

COMMENTARY & ISSUES

This commentary consists of a response to an article by Beth Maina Ahlberg, Ingela Krantz, Gunilla Lindmark and Marian Warsame published in CSP 24(1), and a reply by the authors of the original article.

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It is only a tradition: making sense of Swedish Somalis' narratives of female circumcision and avoiding submission to hegemonic political discourse

Abstract

This paper discusses the perspective and conclusions of an article in *Critical Social Policy*: "It's only a tradition": making sense of eradication interventions and the persistence of female "circumcision" within a Swedish context' (Ahlberg et al., 2004). In their analysis of Swedish Somalis' narratives of female circumcision, the authors interpret the unwillingness of the interviewees to admit a persistence of tradition in terms of 'denial' and 'avoidance'. We argue that an inadequate starting point makes their analysis biased, resulting in a violation of the interviewees' point of view. There is a lack of contextualization and triangulation. Instead of persistence of tradition, as emphasized by Ahlberg et al., we see reasons to focus on processes of abandonment of the practice. Their article raises issues of the researcher's position in a politicized context and of the importance of an awareness of how our preconceptions, as researchers, are formed by hegemonic political discourse.

Key words: cultural change, migration, validity

Introduction

Does female circumcision persist among Somalis in Sweden? Ahlberg et al. (2004) argue in an article in *Critical Social Policy* that the practice persists. Their conclusion is based on a qualitative study including 110 interviewees, some interviewed in groups and some individually, in Sweden between 1997–99.

While there are strong points in the article by Ahlberg et al., there are also critical weaknesses. We argue that the analysis of the interviewees' narratives is biased, and that this is a direct result of the study's premises. Instead of upholding an explorative, open-minded attitude towards the informants at the outset of the study, the authors presume a persistence of tradition, and show no readiness to re-evaluate this premise during the research process.

Below we will present the basis of our conviction that female circumcision (FC) is a practice generally abandoned in Sweden. Our argument is based on qualitative and quantitative studies in the field of FC in Sweden (Essén, 2001; Johnsdotter, 2002, 2004; Tamaddon et al., 2004; Johnsdotter et al., 2005). But first, we will take a closer look at the conclusive statement of Ahlberg et al. regarding persistence of this practice, and some of the empirical data they offer in support of this.

Persistence as a starting point

In the introductory paragraphs of their article, Ahlberg et al. inform the reader that their article 'is about female circumcision and questions *why it persists* despite eradication interventions and the migration of people to non-practising areas' (Ahlberg et al., 2004: 51; emphasis ours). It is further explained that the authors want 'to grasp why and in what forms FC persists' (p. 52), and one of the sections is headed 'The reasoning on the persistence of female circumcision' (p. 64). The reader is given the impression that Swedish Somalis persist with the practice and that this is supported by interview material in the study: '*Does it persist, as our research participants implied*, because it is deeply embedded in the societies practising it?' (p. 51, emphasis ours).

What exactly do the informants say about the practice of FC and its transmission? There are some clear cut statements quoted in the article, but these do not necessarily support the authors' position:

I am against it . . . it is a wrong tradition. It is groundless . . . there is no evidence in religion. This is a harmful tradition causing many health problems . . . and suffering during the wedding night. (p. 59, a young man)

There is no need to discuss it . . . Nobody practises it here because it is against Swedish law. It is a question of doing as the Romans do. (p. 60, an older woman)

We no longer do it. It is forbidden in Sweden. If you want to do such research, go to Africa where it is still practised. (p. 60, statement in a group interview with men)

Statements like these seem to form the basis for the authors' conclusion that Somalis avoid admitting, and even deny, that the practice of FC is maintained in Sweden. The authors are convinced that there is no connection between such statements and actual practice. In fact these quotes support reasoning about how there is 'denial that FC is still prevalent' (p. 71), and how intervention efforts have 'rather than eradicating FC, silenced and stigmatized it' (p. 72) – implying that the interviewees' accounts are dubious. 'Avoidance' and 'denial' (p. 50, p. 71) could be read as euphemisms for *lying*.

Some work has been done in social science regarding lying informants (e.g. Salamone, 1977; Bleek, 1987). The discussion has primarily concerned quantitative surveys. One example is a study about illegal abortions in Ghana (Bleek, 1987). Here the author could discern to what degree responses in a survey were unreliable, since he compared the survey responses with what he knew about the same individuals from traditional qualitative fieldwork (including interviews and observations in a village).

