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Abstract

At the intersection of feminism and postcolonial theory is an acrimonious debate over female genital cutting (FGC). I subject this debate to an analysis in order to separate productive from destructive discursive strategies. I find that both FGC and the literature about the practice are frequently mischaracterized in consequential ways. Especially prior to the mid-1990s, scholars frame FGC as an example of either cultural inferiority or cultural difference. In the 1990s, postcolonial scholars contest the framing of FGC as a measure of cultural inferiority. However, they often argue that Western feminist engagement with FGCs, writ large, is ‘imperialist’. I contend that both accusations of African ‘barbarism’ and of Western feminist ‘imperialism’ are empirically false and inflammatory. Furthermore, reifying ‘African’ and ‘Western’ perspectives erases African opposition to FGC and Western feminist acknowledgement of transnational power asymmetry. I conclude with a discussion of the role of outrage in academic scholarship.

Keywords

academia, Africa, cultural imperialism, discourse, female genital cutting, female genital mutilation, feminism, postcolonialism, race/ethnicity

At the intersection of postcolonial and feminist theory is a heated dialogue between those who condemn female genital cutting (FGC) and those who contest the terms of that condemnation. The dialogue has included such acrimony that scholars describe it as a ‘battle’ at an ‘impasse’ (Lane and Rubinstein, 1996: 31; Leonard,

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2000: 159; Njambi, 2004a: 283). There are good reasons to be invested in this debate. FGC refers to a set of physical changes to female genitalia (more accurately pluralized as FGCs) that are permanent, sometimes extensive, and often debilitating (WHO, 2008). Usually performed at or before puberty, the degree of consent, health consequences, and the conditions of the procedure (how hygienic the environment, specialized the tools, and skilled the practitioner) vary tremendously. It is estimated that 100 million women or more in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia have undergone genital cutting.

FGCs amplify the conflict in the conversation between feminism and postcolonialism because, unlike issues that are historical (footbinding), disturbing but rare (widow immolation), chosen by adults (cosmetic surgery), or impermanent (veiling), FGCs are ongoing, frequent, performed on children, and can involve extensive and irreversible bodily modification. It is difficult, then, and some would say unwise, to adopt the non-judgemental and non-interventionist approach that eases transcultural collaboration. Because FGCs challenge our ability to practice what we preach, academic debate about the practices is an excellent case with which to examine how the two lenses have intersected both informatively and destructively.

Instead of participating in the academic debate over FGCs directly, I take it as my object of analysis. My goal is not to defend or decry opposition to FGCs in the academy, but to help explain and alleviate the acrimony that characterizes this and similar discussions. To do so, I subject the last 30 years of social science and humanities literature about FGCs to a discourse analysis. I code these texts for the framing of both FGCs and the academic literature on FGCs. With the quantitative data, I map the contours of the debate. And, with qualitative description, I evaluate some of the strategies by which scholars attempt to shape the intellectual terrain. With an eye towards discerning those strategies that lead to outrage from those that lead to insight, I separate the heat from the light, intervening in the 'impasse' and deriving lessons for the ongoing conversation between postcolonialism and feminism.

Postcolonial theory, feminism, and FGCs

Contemporary Western feminist engagement with FGCs emerged during a period in US feminist history characterized by a commitment to the notion that women around the world are united by patriarchy (e.g. Daly, 1978; Morgan, 1984). Inspired by this idea of 'global sisterhood', in 1976 Fran Hosken coined the term 'female genital mutilation' and began writing about the practices in her feminist newsletter, *WIN News* (Boyle, 2002; Gruenbaum, 2001). Hosken mobilized a generation of Western feminists for whom FGCs symbolized the extreme nature of gendered oppression in 'Africa'.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that FGCs became such a powerful symbol of patriarchy that their presence often eclipsed complex evaluations of societies in favor of an outright condemnation that many considered ethnocentric. For example,

Robertson (2002: 55) writes that, beginning in the 1980s:

... the audience always wanted to know about female genital mutilation... whatever our own preferences concerning teaching about African women, we were being forced to begin by discussing FGC... All issues were being subsumed into this one.

Regarding the same time period, Gruenbaum (2001: 22) reports that '... once this topic was mentioned, we could not discuss much else...'. Hale (2005 [1994]: 211), too, explains how FGCs shaped reception of her research in the early 1990s:

The point I was making was that Sudanese women were far ahead of US women in the same time period. There was a stir in the room, looks of disbelief, and finally one woman spoke up and asked if it was not true that the women are circumcised. When I responded that it is true, but that it had no bearing on what I had just been saying, I could tell that I had lost the audience.

This climate persisted at least through the early 2000s. Njambi (2004b: 325), for example, reports being asked to 'withdraw' her paper from a conference panel because 'some attendees feared...[it] was offering not a condemnation but rather a positive view of female circumcision'.

The Western 'anti-FGM discourse' (Njambi, 2004a) that contributed to these experiences has been criticized for reproducing a culturally imperialist narrative. This narrative, scholars argue, characterizes people in communities that practice them negatively (James and Robertson, 2002; Nnaemeka, 2005a). Echoing many, Toubia (1988: 101) protests that Westerners have:

... portrayed [FGCs] as irrefutable evidence of the barbarism and vulgarity of underdeveloped countries, a point of view they have always promoted. It became a conclusive validation to the view of the primitiveness of Arabs, Muslims, and Africans all in one blow.

