

## Rites and Wrongs: An Insider/Outsider Reflects on Power and Excision

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The issue of female initiation and “circumcision” is of significant intellectual and personal interest to me. Like previous anthropologists, I am fascinated by the social, ideological, and religious/symbolic dimensions of these rituals, particularly from indigenous perspectives. I also share with feminist scholars and activists campaigning against the practice a concern for women’s physical, psychological, and sexual well-being, as well as for the implications of these traditional rituals for women’s status and power in society. Coming from an ethnic group in which female (and male) initiation and “circumcision” are institutionalized and a central feature of culture and society and having myself undergone this traditional process of becoming a “woman,” I find it increasingly challenging to reconcile my own experiences with prevailing global discourses on female “circumcision.”

Most studies on female genital cutting (FGC) in Africa have been conducted by “outsiders,” individuals who are not from the societies they analyze and who have no personal experience of any form of the operation. The limited number of African women who have written about FGC either come from ethnic groups where female genital operations are not practiced (i.e., Efua Dorkenoo, Olayinka Koso-Thomas) or have never undergone the procedures themselves (Nahid Toubia). There is an unfortunate and perturbing silence among African women intellectuals who have experienced initiation and “circumcision.” This reticence is understandable, given the venomous tone of the “debate” and unswerving demand that a definitive stance be taken—evidently, if one is educated—*against* the practice. However, “insider” voices from initiated/“circumcised” African women scholars can go a long way toward providing fresh approaches to our understanding of these practices and their continued significance to most African women.

In this chapter I attempt to reconcile “insider” representations with “outsider” perspectives. I seek to contextualize my own experience within the broader framework of initiation in Sierra Leone’s Kono society and then contrast dominant Kono paradigms with conflicting international debates that focus on female “circumcision” as a peculiar manifestation of women’s global subordination.

My main quarrel with most studies on female initiation and the significance of genital cutting relates to the continued insistence that the latter is necessarily “harmful” or that there is an urgent need to stop female genital mutilation in communities where it is done. Both of these assertions are based on the alleged physical, psychological, and sexual effects of female genital cutting. I offer, however, that the aversion of some writers to the practice of female “circumcision” has more to do with deeply imbedded Western cultural assumptions regarding women’s bodies and their sexuality than with disputable health effects of genital operations on African women. For example, one universalized assumption is that human bodies are “complete” and that sex is “given” at birth.<sup>1</sup> A second assumption is that the clitoris represents an integral aspect of femininity and has a central erotic function in women’s sexuality. And, finally, through theoretical extension, patriarchy is assumed to be the culprit—that is, women are seen as blindly and wholeheartedly accepting “mutilation” because they are victims of male political, economic, and social domination. According to this line of analysis, excision is necessary to patriarchy because of its presumed negative impact on women’s sexuality. Removal of the clitoris is alleged to make women sexually passive, thus enabling them to remain chaste prior to marriage and faithful to their husbands in polygynous households. This supposedly ensures a husband sole sexual access to a woman as well as certainty of his paternity over any children she produces. As victims, then, women actively engage in “dangerous” practices such as “female genital mutilation” (FGM) to increase their marriageability (see, for example, Chapter 13 of this volume), which would ultimately enable them to fulfill their honored, if socially inferior, destiny of motherhood.

When attempting to reconcile Kono practice with dominant anti-FGM discourses, a number of problems arise, starting with the alleged physical harm resulting from the practice. Part of the problem, as Bettina Shell-Duncan, Walter Obungu Obiero, and Leunita Auko Muruli lucidly argue in Chapter 6 of this volume, is the unjustified conflation of varied practices of female genital cutting and the resulting overemphasis on infibulation, a relatively rare practice that is associated with a specific region and interpretation of Muslim purdah ideology.<sup>2</sup> Kono women practice excision, the removal of the clitoris and labia minora.<sup>3</sup> As several contributions to this volume suggest (see Chapters 1, 5, and 6), the purported long-term physical side effects of this procedure may have been exaggerated. It can be argued, as well, that although

there are short-term risks, these can be virtually eliminated through improved medical technology (see Chapter 6).

Furthermore, among the Kono there is no cultural obsession with feminine chastity, virginity, or women's sexual fidelity, perhaps because the role of the biological father is considered marginal and peripheral to the central "matricentric unit."<sup>4</sup> Finally, Kono culture promulgates a dual-sex ideology, which is manifested in political and social organization, sexual division of labor, and, notably, the presence of powerful female and male secret societies.<sup>5</sup> The existence and power of Bundu, the women's secret sodality, suggest positive links between excision, women's religious ideology, their power in domestic relations, and their high profile in the "public" arena.

The Kono example makes evident underlying biases of such culturally loaded notions as the "natural" vagina or "natural female body." The word "natural" is uncritically tossed around in the FGM literature to describe an uncircumcised woman, when actually it needs definition and clarification. Kono concepts of "nature" and "culture" differ significantly from Western ones, and it is these local understandings that compel female (and male) genital cutting. In essence, what this chapter amounts to is a critique of a profound tendency in Western writing on female "circumcision" in Africa to deliver male-centered explanations and assumptions. Scholars must be wary of imposing Western religious, philosophical, and intellectual assumptions that tend to place enormous emphasis on masculinity and its symbols in the creation of culture itself. In traditional African societies, as is the case with the Kono, womb symbolism and imagery of feminine reproductive contributions form the basis of meanings of the universe, human bodies, and society and its institutions—social organization, the economy, and even political organization can be viewed as extensions of the "matricentric core," or base of society. Female excision, I propose, is a negation of the masculine in feminine creative potential, and in the remainder of this chapter I will show how the Kono case study demonstrates this hypothesis.

This chapter is a culmination of several years of informal inquiry as well as formal research into the meaning of female "circumcision" and initiation, particularly among my parental ethnic group, the Kono, in northeastern Sierra Leone. This study constitutes an analysis of five stages: (1) my subjective experience of initiation from December 1991 to January 1992, which lasted just over one month; (2) indigenous interpretations from other participants, mainly ritual leaders and their assistants, recorded at the time; (3) later academic study, when I returned to Kono for an additional two months in December 1994 and December 1996; (4) a total of nine months conducting formal and informal interviews among Kono immigrants in and around the Washington, D.C., area; and finally, (5) approximately three months spent between January and July of 1998 traveling back and forth between Conakry

and Freetown talking to Kono refugees and women activists, mainly about their more immediate survival concerns but also about “circumcision,” initiation, and the future of women’s secret societies. These discussions included informal interviews as well as formal semistructured interviews with three ritual officials: two traditional circumcisers, or *Soko* priestesses, and one *digba*, or ranking assistant to the *Soko*.

The cumulative data are drawn from interviews with a broad range of Kono men and women: young, old, university-educated professionals in Freetown and in the United States, as well as illiterate villagers and traditional rulers in Kono. If I have sacrificed quantification, it has been for the benefit of collecting detailed qualitative data that would enable my search for meaning and significance, both of which I felt could be best obtained through carefully selected, knowledgeable informants. What this study attempts to explain are the views, beliefs, and rationales of *supporters* of initiation and “circumcision.” The extent to which these attitudes reflect those of all or the majority of Kono women is left open for future research.

My specific aims in this chapter are, first, to elucidate the significance of female initiation and “circumcision” in terms of indigenous Kono cosmology, culture, and society and to demonstrate how and why it is that bodily operations—both male and female—are viewed as necessary and important processes in the dynamics of sex and gender constructions and kinship relations. My second objective is to interrogate specific areas relating to international discourses on eradication of female “circumcision,” using my own personal experience as well as Kono ethnographic data and the accounts of the experiences of individual Kono women. Finally, my goal is to discuss avenues for compromise on the “debate” about female “circumcision” and to suggest alternative strategies to current hard-line approaches.