A particularly sceptical attitude in research is justified when it comes to research about illegal practices. As Bleek expresses it:

Anthropological knowledge is predominantly based upon what people say they do, not on what researchers see them doing. If one wants to investigate something in the past or something occurring elsewhere, one has to rely on secondhand information. Yet things taking place here and now often remain hidden to a researcher, because by their very nature these activities cannot tolerate the eye of an observer. (Bleek, 1987: 315)

The practice of FC, unlawful in western countries, is clearly an example of an activity that 'cannot tolerate the eye of an observer'. Facing the risk of prosecution, it is understandable if interviewees

avoid being open about their 'true' standpoints and actions, if these are contrary to what is regarded as socially acceptable or legal. However, before researchers resort to concepts like avoidance, denial or lying, they need to establish *if* their informants are lying. Bleek continues: 'Since it is the fate of fieldworkers to remain dependent on information from others, it is of crucial importance for them to develop techniques to assess and improve the reliability and validity of such information' (1987: 315).

The allegation that informants are lying requires presentation of some kind of evidence that the statements of the informants are untrue or obviously contradictory. One could say that some sort of triangulation¹ is needed to expose the unreliable quality of the informants' statements. In the article by Alhberg et al., however, no such evidence is presented.

Grasping the context

Some of the interview quotes in Ahlberg et al. (2004) may give a novice in the field of FC the impression that they provide some kind of evidence of persistence. For instance, consider the following quote:

Young men reported during a group discussion, of a conference in Sweden where one Imam was said to have advised people to continue with FC to avoid sexual debut at the age of 13, as is the practice among Swedish girls. (p. 64)

The quote might seem to indicate support for continued practice of FC. However, the lack of contextualization of this quote makes interpretation problematic. Why was this imam at the conference mentioned in the group interview, and how was his statement conveyed? Did the young men express satisfaction with the imam's view, or did they bring his view out to demonstrate their opposing views? Follow-up questions are not reported, which means that the reader lacks an appropriate basis to interpret the utterance.

Furthermore, assessing a quote like this requires a grasp of the wider context. Imams are often thought to be men of influence; hence, if an imam speaks favourably about FC there is reason to suspect a radical impact. Contrary to this view, we have found that the exile reassessment of the relation between Islam and FC is a process, especially among women, that takes place among laypersons

(Johnsdotter, 2002, 2003). This situation is also reported from a study including Somalis in London and Toronto:

They [the Somali women] redefined their Islam. They read the Qur'an themselves. They began to interpret it for themselves. They realized that the circumcision of women was not mandated or even encouraged by Islam, and they were able to separate the concepts of 'Good Muslim Woman' and circumcision. . . . They did not need any man – neither their husbands nor any other authoritative figures – to tell them how to think, what to do or how to do it. (McGown, 2003: 169)

The information about the reported standpoint of this imam is interesting in its own right, but it does not provide us with any evidence about the practice of FC in Sweden.

On other occasions interviewees seem to have given in and vaguely concurred with a proposed standpoint, when facing pressure from the researchers. The value of this material has to be assessed carefully:

When women *were pressed that they circumcise their daughters* to secure marriage partners for them, they agreed adding that men actually enforce FC by: 'refusing to eat food prepared by an uncircumcised woman.' (Ahlberg et al., 2004: 69; emphasis ours)

When the women present 'agreed', were they using a generic 'we' ('we, the Somalis') or were they talking about themselves as individuals? Did they refer to a traditional Somali context (which the very traditional example suggests), or were they saying something about the social context of Somalis in Sweden today?

The women are said to admit that 'men actually enforce FC', referring to the fact that men refuse 'to eat food prepared by an uncircumcised woman'. This is a traditional attitude, reported by some Somalis who account for different motives for maintenance of the practice in Somalia. Is this also something that the younger generation of Somali men in exile practise? It seems more reminiscent of rural and possibly nomadic life in Somalia. There is good reason to treat this kind of material carefully.

The quote also has another interesting aspect: there is a difference between notions about the opposite sex at a general level, and people's own experiences at an individual level. If the researchers had asked the women in the group how many men they knew *in person*, who would refuse to eat food prepared by an uncircumcised woman, they would probably have got a different picture. In our studies (e.g. Johnsdotter,

2002), it soon became obvious that there is often a discrepancy between statements about Somali men *in general* (said to be in favour of FC) and descriptions of *specific Somali men* – primarily men as fathers and husbands (described as opponents of FC). Conceptually, these women categorize men they know as ‘exceptions to the rule’. We can see an example of this also in the empirical data of Ahlberg et al.:

I . . . talk very openly with my brother. I often ask him whether he would marry a girl who is not cut. He says yes. In this way, he is different from the guys who say they cannot marry an uncircumcised woman. There are many stupid guys who say they cannot marry one who is not circumcised. (p. 68, a girl)

It would have been interesting to know if this girl would be able to actually name any of those ‘stupid guys’ or if her statement is part of a more collective cultural knowledge about what men are like and what they stand for. One might argue that the very *idea* of men supporting FC is reason enough for women to maintain the tradition. But also this situation is susceptible to change during times of migration. A still unmarried woman in one of our studies expresses what many women explained to us:

Those men [who are to marry the girls who are born now], they grow up now in Canada or London. I don’t think it will be any problem. Look at me, I’m about to marry soon, but the man I marry won’t ask if I’m circumcised or not. This is not the problem. (Johnsdotter, 2002: 160)

According to Ahlberg et al., there is a paradox in that informants denied persistence of FC at the same time as they had an ‘enormous fear of bringing up uncircumcised daughters in a liberal sexual moral environment’ (2004: 71). Where is the paradox? Our informants report this fear as well, but also the strategies they have developed to handle this situation – strategies which have nothing to do with circumcision: such as increased social control, intensified effort in religious education, but also increased dialogue with the daughters in sexual matters and showing of trust (Johnsdotter, 2002).

Suna

A statement by an elderly man is actually the only example reported in the article by Ahlberg et al. where something clearly favourable is said about FC:

First of all we have a tradition . . . an old tradition . . . not something we are starting now. We are not going to say that today we are in a new modern place, that we should not circumcise our daughters. We must continue to perform suna. (p. 68, an elderly man)

To make sense of this quote we need to understand the traditional Somali folk classification of FC. Basically, there are two varieties:

- I *Pharaonic circumcision* is the most extensive procedure (most often involving excision of parts of the clitoris, the labia minora and a sewing up of the labia majora, leaving a tiny opening).
- II. *Suna*. All procedures, which cannot be labelled 'pharaonic circumcision', are classified as some sort of 'suna'. This category includes procedures that are almost 'pharaonic', all intermediate forms, but also symbolic variants like 'pricking' (inducing a drop of blood by pricking of the clitoris with a sharp or pointed object).

This older man's utterance about the desirableness of maintaining a suna procedure for girls is question-begging: how did the other participants in the group interview react to his statement? Did they agree or disagree? Most importantly: what *kind* of suna is he referring to? Unless one is of the opinion that a milder procedure, like a symbolic pricking, is as bad as a procedure that is almost a pharaonic circumcision, the question is highly relevant.

According to Ahlberg et al. (2004: 62) research participants do not see suna as circumcision and therefore equate this practice with 'stopping circumcision'. It follows that 'when Somalis claim that they have abandoned the practice of FC, they actually keep circumcising according to suna'. This is a rather strong claim. Once again, it is a good idea to look carefully at the evidence. Two quotes in particular are used to illustrate this position:

Swedish law does not recognize that Somali people have already stopped circumcision . . . when I *circumcised* my daughters 20 years ago in *suna*, was this because of Swedish legislation . . . or my better understanding? (p. 62, a religious women leader, first emphasis ours)

Among my granddaughters, only one is *circumcised*. She was however not stitched. Only the *haram* part was removed. (p. 62, a religious women leader, first emphasis ours)²

In fact neither of the quotes supports the position that suna is equated with stopping circumcision, on the contrary they provide evidence

that these persons see suna as a milder form of circumcision, but still, *circumcision*.

In our research, one attitude towards FC dominates among the Swedish Somalis. Practically all of our informants claim that they would never have their own daughters circumcised in any form (not even suna), while they as *a matter of principle* find a symbolic suna *acceptable*. This is a reasoning based on their own interpretation of an Islamic position, and is usually accompanied by the condition that no removal of any tissue may take place. They argue for this position referring to the Quranic ban on inflicting harm on God's creation. When there is a clash between traditional practice and Muslim precepts, religion takes precedence – as stressed also by the interviewees in Ahlberg et al. Those who want their daughters to escape a painful tradition find excellent arguments to defend their position, referring to the 'true' Islamic standpoint crystallized within the internal debate in the Swedish Somali community (e.g. Johnsdotter, 2002, 2003).

Validity and triangulation

What if our informants lie, or avoid telling us the truth? What can be done in cases of doubt? In similar situations we have worked with means of assessing validity at different levels to test and adjust our conclusions. The following methods seem important.

Coherence and credibility

It is important that every extensive interview carries a degree of coherence. The level of coherence in an interview or series of interviews with the same person has something to say about authenticity and trustworthiness (Linde, 1993). An interviewee conveys a comprehensive intelligible description of his or her worldview, or view of a certain issue, and this representation can be compared to other interviewees' accounts and narratives.

Comparison with other studies

Comparing with other studies may be helpful as a means of identifying possible counterhypotheses. For instance, a qualitative study among Somalis in Canada and London showed how a growing

opposition toward FC to a great extent revolved around new interpretations of an Islamic point of view (McGown, 1999). Similar processes of change after migration to other Muslim countries have been reported, by Fábos (2001) regarding Sudanese people migrating to Cairo, and by Kassamali (1998) on Sudanese and Egyptians abandoning the practice on migration to the Gulf States. Morison et al. (2004) on Somalis in London render a more complex picture, but confirm largely that migration gives rise to changed attitudes.

