

Circumcision Revisited: A Universal Practice

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Abstract

Although many countries have officially banned different kinds of violence and discriminatory cultural practices and behaviors including the sexual exploitation of women, and children, Female genital cutting or circumcision has remained like Damocles' sword over the heads of young women, and children unable to shield themselves against a worldwide tradition. The proposed study uses an interdisciplinary perspective combining documentation from literature, sociology, anthropology, history and other domains of investigation not only to shed light on Female genital cutting. This grappling with the topic of female genital cutting set in the conceptual framework of socio-cultural practices and female body appropriation, is mainly to help understand why despite the casualties, and psychological trauma women go through, and the official ban in most countries, the practice of female genital cutting, or mutilation (FGC/FGM) has continued throughout history and its dangers are still haunting countless of young girls today with staggering numbers of more than ten million women having already undergone the practice worldwide.

Female Circumcision (Excision)

Be advised that some graphic and uncommonly descriptive language will be used in this section for the purpose of accuracy and an objective approach to the sensitive issues that female circumcision represents. Critical thinking requires caution in dealing with cultural matters as well as the presentation of true facts to allow a neutral viewpoint. The objective in discussing this apparently barbaric practice is to allow a close look at it, which not only allows comparisons with certain contemporary and modern rites, but also enables the reevaluation of the old practice in its entirety. Female circumcision, also referred to as excision, is a tradition that is found in different cultures in Africa, Asia, and even some parts of Southern America. Just as young boys went through wrestling and other physical and mental initiation rites to become men, the girls, apart from the household duties, had to be circumcised. Thus, in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, at the beginning of her stay with Adizua, Efuru has to undergo this customary ritual before pregnant. Here again, the denomination "circumcision" or "female genital mutilation" would depend on whether the speaker put the practice in a socio-cultural context or whether, as an outsider, s/he gives a judgment of value and looks at the practice as a barbaric mutilation of innocent females. Our critical insight would prevent us from being too judgmental of what we fail to understand and prompt our sensitivity towards the offense our quick reaction might cause to the people concerned.

Considering the religious basis for female circumcision, Lighfoot-Klein (1989) reveals that excision and infibulations are practices done by followers of different religious denominations, including Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Copts, Animists and non-believers in the various countries concerned. However, there is no foundation in the respective religious scriptures for this practice; rather, it is how these religious texts have been interpreted to people that counts. For example, according to Toubia (1995), circumcision is not mentioned in the Qur'an, although it has been often carried out by Muslims who thought that it was required by the Islamic faith. Another scholar, Dorkenoo (1994), pointed out that Muslim law, which governs the lives of believers, originated from two sources: the Qur'an and the tradition of Sunna, recommendations of the Prophet Mohammed. In addition to these two sources, Muslims are governed by the *Igtihad*, tenets of the school of Muslim law throughout centuries. In most African countries the practice of female circumcision is noticeable in Muslim communities. Does it have something to do with religion? The answer is no. However, there has been a tremendous influence of Arabic tradition on some practices so that at times, Arabic culture is confused with Islamic principles. Even though some polemics argue that the aim of the surgery is to suppress the woman's sexual pleasure, it would be difficult to buy into that interpretation and believe that all the perpetrators look for is to prevent women's eroticism, and as a result, inflict pain.

Could we consider this a sadistic behavior seeking to inflict pain upon young innocent girls when we consider that most often, mothers are present to help the young girl endure it without too much fear? When we put ourselves in the minds of the people who still practice this rite, it is apparent that they do not see it as a bad thing, but rather they see an ethical and even a certain 'aesthetic' value in doing it not only to conform with tradition, but also to elevate the girl's self-esteem among her peers who might have been already circumcised. The question is why would women's sexual pleasure be reduced, or even suppressed at times, when at birth both men and women are given an equal sexual potentiality? In Igbo society, the rationale for the removal of the clitoris is that it facilitates childbirth. According to some Igbo rules, the operation should occur before the girl gets married or pregnant.

According to other people, the cutting of the clitoris is a prior painful physical experience, which helps the young girl to later overcome the pain women undergo during childbirth. As an explanation, this is one that is understandable, if one refers to the courage women need to endure pain, and to not scream during childbirth. If this was the reason behind the practice, then one might understand the usefulness of the initiation. Nevertheless, this understanding and meaningful justification should not be seen as an excuse or a support for the practice of female circumcision. Seeking to understanding why people are doing it does not necessarily mean one agrees with the practice. On the contrary, as researchers/learners, it is helpful to seek to understand the reasons behind cultural customs which may look odd to the untrained mind or to the outsider and thereby mislead them into hasty and unfair judgment of the unknown.

Returning to Nwapa's novel and scrutinizing the eponymous protagonist Efuru's case, one realizes that she accepted the torture of circumcision in order to prove that she too, was courageous, and therefore was a woman, as were many others around her. In the minds of the women, this is the first experience of childbirth. But we should not overlook the physical pains that women endure during this operation. It is as much painful as the pleasure and the joy one expects to gain after the surgery. Nwapa gives us an eloquent illustration: "Efuru screamed and screamed. It was painful. Her mother-in-law consoled her. 'It will soon be over, my daughter, don't cry' "(*Efuru*, p. 14).

Meanwhile Efuru's husband was in his room. He felt all the pain. It looked as if he were the one being circumcised. One of the neighbors said to the other: "Efuru is having her bath. "Poor girl, it's so painful." But it is important to point out that this was going to be the beginning of a new life for Efuru. After the operation, people would look at her with new eyes, with respect. All the rituals before and after the operation were testimonies of its importance in that particular society. Nwapa provides an illustration of the rituals: "The woman gave instructions. She prepared a black stuff and put it in a small calabash and left it outside the room where Efuru was lying. "Sprinkle this on the feet of all the visitors before they come into the room. It will be infected, if it is not done...If anything goes wrong, send for me," she added (*Efuru*, p.14). The event is so significant that it has an impact on Efuru's diet, and on her mother-in-law's social behavior in the village:

She was to eat the best food...She was simply to eat, and grow fat. And above all she was to look beautiful. The cam wood was used in dyeing her cloth...She ate whatever she wanted to eat. She did not eat cassava in any form. Only yam was pounded for her. She ate the best fish from the market. It was said she was feasting. On market day her mother went to the market and bought her the best. She too rubbed some cam wood on her hands and feet to tell people that her daughter has been circumcised (*Efuru*, p.15).

Thus, during her stay in Adizua's house at the beginning of her union with him, Efuru has to undergo this customary initiation that is excision, or a female circumcision. Through the above lines, we learn the traditional perception of female beauty. The relativity of beauty is significant in that the Africans' view of a beautiful woman is somehow different from the Western Europeans'. Whereas contemporary Westerners like slender women with a mannequin shape, Africans prefer theirs with more flesh on the body, with roundness. We understand why Efuru had "to eat and grow fat." Good looks still matter in the choice of a wife, or an in-law. Though the traditional African customs have changed, and younger generations tend to prefer skinny girls/women, a large number of people of African descent appreciate plump women, and like to eat good food, which is part of socialization. Sharing food and drink is the primary symbol of welcoming someone in your house. In places where preparing food and drinking is not as common as in the past, people would present cola nuts, just like in some Igbo societies. Coming back to female circumcision, which opponents and most westerners call female genital mutilation (FGM), Nigeria is not the only country where this practice has been performed.

It has also been practiced in many other parts of Africa, including Sudan, Burkina Faso, Cote D'Ivoire, Togo, and Senegal, just to name a few. This practice, which may be considered a monstrous act against the woman's right to control her own body, is tightly linked to people's cultural beliefs and still has a great impact on their daily lives nowadays, especially in rural communities. Unlike the normal and innocent portrayal that Flora Nwapa gave of female genital cutting in her book, *Efuru*, in the mid-1960s, contemporary women writers have gone far to denounce that secular practice as another aspect of women's exploitation and subordination. For instance, African American writer of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker called it "the sexual blinding of women." Circumcision is not without its detractors, as some would say. More and more people are raising their voices against it today. One argument used to combat circumcision is the high risk of death due to hemorrhage and/or infection. The supporters of the practice, on the other hand, consider it a fundamental element of their culture. At this point we are left with two alternatives: getting rid of circumcision or improving conditions for its practice. But given the cultural foundation of circumcision, is it easy or even possible to get rid of it? To what extent are people prepared to drop or lose what they consider an important element of their culture? It seems that they will be more likely to accept an improvement of the conditions for the practice of circumcision. On the other hand, to what extent are the detractors of circumcision prepared to accept such a compromise whereby they feel themselves becoming guilty accomplices?

These are unanswered questions because of the complexity of the problem and its relationship with the mores and beliefs of the people concerned. In the next section I would like to mention a critical perspective, some other works that have already dealt with the same topic, and try a comparative approach with Flora Nwapa's position. In an interview that Tobe Levin conducted with her at the 1980 Frankfurt Book Fair, Flora Nwapa felt that Western media tended to exaggerate the extent of the problem. However, in the same year (1980), she wrote Levin a letter in which she admitted the need to revise her point of view. In fact, she realized that the practice of female circumcision was more prevalent and the consequences graver than she had imagined. Nevertheless, her fiction presents the earlier attitude, accepting female circumcision as an integral part of a vital culture. This was acceptable in those days when nationalism and a search for an authentic identity were in vogue. The author deserves particular credit in having unconsciously opened a painful door for future male and female writers to explore.

As it is said in *Efuru*, "having a bath" is a euphemism for clitoridectomy, and the ritual 'purification' is so important that one baby's death was attributed to the mother's fear of the razor. Since Nwapa presents traditional society in a realistic way, her portrayal of attitudes favoring genital mutilation is, to some extent, entirely appropriate and understandable. Tobe Levin confirms this position by stipulating that Nwapa's compromise is reflected in the manner she scrupulously avoids oversimplification by showing how humanly concerned the midwife and the neighbors are for the health and comfort of the initiate, thus denying both the danger that the operation can represent for *Efuru*, and the fact that certain operators are inept - one is known who has caused numerous casualties. Yet one can perceive the disturbing aspect of the narrative in the following passage. When asked how she was feeling after having gone through circumcision, *Efuru* replies, "It is much better now. It was dreadful the first day." The only consolation she gets is the usual resigned response: "It is what every woman undergoes. So don't worry" (*Efuru*, p.15). Here, the author seems to share this essential attitude as she describes the festive context of the operation as though compensatory.

We are presented with a picture of *Efuru* feted and coddled from one to three months. After her operation, her relatives and neighbors are shown to relish the special situation of happiness culminating in the offer of gifts in the marketplace. We are given to understand the attitudes of women themselves, a kind of solidarity in adversity without any significant attempt to challenge or question the very essence of a practice which causes them pain. The description of the women's or mother's sadistic attitude toward the circumcised individual is not so apparent in Nwapa's *Efuru* as in the first part of Egyptian El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980), or Walker and Pratibha's *Warrior Marks*. In *The River Between* (1965), Ngugi takes a similarly complex approach to the problem of circumcision and even goes further. According to Tobe Levin (1986), *The River Between* is the only fictional work which elevates female circumcision to the position of central thematic importance. Ngugi presents female circumcision as a battleground in the clash between conservative tribal elements and the patriarchal church. The plot is based on events of the 1920s and 1930s, marked by growing national sentiment in Kenya. That period was marked by the creation of two oppositional groups, the Young Kikuyu Association led by Harry Thaku, and Kenyatta's Kikuyu Association dedicated to removing British colonialism and restoring the traditional values eroded under the white rule.

In that revolutionary fervor, Jomo Kenyatta, who would later become Kenya's head of state, gave the definitive male view on female circumcision by asserting that "not a single Gikuyu worthy of a name wants to marry a no excised woman because that operation is the basis of all moral and religious instruction" (Jomo Kenyatta, quoted in Gourld, 1975, p. 105). The critic goes on to point out that in response to this nationalist situation, many males opted for excommunication and expulsion from Presbyterian schools, which were against the excision propaganda, rather than see "their" women freed from the knife. In this regard, resistance to the abolition of female circumcision is clearly, in part, an oppositional gesture against colonialism. An interesting aspect to notice is that Ngugi places the rebirth of the rites within the context of land expropriation, the composition of taxes, and forced labor to pay those taxes. In any case, Ngugi's novel deals with female circumcision not from a feminist, but solely from a humanist, progressive, and chauvinistic standpoint. Nevertheless, as readers, we are led to understand that male insistence on female rites is displaced importance and deconstructive in that there is no logical relationship between the facts. The question that comes to the mind is, "What does land repossession have to do with female circumcision?" An attempt to answer this question conjures up other gender related questions: Why are men in Ngugi's story not using their own circumcision as powerful enough to fight against colonizers?

Here, the objectification of women is blatantly highlighted in that their sexuality is used as a political weapon. Hence, the practice of circumcision seen from a male perspective could serve any purpose that the creative writer would like as well as divert the focus of socio-cultural and political struggle against the European invaders onto women who, in this case, are used as scapegoats to bear the brunt alone. On the one hand, one cannot help but think of the egocentricity of men involved in the traditionally entrenched communities practicing FGM and say, as long as their own privileges are not in danger, they are ready to sacrifice the other gender. Nowhere is the case as vividly apparent, than in N'GugiWa'Thiongo's novel, *The River Between*. Ngugi has tried to show for example, how the brothers were wrong in viewing circumcision as a pure source of cultural integrity from which strength could be drawn in preparation for battles ahead to repossess the land. It appeared that without the removal of the women's clitoris, without purity, the female sexual energy would threaten the tribe with destruction just as in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, where the death of a baby is attributed to the mother's fear of the razor, meaning here, circumcision. The rite of circumcision is so culturally embedded in some societies that girls who escaped it were referred to as "Irigu" and considered outcast or unworthy, according to Ngugi, who provides us with the following vivid illustration:

There was a new edge to the songs. Uncircumcised girls were the objects of cutting attacks. Everything dirty and impure was heaped on them. They were the impure things of the tribe and they would bring the wrath of the ancestral spirits on the ridges. A day would come when these Irigu would be circumcised by force to rid the land of impurity (Ngugi, *The River Between*, p.21).

Here, it is clear that not the white British colonizers, but the deviant African women are to blame for the apocalypse. Looking at this, women are assigned a new symbolic role to play in their society. As critic Judith Cochrane has put it so well in her discussion of Ngugi, they become the "guardians of the tribe," an ascribed status not of direct advantage to them as a group. On the contrary, these women are excluded from the development process by the importation of Western-style sexism and pushed out of the economic field in which they had been sovereign. In this respect, women have been systematically disempowered and abused, as illustrated by the figure of Waiyaki, in which the schoolteacher's nightmare symbolizes the failure of his own attempt to marry an uncircumcised girl. "They were pulling her into pieces, as if she were a thing of sacrifice to the god of the river, which still flowed with life as they committed this ritual outrage on her" (Ngugi, p. 120).

To some extent, female circumcision is an outrage committed against women because it deprives a woman of her most delicate, most precious, and most important sexual organs. Moreover, there are other disgusting and inhumane manners in which this operation takes place in some societies. For example, El Saadawi (1980) shows how female circumcision is a real nightmare whose traumas are forever for women. Another example is the worst situation, where not only is the clitoris cut off but also other parts of the female sex are operated on. This is seen in some parts of Africa, like Sudan and Egypt, where labial excisions and infibulations are practiced. For example, when a married woman or her partner needs to travel, her labia are sewn together in such a way that sexual intercourse is impossible. According to Nawal El Saadawi, a Muslim victim of infibulations herself:

"The importance given to virginity and an intact hymen in these societies is the reason why female circumcision still remains a very widespread practice despite a growing tendency, especially in urban Egypt, to do away with it as something outdated and harmful.

Behind circumcision lies the belief that, by removing parts of girls' external genitals organs, sexual desire is minimized. This permits a female who has reached the dangerous age of puberty and adolescence to protect her virginity and therefore, her honor, with greater ease. Chastity was imposed on male attendants in the female harem by castration which turned them into inoffensive eunuchs. Similarly female circumcision is meant to preserve the chastity of young girls by reducing their desire for sexual intercourse."¹

This practice is mainly meant to "protect" and prevent the woman from committing adultery. Gender discrimination comes into play here, shown through the double standard of actions taken to prevent the woman from free ownership and disposal of her body. Why are similar measures not taken to prevent the traveling man from sexual intercourse wherever he would be? Why is he allowed to go unprotected against sexual temptation? Not to extrapolate a lot from our subject matter, one realizes that the same social behaviors are relevant in today's society when we are dealing with the invasion of STDs and HIV/AIDS, all diseases transmitted mainly through sexual interactions. Although some might argue that the contamination risks are equal between men and women, the reality is that women find themselves more vulnerable than men.

Going back to the risks following female genital cutting, not only does excision prevent the woman from enjoying sex, it may mutilate her by depriving her of her reproductive abilities, and even jeopardize her life forever. Some writings and films portray the unmitigated horror of female circumcision. Regarding the paradoxical socio-cultural context and the perpetuation of this practice, it is necessary to comment on a few aspects at this point. The setting in which female circumcision is practiced shows a completely single-gendered environment. The women are the ones who most likely perpetuate this custom by which they are at the same time victimized and suffer physical and mental trauma. How then could we possibly understand what is going on in those women's minds? Psychoanalysis of the adult women performing the ritual might provide a viable answer. Generally, during the operation, the girl's mother or a close relative is always there to assist, but usually in a "passive" way. She is present, but helpless because of the social pressure/constraints fearing what other people would say. Taking into account the atrocity of the operation we may wonder what reasons can be given for this apparently criminal practice perpetuated on women, and by women themselves. The ready answer to the question may be that "it is tradition," as some people like to justify it. But I think this is a simplistic answer. I do agree that tradition should be respected, perpetuated and transmitted to the younger generations, but not at the cost of female mutilation. This practice raises divergent opinions in and outside Africa because of its socio-cultural background and its danger to women's health and lives.²

Considering the well-grounded socio-cultural impact on people and the tremendous power of gerontocracy on the younger generation, the rites have been accepted without too much resistance. Had female circumcision been without risks and not involving the female genitals, nobody would have cared about it. Otherwise, the polemics would have no place, for nobody can claim to explain the tradition of a society she/he does not belong to. In this respect, Levin attests that

Tradition can also be invoked with pride where the customs in question are innocuous. In international struggle to extend Human Rights to women, the need to distinguish between beneficent and malicious practice has become more acute than ever, for if our aim is the eradication of dangerous rites, Western activists must learn to enter the value system of the circumcised to avoid the counter-productive approach based on ignorance and indignation alone. (Davies, 1986, p. 208)

When practiced in healthy, sanitary conditions, female circumcision is linked to the spiritual healing of the individual and provides a kind of harmony with a specific cosmic order that only the people concerned understand.

¹Nawal El-Saadawi, "The hidden face of Eve, Women in the Arab World," translated and edited by Sherif Hetata, Zed Press, London, 1980, p. 33.

² One way of better understanding African traditions in order to create a basis for mutual respect as different people is through open-mindedness, which allows critical thinking when handling information we receive. Literature and especially fiction writers provide a wide range of issues, whose complexity and approaches might help reconsider sensitive topics as well as secular practices, namely excision. There are male writers as astute as Somali novelist Nurudin Farah (*From a Crooked Rib*, 1970), who demonstrates a high degree of feminist awareness in dealing with the problem of infibulations. Others, like Amadou Kourouna (*Les Etoiles des Independances*, 1968) and Yambo Oluquem (*Bound to Violence*, 1971), are African male authors who previously criticized the inhumane rite, or rendered the initiates' state of mind during the experience through the use of stream of consciousness.

In the same line of ideas, the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) in Dakar, Senegal, has warned feminists against viewing African societies exclusively in terms of female oppression and insists that "solidarity can only exist alongside self affirmation and mutual respect."³ As a matter of interest, Buchi Emecheta has also expressed moderate views on the subject. In an unpublished taped conversation with Sigrid Peicke, in January 1983, she pointed out doubt about the efficacy of western feminist intervention in the campaign for total eradication of excision. What happens when the sanitary conditions fail during and after the operation? This is the aspect that Nwapa has failed to point out in *Efuru*. In the struggle for womanhood, selfhood and the right to dispose of one's body, many Africans on the continent, in the Diaspora, and particularly in the United States, and Europe have organized in associations and undertaken actions to raise people's consciousness. In the process, some prominent African American writers such as Alice Walker have published polemics that might divert the genuine and positive intention of the author's mission, that of consciousness-raising, education, and possible social change

In Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar's collaborative work, *Warrior Marks* (1993), female genital mutilation is presented to the reader as a shocking subject. But considering the extent of the practice affecting one hundred million of the world's women, circumcision is an issue that needs to be laid down for the survival of future generations. The news about a young woman, Fawuzia Kasinga, from Togo, who was kept in detention for more than fourteen months for seeking asylum, is a delicate and complex case to discuss. It is impressive to see how much attention the U.S. media and newspapers gave to this case. A journalist wrote in the *New York Times* front page headline, "Woman Plea for Asylum Puts Tribal Ritual on Trial" (*New York Times*, April 15, 1996). The Kasinga case really aroused the American public's attention and led most media to condemn certain traditional practices that should be revised, if they are to continue for a long time. Though some contradictory letters to the editor were sent to refute the newspapers' rendition of Kasinga's story, journalists were so carried away in the sensational that they would not take those statements into account.

Advocates of granting Ms. Kasinga asylum argued that clitoridectomy or excision is female mutilation, a fundamental human rights violation, and according to certain advocates, the Immigration and Naturalization Service should recognize it as such by granting Ms. Kasinga political asylum. Surita Sandosham argued in the *Daily News* (May 2, 1996) in support of the Kasinga case, answering "Yes, it's brutal persecution" to the rhetorical question "Genital mutilation: grounds for asylum?" Dan Stein responded with "No, it will open the floodgates." To support his argument, Stein pointed out that, clearly, in the societies where circumcision is practiced it is not viewed as torture, punishment, or any other form of persecution. In addition, it is not a governmental practice. Considering that sexuality and rituals related to it are traditionally private matters, one could assert that circumcision is not a governmental issue. However, the contemporary inter-relatedness of the personal and the political has led to the government's involvement in cultural practices that used to go unnoticed. To prevent the relatively high death rate and risks of lifelong sexual or reproductive disability, some African governments have designed policies prohibiting certain risky traditions such as female circumcision. Understanding the viability of an individual story, sorting the problem out for a case study, and coming up with an appropriate solution would be better than politicizing, and overemphasizing/over-generalizing in order to present an agenda should be deplored.

Western feminists have often appropriated underrepresented groups' cases to serve short-term agendas, whereas real help would require an honest and long-lasting collaborative struggle for the empowerment of the needy and less represented. The reality is that it is quite easy to stay outside and pretend to have the solution for all problems, but once faced with the realities from within, things become more complex. Three to four decades ago, Ms. Kasinga's case would have been meaningful and right in space and time. Her case could be generalized to young women in Tchamba and furthermore to the whole African continent, and accepted as something normal. But, today the practice is seen as something barbaric and obsolete that raises questions and polemics about contemporary African women's experiences. Is female genital cutting totally eradicated because of modern development?

³Tobe Levin, 1986, "A Statement on Genital Mutilation" in *Third World: Second Sex Women's Struggle & National Liberation* by Miranda Davies, editor Zed Press, 1983, p. 217 quoted in Carole Boyce Davies and Graves, *N'Gambika*. AAWORD charges the Western Press with extreme insensitivity in the handling of this theme. A plethora of media tracts on the issue are guilty of "aggressiveness, ignorance, or even contempt." Hence, effect has been achieved through sensationalism, violating "the dignity of the very women to be save(d)." Finally, certain Western campaigns have drawn on "the latent racism" present where ethnocentric prejudice is so deep-rooted (p. 219).

The answer to this question is probably no, not just because the normal dissemination of information takes long to reach the people concerned, who unfortunately often reside in remote rural areas. Not long ago, somebody in the West was once again jailed for having practiced excision on his daughter, and the news echoed all over the nation. How do we explain the perpetuation of the practice in big cities and across the oceans outside the African continent, in Europe and the United States?

Even though the Kasinga case has found a great deal of interest and a final solution through the granting of "cultural asylum," a lot of discussions initiated around this issue are partly due to the wide contribution of the media, agencies of dramatizing and over-generalizing the situation in other parts of the world. The book entitled, *Can They Hear You When You Cry?*(1997), issued during the whole Kasinga controversy, has certainly found a large readership among some feminist advocates looking for hot topics to quench their thirst for new women's issues in the United States. But do they happen to look at the issue from different angles or at least put it in a cultural context before rushing into subjective conclusions? An objective treatment of any women's issue must be approached with a critical thinking methodology, which allows one not only to know how certain things are done, but also, and mainly, to understand why they are done, and only after that, to help provide solutions for improvement or eradication, in the case of female genital cutting.

A document on the Mali-net, a Malian website in 1996 is another poignant and factual piece that highlights current discussions about the secular practice of female circumcision. In the same stream of concerns, Celia Dugger presents a striking depiction of the ongoing debate around female circumcision. In her October 1996 article, "Genital Cutting in Africa: Slow to Challenge an Ancient Ritual," she lays out different opinions justifying the cultural enclosures that prevent people from stopping the practice. When discussing an ethnic group in Ivory Coast, the writer argues that the tradition of female genital cutting is woven into the everyday life of the Yacouba people there, just as it was for hundreds of years for ethnic groups in a wide band of 28 countries across Africa. In Man,⁴ it is part of a girl's dreams of womanhood, a father's desire to show off with a big party and a family's way of proving their conformity to social convention. She goes on, "after the rite, the girls are showered with gifts of money, jewelry and cloth. Their families honor them with sumptuous celebrations where hundreds of relations and friends and children feast on goat and cow."⁵

Dugger's 1996 description is so similar to Flora Nwapa's depiction of Efuru in the Igbo society that we have the impression of a static society, regardless of the three decades of difference between the fictional account and the reality of the present African society. But in the last few years, many African countries have begun measuring the prevalence of female circumcision as part of national health surveys or in other research such as surveys of birth control. In the Ivory Coast and Central African Republic, two out of five women have been cut. In Togo, it is one in eight. In the Sudan, the only country that already had a reliable National estimates, it is nine out of ten. In Mali, it is 93 percent.⁶

Considering these figures and some comments by international researchers, there is every reason to say that women in most African countries are nearly as likely to accept this ritualistic practice as their mothers and grandmothers, although this may be changing. Looking at the same figures from another angle also suggests the differences in the extent of the practice between countries. A survey has shown that in the Sudan the prevalence of the practice has dropped from 96 percent to 89 percent over the course of the 1990s, and there has been a shift toward a less severe form of genital cutting. In Togo, a survey found that half of the mothers who had been cut wanted to spare their daughters. While three-quarters of women in Mali favor continuing the practice, the majority of people in the Central African Republic want to end it. Reasons for the decline of the practice in many places are family-planning programs, social health organizations' campaigns for mass consciousness-raising, and some women's sad experiences of death and traumas.⁷ Contrary to the simplistic treatment that we have in Nwapa's(1966) novel, *Efuru*, or the New York Times Magazine article about female circumcision in Indonesia, showing pictures of a group of women practicing this operation in schools, a wide range of scholarship after the 1970s, 1990 to the present, deals with the complex aspects of excision.

⁴ Man is a small village in Cote D'Ivoire where the rite of female genital cutting is still practiced secretly because of the government's prohibition.

⁵AbdiWardere (Original Document) *Genital Cutting in Africa: Slow to Challenge an Ancient Ritual* forwarded to PHN Africa Missions @G. PHN.MLIST@AIDW, Oct. 11/96 with comments by Joyce Holfeld@G.PHN. OFPS@AIDW

⁶Ibidem: Malinet Website

⁷ Ibid: Malien website

In literature as well as in film, the rite is more and more presented in its outrageous aspects not only to raise consciousness of international constituencies, but mainly to urge decision-makers to ban it. The poignant images taken from the film version of *Warrior Marks* are significant graphics meant to shock the spectator. There is a constant stream of consciousness from the narrator which runs throughout the book and which leads to some interrogations. As Walker puts it emotionally, “I think of these young girls as little birds whose fragile bodies have been bashed, whose wings have been clipped before they can discover the power of their own souls and their erotic selves. They have been irrevocably wounded by traditions that cause them much pain and deny them the freedom to fly, to flourish. The circumciser’s knife had eradicated a source of fundamental pleasure for these girls. The knife had cut deep into their souls, putting out the sparkle in their eyes as the psychological and psychic scarification took root. They have been robbed of something so primary. But for now, questions passed at random through my mind: Would they ever experience the pure pleasure of a clitoral orgasm? How many of these girls will develop infections? How many of them will experience excruciating pain every time they menstruate? How many of them will decide not to perpetrate this mutilation on their daughters, and how many will keep the tradition going? When will the cycle of violence and humiliation end?”⁸

The differences between what women want, and what they are able to accomplish reflect a huge gap amongst them. The tremendous influence of gerontocracy on younger generations is one of the reasons why women’s desire to stop the practice can hardly materialize. Parents insist on the rite so that their daughters can be marriageable. Another reason is a common thread in all forms of cutting: the psychological impact of having achieved something special. Let’s take, for example, the motives behind tattooing and body-piercing in modern American or European society. Not to go in-depth into this area, the justifications given to these so-called “cool” practices are almost the same from the young people’s perspective. They tattoo to look like their peers, to look beautiful, to prove their maturity, endurance, or belonging to a particular group, be it a fraternity, sorority, or sports team. Some say they tattoo to rebel against their parents, or to commemorate/immortalize an emotional event, just to name a few examples.

For a member of a group which has established a habitual practice, that in a way has become a ritual, tattooing could be seen as a rite of passage, an initiation that allows transformation and provides the individual with a pass for membership in a particular cultural, or sub-cultural, organization. The person who does not participate in tattooing or piercing, if the rest of the group does, is likely to be viewed as an outcast, as out of fashion, and subsequently, may feel frustrated, rejected, or ashamed when everybody exhibits the *different* designs on their bodies. In light of this, tattooing or piercing one’s body is done for the satisfaction of a code of conduct in a group context, or for a personal fulfillment that certainly provides a kind of pleasure. One should note that though the pleasure, satisfaction or sense of achievement often occurs after the preliminary pain endured during the actual operation, at the specialist’s shop, the bar, or simply at home, sometimes disappointment follows. It is not uncommon to see tattooed people go back to the tattoo shop to have their tattoo removed when they start feeling uncomfortable with the design.

Considering the pain and scars inflicted to the body, could we deny that the body is being mutilated in this process of seeking pleasure and beauty? Could we stop for a while and think about the number of people who subject their body to multiple surgeries to repair unwanted or outdated tattoos? How about those who feel uncomfortable with their natural faces, and decide to trade them for something else by going through plastic surgeries, or those who willingly suffer atrocious and traumatic mutilation of their body parts to lose weight? In an analysis of the physical pain inflicted on the body let us also consider the sadomasochistic setting, where one would draw a certain pleasure though enduring or inflicting pain. In other words, when we narrow the picture down to our contemporary practices of plastic surgery, tattooing or piercing different parts of our body, one realizes that the ultimate satisfaction of the individual supersedes the pain and is worth the sacrifice. Could we have the courage to judge these practices as savage, barbaric, or otherwise, after realizing how close these archaic behaviors are to our own? Even taking into account not only the physical scars, but also the psychological traumas that may result from female circumcision, as opposed to tattooing and body piercing, which some advocates defend as bringing about a personal sense of happiness, do we still have the legitimate right to blame other people for choosing the body part they want to perform their initiation on? Some would say female genital cutting is not the same.

⁸ Walker, Alice and PratibhaParmar, 1993, *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation & the Sexual Blinding of Women*, Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, p. 176-177

What about piercing the nipples, the tongue and other parts that are meant to be the most sensitive and erotic parts of the body? Furthermore, think about the branding that a lot of youngsters enjoy going through to prove their masculinity, to show that they are capable of enduring pain to belong to a club or fraternity, as part of personal self-expression, or as a sign of loyalty.

Though Nwapa has not dealt with the drawbacks of the practice in presenting circumcision as an integral part of the Igbo culture, reference to recent works on the issue shows the intricate network of patriarchy underlying this practice, and the patronizing, self-congratulating attitude of some Western feminists towards indigenous cultures and practices. Some claim their advocacy without ever wanting to understand what is going on in traditional people's minds or without considering the environmental/group effect and shaping of people's mentality based on external and internal influences. For instance, in *Warrior Marks*, the song⁹ that Alice Walker reads during the documentary film shown in California shows that the dancing women sing about becoming men in order to undergo circumcision. According to Walker, women literally abolish themselves as women and take on a male persona in order to participate in the ritual.

This ritual song also reveals how deeply rooted patriarchy perpetuates this violence by turning women into heroes for withstanding the terrible pain of the mutilation. Perhaps this frantic dancing is a way for women to numb themselves. The complexity of this web of denial and distancing demonstrates women's ability to embody, embrace, and reinforce patriarchal power. Unfortunately the phenomenon of "colonizing" and oppressing one's own kind is not new or unique nor is it rare.¹⁰

Walker's idea of the women's heroism is quite revealing inasmuch as it illustrates the prototypical traits shown in the traditional hero image, wherein the actor transcends the natural and human behaviors through courage and extraordinary deeds. Those deeds elevate the individual from his/her simple and natural functions to the uncommon and special. Here we could also refer to the symbolic mask that women have to wear as a shield not to project cowardice or a fragile woman's image to the public spectator. Thus, the women have to move beyond and transcend the traditional gender categorization and prove their courage, as they are being elevated to a higher state of mind, just as men can be, by showing their courage and not crying/screaming from the pain involved in this process. Economic realities underlying the practice in small villages lead women who have no way to survive without a husband to submit to the risks. Ellen Gruenbaum, a medical anthropologist at California State University, San Bernardo, puts it well: people do know the health risks. They have seen people get sick. On rare occasions, a girl will die. But you will not change people's minds by preaching to them or telling them they're primitive. They undertake the risks for reasons important to them.

This is a significant remark that helps outsiders to understand that in matters of culture there is no appropriate judgment of value, and no other individual can understand what is going on in the minds of the people concerned. A relativistic approach is more helpful for understanding that which is different from one's customary knowledge. But are we obligated to keep or perpetuate rites and practices, which undermine and endanger the physical and mental health of women? Other queries come to mind: How many of the women who undergo the rite really feel that they are being used or mutilated? How many are of an age to reasonably protest or stand against the perpetrators? Who are the manipulators? What interests do men and women have in encouraging the practice? These are a few questions that it is necessary to explore in order to fully understand the politics surrounding the perpetuation of customary practices.

Let us further this section with reference to the socio-cultural background in which female circumcision is practiced. We could say that it is a very sensitive and sometimes political issue, which is indirectly related to the development of the society concerned. Though circumcision in the Kikuyu ethnic group (Kenya) was used as political weapon against the British religious establishment, it usually has nothing to do with the political authorities of a country. If Ms. Kasinga's story is true, then female circumcision is not a practice that can be blamed on governmental authorities and stopped overnight, because her case was the drop that spilled the vase. Even though the practice is judged by many as outrageous and even criminal, it is so embedded in the people's minds and so intertwined with diverse socio-cultural issues that its total eradication will take time to materialize. Therefore, the first consciousness-raising should be at the individual and family levels. But is this an easy task when the needy people live in remote and often inaccessible areas?

⁹ From *Moeurs et Coutume des Manjas* by A.M.I Vergiat (Payot, 1937) quoted by Alice Walker in *Warrior Marks*, p. 178-9

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 178-9

Perhaps it is helpful to mention the Western feminists' appropriation of some lucrative international issues, inasmuch as Ms. Kasinga's story resulted in a book publication, a comfortable shelter for her in the U.S., and the production of a documentary which is widely advertised in women's studies arenas. It is important to come back to the rhetorical question that opened this discussion. Shall we preach the abolition of female circumcision while thousands of women are still being victimized, or shall we promote hygienic and sanitary means to lessen the risks of physical and mental trauma? The situation's complexity is such that the people practicing circumcision do not view it in terms of physical mutilation, as opponents have labeled it. What is most important to them is the benefit of circumcision for the individual and the society. But are there any benefits when the initiated person has part of her body cut off, when she undergoes pain and carries an irremediable mark? Could we carry on the ritual without cutting? Here an alternative solution may become a common ground. The final remark is the one Alice Walker makes regarding the criticism that might arise from her book or film. She says:

"Do we care about African children, or are we like the midwife who says she doesn't hear the little girl screaming when she is cutting her? Are we expected to be deaf?"¹¹ The answer to this question is, certainly not. What could we do about it? Perhaps raising people's consciousness about the dangers of the practice might be the first step to eradicating it in the long run.

Women should not be expected to be insensitive to other women's suffering around them, or elsewhere in the world. Though one is often centered on oneself out of human egocentricity and greed, the poverty that drives women to continue practicing some archaic rites has tentacles which indirectly affect women in developed countries as well. Removed from its geographical context and put in a global concept of violence against women, female genital cutting (FGC) is comparable to the other multifaceted ways of subjugating women. Perpetrating and perpetuating the practice is another facet of the violence, abuse, appropriation, and objectification of the female body to better subjugate us. It is incumbent on each individual, women, men and teenagers included, to contribute in their location to an individual or a mass consciousness-raising. In this light, I concur with PratibhaParmar's hopeful statement about the future:

I believe *Warrior Marks* is part of an ongoing project to speak out against the violence directed at women across the world. We need to be willing to transcend all our differences without ignoring them, to build new communities that bring us nearer to our Utopian ideals, to continue to redefine our ideas about womanhood and feminist politics, and to embrace concepts of justice and equality, while at the same time recognizing the complexities of our diverse identities. The future looks hopeful. (Walker, p. 97)

According to her, there is cause for hope when we learn that mothers in different parts of the continent are encouraging their daughters to fight against the practice. Not only mothers, but also fathers and husbands are joining in the awareness of the dangers and the resistance to the practice. In their efforts to change attitudes and break down the local resistance built up over the centuries, these women should be seen as pioneers in their local social transformation.

Other cultural aspects of similar importance in traditional and contemporary societies are worth considering through fiction. Without modern medicine and its sophisticated technology, how did traditional Igbo people manage to sustain their physical, mental and spiritual health before the coming of Westerners? How have people of African descent managed to keep in relatively good health when they have no Dibia to resort to? This last question will lead into touching on survival strategies of African Americans and other people of African descent in the Diaspora who have devised means of survival during and after their forced or voluntary migration to different parts of the world. The focus of this discussion will remain on continental African women and their current predicaments, struggles and triumphs through their own survival strategies and activist involvement.

One should point out that another perspective on the Western feminist attitude towards the issue of female genital cutting is fully analyzed and discussed by articulate scholars, particularly Oyeronke Oyewumi's *African Women & Feminism: Reflecting On The Politics of Sisterhood* (2003), in which she compiles pieces highlighting the complexity of feminism and the role the self-congratulatory and patronizing position of some European and American feminists plays in damaging the work of well-intentioned activists. It is one of the first collections written by continental African women, who are well aware of other women's discourses.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 215

For example, NkiruNzegwu's article "O Africa! Gender Imperialism in Academia" raises the pertinent issue of the perpetuated patronizing attitude observed in academia and warns in her own words:

Our white female colleagues and feminist 'sisters' must learn that solidarity is not built on other women's backs, with people of color relegated to the subordinate status of servers, and cleaners. They need to learn from strategists the art of being one with others if they seek a viable women's movement.¹²

L. AmedeObiora's article, "The Little Foxes that Spoil the Vine: Revisiting the Feminist Critique of Female Circumcision," is another piece worth mentioning. It is a Biblical juxtaposition of images of beauty and destruction. The imagery in the title speaks of how ill-conceived strategies to end female circumcision may undermine rather than further feminist goals. More precisely, it is invoked by the author to capture the insidious and far-reaching negative implications of well-meaning efforts to stem the practice. Within a broader historical and sociological context, the article traces the emergence of the Western feminist campaign against female circumcision in order to illuminate the limitations of its reductionist approach to a deeply embedded cultural phenomenon. Primarily informed by Alice Walker's 1997 best-seller, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the critique emphasizes the subversive dangers of studied sensationalism. Enunciating the virtues of contextualized analysis and bottom-up solutions, derived in collaboration with (not in alienation of) grassroots initiatives, the article calls attention to the need for connections between altered perceptions, material empowerment, and social change.¹³

Cultural Violence

One cannot discuss female genital cutting without associating it with the issue of violence against women and measuring the different forms it takes in our real lives. While FGM/FGC (Female genital mutilation/female genital cutting) may appear too far removed from some of us and we may look at it as "their culture," assault on women has been one of the most pervasive current and personal issues, as it is experienced and witnessed in our homes and neighborhoods. Violence in all its forms, physical or mental, battering, and abuse in all its forms, whether economic, emotional, or verbal abuse, including sexual assault and rape, all of which women are subjected to, do nothing but traumatize and endanger not only women's but indirectly families stability and lives as a whole. In BuchiEmecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, Francis and Adah's example is edifying. The issue of violence is pushed to the extreme when we reach the violation of basic common morality in Francis's behavior, as not only does he fail to take responsibility for his own mediocrity and failure to succeed in his education, but he also blames his wife for all his inabilities and tries to keep her down through belittlement and the destruction of her intellectual property. Francis burns Adah's manuscript of the "Bride Price," which the author euphemistically terms "killing her baby." Think about how many "Francises" are out there and close to us in our homes or neighborhoods. How many women are out there who could have been prolific writers or insightful artists who have not been able to let their talents hatch for being smothered by external constraints, by male egocentricity or peer-female competition and envious endeavors?

