

Politics of Female Genital Cutting (FGC), Human Rights and the Sierra Leone State

Politics of Female Genital Cutting (FGC),
Human Rights and the Sierra Leone State:
The Case of Bondo Secret Society

By

Tom Obara Bosire

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council.
AIM	Amazonian Initiative (a local NGO championing against FGC based in Freetown, Sierra Leone).
APC	All People's Congress.
CDF	Civil Defence Forces.
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.
CGG	Campaign for Good Governance.
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (a civilian intelligence agency of the United States government).
CTN	Cotton Tree News radio, a partnership project between the University of Sierra Leone's Mass Communication Department and International donor agencies. CTN produces UN radio programs.
DVD	An optical disc storage media format commonly used for storing videos.
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States.
FC	Female Circumcision.
FGC	Female Genital Cutting.
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation.
FSU	Family Support Unit (An annexed Sierra Leone police wing in charge of domestic cases).
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus.
IDP	Internally Displaced People.
IDRC	International Development Research Center .
IMF	International Monetary Fund.
INGO	International Non Governmental Organization.
IRB	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.
ISA	Ideological State Apparatus.
KWDA	Katanya Women's Development Association.
MP	Member of Parliament.
NGOs	Non Governmental Organizations.
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia.
NPRC	National Provisional Ruling Council.
ODA	Overseas Development Agency.
PRO	Public relations officer.

RUF	Royal United Front.
SLPP	Sierra Leone Peoples Party.
UK	United Kingdom.
UN	United Nations Organization.
UNDP	United Nations Development Program.
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund.
UNICEF	United Nations Children Emergency Fund.
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women.
USA	United States of America.
WAVES	Women Against Violence (A local NGO championing against FGC based in Bo, Sierra Leone).
WHO	World Health Organization.

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ABSTRACT

This book explores the place of the Bondo secret society, whose precondition for membership is Female Genital Cutting (FGC), in Sierra Leone's post-war politics. The Bondo society is considered a repository of gendered knowledge that bestows members with significant forms of power in the local social context. Members, especially Bondo society leaders, are dedicated to the continued practice of FGC even amidst calls for its eradication. The Bondo is much sought after and overwhelmingly supported by the political elite due to the role it plays in ordering community life and its position as the depository of cultural repertoires (Swidler, 2001:24). Most women gravitate towards the Bondo who also use it to shape and reshape their identity. For example, as part of post war recovery, I argue, the Bondo was employed by political actors to legitimate and extend the hegemony of political movements. This analysis, therefore, examines the complicated interplay of power between politicians and the Bondo society members in the context of an international outcry against the practice of FGC. The book argues that the Bondo society leaders are keen to maintain the status quo because of the forms of power accessible to them in the local socio-economic and political context. Faced with an over-arching discourse of eradication and change concerning the FGC procedure, the Bondo society has in turn fashioned a counter-discourse framed in terms of "defending traditional culture" to forestall changes that could affect the "privileges" they access. I explore the tensions of this situation in this book. That is, on the one hand, the tension brought about by opposition between the FGC reform agenda and the Bondo society members' attempts to resist change in the ritual practice. On the other hand, I am concerned with the tension in the patronage they enjoy from politicians who are caught up in a double bind situation: they simultaneously need support from Bondo members but are, at the same time, reliant on international development aid. In exploring power from below, I examine Bondo society's community stock of knowledge and how this symbolic power is employed in Sierra Leonean politics. This does not lead to a vindication of FGC but underscores the complex social, economic and political meanings embedded in the Bondo and in discourses of power in Sierra Leone. The book points out that eradication advocates need to take account of the various dimensions of the Bondo society's embeddedness in relation to both state and society.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF STUDY

