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FEMALE CIRCUMCISION AND INFIBULATION IN AFRICA

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## Female Circumcision and Infibulation in Africa

David M. Westley\*

\*Boston University, [dwestley@bu.edu](mailto:dwestley@bu.edu)

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## **Female Circumcision and Infibulation in Africa**

**David M. Westley**, *African Bibliographer, Boston University*

### **Preface**

"Female Genital Mutilation" is a recently coined term for a custom going back to the ancient Egyptians. Although it has been reported as far afield as South America and Malaysia, its main locus is Africa. It involves really two procedures, excision of the clitoris with varying degrees of completeness and infibulation or "Pharaonic circumcision", the sewing together of the labia majora of the vulva with catgut or thorns accompanied by excision. A reed or stick is inserted at the bottom to allow urine or menstrual blood to flow through. The varying forms of these procedures are not considered a health hazard by those who practice them but they have been found to be extremely detrimental to the health of those on whom it is performed. Short term effects include ulceration, hemorrhaging, septicemia and tetanus infections exacerbated by the use of crude, unsterilized instruments which can be severe enough to result in death. Long-term effects include retention of urine, disturbances of menstruation, blood clots, edema, obstetrical complications, sterility, psychological trauma and frigidity. It also helps to spread AIDS. Like male circumcision, female circumcision, as it is often called, was originally an initiation rite though now it is frequently practiced on younger girls, even infants.

Many people believe the clitoris to be ugly. Others believe that an uncircumcised girl is incapable of bearing children. Still others believe that infibulation adds pleasure to the husband during intercourse. Excision is said by many to reduce temptation in unmarried girls as is infibulation. Although theories have been proposed, no one knows the origin of genital mutilation. It is clearly found in northern Africa especially in Muslim areas although the Koran and other Muslim literature does not require it. It also occurs among many non-Muslim peoples. In Africa, the practice of female circumcision is found in the countries of Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Togo, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea Bissau,

Sénégal, The Gambia, Mauritania, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Mali. Of course, not all of the peoples in these countries follow such practices.

There are four primary areas of literature on female circumcision and infibulation: anthropological literature, medical literature, protest literature, and legal literature. Although the earliest reported account of both practices is found in the work of Strabo (64 B.C.-20 A.D.), a Turkish born Greek geographer who discovered the custom while traveling up the Nile, literature on the subject did not really begin until the early twentieth century. It was reported mostly by anthropologists and frequently noted only in passing. That is why I have included so many references to it that amount to no more than a page. Occasionally a short medical article has been published. The vast literature on the subject began to multiply with the publication of Fran P. Hosken's *The Hosken Report* in 1979 along with her quarterly WIN (Women's International Network) News. The topic quickly became a heated feminist issue. It was not long before African women, while attempting to end the practice in their own way, began to criticize Western feminists for their writings on the subject. The Association of African Women for Research and Development has stated:

In trying to reach their own public, the new crusaders have fallen back on sensationalism, and have become insensitive to the dignity of the very women they want to "save". They are totally unconscious of the latent racism which such a campaign evokes in countries where ethnocentric prejudice is deeply rooted. [ [Item #27](#) (1983), p. 217. ]

Western feminists, however, have continued their campaign though occasionally acknowledging African protest. One such article is Natasha M. Gordon's "'Tonguing the Body': Placing Female Circumcision Within African Feminist Discourse." ([Item #191](#), 1997). In the meantime *The Hosken Report* has gone into its fourth edition (1994). More significantly, African women have begun to contribute substantially to the literature on the subject.

The increased presence of African women in the West has resulted in the proliferation of two relatively new kinds of literature: medical literature and legal literature. The medical literature concentrates on the repercussions of female genital surgeries, while legal discourse has resulted in laws prohibiting it in the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and France. Recent legal actions have been focused on the issue of asylum, involving cases in which African women have pled for asylum in order to escape an operation. A number of these cases have been successful.

The campaign to end these practices has faced enormous obstacles the most important of which is the tenacity of tradition. Sudan attempted to eradicate infibulation in the 1940s. In Kenya, Daniel arap Moi's government has made it illegal. In Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara's government tried to end it, but since Sankara's death, the practices continue in many parts of the country. It is likely that, even if a concerted campaign could be mounted by the World Health Organization, the eradication of "female circumcision" will take many years.

Nevertheless, positive steps are on the way. In Kenya, Kikuyu girls are undergoing rites of passage that mimic the old ways but in the absence of circumcision. Among the Bambara/Manding and Fulani communities of Malicounda, Sénégal, "in the months May to July 1997, the traditional period for genital cutting, no such operations were performed...for the first time in the community's history" (IK Notes World Bank No. 3 December 1998). This change of practice seems to have occurred after an educational NGO had emphasized health issues in the area. Word spread and the operations were discontinued in an even wider area. In December 1998, the government of Sénégal passed laws prohibiting the practice of "female circumcision".

The purpose of this bibliography is to provide access to the major and minor literature on female genital mutilation with emphasis on Africa. It was put together with the help of three existing bibliographies, Lilian Passmore Sanderson's ([Item #438](#), 1986), Dominique Béguin Stöckli's ([Item #49](#), 1993) and Deanna M. Blackwell's ([Item #58](#), 1997). Entries were double-checked where possible and many corrected. On the whole, each of these bibliographies provided very different literature. I also used the references of Fran P. Hosken, International African Bibliography, and Dissertation Abstracts on CD-ROM. Much additional material was found by continual scanning of references in the literature.

A second purpose of the bibliography is to present a picture of the development of writing, even sensational, on a subject that has grown to such a magnitude especially in the past twenty years.

This bibliography will be updated in about a year. Those who find citations especially since 1997 can send them to [dwestley@bu.edu](mailto:dwestley@bu.edu).

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