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FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING IN ỊJỌLAND: CONTEXT, PERFORMANCE, AND SONGS

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Abstract: Female genital cutting is a vexed issue which has generated a considerable body of scholarship in both the humanities and the sciences. In this study, I focus on the ritual[1] among the Ịjọ of Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region. The paper is purely a cultural analysis of the practice and not one where an argument is put forth, as it were. As such, it gives detailed attention to the performance of the tradition. It also examines some of the reasons why the practice was held in high esteem. The paper further considers some of the subjects of the songs associated with the ritual, including love, sorrow, education, identity, and the supernatural, among others. Data for the study was gathered through observation and interviews.
Keywords: female genital cutting, ibe mọ, Ịjọ, kolokuma ibe, marine spirits, Niger Delta

INTRODUCTION

Female genital cutting, noted by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "all procedures that involve the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons" has been noted as a firm practice in Africa, the Middle East, and to a lesser extent, Asia (WHO 2008: 1; see also Parker 1995: 506; Slack 1988: 443; Barrett 2014: 20). In this paper, I carry out a purely cultural analysis of the ritual among the Ịjọ. In other words, this study is a presentation of how and why female genital cutting was practiced. It is important to state that the paper is neither an examination of power dynamics in the ritual nor a historical investigation of the factors that caused the decline of the practice. Moreover, it is also not concerned with how the tradition bred sexual immorality in Ịjọland (these are all subjects for other days). For all this, some may be disappointed to find that I do not put forward an argument or make a counter-argument, as it were, in the paper.

The data for the research was gathered from observation and interviews. I first collected the songs in Gbarantoru, Gbarain ibe,[2] in 2016. At that time, I was researching Ịjọ funeral dirges at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, for my MA thesis. I further collected the same songs in Igbedi community, Kolokuma ibe, in 2018, when I was in Nigeria for fieldwork while studying traditional Ịjọ poetry for a PhD at the School of Languages and Literatures, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. The respondents were a mix of young and old women. The videotapes of the songs are deposited at the Institute of Niger Delta Studies, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Nigeria.

The Ịjọ, whose ritual of female genital cutting is the concern of this paper, are also referred to in the anglicised form Ijaw or Ịzọn. They are the predominant ethnic group in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region and the fourth largest in the country (Ukeje 2010: 25–26; Ukiwo 2007: 591). They are concentrated in the states of Bayelsa, Rivers, Ondo, Delta, Akwa Ibom, and Edo. The people are neighbours of the Urhobo, Isoko, Itsekiri, Bini, Ibibio, Ikwerre, Etche, Ogoni, and some riverine Yoruba communities. Due to the nature of the physical environment – a terrain of rivers, creeks, swamps, and lakes – in which the Ịjọ are located, their main occupations are fishing and farming. It has been said that the ecosystem of the Niger Delta region contains at least 150 species of fish and that it is one of the largest collections of fish in the world (Nyananyo & Daminabo & Aminigo 2009: 19). Internationally, the people are known for youth restiveness. Since the late 1950s, when crude oil was discovered in the Ịjọ community of Oloibiri, it has been the mainstay of Nigeria's economy. Unfortunately, the Ịjọ and other minority ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region who own the product have not seen much of the money that is taken from their land. Rather, it has bred pollution, suffering, and underdevelopment. For decades, Ịjọ youths, together with those of other minority groups, have been fighting the Nigerian government for proper compensation for the wealth taken from their region (for insightful studies of oil politics in Nigeria, see Anugwom 2011; Ejobowah 2000; Ikelegbe 2001).

Perhaps, I should also point out in this introduction the belief of the people about water spirits since some of the songs used for this study make reference to it. The spirits who live in the rivers, lakes and creeks in Ịjọland are called *bini otu* (water people). Of importance is the belief of the people that this human world with its cars, skyscrapers, and aeroplanes is replicated in the rivers and lakes. It is for this reason, according to the people, that some fishing nets are torn when fishing. It is said that the kind of life they live in there is better than the life humanity lives on land (see, for example, Horton 1962: 201–202 on the beliefs of Kalabari ibe). In the past, altars were erected and food was provided on them for the marine spirits. It is further said that they teach the womenfolk

of the community dance patterns, different hairdos, songs and attire in dreams. Put differently, it is these water spirits, the people claim, that are "associated with contemporary invention and creation" (Horton 1962: 201). Women copy them when the marine spirits carry out shows on sandbanks.

Moreover, it is the belief that some of these water spirits have earthly husbands and wives, which makes it difficult for such men and women to have partners in real life. In addition, these water spirits are more beneficent than their land counterparts, as the saying goes. As such, they are approached for children. Furthermore, they have children who come to be birthed by women on land. As noted by Benjamin Okaba & S.T.K. Appah, they are also the source of an "abundance of fish" (2013 [1999]: 152). They are said to be beautiful: they have long hair and are fair in complexion. For this, they are offered food that is seen as foreign, such as coconuts, eggs, biscuits, sugar, and sweet drinks. There are many tales about people who were thought drowned coming back after days in water to regale them with amazing events in the abode of the marine spirits. This is reflected in the traditional music and oral literature of the people, such as songs, folktales, and proverbs, among others. I now turn to the concern of this paper: female genital cutting among the Ịjọ.

FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING IN ỊJỌLAND

In the past, female genital cutting was a highly-revered practice among some Ịjọ ibe mọ before it collapsed some years ago. However, based on what was said to me by some of my respondents, it was not every ibe that practiced the ritual. For example, my respondents from Igbedi community told me it was not practiced in Egbema, Apọị (West), Gbaranmatu, and Arogbo ibe mọ. Obviously they had people from such places in the community who told them their ibe mọ did not observe such a practice. Mrs Stella Prince, a middle-aged woman from Egbema who used to sell fish in Arogbo, Apoi (West) and Gbaranmatu, in an interview in June 2020, corroborated in strong terms the statement of my earlier respondents. Regarding age range, in Oyakiri, Buseni, Ogboin, and Bumo ibe mọ, female genital cutting was sometimes done even before the child was a year old. In such ibe mọ as Epie, Oporomo, Mein, Seimbiri, Nembe, and Tuomo, a girl was cut when she had got to her teenage years. In contrast, in Tarakiri, Gbarain, Ekpetiama, Kolokuma, and Opokuma ibe mọ, and as noted of Kabowei by Marida Hollos and Philip Leis, it was done when a young woman was already pregnant (2009 [1989]: 64). Unlike infibulation or Pharaonic, which was practiced in the Horn of Africa, the Ịjọ practiced both Type 1 and Type 11 female genital cutting, although Type 1 was, by far, the more popular form (AAP

2010: 1089; Kouba & Muasher 1985: 97; Mackie 1996: 1002; for a description of the various types, see WHO 2012: 1).

Why was the ritual held in high esteem in some ibe mọ? The overriding reason was that the ritual curbed excessive sexual desire in the woman's pre- and post-marital lives. Similar comments have been made by some researchers in regard to the practice in other places in Africa (see, for example, Onadeko & Adekunle 1985: 182; Gordon 1997: 25; Mackie 1996: 1004; Althaus 1997: 132; Slack 1988: 445–446; Freymeyer & Johnson 2007: 71). In fact, one of the respondents in Kolokuma ibe (personal communication 2018) puts it this way: "Even in this community those who were not cut are more fidgety – for want of a better English parallel – than those who were cut." The Ịjọ word *ụsịa*, which I have translated as "fidgety", refers, especially in sexual context, to a scenario whereby a woman does not stay in one place, as it were. Such a woman has a high sexual drive and cannot be easily satisfied. She finds a way to derive pleasure from others even in her husband's house. In the next part of this section, I shall go on to examine the ritual as practiced in Kolokuma, Opokuma, Gbarain, and Ekpetiama ibe mọ.

I have chosen these four ibe mọ as my case study here because I am from Kolokuma and was exposed to the ritual when I was younger (up to my high school days; in fact, it has been about fifteen years since the last ritual took place in my community). In addition, the ibe mọ had identical rites concerning female genital cutting. When I was in Gbarain collecting songs of the ritual in 2016, I was asked to go back to my ibe because the two ibe mọ did exactly the same thing. I insisted, and when they started singing, I heard, apart from one or two songs, the ones that I was very familiar with. Moreover, their (the ibe mọ) settlements are close to one another.

In the past, it was unthinkable not to carry out the ritual on a young woman who had become pregnant in those four ibe mọ (a young woman could also be cut if she had not been impregnated but was judged by her mother to be getting old, as it were). She would not be told of the day she was going to be cut because she would run away from the house because of the pain. It was her mother who would meet her fellow women and tell them that she would want her daughter to be cut on such and such day. The women would never let anyone know about it. The mother of the young woman who was going to be cut would ensure that her daughter did not go anywhere on that day. She would ensure that all her daughter's appointments were cancelled but the daughter would never know what her mother had in mind. She could simply say they would leave the house at about five in the morning of that day to go to their farm. In the morning, before even the day had broken, the women would come to where the young woman was sleeping. They would grab her, take her to where she would be cut

in the compound and bring her back. There was nothing the girl could do. She could move neither her legs nor her arms: the women were too powerful for her!

When a young woman had been cut, her female friends would leave their homes to go and stay with her. It could be more than twenty girls. They would stay with her until her wound was healed properly. That means their period of stay depended on how fast the wound healed. But it was not more than a week or two. In Tarakiri and Epie ibe mo, the girls and young women would leave after a week. During their stay, it was the practice for all of them to go and farm for a few days with the mother of the one who was cut. No woman would ever think of that as an opportunity to complete work on her farm because she would undoubtedly become the centre of gossip among the womenfolk. The money for the sustenance of the girls and young women was provided by both the male lover and the mother of the one cut (just the mother if the daughter had no lover or the lover had no money). But a single person feeding several girls or women for days, especially in rural areas, was and still is no easy task. So it was the norm for relatives on the side of the lover and the one cut to cook food in big pots and take it to the home of the one cut.

Of the girls and young women, one was called *ịselegberearaụ* (literally, the one who mixes camwood). She had the responsibility of mixing camwood and rubbing it on the body of the one cut and the *komọtọbọụ* (literally, the pet child) anytime they took a bath. In many instances, she came from the side of the male lover. *Komọtọbọụ* was a little girl who was always beside the one cut. Sometimes, the two lovers had quarrels about from whose side the *komọtọbọụ* should come when she would be cut. The duties of the *komọtọbọụ* were, among others, carrying a kerosene lamp at night and walking in front of the one cut anytime the need arose, and the soap can when the one cut was walking to the riverside to take her bath.

Female genital cutting became so strong that a young man who had not impregnated a young woman, had her cut and paid the fees was not considered a *man* at all. In fact, in Kabowei ibe, in the words of Hollos and Leis, "to deliver a child without the mother being circumcised was an abomination. An uncircumcised woman cannot be buried in the village because the fertility of the earth would diminish. If the operation was not performed, it is believed that the child will be devoid of human status and will bring harm to the village" (2009 [1989]: 65). If a young woman had not been impregnated by someone and had not been cut, her mother too would become the target of insults from other women. In addition, if the younger sister of a young woman had become pregnant, then her elder sister who had not been impregnated must be cut first. The younger one would not be cut before the older one. The mother knew what

to do in situations like that. Before the younger one's pregnancy grew to the level where everyone would know, she already had the older one cut.

In the first part of this section, I pointed out that female genital cutting later became a celebration like a proper traditional marriage in Kolokuma, Gbarain, Ekpetiama, and Opokuma ibe mọ. In the beginning, when a young woman had been cut, the lover would buy a few pieces of clothing – a towel, a wrapper, some underwear, among others – which she would use for the period of the ritual. After some time, some relatives on both sides would also provide such items of clothing for the one cut. Somehow, at a point in time, something came up, known as the female genital cutting list, which contained all the things that the would-be-husband would buy for his lover (in the anthropological study by Hollos and Leis, reference is made to the lover buying "specified presents" for the one cut in Kabowei ibe (2009 [1989]: 64)).

The list was provided for the man by his in-laws. Later, a day was set aside when the lover was expected to show to the entire community whether he was able to procure all the items on the list. It was a day everyone in the community looked forward to. On the day, seated on one side of the arena were the relatives and friends of the one cut while those of the lover would sit on the other side. The one cut would sit in the middle of the two sides. After the normal oratories between the spokesmen on both sides, the friends and relatives of the lover would take the items that he had bought to the place where the one cut sat. It got to a time when the lover would not only buy all the items on the list but also things that were not on it. In fact, he would buy double each item because people would always say so-and-so got the largest of presents in the community. It became so competitive that the family of the man would ensure that their child outperformed all the previous ones. Relatives on the side of the one cut would also buy many things to give to their daughter on that day. In such a situation, it was only natural for girls and young women to envy those who became the recipients of such things. Fortunately, the way was opened for them too: just become pregnant and be cut. In this way, female genital cutting came to breed immorality as a means by which young women exploited men in those four ibe mọ. Some women, who were not ready to live in a man's home, left their lovers after the first child.

In some ibe mọ such as Tuomo, Seimbiri, Mein, and Oporomo, the ritual, especially how it was celebrated, took a different form from the manner it was done in Kolokuma, Opokuma, Gbarain, and Ekpetiama. First, more than one person was cut on a particular day. It could be from 2 to 20 girls, depending on the capability of the father. A wealthy man could add the girls in his extended family to those of his daughters and have them cut on the same day. When all the girls had been cut, they would be in a secluded room in the man's house

for three days. The first thing they were given to eat was roasted plantain. In those ibe mọ, there was a day fixed by the father when he would show to the community that he had cut his daughters.

On that day, the whole community, as well as those who heard and came from other surrounding communities, would gather to see the *ayoro mọ* (the girls newly cut) in town. The father was the one responsible for all the drinks and food on that occasion which started at night and ran through the wee hours of the following day. In the ceremony proper, all the cut girls, dressed in the proper traditional Ịjọ way, would sit in the middle of the arena with the members of the community standing or sitting on both sides. In front of each girl was a table that had a bowl on it. Their parents, elegantly dressed too, would sit somewhere between the girls. Thereafter, the husbands of some of the ones cut who had already got married by then would put money in the bowls. The money in the bowl of each girl belonged to her and not her parents. At some point in the night, all the ones cut would dance round the community. The ceremony was enlivened by dancing, singing, and drumming all through the night. I am very sure Olodiama ibe (not Olodiama West ibe) also followed the tradition of Mein, Oporomo, Seimbiri, and Tuomo by gathering several girls and cutting them on a single day. For example, Hollos and Leis point out that seven girls died on a single day after they had been cut:

> *…individuals say they heard from elders that the operation [clitoridectomy] was once performed in the village long ago, but no one in memory has done so. According to legend, seven girls died following the surgery, and this was interpreted as a sign from the water spirits that they did not want females to be circumcised*. (2009 [1989]: 64; see also Leis & Hollos 1995: 106)

The incident in Olodiama ibe in which the seven young women died is not fiction. It is still popular among the Ịjọ. In what follows, I shall consider the performance of songs of female genital cutting in Gbarain, Kolokuma, Opokuma, and Ekpetiama ibe mọ.

THE PERFORMANCE OF FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING SONGS

Female genital cutting songs in the four ibe mọ were divided into two groups. One group was sung by the girls from the home of the one cut when they were going to and from the forest to peel the bark of the two trees they used in treating the wound of the one cut. The songs in this group are lighter and

mainly on the theme of love. The subject of love is not a major concern in the other group. Songs in the other group express deeper concerns and Ịjọ religious beliefs. They were sung by young and adult women when they were going to say thank you to anybody who cooked something and brought it to the home of the one cut. When it was time for the thank-you visit in the night – at 8 pm or so – the procession of women would move out from the home of the one cut to the main road of the community. As pointed out earlier, the Ịjọ are a riverine people. Most communities are situated in places that overlook a river. In most cases, there is some distance between where the river makes contact with the sides of the community and from where houses start. Canoes are anchored on the community waterfront. The major and most important thoroughfare in the community, called tumubọlọụ in Kolokuma Ịjọ, is the one that directly overlooks the river. Very often, this main road has houses on both sides. It is a very long, spacious thoroughfare that equals the length of the community. In some instances, you will have to walk past it to get into your canoe and go to farm. It is on this road that some of the performances of oral literature genres (including female genital cutting songs) take place, in the public glare. When performances happen on the road, those whose homes are far away run to watch.

The procession would start formally on this main road. The one cut would stand in front of the women. Due to the wound in the opening of her legs, she would not stand in a position of attention. She stood in a way that the thighs would not touch each other. She also used a piece of wrapper to wrap herself from the legs to the chest. The wrapper covered her breasts. She used her right hand to hold a walking stick (until her wound was properly healed, the walking stick was always in her hands every time she stood to walk). The one cut also had camwood rubbed all over her body. Moreover, she wore beads round her ankles, wrists, and neck. Standing just in front of her in the procession would be the *komọtọbọụ* (the pet child). The little girl or pet child held a kerosene lamp that provided light in the home of the one cut. This was the lamp that provided light for the procession in the night. Then the grown-up girl, the *iselegberearaụ* (the girl who mixes camwood), with the big pot that was used to cook the food for them on her head, stood in the middle of the women, behind the one cut. They walked at a slow pace because of the one cut; she would not be able to walk fast due to the wound between her legs.

