

# “These Things Might Be There in the Bible, But They Are Hidden” – Christian Appropriations of the Practice of Labia Elongation in Zimbabwe

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## <sup>1</sup>SHORT BIO

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## ABSTRACT

It is well documented that Christianity played a significant role in advancing discourses of modernity and in reconfiguring gender and sexual cultures in Africa. However, calls for a return to African traditional cultural practices are dominantly associated with “traditionalists” and rarely with Christians. This stems from a long discursive history of negative constructions of these practices since colonialism through institutional Christian discourses and more recently, Western hegemonic versions of feminism. Participation or non-participation in these practices was (and still is) often projected as signifying whether one is a Christian or non-Christian. While Christianity remains significant in the construction of identities in many African countries, this article troubles the illusion of a shared “Christian identity” by interrogating how Christians relate to certain practices that have historically been framed as “traditional” or “cultural” and therefore divorced from Christian values and norms. In particular, the essay draws from empirical studies done with young urban women and men in Zimbabwe on the practice of labia elongation. The ways in which participants spoke about this practice, challenge essentialist understandings and dominant representations of these so-called traditional practices. Participants took complex and contradictory positions in criticising and supporting labia elongation at different moments by invoking Christian discourses interwoven with notions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and race. Drawing from the work of poststructuralist and postcolonial feminists, the essay demonstrates how contemporary Zimbabwean urban Black Christians exercise agency in redefining this practice in relation to their own Christian identities as they take up different subject positions and navigate multiple identities connected with their lived realities.

## KEYWORDS

labia elongation; Christianity; Zimbabwe; identities; sex education; tradition

## Introduction: Christianity, Sex Education, and Tradition

As Africa continues to face the HIV and AIDS pandemic, there have been calls by some traditional leaders for a return to some African traditional cultural practices because they see HIV and AIDS as punishment for Africans for abandoning their culture.<sup>1</sup> Against this background, there has been a revival of practices such as virginity

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<sup>1</sup> Preben Kaarsholm, “Culture as cure: Civil society and moral debates in KwaZulu-Natal after apartheid,” *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 18, no.2 (2006): 89.

testing promoted as a solution to fight HIV infections as it supposedly controls sexual immorality. The danger with this is the romanticising of cultural practices that subjugate women by controlling their sexuality, when men or boys are not subjected to virginity testing practices.

In most instances, discussions around these cultural practices take either the "return to culture" or the "liberation from culture" discourses.<sup>2</sup> The former argument is dominantly associated with "traditionalists" and rarely with those constructed as Christians, who are associated with the latter. This stems from a long discursive history of negative constructions of these practices since colonialism through institutional Christian discourses and more recently, Western hegemonic versions of feminism. Christianity came as a modernising mission, with colonialism as an accompanying ally.<sup>3</sup> The overarching goal for missionaries was to replace indigenous practices with Christian practices which were presented as superior. This was achieved through the oppositional construction of tradition relational to Christianity – one of the versions of modernity. Christian missionaries attempted to denigrate most of the traditional cultural practices that marked the transition from childhood to adulthood.<sup>4</sup> These customary practices (especially those relating to sexuality) were, according to Schmidt,<sup>5</sup> "repugnant to European concepts of morality." What seems clear, which I will elaborate on in detail below, is that Christianity, with the support of colonial authorities, contributed immensely to a redefinition of African cultures and sexualities and gender relations.<sup>6</sup>

Christianity not only influenced a shift in modes of sexual expression for the colonised, especially Black African women, it also emerged as an

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<sup>2</sup> Anette Wickström, "Virginity testing as a local public health initiative: a 'preventive ritual' more than a diagnostic measure," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16, no.3 (2010): 534.

<sup>3</sup> Ezra Chitando, "Down with the Devil, Forward with Christ! A Study of the Interface between Religious and Political Discourses in Zimbabwe," *African Sociological Review* 6, no.1 (2002): 2.

<sup>4</sup> Tompson Makahamadze and Fortune Sibanda, "'Battle for survival': responses of the Seventh-day Adventist church to the HIV and AIDS pandemic in Zimbabwe," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 96, no.3 (2008): 293.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Schmidt, "Negotiated spaces and contested terrain: Men, women, and the law in colonial Zimbabwe, 1890-1939," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16, no.4 (1990): 623.

<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Tamale, "The rights to culture and the culture of rights: a critical perspective on women's sexual rights in Africa," *Feminist Legal Studies* 16, no.1 (2008): 47-69.

important site of identification for the colonised and still does for most people in postcolonial African countries as reflected in this article. Although Christianity is not presently associated with a particular social class, it is worthwhile mentioning that during colonialism it played a central role in the creation of an African elite.<sup>7</sup> This was achieved most significantly through missionaries who were the first to offer formal education to Black Africans.<sup>8</sup> This is why Christianity was seen as “an agency of social mobility” for Africans, especially during colonialism.<sup>9</sup> To demonstrate this shift in social status in that colonial context, the Zimbabwean middle-class “rejected tradition and custom in favour of modernity.”<sup>10</sup> Partly, this was to show that they had progressed more than their uneducated counterparts. More significantly, assuming this position was more connected with Christian teachings in missionary schools, which sought to denounce African traditions.

Writing from a historical South African context, Erlank<sup>11</sup> observes that, in the twentieth century, attitudes by Black South Africans towards sexuality matters were largely dependent on whether one was a Christian or non-Christian. Nonetheless, even among African Christian communities themselves, ideas on sexuality tended to be distinctly framed around one’s social class. Prior to the Christian influence, literature suggests that discussions about sexual experimentation and sexual pleasure were acceptable within various African cultures.<sup>12</sup> For instance, the practice of non-penetrative “thigh sex” among adolescents was an acceptable practice among the Xhosa and the Zulu.<sup>13</sup> However, this practice became less common because of its “immoral and un-modern connotations”<sup>14</sup> that were not in tandem with Christian ideals. It must also be noted that missionaries sought to ban traditional initiation schools which were the main transmitters of sexuality education and promoters of sex related cultural practices such as circumcision. They

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<sup>7</sup> Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmí, *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western Gender Discourse* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Michael West, *The rise of an African middle class: colonial Zimbabwe, 1898-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> West, *The rise of an African middle class*, 60.

