

HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMAN RITES: ADVOCACY, RELATIVISM, AND THE ISSUE OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Becky Digan
Department of Anthropology
Bloomsburg University

Women of the world are faced with constant challenges to maintain tradition in the face of rapidly changing social conditions due to globalization and culture change. When the maintenance of tradition involves human rights violations, these challenges can become life threatening. Some human rights violations, such as sex slavery, span all the continents, while other violations, such as female genital mutilation, are more restricted and culture specific. In this paper, I address the tension over human rights and the rights of cultures to maintain and practice their traditions. The issue of female genital mutilation has been argued to be one of "the most culturally and emotionally charged battle grounds where the cultural relativist confronts the advocate of universal human rights" (Fluehr-Lobban 1998: 3). In response to the controversy over female genital mutilation, I critically consider the tension within the discipline of anthropology between moral relativists and the advocacy anthropologists who call for research, political action, educational programming, and policy making to eradicate female genital mutilation.

Some anthropologists argue for a form of cultural relativism on the issue of female genital mutilation, holding that cultures should not be interfered with and that no matter what the custom or how harmful it may be, anthropologists should not make negative judgments and impose outside values on a culture other than their own. The concern over cultural survival (the cultural right to practice their traditions), and the rights of the individual to choose circumcision are at the center of the argument that anthropologist's should not act as advocates to eradicate the practice of female genital mutilation. Such a perspective holds that anthropologists should maintain an "ivory tower", scientific focus by arguing that "we should never forget that a commitment to improving the world is no substitute for understanding it" (Hastrup & Ellass 1990:306). For example, Rob Winthrop (2001) argued that female circumcision maintains cultural pluralism and is not necessarily a human rights issue because we cannot identify what is universally bad or good for all people.

Our challenge in contemplating female circumcision is to decide on which side of his moral bright line it belongs: with the universal "bads" or the plural cultural "goods" . . . Perhaps what is most unsettling about the practice of female circumcision is its acknowledgement of the importance of communities, descent groups, and traditions. Yet Western conceptions of human rights have been almost completely predicated on the autonomy of the individual. In this cultural encounter over "human rights", perhaps some rethinking is in order (Winthrop 2001:40). I conclude this paper with the argument that such a position confuses moral relativism with cultural relativism, and that anthropologists can adhere to a relativistic perspective while simultaneously taking actions aimed at alleviating human suffering and solving human problems. Many anthropologists, like Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, have come to realize that a position, which rejects the possibility of universal human rights in favor of cultural rights, may be inherently flawed from a moral and empirical perspective. To advocate for the continuation of extreme forms of human suffering in order to not betray one's disciplinary ideals and the culture of one's research, may violate greater universal human rights, which inherently supercede such cultural rights. For a long time I felt trapped between my anthropological understanding of the custom and of the sensitivities about it among the people with whom I was working, on the one side, and the largely feminist campaign in the West to eradicate what critics see as a 'barbaric' custom, on the other hand. To ally myself with Western feminists and condemn female circumcision seemed to me a betrayal of the value system and culture of the Sudan . . . I came to realize how deeply I felt the practice was harmful and wrong (Fluehr-Lobban 1998: 3).

The Issue of Female Genital Mutilation

In this section of the paper, I define and describe the specific practices of female genital mutilation (FGM) in order to contextualize the custom into a human rights discourse and dialogue. Depending on geography, a female may go through one of three different genital mutilations. Mary Daly (2000) provides a description of different types of Female Genital Mutilation based on Fran P. Hosken's 1976 report in *WIN News*:

1. Sunna Circumcision: removal of the prepuce and/or tip of the clitoris.
2. Excision or Clitoridectomy: excision of the entire clitoris with the labia minora and some or most of the external genitalia.
3. Excision and Infibulation (Pharaonic Circumcision): This means excision of the entire clitoris, labia minora and parts of the labia majora. The two sides of the vulva are then fastened together in some way either by thorns...or sewing with catgut. Alternately the vulva are scraped raw and the child's limbs are tied together for several weeks until the wound heals (or she dies). The

purpose is to close the vaginal orifice. Only a small opening is left (usually by inserting a slither of wood) so the urine or later menstrual blood can be passed (Hosken 1976:30).