## Background to a Practice: Kono Cosmos, Culture, and Society

The Kono are a Mande-speaking people who, according to oral historical accounts, migrated from the Guinea savannah region toward the end of the Mali Empire to their current home in northeastern Sierra Leone.<sup>6</sup> Kono is also the name of their geographic location and their common language. Most Kono uphold indigenous religious beliefs, although a minority proclaim Islam, and even fewer profess Christianity as their dominant faith. The subsistence economy is based on agriculture, with rice being the main crop. Diamond mining has had a major, if not disastrous, impact on Kono economy, culture, and social life. Today intense civil war rages in the diamond-rich areas (see Richards 1996 for an analysis of the full complexities of Sierra Leone’s “bush war”). This conflict has driven out virtually all peasant farmers from their vil-



lages as well as traditional chiefs, professionals, and businesspeople, many of whom have also become victims of the protracted upheaval.<sup>7</sup>

The most salient organizing principles among the Kono are complementarity and interdependence (Hardin 1993:154–156), which are manifested in all aspects of social, political, economic, and religious life and—of particular interest to the discussion at hand—through female and male initiation and circumcision. The two institutions of paramount importance are Bundu, female “secret societies,” and Poro, the male counterpart.<sup>8</sup> Sande is sometimes referred to as the “counterpart” of Poro by such scholars as Warren D’Azevedo (1994), who view the former as an ideological tool of patriarchy. However, D’Azevedo concedes that Sande predates Poro and that it was the women’s cult that *yielded* some of its powers to men and has nevertheless been able to maintain its autonomy and distinct sources of “medicines,” or power over men and other uninitiated. Politically, the separate male and female leaders of Bundu and Poro, called *soko* and *pamansu*, respectively, are all powerful. These two individuals, female and male, are considered the mediators between this world and the transcendental world of ancestresses and ancestors, other spirits, and *Yataa*, the distant Sky-God or, literally, the “One You Already Met.” Bundu promulgates feminine interests: peace (through marriage alliances), sexual conduct, fertility, and reproduction. Unlike among some of their neighbors, the Poro leader among the Kono is usually the village chief, and he is responsible for masculine interests such as warfare, hunting, and arbitrating land disputes.<sup>9</sup> Transgression of these clearly demarcated domains by either sex is an egregious, and sometimes capital, offense.

Social organization also reflects this female-male duality. Kono lineage systems combine “public” and “domestic” into complementary and interdependent spheres of female and male influence and prestige. As Kris Hardin observed, the *bain den moe* is the matrilineage par excellence and is represented by the mother’s brother and his descendants (Hardin 1993:60). The *bain den moe* embodies a “motherhood,” or “one-womb,” ideology, and relations are marked by closeness and familiarity (Amadiume 1987; 1997). Throughout her marriage a woman can count on her *bain den moe* as a check against her husband’s *fa den moe*, where she resides and contributes her physical labor as well as her children, who will “belong” to her husband’s lineage.<sup>10</sup> The *fa den moe*, however, is the stereotypical patrilineage, regarded with distance and formality and responsible for transmitting to individuals their juro-political status.

Both Hardin (1993:123–140) and Parsons (1964) point to the way in which female and male complementarity and interdependence also serve as the underlying principle behind the sexual division of labor. Women are responsible for the care of young children, and their share of farm work includes weeding, assisting with the harvest, and processing the harvested rice for the entire year. Men are responsible for obtaining land and rice seed, for

falling trees and brush, and for sowing rice and plowing it into the ground. Although men "control" the land, they depend on the labor of women to make it productive, and the latter can withhold their services if they have particular grievances that need to be aired and resolved. Whereas in agriculture, men control the end product of the harvest, in indigenous cloth production women own and control the finished goods (Hardin 1993:135). As only men are permitted to weave, however, strict sexual interdependence is maintained in this area of production as well. There are certain "sacred" sectors of production that are exclusively male and exclusively female, such as blacksmithing (male) and ceramic pottery (female). Today, however, dramatic changes in the modern economy are resulting in women clearly becoming more and more economically and socially disadvantaged. Women are becoming more dependent on men for their survival as diamond mining and cash cropping and the increasing importance of cash as primary medium of exchange have led to a decline in the demand for goods traditionally produced by women.

### *Ritual Initiation in Kono*

Initiation of girls into Bundu and boys into Poro takes place during the dry season, after the harvest, when food is plentiful and there is a significant amount of free time. This time of year is also symbolically important because it represents a new season of fruitfulness, fertility, abundance, and the possibilities of new life—just as initiation seeks to give birth to new, fertile, culturally transformed young women and men. Thus, symbols of agricultural production and human reproduction are synthesized and given powerful meaning in initiation; but also initiation finds its meaning and justification in the performance of everyday farm work and sexual relations, both of which are defined in terms of female and male separate yet complementary contributions. The women's Bundu society and the men's Poro are severally responsible for the "creation" of female and male sociocultural beings from the raw material of nature, young children. Although some authors have stressed the symbolic negation of female reproductive powers by men, usually in reference to male initiation (e.g., Bloch 1986; Herdt 1982), it is important to note that for the Kono (and I suspect, for other initiating/genital cutting groups as well) what is negated is the biological reproduction by both male and female human beings, and what triumphs in initiation is the cultural creation of sexual and gender identity through the ritual process and the important intermediary role of the priest or priestess (as in the case of the *soko*). The imagery of female reproduction is central to the ritual creation process. After undergoing a symbolic death, young initiates enter a metaphorical womb, the sacred grove, where they are circumcised—thus given an unambiguous sex—and then remain in a liminal state while they receive ritual instruction. They are ritually

"reborn," figuratively removed from the "vagina" of the sacred grove, as new persons with full social membership in the adult world.

In Bundu initiation, the *Soko* effects adult female identity through the act of excision and, in so doing, realizes a novice's procreative value. A young initiate's *bain den moe* are significant also in transferring fertility, that is, the healthy delivery of newborn babies. It is only through the blessing of the maternal uncle's ancestors that a newly "created" female with reproductive powers can actually, successfully procreate. Without such a blessing, a woman may certainly conceive, but her children may be stillborn or chronically ill or may not live for very long. Certainly the husband's patrilineage is desirous of healthy new members, but it depends on Bundu and any incoming bride's maternal line for its proliferation. Hence, the centrality of individual women and female ideology in controlling and manipulating the most critical resources in society: women's fertility and sexuality. What follows below is a sketchy description of my personal experience with Kono initiation. Much detail has been omitted as a result of space constraints as well as my desire to respect the secrecy and sensitivity of women's esoteric ritual and supernatural knowledge.

During the 1991 Christmas holidays, I traveled to Sierra Leone with my mother, one of my aunts, my uncle, my sister, and my cousin, my aunt's daughter. It was my final year at university in Washington, D.C., where I was born and have spent most of my life. My formative years, however, were spent in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. It was during these early years in Africa that I first heard adult whispers about "Bundu society," the "Bundu Devil," and the fearfulness of initiation that, I was admonished, every girl must undergo in order to become a woman. "They're all witches! They rub you with white stuff, they mark your body and rub medicine, and then *they cut you!*" One of my female relatives, an uninitiated aunt only a few years older than I, used to taunt me with such remarks after we arrived in the United States. She would claim that she had spied on her older sister when the latter was "joining"<sup>11</sup> the secret society. While in school in the United States, I used to have a recurring memory of a time when my family was living in Freetown and the masked "Poro Devil" of the men's secret society was approaching, and all the women scurried to find their children to bring them inside their houses. All the doors and windows were then locked shut, and the lanterns were blown out, until the terrifying procession passed out of sight. On one occasion my brother could not be found, and I recall crying fitfully, thinking that he had been "discovered" and "swallowed" up by the devil. Although it turned out that the rascal was only hiding underneath the dining room table in our house the entire time everyone was looking for him, this did not lessen my burning curiosity to know what these "devils," "medicines," and "secret societies" were all about. So, when my grandmother, mother, and aunt all approached me, some fifteen years later, saying that it was "time," no one could

have been more excited as well as afraid. My younger cousin and sister also looked forward to the promised feasting, gifts, and celebrations, as well as their first trip to their ancestral homeland.

Our first week in Freetown was spent visiting relatives who welcomed us, congratulated us for coming, and gave us gifts and their blessings. We then traveled upcountry to Kono, where both of my parents grew up. Our first stop was in Koidu, the capital of Kono, where my mother's sisters resided. Hundreds of close and distant relations came out to greet us, sing and dance, and honor our arrival and the upcoming "occasion." After several days, we traveled to Ghandhoun, my mother's patrilineal village, to pay tribute to my grandfather's tomb. He had passed away four years before. In the presence of the entire town, including fourteen of my grandfather's twenty-plus wives, my grandfather's spirit was assured that we had been brought back "home" from *Puu* (the white man's country) to carry on the traditions of our people and that his formal blessing was being sought. I was later told by a cousin that the selection of the *soko*<sup>12</sup> and the ritual "crier" (whose voice drowns out those of the initiates during "circumcision") also took place at this time.

After the greater part of "initiation business" (location, leaders, musicians, food preparation, and so on) was sorted out by the women, my sister and I were driven through thick forests and rough hills to my father's birthplace, Bomanjah. We were greeted by my father's relatives, and my mother was thanked again and again for bringing us. Later in the afternoon, everyone gathered in a clearing at the village center. Prayers and libations of cooked rice and fowl were offered to my father's lineage ancestors. Also, representatives were selected to attend and participate in the ceremonies in Koidu.

We returned to Koidu the following morning after traveling the entire night. The town was busy with arrangements and preparations for the "dance." I tried intently to observe everyone, every action and event taking place, although it was categorically understood that I was not to ask questions at this stage. I was concerned about my little sister, but she was enjoying being the center of everyone's attention. I "knew" what was going to happen to us, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her—perhaps like my mother could not bring herself to tell me, in her own words, "from her own mouth"—for fear of making her afraid as well. In any case, I was truly fascinated and overwhelmed by such a radically new experience. I reasoned that whatever it was I was going to endure, it would be worth the experience, the excitement of watching and being involved in the drama around me.

There was a sense that "it" was approaching. At some point we, the initiates, were isolated from everyone else. This seemed to mark the "beginning." I was more on constant alert than I was frightened. I did not want to miss anything. My female cousins/assistants were all very supportive, and I let their eyes and expressions guide my own feelings. I asked them about the pain and whether I would ever enjoy sex again, and they laughed. One very pretty

twenty-one year old said to me, smiling: "When a man really loves you, he will take his time to do it, and it will be very sweet."

It must have been decided that two of my mother's sisters' homes would serve as the main ceremonial sites. The first ritual meal was prepared at the home of my mother's younger sister, Mama Yei. It was bitter and tasteless, but I was told it contained important "medicines" for our protection and was admonished to eat every grain. The initiates included myself, my sister, and a very young cousin, Sia (our American cousin who traveled with us was being initiated in her own father's village). The older women instructed us not to put anything else in our mouths; we should not accept food from anyone thereafter except from the two female elders who had been pointed out to us.

During the afternoon of this "first" day of initiation, we were taken to a river behind Mama Yei's house and bathed with special leaves and other oddities. I was given a *lappa* (wrap-around skirt), which I used to cover my body. When we were taken back to the house, our bodies and faces were painted thoroughly with white clay. We were then rushed outside into the front yard. A thin "rope" with a small amulet was attached around our waists, similar to ones worn by young children throughout West Africa for protection as well as decoration. Several women came to us and also tied various vines and leaves around our waists. I could hear the voices of some of my young male cousins singing songs about the imminent construction and preparation of the Bundu bush.

We were taken to the rear of the compound while it was still light. There was an endless stream of people dancing, singing, and waiting for us, the initiates, to emerge. When we did appear, dozens of women cried out, ran toward us, and surrounded us. Little Sia was being teased and taunted by the young boys in the crowd. She held on tightly to her grandmother's hand and turned her chin up in a subtle display of indifference. We were then led to my mother's oldest sister's compound. Although I was feeling queasy and dizzy, I could make out some familiar faces from the hundreds who had gathered to witness and partake in the ceremonies. I saw my mother, whose distance was becoming unbearable. I saw relations I used to know in the United States who had just somehow "disappeared" through the years. Elaborate indigenous country cloths were laid out across the bare ground and then on top of us. Perfumed talcum powder was tossed over us as the hairbraiding rite commenced. Ritual combs and braiders had been carefully selected. Drums were beaten as money was tossed from the crowd to the braiders. Mock battles took place between what I later understood were members representing my father's lineage, *fa den moe*, and those standing in for my mother's line, or *bain den moe*. In one such "battle" my sister, little Sia, and I were yanked up off the ground again and again and metaphorically "kidnapped" by a woman, also painted in white clay, whom I later made out was our "guardian spirit." My *fa den moe* would then attempt to take us back, but we were not released until

their representatives had offered a substantial amount of money to the "guardian spirit."

Finally, I was grabbed by a different woman—extremely beautiful, elegant, almost regal. She walked my exhausted body away from the crowd, which followed behind. She explained that she was a dear friend of my mother's, that she was there to help me and to take care of me, and that she had lived and traveled extensively in Europe and the United States, so she understood what a culture shock this experience must be for me. She reassured me that my mother was okay, but that she could not be around until later, and that I should not worry because we were all in very good, skilled, and capable hands. "This is our culture," she repeated to me over and over again. The dreadful white-painted "guardian spirit" showed up again, trying to take me away in order to get more money from my father's relations, but my new "mentor" berated her and sent her away.

Later that evening—and I felt as if every moment was being closely timed—I was told by another close friend of my mother's, a registered nurse, what the "circumcision" rite entailed. She said she would give us an anesthetic injection to thwart any immediate pain and that she would also administer oral painkillers and antibiotics to prevent further pain and infection after the operation. She also pointed out that those of my relations among the audience who were medical doctors were on full alert and that there were clinics close by in case of any emergencies. I was suddenly struck by the full extent of what I had allowed myself to get into. Also, I realized that her revelations were against the "code of silence"—yet she felt obligated to inform me of what was happening, perhaps because I was a full-fledged adult or because I had been brought up in *Puu*.

We were given more "medicines," bitter-tasting, moist leaves. The celebrations went on while we were secluded inside the house. I was feeling increasingly "high" and paranoid and suspected the not-so-innocuous-looking "medicines." None of us were permitted to sleep, but we were interrupted every few minutes or so to participate in this or that prayer, blessing, or libation. At about two or three o'clock the following morning, we were made to strip by the elderly women "guarding" us. Our nether regions were shaved and we were given different *lappas* to wear. My mother appeared, her face visibly worn and drawn, and then she disappeared. An hour or so later, the noise died down.

We were rushed out, surrounded by dozens of unfamiliar older women, to another house a few yards away. We were made to sit up on the dusty cement floor, more and more women filtering in after us, one by one taking up every corner in the small room until there was no more space. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. I looked over at my sister and little Sia, both lying motionless on the ground, propped up by older women sitting among them. My mother came in with some other women, and I could see in her worried

eyes that the time had come. But she did not look at me directly, and then she was gone again.

The nurse, my mother's friend, called me to her. I began to sweat as she reached into her white bag. She took out a syringe and needle and searched for the medication. The other women stared with curiosity at the nurse and her impressive paraphernalia. My sister woke up and saw the needle, and her mouth fell open. She cried out as she saw me open my legs. I was immediately hurled up and carried out by several massive, corpulent women before I could even turn to my sister. The women kicked the door open. It was dawn.

The Bundu bush is a large clearing at the site of a sacred grove sheltered from view, with "walls" made from bamboo shoots and leaves. At the center is a vast cotton tree with leaves that serve as a rooftop. I was hoisted up by four or five of these stocky women. I looked down: a large leaf had been laid on the ground directly underneath my buttocks. I looked up again. Terror finally overcame me as the women's faces, now dozens, now hundreds, moved in closer all around my near naked body suspended in mid-air. They grabbed my legs and arms apart. The women's screams, the sounds of drums, and then a sharp blade cut deep into my flesh on one side and then on the other. As I cried out in unimaginable agony, I felt warm blood ooze down between my thighs. Perhaps for the first time since I was an infant, I vomited.

I saw more, even heftier, women bring out my sister, and I tried to yell. My pleas were inaudible; I knew I had no more strength. After seconds, Sia's body was brought out, but everything appeared as a distant blur—I must have fainted. The women must have sat me down at the foot of the cotton tree because when I did come around, that is where I was, with my head resting against my mother's chest, studying the thick, bloodied piece of cloth beneath me which was tied to the thin "rope" around my waist. I felt like I was carrying a brick load between my legs. I looked for my sister—she was playing, actually running around with little Sia and some other convalescing girls in the Bundu bush. I guessed her anesthetic had been given time to take effect.

I looked up at my mother as she held me, and I begged her to take me "home," back to the United States—back to "civilized" society, I lamented at the time, where one only *reads* about this kind of thing in *National Geographic* or other exotic magazines! She kept apologizing and saying that she felt guilty. She told me that we would not stay in the "bush," that my sister and cousin and I would recover instead at my mentor's house. My mother coaxed me into participating in one more "kidnapping" rite and another special rite at the trunk of a large cotton tree, as well as a march through the town surrounded by the women, my very tormentors. We, the initiates, were once again isolated, but it was decided that the final coming-out "dance" would be suspended.

