

# REVIEW ESSAY

## JANICE BODDY'S *CIVILIZING WOMEN*

• JOHANNA NIEMI •

JANICE BODDY. *Civilizing Women: British Crusades in Colonial Sudan*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pp. 440, 1 map. ISBN13: 978-0-691-12304-2.

Sudan is in the headlines today. Frequent mention is made in the daily media, not only of the war and possible genocide in Darfur, but also of tensions between the Muslim North and Christian and native South over oil revenues, flowing in mainly from the Southern provinces. Not surprisingly, many of these tensions appear in Janice Boddy's research on colonial Sudan from the mid 1880s until independence in 1956.

Sudan has been the focus of Janice Boddy's widely read work over the years. *Aman: The Story of a Somali Girl*, a volume edited by Virginia Lee Barnes and Janice Boddy (1994) is even available in Finnish (*Aman. Somalityön tarina*, 1996). In this book Barnes and Boddy recorded the life history of Aman, a Somali girl who led an unconventional life in traditional Sudanese society, leading finally to exile in the United States.

As the title of Janice Boddy's new book indicates, it narrates how Western women, both midwives on the ground in Sudan and feminist activists at home in England, tried to civilize the native women of Sudan in particular by rooting out the "barbarous" custom of female genital cutting. The title is purposefully ambiguous: both the civilizers and the civilized are women. That is not to say, however, that women are the main actors in this history.

Actually, the book contains two parts. The first is an inquiry into the history and politics of colonial Sudan and the second part addresses the crusade against female genital cutting. The crusades are seen in their historical context, in which the British colonizers formed alliances with Muslim Egypt to govern the Sudan.

### *The mindset of the colonizers*

For me, as a non-anthropologist, the first part of her very well-researched and written book, in which Boddy sets out the broad context of her study, was fascinating reading. It seems that Boddy has investigated every available archive in search of documentary data and her reading of the primary material goes far beyond a mere recital of 'what happened', to explore how people thought about and gave meaning to events. The contextual organization of the book into thematic chapters and the frequent use of Sudanese terms, names and references to historical events would make the book difficult to read were it not for the excellent lists of translations, persons and historical moments.

Boddy succeeds in combining the historical and political contexts with an analysis of the colonial mindset, especially that of the colonizers. Colonialism appears as kind of a masculine game in which the colonizers are simultaneously trying to impress the colonised with pomp and ceremony (as with the visit of the British monarchs described on page 62) and the people at home with heroic stories about the dangers and adventures encountered

on hunting and other expeditions (p. 69). In many ways, this description of colonialism resonates with the neo-colonialism of today; of the governing of 'those' by 'us', with the contemporary 'us' being the international organizations, the international donors and the international companies. The colonizers of then, as of today, were mostly men, single men. During the first decades, the British in Sudan were not allowed to bring along their wives. (Today some places are still considered as hardship destinations for foreign workers, where families are not allowed or welcome.) Today, as then, 'home' is the recipient of tales about dangers and adventures, and the peculiarities of the local people.

Boddy's description and analysis of the role and partial integration of the natives into the administration and enforcement of colonial values and hierarchies shows how the British played on the opposing interests within the "native community". The Northern Muslims were in many ways allies and assistants of the British and the Egyptians. For example, the Brits upheld a belief that the Southern natives are "slavable" by nature and in this way unlike the Northern Muslims (p. 158). In other contexts, the Muslims of the North had to be controlled. Here, the role of the Egyptians was crucial until they were expelled from Sudan in 1924 after Egypt had already become independent. The Egyptians were, on the one hand, held as superior and more civilized than the Sudanese and therefore suitable for governing, but at the same time susceptible as Muslims. The Brits feared that Islam would spread to the South and in this context also tried to restrict the practice of female genital cutting from spreading to the South.

British attitudes towards local customs were ambiguous and highly dependent on their actual political interests at any given point. The natives (native men) were given narrowly defined roles and responsibilities in the local administration. However, when an educated group of Sudanese men started to emerge, the British started to favour "Native Administrations", that is, a form of self-government by local people. This policy had a tendency to split the population. It led to frustration and political activism among the educated Sudanese as their legitimate expectations of positions after attained education were not fulfilled and to conflicts between the native communities and the educated Sudanese (p. 132).

