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Searching for "Voices": Feminism, Anthropology, and the Global Debate over Female Genital Operations

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# Searching for “Voices”: Feminism, Anthropology, and the Global Debate over Female Genital Operations

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The issue of “female circumcision” has generated heated public debate in Europe and the United States over the last several years. The controversy has centered not only on the North African and sub-Saharan African countries where most clitoridectomies and infibulations have historically been performed, but increasingly on those Euro-American countries where immigrants who perform such practices now reside. Several legal cases in France in the early 1990s generated widespread publicity when African immigrant parents and a circumcisor were charged with child abuse and assault for performing clitoridectomies (Weil-Curiel 1994; Winter 1994). In 1994, a Nigerian woman residing in the United States, Lydia Oluloro, successfully contested her deportation by arguing that if she returned to Nigeria her daughters would be forced to undergo “circumcision” (Corbin 1994; Gregory 1994). The recent case of Fauziya Kasinga, a young Togolese woman who came to the United States seeking political asylum in an effort to escape a forced clitoridectomy and a forced marriage, has generated even greater media attention; a public outcry emerged when it was revealed that Kasinga had been incarcerated in a Pennsylvania prison for 16 months along with other asylum-seekers (Dugger 1996a, 1996b). In a more literary vein, Alice Walker’s widely publicized novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), has strongly condemned the practice of female genital mutilation. More recently, she has collaborated with Pratibha Parmar to produce a documentary film and companion volume on the subject, both of which are entitled *Warrior Marks*, garnering still more media attention in Western countries (Parmar 1993b; Walker and Parmar 1993). Media accounts have included articles and op-ed pieces in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine, and segments aired on TV and radio news programs including *ABC World News Tonight*, *Dateline NBC*, *ABC’s Nightline*, *CNN’s Newsnight*, and National Public Radio’s (NPR) *All Things Considered*.<sup>1</sup>

Despite, or perhaps because of the explosiveness of the topic, feminist anthropologists have paid relatively little attention to female genital operations.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, there is clearly a need for such analysis. The issue strikes numerous nerves, as it challenges fundamental understandings of body, self, sexuality, family, and morality, and as it plays upon tensions relating to cultural difference, the relationship between women and "tradition," and the legacy of colonial-era depictions of gender relations in non-Western countries. The public debates over female genital operations also raise pertinent questions about our contemporary social world. While an earlier international debate about female genital mutilation reflected the growing influence of feminist movements in the 1970s, the recent controversy bears a distinctly 1990s cast. As is now commonly acknowledged, the exponential growth of global communications and multinational corporations has been accompanied by increasingly migratory habits as immigrants, refugees, and tourists, among others, crisscross the globe. These transformations are breaking down what has been a pervasive, if always problematic assumption—namely, that internally homogeneous First and Third Worlds exist as radically separate "worlds."<sup>3</sup> The centrality of African immigrants in Europe and the United States to recent Western media accounts of female genital operations, as well as the role Africans have played on both sides of the debate, suggests the growing permeability of national and social boundaries in an increasingly "globalized" era. In short, the current controversy surrounding female genital operations is inextricably linked to other contemporary debates that concern the nature of universal "human rights" and the ways such rights include, or exclude, women; the cultural rights of minorities as immigration increases in Euro-American countries; and, ultimately, the meaning and viability of "multicultural" societies.

The issue of female genital operations poses particular challenges for feminist anthropologists in that the topic viscerally encapsulates the potential tension between feminism and anthropology. Marilyn Strathern (1987) once accurately characterized the relationship between the two as "awkward," and part of that awkwardness stems from a perennial conflict: when feminist political concerns challenge anthropology's trademark emphasis on cultural understanding, where should the allegiance of feminist anthropologists lie? This apparent awkwardness, however, may instead prove useful by challenging us to grapple with a central assumption underlying the debate. Namely, why is there a tendency to understand female genital operations in "either/or" terms, in other words, in terms of *either* cultural relativism *or* politically-informed outrage?

In this article, I attempt to address this issue by offering a dual perspective that looks at the practice of, and discourse surrounding, female genital operations. I will ground an analysis of the discursive politics surrounding genital operations by offering an ethnographic account of clitoridectomy within the context of daily life for a rural population in western Kenya's Kikhome village in 1988.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, I question whether either of the seemingly polar viewpoints commonly expressed toward female genital operations in Europe and the United States—moral opprobrium or relativistic tolerance—is sufficient to construct an adequate feminist and "humanist" political response to this issue.<sup>5</sup> I instead suggest that within the Euro-American debates, both sides—critics and relativists—

often share an unacknowledged common thread. This commonality is a hardened view of "culture" based on a rigid essentialist notion of difference that can be historically linked to the colonial era (see also Koptiuch 1996). By addressing these issues, I hope to help lay the groundwork for a more productive feminist and anthropological debate capable of transcending the binary terms in which female genital operations are commonly discussed—binary terms that falsely suggest an insurmountable chasm between "us" and "them."

### Circumcision, Mutilation, or Torture? The Politics of Naming

Female genital operations are known by a variety of names. In addition to the names found in the languages of those conducting the practices, there is an extensive terminology in English that includes female circumcision, clitoridectomies, excision, infibulation, genital mutilation, and, in the perspective of some Anglo-American observers, torture. The practices, like the names, are not monolithic; the severity of the procedure varies, as do the peoples and geographic regions involved. Female genital operations occur in a variety of places, from Indonesia to the Middle East to Europe and the United States; however, the vast majority of female genital operations occur on the African continent in countries as diverse as Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Egypt, Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Togo, Senegal, and Mali. Practitioners include Muslims, Christians, Falasha Jews, and followers of indigenous African religions. Although the reliability of such statistics is unclear, estimates suggest that up to 100 million women have presently undergone some form of genital operation (Toubia 1994).<sup>6</sup> The physical operation ranges from the removal of the tip of the clitoris (a procedure known as *sunna*) to the excision of the clitoris itself and potentially portions of the labia minora and majora (clitoridectomy or excision) to the most radical form, which includes clitoridectomy as well as the removal of the labia minora and majora and the sewing together of the remaining tissues (infibulation). These practices also have a history in Europe and the United States: ancient Romans pierced the genitalia of their female slaves with pins or fibula, hence the term *infibulation*, while some turn-of-the-century European and American doctors used clitoridectomy as a cure for masturbation and so-called nymphomania (Dawit 1994; Harcourt 1988; Lightfoot-Klein 1989).<sup>7</sup>

The act of naming these practices is controversial in and of itself. The generic use of the term *circumcision* in English treats the removal of the foreskin in males as equivalent to the removal of the clitoris in females, obscuring the permanent loss of sexual sensation in girls.<sup>8</sup> Similar usages often exist in the languages of those people engaging in such practices, suggesting the social and symbolic links that many practitioners make between "circumcision" for boys and girls. In this article I have sought to avoid this mystifying usage, while I have also avoided the terms *female genital mutilation* and *female genital torture*, which carry the implicit assumption that parents and relatives deliberately intend to harm children. When referring to the full range of such practices, I have instead adopted the term *female genital operations*. My goal in doing so is not to coin a new phrase that purports to escape the problematic power relationships

surrounding this topic, for clearly that is impossible. Nevertheless, existing usages are deeply embedded in the “either/or” perspectives characteristic of discussions of female genital operations, with *circumcision* signaling relativistic tolerance and *mutilation* implying moral outrage. Although I find the term *female genital operations* preferable to existing terminology, whenever possible I have preferred the more historically and geographically specific terms *clitoridectomy* and *infibulation*.

### **Contextualizing Clitoridectomy: Excision as Initiation in Western Kenya**

By sketching the social context of clitoridectomies as performed by the people living around the village of Kikhome in western Kenya in 1988, I hope to encourage a reinfusion of humanity into a debate that has often been reduced to dehumanizing abstractions. However, by drawing on my own observations and experiences in the Kikhome region, I also run certain risks. In Kikhome I was an outsider, a young white female North American living in the community while on a teaching stint, and my knowledge of the practice of excision was limited.<sup>9</sup> My goal, however, is not to offer a generically applicable social scientific analysis of female genital operations—an impossible task given the diversity of practices and the plethora of meanings attributed to them. Nor is my intention to offer a definitive ethnographic account of clitoridectomies as performed in the Kikhome region. Instead, my purpose is to describe the quest to know, the desire to understand these practices as an “outsider,” someone inevitably forced (as we all are) to draw upon her or his own resources for understanding the world. In Kikhome, I felt compelled to try to understand the ritual clitoridectomies performed there both because the practice deeply troubled me and because I sought some way of thinking about the issue that I could reconcile with my sense of myself as a feminist, as a student of anthropology, and as a friend of many in the community where I was staying.

While my account is written by someone on the cultural margins of life in Kikhome, such a location is perhaps ironically appropriate. The international controversy over female genital operations has largely occurred in human rights reports, health bulletins, international conferences, and media accounts across a variety of countries. In this international debate, I, along with many Euro-Americans, have been a privileged “insider” with greater access to the international flow of representations concerning female genital operations than most women in Kikhome, whose bodies carry such intimate knowledge of these practices. We are all to various degrees both “insiders” and “outsiders,” and these statuses are deeply embedded in the power dynamics that structure our relationships with each other. In writing this, I hope to blur our sense of where the “problem” with female genital operations lies, at the same time blurring distinctions over who has the “right” to speak about such issues. To suggest that only those who have experienced a practice or those who can lay claim to it on the basis of racial or ethnic identity have the “right” to speak essentializes both practitioners and nonpractitioners by locating them in bounded groups assumed to share common beliefs—a reductionist view that ignores a far messier reality. In choosing

to write on this topic, however, I do not justify the ways in which Euro-Americans have dominated international debates over female genital operations both historically and at present. Instead, by locating this controversy “interculturally,” I intend to draw attention to the responsibility that Westerners hold for the terms of these debates—for interest in Europe and the United States stems not only from feminist or humanist concern, but also from the desire to sensationalize, to titillate, and to call attention to differences between “us” and “them” in ways that reaffirm notions of Western cultural superiority.

### “Circumcision”: The Ceremonies

Kikhome, a village that consists of a few small storefronts, is located amidst the dispersed mud-and-thatch homes and the subsistence farm plots that checker the foothills of Mount Elgon near the Ugandan border. For town- and city-dwellers in the heavily populated western province of Kenya, the village of Kikhome in 1988 was seen as a remote backwater, difficult to reach by transportation and almost inaccessible when the rainy season turned the dirt roads and paths into slippery, viscous mud. The high school compound where I stayed as an English teacher was located in the flat valley at the base of the foothills. While the Bukusu, a Bantu-speaking group, formed the majority of the people living in the valley, the Sabaot, a group of Kalenjin Nilotic ancestry who had historically been pastoralists, now farmed the hills overshadowing Kikhome. Although the majority of students at Kikhome were Bukusu, there was a sizeable minority of Sabaot. Immediately after I arrived, my high school students, both male and female, began telling me with a boisterous pride about their circumcision ceremonies. They informed me that while the Bukusu circumcised only boys, the Sabaot initiated both girls and boys. Unfortunately, they lamented, I had missed the Bukusu ceremonies, but assuredly I would be invited to Sabaot circumcisions over the December school holidays.

True to their word, and to my unacknowledged discomfort, several of my teenage students did invite me, months later, to their initiations. On the evening before one of the initiations I attended was to take place, Beatrice, a teenage student at Kikhome, led me and a fellow U.S. teacher along the winding paths crisscrossing the foothills of Mount Elgon to the family compound of her cousins. It was just before dusk when we entered the compound, which encompassed a series of round mud houses neatly roofed with thatch, and where we encountered a festive atmosphere that reminded me of graduation parties at home in the mid-western United States. The compound was crowded with people of all ages, and many of the older guests were sitting on the ground drinking homemade grain beer, or *buzaa*, brewed especially for the occasion. Near the main house, both male and female initiates “danced,” or rather, paced strenuously back and forth, swinging their arms and loudly blowing whistles. The teenage girls wore skirts and the boys wore shorts of bright red fabric decorated with colored strips of cloth and white T-shirts emblazoned with “Datsun” or “Free Mandela” logos. Their arms and faces were painted with white, chalky designs; the girls wore colored knitted caps and the boys colobus monkey headdresses. Beatrice

explained that when young people felt they were ready (generally between the ages of 14 and 16 for the Sabaot), they would request their parents' permission to be initiated. After training for several months to learn the necessary songs and dances under the guidance of their sponsors, the initiates would go around inviting friends and relatives to the ceremonies.<sup>10</sup>

As darkness fell, the increasingly drunken crowd surrounded the candidates and encouraged them by joining in the dancing and singing. The bright glow of pressure lamps cast a flickering light on the raucous, gyrating crowd as well as on the wooden faces of the initiates, which were masked with the expressionlessness expected of those awaiting circumcision. The dancing continued throughout the night; we were told that it would tire the novices and numb them for the pain to come. At dawn, the initiates were led by circuitous routes to a stream, and before being bathed in its water (a restricted part of the ceremony witnessed only by the initiated), they were harangued by their mothers and warned not to disgrace their relatives, living or dead, by showing cowardice. After being led back to the family compound, they were immediately circumcised. The cutting was public and demonstrated to the community the bravery of the initiated. The boys were cut by a male circumcisor while standing; the girls were excised by a woman as they sat with legs spread on the ground, their backs supported by their sponsors. The crucial test was for the initiate to show no pain, to neither change expression nor even blink, during the cutting. Remarkably enough to my friend and I, the initiates remained utterly stoic and expressionless throughout. We were told it is this ability to withstand the ordeal that confers adulthood, that allows one to marry and have children, and that binds one to one's age-mates.<sup>11</sup>

Mary, one of the students whose ceremony I had witnessed, later told me that she and her fellow initiates had recuperated for a month, boys and girls separately, in special huts. After both male and female initiates judged themselves sufficiently healed they informed the adults, and then the boys and girls rejoined and ceremonially climbed up into the lower hills of Mount Elgon to a large cave behind a small waterfall. After a ceremony at the cave during which the ancestors were invoked, the celebrating initiates were allowed to raid local gardens on their return, mischievously stealing bananas and pelting the houses of their owners without fear of punishment. In a final ceremony at the family compound, they were given new clothes and gifts, and they then reentered daily life as adults.

### **The Search for Voices**

After witnessing these ceremonies, I had a better idea of what Sabaot initiation entailed.<sup>12</sup> Yet I had not come any closer to relieving my own inner distress about excision. I decided that if I could ascertain what these young people "really" thought about the practice, it would help me formulate a position of my own. But the question remained—how could I discover their "real" thoughts? Obviously, there was a great deal of public support for initiation. For them to criticize circumcision publicly or to reject it would have led to accusations of

cowardice, to social ostracism, and perhaps to physical violence, as Beatrice acknowledged had happened in the past. Thus, pondering the relationship between the public voices of these young people and their “real” voices, I embarked on a search for an “authentic” perspective.

In my capacity as an English teacher at the secondary school where I taught, I gave the Form III students—the equivalent of U.S. high school juniors—the option of writing an essay about “female circumcision,” and some of the Sabaot students chose to do so. Although clitoridectomies have been illegal in Kenya since 1982 and were denounced in the Social Education classes at the secondary school where I taught, the students who responded argued that the continuation of the practice was important on the grounds that it was, as they described it, “our custom.” They stated that the primary purpose of the practice was to keep unmarried girls from getting “hot”—that is, from having sexual relations and getting pregnant before marriage or from having extramarital affairs later. Yet while the one essay written by a boy contained no objections to the practice, the essays by girls (who had already had clitoridectomies) did. These students argued that the practice was “bad” because it was forbidden by President Moi and by Christianity (most people in the area were syncretic in their religious beliefs, espousing both Christianity and indigenous African religions). One female student, who had enthusiastically invited me to her sister’s initiation, stated that the practice was simply another way of “destroying” women’s bodies, a use of language that seemed to mirror the Social Education curriculum more than the usual voices of my teenage students.

At the time, I was perplexed: Were the objections raised by these young women what they really thought or were they merely parroting what they had learned in school or in the sermons of local Christian leaders, who had a long history of deploring the practice? Were objections based on Christian teaching “authentic” or was this simply another way their voices had been colonized? What “authentic” voice might these young women use to object to the practice? Certainly they would not use the language of individual rights prominent in Euro-American feminism but which seemed selfish and antifamily to many East Africans. Perhaps these young women were simply strategically merging their voices with those of more powerful others, such as the Christian church or President Moi, and hence circuitously expressing their “real” thoughts?

I attempted to address these issues when several young female Sabaot students stopped by my house on the school compound one afternoon to see the pictures I had taken during their initiation. Trying to summon a neutral tone, I explained that I wanted to know more about the practice. I pleaded ignorance, stating that although baby boys are often circumcised in hospitals in the United States, we do not have public circumcision ceremonies.<sup>13</sup> The four young women assured me that their “custom,” as they called it in English, was good. Lydia, who had recently been initiated and who had a look of religious ecstasy on her face that startled me, argued that it was something a person had to accept with her “whole being” and when one did so, one did not feel the pain. Laughing at my skepticism, they told me that the pain at the time of the ceremony was not



very bad (due presumably to shock and fatigue), and that it was only later that the pain became intense. But, I asked carefully, women in my country would worry that they would “regret” the ceremony later. My innuendoes to the sexual consequences of excision met with boisterous laughter, and the young women replied in a light yet serious tone, “But we are already regretting it!” In other words, there was no delusion among these adolescent girls, some of whose married and unmarried peers were already pregnant, about how it would affect their sexual pleasure. I asked whether they wanted their daughters to be “circumcised.” One said she would because it was an important custom to continue; a second, after some thought, said she would not; and Mary, whose initiation photos we were perusing, looked uncomfortable and declined to comment.

