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Culture in Transit
— The Migration of Female Genital Excision to Europe in Euro-African Writing

ABSTRACT:
While past discussions of female genital excision concentrated on its incidence in Africa, attention of late has been shifting to the emergence of the tradition in the African diaspora. This essay examines how four authors of African descent explore the migration of female genital excision to Europe. It compares a remarkable passage in the novel Abessijnse Kronieken (Abyssinian Chronicles) by Moses Isegawa with the autobiographical writings of two anti-‘FGM’ (female genital mutilation) activists, Mutilée by Khady Koita and Desert Children by Waris Dirie, and with the novel Rebelle by Fatou Keïta. Although these authors share a critical outlook on the practice, the discursive and narrative strategies they adopt differ greatly. A close reading of the four texts reveals that Isegawa fails to contextualize adequately the practice of female genital excision; this contrasts with his three female colleagues, who do acknowledge the conventional cultural and religious discourses on female genital excision yet remain adamant in their abolitionist stance.

ALTHOUGH ABESSIJNSE KRONIEKEN/Abyssinian Chronicles (1998/2000) was received to mixed reviews, Moses Isegawa’s literary debut is undoubtedly a remarkable specimen of Euro-African creative writing. Within four years of its publication, the novel had accrued enough celebrity status to be included among Africa’s 100 Best Books of the...
Twentieth Century. Parading in this list as new kid on the block, one from the diaspora to boot, it has boldly claimed its place among such long-standing icons of African literature as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Léopold Sédar Senghor’s *Œuvre poétique* (1964), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). The novel has also earned the Uganda-born Isegawa considerable recognition in the Netherlands, his country of residence since 1990. Together with authors such as Kader Abdolah, Abdelkader Benali, Hafid Bouazza, Fouad Laroui,1 and Astrid Roemer, he is regarded as one of the major representatives of ‘migrant literature’ in the Netherlands. Isegawa’s prominence on the Dutch literary scene is particularly noteworthy since he writes in English. First published in the Netherlands in Dutch translation, his first novel and later writings have since found their way to audiences across the globe in various languages, including English. *Abyssinian Chronicles* – the manuscript’s original title has since 2000 graced the covers of UK and US editions2 – thus testifies to some of the linguistic complexities of writing and publishing in the African diaspora. If the novel’s position in African (diasporic) literatures merits further attention, I mention Isegawa’s first book here for a different reason: namely, the author’s references to female genital excision (I will justify my use of this cover term presently) and its practice in Europe at the recent turn of the millennium.

Explorations of female genital excision in both African fiction and life-writing3 are neither as rare nor as recent as one might think. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the practice has been explored in African literatures ever since the rise of the latter in the 1960s, by men and women, from the early African pioneers to contemporary writers, and from both the continent and the diaspora.4 Among the authors are the Kenyan Ngũgĩ, the Egyptian Nawal El

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1 See Fouad Laroui’s article and short story in this volume.
3 The terms ‘African fiction’ and ‘African life-writing’ are used in their broadest sense to refer to fiction and life-writing produced by African authors from the continent as well as the diaspora. The term ‘life-writing’ covers the whole spectrum of (auto)biography and refers to writing that is subjected to varying degrees of fictionalisation.