

A QUESTION OF SUBJECTS: THE "FEMALE
CIRCUMCISION" CONTROVERSY AND THE POLITICS
OF KNOWLEDGE

Sondra Hale

INTRODUCTION

This essay is not *about* "female circumcision." It is, in fact, not even *about* the debates regarding "female circumcision." It is about *knowledge* (including research, data, teaching, and community education), and *politics and action* and their inseparability. It is about the politics of knowledge and what the feminist poet, Marilyn Frye, has called "arrogant perception."¹ It is about *subjects* that force us to see the relationship between knowledge, history, and politics.

By implication it is also about whether or not--and how--we can be allies for one another. For the purposes of this essay I am asking how so-called "western" women can be allies of so-called "Third World" women. And, overlapping and within that, I am asking if it is only politically and intellectually acceptable for African-American women and others in the diaspora to be allies of African women. To state the questions simply: How can euroamerican women be allies of women of color? And, how can ethnically/racially/culturally diverse feminists be allies of each other? This brings us to ask why the process of alliance has usually been unilinear. That is, in our racist and colonial/neo-colonial world, do we mainly think of the invitation to alliance from one direction only? This usually results in one group/side being treated or seen as a "welfare group" and as the recipients of largesse.

With regard to the subject at hand--"female circumcision"--have some or all of us been invited to action? In general, is it problematic to act on behalf of another group/region/society without invitation? In some cases (as in cases of genocide, for example), might it be problematic to wait for an invitation? How do we determine who is the "legitimate" inviter? What role does silence play?

I began by saying that this is not an essay about "female circumcision" (or "female genital surgeries"),² but about the world in which this subject is now being discussed and debated. What do our points of view reflect about the politics of knowledge? About the world in which we live? About the institutions in which we are taught and where we teach (e.g., UCLA, African Studies, etc.)? I will return to these points.

LOCATION/POSITIONALITY

With this essay I am breaking a thirty-three-year-long *silence* on the subject of "female circumcision" in Sudan. The answers to the questions of why I chose silence in the first place and why I am breaking it here are embedded in what follows. Naming my location and stating my positionality are important processes in challenging the state of affairs, i.e., the politics of knowledge surrounding the "female circumcision" debates. I often introduce myself, only partly in jest, as a "recovering anthropologist"--mostly to underscore the self-transformation I have tried to undergo to shake off (like an *intifada*) some of the ideological trappings embedded in the field. Many of my colleagues were trying to do the same in the late 1960s.³ But my first graduate degree is in African Studies from this very institution from whence this publication springs. I was one of the founders of the African Activist Association and *Ufahamu*.

My main research area is *Sudan*, which many view as the heart of the various practices of "female genital surgeries."⁴ I have also recently carried out research in Eritrea, where the operation is also performed.⁵ I lived in Sudan for six years over a period of thirty-three years and have made seven trips there. The closest friends of my life are circumcised women, and I have witnessed the operation, attended ceremonies celebrating the event, have had many conversations with my friends, and have read much of what has been published on the subject. One of my oldest and closest friends is Dr. Nahid Toubia, a medical doctor and one of the leading Sudanese feminist intellectuals in the fight against "female circumcision." She and I have been very close in our politics and came into our feminism together. She has made some choices that are different from mine, for example, entitling her book *Female Genital Mutilation: A Call for Global Action*. Yet, even Dr. Toubia, who uses the term "mutilation" and calls for "global action," has taken offense at the way in which North Americans and Western Europeans have approached the subject matter.⁶

To continue locating myself, I am a Marxist or a socialist-feminist who teaches courses on gender issues in cross-cultural perspective. I am a white, middle-class woman born in the United States of working-class, euroamerican parents.

