ing because it lacks an imaginative summation of the once and future zoo. Scattered throughout the book are insights into what might be, what could be, and what should be. For instance, Hancocks provides a delightful section on an exhibit of otters that shows how public perceptions of what animals perceive and need are frequently erroneous. There is an urgent need for zoos to educate for biological literacy and to combat naïve anthropomorphisms about the animal's world. The world of animals varies greatly from species to species. Zoos, however, recreate habitats on a human scale and in our range of color vision. They could instead give exciting impressions through animal eyes, ears, or noses. Portable interactive video devices (CD-ROM and beyond) could replace those awful audio wands and could supplement zoo tours with instant information banks. The author notes that the world of the small and very small impinges on all our lives, and confrontation with living bacteria and viruses could also be made part of the zoo experience. He highlights interactions between plants and animals in a section on pollinators, and he repeatedly stresses the need for cross references among bioexhibits institutions.

Hancocks ends *A Different Nature* with a beautiful philosophical epilogue, but the book calls for something more: for his explicit vision of the reinvented zoo (whatever it could be called) set forth in imaginative detail. There the author's wisdom, life experience, and enthusiasm could be brought together for the benefit of us all.

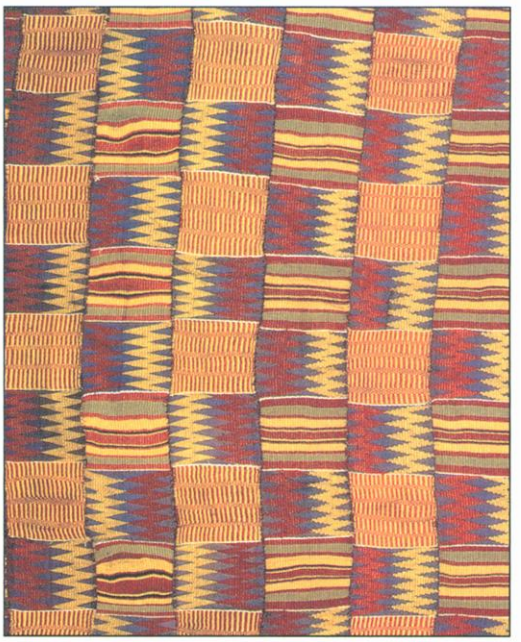
BOOKS: ANTHROPOLOGY

Complexities of a Controversial Practice

Carla Makhlouf Obermeyer

About four years ago, after an exhaustive review of the female circumcision (*2*) literature, I wrote an article in which I deplored the state of our knowledge and advocated better research as a prerequisite to interventions. When I shared a draft with a colleague, he commented: "So, you don't think we should send the marines?" His wry response captures the then-prevalent assumption that any writing on female circumcision would be militant. As the two books reviewed here demonstrate, today the presumption is even less valid.

The author is in the Department of Gender, Women, and Health, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland (*1*), and the Department of Population and International Health, Harvard University, USA. E-mail: obermeyerc@who.ch



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One perceptible shift in the large literature on the subject concerns empirical research. Although published accounts are still dominated by advocacy writings, research is slowly gaining in importance. We now have estimates of the prevalence of female circumcision in most of the 29 countries where it is found (*3*), and we are accumulating evidence on its health consequences. A second shift concerns the perspectives from which the topic is considered. While outright condemnation and activist calls for eradication continue to prevail, recent discussions are characterized by a greater diversity in viewpoints and have begun to include more women from the countries where the practices are found.

Both books exemplify these trends, though they differ considerably in scope, format, and the sort of evidence on which they are based. Ellen Gruenbaum's monograph presents the recollections of an anthropologist who is, in her own words, "grappling with the female circumcision controversy." Gruenbaum (dean of social sciences at California State University, Fresno) makes it clear that she has never worked specifically on female circumcision. She recognizes that her data are patchy, that her linguistic skills in Arabic are limited, and that the practice strained her ability to make sense of it. She does, however, have considerable field experience in Sudan, where infibulation (the most extensive operation) is the norm. The fact that she encountered the practice in the course of researching other subjects allows her to put it in context. She considers it in relation to other aspects of the culture, including economic development, ethnic identity, the zar (spirit possession rituals), marriage and sex roles, and societal values.

