Performing the Eradication of Infibulation
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Mana Abdurahman Isse at Merka, Somalia

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Mana Sultan (1953-2008) was one of the daughters of the last sultan of Merka, Abdurahman, a legendary figure with about 400 wives, according to rumours, and an enlightened man who freed his Bantu slaves and educated his children. A daughter of his first wife, Mana was also a political referee, working to build up a dialogue among the warring factions, in particular between the government and the Islamic Courts. During the Nairobi Conference in 2004, she had even succeeded in obtaining that 12% of the representatives in the provisional Parliament were women.

Mana was the soul behind Ayuub, a refugee village near Merka. Helped by a Catholic NGO, Water For Life, Ayuub had grown into a community of about 600 people, with more than 30 schools linked to it, and promoting rural development projects all over the area of the Lower Shebelli river. From 1996 to 2008 Mana also dedicated her efforts to the campaign against FGM in the area of Merka.
The video-clip of the DVD presented at this symposium is a part of a third or forth copy of a videotape recording events occurred in 2007, translated from the Somali language into Italian and English. Titles and captions were added by us. The video-clip has been heavily edited by the producers. It uses footage (two clips and a stump) from tapes recorded by amateurish cameramen with very old cameras, in at least three locations. Then it has been poorly assembled, cutting out some important parts.

The goal of the video-clip is not anthropological. It wants to send a message and document the activity of the NGO for the sponsors. The Somali translator was neither a professional interpreter nor an anthropologist, but a doctor. He sometimes tried to give us a “cultural”, Westernised interpretation of the event.

A Technical Assessment
A Constructed Video-clip

- Three tents
- Three blackboards
- Three locations
- Three audiences
- Three performances

We are working on the constructed message, not on the original performances.
Western Elements

- School tents from NGOs and UNICEF
- Written language
- Poster picture from NGOs textbooks (light-skinned girl)
- Western Medicine concepts (syphilis, tetanus, germs)
- Razor blade
- Reference to women's sexual pleasure

Mana directed the events: the performer, an elderly woman we will call Habiba (a pseudonym), uses a poster which has been produced by a boy student chosen for his graphic skills. The blend of Western and Somali cultural traits cooperate to make the message effective.

Somali Elements

- Elderly woman (authority)
- Poetry and song as means of both mass communication and education
- Somali dresses
In Somalia poetry is the currency of conversation and it is used as a platform for everything from education and entertainment to politics and debate, disseminated all over the country through the use of cassette tapes and players. With no pervasive written language, Somali culture is indisputably oral, and Somali population is mostly made up of non-literate nomads.

Somali women have their own classical poetic genre called *buraambur* and, although its memorization and transmission has traditionally been restricted by social convention, it is no less socially and politically engaged than the men’s genres. Shifting social norms as a result of war and exile have now permitted many Somali women to play increasingly active public roles, including the public recitation of their poetry at political and cultural events.
Johansen (2002) has remarked that most Somali women do not talk about their experiences in connection with infibulation with other Somali women. Finnström and Söderhamn (2006:421) suggest that maybe that is too difficult for them to acknowledge the memory. Moreover, Somali women express a stoical attitude to pain, which is considered a natural part of their lives, which is simply the truth, given that the complications are various and all painful (Pieters and Lowenfels 1977:731). Even if the reports show that the torture is far from noiseless, the circumcisers tell the girls not to scream because it is a cowardly behaviour, a cultural aspect common to most societies practising FGM. Although FGM continue to be practised throughout Somalia, people now discuss it, which is a sign of social change started in the 1980s. Hence, the fact that the audience in the video-clip openly condemns pharaonic circumcision shows that a number of women are more and more aware of the harm caused by infibulation.
The video-clip is analysed adapting: Turner's (1967, 1974) notion of “Social drama” and his analysis of symbols as well as Bloch's (1989) discussion on formalized language as a source of traditional authority.

**TURNER:** Every social drama alters, albeit minimally, the structure of the related social field. Hence its “liminal” or “threshold” character, which transforms the social drama into a limited area of transparency on the opaque surface of social life.

**BLOCH:** formal speech making, intoning spells, and singing are but different steps in the same process of transformation from secular discursive language. In a highly formalized or ritualized political situation there seems no way whereby authority can be challenged except by a total refusal. The propositional meaning potential of language is lost by formalization, but speech acquires an illocutionary or performative force. In a song, however, the illocutionary or performative force is at its most, because “You cannot argue with a song.”
Through recited verse and song, that is through the formalization of language, Habiba creates a space which, if not “liminal”, is at least “liminoid” in its characteristics. Habiba’s performance creates a ritualized, non-ordinary time/space in the school tent (the con-text) by means of progressively formalized speech through poetry and song as well as a hint of dance. Here the propositional meaning of the speech is weak, and its performative force is strong. The pre-text is represented by the poster and the sub-text by religion. She elicits a response from the female audience by progressive formalization and repetition.

