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African Literature

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Curiosity Around the World

Books are so interesting and fun. It is like you can learn something while being entertained that the same time. Throughout the novels in this class I have found it so interesting to learn about the different cultures of Africa. I never knew how interesting it would be to learn about the rituals, problems, or even just the celebrations in Africa. The book that stood out to me the most was *Monique and the Mango Rains.* It was defiantly an eye opener to read about the living conditions in Mali and the fact that they really didn’t have a health code. The birthing center was an unorganized and unsanitary mess but Monique did the best that she could with what she had. She is truly inspiring. Helping patients was her number one goal because no one else knew how. This book expressed such a difference from our culture today compared to Mali’s lifestyle and for this paper I will choose one topic and look deeper into the subject. I will be walking you through my step-by-step journey, so just hold on for the ride.

Now to choose a topic on one thing that I found interesting in *Monique and the Mango Rains* is extremely hard because there are just so many. As I am writing this paper right now, I am torn between the topics of the celebration of childbirth or female circumcision. Both topics were mentioned in the story and they are both topics that really spark my interest. I think I will look farther into female circumcision. In the story we first hear Monique say, “It hurts. Most women have not known this pain since they were young; since their kolkboli” (Holloway 112). Kolkboli happens to mean excision. This was a tradition that involved the clipping of the clitoral hood. Kris had read about it in her Peace Corps manual but just like the rest of us, she was shocked. In fact, it was a shock to Monique that Kris had not had the procedure. That right there amazes me of how different cultures can be and how blind we are to the fact that not everyone does the same things. Everyone around the world has different beliefs, rituals, and habits. Monique then talks and describes the procedure to Kris. “Well, here, it is done when girls are nine, or ten, like that. It’s hard for me to remember exactly when it was done. It was so long ago… I remember being very excited that it was time. I remember being talk to, being held down tightly, being held very still… There was so much blood but none of us cried… Ah! I have never had such pain. Never, even in childbirth” (Holloway 113). Kris started to connect the dots and was appalled as to what she just heard. Kris did not know what the point of it was and that is the question I began to ask myself. Why did they do that in this culture? What purpose did it serve and was it necessary? How long has this tradition been carried on? In the text Monique says that this procedure helps girls become good wives and this helps women to bear children. Monique disagrees that it helps women bear children because she hasn’t noticed that herself. But what made people think that? In this paper I really want to explore these questions that I have. This is such an interesting topic to me. Later in the chapter, Kris talks about a women’s group in Bamako that is speaking against this procedure. I also would like to do further investigation on whether the women were successful or not and if this is still taking place today.

In the novel we learn that there are three levels of female circumcision that are practiced across Africa. “Circumcision, or *sunna*, entailed the removal of the hood of the clitoris and sometimes part of the clitoris itself; excision was the removal of the clitoris and all or part of the inner lips of the vagina; and infibulation mean the removal of the clitoris, inner lips, and all or part of the outer lips… Excision was the form that was most common in Mali, universal really, with 96 percent of girls being cut” (Holloway 128). With all of that said I would like to investigate the truth to that, and also why this was practiced in Mali. After a quick search of “circumcision in Mali” I came across a Website called *The U.S Department of State*. This was one of the first links that popped up with my search and it seems very credible. One of the first things that I read was the different types of circumcision that is practiced. They are labeled with type one, type two, and type three. Just like the novel, this site says that Mali practices mostly the excision but also sometimes practices circumcision, *sunna,* which is also referred to as type one. This site continues to talk about the procedure and informs us that a “saw-tooth knife is commonly used to perform the operation.” Also rural villages have very little access to methods of sterilization, so the risk for infection is high. Just to make it clearer, only 4% of operations are done in a hospital by a health professional. So that is appalling to think about how many women have to deal with not only the pain of the operation but also the pain of infection that follows. This all seems so awful to me. It still leaves me to wonder, WHY they do this operation and what does it benefit? According to the World Health Organization, FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) has no health benefits for girls or women. This operation can cause severe bleeding and problems going to the bathroom. It can also cause cysts, infections, as well as complications during childbirth. This can even increase the risk of newborn deaths. So that is interesting to read because people in Mali, according to Monique, believed that this operation helps women through childbirth. We can clearly see that their rituals and beliefs are not always right. Twenty-six out of forty three African countries carry out this procedure (Reymond, Mohamud, Ali).

After doing a few more searches, I found some useful information. I found some beliefs of having FGM and when and why it originated. I read that it is hard to tell when FGM started but with the information they have gathered they can date back to 163 B.C when a Greek papyrus mentioned the operation being performed on girls in Memphis, Egypt, at the age when they received their dowries. The FGM originated as a form of initiation of young women (Lorenzi). However many years later gynecologists would perform this to treat various psychological symptom such as masturbation and nymphomania. In the recent years, FGM has been recognized as violation of the girls and women’s rights. FGM is a crime in many countries now. The United States outlawed FGM is 1997 (Lorenzi). So what are some recent traditions of why they do it? In the same article from the US Department of State some cultures believe that if a female has not underwent the procedure then they cannot marry. Some also believe that if the clitoris comes in contact with the babies’ head, during birth, then the baby will die. I also read that the Malian society considers an infant just a “child” until they have been circumcised. They believe that the clitoris in a female represents the male element in her and the foreskin of a young boy represents the female part of them. These parts must be removed clearly to be able to establish ones gender. Now these traditions and reasoning’s all seem silly to us but it is important to consider that these people were raised with these thoughts and so they believe them. Maybe if they knew our superstition of if you break a mirror you get seven years of bad luck they would think we were just as crazy.

