

# 'You will not excise my daughter'

THE World Health Organisation is in the anti-mutilation business too. They have made a film about excision in Burkina Faso, with the above title. Well done the WHO. They ought to get it shown and repeated, and re-repeated, on every television station in Africa and the Middle East. Here's what happens in the film.

A young urban family from Ouagadougou (sprawling and dusty capital of the Mossi homelands which used to be known as Upper Volta) makes the monthly visit to the grandparents (in this case the husbands' parents) and find themselves up against Tradition the family arrives and says "hallo". The calabasse of water (probably it was millet beer) passes around and the usual litany of greetings is exchanged. Now the wife has gone off to see Grandma in the kitchen. In the compound, the kids are racing through the dust with the cousins, chasing birds away from the millet crops. Grandad is sitting on a low stool in the shade of the thatched house, talking man-to-man with his eldest son: "I have to speak with you about a serious matter my son. Your daughter Nafi has passed the age of excision. The old women and the fetishers are annoying me. I am the chief of this village, and yet the elders are criticising my family. We must therefore organize Nafi's excision without delay."

The chief's son disagrees. As it happens he is not only a modern man (one wife, two children, city clothes, a small clean house with a video and a Peugeot car in which to visit the village); he is also a medical doctor. The doctor traces all the health arguments and tells his father that excision is out of the question. When the chief tries to come on heavy, the son just walks off leaving the old man fuming.

The village is divided, and everything that happens increases the divisions. The doctor carries out his free monthly clinic as if nothing has happened. The village council, under the chairmanship of the chief and the animation of his doctor son, discuss whether they should now invest in a village pharmacy, and how they can reduce the population's major health epidemic, malaria. (Meanwhile back in the kitchen, the doctor's wife is grinding flour with

a stone roller, such as you see in museums on our stone- and iron-age ancestors. In the African village, labour-saving technology for the housewife is very rare.)

Having settled the matter of better health, the chief returns to the important matter of tradition . . . and excision. "As long as I am chief, my decisions are commands" thunders the doctor's father. The chief's official tam-tam drum echoes the chief's official words. Several elders speak in support of tradition. Then an old soldier steps forward resplendent in grey beard and medals. "Who are you to attack Doctor?" he cries. "You Bakary, I didn't hear your hear you complaining when Doctor operated your hernia last year. As big as a football it was! Which of the elders here doesn't remember Bakary's hernia? Why Bakary, you could hardly walk last year. You had to hold your hernia in your arms to stop yourself falling over. But you weren't criticising Doctor's ideas then, were you? And you, Yacouba: what about your goitre? The size of a baobab fruit it was! Before Doctor removed your goitre for you, you had a voice like a toad,

and your only contribution to the village was your man's voice, you use it to attack his ideas. Is that gratitude? Is that wisdom? Which of us had Doctor's knowledge about the goitre? None of us! And which of us has Doctor's knowledge about excision? If he says it is a dangerous practice, who can refute him? So we should recognise that new knowledge is a good thing, and we should listen to Doctor's information about excision."

The doctor gave a presentation in the middle of the village under the Tree of Palaver. With flip charts and photographic enlargements, he presented the horrors of excision. The villagers watched in stunned silence as the doctor showed pictures of forbidden secrets and hideous deformities. He spoke of girls dying of tetanus, who had been excised with a rusty blade, of girls bleeding to death, of urinary fistulas making women incontinent and unsocial for life, of child-birth pains and deaths, of frigidity and fear and divorce. "Circumcision for boys is normal, necessary and hygienic," finished

the doctor: "But no religion, no prophet, no doctor has ever recommended excision."

The following month he brought a panel of ethical experts: one Islamic imam, one Protestant pastor, and one Roman Catholic priest (known in Burkina as a "mon père"). The panel were unanimous that excision is a thing of tradition, not of religion. The pastor said it was forbidden; the "mon père" condemned it as diminishing the dignity and status of women; the imam stated that it is "not required by Islam". After a moment of silence, the chief declared that he had heard their views, but that "Tradition is not the same as religion". Confronted by such ethical solidarity, however, the chief now ordered his fetishers to go off and consult the ancestors, the spirits of the rivers, the spirits of the bush, and the spirits of the mountain.

While the ancestors pondered, Doctor was taking his campaign to the women. In a question and answer session chaired by a midwife, he heard all the fears of the women who had, as he said, "suffered from this servility invented by man to guarantee the fidelity of

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women". Is it true that a woman who is not excised will die in childbirth? "No, that is not true: the midwife here can attest to cases of unexcised women who have given birth without problem." Is it true that a baby will die if it touches the clitoris? "No, that is superstition quite unfounded in truth." Is it true that a child born to an unexcised woman cannot be baptised by the imam? The doctor explained what had been said by the ethical panel in the village council. Yes, a child can and should be baptised; no, it is untrue that such a child will be denied entry into Paradise; and if your mother-in-law says that she will refuse to carry hot water for you when you give birth, this is because she is still under masculine domination, and you must reason with her.

Back in the Ancestor House, the chief fetisher was offering a white cock. "If it dies on its back, let the answer be "Yes" . . . that excision of women is strong custom which should be maintained. And if it dies on its belly, let this be the answer "No", that excision is

unnecessary." The fetisher slit the throat of the hapless cock, and spread the gushing jet of blood across ancestral alters strewn with feathers from countless previous sacrifices. He dropped the cock. It raced around the floor like a headless chicken (which it had now become) until it dropped, shuddered and lay still: on its belly. The fetisher's jaw dropped open. "But if we stop this tradition," he groaned, "our influence will be gone. This cannot be. Tradition must be protected. We must deny the Ancestors, and maintain excision." And thus it was reported to the village council.

The doctor and his wife went back to Ouagadougou, leaving the kids with grandma for the week. And that very night the word went round that the old women should excise three girls . . . including Nafi. Fortunately there is very little secrecy in a village, and some youths overheard the news. While the old women processed to the Excision House, two young men went racing off into the bush on a "mobylette", one of those ubiquitous little Peugeot mopeds which make the citizens of French-speaking countries so mobile. Nafi was to be the third of the victims. Even as she was dragged screaming from her grandmother's hut towards the bloodied ritual knife, a police van raced up and all the old women were arrested. For excision is against the law in Burkina. As Nafi was led home shaking, a policeman bent over another of the girls, lying curled up under a blanket. She had led to death. Her body was still warm, warm as the pool of blood soaking into the earth at her side.

The following day the film finishes in sorrow and in victory. The village is in mourning. The dead girl was the only daughter of the Chief Fetisher: he who defied the Ancestors. Today it is the men who process to the Excision House. There they set fire to this hut of shame, and the chief declares that his doctor son was in the right. "As long as I am your chief, my decisions are commands." Once again the ritual tam-tam drum echoes the words of the chief. "I have decided that excision is unnecessary, cruel, and not desired by the ancestors. If it ever happens again in any family of this village, I shall personally castrate the head of the household."