

effects in series of signs inscribed on their 'social skin'. In the dynamic gender models the Turkana construct, 'maleness' and 'femaleness' depend on culturally definable acts and not unchangeable essences. Once the *act* and not the biological individual becomes the focus of analytical attention, it becomes possible to understand how the Turkana use gender as a technology of transaction and transformation in a more abstract way – in which men and women alike bear both masculine and feminine qualities in an androgynous balance and show these traits in the acts they have learned to perform.

Cross-fertilisation between practices, perceptions and physical experiences in cultural creativity deserves more analytical attention. The gendered body is a register of lived reality and experiences within the particular environment from which people draw their practical knowledge and living. Perceptions of bodily processes seek to blend physical and social levels of experience, so that what we know about one participates in our understanding of the other. It is therefore reasonable to expect that people will pick out those traits from the pool of potentialities laid down in the physical body, which can best capture their concerns and link these up with some salient characteristics of the setting. Different ways of experiencing and representing the body present us with different devices for letting the physical illuminate the social, highlighting some aspects while hiding or down-playing others. Just as the East African savannah is a 'cultural landscape' in the pure sense of the term, shaped by the Turkana, moulded by the action and images of their bodies and those of their livestock, so the material body itself is moulded by the cultural constructions spun around it. As the women make clear in their song, the body is both like, and *is*, the social relations situated by livestock and the landscape that surrounds it.

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## Transforming Women into 'Pure' Agnates: Aspects of Female Infibulation in Somalia

Aud Talle

### The Body at Issue

'What is being carved in human flesh is an image of society.'

This citation from the book *Purity and Danger* (Douglas 1966: 116) can serve as a point of departure for the present chapter which explores symbolic dimensions of female genital mutilation in Somalia.<sup>1</sup> Douglas's laconic formulation draws attention to an interrelation of sorts between two bodies: the human and the societal. As indicated in the title of this article, our concern will also be with two bodies: the female human body and the agnatic group (a 'male' body). The contention of the article is that the surgical intervention and ritual act of infibulation (*gudniin*) is intimately related to the production and maintenance of gender categories and with the construction and deconstruction of gendered persons in Somali society. Furthermore, the article raises the point that the physical mutilation of the female body symbolically ties the woman to her agnatic group. As will be elucidated below, patrilineal kinship is a bearing structural principle in Somali society, but women are by definition only loosely connected to these patrilineally-based groupings since affiliation goes through the male line. It should be noted, however, that Somali women have a closer attachment to their agnates than is common in societies with similar kinship structures (Lewis 1962).

Infibulation, also called Pharaonic circumcision,<sup>2</sup> is a form of genital mutilation where the clitoris, the labia minora and inner parts of the labia majora are wholly, or partly, excised; thereupon the sides of the vulva are stitched together. A tiny orifice, so small that 'nothing larger

than the end of a needle can pass', is left open serving as an outlet for urine and menstrual blood. The surgery transforms the natural genitals of a woman into a flattened, smoothed vulva with an oblong scar and a tiny hole at the lower end. In appearance the mutilated vulva is radically different from that of natural pudenda; the operation accentuates and dramatises the difference between female and male genital organs. Prima facie any similarity between the two is drastically reduced by this intervention. The parts being carved away are the 'hard' parts of female pudenda, some Somalis say, and in this culture 'hardness' is associated with maleness (Helander 1988). Thus the male element of female genitals, the clitoris, is irrevocably removed by the operation. The clitoris, as it were, must be excised in order to give clarity to the female-male distinction and to propagate 'gender identity' (Rubin 1975).

Gender is a metaphoric vehicle in the Somali culture; it provides telling images of how to think about and value other relations and distinctions. This scheme of gender classification proposes an hierarchical relationship between the sexes, as well as between 'things' female and male, giving precedence to the male image (Helander 1988). The efficacy of gender as a metaphor may be related partly to the practice of infibulation, and to male circumcision, which I shall also discuss briefly below. Genital mutilation manipulates and strikes at the very part of the body where the anatomical difference between women and men is apparently most prominent. Thus the surgery reinforces a primordial, genetic dichotomy. It may seem that gender images sprung out of biological sex make such a strong case in the Somali culture, because the biology itself, in fact, is partly 'constructed'. In this sense infibulation provides an instructive example of how gender is not causally dependent upon sex (Butler 1989).

As noted by Helander (1988), in Somali thought, the human body appears to be built up of 'female' and 'male' constituents, alluded to as 'soft' and 'hard' parts, respectively. The parts which are defined as 'hard' (*gaybo adag*) include bone, the testicles, the penis, the teeth and reason (intelligence) and are inherited patrilineally through the semen of the father, while those which are 'soft' (*gaybo jileescan*) – the blood, veins, the muscles, skin and tissue, flesh, the hair, nails and the cartilage – derive from the mother through the female blood, blood being the chief element that a woman contributes at conception (ibid.: 126). The newborn is thus composed of both male and female parts; in gender terms it is an 'androgyn', to paraphrase Strathern (Strathern, chapter 2, this volume). We shall see later that bodily substances are used as metaphors for social relations – the bones ('hard') are an idiom for agnatic relations and veins ('soft') stand for matrilineal and affinal rela-

tions. Taking the person to be a 'microcosm of social relations' (Strathern 1987b), a central topic expounded on in the present volume, the Somali child – being an outcome of interaction preceding birth – is a person formed of both 'hard' and 'soft' relations. In their multiple-gendered state, Somali women and men are considered to be impure beings, hence ambiguous and incapable of reproducing themselves until they have become 'women' and 'men'. The gendering of the person, however, begins right after birth, when the women assisting in the delivery announce the sex of the child to the people around. In the case of a boy being born, enthusiastic clappings and ululations can be heard from inside the delivery house. On the other hand, the birth of a girl is met by a conspicuous silence and restrained emotion. The bodily 'opening up' of the women through their ululations at the birth of a boy and, conversely, the 'tying' of the body through silence, introduce us to the metaphor of 'opening'/'tying' which, I suggest, is a key symbolic theme that Somalis work with and rework in the process of gender-making.

### Infibulation in Somalia

I begin with a few remarks on the event and performance of female infibulation in the Somali context. The operation is performed on girls while they are still young, usually between the ages of eight and ten, sometimes older, but never beyond puberty. It is usually done in the home of the girl and, as a rule, is undertaken by an elderly woman skilled in the task (*guddo*, 'circumciser'; *ummuliso*, 'midwife'). Traditionally, the operation is carried out without any extensive form of anaesthetics or antiseptic precautions. A mixture of herbs and myrrh called *malhal*, which has a pleasant, if pervasive, smell, and is believed to have homeostatic and cicatrizing properties, is applied to the wound after the operation to prevent excessive bleeding and infection. Depending upon the routine and skill of the circumciser, the instruments used for operation are either a small knife or a razorblade for cutting the flesh and thorns or catgut for the stitching of the severed parts.