Each day there are a staggering number of 6000 women and girls genitally mutilated. Worldwide 135 million women are genitally mutilated (fgmnetwork.org). Women who undergo FGM are likely to have negative physical and mental consequences. According to the website *fgmnetwork.org*, a woman may suffer from hemorrhaging and shock to long lasting problems such as depression, sterility, painful scars, clitoridal cysts, and chronic urinary tract and pelvic infections. Sometimes the consequence is death. Virginia Anikwata knew the consequences of FGM all too well, for she was genitally mutilated (Grim 2000). Virginia came to the United States from Nigeria with her husband who was attending college. The couple had a daughter. Within a few months after their daughter was born, Virginia's husband died. Virginia fought deportation because she knew that she would become the property of her deceased husbands family. She feared that the family would force FGM onto her daughter (Grim 2000). Other women's personal narratives and testimonies reveal the very real suffering and physical torture that Virginia wanted to prevent for her own daughter.

Never will I forget the sound as scissors separated the flesh between my legs from my body. It haunts me. I had received only local anesthesia, and the pain was horrendous. I struggled to get away, but couldn't—a doctor, a nurse and my mother held me down.

A Somalian Woman

<http://www.fgm.org/Retzlaff.html> 2001:8

Female genital mutilation is complete castration. Millions a year, thousands of little girls a day suffer quietly under the effect. We need to ask ourselves: how can I help? What is my part? We together might be able to make a difference. I just turned six years old when my mother called me from the playground to tell me, "Today is the day for circumcision."

An Ethiopian Woman

<http://www.fgm.org/Retzlaff.html> 2001:8

Every summer a group of girls would go off [with the circumcision performer], and every year, at least one girl would not come back. We all knew why.

A Woman from Sierra Leone

<http://www.fgm.org/Retzlaff.html> 2001:8

I screamed with pain despite the tight hand held over my mouth, for the pain was not just a pain, it was like a searing flame that went through my whole body. After a few moments, I saw a red pool of blood around my hips.

An Egyptian Woman

<http://www.fgm.org/Retzlaff.html> 2001:8

FGM practitioners often describe the practice as a rite of passage for a girl to enter womanhood. In cultures where a woman's value is based on her virginity until marriage, FGM is considered a sure way to preserve it. Proponents of FGM claim that mutilation protects young girls from 'unwilling sexual encounters'. It must be entirely coincidental then that the same societies who practice FGM have the highest rape rates in the world. In parts of Southern Africa, one in two women will be raped during their lifetime (<http://www.contrib.andrew.cmu.edu/~1grim/whitepaper.htm> 2001:3). FGM may not necessarily ensure a virgin at the point of marriage in these instances. The fact that there is no guarantee that a girl will remain a virgin in these circumstances leads to other reasoning for the practice. "The fact that it is women who carry out the practice, and who are its strongest defenders, must be analyzed in terms of their weaker social position" (Brettell and Sargent 2001:481). The women practitioners of FGM are themselves placed in a powerful position due to their "skills." They play a very important social role in these societies and have social status to lose should the practice diminish. Women in these cultures hold very little importance outside of their wifely and motherly duties, and economic independence is not readily available. Their socioeconomic status is only gained through their husband. Men want their brides to be virgins and so the cycle is viciously maintained. I am left wondering that if the tables were turned between men and women in these cultures, how often would genital mutilation happen? Would it have a place in these cultures? It seems reasonable to argue that female genital mutilation would not be practiced if women were not dependent on men for social standing and economic survival. The practice is tacitly as much about masculine power and gender stratification as it is explicitly recognized as an aspect of human sexuality. The implicit power relations which are associated with FGM provide the basis for the argument that women's participation is not voluntary, but instead a manifestation of their subordinate position in society. Women's acceptance

and even defense of FGM is an example of how hegemonic social systems can mystify victimization as a form of personal autonomy. Quite simply, when women argue that FGM preserves their culture, they have internalized the hegemonic ideology of their society. I fear that many anthropologists have done the same in their zeal to defend cultural rights. In addition to the socioeconomic control of FGM discussed above, the tradition may be based in other deep-rooted issues of masculine power and social control. The notion that men have higher inherent value is implicit in the perspective that what "is cultural and subject to human manipulation is assigned more worth than that which is natural; hence women and women's roles are denigrated or devalued" (Brettal & Sargent 2001: 157). Men are the empowered in these cultures and thus are in a position to impose stipulations on what aspects are valuable and which are not. For men this is concrete and manageable. Women's natural abilities such as menstruation, pregnancy, birth, and nursing babies are not concrete or manageable for men. Therefore, men lay stipulations on and devalue women's natural abilities. Controlling women's sexuality is of utmost importance due to the natural process over which men have no control. This type of thought leads to the notion that "the clitoris is 'impure' because it does not serve male purposes" (Ashton-Jones and Olson 2000:465). A woman's sexual gratification is meaningless, but a woman's fidelity is crucial. Men dictate what is proper, and preferable and women who want to ride on the coattails of the empowered live by the standards set by the men, who establish and structure the culture. The hegemonic nature of the position in which men place women, perpetuates the condemnation of women and their natural processes. This hegemonic ideology has escalated into women condemning women who defy and condemn FGM. For an anthropologist to address the issue of FGM in these cultures, she must first know where to begin and who to address first. Attempts are already being made to educate women on the physical complexities and dangers of FGM. Although many women are refusing the procedure in some cases, other women understand the risks involved and yet will not forgo the operation. In other cases, women even blame the girls for any complications which they suffer after the operation is performed.

