are wont to remind us, has persisted for thousands of years.

Copying-fidelity: within remarkably broad parameters, all circumcisions are visually alike, constrained by the parameters of penile anatomy.

Fecundity: the age, circumstances, and especially reasons given for circumcision, are subject to evolutionary change, and this paper focuses on these factors.

A memplex is a cluster of related memes. Dawkins called it a “co-adapted meme-complex,” but the name of the meme has evolved. Examples of memplexes are religions, clusters of customs such as Christmas celebrations, and languages. Defining the boundary between a meme and a memplex is a problem, but circumcision defined minimally as cutting the foreskin off the penis is clearly a meme, while the full context giving rise to circumcision is clearly a memplex.

In the context of those memes, such as sexual taboos that promote having more children to whom the taboos are taught, thus causing the memes to proliferate, Blackmore writes:

Given that young men have a strong desire for sex, dissuading them from masturbation is likely to increase the amount of vaginal sex they will have, thereby increasing the number of the offspring to whom they can pass on the taboo. (Lynch, 1966),⁸ Lynch suggests a similar explanation for the success of the circumcision meme, because circumcision makes masturbation more difficult, but not vaginal sex.⁹

However, there is no evidence that circumcision significantly increases the birthrate, and many men claim their circumcision does not make masturbation more difficult, but the belief that it did was sufficient to establish circumcision in the United Kingdom and then the United States, late in the nineteenth century, and once established, it sustained and sustains itself by associated memes that had and have nothing to do with masturbation or sex. In fact, for most of the twentieth century, any role of the foreskin in sex has been ignored or denied in circumcising cultures.¹⁰

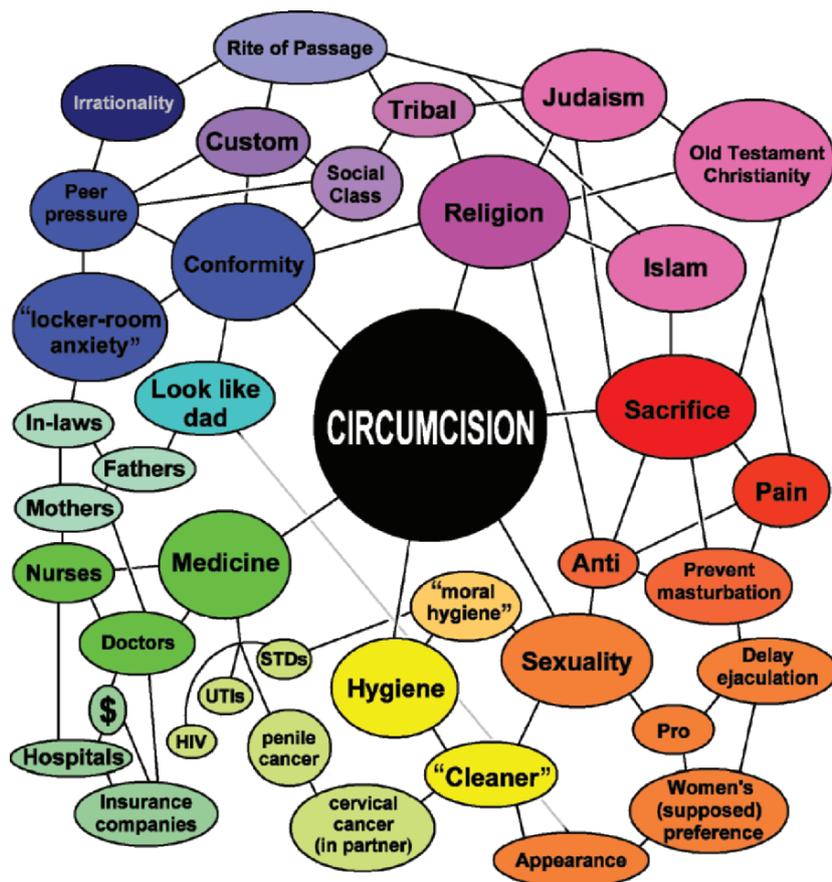
Immerman hypothesizes that circumcision “reorganizes the male’s sensory somatocortex to raise the threshold of sexual excitability/distraction” making young men “slightly more tractable” and “slightly more restrained sexually and more cooperative in the pair bond.”¹¹ These are debatable as evolutionary/biological goals for young men, and societies in which these are deemed desirable do not necessarily claim them as purposes for circumcision.