The Performative Force of Formalized Speech

Habiba's oral performance can be divided into four parts, made up of recited verses in the opening, sung refrain, spoken verses, sung verses and refrain, and recited verses again in the closing. On the other hand, the poem/song is made of a chant and counterchant, where the crude description of the operation of the infibulation is alternated by exclamations (such as “Mom, don’t do the pharaonic cutting to me!”), or by the refrain “Mothers are to be blamed for it”.

I libri sacri non dicono di fare questo.
Two are the main arguments against infibulation: health and religion. Using the strong metaphor of syphilis for clitoris, that is one of the traditional arguments in favour of the operation, Habiba counterattacks mentioning tetanus, to which she adds other painful consequences. Yet, the religious argument is even stronger: the child becomes the kid or the lamb on the butcher's block, ready to be sacrificed.

The sacrificed animal and the child are both associated and opposed symbolically: they are opposed because the former has its throat slit open, the latter has her genitals slit to be closed. On the other hand, also the girl will be slit open: in most marriages, the husband or one his female relatives will enlarge the vaginal opening with a small knife so that sexual intercourse can take place. At the time of childbirth, the infibulation must again be opened, and this time opened widely. In the villages, the grandmother, who functions as midwife, passes a small knife between the head and the inner wall of the infibulation, completely separating the labia. As soon as delivery takes place, the infibulation must be restored.
While slitting the throat of an animal in the prescribed way (*udhya*, Arabic) is correct, because it conforms to the religious texts, female circumcision is not. “It's a sin”, Habiba points out. “The sacred books don't order to do it. Neither Christianity nor Islam”. Mothers, who should conform to tradition, on the contrary, are those to blame.

The DVD wants to stress the superiority of Islamic law over customary law.

In the relationship between girls and sacrificed animals there is another layer of symbolic meaning: at the Festival of Sacrifice (*Ciidwayneey* in the Somali language) an animal has its throat slit, not a human being, after God tested Ibrahim’s faith. Hence, the sacrifice of the girls should not occur, according to the sacred texts.
The video-clip shows that, in order to succeed in attenuating, or even eradicating FGM, it is extremely important that the intervention is performed according to the socio-cultural norms of the population involved. Poetry remains a preferred medium for the communication of sensitive social messages in Somalia, while poetic license allows people to address issues that may cause embarrassment when discussed in ordinary conversation. Habiba's performance accords with Somali cultural norms; in this context, however, the contribution of a number of reformist shaykhs cannot be underestimated.

The video-clip, moreover, shows that Mana found valid collaborators and followers to continue her work, and, in addition, that they had gone a step further Gudnin Usub, possibly following today's trend which has mostly abandoned any ritual during the operation, where it existed, all over the area practicing FGM (Moen 2008). This step forward is bolder and points to the prevention of FGM: the women in the audience seem to accept this proposal, although whether they will be able to carry it out is to be seen.
The success of Mana’s work notwithstanding, any attempt to export the format of the video-clip to other communities, in Somalia or elsewhere, should be weighted against the cultural prejudices it has to overcome in a different context. The status of Mana, as the daughter of a legendary sultan’s first wife, and hence her social and political prestige as well as her own political action, is in fact undermined by the low social standing of Mana as a woman from Merka, an Arabized town in Southern Somalia. A video, which presented the alternative Sunna Gudnin ritual promoted by Mana in 1999-2001, was severely disparaged by Somali viewers, even before discussing the content of the project, on the basis that Mana belonged to a low status group, member of the that caste spitefully dubbed habasho. The Somalis in the audience could not give credit to a woman who belonged to a people of “slaves”.

Perhaps the best known features of the Somali socio-political system are clanism and segregation. There is a hierarchy of clans: certain clans are traditionally classed as “noble clans”, referring to the belief that they share a common Somali ancestry.

The first tier of the clan families is made up by the four noble Samaale clans. They make up almost 75% of the population and are nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists. The Saab agro-pastoralist clans form a second tier, because they are more heterogeneous and have assimilated non-Somali elements. They live along the Jubba and Shebelli rivers, and many have become sedentary city dwellers.

A third tier is considered as ritually unclean by the other Somalis. Minority clans and other ethnic groups include ethnic Somali occupational clans as well as non-Somali groups such as the Bantu, and lineages of relatively unmixed Arab or Persian descent. Many of these disenfranchised communities living along the Jubba and Shebelli river valleys are connected to the Saab clans as clients, and are known derogatorily as habasho.
The intervention towards the eradication of infibulation and other types of FGM must be entrenched within the culture of the people practising it. In the case of stratified, caste-like, xenophobic societies such as the Somalis, the messenger is as important as, if not more than, the message: thus it has to enjoy a prestigious social standing to be really influential.
Let's hope, however, that many other Somali women will follow Mana's example:

We have refused it, we don't want the pharaonic one.