The interactions that I have narrated, a few among many, were complex and full of nuances. I began to recognize the naivete of my search for “real” voices, for clearly the girls’ voices shifted according to context depending on whether they were at the ceremonies, with adults or peers, in mixed-sex settings or among female friends, or, I surmised, alone. Given the legacy of both Freud and Erving Goffman, it seems evident that each self has a public as well as a private side and many more layers within it, from the conscious to the deeply unconscious. What happens, however, when these apparent layers of the self contradict each other? Do these young women, and indeed all of us, have straightforward “best interests” or are our interests, on the contrary, multiple and contradictory? And, where would one locate the “authentic” self? In Western thought, we tend to privilege that which is most interior or private. Yet obviously, as critics of Freud’s universalism would emphasize, our unconscious is also a product of the times and places in which we exist, thus challenging the idea of a “layered” self that possesses an inner core untouched by our contemporary surroundings.

Another incident in Kikhome supported my later interpretation that the “best interests” of these young women were indeed contradictory. My responsibilities at the secondary school included organizing schoolwide debates. Before the main debate, students were allowed to publicly raise issues in front of their classmates. On one occasion, a young Sabaot woman who had recently been initiated demanded to know why Sabaot girls were forced into circumcision. In a mirror image of this challenge, a female Bukusu student at a later debate asked why Bukusu girls were not “allowed” to be initiated like Bukusu boys. Here, the Bukusu young men jeered, saying derisively that Bukusu girls were not allowed to be circumcised because circumcision of girls did not happen “in the Bible.” The irony that at least some of the girls of both ethnic groups envied the position of the other reconfirmed for me that excision was both in *and* against the interests of the Sabaot young women. By undergoing the painful public ordeal of initiation, not only did they develop a personal sense of self-confidence and pride that made them feel like adults, they were awarded considerable public respect. But this respect came at a price—the price of decreased pleasure and the containment of their sexuality, even if in ways widely considered appropriate by both women and men.

### **Kikhome through the Anthropological Looking-Glass**

Later during the course of my graduate studies, I combed the anthropological literature for help in understanding the clitoridectomies I had witnessed in Kikhome, hoping that other scholars could assist in untangling the complex questions these practices raised. As I searched for deeper insight into why Sabaot women and girls in Kikhome supported excision, I wanted to know how the significance of these practices extended beyond their ritual and psychological meanings and related to other forms of social life such as kinship groups, ethnic identity, and economic practices. Furthermore, I wondered how women's support for excision in Kikhome could be reconciled with the Western assumption that female genital operations are an expression of male dominance and, in a different vein, how women who have experienced these practices conceived of their sexuality.

There was, however, almost nothing in the anthropological literature that focussed on excision in sub-Saharan Africa. Anthropologists and social theorists from Van Gennep to Victor Turner offered context for excision as a social ritual by discussing the meanings of rites of passage and adolescent initiation (for example, Gluckman 1963; Richards 1956; Turner 1970; Van Gennep 1909); none, however, focused specifically on clitoridectomies. Goldschmidt's (1976, 1986) fieldwork during the 1960s among the Sebei, a Ugandan subgroup of the Mount Elgon Sabaot, proved more pertinent, although his account of initiation rites was largely descriptive and touched upon differences between male and female circumcision only in passing. He did, however, briefly speculate that excision was less about controlling women's sexual desire than about offering Sebei women a source of collective strength as a counterweight to male dominance. Goldschmidt suggested that excision enhanced women's status by binding them together as a group in possession of ritual secrets revealed through initiation; men respected and feared these secrets, thereby offering women greater leverage in male/female interactions (1986: 110–111). While this insight was suggestive, his assumption that the practice was not about sexuality gave me pause: not only did it seem counterintuitive, but it also did not accord with the accounts from people I knew in Kikhome.

I later turned to the work of Rose Oldfield Hayes and Janice Boddy, who each had conducted research in northern Sudan during the 1970s and examined another type of female genital operation—the more severe infibulation, which involves both excision and the sewing together of the remaining tissues. This procedure was usually performed on small girls, often four to five years of age, and was not the test of endurance leading to adulthood that it was among the Sabaot. Many people in the area felt the practice to be an Islamic religious duty, although most Muslim peoples do not engage in this practice and it is not required by the Koran, as some contend. Despite the physical and social differences between infibulation and clitoridectomy, Hayes's and Boddy's analyses were relevant to Kikhome in that they further explored social settings in which it was widely considered desirable to “socialize” female sexuality or fertility

through genital operations. In addition, both analyses focused on the motivations of women as participants in these practices, not simply as victims.

In her 1975 article, Hayes argued that in order to understand why women, particularly older women, were the most vocal supporters of infibulation, it was necessary to consider their positioning within family groups. In northern Sudan, families were organized around lineages that traced descent solely through men, while women moved to join their husbands' lineages upon marriage. The importance of maintaining the integrity of patrilineages was paramount and served to determine the social status of individuals. As in many other Muslim societies (as well as in many Christian, circum-Mediterranean regions) strict sex-segregation prevailed, and the honor of families was intrinsically linked to the sexual purity of its female members and of the in-marrying women under its protection. According to Hayes, proof of virginity remained a prerequisite for marriage, and infibulation was taken to index both physical and "social" virginity, as evidenced by the practice of reinfibulating women after childbirth or upon later marriages. If not properly channeled, female sexuality was considered to be the greatest possible source of disgrace to the patrilineage. As a consequence, women infibulated their daughters to protect them from the supposedly wanton sexuality believed intrinsic to women and which, if uncontrolled, could lead to rape, illegitimate children, social disgrace, and retributive death. Given that family and social organization in this area was clearly male-dominant, the women who vigorously adhered to such practices were responding pragmatically to the exigencies of everyday life.

Hayes's analysis also helped illuminate the Sabaot context. While the Sabaot are not preoccupied with chastity and virginity as are the northern Sudanese, kinship organization in both places is similar. Sabaot women experience the characteristic ambiguity of women in patrilineal and patrilocal social orders. Although each Sabaot woman is a member of her father's patrilineage and thus an "outsider" in her husband's kin group, her hopes of increasing her social status are linked to producing offspring for the husband's patrilineage.<sup>14</sup> As is true in other parts of the world, kinship arrangements have strong economic dimensions, and for the Sabaot, as largely sedentary former pastoralists, cattle remain symbolically and economically important. It is cattle that a circumcised, and thus marriageable, young woman's family receive from the groom and his family, thereby transferring rights in her reproductive potential; it is cattle (perhaps the very same cattle) that are used to pay the bridewealth for women's brothers' marriages, thus permitting those brothers to perpetuate the lineage for both living and dead relatives; and it is the reluctance to return cattle that may make a woman's father and brothers fail to support her claim for a divorce (Goldschmidt 1976).

Janice Boddy's work (1982) has contributed a symbolic interpretation to the sociostructural explanation of infibulation offered by Hayes. Unlike the situation in Kikhome, Boddy noted that in the northern Sudanese village of Hofriyat, the ritual circumcision of little girls was only mildly celebrated, compared to the elaborate festivities associated with boys' circumcisions. Nevertheless,

infibulation held meaning for Hofriyatis as a source of purification. Boddy offered a richly detailed analysis linking infibulation, purification, and cleanliness to the symbolic properties of birds, ostrich eggs, warmth, moisture, enclosures, and wombs. She concluded that infibulation is actually an assertive symbolic act for Hofriyati women that serves to emphasize a type of femininity that focuses on fertility while deemphasizing their sexuality. She wrote, "By insisting on circumcision for their daughters, women assert their social indispensability, 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" (1982:687). The ability of women to reproduce or found lineages was the stuff on which the social careers of women were based, and it was older women, as mothers and grandmothers, who emerged as powerful forces within patrilineages through control over their offspring.

Boddy also noted that in this strictly sex-segregated society, women achieved social recognition not by becoming like men, but by emphasizing their differences. By removing that part of the external genitalia thought to most resemble that of the opposite sex, circumcision was believed to enhance the masculinity of boys and the femininity of girls (1982:688). In an interesting parallel, this belief mirrors that of the Dogon of Mali, who also practice female genital operations (Griaule 1965), as well as that of some West African immigrants in France who have argued that to not circumcise a girl would leave her "not only 'unclean' but 'masculine,' in that she retains a vestige of a male sex organ" (Winter 1994:941). A Kenyan teacher from a village neighboring Kikhome offered an argument about excision that echoed Boddy's interpretation that female genital operations served to emphasize differences between women and men. The female teacher argued that clitoridectomies were positive for women in that while men were enslaved to their sexuality, circumcised women were better able to resist their desires, thus affording them more control than men. This argument recalls the strategy of Victorian feminists in the United States who based claims to public authority on their alleged moral and sexual superiority to men (Epstein 1981; L. Gordon 1977). However, there is an important difference. In Sudan, while women's sexuality might be harshly "socialized," it was not repressed in the sense of encouraging prudishness, as was common among the European and North American Victorian middle classes. Lightfoot-Klein (1989), an opponent of genital operations, noted the lustiness and bawdiness of older North African village women. To her surprise, some village women who had been infibulated gave detailed descriptions of orgasms, presumably because other areas of the body had become intensified erogenous zones. Lightfoot-Klein's account was confirmed by a Sudanese doctor, Nahid Toubia, who cautioned that little is known to medical practitioners about the sexual functioning of infibulated women or the processes by which women might compensate for loss of the clitoris through other sensory areas, emotion, or fantasy (1994:714).<sup>15</sup>

Among the Sebei Sabaots, Goldschmidt recorded an open interest in sexual matters and a concern with sexual prowess. He noted that a culturally sanctioned form of sexual petting in which orgasms were allowed but penetration prohibited

had historically been permitted to both boys and girls prior to marriage and even circumcision (1976:203).<sup>16</sup> Drawing on fieldwork observations from the 1960s, he expressed doubt as to whether “any normal boy or girl reaches circumcision a virgin . . . ,” although, he noted, it was still strongly disapproved of for an uncircumcised girl to be pregnant (1976:204). He also described the initiation festivity itself as a time for open sexual license and that extramarital affairs were relatively common for both men and women, although women could be beaten on this account while wives held no sanctions over their husbands’ behavior. On the basis of this apparent openness, Goldschmidt deemed implausible the view that clitoridectomies were intended to decrease women’s sexual desire. He did, however, stress that sexual activity between men and women was tension-filled and that relationships between the sexes were generally characterized by hostility and mistrust (1976:241). Thus, in this context, clitoridectomies might be best understood not as a simple attempt to eradicate the sexual desires of women, but as attempts to control, and appropriately channel, women’s sexuality and fertility in a patrilineal and patrilocal context. The reality that most forms of clitoridectomies and infibulations originated and continue to be performed in patrilineal and patrilocal societies suggests the importance of such contexts.

After exploring these anthropological accounts of female genital operations, illuminating as the accounts were, I was frustrated by the numerous questions that remained unanswered. One crucial question concerned how these practices had changed over time. How, I wondered, had the ritual initiation of girls in Kikhome been transformed from the precolonial to the colonial and, ultimately, to the postcolonial era? Furthermore, was there room in existing anthropological accounts of female genital operations for the agency of individuals and for resistance to social norms? Goldschmidt noted that the refusal of girls or boys to be circumcised was called “crying the knife” (1976); had those who “cried the knife” always shared the dominant viewpoint that their actions were shameful? Did such actions ever take on connotations of active resistance, and were such actions ever more than individual? While sociostructural and symbolic interpretations of genital operations provided insight into the practice of female genital operations at a given moment in time, such interpretations also had their limitations. The theoretical legacy of functionalist and symbolic schools within anthropology has meant that many accounts have focused too narrowly on the present, on bounded social groups, and on cultural consensus.

What alternative understandings might historically-based accounts of female genital operations suggest? Historian Claire Robertson, who has looked at the relationship between clitoridectomies and collective social organization for Kikuyu women in Kenya, offers one attempt to consider female genital operations as historically malleable practices (1996). Robertson argues that women’s age sets, a form of social organization originating in the precolonial era and characterized by gerontocracy and an emphasis on the ritual practices of initiation and excision, also historically served the little-known function of organizing women into collective work groups on farms. With the increased stratification of Kenyan society in the colonial and postcolonial periods, the importance

of women's collective efforts to organize their labor have, according to Robertson, not died out but been transformed. She argues that age sets have metamorphasized in the contemporary period into relatively egalitarian grassroots savings associations, environmental groups, and other cooperative labor and financial ventures that are being strategically used by Kikuyu women in their battle against poverty. Robertson writes,

From the 1920s to 1990 women's collective efforts moved from a more specific form of patriarchally sanctioned organization concerned with controlling sexuality and fertility to a more class-based women's solidarity involved with promoting women's economic activities. [1996:617]

As a result of this transformation, Robertson suggests that the importance and incidence of initiation and clitoridectomy have decreased (1996:629–630). Theoretically, this account focuses on the agency of Kikuyu women and in doing so allows space for these women to either agree with or resist the valorization of excision, and thereby to potentially transform such practices. The possibility of resistance, for example, is suggested by colonial era accounts in which some Kikuyu women are reported to have run away to mission stations in apparent attempts to escape forced marriages and possibly clitoridectomies (1996:624).

Presumably, female genital operations also play an important role as markers of social, ethnic, religious, and other forms of identity, an interpretation that has thus far gone largely unexplored in anthropological accounts. Even a brief consideration of the practice of male circumcision, which has both historically and at present served as a potent marker of group identity in European countries, would suggest the need to explore such a possibility (see Boon 1994; Boyarin 1996). Although excision appears to be on the wane among the Kikuyu (Robertson 1996), Goldschmidt's earlier account noted that the importance of the practice appeared to be on the rise among the Sabaot (1986:111). Given the considerable violence that erupted between the Bukusu and the Sabaot in the years after I left Kikhome, one productive avenue for future research would be to explore the potential relationship between ethnic identity and this increased support for clitoridectomies. In other words, how and to what extent do clitoridectomies serve as symbols of ethnic identity and "tradition" within the volatile politics of the Kenyan nation-state?<sup>17</sup>

Despite the insights provided by the literature on these practices, stumbling blocks remain for anthropologists in developing a politically-engaged feminist position on female genital operations. Anthropological accounts that focus on how such practices either function or provide meaning, without attendant focus on how practices are transformed and given new meaning, discourage activism by implying that if such practices ceased, a social "need," symbolic or material, would be left unfulfilled. The transformation of the role of female genital operations in initiation and age sets for Kikuyu women challenges any such rigid link between social "needs" and particular practices. If our analyses do not emphasize the potential for transformation in practices such as female genital operations, the

result can be a dangerous perceived dichotomy between cultural “others” for whom cultural practices “function” (and thus should be respected) and Europe and the United States, where “traditions” are open to challenge. Alternatively, attempts to provide historically-based, nonessentialized accounts of such practices may offer one route to overcoming the widespread Euro-American tendency to view female genital operations solely in terms of either cultural relativism or moral outrage.

### **Beyond the Village: The International Controversy Surrounding Female Genital Operations**

Clearly, the questions raised by female genital operations extend beyond Kikhome or Hofriyat in Sudan and even beyond the boundaries of the Kenyan, Sudanese, and other African nation-states. Even before arriving in western Kenya, my perceptions of “female circumcision” had already been shaped by the vocal international controversy surrounding the issue; I had first learned of the practice from an article by Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem (1983) that I had read in a women’s studies class as an undergraduate. Obviously, I was operating in a particular social and cultural context as much as the villagers of Kikhome, and media accounts of female genital operations in places like Africa formed part of the background noise of the cultural world in which I was an “insider.” As I followed the written and televised reports on female genital operations in the United States, I became increasingly intrigued by the cultural dynamics of the debate itself. After living in Kenya, the “commonsense” terms operative in Western accounts of such practices seemed increasingly peculiar and deserving of explanation in their own right. Consequently, I will now leave Kikhome to begin addressing the discourse of this international debate, its historical roots, and its relationship to preexisting Euro-American understandings of Africa and Africans.

Although opposition to female genital operations by Westerners has a long history extending back at least to the colonial era, it became an issue of concern to Second Wave feminists in the United States and Europe during the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> Influential articles by Gloria Steinem, Mary Daly, and others, including Third World activists such as Nawal El Saadawi (1980), condemned the practices, and international health organizations also took up the cause. In this depiction of female genital operations for an international audience, the practices became largely severed from their sociocultural context (with the exception of El Saadawi’s article). While in Kikhome male and female initiations were performed side by side (albeit with very different consequences), in the Western-oriented literature opposing such practices there was an exclusive focus on the tormenting of girls, if not solely by men, then by a monolithic patriarchy.

During the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–85), female genital operations became a prominent and controversial issue. However, the response to the ensuing publicity was not what many First World feminists might have expected. Instead of being congratulated for their opposition to female circumcision, they were called to task by some African and Third World women,

including a group that threatened to walk out of the mid-decade international women's conference in Copenhagen in 1980. While some of these women themselves opposed female genital operations, they objected to the way the issue was being handled by First World feminists and called attention to the troubling power dynamics that exist between the First and Third Worlds, as well as between First and Third World women.<sup>19</sup> This confrontation led by African women formed merely one segment of a broader challenge to mainstream Euro-American feminism by women of color, working-class women, lesbians, and many Third World women, who felt that their experiences and understandings had been excluded by white, middle-class formulations of feminism (Jayawardena 1986; Mohanty et al. 1991; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Tokarczyk and Fay 1993). This challenge to Euro-American feminism also resulted in a shift of attention toward issues of difference among women as well as toward a reformulation of feminist politics that focused on coalition-building and the recognition of diversity rather than an assumption of homogeneous interests (Butler and Scott 1992; Haraway 1989; Ramazanoglu 1989).

