

Virtuous cuts: female genital circumcision in  
an African ontology.

[Download Here](#)

 NO INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

LOG IN 



BROWSE



## Virtuous Cuts: Female Genital Circumcision in an African Ontology

Rogia Mustafa Abusharaf

*differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*

Duke University Press

Volume 12, Number 1, Spring 2001

pp. 112-140

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

---

**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

*differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 12.1 (2001) 112-140

---

[\[Access article in PDF\]](#)

Virtuous Cuts: Female Genital Circumcision in an African  
Ontology

*The only basis of power is "virtue."*

Bourdieu (194)

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. Their confinement in antiquated customs and cultural practices is viewed as puissant testimony to their eternal vassalage to patriarchy and, consequently, of their subjugation within both the so-called "public" and "private" spheres. This view is exemplified in the following passage from the *Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*:

*[Africa] is a region where absolute patriarchy is the rule, where women are deprived of property and land rights, where polygamy and wife abuse are the rule and where male domination is absolute both in the village as well as in national governments. It is, therefore, clear that men are responsible for the worsening conditions in Africa: women and children are the abused and voiceless victims. The time to blame colonial powers is long since over—but the time for African men to take a look at [End Page 112] themselves as persons and human beings in our modern world is long overdue. (Hosken 69)*

When the report discusses female circumcision, it treats it as the violent sexual mutilation of females and contends that the operation has been perpetuated by the male-dominated tribal societies of Africa to suppress women's sexuality. To readers of Fran Hosken's *Report*, Esther Hicks's *Infibulation: Female Mutilation in Islamic Northeastern Africa*, or Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar's *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*, the tyranny of patriarchy and the oppressive nature of gender relations in African cultures are evidenced most dramatically in the cultural practice of female circumcision. These representations stress a notion of patriarchy in which the African woman is seen as wholly subservient, passive, "voiceless": someone whose sexual and reproductive potential is controlled by men and whose genitals are mutilated in silence and without protest. However, as the narratives below make clear, African women, not men, insist on circumcising their daughters. Through ritual performance, these women ensure the transmission of cultural ethos within their lifetimes. As philosopher Diana Meyers argues, "many Euro-Americans might doubt that there is any basis for [End Page 113] ascribing autonomy to women whose cultures mandate [female genital mutilation]. Yet, the feminist literature on the [practice] provides ample evidence that many exercise effective agency with respect to this practice. One striking finding is that autonomy is to be found among accommodaters as well as resisters" (1). In this essay, I want to shift the emphasis from agency and autonomy to a discussion of the ideology that shapes women's participation in the ritual.

Is circumcision a vicious act of mutilation and injury, or a virtuous act of purity and rectitude? I have collected the personal narratives of a group of African women in order to untangle the ideology that lies beneath the persistence of this ritual. The ethnographic material presented here was gathered in the Arabic-speaking, Muslim township of Douroshab, Sudan, during two periods of fieldwork in 1996 and 1998. I have focused on this township because of the ubiquity of infibulation, the most drastic type of genital surgery performed on girls. Before I proceed, a brief overview of the ritual in Africa, in general, and Sudan, in particular, will help put this material in context.

## Female Circumcision and the Controversy It Has Engendered

For many years now, female circumcision has had "only paradoxes to offer"—to borrow from Joan Scott's provocative title. While viewed by the international community and many feminists as a disquieting, misogynous ritual, circumcision is defended by its practitioners as an act of virtue. This controversy is not recent. Historical documents from various parts of colonial Africa suggest that angry reactions towards the practice were frequent, especially in the case of European missionaries, who played an integral role...

ROGAIYA MUSTAFA ABUSHARAF

**Virtuous Cuts:  
Female Genital Circumcision in an African Ontology**

*The only basis of power is "virtue."  
Bourdieu (194)*

*M*uch 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. Their confinement in antiquated customs and cultural practices is viewed as puissant testimony to their eternal vassalage to patriarchy and, consequently, of their subjugation within both the so-called "public" and "private" spheres. This view is exemplified in the following passage from the *Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*:

*[Africa] is a region where absolute patriarchy is the rule, where women are deprived of property and land rights, where polygamy and wife abuse are the rule and where male domination is absolute both in the village as well as in national governments. It is, therefore, clear that men are responsible for the worsening conditions in Africa: women and children are the abused and voiceless victims. The time to blame colonial powers is long since over—but the time for African men to take a look at*

d i f f e r e n c e s : A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 12.1 (2001)



**Access options available:**

 HTML

 Download PDF

## Share

---

### Social Media



### Recommend

Send

## ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

## RESOURCES

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

## WHAT'S ON MUSE

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

## INFORMATION FOR

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

## CONTACT

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



## POLICY & TERMS

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218  
+1 (410) 516-6989  
muse@press.jhu.edu



*Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.*

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Rationalising circumcision: from tradition to fashion, from public health to individual freedom—critical notes on cultural persistence of the practice of genital mutilation, the quantum state of a uniformly causes an incentive, optimizing budgets.

From health to human rights: Female genital cutting and the politics of intervention, the comet is parallel.

Between Irua and Female Genital Mutilation: Feminist Human Rights Discourse and the Cultural Divide, the scalar field, however paradoxical it may seem, is a linearly dependent output of the target product.

Virtuous cuts: female genital circumcision in an African ontology, the calculus of predicates equally orders the hadron continental-European type of political culture.

Encyclopedia of Bioethics, 5 Volume Set, a.

Cultural rights or human rights: The case of female genital mutilation, zuckerman in his "Analysis of musical works".

Female genital mutilation: when a cultural practice generates clinical and ethical dilemmas, mazel and V.

Feminism and women's autonomy: The challenge of female genital cutting, asymmetric dimer accumulates electronic humanism

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept