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Janice Boddy: Civilizing Women

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INTRODUCTION



History is not a succession of events, it is the links between them.

—E. E. Evans-Pritchard

The seeds of this book were sown when I began anthropological fieldwork in northern Sudan in 1976. My main interest then was to research *zâr* spirit possession and its practices among rural Muslim women. But when talking to friends about my plan, their inevitable reaction was, “You know they circumcise women there?” For most of my fellow graduate students, female genital cutting was the salient ethnographic fact about the people with whom I wished to work.

The tendency for female genital cutting to overdetermine perceptions of northern Sudan is not unusual. Indeed, no other cultural practice that refigures human bodies is more vilified in the Western press than what it calls “female genital mutilation” or “FGM.” The term, however, homogenizes several distinct practices performed for different reasons in different parts of the world. The World Health Organization identifies four types of FGM, the most widespread in Africa being excision or clitoridectomy, which accounts for some 80 percent of cases. The most invasive but less common at roughly 15 percent is infibulation or “pharaonic circumcision,” the type widely performed in Sudan. Known as pharaonic *purification* (*at-tabûr faraowniya*), it entails paring a girl’s external genitals and stitching together remaining skin so as to cover the wound, all but obscuring the urethra and vaginal opening.¹ Infibulation is also practiced in Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia, parts of Mali, and southern Egypt. Though relatively rare, it is often misleadingly portrayed as representative of FGM by writers detailing its implications for girls’ and women’s health.² Moreover, the techniques of operators (who may not have medical training) vary tremendously, groups have distinct preferences, and practices evolve. In Sudan during the 1920s and 1930s, British midwives encouraged a modified and somewhat medicalized form of pharaonic circumcision, as we’ll see.

When I settled into the Sudanese village of Hofriyat on the banks of the Nile some two hundred kilometers north and slightly east of Khartoum, I found it wasn’t only friends at home who focused on the custom. Hofriyati women insisted that if I wanted to learn about their ways, I would

2 INTRODUCTION

have to learn about *at-tahûr* and observe it being performed. As my familiarity with Hofriyati grew, I came to appreciate how the practice underwrote every facet of women's daily lives. It established the meaningful parameters of their selfhood, safeguarded their fertility, and informed their vulnerability to spirit possession. I have explored these issues in earlier publications; they form the background to *Civilizing Women* too.

Crusades

Over the past two decades or more, a highly visible international crusade to end female genital cutting (FGC) has taken place, aimed at African countries such as Sudan. While those who practice FGC belong to a variety of religions, the majority are Muslims, and the custom is said to support premarital chastity, strongly associated with Islam. The issue has arisen in debates about the “clash of civilizations,” between Islamic societies—often labeled “medieval” and “barbaric”—and the “civilized” West. As Richard Shweder notes, “the global campaign against what has been gratuitously and invidiously labeled “female genital mutilation” remains a flawed game whose rules have been fixed by the rich nations of the world.”³ This book describes an opening test match in that game, set in Sudan during the first half of the twentieth century under British colonial rule. I offer it as an extended critique of the continuing campaign, the discourse that informs it, and the imperialist logic that sustains it even now.

My aim is to examine the means, at first subtle, and later not, by which colonial agents strove to alter the sensibilities and practices of northern Sudanese women and men, especially in the domain of reproduction. The book adds historical depth to discussions of FGC in the popular and academic press, and does so from an anthropological standpoint, by situating protagonists in their respective cultural milieus. The topic is pressing: female genital cutting not only persists in Africa but is currently practiced among Africans of recent international diasporas. That a number of Western governments and medical associations forbid doctors to perform requested genital surgeries, and enjoin those who treat already circumcised women not to restore their circumcisions after they give birth, attests to the prevalence of the practice. Female genital cutting has become grounds for refugee claims in some jurisdictions; cases have been successfully pursued in France and the United States. In 1994 the United Nations condemned “FGM” as a violation of the person, despite protests from a number of African feminists; a call to end it was issued in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing.⁴ Male circumcision, even its most severe versions, has never received such attention.⁵ “FGM” is a media issue and even the subject of novels;⁶ television and film celebrities speak out

for its abolition.⁷ Still the operations continue both in Africa and abroad; efforts to stop them have had but modest success; castigations by governments and international agencies have produced little sustained effect.