More women would join the procession as it moved on. There was no one designated as the lead singer among them. They had three to four elderly women who, in addition to having in-depth knowledge of female genital cutting songs, knew how to sing well. As they were moving, one of them sang a song. When the woman (the lead singer at this time) finished her song, the procession stopped and sang the song that was just finished by the woman. When

they were through, they moved on as another woman began singing. Anywhere they stopped to take over the song, as it were, from the lead singer, the people standing or sitting where they had got to on the road would say, "*ọ boboma-a*" or "*ọ nụa-oo*", greetings meaning "you are welcome". The procession would respond *ee* (yes) to the audience. Somebody in the procession could also say these greetings and everybody in it would respond. People neither clapped hands nor beat percussions. The procession moved slowly. The women would move in this way to the home of the person who cooked for them. While there, all of them would keep chorusing "*nụa-oo*" (thank you) several times. As expected, children were always at the back of the procession.

On the return to the home of the one cut, they would not stop at any place again, but the songs were continued to be sung. The interaction between the procession and the audience adds beauty to the performance. For example, sometimes, before the lead singer at that moment took up a song, you would hear somebody in the audience asking a woman in the procession how it was possible for her to be in the procession when she had earlier said she had a headache. One would also hear in-laws greeting their in-laws. Moreover, some would ask after the welfare of relatives and friends who were neither in the procession nor in the audience. In addition, a woman would tell another woman that her cassava farm had been submerged by the flood or the bunch of plantain she had been looking forward to cutting and giving to her in-law had been cut by a thief. From the manner in which female genital cutting songs were performed, especially the interactions between the audience and the procession, one can understand why some folklorists and anthropologists sought a performance-based definition or approach to the study of folklore (see, for example, Malinowski 1926: 29–30; Hymes 1971: 42–43; 1975: 13; Abrahams 1968: 157; Ben-Amos 1971: 4; Bauman 1975: 290). In the final section of the paper I examine some of the subjects of the songs.

FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING SONG SUBJECTS

There were many songs that people sang during the period a young woman was cut. As noted earlier, some of the songs deal with the subject of love. Others, as with most Ijọ song-poetry, express the beliefs of the people. Few express the unpleasant experiences of the unfortunate in the hands of the privileged. For example, the following song is on the subject of love:

In' agbaịowei bẹịn bo ị saị-oo-ee	My lover, come and take me
In' agbaịowei bẹịn bo ị saị-oo-ee	My lover, come and take me

Timi fa ba Ebiere bụnụgha-oo-ee	Whenever Timi is not around, Ebiere won't sleep
Timi fa ba Ebiere bụnụgha-o	Whenever Timi is not around, Ebiere won't sleep
Pabara weleke	*Pabara weleke*
Ebiere fa ba Timi bụnụgha-o	Whenever Ebiere is not around, Timi won't sleep
Pabara weleke	*Pabara weleke*
Ebiere fa ba Timi bụnụgha-o	Whenever Timi is not around, Ebiere won't sleep
Pabara weleke	*Pabara weleke*

(Armstrong 2020: 454–455)

I have used 'Timi' and 'Ebiere' in the song to represent two lovers. These two names shall be used throughout this paper. The song was sung by the girls from the home of the one cut when they were going to and coming from the bush to peel off the bark used to treat the wound in the clitoris of the one cut. As is obvious from the song, the lovers cannot be separated. Another subject expressed in the songs is melancholy, as in the song below:

In' agbaịowei Lagosị ọ mu ya ma dein baị kpọ waị bugha
In' agbaịowei Lagosị ọ mu ya ma dein baị kpọ waị bụgha
O kẹnị fị kị fị kpọ fị lẹta kpọ gẹ nị yaragha
O kẹnị dọn kị dọn kpọ dọn lẹta kpọ gẹ nị yaragha
Ị wẹnị mu bẹdị ọ koro ya bẹdị sẹ kpọ dọ dọ
Ị finmọ na kị kẹnị anga pou ya bịsa anga kpọ dọ dọ
Ị yangi opuru floụ tụọ-o
Ị yangi opuru floụ tụọ-o
Opuru floụ tọụ kpọ ị mọmọ tiẹ
Ere 'wọụ mọ bo ị barị youwo
Ere 'wou mọ bo ị barị youwo
In' agbaịowei wẹnị mu fadọụ

My lover went to Lagos but hasn't come back after two days
My lover went to Lagos but hasn't come back after two days
Even if he has died, he hasn't written a death letter to me
Even if he's sick, he hasn't written a sick letter to me
I went to lay on the bed but it's cold
I shifted to one side, but that side too was cold
My mother in-law, please cook crayfish soup