Two events related to the subject of this essay altered how I see the world. The first event occurred in 1961, shortly after I had arrived in Khartoum, Sudan, and was happier than I had ever been in my life--loving the place and the people, thinking of Sudanese as the warmest and most gentle people I had ever met.⁷ Then, quite off-handedly, and in the kind of bemused way men talk to women when they know they are about to shock them, I was told by a British doctor (left over from

the colonial period), and Professor of Medicine at the University of Khartoum, in the course of a social conversation over our gin and tonics, that all Sudanese women are circumcised: Muslims, Christians, and Jews. He then, without invitation, went on to describe the operation. I was so stunned and repelled that I could hardly teach my high school class the next day at Unity High School for Girls--a classroom of some forty Muslim, Christian, and Jewish girls. How could I process that information? I asked how such a loving, gentle culture could do that to young girls. How could I go on liking the place and the people? How could I fit it into my world view and moral framework? I battled with my ethnocentrism. (I had just read Laura Bohannon's barely fictionalized personal account of going through the same sort of crisis in *A Return to Laughter*.⁸ In general, cultural relativism had worked for me across the board, although it did not seem to be working this time.

After some many months of brooding, I decided that this was a practice that I could not expect to understand and that, because I could not possibly understand it, I had no right to discuss it in print or in public settings. And I didn't. After some time I also decided that it was not incumbent on me to embrace the practice or to see it in some positive light.

Some fifteen years later (I can still recall the room and the people), I was giving one of my first university seminars on Sudanese women. It had taken me that long to embrace Women's Studies, my having resented being nudged in that direction by sexist anthropology professors simply because I was a *woman* graduate student. In the talk I was developing ideas about how powerful and emancipated Sudanese women were before colonialism, how progressive they were by 1965 in terms of political and social rights, how many women doctors there were, the childcare and parental leave services they had, and the like. The point I was making was that Sudanese women were far ahead of U.S. women in the same time period. There was a stir in the room, looks of disbelief, and finally one woman spoke up and asked if it was not true that the women are circumcised. When I responded that it is true, but that it had no bearing on what I had just been saying, I could tell that I had lost the audience. Murmurs told me that no one in the room could possibly believe my point that in many ways Sudanese women were more emancipated than U.S. women. The year of the lecture was at the peak of the so-called "second wave of feminism," and this was a room full of mainly white feminists whom I saw at the time and now as having a genital definition of women.

As the years wore on, it became increasingly difficult to be successful in our work against the anti-Muslim, anti-Arab racism in this country because of the active participation of mainly white feminists

keen on showing that Middle Easterners and other Muslims were barbaric toward their women--using "female circumcision" and "veiling" as the definitive indices.

CONTEXT OF THE CONTROVERSY

As most *Ufahamu* readers would acknowledge, this is a modernist/capitalist world still in the throes of colonialism and the racism that undergirds these systems. It is a world guided by liberalism, the centerpiece ideology of capitalism. The Metanarrative or Master Narrative of liberalism is the quest for an egalitarianism built on a social contract that gives each an equal opportunity. Within that liberal, egalitarian stance is the credo of cultural relativism, which became a guiding principle of anthropology/ethnography. The Truth of cultural relativism is that all cultures are okay on their own terms.⁹

Often counterposed to liberal cultural relativism are at least two other Meta- or Master-Narratives, both undergirded by universalism. I am referring to Marxism and feminism. Some Marxist anthropologists, for example, see cultural relativists in a "state of moral and ethical confusion characterized by contradictory, weak, unconscious or disguised value judgments."¹⁰ Like left feminists, reconstructed Marxists take the position--with their moral goal being the end of class, gender (and race) oppression--a universal freedom--that there are "universally valid moral beliefs and right and wrong rules and modes of behavior."¹¹

Basically, I am raising the issue of whether or not, with regard to our subject, this universalism of feminism, obscured ethnocentrism, is another form of cultural imperialism. Returning to our questions, is it possible to engage in critical thinking vis-a-vis what the legal scholar Isabelle Gunning, calls a "culturally challenging" practice¹² and still be respectful to other perspectives and cultures? She uses the term "to describe any practice that someone outside the culture would view as 'negative' largely because she is culturally unfamiliar with it."¹³

THE DEBATE

What is the "debate" about? Where does it take place? Who is participating? What is at stake in the sense of whose interests are being served or not served? What are some of the problematics of this debate?

