

9 Shame and Circumcision in Africa

Wafula Yenjela

In *From Guilt to Shame*, Ruth Leys (2002) defines shame by contrasting it with guilt in the context of the Holocaust. According to Leys (2002, 11), “intention and action [are] intrinsic to the notion of guilt” whereas, on the other hand, shame

concern[s] not your actions but who you are, that is, your deficiencies and inadequacies as a person as these are revealed to the shaming gaze of the other, a shift of focus from actions to the self that makes the question of personal identity of paramount importance.

Here, the shaming gaze is committed to holding the individual to account for deviating from the norm. In some instances, the shaming gaze originates from a culture of globalization, which seeks an international community but one that conforms to the dominant cultures of the Global North (see Kanu 2013). Nevertheless, shame appears to be imbued with moral value. In her reading of John M. Coetzee’s (1999) novel *Disgrace*, Alba Sanchez (2019, 138) defines shame as an emotion that reduces one to an object:

In shame, you experience yourself as the object of someone else’s perception, you become an object for the other. [...]. It means that we focus on the dimension of ourselves that can be perceived from the outside and engaged with.

Above all, Mikko Salmela (2019, 180) argues that shame goes beyond other people’s expectations:

Insofar as the expectations and normative meanings of social identities have been internalized by the self, they belong to the person’s social identity irrespective of the source of those expectations and normative meanings, which are largely the same for everyone who shares the same social identity.