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## **Other Countries, Other Customs. FGC - Background and Perspectives of a Controversial Rite of Passage**

### **Introduction**

Female Genital Cutting (FGC) is a painful ritual operation, which - at least in the Western World - is being discussed increasingly controversially. The issue is both political and sensational, as it concerns the most intimate parts of the female body, and their alleged abuse at the hand of patriarchal force. This irreversible and painful operation ostensibly challenges any common sense and logic. Given the desire for the largest possible number of descendants prevalent amongst numerous ethnic groups on the African continent, the operation also paradoxically seems to increase the mortality risk for mothers and newborn babies. The removal of intact parts of the body without any medical need seems even more absurd under the predominantly unsatisfactory hygienic conditions, and with the lack of available medical technology. I have tried to investigate the roots of this ambiguous operation in the context of my thesis in order to find subsequently perspectives, which could substitute the pain and the negative consequences of the operation.

### **Working hypotheses**

During the research, the following three hypotheses for FGC were examined:

1) FGC is an expression of male power and violence. Performing an operation on the female vulva is an expression of male control over female sexuality. Male dominance is marked and consolidated in relation to the female sex: "Genital and sexual mutilation of women and girls has been practiced by the paint dominated tribal societies of Africa and the Middle East for many centuries" (Hosken 1993:8).

2) FGC is practiced in order to control population growth. Especially the radical types of totally Excision and Infibulation prevent pre- and extra-marital pregnancies, as well as restricting time and occasion during which conception is legitimate. "But genital mutilation is nothing but a traditional method of birth control" (Ravenholt 1980(2): 35).

3) FGC is the physical representation of social standards. The operation is a substantial component of a rite of passage. Through genital cutting the transformation in status, which the female individual is undergoing, is illustrated effectively. "Female circumcision is the physical marking of the marriage ability of women, because it symbolizes social control of their sexual pleasure -clitoridectomy- and their reproduction -infibulation-" (Toubia 1995).

## **Methodology**

I have based the thesis on my observations during my field research with the Arbore in Southern Ethiopia from 1993 to 1999. There I interviewed women, as well as men, about their motives for the execution and retention of FGC. My concern was to find out how these people, who were directly involved in FGC, defined this operational interference. During the course of the research the difference between an emic and etic perspective became apparent.

My analyses were primarily derived on a qualitative level, from which a hermeneutic approach for the research was developed. A quantitative analysis with questionnaires would have been possible, however, I have rejected the option as ineffective, especially as the accuracy of the initial statements was very doubtful. Taking a socio-anthropological approach helped to bridge the gap between internal, self-perceptive, and external cultural conceptions about FGC.

Engaged observation, discussion, and interviews formed the basis of my research. Much important information was obtained incidentally, during informal conversation or through casual gossip. My own photographs have proved an invaluable supplement to my research. Tape and video recordings I took provided additional material to help assess the total situation.

## **Results**

The first two hypotheses were not tenable under the evidence from the collected qualitative and quantitative data. However, the third hypothesis, which defines FGC as a substantial element of a rite of passage, was confirmed. As Durkheim formulates "Man muß unter dem Symbol die Wirklichkeit erreichen. Die barbarischsten und seltsamsten Riten [...] bedeuten irgendein menschliches Bedürfnis, irgendeine Seite des individuellen oder sozialen Lebens." (ibid. 1981 :19).

This 'aspect' provides the central motif of FGC, which marks the transition of the female initiate into a fully fledged member of society and eligibility for marriage, which is underlined by a rite of passage, the accomplishment of which is symbolically illustrated by pain and the ensuing scars. FGC is not an expression of the arbitrary exercise of patriarchal violence, but rather a demonstration of a social standard applying to the female body. The basic condition of this operation consists of marking and making recognizable a status change, as undergone by female individual. Through the operation the girl, or young woman, obtains the constitutive authentication for marriage and reproduction.

Society uses a set of specified symbols to authenticate the eligibility of an individual for certain actions. The kinds of symbols that diverse ethnic groups use for this purpose cannot be explained with logic. The elements are inventions, designed in order to represent the standards and values of a society figuratively. In the case with FGC, such a figurative expression is accomplished through the body, similarly to numerous other existing actions, which are used to define the affiliation of somebody to a certain group. One explanation is that forceful corporeal symbols such as physical pain most convincingly express a group affiliation. Furthermore, they provide an indelible memory imprint for the initiate of his or her transition and the concomitant social consequences. Any important status change requires such an impressive sign as durable proof of its implementation, as it were. The process of transformation has to be convincing for the participants, and manifestly comprehensible for observers. It is a crucial step in the life of an individual, and its execution and existence is pivotal for his or her future existence. The FGC ritual separates as a group those eligible for marriage- and reproduction from those unauthorized to do so. It sub-divides the group of pregnant women into morally well-behaved women and "sluts".

Such separations can be illustrated by symbols, which are not immediately evident. Such concealed characteristics as represented through pain are particularly intense and durable. Hairstyles or clothes can be changed, as can a place of residence, but the physical pain of a rite of passage will never be forgotten. The scars on the body remain forever and are impossible to erase physically as well as mentally. Pain and scars render the body into a signifier of collective cultural memory. The initiate's new status is engraved on his or her body. For the initiate, this designation turns into an unforgettable test of hardship. By successfully passing the examination the characteristics of his or her former status are erased and the initiate proves him- or herself worthy of the new status. The Dani of New Guinea cut off a piece of their own finger or of that of a young girl when close relative or intimate friends have died. The physical loss represents ritual respect, a memory of the deceased, which will

remain alive forever (Rainer 1998:110ff). On Palau / Papua New Guinea the women have their mons veneris tattooed. Only thus are they recognized as adequate and eligible for marriage. Furthermore, the sort of ornament chosen denotes the rank and wealth of the woman (Probst 1992:16ff). With the Arbore of Ethiopia a hero is marked by several vertical rows of scratch scars. They demonstrate to everyone that the man has killed an enemy. There are many instances of such pain-induced markings and they occur equally in both sexes.

