Should Anthropologists Work to Eliminate the Practice of Female Circumcision?

YES: Merrilee H. Salmon, from “Ethical Considerations in Anthropology and Archaeology, or Relativism and Justice for All,” Journal of Anthropological Research (Spring 1997)


ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Professor of the history and philosophy of science Merrilee H. Salmon argues that clitoridectomy (female genital mutilation) violates the rights of the women on whom it is performed. She asserts that this operation is a way for men to control women and keep them unequal.

NO: Professor of anthropology Elliott P. Skinner accuses feminists who want to abolish clitoridectomy of being ethnocentric. He states that African women themselves want to participate in the practice, which functions like male initiation, transforming girls into adult women.

For more than a century anthropologists have seen cultural relativism as an essential antidote to ethnocentrism, a perspective that evaluates and judges the practices of other peoples according to the standards and sensitivities of one’s own culture. This issue raises questions about the boundaries and limits of the anthropologist’s cultural relativism. By evaluating cultural practices in a culture’s own terms, anthropologists have long defended cultural diversity and the general principle that dominant cultures should not force members of weaker cultures to abandon traditional customs and practices, simply because practices appear peculiar, bizarre, or wrong to those in power. But today the world is increasingly integrated, and a number of international organizations have
emerged whose purpose is to defend a single universal vision of human rights. Few anthropologists would object in principle to the notion that human rights should be defended for all people, but universal moral codes also challenge the rights of cultural groups to be different.

In this issue two scholars debate whether or not anthropologists should interfere with the cultural practice, found in many parts of Africa and the Middle East, of clitoridectomy and infibulation, variously called female circumcision or female genital mutilation. The practice is typically part of female initiation ceremonies and takes different forms in different ethnic groups, varying from relatively minor surgery to the clitoris (clitoridectomy) to the complete surgical removal of the clitoris and much of the woman's external sexual organs, after which the vagina is sewn up, leaving only a small opening (infibulation).

Merrilee H. Salmon refers to this practice as female genital mutilation and argues that it is fundamentally wrong, a violation of a woman's human rights. She contends that the practice is part of a male-centered power structure, which allows men to control women. Although Salmon acknowledges that women often control the ritual and even the surgery, the practice of female circumcision nevertheless supports male dominance within the community. In her view this cultural practice is an immoral one, and anthropological calls for moral relativism in this case are fundamentally ill-founded.

Elliott P. Skinner counters that female circumcision is only found in African societies where male circumcision is also practiced. Both practices involve mutilation of the genitals and are the means of transforming male and female children into adult men and women, respectively. Skinner maintains that not only are the female rituals entirely in the hands of other women, but that the practices empower women within a society where men might otherwise dominate them. Feminists who argue that this practice is an example of male power over women, in his view, have got it wrong. Calls for the abolition of female circumcision began with Western missionaries who found the practice repugnant. He states that Africans supported female circumcision as a form of resistance to white domination, and in Skinner's view current calls from Western people for the abolition of this practice is another example of Western domination of African societies.

At issue here are several key questions: Is female circumcision morally repugnant? Should anthropologists defend it or work to stop it? How should anthropologists deal with such practices when they see them occurring in their village communities where they work?

Although this issue seems very narrowly focused on a particular traditional custom in only one part of the world, it has important general implications for cultural relativism and universal human rights. Should anthropologists defend cultural practices simply because they are traditional? Do anthropologists have a responsibility to help end practices that they find morally abhorrent? If so, whose moral notions should be followed? Is moral relativism fundamentally flawed, as Salmon asserts?
Ethical Considerations in Anthropology and Archaeology, or Relativism and Justice for All

Cultural Relativism and Ethical Relativism

Respect for the beliefs, practices, and values of other cultures, no matter how different from one's own, is a hallmark of anthropological wisdom. Franz Boas, the father of American academic anthropology, rejected invidious comparisons between European "high culture" and indigenous American languages, myths, art forms, and religions. Boas, dismissing absolute scales of cultural development such as those proposed by Condorcet and L. H. Morgan, insisted on studying the culture of each group in the context of its own historical development. Boas's work forms the historical basis for the anthropological doctrine known as cultural relativism.

Many anthropologists regard ethical relativism as an easy corollary of cultural relativism. I show that this view is incorrect. Cultural relativism does not entail ethical relativism; an anthropologist can consistently embrace cultural relativism while rejecting ethical relativism. As most anthropologists understand it, ethical relativism identifies the concepts of good and evil, or right and wrong, with what a particular culture approves or disapproves. Because ethical standards arise within particular cultures and vary from culture to culture, ethical relativists deny any extracultural standard of moral judgments. According to them, moral judgments of good or bad are possible only within a given culture, because such judgments refer only to compliance or noncompliance with that culture's norms.

The fact that a belief arises within a cultural context, however, does not imply that it can have no other basis. Although moral beliefs, like all other beliefs, arise within a given cultural setting, some of those beliefs may transcend the cultures in which they arise. Condemnation of murder and recognition of obligations to help others who are in extreme need, for example, are common to many cultures. Moreover, societies that differ in derivative moral judgments about marriage between close relatives frequently agree about more fundamental moral judgments, such as the immorality of incest. This modicum of moral

consensus has encouraged some critics to try to refute ethical relativism by identifying a set of universally acceptable moral principles.