Despite these criticisms of the way Third World women had been represented, Alice Walker's novel (1992), the film *Warrior Marks*, and its companion volume (Parmar 1993b; Walker and Parmar 1993), as well as essays published by the National Organization for Women (see NOW 1994), have provoked a replay of debates over female genital operations in terms remarkably like those of the 1970s. This frustrating sense of déjà vu may be dismissed as Walker's and NOW's refusal to engage the productive aspects of earlier debates. However, more pertinent to understanding why these accounts have generated such a barrage of media attention is the way that Walker's and NOW's presentation of female genital operations have fed into powerful and value-laden understandings of differences between Africans and Euro-Americans—understandings that are being reemphasized with increased immigration from the Third World to the First. Such understandings presume a radical difference, a binary opposition between First and Third Worlds that itself is built upon the historical belief in a chasm between “modern” Euro-Americans and “native” colonized others. Reading through much of the Western-based literature opposing female genital operations, the degree to which many of the arguments work to reproduce such beliefs is striking.

One common trope in much of the Euro-American-oriented literature opposing female genital operations has been the tendency to characterize African women as thoroughly oppressed victims of patriarchy, ignorance, or both, not as social actors in their own right. Sub-Saharan and North African women are alternately seen as not being allowed to express their voices, or as having defective or confused understandings if they speak in favor of genital operations. For example, Daly wrote that in relation to genital operations, “the apparently ‘active’ role of the women, themselves mutilated, is in fact a passive instrumental role. . . . Mentally castrated, these women participate in the destruction of their own kind” (1978:164). Here women are blamed for their false consciousness and are seen as the mere pawns of men. More recently, in the case of African



immigrants in France, Winter similarly argued that "one of the greatest problems facing feminists campaigning against excision is, in fact, women's complicity in their own oppression and in that of their children" (1994:964). Hosken had attributed the apparent complicity of African women to their isolation from the "outside" world, stating, "Local women—who it is said should speak for themselves (the majority of whom are illiterate . . .)—have no connection with the outside world and have no way to organize against the practice" (1981:11). This position is particularly belied by the current organizing of African women's groups, both on and off the continent, in relation to female genital operations. Feminist scholars, particularly those from non-Western countries, are increasingly critiquing portrayals that presume Third World women to be dominated by an ahistorical patriarchal "tradition" that is assumed to be more severe than that in Europe or the United States. The anthropological literature does support the view that gender inequality is widespread; nevertheless, the cultural and historical particulars of how gender relations are constructed differently in different places, and the alternate sources of power and authority that women often hold, are ignored in these generalized assumptions about the oppression of Third World women (Mohanty et al. 1991; Ong 1988; Spivak 1988).

Much of the Western-oriented literature opposing female genital operations also constructs "culture" and "tradition" in problematic ways. Rather than focusing on "culture" as historically changeable and broadly encompassing beliefs and practices characteristic of a social group, the discourse on genital operations understands culture as ahistorical "customs" or "traditions." Such "traditions" are simultaneously depicted as the meaningless hangovers of a premodern era and as the defining characteristic of the Third World. In this scenario, "traditions" in the Third World are hardened essences that can only be shed by modernization, while in the West, "backward" cultural traditions are conceived of as being steadily replaced by "rational" ways of life. To quote Hosken once again, "The myth about the importance of 'cultural traditions' must be laid to rest, considering that 'development'—the introduction of imported Western technology and living patterns—is the goal of every country where the operations are practiced today" (1981:10). "Development," assumed to be the intrinsic property of Europe and the United States, rather than a cultural construct in its own right, emerges in this discourse as the antithesis of cultural traditions.

Culture and traditions are often coded as harmful, coercive, and superfluous. Pratibha Parmar proclaims that women who have undergone genital operations have "been irrevocably wounded by traditions" (1993a:176), and she and Walker adopt the slogan "Culture is not Torture" in *Warrior Marks* (Walker and Parmar 1993). Linda Weil-Curiel, a lawyer prominent in legal battles against female genital operations in France, criticized the suspended sentences given to some African immigrant parents, stating, "the parents are the real culprits. They know they are going to hurt the child, and they nonetheless take the child to the excisors, to the knife . . . there is no excuse, ever, for such a deed" (quoted in Walker and Parmar 1993:265). Here, immigrant parents are condemned for not being able to

think outside "culture," implying that the author feels herself capable of doing so. Forrest Sawyer, the anchor of ABC's *Day One*, emphasized the presumed weight of culture: "This is a brutal, disabling ritual so tied to culture and tradition that for thousands of years women have been powerless to stop it. In fact, the taboos are so strong that the women subjected to it will rarely talk about it at all" (1993).

A recent front-page article in the *New York Times* concerning Fauziya Kasinga highlights the assumption of the oppressive nature of "tradition" (Dugger 1996a). Despite information in the article suggesting Kasinga's elite and "modern" background (for example, Kasinga's father owned a successful trucking business in Togo, and she attended boarding school in Ghana), the language of the article stresses the exotic, relying on such terms as *tribal law*, *bloody rite*, *banish[ment]*, and *family patriarchs in their tribe* (Dugger 1996a). Rhetorically, the article suggests the ironic parallels between the alleged fetters of "tribal customs" and actual fetters in a Pennsylvania prison, where Kasinga was detained while seeking political asylum; here, the irony emerges as Dugger challenges the assumption of "freedom" in the United States by suggesting parallels with the (unquestioned) oppression of "tradition" in African countries. Similarly, Kasinga's televised response to a surprised Ted Koppel, informing him that most young women in Togo are happy to have the procedure done and "think it is something very great," could not dislodge the program's implicit assumption that these women are coerced and would gladly flee their own countries to escape such practices (*Nightline* 1996). Thus, rather than acknowledging Kasinga as a young woman who had dared to resist social norms of which she disapproved (in part because she was raised in a liberal household that offered alternative life choices), the media accounts instead emphasized the allegedly coercive and oppressive nature of African cultures and societies as a whole.

In other accounts, collective "culture" is judged to be less relevant than "rights" premised on the individual. As Tilman Hasche, the lawyer for Lydia Oluloro, the Nigerian woman who legally petitioned to remain in the United States to prevent the excision of her daughters, stated in a *New York Times* article, "Frankly, I don't give a damn if opposing this is a violation of someone's culture. To me, female genital mutilation is a violation of the physical and spiritual integrity of a person" (Egan 1994). In some accounts, cultural beliefs are recognized only as "insanity." For example, A. M. Rosenthal of the *New York Times* called on the people and governments of the countries where genital operations are practiced "to revolt against the sexual and social insanities that allow the mutilation of half their population" (1992).

In contrast to this image of sub-Saharan and North African societies as tradition-bound and oppressed by culture, Euro-American institutions and values are depicted as exemplars of culture-free reason and rationality, as represented in particular by Western medicine. This binary distinction between a rational West and an overly traditional and cultured "rest" has been underscored in the oppositional literature by emphatic attention to the health problems associated with such practices. Health consequences *are* real and disturbing. For

clitoridectomies, these include the possibility of hemorrhage and infection, and in the case of infibulation, they include difficulties with urination, intercourse, and childbirth; fluid retention; and cyst formation (Toubia 1994). Yet as a position statement issued by the Women's Caucus of the African Studies Association noted, these health consequences must be located within a larger context in which women's health may also be severely affected by malnutrition, lack of clean water, and inadequate health care (1984). Henry Louis Gates asks, "Is it, after all, unreasonable to be suspicious of Westerners who are exercised over female circumcision, but whose eyes glaze over when the same women are merely facing starvation?" (1994). The question of why these particular health issues generate such a barrage of interest deserves closer examination.

Clearly, popular interest in female genital operations stems in part from their sensational aspects, practices that simultaneously horrify and titillate Euro-American audiences. This tendency toward sensationalism draws on a long history in which sub-Saharan and North African women's bodies have been simultaneously exoticized and eroticized, as evidenced in the pickling of a "Bushman" woman's vulva and its display in France in the 19th century (Gould 1985) and erotic French colonial postcards that draw on sexually charged ideas about veiling and the alleged languorous harems of imprisoned Muslim women (Alloula 1986). Concerning the recent interest in female genital operations, Dawit noted the voyeurism implicit in a CNN newscast that spent nearly ten minutes graphically depicting the infibulation of an Egyptian girl (Dawit 1994). Modern medical discourse may in fact perform the dual role of using the "objective" language of science to construct the issue as outside of "culture," while simultaneously offering a sanitized way of continuing the preoccupation with the genitalia and sexuality of African women.