<sup>10</sup> West, *The rise of an African middle class*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Natasha Erlank, “Plain clean facts and initiation schools: Christianity, Africans, and sex education in South Africa, c. 1910-1940,” *Agenda* 18, no.62 (2004): 77.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Peter Delius and Clive Glaser, “Sexual socialisation in South Africa: A historical perspective,” *African Studies* 61, no.1 (2002): 27-54.

<sup>13</sup> Delius and Glaser, “Sexual socialisation in South Africa,” 33-4.

<sup>14</sup> Erlank, “Plain Clean Facts,” 78.

argued that these initiation schools promoted "improper sexuality and obscenity."<sup>15</sup> While some young Christian converts found themselves withdrawing their participation in initiation ceremonies as an expression of devotion to their new religion,<sup>16</sup> to a greater extent, missionaries faced resistance from the communities in which circumcision was predominantly practised. This prompted some Christian churches to create alternative Christian initiation schools with the intention of stopping Christian boys from taking part in traditionally run circumcision schools. It can be argued that this was an attempt, not only to separate Christians from non-Christians, but to construct Christian initiation schools as modern and distinctly different from those run by "traditionalists." The difference was seen in the reconfiguration of the sexuality education within these Christian initiation schools, which was now delivered in moralist ways and became less and less sexual over time.<sup>17</sup>

While what I have discussed so far presents precolonial and colonial constructions of cultural practices within Christian discourses, current Pentecostal Christian teachings still emphasise premarital abstinence, which arguably signifies a "break with the past" and an integral component in the creation of a modern personhood.<sup>18</sup> Some scholars suggest that these teachings continue to appeal to "upwardly mobile [Christian] women" who are educated, from urban backgrounds, and are in the upper economic social ladder. Implied in these authors' conclusions is that the conservative Christian sexual teachings have little to no resonance with rural low-class uneducated women. This essay aims to interrogate such arguments that seem to reproduce rather than challenge essentialist and binary constructions of identities. In particular, the article foregrounds the argument that Africans continue to exercise their agency to reshape Christianity even in contemporary postcolonial contexts. Deploying discourses on Christianity, I aim to demonstrate how the current African context Pentecostalism appears to produce "rigid moralities about sexuality" for its members, yet also showing "how these

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<sup>15</sup> Erlank, "Plain Clean Facts," 78.

<sup>16</sup> Mercy A. Oduyoye, "Human rights and social justice: A theological reflection on Christian social teaching from 1966-1976," *RELIGIONS: A Journal of Nigerian Association for the study of Religion* 2, no.2 (1977): 76-7.

<sup>17</sup> Erlank, "Plain Clean Facts," 79.

<sup>18</sup> Astrid Bochow and Rijk van Dijk, "Christian Creations of New Spaces of Sexuality, Reproduction, and Relationships in Africa: Exploring Faith and Religious Heterotopia," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42 no.4 (2012): 325-44.

rigidities produce new fascinations and alternative positions at the same time.”<sup>19</sup>

The article draws from an empirical study conducted with young urban Shona women and men in Harare, Zimbabwe, to understand how they constructed their identities around the practice of labia elongation.<sup>20</sup> Much of the existing literature about this practice is from Uganda,<sup>21</sup> Rwanda,<sup>22</sup> Lesotho,<sup>23</sup> and Mozambique.<sup>24</sup> Indications from these studies are that labia elongation is the way through which women conform to cultural and marital expectations. This literature also associates the practice with enhanced sexual pleasure, although there are contradictions in terms of whose sexual pleasure improves – those of men or those of women? In the Zimbabwean context, some White male historians, anthropologists, and medical doctors wrote about labia elongation among the Shona during and shortly after the colonial era, producing limited narratives about this practice,<sup>25</sup> while it is unclear who provided them with this knowledge. For example, one of these authors wrote that labia elongation was done to prepare a girl’s body “to receive the man,” adding that “in no way [was] it intended as a form of sexual excitation.”<sup>26</sup> From this, it is unclear whether the author implied that the practice has no association with sexual pleasure in general or female sexual pleasure in particular. There are suggestions that in the past, husbands who married women without elongating their labia would send them back to their families, which is why girls were forced by their family

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<sup>19</sup> Bochow and Van Dijk, “Christian Creations,” 329.

<sup>20</sup> Labia elongation is a process that involves the massaging and pulling of the inner labia of the vagina, using the thumb and index finger, sometimes after applying certain herbal oils or powder to ease the stretching process.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Sylvia Tamale, “Eroticism, sensuality and ‘women’s secrets’ among the Baganda,” *IDS bulletin* 37, no.5 (2006): 89-97.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Josefina Larsen, “The social vagina: labia elongation and social capital among women in Rwanda,” *Culture, health & sexuality* 12, no.7 (2010): 813-26.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Mathabo Khau, “Exploring sexual customs: Girls and the politics of elongating the inner labia,” *Agenda* 23, no.79 (2009): 30-7.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Guillermo Martínez Pérez, Esmeralda Mariano, and Brigitte Bagnol, “Perceptions of Men on Puxa-Puxa, or Labia Minora Elongation, in Tete, Mozambique,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 52, no.6 (2015): 700-9.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. for example, John Williams, “Labial elongation in the Shona,” *The Central African Journal of Medicine* 15, no.7 (1969): 165-6.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Gelfand, *The genuine Shona: Survival values of an African culture* (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1973), 169.

members to engage in this practice, even if they were Christians.<sup>27</sup> Zimbabwean scholarly literature on this practice remains limited, which makes it difficult to ascertain how widespread this practice is in the country. However, discussions about this practice are common on social media platforms such as closed women's Facebook groups, and some women's rights activists' personal blogs,<sup>28</sup> which may not be seen as proper sources of intellectual knowledge. In the following sections, I present findings on how participants in my study framed themselves in relation to labia elongation and, to a lesser extent, male circumcision,<sup>29</sup> but first I reflect on the methodological and theoretical approaches I used.