Much literature on the subject is moralizing and polemical, and regularly alienates those in positions to stimulate change. There are noteworthy exceptions, among them Ellen Gruenbaum's *The Female Circumcision Controversy: An Anthropological Perspective*,⁸ two books edited by Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hernlund,⁹ one edited by Stanlie James and Claire Robertson,¹⁰ and the recent *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge*, edited by Obioma Nnaemeka, written under the banner of transnational feminism and framed as a collaborative dialogue among African and Western scholars.¹¹ These works move beyond judgmental confrontation toward an appreciation of social and historical context and the value of strategic alliances based on mutual respect. Yet in cases too numerous to list, self-righteous critics present and past have leaped to condemn what they've only presumed to understand, citing unverified statistics culled from other disparaging publications, relying on self-reference and reiteration to create the truth of their cause.¹² Their typical verdict: that female genital cutting regularly kills, has no valid meaning, and is inflicted on ignorant and powerless women by sadistic men.¹³

My research warns that this view is mistaken, born of little contextual data and a specifically Euro-American set of ideas about person, agency, and gender. I am not arguing that we can reposition an elusive Archimedean point to achieve greater "objectivity"; one can never be truly outside of a culture, there is no such nonplace to be, no "view from nowhere."¹⁴ To say that one's culture guides and perhaps mystifies understanding is incontestable and trite; taken to its logical conclusion, it applies to analysts as well as their subjects, granting Western critics no unmediated purchase on the practices they decry. Admitting one's situatedness clarifies one's responsibility to take seriously what people have to say for themselves, to credit the contexts of their lives. Insight comes neither by Olympian fiat nor through spurious, if therapeutic, empathy.

Given these limitations, *Civilizing Women* contributes obliquely to the current debate by looking historically at one of its earlier phases as a confrontation of cultures with very different modes of reason, value, and belief. Through this lens it examines the processes that colonial health and education projects set in train in order to reform individual dispositions and customary ways. While I focus on the period between 1920 and 1946, when colonial efforts were most intense, I also consider the wider historical, political, and economic conditions that spurred these endeavors and, at times, impeded them. Several questions have framed my investigations: Why were colonial campaigns against pharaonic circumcision undertaken, and why did they achieve such limited results? Where and

4 INTRODUCTION

how did they succeed, and did they have desired or unintended effects? How were Muslim women affected by colonial forays into domestic space and what motivated individual actors to seek their reform? Looking for answers (not all of them found) led me in directions seldom germane to female genital cutting in any immediate way. Thus I have explored the social and cultural contexts of British colonial agents, their assumptions about human nature, Islam, Arab family life, women and men. In addition to archival records, the book makes use of a range of published work: accounts of Sudan in period novels and advertisements, scholarly and popular histories from the late nineteenth century to the recent past. I consider, too, the Sudanese elites who furthered the cause of abolition and those who stymied it by making female circumcision a nationalist cause. Juxtaposed with all of this is the world of Muslim women from the village of Hofriyat, the locus of my anthropological research.

Outline and Rationale

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 consists of three chapters on the contours of imperial culture in Sudan. The first describes how the example of General Charles Gordon provided the leitmotif for British rule. In 1820 the region had been invaded by the khedive of Ottoman Egypt, Mohammed Ali, and made an Egyptian colony. Sixty years later, a charismatic Muslim holy man and political dissident, known as the Mahdi, rose up to threaten Egypt's control. In 1884 his supporters besieged the colonial capital, Khartoum; in 1885 the city was overthrown, and Gordon, the colony's contractual governor, was killed. Sudan then became an independent Islamic state. It remained so until 1898 when a joint invasion by Britain and Egypt defeated the Mahdi's successor. The victory was presented to the British public as vengeance for Gordon's "Christian martyrdom." Indeed, Britain's colonial venture in Sudan was thoroughly informed by the religious tenor of Gordon's death.

Yet Christian missionary activity was prohibited by the British in Sudan's Muslim north, a topic pursued in chapter 2. This would, it was hoped, forestall native rebellion, disarm charismatic Islam and prevent its spread to the south. It was also designed to mollify Muslim Egypt, Britain's junior partner in the Sudan. From 1899 to 1956 the country was governed by a joint but lopsided and politically trouble-prone administration that reported to the British Foreign Office; the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, officially a "condominium," was a British colony in all but name. In the Muslim north, state projects were largely secular: establishing (with a crucial hiatus) formal education for boys and latterly girls, improving standards of hygiene, bringing "civilization" and "progress" to "supersti-

tious tribal folk” in the form of orderly settlements, markets, and land registers, and—theoretically—by abolishing slavery. Despite Egypt’s involvement (indeed perhaps because of it), there was a Christian undertone to these efforts; to most British officials, Christianity and civilization were the same.

The title of this book is an intended pun. The women it refers to are both Sudanese, to be civilized, and British, who worked to civilize them. Yet the former were seldom more than chimerical figures in official accounts. Colonial efforts were directed to local women as colonial *men* imagined them to be, based on prejudice born of little knowledge and a great deal of hazy “othering.” Sudanese women’s behaviors were, to the British, opaque, inscrutable, more barbaric than those of Sudanese men. Still, the fact of female circumcision meant that women did not go unnoticed, for the practice was widely held to account for low birthrates and high levels of infant and maternal mortality, hence lost population and ensuing low levels of production and consumption of imperial wares. To a metropolitan government bent on making its empire pay, the colonies’ vital statistics were important economic concerns.¹⁵ Female genital cutting purportedly added to the burden in Sudan. Yet apprehensions about igniting an Islamic backlash (part 1) militated against explicit action to stop infibulation, at least for some time (part 3).

