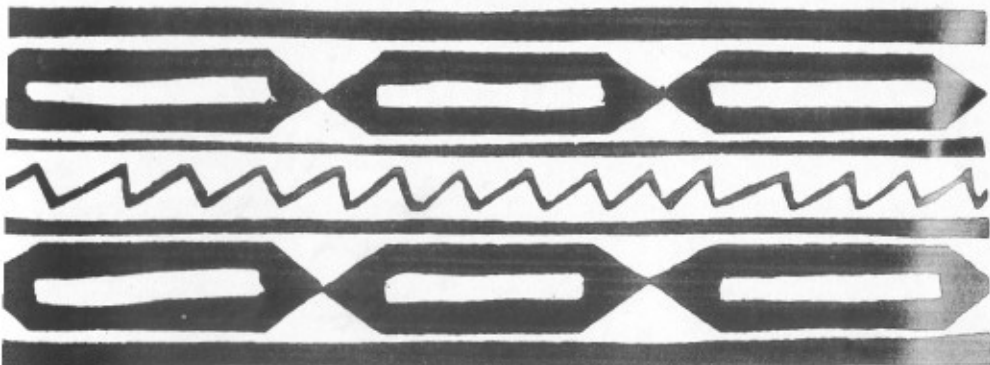


ALICE WALKER *and*
PRATIBHA PARMAR

WARRIOR MARKS

*Female Genital Mutilation and
the Sexual Blinding of Women*

*Jonathan Cape
London*



CONTENTS

PART ONE

- Introduction* 3
- Alice's Journey* 5

PART TWO

- Introduction* 89
- Pratibha's Journey* 99

PART THREE

- Interviews* 239

- Film Credits* 351
- Acknowledgments* 353
- Afterword* 359
- Female Genitalia* 365
- Types of Female Genital Mutilation* 367
- Contact Organizations and Advocacy Groups* 369
- Selected Bibliography and Suggested Reading* 371
- Permissions and Photo Credits* 373

the countryside so that I could get a sense of the colors, the light, and the vegetation. We saw huge termite hills scattered along the roads. The dusty red earth here settles on everything, including on the leaves of the palm trees, which looked as if they were made of red earth.

Later we went to give Bilaela half of the agreed-upon money. She complained about not receiving the other half, and insisted that we count the money in front of her, so that she could be sure we weren't cheating her! We have reached a compromise agreement with her, and among other things, she has arranged for us to shoot the "coming out" ceremony this Sunday, as well as the workshop with the traditional midwives, the one the local campaign against female genital mutilation runs on a regular basis.

If it were not for the fact that Alice is arriving tomorrow, I am certain Bilaela would not continue to work with us.

FRIDAY, 5 FEBRUARY 1993

Alice and the crew arrived today and all day I was simultaneously excited and nervous. We had to arrange for vans and cars to pick them up, along with all the equipment. I went into the arrival compound to greet them. It was wonderful to see them all, and I got such a buzz from seeing all those wonderful shiny silver boxes containing the equipment! The best part of a production for me is the shoot itself, and now, finally, it's happening.

I'd been worried about the customs process, but Malign, who has turned out to be amazingly well-connected,

spoke to a friend of his who just happens to be inspector for airport customs, and he eased us through.

SATURDAY, 6 FEBRUARY 1993

The crew had a rest day today, except for a meeting with Naz and me to discuss the shooting schedule for the week. Judy, the sound recordist, and Lorraine, the camera assistant, are the two crew members with whom I haven't worked before. Nancy Schiesari, the camerawoman, and I have worked together on two previous films, so we are somewhat familiar with each other's ways.

Had a long meeting with Alice and Deborah Matthews, who is accompanying Alice as her assistant. I am glad Deborah is here to keep Alice company, because we won't be needing Alice every day. I have arranged for Malign to be at their disposal for sightseeing.

Alice and I found some time to spend alone together, and we talked. She sounded so excited about her new love back in the U.S.! She was beaming and smiling and was quite irrepressible.