In principle, any woman who has the right talent or sufficient courage may take up work as a circumciser. One important ability required is that she should not be 'afraid of blood'. Customarily these women belong to an occupational group of low social standing.<sup>3</sup> Being marginal to the society through their group status, infibulation practitioners are persons somehow betwixt and between. Although they definitely are women – they have themselves been infibulated – when performing infibulation they act as men, chiefly because they draw human blood by handling the knife. The drawing of human blood,



mainly in fighting and ecstatic dancing, is strictly a male preoccupation among the Somalis. The work thus is surrounded with ambiguous feelings and, in a sense, is regarded as degrading. The frequent exposure to the sight of genitals affects the eyes of the practitioners and the most active ones among them habitually complain about having bad eyesight.

In urban areas, infibulation is commonly performed by medically trained personnel. These 'doctors', in addition to giving prophylactic antibiotics and tetanus injections, normally apply local anaesthetics when operating. The use of anaesthetics obviously helps to lessen the pain of the operation and for that reason is preferred by most parents who can afford the cost. Besides, parents feel that professionally performed surgery is less risky to the health of their daughter. With the professionalisation of the operation, men have also become involved in the work.

The intervention on the body is performed in two stages: the excision and the stitching. First, the clitoris is excised.<sup>4</sup> This is considered an act of purification (*xalaalays*; from the Arabic *xaalal*, allowed by religion) and, in praise, the women present ululate and clap. The clitoris (*kinir*) is a part of the body that is connected with dirt and childhood. A girl who has not yet been infibulated or excised is referred to as being *kinirleey* (childish; having clitoris). To adult Somali women the word *kinirleey* has a very negative and somewhat embarrassing ring. Another Somali synonym for *kinir* is the less common *awle* which means approximately 'with (or having) father' (Ferrandi 1905, quoted in Helander 1988). This term suggests, as noted above, that the girl's outer genitals have been acquired from the father (i.e. patrilocally, like the penis, *gus*). Logically, by removing the parts of the female genitals that show from the 'outside' or protrude, i.e. the 'male' parts, women become more 'feminine'. In contrast, we shall see below that male circumcision, which is the rite for boys corresponding to female infibulation, uncovers the glans penis and makes it protrude. As women become more feminine, they also become more 'human', as it were. The protruding parts of female genitals are sometimes likened to the hump of the camel, and to leave animal traits in the female body would render it impure in yet another way.

When all the 'black' flesh (i.e. the pigmented parts of the genitals) has been pared away, the sides of the vulva are stitched or bound (*tol*, *qodob*) together, usually with thorns (*qodax*). These are held in place by a narrow string wound around the thorns' edges in a zigzag pattern. The purpose of the string is to prevent the thorns from loosening, and to protect the skin of the girl from being pierced by the sharp ends of the thorns. This particular string is referred to by the word *barkimo*, actual-

ly the term for the traditional Somali headrest, but here meaning 'cushion', giving the connotation of shielding and protection. The legs of the girl are then tied together with cloth strips, *dabar*, torn from old clothes. *Dabar*, is the same word as that used for ropes made of vegetable fibres (often from the inner bark of the *acacia bussei*, which is softened by chewing and soaking) and used for tying animals in the homestead. All ropes in a Somali household are prepared by women and girls who process them when out herding, in the homestead or on their way to the marketplace. Ropes and strings, a domestic artefact of major importance in the household, are both practically and ritually closely associated with women and female qualities.

The newly infibulated girl is left in a prone position for the next few days to rest and to avoid bursting the suture. Throughout the operation, the women participating direct the work of the circumciser. They make sure that all the 'unclean' parts are properly removed from the girl's body and that the 'hole' (*dalool*) left after the suturing is of the right size. Simultaneously as the operation is being executed, the women soothe the girl and give words of encouragement to her to be brave and endure the ordeal. People sometime represent the tying as a logical consequence of the excision because, after being excised, the vulva looks like an open wound 'begging' to be closed. In Somali cultural representation, 'opening' and 'tying' are interrelated in a profound manner and, in the case of infibulation, are held to be aspects of the same act.

The operation is an event of great significance to most Somali women, as from that point on their bodies are irreversibly changed. A crucial step has been taken in shaping them as 'females'. When the stitches are healed and their legs untied, the girls who have been infibulated begin to behave like small 'women'. Among other things, they modify their way of moving from the running and jumping of childhood to the slow and careful walking characteristic of adult women. The shift from one state to another is further marked by shaving the head and by a change in hairstyle. The shaving of the hair is particularly significant. Women have their hair ritually shaved only twice in their lifetime: after birth and after their circumcision. By this allegory, the rite of infibulation may seem a kind of rebirth. This is further supported by the practitioners' boasts that they are the ones who bring the girls into 'society' as 'adult' persons.

It is not until a girl has been operated upon that she gains prestige and acceptance among her peers. Those girls who have their infibulation postponed beyond the appropriate age are often reminded of this fact by their age-mates. For instance, unoperated girls may not be allowed to touch the hair of those who have already been operated upon

because it is held that they are unclean and bodily contact with them may be contaminating. The constant pressure on uninfibulated girls from their friends make many of them initiate their own operations either verbally by begging their mothers to have it performed or physically by actually cutting themselves. A commonly heard story is that of a grandmother or aunt who was so anxious to have her infibulation, that she withdrew to a lonely place and tried to operate upon herself. The story goes that she did not get very far with the surgery because as soon as she saw the blood gushing from the cut, she became frightened. Her action in attempting to hasten the process, nevertheless, is strongly taken to be a signal of her innermost wish.

A girl's infibulation, however, is not regarded as of particular ceremonial importance nor a time for any extravagant festivity. It is of concern mainly to the women of the family, and possibly some close neighbours, and although they may allow themselves modest portions of good food and give the girl a few small presents and/or some money, it is not considered an event of great social significance collecting many people. Rather, it has an aura of secrecy and 'privacy'. That, however, gives the occasion its distinctive social characteristic. The adult men of the family distance themselves from the occasion and often leave the home altogether. The timing of the event is decided upon by the women who inform the father and other concerned men about the date, but they never really discuss it with them. Beyond the ranks of adult women and girls, infibulation is to a large extent a verbal non-issue. In the context of the family, as well as that of the community, it is muted. As one informant put it, 'People simply do not talk about it, they just do it.' The observer is often struck by the Somali people's lack of interest in and avoidance of this part of their culture. Typically, the otherwise elaborate and rich Somali poetry which highlights almost all aspects of their life seldom concerns female infibulation (Xaanghe 1988).<sup>5</sup> The lack of interest in the topic of infibulation is also revealed in the literature on the Somali people where it is seldom mentioned except as a footnote or in an appendix.<sup>6</sup> The silence surrounding the issue of infibulation is in itself significant, however, and the non-reporting of the phenomenon should not be read as empirical absences. The cultural meaning of the practice comes to the surface in symbolic expressions other than verbal utterances and these may speak more loudly than words to those who are familiar with the code.

The day of infibulation is an event that most women remember vividly, not least for its immense pain. Fadumo, now a woman of fifty-five, was infibulated when she was nine in her home area in central Somalia. She recalls the day very well:

It was early in the morning that my mother called me and gave me a bath. As she was washing me, she told me that I would be infibulated the same morning and that the circumciser had already been sent for. I was aware what would happen to me because I had witnessed some girls in the neighbourhood being infibulated. For me it was a natural thing and I always knew that one day it would happen to me also. But I was very much afraid because I had seen how the girls used to shout and cry when they were operated upon.

When everything was ready for my operation, I was seated on a wooden stool and held by three grown-up women. One of them was my mother. They opened my legs wide apart. Two of the women took one leg each and held them firmly; the other one sat behind me. She held my head between her knees. The circumciser squatted in front of me.

As soon as she touched the skin with her knife and began cutting, I shouted and struggled to get loose. But it was impossible. The women held me in a vice-like grip so that I would not get hurt, and to enable the circumciser to do her work properly. When the woman was cutting my flesh, I felt as if my intestines were being grabbed and pulled out. After all these years I still feel that particular sensation.

In despair I shouted the name of my brother, who was eleven at that time. We herded the sheep and goats together and were great friends. He was actually the only one that I could appeal to under this ordeal, because my mother was holding me and my father had left the homestead that day, as is common among us when a daughter is infibulated. As soon as my brother heard me shouting his name, he came running. He threw stones at the hut where I was being operated to make the women stop hurting me. But my mother went out and chased him away.

At last, after what seemed like ages to me, the operation came to an end. I was carried out and put on a mat to rest. My thighs were shaking terribly from the strain that my body had been through. My mother brought me warm gruel with fat in to drink. This should make the trembling stop. I had been stitched with five thorns and my legs were tied from the hips and down to the ankles to make the parts grow together properly.

After the operation, the biggest problem was to urinate. Whenever I felt the urge, I kept it back. In the evening my mother managed to persuade me to release it. It was very painful; it was just like putting lime juice on a wound.<sup>7</sup>

On the fourth day the thorns were pulled out. To make them come out easily some drops of fat had been applied to the wound the previous night. As soon as the thorns were removed, my mother ululated and told me that the place was sewn perfectly and that my opening was as desired.

### A Note on Male Circumcision

In social and cultural terms, male circumcision exhibits many parallel traits to female infibulation but is acknowledged to be less painful and of



less physical consequence. The boys undergo the operation about the same age as the girls and it is also done on them individually in their homes. As with the case of infibulation, the festivity surrounding male circumcision is limited. However, the circumcision of a boy does not require specialised practitioners and can be performed by any male person, a relative or a neighbour. The operation follows this sequence: after being tied (*xidh*) with a small string from the chewed bark of the acacia tree, the foreskin is stretched hard forward, and then, in one stroke, it is swiftly cut with a razorblade or knife. Both the foreskin and the string are severed from the boy's body. Practical considerations aside, the tying of the string on to the foreskin before it is cut may lead us to speculate that the string, an object attributed with female qualities in many contexts, renders this particular piece of flesh 'unclean' for the boy and, accordingly, must be removed. When the cut is made, the skin is drawn behind the glans to make it visible and protruding as a circumcised male organ is something to be proud of. A leaf of a herbaceous creeper (*carno*: a species of the *cyphostemma* genus) in which a hole as been made, is, finally, pulled on to the newly circumcised organ in order to protect the cut part behind the glans. The succulent texture of this particular leaf makes it ideal for carving figures in. Somali children are often found carving play animals out of them. During the period of healing no woman is allowed to see the penis, as the circumcision wound may become infected and refuse to heal. Young boys' penises are denoted *buuryo* and at circumcision Somalis say they are 'breaking' the *buuryo* (*buuryo jebis*). The word *buuryo* shares a common root with *buuran*, which refers to a swelling or growth on the skin. When applied with reference to a boy's penis it is used as an extenuated expression for the more obtrusive *gus*. Uninfibulated girls are also said to 'have *buuryo*' (*buuryo gab*) before they are operated upon. The girl's *buuryo*, however, is completely excised at her infibulation, while that of the boy is only broken. *Buuryo*, like *kintir*, has the connotation of childlessness and uncleanness. By breaking the *buuryo*, i.e. removing the foreskin now being feminised on the string, the boy becomes purified (*axalaal*). The act also makes him more 'masculine' and is a step in preparing him for marriage and adult life. Before they are circumcised, boys, like girls, are insulted by their peers for being 'impure' and 'childish'. Similarly they have to refrain from certain actions, most notably the slaughtering of animals.

### The Cultural Explanation

Somali people have many explanations as to why they support and maintain such a hazardous practice as female infibulation.<sup>8</sup> First and

foremost, they tend to look upon it as protection for the girl against indecency and immorality. Generically, women are held to be easily affected by visual impressions and emotions, and thus prone to be led astray by forces beyond their control. For instance, women are more likely than men to fall victim to spirit possessions (Lewis 1966; Helander 1988). A reason often given by informants as to why Somalis originally began to infibulate their girls was the risk of sexual assault that young girls faced while out herding alone. (As will be discussed shortly, Somalis are, by tradition, nomadic pastoralists.) Since an infibulated girl cannot be exploited sexually against her will without severe damage to her body, the infibulation is a safeguard against unwanted pregnancies and unidentified paternity. Somali men regularly stress the value in being 'the first' to open a girl. Second, genital mutilation is an act of purification as an 'uncut' girl is synonymous with an 'unclean' one (*xaraan* from Arabic *xaraam*, prohibited by religion). The operation takes away the parts of the body that are considered to be harmful and disgraceful for a woman to possess. In addition, it eliminates the potential danger of an 'untouched' clitoris. The popular saying that the clitoris will grow to an unbecoming length (like boys' *buuryo*) when not cut, even though not literally believed by most Somalis, nevertheless makes a 'good' and convincing argument. Of more significance is the notion that the excision of the clitoris helps to control the sexual urge in women. This is an argument often put forward by educated Somali women as to the persistence of the practice. A word usually cited in Somali vernacular when translating 'pleasure' or 'lust' is *kacsi* (from the verb *kac*, 'get up'). *Kacsi* means erection of the penis and as such refers to an identified sexual reaction in men. To the best of my knowledge, there is no equivalent term or phrase in Somali with particular address to the physical manifestation of female sexual desire or lust. This verbal suppression of female sexuality was also seen in the evasive answers nomadic women often gave when questions regarding sexual desire were raised and whether or not they themselves had had that particular sensation. Commonly they responded with counter-questions or statements such as: 'Is that a good thing to have?' or 'We do not care about such feelings.'