As we know, this procedure is not helpful in any way. In fact it causes more harm then good for these girls around the world. There are multiple activist groups around the world that are trying to stop this procedure and also preaching for the young girls to have rights. In the novel *Monique and the Mango Rains* we read about a group in Bamako that works on women’s rights and is speaking against this procedure. To get some more information on what is being done about this and who is speaking out, I headed to the Waldo library to gather some pertinent information. When I first got here I had no idea of what I was looking for. I was just hoping that there would actually be books on this topic. I knew that I wasn’t going to be able to find books on my own so I went to the information center to get help and clarification. They asked me what books I was looking for and of course I had no idea. I just told the gentleman that I was working on a research paper and it was about Female Genital Mutilation. I also said that I needed to have five print sources for my paper. He was very helpful. He actually took the time to sit me down and show me how to search for books here at Waldo. He was showing me how you can limit your search if you use quotation marks. He then asked me if eBooks were allowed because he was worried that was all that they were going to have. Of course I said that they were not allowed for this paper, we needed to get the experience of looking at an actual book and search for material ourselves instead of just using the click of two or three buttons. I actually really like this idea because it is kind of a fresh environment, if you will. It’s nice to actually read a book in a quiet environment and also be delighted and interested in the topic. It was just a nice change of pace. After we searched the library databases we found two books that seemed very good for my topic. He did mention that there might be books in the same area with the same topic. So with all that said I gathered up my things and went on the hunt for these books, all by myself might I add. It was not difficult at all to find the books. After about two or three minutes I had found probably more than I could handle. After doing the research so far with my electronic sources I knew that this topic was pretty recent but I was quite shocked, however, to find a book that was published in 2016. This first book that I pulled off the shelf is called *When Norms Collide*. It is by Karisa Cloward and this book as some great statistics and fascinating information that I will share later on. As I continued to browse the shelf I found other books with the same topic. Looking into those sources I have also pulled some great information as well. With tons of sources and information now at my finger tips I would like to continue with the question of what is being done to stop this procedure from happening and is this still going on today? As I have previously stated, we hear about a women’s rights group in Bamako. They however are not the only group that is speaking of women’s rights and speaking against this procedure. “In Kenya, one of the first efforts to address FGM was organized by Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (MYWO), a national women’s organization. MYWO implemented the first “alternative rite of passage” program, essentially attempting to mirror the symbolic transition to adulthood that the female circumcision provides for girls in some communities” (Cloward 5). Unfortunately there was no evidence that the program reduced participation in this procedure. This actually showed that the local norm for FGM carried a lot of weight when it came to this cultures and communities. The parents would schedule the procedure for their daughters at a later date even after hearing the alternative rite of passage. It frustrates me that people just like to form to whatever else society is partaking in. If you think about it though, it only takes one person to step out of the box and try something new and then before you know it that will be a new “norm”.

Still these traditions hold all of the power. Cultures around the world are still going to do what they believe in. Another book from the library states, “that FGM has emerged in societies where women are chattels, objects of (some) economic value, to be passed from father to husband, and for whom a life independent of male ownership is unthinkable” (Burrage 83). It is appalling to think about this, women not having a choice. With the background knowledge that I now know about Africa this does make sense. Women were treated like an object. It shows that they are like an object just because of bride price for example. The father is basically selling his daughter to someone who is worthy and can pay it. There has been so much controversy with this topic from different countries around the world and multiple organizations to find solutions to this procedure. However, women’s insecure position in society needs to change before fundamental rejection of circumcision can be achieved (Gruenbaum 177).

FGM had something to do with purity and chastity as well. A clitoridectomy was often used to reduce sexual feelings and satisfaction. It is reflected in this practice that the girl or young woman is untouched until she is taken as a bride (Burrage 84). FGM was also practiced to control women’s sexual activity by limiting their sex drive or more precisely by limiting the physical pleasure that came with sexual intercourse. They believed that excision, pleasure, and chastity were linked to preserve a woman’s virtue and protect mans honor (James and Robertson 102).

So now after doing all of this research and leading up to the conclusion of my paper, I now have developed another question. Is this operation still happening in Mali? I found a site with the most recent update. According to *Equality Now* there is documented efforts to stop this procedure all the way up to August 20th 2015. However, in the sixteen years since the Malian Government adopted its first plan to stop FGM, FGM practices still remain high and anti-FMG law has yet to be in place. The argument of religion still remains. This truly saddens me that this pointless and degrading practice is still in place. I know that I look at it as pointless and degrading but Mali and other countries around the world must see a point to it. I feel as if I really have learned a lot about FGM. I have learned where it originated from and what the purpose was. I have learned the different types of circumcision and why this practiced is carried out. I feel as if I will never understand truly why it is practice because I just simply cannot relate. I will never agree with them because that is not my religion nor was it the way I was raise. With that said it does kind of bother me that I will never be able to relate and fully understand. It would be nice to hear actual women who had the procedure speak against this instead of just reading a bunch of research on the subject. Overall, yes all of my questions were answered but I am just having a hard time relating and therefore it is leaving me still confused and interested in this topic. Thank you for joining me in my research journey. I hope you have enjoyed the ride.

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