SUNDAY, 7 FEBRUARY 1993

The first day of the shoot! It was traumatic and emotionally draining. I don't know what I could have done to have prepared myself for what we witnessed today. We filmed at the village of Dar Salamay, which we'd visited during the first week of the research period. We had arranged to come back today to film the girls who were "coming out" of the bush after having been excised two weeks ago.

Today was the day when all the women in the village were preparing for the coming-out ceremony. Traditionally, it is at this time that the initiation into adulthood takes place, with special songs and dances and chants. When girls as young as four undergo this initiation and excision, I wonder what they could possibly learn about wifely duties!

It seems the village as a whole practices excision, though not infibulation. The coming-out ceremony will be the first public appearance by the girls since their excision.

We arrived at the village with Fatima, our interpreter. While we waited in the same courtyard where we stood a week ago, when we had come to introduce ourselves, we were given a wonderful surprise. A large group of girls from about three to ten years of age, as well as a few boys, started

playing clapping games and performing for us. A young boy with a makeshift mask on his face and a stick in his hand rushed into the courtyard with a group of boys behind him and danced, while the girls looked on and clapped. This spontaneous performance by the children of the village was a charming gift and made us feel welcome.

I was glad that I'd had the chance to film the faces of these young people. I thought about the fact that the girls in the dancing, laughing group, who hadn't already been excised, would be in the near future. I detected a sadness in the eyes of many of them.

There was an air of anticipation. Alice sat in the courtyard talking with Bilaela and looked at ease. She had enjoyed watching the children dance as much as the rest of the crew.

While we waited for the coming-out ceremony to begin, I decided I would like to do an interview with a mother of one of the recently excised girls. I wanted to know why mothers put their daughters through the terrible pain they themselves had experienced firsthand. The answer seems to be that the weight of tradition is so heavy that to protest is to risk your life, or at the very least risk banishment from your village and your community. Aminata Diop's experience is a painfully vivid illustration of this.

Fatima introduced Alice and me to a woman named Mary, whose daughter is one of the circumcised girls. Her daughter is also named Mary, so we began to refer to them as big Mary and little Mary.

Alice and I discussed the questions that we wanted to ask, and Fatima translated.

Big Mary was quite shy at first but soon warmed up.

The children put on a spontaneous "show" for us. Dar Salamay, The Gambia.



Somehow I feel that the pointed questions Alice asked her on camera made her think about excision in a way she'd never before considered. Little Mary, who is only four years old, is the youngest in the group of excised girls. When big Mary said, in the course of the interview, that she would stop this practice if she had the power to do so, because of the pain, it was a powerful moment. I know I will end up using this interview almost in its entirety, because it offers at least a little hope in the form of a mother's acknowledgment that excision is painful and that most mothers would rather not put their daughters through it, given the choice.

By now it was very hot, and the crew went quickly through the crate of water.

Finally we were taken to the edge of the village where the ceremony was about to begin. A circle of women danced

The tree at the edge of the village under which the "celebrations" took place. Dar Salamay, The Gambia.



around a giant tree, which created an umbrella against the hot piercing sun.

As I walked through the circle, I saw a group of girls, their bowed heads covered in scarves, sitting with their legs stretched out in front of them. They looked totally stunned, bewildered, in shock and total despair. For a few minutes I just stared, and suddenly their expressions hit me with such force that I felt tears begin to roll down my cheeks. I quickly left the circle and grabbed Nazila and told her to get me in shape. I had to direct the crew and couldn't give in to this pain, not now.

Within minutes I was back in the circle, directing the crew. I didn't want to cut myself off from my feelings, but I had to put a hold on them so that the sadness I felt wouldn't stop me from doing what I had to do. I couldn't afford to get lost in my feelings, especially not when I thought of what the young girls sitting there must have been experiencing. But really, their feelings were unimaginable to me.

Setting Dar Salamay, The Gambia.



Finding the balance between communicating with the people you are filming and standing back from them in order to think about the shot, the image, and the next question is a very difficult process. The first time I confronted this confusion of feelings and roles was in 1987, when I was making my video *Reframing AIDS*. I was interviewing a man, George Cant, who had AIDS and who was talking with pride and pain about his impending death, and I found it difficult not to share his pain as I struggled to focus on the next question on the sheet in front of me, as well as think about directing the camera operator.