To leave a girl 'uncut' is held to be disgusting and 'unnatural'. Pudenda which have not been smoothed/excised and then tied/covered are considered ugly and improper.<sup>9</sup> A woman without these specific qualities is to the Somalis an anomaly and a phenomenon which simply does not exist among them. The vision of such a creature is beyond their comprehension, something they cannot even express in words.

### Some Characteristics of Somali Society

In order to better understand what follows, it will be useful to describe some of the general features of Somali culture and social structure. The description is done with reference to a generalised picture of Somali society, paying attention to local variations and changes where necessary.<sup>10</sup>

The majority of the population in Somalia are nomadic pastoralists. Their economy is largely based upon the rearing of camels, cattle, sheep and goats. Except for the relatively fertile stretches of land in the areas between the two rivers of Shebelle and Juba, the country is mainly dry and consists to a great extent of arid grasslands which provide the people with a rather harsh ecological environment. The pastoralists migrate with their herds and flocks of animals between seasonal grazing areas and water sources and often cover large distances during these moves.

The differing characteristics and needs of the pastoralists' animals, as well as variations in ecological conditions, necessitate the use of different migration routes. Of particular importance is the periodic division of the family production unit into two local residential groups – the camel camp and the sheep and goat hamlet (Lewis 1961). It is women who are normally in charge of the flocks of sheep and goats and this division of the domestic unit which allows women to live without the company of adult male family members for long periods means they have quite extensive decision-making power in the management of family resources.

Among the Somalis, nomadic life is held to be extremely hard and to demand a lot of endurance and stamina. In addition to the physical hardships of constant moving, an added burden is the frequent occurrence of conflicts and skirmishes with other people *en route* to pastures and water sources. Despite these difficulties, most Somalis, nomads and non-nomads alike, value the pursuit of pastoral nomadism, and it constitutes the basis of their identity as Somali people. This identity is reinforced by the fact that the Somalis are a relatively homogeneous population culturally who speak a common language, (with some dialectic variations), and share the same Sunni Muslim religious faith.

One aspect of the social structure of crucial importance for the present discussion is the primacy of *agnation* (*tol*) in the constitution of social relations (Lewis 1961; Helander 1988). The Somali population is divided into a few large patrilineal clans of several hundred thousand members each. Sub-groups or smaller segments of these function as corporate groups economically and politically, whose internal relationships are set within an egalitarian, pastoral ideology. To the individual, these smaller groups are of more practical relevance than the clan. There is no space here to discuss the complex morphology of Somali

clans and lineages. Suffice it to say that the relationship between agnatic kin, particularly the relationship between brother and sister, is culturally represented as one of the closest ties in Somali culture (Xaanghe 1988). Brothers and sisters of one father and/or mother call each other by the reciprocal term *walaal*. This term may be extended to all agnates of the same generation, even to friends when one wishes to elicit a preferential aspect of a relationship (Helander 1991). The verb *tol*, which signifies agnation, literally means to 'sew' or 'bind' together and when used in the context of patrilineality it indicates that kin related on the male side are considered to be so close as if sewn together and thus not separated easily. A man can never change his genealogy or voluntarily break his ties to his agnatic kin as he is forever linked to a line of agnates stretching thirty to forty generations back. The sewing metaphor evokes images of intimacy, cohesiveness and permanence. I want to draw attention to the fact that the word *tol* used as a referent to agnatic kinship is also applied to an infibulated girl. Below I argue that what may appear as a semantic coincidence, in fact embodies a significant symbolic message.

The situation of women within the kinship structure is somewhat different from that of men. Although women, to a great extent, remain members of their agnatic group even when they marry, their procreative abilities are partly transferred to their husband's group upon marriage. Female fertility is, in fact, a main element around which the reciprocal interplay between agnatic families revolve. Within this conceptual and organisational framework there is no place for the illegitimate child, and a child, in particular a son, born out of wedlock is a person to be pitied. By having deprived her agnates of the control of her fertility by acting on her own, the child's mother has sinned most severely against the agnatic code; her immorality is transferred to the child, making it a defiled person.

Compared to matrilineal and affinal ties, agnatic relations are held to be 'hard' (strong) partly invoked in the idiom of sewing. Such relations are referred to by the term 'bone' (*laf*) and sometimes 'testicles' (*xiniin*) which, as already noted, are 'hard' parts of the body. When Somalis say they are of the 'same bones' (*isku laffo ayaannahay*) they are referring to a 'greater, undifferentiated totality' (Bloch 1992: 171). As a person's bones are inherited in the male line through the father, a 'physical' relationship between agnates is demonstrated. The most durable part of the human body, the bones (which in a corpse decay long after the flesh and blood) conjure up an image of the agnatic body as a strong and lasting entity. The 'strength' of a lineage is defined by its genealogical depth and number of live male members, making numerical strength an



important marker of agnatic strength. A 'strong', in terms of powerful and influential, lineage is called *laan dheere* (long branch: Lewis 1961; Helander 1988). Somalis refer to the procedure of counting male lineage members as 'penis counting' (*qode tiris*, Lewis 1961: 174). The derivative word *goodhi* means 'male', which bespeaks the cardinal importance of genitals in constituting gender images within the agnatic context.

On the other hand, affinal relationships established through women are held to be 'soft' and are designated by the term *xidid*, literally meaning 'veins' or 'roots'. The metaphor of root and vein refers to the crisscrossing and ramifying relationships created through marriages. Helander (1988) reports from southern Somalia that the word *dhareer* ('saliva') which denotes a category of adopted clan members joined through marriage links, also has the meaning of 'soft cushions in between bones', that is cartilage (ibid: 133). The reference to cartilage, cast in the idiom of cushion, suggests that women, when married into agnatic groups ('hard' units), constitute an elastic connecting link between them. Referring back to the infibulation surgery, we recall that the string wound around the thorns is spoken of as 'cushion'. In contrast to the 'hard' and durable agnatic bonds, relations established through women are 'soft' and likened to strings, ropes, hair: that is, they are brittle and perishable and may be broken if necessary.

Every Somali man and woman is under strong social pressure to respect and honour the agnatic bond and to maintain its unity. Besides the number of 'penises' (i.e. male strength), the social standing of an agnatic group in relation to others is to a great extent founded on the courage and bravery of its male members in defending and managing its resources (i.e. people, livestock, grazing areas, water points) and on the chastity and purity of its female members.