Helsten says “All societies have found the arguments that best fit their local cultural traditions and environments in order to introduce or maintain genital mutilation in its various forms.”¹²

While Dawkins and Blackmore consider circumcision a meme, the central idea of cutting part of a baby’s or child’s penis off is always embedded in culture, tradition, religion, and/or medicine. That is why it is so dangerous to draw any conclusions from correlations between circumcision and any of the other accoutrements of a society, such as the incidence of

some disease. There are always other factors to consider. While hundreds of distinct reasons for circumcision have been offered,¹³ they fall into a few broad classes.

Here are some of the main ideas around circumcision:



1. THE CIRCUMCISION MEMEPLEX

Things are actually more complicated than that. Ideas from one side of the diagram are frequently entangled with those from the other. For example,

Masturbation is an individual act, and suppressing it helps maintain conformity.

The role of the father and perhaps the doctor is entangled with that of Old Testament patriarchs.

US women who prefer circumcised penises do so because custom has made that the only kind they encounter.

Women's supposed preference for the appearance of a circumcised penis connects with the father's wish that the son look like him.

In spite of such cross-connections, ritual circumcision and routine infant circumcision, i.e., without medical indication, might almost be considered different memes that happen to share the same phenotype:

Muslim ritual circumcision, done in infancy or childhood, is associated with ideas of ritual cleanliness, conformity, and as a rite of passage to manhood, as well as the belief that it is required by Islam. Customs vary across the huge Islamic world, but it is usually associated with celebration, feasting, and treating the boy as "Prince for a day," all parts of the Muslim memplex that cement it into that culture. We have one report that Muslim circumcision is surgically much milder than western "medical" circumcision,¹⁴ and this could explain how it can be done to boys old enough to speak.

Jewish ritual circumcision takes place at a social occasion for adults where the emphasis is on food. It is common for a meal, celebrating a symbolic act to take center stage and eventually replace the act. Much later, its subjects are explicitly taught about its significance (the meme is transmitted very deliberately) although that significance itself is a whole complex of ideas, some unrelated:

To keep a bargain Abraham made with God

As a badge of Jewish identity

To make him look different from outsiders

To remind him of anti-Semitic persecution

To bond him with his community

To educate him in his parent's faith

"... because Jewish men should be able to feel the pain of others more easily."

To symbolize humanity's unique essence as more than animal

To offer our children to a higher spiritual life

To ensure a share for him in the world to come

To draw down the Divine light, bring down the soul of holiness into the body, reveal the Jew's inherent connection to God

To signify the union of body and spirit

Because “[t]his paring away of the superfluous skin allows for Shechinah energy (the ‘essence’ of the Universal Deity) to permeate the seed of Israel.”¹⁵

Because the foreskin concentrates negative energy

To “spiritually remov[e] and eliminat[e] undesirable character traits...depressive tendencies and so on...”

[To] eliminate from the body of the child, forces which might try to cultivate overindulgence in physical pleasures, etc.”

For “its positive effects on the generations to come.”

These might be summarized as “Identity,” although it is generally agreed that circumcision is not what makes a boy Jewish, and supposed spiritual benefits, and the good feeling that some Jewish men have, of continuity with their age-old tradition through being circumcised, cannot be gainsaid. Yet ritual cleanliness is the invisible guest at the feast. Jewish defenders of circumcision frequently cite cleanliness and express horror at the supposed uncleanness of the foreskin, as in this novel, set in sixteenth-century Portugal:

Opening the draw string of his pants, he allowed the filth of his uncircumcised penis to unsheathe into the air.¹⁶

2. ROUTINE INFANT CIRCUMCISION IN THE USA PERPETUATED BY STEALTH

Circumcision is usually done out of the parents' sight, and at one time they were not even told it was to be done. Two parents might agree to circumcise their son for reasons that have nothing in common, might even be contradictory, and never share their reasons.