I think of these young girls as little birds whose fragile bodies have been bashed, whose wings have been clipped before they can discover the power of their own souls and their erotic selves. They've been irrevocably wounded by traditions that cause them much pain and deny them the freedom to fly, to flourish.

The circumciser's knife had eradicated a source of fundamental pleasure for these girls. The knife had cut deep into their souls, putting out the sparkle in their eyes as the psychological and psychic scarification took root. There is no doubt that the images of these girls will continue to haunt me, and I believe viewers will be similarly affected by what we witnessed today. This thought kept me going through the next few weeks of the shoot. Because I needed to be strong and clearheaded during the making of the film, I was forced to push the pain I felt for these girls into the shadows, where it remained buried until I began the editing process. Later, when I began mourning the loss of wholeness in these girls' lives, their loss of sexual pleasure, I felt devastated and enraged. They had been robbed of something

so primary. But for now, questions passed at random through my mind:

Would they ever experience the pure pleasure of a clitoral orgasm?

How many of these girls will develop infections?

How many of them will die as a result of the excision?

How many of them will experience excruciating pain every time they menstruate?

How many of them will decide not to perpetrate this mutilation on their daughters, and how many will keep the tradition going?

When will this cycle of violence and humiliation end?

The dancing seemed to go on endlessly. Women circled around and around the girls, with the midday sun beating down on us all. The two men who were allowed to be present drummed insistently, and all the time the girls sat there, looking frightened and shocked.

Most of the women who were dancing around the girls were called the barren women. Apparently every village has a barren women's group, whose members are widows, or women who have not been married or do not want to get married, as well as women who have been abandoned by their husbands because they cannot have children. Some of them were dressed as men, and at first we were confused, thinking that there were many men at the ceremony. Perhaps some of the women were lesbians.

The song that Alice had read during the shoot in California came into my mind, a ritual song of female circumcision. It was found in a book published in Paris in 1937, and translated from the French by a Dutch man named Hans

Puamp, whom Alice had met on her travels around the world.

The mothers sing to the daughters on the day of circumcision: "We used to be friends, but today I am the master, for I am a man. Look—I have the knife in my hand, and I will operate on you. Your clitoris, which you guard so jealously, I will cut off and throw away, for today I am a man.

"My heart is cold. Otherwise I could not do this to you."

The daughters sing in response:

"Your words make us very scared, but we cannot escape. You have been operated on as well, and you did not die. So we will not die either."

The old women try to increase the fear of the girls:

"Don't be so sure of that, sisters. My heart almost breaks, and I am deadly scared. Oh, if I could change myself into a bird—oh, how fast I would fly away."

The girls answer:

"It's a disgrace to be afraid. If we'll die, it is a pity, but we have to be courageous."

After the operation, the girls are humiliated and mocked by the other women present. They sing:

"You thought nobody could overcome you. You ate by yourself. You ran fast, but now you are wounded. You said no one could ever stop you, but today you were held by two women. You used to take care of yourself. Now somebody else has to wash you and nurse you. You made love, but that's impossible now. You used to piss well, but from now on you will cry when you piss. You used to move so graciously, with closed legs. Now you walk with your thighs apart, like a toad or a mouse.

The victims respond:

"Today the knife has killed the guardian. Now he is dead. My village is unguarded. It used to be dirty, but now the guardian is gone. It will be clean."

The elderly ladies mock:

"You did not suffer as much as we did. Your clitoris is much smaller."

To which the young girls answer:

"My clitoris is just as large as yours, and if we could exchange our pain, you would find out we are suffering just as much as you did."

Finally, the oldest women in the ritual threaten:

*"Don't you quarrel, or we will punish you. We will make your pain unbearable by rubbing salt in your wounds."**

In this song, the women sing about becoming men in order to do the circumcision. Women literally abolish themselves as women and take on a male persona in order to participate in the ritual.