Critics also argue that the practices are mischaracterized: that the most extreme versions receive disproportionate attention and negative health consequences and effects on sexuality are overstated or, at least, unproven (Ahmadu, 2001; Kratz, 1994; Lewis, 1995; Obermeyer, 1999, 2003; Shell-Duncan, 2001). Stories about FGCs, then, tend towards hyperbole, serving in part to titillate Western audiences with gruesome stories about African men's sexual domination of women (Walley, 1997). In fact, scholars contend, FGCs are not wholly or exclusively 'African' practices, but are practiced elsewhere in the world and in only some parts of Africa (Brière, 2005; James and Robertson, 2002), and attributing their persistence to patriarchy grossly oversimplifies their social, cultural, and economic functions (Korieh, 2005; Leonard, 2000; Obiora, 2005).

This critique of Western discourse about FGCs was facilitated by a more general contemporaneous correction to Western feminist theory coming from scholars

studying postcolonial global inequality (e.g. Amos and Parmar, 1984; Chatterjee, 1993; Mohanty, 1991; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Complemented by a parallel criticism coming from US women of color (e.g. Anzaldúa, 1990; Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989), this literature has shown that Western feminism too frequently ‘... erases material and ideological power differences within and among groups of women’, substituting for their diversity a falsely universalized white, Western, middle-class female subject (Mohanty, 1992: 83; see also Alcoff, 1988; Spelman, 1989). Global sisterhood was one of the casualties of this critique.

By the turn of the century, much feminist scholarship was devoted to documenting and validating differences among women (Ali, 2007; Eisenstein, 2004; Lacsamana, 1998; Narayan and Harding, 1998). The Woman that had been at the center of feminist theory had been ‘radically pluralize[d]’, causing scholars to question the very category, the possibility of gender-based transnational alliances, and the future of feminist theory (Eisenstein, 2004: 5; Benhabib, 1996; Egeland, 2004; Nicholson, 1990). In response, feminist scholars embarked on a new project, one still under way, designed to re-theorize gendered alliance in a way that attended to other axes of oppression.

In the meantime, not all feminists in the academy accepted the postcolonial turn as an unmitigated good. Privileging national or ethnic cultural ties over gender, it was argued, eviscerated feminist projects by making women vulnerable to the demands of their group, lest they be labeled ‘Westernized cultural traitors’ (Bunch, 1990; Narayan, 1998: 102; Okin, 1997; Phillips, 2007; Rudy, 2000). The right to protect one’s group, then, translated into the right of men to control women. Scholars used FGCs as an example of exactly the kind of gendered oppression that could be politicized in this way (e.g. James, 1994; Kalev, 2004; Okin, 1997) and, in fact, genital cutting has been defended in the name of resisting Western cultural encroachment and economic control (Gruenbaum, 2001; Tripp, 2002).

Scholars who characterize non-Western cultures as patriarchal, however, have been accused of discriminatory cultural essentialism (Benhabib, 2002; Merry, 2006; Narayan, 1997, 1998; Phillips, 2007; Volpp, 2001; Warnke, 2005). An essentialist view suggests that culture is rigid and timeless and that cultural members perfectly adhere to all tenets. This reification of culture, when applied to a society characterized by patriarchy, leads one to unfairly condemn some societies as unredeemable and encourages cross-cultural intolerance. (Western cultures, it should be noted, are typically excluded from both reification and attributions of patriarchy [e.g. Wade, 2009]). The French approach to veiling is an excellent case in point. Despite widely variant motivations for veiling articulated by women, veiling is assumed to translate into women’s subordination, leading France to restrict women’s rights to dress as they please in the name of feminism (Hirschmann, 1998; Read and Bartowski, 2000; Werbner, 2005).

Scholars writing against cultural essentialism insist that cultures are dynamic, evolving, inter-penetrated, and internally contested (e.g. Benhabib, 2002; Narayan, 2000). Because cultures change, is it never fair to characterize a society as *inherently* patriarchal, nor to reduce social patterns to culture alone (Eriksen, 2001;

Phillips, 2007; Turner, 1993). Instead, cultures are always-shifting products of internal struggles, interaction with other cultures, and social, economic, and technological change (Abu-Lughod, 1991).

Neither gender nor culture, then, is a reliable basis on which to build alliances or determine interests. Global sisterhood, today, seems naïve, as does the reification and romanticization of cultural difference. Identities, even intersectional ones, are no basis for alliance (Bahl, 1997; Benhabib, 1996; McCall, 2005; Naples, 2003). With both gender and culture destabilized, determining women's interests, however, has become increasingly complicated. Acknowledging both feminisms and modernities has helped decenter the West, but it also threatens to collapse into relativism. Scholars who are committed to both anti-imperialist and feminist scholarship struggle anew with how to adjudicate between feminist and postcolonial concerns.

Ultimately, a consensus has emerged that understanding what women need, and how to best align transnationally in productive ways, requires a willingness to abandon our preconceived notions about what liberation for women looks like. Gunning (1992), for example, calls for an end to 'arrogant perception', or the assumption that the Other and her culture is both different from and inferior to you and yours, whereas Boddy (1998) encourages us to adopt a 'radical uncertainty' or a willingness to continually revise our knowledge about unfamiliar practices. Dembour (2001: 59) proposes that we practice an 'unstable' ideological balancing of universalism and relativism within which we 'err uncomfortably', accepting that true and conclusive knowledge is impossible.

FGCs, however, test our willingness to do these things. For many, the cutting of girls' genitals marks the limit of their ability and desire to adopt 'radical uncertainty' and the 'playfulness' that Gunning proposes we bring to learning about unfamiliar cultures seems downright inappropriate. Some argue that epistemological restraint, like the kind that Dembour recommends, is misplaced in the case of FGCs; there is simply no room for error, 'comfortable' or not, when girls' clitorises are being excised daily. FGCs are a tough test case, then, for those committed to both postcolonialism and feminism.