Advocacy Anthropology and Relativism

Perhaps one of the greatest points of confusion in the discipline of Anthropology is over the issue of cultural relativism. One of the most significant problems in the debate over relativism and advocacy anthropology, is the notion that cultural relativism is the more scientific perspective. Despite this misunderstanding, it has been argued that objectivity and positivism are not exclusive to relativistic thought and that "advocacy can be dispassion-

ate, empirical, substantiated, careful in the way that it is framed, and based on very substantial information and research” (Ervin 2000: 129). As I understand cultural relativism, it simply refers to the notion that any aspect of a culture can only be understood in the cultural context in which it occurs (Rachels 1993). This understanding of cultural relativism holds that anthropologists should not condemn or defend any cultural practice when utilizing a relativistic perspective. Relativism is a perspective, which allows for a context-specific, systematic understanding of cultural beliefs and traditions. It does not involve any kind of judgment whatsoever. Suspending judgment for the sake of scientific observation and analysis, however, does not mean that such judgments cannot be later made. What is important to consider is that cultural relativism and advocacy for universal human rights need not contradict one another.

Cultural Relativism asserts that since each culture has its own inherent integrity with unique values and practices, value judgments should be withheld or suspended until cultural context is taken into account ... Theoretically, anthropologists always should be observers and recorders not evaluators of other peoples' customs and values. While some anthropologists would still agree with this view, others, both inside the field and outside, especially in the arena of human rights, are challenging this concept. It is important to state at the outset that universal human rights and cultural relativism are not philosophically or morally opposed to one another (Fluehr-Lobban 1998:1).

I believe that confusion over the concept of cultural relativism has led some anthropologists to argue that any position of advocacy is incompatible with the scientific goals of the discipline of Anthropology (Hastrup & Ellass 1990). In my opinion, this concept has been confused with moral relativism, thereby resulting in a justification for anthropologists to maintain an “ivory tower” position toward human suffering and the issue of universal human rights. Moral relativists argue that each culture has its own beliefs about right and wrong, and therefore there can be no universal human rights. To embrace moral relativism is to take cultural relativism to the extreme. Furthermore, to argue that there can be no universal morals and ethics, and consequently each culture has the right to practice whatever traditions they choose, is to advocate and defend traditions such as genocide, slavery, and torture. Surely, this is not what Franz Boas (1896) had in mind when he called upon his students to reject the comparative method in favor of a more objective, empirical, context-based approach that he deemed to be “cultural relativism”? The “ivory tower” position holds that anthropologists should not apply their knowledge to solve human problems and improve the human condition, in that such an

application violates the relativistic perspective that is fundamental to the discipline. They argue that anthropology is essentially a science, and that scientific inquiry should not be muddled by moralistic concerns. Some are very skeptical about anthropological advocacy. They doubt that the practitioners of a science devoted to describing and analyzing all of the behaviors and ideologies of humanity can choose one cause and advocate it to the exclusion of others. Anthropologists need to remain objective. They need to keep a distance, avoid partisanship, and try to tell all sides of issues (Ervin 2000: 126).

Advocacy Anthropologists as Information Providers

When those in the “Ivory Tower” turn a deaf ear to the cries for help, advocacy anthropologists are there to assist. Advocacy anthropologists act on the principle that some people in most cultures want change and the fact that most cultures have some form of stratification which leaves their members marginalized and dissatisfied. Cultures are not homogenous and to assume that all individuals in a culture want to maintain tradition is erroneous. One thing that has always been notable about anthropology is that it cannot be a purely “ivory tower” subject; it operates with real people in real communities. Furthermore, those communities always contain internal contradictions and confrontations as well as conflicts with other sectors of society, including those that have power over them. Anthropologists cannot avoid these differences (Ervin 2000: 128).