1.0 Introduction

Over the years, debates in the “Western” world and other parts of the world through the media of mass communication have revolved around a broad range of local cultural practices which appear incompatible with the health, well-being and human rights of both women and children. These “harmful traditional” practices include, but are not limited to, polygamy, sati, forced and early child marriage, food taboos, wife sharing, wife inheritance, male child preference, widowhood rites and honour killings. However, it was the ritual practice called “Female Circumcision” (FC), also known as “Female Genital Mutilation” (FGM) that sparked off the most unsettling debates. National governments that have practicing communities within their frontiers have come up against an international discourse calling for an end to this practice. The international community explicitly called for the eradication of these practices by increasingly linking eradication to the disbursement of international development aid (Boyle, 2005). The United Nations Organization (UN) through its affiliate the United Nations Children Emergency Fund and United Nations Population Fund (UNICEF; UNFPA), defined “FGM” to mean:

all procedures involving the partial or total [amputation] of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or other non-therapeutic reason (WHO UNFPA and UNICEF, 1997: 1-2; 2008:1).

The World Health Organization (1997:1) has, furthermore, classified genital cuttings into four categories:

Type I - Excision of the prepuce, with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris

Type II - Excision of the clitoris with partial or total excision of the labia minora

Type III - Excision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening (infibulation)

Type IV - Unclassified: includes pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris and/or labia; stretching of the clitoris and/or labia; cauterization by burning of the clitoris and surrounding tissue; scraping of tissue surrounding the vaginal orifice (angurya cuts) or cutting of the vagina (gishiri cuts); introduction of corrosive substances or herbs into the vagina to cause bleeding or for the purposes of tightening or narrowing it; and any other procedure that falls under the definition of female genital mutilation given above.

The above definitions and categories, can be said to be problematic, since they are grounded in a Western conception of health. That is to say, they presuppose the universality of a particular concept of “health” whereas ideas about what is healthy vary across history and space. Health is a socially and culturally constructed reality (Foster & Anderson 1978; Kleinman; 1980; Romanucci-Ross et al, 1997 and Hahn & Inhorn, 2009). Although WHO recognizes the existence of alternative medicines and by implication local therapeutic knowledge systems, it can be argued that it privileges the hegemony of the Western biomedical health model over local health concepts in its language and policy recommendations. This implies the rejection of alternative health practices and the communities that practice them. Moreover, even when no two societies practice FGC alike or for the same reasons, WHO’s definition homogenizes many different practices by subsuming them under the heading of “circumcision”. The practices reflect different local nomenclatures and are based on different cultural logics, which tend to be represented using all-encompassing concepts such as culture, religion, and aesthetics (Njambi, 2004).

Female Circumcision is practiced in 28 African countries, in some Middle Eastern countries and among immigrant populations in Europe, North America, the United States and Australia. Sierra Leone has an approximate 80-90 percent prevalence rate of FGM (Skaine, 2005:235). Debate on the practice of FGC has in the recent past reverberated across both local and international fora since the feminist “second wave” of the late 1970s. This, added to the global traffic of people, goods, ideas and services has turned a culturally specific rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1966) into an issue of great international concern. What is arguably lacking in such cases is an adequate understanding of the entanglement of the ritual practice with

local politics. This case-based study of “female circumcision” among the Mende of Sierra Leone provides an arena for an examination of the intersection of this local rite of passage with national politics in Sierra Leone. Specifically it examines the simultaneous subscription and resistance to the international human rights discourse that calls for the eradication of female genital cutting practices on the part of the Sierra Leonean political community. Sierra Leonean politicians maintain an ambivalent posture in relation to the international discourse advocating the eradication of FGC. In this respect, the politicians are simultaneously using the mobilizing skills of the Bondo secret society whose central rite for membership is FGC in order to foster their political careers while covertly challenging the international normative order since they need international development aid. Theoretically, this study shows how the practice is appropriated by various actors (the state, the Soweis¹ and politicians of different kinds) who support the continued existence of the Bondo society so that they can continue to apportion its associated symbolic meanings for their own interests. The cultural significance thus vested in this practice, therefore, calls for a re-evaluation of the agency of participants. I accordingly seek to unfold the politics behind the Bondo secret society, the struggles over the definition of the practice among different contending actors and the contradictions such struggles engender.

