

"The Cut: The Technology and History of Male Medical Circumcision in South Africa"

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In 2010 the National Health Minister of South Africa announced the launch of a new and sweeping national campaign in the fight against HIV: medical male circumcision.

This paper traces the context of the rise of this technology of the body, and does so by historicising the circumcision of boys and men in Southern Africa, particularly in the region today known as KwaZulu-Natal. Drawing on news media, published reports, official speeches and statements, review articles, medical protocols and scientific papers, and an *in situ* view of the “roll out” of this campaign, the paper is framed around a series of questions:

What is “medical male circumcision” and how has an understanding of this emerged? How is this practice contested and why and by what agencies and parties with what status and power? Who adjudicates the definitive practice? What meaning-making is at work and what sense is being made of this by health workers, as well as the citizenry at large? What transformations on the body politic and the body individual are bound up with this surgical and social intervention? In a society recently uncurling from a decade of AIDS Denialism, what weight and impact do claims about medical male circumcision have? How are local and global productions of knowledge about medical male circumcision merging or diverging? Does this intervention spell an era of South African state interconnectivity with ascendant global science on medical male circumcision, or does the local context engender a global dialogue in ways that challenge conventional claims of northern and western hegemony? What role do world and regional donor and health organisations play in this complex network? And how is medical male circumcision “working” in relation to the daily South African thick social life of practices, claims and technologies crafted around “healing”, “infecting”, “curing”, “preventing” and “treating”. How and when and why does medical male circumcision gain a purchase on its target population?

The paper argues that precisely because the science, the technologies, as well as the meanings of medical male circumcision are all heavily contested, an historical view is apposite. The campaign is being debated widely. These technologies and methodologies are on a national stage and this paper explores the *mise-en-scène*, as well as the back-stage, of this national production.