Within this segmentary structure of agnatic affiliation, the various groups are in opposition to each other but are at the same time joined by common descent, matrilineal ties and marriage relations. Traditionally, the lineage groups at a 'primary level' (of six to ten generations depth, Lewis 1961: 6) are exogamous; but practices vary considerably and there seems to be an overall trend towards marriages being contracted even within this group. Among certain nomadic groups in central Somalia, for instance, endogamous marriages within the primary patrilineage have been quite common for a long time, although conjugal unions between as close agnates as parallel cousins of first or second degree seem to be more widespread and accepted now than was the case only a few generations back. One explanation given by male informants for this increase in marriages between closely born agnates is that it ensures a better treatment of daughters and sisters in married life. Another

explanation for the recent trend towards parallel cousin marriage in other parts of the country, for example in the north, is that marriage within the primary lineage group is a way of strengthening the agnatic bonds which people say have become looser than they used to be. Marriages between matrilineal relatives have always been widespread and preferred by the Somali people, with the result that matrilineal ties coincide with affinal ones.

The Somali marriage (*guur*) is not merely a pact between a man and a woman, but an alliance between agnatic families. For a woman, to become married is to be known as 'being tied' (*xidhid*, the same term as for affines). In fact, the expression is often heard that a woman, once she has been betrothed to a man, 'has been tied to him' (*nimbay ku xidhaan-tahay*). The establishment of a marriage presupposes the exchange of bridewealth and dowry. In brief, the bridewealth (*yarad*), a prestation from the groom's family to that of the bride, consists of a substantial number of animals, cash, and other goods. Although the actual value of this prestation may not be impressively high because of the effect of the dowry (*dibaad*) flowing in the opposite direction, it does foster respect and amity between affines. Besides the *yarad* and *dibaad*, the bridegroom offers the bride a personal gift (*meher*) as part of the marriage contract. The promise of the gift is given in front of a sheikh or *wadaado* (religious man) and establishes the conjugal pact between husband and wife. The *meher* is usually not very large in value and is routinely presented after the wedding, sometimes not until the husband divorces his wife. This prestation may, in fact, be no more than a verbal commitment. Like the rules of exogamy, bridewealth practices vary. For example, among the endogamous groups in central Somalia referred to earlier, money, rather than animals, is used in marriage transactions with the exception of a young male-camel as *meher*. Even when married, a woman's agnates continue to be responsible for her judicially, and, in spite of bridewealth, uxorial and genitrixal rights in her are never completely transferred to her husband and his family. The frequency of divorce among the Somali has been explained by this fact that the bond between a woman and her agnatic family is never really severed (Lewis 1962).

It is quite common to hear Somali women and men claim that if a girl's infibulation is broken before marriage, her parents will not receive a high bridewealth for her which above all means a lack of respect for them. It is only a 'virgin' girl (*gabar tolan/qodban*: 'a girl who is sewn/joined together') who collects any substantial bridewealth. Certainly, the economic value of the pending bridewealth is an inducement for the parents of the girl to keep her infibulation intact. More importantly, I would contend, a girl's infibulation emblematises her relation-

ship to the agnatic group she comes from as well as representing her agnates' role and competence as guardians and protectors of her virginity. By extension, this role also affects their reputation as reliable marriage partners and allies. When giving away a 'closed' girl, the agnatic group is simultaneously giving something of itself away; the gift of such a girl signifies the unity and credentials of her lineage group.

### The Importance of Virginity

As suggested above, the Somali notion of virginity is central to the analysis being pursued here. Let us return briefly to the operation of infibulation. By stitching together and closing the vaginal entrance of the girl, an artificial virginity is constructed. Thus, in Somalia virginity is not held to be a natural condition in women but has to be forcibly implanted on girls while they are still very young. The hymen of a woman, which attracts so much interest and attention in many Muslim societies and evokes strong sanctions if it is broken before marriage, has little social or cultural significance among nomadic Somalis. Some even claim that Somalis, particularly men, are often unaware of the existence of this membrane (Dirie 1986). Put simply, to them a chaste girl means a 'sewn' girl. It may be that the closing of the flesh is more important symbolically than the excision, as the cutting of the flesh is irrevocable while the closing of the vulva can, in principle, be executed over and over again. Although never as tight as the first time, later surgeries return the woman's body to its previous state by remaking her virginity. The occasions when the body is redone are mainly after childbirth and divorce and, less commonly, after premarital sexual life. As Hayes (1975) puts it with reference to infibulation in the Sudan, virginity under these circumstances is not an anatomical facticity but a social category.

From the day the Somali girl is operated upon until she marries, she is repeatedly reminded by other women and girlfriends of the importance of her 'virginity' and of the severe punishment that will follow its loss. Unmarried girls often show their infibulation to each other and compare the neatness of the scar and the size of the orifice. It is also common for female relatives and neighbours to visit each others' houses to inspect the surgical result in newly operated girls. This was particularly the case when the Somali first began to have the operation performed by medical professionals. The women were curious to see whether they could accept the work done by these new surgeons. The scar recognised to be the most attractive is one which is straight and narrow (Fig. 4.1). After the operation, the wound sometimes gets septic and may leave scar tissue in the genital region. If there is too much scar

Figure 4.1 Left: Normal adolescent vulva; Right: Infibulated vulva



tissue, the Somalis think it gives the genitals an ugly look. Furthermore, such scar tissue may suggest an unsuccessful operation, thus reminding people of a painful experience. Somalis also consider that the vaginal aperture should be small – the smaller, the better – as the moral standing of a tightly sewn girl cannot be thrown into doubt. It is not uncommon for quarrelling or fighting girls to end a dispute by challenging each other to compare their genitals. 'Dare, bring it (i.e. the genitals) to display' (*carr soo dhiigo*). Adult Somali women told me that during their upbringing, many of them were constantly worried about whether their infibulation was properly done or not, and their main concern was about the size of the opening. Some had their infibulation redone if they suspected it to be too large. To Somali women a small vaginal orifice is a sign of distinction. Many feel proud to think that they were well 'sewn' (or 'properly done', as some phrase it) among their family and that they were entrusted to keep it this way until their family decided otherwise.

I make the argument in this chapter that infibulation is a confirmation of women's inclusion in an agnatic family; and in this perspective, simply, the logic is that the smaller the opening, the more enclosed is the girl in her agnatic group. The binding together of her pudenda with thorns, metaphorically sews her into the agnatic collective. By taking away everything that is defined as male in the female genitals, and reshaping its form by closing it, Somalis are thereby creating a new organ very far removed from the original one. The constructed genital 'resembles' the male organ by its straight scar/seam and small orifice at the lower end.<sup>11</sup> I suggest that the surgery changes the outer 'sex' of the woman and makes her into a 'man', a pure agnate. This may seem a contradiction in that the same act that takes away male parts from the female pudenda to make women more feminine and clean also creates



an imaginary male. Infibulation as a cultural device then constitutes gender both as segregated and hierarchical in that the distinction between female and male images is sharpened, and is transformative and processual, as these images may also merge into and replace each other. The performance is a forceful symbol of belonging. The symbolic representation of a male organ in the scar, through the act of sewing, may partly explain why Somalis appreciate the straight scar and abhor the one not having this clear configuration. They themselves, however, do not make such an explicit connection and would probably object to this interpretation because for them female infibulation is a unique case and not comparable to anything else.