The anti-FGC advocacy literature has variously defined the ritual practice using expressions such as “Female Genital Mutilation”, “Female Genital Castration” and “Female Genital Surgery”. These expressions are, it can be argued, suggestive of an ideological dichotomy - Western/Non-Western or even superior/inferior. “FGM”, for instance, presents initiates as “mutilated”, which to those involved may be seen as an insult. On the other hand, the use of the expression “Female Genital Castration” conjures up an image of infertility whereas members of the Bondo society, at least, maintain that the practice specifically prepares women for motherhood. This terminological debate shows the different framings of the issue and the multiple conceptions of health and rights at stake. Practitioners are arguing that it is their right to practice their culture and accuse their critics of neo-colonialism. From the perspective of those focused on human and reproductive rights, however, “mutilation” reinforces the view that the practice involves a violation of women’s human rights, a form of culturally endorsed violence and potentially, child abuse. It was against the

¹ Soweis is the local name for the women who are responsible for overseeing initiation into *Bondo*. I use this term throughout my book to refer to FGC practitioners.

backdrop of this terminological divide and the conflicts that it expresses that the UN in 1999 drew attention to the risk of “demonizing” certain cultures, religions and communities. Since then, the term “cutting” has been increasingly used to avoid alienating practicing communities.

This study adopts Tangwa’s (1999:183) definition of female genital cutting as “any surgical intervention on the genitals of a human being for cultural, religious or purely secular and profane reasons”. Although, in the field, the expression “Female circumcision” provided a common discursive ground with my respondents, I will use the term Female Genital Cutting (FGC) in this book. I will only use FC when making a direct quote from respondents or from theoretical texts. Among practicing communities in Sierra Leone, FGC is subsumed in the wider initiation procedures of the Bondo society. For that reason, in local nomenclature FGC is tangentially referred to as “put Bondo” (denoting the occasion when girls are first taken to the initiation camp) and “pull Bondo” (which means “graduation” from the Bondo initiation camp that confers membership to the society). The “pulling of Bondo” is marked by a major ceremony called “the coming out ceremony”. I will use these terms, together with the term “Sowei” that refers to female initiators, in my book, in order to contextualise my writing.

As suggested, this study examines the implications of this customary practice in both Sierra Leonean national and international politics. Local politicians are known to woo members of the Bondo secret society whose badge of membership is female circumcision for votes. This means that the ritual procedure is invested with wider significance within Sierra Leonean politics. Therefore, my concern is to provide an “emic” view of the dynamics of the ritual procedure and of its changes over time through a case study of the Bondo secret society’s relationship with the Sierra Leonean state. Though momentum for social change concerning FGC has been generated, cultural institutions such as secret societies perform specific functions within their socio-cultural setting. In this regard, I argue that FGC eradication campaigns need to situate their discourse within the social context of the practice.

1.1 Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Sierra Leonean politicians constantly distance themselves from condemnations of female genital cutting. The Bondo secret society is believed to be the custodian of particular gendered knowledge, and has a

wide appeal across the country and across almost all ethnic groups. During the 2002 elections, the lone female candidate was reportedly chased away during her campaigns in Kenema for allegedly being against FGM. Given the society's place in Sierra Leonean politics as a mobilizing force in politics, public discussions of FGM are not tolerated. The Bondo society is seen to be capable both of making and ruining the careers of politicians. Indeed I was told during a focus group meeting that "the politician who will ban Bondo society activities in Sierra Leone has not yet been born [...] No politician will stand in front of us and say she or he hates Bondo because they are afraid to lose their election"(Focus group 4 on 05/03/09 with Mende initiators). Following the presentation of a paper at an international conference by a gynaecologist and prominent anti-FGM activist, Dr. Olayinka Koso Thomas, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shirley Gbujama is said to have joined forces with demonstrators against Koso in the capital city and protested to the President, saying: "We will sew up the mouth of those preaching against Bondo" and urged President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah to stand firm for the society and "not to forget your roots". In his reply, the President is said to have promised the society his total support, pointing out that he himself is "from a traditional background". Indeed, many Sierra Leonean politicians since independence in 1961, including former Prime Minister Sir Milton Margai², have preferred to court and cajole members of the Bondo by building them initiation centres or "bushes" in their constituencies and providing money to support the initiation of large groups of girls into the society.