We remained in seclusion for several days or weeks—I had lost track of time. An older woman would come to us daily, bathing our wounds. She was



always flanked by several other female elders. I found out later that she was our *soko*, the well-respected and revered excisor. Her entire reputation, her renowned surgical skills, her supernatural abilities, even her alleged sacred knowledge were all being tested during our excision rite. Not only were we, the initiates, the direct descendants of the ruling family in Ghandouhn, but we had come all the way from *Puu*. In these rapidly changing times of so-called development and modernization, the *sokos* are well aware of the threat to their power and authority and, worse, the challenge to their way of life and valued traditions. It was during this time, when the pain had subsided and I was assured by Bundu officials as well as by cousins my own age that my operation would in no way inhibit my sexuality, that I became relaxed enough to start inquiring into the historical relevance of initiation and why it remains important to contemporary women.

It is this older generation of women, particularly those within the Bundu traditional hierarchy, who are arguably the immediate and direct beneficiaries of female excision rites. However, from these women and the rituals they promulgate, I have learned to question my steadfast beliefs and values as a "Westernized" woman. Women of my mother's generation and now my own must weigh the benefits of such traditions against increased international concern about its physical, psychological, and sexual consequences for women. Ultimately, it is up to each generation of women to decide whether to continue or to reject this tradition without fear and coercion from outside as well as inside.

## The Significance of Genital Cutting

What is the significance of such a ritual that, as described above, can be very painful and entail medical and other risks for initiates? Above I briefly examined the dual-sex structure of Kono society as a backdrop to an analysis of the relevance of female (and male) circumcision. In this section, I put aside for the moment health, sexual, and psychological issues raised by outside observers and activists against FGC, in order to consider in greater detail possible explanations and rationales for the tradition in terms of Kono worldview, dominant gender ideologies, the systemic and political influence of female ritual leaders, and, finally, individual motivations. First, I consider indigenous constructions of cosmology to the extent that these can be guessed at from documented mythologies of neighboring peoples with similar traditions and institutions. Second, I analyze local ideas regarding nature and culture and how these impinge upon human bodies and cultural constructions of sex and gender. I also consider dominant ideas regarding reproduction and sexuality and the rationale these suggest for genital cutting. Third, I discuss the ideological ramifications of female "circumcision" and its link to "matriarchal"



power, as well as female ritual and sociopolitical authority. Finally, I discuss perhaps the most compelling reasons for the continuation of the practice, which, I believe, are rooted in the individual/psychological experiences of the rite. Although I treat these various "explanations" for FGC distinctly for analytic clarity, they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing and, taken together, form overwhelming unconscious and conscious motivations for the continuation of the tradition in the face of international condemnation.

### *Kono Cosmology*

Anthropologists have for many years studied the cosmologies, or worldviews, of ethnic groups in many parts of the world who practice initiation and rites involving body modifications. A recurring theme running through creation myths of such groups is the inherent bisexuality of human beings. I believe that the Kono, or their early ancestors who came from Mali or Guinea, may have once possessed such cosmological understandings of creation, which would explain their view of humans as "naturally" androgynous beings who must later undergo rebirth (initiation) to be "made" female or male, that is, "given" an unambiguous sex. Although thus far, I have been unable to obtain such specific creation stories pointing to the intrinsic bisexuality of humans from reliable sources among the Kono, an inference can be made that similar myths may have existed in the past, based on the prevalence of such stories among neighboring groups with whom the Kono share many other cultural traits (notably, female and male circumcision as complementary processes) as well as historical and geographic links, such as the Dogon of Mali. According to the Dogon myth, excision is justified on two counts: First, the initial act of intercourse between male Sky-God and female Earth was prevented because of the presence of a protruding anthill. Only after the barrier was removed could intercourse take place and, subsequently, the conception and birth of first ancestors. Second, these first ancestors, due to a related fluke, were born androgynous—masculine elements were present in the female and feminine elements in the male. These inhibiting "cross-sex" elements had to be removed in order for men and women to be completely distinct and reproductive (see Parrinder 1996:27–28).

For the Kono, however, the role of Sky-God (*Yataa*) is much more obscure. Kono hardly refer to Earth and God and first creation, only inasmuch as the concept of *Yataa*, the "One You Already Met," is self-explanatory—the beginning and the end. Notwithstanding, autochthonous<sup>13</sup> creation is suggested in the widely held view of Earth as the wife of God. Also, ritual sources do recount myths of their first ancestresses accidentally severing their own clitorises, which was discovered to be a good thing, a source of power and knowledge to be kept secret from men and perpetuated in ritual. The implicit belief that the first ancestors were born from Earth, God's wife, and local

mythology that depicts primordial females (inadvertently) excising themselves (usually through youthful masturbation) suggest some striking similarities to the Dogon story and a possible cosmological basis for explicit indigenous perceptions of the clitoris as an inherently masculine organ. Marilyn Strathern (1987) also postulated an "androgyny" theory to explain genital modifications among the Hagen of Papua, New Guinea. According to Strathern, indigenous views of the cosmos explain how persons are born "complete," that is, each individual contains both masculine and feminine elements at birth. Initiation is meant to engineer the deconstruction of persons into "incomplete" halves—male or female—who would then be capable of reproduction.<sup>14</sup>

However, the suggestion that the Kono may hold certain deep-rooted beliefs regarding the religious origin and necessity of female (and male) circumcision does not explain why the practice prevails today, particularly since local rationalizations are rarely alluded to on this level. Moreover, the fact that the layperson cannot recall such mythologies or stories about the cosmos or creation is further reason to consider other local justifications and motivations for initiation and "circumcision." Also, such worldview explanations that justify genital operations could rightly be interpreted as local ideological rationalizations that ensure the social status quo and the dominance of one group over another (e.g., Herdt 1982; Bloch 1986; see also Chapter 7 of this volume). In the case of the Kono and female "circumcision," as I will later demonstrate, ideological dimensions of female rituals ensure the power and preeminence of older women over younger women as well as over men in society. Nevertheless, myths are important because they point to origin and meaning (Bachofen 1967:70), however much history imposes its own distortions and reinterpretations (Bloch 1986:10–11). Also, the question of origin is becoming increasingly important, particularly to African women who uphold the tradition and are continually finding themselves in a position to justify the practice to outsiders and, perhaps more so, to themselves.

### *Nature, Culture, and "Sex" Categories*

Principles of sexual complementarity and interdependence that underlie fragmented constructions of Kono cosmology and mythology are also evident in more accessible cultural notions of sex and gender and the practice of sexual operations. Unlike Western cultures, which divide human bodies into two sex categories, "male" and "female," believed to exist outside culture and therefore "natural" and immutable, the Kono have a different ontological understanding of bodies: only infants and very young children are conceived of as "natural," ontologically prior to "culture," or "proto-social," as MacCormack remarked for the Sherbro concept of children in southern Sierra Leone (MacCormack 1980:95). Like other areas that fall into the category of "nature," such as the "bush" or forest before being cleared or "tamed" and "made" into

productive farmland, children must be “made” into either “male” or “female” depending on the appearance of their genitalia at birth, in order for them to be able to reproduce and become part of the world of “culture.” Children and postmenopausal women, who have not reached in the first case or have passed in the second their sexually productive cycles, are given an ambiguous sex status—that is, they are seen as somehow androgynous or socially gender neutral. Initiation is the occasion for the social and cultural construction of “male” and “female” beings, and genital cutting is the key mode of effecting physical, psychological, and supernatural transformation of both sexes.

### *Reproduction and Sexuality*

When asked about the significance of excision, ritual officials recite what are now common rationalizations for the practice (see Chapter 1 of this volume): “culture” and “tradition,” cleanliness, purity, enhancement of fertility, and reduction of excessive sexual desire. The previous discussion about cosmology and cultural models of sex and gender was an attempt to explore underlying indigenous religious and cultural reasons, such as the idea of the inherent bisexuality of humans, which contribute to excision being vehemently defended as “tradition” and “culture.” Local discourses on cleanliness and purity regarding excision also imply beliefs about the inborn masculinity of females, symbolized by the clitoris. Kono ideas about female fertility and sexuality also follow upon creation myths and beliefs about nature and culture as well as sex and gender, which idiomatically justify the necessity of female “circumcision.”

For the Kono, sexual pleasure and reproduction are inextricably linked; the former is an incentive for the latter. The presence of the clitoris is seen to inhibit female fertility and sexuality in several ways. First, ritual officials and other Kono women adamantly maintain that if left untouched, the clitoris will continue to grow and become unsightly, like a penis; and second, leaving the clitoris untouched will categorically lead to incessant masturbation and sexual insatiability.