Its victims are discouraged from discussing it or even thinking about it. This silence has a component that is peculiar to circumcision and in part arises from the taboo on sex. Thus the transmission of the meme is often done indirectly, through euphemism (“a little snip”) and with a kind of desperate jocularity (“I’m just taking him away for his circ.”).

The ostensible reasons are:

medical, hygiene, and cleanliness

supposed psychological benefits of looking like the father, coupled with tradition or custom

sexual, coupled with women’s supposed preference

fear of difference, projected into the child’s future locker-room experiences

Each of these is a cluster of ostensible reasons, sometimes contradictory, for example, to both increase *and* decrease penile size or sensitivity.

The memes of Jewish circumcision and routine infant circumcision in the US are like the two members of a double star orbiting each other, influencing each other while keeping their distance. The interaction can be seen in many TV sitcoms,¹⁷ where the circumcision being discussed is ostensibly Jewish, but stripped of any religious connotations, and many of the other “reasons” are adduced. An unknown number of US Jewish babies are reportedly circumcised in hospital before the eighth day, nullifying any covenantal value, but satisfying other memes of the memeplex.

The most effective memes are simple and couple the meme with something universally agreed to be good:

God said we must circumcise

All the nicest people are circumcised

Circumcision is American

Circumcised penises are cleaner

Circumcision protects against AIDS (or cancer, or whatever is the most feared disease of the day)

These associations make them hard to argue. Meme theorists call these associated ideas “baits” (promises to reward the host) and “hooks” (the part of a meme that urges replication).¹⁸

Two important memes — both are of the form “circumcise for the sake of someone else” — are complementary, but not exactly so:

3. “A BOY SHOULD LOOK LIKE HIS FATHER” AND “WOMEN PREFER CIRCUMCISED MEN”

“A boy should look like his father” seems to be spread mainly by *women*. In Western society, it sounds like popular wisdom and it can be spread without mentioning circumcision directly. It purports to be about the son’s feelings, coupled with “locker-room anxiety,” but it is really about the father’s feelings: it is very rare for a boy to wish or ask to be circumcised to look like his father.

At a deeper level, it links to the more general “looking like his father” that assures the father that his wife’s son is indeed his child. For that reason, it may be that the meme “a boy should look like his father” has a basis in biology:

Species that survive do so because they behave in ways that promote the survival of their own genes.

Individuals promote the survival of their own offspring and, in the wild, have no interest in the offspring of unrelated others or even a negative interest, as where a conquering alpha male lion kills the offspring of his predecessor.

Appearance is one of the ways individuals recognize their own offspring.

A male may be less likely to bond with his son if the appearance of his son’s genitals is markedly different from his own. This fails to explain how he bonds with his daughters, but that may have a quite different mechanism, since the bond is different.

The boy’s mother may fear that the father will not bond if their appearance is not similar and collude with making them match.

The question arises, how could circumcision get established if intact fathers risked failing to bond to their circumcised sons? The answer is that, in both the mythical origins of the religious rite, and probably its actual origins, and the historical origins of the surgical rite, such as Kellogg,¹⁹ circumcision of boys out of infancy was customary for a generation or more before that of infants was, so intact fathers had intact sons, who grew up, were circumcised, and became the circumcised fathers of sons they then had circumcised. So there was no time when many intact fathers had circumcised sons.

How, then, did circumcision come to an end in Britain and New Zealand²⁰ without demur from the circumcised fathers of intact sons? A partial answer is that fathers and mothers were not consulted but were

presented with a *fait accompli*, if doing nothing can be called a *fait*. The meme was never given the opportunity to be invoked.

This meme of “looking like his father” is related to circumcision as a *condition of, and rite of passage to, manhood*, the general pattern of tribal, as distinct from medical or religious, circumcision. A boy not only should look like his father, but actually must be made to look like his father, in order to become equal to him. It is notable that the three groups of cultures where this is the pattern, in Africa, Australia, and Polynesia, all separate boys from not only their mothers but also their biological fathers for the rite, and deliberately bond them with their peers instead, under the tutelage of the adult males collectively. On the Polynesian island of Tikopia,²¹ the boy is cut by the most skilled man available, supported by his maternal uncle.

The complimentary meme, “Women prefer circumcised men” seems to be spread mainly by *men*. After all, women don’t need to be told what women prefer.