Many women seek asylum for themselves or for their daughters in order to not undergo FGM. This is unmistakably a desperate cry for help and a clear sign that they do not agree with the traditions of their culture. Today’s anthropologists have to step away from misassumptions about cultural relativism when addressing moral issues in a culture where individuals are asking for help. I am convinced that advocacy anthropology is the only way to clearly and justly address morally questionable cultural practices such as FGM. Advocacy largely deals in information and involves delivering messages—making the vague more explicit, interpreting what has not been properly understood, and providing new information (Ervin 2000: 124).

Advocacy anthropologists see that cultural relativism has a place, but it doesn’t belong where human rights are being violated and people are asking for assistance in protecting their human rights. I am left wondering if “ivory tower” anthropologists do not get involved as advocates because they consider these cultures as unworthy of knowledge, information, and alternatives. Is it the fate of these cultures that are struggling to maintain tradition, yet second-guessing their own cultural practices, to be left to fend for

themselves because of mistaken notions of cultural relativism and claims to science? Anthropologists have knowledge that should be shared with cultures in order for them to make their own educated choices. They should be allowed the dignity of making educated decisions on how they want to participate in the dynamics of today's world. Ultimately, I am left wondering what is so difficult and controversial about sharing knowledge that might help a culture get clean water, prevent disease, or stop female genital mutilation? I believe that it is possible to act as an advocate for some individuals in a culture, while acting to preserve it at the same time. In some situations, changes that promote universal human rights may be the key to long-term cultural survival and preservation. If a culture does not fulfill the physical and emotional needs of all of its members, it could be argued to be inherently unstable and bound to change. Advocacy anthropologists who are concerned over the needs and well being of all members of a culture, may possibly and ironically play a role in preserving that culture. When the ideas of cultural relativism, cultural survival, and universal human rights are not placed in opposition or seen as mutually exclusive possibilities, an entirely new perspective and a more creative understanding are made possible. I believe that such creative ideas are essential to addressing the problem of female genital mutilation.

Relativism and the Problem of Cultural Heterogeneity

Essentially, arguments which put forth the idea that anthropologists should not take an advocacy role to eradicate female genital mutilation are generated from a relativistic position that ignores issues of hegemony and cultural heterogeneity. Not all women in all cultures agree to genital mutilation, and many who do "choose" to accept it could be argued to have been coerced by a hegemonic system that only gives the appearance of "choice". When all alternatives are worse than the "choice" and when women internalize their position of social oppression as appropriate and just, it is reasonable that they may accept and even defend their right to be circumcised. It is crucial that anthropologists not confuse free and informed choice with hegemonic compliance. It is this very compliance that I believe influenced the argument that circumcision is freely chosen by women and is "essential to preserve cultural context and complexity" (Winthrop 2001: 40). Maintaining an understanding of a culture in its context is of the utmost importance for an anthropologist, but what if something doesn't neatly fit into the context of the culture? What if the basis for a cultural practice is not good for the whole culture? What if the cultural practice was based on false perceptions, which lead to physical ailments and even death to members of the culture? I believe that FGM is based on false perceptions and that it is a cultural anthropologist's duty to help dispel false perceptions.

Final Conclusions and Reflections

In conclusion, a cultural anthropologist going into the field should have four concerns in addition to their research goal. Anthropological ethics must be followed while doing any fieldwork. To breach these ethics is a violation against the ethos of the discipline. Secondly, an anthropologist must keep the differences between cultural relativism and moral relativism in perspective. Thirdly, an anthropologist must keep in mind the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is important that the anthropologist has a strong hold on the concept of cultural relativism and understands that violations of human rights are not relative. Lastly, it is vital to remember that cultures are not homogenous. There are individuals in a culture who may not agree with every aspect of their culture. They may feel trapped within cultural norms and practices and therefore violated by restrictions and traditions that cause them real harm. I firmly believe that to ignore human rights in a culture when people are asking for their rights not to be violated, is a violation of humanity and the spirit of Boasian teachings on human dignity. Perhaps my perspective constitutes a moving back to Boasian tradition as much as a "moving beyond" modern ideas of cultural relativism:

Anthropologists can aid the international dialogue enormously by developing approaches to universal human rights that are respectful of cultural considerations but are morally responsible ...

In this spirit anthropologists could be among the best brokers for inter-cultural dialogue regarding human rights. We have moved beyond the idea of a value free social science to the task of developing a moral system at the level of our shared humanity that must at certain times supercede cultural relativism (Fluehr-Lobban 1998: 17).

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