Ironically, at the same time as the event of infibulating a girl draws her closer into the agnatic collective, it signals a segregation between sisters and brothers as members of different sexes. In the case of Fadumo we saw that the brother could not help his sister even though he wanted to and attempted to do so. This emotional frustration was also experienced by other male informants. One had as close a relationship to his sister as the brother of Fadumo in that they shared the days together herding the sheep and goats. On the day of his sister's infibulation this relationship suddenly changed and, according to him, it was never the same again. While she was being operated upon, he could hear her screams and knew that she was in terrible pain but he could not do anything. Even when the operation was over and she lay groaning in the shadow of the hut, he did not have the courage to approach her and comfort her. Although nobody prevented him, he felt that it was inappropriate to interfere. Suddenly it occurred to him that the distance between them had become very great. Her operation was an affair of women of which she was a part, but he was not. Because of his inaction, however, he felt he had betrayed his beloved sister that day. By intuition, he knew that the mutilation of his sister was wrong not only because it caused her pain, but also because it separated them. Furthermore, the violence done to her is simultaneously inflicted upon him or upon the agnatic group, represented by its male members, to which they both belong. It should be remembered that fathers physically leave home when their daughters are infibulated. Herein, I venture, lies a distressing contradiction in the experience of Somali people: namely, that the ritual act of enclosing the girls into a male-based collective by inscribing the insignia of agnation on to their bodies, also separates sisters and brothers, women and men, into two laterally segregated gender categories. Once boys and girls are circumcised, their orientation in action and interaction towards their own sex group is marked. This lateral dichotomisation moulded in a idiom, lays the foundation for the

gender hierarchy which is so pronounced in Somali cultural representations.

Every Somali girl knows that a good marriage for herself and her family is to a great extent dependent upon the preservation of her 'virginity'. A girl who is 'open' at her marriage is considered to be 'loose' (*naag xun*; 'bad woman') both morally and in relationship to her family. In the Somali culture, morality and kinship are closely intertwined. The untimely or illegitimate deflowering of a girl represents a transgression of the unity of the agnatic group. Such a girl cannot stand up for her natal group in marriage and be reciprocated with another nubile girl, who will bestow her own agnates with children to reproduce and strengthen the group. Hence a daughter or sister who has her infibulation broken before marriage brings 'bad reputation' (*dheg xuno*) to her family. Within this system, female chastity is of crucial significance for male ranking.

### The Shaping of Virility

It is the privilege of the husband of the girl to open her and 'make her into a woman' (*naag*: wife, non-virgin). Defibulation is the inversion of infibulation in that instead of 'sewing' and 'closing', the symbolic themes are those of 'separating' and 'opening'. The utmost proof of a man's authority and control over a wife and her potential offspring is, in fact, the penetration of her infibulation.

Traditionally, the man uses his penis to defibulate his bride. But if that fails, he should be brave enough to 'take to the knife'. The dagger and the penis are both symbols of male selfhood and power over women. DeVilleneuve (1937) recounts from Djibouti how the bridegroom on the morning of the wedding night would strut around in the town carrying his dagger on his shoulder. In the act of defibulation, the penis becomes a weapon (Roheim 1932). It is the medium by which the bridegroom penetrates the skin sewn together over the vagina, 'opens' the girl and attains access to her sexuality and fertility. The act of penetration transforms her 'male' sex into a 'female' one which makes her ready to conceive and reproduce for the husband's agnatic group. The breaking of a girl's infibulation is a token release from the bonds to her own family. However, the consummation of the marriage is a prolonged process: it may take several days, weeks and even months. In the act of defibulation the male role is imbued with force and power. The wife, when confronted with the pain and the humiliation inflicted upon her through the sexual act, spontaneously struggles against the efforts of the husband to 'open' her. Sometimes the struggle turns into a veritable fight between the two and

in this battle the occlusion of her vagina, the fake penis, becomes her weapon. Many women flee or find various excuses for postponing the consummation of their marriage. Others have to be tied with ropes so that the husband may get a fair chance to penetrate them. Occasionally, the husband may even be aided by his agnates to hold the woman down while he performs his duty. In one particular case when the husband managed to force his way through the scar tissue after three months of struggle, the wife screamed at the top of her voice. She claimed that her cry at this exact moment was so loud that it could be heard in the whole neighbourhood. For her the penetration was both a relief from the pain and a shock to find the body open. Once the penetration has been accomplished, however, the female role in the sexual act appears to turn from resistance to submission and obedience.

A Somali man who does not have the personal strength to open his wife, but has to call on assistance, runs the risks of being disgraced as a weak and cowardly person. It is, however, relatively common, at least in urban areas, for the defibulation of the bride to be done surgically, especially if the consummation of the marriage is delayed for too long or if the husband is scared or reluctant to do it himself. A surgical defibulation is usually done secretly through an agreement between the wife and husband. Even the bride may feel uneasy with the thought of having a husband incapable of performing the act himself. Some see such incapacity as a confession of impotence. The penetration of a well 'sewn' woman in marriage is not only an expression of the husband's control over his wife and her procreative powers, which her family has guarded for him, but is also an important proof of his virility, masculinity or strength (*raganimo*; 'to be a real man').

It is claimed that Somali men find pleasure in a very tight opening in that some resistance and a certain amount of coercion when performing coitus is said to enhance their satisfaction and manly pride. The saying, 'You are like the penis in preferring tightness' (*gus ciriri jecete oo kale*) is often used by men to characterise other men who tend to solve an easy problem in a complicated way. Women also undoubtedly prefer their vulva to be closed. To them it is more attractive, more feminine. Hence it is a great offence to say to a woman that she has 'wide (long) genitals' (*laan dheer*). *Laan dheer*, as we have seen, means 'long branch' of a lineage, i.e. a lineage counting many members, thus associating a woman referred to in this way with hardness and strength: in other words, with male qualities. Here again we find a semantic association between genitals and kinship structure. The kinship idiom in this context alludes to 'male' properties in the female genitals, which insinuates that she is not a proper woman in all aspects of the term.

Women commonly believe that the greater the size of their vaginal opening, the greater the risk that their husband will leave them and find another woman. This interconnection was clearly spelled out in my discussion with nomadic women. In the particular area where I lived, divorces were exceedingly common. As soon as a woman was divorced, she would prepare herself for another marriage by having her vagina resewn. The women claimed that they found it 'shameful' (*ceeb*) in the sense of embarrassing and offensive to show themselves to their new husband with an 'open' vulva. Only elderly women seemed unconcerned about their bodily perfection. After a long and what appeared to be a relatively fruitless discussion with two young women, one of them gave this explanation as to why men prefer closed women: 'They like it because the tight place and the open place are not the same.' Whereupon she took two milk containers, one in each hand, showed me the openings of the containers, which had different sizes, and asked: 'Is there not a difference between these two containers? Which one is the most beautiful?' In her representation the difference is underscored, but also implied in this distinction is the preference for 'tightness'. In this context 'tightness' has a wide range of connotations, summed up in the Somali word *ficaan* ('good', 'beautiful'). The cultural preference of tightness to body orifices appears to be particularly elaborated in societies where female infibulation is practised (Boddy 1982). Aside from the aesthetic considerations of cleanliness and hygiene, an uncovered vagina can raise the suspicion of a woman's new husband about what kinds of relationships she has had between her marriages.

When the husband himself does not penetrate his wife, he will nevertheless have to inspect and confirm the bride's 'virginity' before she is 'opened'. Therefore, when the defibulation is done surgically, it is usually not performed until the second or third day of the wedding. The husband is not himself present at the defibulation. His female relatives (his mother, sister or father's sister) act on his behalf and witness the 'opening' (*kalagayn*: 'separate', 'tear apart') of the bride. The bride's relatives also participate to make sure that everything is done in an orderly and satisfactory manner. A small cut is made along the scar, large enough to assist the man with the penetration. When the opening is made, the women present ululate and express their satisfaction with the 'creation' of the woman. While the wound is still bleeding, the husband resumes sexual intercourse with her. This example lends support to Bloch's (forthcoming) argument that it is the agnatic group, not the individual man and woman, that is the social agent in the marriage ritual. In the *xeedho* ritual performed in a particularly elaborate manner at town weddings, the 'bodily' character of the agnatic group is, perhaps,



even more clearly manifested. This ritual is, in fact, a condensed symbolic version of the traditional wedding ceremony, of which only a brief account can be provided here.

The *xeedho* is a wooden eating bowl commonly found in all nomadic households. At weddings the bowl is filled with a palatable dish (*muq-mad*) prepared of sun-dried meat which has been fried in butter and seasoned with spices to which ghee and dates are added in large quantities. The dates are mixed with flour into a dough-like substance before being placed in layers on top of the meat and formed into a conical shape protruding above the rim of the bowl. The *muqmad*, recognised to be a delicacy, is a nutritious, life-giving foodstuff and is especially appreciated by Somali men. It lasts for a long time and thus serves as a reserve food in nomadic households, often being given as a treat to distinguished guests. The bowl with the dish is usually stored in a basket (*safiyu*) consisting of two conical baskets joined at right angles, covered with a piece of tanned leather, nicely decorated with cowrie-shells, and tied together with leather strips and cords. In the urban setting, some modifications in storage methods are found. Enamel bowls have replaced wooden ones, the cover around the basket is made of white cloth rather than leather and the leather straps have been replaced by a 10–15 metre-long string which is wound around the basket in an intricate, complex pattern (Sheekh-Muhammed n.d.). Furthermore, at the *xeedho* ceremony the basket is given a human form. It is 'clothed' in similar attire to that of the bride, brought to the wedding by her relatives and attended to by a youngnubile girl from the bride's family. She is responsible for watching the opening of the 'bride' which is done by the male relatives of the bridegroom. After having greeted the symbolic bride, they pretend to undress her one piece of cloth at a time, following a strict sequence. As many as possible of the bridegroom's agnates are expected to participate. The last sequence of the ritual is the unknotting of the cord which represents the virginity of the human bride. This is also the most challenging part, because the relatives of the bride, who have prepared the *xeedho*, have made an effort to ensure the unknotting is as difficult as possible. The unknotting is made even more difficult by the diversionary manoeuvres of the attendant who does not allow the men much time to work out how to open it. While this is happening, the male relatives of the bride remain passive and watch the spectacle. One by one the men from the bridegroom's group try to unknot the 'bride'. If any of them cheat, use tricks or mistreat the *xeedho* bride, for example by using a sharp instrument or fingernails, the attendant will slap their hands with the stick she is carrying. Every time a candidate fails, punishments are meted out by the attendant and a specially selected com-

mittee. They make him dance, sing or perform other comical acts in front of the wedding audience. Many of them feel uneasy and embarrassed about their poor performance. It may take several hours to find the ends of the cord. Should the unknotting be done easily, however, the mother of the bride takes it very badly. She may even demand that the opening of the *xeedho* is postponed. The tying of the *xeedho*, which she herself has supervised, as she supervised the tying of the real bride some years before, in this ritual stands for the quality of the infibulation of her daughter.

The person who eventually succeeds in finding the knot removes the cloth wrapped around the basket, lifts off the top, and exposes the dome-shaped cover of dates, ready to be cut. First he washes his hands, then he cuts through the date cover with a knife to get at the juicy, tasty meat underneath. Thereafter, pieces of meat and dates are distributed among the guests, included the bride and bridegroom. In the *xeedho* ritual it is clearly spelled out that for the bridegroom's group to get hold of the precious gift of the *muqmad* offered them by the bride's family, they have to work hard and prove themselves in a reciprocal, but competitive, play with their matrilineal kin who are the gift-givers. Behind the cosmetic surface of the dish, that is the date layer, lies the embryo of prosperity and growth of their agnatic lineage, namely female fertility, epitomised by the meat soaked in ghee.

The consummation of the sexual relationship in Somali marriage is congested with physical sufferings not only for the women but also for the men. For the majority of Somali women it is no less than a traumatic experience, filled with anxiety and fear. Women, in general, tend to speak far more bitterly about defibulation than infibulation, as it involves the separation of the women from their own group signified by the opening of the scar. At defibulation the man is not only creating a 'woman', he is at the same time creating himself as a 'man'. In the sexual act the wife-husband (*naag-nin*) pair is constituted. As a non-virgin, she becomes a fertile woman, a potential mother. He, as a married man, may now join the lineage assembly (*shir*) and become a politically active and full member of his society. At this point in their lives they are both pure and gendered persons, ready to produce offspring.

### Summing up

This account has attempted to elucidate some concepts which may seem fruitful for an analysis and understanding of the cultural practice of infibulation. In doing so, we are moving within several levels or domains of lived reality. It has been shown that infibulation is a premise

for marriage and childbearing and is closely related to the security of paternity and the continuity of the agnatic line. Further, the practice has dimensions of purity and ~~impurity~~ taste and aesthetics. We have also seen that female infibulation continues to be meaningful under varying social, economic and political circumstances.