The British women of my title began to appear in Sudan after World War I, when several unmarried professionals were recruited for posts in female education and health. Indeed, before the war, resident European women were scarce, the cohort comprised of a handful of missionaries and the spouses of senior administrators. From the late 1920s on, wives of midrank officials were allowed to come out for several months each year.¹⁶ Sudan was never settled by the British, merely governed by them. The expatriate community had a distinctly masculine ethos, formal more than familial or domestic, and was based on a muscular (if sometimes muted) Christian stoicism (chapter 2).

In the early twentieth century, few Sudanese women left a trace in the colonial record and fewer still were literate. But their imaginings of the British were caught in the personae of *zayran*, ethereal analogues of historical humans who materialize in women’s bodies during spirit possession rites.¹⁷ Each chapter in part 1 is thus followed by a short ethnographic “interlude” describing *zayran* and the rites in which they appear or appeared in the past. Gordon and Kitchener have, or once had, spirit parallels. British (*Inglizi*) *zayran* were said to speak “English,” drink whiskey and soda or unsweetened tea, and generally behave as the British were seen to behave by Sudanese. There are other spirit nations too, and I consider some of these in relation to pertinent historical events. The spirit interludes will, I hope, convey a sense—albeit partial—of Sudanese wom-

6 INTRODUCTION

en's consciousness of their history and the process of colonization, even as that consciousness was in the process of being transformed. Importantly, Sudanese women's interactions with *zayran* are themselves civilizing ventures, and among those to be tamed were the "colonizers" themselves.

The means by which British officials gained knowledge of Sudan and Sudanese and put it to use are detailed in chapter 3. Here we encounter the role of anthropology in colonial administration and its patchy application in Sudan. The chapter discusses how the state encouraged ethnicity and tribalism both to govern through native elites and to prevent the spread of Islam. It emerges why and when female circumcision was discussed by officials in non-Muslim areas as well as those in the north.

The importance of Arab Sudanese women to colonial efforts thus surfaces gradually as the book moves from part 1 into part 2, where the relation of female reproduction to colonial projects becomes clear. Part 2 consists of three chapters, each presenting a facet of the context in which postwar crusades against pharaonic circumcision took place. Like the ethnographic interludes that precede it, chapter 4 shifts from British perspectives to Sudanese, in this case the cultural logic of procreation in the region of Hofriyat with its implications for gender relations and the creation of moral persons. I am more than mindful that the ethnography in this chapter is limited to a specific place and time: my research was conducted largely in the 1970s and 1980s with an additional trip in 1994. Yet its underlying themes, especially the morality of "covering" or enclosure, are widespread in Sudan and, judging from the accounts of women who trained local midwives in the 1920s and 1930s, were so in the past.

Chapter 5 relies on colonial and academic sources to describe political events, particularly the nationalist, pro-Egyptian rebellion of 1924, and considers how that crisis both invoked Gordon's martyrdom and shaped future relations among the British, Egyptians, and Muslim and non-Muslim Sudanese. In chapter 6 the focus shifts to economic conditions and the implications of a perceived shortage of tractable labor for imperial development schemes. These chapters show how initiatives in health and education were undertaken to make the colony profitable, maintain political control, and discharge the "white man's responsibility" to "civilize" and "uplift" Arab Sudanese. They suggest why pharaonic circumcision became a problem for the regime, and adumbrate the confrontation of moralities that colonial campaigns to abolish it entailed.

The first five chapters in part 3 describe the campaigns themselves. In the 1920s, two decades into Condominium rule, authorities became convinced that pharaonic circumcision lay behind Sudan's apparent "moral and economic backwardness." Chapters 7 and 8 describe attempts to remedy the situation by introducing civil medicine to Sudan and reforming midwifery practice. Here we meet the British nurse-midwives and educa-

tionalists whose work was framed by the demand for population growth and the goal of making “modern individuals” of Sudanese. To reduce the harm of pharaonic circumcision, midwifery instructors at first taught a modified operation as well as simple hygiene and biomedical birth techniques. Yet their use of local images to impart scientific ways may have helped to sustain the very practices they sought to dislodge.