It may be that in circumcising cultures women *will* prefer circumcised men, following the principle of “runaway sexual selection:” females prefer some characteristic, such as long tail feathers in males, even though or even because it puts the males at a disadvantage. If a female tries to buck the trend and mate with a male with short tail feathers, her short-tailed male offspring are less preferred by the next generation and her preference dies out.

In the same way, it makes genetic sense for women to prefer the kind of penis they think most women prefer. This has been demonstrated many times for characteristics indicating health, fertility, and the ability to provide for young. It may be the underlying reason for the expressed preference of US women for circumcised men.

The Williamsons’ study of women in Iowa shows that the meme is widely believed by women where the great majority of men are circumcised even by the women who have no basis for comparison.²² Women who do themselves prefer circumcised penises are of course more likely to believe and transmit the meme, while the others are silent, giving the impression that all do.

The meme “Women prefer circumcised penises” is likely to spread among men wherever a majority of men are circumcised, whether there is any truth to it or not because it comforts men to think they are of a preferred type.

This meme is extremely strong where circumcision is tribal, and hence universal within the tribe, taking the extreme form “No woman will look at a[n intact] man.” Women in bars in Samoa and *fa’afafine* transsexuals, more or less, are said to check European men out manually before agreeing to go with them.²³

When women hear the meme, they are likely to assume that men are speaking from experience, not just wishful thinking. If they are smart, they will not hurt circumcised men's vanity by telling them that they have no preference or actually prefer intact penises. So men's belief in the meme is reinforced and not challenged.

These two complementary memes mean that circumcision becomes a marker of conformity having nothing to do with hygiene, sexuality, religion or anything else, only itself. A circumcised penis proves that you have orthodox, "normal" parents.

There is no corresponding meme "Women prefer intact penises" in communities where most penises are intact, not because women don't prefer them there, but because, where intactness is already the norm, it is spread genetically, not memetically. Intact penises don't need memes to continue, only genes. Circumcision always needs memes. Intactness does need memes to supplant circumcision, to move into areas where circumcision is the norm, and genital integrity activism may be considered a memplex.

4. THE MEMETICS OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

The meme "A girl should look like her mother," corresponding to the one for boys above, is not greatly recorded in cultures that practice FGM, if at all.

"The motivation for the practice varies from setting to setting and reflects beliefs and cultural mores that include religious, health, and social factors. For example, FGM is believed to maintain cleanliness, increase a girl's chances of marriage, protect her virginity, discourage "female promiscuity," improve fertility, prevent stillbirth."²⁴

This is probably because questions of maternity seldom arise. The very similar idea, "I want her to look like me," has been heard,²⁵ but the difference is that it does not pretend to be altruistic.

The complementary meme, "Men prefer circumcised women," is very strong in cultures that practice FGM. In fact, it takes the extreme form "She *must* be circumcised or *no* man will want to marry her." This is probably spread more by women, since the marriage of their daughters and continuation of their genes, including the extra-nuclear, mitochondrial gene line, is of vital importance to them.

Men collaborate, not by preferring circumcised girls as such, although in a tribal society, her genital status will not be a secret, but by refusing to take a woman who has been rejected by all other men, since in most other circumstances, this is a marker that she is somehow genetically unfit.

FGM is also spread by the meme “FGM makes a woman faithful” and, to the extent that it makes intercourse difficult or impossible without defibulation or opening and makes it unpleasant then, it has some truth. The biological function of that is, as always, that it reassures a husband that it is his genes he is investing energy in, when his partner gives birth.

5. INTERSEXUALITY

When a child is born intersexed, their parents and their deliverers are thrown into a panic because the idea “Humans are male or female” is immensely strong, so strong that it seldom needs to be expressed in so many words, but is built into many of our languages through grammatical gender, being intimately associated with our genes. A meme for preferring intersexuality would have no future. What is striking is that the surgical action that is taken in response to that panic has little or no bearing on the child’s genes, or their reproductive future, but is concerned almost entirely with the appearance of their genitals. Regardless of biological facts, the ultimate test for humans of another person’s sex is the appearance of their genitals, and the meme “A child should look like its parents” kicks in for both parents.

6. THE ALTRUISM MEME

Blackmore illustrates that altruism is a powerful way of spreading memes. Hence, many memes spread by linking themselves to altruism.