This is the relationship which I focus on in this research: examining the dynamics of the relationship between politicians and Bondo adherents over time in the face of criticisms of the presumed harmful effects of the practice of FGC. More closely defined, empirical questions, deriving from this main problem include the following:

- 1) Why are politicians supporting the Bondo secret society and by extension, FGC?
- 2) What is the trajectory of the relationship between the Bondo secret society and the Sierra Leonean state?
- 3) In what ways has this alliance been affected by the global condemnation of FGC?

² As a medical doctor, he is reported to have closed ranks with the Bondo and provided medical care for initiators as well as continuing to throw his weight behind the society by building 'bushes' for its members.

- 4) What is the place of the Bondo secret society in Sierra Leonean politics and what type of agency do initiated women have in national politics in Sierra Leone?
- 5) What is the impact of the alliance between the Bondo secret society and the state on the campaign to end FGC in Sierra Leone?
- 6) What factors are contributing (if any) to the present state of acceptance and contestation of FGC by particular individuals, groups and within the national political arena of Sierra Leonean politics?

1.2 Rationale of Study

Whereas the literature on FGC is extensive, systematic studies (based on empirical research) about state alignment with the institution sustaining the practice are rare. It is, therefore, useful to conduct a study that will help social scientists to understand the tensions and conflicts that are taking place between pro- and anti-female genital cutting activists at the local, national and international levels. The situation in Sierra Leone is a particularly appropriate context in which to examine these questions. This study will, therefore:

- 1) Provide a historically-based account of the dynamics of the relationship between the Bondo secret society and the Sierra Leonean state.
- 2) Explore the local, national and international dynamics involved in the renegotiations of the meaning of FGC as well as the various tensions and alliances between groups and individuals within this society at various scales.
- 3) Fill the gap in the existing empirical literature and provide an alternative understanding of FGC within the context of tacit state condonation of the practice.

1.3 Justification for the Study

My research design will reflect the objectives of critical feminist scholars like Abu-Lughod (2002), Mohanty (1988), Sylvester (1995), Lazreg (1988) and Spivak (1994), who question previous approaches that, they claim, have tended to present non-Western women as having no agency or as being merely victims. They point to a hypocrisy implicit in the Western feminist interventions in relation to the lives of so called “Third World” women, pointing out that “Third World” women are neither a homogenous

entity, share the same interests nor have a monopoly on victimhood. In this respect, they call for a more attentive recognition and consideration of difference. Wally (1997), for instance, takes issue with the sensationalisation of the anti-FGC campaign and suggests that we should take cognizance of power relationships when examining the social context of the ritual practices as well as international controversies and power dynamics surrounding support and opposition to such practices everywhere. It is this concern to recognise both women's agency and local meanings associated with the practice which I have tried to take into account through the ethnographic part of my research.

I believe that a historically and ethnographically based account might provide alternative understandings about the meanings of the ritual practice and about its symbolic place in the alliance between the Bondo institution and the Sierra Leonean state. "Western" research curiosity has tended to focus on the most drastic form of FGC, especially infibulations in the Sudan (see Boddy 1982, Gruenbaum 1982), and mostly on the Islamic context. In my own research, in the context of Sierra Leone, which is markedly different I have tried to locate and understand the meanings of the practice as dynamic.

