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## The Pot Calling the Kettle Black

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Industrialized countries seem to look condescendingly at African societies that practice female clitorrectomy, but the same people line their sons up to be circumcised soon after birth. A clitorrectomy, also known as female genital mutilation (FGM), is defined as “a destructive, invasive procedure that is usually performed on girls before they reach puberty that removes part or all of the clitoris” (Female). There are many different types of female genital mutilation. The lesser of the three evils is called Sunna circumcision. The tip of the clitoris and/or its covering, known as the prepuce, is removed. The second type is called clitoridectomy, in which the entire clitoris, the prepuce and the adjacent labia are removed. The last classification is infibulation, also referred to as Pharaonic circumcision. This is a later process done after a clitoridectomy in which the vulva is also sewn up. “A small hole is left to allow urine and menstruation fluids to pass through” (Female).

Most of the females that are subject to this unpleasant form of oppression suffer horrible side effects. Excruciating pain, mental and physical scarring, hemorrhaging, and obstetrical and gynecological complications are some of the side effects of female circumcision. During the procedure, which is traditionally done with a rock, jagged knife, or glass, a young girl may bleed to death due to poor medical care and no anesthesia. The object that is chosen may also be scissors, but the chosen weapon is only used for this purpose and is considered sacred. Traditions that are held by the various tribes in Africa take precedence over the basic human rule of no intentional suffering. The women and men of these societies don't see life without the practice of female mutilation. Over time, it has been understood, by African tribes, as a part of the rites of passage that a young child must go through in order to be recognized as an adult.

In order for someone to understand why a mother would force her five to eight year old to endure such agony and torture, one must have the cognizance of how the practice started. Many African cultures believe that the clitoris is a masculine part of the female body that must be removed in order for the woman to be truly feminine. Tradition tells of a god named Amma, who created the first woman. Amma became lonely and chose to have intercourse with the woman. The clitoris of the woman was seen as a termite hill. The story is told as this:

At God's approach the termite hill rose up, barring the passage and displaying its masculinity. It was as strong as the organ of the stranger, and intercourse could not take place. But God is all-powerful. He cut down the termite hill, and had intercourse with the excised earth. But the original incident was destined to change the course of things forever... (Walker, *Possessing* 169).

From this tale, young girls were meant to feel dirty in some way because they were "uncut". If females refuse to have the procedure done they are shunned and forced to leave their village. It is seen as an embarrassment to a young girl's family and ancestors who participated before her.

The act is entrusted to a group of women or a single motherly figure in the tribe. Young girls are taken from the village and led deep into the bush. In Alice Walker's book, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she describes the life of an adult woman who experienced circumcision later in life than most females. The woman in the book voluntarily undergoes the crude operation to please her husband, who will not marry her unless she submits to the tradition. The woman, Tashi, has a child who is mentally slow as a result of her being circumcised. Complications that occurred during her son's birth caused him to lack the adequate amount of oxygen for his brain, and this caused the retardation. "In parts of Africa, FGM is delayed until two months before a woman gives birth. This practice is based on the belief that the baby will die if he or she comes into contact with the mother's clitoris during birth" (Female). Walker included the details of the child's handicap, in order to manifest the suffering of his mother, so her readers would know that this mutilation doesn't just affect the victim, but also everyone who is associated with her. Tashi, in the story, later in life returned to her native village and killed Mama Lissa, the woman who performed the circumcision on her. Depression and resentment towards M'Lissa built up and caused Tashi to commit a murder. Many psychological effects also result from the tradition, which lead many people to think that laws such as this one should be outlawed.

It is suspected that "114 to 130 million women worldwide have had the operation" (Fighting). The story that is used as justification of female circumcision presents females with the idea that they are not acceptable the way that they are. Young girls are told that they must change their bodies in order to please their potential husbands. Men play a great role in this continuation of mutilation. Men, who are the heads of the villages, encourage the young girls to submit willingly to the, at times, unbearable pain. Men enjoy the tightness of the vagina after it has been closed and scar tissue replaces the naturally smooth skin. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, an old man is mentioned who died alone because he was so

forceful with his newly circumcised wives. The women claimed that he would take a knife and slice them open, then push himself inside. This can be compared to putting salt into an open wound. The women eventually abandoned this man and committed suicide by drowning. His pleasure came from their pain. *Warrior Marks*, also written by Alice Walker, reveals the ideas of traditions steeped in pride and pain. "According to tradition, the husband should have prolonged and repeated intercourse with her during eight days. This 'work' is in order to make an opening by preventing the scar from closing again" (Walker, *Warrior* 257).

Many people are still perplexed by the idea that industrialized people believe they are more civilized than those societies that practice this form of tradition. The fact still remains that male circumcision is a common practice in the exact same "civilized" countries. In the United States, for example, many citizens see the practice as barbaric. "Male and female circumcision in the United States began as a way to stop masturbation in the 19th century" (Infant). After so many boys had been circumcised, it was seen as important to continue the procedure because "it was necessary for sons to look like their fathers, children must conform with peers, improved hygiene would result, and diseases such as urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted diseases, and cancer rates would decrease" (Female). These reasons all sound the same as some of the justifications given by the African tribes.

There are religions which are practiced in the United States that also promote male circumcision. Judaism, for example, uses God's word as a basis for the act. Jews cite the Torah's words, the Old Testament of the Bible, as the foundation for the continuation of their progeny being circumcised. In Genesis 17:7-14, the text says:

And God said unto Abraham: 'And as for thee, thou shalt keep My covenant, thou, and thy seed after thee throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which ye shall keep, between Me and you and thy seed after thee: every male among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of a covenant betwixt Me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any foreigner, that is not of thy seed. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised; and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that should shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken My covenant (Circumcision).