A debate on Joan Korenman's women's studies listserv illustrates just how heated conversations about FGCs still remain. In 2008 a member asked a question using the phrase 'female circumcision'. Subscribers responded that they were 'surprised', 'shocked', 'depressed', and 'outrage[d]' that a person would choose the term 'circumcision' over 'mutilation'. It was suggested that doing so was 'terminally naïve' and 'monstrous'. Other subscribers labeled that reaction 'ethnocentric' and 'imperialist', which triggered an attack on 'FGM defenders' who, in crying imperialism, were 'tortuously self-righteous', 'bullying and self-flatter[ing]'. One accused another of 'anti-feminist discourse'; another questioned that anyone 'reasonably informed' could hold a particular position; a third suggested that certain statements 'do not deserve to be treated with respect'; feminist academics debated who did and did not have 'empathy'. The discussion spanned 80 posts over five days before it was shut down by the list administrator.

The 'fighting words' in this exchange (Collins, 1998) testify to the fact that FGCs turn up the heat. Accordingly, I treat the debate as an especially sharp manifestation of this negotiation and interrogate it for the sources of the acrimony in the dialogue about FGCs specifically and between feminism and postcolonialism more generally.

Methodology

Because Hosken is widely considered to be responsible for initiating contemporary feminist engagement with FGCs (Boyle, 2002; Gruenbaum, 2001; James, 1998), my analysis begins in 1976, the year of Hosken's first publication about FGCs, and ends 30 years later, in 2005. Because scholars in the social science and humanities engage with critical social theories such as feminism and postcolonialism (Collins, 1998: xiv), I restricted my analysis to this literature. I searched JSTOR and ProQuest for all documents that included the terms 'female circumcision', 'infibulation', 'excision', 'clitor(id)ectomy', or 'female genital' -'mutilation', -'cutting', -'surgery', or -'operation' in their title or abstract. To ensure that I captured feminist scholarship, I also searched Gender Watch and the 25 gender journals with the strongest impact factors for the 1999–2007 span. I included *Feminist Theory*, as well, which was not included in the rankings because it was launched in 2000. I added these documents to my existing collection. I then excluded reprints and documents that were not centrally concerned with FGCs, not about FGCs at all, not in English, or unobtainable. I also excluded works that were not published in an academic venue or not written by an academic, but made 13 exceptions for highly influential works by El Dareer, Hosken, Lightfoot-Klein, Koso-Thomas, Morgan, Steinem, and Toubia. The final set of documents included 98 articles, nine monographs, nine book chapters, and 25 original essays published in anthologies for a total of 141 documents.

My analysis involved a chronological reading of the sample with the document as my unit of analysis. All documents were coded for *year*, the *national origin of the author* (determined by online biographies or self-reports in published writings, wherever possible), and whether the *object of analysis* was FGCs or the literature about FGCs.

For documents with FGCs as their object, I coded whether their authors use a *cultural inferiority* or *cultural difference* frame (hereafter the inferiority and difference frames, respectively). The inferiority frame is indicated with language that identifies FGCs as something that only a bad or uninformed person would do (e.g. FGCs are obviously bad and, therefore, the people who support them must be cruel or ignorant) ($n = 22$). The difference frame is indicated when a scholar explains that the practices are unfamiliar, but resists condemning the people involved (e.g. FGCs may be new to us, and they may indeed be bad, but people support them for rational reasons that we should try to understand) ($n = 31$).

For documents that involved a postcolonial critique of the literature about FGCs, I coded whether the critique was the *central goal* of the essay ($n = 32$) or

the essay was simply *informed* by the critique (e.g. an empirical or analytical argument that acknowledged the postcolonial perspective) ($n = 56$). This allowed me to measure the frequency of the postcolonial critique and its influence, respectively.

Most of the coding decisions were straightforward, but some did require a judgment call. Some authors who use the inferiority frame, for example, were more aggressive in their condemnation than others. I am confident, however, that the patterns revealed are robust and would remain even if the borderline cases were re-assigned. Still, these patterns apply only to the population of social science and humanities literature that addresses or references FGCs and is also indexed in online search engines. When I refer to ‘academic literature’ or ‘academic discourse’, then, I mean to describe only this specific population of texts.

In the next section I use this quantitative data to structure a qualitative discussion of 30 years of academic discourse about FGCs, considering how scholars triggered and managed conflict. I show how, in doing so, they shaped both the terrain on which FGCs were discussed and the kind of knowledge that scholars would produce. My discussion pivots on the most significant shift in academic engagement with FGCs: the postcolonial turn in the mid-1990s. I begin there.

The postcolonial critique

As discussed in the literature review, scholars making a postcolonial critique argue that Western discourse about FGCs frames the practices as a measure of cultural inferiority and positions African men and women as objects of intervention, not subjects in their own right. Figure 1 reveals that, by the mid-1990s, the postcolonial critique of Western engagement with FGCs dominated the literature. Between 1996 and 2005, the critique itself was made frequently ($n = 26$) and most research and

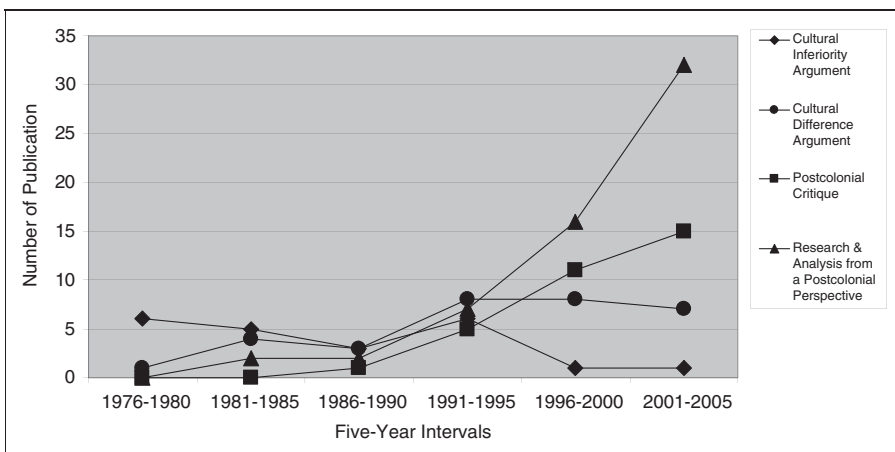


Figure 1. Frequency of Each Type of Argument.

analysis proceeded with it in mind ($n = 48$). In these 10 years, 17 of 91 documents (19 percent) did not make or reference the postcolonial critique of Western engagement with FGCs.

Postcolonial critics, then, were incredibly successful in turning the conversation towards the underlying assumptions driving condemnation of FGCs in the West, making a discussion of these concerns standard practice for social science and humanities scholars writing about the practices. This literature contributed a great deal to our understanding of Western opposition to FGCs and cultural imperialism generally. It also, I will argue, contributed to the idea that Western and non-Western scholars were at an 'impasse'. Some scholars overgeneralized their critiques, taking aim at 'Western feminism' or 'Western discourse'. Their essays, which account for 26 of the 91 that make or use the postcolonial argument (28 percent), targeted an indefensibly broad range of actors, often conflating Western feminism, opposition to FGCs, and cultural imperialism. Before turning to this critique, however, I briefly discuss the wide-ranging contributions of this literature.

Using FGCs to understand cultural imperialism

This literature cast much-needed light on how Western engagement with FGCs involves the reproduction of culturally imperialist narratives, but scholars in this area also use the lens of FGCs to teach us a great deal about cultural imperialism itself. For example, seeking to explain why some Western feminists object so strongly to FGCs, scholars show how opposition is shaped by Western faith in the objectivity of Western medicine (Morsy, 1991), the invention of a 'natural' body that conforms to Western cultural assumptions (Njambi, 2004a; Shweder, 2002 [2000]), and beliefs about sexuality, especially the politicization of clitoral orgasm for women that occurred in the 1960s (Boddy, 1998; Hetherington, 1997; Lane and Rubinstein, 1996; Lyons, 1981; Parker, 1995). Other scholars expose the double standards that allow us to apply a 'bifurcating tunnel vision' to different kinds of genital cutting practices as if they are in all ways incommensurable (Davis, 2002: 27). This research includes comparative analyses of FGCs and bodily alterations common in the US, such as intersex surgery, male circumcision, and cosmetic surgery (e.g. Bell, 2005; Chase, 2002 [1998]; Sheldon and Wilkinson, 1998; Silverman, 2004; Wilson, 2002).

Other scholars inspired by the postcolonial critique contribute to our understanding of how cultural imperialism shapes individual and institutional responses to FGCs. They use FGCs to examine knowledge production (Mackie, 2003; Obermeyer, 1999, 2003), social institutions such as law (Gunning, 1999; Salamat, 1996), the immigrant experience (Johansen, 2002; Leval et al., 2004), intranational intercultural conflict (Allotey et al., 2001; Bloul, 1994; Lionnet, 2005 [1992]; Winter, 1994), transnational alliance (Davis, 2004; Kalev, 2004; Lane and Rubinstein, 1996; Levin, 2003; Shweder, 2002 [2000]; Tripp, 2002), and social change (Boyle, 2002; Mackie, 1996). These analyses show us how imperialism

shapes our minds, institutions, and conflicts, thus raising awareness about Western hegemony.

The postcolonial critique of Western engagement with FGCs, then, sheds a great deal of light on both the practices themselves and the discursive and institutional processes that further cultural imperialism. Some of the works in this tradition, however, create more heat than light. In the next section I will show how these have contributed to the antipathy in the dialogue by affirming the very binary logic that troubled critics in the first place.

Framing 'Western feminists' as cultural imperialists

Scholars who frame Western feminists as cultural imperialists typically do so by selecting one or a handful of examples of imperialist writing and generalizing that example to the whole. In some cases they explicitly include academics; in others, they simply do not exclude them. The effect, often stated overtly, is to conflate Western opposition to FGCs with cultural imperialism, such that all Westerners who oppose the practices do so, by definition, illegitimately.

Some postcolonial scholars use a (set of) feminist(s) or a (feminist) institution – such as Fran Hosken or mass media – as representative of 'Western feminism', thereby generalizing problematic language to all Western feminists. In some cases, Western academic feminists are implicitly included in these generalized critiques. For example, Obiora (2005: 183) writes:

With particular reference to Alice Walker's critically acclaimed novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, this chapter calls into question the authenticity and validity of the barrage of literature that informs Western feminist protestations against the practice of female circumcision in Africa.

Generalizing, Obiora uses Walker's novel to represent all 'Western feminist protestations' of FGCs. In another article, Abusharaf (2001a: 112) begins with a grammatically passive sentence and blanket condemnation:

Much has been written on gender violence in Africa. In this burgeoning literature, African women are repeatedly painted as downtrodden, forlorn, helpless casualties of male dominance.

The passive voice leaves the source of this literature unstated and the literature itself undifferentiated. In these examples, because academics are not excluded, they are potentially guilty by association.

Other scholars do include academics, condemning 'scientific inquiry' (Leonard, 2000: 158), 'scholarly circles' (Korieh, 2005: 112), or 'academic campaigns' (Hale, 2005 [1994]: 33). Lane and Rubinstein (1996: 35), for example, critique Hosken and Walker (who are not academics), but identify their target broadly, lumping in

academia:

By the 1980s female circumcision was condemned widely in the *Western popular and scholarly press*, variously labeled as a ‘crime of gender,’ ‘torture,’ ‘barbarism,’ ‘ritualized torturous abuse’... [my emphasis].

Likewise, Hetherington (1997: 6–7) writes that ‘Africa is once again being generally denigrated and reviled as the home of all kinds of savagery’ by, alternatively, ‘academia,’ ‘Western women,’ and the ‘Western press’. Similarly, Shweder (2002 [2000]: 219), discussing statements by lawyers, media actors, and activists, but not academics, nonetheless claims, provocatively:

...in the liberal academy...there has been an easy acceptance of the anti-FGM representations of family and social life in Africa as dark, brutal, primitive, barbaric...

In sum, these documents, at best, discuss a few examples of the Western academic literature but the literature, as a whole, is routinely labeled ‘ethnocentric,’ ‘[neo]imperialist,’ ‘[neo]-colonialist,’ ‘universalist,’ ‘racist,’ ‘arrogant,’ and ‘salvationist’ (Ajayi-Soyinka, 2005: 49; Akudinobi, 2005: 154; Brière, 2005: 166, 167; Chase, 2002 [1998]: 126, 145; Hetherington, 1997: 7; Korieh, 2005: 111, 115, 118, 122; Njambi, 2004a: 286; Nnaemeka, 2005a: 14, 2005b: 14, 2005c [2001]: 29, 35; Nwankwo, 2005: 220, 223, 237; Obiora, 2005: 186; Parker, 1995: 513; Shweder, 2002 [2000]: 235).

In some cases, authors go so far as to conflate being ‘Western’ with opposing FGCs and with cultural imperialism, making a Western, non-imperialist, anti-FGC argument logically impossible. For example, Njambi (2004a: 282, 285) differentiates between ‘hardliners’ who aggressively criticize FGCs and ‘softliners’ who argue for contextualization and understanding, but she rejects the significance of this division:

Throughout the paper I employ the phrase ‘anti-FGM discourse’ to identify various perspectives and strategies, especially in the west, that have played an important role in the shaping and promotion of the eradication of female circumcision as practiced mainly by Africans... They embrace various means of stating their views against female circumcision practices, even as they agree that these practices are harmful to female bodies and must be eradicated...

I argue that much of the ‘anti-FGM discourse’, as currently formulated, overly homogenizes diverse practices, is locked in a colonial discourse that replicates the ‘civilizing’ presumptions of the past, and presents a universalized image of female bodies that relies upon particularized assumptions of what constitutes ‘naturalness’ and ‘normality.’

What matters, Njambi explains, is not ‘their various means of stating their views against circumcision’, but the belief that FGCs are ‘harmful’ and ‘must be eradicated’. Njambi conflates being opposed to FGCs with ‘colonial[ist]’ inclinations. This masks the fact that, while her hardliners can be said to use ‘stories of primitivity and barbarity’ (2004a: 299), her softliners simply cannot. For example, two of her targets, Gunning (1992) and Winter (1994), make the postcolonial critique themselves. If softliners are included in the ‘much of’ the discourse that counts as colonialist, then she is excluding almost no one at all. In defining ‘anti-FGM discourse’ in this way, Njambi homogenizes a discourse that, in fact, varies quite dramatically.

Similarly, Nwankwo (2005: 220) uses a determinist biology metaphor to argue that ‘Western feminism’ is inherently ‘imperialis[t]’:

Imperialism and Western feminism share the same ancestry... Because Western feminism is what it is, it proceeds genetically in tune with its pedigree, Western patriarchy.

Korieh (2005: 116), too, equates ‘current feminist discourse’ and colonialism:

Colonial discourse and the current feminist discourse on female circumcision assume the same binary trajectory of a civilized, emancipated, and autonomous Western woman, on the one hand, and the oppressed and backward non-Western woman bound by tradition, superstition, and male suppression on the other.

Korieh homogenizes both discourses when he asserts that they ‘assume the same’ trajectory. He also reifies the binary between the West and Africa, and Western and non-Western scholars, by placing them in opposition (‘discourse’ and ‘counterdiscourse’):

...African women have contributed to the female circumcision debate by producing a counterdiscourse to the Western feminist-informed arguments in the debate. (2005: 113)

In sum, more than a quarter of the critics who invoke the postcolonial critique of Western feminist academic engagement with FGCs conflate ‘Western feminists’, opposition to FGCs, and ‘imperialism’. With this conflation, they construct a Western ‘anti-FGM discourse’ that is, I will argue, not representative of academic engagement. Our first clue that this assertion may be false is the fact that many of the people criticizing Westerners for their imperialist approach are, themselves, Western. A second clue is the fact that the vast majority of scholars making the postcolonial critique are themselves opposed to FGCs, suggesting that opposition to the practices alone is no indication of a culturally imperialist approach. A third clue is the dominance of the postcolonial perspective since the mid-1990s. But to truly evaluate the

claim, we need to look closer at the entire trajectory of academic discourse both before and after the postcolonial turn.

Framing FGCs

The strong words of the postcolonial critics are inspired by a discourse that, truly, deserves aggressive critique. Figure 1 shows that the imperialist language they identify, what I call the inferiority argument, dominated the earliest five years of the discourse (1976–1980) and was prominent until the mid-1990s when the postcolonial critique of the inferiority frame gained ground. My discussion of this critique (below) confirms the critics' accusations.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that all of the early literature was characterized by an imperialist argument. Figure 1 shows this was true in the late '70s, but the discourse in the '80s and early '90s (preceding the postcolonial turn) was not dominated by an inferiority frame. Instead, the inferiority frame is challenged almost from the beginning by scholars who reject the idea that the presence of genital cutting marks a society as inferior and, instead, attempt to re-frame FGCs as an example of difference. Below I offer a discussion of both approaches to talking about FGCs.

Framing FGCs as inferiority

There is no question that some Western scholarship about FGCs deserves critique. Scholars in 22 of the 141 documents (16 percent) frame FGCs as an example of 'African' inferiority. To these scholars, FGCs represent the kind of gendered oppression that occurs in 'barbaric' places. This argument was popularized by Fran Hosken (1976a,b; 1981) and is made primarily by American and European scholars, but was also articulated by African scholars (such as Awa Thiam and Olayinka Koso-Thomas, who were born in Senegal and Nigeria, respectively). Hosken, Daly, and Lightfoot-Klein have been criticized widely for their use of the cultural inferiority frame (Abusharaf, 2001b [2000]; Gunning, 1992; James, 1998; Kirby, 1987; Robertson, 2002). I will focus on other examples to show that this approach extended beyond the most familiar cases.

Some scholars portray people in communities that practice FGCs as cruel. For example, implying cruelty on the part of men (and sometimes women), scholars call FGCs 'horror[s]'; 'brut[al]', 'cruel', and 'torture' (Accad, 1993: n.p.; Annas, 1996: 325, 353; Koso-Thomas, 1987: 2; Lowenstein, 1978: 421; McGarrahan, 1991: 269; Simms, 1993: 1954; Slack, 1988: 466; Thiam, 1998 [1983]: 382; White, 2001: 192). Lowenstein (1978: 417) describes 'unfeeling husband[s]'; Koso-Thomas (1987: 14) claims that mothers are 'keen for their daughters to experience pain...' Indeed, FGCs are frequently called 'inhuman', a term that calls into question the very humanity of those who choose it for their children (Annas, 1996: 331; Simms, 1993: 1955; Slack, 1988: 468; see also White, 2001: 192).

Alongside the portrayal of people in communities that practice FGCs as bad, women (and sometimes men) are characterized as helpless, ignorant, and irrational. Scholars argue that inferior thinking translates into ‘...some justification for a paternalistic approach’ (Hayter, 1984: 326), that women with genital cutting fail to understand the relationship between their health problems and FGCs (Simms, 1993), and that informed consent to FGCs is impossible because women in these communities are ‘...not sufficiently knowledgeable to choose wisely’ (James, 1994; Slack, 1988: 440). Occasionally, circumcised women are described as ‘slave[s]’ (Levin, 1980: 201; White, 2001: 132). These scholars categorically dismiss women’s experiences with, and understanding of, their culture and cultural practices in favor of their own projected beliefs.

The idea that FGCs are specifically an ‘African’ practice, and that the deficiency of people who support the practices is related to their African-ness, is solidified by scholars taking this approach. Several high-profile works give the impression that FGCs occur only in Africa and among all Africans. Daly’s (1978) widely read essay is titled *African Genital Mutilation*; an influential review is called *Female Circumcision in Africa* (Kouba and Muasher, 1985); two of Hosken’s works are titled *Genital Mutilation of Women in Africa* (1976a) and *Female Circumcision and Fertility in Africa* (1976b); while the subtitle of Lightfoot-Klein’s (1989) book is *An Odyssey into Female Genital Mutilation in Africa*. These titles, even when authors are more careful in their text, give the impression that FGCs are a unique and ubiquitous ‘African’ problem. Moreover, scholars, even when geographically precise, sometimes elevate the relevance of the presence of FGCs in Africa. For example, Kouba and Muasher (1985: 95) specify that FGCs occur outside of Africa, but write: ‘nowhere in the world is female circumcision more prevalent than on the continent of Africa...’ This comment does not add information, but instead instructs the reader to focus on Africa specifically (see also Annas, 1996; White, 2001). Finally, in some instances, authors specify where FGCs occur, but lapse into using ‘Africa’ in their text. Simms (1993: 1994), or example, discusses ‘African children’ and Koso-Thomas (1987: 1) discusses ‘African communities’. ‘Africans’, then, become the evil and ignorant perpetrators of this ‘hideous’ ‘scourge’ (Levin, 1980: 201; Koso-Thomas, 1987: 1). (This later feeds into the tendency for postcolonial critics to posit an antagonistic binary between ‘Africans’, who are, indeed, targeted by these speakers, and the West.)

While criticism of the inferiority frame would not gain momentum within academia until the mid-1990s, African activists began protesting almost immediately that the inferiority frame was culturally imperialist (documented in Lightfoot-Klein, 1993; Thiam, 1998 [1983]; Toubia, 1985). Instead of responding sympathetically, however, many scholars repudiate anticipated accusations of imperialism, reasserting a commitment to female solidarity. Here I bring Hosken, Daly, and Lightfoot-Klein back into the analysis as scholars have not previously discussed their counterframing efforts.

Hosken (1981: 11) labels the African activists who object to her activism 'ethnocentric' and accuses them of 'exploit[ing] the issue'. Retaliating, she writes:

To pretend that little girls and women because they are black or brown and live in a different environment and culture do not feel pain and are not terribly damaged by having their genitalia excised, is the ultimate in racist and sexist discrimination. . .

(Hosken, 1976b: 10)

To the framing of her work as 'neocolonialis[t]', Hosken (1976b: 10) responds, incredulously:

...teaching the truth about reproduction to stop the needless torture of female children by butchering their genitalia with kitchen knives and razor blades is called 'interference in cultural traditions'.

Hosken, then, when confronted by African activists, reacts aggressively, and with fighting words, naming them as 'racist' and 'sexist'.

Hosken is not alone in this reaction. Other scholars also reveal that they are aware of, and reject, the way some African women perceive Western agitation around FGCs. Daly (1978: 154) writes:

Critics [of FGCs] from Western countries are constantly being intimidated by accusations of 'racism', to the point of misnaming, non-naming, and not seeing these sad-rituals. The accusations of 'racism' may come from ignorance, but they serve only the interests of males. . .

Daly frames African women's perceptions of FGCs as 'ignorance' and accuses them of complicity with sexism. Similarly, Levin (1980: 154) rejects the framing of Western feminists as 'colonialist or racist supremacist' by saying that African women make such claims only because they are 'victims'. Koso-Thomas (1987: 1) frames African women as ignorant. She writes, 'Women . . . do not realize that some of the practices they promote were designed to subjugate them . . .'. And Accad (1993: n.p.) argues that African women resist alliance with Western women because they value 'loyalty' to African men over 'truth' (see also Annas, 1996; Thiam, 1998 [1983]).

Hosken and others using the inferiority frame resist African critiques of their anti-FGC rhetoric out of a feminist commitment to prioritizing female solidarity over other axes of alliance. Their counterframes suggest that mediating their anti-FGC efforts is 'sexist' or 'racist' because it deprioritizes (non-white) women's well-being. Their commitment to global sisterhood, in other words, translates into a sense of entitlement to define African women's interests, intervene on their account, and dismiss their resistance.

The words of Fran Hosken and her academic counterparts haunt the halls of academia. It is the unmistakably 'venomous' nature of these attacks (Ahmadu,

2001: 283) that makes the postcolonial critique important. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that all (Western) academics speak an imperialist language. In the next section, I review a competing frame for FGCs: cultural difference.

Re-framing FGCs as difference

Scholars use the difference frame in 31 of the 141 documents in my sample (22 percent). Unlike those who make an inferiority argument, those using the difference frame attempt to explain FGCs to a naïve audience; they describe FGCs as an unfamiliar and distressing practice that, nonetheless, needs to be understood as well as opposed. Many of these scholars address the possibility that learning about FGCs might stoke or ignite anti-African views and try to intervene by humanizing people that practice genital cutting. This re-framing initially comes primarily from anthropologists, most of whom were American or European.

Scholars arguing in favor of a difference frame for FGCs actively try to contest ethnocentric reactions (Boddy, 1991; Morgan and Steinem, 1983 [1980]). They warn of ‘sensational’ accounts in ‘Western media’ and from activists (Grassivaro-Gallo and Viviani, 1988: 165; Winkel, 1995) and argue that FGCs are not cruel, but meaningful, even ‘lov[ing]’, in context (Assaad, 1980: 3; see also Leonard, 1996; Van der Kwaak, 1992). For example, in her influential article, Boddy (1982: 696) explains the meaning of FGCs in Sudan:

In that infibulation purifies, smooths [sic], and makes clean the outer surface of the womb, the enclosure or hosh of the house of childbirth, it . . . culturalizes a woman’s fertility. Through occlusion of the vaginal orifice, her womb, both literally and figuratively, becomes a social space: enclosed, impervious, virtually impenetrable.

Complementing the cultural analysis, Gruenbaum (1982) offers a structural explanation for FGCs, emphasizing women’s economic realities as they are shaped by state and global politics.

These scholars oppose FGCs, but they do not dismiss the concerns of African activists. Morgan and Steinem (1983 [1980]: 323), for example, explain that ‘African and Arab governments and individuals’ sometimes feel that the West is ‘motivated [by] . . . racis[m] or neocolonalis[m] . . .’. They concede that these concerns are rational and argue for ‘sensitiv[ity]’, support, and deference to women involved in grassroots movements. Gruenbaum (1982: 10–11) argues that it is important to have ‘indigenous women . . . involved in all stages’; she criticizes ‘heavy-handed’ approaches for their tendency to create a ‘backlash’ (see also Ginsburg, 1991). Likewise, Van der Kwaak (1992: 785) argues that to aggressively attack FGCs without respect for the women in the communities in which they are practiced is an ‘ethnocentric, ideological position’ and that ‘without subscribing to cultural relativism we should leave much to the people themselves’. Arbesman and colleagues (1993: 40) argue that it is important to ‘strike a delicate balance between helping women change potentially harmful practices while at the same time

enabling them to maintain their cultural diversity'. Taking a different approach, Winkel (1995) attempts to articulate an argument against FGCs that is based on Islam, so as to avoid exporting Western logic.

In sum, by the mid-1980s, many Western scholars were responding negatively to their peers' use of the inferiority frame and sensitively to the concerns of African activists. Instead of demonizing or infantilizing Africans in communities that practice FGCs, they sought to humanize them by shifting the frame for the practices from inferiority to difference. They also try to undo some of the damage compounded by the inferiority frame, challenging ethnocentrism in their readers and advocating alliance. These authors do not have perfect solutions to transnational power imbalances, but neither are they ignorant or dismissive of them.

There are many scholars, then, who eschewed the inferiority frame in favor of a difference frame, even before the postcolonial turn. A preponderance of these scholars, further, are decidedly Western, as are many of the scholars making postcolonial critiques. These facts refute the overgeneralized condemnation of Western academic discourse as culturally imperialist. Some of it certainly was; but much of it was not. Nor does it cleave onto Western speakers. Further, despite the early resistance to criticism of the inferiority frame, scholars today avoid it, at least in their academic writings. In the last 10 years under investigation (1996–2005) I coded only two documents with the cultural inferiority frame.

Conclusion

In this first systematic examination of the social science and humanities literature on FGCs, I have documented the extent of the inferiority argument, showing that it reaches far beyond the usual suspects of Hosken, Daly, and Lightfoot-Klein and was not articulated solely by Westerners. I have also documented, however, the diversity of Western academic engagement with FGCs even prior to the postcolonial turn. The culturally imperialist approach to understanding FGCs was joined almost immediately by one sensitive to global power imbalances and attentive to the risk that FGCs would foster anti-African prejudice. Importantly, Westerners were among the first to challenge the inferiority frame. They have also actively participated in making the postcolonial critique, one that has been so successful that, among social scientific and humanities scholars publishing in academic venues, the inferiority frame has all but disappeared. More, the fact that research and analysis that draws on the postcolonial perspective now far exceeds any other approach suggests that Western academics – writers, reviewers, and editors – have not only responded to the postcolonial critique, they have embraced it. Indeed, the story of Western feminist academic engagement of FGCs, criticisms to the contrary, supports Desai's (2007: 801) claim that '... one of the strengths of feminisms has been their openness to self-critique and change'. In sum, while accusations of 'imperialism' draw attention to the fighting words used by scholars who apply an inferiority frame (and rightly so), when they are made today toward Western

academics writing about FGCs, they are both overgeneralized and anachronistic. We are not at an 'impasse' after all.

The heat in this debate is derived, then, from both sides erasing diversity in favor of stereotyping. Much in the same way that some scholars conflate 'Africans' with 'barbarism' and construct a thing called 'female genital mutilation' out of a wide range of practices, some postcolonial critics (Western and non-Western alike) conflate 'Western feminists' with 'cultural imperialism' and construct a thing called 'anti-FGM discourse' out of a diverse set of arguments, only some of which reproduce a culturally imperialist narrative. Accordingly, attacks on both 'anti-FGM discourse' and 'female genital mutilation' have been overly zealous. Essentially, in the same way that many scholars object to oversimplified, condemnatory characterizations of 'Africans', some scholars today are responding to oversimplified, condemnatory characterizations of 'Western feminists'. So, just as the attacks on 'female genital mutilation' inspired aggressive resistance by and on behalf of people from communities that practice FGCs, the attacks on Western feminists have inspired reactionary responses.

More than just empirically false and inflammatory, however, the reification of the Western/African binary results in certain invisibilities. First, the conflation of Western feminism, opposition to FGCs, and cultural imperialism makes invisible the fact that almost all speakers in this discourse are opposed to FGCs, including a strong majority of the scholars who critique Western feminist rhetoric and involvement. Second, these scholars overwhelmingly share ideological commitments to feminism and against cultural imperialism and racism. Today, most Western feminist academics who write about FGCs argue in favor of careful, contemplative alliance with women from relevant communities. Third, conflating 'Western feminism', 'imperialism', and opposition to FGCs erases both grassroots abandonment efforts and genuine attempts at cross-cultural understanding and transnational alliance on the part of Westerners (Abusharaf, 2001a, 2001b [2000]; Davis, 2004; Gruenbaum, 2001; James, 1998). In addition to creating acrimony among academics, then, this approach undermines practical attempts at harm reduction and abandonment of FGCs.

There are lessons in this analysis for those of us who wish to adopt both feminist and postcolonialist approaches on FGCs and other issues that turn up the heat, such as veiling, sati, child marriage, and sex-selective abortion. First, we must remain vigilant against the reproduction of false binaries that undermine alliance and stifle theory. Accordingly, we must avoid attributing characteristics – such as false consciousness or ideological betrayal – to homogenized identity-based groups, even when there is evidence that some members of groups can be so characterized. Such attributions make the mediation of conflict logically impossible. More concretely, if we expect Western feminists to adopt a position of radical uncertainty in regard to practices that they find appalling (and we should), then it is incumbent that we also adopt a position of radical uncertainty in regard to the motives and logics of Western feminists.

Second, this analysis of Western academic discourse about FGCs raises questions about the role of outrage in scholarship. Both feminism and postcolonialism are critical social theories that address inequality. Outrage is appropriate. Indeed, outrage brought both FGCs and the postcolonial critique to the attention of Western feminists, developments that were welcomed by many African and Western feminists alike. But outrage has also driven a dialectic of accusation that has contributed to discomfort and distrust among academics. When we arrange our firing squad in a circle, both theoretical advances and practical victories are undermined. When scholarly attention to these issues engenders fiery controversy – as it did very publicly on the Korenman’s Women’s Studies List Serve – scholars may, quite logically, choose to study something else. Concurrently, participating in the debate between the ‘Western’ (feminist) and ‘African’ (postcolonial) perspective may distract scholars from more productive empirical and theoretical projects that involve FGCs and eclipses the scholarship that does occur, making less prominent how much we have learned about the practices and how much they have taught us about our complicated world. Both the push away from doing research on FGCs and the pull into the debate are problems insofar as those issues that potentially inspire the most heat may, in fact, be among the most useful and important ones with which to wrestle.

An end to outrage would be both undesirable and impossible. We can, however, channel our outrage toward more constructive ends. Instead of aiming it at groups of people, we need to more precisely target problematic ideas, policies, and institutions. Those scholars, for example, who critique concrete examples of culturally imperialist and anti-feminist work, along with those who identify exactly how our public policy and institutions are shaped by imperialist and sexist narratives, contribute to theorizing mechanisms of oppression. This work is illuminating.

We must, also, hold ourselves and others accountable to a more civil and rigorous standard of scholarship. First, we must be careful in how we use language; accusations of ‘barbarism’ and ‘imperialism’ create more heat than light. Second, we need to be more attentive to the limits of our research methods: generalization from analyses of novels, the media, activist literature, or any single source or set of non-representative sources is unwarranted. Finally, we must be more critical of what we read. Much of the heat regarding FGCs is a result of stories about genital cutting that privilege the most severe type and portray parents and practitioners as heartless and irrational. This is a partial and biased account of the practices and it took a great deal of effort to expose it as such. Likewise, much of the heat regarding Western academic treatment of FGCs has been stoked by claims that have not stood up under scrutiny. This analysis of academic literature on FGCs, then, reminds us to approach even friendly texts critically.

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