Secret societies, of course, have existed in other cultural and geographical settings, such as among the ancient Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, and include such examples as the legendary Hung Society of China (a women's secret society that lasted for over 1,500 years). In the context of Africa, many secret societies are mainly tribal or clan based with some taking the shape of age-set societies (Henderson and Umunna, 1988:30; Imperato, 1980:47; Shetler, 2003: 385). Others are general ritual (masking) societies predominated by men (Borgatti, 1976; Peel: 1977; Weatherby, 1988; Magid, 1972). Following the colonial encounter in Africa, many of these secret societies, at the behest of colonial decrees, either went underground and ceased to exist (Smith, 2001:187) or were adapted into administrative posts called chieftaincy to serve in the colonial indirect rule policy (Magid, 1972:289). On his part, Magid (1972) points out that though external domination by colonialists affected the socio-political significance of secret societies by super-imposing their place with "apparatus of modern government"³, secret societies and dance groups

³ These are co-operative societies that offered credit facilities and marketing assistance, political parties and Christian denominations. As it were, these organs drew very few members because they did not capture the wider spirit of rural social past-time activities. Christianity, for example, was handicapped by the fact

among the Idoma of Nigeria have started gaining political significance especially in local government politics (Ibid, 1972:302). The re-emergence of secret societies into the fore has something to do with the fact that the changes introduced during colonial administration were just the “super-structure”, they did not take care of rural social interaction needs (Ibid:300). Like most of the secret societies studied by the scholars above, the Idoma secret society (aiowa) excludes women from its membership. This is unlike the Bondo secret society of Sierra Leone which is the subject of my study. Most secret societies in Africa have also not managed to appeal widely across clans and tribal boundaries like the Sierra Leone Bondo society does. Secret societies with a wide appeal more closely related to the context in which I conducted my research are the Poro, secret society in Sierra Leone and Liberia, an exclusive sodality for men, which I discuss at points below, and the Yassi along with Bondo women’s secret societies in Liberia. The Bondo secret society in Sierra Leone though an exclusively women’s society, is openly courted by male political elites in contemporary Sierra Leone in spite of international condemnation of the practice of FGC which is a precondition of Bondo society membership. It is the forces that animate this special relationship between political actors and the Bondo society in Sierra Leone that my research sets out to explore.

In unravelling this dynamic, I will therefore explore the transformations of the Bondo over time with a view to deciphering the agency of individuals and groups alike. Additionally, my study will partly complement gaps in previous anthropological studies carried out on the institutional structure of the Bondo secret society. In the next chapter, I explore the literature on FGC with an intention of situating my study more carefully in relation to the existing literature.

that it was a recent entry into the community social set-up and was at the same time distracted by the riveting denominational rivalries between Catholics and Methodists. Christianity was also overwhelmed by the enormous task of rolling out an education program in the community that diverted resources from its core objective of spiritual evangelism while political parties were dominated by village elites and “would be notables” thereby leaving little room for a wide array of people that did not fall into the elite class to engage meaningfully in community social recreation (Magid, 1972:300).

CHAPTER TWO

MULTIPLE UNIVERSALISMS: THE CASE OF FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING IN SIERRA LEONE

2.0 Introduction

As is often the case, the debate concerning these women is less about the women themselves than about the appropriation of women as political symbols. In other words, it is about the use of women as ammunition in a polemic of central concern to their lives, but where the issue at stake is not the women's own interests, but, rather, the consolidation of the powers of others to define those interests (Winter, 1994:939).

An extensive literature exists on the ritual practice of FGC, but studies on the intersection of the ritual practice with local, national and international politics are rare (for exceptions see, for example, Kenyatta (1937), Pedersen (1991), Boyle and Preves (2000)). This is the case despite the fact that this local rite of passage has become an issue of great international concern. Both Kenyatta and Pedersen examined the double appropriation of women as a form of symbolic ammunition in colonial Kenya by the British. The Mau Mau anti-colonial fighters opposed attempts by the colonial government to outlaw female circumcision in Kenya. Such debates were represented both as a clash between modernity and tradition, on the one hand, and as situations in which white men, under the auspices of feminism, protected black women from black men. On their part, Boyle and Preves (2000) document the fact that states often publicly subscribe to international norms prohibiting FGC for instrumental reasons - this subscription is used as an excuse to acquire scarce development resources that are diverted to other domains of national life. They note a clash between this subscription to international norms and national political interests i.e. the protection of community interests and minority rights, since most often it is minority ethnic communities within national populations that practice FGC. For fear of demonizing these minority ethnic communities, these governments are ambivalent: they position

themselves both with and against the international community. A similar ambivalence is evidenced in the case of Sierra Leone, which is the focus of this study.

Like these studies, my research examines the Bondo secret society's alliance with the Sierra Leonean state. I document the centrality of the debates on FGC in Sierra Leonean politics, specifically the dynamic relationship between anti-FGC activists, the Bondo secret society practitioners and the state over time in the face of criticisms of the presumed harmful effects of the practice of FGC.

2.1 FGC a 'sado-ritual'?

The issue of female genital cutting has elicited a variety of responses in both academic and public discourse. The earliest commentators on the issues of FGC were feminist activists and scholars (Hosken, 1978; 1986; 1993, Daly 1978, Levin, 1980, Walker, 1992, Walker and Parmar, 1995). They argued that FGC was an assertion of male dominance over women. Daly, for instance, pronounced the practice to be a form of "violence against women", a "Sado-ritual" that provided evidence of a "cross-cultural hatred towards women" (Daly 1978:155,160). Saurel extended this line of thinking by terming FGC "a genocide of girls and women" with its victims 'buried alive'" (1981:1-3, 19 in James and Robertson, 2002:83). Another term used to describe the practice was sexual torture (Levin, 1980:200). Fran Hosken, the American radical feminist, publisher of *Women's International Network News* newsletter and author of *The Hosken Report: genital and sexual mutilation of females* is widely credited with popularising the term female genital mutilation (FGM) that was/is widely used, including by international organisations and development agencies such as the WHO, ODA, IDRC and the UN. Hosken, for example, argued that the politics of FGM was predicated on African males' affirmation of power over female sexuality: "FGM is a training ground for male violence. It is used to assert absolute male domination over women not only in Somalia but all over Africa (Hosken 1993:5)... [F]or African men to subject their own small daughters to FGM in order to sell them for a good bride-price shows such total lack of human compassion and vicious greed that it is hard to comprehend (Hosken 1993:16)."

Despite criticism that her book borders on "yellow journalism" (Hay, 1981:526), Hosken's report generated interest over FGC in the media and

in significant feminist journals such as *Signs* (see James and Robertson, 2002:67; Hay, 1981:524). More recently, but in line with Hosken (1978), Gordon (1991) accuses patriarchy of perpetuating the practice with the aim of controlling women's sexuality among Muslims in Arab society (see also, Al-Hibri, 1982, Antoun, 1968, Beck and Keddie, 1980, Rugh, 1984). He takes issue with the relativist position espoused in ethnographic studies such as that by Boddy (1982) which tries to contextualise FGC as it is practiced in Sudan, describing Boddy's assertion that FGC is a rite of passage as the most "venerated anthropological explanation" (Gordon, 1991:9). Boddy, in a rejoinder, contends that his essay captured "the epistemological tacking between humanist positivism and contextual non-positivism" in the FGC debate (1991:15). Boddy therefore makes use of a relativist conception of the practice in order to capture the ideological understanding of FGC in the social and politico-religious contexts of her geographical area of study. Although Boddy clearly makes the case for a relativist argument, it can be claimed she does not adequately address the question of how or why women accept the received wisdom that FGC is a necessary practice. It could be argued, then, that one should remain alert to the fact that relativist propositions can at times be used to mask the reality of widespread domination in society. Conversely, of course, Gordon's (1991) critical attack on cultural relativism privileges an alternative understanding of the FGC practice. It prioritises the need to make an ethical judgement about the practice, regardless of local meanings, but is arguably blind to the significance of the latter.

2.2 Patriarchy and FGC

Meanwhile, other feminist scholars have accused women perpetuating the FGC practice of suffering from "false consciousness" (Daly, 1978) and being "*Prisoners of Ritual*" (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989)¹. These studies, therefore, lay the blame for the practice of FGC at the feet of patriarchy. However, it is important to recognise that patriarchy is not monolithic (see, e.g. Anzilotti 2002; Hardwick 1998; Kandiyoti 1988; Lee and Clark 2000; Miller 1998; Anthias, Yuval-Davis and Cain, 1992:105-106). Patriarchy has to be understood as dynamic, and should not be described

¹ The title of her widely circulated book is *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Circumcision in Africa*. She says: "I looked for villains in this conundrum but I didn't find one, I found instead men and women entrapped into in an antiquated ritual dating heavens knows how far back into history, unable to free themselves from its centuries old enmeshment, all of them it's prisoners" (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989 in James and Robertson, 2002:66).

in a way that implies the lack of either resistance or agency among those affected by it.

In other words, the way the practice of FGC is construed varies from one geographical space and time to another as pointed out by critical feminists (cf Waley, 1997; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty 2002). Though instances of oppression by patriarchy have been widely documented in feminist studies, the way in which power is negotiated in FGC practicing communities in Africa can be complex, as this book will discuss. In the case of the Bondo secret society in Sierra Leone, women exert significant social control through the Bondo society and the leaders of the society are, therefore, much sought after by politicians who are keen to tap into the Bondo society's mobilising skills to foster their political interests and careers. As a result of this, discourses of FGC eradication in Sierra Leone have been met with acts of resistance from sections of women in FGC practicing communities and from local political elites. Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the "patriarchal bargain" may be instructive here (see also Lorber, 1989:24). She argues that women routinely strategize to maximise alternatives available to them within patriarchy so as to safeguard their security and well-being. She notes that there are different forms of patriarchy with "distinct rules of the game" (1988:274). The two variants of patriarchy include male domination in sub-Saharan Africa and what she calls "classical patriarchy"². She argues that women make bargains with the patriarchal order so as to keep space open for themselves. These "bargains" are met with resistance, in the context of sub-Saharan male dominance, and by accommodation in classic patriarchy. In the sub-Saharan patriarchal context, she observes that polygyny and its attendant marital insecurities are at the same time "matched by areas of relative

² Under classical patriarchy, women accommodate male control but in return, more responsibility is then placed on the men to provide the women with security and well-being. A case in point is the case of pro-family feminists who opposed abortion despite the fact that it would give women more sexual freedom. Acceptance of abortion would spare the men responsibility and consequences of their sexual activity in a way that could potentially deprive women of security stemming from the responsibility placed on men (Kandiyoti, 1988:284). Though this form of male domination initially suppresses women's freedom, the women prefer to adopt interpersonal strategies through their sons and husbands to "maximise their security" thereby colluding in their own suppression rather than come into direct conflict with patriarchy and lose their "bargaining" base (Ibid: 274).

autonomy³ which [women] strive to maximise” (1988:277). Changes to an existing “patriarchal bargain” tend to be resisted by the women involved⁴. Her key argument then, is for an understanding of patriarchy which is willing to deal with local specificities and negotiations. Indeed the author says reflectively about male dominance in sub-Saharan Africa that “accustomed as I was to only one type of patriarchy [classic patriarchy], I was ill prepared for what I found” (Ibid).

