

## Chapter 5

# PSYCHOLINGUISTIC APPROACHES TO RITUAL LABIA MINORA ELONGATION AMONG THE BAGANDA WOMEN OF UGANDA

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**Abstract:** Ritual elongation of the labia minora is a unique enlarging modification of the external genitalia exercised for cultural reasons (FGM type 4 - WHO 1996). The practice is common among the Baganda women of Uganda, where a variety of terms are used to describe the rite. Psycholinguistic analysis was conducted both in present day Africa, where elongation of the labia minora results from ritual manipulation, and through the bibliographical accounts of western authors (anthropologists and doctors) from the 1950s and 1960s. A semantic polarization results in the linguistic expressions. In Africa, the positive connotation of terms used to describe the rite indicates its substantial valorization. The vocabulary used by Western authors, however, includes reference to aspects of rural Europe suggestive of poverty and ignorance (“apron”), or symbolic ridicule of the manipulated feature, equating it to the ear of a Cocker Spaniel.

## 1. PREFACE

As language is an instrument that is fundamental to the life of a community, it is an element impossible to ignore when considering daily exchanges. Especially for adults, all features of social life are expressed through language: ceremonies, prayer, oaths; and, through oral tradition, retellings of past events that allow the memory of a community to be

preserved (Cardona, 1976). In recent years, anthropologists fascinated by this condition have shown increasing interest in developing a deeper understanding of non-European languages that, for the enrichment that they provide, are considered carriers of implications and values connected to a conceptualization different from our own; thus creating the field of ethnolinguistics.

In traditional African society, the elderly were the keepers of knowledge given the task of transmitting essential morality through oral tradition. Among the populations of Uganda, this was conveyed by considerable use of proverbs, sayings, maxims, riddles, epic poems, and fables. The expertise of an elder was not limited to telling, but rather shown in knowledge about how to apply such proverbs to different situations, offering suggestions rather than solutions, and leaving it up to the listener to find an answer.

Education of children in village life also took place through words and colloquial expression rich with allusions, plays on words, and double meanings. The content results are complex and comprehensive, and the language is well described as poetic (Cisternino, 1987).

As for ritual elongation of the labia minora (WHO female genital mutilation type 4, 1996), a rite by which the body of an adolescent girl is prepared for marriage, the *ssenga* was the traditional person trusted with the upbringing and sexual education of her niece until marriage. This role was carried out, most especially, through words and practical demonstration (Grassivaro Gallo & Villa, 2004).

## 2. PSYCHOLINGUISTICS OF ETHNIC FEMALE GENITAL MODIFICATION (EFGM)

According to Cardona (1976), the topography of the human body serves as a model on which a variety of linguistic realities are projected. In several known examples (Friedrich, 1969), every word denoting a body part, in addition to its function in mapping the body, has a secondary meaning regarding the genital area. In contraposition to these two possibilities, indicating the strictly physical body, stands reference to the external world (the house, trees, etc.), distinguished from the former, and expansive into the psychosocial sphere. It is not to be said that such an expansion is universal, however, where present, this proves useful in revealing important features of human behavior that transpire from terms used and their attributed significance (Taha Baasher, 1982). Considering this, the psycholinguistics of ethnic female genital modification is of great interest.

Among the African diaspora, for example, female immigrants from the zones of Africa where excision is practiced are deeply offended by Western

use of the term “mutilation” to indicate interventions on the external genitals. Therefore, we suggest the adoption of the neutral term “ethnic female genital modification” (Puccioni, 1909; Fusaschi, 2003), which is more acceptable to all.

Another relevant psycholinguistic consideration noted in the past (Taha Baasher, 1892; De Rachelwitz, 1963) is reconfirmed through an analysis of the elongation of the labia minora in Uganda. The vocabulary used to indicate all expressions inherent to modifications of the genitals, anatomical terms, and the associated customs and behaviors, when not completely absent, is extremely limited in populations that excise the genitals (“reducers”) (Fusaschi, 2003). Contrarily, populations practicing modifications that increase the size of the genitals (“expansors”) have a considerable vocabulary at their disposition that is rich with differentiated linguistic structures for the discussion of sexual topics (Kashamura, 1973).