My mother-in-law, please cook crayfish soup
Cook crayfish soup but it will stand with you
Oh! weep for me, my fellow girls
Oh! weep for me, my fellow girls
My lover has gone away
(Armstrong 2020: 455–456)

In this song, the lover of the young woman has gone to a distant place, Lagos, in southwestern Nigeria, perhaps to look for money in order to cater for his family back home. In the past, Lagos was a city for which Ịjọ men often left their rural areas. Some would leave their wives or lovers and children with their parents. In Lagos, they would venture into sand business (the work involves entering the water and bringing out sand). This is one job Ịjọ men know how to do very well because the rivers in their communities have lots of sand beneath them. But they would have to go to Lagos because it required the use of much more sand than their rural communities, which meant much more money. The young woman has not heard from her lover for just two days, yet she cannot contain herself. Is her lover sick or has he died? She does not know because he has not written a letter to her to that effect. She is unable to stay in one place. Everywhere is cold for her. She is fidgety. At such times, the mother-in-law would do everything to calm her daughter-in-law. She would want to cook the daughter-in-law's favourite food, crayfish soup, as in the song above. Many Ịjọ prefer crayfish soup to any other. It is what some of them serve their guests. Unfortunately, it is seasonal, meaning you only cook it during the flood season and when the flood is beginning to recede. The daughter-in-law might be the one to tell her lover's mother what to cook, as in the song. Sometimes the young woman would tell her mother-in-law she would not eat after the food had been cooked. At other times, before the food was even ready, the young woman had told her mother-in-law that she did not have the appetite to eat, as in the song. It is as if her lover had gone away completely. She calls on her fellow girls to weep over her misfortune. The subject of sorrow of the one cut is further expressed in the song below:

In' amaran yaịndọụ nị ịn'	Ay me! my walking stick hurts me
amaran kị dọnmo!	because it's been broken!
Ine gịdẹ seidọụ nị ine	Alas, my basket hurts me
gịdẹ kị dọnmo!	because it has been damaged!
Bịbị finigha gịdẹ deri	Oh woman who weaves a basket
araụ bo tọlọmọ youwo!	without opening the mouth, weep for me!
Akparan 'wọụ wo!	Oh daughters of the home of the one cut!

Ị daụ o!	Oh my father!
Akparan ‘wọụ wo,	Oh daughters of the home of the one cut,
akparan ‘wọụ wo!	daughters of the home of the one cut!

(Armstrong 2020: 456–457)

This song expresses the excruciating pain the young woman goes through during female genital cutting. It also brings to the fore one aspect in the life of the Ịjọ: not calling the organs directly by their names and not using taboo words. Instead, euphemisms are used. To date, parents and older people do not discuss the organs of the body in the presence of children and teenagers even though this group knows these things better than their elders. Since these songs were performed in the open, other terms had to be used. *Amaran*, walking stick, refers to labia minora while *gịdẹ*, basket, is clitoris. Moreover, the mention of labia minora and clitoris in the song tells the reader the type of cutting that was done, which is Type II.

Many of the songs express the subject of sorrow, some in different ways. Some songs are on the experiences of what people pass through in the hands of others. For example, in Ịjọland, when a husband has died, it is the norm for the widow to be given to a man among her in-laws as a wife. Sometimes the family of her late husband has not taken a decision on this because there is no capable or free man, as it were, among them. During this period, different men will make advances to her, perhaps telling her they will marry her and take care of her children. However, they will not marry her; what they want is to have relations with her and dump her. She knows this. However, sometimes she may feel one of them is genuine about his intentions. She eventually gives in and is ditched, as in this song:

Ị ba bo teki mịẹnga-a?	What will I do again?
Ị ba bo teki mịẹnga-a?	What will I do again?
Duere-o!	Oh, a poor widow!
Ị ba bo teki mịẹnga-a?	What will I do again?
Orukụmọ ị nọ tuu kpọ numugha timi	For long, I wasn’t known
Wo ị lẹlẹmọ bo tuu numudọ nị	But now he has tricked me into knowing me
Wo ị dịnịmọ na bụrụ indi	I’ve been pushed by him to float
tẹịn bara tẹịn o	like rotten fish

(Armstrong 2020: 457–458)

This song also served the purpose of educating women, especially the one cut who would soon go on to live with her husband, about the ways of Ịjọ men. Any

of them could become a widow suddenly and so they needed to be wise and careful. So, it was appropriate that a song like this was sung during the period when a young woman was married. Here is another song that expresses sadness:

Mu da ị bo ye mo kị gba-a	"I shall go and come back," he said
Yọụ mu odi kiri bọ dein ya mesi-o	He has gone to Odi and stayed forty days
Mu da bo ye mo kị gba-a	"I shall go and come back," he said
Odi kiri ịn' ama-o	"Odi is my community"
Mu da bo ye mo kị gba-a	"I shall go and come back," he said
Yọụ mu odi kiri bọ dein ya mesi-o	He has gone to Odi and stayed forty days

(Armstrong 2020: 458–459)

This is one song that expresses the shame and sadness the one cut feels. It is natural for a community to have non-indigenes. Such men would impregnate a young woman of the community they are living in, and this young woman too would be cut. It may be that the man did not have the money to pay the fees and provide money for some of the things needed in the home of the one cut. In a situation like that, he would inform his in-laws that he would go to his community, get some money and come back for the ritual. When he left the community, he would not be seen again. The mother of the impregnated young woman would have to have her daughter whose lover had run away cut before she gave birth. The whole shame would be on the mother, her daughter and their relatives and friends. There were also times one would have an understanding with one's mother-in-law that she should use the little money she had or go to anyone who could lend her money and start the ritual. The lover would say he would go to his community to get some money, buy the other remaining items on the list of female genital cutting, come back and pay the debt. He would leave immediately and not be seen again, having fled as in the song above.

The subject of sadness is expressed in another way. One imagines how life would have been if it were so-and-so who gave birth to one. In most cases, the family one was born into is poor. Life is so difficult compared to the life one's friend enjoys. Such thoughts are not uncommon in Ijọ rural areas. Often you sleep in hunger, unlike your friend. When you are born into a poor family, you must learn how to behave too. There is nothing for you to brag about, as in this song:

Bọụ kị 'zi wẹrị ya dengịtimo	If it were *bọụ* fish that gave birth to me, I would be boastful
Bọụ ki 'zi wẹrị ya dengịtimo	If it were *bọụ* fish that gave birth to me, I would be boastful
Epelepele ị zidẹị nị	I won't be boastful because *epelepele* fish gave

ma degha-o	birth to me
Ụya-o ụya-o	Oh what suffering, what suffering.
I kiriki bini ama bo i dau	But I was my father's favourite,
komotọbọụ-o, komotọbọụ-o	favourite underneath the waters.
(Armstrong 2020: 458)	

This song also applies directly to the one cut. Female genital cutting, as noted earlier, was a big festive time if the parents or in-laws of the young woman had money and numerous farms. In the case of the young woman in the song above, it was a simple one. Ironically, she was the darling of her father in the land of water. The *bọụ* fish is more highly regarded than the *epelepele* fish. They are used in the song to contrast the two families. Note also the belief regarding water spirits in the song, something that was pointed out at the beginning of this paper. Here is another song that expresses belief in water spirits:

In' ẹfẹrẹ kọnmu kaịweremi-o	My breakable plate was taken and locked
Bini bolou ịyọrọaraụ ịn' ẹfẹrẹ	The woman of the water took my
kọnmu kaịweremi-o	breakable plate and locked it
Ẹfẹrẹ bị barasin-o	Free the breakable plate
Ẹfẹrẹ bị barasin-o	Free the breakable plate
Bini bolou bo tọrụ ịmgbọ mọ ya	Why can't the money in the water be used
kị ẹfẹrẹ fẹgha ya	to buy a breakable plate?
(Armstrong 2020: 459)	

The above song concerns the life of somebody whom a woman in water has locked up. She is told to release the life of the person. As claimed by people, once someone's life has been locked up, they will not be able to live a satisfying life until death. Perhaps any person they marry will die. Moreover, the money they look for in life never enters their hand. Life becomes miserable for such people. For a young child, as noted above, people say the baby is dying and coming back to life because the marine spirit has not released the life of the baby entirely to live on earth. The Ịjọ poet and playwright J.P. Clark-Bekederemo has made use of this phenomenon – a baby dying and coming back to life on a regular basis – in his poem "Abiku". In many instances, and because of the matrilineal nature of the Ịjọ, it is the mother who will look for a solution. It is also the belief of the people that not every marine spirit has a child. Therefore, it is probable that the marine spirit has locked up the life of the woman's child because she is childless or has no other one. It is no wonder the mother of the child asks the marine spirit whether she could not use the money she has to buy a child.