People are nice to each other to get kindness in return, and their emotions are designed appropriately. ...Kind and generous behaviors will spread by imitation, ...behaviors that *look* like kind and generous ones, or are prevalent in kind and generous people, will also be spread by imitation.

...if you are in a community that uses reciprocal altruism, you are likely to gain most by being with people who are known to be generous. So the generous people will have more contact with others and therefore more opportunities for spreading their memes.²⁶

Memes that have nothing to do with altruism can benefit from “copy-the-altruist” by just tagging along for free. ...we can expect memes to have devised strategies for getting into altruistic people without actually being altruism memes themselves (or more accurately, memes that happen to have such strategies should have survived better than those without, and we should be able to observe them around us). Are there such examples? Yes. They range from

little groups of co-memes to very complicated memplexes. ...the essence of any memplex is that the memes inside it can replicate better as part of the group than they can on their own.²⁷

Circumcision is an excellent example of such a memplex, the cluster of ostensible reasons for doing it is hydra-headed and ever-changing. The silly ones are carried on with it, as well as those with any validity at all.

The ostensible reasons for infant circumcision always have an altruistic component. Even the reason “to punish him for masturbation” was only prevalent when that was believed to be for his ultimate betterment, including the salvation of his immortal soul.

Blackmore cites Allison²⁸ on “beneficent norms” applied to religion:

If you see someone else who acts the same way as you do, it is likely that you both have cultural ancestors in common. If you now help him, you make it more likely that he will be successful, and hence that he will pass on his memes, including the rule ‘Be good to those who act like you.’ Allison calls this a ‘marker scheme.’ He gives the examples of wearing a turban or abstaining from certain foods. ...He adds that markers that are costly or difficult to learn can deter exploitation by outsiders. Apart from languages, a good example is religious rituals. Many of these require years to learn and others, such as ritual circumcision, are certainly costly for an adult.²⁹

7. SO COSTLY THAT RITUAL CIRCUMCISION OF CONSENTING ADULTS IS VERY RARE AND EVEN SOME BRANCHES OF JUDAISM ALLOW CONVERTS TO FORGO IT

Unlike those beneficent norms, religious, ritual, and “medical” circumcision and FGM are forced on infants and children by adults who have already undergone it themselves. The ones who perform it are not those who suffer now. Their culture or religion has taught them that it is “inevitable” and “necessary” and “beneficial” so that they are able to suppress their natural revulsion, and even wallow in their own empathy with the child’s pain. They have usually forgotten their own pain and may take comfort that their sons will too. If they remember the pain, they may consider that it, too, is valuable, as Nelson Mandela does.³⁰ So by a variety of dodges, the circumcision meme can pass itself off as altruistic. Or rather, people infected with it can.

8. THE SPANNER IN THE WORKS

Meanwhile, the irrational aspect to the circumcision memplex adds a complication. Circumcising a baby is “doing something” at a particular time and place, so it has a definiteness about it that leaving the baby alone does not. In fact, US mothers who leave their babies intact are frequently accused of neglect.

Circumcision leaves a vivid mark of having been done. It does not usually do sufficient harm at any one time to be genetically or socially contraindicated, unlike, say, castration. There is some suggestion that ritual circumcision may have been introduced in Egypt as a substitute for ritual castration of a priestly caste rather than the whole male population, obviously. The good that circumcision supposedly does is set in the unforeseeable future. In this, circumcision is like those religion memes that promise infinite and eternal rewards or punishments after death. Since the evils it is supposed to prevent are rare, it is allowed to take credit by default for their absence. In this, it is something like a lucky charm or wearing garlic to ward off vampires.