For instance, in the Sudan, the terms used to indicate infibulation are limited to three nouns: *khitàn*, meaning “circumcision;” *khifàd* (from the Arabic word *khafad*), “to reduce;” and *taòur* (from the Arabic *tahaar*), “to purify.” These are always followed by the adjective *fàraòni* (pharonic) (Toubia, 1999; Rizzo, 2001-2002).

In Somalia, the most general term used to indicate female circumcision is *gùdnìn*. The two possibilities are *sunna gùdnìn* (attenuated circumcision), and *cadi gùdnìn* “the normal,” to designate” infibulation.”

Among “reductor” populations, there is an apparent absence of a term for masturbation. This is the case in Somali (Omar Abdulkadir, personal communication, 2003), in Eritrea (M. Cosentino, personal communication, 2003), and in Egypt, where the idea is conveyed through a euphemistic expression constructed from the Arabic words for “habit” and “secret;” *el ada el serreya* (Romagnoli, 2003).

In Somalia, neither the concept nor the word “virginity,” meaning “integrity of the hymen,” exist. Infibulation instead serves to create the desired physical condition (Mohamed Somalia, circumcision operator in Mogadishu, personal communication, 2004). In the Sudan, the expression “breaking virginity” refers to the first marital intercourse with infibulated women (Hamid Al-Bashir Ibrahim, 1997).

The situation is reversed in “expansor” populations. According to Kashamura (1973), “... in all of the Great Lakes region (of Africa), where the vulva is artificially elongated ... a significant vocabulary, rich with metaphors used in discussion of sexual issues is available. For example, there are about ten different ways to indicate the female sexual organs.”

### 3. PSYCHOLINGUISTICS OF LABIA MINORA ELONGATION AMONG THE BAGANDA OF UGANDA

It is important to note that all interviews about genital elongation were conducted in the local language, *Luganda*, even though our subjects (school girls, teachers, and wise women who execute the genital manipulations) generally spoke English.

References to the practice are common in women's conversation, as it is held to be fundamental. The subject, however, is not discussed between mother and daughter, as it is considered taboo (Wele, 1993; Francheschini, unpublished data).

Genital manipulation is indicated by a variety of terms. The most common, *okukyàlira ensiko* (visiting the bush), refers to the clearing where, safe from view, the first intervention will take place at the hands of the *ssenga* (paternal aunt), or occasionally the *jaja* (a grandmother figure, who in the extended African family assumes a more important role than her Western counterpart).

A more common expression is quite graphic: *okusika enfuli* literally means "pull the vulva." The elongated labia minora are called *mfuli* (the same term in Swahili is used by Luba and Nkundo women of the Congo, by the Hottentots of South Africa, and by the Swahili of Tanzania and Kenya (De Rachewiltz, 1963). Gisu women of Uganda also use the term *mfuli* to indicate the manipulated labia minora, which assume "the morphology of a turkey's crest" (De Rachewiltz, 1963).

The elongate labia are also called *abalòngo* (twins) because the two must assume equal length for symmetry, and because their creation is believed to favor the birth of twins. Such an event, always of great auspice in a multiparous culture, is especially esteemed among the Baganda, where it is retained that a couple having produced twins is blessed with particular capacity to influence the growth of bananas, a local food staple. During the initiation of twins, the parents are encouraged to engage in sexual intercourse (Kisekka, 1973), which is enhanced by the practice of labial elongation (*okusikina*), as it increases the reciprocal pleasure of both partners (Sengendo and Sekatawa, 1999).

A celebration that is both sacred and profane follows the birth of twins. The father, using his penis, knocks a banana flower out of the hands (or the vagina) of the mother, who lies on her back in the grass. The couple then dance in their friends' orchards to insure an abundant harvest (Fraser, 1922; De Rachelwiltz, 1963).

The enlarged labia are also called "doors" (a recent Anglo-Saxon expression); the significance of which was described by a Baganda wise

woman, “building a house would not be possible without doors to let you in,” and by another, “...passing through the door, you are obliged to respect the house in which you enter.” A Ugandan proverb says “*bulugadde batya (oluggi)*” (how could they make such a narrow door? We can’t get anything through (Walsen, 1982). A girl who undergoes the rite will no longer be an *omugaso* or *kyangaala* “something completely open or unadorned” as though she had a hole; she will also be spared from disparaging expressions, such as *kiwompogoma*, *kiwowongole*, *kifufunkuli*, *funkuli muwompogoma*. If she does not undergo the rite, she will remain forever *odiba* (literally, “not ready”), being a girl who must remain unmarried. On the other hand, “after having pulled, one grows rapidly, and the boys begin to arrive.” “During intercourse, a man will ask the woman if he can touch her labia minora. After having received permission, he will softly pinch, assuring that his partner feels no pain during these acts” (Sengendo and Sekatawa, 1999). “This pull is not bad because it helps a mother when she must give birth, in fact, it enlarges the path for the baby.”