## Research Process, Theoretical and Analytical Focus

In selecting research participants for my study, the characteristics I was interested in included their age,<sup>30</sup> gender, ethnicity,<sup>31</sup> and their middle-class<sup>32</sup> status. Their religious affiliation was not among the characteristics I was looking for, yet (Pentecostal) Christianity emerged as a significant defining identity for most participants as I engaged them in conversations through focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews. In total, I engaged with 28 participants (18 female and 10 male) through focus groups. I then conducted ten in-depth interviews with women only, six of whom participated in the focus groups. I also need to state that the women who participated in this study were not selected based on whether they had undergone the practice, and neither

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<sup>27</sup> Mavis Muguti and Nomatter Sande, "Women's Sexualized Bodies: Dealing with Women's Sexual Autonomy in Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe," in *The Bible and Gender Troubles in Africa*, ed. Joachim Kügler, Rosinah Gabaitse, and Johanna Stiebert (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2019), 185-201.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. for example, Betty Makoni, "Labia elongation is female genital mutilation type 4 – harmful to girls," personal blog, <http://muzvarebettymakoni.org/labia-elongation-is-female-genital-mutilation-type-4-harmful-to-girls/>.

<sup>29</sup> While my PhD study intended to focus exclusively on the practice of labia elongation, male circumcision emerged from the participants as a male version of genital modification. This is why my analysis will also refer to this practice.

<sup>30</sup> My participants were in their 20s and 30s.

<sup>31</sup> My sample was limited to those who identified as Shona. The Shona are considered the largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe as they are said to account for 82% of the total population. However, the Shona as a sociolinguistic category is made up by various sub-ethnicities, notably the Karanga, Manyika, Zezuru, Korekore, and Ndaou.

<sup>32</sup> Because "middle-class" is a contested category, in the context of this essay I use it in its relative and loose sense to refer to people who are both educated (at least to the level of a first degree) and salaried professionals (or children of professionals) who stay in medium to low density residential suburbs.

did I select men on the basis that their wives or girlfriends had elongated labia. However, these details sometimes emerged during our conversations when some women would disclose their labial status. The inclusion of men in a study about a female practice was motivated by arguments that gender is a relational category, and therefore “to study women in isolation perpetuates the fiction that...the experience of one sex has little or nothing to do with the other.”<sup>33</sup> Prior conversations before my study indicated that labia elongation, though a female practice, was done for men’s benefit. Hence, it was also important to capture men’s views regarding this practice.

I took an inductive approach where I treated those who participated in the research as producers of knowledge and authorities about the social worlds they construct.<sup>34</sup> With this, I mean that inasmuch as I started off by focusing specifically on the practice of labia elongation, I allowed the research participants to set the agenda and incorporate themes and issues which seemed significant to them and which ultimately influenced the direction that the research took.

Theoretically, my study was influenced by poststructuralist feminism, which attempts to theorise the relationship between meaning and subjectivity by placing emphasis on the importance of language, discourse, and other signifying practices.<sup>35</sup> Influenced by Foucault, post-structuralist feminists argue that discourses are multiple and vary in authority. As such, discourses offer different subject positions that women can take up, which arise from “competing [and] potentially contradictory ways of giving meaning to the world.”<sup>36</sup> Women may relate with and “conform to traditional discursive constructions of femininity or they can resist, reject, and challenge them.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, individuals are not passive pawns of powerful institutional or cultural discourses.

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<sup>33</sup> Joan Scott, “Deconstructing equality-versus-difference: Or, the uses of poststructuralist theory for feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no.1 (1988): 32.

<sup>34</sup> Emmanuel Mayeza, “Playing gender in childhood: how boys and girls construct and experience schooling and play in a township primary school near Durban” (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> Nicola Gavey, “Feminist Poststructuralism and Discourse Analysis,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 13 (1989): 459-75.

<sup>36</sup> Gavey, “Feminist Poststructuralism,” 464.

<sup>37</sup> Gavey, “Feminist Poststructuralism,” 464.

The Foucauldian discourse analytical framework guided my analysis because it allows one to “identify the ideological and power effects of discourse.”<sup>38</sup> Drawing from the Foucauldian genealogical discourse analytical steps developed by Carabine,<sup>39</sup> I was particularly attentive to the interrelationship between discourses; absences and silences; resistances and counter-discourses; the effects of the discourse; and contextualising the material in the power/knowledge networks of the period. I attempted to analyse how and why participants position themselves in relation to “popular and influential discourses” of gender and sexuality.<sup>40</sup> I also paid attention to the shifting subject positions that young women and men took up during the different interviews. I took note that subjective positions are linked to gender scripts informing what is framed as appropriate “masculine and feminine norms” for people of a particular “background, culture, ethnicity, religion, and class [which] then play into the membership categories that they perceive they belong to.”<sup>41</sup> In my focus on Christian identities in this essay, I try to show how these are constructed in quite complex ways as they intersect with other significant identities. As I present findings, I sometimes quote extensively from what participants said to demonstrate how their positions shifted precariously within focus group discussions and even in individual interviews. To ensure anonymity, the names of participants appearing in this essay are all pseudonyms.

## **Pentecostal Churches, Bridal Showers, and Labia Elongation**

I introduce the notion of bridal showers<sup>42</sup> as important contemporary urban feminine sites of sex education and initiation platforms that mark

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<sup>38</sup> Vivien Burr, *Social Constructionism* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 18.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Carabine, “Unmarried motherhood 1830-1990: A genealogical analysis,” in *Discourse as data: A guide for analysis*, eds. Simeon Yates, Stephanie Taylor, and Margareth Wetherell (London and Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2001), 267-310.

<sup>40</sup> Rob Pattman, “Researching interviews, braais and diaries and the gendered performances of young men in South Africa and Zimbabwe, and setting agendas for HIV/AIDS education,” in *Society in Focus-Change, Challenge and Resistance: Reflections from South Africa and Beyond*, eds. Lindy Heinecken and Heidi Prozesky (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 272-89.

<sup>41</sup> Helen Cahill, “Approaches to understanding youth well-being,” in *Handbook of children and youth studies*, eds. Joanna Wyn and Helen Cahill (Singapore and London: Springer, 2015), 95-113.

<sup>42</sup> Bridal showers are celebratory urban parties organised for women who are about to wed, and normally take place a week or two before the white wedding. They become sites of sex education or initiation for a soon-to-be bride.



the transition from being a single to a married woman.<sup>43</sup> A bridal shower represents “a new sanitised, urban version of girls’ initiation” introduced by middle-class urban women “to avoid the dangers of initiation ceremonies becoming too traditional.”<sup>44</sup> What is more significant, however, from personal observations, is the increasing role that the church takes in organising these parties as a platform in which female church elders take in educating the soon-to-be bride on how to conduct herself as a proper Christian wife, replacing paternal aunts who traditionally performed this role. It has become very common in Zimbabwean churches (through women’s groups) to host bridal showers for its female members. Even in cases where the relative or friends of the bride organise the party, they might even invite a female pastor or a pastor’s wife from her church to give a speech during the party proceeding. The role of the church in contemporary feminine sites of sex education, such as bridal showers, could contribute to scholarly debates, yet it remains an unexplored area especially in Zimbabwe.

One of the female participants in my study, Tanya, who married a pastor, had her bridal shower organised by women in her church. She recounted how she was taught to “balance the work of God, to balance being a mother, being a wife, [and] even to handle myself [sexually] in the bedroom.” She said she was also urged to “enjoy sex” because it was God’s “covenant” and “the only special thing between a wife and a husband.” Having attended one bridal shower where the bride-to-be and other women present were encouraged to elongate their labia, I was keen to know whether this topic featured in my participant’s party, to which she responded:

Nobody even mentioned it [laughs] at the kitchen tea [party]. [Laughs] No one ever said that, maybe they said it and I missed it or what, but no one

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<sup>43</sup> While bridal showers are for women, there are also bachelor’s parties for men about to get married, although these are not as common as bridal showers. When they occur, they are organised by male friends, while pastors are rarely invited. I did not focus on bachelor’s parties, because from interviews I conducted with men about how they know about labia elongation they did not mention these as platforms through which they learn about this practice. Instead, they mentioned the internet and peers as their sources of information on labia elongation. However, I must add that some female participants complained that, while women at bridal showers were encouraged to sexually please their husbands, men were not subjected to similar teachings at bachelor’s parties where all they do is “drink beer and braai meat.”

<sup>44</sup> Gisela Geisler, *Women and the remaking of politics in Southern Africa: Negotiating autonomy, incorporation, and representation* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2004).

ever told me that at the kitchen tea. I think churches don't [teach this]; most churches are silent about such things though they know that it's important or that men like it, or that some women in church actually already have them, but I [think] they do it outside the church, because I personally haven't seen any church where they talk about it except recently.

When I asked her why she thought most churches do not teach about this practice, she said it was because they believe that it is "done in the name of tradition, [therefore] it's not holy-like." Interestingly, she told me that her husband in one of the ladies' church meetings had encouraged women to elongate their labia which aroused "a lot of interest" among the ladies from this church. Contributing to these women's interest and delight, it seems, is the idea that a male pastor, and a religious figure, was endorsing a traditional practice often constructed as ungodly in dominant Christian discourses, yet quite significant to most of them.

Following this conversation, and upon Tanya's invitation, I had an opportunity to attend a belated bridal shower organised for a recently wed bride in their church. Interestingly this bridal shower was held in the same church building where Sunday church services are conducted.<sup>45</sup> Tanya, as the pastor's wife, assigned the vice chairwoman of their women's fellowship group to teach the new bride about how to transition into marital life where she was expected to satisfy her husband sexually. The vice chairwoman (whom I was informed is of Malawian origin)<sup>46</sup> told the women present that "our father" (referring to their pastor, Tanya's husband), had asked older women in church to teach younger women about labia elongation and its benefits. She encouraged women present to engage in this practice if they had not done so, adding that elongated labia would help to clip "nhengo yababa" (daddy's part), implying penis, stopping it from constantly slipping out of the vagina. She added that elongated labia were significant because it enhanced sexual pleasure for

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<sup>45</sup> Normally bridal showers are held in houses. This was the first time I had attended a bridal shower held in a church building.

<sup>46</sup> Although it emerged in my study that most women in Zimbabwe had undergone labia elongation, there was a suggestion that this practice had been popularised by older women of Malawian and Mozambican origin who are said to be more knowledgeable about this since they attend cultural initiation schools. Emerging from conversations with other participants were stories that Malawian and Mozambican women have established "sex academies" in some highdensity suburbs where they teach women how to spice their sexual lives including how to pull one's labia effectively within a short period. Women will then pay for these services.