This ritual song also reveals how the deeply rooted patriarchy perpetuates this violence by turning women into heroes for withstanding the terrible pain of mutilation. The song and the dance symbolize the eradication of the bond between grandmother and mother, mother and daughter.

Perhaps this frantic dancing is a way for the women to numb themselves. I wondered if the dance helped them to be detached, to deny their pain. The complexity of this web of denial and distancing demonstrates women's ability to embody, embrace, and reinforce patriarchal power. Unfortunately the phenomenon of "colonizing" and oppressing one's own kind is not new or unique, nor is it rare.

*From *Mœurs et Coutumes des Manjas* by A.M.I. Vergiat (Payot, 1937).



"Little Mary" and another girl being bathed, "purified," at the close of the "coming out" (back into the village) ceremony.



"Little Mary" being reprimanded by one of the dancers.



Since the girls had never been told what was going to happen to them when they went to the bush, they probably didn't know what was going to be done to them next. We followed the women with our camera, to film the girls being washed in a purification ceremony. Then came a stern lecture to the girls from the circumciser, before a chicken was beheaded by one of the two male drummers present at this ceremony. (Later Alice said that the message is being spelled out very clearly to the girls, "If you don't do as we say, then you too will be beheaded." Control through subliminal terror.)

The headless chicken crawled toward the feet of the young girls and seemed in particular to go toward little Mary, and her blood-spattered feet recoiled from the touch of the dying chicken.

A woman dressed in men's clothes harshly held down little Mary's feet. Little Mary's eyes appeared woeful, terrified; she stared at the camera while being washed.

A woman came toward the camera, dancing defiantly.

I know some of these images will stay with me forever.

Finally the girls were given a special meal. They were also given gifts of beautiful clothes, including woven shawls. We were told that this was one of the only times in their lives when they would get to eat this well and would be the clear center of attention.

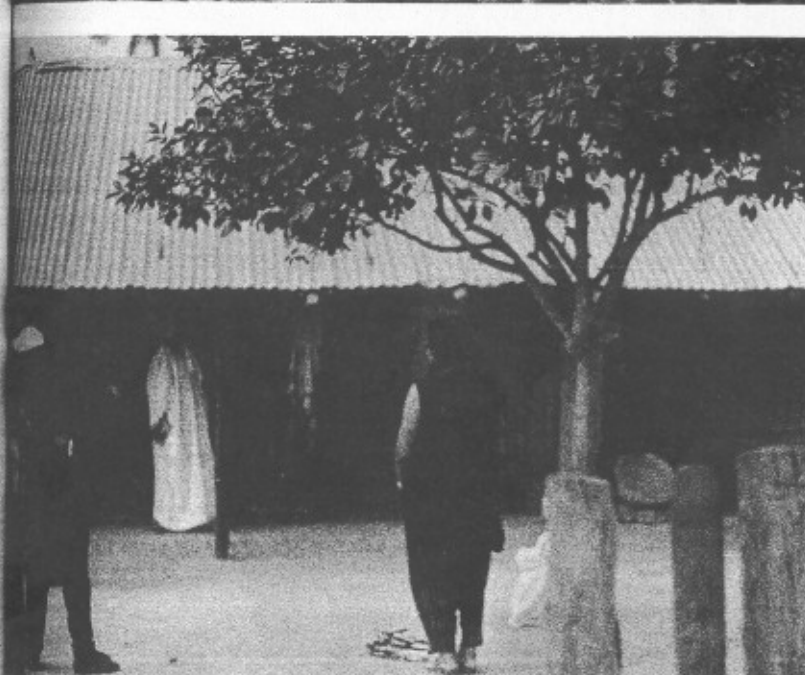
Then the procession, headed by the circumciser and her assistants, led the girls back to the village. They proudly carried the calabash, which holds their instruments of torture, on their heads. A return home after two weeks in the bush. I asked Nancy to shoot this with a handheld camera. I particularly wanted to capture images of the girls' feet shuffling along in a line as they were escorted back to the

village by a group of women, dancing and singing. Little Mary was squeezed in between two taller girls. Many of the girls hid their faces behind their beautiful new shawls as they were taken to the village square, and made to dance with their mothers to the relentless drumbeat, which had not stopped once since early morning.