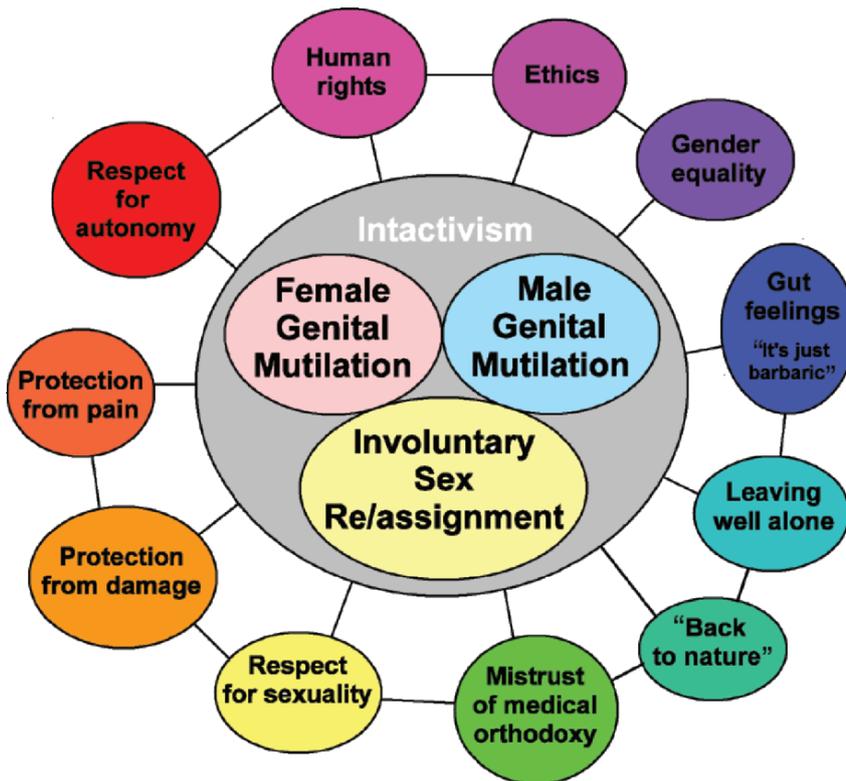
Like genes, memes evolve to maximize their transmission. Secular circumcision quickly evolved from being a childhood treatment for masturbation to an infant prophylaxis for it, largely because newborns can put up less resistance. Jewish circumcision probably moved in the same direction in ancient times. Muslim, Korean, Philippine, and tribal circumcision have yet to do so, though there are some trends in that direction, concurrent with the medicalization of the ritual. When masturbation hysteria waned, circumcision, or rather, people’s wish to circumcise — for that is the heart of the circumcision memplex — attached and reattached itself to the successive diseases it was alleged to prevent. The concept of a meme or memplex is particularly productive with regard to genital mutilation because the idea of genital mutilation has a life of its own that is independent of individual rationality.

This paper will not go into circumcision for the sexual gratification of the circumciser, because its extent and role is unknown and unstudied, but it certainly exists.³¹

9. INTACTNESS, THEN, IS ALSO A MEME?

An intact penis or female genitalia is not itself a meme nor a memephenotype because it is not a behavior, and it is transmitted by genes, not by imitation. In the context of a strongly circumcising culture, it may require unusual determination to break the hold of the circumcision meme, but, for the most part, leaving a baby alone needs no reason.

However, the campaign for genital integrity, which only exists in the context of genitally mutilating cultures, may usefully be considered a meme or memeplex. Here are some of the ideas linked to it:



10. THE INTACTIVISM MEMEPLEX

Opposition to the three varieties of genital modification has been amalgamated here because most of the associated factors relate to all three in greater or lesser degree. I put the "gender equality" meme near to male circumcision, but there is a special relationship between feminism and opposition to FGM — women's outrage that this can be done to women. We might speak of "gender solidarity." There seems little or no equivalent men's outrage, based on gender solidarity, that this can be done to fellow men. It seems to be overwhelmed by a macho denial of pain imposed on tiny babies.

The genital integrity activism memplex is clearly much simpler than the circumcision memplex. The different elements also reinforce each other in ways that the parts of the circumcision memplex do not. These are two of the strengths by which the genital integrity activism memplex may ultimately prevail. Genital integrity activism is an easy idea to transmit, and once transmitted, it is not easily lost.

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 - ¹⁴ Amber Craig wrote: “Baba Jallow [came to] speak ... about his new book *Dying for My Daughter*. ... he remembered his circumcision [in Gambia]... he and a bunch of pre-adolescent boys were “taken to the bush” and a slit was made in the frenulum.” “Baba understood [circumcision] to be cutting the frenulum and could not understand our concerns. Now he does.” — Marilyn Milos.
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