Also here we can find interesting parallels with contemporary neo-colonialism. The roles of locals (no longer referred to as "natives") include a variety of positions such as drivers, interpreters and fixers but also some carrying very substantial responsibilities such as judges and decision makers—and even educated women are included—but in countries like Bosnia, Kosovo or Iraq within clearly set limits. Some of Boddy's sentences could be directly transferred to a description of the contemporary 'neo-colonies'. For example, Boddy states: "While claiming to bolster the autonomy of Sudan's natural leaders—the largely untutored native elite—British officials reserved the right to override their decisions and appoint and dismiss them as they saw fit" (p. 131). Paraphrased and reproduced in a contemporary context this sentence might read: "While claiming to bolster the autonomy of *Bosnia's/Kosovo's local* leaders—the largely *communism-inherited nationalistic* elite—the *international community* reserved the right to override their decisions and appoint and dismiss them as they saw fit." The book is recommended reading for everyone who wants to understand relationships between international elites and native/local populations.

*Female genital cutting*

Reading the book as a Western feminist, a person whom Boddy seems not to hold in high regard, I had some difficulty in summarising Boddy's position on female genital mutilation (FGM) to myself and to friends and family members who were curious about the content of the book which occupied a big part of my summer holiday. Boddy seems to avoid taking a position on FGM as such. However, she is more candid about her position on the attempts ("crusades", as she calls them) of the Western feminists to abolish the custom. The book starts with a critical account of the feminist crusades against female genital mutilation and even the word 'crusade' speaks for itself.

As I understand it, her message is that the even most well-meaning attempts are, at best, futile and, at worst, can produce consequences opposite to those intended if they are implemented in the absence of the cooperation of those whom the measures concern and with a lack of understanding of the social circumstances in which the measures are implemented. In Boddy's own words: "And as with slavery, colonial efforts to eradicate pharaonic circumcision were often undermined by other measures that supported it, that adventitiously confirmed indigenous understandings because they drew on their obvious forms" (p. 163). "Thus, while officials condemned infibulation, their approval of northern gender dynamics—overt male supremacy, patriarchal leadership, female subservience and domesticity—lent it unintended support" (p. 182).

Once again from the position of a Western feminist, I could not resist the temptation to compare the discourses on FGM produced in the context of colonial Sudan with those in contemporary Finland—where female genital mutilation is not, as yet, much discussed. The Finnish immigrant population, even if growing, is still one of the smallest in Europe and most immigrants have come from neighbouring countries. However, some groups, especially Somalis who have been immigrating since the 1990s, may have brought the practice to Finland. Medical Doctor Mulki Mölsä (1994: 2004) has conducted two interview studies among Muslims living in Finland in order to chart the prevalence of the practice and attitudes towards it. The Finnish League for Human Rights, Ihmisoikeusliitto (2004), has also drafted and accepted guidelines for health care personnel for the prevention and treatment of female circumcision. The discourses on FGM in these three Finnish documents in the early twenty-first century have many similarities with those in colonial Sudan.

First, it is politically incorrect to speak about female genital mutilation, excision, infibulation or even clitoridectomy—the politically correct term is circumcision. In colonial times, the term was "pharaonic circumcision" (p. 174-175). Boddy often uses the terms circumcision and infibulations, and prefers 'female genital cutting' to 'female genital mutilation'. Today, for example, the WHO uses the term female genital mutilation (p. 203) and makes a distinction between infibulation or pharaonic circumcision (removal of all of the labia and stitching together the whole area), excision or clitoridectomy (removal of the clitoris and the inner lips) and sunna circumcision (removing the prepuce or the hood of the clitoris). According to the Finnish guidelines, it is appropriate to speak about all these forms with the term circumcision.

A lot could be said about this terminology. The preference for the term 'circumcision' puts the operation on a par with the male operation, which is generally considered as rather harmless. The terms clitoridectomy and FGM that have an obviously female point

of reference and do not hide the severity of the operation are all but outlawed as politically incorrect. The most serious operation is labelled pharaonic circumcision, a term that is loaded with contradictory meanings. Reference to the Pharaohs gives the operation a historical (but not necessarily correct) context. At the same time the adjective recalls a highly coercive and hierarchical social structure, thereby also drawing attention to the severity of the operation and is, therefore, in confusing contradiction with the latter, belittling word 'circumcision', which also serves to remind us that we are not speaking of a thing of the past.