This, broadly, is the perspective which I wish to adopt. I understand FGC as an act of gender based violence, but I argue that in the case of Sierra Leone, it must be understood from the perspective of its practitioners - that is, in terms of the local and national context that shape women’s lives. In this scenario, there is a need to investigate how women are using the gendered⁵ knowledge of the procedures as powerful resources in their own right.

Other scholars have noted that although the practice is ordained by women, they are often following a wider “normative” belief that dovetails with the central guiding principle of patriarchy - men’s ability to control women’s sexuality for both biological and social reproduction. El Dawla (1999) argues that, in a context in which women are socially defined by

³ She elaborates the concept of relative autonomy by stating that “Men's responsibility for their wives' support, while normative in some instances, is in actual fact relatively low. Typically, it is the woman who is primarily responsible for her own and her children's upkeep, including meeting the costs of their education, with variable degrees of assistance from her husband. Women have very little to gain and a lot to lose by becoming totally dependent on husbands, and hence they quite rightly resist projects that tilt the delicate balance they strive to maintain. In their protests, wives are safeguarding already existing spheres of autonomy” (Kandiyoti, 1988:277).

⁴ “The [...] development projects discussed [...] tend to assume or impose a male-headed corporate family model, which curtails women's options without opening up other avenues to security and well-being. The women perceive these changes, especially if they occur abruptly, as infractions that constitute a breach of their existing accommodations with the male dominated order. Consequently, they openly resist them” (Ibid).

⁵ The Bondo society is considered a key source of knowledge on issues related to women and family life. This knowledge is used in some forms to structure community organisation in ways that empower members. A case in point is knowledge regarding traditional herbal medicines locally known as “the leaf” which can be used to cure common ailments and also for “protection” against malevolence (Field-notes 23/03/2009).

their bodies and by regimes of practices controlling their bodies in ways that are different from men, it is possible for such women to be controlled and manipulated to uphold FGC despite the practice being harmful to them. She thus highlights the paradox that FGC is designed to curtail women's sexual appetite yet they are expected to be sexually responsive to their spouses during marriage. On her part Parker (1995:520), argues that the concern with FGC coincided with the emergence of feminist movements that championed sexual freedom of women when the clitoris was symbolically a powerful representation of women's sexual liberation and other rights (see also Obermeyer, 1999; Greer, 1984:201; Dorkenoo, 1994:17). This view of FGC as extenuating women's sexual pleasure has been central to the discussions of a number of feminist scholars (see Koso-Thomas, 1987; Lightfoot-Klein, 1989; Dorkenoo, 1994, Obermeyer and Reynolds, 1999:116).

Arguably, however, such a view is based on a Euro-American conception of sexuality (cf Walley 1997:421; Nnaemeka, 2005:193) whereas I would argue that "appropriate sexuality" should be understood as being socially and culturally constructed. In this respect, for example, Johnson describes how loud noises among the Mandinga in Guinea-Bissau are associated with wild animals, witches, spirits, etc., and thus experienced as negative and dangerous: "Screaming during sex – associated with sexual pleasure – is a highly inappropriate mixture of these human/nonhuman realms and thus considered to be dangerous" (2000:228). For a commentary on the ideological aspects of the western discussion on sexuality of circumcised women see Ogbu (1997), Obermeyer (1999), Johnson (2000), Dellenborg (2004:79) and Ahmadu (2000). Alongside the question of FGC as a practice which deprives women of sexual pleasure, harmful health effects associated with FGC have been presented as a compelling reason why the practice should be eradicated. In what follows, I analyse the literature on the harmful health effects of FGC and its impact on FGC eradication discourse in Sierra Leone.

2.3 The health and human security paradigm in anti-FGC discourse

FGC eradication discourses were for a long time mainly premised on the negative health effects associated with the practice. Jones *et al* (1999), for example, examined genital cutting practices in clinics in Burkina Faso and Mali with the intention of assessing the impact of the practice on women's health. They discovered that 93% of women in the Burkina Faso and 94%