Another aspect of abuse is illustrated through *Second Class Citizen*'s protagonist, Adah, who is "incapacitated" by multiple child births and her husband's refusal to cooperate in her choice of family-planning and use of birth control, and overburdened by work to support a whole family, first in Nigeria and later abroad, in England. By extension, and in opposition to another male character depiction in African American Harlem renaissance writer, Zora Neale Hurston's best seller, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Tea-Cake transcends from the social norm of the 1920's-1930's and lavished love and understanding on his wife, Janie. Moving away from Nwapa's generation of the post-independence writings of the 1960s to BuchiEmecheta's generation of the 1970s, and focusing on the new generation of young African women writers, one must mention the Igbo woman writer ChimamandaNgoziAdichie. Her groundbreaking first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, deals with re-occurring themes of culture, tradition versus modernity, relationships, family, education, class, and abuse, which are taken to a relatively complex and further level where the abuser ends in tragedy. Compared to the mild level of violence in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, anger is not based on poverty or the partner's fault, but rather on apparently unexplainable factors. Violence against women takes the form of physical abuse when the wife is incapacitated and cannot defend herself because of pregnancy. In addition to the emotional and physical abuse of his wife, Eugene's violent reactions terrorize his children in the house.

¹²Nkiri, Nzegwu, 2003, "O Africa! Gender Imperialism in Academia" in *African Women & Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* edited by OyeronkeOyewumi, Africa World Press, 144

¹³ Ibid, p. 197

A fake goodwill benefactor, devout Christian, and respected Igbo native, Eugene combines all the paradoxical and contradictory characteristics of the lovable public figure he projects to his community and society, and the abusive father and brutal husband he is to his close family. The abuse is pushed to the extreme in which he becomes a constant threat to the freedom of movement and expression of his children, Kambili and Jaja. The emotional abuse of his family culminates in its destruction and Eugene's tragic death by poisoning. Though the family collects the pieces to continue surviving later without the father, the scars of an iron-hand upbringing and the fear that the children have developed overshadow any parental love which was experienced.

Adichie's depiction of aunt Ifeoma is poignant in the sense that she stands out as a counter-weight to her brother, Eugene's disrespect and ruthlessness towards their father, who symbolically represents the Old Igbo traditions and beliefs in ancestors. Her characterization allows an escape for Kambili and Jaja to socialize with the outside world of teenagers. Though other pressing themes such as domestic violence and the religious blinding of communities are worth discussing, I would rather devote another study cadre to deal with those aspects of contemporary African literature typical of the aftermath of the independence era. From that angle, Adichie has moved further in dealing with gender and other intertwined issues of class and bigotry embedded within her Igbo society, regardless of the current apparent emancipation and economic growth. Her character delineation of young Kambili is testament of the genius that will undoubtedly be exhibited in future writings and exposure to the public.

Pushing the discussion further and in reference to famous African American woman writer, author of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar (1993), one might ask why the producers of the film and book *Warrior Marks* failed to deal with other issues, such as the burning of women or female infanticide in India, poverty and others. Is their treatment of FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) not another contribution toward strengthening stereotypical concepts and as such, perpetuating the existing negative image of women in different parts of the world, namely African and Asian women?

On the one hand, the way the media and foreign feminists approach the issue of Female circumcision is offensive to those who are not even members of communities practicing FGC. On the other hand, somewhere along the way, the issue of female circumcision should be discussed in order to find possible remedies, and avoid irreparable mistakes. Why do Africans always have to be presented on the darker side? This cry of indignation and anger that might come from people who think an outsider has no right to criticize African culture could be perceived as legitimate, as it reflects one's victimization, including a negative reaction resulting from a blind and chauvinistic pride. It is not only in Africa that women undergo circumcision, it is wide spread in other parts of the world like Indonesia where Social services practice it every season in public settings as schools, just like immunization campaigns in the U.S and elsewhere.¹⁴ Regardless of emotional feelings and judgment of value different groups of people have about female genital cutting, the truth of the matter is that its practice is detrimental to women wherever they are. Stories and myths souring the practice of circumcision are built on the reality and the traumatic experiences many female human beings go throughout generations.

It is true that an outsider can never penetrate the psychological impact and the scope of the ritual but the outsider's reaction might have a positive impact. What if s/he is an "outsider within" who is a participant-observer or someone who can identify better by being at the same time able to understand and to distance her/himself to better see, compare and finally reevaluate the practice? Thinking of the reaction people had at the publication of Walker and Parmar's book *Warrior Marks* (1993), outsider's reactions can help us reexamine some secular practices that have blinded our whole integrity as women and full human beings with senses. This leads to going back to the Kasinga's case and pointing out the positive role the media publicity including the Human Rights Advocates and feminist involvement have generated.

Today, more and more people are aware of the practice and its health and death threats to women's human right to life, and countries took official steps banning it. U.S. Department (25 February 2009)-Togo: Country Report on Human rights practices-2008, revealed the current governmental efforts to sensitize people and the pervasive perpetuation of FGM in the country. According to the U.S. Depart of State country Report on Human Rights Practice, penalties for practitioners range from two months to five years in prison as well as substantial fines.

¹⁴ The New York Times Magazine, "A Cutting Tradition" by Sara Corbett, Published January 20, 2008, nytime.com/.../20circumcision-thtml

(Accessed 06/04/2010)

Further, the research found that the law prohibits FGM. However, according to UNICEF, FGM continued to be perpetrated on approximately six percent of girls. Although no statistics were available, the government and NGOs believed the practice had decreased significantly in urban areas since the 1998 anti-FGM was passed but it continued as previously in rural areas. . . . Most cases occurred where victims usually were unaware of their rights. . . . Traditional customs often took precedence over the legal system among certain ethnic groupsⁱ

Section III of a United Nations human Rights Council report from 2008, under the heading “Women and Minors” states that concerning violence against women resulting from entrenched adverse cultural norms, the Special Rapporteur shares the concern of the committee on the elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in particular when it comes to female genital mutilation (FMG). He was informed about only one case of a perpetrator of FGM and the victim’s father who was sentenced to 12 months imprisonment under the 1998 Act No. 98-106. Here, attention should be paid to the discrepancy between the data collected in some parts of the country showing 33 percent of women having gone through the procedure, and yet, only one case being reported.

ⁱⁱ This reflects clearly that people are unwilling to talk and unveil the truth for fear of retaliation from family members, repudiation by parents or being judged by peers in their community. The pervasive pattern of a cultural violence based on customary practices generally under the umbrella of tradition which muzzles women, men and children is still being experienced by millions of people, especially women and children not only in Togo, or Africabut around the world.

There is need to bring this chapter to an end by referring to the Humanitarian News and Analysis: A Project on the UN Office for the coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Benin-Togo, the Togolese Ministry of Feminine Promotion and Social Affairs has indicated that, in theory the Ministry would seek to protect any woman who claims abuse of her human rights. However, there is no documented precedent of women seeking protection from FGM within Togo. The Togolese Human Rights League states that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may not be able to effectively protect women against FGM because it is considered “a family matter.”¹⁵ Let us wrap up the discussion on this sensitive topic of female circumcision, female genital cutting (FGC), body transformation, and subsequent psychological traumas with a free verse:

For Rama¹⁶

In memory of those little girls
Who underwent the “Bath”
Without being capable of fleeing
Or protesting
To save and protect their fruit

In memory of RamotaAduni
Whose beauty was un-common!
Whose freshness was like passion fruit!
May your innocent soul rest in peace!
Like a young bird whose wings are plucked
You fell down, prey to that outrage!