Whether universal agreement exists on any specific basic moral judgment is partly an empirical matter and partly dependent on how such terms as "murder," "cruelty," and "incest" are defined. Colin Turnbull's (1962) admittedly controversial studies suggest that the Ik do not embrace the most likely candidates for fundamental moral principles, on any reasonable definition of such principles. In Turnbull's account, the Ik provide a striking counterexample to general views that cruelty to children, for example, is universally condemned. Even if Turnbull's account is rejected, the search for moral principles that are both reasonably specific and universally acceptable is problematic.

The lack of agreement about principles, however, is not sufficient to demonstrate the truth of ethical relativism. What a culture regards as right or wrong conduct depends to some degree on both the members' factual beliefs about the state of the world and their beliefs about the likely consequences of their conduct. The absence of any universally accepted standards would support ethical relativism only if cultures that shared all the same factual beliefs and agreed about the consequences of particular behavior nevertheless disagreed in their ethical judgments. This situation has not been demonstrated. In fact, many apparent differences in ethical matters are resolved by bringing forth pertinent facts about the conditions under which moral choices are made. Even Turnbull (1962) goes to considerable trouble to show that severe hardship and deprivation of material resources in Ik society have altered their perceptions of reality. Whereas lack of universally accepted moral principles does not prove ethical relativism, however, neither would the universal acceptance of some specific moral principles disprove ethical relativism. The agreement could be accidental instead of arising from some feature of the human condition. Berlin and Kay's (1969) refutation of the relativism of color classification was convincing only because they were able to demonstrate the physiological—and thus cross-cultural—basis for color classification.

Ethical relativism apparently accords with anthropologists' determination to reject ethnocentrism and maintain a nonjudgmental stance towards alien cultural practices. Nevertheless, both anthropologists and philosophers have noted a serious problem with relativistic ethics: it seems to rule out condemning even such obviously immoral acts as genocide so long as they do not conflict with prevailing cultural norms. Ethical theories about what constitutes right and wrong behavior are severely tested when they go against our deepest moral intuition in this manner; in such cases one naturally questions the theory rather than giving up the intuition. H. Russell Bernard (1988:117), for example, says that cultural and ethical relativism is an excellent antidote for overdeveloped ethnocentrism. But cultural relativism is a poor philosophy to live by, or on which to make judgments about whether to participate in particular research projects. Can you imagine any anthropologist today defending the human rights violations of Nazi Germany as just another expression of the richness of culture?
Bernard’s use of “is” in the first sentence shows that he does not distinguish cultural from ethical relativism. If he had done so, his point would be less confusing. Cultural relativism, in Boas’s sense of trying to understand and evaluate the practices of other cultures in their own historical context, is a good antidote for ethnocentrism. Identifying the practices of any culture as the ultimate moral standard for that culture, however, is a different matter and rightly raises problems for a reflective anthropologist. Bernard in mentioning Nazi Germany has offered the standard counterexample to the claim that morality recognizes no extracultural authority.

Despite its fatal flaw, however, ethical relativism still enjoys wide acceptence among practicing anthropologists. Ethical relativism, for example, played a role in testimony by a French ethnologist in the trial of Bintou Fofana Diarra for complicity in the genital mutilation of her infant daughter. As reported in the New York Times (Weil-Curiel 1993), the unnamed ethnologist testified that “Africans should not be punished [for genital mutilation of infant girls] because they act under social pressure.” The principle implicit in this statement—that one should not be punished for acts done under social pressure—is uncomfortably similar to the defense offered by Nazi war criminals.

A second problem with making cultural standards the final arbiter of morality is that this practice presumes a uniformity in cultures that current research denies, even for small, isolated, and tightly knit societies, or it gives a privileged moral position to powerful subgroups within the society. In the latter case, for example, the power to set cultural norms may belong to a minority whose control of valuable resources enables it to force others to follow its standards. Conversely, the power to set norms may accrue to those who are members of the majority, while significant minorities have no voice. In either case, one can only refer to the norms of “the culture” by ignoring ethical disagreement within the culture.

Some anthropologists believe that relativism is the only ethical stance that is compatible with a scientific investigation of other cultures. A scientific anthropologist presumably formulates “neutral” descriptions of the culture, reporting such quantifiable information as the frequency of occurrence of behaviors and perhaps the observed attitudes (approval, disapproval) of members of the society, while refraining from judging the culture or interfering with it in any way. Whether such detachment is required to maintain scientific integrity and whether such detachment is even possible are points raised by D’Andrade (1995) and Scheper-Hughes (1995). D’Andrade (1995:399) points to the alleged subjectivity of ethical judgments and contrasts these with the objectivity of scientific judgments. Scheper-Hughes (1995), however, objects to a scientific detachment that would prevent anthropologists from taking an active role in alleviating suffering among their research subjects. This debate is somewhat at cross-purposes because D’Andrade’s main concern seems to be with an epistemic relativism that claims that such notions as knowledge and truth have no extracultural basis.... Scheper-Hughes, in contrast, is worried about the behavioral implications of a relativist ethics that takes the existing social arrangements in a culture as the ultimate moral authority.
The strict separation of science and values, a cherished principle of logical positivism, is increasingly difficult to defend in the face of ethical problems raised by scientific advances in many fields. In particular, current biomedical techniques for genetic engineering and research on human embryos raise important problems that tend to blur lines between scientific and value judgments. Bernard (1988) notes that when resources are limited, the very choice of anthropological research topics is value laden. The possibility of an ethically neutral or completely value-free science of human behavior now seems to many scientists both unattainable and undesirable, but recognition of the interrelationships between science and values need not prevent the limited type of objectivity that D'Andrade argues is possible for anthropological research.

Anthropologists may continue to avow ethical relativism despite its difficulties because they have not articulated an alternative ethical theory that is consistent with their distaste for ethnocentrism and their respect for cultural diversity. Nevertheless, maintaining a consistent form of ethical relativism is highly problematic in the present research climate. Facing the loss of valuable anthropological and archaeological resources, anthropologists have reexamined traditional relationships with their subjects, their colleagues, and the general public. To resolve problems and achieve clarity, they are currently debating and revising professional ethical standards. Despite the traditional commitment of anthropologists to relativism, the ethical principles that underlie their professional codes are not relativistic. The codes refer to their duties and responsibilities, and—by implication at least—to the corresponding rights of their research subjects, colleagues, and the general public. The conflict, often unacknowledged, between the avowed relativism of anthropologists and their sincere concern with justice and rights can lead to confusion and ineffectiveness in achieving the important goals of preserving anthropological resources and protecting cultural minorities.

An Anthropological Example—Female Genital Mutilation

The arguments of feminist anthropologists for altering discriminatory practices of other cultures similarly compromise a commitment to ethical relativism. In some cultures, all females are subjected to genital mutilation. In its severe form, this involves cutting away most or all of the external sex organs (euphemistically called “circumcision”) and sewing or sealing (infibulating) the vagina so as to leave only a pinhole opening for urination and menstruation. The practice affects an estimated ninety-five million or more women in at least twenty-five countries, mostly, but not all, in Africa (Lightfoot-Klein 1989). Within the cultures that practice genital mutilation, little disagreement exists about its value, though different groups offer various justifications for the practice. Most, but not all, of the countries that engage in the practice are predominantly Muslim, but it is absent in many other Muslim countries. The operation typically is performed on girls from six to nine years old but also on younger girls and infants. Sometimes when a bride is an “outsider,” she is infibulated just before she marries into a group that follows the custom.
Anthropologists have attempted to document, understand, and explain this practice, which, aside from its harshness, strikes most Westerners as extremely bizarre. Why do they do it? What possible benefit do they see from it? How could it be so widespread? In contrast to most accounts in the contemporary press which dismiss the practice simply as a way of oppressing women, anthropologists’ explanations are appropriately complex. They refer to the cult of virginity, the cultural association between female purity and the society’s honor, and the antiquity of the tradition—Herodotus, writing in the fifth century B.C., obliquely refers to its practice in Egypt, and some mummies show evidence of infibulation. Anthropologists also cite the symbolic role female circumcision plays in distinguishing the Arab-Muslim African societies that practice it from their culturally distinct neighbors.

In places such as the Sudan, where the practice is nearly universal, anthropologists discuss genital mutilation in the context of social practices that involve other forms of mutilation practiced upon both males and females, such as tribal scarring of the face and piercing of body parts. Anthropologists also emphasize the cultural value of enduring pain without complaint. Economic explanations are also proposed. Midwives who perform the operations are sustained by the fees not only from the original circumcision and infibulation but also from treatment of the inevitable medical problems that result. Other explanations are psychological, such as those that refer to the attitudes of older women who say that they have gone through the experience and therefore do not see why the younger ones should be spared.

Besides offering their own historical and cultural explanations, anthropologists report the explanations of the people who engage in the practice. These include such claims as we have always done it, our religion requires it, no one will marry an uncircumcised woman, it makes us clean, it makes us more beautiful, it improves health, it limits the sex drive, it is good for fertility, and—referring to reinfibulation after childbirth—it deters a husband from seeking additional wives.

Some—relatively few—women and men in such societies do question the practice or its supposed benefits, particularly if they have been exposed to modern Western culture. But when asked why they nevertheless have their daughters circumcised, they refer to tradition, or say that their female relatives insisted, or insist that no one would marry the girl unless she were circumcised. Most explanations of female genital mutilation come from women, since few men can be persuaded to discuss the issue, claiming for the most part that it is women’s business. Jomo Kenyatta, the revered former leader of Kenya and member of the Kikuyu tribe, who earned a Ph.D. in anthropology under [Bronislaw] Malinowski, however, said, “No proper Kikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised” (Kenyatta 1938, quoted in Lightfoot-Klein 1989:71).

Women in cultures that practice genital mutilation claim that it is done for the benefit of the men, but women alone are responsible for arranging and performing the operations. Even the question of the acceptability of bridal candidates is largely under control of the women since arranged marriages are the rule, with the groom’s mother having a prominent voice. (Recently a young woman from Togo sought and was granted asylum in the United States to avoid
genital mutilation. The woman became endangered, however, only after her father had died. Her guardianship then passed to her aunt, who attempted to commit the woman to an arranged marriage.) Thus the practice is unusual inasmuch as it is intended to control women, it affects them almost universally, and they suffer the greatest harm from it; but they manage and control it almost exclusively.

The presence in European cities of sizable African communities that maintain the practice—despite local laws that prohibit it—has brought female genital mutilation to the attention both of the courts and of feminists who see it as "butchery intended to control women" (Weil-Currie 1993). Anthropologists who claim to be relativists face the ethical dilemma of whether their responsibility ends with describing the practice and placing it in a cultural context, whether they are obligated to protect the practice from outside interference, or whether they should help to end the practice. Relativism might suggest that they have a further responsibility to protect, or at least not interfere with, this culturally sanctioned practice. At the same time, as relativists, they must also consider their responsibility to cooperate with members of their own culture who are trying to end the practice on the grounds that human rights are being violated.

Although relativistic anthropologists are reluctant to try to alter the values of other cultures, many think it appropriate to try to correct mistaken factual beliefs when this would benefit the welfare of members of the culture. Value judgments that are based on mistaken factual beliefs may be revised without undermining the values themselves. Clearly some beliefs of cultures that practice genital mutilation are factually mistaken. Contrary to those who say the practice is beneficial to sanitation or health, mutilation causes severe medical damage in many cases. The operation can cause immediate infection, excessive bleeding, and even death. Delayed common effects of the operation are infections of the urinary tract, menstrual problems, painful intercourse, reduction in fertility, and complications in childbirth. Nor does the Muslim religion command infibulation, as some believe. The practice does not guarantee virginity, since reinfibulation, which simulates the virginal state, is widely practiced. Because sex drive is more a matter of endocrinology than external organs, the claim that infibulation limits sex drive is likewise questionable.

Insofar as genital mutilation is motivated by sanitary or medical considerations, therefore, knowledge of the facts would tend to undermine the practice without reducing the cultural commitment to the values of purity, fertility, or health. Insofar as genital mutilation is motivated by other factors, such as maintenance of cultural distinctiveness and increasing the ability to endure pain, its medical harm could be alleviated by practicing less severe forms of circumcision without infibulation and by performing the operation only in a sterile clinical setting.

Such a medical solution, while it would save lives and preserve health, does not address the ethical question, raised by feminists, of the right to control one's body and whether or to what extent this right is inalienable. Since genital mutilation is usually performed on children, an important issue is whether parents have the right to harm the child in this way. Parents and guardians cannot violate inalienable rights of their children even for some supposed benefit.
Parents may, however, subject children to some kinds of discipline, as well as to dangerous and sometimes painful medical treatment, when it is for the good of the child. Erroneous views about the supposed benefits of genital mutilation, of course, cannot justify harming the child.

Unlike mistaken claims about the medical benefits of mutilation, other claims are apparently correct. Marriage within the culture as things now stand may not be an option for an uncircumcised woman. Moreover, for females in that culture, marriage is a prerequisite for obtaining any other rights. So being able to marry is a clear benefit and may outweigh the harm of circumcision from the point of view of the girl. (According to principles of justice, the benefit that justifies a harm must accrue to the individual who undergoes the harm, not merely to her extended family. Thus, loss of a bride price for the family would not, without further argument, justify the harm to the child.) Feminist anthropologists, as well as others who are concerned with human rights, want to take both educational and legal means to end the practice of genital mutilation. Their attitude, however, is not consistent with a commitment to ethical relativism...

**Individual Rights and the Common Good**

... In looking at the question of genital mutilation, the following pertinent questions arise. How fundamental is the right not to have one's body altered? At what age does the girl have the right to decide for herself whether to undergo a mutilation? Young girls in the Sudan who are not circumcised by their eighth year usually ask to have it done. Should we disregard these requests because the children are mere dupes of the culture? If they are, can they ever reach an age of consent? Many Western cultures practice ear piercing on infant girls, and many others accede to the wishes of six or eight year olds to have their ears pierced. Circumcision of male infants is common. Bodily mutilations are as much a part of cultural identity for some cultures as distinctive styles of clothing. Some mutilations we regard as attractive, some as beneficial to health, some as harmless, some as aesthetically offensive, others as brutal. Severe genital mutilation surely falls into the brutal category. Moreover, its rationale is empirically flawed, and because its harms disproportionately affect females, it raises serious questions about violating rights. In cases such as this, anthropological understanding of the practice can legitimately be used to aid attempts to eradicate or modify it for the benefit of the members of the culture where it is practiced. Those who disagree should at least argue for the practice on stronger grounds than the value of cultural diversity....

Anthropologists who work in cultures that withhold fundamental human rights from women, children, or any other subgroup face difficult choices about taking any action to restore rights. Some anthropologists would say that their decision to work in such cultures obligates them to alleviate the problem. Others hold that their role as anthropologists is to observe cultural phenomena and record and analyze them as accurately as possible, but not to try to alter conditions. In either case, the anthropologist has a minimal obligation to report the observed and analyzed state of affairs in normal anthropological
outlets for publication. Anthropologists do not betray secrets or violate confidences when they describe a custom that is almost universally practiced in the culture. By calling attention to an unjust practice, however, anthropologists at least implicitly invite groups devoted to the protection of rights to take action. By presenting the offensive practice in its full cultural context, which may involve revealing its latent functions in addition to its manifest or stated functions, anthropologists also provide valuable information about how to control or prevent the practice.

After the anthropologist acts to present information in an appropriate way to a suitable audience, his or her responsibility to try to alleviate the injustice seems to me neither greater nor less than that of any person who is in a position to help the victims of an unjust practice. Even if no further action is taken, I think that the anthropologist who refuses to recognize that the value of cultural diversity is morally subordinate to that of protecting rights is on shaky moral ground. The anthropologist who retreats into ethical relativism in such situations, as did the ethnologist at the trial of Bintou Fofana Diana, does not demonstrate tolerance by appealing to social pressures in another culture but instead risks being committed to the same morally untenable position as the "Nazi defense."

**Conclusion**

I have reiterated some criticisms of ethical relativism, a position which once seemed to offer anthropologists a way to profess tolerance and avoid criticizing the morality of some practices of other cultures. My arguments try to show not so much that ethical relativism is "false" but that its consequences conflict with our deepest held moral intuitions and that it cannot be held consistently while embracing those intuitions. I have tried to show also that anthropologists need not forego tolerance if they abandon relativism in favor of a morality based on principles of justice and fairness. The concern with justice that guides anthropologists' codes of professional conduct can provide the starting point for a more sophisticated analysis of rights, which can be used to analyze cultural practices. (The philosophical literature on rights is vast, but a useful entry for anthropologists is available in Baker 1994.) Ethical judgments of another culture's practices, especially when based on deep understanding of their life, customs, and tradition, are indicative neither of ethnocentrism nor of intolerance. Instead, they show respect for the basic anthropological belief in "the psychic unity of humans" and a commitment to justice and fairness for all.

**References**

Female Circumcision in Africa: The Dialectics of Equality

Culture and society must, of course, always take account of human biology, but they do so in complex ways. The distinctive characteristics of culture is that it transcends nature; but this does not mean that it has left it behind—rather, it has turned it upside down.

— Robert F. Murphy (1977)

Female circumcision or clitoridectomy, called by the Mossi, the Bongo, is not too subtle mechanism of Mossi women to challenge the superiority of men. This was the thought that flashed through my mind, as I watched with amazement, the quiet pride of the women and girls performing the rituals of the graduation ceremonies of their own Bongo. Here were women doing things that they usually never did, and more importantly, should not have been doing. They had procured the drums from men and, much to my surprise and their amusement, were beating them. Where had they learned? Oh yes! They must have practiced these rhythms while pounding millet and sorghum in their mortars. Inexplicable was the source of their knowledge of the songs and dances of the Bongo which were allegedly the sole province of males, but which they performed equally well. True, I had learned both the dances and songs of the Bongo during my numerous visits to the circumcision lodge, but these female graduates did them better than I ever did. Surely some Delilah had tricked a Samson who had then revealed the secrets of arrogant men. During the Bongo ceremony, Mossi women were showing to the men publicly, that they knew male secrets, and moreover, these were not important after all.

The subject of male circumcision and female clitoridectomy and infibulation in African societies has been the source of great speculation and controversy, primarily because it involves the "fundamental ontological differences between the sexes—conditions of simple being—based in the first instance on anatomical distinctions" and what flows from these. Questions raised have been: 1. Are these operations cruel? 2. Do they have anything to do with sex? 3. Do they reveal anything about the relative merits of various cultures' sexual sensibilities? and 4. Do male and female versions of the operations differ with

regard to the answers to questions 1 and 2? Some anthropologists and some non-anthropologists have already strong views on these questions.

Fran P. Hosken discussing "Genital Mutilation in Africa," severely criticized those "Anthropologists (mostly men) who have studied African traditions have done no service to women by utterly disregarding women's health while they attribute 'cultural values' to such damaging traditions as excision and infibulation." Considering these practices "deleterious to health and indeed dangerous," Hosken lamented that many African groups "subject their female children to genital mutilation for a multitude of 'reasons,' many of which conflict and all of which are based on total ignorance concerning reproduction." She wondered aloud whether it was really in the interest of such populations "that such damaging myths are perpetuated under the cloak of silence and are praised as 'culture' in the literature? I think not. The time has come to face the facts." (Hoskin 1976:6) Hosken is tired of, and angry about those "explanations" of men and of what she calls "brain-washed women" who attribute clitoridectomy "to the fear of female sexuality," and the need to "prevent adultery." (Ibid.)

Simon D. Messing, an applied anthropologist, feels that he and his colleagues "cannot evade the issue of such a serious and widespread problem as genital mutilation of females, if they are concerned with public health... they should not leave the burden of this task entirely on the shoulders of radical feminists—and the latter in turn should welcome our cooperation." (Messing 1980:296)

Neither the radical feminists nor the anthropologists have considered the possibility that in the frequent dialectics that we find in social life, female circumcision might well be one of the numerous ways in which women challenge the vaunted superiority of men. . . .

Given the contemporary controversy surrounding "female" circumcision (really an interesting misnomer), it is generally ignored that circumcision is predominantly a "male" ritual. Many well-known ancient peoples, such as the Hebrews (who probably adopted this ritual in ancient Egypt as they borrowed other interesting aspects of that culture) limited circumcision to males. The same thing is true for many African populations. As far as I can ascertain, there is not a single African society in which female circumcision exists without its male counterpart. The reasons for this are as intriguing as they are germane to this article. . . .

Initiation ceremonies preparatory to marriage, sexual relations, and the creation of families, are widespread in African societies, but are not necessarily linked to either circumcision or clitoridectomy. . . . Characteristic of this rite de passage is the customary withdrawal of the initiates from the world of people; their education into the knowledge and lore of their societies; and their subjection to a great deal of physical pain and other hardships. . . .

The Mossi initiated and subjected their pre-pubescent youth to both circumcision and clitoridectomy. In the Manga-Nobere districts of Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) in southern Mossi country, every three or four years, during December, the coldest part of the year, and depending upon the food supply, the Mossi opened the "Bongo" or the initiation ceremony for boys, in
a secluded area in the woods. Here were gathered about twenty to thirty boys, age seven or eight to twelve years old, from the surrounding villages and their helpers. Known as Bankousse, these youths built a camp called the Keogo, placing barriers on the paths leading to it so as to warn off uncircumcised children and women. The mothers of the boys brought food daily to the barrier, but did not cross it.

The Mossi considered circumcision to be a simple surgical act which was only incidental to the Bongo—a veritable initiation to life involving a great many hardships. Almost immediately after arriving at the Keogo the boys were circumcised by the head of the camp, known as the Nane who used a sharp razor for the operation. As in other parts of Africa, the initiates were not expected to cry, and their wounds were cared for by the Nane. Then came the important post operation period called komtogo or "bitter water" by the Bankousse because of the pain involved. Despite the cold nights, they had use of only a small fire and were not permitted to use any covers. Every morning they were forced to bathe in a cold pool, and when they returned, they had lessons to learn involving history, nature study, and life.

The Bongo had its own mystery language whose words turned out on analysis to be synonyms for ordinary More (the language of the Mossi) with the prefix "na." The camp had its own rules on which rank was based, not on those on the outside, but on the order in which the youths were circumcised. What the Nane attempted to do was to forge a link between the boys in opposition to himself, who acted like a veritable ogre. Walking about the camp with a long stick, he whipped the youngsters into line, threw sand in the food brought by the women, and made the Bankousse dance and sing until they were exhausted.

Graduation ceremonies of the Bongo involved going into the woods, cutting grass for the horses of the chiefs, and wood for their fires. Then on the appointed day, the mothers brought new clothes for their sons, hoping that none of them had died during the ordeal of the Bongo. Then on the appointed day the graduates dressed in their new clothing marched through the market place, and visited the chief. Then they engaged in dancing and singing at a public place just outside the market place.

As usual in almost all parts of Africa, the Mossi women were in complete charge of their Bongo from which they excluded all men. Their Keogo was not in the woods, but was in the compound of a woman who lived by herself. But as usual for males, I could find out nothing about the nature of the excision that took place. I did hear the drumming and singing that took place there all night until the wee hours of the morning, and did observe the young girls going backward and forward to their homes. Invariably they carried a tufted staff, said to have been given to them by their prospective husbands. The women would say nothing about the symbolism involved, considering the information specific to women alone. The most that they would say about what went on in the female Bongo was that the males have their secrets and so did the women.

Like the graduation exercises of the male Bankousse, the female ritual was a village-wide affair, but strictly within the province of the women. Market days before, the relatives and prospective husbands of the graduates, shopped for the clothes and headties, and makeup for them. Then on the day of the exercise, the
young girls went to the home of the female Nane and accompanied by their mothers and sisters who were beating drums and singing, went to the village square where the Bankousse danced and sang the traditional airs of the Bongo. From time to time, male relatives and husbands would detach themselves from the line of spectators and approach the dancers, giving them presents of money. To all intents and purposes, the female Bongo was structurally and functionally quite similar to that of the males. This ceremony demonstrated to all that the Mossi women were just as capable as the men in performing an initiation ceremony whose function was to transform girls into women, as the male version transformed boys into men. Moreover, they had more effectively kept men from knowing their secrets than did the males, whose secrets they had obviously shared.

What is important about the puberty rituals in African societies, whether they involved painful initiation, and whether they involved genital mutilation with recognizable pain, are the emic and etic features involved. The Africans do have their own views of their rituals even though others have ignored these views and insist upon their own interpretations. This is perhaps par for human beings involving as it does relative power. There is no doubt that had they the requisite power, Africans would insist that the world accept their interpretation of their own rituals, as well as their views of the rituals of others. Anthropologists would do well to keep this in mind.

The Mossi are not much given to speculating on the imponderables of social life, or the world in general, judging such ratiocinations quixotic. To them the Bongo for men and for women have the same meaning and serve the same function for both men and women: preparation for marriage and rearing families. Indicative of this equality is that the two genders control their own initiation rituals, even though women have to borrow drums from the males. When badgered about the sexual features involved in genital mutilation, an admittedly chauvinist Mossi male might suggest that since females are inferior to males they are not permitted to touch the male organ during sexual congress, and that clitoridectomy makes sexual congress easier. This may be as good a rationalization as any other, but flies in the face of the anxiety of Mossi men over the conduct of their wives, and their stated axiom: "Women are so important that if a man receives as a wife, either a blind woman or a leper, he should close his eyes, close his mouth, and close his ears, and keep her."

The equally male chauvinist Dogon explicitly associate both circumcision and clitoridectomy with elaborate myths concerning creation and cosmology. Both operations are said to have been instituted as punishments and are indicative of the incomplete state of human beings resulting from the primordial crime of a godling. There is the removal of the opposite sex complement with which all human beings were originally intended to be equipped. Thus for the Dogon there is complementarity in the operation. Mary Daly criticizes the Dogon for what she considered an emic patriarchal obfuscation of the true purposes of the operation, namely the intimidation and humiliation of women. What she conveniently ignores is the fact that the Dogon forbid men to have intercourse with their wives against their will and that the sexual responses of
wives are in large part conditioned by the treatment they generally receive from their husbands (Daly 1978).

Somewhat like the Dogon, both the Egyptians and the Northern Sudanese stress the complementarity of circumcision and clitoridectomy. Referring specifically to the Sudanese, [Janice] Boddy asserted that

Through their own operation, performed at roughly the same age as when girls are circumcised (sic) (between five and ten years), boys become less like women: while the female reproductive organs are covered, that of the male is uncovered, or, as one Sudanese author states, of a child's sex... by removing physical characteristics deemed appropriate to his or her opposite: the clitoris and other external genitalia, in the case of females, the prepuce of the penis, in the case of males. This last is emphasized by a custom now lapsed in Hofriyat wherein one of the newly circumcised boys' grandmothers would wear his foreskin as a ring on the day of the operation (Boddy 1982:687-8).

Paying special attention to the widespread African emic notion of complementarity in the rituals of circumcision and clitoridectomy, Boddy insists that

By removing their external genitalia, women are not so much preventing their own sexual pleasure (though obviously this is an effect) as enhancing their femininity. Circumcision as a symbolic act brings sharply into focus the fertility potential of women by dramatically de-emphasizing their inherent sexuality. By insisting on circumcision for their daughters, women assert their social indispensibility, an importance that is not as the sexual partners of their husbands, nor in this highly segregated, male-authoritative society, as their servants, sexual or otherwise, but as the mothers of men. The ultimate social goal of a woman is to become, with her husband, the cofounder of a lineage section. As a respected haboba she is "listened to," she may be sent on the hadj (pilgrimage to Mecca) by her husbands or her sons, and her name is remembered in village genealogies for several generations (italics supplied) (Ibid.:687).

Although Boddy had her own etic views of female genital mutilation among the Sudanese, her ethnographic data support the etic argument of this paper, namely that in this instance of the dialectics of social life, clitoridectomy rather than a ritual performed by women, to demean their already low status in many African societies, is a declaration of equality. What is interesting is that there are few, if any, cases in the ethnographic record where African women (as contrasted to the normally sexist African men) see this ritual as reducing their status. Feminists may consider the African women who defend this practice as "brain-washed," but should be aware that many African women, as well as men, take the same jaundiced view of many rituals of Western Christendom. True, some contemporary African women object to clitoridectomy, but few had dared to confront their mothers and grandmothers over the issue for fear of being taken for "black" white women. The implication here is that these women have failed to assert that cultural equality for which Africans have fought long and hard.
What is important about the controversy about clitoridectomy in Africa is that African women were never part of it. The issue grew out of a Judeo-Christian concern over human sexuality, involved Christian missionaries in Africa, and was used by African men in their struggle for cultural autonomy from Europeans, and ultimately for political independence.

Missionary opposition to clitoridectomy among the Kikuyu was very much linked to their opposition to all aspects of African culture that could frustrate their attempts to impose Western Christendom. We are told that

The missionaries recognized the significance of the initiatory rites, of which circumcision was the outward physical symbol, and they were appalled at what they saw in them. The physical operation they considered brutal and unhygienic and in the case of girls a barbaric mutilation with permanent ill-effects. But the atmosphere in which the ceremonies were carried out seemed to them even more evil, with what they took to be the sexual innuendo of the dances and songs, the licentiousness of the old men and women and the gloating cruelty of the operators and their attendants. They taught against the practices and prayed that the people might forego them altogether (Italics added) (Murray-Brown 1972:50–51).

... What had started out as an issue over clitoridectomy, and a practice which many African Christians were prepared to change, became a cause célèbre over the issue of African cultural and political freedom. Much to the alarm of the colonial government, it became known locally in October 1919 that "John [Jomo] Kenyatta" who had gone to Britain to protest settler colonialism, had been to Moscow and was "in close touch with Communists and Communist Organizations." Songs praising Kenyatta and ridiculing the governor were outlawed as seditious, creating anger among anti-mission Kikuyu.

The problem now was that clitoridectomy had become inextricably linked to the Kikuyu desire for equality in their homeland. The missionaries were insisting that Kenyatta "should tell his people to obey government officers, Kikuyu chiefs, and missions in control of schools."