Those uninformed about circumcision will benefit from Gruenbaum's summaries of topics ranging from terminology, sexual response, and ways of "getting involved," to more complicated issues like cultural relativism, colonialism, or patriarchy. Although some aspects of these discussions are simplistic, the author's manifest concern for the welfare of the people she studied shines through. And she does touch on the "questions at the heart" of the debates.

Those already knowledgeable about female circumcision will probably be most interested in the concrete descriptions Gruenbaum offers: life conditions in Khartoum and rural areas; the social interactions surrounding the ceremony; vignettes about people; and conversations with Sudanese informants about family, work, notions of the female body, and sexual fulfillment. Such firsthand information compensates for the book's shortcomings and makes *The Female Circumcision Controversy* a valuable introduction to the human context of the practice.

Although similarly concerned with the controversies, the volume edited by Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hernlund (anthropologists at the University of Washington) takes a different approach. The fourteen chapters deal with eight of the countries where female circumcision is found. The authors, who include three women from these countries, use methods from anthropology, demography, history, political science, and public health. In their thorough overview, the editors discuss terminology, typologies, and prevalence, as well as the medical and sexual consequences of the practice. They also introduce the major questions surrounding female circumcision, in particular those that emerge from the medicalization of the practice and the mobilization of international efforts to eradicate it.

Female "Circumcision" in Africa
Culture, Controversy, and Change
Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hernlund, Eds.
Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 2000. $59.95. ISBN 1-55587-871-7. Paper, $22.50. ISBN 1-55587-995-0.

Three chapters touch directly on the prevalence of female circumcision: Mairo Usman Mandara finds considerable variations among ethnic groups in northern Nigeria. I. O. Orubuloye *et al.* argue that among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, the practice, once universal, is decreasing. And Lori Leonard documents the recent diffusion of female circumcision into Chad. These varied results underscore the dynam-

ic nature of the practice, caution against assuming that change is unidirectional, and highlight the importance of monitoring prevalence rates.

Although none of the chapters are based on epidemiological studies, several present information on the health and sexual consequences of female circumcision. Their results are worth noting. Gruenbaum finds no evidence of fertility impairment. Deborah Balk tries to disentangle the effects of infibulation and divorce on fertility, but her results are inconclusive. Shell-Duncan *et al.* detect no effect of circumcision on obstetric performance. And three chapters report contradictory responses by informants regarding the effect of circumcision on sexuality. These findings confirm a point I suggested in my earlier review (*4*): All forms of female circumcision may not be equally devastating, and their consequences ought to be better documented through careful studies.

The Female Circumcision Controversy
An Anthropological Perspective
by Ellen Gruenbaum

University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2001. 250 pp. $55, £39. ISBN 0-8122-3573-8. Paper, $24.95, £17.50. ISBN 0-8122-1746-2.

Discussions of efforts to fight the practice call into question some of the strategies that are thought to be effective. Lynn Thomas' historical chapter shows that legal bans in Kenya resulted in mass circumcisions and many dramatic instances of adolescent girls cutting themselves in protest. Claudie Gosselin's analysis of a campaign in Mali finds that the majority of the population is unconvinced about harmful consequences, in part because of exaggerations by local campaigners. She also suggests that traditional practitioners who agree to abandon the practice may well be replaced by more enterprising "modern" health personnel. Two authors address the possible separation of the ritual and cutting parts of initiation ceremonies. Michelle Johnson cautions that such separation would likely be difficult in the Mandinga culture of Guinea-Bissau, and Hernlund describes attempts to promote "ritual without cutting" in youth camps in the Gambia. Gerry Mackie advocates community discussion and public pledges because he attributes the persistence of female circumcision to a fundamental social convention related to marriageability. These diverse experiences indicate that designing multipronged interventions is likely to be more effective than aiming for simple targets.

A controversial theme that surfaces repeatedly in the volume concerns the medicalization of female circumcision. Most observers believe these operations would gain legitimacy and become entrenched in the health system if medical professionals were allowed to perform them. The World Health Organization, along with activist women's health groups, strongly disapproves of medicalization. Nonetheless, there is mounting evidence that female circumcision is increasingly performed by medical personnel. Several chapters in the book document this point, and Mandara even shows that most of the physicians in her study disagreed with the priority given to eradication efforts in their country. Shell-Duncan *et al.* contend that where socioeconomic circumstances are unlikely to change rapidly and women have no choice but to go through the operations, intermediate harm-reduction strategies ought to be considered. In the population they studied in Kenya, even minimal medical treatment was effective in reducing complications.

Another contentious issue, increasingly present in debates about circumcision (*5*), concerns universalism versus relativism. Not coincidentally, two of the "native" authors are critical of universalizing constructs that they see as ethnocentric and based on "Western" or "post-colonial" conceptions of the Other. Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf calls for elucidating the perspectives of women in societies practicing female circumcision, and she illustrates her plea with an analysis of feminist writings from Sudan. Fuambai Ahmadu contends that outsiders' aversion to the practice has to do with the male-centered bias of their own assumptions. She claims that the initiation confers esthetic and esoteric advantages and "essentializes womanhood." More than its intrinsic persuasive power, what makes her argument unique is that it is based on participant observation of the most intense kind. Born in the United States, Ahmadu returned to Sierra Leone to undergo initiation. Now she wishes to break the "perturbing silence" among African women who have gone through the operations.

Such thought-provoking contributions are welcome, especially on a topic that has long elicited more rhetoric than evidence. *Female "Circumcision" in Africa* will no doubt mark a new phase in our efforts to understand this complicated issue. Some crucial questions, however, need to be more explicitly addressed: the connections between circumcision and marriageability, the attitudes that sustain the practice, and the conditions that make it meaning-full as Ahmadu asserts it is, or meaning-less as Leonard implies it may be. Progress in understanding these dimensions of the problem requires that we overcome the tendency to move behavioral research along two disconnected pathways: one aimed at generating empirical evidence about behavior, the other designed to uncover its meaning. Integrating both lines of inquiry is essential when evidence and interpretation are as hotly contested as they are for female circumcision.

References and Notes

1. The views expressed here are my own and do not represent those of the World Health Organization.
2. The problem of terminology remains an awkward one and is discussed by the authors in both books. Because they choose to use the word circumcision, here I have done so as well.
3. See the February 2001 update from the World Health Organization: www.who.int/frh-whd/FGM/prevalence_rates_for_fgm.htm
4. C. Makhlouf Obermeyer, *Med. Anthropol. Q.* **13**, 79 (1999).
5. "The End of Tolerance: Engaging Cultural Differences," R. Shweder, M. Minow, R. Markus, Eds. *Daedalus* **129** (Fall 2000).

BROWSINGS

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Vanishing Voices. The Extinction of the World's Languages. *Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine.* Oxford University Press, New York, 2000. 253 pp. $27.50, £19.99. ISBN 0-19-513624-1.

The authors estimate that the last 500 years have seen the loss of half of all known languages and that one of the remaining 6000 disappears each week. Combining perspectives from anthropology and linguistics, they discuss how languages become endangered and why the loss of linguistic diversity matters. They find languages are threatened by the same trends that are undermining biodiversity. Thus, the key to saving dying tongues lies in the preservation of the cultures and habitats of the people who speak them. Cornish disappeared in the late 18th century (the last native speaker is buried in this grave). Success stories such as the revitalizations of Hawaiian and Welsh offer hopes that other voices might avoid its fate.