Like myths about the origin of excision, which invariably mention inadvertent cutting of the clitoris, the theme of masturbation is omnipresent in Kono accounts of the practice. Because the presence of the clitoris is seen as leading to excessive masturbation and excision is viewed as a condition of fertility, masturbation is logically construed as a deterrent to female fertility. It was explained to me during my seclusion period that an oversized clitoris and masturbation are inimical to fertility because the first is an obstruction and the latter an avoidance of coitus. Without coitus there can be no conception leading to human reproduction (notwithstanding modern reproductive technology, which is unavailable, if not unknown, to Kono villagers). Masturbation can be seen as preventing coitus to the extent that a young girl, discov-

ering that she can sexually stimulate herself or be manually stimulated by others (including other females), does not desire or seek vaginal penetration by a man's penis. The clitoris is seen as parallel to the penis of a prepubescent boy—both have erotic but no reproductive value. However, according to a ritual informant, a young boy develops into an adult man, and his penis enlarges and acquires procreative value, whereas in most cases the clitoris remains relatively diminutive in size, incapable of penetration, and thus can neither sexually satisfy nor impregnate another woman. In short, the clitoris is analogous to a *dysfunctional* penis where women's reproduction and (hetero)sexuality is concerned. Thus, excision can be interpreted metaphorically and physiologically as an eschewal of undeveloped, inhibiting masculinity.

### *Female Ideology, Authority, and Power*

However, inasmuch as a culture's sex and gender models and beliefs about reproduction and sexuality can make sense of cultural practices such as genital modifications, they are still inadequate in accounting for the widespread continuity of these practices. Thus far, I have presented Kono ideologies as if these existed in a cultural vacuum, isolated from contact with outside groups and external influences that may promulgate conflicting practices and beliefs. As noted earlier, dramatic changes have occurred, particularly within economic sectors, that have uprooted traditional life and precipitated permanent shifts in Kono society. Young Kono women, drawn to urban mining centers, are heavily influenced by new, "global" culture defined by American hip-hop, Coca-Cola, "gangsta" videos, and classic action-packed films such as *Rambo* (again I recommend Richards 1996 for an account of postmodern youth culture and the bush war being waged in Sierra Leone). Many young women are actively engaged in war, primarily as rebel recruits, exposed to and themselves committing some of the worst human atrocities in recent international history. Other Kono women have traveled, been schooled and spent most of their lives abroad. Some are national political leaders having to come to terms with heated issues such as the small yet vocal war being launched internationally to end female "circumcision." In this section I discuss the remarkable degree of continuity still found in practices of initiation and "circumcision," despite these broader changes brought on by modern developments.

Among the Kono, as Hardin has observed, power (*gbaseia*) involves above all the ability to "harness knowledge, medicines, witchcraft, and other supernatural means in socially appropriate ways" (Hardin 1993:192), and Bundu and Poro are the ultimate embodiments of female and male power, respectively. There can be no adequate understanding of the compelling force of initiation and "circumcision" without an appreciation of women's power and influence in Kono society even today. The social and cultural imperative to initiate and "circumcise" one's daughter is expressed top down through hier-

archically organized categories of women. Within the women's sphere of sociopolitical and religious influence, the *soko* is the top woman, the mother of the community, the ritual intermediary between living women, their female ancestresses, and the Earth Goddess. The *soko* is also the custodian of ancient ritual secrets, particularly regarding fertility and the feminine role in creation, but she is also guardian and protector of dangerous ritual "medicines," or "leaves," which are used to protect novices during initiation, particularly from witches and other malevolent supernatural forces who "smell" the fresh blood of novices (see also Chapter 7 of this volume).

The *soko*'s "medicines" are also used to defend the sodality against intrusive men and other noninitiates who may try to steal its secrets and powers. In fact, several women ritual officials professed that the *soko* has power over all men, including those within the Poro hierarchy. Because of their secret knowledge regarding fertility, such women have the power to cause impotence in men as well as death. K. Kargbo, a Sierra Leonean diplomat and former practicing gynecologist and consultant on female "circumcision" issues, mentioned to me in an interview (August 7, 1994) that if a male politician ever wanted to commit political suicide in his country, he need only speak out against Bundu and incur the wrath of its leaders and masses of women in society.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the potential of witchcraft and "medicines" is accepted by virtually all sectors of society presents compelling mechanisms for social control remaining in the hands of these women.

Most important, the *soko* has the socioreligious authority to create "woman"—that most productive and reproductive asset as far as patriarchy, that is, male-headed families, compounds, villages, and lineages, is concerned. She gives religious, social, and cultural sanction to women's reproductive and productive roles: an initiated or well "trained" woman will fulfill her social responsibilities as mother and as farm laborer. Given the traditional socioeconomic primacy of marriage and motherhood among the Kono, as in most African cultures, and Bundu's paramount historical function of producing marriageable women committed to accomplishing their productive and reproductive roles, the *soko* is charged with the most credited task in society. However, the role of Bundu and its leaders in this regard has engendered some controversy among scholars. D'Azevedo (1994:342–362) and Caroline Bledsoe (1984) in particular have criticized Sande and female ritual officials as colluding with patriarchy in order to maintain the subordination of women in society. This position, however, misses the point that female subordination is much more complex and situational than Western analysis permits. What Bundu teaches first and foremost is the subordination of young girls and women to female elders: their mothers, future mothers-in-law, grandmothers, older women within the community, and, of course, female ritual leaders.

Secondly, novices are taught the *art* of subservience to some categories of men, that is, their future husbands and other male representatives of those

lineages.<sup>16</sup> In the first instance, vis-à-vis female elders—that is, within their own sex group—initiates and younger women *are* inferior. However, cross-sex status comparisons would violate local dual-sex models, which emphasize complementarity and interdependence through sexual difference and autonomy. In the second instance, vis-à-vis their husbands and their male (and female) lineage representatives, young novices are taught to *feign* subservience—in verbal communication, body language and gestures, and the performance of domestic duties—in order to live harmoniously among their affines. But ritual leaders do not only teach subservience. They themselves are examples of ultimate female authority: wise, unyielding, and unsentimental. It is the *soko*'s responsibility to see to it that novices are inculcated with the ideals of femininity as laid down by previous ancestresses: stoicism, which must be displayed during excision; tenacity and endurance, which are achieved through the many other ordeals a novice must undergo; and, most important, “dry-eye,” that is, daring, bravery, fearlessness, and audacity—qualities that will enable young women to stand their ground as adults in their households and within the greater community. Thus, the *soko* has a paradoxical responsibility of “creating” dual-natured “woman”: a community-oriented and subservient person to be exchanged in marriage, as well as a defiant individual who capitalizes on the bolder qualities ingrained in her feminine identity in defending her own goals, priorities, and stakes within society.

### *Mothers: Upholders of Tradition*

Female elders flank the upper echelons of Bundu. The next and most important category of women as far as the continuation of initiation and excision is concerned are the middle-aged grandmothers, whose critical job it is to put pressure on their daughters, who may be wary young mothers. These eminent elders have significant moral and emotional control over their married daughters. New mothers often spend a great deal of time in their natal villages under the supervision of their own mothers, particularly after the birth of and throughout the weaning period of their children. This group of older women are well aware of their importance when it comes to initiation and are often the ones spearheading the organization and orchestration of their granddaughter's ceremonies. It is incumbent on mothers to initiate their daughters properly, according to ancestral customs, in order for the latter to become legally recognized as persons with rights and responsibilities in society. Thus, there is enormous cultural demand for mothers to conform to the tradition of initiation, no matter how far their travel, the length of their absence from their local communities, and for those who are abroad in Europe or the United States, the intensity of their “Westernization.”

For Kono women living in the diaspora, there is not much difference because many remain very close to their mothers. Although older women and

female ritual officials put tremendous social pressure on mothers to "circumcise" their daughters, this pressure does not sufficiently explain why most women adhere to the tradition. If most women felt in some way oppressed by this aspect of culture—after all, they too were once initiates—why not then rise up individually or collectively and put an end to it? When the urgency is somewhat mitigated by distance and systematic disapproval of host countries, what are the reasons for continuation? As has been observed elsewhere in this volume, the reluctance of women to disengage from female "circumcision" could well be a result of gauging what other women will do—that is, some women may not actually support the continuation of the practice, but they do not want their daughters to be the odd ones out.