O parents!
Protect us against that “Ritual”
That has become so casual
No, never again
Never again
Shall this be done to someone in our family!
Be it nipple, Jewel or navel,
Let us wage a war of peace
To save that body piece,
And say, NO!
Never again!

¹⁵<http://www.Irinnews.org/Report.aspx? Report ID = 82104>

¹⁶ This poem was written in memory of my sister who bled to death after being circumcised very young. I have never recovered from that loss. Now, instead of doing it to very young children, the girls and young women were/are convinced into undergoing this practice secretly not only for respect at the family level but from the would be husband’s family level.

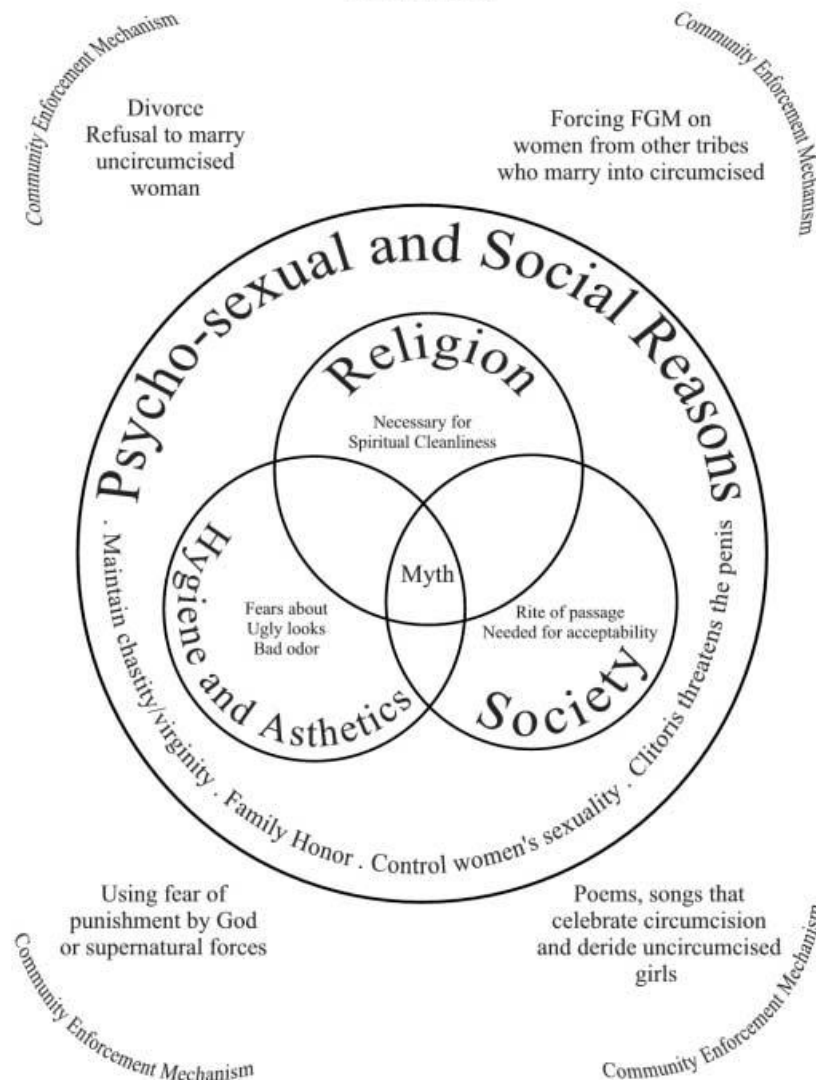
Never again should we let go of
A small piece of our body
Never again should we torture
Our body by piercing it

Whole are Mind, body and soul
Let us protect that sanctuary!
Never again should we
Mutilate our body and let
That diamond or golden ring
Hang on it
For beauty
Or cupidity! (From "Reminiscence" by S. Boukari, 2007)

Based on the assumptions and the resistance to bringing significant changes in people's minds and behavior toward what we have come to label as violence and abuse, the progressive educational campaign on the issue may be the most viable strategy to touching family members to stop the practice. In conclusion, in to end the practice of female genital mutilation, Nawal El Saadawi's statement in *African Women Writing Resistance*, 2010, is edifying: Female and male genital mutilation (FGM and MGM) are not characteristic of any society of any religion or any country, or race or color, or ethnic group. Like the oppression of women and poor classes they constitute an integral part of the political, economic, sociocultural, and religious systems preponderant in most of the world.—west and east, north and south, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and others. FGM and MGM were born of developments in history that led one class to rule over another and men to dominate women in the state and in the family unit, which together constitute the core of patriarchal class relations.¹⁷

¹⁷Nawal El Saadawi, 2010, "The Struggle to End the Practice of Female Genital Mutilation :Changing a Social System Into a Divine Law" in *African Women Writing Resistance: Contemporary Voices*, Edited by Jennifer Brawdy de Hernandez, Pauline Dongala, OmotayoJolaosho, and Anne Serafin, p. 192

Figure 1: Why the Practice of FGM Continues:
Mental Map



¹Department of Women's Health- Health Systems & Community Health World Health Organization (WHO 1999)ⁱⁱⁱ

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- To raise awareness of the dangers and indignities of female genital mutilation (FGM), the Generation Femmes D'Afriqueetd'Ailleurs (GFAA)
- www.riveratimes.com/.../award-winning-film-on-female-circumcision.html
- (Retrieved, June 27, 2010)
- Tariq Ramadan on Female circumcision
- www.in.com (Mar, 30, 2009)
- (Retried June 27, 2010)

Notes

ⁱ In the case of Togo, the example can apply to the Central Region of the country, particularly in Sokode (Tchaoudjo), Bassar, Bafilo, Tchamba and others where coincidentally the concentration of Muslims are, though the practice has nothing to do with religion, Islam or Christianity. One should also note that the perpetuation of the practice is favored by family pressure and lack of freedom of speech. Silence, due to retaliatory punishment and age-group shame for girls prevent people from speaking out and revealing the continuation of the practice. Further information can be found on: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (20 July 2006) Togo: Female genital mutilation (FGM): practices, beliefs, and Protection Offered.

ⁱⁱ **Department of Women's Health- Health Systems & Community Health World Health Organization, 1999-** This review was undertaken for the World Health Organization by the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Washington DC, USA. The review was originally compiled and edited by Asha A. Mohamud, Nancy A. Ali and Nancy V. Yinger. Additional support within PATH was provided by ZohraYacoub, Dawn Sienicki, Samson Radeny, Ann Wilson, Elaine Murphy, Elsa Berhane, KalleMakalou, TahirKhilji, Wendy Wilson, JoAnn Villanueva and Andrea Flores.