Let me begin with the last question: One problem, it seems to me, is that there is a great amount of racism and ethnocentrism being expounded in the name of participation in either a feminist struggle or a human rights struggle. Western feminists (white and of color) have been given license to let their ethnocentrism free associate! A broader

but related issue is, of course, that one part of the world is defining human rights for the rest of the world.

Another problem is that people in the West, if we want to engage in some critical thinking about the issues, are starting from the wrong place. For example, feminists in the United States might want to begin to look at the abuse of women and children here in the United States: the rape capital, the child abuse capital, arguably the domestic violence capital, and one of the body mutilation capitals of the world! We might want to look at our society where more women are hurt and killed by the men in their lives than in any other way.¹⁴ In terms of children, we might want to look at the ominous spread of malnutrition, disease and death brought on by young girls trying to fit the slim image that our society demands of them. Starvation for the sake of beauty. Mutilation (called "cosmetic surgery") for the sake of dominant culture beauty standards is now common among the very young.

Again, with regard to starting with one's own society, feminists would be kept very busy just looking into the clitoridectomies performed in the United States--into the 1950's--to control female hysteria, masturbation, and the like. We could probably look into other unnecessary surgeries performed on women as well, e.g., too-radical mastectomies and hysterectomies.

As for the various positions or stances in the "debate," there are a number of them. There are people both "inside" and "outside" (and those "inside" who are "outsiders," i.e., marginalized by their own society) of the cultures where we find the practices that hold these views:

1. The practices seen not only as part of the culture, but a positive and necessary part.
2. The practices seen as not very pleasant or healthy, but necessary to maintain the culture.
3. The practices seen as something that sets the practitioners off from the "West" and other societies so that any threat to the practices from the outside causes a retrenchment or even a revival/reassertion of the practices. The practices, then, seen as forms of resistance. Sometimes the practices get romanticized in the process.
4. The practices seen as harmful, immoral, repugnant, repressive (or all of the above) and should be stamped out immediately by any means necessary--even from the outside, if needed.
5. The practices seen as harmful but elimination/eradication of the practices will come about in due course ("natural" process of change). This may take

a long time, but "we" should not hurry the process, nor interfere.

6. The practices as they are carried out by some people in some areas are too severe. There needs to be a lessening of the severity (e.g., clitoridectomy instead of infibulation) and a medicalization of the practices (i.e., operation performed in a hospital or by medical personnel).

7. The practices seen as a form of child abuse, crimes against women and children, torture, or human rights violations. Therefore, outside coercion and force should be used to eradicate the practices.

8. The practices are called for in Islam. That is only one more set of reasons to think of the Middle East and Islamic or Arab countries as "barbarian," or at least not as "advanced" as most other regions.

9. In this country, only African Americans or people of Arab or Muslim descent have a right to speak about the practices.

10. In some areas of Africa, for example, people have a lot more to worry about than these practices (e.g., drought, starvation, war, disease, infertility, high infant and mother mortality, and abject poverty--not to mention economic exploitation and neo-colonialism).

11. We should stop using cultural excuses for crimes against women and children.

There are also people like me who accept the last two points and also believe that the practices are not healthy or humane and are politically suspect in terms of gender relations, but respect and trust women and some men in those cultures where they are practiced to deal with their own gender issues. So much of what has been said about the occurrence and need for eradication has deemed people engaged in resistance in the countries where the practices are carried out as *invisible*. Where there are people already socially, medically, and politically engaged in working on these issues, I maintain I should be an *ally* only if I am invited by the people involved in the issue. Furthermore, I can make a contribution to gender scholarship and to gender politics by contributing what I know about my own society. The process of change and exchange should be multidirectional, a situation where I can call upon my sisters in African and Middle Eastern countries to help me understand aspects of our gender politics here in the United States. Since I learned my feminism from Sudanese women, that makes sense to me.