Kono women living in the diaspora explain that they want their daughters to enjoy the same legal rights as other women, and even more, they want them to "fit" into Kono society and be respected among their peers and the entire community of women. My own personal experience, which is hardly unusual, is a case in point. I am often reminded by Kono relations that had I not undergone initiation, I would not be able to be involved in meetings concerning "women's business," that I would not be able even to speak as a "woman" or on behalf of any women. Moreover, no initiated Kono woman would dare to talk to me about Bundu. In short, I would be ridiculed and maligned as an arrogant *puu moe*<sup>17</sup> or worse, an "uncircumcised woman," the ultimate insult against a woman. At the same time, these women do not necessarily believe that their Western-born or -bred daughters will care to be integrated in or accepted by Kono society. In fact, some admit that their daughters, if left to themselves, have no intention of visiting Kono or even Africa for that matter (given the negative image of war and poverty), let alone of marrying Kono men.

Societal coercion and pressure to conform, however, do not explain the *eagerness* and *excitement* felt by vast numbers of participants (residents in Kono as well as outside) in initiation ceremonies, including mothers of initiates, even if these same mothers also experience anxiety over the safety of their daughters. It is difficult for me—considering the number of these ceremonies I have observed, including my own—to accept that what appear to be expressions of joy and ecstatic celebrations of womanhood in actuality disguise hidden experiences of coercion and subjugation. Instead, I offer that most Kono women who uphold these rituals do so because they *want* to—they relish the supernatural powers of their ritual leaders over against men in society, and they embrace the legitimacy of female authority and, particularly, the authority of their mothers and grandmothers. Also, they maintain their cultural superiority over uninitiated/uncircumcised women.

There are numerous examples of how modernity and tradition coexist and intermingle, how initiation and "circumcision" can remain meaningful for individuals despite rapid changes in education, modernization, migration,

war, and so on. Kono women engaged in altercation as far away as London and Washington, D.C., often challenge each other's womanhood—that is, the brazenness that undergoing the knife is supposed to produce and that reinforces the significance of excision as a symbol of strength and power. One female relation, who claimed to be against excision, was quick to disparage Krio<sup>18</sup> women as “uncircumcised” and “dirty” and also insisted that despite her current ambivalence, she will have her daughter “join” Bundu. In this case, excision was asserted as a symbol of cultural difference and superiority. Also, I have accompanied several female relations in delivery rooms and watched as the latter are cajoled by other female relatives to *biah*—a Krio word meaning “to endure and overcome the pain.” The woman in labor is made to recall that she is a “woman,” after all, a *Sandeene*.<sup>19</sup>

### *Initiation, Change, and the Impact of War*

Neither modernity, global eradication campaigns, nor high-tech warfare has delegitimized initiation and “circumcision” among the subjects of this study. Rather, initiation has been changing according to exigencies of the day. The duration of seclusion has been drastically reduced, and in some rare cases, there is “cutting without ritual” (see Chapter 12 of this volume). Gone are the days when young girls spent many months and Kono boys several years in the bush, receiving cultural and religious instructions and practical training in domestic duties as well as in artistic performance, particularly song and dance. In modern times children have greater access to secular education, and so young girls enter the “bush” (sometimes the house of an older female relation) for not more than one month, sometimes just a couple of weeks, until their wounds are healed enough for their return to school. Although there was previously a limited amount of “cutting without ritual,” notably among Christian Krio women who decided to marry Kono men and preferred to be “circumcised” in hospitals, today, I am told, “circumcisions” are performed on girls when they are as young as toddlers, in the fear that these children may forever forgo their Kono identities, either because of intensification and aggressiveness of eradication campaigns or because they may wind up as refugees in other, possibly Western countries as a result of dislocations caused by war.<sup>20</sup>

Back in Kono, other institutions co-opt and exploit the powerful symbols of secret societies for more destructive goals than “circumcision.” The horrifying reality of “ritual without cutting” in war-torn Kono differs radically in intention and effect from the eradication strategy employing that concept in the Gambia (see Chapter 12). Young Kono women (and men, often young boys) engaged in bush fighting, either on the side of junta/rebels or of local traditional militia (*kamajohs*), must undergo new-age initiations and come under the influence of powerful “modern medicine” (i.e., crack cocaine) fashionable in West African warfare today. Reports from child soldiers suggest that the ear-



lier versions of (particularly male) initiation rituals that emphasized killing, in hunting and war, and all kinds of unimaginable physical and psychological ordeals, are now primary methods used by rebel leaders in recruiting and converting young fighters, both male and female. "Circumcision" in these war campaigns would be irrelevant, if not redundant: virtually all recruits will have already gone through the "bush," but other initiation symbols are amplified, distorted, and abused for the purposes of warfare. Despite the grisliness of such facts, they reinforce the historical and religious legitimacy of initiation on a psychic level for individual women (and men) and demonstrate how these ancient rituals, originally conceived of for one purpose, may still be relevant today, even to justify additional, more nefarious ends.

### The "Debate": Physical, Sexual, and Psychological Effects

Anthropologists have not been the only ones interested in initiation and female genital cutting. In the 1980s, and 1990s many others—feminists, politicians, international aid organizations, and the international medical community within and without Africa—have produced a plethora of literature and convened conferences and the like on the subject of the effects of various forms of genital cutting on women's bodies, sexuality, and psychological well-being. My intention in this section is to interrogate some of the major assumptions in prevailing international discourses on female "circumcision" in light of my own experiences and the data collected from other Kono women, primarily but not limited to immigrants residing in the United States.

First, as regards the health implications of excision, several short- and long-term risks have been associated with the practice (see Chapter 1 of this volume). I have personally interviewed several male and female Sierra Leonean gynecologists who profess that although they regard excision as "medically unnecessary," the practice does not pose any significant adverse long-term effects to women, and that, moreover, traditional circumcisers are on the whole "very well trained" and are "experts" at what they do. None had personally treated women with long-term problems related to excision, but all stated that they had come across "reports" of horror cases.

The doctors I have spoken to, irrespective of their position on the legitimacy of the practice, agree that short-term risks can be significantly reduced, if not altogether eliminated, through the use of antiseptic instruments, anesthetics to reduce pain, and skilled traditional officials. Also, it must be noted that most Kono women I have spoken to maintain that excision has existed in their society for hundreds of years, and the practice has neither adversely affected their fertility nor given their womenfolk the types of gynecological or obstetrical problems that have been associated with the operation in recent

years. Thus, if some medical practitioners are saying that safe excisions are possible under the right conditions and if many Kono women do not attribute gynecological/obstetrical problems to their operations and choose to continue to uphold their tradition, a genuine case for limited medicalization can be made. As has been noted in Chapter 6, such steps may reduce the immediate risks of the operation for young girls, until such a time that women are collectively convinced to give up the practice.

Second, my research and experience contradict received knowledge regarding the supposedly negative impact of removing the clitoris on women's sexuality. Much of this taken-for-granted information may come from popular misconceptions about the biological significance of the clitoris as the source of female orgasms. It is probable that such myths evolved as a result of the heightened focus on the female clitoris during the 1960s sexual revolution and subsequent discourses regarding women's sexual autonomy (Henrietta Moore, personal communication). The clitoris has come to be seen in Western societies as not only the paramount organ responsible for women's sexual pleasure but has also been elevated as *the* symbol of women's sexual independence because the latter suited women's objectives in asserting their sexual agency and rejecting previous constraining notions of their roles as wives and mothers.