The privileging of Euro-American experience in the medical discourse surrounding genital operations is also apparent in the discussion of pain. Most of the literature lists pain at the forefront of the "medical" consequences or problems associated with genital operations (D. Gordon 1991; Kouba and Muasher 1985:101). And it is pain that leads to accusations that genital operations are "torture." However, for the adolescent initiation rituals that I described for Kikhome, pain is an intrinsic part of the ritual and is socially meaningful—although it is not for infibulation and sunna operations, for which sometimes an anesthetic is used or which are done in the hospital. While all humans presumably have the same range of physiological responses to pain, barring individual differences and learned techniques for controlling pain, the meanings associated with pain and ideas about how one should respond to it vary situationally as well as cross-culturally. Within the context of sub-Saharan African initiation rituals (or for that matter, U.S. military boot camps or Indian ascetic rites), pain may be viewed not simply as something to be avoided but as something to be endured that can result in the positive transformation of the individual.

To summarize, much of the Western-oriented literature by Euro-Americans that opposes female genital operations invokes a series of binary oppositions, including:

First World	Third World
modernity	tradition
science	superstition
civilized	barbarous
freedom	torture/repression
women as actors	women as oppressed
medical knowledge	ignorance/disease

The cumulative effect of these binary oppositions is to perpetuate a dichotomous understanding of First and Third Worlds, an enduring division between “us” and “them.” This division is strikingly apparent in Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), where the dysfunctional sex life, intensely painful childbirth, deformed child, troubled marriage, and tortured soul of the main character, Tashi, are all attributed to “circumcision.” Tashi is then contrasted with her U.S. husband’s French lover, who emerges as the embodiment of female liberation and for whom birth is orgasmic. Perhaps the sense of a radical separation between First and Third Worlds, however, is most forcefully reproduced in accusations of “torture.” Because clitoridectomies or infibulations are usually performed at the request of parents and relatives, those whom Weil-Curiel classifies as “the real culprits,” this discourse implicitly suggests that even family members in such societies are callous or barbaric enough to “torture” their own.

### Colonial History and the Debate over the Status of Women

A perusal of the Western-oriented literature opposing genital operations, much of which reproduces such disturbing power hierarchies, makes starkly apparent why gender is a fraught issue between so-called First and Third Worlds. It is also clear that understanding the tenacity of the discourse discussed above requires understanding its history; and in fact, much recent scholarship has focused on colonial discourses of gender and the uses to which such discourses were put. This scholarship has argued that the alleged overwhelming oppression of “native” women by “native” men was consistently used to justify colonial domination and that Euro-American feminism was itself used toward those ends.

The colonial discourse on female genital operations in Africa resembles that on other practices such as *sati* (widow-burning) in India, foot-binding in China, and veiling in Muslim societies. Numerous scholars have documented how representations of the domination of non-Western women by non-Western men were used to justify British and French imperialism (Ahmed 1992; Lazreg 1994; Liddle and Joshi 1989; Mani 1990). Colonial representations that reified male domination as “traditional” throughout the Third World ignored the ways in which colonialism, and the economic transformations that accompanied it, systematically oppressed both colonized women and men. It also ignored the ways that colonialism hurt women in particular by economically undermining what was an already vulnerable group and by subverting women’s historical sources of power and autonomy. The symbolic importance of Algerian women’s

"oppression" in underpinning French colonialism was given physical form in a staged ceremony in which Algerian women were unveiled by French women in a symbolic enactment of the "enlightenment" of French rule. This ceremony was staged during the 1950s in response to the growing resistance to French rule by the Algerian nationalist party, the National Liberation Front (FLN), which itself included many women (Knauss 1987; Lazreg 1994). The reality of gender inequality in France—for instance, that French women were themselves not allowed to vote until after World War II—did not stop French women from being held up as the liberated ideal for Algerians.

Leila Ahmed argues that budding Euro-American feminist ideals were co-opted into the service of justifying colonial domination. She writes,

Even as the Victorian male establishment devised theories to contest the claims of feminism, and derided and rejected the ideas of feminism and the notion of men's oppressing women with respect to itself, it captured the language of feminism and redirected it, in the service of colonialism, toward Other men and the cultures of Other men. [1992:151]

Ahmed addresses the ironies of this situation. She notes that Lord Cromer, the British consul general in Egypt at the turn of the century, wrote at length about the degraded status of Muslim women as epitomized by the veil and by sex segregation. It was this degradation that symbolized for him the cultural inferiority of Egyptian men and underscored the importance of the Western "civilizing" mission that could help Egyptians "develop" (Ahmed 1992:153). Ahmed notes, however, that in England, Cromer was a founding member and even president of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage, and that in Egypt, he did little to implement educational policies that would help Egyptian women. Liddle and Joshi (1989) and Mani (1990) make similar arguments for colonial India. Mani argues that the debate over sati was less about women than about evaluating the worth of Hindu tradition in terms that would cast colonialism as a "civilizing" mission. Liddle and Joshi note that Katherine Mayo's 1927 book *Mother India*, which documented in detail male abuses of women, was used in England to justify the denial of self-rule to India (1989:31).

What Ahmed labels "colonial feminism" was often replaced in the post-colonial era by "state feminism," in which many women's organizations were co-opted by national governments and staffed by female relatives of male politicians. For example, in Kenya the colonial government's women's organization, Maendeleo ya Wanawake, was later taken over by the national government (Robertson 1996:633). Despite the centrality of women in many nationalist movements in the 1950s and 1960s (and earlier in India), male nationalists were often ambivalent toward gender reform. In some cases, legal reforms affecting women were extremely limited as in Algeria and Egypt, or they were gestures offered by male politicians to demonstrate their countries' "modernity" (Hatem 1995; Kandiyoti 1991; Lazreg 1994). In the case of India, while male nationalists supported a women's movement that provided support for the nationalist cause, men were often hostile toward the reform of personal law that challenged

the status quo within families (Liddle and Joshi 1989). As Kandiyoti suggests, in order to understand reactions to "feminism" in many Third World countries, it is necessary to understand the ways in which feminism has been co-opted and monopolized by ruling interests and elites in these countries (1991). Furthermore, focusing solely on formal "feminist" organizations obscures "indigenous" forms of feminism that do not necessarily accord with the middle-class Euro-American model (see also Ahmed 1989; Jayawardena 1986). For example, the activism of peasant, working-class, and minority women may be downplayed when evaluated solely in terms of gender interests rather than the intersection of gender with ethnic and class issues. The reality that First and Third World women have different needs, concerns, and power bases, combined with the particular histories of feminism in former colonies (Kandiyoti 1991), has contributed to tensions in the midst of efforts to create an international women's movement (Moser 1991). Female genital operations have proven to be one of the most powerful fault lines along which such tensions erupt.

### **Gender and the Hardening of "Tradition"**

Attention to colonial history reveals that cultural arguments can be a double-edged sword. While such arguments may be used to advocate tolerance in the face of difference, they may also be used to stifle change and impose or buttress particular culturally-defined power relationships. The conceptual fusing of women with culture and tradition has particular implications for women, who may become symbols in a battle to construct particular versions of "modern" or "traditional" society. This tendency is clear in the case of female genital operations. In Kenya in the late 1920s and early 1930s, missionaries of the Church of Scotland waged a campaign to stop the practice of clitoridectomy among the Kikuyu who lived in the area surrounding Nairobi. Clitoridectomy, which appeared to be on the wane despite its importance to the age-grade system, was revitalized and given new meaning not by "traditionalists," but by the young nationalists of the Kikuyu Central Association. As Pedersen notes,

As a defense of clitoridectomy became entangled with long-standing Kikuyu grievances about mission influence and access to land, clitoridectomy, always the sign of the "true Kikuyu," also came to be seen as a mark of loyalty to the incipient, as yet imaginary, nation. [1991:651]

Although women's voices were largely unrecorded in this debate, Robertson suggests that the fight against the missionary ban on clitoridectomies was also related to the desire of Kikuyu elders and young militant men to control women's trading in Nairobi because it threatened male sexual and economic dominance (1996:623). Jomo Kenyatta, leader of the Kikuyu Central Association and later the powerful first president of an independent Kenya, was himself a prominent cultural nationalist proponent of clitoridectomies. Kenyatta, who had been a student of the famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in

England, positively portrayed and defended the practice in *Facing Mount Kenya*, an ethnographic study of his Kikuyu ethnic group (1959[1938]).<sup>20</sup>

According to both Leila Ahmed (1992) and Lata Mani (1990), the association between women and tradition was in large part the result of the colonial legacy. Underlying much colonial thought (and much anthropology) has been the assumption that cultures are bounded, discrete units defined by ahistorical "traditions" or "customs" (Handler 1988). Ahmed argues that colonialist isolation of the veil as not simply the symbol, but the enactment par excellence, of Muslim cultural inferiority and degradation, positioned women as the ahistorical embodiment of that "tradition." She argues that this link between women and "tradition" was perpetuated by nationalists who in their fight for independence simply inverted the equation and instead championed the veil as the embodiment of religious and national identity (1992). Partha Chatterjee argues that Indian nationalists, operating under colonial control in public arenas, conceded Euro-American superiority in technological terms but came to view the "inner" world of domesticity and "tradition" associated with women as the sphere in which Indians could demonstrate their superiority, spiritually and culturally, over the West (1989, 1993; see also Kandiyoti 1991, Knauss 1987, and Lazreg 1994 for parallels in Middle Eastern and North African countries). Thus, while "tradition," codified in its most rigid and hierarchical form under British colonial law, was understood by the colonizers as both intrinsic to the character of the colonized and the embodiment of their inferiority, it was often inverted in its essentialist form by the colonized themselves to epitomize a cultural integrity and worth that was defined in highly gendered ways.

This association between women and culture-tradition has also meant that attempts to increase or maintain control over women are often argued in cultural terms, as demonstrated by a Kenyan legal case that attracted international attention in the 1980s (Cohen and Odhiambo 1992; Stamp 1991). This case pitted a socially prominent Kikuyu widow, Wambui Otieno, against her deceased husband's Luo patrilineage for the right to bury the body. This battle tapped deep tensions within Kenyan society, including the relations between Luo and Kikuyu ethnic groups, nuclear families versus patrilineages, and urban elites versus the rural poor. Nevertheless, the case was argued through an intertwined discourse of gender and "reified" tradition. The Otieno lawsuit encapsulated the same potentially contradictory meanings associated with "tradition," as have female genital operations, and it similarly pricked nationalist pride as the controversy circulated in the international media. Particularly when portrayed for international audiences, female genital operations have often been a symbol of "backwardness" and a source of "shame" to those in Third World countries who are concerned that their nations live up to Western-defined standards of "modernity."<sup>21</sup> At the same time, in a cultural nationalist tradition, defense of these practices has also served as a symbol of cultural integrity or resistance to Euro-American domination—ironically, a thoroughly "modern" position. What is disturbing to feminists, however, are the ways that attempts to create particular

versions of cultural tradition may be translated into attempts to create, and thus control, particular kinds of women.

This association between women and hardened notions of “culture” and “tradition” is not limited to the so-called Third World. Kristin Koptiuch, for example, explores its implications in the use of “cultural defense” arguments in legal cases dealing with immigrants in the United States (1996). She cites a case in which a Chinese man living in Brooklyn murdered his wife for allegedly having an extramarital affair. His lawyers defended him on the grounds that his actions were dictated by his rural Chinese background, in which adultery brings great shame to a man and his ancestors—a position defended by an anthropologist brought in to offer expert testimony. The judge downgraded the charge from murder to manslaughter and gave him the lightest sentence possible—five years of probation, even though, as Koptiuch notes, he would have been sentenced for murder had he been living in China. Unfortunately, this case is not unusual; in the United States, many cases that make use of cultural defense arguments do so on behalf of men in instances of violence against women (Koptiuch 1996). To extrapolate from Koptiuch’s argument, if cultural defense arguments are allowed to stand, the specter is also raised of a potential dismantling of protective legislation through the creation of innumerable exceptions. Such an escalation is possible because “cultural” arguments can be made not only for non-nationals, but also for numerous other racial, ethnic, religious, and other identity-based groups.

Koptiuch’s argument carries implications for international debates over female genital operations. It suggests that the common responses to such practices—both the relativist argument, which privileges cultural tolerance, and the blatantly ethnocentric argument, which assumes the “backwardness” of African traditions and the inferiority of immigrants—carry male-dominant and colonial legacies based on hardened notions of tradition and culture. This raises difficult questions for feminist anthropologists: if we resort to cultural relativist arguments in the attempt to divert the racism embedded in much of the international outcry over female genital operations, do we end up undermining those African women who are themselves working to change these practices? Are we participating in leaving them exposed to charges that they are denigrating their own “traditions” and being culturally “inauthentic?” In using an uncritical notion of “culture,” do we in fact create the same sense of difference, of estrangement from each other’s lives and worlds, that is also generated in the flagrantly ethnocentric literature that opposes female genital operations?

### **Conclusion: Who Speaks?**

Soon after the opening of the film *Warrior Marks* (1993), an op-ed piece appeared in the *New York Times* written by two African professional women, Seble Dawit and Salem Mekuria, with the named support of six others, all of whom oppose and have been working to abolish female genital operations. They wrote,



We take great exception to the recent Western focus on female genital mutilation in Africa, most notably by the author Alice Walker.

Ms. Walker's new film "Warrior Marks" portrays an African village where women and children are without personality, dancing and gazing blankly through some stranger's script of their lives. The respected elder women of the village's Secret Society turn into slit-eyed murderers wielding rusted weapons with which to butcher children.

As is common in Western depictions of Africa, Ms. Walker and her collaborator, Pratibha Parmar, portray the continent as a monolith, African women and children are the props, and the village the background against which Alice Walker, heroine-savior, comes to articulate their pain and condemn those who inflict it.

Like Ms. Walker's novel "Possessing the Secret of Joy," this film is emblematic of the Western feminist tendency to see female genital mutilation as the gender oppression to end all oppressions. Instead of being an issue worthy of attention in itself, it has become a powerfully emotive lens through which to view personal pain—a gauge by which to measure distance between the West and the rest of humanity. [1993]

They concluded by noting:

Neither Alice Walker nor any of us here can speak for them [African women on the continent]; but if we have the power and the resources, we can create the room for them to speak, and to speak with us as well. [1993]

Efua Dorkenoo, a woman of West African descent living in England, responded to Dawit and Mekuria's op-ed piece in an article that was signed as well by a number of other African professional women living in the West. The letter was printed in a special section of NOW's newsletter under the heading "African Women Speak Out on FGM [female genital mutilation]." Dorkenoo wrote,

The authors of . . . [the op-ed piece in the *New York Times*] made the mistake of presenting themselves as speaking on behalf of all African women. African women working on this problem come from different perspectives and different experiences. . . . If we Africans sincerely wish to see an end to this harmful practice, both in Africa and the West, we cannot rule out media coverage irrespective of how painful the memories of FGM might be. It is time that we stop blaming others and being hysterical whenever this subject is raised; rather we should focus on how to tap into international goodwill to stop this suffering of our girls. . . . Many may not care for Alice Walker's perspective on raising awareness of FGM, but at least we should be honest enough to acknowledge that her recent work is bringing the subject to the attention of a wider international audience. [1994]

That Dorkenoo and her supporters see Dawit and Mekuria as attempting to speak for *all* African women—despite their stated intention to the contrary—alerts us to the ongoing importance attached to "authentic voices" and the presumed ability of such voices to speak for others. This preoccupation with authentic voices stems from the recognition that such voices are widely considered persuasive in an Euro-American political discourse that focuses heavily on identity. At the same time, this exchange provides a graphic demonstration of the inadequacy of such a model. Obviously, there is no unified "voice" for

African women, even among such a relatively distinct category of women as African professionals who oppose genital operations and live in Europe or the United States.

Poststructuralist feminist scholars like Judith Butler have criticized this preoccupation with identity politics (Butler 1990; Butler and Scott 1992). In a challenge similar to that posed against hardened understandings of "culture," Butler criticizes identity politics for building on and encouraging essentialism—that is, the reduction of complex human experiences and competing identities to static essences presumed to emanate from the unambiguous facts of gender, race, or nationality (1990). While historically, the concept of "culture" provided a space that allowed for respect and understanding of differences, "identity politics" has similarly provided dominated groups with an arena for organizing and demanding rights. If not problematized, however, the terms in which such claims are made can work to create new forms of oppression rather than greater liberation. Hardened conceptions of "culture" can suggest both insurmountable barriers between "us" and "them" and a predetermined "authenticity" to which individuals are pressured to conform. Similarly, a feminist politics based on identity can be reduced to a preoccupation with ever finer distinctions between categories of women, each presumed to be internally homogeneous. These questions are not theoretical niceties but reflect serious political concerns, particularly in this ever globalizing era. In the United States, where politics is often organized around identity and pleas for tolerance are made in the name of "multiculturalism," we need to know which understandings of "identity" and "culture" are at work. How, for example, do we interpret the calls being made for "cultural asylum" in cases like those of Oluloro and Kasinga? How can universalized conceptions of "human rights" be made to include "culture" and the particular situations that women find themselves in, without creating new cages for ourselves by reducing culture to coercion and identity to hardened essences?

In the effort to transcend "either/or" reactions to female genital operations that are limited to either moral outrage or cultural relativism, one initial step is to recognize that "female genital operations"—despite my own use of the phrase—do not exist as a category. To lump together the diverse forms of the practice into a bundle known as "female genital mutilation," "female circumcision," or "female genital operations" obscures the diverse geographic locations, meanings, and politics in which such practices are embedded, and rhetorically constitutes a generic "they" who conduct such practices and a generic "we" who do not. In offering an account of a particular place, Kikhome, my goal was not to provide a neatly argued social scientific account of the practice. Instead, my goal was to use this particular place at a particular point in time, as well as my encounters with some of the young women I knew there, as a means to explore the myriad issues surrounding female genital operations and to begin to phrase the kinds of questions that might help to elucidate these practices. Such questions range from symbolic meaning and individual psychology to the gendered politics of family organization, ethnic identity, colonial, and postcolonial states to the presumed links between women and culture-tradition.

The questions suggested by the situation in Kikhome, however, can just as productively illuminate the international controversies surrounding female genital operations. Just as we might explore the historical and political contexts in which clitoridectomies are embedded in Kikhome, and how such practices are both in and against the interests of young women there, we might ask related questions about the contexts in which international struggles around such practices occur. When and why do we exhibit relativistic tolerance toward female genital operations? In what contexts do we express moral outrage? How might our responses hurt, as well as help, African women? How does the global politics of relationships between First and Third World countries, from the legacy of colonialism to contemporary global economics and population flows, shape our participation in these controversies? And, just as the young women in Kikhome might have strategically merged their "voices" with more powerful others like the church and state, so too can we ask how those of us participating in these international controversies are strategically merging our "voices" with one or more of the powerful discourses of feminism, cultural nationalism, relativism, humanism, and in some cases, to be blunt, racism. What are the histories of such discourses and to what ends are we using them?

Ultimately, however, the theoretical separation between clitoridectomy in Kikhome as ritual practice and the international controversy surrounding female genital operations as discourse is untenable. Discourse is also practice; it is not simply a way of understanding or thinking about the world, it is also a way of acting in it. Given that our discourse also signals a form of intervention, I would like to encourage feminists of whatever national origins, race, or gender to work against those assumptions being made in Western-oriented media accounts of female genital operations that reproduce colonial and neocolonial ideologies. Feminist anthropologists can also make a productive contribution by examining the social contexts of both ritual practices and international controversies and by exploring the power dynamics surrounding support and opposition to such practices, whether in rural African villages or urban France. For those interested in more hands-on styles of activism, critics of identity politics and hardened notions of culture are also pointing us in the direction of a feminist politics based on alliances and coalitions (Butler 1990; Haraway 1989; Mohanty 1991); hopefully, this brand of feminist politics will also be capable of critiquing practices such as clitoridectomy and infibulation without resorting to neocolonial ideologies of gender or denigrating the choices of women who support such practices. At the same time, Kenyan anthropologist Achola Pala-Okeyo cautions that "the role of [Western] feminists is not to be in front, leading the way for other women, but to be in back *supporting* the other women's struggles to bring about change."<sup>22</sup> Here Pala-Okeyo forces us to recognize that all of us, along with the debates in which we are engaged, are products of tenacious power relationships with long histories. The hope is that we can bring this recognition to bear at the same time that we form alliances based on shared politics across boundaries of race, nationality, and gender.

## Notes

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1. Dawit and Mekuria 1993; Dugger 1996a, 1996b; Raspberry 1993; Rosenthal 1992; Gregory 1994; *Nightline* 1996; *ABC World News Tonight* 1996; *Newsnight* 1994; *Dateline NBC* 1994; *All Things Considered* 1994. See also *CNN Specials* 1994a, 1994b; *Day One* 1993; *Morning Edition* 1993.

2. However, see Ellen Gruenbaum's article in the May 1995 edition of the *Anthropology Newsletter* of the American Anthropological Association. Panels were also held on "female circumcision" at the 1994 African Studies Association and American Anthropological Association meetings. Earlier research was done by Janice Boddy (1982) and Rose Oldfield Hayes (1975).

3. Despite the problematic aspects of the terms *First* and *Third* Worlds (problems include the assumption of hierarchy, the proclivity toward homogenization, and the attendant lack of specificity and historicity), I will nevertheless follow Mohanty et alia. (1991) and retain this usage. Since this paper seeks to critique precisely these types of homogenizing and unhistorical tendencies, the continued use of *First* and *Third* Worlds here signals a desire to problematize rather than accept such assumptions.

4. Kikhome and all names mentioned herein are pseudonyms.

5. As Lila Abu-Lughod has argued, while the universalist presumptions of "humanism" must be problematized, the concept continues to hold value for anthropologists as the "language of human equality with the most moral force . . ." (1991:158).

6. Robertson notes that statistics may be based on the erroneous assumption that if some members of an ethnic group now practice genital operations or had in the past, then all members continue to do so today (1996:61, footnote 2).

7. A recent *New York Times* article also described how some women in the United States, who at birth had their "abnormal" (often unusually large) clitorises surgically altered with detrimental effects on later sexual functioning, are protesting this medical practice (Angier 1997).

8. While some opponents of male circumcision also argue that removal of the foreskin decreases male sexual pleasure, the removal of the clitoris would be more equivalent to the amputation of the penis (for example, Toubia 1994:712). It is not often discussed in the literature, however, how women who have had such procedures experience their sexuality. The more radical procedure of infibulation, which includes not only the removal of the clitoris and labia but the sewing together of the remaining tissues, commonly leads to painful sexual intercourse, and Boddy notes that many women she spoke to in the Sudan avoided intercourse for this reason (1982). On the other hand, Nahid Toubia, a Sudanese doctor who opposes the practice, cautions that "the assumption that all circumcised women have sexual problems or are unable to achieve orgasm is not substantiated by research or anecdotal evidence" (1994:714). She notes that the "ability of women to compensate for it [infibulation] through other sensory areas or emotions and fantasy is not well understood" (1994:714; see also Lightfoot-Klein 1989). Although there has been much concern by opponents of female genital operations with the psychological impact of genital operations (for example, Walker 1992; Walker and Parmar 1993), this impact would obviously depend heavily on the

social context and meanings that individuals attribute to such practices. Toubia does state that in her clinical experience in the Sudan, many infibulated women seem to experience anxiety relating to their genitals. Presumably, the impact of such procedures would be very different for those women raised in Euro-American countries, where such practices are not prevalent and would be socially stigmatizing rather than valued. African women in France who have organized against the practices argue that "circumcised" adolescent girls living there experience "enormous psychosexual problems" (MODEFEN 1982, quoted in Winter 1994; Thiam 1978).

9. I was teaching under the auspices of the World Teach Program, a nongovernmental, U.S.-based organization that helps college graduates find international teaching positions.

10. For a similar description among the Sebei, a subgroup of the Sabaot, see Goldschmidt 1976 and 1986.

11. See Goldschmidt 1986.

12. However, there were secret aspects of the initiation of which I would remain unaware. Goldschmidt (1986) describes a ceremony among the Sebei which parallels those of secret societies in other parts of Africa and which is closely guarded from the uninitiated or from the opposite sex. He states that at the end of the recuperation period, the night before the cave ceremony in the hills, initiates are taken out individually into the "bush" and frightened with a replica of an animal (a leopard for girls and a lion for boys), accompanied by noise produced by twirling a stick, one end of which is attached to the head of a drum or a bull-roarer. After receiving scratches from the animal that mark one as being initiated, they are "introduced" to the animal, learning its secret.

13. However, the public circumcision ceremony of the *bris* is performed on Jewish male babies in the United States.

14. Tellingly, Goldschmidt relates that women continue to hold the clan affiliation of their fathers, but Sebei men state that wives take the clan affiliation of their husband (1976:87).

15. For further information, see note 8.

16. This practice bears a striking resemblance to that described for the Kikuyu, among whom young women were also excised. See Kenyatta 1959[1938].

17. Also see Pedersen 1991.

18. The first wave of feminism emerged in the United States at roughly the turn of the century.

19. Author's interview with Dr. Constance Sutton at New York University, May 10, 1995.

20. This issue is further explored by East African author Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his 1965 novel *The River Between*.

21. For example, in an interview with CNN in 1994, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak attempted to dismiss the topic by stating (inaccurately) that female "circumcision" was rarely performed in Egypt. Similarly, a top Nigerian official in the United States described Lydia Oluloro's plea for asylum in 1994 as calculated to "denigrate the image of Nigeria," arguing that female "circumcision," "in the very few cases where it is still practiced," was done with the consent of those involved (Jaya Dayal, "Nigerian Official Calls Mother's Plea Calculated." Inter Press Third World News Agency, listserv message, March 26, 1994). Seble Dawit (1994) noted that the Nigerian Embassy submitted a protest to the U.S. court that the practice of female genital mutilation was unheard of in Nigeria (although about half of Nigerian women undergo female genital operations) and that Oluloro was vilified and called a traitor by many Africans.

22. Dr. Achola Pala-Okeyo was responding to recent media accounts of Euro-American feminist responses to female genital operations in an interview with Dr. Constance Sutton at New York University, April 15, 1994.

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