In Israel, a study was undertaken where qualitative interviews were combined with genital examinations. The group studied, Ethiopian Falashi Jews, claimed they had abandoned the practice at once after migration to Israel, and the researchers could not see any signs of 'distress or nostalgia' (Grisaru et al., 1997: 214). The genital examinations, including 113 fertile women, confirmed abandonment of FC.

There may also be reason to compare the case of FC with the abrupt abandonment of the 'deeply rooted' practice of foot-binding in China a century ago (Mackie, 1996, 2000).

Triangulation by means of different data

Using data that take different perspectives on a topic may be particularly useful. For instance, a quantitative survey investigating Swedish health care providers' experiences (Tamaddon et al., 2004) supports the view that there is no abundance of unreported cases within the health care sector in Sweden. Very few health care providers had seen a newly performed circumcision in a patient, and the few cases reported may date back to the early and mid 1990s, when large groups of Somalis arrived in Sweden.

In Denmark, a general screening of (undressed) children when first attending school takes place in some cities. There is not a single documented case of a girl, growing up in Denmark, being circumcised (*Berlingske Tidene*, 31 January 2003).

We have also studied suspected cases in Sweden. No case has ever been taken to Swedish court. Nonetheless, in 2003, a study was undertaken to investigate and analyse all police reports dealing with suspected cases of FC through the years, including 'hearsay cases' reported by interviewed health care providers, social workers, municipal legal experts, hospital legal experts, police officers and other key actors working in the field in Sweden (Johnsdotter, 2004). In most

cases, it could be established that no circumcision had been performed. In other cases, it seemed unlikely, and in yet a few cases there was a possibility that illegal FC had been performed but no way to prove it. The large share of unfounded suspected cases shows that the level of alertness is high in Sweden. It is unlikely that there is a substantial, but hidden, incidence of FC, since most cases handled by the authorities turn out to be groundless.

A politicized context

It is important to note that the presupposition of Ahlberg et al., that FC persists among Somalis in Sweden, is not a deviant position. On the contrary, it is the public – and official – view of the state of affairs, and the taken-for-granted starting point of most reports of the issue in the mass media:

Everyone familiar with the matter is quite sure that female genital mutilation occurs in Sweden and in the rest of the European Union, but nobody knows of the extent. We don't even know if it is 20 percent or 90 percent of the women in some groups who have been mutilated. (representative of the Swedish Board of Health and Welfare, *Dagens Nyheter*, 30 May 2001)

For instance, 500 girls are born among Swedish Somalis every year. Since 98% of the girls in Somalia are being genitally mutilated, it is likely that a substantial share of the Swedish Somali girls are being mutilated. (Maj Britt Theorin, EU commissioner, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, 8 June 2001)

Sweden was the first western country to legislate against FC (in 1982), and this initiative was followed by several governmental programmes to check the practice and work for attitude changes among the immigrant groups concerned (including at least 50,000 people). Follow-up studies have not been launched to see if any cultural change has taken place. Hence, the essentialist notion of African unreflective tradition-carriers in Sweden can prevail – especially since there is no way to prove this depiction wrong. One might argue that the lack of documented cases is explained by the fact that we are dealing with a clandestine, underground activity. Such an attitude promotes a situation where these ideas can live on forever; the representation of Swedish Africans who mutilate their daughters on

kitchen tables in the suburbs. It provides free reign for people to misconstrue and misuse this important issue. For instance, a journalist in one of Sweden's most important daily newspapers wrote in an editorial: 'It is not Anders and Greta Svensson [names representing "typical Swedes"] who have their five-year-old daughter circumcised on the kitchen table, by a Somali circumciser on tour in Sweden' (*Dagens Nyheter*, 11 October 2002). No evidence whatsoever is provided to support that anyone else does this either. In this kind of situation there is no way for the Africans to clear themselves of suspicion: how can they prove that this is *not* going on?

This is a field of stakeholders (experts, officials, politicians, journalists, activists, community leaders). All actors have their own agenda and their own interests in presenting reality in one way or another. Our critique of Ahlberg et al. is also about this political field. To insist that Swedish Somalis persist with the practice of FC, while not presenting any evidence to support this conviction, is a submission to hegemonic political discourse. It is a question of both scientific standards and ethics. To borrow a phrase from McGown (2003), it is a matter of 'standing on authentic ground' at the representation of a group of people. If we truly listen to how Somalis describe their lives, it may show that female circumcision is something that is negotiated and reassessed far away from our preconceptions about 'deep rootedness' and culture preservation. Perhaps, in fact, it *is* 'only a tradition'.

Notes

1. Triangulation: a way to check the validity of data by comparing them to other sets of data (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).
2. *Haram*: Arabic; that which is forbidden for Muslims.

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