However, the presumptions that inform Kono women's values regarding female sexuality, as in other aspects of sociocultural life, emphasize sexual interdependence and complementarity, principles that are profoundly heterosexual. Western women's notions of the importance of the clitoris to female sexual autonomy can be contrasted with Bundu officials' stress on vaginal stimulation, which implies male penetration, and this emphasis glaringly suggests heterosexual intercourse, which is considered the socially ideal form of sexual relations because it leads to reproduction. My informants consider vaginal orgasm as independent of the clitoris but still fundamental to a woman's sexuality. Perhaps because women believe that the "internal" vagina is the appropriate locus of women's sexual pleasure, they profess that the clitoris is redundant and leads to excessive "sexiness." Also, because the clitoris is associated with androgyny and "nature," its presence signifies lack of self-control or self-discipline, which are attributes of "culture." Bundu officials insist that the clitoris is "no good" and that it leads to uncontrolled masturbation in girls and sexual insatiability in adult women. It is believed to be a purely superfluous erotic organ, unlike a "proper" adult penis, its sex-corollary, which at least has reproductive functions. It is thus understandable, even if one does not agree, how some Kono women can claim that although excision curbs a woman's desire for sex, the operation itself does not reduce her enjoyment of sexual pleasure.<sup>21</sup>

As pointed out in Chapter 1, there can be no way to "objectively" test the evidence regarding the impact of excision on women's sexuality because it is

subjective and individually variable. Notwithstanding, an interesting finding in *The Hite Report* is that the external clitoris constitutes a small fraction of the total nerve endings that produce sensations for the entire appendage (see also Chapter 1). This suggests that excision does not damage most of the clitoral nerve endings because they are beneath the vaginal surface. Thus, paradoxically, even according to "objective" biological science, it is possible for a woman's sensitivity to remain for the most part undiminished after excision. This would probably explain how it is that many women who had sexual experiences *prior* to excision, the author included, perceive either no difference or increased sexual satisfaction following their operation. In any case, most contemporary, urban-educated as well as rural Kono women are just as interested in their sexuality as are their counterparts in Western countries, and they do not perceive excision as inhibiting them in any way. It is also worth noting, especially since it is usually omitted, that significant numbers of Western women, despite having their clitorises intact, experience their own difficulties in achieving any kind of orgasm, clitoral or vaginal.

Finally, with regard to the psychological well-being of young girls and women who have undergone initiation and excision, more research is needed before any credible generalizations can be made. A small but growing number of African female activists against various forms of "circumcision" have detailed the pain and trauma they underwent and the lasting impact such negative experiences have had on their lives, and they campaign against what they rightfully believe to be an affront to their human rights and womanhood. I have spoken to a few young Kono women who are adamantly opposed to initiation because of their experiences of pain, abuse, and maltreatment by female elders in the "bush." However, most women I have interviewed fervently support the practice, and my observations in the field confirm that most girls not only continue to look forward to their initiation but, further, demonstrate their ongoing support for the practice by actively participating in later ceremonies involving younger female friends and relations.

## Conclusion

The question is often put to me: "How can a Western-bred and -educated African woman *support* a practice that degrades women and deprives them of their humanity?" Notwithstanding the ethnocentrism in this remark and the fact that I prefer to consider myself "neutral" in terms of the continuation of the practice, I am aware of many educated, professional, "circumcised" African women gracefully negotiating their way through culturally distinct settings. There are those, the author included, who refuse to privilege one presumably objective, scientific model of personhood over supposedly "misguided" local interpretations but rather seek to juggle "modern" and "tradi-

tional" identities according to the appropriate cultural context. Educated, "circumcised" African women, like most people of multicultural heritage, maneuver multiple identities depending on the specific circumstances in which they find themselves. Personally, I do not see any conflict or contradiction in being educated and being "circumcised" because the contexts which require each of these cultural idiosyncrasies are separate and distinct.

For me, the negative aspect of excision was that it was a physically excruciating experience, for which, given my relatively cushioned Western upbringing, I was neither emotionally nor psychologically prepared. This is in contrast to most of the prepubescent Kono girls with whom I was "joined." As with the young Mandinka girls in the Gambia among whom I am currently conducting fieldwork, they "took" excision "bonically" (a Krio term used to describe sheer human strength, strength of the flesh) and in a few hours were up, laughing and playing.<sup>22</sup> After one or two days, they were jumping up and down dancing the "bird dance" to the rhythm of makeshift drums in preparation for their big "coming out" dance. To impose on my research what was my own experience of "pain" would be a gross distortion of the experiences of most of the other novices and thus a certain disservice to anthropological knowledge in general.

The positive aspects have been much more profound. Initiation was the "acting out" and celebration of women's preeminent roles in history and society. Although I could not at the time put together all the pieces, I felt I was participating in a fear-inspiring world, controlled and dominated by women, which nonetheless fascinated me because I was becoming a part of it. In the years since, I have managed to make sense of much of the ritual symbolism and "acting-out," enough to understand that women claim sole credit for everything from procreation to the creation of culture, society, and its institutions, and, most important, they maintain a "myth of male dominance" so that their fundamental prerogatives are not threatened by increasing masculinization of religion, culture, and society in Africa (see Amadiume 1987).

One such prerogative is the virtual deification of mothers among the Kono (and most African societies, for that matter). Consequently, one of the greatest abominations of any African male or female, high or low, is the curse of his or her mother. This is not only symbolically important for women, but it gives them "real" power in inter- and intradomestic lineage and immediate family relations, by virtue of the moral privilege women have over sons and daughters. This could also explain the findings of Heidi Skramstad (1990:17) and Ylva Hernlund in Chapter 12 indicating that Gambian Mandinka women continue "circumcision" first and foremost out of respect for their mothers and grandmothers. Even for the few Kono women who have second thoughts about "joining" their own daughters, the idea of eradication never comes up. It is not so much that an unexcised woman is unfathomable to them, but the public defiance and condemnation that abolition campaigns require would

constitute a most unfathomable "insult" against their mothers and grandmothers.

Another feature of excision is the way in which the scar itself symbolizes women's sameness or common female identity. In effect, the operation rite is what defines and, thus, essentializes womanhood. Unlike in Western society, there is no confusion or fruitless intellectualizing about the definition of "woman." Among the Kono, a woman is a woman by virtue of the fact that she has been initiated and nothing else. But initiation also creates a hierarchical ordering of women in society. At the apex is, of course, the *Soko*, the mother of the community, then an individual's mother, after which is her mother-in-law, and then all other older women in the community. A woman's equals are her age-mates, those with whom she was initiated and those falling within the same age group. Thus, sameness is not always tantamount to equality, and neither does it imply strict conformity to dominant values of womanhood, such as motherhood. For example, my grandmother often nags me about not yet having children and about the importance of motherhood to a woman, but for her, as for the entire community, it was my initiation that "made" me into a "woman."<sup>23</sup> Perhaps these ideas explain how some "circumcised" African women can be educated and Westernized and yet not view the practice as an affront to their womanhood. In short, initiation/excision has the positive value of creating sameness among all women and maintaining equality within age-groups as well as a general hierarchy of female authority in society.

Other advantages of initiation include beliefs about women's esoteric knowledge and their monopoly over powerful "medicines." Although excision cannot be said to be a marker of ethnicity today (most ethnic groups in Sierra Leone practice excision), what does distinguish Kono Bundu from those of other groups are the "medicines" that are used. According to a high-ranking Bundu official, even more important than excision itself is the women's "medicine" used in the ritual. The more powerful a sodality's "medicine" is reputed to be, the more feared and thus influential are the women leaders of such a group. Kono women often assert the power of their own "medicine" and claim that this is how they dominate their men and "keep them home." Also, it is believed that the "medicine" that is used for the novices during initiation will protect them against all sorts of witchcraft and other malevolent supernatural practices, which may be aimed at them throughout their lives.

My final and more subjective point is my shared view of the aesthetics of excision and (male) circumcision. I propose that the basis of Kono appreciation of male/female genital modifications is compatibility and harmony with basic principles of complementarity and interdependence. These ideals underpin cosmological beliefs regarding sex and gender difference and are manifested in the dual-sex organization of culture and society. As long as there are

deeply implanted mental associations of the clitoris with masculinity, then the former will continue to be regarded as dirty, abnormal, unclean, and harmful by a culture that sees "male" and "female" as fundamentally separate and distinct moral categories.

### To Cut or Not to Cut? The Future of Excision

Although location and identity may establish who is an "outsider" as opposed to an "insider" with respect to studies on FGC, these factors do not automatically determine the position of any writer regarding abolition. For example, not a few anthropologists—who are by discipline Western scholars and often by nationality "outsiders"—have been bitterly criticized for their attempts to represent the cultural viewpoints and values of their informants. Conversely, indigenous African female activists or "insiders" fighting against FGM often promulgate the same messages contained in global discourses that link the practice to women's social, sexual, and psychological oppression. What is certain is that the future of FGC will depend on the extent to which "insiders" themselves are convinced of the purported negative effects of the practice.