Kenyatta’s subsequent defense of clitoridectomy as an operation in which the operator had "the dexterity of a Harley Street surgeon... with a stroke she cuts off the tip of the clitoris... the girl hardly feels any pain" (Jomo Kenyatta 1962) is only understandable in light of the role that clitoridectomy had played in the drive of the Kikuyu to achieve equality for their institutions in the face of Europe’s arrogance. Like Bob Murphy, Kenyatta was very aware of the dialectics of social life. For him colonial tutelage was oppressive and alien. He wrote:

In our opinion, the African can only advance to a 'higher level' if he is free to express himself, to organize economically, politically, socially, and to take part in the government of his own country. In this way he will be able to develop his creative mind, initiative, and personality, which hitherto have been hindered by the multiplicity of incomprehensible laws and ordinances (Ibid.:192).

What the conflict over clitoridectomy did was to bring to "an abrupt close the paternalistic phase of missionary activity; henceforth the emphasis would
be on the growth of native churches. The high noon of imperialism... [and the attempt] to extend white dominion over all of East Africa, was over." (Ibid.:151)

Kenyatta has been pilloried by many female scholars and feminists, for defending a practice (which he was prepared to see abolished), in the greater interest of political equality for Africans. Few noted, as did Harriet Lyons, that Kenyatta had suggested, perhaps as an after thought, that clitoridectomy may have been practiced to prevent masturbation, a practice condemned in both Kikuyu boys and girls, and that his major emphasis was "largely on social structure." (1981:510) Moreover, he was fully prepared to use education to abolish it. A more intemperate view of Kenyatta's action is that of Fran Hosken who declared that

An international feminist observer cannot help but wonder why the male African leadership does not speak out about the mutilation of women, a custom that was reinforced by Kenyatta in Kenya and is also supported by the independence movement under his leadership... It clearly affects the status of women in political affairs (Hosken 1976:6).

Understandably, there are some African feminists who agree with Hosken. Nevertheless, it should be noted that "the resistance of African feminists to anti-clitoridectomy agitation—evident at the United Nations World Conference on women held in Copenhagen in 1980" accords fully with the demand of Kenyatta for African cultural autonomy. Like him, these women realize that African practices must be brought into line with those characteristics of the emerging global civilization. What they insist upon is respect, and the end of European arrogance.

The problem with blaming Kenyatta and other African men for clitoridectomy misses the important point that African women have always been in control of this ritual (until now when male doctors may perform it in modern hospitals), and probably used it, to declare their equality with men. Faced with discrimination for not possessing those characteristics with which dominant social strata have linked their dominance, African women, like other women, and subordinate groups, have striven to acquire the traits viewed as valuable. These practices vary cross-culturally in time and space, and can be as different as Japanese females surgically operating on their eyes to approximate those of American males during the occupation of their country; to certain American females bobbing their noses; other Americans bleaching or darkening their skins; and still others dressing like males, and creating female counterparts of such organizations as Masonic lodges, veteran groups, and institutions of higher learning. In many of these cases, the males or dominant groups whose characteristics were being imitated, were not aware of the attempts to achieve equality with them, or to win their favor. That they were responsible for the behavior in the first place may well have been true, but a dialectician like Robert Murphy, whose eyes were probably opened by his wife, Yolanda, would smile at the irony of it all.
References


POSTSCRIPT

Should Anthropologists Work to Eliminate the Practice of Female Circumcision?

The issue of female circumcision raises important questions about whether or not there are limits to cultural relativism. Critics of cultural relativism have often pointed to the Nazi atrocities during the Second World War as examples of immoral practices that can be understood in culturally relative terms but should not be condoned. Cultural relativists in such cases counter that unlike male or female circumcision in Africa, genocide was never morally acceptable in German society.

At issue here is whether or not an unhealthy practice should be suppressed because it is unhealthy. If anthropologists work to abolish female circumcision, should they also work to prohibit use of alcohol, tobacco, and recreational drugs in our own society because such products are unhealthy? Are there limits beyond which cultural relativism has no power? If anthropologists and international organizations are right to stop female circumcision, would they also be justified in working to abolish male circumcision in Jewish and Muslim communities on the same grounds?

Without dealing directly with issues of cultural and moral relativism, Skinner argues that anthropologists should take seriously the concerns of both African men and women, the majority of whom want to continue to practice clitoridectomy and resent Western attempts to suppress the practice. For another view from a similar perspective, see Eric Winkel’s essay “A Muslim Perspective on Female Circumcision,” Women & Health (vol. 23, 1995).

There are many essays by authors who wish to abolish female circumcision, and nearly all of them refer to the practice as female genital mutilation. A lengthy bibliography can be found at http://www.fgmnetwork.org/reference/biblio.html. Typical examples would include Harriet Lyons’s “Anthropologists, Moralities, and Relativities: The Problem of Genital Mutilations,” Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology (vol. 18, 1981) and Anke van der Kwaak’s “Female Circumcision and Gender Identity: A Questionable Alliance?” Social Science and Medicine (vol. 35, 1992).


For a discussion of issues dealing with cultural relativism and anthropological ethics, see Ethics and the Profession of Anthropology, Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, ed. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).