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the husband. She reminded them that a “woman’s vagina should not be like that of a girl,” and therefore elongated labia brought that difference. So, in this context, elongating one’s labia was very explicitly constructed as differentiating a girl from a woman, who was presumably deemed sexual. She ended the topic by offering her services to show those who wanted to do it, about how to do it.

Despite witnessing this Christian led bridal shower, the other women I interviewed could not agree whether Pentecostal Christian churches teach or should teach about labia elongation. However, the main position they took was that they “don’t normally teach” this specific subject and sexuality issues in general, especially in public events such as kitchen parties. One of the women, Chenai, explained that because sexuality and labia elongation were “intimate [and] private things,” only those women who were about to get married and those already married were taught about these individually and in private and by specialists in the area.

Others indicated that in the few cases where young women were taught about labia elongation by religious figures, it was often done in non-sexualised ways despite the fact that they are already adults. Ruva, another female participant, indicated that she once attended a single-women meeting at their church when she was 26 years old. A female church elder who was leading the meeting told the young women to elongate their labia as that would help them to urinate in a “smart way without splashing urine all over the toilet seat.” When I asked Rudo whether they had responded to this elder, she said, with laughter, that they kept quiet. She added that while the young women in the meeting did not openly question what they were told, most knew that what the church elder had taught them about labia elongation “was a lie.” This was an indication that young women can act ignorant of sexuality issues in front of prospective suitors, teachers, or parents who construct themselves as authorities on sexual knowledge.<sup>47</sup> In this case, the assumption by the church leader was that, since these young women were still unmarried, they have no prior knowledge of sexuality matters from other sources of sex education including traditional initiation schools, family, and peers. This is tied to Christian discourses em-

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<sup>47</sup> Abigail Harrison, “Hidden love: Sexual ideologies and relationship ideals among rural South African adolescents in the context of HIV/AIDS,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 10, no.2 (2008): 175-89.

phasising chastity before marriage. This, however, problematises churches as sites of sex education because they continue to impart knowledge that does not match the realities of their congregants.

## Defying Creation? The Bible and its Position on *Mabhaibheri* (Elongated Labia)

As the previous section demonstrated, there was no consensus about whether Pentecostal Christian churches allow teachings about labia elongation and whether this practice is against Christian norms, because of its association with culture and tradition. Nonetheless, some of the participants invoked biblical discourses to justify labia elongation, although this often took complex and contradictory forms. Before discussing the appropriations of labia elongation by Christians, it is worth mentioning that among the numerous metaphorical names that participants gave to elongated labia,<sup>48</sup> was "mabhaibheri," a local Shona term loosely translated to mean "Bibles." In other words, the folds that characterise the protruding extended labia are said to resemble pages of the Bible.

In this section, I wish to focus on the arguments and counter arguments that emerged from women and men, after some argued that labia elongation interfered with the natural order of things, a concern significantly framed in religious terms. In my initial conversations with some women, they indicated that women who undergo labia elongation have "no clue about what the Bible says," which reiterates other findings that this practice and female genital mutilation are not backed by biblical scriptures.<sup>49</sup> Although noting that the practice is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, other participants even quoted Bible verses to support labia elongation. In the excerpts below, taken from separate interviews I had with Tanya and Rudo, who are both married women, they both argued that labia elongation was in line with biblical teachings, although they voiced their opinions with traces of doubt.

Tanya: I'm not so sure if it [labia elongation] is satanic or if it is godly (laughing) about why church people don't talk about it. But I guess, I

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<sup>48</sup> The euphemist names given to elongated labia varied but were linked to their physical appearance (for example "number elevens," *nzeve* [ears], "extended family," *mabhaibheri* [Bibles]), or their purpose – *maketeni* (curtains), *zvidhori* (dolls), "daddy's toys," and *madhoiri* (doillies).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Muguti and Sande, "Women's Sexualized Bodies," 193.

guess it's because that it is not mentioned in the Bible, because in the Bible you don't hear it explicitly. You hear of girls that they are, they were prepared...like in the book of Esther that they [women] took like a year preparing to go and parade themselves before the King and you wouldn't really know that for that year what exactly will they be preparing. You might be tempted to think that maybe they were being inspected of all those things like elongated labia but it's not written, so you wouldn't really know whether it is so acceptable, is it biblical? But...why I think it wouldn't be sinful to do it, is [that the] Bible respects the fact that as a wife you should [do what your husband wants]. Just like the husband is commanded to love his wife, the woman is commanded to respect and submit to the husband, so if the husband thinks that he wants them [elongated labia] on his wife, the wife can go out of their way to have them. So I guess it's not out of line [with biblical teachings].

Rudo: [W]hat happens in churches is that they say that one thing that you must value most if you are a married woman, you must value your husband. So what your husbands wants, that's what you want, that's what you do meaning that it is not a [biblical] teaching that is done openly that do so-so-so and do this because maybe another man doesn't like it.

The fact that the practice of labia elongation is not explicitly stated in the Bible could be the reason behind some churches' silences around it, especially those who follow the doctrine that "we speak where the Bible speaks and become silent where the Bible is silent."<sup>50</sup> However, what is most significant in this context is the way these two women justify labia elongation by drawing from biblical discourses around husband-wife relationships which, as they demonstrate, are characterised by unequal power relations. It has been demonstrated in other studies that "in some cases the Bible is unfortunately evoked to support the superiority of men and the subordination of women."<sup>51</sup> What we see in the above narratives, is how women (and not men) employ biblical discourses that support female submission,<sup>52</sup> which reinforce rather than challenge female subordination. The implication is that a good Christian wife must always do what the husband *wants* and as the Bible *commands*. What this also highlights is the reification and deification of the Bible as a powerful person, the same way "culture" is also often personified by participants in relation to gender and sexuality. Often, discourses on "culture" and the

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<sup>50</sup> Francis Machingura and Paradzai Nyakuhwa, "Sexism: A hermetical interrogation of Galatians 3:28 and women in the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 8, no.2 (2015): 94.

