

Response to:

Rites and Wrongs: An Insider/Outside Reflects on Power and Excision

by Fuambai Ahmadu

In this work, Fuambai Ahmadu presents an insider view and academic study from a lesser known perspective on Female Genital Cutting (FGC). It is a powerful narrative as Ahmadu taps into her own experience of undergoing the ritual and shares the first-hand knowledge of the customs and notions that inspire this initiation rite in the Kono group. She uses both informal inquiry and formal research to understand and articulate female circumcision and initiation in Kono society to present an “insider” view of the practice. She starts with a detailed description of her personal experience through initiation followed by discussion on interpretation of the practice from conversations with ritual leaders, Kono immigrants and Kono refugees and activists. She focuses on the viewpoints of the supporter of this rite and leaves the task for generalizable claims to another study.

Ahmadu’s introduction to Kono cosmology and concept of nature, culture and gender was very insightful to me. She describes that, “the most salient organizing principles among the Kono are complementarity and interdependence” (Ahmadu 287). The secret societies of Bundo (for female) and Poro (for male) form an important role to control knowledge on medicines as well as create a connection with each other and the transcendental world. The leaders Soko and Pamansu are the mediators and leaders of these rituals. Ahmadu emphasized on the female-male duality in the social organization: mother’s and father’s lineage are important and the gendered labor roles balance each other out. However, she does point out that the changes in the nature of jobs from

agriculture to diamond mining has affected the traditional relations. Further, Ahmadu explains that in western cultures, a child is categorized into a sex female or male based on a nature and not culture. However, in Kono ideology, children are seen to be born with both sex and through initiation they acquire the role and responsibility are made into male or female gender. The circumcision is to remove the male part in females and vice versa to make one more pure, beautiful and feminine/masculine. Finally, she argues against the popular outrage that women's right to sexual pleasure is diminished and this is a mode of control. However, she explains that "for Kono, sexual pleasure and reproduction are inextricably linked; the former is an incentive for latter" (Ahmadu). In line with this thought, the clitoris is seen to lead to excessive masturbation and a deterrent to reproduction.

While Ahmadu makes a strong case that initiation rite is a product of the Kono view's on sexuality and gender and it is not a legacy of patriarchy as the women are taught to have a dual nature and to be subordinate "to female elders: their mothers, future mother-in-law, grandmothers" first. I can imagine Susan Okin, author of "Is Multiculturalism bad for Women?", still considering this an oppressive practice that is perpetuated by the older women who are "often co-opted into reinforcing gender inequality" (Okin 24). To her, I imagine, young girls are still pressured into this by not having an educated alternative that does not leave them socially alienated which is what perpetuates the practice. Personally, I can see Ahmadu's point of view, knowing that the belief system and the interdependent organizing of Kono society, being a part of the community and finding the sense of identity as a collective holds more weight than pure exercise of individual agency.

The reading was a well-articulated account into the culture, customs and belief systems that make male and female initiation rites a significant and a core part of Kono life. While reading this account, it was difficult, yet extremely important for me to remain impartial and open minded as she shares the Kono view of creation. As reinforced by Dr. Shweder in class, a key to doing cultural psychology fieldwork is to delay the judgment and that one must try to see the world from a native point of view. In this case, as she described the cosmological explanation for upholding the tradition, I caught myself dismissing it as an implausible explanation and still seeking more concrete reasons, such as some medical benefit, to support the pain inflicted by the practice of physical modification. Interestingly, coming from an immigrant Hindu family from India, when we discussed customs such as funeral rites that required acceptance of equally plausible or implausible explanation of what happens to a soul after death, I did not feel a mental resistance. This made me conscious of the deep level of biases caused by the framework of the culture we operate in and while talking about or judging other cultures, how important it is be extremely aware of it and ultimately concede that one may never truly be able “see what the other person does”. This heightened my respect and support for Ahmadu’s approach to bring forward an “insider’s” view on the matter of female circumcision and support that the activists must consider the deep, social value of the custom before demonizing it. I also find her conclusion reasonable and acceptable – for traditionalists “to relinquish their insistence that uncircumcised women are not socially and culturally “women”” and for activists to not “stigmatize those who uphold their ancestral traditions” (Ahmadu 309).

References

Ahmadu, Fuambai (2001). Rites and Wrongs: Excision and Power Among Kono Women of Sierra Leone. In B. Shell-Duncan and Y. Hernlund (Eds.). Female 'Circumcision' in Africa: Culture, Change and Controversy. Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner. Page 283-312.

Okin, Susan M. (1999) "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" In S.M. Okin Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?, Princeton University Press pp. 9-24