Perhaps physical pain, injury and concealed scars are used as effective signifiers when a change of social status is not immediately apparent externally. For instance, when a young girl has passed into eligible status for marriage and yet remains resident in the house of her parents. Briefly comparing the characteristics of the stages of female socialization of the Arbore and their neighbors the Hamar (see Lydall and Strecker 1979) should clarify this. The Arbore practice Female Genital Excision during the first wedding ritual (*sud*). The Hamar, however, do not practice any form of a ritual genital operation on their females. In spite of many similarities between the rites of passages from girl-to-bride and afterwards to wife, such as bride price, and the ritual handling of water as a cleansing sign to get rid of childlike characteristics, there are many apparent differences between in the two societies:

- While the *uta* (brides) of the Arbore let their hair grow gradually, Hamar brides get their heads shaved bald in one go, in addition to getting covered in butter and ochre dye during the entire time of their bridal status. The *uta* of the Hamar have to abandon all their old clothes and jewelry on entering the house of the mother-in-law. Their exterior appearance is changed completely and abruptly, contrary to that of the Arbore brides.
- With the Hamar the final transition to married status happens with the incidence of bride's menstruation, as final evidence of past moral behavior. Such evidence does not seem to be necessary with the genitally cut *uta* of the Arbore.
- Whereas the *uta* of the Arbore are integrated into the daily work pattern of their in-law's household, the *uta* of the Hamar are assigned to the privileged status of guest, and where their behavior changes accordingly.
- Contrary to the Hamar, marriages with the Arbore can be divorced. After divorce the women of the Arbore acquire the status of *baski*, which is equal to a widow and partly also to an easy going girl. Sexual contact with different partners is permitted for a *baski*, but not remarriage.
- Before marrying, a young woman of the Hamar allows herself to be whipped on the back by her male suitor. It happens upon her own instigation. The bloody streaks of this ritual

whipping are an indication of her affiliation, her subordination towards her prospective husband, and her ability to bear pain. This could be regarded as a functional equivalent to the Excision with the Arbore.

## **Conclusion**

This exposé has demonstrated that social control is primarily exercised via control over the human body. Even here, in the Western, and allegedly emancipated, world we often prefer to portray differently - the human body is not self-determined, but rather defined and deformed by its surrounding social environment. The definition is manifested through the application of physical standards, corrective drill and exercise, disciplinary action (for bad behavior), discipline and supervision. The community, not the individual, sets the standards for the individual body, does the body proper design. Here accepted social standards of normality have hardly anything in common with what may be considered to be natural. In societies where FGC is practiced a woman is considered worthy of marriage only if she is cut. She is conforming to the social norm only then, in short, she can be considered as a normal woman. Submitting to the required norm renders her actions morally correct. Nor could a man under these circumstances morally afford to marry a woman who does not conform to these social standards. He, too, would defy accepted standards or at least would risk damage to his reputation. Hence, the statutory prohibition of FGC would be of little effectiveness in any desired change or elimination of the ritual. Who would abide by a law, which contradicts accepted moral standards of behavior?

Something similar applies to the medical argument, which is frequently used in the discussions around FGC. Whatever may be regarded by one society as non-standard or even sick, might just as easily conform to accepted conception of health and normality in another. In this instance the cut vulva represents accepted social convention, which marks normality, and thus it does not represent a pathological condition. On the contrary, the condition here is considered as normal. Anyone deviating from these pre-determined physical standards would risk encountering social rejection or even downright segregation. FGC does have health risks. In these closed societies, non-adherence to the standard carries with it the risk of inevitable social death. Even the WHO has defined the term 'illness' in its Alma Ata Declaration as the restriction of physical, psychological, or social well-being. Statutory regulation or the medical references to health hazards are thus of little argumentative use in the campaign against FGC.

However, social conceptions of morality and normality are nothing fixed or static. Just as societies are exposed to continuous change, standards and conceptions of identity are exposed to a constant process of re-appropriation, re-examination, and re-definition. This can be the source of possible change. The FGC ritual can be changed, if its symbolism is changed. A status change and its explanation can be achieved without involving elements of pain and physical scarring, but not without the provision of an alternative! So-called functional equivalents must be found which carry sufficient weight to replace these powerful symbols. Designating status change will always be required. By a substitution neither the ritual as such, nor the authority of the executing persons, nor the social validity of the rite of passage would be challenged. A status change could be manifested just as clearly by an external transformation (hairstyle, clothes, jewelry etc.), by behavior (gestures, language, walk, self-confidence etc.) and through the significance of location (moving to parents-in-law after the wedding etc.). This means that the future of the FGC ritual does not lie in its prohibition or in education about its harmful character. Rather it lies in replacing the hazardous elements with less risky components during a rite of passage, which is just as forceful a demonstration that a status change has taken place and which is acceptable to members of the societies concerned, too. In parts of Kenya this is already successfully practiced in a ritual called 'cutting with words' (Schnüll 1999:41).

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### **Publications**

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| 1999 | Sozialanthropologischer Fotokalender; Eigenverlag  |
| 2000 | "Die Exzision der Vulva. Ein gesellschaftliches Konzept zur Normierung sexuellen Verhaltens"; IN: Sexuologie 7 (4); Urban & Fischer Verlag; Jena |
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### **Planned researches**

Comparative Research to Rite of Passages / FGC in Ethiopia; Coffee in Northeast-Africa;  
Photo and Film Projects

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