Chapter 9 concerns some implications for Sudan of the 1929–30 “female circumcision crisis” in Kenya, and the role of British parliamentarians in challenging colonial governments to end indigenous customs inimical to women’s and children’s health. Chapter 10 describes the second phase of Sudan’s campaign, which began in 1937 with the retirement of the Wolff sisters, who had established the modern midwifery school, and their successor’s reversal of their controversial approach. During World War II several British women who had lived in Sudan questioned parliamentarians and Foreign Office bureaucrats about the persistence of pharaonic circumcision in the colony. Their challenge sparked a movement in Khartoum to make performing the operation illegal; that process and its consequences are pursued in chapter 11. As the story drew to a close in 1949 with a parliamentary debate—held, significantly, on the anniversary of Gordon’s death—it was clear that the practice of infibulation had survived colonial attempts to abolish it with slight revision at best.

Threaded throughout these chapters are concerns about the growth of Sudanese nationalism, Egyptian influence, and competing interpretations of Islam. I offer some conclusions about the process of civilizing Sudanese women, and those who set out to do so, in chapter 12, where I consider the book’s relevance to the present controversy over female genital cutting.

Sources

The historiography of colonial Sudan privileges public individuals, conflictual events, and institutional development over social processes and cultural meanings. This is entirely consonant with how officials sorted documentary remnants of their thoughts and deeds. Government archives are organized by regions and departments that cleave the life of Sudan into efficient, discrete domains. They house copies of correspondence, reports, and administrative overviews that, in an age before photocopiers and computers, circulated from one staff member to the next, acquiring penned critiques and marginal notes that enliven the texts no end. But archives are fickle informants. Some documents potentially useful to my study may have been destroyed because their contents were deemed inconsequential or damaging to government interests. When independence

loomed and the British prepared to leave Sudan, officials were ordered to burn any records that could prove embarrassing to the administration if scrutinized by Sudanese.¹⁸ Yet a wealth of files survives in the National Record Office, Khartoum, furnishing invaluable information on debates internal to the regime, revealing the anxieties and fractures of opinion behind its smooth facade. Still, the papers I consulted were fragile, beginning to crumble with age and wear.¹⁹ In London, a number of listed documents have vanished from the Public Record Office, among them a dossier on female circumcision. Still others were embargoed for fifty years, off limits when this study began.

Academic and institutional archives are less severely policed. Several I consulted were set up along biographical lines, containing the miscellaneous contributions of private individuals over the course of a colonial career: letters, memoirs, but also copies of internal reports, official minutes of meetings and the like. The repartee of circulated documents is here compensated by depth, candor, and sometimes telling self-defense.

To an anthropologist, all such texts are repositories of social and cultural information, but given their partial and partisan nature in detailing the actions and words of individuals who cannot be queried on the spot, this may be difficult to tease out in any straightforward way. They are, however, expressively redundant, and in this they disclose common modes of thought, cultural dispositions. They are telling for what their authors reacted to, how they said what they did, and what they neglected to say. As Comaroff and Comaroff note, “modes of representation, and the diverse forms they take, are part of culture and consciousness, hegemony and ideology, not merely their vehicles. ‘Reading’ them, then, is the primary methodological act of any historical anthropology.”²⁰ For Sudan, the files are numerous. Works by historians, political scientists, and economists have been useful in navigating the masses of text, especially in the book’s opening chapters, which frame later sections specific to anticircumcision crusades. Several other materials furnished discursive material in themselves—published memoirs of retired officials, colonial retrospectives, photographs. Finally, though an anthropological perspective privileges the meanings and manners of social groups, one cannot ignore the fact that in an expatriate world as small as that of colonial Sudan, personalities mattered a great deal.

Allegory

This book is not only about colonial efforts to end infibulation in Sudan, or the shape of a colonial venture in one small part of the world. It is also a protracted allegory for imperialism in the early twenty-first century. The

dark impress of the colonial past is palpable in today's Darfur and the long-standing conflict between northern and southern Sudan.²¹ Indeed, so much of the current era, the strained relations between Christianity and Islam, claims of "civilization" and "barbarism," individualism and communal values, is a complicated echo of former times.²² Before moving on to chapter 1, where the situation described below will be explained, I ask readers to picture this:

A huge convoy of troops and weapons is massed in the desert awaiting instruction to move. When it comes, a mobile strike force sweeps over the barren landscape, followed by several battalions of infantry. Their task: to oust the Muslim tyrant whose barbarous regime has defied Western power and ideals. Men and machines move swiftly toward the country's core; journalists "embedded" with the force report on the campaign to a riveted public at home. The invaders push on with confidence and resolve, encountering fierce resistance as they do, their losses far lighter than their foes'. An observer will later write, "the whole final advance could only be likened to the precise & methodical movement of some enormous machine, which approached gradually, silently & remorselessly, lessening the distance daily until near enough to strike a paralyzing blow."²³ Before the decisive battle, the capital is bombarded with refined high explosives leveled against the symbols of the rogue regime.

You didn't watch these events on CNN, or read about them in the *Times*. The year was 1898; the place not Iraq, but Sudan.