

SUMMARIES

► *Elisabeth Bekers*

Female genital excision in African literatures

Literary contributions to an evolving and complex debate

Female genital excision is undoubtedly one of the most widely debated cultural traditions of our time. Although the practice is most prevalent in Africa, African voices tend to be ignored in the international debate on female genital excision. This article shows how literary authors from across Africa and the diaspora have contributed to the debate over the last four decades of the twentieth century, in response to changing attitudes about ethnicity, nationalism, colonialism, feminism, and human rights. In the literary discussions of female genital excision a gradual evolution can be discerned – from the 1960s, when writers mindful of its communal significance carefully ‘wrote around’ the physical operation, through the 1970s and 1980s, when they began to speak out against the practice and their societies’ gender politics, to the late 1990s, when they situated their denunciations of female genital excision in a much broader, international context of women’s oppression and the struggle for women’s rights. In this literary-historical overview special attention is paid to two novels that recently emerged in the African diaspora in the Netherlands, *Idil, een meisje* (‘Idil, a girl’, 1998) by the Somalia-born Yasmine Allas and *Abessijnse kronieken* (1998; *Abyssinian Chronicles*, 2000) by the Uganda-born Moses Isegawa.

► *Jyotsna Agnihotri Gupta*

Unwanted daughters

Discrimination and elimination of the girl child in India

This article examines the cultural and socio-economic reasons for son preference and discrimination and elimination of the girl child in India from a historical perspective. It argues that the main reasons lie in the two-fold strong familial and societal pressure on women to bear male children and the Indian government’s population policy, which puts pressure on couples to have only one or two children. The role played by modern reproductive technology used to select and detect the sex of the embryo or foetus in providing the scientific tools to perpetuate the embedded gender bias in society is highlighted. Some policy and legislative interventions made by the government, as well as actions taken by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), particularly women’s rights advocates, that aim to discourage the perpetuation of these harmful practices or to counteract their harmful implications are discussed. Drawing upon insights derived from literature study, government policy documents, media reports, and empirical research conducted in India for the World Health Organization, the author warns against the dangers of the ‘culture trap’ and ‘cultural relativism’ and argues to look beyond culture in seeking both the causes and solutions for discrimination and elimination of girls in India.

► *Conny Roggeband*

Harmful cultural practices

A useful category for genderstudies?

The concept of Harmful cultural practices has severe drawbacks, the author argues, for use in politics as well as in academic research. HCP is not a gendered concept and it is too vague to engender criteria to determine which practices are in fact culturally harmful. In political as well as academic discourse, false dichotomies tend to be created between 'north' and 'south' and between freedom of choice and harmfulness. The discourse of human rights that has become the main habitat of the concept makes it difficult to critically reflect on the intermingling of normativity and culture. Human rights are typically presented as a universal system of norms and values obscuring the fact that the project is itself cultural in nature. It is important, however, to keep in mind that culture itself is tied in with political, economic and social power structures. Roggeband is careful not to end up in cultural relativism; she pleads instead for an active dialogue between all parties concerned about practices that exclude, exploit or oppress women. This dialogue must in the very first place include the excluded, exploited or oppressed themselves.

► *Anke Van Vossolle*

Wife inheritance

'Wife inheritance' refers to the marriage between a widow and a male relative of her deceased spouse, usually her brother in law. Historically this custom intended to provide a form of social security for widows and their children. However, various social evolutions have changed this, like the disintegration of the extended family, the impact of western religions, the introduction of the human rights discourse in countries where the levirate marriage is practised, the rise of emancipation movements under the influence of feminism, growing poverty, war, and the spread of AIDS. This article argues that non-protective motives are getting to the fore. Did protection slowly give way to damage? The underlying hypothesis is that 'wife inheritance' in fact is a traditional practice that is harmful to the health and well-being of widows.