Obviously there are many different views (inside and outside) on the origins of "female circumcision," the methods we might use for eradication, who should play the leadership roles, etc. I have only touched the surface in outlining the debate.

Another issue is why we are seeing so much western scholarship, publicity, and international agency activity about the practice *now*. Perhaps we should ask ourselves what is going on in this country in terms of both gender and race struggles. Laura Nader has fused her ideas with those of Edward Said in *Orientalism* to maintain that men control the women in their own society by trying to control the women of other societies.¹⁵

The above leads me to raise the sensitive issue of why so many African American women are becoming activists in the campaign against the practice. As a white woman I do not want to comment on the right or wrong of the public activism against "female circumcision" of such celebrities as Alice Walker. Most of this activism (in the form of writing, making films, appearing on the popular media, etc.) has developed into a kind of essentialist stance in which Walker and others, because they are Black, seem to be taking on the "burden" of "female circumcision" in Africa as, somehow, their preordained cause. It is quite different from, say, some American Jews who profess a special responsibility to stop the persecution of Palestinians in Israel. As it has been expressed to me by such American feminists as Sherna Gluck, such a position is related, among other things, to the strong Zionist lobby in the United States and its strengthening effect on Israeli state policies.¹⁶ But to return to the Nader/Said ideas above, what is happening in gender/race relations in the United States that is compelling so many African American women to launch into the campaign? Is it related at all to African (continent) women? Or is it more related to what is happening within the American African community? To the rise of Pan-Africanism? To the increasing poverty and oppression of Black Americans? What is the relationship now of dominant white male culture to African American women? These are not questions I can answer just yet, but it is still important to raise them.

We might also ask how and why so many westerners, especially, (but not only), white feminists, are becoming active in either scholarship or politics around this issue without knowing anything about the practices or without having had a single conversation with a circumcised woman! In this sense and in others, we seemed to have engaged in a great deal of "arrogant perception" (Marilyn Frye), which really relates not so much to what we think of something, but what we do with that information and, especially, how we use our analyses to set ourselves apart from "them."

I am amazed at the lack of complexity in westerners' approaches to the subject of "female circumcision." First of all, we talk as if there is only one type of operation, that it is performed in the same way and for the same reasons all over, that there is no pride in it, and if there is, then it must be "false consciousness." Below exemplifies how complex the subject is when one talks directly with Sudanese women, as both Janice Boddy (cited below) and I have done. Instead of presenting genital surgeries as male attempts to control female sexuality, the explanations are far more complex.

1. Some (but not many) talk about the surgery *enhancing male sexual pleasure*.
2. It is also not common to hear that the surgery *restrains female sexuality*. This is much disputed, and considering the active sexual life of married and unmarried Sudanese, it is unlikely as a blanket rule.
3. We do hear ideas about *protection of family honor*, as well as notions of *chastity, modesty, and virtuousness*.¹⁷
4. There is an *emphasis on fertility*,¹⁸ i.e., it *socializes toward fertility*.
5. Mainly, "[Sudanese women]...assert that it is performed on young girls so as to make their bodies clean (*nazif*), smooth (*na'im*), and pure (*tahir*), this last term furnishing the Sudanese colloquial for circumcision in general: *tahir* ('cleansing' or 'purification')."¹⁹
6. In other words, circumcision prepares her body for *womanhood*--thereby confers the *right to bear children* and, therefore, *to advance her position*.
7. It is also *socialization to selfhood*.²⁰
8. It *creates a social boundary*.
9. It is part of the *creation of gender identity*.

