

Publication

"Cutting for love" : genital incisions to enhance sexual desirability and commitment in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Author(s) Scorgie, Fiona; Beksinska, Mags; Chersich, Matthew; Kunene, Busi; Hilber, Adriane Martin; Smit, Jennifer

Author(s) at UniBasel [Martin Hilber](#), [Adriane](#) ;

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Several studies have documented women's use of vaginal practices in South Africa to enhance their desirability to men. This article describes a little known practice of this kind among women in KwaZulu-Natal. It involves the use of small incisions in the genital area (and often abdomen and breasts) to introduce herbal substances, described as love medicines, into the body through the incisions. In-depth interviews were carried out with 20 key informants and 20 women, and eight focus group discussions with women and men, in a rural and urban site in 2005-06. A province-wide household survey was then conducted using a multi-stage cluster sample design among 867 women aged 18-60. Forty-two per cent of the women in the household survey had heard of genital incisions; only 3% had actually used them. The main motivation was the enhancement of sexual attractiveness and long-term partner commitment. It appears to be a very recent practice, but may be an extension of an older healing practice not involving the genitals. It was most prevalent among rural women aged 24-29 (although not significant), those with less education, and those who suspected their partners of having other partners. It is linked to the modern popularity of love medicines, which in turn illustrates the troubling state of gender relations in KwaZulu-Natal today

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