The Somalis seem to believe that women have to be 'created' as females and as gendered persons. A crucial aspect of personhood in Somali culture is that one belongs to an agnatic group. Girls, like boys, are, of course, ascribed members of their father's lineage at birth, recalling that they both inherit 'hard' body parts from the father. For the girls, however, this ascription has to be confirmed later in life by a second 'birth' through the rite of infibulation. We have already noted that by the stitching of their vulva, women are metaphorically sewn into the patriline. Their natural organ is replaced by a constructed one which, through the seal of agnation (the 'penis': hard qualities), transforms girls into pseudo-males in kinship terms. In this state women are autonomous persons, but inactive and unable to reproduce. The opening performed by the husband and his family, and to which the woman eventually complies, makes her incomplete (her genitals are 'untied', 'torn') so that she may act in the husband-wife pair (Strathern 1987b). They are 'women' anew in gender terms. The procedure repeats itself when a woman divorces or delivers, is resealed and opened again. She oscillates between states of being closed and open, complete and incomplete, passive and active. Every time the man penetrates a 'tight' woman to open her, also acts as a male, a gendered person.

During the various stages of the process, a woman endures physical suffering. On the different occasions, however, when interventions are performed on her genitals, it is impressed upon her that her pudenda have a tremendous importance far beyond the boundaries of her physical body. The manipulation of the female body is of primary concern to another body, i.e. that of her agnatic group and that of her husband. The validity in Douglas's formulation, also for the pastoral Somalis, should now be clear. Infibulation encloses a woman with the agnatic group but in an inferior position. Defibulation separates her from the same group. The strong ties that women have to their agnates and the difficulty of severing them must be understood not only through the juridically based relationships they retain to their own family after marriage but also through the symbolic power that infibulation has, as mediated by the sewing metaphor, in conveying significant messages of gender and kinship affiliation.

## Notes

1. This article draws upon material collected during research periods in Mogadishu, the capital, between 1983 and 1988, and upon shorter field work among nomads in Belet Weyn District in central Somalia in 1989. The people among whom the study was conducted in Mogadishu originated from various parts of Somalia. Some of them had lived in the capital for several generations, others were more or less newcomers. The data collection has been carried out within the research project '*Female Circumcision - Medical and Social Aspects*' which is part of the research collaboration programme between the Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts (SOMAC) and the Swedish Agency for Research Collaboration with Developing Countries (SAREC). My sincere thanks to Asmina Muhamud Warsame, Sidiya Musa Ahmed and Dr Faduma Haji Muhammed who have participated in the project. I am also indebted to the editors of this volume, in particular to Vigdis Broch-Due, for insightful views. Bruce Kapferer read an earlier version of the paper and offered constructive comments, so did Also Karin Norman. I am grateful to Bernhard Helander for many fruitful discussions. My thanks also to Gudrun Dahl for the drawing.
2. The term Pharaonic circumcision is derived from the belief that the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt performed similar operations on their women, which should indicate that we are dealing with a practice of great antiquity (Widstrand 1964).
3. This group is so closely associated with female infibulation that Somalia people, instead of asking whether a girl has been infibulated or not, simply say 'Has she been "given" to the [name of group] yet?'
4. The clitoris area is considered a dangerous place (*halhowle*) to touch with the knife having consequences for life-and-death and has to be removed with utmost proficiency. *Halhowle* which approximately means aorta, refers to the dorsal artery of the clitoris and if cut carelessly may lead to heavy haemorrhage and endanger the life of the girl. This term is also used when referring to other vital places of the body, for instance the region of the heart.
5. The explanation of this given by a female scholar specialising in poetry and oral tradition was that infibulation was never a debated issue among the Somalis. My informant suggested that once people begin to protest against the practice they will most probably express their feelings on the subject in poetry. There are already a few poems circulating about the agony of infibulation. One of them goes like this:  
  
Oh, beloved father, let me go  
let it (the clitoris) remain there, but let me go  
let it (the clitoris) hang there, but let me go  
even if you do not get someone to marry me  
even if you do not get camel for the bridewealth.

6. An exception here is Annie de Villeneuve's well-known description of an operation that she witnessed in Djibouti in the mid-1930s (de Villeneuve 1937).



Infibulation has also attracted the attention of anthropologically oriented psychoanalysis (Roheim 1932). However, during the last decade two books in English by Somali scholars have been published (Abdalla 1982; Dixie 1985). The first book, by a woman 'victimised' by this practice, as she herself expressed it, caused a great deal of discussion when it first appeared in exclusive circles in Mogadishu.

7. Somalis often put limejuice in sores, believing that its acidity has disinfectant properties.

8. Medically, the surgery has a number of adverse effects on the health of women and girls such as haemorrhage, infection, shock, urinary retention, dysmenorrhoea, fistulas, cysts, prolonged deliveries and others (Laycock 1950; Dixie 1986).

9. Somalis usually shave their pubic hair in order to look proper and clean. Some modern, educated women will normally not do this, claiming that they do not believe in such traditional perceptions of 'cleanliness', unless they have to go to the doctor, for instance, and then feel they have to present well-cared-for body.

10. The fact that the account is not confined to one particular locality, as the convention is in anthropological writing, is related to the kind of composite data upon which this exposition is based (note 1).

11. I am indebted to Marilyn Strathern for pointing out this specific interrelationship to me.

## 5

## Encountering Femininity: The Ontogenesis of Bedamini Male Selves

Arve Sørum

The Bedamini is an ethnic group living between the East Strickland Plain and the Great Papuan Plateau in Western Province, Papua New Guinea. This is a border zone between highland and lowland. They are a small world, traditionally reaching as far as the eye. The Bedamini number approximately 4,000 people, spread out in a variable number of longhouse communities, with an average number of about sixty inhabitants. They are primarily horticulturalists, shifting their longhouse sites every three to five years. Each longhouse is an independent political unit. It is common to find two or three longhouses situated comparatively close together, in close social contact. A spatial separation of the sexes into different sleeping quarters within the longhouse in the middle of collective living, is reflected in the social interaction between men and women generally. On the one hand, interaction flows fairly freely in daily activities; on the other, males have little knowledge of what interaction between women is about, and the men, at least, try to keep the significance of much of their own interaction hidden from the women.

For more than a decade, there has been a powerful trend in anthropology of treating cultural expressions as constitutive. They are not just seen as the media in which meanings are expressed or reflected; they themselves constitute that meaning. In humanistically oriented anthropology it has become common to hold the view that the anthropologist's construction of 'Culture' on this basis is like the construction of a bridge between two worlds. Both Geertz (1983: 36-71) and in particular Wagnier (1975: 1-17) have cogently argued that such is the nature of cultural translation. The cultural description is thought of as the result of a meeting of two cultures, a 'dialogue' in which scientific ('etic') concepts and cultural 'prejudices' are confronted with native 'emics' and ways of doing things.<sup>1</sup> I have at times spoken of cultural translation as