The medical evidence as well as the speculations regarding adverse effects on women's sexuality do not tally with the experiences of most Kono women. It is the immediate physical pain and risk of infection that concern most mothers, and both of these hazards can be reduced, if not eliminated, through medicalization, education, and general modernization of the operation. A compelling point has been made, however, that all the eradication mechanisms, such as policies of international organizations and local non-governmental organizations devoted to changing people's attitudes and behaviors, have already been set in place and that most likely there can be no going back (see Chapter 1 of this volume). But the virtually universal resistance to change after several decades of international and internationally sponsored local campaigning, conferencing, and legislating suggests that what is seriously needed is a rethinking of previous eradication strategies and a deeper appreciation of the historical and cultural relevance of this ancient practice and its symbolically dynamic and fluid links to women's changing sources and notions of power.

In my opinion, if eradication has become an irreversible "international" political compulsion, then the idea of "ritual without cutting" (see Chapters 1 and 12 of this volume) seems to be a reasonable middle ground. The ritual-without-cutting model positively values many cultural aspects and beliefs underlying female genital operations and initiation while attempting to eliminate the actual physical cutting. Perhaps what *is* needed to replace the physical act of cutting is an equally dynamic symbolic performance that will

retain the same fluidity in associated meanings—eschewal of masculinity, womanhood, fertility, equality, hierarchy, motherhood, and sexual restraint. However, for rural Kono women in particular, the “cutting” and “medicine” are all-important. Also, as I discussed earlier, “ritual without cutting” can be very dangerous when taken out of context, such as in the recruitment and “training” of child rebels in Kono.

I continue to support, however, the goal of medicalizing and modernizing initiation and “circumcision”—not necessarily in a full sense of institutionalizing female “circumcision” or transferring the practice from the “bush” to hospitals, as in male circumcisions today, because this would reduce the power and authority of female ritual leaders and female elders but rather by making available basic, modern hygienic equipment and medications to traditional officials to use during rituals. I support change that will promote safe, sanitary environments, so that initiates are given adequate, modern medical assistance to reduce pain and the risk of infection. The position that this only legitimizes the practice is dangerously arrogant: the practice is already seen as legitimate by its proponents, who have themselves undergone excision, and denying them the benefits of medicalization only continues to endanger the health and lives of innocent young girls. Modernization should also include impartial, neutral education within primary and secondary schools.<sup>24</sup> Such education should detail both the positive historical and cultural significance of initiation/“circumcision” as well as its possible negative health effects. The emphasis should be on preparing young girls to make informed choices about their futures and the futures of their own female children.

What direction individual women take should be left to them and their immediate family members. Just as much as diehard “traditionalists” must relinquish their insistence that uncircumcised women are not socially and culturally “women” and therefore must be denied legal rights and dignity within society, hard-line efforts by abolitionists to coerce women to reject the practice and to stigmatize those who uphold their ancestral traditions as “illiterate,” “backward,” and against “women’s rights” and “progress” are unacceptable. In this “debate,” the majority of “circumcised” African women are unfortunately caught between a rock and a hard place, as the adage goes: either break traditional customary laws and face the consequences of “not belonging” or ignore increasing efforts to ban the practice and face possible legal penalties instigated by eradicators at the national and international level. Today, it seems that the pressure on “circumcised” African women, educated or not, is to choose between these two extremist positions—to be either “anti-culture” or “antiprogress.”

Change may indeed be occurring gradually, but I do not believe this is necessarily a direct result of anti-FGM campaigning. In my grandmother’s days, excision was a universal rite of passage. For my educated, Christian mother who has spent over thirty years in the United States, initiating her

daughters was a matter of judgment, an expedient choice to enable us to navigate easily between worlds. My generation is faced with a dramatically different and greater complexity of issues and other priorities (i.e., the complete destruction of Kono through civil war), and as a result, initiation and excision can hardly be said to be the most pressing preoccupation of young, contemporary Kono women. In the event that I ever have a daughter, I would like her to be well-informed about the sociocultural and historical significance of the operation as well as its purported medical risks so that she can make up her own mind, as I had the opportunity to do. Regarding female initiation and "circumcision" in Africa, John Mbiti has noted: "If they are to die out, they will die a long and painful death" (Mbiti 1990:129). However, through more culturally sensitive and appropriate "education" as well as limited medicalization strategies, the "death" of female "circumcision" could be more gradual, more natural, and a lot less painful for millions of future African women and girls.

## Notes

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1. See Strathern (1987) for an important critique of this assumption based on her work among the Hagen of Papua New Guinea. Another poignant critique of Western assumptions and models of sex and the acquisition of gender identity is offered by Atkinson and Errington (1990).

2. "Rare" in terms of the types of procedures undergone by the total number of African women from cultures that uphold some form of female genital cutting throughout the continent.

3. I will use the terms female "circumcision" and female genital cutting in a general sense to mean genital operations that, although rooted in cultural, historical, and



religious traditions, have no "medical" or "clinical" basis. The term "excision" will be used to describe the specific procedure undergone by Kono women.

4. This term is used by Amadiume (1997) to refer to the mother-focused structural/ideological basis of most traditional African societies.

5. I use the terms "secret societies" and "secret sodalities" interchangeably.

6. Most scholars and observers agree that the Kono (and Vai of southern Liberia) are ethnically a Mandinka subgroup who now consider themselves as a distinct cultural/linguistic group since their migration and settlement in their current geographic location.

7. The bulk of the research on which this chapter is based was collected prior to and during the gradual destruction of this area of Sierra Leone due to protracted rebel fighting. As of January 1999, Kono, a region rich in diamonds, has been completely overrun by rebels who are using the area to mine minerals, which are then used to finance the weapons and mercenaries needed for their war against the government. Kono people are currently living as displaced persons within those areas of Sierra Leone not under rebel control and as refugees in neighboring countries and in the West.

8. The women's secret society among the Kono is known as Bundu. However, among the Mende and other neighboring groups, they are called Sande. I use the term "Bundu" specifically in reference to the Kono and the term "Sande" when referring generally to secret societies in the region or to specific ethnic groups studied by authors whose work I cite.

9. See, for example, Ottenberg (1994b). Among the Mende, female chiefs are often the norm, and they are usually leaders of Sande (MacCormack 1972, 1979). These women can also be initiated into Poro and buried as "men" in the Poro bush (interview with male Poro informant).

10. See Kopytoff and Miers (1977) for an illuminating discussion of the concept of "belonging" in African lineages.

11. This term is used to signify variously becoming a member of Bundu, the initiation process itself, or the act of "circumcision," or any combination of the three.

12. Among the Kono, the *soko* is both head of Bundu and also the traditional circumciser.

13. In Greek, this term means "from the earth itself."

14. For the purposes of this study, my focus is primarily on the symbolic meaning of excision, bearing in mind that male circumcision is viewed as a necessary, complementary force.

15. An interesting parallel was recently provided in a statement by a Mandinka schoolgirl in the Gambia, where I am currently conducting research. She argued that there could never be any legal ban against female "circumcision" in the Gambia because all the male politicians are afraid of the powers of the *ngansingba* (traditional circumciser), who can strike at the seat of government in the capital of Banjul even from circumcision camps in the hinterland.

16. It is the patrilineal institution (*fa den moe*), made up of male and female members, which is regarded with such formal respect. Women have more relaxed relations with male and female members of their *bain den moe*, or maternal line. Thus, men are not automatically regarded as superior to women, if such a comparison can even be made. Status asymmetry depends on kinship/affine roles. A woman is subservient to her husband and his family, her children's *fa den moe*, but is on a par with her brother and her uncle, mother's brother, and other male members of her children's *bain den moe*. A woman's husband can also, of course, be another woman's brother or uncle, and status differentials will vary accordingly.

17. Literally, this means "white person."

18. Term used for the descendants of freed slaves who live in and around Freetown and account for less than 2 percent of the population. Although they have their own versions of 'secret societies,' they do not practice initiation and "circumcision" of girls. Boys, however, are routinely circumcised in hospitals.

19. *Sandeene* is the name (a term of endearment) used for initiates. It comes from the words *Sande* and *deene* (meaning child).

20. Western aid workers report that mass initiations are taking place in refugee camps, presumably with little or no ritual.

21. This is true also of many of the Mandinka women in my current study.

22. Female participants in my initiation used this expression to distinguish modern bourgeois rituals, equipped with anesthetic and the like to numb pain, from common, traditional rites with no medications. When stoicism is displayed by initiates in the latter case, the rite is said to have been endured "bonically."

23. Like many older Kono women, she does not see my not having a husband as particularly relevant to motherhood.

24. For example, a pilot program at Gambia College, sponsored by the UN Children's Fund, trains primary school teachers in their cultural studies curricula to instruct students about the cultural and health dimensions in a "neutral" manner.

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