Jewish people interpret this as saying that Abraham received the word from God instructing the future Jews to circumcise all the male children born into the religion. This act is seen as a covenant between the young boy and God. To a religious person, particularly a Jew, this mutilation is venerable.

They do not include in the Torah or the Bible how the actual procedure is done. In the “clean” hospital setting, the baby boy is brought into a room, and he is then strapped down to a table. Restraints are also used in America (ironically, also known as the home of the free and the brave), just as in Africa to make the procedure easier for the mutilator. Restraints are the same whether they are human or “various organic compounds produced by polymerization” (The), also referred to as plastic. At birth, there is small opening on the penis to prevent foreign things from entering the baby’s body. This natural method of defense won’t stop a scissor happy doctor. The small opening in the penis must be widened.

Some doctors will use local anesthesia, but this is by no means common. The foreskin is attached to the glans by a membrane called the synechia. The glans and inner lining of the foreskin are still developing in the young child. During circumcision, the synechia must be torn apart. Naturally, this is painful. The foreskin is clamped. A slit is made in the dorsal side of the foreskin. The slit is separated and the foreskin is laid back and the foreskin is sliced off at the distal edge of the ligature using a knife or scissors (What).

As the child lies there and screams, the doctor presses on to remove “on average one third of the penile skin system which includes sensitive inner and outer preputial layers” (What).

Many people want “civilized” countries to be able to see the similarities in the reasons shared for circumcising children. There is no medical evidence, from either area, that male or female circumcision is still necessary. “Furthermore, faith is the only reason that Jews should circumcise their male children” (Circumcision). There are no direct benefits of the mutilations.

“Up until the mid-20th century, some physicians in the United States wrongly performed clitoridectomies for a variety of clinically unsound reasons” (Female Genital Cutting). These U.S. doctors cited reasons to do the mutilations such as, a method to control the population of the mentally ill, and a way to keep women from committing adultery. Today female genital mutilation is still practiced in the United States, although there are laws that should prohibit the act from happening.

Since 1998, 16 states have instituted criminal sanctions against the practice of FGC: California, Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia and Wisconsin. A federal law criminalizing the practice was passed in 1996 and became effective in April 1997. The law provides that the practice of FGC on a person(s) under the age of 18 is a federal crime, unless the procedure is necessary to protect the health of a young person or for medical purposes connected with labor or birth. The penalty for violating this law is a fine or imprisonment for up to five years, or both. This law specifically exempts cultural beliefs or practices as a defense for conducting FGC (Female Genital Cutting).

The law is in place, but is not considered a hindrance to mothers who lust for their daughters to go under the knife. Many immigrants to the United States often form social support systems in order to aid each other. Throughout this infrastructure, there are elder women who believe in upholding the traditions of their native lands. They are dedicated to the practice and willingly feed the hunger of the mothers who want to circumcise, circumcise, circumcise. If it is impossible, which is highly unlikely, to find someone who will perform the procedure, mothers enthusiastically send their children out of the country, to the places where their mutilations occurred without concerns about the financial or emotional costs. On a deeper outlook, there are many differences in the female and male circumcision practices. Females are cut when they are knowledgeable of what is being done to them. They experience the pain their entire lives and their ways of life are dramatically changed. Warrior Marks chronicles one of Walker's trips to Africa. During her visit, she made time to pass through African villages. Walker made note of how the young and old circumcised women shuffled their feet. The circumcisions had left it virtually impossible to walk with the standard gait. She heard stories of how the women could not perform day-to-day tasks, such as urinating with the swiftness that they once possessed. Walker also noticed that the young girls had lost the "brightness in their eyes" (Walker, *Possessing* 20). Males go through the procedure at an early age when they are not really aware of what is happening to them. The fact that the memory in males does not really exist, surely should not lessen the idea that baby boys, without their consent, are violated in the same manner as the young women in Africa.

Various arguments exist that are used to justify the circumcision of the world's youth. Some feel as if it is a part of their religion. Other people say that this is a cultural phenomenon that robs children of their choice to be whole, or forever have a part of them missing. Tashi, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, after being circumcised, felt as if she was never truly complete. Worldwide there are organizations that are trying to outlaw female and male circumcision. A group that is working to end female mutilation is Amnesty International. "Amnesty International is a group that concerns itself with making sure that all people are entitled to basic human rights" (Why). On March 5, they are launching a program that plans to try and stop violence against women. The organization is devoted to help stop the mutilation in Africa and give refuge to any of the young girls who want to leave their village in order to escape the jagged rock. This group makes treaties with countries and follows up with the citizens to make sure that the government is keeping up its end of deal. For 15 years, Amnesty International, or AI, has been fighting for women's rights to not participate in female circumcisions. For AI to have such a monumental task, the groups and conferences they hold have a positive effect in the villages that are willing to listen to the warnings about infection and the spread of HIV, by unclean circumcision instruments. In conclusion, it is obviously clear that views of tradition have many different sides to them, and similar forms can most certainly be found in cultures that may claim that the practices are barbaric. Most people would never associate baby-boy circumcision, which is mostly done in a sterile environment, with a female ritual ceremony that makes a young girl a woman in Africa. After so many years of a tradition that is expected, it is extremely hard to simply decline an invitation to circumcision in which ancestors participated. They don't realize the complications that may result from such a drastic remodeling of their genitalia. Baby boys aren't left with the same number of side effects, but, once again, this does not make the practice acceptable. In order for everyone to get along with each other, we must not judge the practices done by one another. This would simply lead to the pot calling the kettle black.

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