A true Baganda woman with enlarged labia will become “more receptive and hot.” This is a sign of respect and welcoming for her future husband, as it “helps to pleasure while one plays at sex.” “Sex, in fact, is considered a game, and “playing sex” is the expression most used to indicate coitus (Forster and Furley, 1989).

The plants used by the *ssenga* in the first intervention are also denoted through highly symbolic names: *namirembe* (literally, “bringer of peace”), being auspicious for conjugal peace and stability; *kabbo ka bakyala* (literally, “women’s cup or basket”); *mukasa*, name of the divinity of Lake Victoria. At the birth of a son or of twins, she is always thanked for bounty and abundance. In the past, a girl who did not want to undergo the rite would be thrown into the same lake.

Finally, it is interesting to examine the word used to denote the handkerchief that the *ssenga* uses to dry her hands after the first manipulation of her niece. In Lugandan, it is called *nkumbi* (garden “hoe”). The symbolic significance is clear, as the hoe serves to till the earth in preparation for an eventual harvest, the rite of labia minora elongation prepares the girl’s body for matrimonial fertility.

In Western literature, however, we find that English anthropologists and geographers have used the term “apron” to describe the elongated labia minora of Hottentot women (Stow, 1905; Scapera, 1939); French anthropologists have called it a *tablier* (Le Vaillant, 1790), and Italian academics have called it a *grebiule* (Rugiu, 1931). These related terms refer to the morphology of the altered parts, which reach as far down as the middle of the thigh, but these terms also refer to an article of clothing characteristic of rural Europe.

The observed morphology assumed either the appearance of a “folded butterfly” wing in the tribes of South-West Africa: in the Naron and Auen of Kalahari, or, less expansive at the attachment and more so in the exterior margin, of a “turkey wattle” in the Bushmen of the Province of the Cape and of Botswana (Drury and Drennan, 1926; Dart, 1937; Baker, 1974).

In a book on gynecology, we have found a unique expression for the elongated labia minora that describes them as “spaniel ear *nymphae*” (Jeffcoate, 1967). We have also found terms derived from obsolete anatomical vocabulary: *longynymph* (Drury and Drennan, 1926), translated in Italian as *longinifismo* (Battaglia, 1954), and in French as *macronymphie* (Erlich, 1896; Fauvelle-Aymar, 2002); deriving from the term *nymphae*, which designates both the labia minora and labia majora.

#### 4. COMMENTS

From the psycholinguistic analysis of the various expressions used in Africa and used by western authors, one can make several observations. First, in both the African and western vocabularies, some terms refer to anatomy; *longynymphism*, *mfuli*, etc. These are of less interest from a psycholinguistic perspective. Among the remaining expressions, a semantic polarization is evident.

In Baganda vocabulary, a substantial valorization of the local tradition emerges from repeated reference to tools and important phases of agricultural life: twins, with ceremonies for the fertility of fields; the door, an indispensable element of the house to protect the family; the forest, a sacred place where the first intervention by the *ssenga* occurs (similar to the *bois sacré*- Kashamura, 1973); and the hoe, which makes the earth fertile. The names of plants used in genital manipulation are also given positive connotations, referring consistently to fertility gods. Completing these observations is the respective linguistic valorization or degradation of women who have or have not accepted the practice.

Expressions used by Western authors refer to a daily aspect of the rural European environment; the apron. This was probably connected to the poverty and ignorance that often coexisted in lower class populations. Other terminology ridiculed the genital morphology, comparing it to the ear of a cocker spaniel. Such references, used primarily during the middle of last century, indicate a disparaging view of the African, condemning his traditions because they are different from our own.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The psycholinguistics of female genital modification reveal a reductive/expansive dichotomy that is reflected in the sexual customs of the populations examined. A vast gulf divides the “expansors,” who are generally more comfortable with sexuality and who possess a rich and specific vocabulary on the subject, from the “reducers” (excisors and infibulators), who have a negative view of sex and whose vocabulary on the subject is relatively poor.

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