<sup>51</sup> Machingura and Nyakuhwa, "Sexism," 95.

<sup>52</sup> These are based on the biblical verses, Ephesians 5:22 and Colossians 3:18.

Bible are used to emphasise and justify female submission, a clear indication of what has been theorised as an alignment of discourses of tradition and Christianity, especially in postcolonial countries like Zimbabwe.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, this stands in stark contrast to colonial discourses which constructed the two in oppositional ways.

My findings seem to support the argument that Black African Christians selectively appropriate dominant Christian messages and in the process identify "possibilities for creative agency in the midst of constraints."<sup>54</sup> Whereas, what the two female participants quoted above, affirms dominant discourses of a shared Christian identity (as Christian wives) in the passage below, I illustrate how religion was raised by other participants to critique labia elongation around discourses of individualist self-improvement and agency. I demonstrate how the idea of the *Creator* arose in the focus group I conducted with men where labia elongation was constructed by others as a practice that undermines the authority and expertise projected on to *the* Creator. This followed an argument between Masimba and Ras, which was provoked by a question about whether labia elongation ought to be promoted. Taurai then draws an analogy, immediately supported by Ras, between labia elongation and going to the gym to build muscle, or getting circumcised, constructed as male versions of "working" one's nature in relation to one's body.

Masimba: Personally, the way I see it is that, nature, if a person was created normal [without elongated labia], there is nothing to add or subtract.

Ras: Were you born circumcised? (Taurai laughs)

Masimba: What I am saying is (Taurai laughs) whoever...

Ras: Let's talk guys, is there a man who is born circumcised? (Masimba: No, wait, wait let me finish.) So why are they encouraging circumcision?

Masimba: I am saying that the Creator, when he created humankind, he created something that is perfect, a human being, and you can't add or subtract anything from it. When a human was created, it was perfect, but we (Taurai: We are adding on), it's now our own thinking, we think

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<sup>53</sup> Rob Pattman, "The beer drinkers say I had a nice prostitute but the church goes talk about things spiritual: Learning to be men at a teachers' college in Zimbabwe," in *Changing men in Southern Africa*, ed. Robert Morrell (Durban: University of Natal & Zed Press, 2001), 225-38.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Kollman, "Classifying African Christianities, Part Two: The Anthropology of Christianity and Generations of African Christians," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 40, no.2 (2010): 118-48.

differently. We are thinking that what we are doing has a benefit or whatever.

Taurai (interjecting): Masimba, Masimba, why do you go to gym? Why do you go to the gym?

Masimba: What?

Taurai: Why do you go to the gym?

Ras: If you were created perfectly?

Masimba: To change my appearance.

Taurai: Why do you want to change what God has created as perfect?

Obert: No, going to the gym is not to go and change, it's to...

Taurai & Ras: You change! You change!

Masimba: (chuckles) Yes, I change, but the change...

Obert: It's for healthy reasons...

Sam: I personally feel that natural things taste good just as they are...

People now want to put spices, but natural is the best, so people should just be as God created them.

Taurai: Nothing is added, herbs or anything when pulling labia, it's the same with you, you just lift weights and your muscle grows.

In the above excerpt, going to the gym in this case is on the one hand presented as a male activity, while situated around versions of middle-class masculinities and discourses of self-improvement on the other hand.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, arguments in favour of labia elongation and male circumcision are both secular and individualistic which render people's bodies as projects on which to *work* and *improve on*, from where the Creator ended, through their own actions. Such self-improvement discourses and practices seem to resonate with key features of modernity, yet, ironically deployed by some participants to justify a traditional cultural practice. The reason why men alluded to male circumcision is against the background that currently Zimbabwe is one of the countries in Southern Africa promoting it as an HIV prevention strategy. The circumcision campaigns are, however, not exclusively framed within health discourses, but also in discourses of modernity and sexuality. For example, medical circumcision is presented as desirable because it supposedly limits the likelihood of premature ejaculation, while also carrying connotations of being fashionable and wise.

Just like men in the conversation presented above, some women, who identified as Christian, also drew analogies of applying make-up and trimming eyebrows to justify the practice of labia elongation, at the same

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<sup>55</sup> Hannah Farrimond, "Beyond the caveman: Rethinking masculinity in relation to men's help-seeking," *Health* 16, no.2 (2012): 208-25.

time deploying a discourse of creation as exemplified in the following response:

Chido: [T]he issue is, it's not all about that God created me without them [elongated labia]; if it was like that, people would not be applying those Black Opal,<sup>56</sup> people would not be trimming their eyebrows, because you were not created [like that]. God created you with all those eyebrows, so why are you removing them, but it's all about what people are encountering in their day-to-day lives. Even in churches, people would not be wearing trousers, people would be walking around naked because we were created naked.

Like the men's accounts discussed above, Chido seems to construct labia elongation in terms of its aesthetic value,<sup>57</sup> just like applying make-up, or wearing clothes, supposedly to improve from where God left off. This seems to support the "interplay between modernity and religion"<sup>58</sup> since the colonial era and how Christianity operated as one of the idioms of colonial modernity. For Coly,<sup>59</sup> "the modern and civilised body is a religious (Christianised) body." In the light of these observations, my participants' invocations of religion appear to be linked to their affirmations of their Christian and middle-class identities. For example, the gym and muscle building analogies to labia elongation, which made such a powerful impact in the men's group discussion, are reaffirmed by Chido's own feminised analogies (of trimming eyebrows and applying Black Opal) which appear to signify middle-class femininity.

The support and justification of traditional practices such as labia elongation, specifically by my participants and more generally, Black African women, in some way demonstrate their "silent struggles against colonialism and postcolonial forces including religion, which [were] aimed at imposing a 'modern' view on sexual behaviour."<sup>60</sup> Yet, not always does this imply "struggles" against religion and modernity. In other contexts, there is an affirmation of both, summoned to signify modern

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<sup>56</sup> This is a range of make-up products popular with Black African women.

<sup>57</sup> Bridgette Bagnol and Esmeralda Mariano, "Politics of naming sexual practices," in *African Sexualities: A Reader*, ed. Sylvia Tamale (Cape Town, Dakar, Nairobi, and Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2011), 271-87.

<sup>58</sup> Ayo Coly, "Un/clothing African womanhood: Colonial statements and postcolonial discourses of the African female body," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 33, no.1 (2015): 18.

<sup>59</sup> Coly, "Un/clothing African womanhood," 18.

<sup>60</sup> Bagnol and Mariano, "Politics of Naming," 26.



rather than traditional appropriations of labia elongation, and to accentuate their middle-class femininities.

However, I wish to return to Chido's remark that people's participation in (or support for) some of these practices is "all about what people are encountering in their day-to-day lives," since it requires elaboration. In my conversations with women, most of whom were married, they seemed to be of the opinion that when one elongated her labia, this limited the chances of her male partner becoming promiscuous. This is because a significant number of participants associated labia elongation with enhanced male sexual pleasure. In other words, labia elongation was perceived not only as a practice but a strategy that women use to control men's sexual behaviour. This is significant in the wake of HIV and AIDS that is also infecting and affecting Christians.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, some women appeared to embrace male circumcision (despite coming from non-circumcising communities) which they associated with their own female pleasure and better penile hygiene. Hence, in this context, participants suppressed their ideal Christian identities, choosing to highlight that they were also desiring sexual beings who encounter the same struggles as non-Christians. Although most Christian churches still shy away from discussing sex education issues or cultural practices, marital challenges such as high divorce rates and health complications are realities that confront even Christians.<sup>62</sup> This could explain why some Christian pastors and leaders now exercise some flexibility by speaking in support of these practices even if the doctrine of the churches they represent remains rigid.

## **The Shifting Christian Identities in Relation to Varying Feminine Subjectivities**

What I have highlighted is the issue of participants' agency through framing labia elongation in particular ways and how they negotiated their identities in complex and sometimes contradictory ways to demonstrate that human beings are "site[s] and subjects" of multiple discourses.<sup>63</sup> As people engage in processes of identity construction, they "can only

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<sup>61</sup> Mike Kesby, "Participatory diagramming as a means to improve communication about sex in rural Zimbabwe: A pilot study," *Social Science & Medicine* 50, no.12 (2000): 1723-41.

<sup>62</sup> Muguti and Sande, "Women's Sexualized Bodies," 186.

<sup>63</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminist practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

identify their 'own' interests in discourse by becoming the subject of particular discourses." Thus, the way participants spoke about labia elongation was not just about how they perceived this practice, but represented "a staking of identities"<sup>64</sup> against an array of possible femininities and masculinities. In certain instances, participants were constructing labia elongation as a cultural practice but in ways which did not make them appear traditional or cultural when they associated themselves with it. In particular, this is evident in how they invoked Christian religious discourses to either justify or critique labia elongation. Others emphasised discourses of self-improvement to critique dominant Christian discourses which may construct labia elongation as cultural, and therefore "unchristian," since it was going against the Creator. The positions they took, I argue, were in many instances a demonstration of how significant this practice is in their lives even though they identify as Christians.

In this section, I wish to demonstrate that identities and subject positions are never static nor coherent, but are contradictory and always in motion, since they are always (re)constructed in relation to the prevailing social context and multiple social categories in which individuals place themselves. Poststructuralist feminists note that

many women acknowledge the feeling of being a different person in different social situations which call for different qualities and modes of femininity...contradictory and precarious but...can introduce the possibility of political choice between modes of femininity in different situations and between the discourses in which they have their meaning.<sup>65</sup>

I trace the shifting positions of one of the female Christian participants that I interacted with in a focus group discussion, an interview, and other informal conversations. When I initially communicated with her with a text message, requesting her to participate in my research, while expressing interest to be part of the research, she indicated that she felt labia elongation was "altering God's creation [and] it's abuse." She then asked whether I personally supported the practice. When I evaded the question, she then specifically asked if I had undergone elongation. When I indicated that I had not, she was quick to say that "most of those

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<sup>64</sup> Pattman, "Beer Drinkers Say," 235.

<sup>65</sup> Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 86.

[women] who think it's important are uneducated." Reflecting on this, one can argue that she was presenting herself (and even myself) as educated and empowered women, thus disassociating us from the practice she constructed as a source of "abuse" and against Christianity. However, months after this conversation, when I asked her during an interview why some women were not keen on pulling their labia, she pointed out that some women

think it is some form of abuse, that why should you pull yourself? Why should you try to be something that you are not? If God wanted these things [labia] to grow long, he would have created them long (laughs); there are some people with those line of thoughts, but then...each one will be trying to justify their decision.

When I reminded her that she had expressed a similar opinion earlier, she said her "mindset has changed to some extent" adding that she "wouldn't even mind trying it [although she] wouldn't go to a lot of trouble to do it." I found it puzzling that she was now among the women who alluded to biblical references to rationalise labia elongation. She is the one who argued that labia elongation, though not stated in the Bible, is implicitly biblical if done to please the husband. In the focus group discussion that she participated in, after other women spoke positively about the practice, I was surprised when she posed the question, "So what do we do? I have girl children, should I tell them to pull?" The question implied that her perception of labia elongation was shifting to an extent that she was now considering educating her own (and church) daughters about this. I found her question perplexing because I was under the impression that she would criticise this practice using the same arguments she gave to me in our earlier conversations.

While her shifting narratives seem to suggest problematic contradictions, I argue that they are just an affirmation that *the self*, or one's positionality (in relation to a research context and particular discourses) is fluid and in a constant flux.<sup>66</sup> If the self "also conveys the notion of identity,"<sup>67</sup> then this woman's accounts clearly emphasise that identities are not intrinsic but relational, produced, and constructed through interaction with

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<sup>66</sup> Rob Pattman, "Ways of thinking about young people in participatory interview research," in *Handbook of children and youth studies*, eds. Johanna Wyn and Helen Cahill (Singapore and London: Springer, 2015), 79-92.

<sup>67</sup> Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988).

others.<sup>68</sup> Her shifting perspectives on labia elongation were, therefore, influenced through interaction with other women, to which she admits that because most women constructed labia elongation as "very important," one could easily "buy into some of their ideas." This, of course, begs the question of whether individual interviews are research contexts in which an interviewee is free to reveal the "authentic" self as suggested in realist or naturalist approaches to social research.

I also want to allude to responses by another woman – Ruva from the Remba ethnic group.<sup>69</sup> She was clearly not keen to affiliate with this group, especially those in rural areas, because she believed that they did not "value education" and were too much into "cultural things," such as practising labia elongation. The position she took seemed to be influenced by the fact that she identified as a Christian residing in an urban area, hence affiliating herself with an ethnicity she constructed as cultural or traditional would conflict with her Christian beliefs and urban middle-class identities. She made this apparent when she stated that "our versions about cultural practices such as labia elongation differ from those by people in the rural areas who have no clue about what the Bible says." Yet, after she revealed that she had also elongated her labia, I asked her what motivated her to elongate despite her attempts to dissociate herself from the Remba cultural practice, to which she responded that she did it "for the sake of being girls." Here she presented labia elongation as a feminine practice which should not simply be associated with particular ethnic groups – a position that was also echoed by other participants. In some way, this contradicts studies cited above, which associate this practice only with specific ethnic groups.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Earlier in this essay I alluded to how colonial discourses constructed (Western) modernity in opposition to (African) tradition, and Black African culture in opposition to Christianity, which served to produce hierarchies and asserted the superiority of the colonisers. Yet, in a postcolonial African context, we are advised to be wary of naturalising categories by

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<sup>68</sup> Jane Elliott, *Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> The Remba are part of the ethnic groups in Zimbabwe that are said to still be practising traditional initiation schools where male circumcision and labia elongation are emphasised.

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simply taking “either/or” approaches that “posit complex social issues on a binary plane”<sup>70</sup> – precisely because in everyday practice, categories of modern and tradition (or Christian and non-Christian) do not operate in their essentialist form as stark opposites.<sup>71</sup> The findings presented above reflect this, while further observations made in a study of the Igbo identities in Nigeria support the notion that Black Africans have exercised agency in ways that have Africanised the earlier versions of Christianity to an extent that their cultural and Christian identities no longer appear as “fundamental contradictions.”<sup>72</sup> Seemingly, African Christians appear to positively reconcile their Christianity with African cultural practices in assertive ways, showing how normative Christian discourses operate not only as suppressive, but also as productive forces. This is made apparent in the way that some Christian participants reinterpreted biblical scriptures to give meaning to labia elongation in their lives, even though it is predominantly presented as a non-Christian practice. The bridal showers that I alluded to, have also become sites that enable African Christian women to exercise their agency in redefining their cultural identities as postcolonial Christian women.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the invitation of (female) pastors (as moralistic figures) to kitchen parties and not to bachelor’s parties, signifies how morality and the duty to provide sexual pleasure is often imputed to women, while men can revel in their naughtiness in bachelor’s parties. In order to challenge this, some scholars argue that “there should be a synchronisation of the syllabus taught at bridal showers and the bachelor’s party” where both men and women are taught about how to mutually please each other sexually.<sup>73</sup> The church discourse in biblical texts shared at some of these bridal showers or other Christian women gatherings contribute to the representation of women as mere objects of sexual desire, whose bodies are and should be under the control of their husbands.<sup>74</sup> This argument is affirmed by how Christian women in my studies implied that the decision for some women to elongate their labia is not personal but depends on whether or not their husbands express desire for elongated labia. The desire to please husbands stems from

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<sup>70</sup> Tamale, “The rights to culture,” 48.

<sup>71</sup> Harry Garuba, “Explorations in animist materialism: Notes on reading/writing African literature, culture, and society,” *Public Culture* 15, no.2 (2003): 264.

<sup>72</sup> Axel Harnett-Sievers, *Constructions of Belonging: Igbo Communities and the Nigerian State in the Twentieth Century* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006).

<sup>73</sup> Muguti and Sande, “Women’s Sexualised Bodies,” 196.

<sup>74</sup> Muguti and Sande, “Women’s Sexualized Bodies,” 186.

the fear that men might leave them for other women who have elongated labia. Women are subjected to additional pressure from female church leaders to provide maximum sexual satisfaction to their husbands even if it means engaging in cultural practices that "militate against women's sexual autonomy."<sup>75</sup>

This article has highlighted the continued significance of the cultural practice of labia elongation in the lives of urban Christian women even though its importance is linked more with enhancing male sexual satisfaction than women's sexual desire. It has also demonstrated that while dominant Christian discourses either denounce or are silent about such practices, some ordinary Zimbabwean Christians are exercising agency in reshaping these narratives by openly associating themselves with labia elongation even in Christian spaces.

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<sup>75</sup> Muguti and Sande, "Women's Sexualized Bodies," 191.

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