

A Cultural Clash. The case Female Genital Cutting

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Female Genital Cutting (FGC) is a specific procedure performed by ethnic groups to mark a girl as marriageable. It has the character of a ritual operation and is practised in over 40 countries world-wide. More than 30 are situated on the African continent in a belt between the West African Countries on the coast of the Atlantic and the Horn of Africa. Occasionally the practice is also found at the Southern point at the Arab Peninsula¹, in Asia and in Latin America². Contrary to popular opinion FGC is not practised exclusively in Islamic societies; Christians and members of indigenous faiths also perform this ritual. Thus FGC is neither religiously, nor geographically nor socially confined. It is specific conceptions of individual ethnic groups about morality, body condition, and the social career of female individuals, which determine whether FGC is deemed necessary or rejected.

In the West FGC has been discussed for about 20 years; and mostly condemned. The discussion was, among others, triggered by the prominent appearance of women who were directly affected. But also members of the social and medical services, who are involved with female migrants, have brought FGC to the public attention. The topic is used as a political issue too, and has provided suitably sensational news for the mass media.

In the scientific community the opinion about FGC is not at all uniform. Public knowledge is still very insufficient. European reaction to genital operation on African girls tends to be shocked. However, the real social circumstances conditions of this procedure are barely known. Opinions are formed by sensation hungry mass media with their usual emphasis on the shock-horror aspects, as governed by comprehensible economic interests (increase circulation and audience quotas). Tendentious statements like "eighty million living African girls and women are victims of this trauma" or "each day about 6.000 girls are subjected to this cruel fate"³ are clear indications of the fact that an earnest discussion is not looked for, rather, the debate is determined by prejudice. Hence the usual and expected European public outcry ensues but rarely do we witness an attempt to seek explanations or even to suggest an understanding. Thus it still remains obscure why this custom has been practised for centuries and continues to be popular.

Supposing, in the theory of Milton H. Erickson, that humans in any given situation will select the best possible alternative for action, which is available to them, i.e. every human action follows a certain logic, we inevitably must ask ourselves, what

¹ Formerly these regions had close trading connections with East African countries over the Red Sea. Possibly Arab traders transferred the ritual with the export of slaves to regions of the Arab Peninsula.

² Brazil is an example, where possibly slaves from West Africa imported the custom.

³ Schnüll 1999 :11, Bundesministerium Informationsschrift 1996, WIN News 1995(1) :34, Hosken 1993 and others

the reasons and emotional motives could be determining the logic of FGC? And why has the practise been considered for hundreds of years by many ethnic groups as the best available form of action to mark marriageable girls? Western logic has been primarily governed by worries about increased mortality risks, and furthermore considers the action of cutting off intact bodily parts without any medical need absurd. According to Western values the ritual appears as senseless and inexplicable violence exercised by mothers on their daughters. Consequently we cannot help judging this behaviour of the African people as primitive and grotesque. Not surprisingly, conventional modes of debate concerning FGC are conducted in simplistic terms of culprits and victims. This point of view does not in the least help to understand the internal motives and the logic of the phenomenon FGC.

In any concern with the issue, we are first of all obliged to leave behind Western value concepts and take an unbiased look at the motives of the peoples concerned. From the emic point of view FGC is considered as a vital demarcating status mark. But according to Western value systems, FGC is interpreted as mutilation contravening human rights, and treated as such. As far as the former is concerned, FGC helps to implement morality and demarcate social status. For the latter the operation is hurting and highly immoral.

In socio-anthropological research it is accepted that opinions about the suitability of moral and social institutions vary widely around the world⁴. An example: what is the suitable moment for sexual intercourse for a girl? 1. With the menarche? 2. Age 18? 3. At marriage? 4. Before marriage provided that no pregnancy takes place? 5. With the move into a common household with the partner? 6. With parental consent? ... For our argument it is important to see that each of these moral opinions is held valid and usually unchallenged within the group concerned.

Hence FGC is explained by the societies practising it as a vital procedure "for our tradition". The view is mirrored in the relevant literature and matches my own field research in Ethiopia. FGC is a vital component of a rite of passage and remains unchallenged by the people practising it. The custom helps a girl cross the enormously important threshold to marriageable status. Only with this kind of physical marking does the girl have any chance of a normal social career. If the indicator is missing, she can neither become sexually active nor enter motherhood. She would not be considered to conform to required social norms and highly immoral. She would be considered anti-social, social rejection would be the inevitably result.

⁴ See i.e. Leach 1982

Below I shall cite, using the example of the Arbore, how FGC functions as one physical characteristic amongst many others in a chain of varying symbols, to indicate the social career of female person.

The Arbore are Cushitic agropastoralists living in the Southwest of Ethiopia. They are a closed society currently numbering approximately 5.000 members. First, all children are called *morqo*. *Morqo* and *oota* [cattle] are considered to be the same in Arbore. From both no special behaviours are expected. However, they represent prestige for the families. *Morqo* is a sexually neutral definition for the "grey mass" of the smallest ones, who are not yet considered as individuals⁵. Female individual identity is conferred socially with accession to the title "*haraté*", "unmarried one" which determines a young girls first rights and obligations.

The *haraté* stage begins to integrate a girl into the working process. Her labour contributes enormously to the potential of her family. Accordingly the dowry the bridegroom has to pay for her, is very high. Usually the girls are married off around the age of 20. The act of marriage consists of two separate principal rituals. The first ritual is called *sud* [marriage]. After the bridegroom has paid the dowry, the *haraté* will be taken from her family and initiated for the next level of socialisation with FGC. In Arbore the ritual operation is practised in form of a radical excision, i.e. the visible clitoris and the labia minora are removed. Thereby the female initiate enters the liminal status of *utanté* [bride] and moves in with her parents-in-law. There she is observed over several months whether she is diligent, socially compatible, and for her moral behaviour. During this stage of "marriage on probation" sexual intercourse for the couple is considered taboo. Usually the period may last between six months and two years, after which the second marriage ritual ensues, called "*min gussin*" "building a house". Now the couple moves into their own household and the bride may legitimately get pregnant. The bride is expected to lose her virginity on the first night together under the scrutiny of the male public, and afterwards she is designated as *sallé* [wife].

All levels of socialisation *morqo*, *haraté*, *utanté* and *sallé* are recognisable by physical, emotional, or economical marks, which are associated with certain norms of behaviour.

morqo [child]

Gender:	neutral
Body Coverage:	none
Hair:	initially natural, later shaven
Jewels:	few, individual necklaces and bracelets

⁵ This view is underlined, that in the case of death *morqo* will be buried in the hut and not, like the other Arbore considered as individuals, in a defined burial-place outside the village.

Covered Marks:	The child is not perceived as an individual.
Codes of Behaviour:	unaffected
Passage:	flowing, without a special ritual
<i>haraté</i> [unmarried]	
Gender:	female
Body Coverage:	short loincloth, later ankle-length leather skirt
Hair:	shaven
Jewels:	ear decoration, headband), necklaces, bracelets, assorted bangles
Body Decoration:	extraction of the lower incisors, ritual scarring of belly or upper arms
Covered Marks:	lots of jewellery indicates presence of an admirer, flirtatiousness during dances indicates availability
Codes of Behaviour:	loose inquisitive contacts between young people of both sexes are permitted. Sexual contact is considered taboo. Pregnancy would involve dire social consequences
Passage:	FGC as rite of passage
<i>utanté</i> [bride]	
Gender:	female
Body Coverage:	knee-length cotton skirt , goat leather cape
Hair:	long, not plaited
Jewels:	Increasing number of necklaces, finger rings and bracelets, belt of metal rings, one bangle per leg only
Covered Marks:	change of residence, conformity by genital operation, strong group dynamics, appearance often collectively, increasing corpulence, paid high dowry
Codes of Behaviour:	The bride has to prove herself at her in-laws house, morally, and in her diligence. Bride and groom being together is permitted, sexual contact is considered taboo.
Passage:	setting up own household as rite of passage
<i>sallé</i> [wife]	
Gender:	female
Body Coverage:	knee-length cotton skirt
Hair:	shoulder-length and braided
Jewels:	bracelets, less jewels, no bangles
Covered Marks:	change of residence, children, personal responsibility for the organisation of daily work, own household, paid second dowry

Codes of Behaviour: Sexual intercourse and pregnancy are legitimate and desired. Demonstration of the marital affiliation is permitted (husband right and wife left position in the house).

In Arbore the transition to a higher level of socialisation is demonstrated by visible changes in clothes, hair-styles and decoration, as well as by covered indicators such as FGC and a change of residence. Thereby FGC is a crucial component in the context of these marks. The infliction and sensation of pain appears as a crucial mechanism of social scrutiny and imparts the full significance of her transformed social status to the affected young woman and to society. The logic of such social indicators and symbols for ritual today is often not recognised anymore. Often the original reason for many contemporary ritual practices has become obscured. For instance, in the Middle Ages drinking partners clinked each other's heavy beer mugs, so that drink would spill into the partners mug to indicate that your partner had no intention to poison you. Hand shaking indicated an absence of weapons. Not to clink mugs or to shake hands would arouse suspicions. Today we are still shaking hands or raising our glasses, because we are convinced that these actions are proper and courteous. To ignore the custom is considered uncivilised, if not downright hostile. Not to shake hands demonstratively separates friend and enemy. Thereby we are not aware of the origin.

Beyond their comprehensible logic, the ritual signs are a collective expression of given social order and associated standards and values. (It is immoral to poison somebody sanctimonious during a drinking-bout.) It is inappropriate to judge any such symbols in terms of categories like "right and wrong" and/or "good and evil". If at all, we should employ neutral categories such as "strange or inherent" or "comprehensibly or incomprehensibly". Understanding the idea behind the symbolism is of crucial importance. Thus, about 70 years ago, Adolf E. Jensen gathered and compared numerous examples of rites of passage containing male circumcision. In his introduction he mentions conventional scientific attempts to explain the primary logical reasons, which could lead to circumcision and concludes. "[...] *man verzichtet am besten auch auf eindeutige Erklärungen, solange sie nur Möglichkeiten bleiben können, und versucht statt dessen, den Ideengehalt einer Kulturerscheinung, die Vorstellungswelt in ihrer Gesamtheit zu erfassen, die den Boden für die Entstehung einer oder mehrerer Sitten zu geben vermochte.*" (ibid. 1933:3).

Jensen has understood something fundamental. The basic question cannot be: why was a ritual element invented and executed in exactly this way? Rather the question is: which idea is at the bottom of it? What is to be symbolised? Of course we can

speculate, whether FGC originally served population control⁶, or whether it was intended to limit body odour to protect girls in pastoral societies against male rape or attack from wild animals⁷, or whether it represents an arbitrary demonstration of patriarchal politics to control female labour and reproduction⁸. Unfortunately, none of this is helpful. The societies practising FGC see it as a traditional operation, which you do not analyse, and which alone is able to create identity, strengthen the moral code and confirm the vitality of society as a whole. The ritual is an exclusive way to distinguish a girl for her future marriageable status and ensuing respectable motherhood. This is the conviction behind the operation, i.e. it is seen as an irreversible mark of her group affiliation, which can be checked by public scrutiny. The value of the social group affiliation is not negotiable.

Thus during the FGC debate two totally different value systems clash. In Europe the discussion is conducted by Europeans amongst Europeans according to European values, which is anathema to the Africans concerned. Conversely in African societies a discussion of FGC usually does not take place at all, or is impossible. Talking about the most intimate parts of a woman's body and about women in such intimate terms is not done, even not at all public. However, if we want to engage successfully in a meaningful debate we must be able to set out with principles, which are appropriate for both sides. Only by a common ground (e.g. a commonly accepted social value) can we transform something contentious (e.g. FGC) into something acceptable for both (e.g. through reorganisation). (Of course on condition that we necessarily have to come to an agreement with FGC any way.) One common approach could be found in the love of parents for their children. Every generation of parents endeavours to ensure the optimum social career for their offspring. That therefore in some African societies used tool FGC is just very strange for us. But there may possibly exist other means, equally potent in Western, as well as African societies to demonstrate love and care for children. Three are discussed here:

1. Genital Operations

Until the beginning of the 20th Century, genital operations like ovariectomies and clitoridectomies were practised in Europe and North America with female patients too, without any recognisable organic reason⁹. It was considered an acceptable cure of so-called female afflictions such as hysteria or masturbation. These operations simply had to do with what society accepted as healthy or, better said, as normal. Hence masturbation was not acceptable. This compares well with societies practising FGC; where a cut vulva represents accepted standards of normality.

⁶ Ravenholt 1980

⁷ Grassivaro Gallo & Viviani 1990

⁸ Hosken 1993 :315

⁹ Laqueur 1996: 200f, Lightfoot-Klein 2001: 214

However there had been no ritual base in Europe for a clitoridectomy. Additionally, these operations, at least officially, belong to the past.

2. Marking the Group Affiliation

It is a socio-anthropological constant that affiliation to a certain group is demonstrated by physical, partially irreversible modifications, by wearing uniform, for instance, tattoos (undergoing a renaissance in Europe), traditional students' associations wearing bruise marks, corselets to get a wasp-tail, cutting off finger limbs¹⁰, or artificial skull deformations¹¹. This is often concomitant with infliction of pain. In the West, too, it is usual to cut, to tie, to hush up, to press, to paint over, to castigate, to cover etc., in order to mark out someone as a member of a certain group. Here, too, personal conceptions of identity are purposefully co-ordinated with group conceptions, without any apparent logic in these physical changes. However, though group regulations in Western nations are quite rigid too, but individuals have the possibility of choice, even to change to another group, without having to fear ostracism from society. A student may choose whether he would like to join students' association and expose himself to the risk of duel. An Arbore woman does not have such an option. She cannot choose whether she wants to expose herself to the risk of cutting or not. For her, even the idea of demanding an option is inconceivable.

3. Rites of passage

Rites of passage are a component in all societies. Their respective symbolism varies strongly, however. Such variations are deliberate, in order to draw a recognisable line with other societies or groups. In our society there is an apparent trend for the significance of rites of passage to decrease. Today, a young person can participate in confirmation or not. Its meaning in his or her social career is not very significant. A German woman can decide whether she gives birth in or out of wedlock, or, if she perhaps moves to the city, where single mothers receive more social acknowledgement than in the countryside. This means that, in contrast to FGC practising societies, we have again the choice, whether we want to carry out a rite of passage or not, without having to face up to critical consequences. Furthermore, through existing rites of passage in the West are often connected with strong stress situations for initiate, the element of physical pain plays a subordinate role. In addition, in Europe a female rite of passage that is connected with a genital operation does not exist.

¹⁰ Rainer 1998

¹¹ Melk-Koch 1999

African, like European societies tend to use comparative means in order to ensure the optimum social career for their offspring. Certainly these means are not identical¹². In our society it has not been usual to cut female genital organs for ritual reasons and we do not have a rite of passage that is so cogent and painful as FGC. Furthermore, general conceptions about the quality of life are evaluated differently by African and Western societies. The Arbore judge the value "love for the children" differently than we do. The argument of physical health is quite accepted by them, but it is not regarded as so crucially important in the social context as the argument of psychological and social health¹³. FGC can effect serious physical impairment; disregarding this standard is, however, inevitably connected with social ostracism. Europeans, who are centered on physical well-being, cannot imagine at all, how unwell a single uncut Arbore woman would feel, and what kinds of extensive social consequences would ensue for her, if she deviated from the prescribed standard.

FGC thus can not be discussed on the level of a European value system. This also applies to organisations, which carry out public awareness campaigns to warn against FGC on the basis of Western derived values. The application of terms like "enlightenment" and "warning" derived from the West is ill-conceived already. This is one reason for failure. Here, Africans are told to be "enlighten", that their values are wrong, and they have acted unscrupulously for centuries. A truly colonialist style! It is a manifestation of a patronising attitude towards African people, who are rightly indignant if they are represented with terms like "Female Genital Mutilation" as barbarian and irresponsible and the love to their children is denied to them. The regard to the own cultural prejudice is barricaded to the Western culture-external activists. They are not able to deal with attitudes, which are different to their own, acting in foreign cultural backgrounds according to the motto "I know what is good for you". Members of NGO's with the best intentions have to face the question, whether they are possibly exercising cultural imperialism here. As long as African societies do not themselves ask for support, FGC remains their own affair. Uninvited, we Europeans do not have to convince them of the correctness of our own values. As long as FGC represents an unchallenged valid means of status demarcation, there also cannot be consent. To exercise material pressure by means such as withholding funds from development aid in order to dissuade African countries from applying FGC is nothing but extortion. The preferable approach is to engage in constructive debate about alternatives to FGC on the initiative of the people concerned. Such possible alternative symbols must be recognised by Africans

¹² See also Shweder 2002

¹³ In the WHO declaration of Alma Ata disease is definite with every restriction of the physical, psychological and social well-being. In the case of illness are to identify "the needs of single persons and groups" and to guarantee "the proper aid by consideration of medical, psychological, social and ethnical aspects". (Juchli 1991)

as a new sign of their group affiliation, as this value is not negotiable. By an exchange neither the social authorities, nor the loyalty of the individual towards society, nor the social determination of the rite of passage are called in question.

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Summary

Female Genital Cutting (FGC) is a specific procedure performed by ethnic groups to mark a girl as marriageable. The opinion about this rite of passage is not at all uniform. From the emic point of view FGC is considered as a vital demarcating status mark. But according to Western value systems, FGC is interpreted and treated as mutilation contravening human rights. In this article I illustrate the clash of two different value systems and come to conclusion, that FGC cannot be discussed on the level of a Western value system. A change of FGC ritual only can take place on initiative of the people concerned, in form of alternative symbols. These alternative symbols must be recognised by them as a new sign of their group affiliation, as this value is not negotiable.