Furthermore, there are some songs that give the reader an idea of some of the things required for the ritual, as in the following:

Abị Timi waị bo-o	Come back, Timi
Kasa kana subo bo	Bring a basket of palm kernel chaff
Abị Timi waị bo-o	Come back, Timi
Kasa kana subo bo	Bring a basket of palm kernel chaff
Abị Timi waị bo-o	Come back, Timi
Ị ta biri bi nagha-a?	Did you not hear that your wife has been cut?
Abị Timi waị bo-o	Come back, Timi
Ị ta biri bi nagha-a	Did you not hear that your wife has been cut?
Abị Timi waị boo	Come back, Timi
Isele tini kpọ fẹ bo	Buy a tin of camwood too
Abị Timi waị bo-o	Come back, Timi
Isele tini kpo fẹ bo	Buy a tin of camwood too
Abị Timi waị bo-o	Come back, Timi
Towelị kpọ fẹ bo	Buy a towel too
Abị Timi waị bo-o	Come back, Timi
Towelị kpọ fẹ bo	Buy a towel too
Abị timi waị boo	Come back, Timi
Ị ta biri bị nagha-a?	Did you not hear that your wife has been cut?

(Armstrong 2020: 459–461)

In this song, the lover was not in the community when the young woman was cut and so he is told to come back. However, he should not forget to buy the things that are required throughout the period of the ritual such as camwood, a towel, and palm kernel chaff (used as firewood in traditional Ịjọ society).

Moreover, the ritual afforded members of a community the opportunity to know the identity of the lover of the one cut. Some young men and young women chose to keep their affairs secret in the early stages. This was why sometimes, even when the protruding stomach could no longer be hidden, people would still not know the identity of the young man who was responsible for the pregnancy. Unfortunately, the ritual would reveal something that had been a secret for months, as in the following song:

Timi mọ Ebiere mọ bụnụwarị	No one knew of Timi and
kịmị kpọ naa wẹrịmo	Ebiere's relationship
Otungbolowarị dọ	Silence was the mosquito net
Dọ, dọ, dọ	Silence, silence, silence
Otungbolowarị dọ	Silence was the mosquito net
Muguru-muguru-muguru	*Muguru-muguru-muguru*
Otungbolowarị dọ	Silence was the mosquito net
Bẹdị	Bed?
Wịnkị	*Winki*
Otungbolowarị	Mosquito net?
Yankiri-yankiri	*Yankiri-yankiri*

(Armstrong 2020: 461–462)

As shown in the song, there was silence in the mosquito net, as it were. The reduplicated onomatopoeic words *muguru-muguru* and *yankiri-yankiri* suggest the kind of sound the bodies of the lovers made in the act. *Winkị* is another onomatopoeic word that refers to the sound iron bedsteads make when one lays on the mattress, especially when making love. In the past, they were the kind of bed in vogue among the Ịjọ.

One obvious characteristic of the songs associated with the ritual is that they foreground the geographical location of the people. Expressed differently, the songs make reference to the fauna and flora of the Niger Delta region, such as the different species of fish, palm trees, and crayfish. In addition, figures of speech and sound are employed in the songs. For example, a widow who has been abandoned by a man after having relations with her is likened to rotten fish that floats on the water, something that is a common sight in the local lakes, streams, and rivers. And as earlier noted, euphemisms are used instead of calling the clitoris and labia minora directly by their names.

CONCLUSION

Female genital cutting, despite its obvious negative consequences, was a respected and popular practice among some Ịjọ ibe mọ in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region before it succumbed to pressure from Westernisation. The major reason why a woman was cut was that it controlled her sexual life before and after marriage. Even among those ibe mọ that practiced the ritual, there were some differences with regard to age, typology, and the attendant celebration. As a result of its hold on the people in the past, it would be hard to imagine the majority of women who went through the ritual telling someone that it

was a bad practice. Rather, many women still happily recall the time when it thrived. Because the ritual is no longer practiced, the attendant songs are no longer performed. As pointed out in the preceding paragraphs, some of the subjects expressed in the songs are sorrow, loneliness, the supernatural, and identity. Other songs give an idea of the items required for the ritual.

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NOTES

[1] This ritual was briefly discussed in my paper entitled "Traditional Ịjọ Poetry" in *The Literature and Arts of the Niger Delta* (Armstrong 2021).

[2] The term is normally rendered in English by the people as "clan". The plural form is ibe mọ. An ibe comprises a group of smaller communities that share strong kinship. The communities in an ibe, often thought to speak the same dialect of the Ịjọ language, are commonly founded by a man's male children (see, for example, Alagoa 2005 [1972]).

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