CONCLUSION

This essay has been a call for "us"--and I am mainly (but not exclusively) addressing white feminists--to self-interrogate, a call for us always to be suspicious of our ideas and beliefs, and to work on ways of being (invited) effective allies. Whenever we become engaged in the affairs of the "Other," we should be suspicious. Whenever we take on, uninvited, "their" plight as "ours," when there is so much to do in our own oftentimes pitiful society, it is useful to examine the timing, the actors, and the rhetoric. If the media and academic campaigns aimed at eradicating "female circumcision" are attempts to add to our knowledge

bank, to "understanding," to cross-cultural information, then we might want to examine the politics of knowledge.

This essay is not a statement against altruism, nor political activism on behalf of others, nor resistance to gender oppression everywhere, although these always have to be interrogated. It is a call to step back and ask why, oftentimes, the idea of "female circumcision" is the *only* idea an American may hold about Africa or the Middle East.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Marilyn Frye, "In and Out of Harm's Way," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (1983), pp. 52-83. I want to thank Isabelle Gunning for reminding me of Frye's useful concept in her article, "Arrogant Perception, World-Travelling and Multi-cultural Feminism: The Case of Female Genital Surgeries," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, Vol. 23, No.8 (1992), pp. 188-248.

² I would defeat my purpose to debate terminology here. It should seem clear that "circumcision" is technically a misnomer, but it has the usefulness here of being a more "neutral" term. Still, it is not completely devoid of impact. More importantly, it is not medicalized, as is the term "female genital surgeries." Of course, Alice Walker and many, many other Americans are opting for the more dramatic term, "female genital mutilation." It is, however, perhaps unfair to imply that only Americans are using that term when Sudanese medical/political activist, Nahid Toubia, has written a booklet entitled *Female Genital Mutilation: A Call for Global Action* (New York: Women, Ink., 1993). In a later publication, however, Dr. Toubia herself moves back and forth between "female circumcision" and "female genital mutilation." Nahid Toubia, ed., et al, *Arab Women: A Profile of Diversity and Change* (New York and Cairo: Population Council, 1994). Language and who uses it are, of course, politically and epistemologically significant.

³ I have written about this process in "Feminist Method, Process, and Self-Criticism: Interviewing Sudanese Women." In *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 121-136.

⁴ Nahid Toubia, for example, estimates that "female circumcision" is performed on 90% of northern Sudanese women. Toubia, et al, *ibid.*, 1994, p. 27.

⁵ Eritrea is recently independent. While struggling for thirty years for liberation from Ethiopia, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, in particular, worked against the practice. However, it is still widely performed.

⁶ Personal communication.

⁷ I discuss this suspect romanticism in Hale, *op. cit.*, 1991.

⁸ Elenore Bowen (pseudonym for Laura Bohannon), *A Return to Laughter* (London: Victoria Gollancz, 1956).

⁹ See Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934).

¹⁰ Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, (New York: Crowell, 1968), p. 163.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹² Gunning, *op. cit.*, 1992, p. 191. Gunning herself outlines the complicated journey that she, too, had to undergo vis-a-vis the subject of this essay, for example, acknowledging her "arrogant perception" as an African American woman looking at what she calls "female genital surgeries" (which also represents a shift from her earlier terminology of "female genital mutilation").

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.191.

¹⁴ Although I do not think it necessary to cite the statistics of violence against women to a mainly American readership, a few numbers might be useful. *The Los Angeles Times* in its "World Report" section (June 29, 1993) reports that "Battering is the greatest single cause of injury among U.S. women, accounting for more emergency room visits than auto accidents, muggings and rape combined." And, "A recent national survey found that each hour, 76 American women over the age of 18 are raped—683,000 rapes per year. One in five American women is likely to be a rape victim in her lifetime." These are highly conservative statistics in comparison to most feminist quantitative analyses.

¹⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); Laura Nader, "Orientalism, Occidentalism and the Control of Women," *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1989), pp. 323-355.

¹⁶ See Sherna Gluck, *An American Feminist in Palestine: The Intifada Years* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1989), p. 55, note 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-56.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-60.