Secondly, pharaonic circumcision is unequivocally condemned. In colonial Sudan, the campaigns aimed first at abolishing the pharaonic form of the operation though the law of 1946 in Sudan prohibiting pharaonic circumcision produced an opposite effect: the operations flourished (see Boddy's article on the political struggle to end the practice in this issue). The ethnic communities in Finland, in which many women have experienced the operation before coming to Finland, are relinquishing the custom and all interviewed persons condemned it. The Finnish low-profile policy that is based on the distribution of information through health care workers seems to be successful, because the most serious form seems to have nearly disappeared.

Thirdly, *sunna* is suggested as a less severe operation. In the first part of the colonial period, two English midwives, the Wolf sisters, who founded the profession and education of midwives in Sudan, campaigned for the abolition of pharaonic circumcision and taught *sunna* as a less severe alternative (p. 196). Later their successors led campaigns against all forms of female genital cutting. Interestingly, Boddy sympathises with the first approach. There is little evidence of the success of either campaign. The Wolf approach was replaced before it could reasonably have yielded real results leaving the arena free for speculations about whether it might have succeeded given time.

In contemporary Finland, Muslim fathers and young prospective husbands initially condemn pharaonic circumcision. Then they go on to say that they might (just might) considered *sunna* as it is a less severe operation, especially if they felt pressure to do so from the religious community. In religious terms, *sunna* generally means that a practice is recommended.

Fourth, no one seems to know what *sunna* (circumcision) would actually comprise. It is supposed to mean that the clitoral hood or prepuce is removed. No one seems to know what that means. The common type of *sunna* in colonial Sudan was excision or clitoridectomy—removal of the clitoris. The Finnish immigrants seem to have little idea what they are talking about when they mention *sunna*. One girl said "It is just this, little blood only, no mutilation, that is *sunna*" (Mölsä 2004: 12). And another "Because it is done, I don't want to know about it" (Mölsä 2004: 11).

Fifth, health arguments prevail. In colonial Sudan it was argued that the *sunna* operation should be performed by trained midwives so that the people would not have to turn to untrained operators. In Finland, the discussion of FGM is left to the health care personnel who are encouraged to make meticulous recordings of the situation of immigrant girls belonging to a suspect ethnic group (Ihmisoikeusliitto 2004: 21-22). It was and still is a taboo among such immigrant groups to recognize that women might have an interest in sexual pleasure or a right to self-determination about it (Ihmisoikeusliitto 2004: 15-16).

*Women's voice*

A starting point in Janice Boddy's work has been an interest in the women's voice, yet despite her extensive archival research, there is practically no evidence of the Sudanese women's own thoughts about the practice.

The British women's condemnation of and campaign against the practice is carefully documented (see also Boddy's article in this issue). The role the British men have in this process is quite interesting. For them, native women are pictured as the exotic other. Earlier in the book the image of the black woman in early twentieth century literature is documented; the sexualized atavistic black woman, whose oversized sexual organs (hypertrophied labia) are portrayed as the expression of over-sexualisation (p. 42-43). Against this background it is interesting to notice that whenever the British women's campaigns to abolish the practice and to promote the rights of the native women required action from the colonial authorities for implementation, these authorities regularly opposed such programs, leaving the matter in the hands of Sudanese men. According to Boddy's analysis, the colonial authorities tended to see the continuity of the practice as the failure of Sudanese men to control their women. They declined to admit that the practice served the interests of the Sudanese men who, however, agreed to slowly outlaw pharaonic circumcision in 1946 as a part of the political program aimed at inclusion in the sphere of civilized countries and to qualify for independence.

The women's voice is heard in the practice of *Zâr*, which was the original theme of Boddy's research. *Zâr* is a trancelike performance of dancing, bodily movements and singing by the women, in which the spirits occupy a woman's body and express their wishes through her and her dance. The spirits can be hostile or friendly, but they always have to be served and their wishes followed. The wishes of the spirits are regularly to the benefit of the woman through whose performance the wishes are expressed. For example, the spirits may bring beautiful cloths or jewellery to the bearer of the spirit. The spirits may have a character that imitates an existing person, sometimes even one of the British who lived in Sudan and were known to the performing women. In Boddy's interpretation, in *Zâr* the women could ridicule the British and, perhaps, to some extent also critique their gender roles.

Exploring the meaning of the operation, Boddy argues that the circumcision of both girls and boys is part of the construction of gender. By cutting out the parts of the sexual organs that are alien to one's own sex, the young person becomes the whole woman or man (p. 112). She sees sex in the Sudanese culture as constructed and gender as primary, as opposed to the situation in contemporary Western culture, in which biological sex is held to be primary and gender as constructed. I must admit that I am not quite convinced of this interpretation. Or perhaps this interpretation should lead us to question the common understanding of the relationship between sex and gender in our own contemporary culture. The intensive modelling of the body through practices of dieting, body building, piercing, plastic surgery and so on might be signs of construction of the sex according to the images of gender that are dominant in this culture.

Thanks to Dr. Mulki Mölsä's work we can, at least to some degree, hear the voices of Muslim women in the Finnish discussion of today. There is no evidence of that operations are being performed in Finland but some girls have been circumcised before moving to

Finland. It is also suspected that some have gone through the operation while on a visit to the countries of origin.

The interviewed girls minimise the procedure. "It wasn't really an operation. It was just required that blood appear, that was it. No stitches or touching, just a little cut" (Mölsä 2004: 12). A girl who would not let it be done today said: "Yet I am satisfied that it was performed when I was small, because it hurt less. Luckily I did not have trouble afterwards." The girls do not want to think about it. "Young people do not think about it... If I return to my home country I will have a profession, maybe a family." In this quotation the girl gives preferential attention to the education she will be able to get in Finland. If she returns to her home country, she will not be dependent on marriage because she will have a profession.

The girls also talk about the meaning of the operation with regards their identity construction. A girl who had herself (as she says) accepted the operation in the home country observes: "If God says so, why would it not be healthy... She who is not [circumcised] is like a shame. She is like nothing. And I did not then want to be nothing" (Mölsä 2004: 12). Interestingly, the girls do not question the control of their sexuality. A girl who opposes all forms of the operation says: "A woman who has not been circumcised will be a virgin until marriage if she is a Muslim" (Mölsä 2004: 12). Even if the operation as such is outlawed, the control of the girl's sexuality is not questioned. Even if the forms of control changed, virginity would still be central to the control.

### *Conclusion*

The contemporary Finnish discussion of FGM has many parallels to the colonial discourses in Sudan. I find quite convincing Boddy's argument that a campaign to abolish the practice is likely to fail unless it is informed by the broader social context of the society and unless it is accompanied with other measures to improve the women's position. As Boddy seems to argue, no isolated measure, such as a ban on FGM, is likely to succeed. The partial success of the Finnish approach can probably be explained by the fact that it has not been an isolated project. The girls have had opportunities for education, jobs, alternatives to marriage and even the possibility of escaping unhappy marriage, and they also give expression to the primary value of education in their own answers.

However, I do not join Boddy in her critique of the Western feminists who have campaigned against the practice. As one myself, I think that Western feminists must have the freedom to express their opinion. As we do not accept violent restrictions on our own sexual self-determination or that of our daughters, any other opinion than condemnation of FGM would be racist in denying the rights we claim for ourselves to those from another race or culture. I think that Boddy also overestimates the impact of Western feminists. Her own work shows convincingly that the British women had a very marginal role in colonial Sudan. Basically, they were only given a role in the development of midwifery professionals. Thus, they were basically given a voice only insofar as FGM was concerned. The women tried to draw attention to the girls' right to education and to the need to allocate funds to it but with no success. I doubt whether much has changed since colonial times. Neo-colonialism is still predominantly a male game, leaving women merely an agentive role in

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'women's issues'. Therefore I can only respect the women who argue and campaign against FGM and I wish that they (or I for that matter) also had strength to campaign for the right to access to education for all women in all parts of the world.

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JOHANNA NIEMI, LL.D.  
SENIOR RESEARCHER, DOCENT  
NATIONAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF LEGAL POLICY  
FINLAND  
[johanna.niemi@om.fi](mailto:johanna.niemi@om.fi)