We were able to film an interview with the village circumciser. She was adorned in a white gown and turban, and wore a long, thick silver chain with several pendants. In her hands she held a red and green striped baton. Next to her sat her assistant, also dressed in white. By their feet was the calabash containing their instruments. The circumciser looked hard as steel. Alice sat to the side of them. It was a highly charged tableau. She was defensive and belligerent, refused to reveal very much. Everything is a secret, and "even if you put a knife to the girls who have been circumcised, they wouldn't talk and tell you what is cut and how it is done." When she said that she would never be in the company of women who are not circumcised and she could distinguish these women from the others, Alice confronted her: "There are many women among you now—all of us women—who are not circumcised. Did you know that, and how can you tell?" The circumciser just laughed and said, "You want to know everything."

This interview made me realize how deeply fossilized these customs and traditions are in women's psyches, and that even if there were legislation against female genital mutilation, it would not disappear overnight. A lot of work still would need to be done.

Masses of funding and resources are needed to train women health workers to go into the rural areas where the majority of mutilations are being performed, so that women



The children who were mutilated two weeks before our arrival. "Little Mary," four years old, is in the center.



Waiting for the circumciser to emerge from her house. Dar Salamay, The Gambia.



can be informed about the harmful health consequences of this practice. The government needs to come out strongly and publicly against it and not worry about losing votes. The Muslim leaders who are against it need to speak out all over the country and discourage the belief that it is in the Koran—many Islamic theologians argue that it isn't. There are many other strategies for change that African women continue to discuss, but as always, the excuse for inaction is that there is not enough money.

We did our final interview of the day with two girls aged twelve and fourteen, who had been circumcised two weeks before. We held this interview in the same courtyard we'd used for the interview with the circumciser, and even though she herself was no longer there, there were many other women nearby who monitored every word the girls spoke. Of course, the poor girls were terrified and said, almost in a robot fashion, that this was the happiest day of their lives and, yes, they would do it to their daughters because this is their tradition. It was so sad to see the light gone from their beautiful eyes, to see their drawn faces. In these last two weeks, they had been catapulted into adulthood with great violence.

It was a long, long day, an incredibly painful start to the shoot. We went through about twelve rolls of film (120 minutes), and the crew worked fast and well despite the emotionally draining and physically difficult circumstances. Nancy was quick in moving her camera around. She tuned in immediately to what I wanted. She is a sensitive soul as well as a brilliant cinematographer. This is why I like working with her.

That night I was jolted out of my sleep by Nazila. I'd been screaming and crying, and my body was in spasms.

All the emotions of the day were bursting out in the darkness as I dreamed that I was being circumcised, and shouted, "No, no, don't do it, please," while in the background, the drumming rang in my ears. The sound of drumming stayed with me for days and days.

MONDAY, 8 FEBRUARY 1993

Today's half-day shoot went smoothly except when Lorraine, the assistant camera operator, fainted right next to the termite hill. The sun was intensely hot, and she had been treated that morning for a twisted ankle.

As we prepared to film Alice at the termite hill, we saw a group of women dressed in their finest clothes walking in a group down the dusty red road. It was a powerful image that spoke to me of the determination of African women. The way they walked together conveyed a sense of sisterhood, friendship, and hope, and in fact it was the very image Alice had described when she'd said she wanted to be filmed with African women celebrating their strength. Luckily, some of these women were from Malign's village, and he introduced us to them. They were on their way to a naming (christening) ceremony.

I told Alice I thought a shot of her walking with them to the accompaniment of Labi Siffre's song "Something Inside So Strong" would be a great sequence for the film. Alice had introduced me to this song, which she loves, and so of course she liked the idea. "I knew you were thinking that," she said. We both recalled the night in London at the Hackney Empire when Labi Siffre had sung this song, prompting everyone in the audience to rise to their feet, singing and clapping: