

THE SUN CAN NEVER DRY LAUNDRY IF IT'S KEPT IN THE SHADE

(Peul proverb)

The pathway to abandoning FGM

Seydou NIANG



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peul proverb

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Translated from French by Jeanne Bishop

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Author's Note

The contents of this book are based on facts inspired by real-life situations. The aim is to enable both professionals and the public to learn methods of addressing the question of FGM with the communities concerned. I recount what I've heard during my awareness-raising meetings and how I proceeded to prevent FGM of the girls in my native region in the north of Senegal and later in Europe.

Although inspired by the particular circumstances of one community (Fulani, north of Senegal), certain elements may also serve to heighten awareness in other practicing communities. In fact we find most of the justifications for the practice of FGM in several different communities. Raising awareness of such a topic is not easy and requires a lot of tact as the subject touches on strong identity issues.

I don't claim to know the ultimate method for achieving abandonment I can only share an experience that has proved its worth, starting with my own family.

FGM is almost always considered a women's issue when in reality the suffering it causes affects men as well as women. Consequently the mobilisation of men and their involvement in raising awareness is extremely important, given their decision-making authority still present in practicing communities.

Several people in the book make statements that we do not endorse. By 'we' I refer to all our partners in the project Men Speak Out (GAMS Belgium, FORWARD UK, HIMILO Foundation, Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp) and all who fight for equal rights. I have chosen to add them to show the reader the variety of arguments that can be put forward by those who see, in the continuation of the practice, benefits they have never questioned.

FGM is a social issue that involves several other topics: the role of women in society, cultural identity, education, human rights, health, etc. This is why listening to and respecting the person telling their story is of utmost importance.

Most of those who are for FGM are so because they were raised to believe

in the usefulness of the practice and have known no other alternative. The best way to help them become aware of the dangers is to focus on what they by giving them an opportunity to question the behaviour and cultural beliefs by giving the concrete examples in everyday life situations, such as the disappearance of other practices or beliefs how these have affected the well-being of their society.

On the other hand, there are those who are opposed to abolishing FGM in the name of certain community ideologies. They are worried about preserving the authenticity of their community, and keeping their social power; or because they consider that putting an end to the practice would mean surrendering their community to the invasion of outside developments.

Any means that will help abolish the practice are good; either through repression or awareness-raising. However, what must prevail above all is an awakening that will allow a person to opt for abolition because they have understood the dangers.

Through critical reading, some responses may certainly be questioned in relation to other issues that appear here and there in the dialogues, but what interests me here is making people reflect on the practice of FGM. If the replies can be applied to other topics, to which an association or an individual is committed, I would be delighted if they can help in their cause.

The text shows through Yéro, the central figure, that men are sensitive to matters concerning their mothers, wives and daughters. The position of some of the characters also shows that it's not because we are a woman or a man that we are for or against the practice.

Finally if we have chosen to present this subject in fictional form, it is to allow the reader to get a socio-cultural understanding of the issue among practicing communities and to enable the reader to grasp the commitment, the determination, the strategy but also the problems of those who are committed to such causes. We want to take the reader on a reflective journey so that he too may find some ideas and arguments to help his fellow citizens: We are all concerned.

There is a summary of all useful information (arguments, counter-arguments, legislation ...) at the end of the book.

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Characters

Aminata Tokola	Griotte and President of a women's group in Bito
Bathie	Griot in Bito
Ceerno Jibril	Imam of the Village of Bito
Kange et Piindi	Daughters of Kouro and Kekkere, live in Brussels
Kekkere	Husband of Kouro lives in Brussels
Kouro	Cousin of Yéro and Lilly, wife of Kekkereet, and mother of Kange and Piindi, lives in Brussels
Légo	Brother of Kekkere lives in Bito
Lilly	Cousin of Kouro and Yéro, explores the arguments in favour of FGM, lives in Bito
Malick	Young radical Islamist, son of the village Imam, Bito
Mc Deve et Annore Leniol	Young rappers from Bito
Moctar	Friend of Yéro and Quranic student who promotes the Fulani Culture, lives in Bito
Patrick	Belgo-Senegalese Christian, friend of Yéro
Tanoo	Mother of Kekkere, lives in Bito
Thiérno Bokara Diallo	Imam of the village of Lugge
Yéro	Cousin of Kouro and Lilly, militant teacher for the abolishment of FGM, lives in Bito
Zouber	Activist for human rights, lives in Nouakchott

Locations

Bito	Senegalese village hometown of Kouro, Lilly and Yéro
Brussels (Briksel)	Capital of Belgium
Lugge	Village about 60 kilometers from Bito where Yéro teaches
Madina Nidathiebe	City between Bito and Lugge
Nouakchott	Capital of Mauritania, a one day drive from Bito
Sedo Abbass	Village which has twice organised public declarations for the abolition of FGM

CHAPTER 1

Nostalgia

Brussels, Belgium

The cars drives slowly along Rue de l'Hôtel des Monnaies. It's a little overcast and cool in Brussels. On the pavements, some ice remains; it had snowed again although it was nearly spring. The two girls she had just collected from the nanny play with their game consoles.

She hears a siren that seems to come from the left. She hates that sound. She slows down at the traffic lights, puts a CD in the player. The voice of Guellaye, melodious and poetic draws a smile. The light changes to green, she stops to let the ambulance pass. While listening to the heroic story of Hameth Birome, sung by the most famous poet of her Fulani ethnic group, Kouro sees again images of her childhood. Those of her cousin Lilly constantly there. She promises herself to call and tell her the news.

It has been three years since she's been back to Bito. Her eldest daughter was barely two years old when, for the second time, she went back to the village to see her parents. The youngest will soon make her first trip to the land of her cousins.

Although well integrated in appearance, Kouro struggles deep inside to separate herself from the values she grew up with. Between her hometown and the capital where she was raised by her aunt, her father's sister. Despite having lived in Dakar for more than 40 years, her Fulani aunt didn't speak a

word of Wolof. Her husband was an important businessman who had very good relations with almost all sectors in Dakar. It was thanks to one of his friends, a headmaster in those days of a girls high school in Dakar, that Kouro was able to do her Bachelor's Degree and continue her studies at the Cheick Anta Diop University before arriving in Brussels, 15 years ago.

Kouro now has her own car, lives with her husband and two daughters in a nice apartment in Saint-Gilles. She congratulates herself on her career and job as an banking executive. Kouro is still grateful to her uncle and his friend; and always tells herself that she could have ended up in a loveless marriage, without knowing anything of the world of knowledge. She supports who she can, communicating regularly with Lily, her only cousin and friend remaining in the village.

CHAPTER 2

The unexpected debate

Bito, Senegal

It had been hot throughout the day. The shadows of the trees begin to lengthen, bringing both men and animals a satisfying mellowness; the heat eases. Lilly walks slowly stopping sometimes at a shop fence to greet the neighbours. She takes a small smooth stick out of her wallet, picks her teeth for a while. Moving leisurely forward, her wallet tucked under her left armpit, she manipulates her mobile phone to reply to a message. She arrives at her cousin's house, a trained teacher. Yéro is with Patrick Séne, one of this friends, on holiday from his native country Belgium. Patrick's parents are of Serer origin from Fatick in the centre of Senegal. The two friends had met during a training course in Dakar 10 years earlier.

After the usual greetings and jokes between cousins by blood (Lilly and Yéro) and by alliance (Fulani and Serer¹), Lilly who has just celebrated her 43rd birthday addresses her cousin:

— To see you there, all relaxed in your chair, anyone who doesn't know you would think you were someone important. But me, who saw you as naked as a worm all through your childhood, I know who you are.

1 Ethnic groups. It is tradition for cousins to make jokes to relax the atmosphere.

Yéro who has great esteem for his cousin laughs. He likes to remember their shared childhood.

— Kouro sends her greetings, she continues. She called me about an hour ago. She'll be coming here with her daughters for a holiday. She wants to take advantage of the opportunity to have them cut and at the same time honour her commitment to tradition, despite having lived so many years amid the toubabs². I admire her a lot, because I know of some, several Serer in fact, who once in Europe would do anything to renounce their customs in the name of integration and evolution. But you, Patrick, you can be excused because you were born over there.

All three laugh:

— You're mistaken, Cousin Lilly, said Patrick. We're Europeans that's certain, but part of us is African. Nothing can erase or change that and we're proud.

While Lilly sits down on the mat, Yéro, a little mockingly says to her:

— Seriously though, I hope what you just said was one your endless jokes. How can Kouru, who did graduate studies and is living in an environment as advanced as Belgium, afford to have such ideas? Maybe I heard wrong. Have her daughters cut, you say?

— Yes. And where is the problem? she asks. Do you think that all these radio programmes, endless meetings, discussions to no end and I don't know what else, will make us abandon the practice that saw us born and which, incidentally is good for all society?

Her cousin can read in her face that she's serious. Strategic and methodical, the teacher who in recent months has become involved in making the population of his region aware of this sensitive issue, says to himself: here is an opportunity not to be missed.

— Listen my dear, he says. The world is not a rock, it's a vine that grows and evolves. Nothing is fixed. You just have to look all around you

2 White people

to realise. Floodwaters widen the river bed. But I would like you to tell me the reasons why you value and hold on to this practice so fervently?

Patrick, who up until then was watching them wide-eyed, a serious expression on his face, runs a hand through his hair and intervenes:

— I too would like to understand. It's true that our traditions are a part of what defines us, but all the same, there are some of which I just don't grasp the significance.

— Very well, replies the woman. I'll tell you. Firstly, because it has always been practiced by our ancestors.

Yéro interrupts:

— Just a moment. Sorry to cut you off. But just because our ancestors practiced it, doesn't make sense to me. If that's the case, why have we abandoned other things that they have practiced since the beginning of time? For example human sacrifice, worshipping inert things³. And directly connected to this subject, exhibiting the virginity loincloth in public places⁴ ?

— Now you're just mixing up everything, replied his cousin. The examples that you give have no relation whatsoever. Those acts were despicable and contrary to our religion. We don't practice them because they were inhuman. It's quite different to being cut. It protects us from temptation and infidelity. The reason we no longer show the bloody loincloth after the wedding night is because of respect for the privacy of the couple.

Still calm and relaxed, Yéro shakes his head and says with a smile:

— Alright, as you wish. But what temptations do cutting protect you from? How does it make you faithful?

3 For example, worship a tree or anthill, etc....

4 Traditionally the morning following the wedding night, proof of the girl's virginity (bloodstained sheet) had to be shown in a public place.

— You really make me laugh. You want it put crudely, I'll give it to you crudely, replies Lilly. It helps us women to control ourselves. It reduces the urge to only think about sex and helps our daughters to keep their virginity until marriage, so as not to dishonour the whole family. In addition, it helps us stay faithful to our husbands unlike those loose, non-circumcised women who can't keep their loincloth in place once night falls. They sleep around without thinking, because this bit, in between the legs, doesn't stop moving. The only way to stop it and calm the constant desire it causes is to have a good *Yéro*⁵ and we don't want this depravity for our daughters.

Patrick, amused by her words, exclaims:

— That argument is really a meaningless.. I grew up with non-circumcised girls and they're not easy at all. If they were, I would have slept with them all the time. Be assured it's not as simple as that.

— Yeah, sure, says Lilly with a derisive pout. We may not have been in the past but now we know what goes on. You don't need to go so far, just to our own major cities populated by those ethnic groups that no longer practice, people come back and tell us about the debauchery they've seen there.

— You're like a blind person, resumes *Yéro*. As we say here: he who guards his field does not see the birds eating his millet but rather the birds pecking in the field of his neighbour⁶. You say that female circumcision helps to control the desire to have sex before marriage. OK, I like the idea that my future wife hasn't had sexual intercourse with anyone else but me. But I would also like, when we got married, that she wants to have sex with me. According to the principle that you have just explained, once cut, the part that is supposed to awaken the desire in my wife, is gone forever... What will that do for our intimacy, knowing the part removed hasn't been frozen and put in a safe place until it needs to be re-used like you imply? To say that it allows girls to keep their virginity, is just a completely false and simplistic loophole. As know you very well, nowadays, even here in our own village where all the girls have been cut,

5 Metaphor; she uses her cousins name when referring to the penis

6 Proverb

the most of them have had sex before marriage. The proof is at least two (unmarried) girls get pregnant every year. It's well known.

Seeing globalisation as the cause of all ills in society, Lilly explains:

— It's because they're influenced by the so-called "developed and by the soap-opreas on television where there's no shame.

The man continues without letting himself get distracted:

— But since they've been "cut", they're supposed to be able to control themselves and have no desires, right?

— I'm not saying that they no longer have desires, she says raising her index finger. I'm saying that it reduces the intensity.

— Ok if you say so, concedes her cousin. But the fact is, even with their husbands the intensity won't increase. You spoke of other ethnic groups and people who don't practice and who are living in debauchery. One, you're just regrouping false information, since you yourself don't know anyone in that situation. Two, you can never say with certainty, when seeing someone who behaves in a certain manner, whether she has been cut or not. It isn't written on their forehead as far as I know.

Patrick listens carefully before saying laughingly:

— Cousin, I love the image of a clitoris being frozen for years, then re-used. It's funny, but for me, I think it gives food for thought.

CHAPTER 3

Following the debate; Religious justification

Illy calls her adopted daughter and asks her to turn down the music she was listening to a short distance away. She turns her chair to have both men in her sight, and says sharply:

- Listen you two. Don't make fun of me. What I'm saying isn't a joke.

Even if I wanted to go along with your theories, what would you do about the fact that this practice is a Muslim religious obligation? Even the marabouts who guide us in our faith tell us so.

The teacher knew perfectly well that sooner or later his cousin would rely on religious arguments to justify her position, he gently takes hold of her hand saying:

- Wait! Wait! First tell me what is a religious obligation?

She pulls her hand away and sneers:

- Ha ha, now you want to put me at odds with my faith. A religious obligation? There's nothing to explain, it's very clear. It's what every Muslim is obliged to do in the name of the Divine Law. If you have

another explanation, tell me.

— Thank you for your answer, said Yéro placing his hands on his knees. It's time that you, and those like you who call themselves believers, make an effort to know your religion a little bit better. I'm not saying that you don't know anything, but you would be better off by thinking more and doing research than limiting yourself to devouring everything that the marabouts and other charlatans feed you all the time. I have to say that many of them don't inform you to enlighten you, but rather because there is an issue behind it, but I'll come back to that.

Lilly rolls her eyes.

— First of all, resumes Yéro, a religious obligation, at least in Islam is a commandment from God which the humble believer can't refuse. This is written in black and white in the reference book, The Quran. What isn't found there is consequently not compulsory. In all the chapters of this book, there is not one verse that mentions female circumcision.

— Yes but religion doesn't just amount to that, she tells him. There is the Sunna too. Even if it isn't an obligation, it's part of the Sunna and we have to take into account the example of the Prophet (Peace and Blessings be upon Him).

Patrick, the Belgian-Senegalese, has been following the discussion closely. He reacts:

— All this is beyond me. I'm listening to you both I'm a Christian. I don't know anything about Islam, but I do know that nothing like this is mentioned in The Bible.

CHAPTER 4

Should the link between female genital mutilation and (Muslim) religion be denied?

Bito, Senegal

Born into a practicing family and community, Yéro understands the difficulty of brushing off such a deep rooted belief that has been around for a long time among conservative and proud Fulani people. He knows from experience that the best weapon is to be patient and non-judgemental

He picks up the cup of water placed on a small stool on his right and takes a sip.

— This discussion is getting interesting, he says. The fact that you see that it's not an obligation is already a good start. First of all it's important to understand what the sunnah is all about. Without doubt Mohamed is our example and we must do everything to try and be like him, I don't deny that, but let me explain to you again what we call Sunnah really is.

Lilly smiles and says, Yes Moussé⁷. Yéro pays no attention to his cousin's mockery, who has the habit of saying that Yéro considers everyone as his pupils. He continues:

— It's either what the Prophet recommends us to do, or what he did

or what he refrained from doing without telling us to imitate him, or something he tolerated during his lifetime, meaning things that others in his entourage did and he did not forbid it. Now let's get back to what concerns us, namely female genital mutilation. The Prophet had daughters and there is no known evidence that they were genitally mutilated. It's reported in a non-authenticated⁸ Hadith that in his lifetime, he once said to a cutter: "Touch lightly and do not abuse, because this renders the face radiant and more pleasing for the husband." In my opinion this means he didn't support the practice. Thirdly, in the religious writings called *Risala*⁹ - the practice of female genital mutilation is cited in a chapter where we talk about wanted or desired things, for example, shaving pubic hair and armpits, cutting the nails. On the basis of that, do you really think that someone who didn't cut their nails or shave their head is less of a believer? Finally, have you ever questioned yourself (and your faith) for not copying all the deeds and actions of the Prophet that are part of The Sunnah?

Lilly shakes her head.

— Just one last thing, continues Yéro. It's been reported by several sources that God doesn't impose on any soul that which exceeds his limits and that we must not make any person suffer, because Islam means Peace. Have you ever wondered why some Muslims don't practice female genital mutilation and some non-Muslims do? Even if, you don't seem to see problems with the practice, the doctors and health professionals tell us the opposite and explain very clearly the effects it can have, not only on a women's social life, but also on her physical and mental health.

Lilly, shelling peanuts while listening to him, abruptly puts the bowl on the ground and crushes the final one remaining in her hand. Irritated, she says:

— Do they know better than us, the people who have undergone it? Anyway, if all these complications they inundate us with were true, we wouldn't be here today discussing it. We are all born of women who were cut. Even better, for generations the men of God and the most famous

8 Not unanimously recognised by the Islamic Ummah. This explains incidentally why many Muslims don't practice female genital mutilation.

9 Or *alrisala* in arabic, theological works.

people were born in families that practice the tradition. Why, if these problems have always existed, why weren't they identified at that time?

Yero recalls a recent discussion with a few friends on the issue of homosexuality, during which some decided that it wasn't a subject that deserved to be debated and was cut short. He realises how lucky he is that his cousin, even if she doesn't share his point of view, accepts the debate.

— I'll try and explain it to you. I admit your question is not irrelevant. However, the answer lies within you. You know as well as I do, or at least you have heard these words: seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave; search knowledge even if you have to go to China; every day a glimmer of knowledge is born for the good of the planet.

Well, if the causes of the problems weren't identified for so long, it is simply because science wasn't as advanced back then as it is today. I'll give you some examples so that you can understand.

When you were pregnant with your first son Kodel, you went to Dakar and in the sixth month of pregnancy¹⁰ you already knew, thanks to your doctor, that it was a boy. It was through science that you were able to see your son swim in your womb. You were also raised hearing this saying, no one can know what is found in the belly of a mother before she gives birth. This was true a few years earlier because science had not yet developed to the level it is today.

His cousin nods and smiles.

— Another more common example, continues Yéro. twenty years ago, when we were still young, everybody told us, our parents included, that malaria was caused by spirits. We argued forcefully that people were bewitched. Better still, at that time and even more recently, illnesses such as tetanus and polio were widespread because there was no known cure. But you have to agree with me that it's thanks to the advance in medicine that these diseases are controlled.

10 It's very rare for a pregnant woman to have an ultrasound if not necessary for medical reasons, it's too expensive

— That's true, says Lilly as though she'd suddenly had a revelation. I remember just before my aunt died, she was delirious and said it was witches, whereas today all the signs show it was malaria. Even so, that still doesn't explain how we can trust what these doctors now say, when they dare to condemn a practice that we underwent ourselves without suffering of any of the complications they talk about.

CHAPTER 5

Ignorance about the dangers of female circumcision and the scapegoat.

Bito, Senegal

Yéro feels that his examples have opened a window of understanding in his cousin's head. Making references to concrete evidence that she had never thought about and in this way letting her see for herself why it's unnecessary and harmful to cut young girls is the best way to participate in the abolishment of the practice, even if little by little.

- I'm going answer with a question, he announces. Tell me, what do you do when you have a headache or stomachache, or you are just not feeling well? Do you not go to consult the doctor or, more often in your case, the traditional healer?
- Of course I do, she exclaims. Because I don't have any remedies and they know about all the herbs, incantations or pharmaceutical products.
- Exactly. And when taking the medicine, do you follow the recommendations they give you to the letter? asks Yéro.
- What do you want me to do? If I don't, what's the point in going to see them? she says.
- From what you just said, it's obvious that you trust them when you're sick, says Yéro. tYes indeed. I would even add that the health

professionals have no interest in saying a practice is risky if it's not. Maybe Lilly can enlighten us.

— Hmm, says Lilly. In principal they have no interest but we mustn't forget that sometimes they vaccinate us with products to supposedly prevent diseases, when in fact it's to stop us having children. This is the case with the polio vaccinations, at least that's what everyone is saying. The Westerners have programmes with which to control us. They go through non-Governmental organisations with the support of our uprooted leaders, who are just the puppets of these so-called powerful countries.

Always respectful of his cousin's views, Yéro says laughingly:

— It's true the behaviour of some of our leaders with regard to these powers can be criticised, but again, I appeal to your mind. You've proved up until now that you can use it. It's possible that some of the major public health programmes are not without risks or as you think, have ulterior motives. The acquisition of a vaccination or a therapeutic drug comes with a price that's unfortunately paid by the poor; clinical trials, guinea pigs. However, I said at the beginning of our discussion, don't believe everything you hear around the fountain at the market. The polio vaccination, much-maligned, has proved its worth by almost eliminating this terrible disease, and we still continue to breed like rabbits. Getting back to your statements about Westerners and non-Governmental organisations - tell me first if you think that something differentiates them from us. For example, do you feel more or less human than them?

— As I live in both cultures it's not difficult to answer, teases Patrick.

— Me neither. I don't mind answering, says Lilly. I think we're all humans, but you can't make me believe that we're not different. We have our values and they have theirs.

What saddens me is that they continue to want to dominate us, this time not with slavery and trafficking or being forbidden to speak our own native languages, but by systematically taking away piece by piece that which has built our identity.

— You're moving on to other things now, which are different to what we first talked about – female genital mutilation. But of course this can still lead to interesting points of view, says Yéro picking up his wallet that had just fallen from his pocket. Let me tell you something. When you said that we are all humans but different, that's as true as: "the circumference of the head of a penis¹¹". Accepting that we are all human is means recognising that we are all equal.

— No, no. Not so fast with the human rights, equality, feminism, blah blah blah, she shouts. Answer first about the brainwashing carried out by the NGOs and development programmes that have managed to get young people like you into their camp sometimes with allowances distributed during the pseudo-seminars on the coast.

— Ha ha ha! Ok. As you like, continues her cousin. I had no intention at all of dodging your question. I'm happy that you're ready to tackle the assumption that we're corrupt for fighting against our own traditions. We'll come back to that.

Lilly sneezes and drops her phone. Patrick picks it up and gives it to her. She turns to her cousin and says with a smile:

— That was nothing to do with what you just said, I'm starting to get a cold.¹²

— I didn't say anything, replies Yéro before continuing. The NGOs, are organisations created by people like you and me. Their brain isn't any different from ours, so I don't think it's worth being afraid because we can talk to them, argue and uncover lies they would want us to believe. They allow people like us, far from cities where the children have no access to education, to have useful information to cope better with the harsh realities of everyday life. He who brings you knowledge, in principle doesn't wish you any harm.

Lilly doesn't seem to agree but she lets her cousin continue:

11 Fulani expression meaning it's an undeniable truth.

12 Traditionally when someone sneezes following a statement, it's supposedly proves that the statement was true.

— We don't deliberately choose not to need information. Knowledge is infinite. It's down to our own free will. In our tradition, which you so strongly defend, as do I, just in a different way... In our tradition we are taught a lot of things that, as such, are not good at all.

Patrick is stroking a kitten that had come up to his chair. He lifts his head and smiles at Lilly.

— I'll give you a couple of examples, Yéro resumes. When you're taught a verse to provoke stomach or back ache in another person so they can't swallow their food, you can't tell me that it's a good thing. But we learn it anyway because it's said in our language, "No one knows what the dawn will bring." Well, as for the NGOs I can't say one hundred percent that their programme is good, but we'll never know if we're not acquainted with them.

His cousin says:

— Yes, but this is between us. There are no outside influences coming with ideas about human rights or other such notions.

The kitten weaves around Patrick's legs and gets into position ready to pounce on a pigeon that is seen pecking near an overturned mortar, a few metres away from them. Patrick brushes the cat hairs from his thigh and intervenes:

— I agree with Lilly on this. The speeches on human rights they give us, are just a whole load of waffle. They don't even believe in it themselves. Moreover, I think it's what has created all these women's movements in Belgium and everywhere in Europe and now in Africa, claiming that women are equal to men, or I'd even say superior to the men of today. Maybe it's this hypocrisy that makes certain people want to hold on to traditions as bad or barbaric as they may be, like female genital mutilation.

— Looks like, I'm going to have a tough time with you two, says the teacher. I do agree with one of your ideas. It may well be that the use of or the interpretation of the notion of human rights, depending on the environment, can be confusing. But I think that you will agree with me that, despite everything, men, women, black, white, purple or whatever

you like, we're all born in the same way. Specifically from the lower abdomen of a woman following a coupling between two people, or, if you were born in in the last quarter of the century, by scientific procedures, proof of the progress of human thought via science and technology. This is an undeniable proof of the statement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: All men are born free and equal.

A cart full of hay passes in front of the house; they respond to the driver's greeting with a wave of the hand. Yéro continues:

— The principal of human rights doesn't belong to a people or an ethnic group. It's universal. You were saying earlier, Lilly, that these are foreign influences. It just proves that you defend what you don't know. Because in 1776 here, in the heart of Fouta, in this remote place where we call home, Thiérno Souleymane Baal¹³ who you so greatly admire, initiated discussions on human rights and drafted a constitution is very similar to the Declaration of Human Rights voted in 1948 by the United Nations when you look closely. Almost as though the articles of its text had been copied.

Patrick you talk to me about feminists. Yet it's funny, they fight to free women and Lilly and her accomplice and cousin who almost grew up there where these movements were born, seem to be militants for the continuation of a practice that, in terms of health has risks and in terms of human rights, is a form of violence against women to control them.

For most of them, they're far from suffering directly but feel concerned for the fate of other women who undergo female genital mutilation all over the world. Sometimes they are accompanied by men involved in the same cause.

Annoyed again, Lilly snaps:

— We're not mutilated, damn it. We honour a practice that represents education, initiation and love for us. We have no inferiority complex about this. Even if Patrick agreed with me on the principle of human rights, I cannot accept that it qualifies us as barbarians. This practice has

13

Historic figure of Fouta, learned Muslim and war chief of the XVIIIth century

a meaning for us. Do you believe that Kouro doesn't love her daughters or just wants to make them suffer? Who can love a daughter more than the one who brought her into the world? I understand, given the debate we're having, that things are changing but we can't just impose something on people in the hope of helping them. Yes there is suffering everywhere as the saying goes: "the one who decides to be circumcised must be prepared to see blood.¹⁴" This gives me the opportunity to return once again to female genital mutilation. Why spend so much time raising awareness about this practice, when no one speaks of its counterpart, male circumcision? Yet both are supposed to eliminate the masculine or feminine intimate parts? Speaking as a woman, I think it's a form of violation of rights just to talk about the women. And you Yéro, why are you, as a man, so systematically interested in an issue as intimate and feminine as our genitalia?

— OK, Yéro says coolly. Let's say instead that you're cut or have put on the loincloth, to use our vocabulary. Perhaps in the end, you'll understand why this term is used. I also understand that the meaning that was given to the practice throughout history was a manifestation of the love the parents have for their daughters.

— Rubbish, says Lilly tying her scarf.

Yéro understands her frustration, he goes on:

— In a community where all girls are cut – not doing so exposes them to rejection by society, going as far as ignoring the food she has prepared and excluding her because of supposed impurity. No parent wants to put their daughter in this situation. I don't accept either that we treat those who practice cutting as barbarians, because this word evokes lack of civilisation. Beyond the practice itself, one feels a value judgement on the whole community. It's important to give these communities the time to listen and to understand. To achieve this, respect is imperative. This will allow them to start living a new life and to conscientiously choose what is best.

Lilly calms down and listens to her cousin.

14 Fulani proverb of Fouta Toro

— It's logical to ask why the debate doesn't also include male circumcision, continues Yéro. The two practices are different, we don't cut the same organs, but you know, that may happen one day. It's quite controversial, there are pros and cons of male circumcision. For example, World Health Organisation recommends that males should be circumcised to reduce the risk of spreading HIV, but other researchers have shown that long-term, the risk of being infected by HIV is the same, circumcised or not if condoms are not used. The other controversy is that while circumcision is almost fully accepted by Muslims and other religions as with the Jews, it's not an obligation but more of a recommendation. The proof is we do not circumcise or practice female genital mutilation on a person converted to Islam. It is not in any way a condition for conversion.

— That indeed gives something to think about, says Patrick scratching his head, I've never thought about it from that angle.

CHAPTER 6

Some sociological elements: circumcision and female genital mutilation

Bito, Senegal

Patrick follows Yéro's explanations with interest. To understand better he asks:

- She spoke about removing the feminine and the masculine in both practices. Does that mean someone who hasn't undergone either of these practices is at the same time a woman and a man?
- In any case that's one of the reasons they give, she says.
- That too can be explained, replied Yéro. Circumcision in both forms, male and female, was in the far distant past a form of initiation. Duties were distributed between men and women. There was a certain way to behave, act, work - depending on whether you are a man or a woman. During these initiations, we taught one or another concepts and practices which that are part of our . These practices were supposed to be permanent markers to ensure that everyone remembers if they are male or female. But it's now been shown on all levels that one may well do what was destined for the other sex. Kouro, today a bank executive, would have been a cleaner if she had been born in her grandmother's era, because that was the woman's duty.
- True, reasons his cousin. I remember that my father didn't want

me to continue going to school because, according to him, my main duty was to have a husband and manage my household. I really regret it. Here too in the village, we never stop working in the fields all year round while many of the men don't even want to stoke the fire beneath the cooking pot. But you still haven't explained why you speak about women's matters?

— I'm not a man without a woman, Yéro argues. You're not a woman without a man. Everything that concerns one, also concerns the other without exception.

Let's take for example female circumcision. Imagine that I live with my wife. We love and complete each other. She has been cut and suffers great pain during sexual intercourse. Me, the man shares this moment with her, a moment that should just be filled with pleasure and joy. How can I not be affected by her condition? She's suffering, it makes me suffer to see her and not be able to reach climax together. The frustration is shared. I might be tempted to discover something else, just as she might think that it's all my fault and be curious to try someone else.

Lilly and Patrick nod.

— This calls into question the idea that the practice helps women stay faithful, continues Yéro. On the contrary, the search for pleasure can lead to having other partners, believing that the problem is with the other. Female genital mutilation, like all other forms of violence faced by women and men, is a societal problem. We are all concerned.

— Of course there are risks and consequences because of the practice, acknowledges Lilly. But do the operations carried out in hospitals by doctors carry no risks? Everyday people die under the scalpel.

— I've already heard this argument, death is inevitable, and we shall all die when the time comes, regardless of where or how old we are, replies her cousin. In the meantime, when we're sick, we go to get treated. We don't say, what must be, must be. God wants to help those in the shade, but is ashamed of those in the sunlight¹⁵.

15 Fulani proverb of Fouta

The operations carried out in hospitals are used to help those suffering from a diseases, but from what disease suffers a young girl born with normal body organs? Would she be imperfect with a clitoris? Did God make an error when creating women? Is it up to us humans to modify one of God's creations if that person doesn't even know what use the organ has?

— *Astafourla*¹⁶, says Lilly hands on the mouth. Who would dare to question God's wisdom? It's true that it gives food for thought when put that way. But, what makes me angry is the fact that some say, that because we are cut, we are no longer women. We can't all be summed up in a clitoris.

Me, I was cut, and I have no problems that prevent me living my life as a woman. I have no problem during intercourse. I can't even imagine feeling anything more than I already do, that's why I'm scared. I think thatif I hadn't been cut and the intensity of my desire was even greater than how I already feel, that would be very difficult for me.

You're going to kill poor *Lem*¹⁷, Yéro says mockingly. That's why he's so thin. But does the fact that you don't have malaria for many years mean that others don't suffer? Of course not. Suffering from pain and being able to make a link with the cause is different. When we first talked about the existence of germs, those little creatures invisible to the naked eye, many people in this village said it was nonsense. But, when we ask if they can see jumbo¹⁸ diluted in a cooking pot, they say no, while knowing from the taste that it's there of course. Only then did they begin to accept the existence of germs and paid more attention.

It's the same with female circumcision, we can't make a link with certain dangers and this practice. In 1980, when Djeynaba's daughter died three days after being cut, it was argued that the spirits weren't satisfied with the sacrifice. You know as well as I that the girl had a haemorrhage and bled to death.

16 God forbid

17 Name of Lilly's husband

18 A stock cube

Lilly remembers:

- It was very sad. Her mother still hasn't recovered from it. Every time she talks about her daughter, she bursts into tears.
- I would just like to end by saying that in my eyes, you're no different from any other woman whoever she may be, except that you're ugly, reassures her cousin. People just want to draw attention to the suffering of thousands of women – and by extension men – because of female genital mutilations.

Patrick also jokes a little to cheer up his Fulani cousin, who seemed sad after looking back on the death of little Awa:

- Fulani ugliness is well known everywhere, she's not the only one.

Lilly looks at the Serer smiling:

- I'm sure to be a beauty queen in *Saloum* amongst the Serer. Yéro, you've given me a lot to think about now with all these arguments. It's difficult to have a proper discussion on the subject with so many people wanting to raise awareness. Mainly because they want to impose their own visions upon us, constantly reminding you that it's forbidden by the Government, and if caught you will be sent to prison. It doesn't make sense. How can you imprison a mother and separate her from her daughter?
- It's a good thing that laws exist otherwise people would do whatever they want, Patrick remarked. There are people who only do good deeds because they're afraid of being punished.

The woman says calmly:

- Yes, certain laws are good, but I really think punishing a mother who has her daughter cut to assure her a place in society is going too far. The law doesn't resolve anything. We know that drugs are forbidden but there are thousands of people who use them, even among police officers. If we impose laws on people, especially on something as deep-rooted as female circumcision, they'll find ways to do it without the knowledge

of the guarantors of the law. Especially for something as deep-rooted as female circumcision.

CHAPTER 7

Between repression and awareness

Bito, Senegal

Yero feels he's on a mission for the abolishment of FGM. He tries to think of the best way to achieve this goal. With the eye of the teacher that he is, he analyses:

— There are good and bad things in every society, that is the essence of the universe. It would be boring if there was only good or evil. As the saying goes, "if we sell our souls, many will not find a buyer"¹⁹. Because every one believes that their way is the best, and that they don't need any one else. But the salvation of humanity depends on the exchange of the ideas and experiences of all. We all advance at different speeds, we are determined by our multiple and differing characters. However, we can meet our goals by taking example from others.

Whenever doing something is imposed on someone, the result is never as satisfactory as hoped. If someone forbids me to swim at the beach that I've been going to for many years without giving me any satisfactory explanation, I'll find a way to go at odd hours and to swim. And on top of that finding a way to do it secretly becomes exciting because I get to challenge authority.

Patrick approves with a nod. Lilly, hand on chin, listens attentively. Yéro takes advantage and says:

— Of course the danger is real for those who forbid me to go. But that doesn't mean that it is real for me, as I have never seen nor felt the same danger as them. Freedom of choice is the most wonderful gift our brain gives us. Our choice depends on the clarity of the information we receive. This clarity is assessed by the way the information was delivered to us.

That is why it's the important of to be on the same level as those we wish to explain something to. Because, by using academic language and by making them feel as if they were to a primary school pupils they will become bored. And the complexity will only reinforce the barrier and rejection of the information you provide.

A society cannot endure without safeguards. But, I also think that punishment should be a last resort for an issue as sensitive as FGM. We need to do everything to ensure that the reason for the prohibition is understood. Without that the practice will go underground as you say, and cause even more damage.

CHAPTER 8

The discussion

Bito, Senegal

A *salam*²⁰ rings out behind them. Instinctively they respond together *maleykumsalam*²¹ turning to get a glimpse of Moctar coming through the door. He is dressed in a blue, very light, ankle length boubou, black and yellow leather slippers and is wearing a long rosary around his neck. In his left hand he is holding a book of tales and legends in Fula. His forehead enlarged by his shaven head, reflects the reddish rays of the western sun announcing dusk. The fresh smell of the ground dampened by fine rain the evening before, blends with the perfume Moctar had splashed on before leaving his home, a habit he inherited from his maternal grandmother.

He walks towards them, holding out his hand smiling at Patrick and Lilly. Yéro squeezes his hand and unbalancing him, takes him in his arms saying:

— I wonder what the kids of today eat. Look at him. When he left the village to continue his Quranic studies in Matam, he was as small as your youngest child.

He looks at Lilly.

20 A greeting

21 Response to a greeting

Moctar is 10 years younger than Yéro, but the two get along as if they were of the same age and every time they meet speak of politics, culture, development. Even if they don't always share the same opinions, they like to debate and argue with great respect for each other. Ten minutes together is all it takes before the echo of their voices invites others to join them. Some because they like to listen, others because they know tea will be served. Some even take this opportunity to arrange secret lovers meetings to live their forbidden love.

Moctar refuses the chair his elder offered him, pulls up a small mat that was at the foot of a mango tree, sitting next to Patrick he removes his rosary and places it in front of his crossed legs.

— So Patrick, he says, when did you arrive? This time there's nothing you can do to leave me here. You're going to put me in your suitcase and take me with you to Brussels. How are your parents? You impress me. I wonder how someone who grew up in Europe can still appreciate Africa.

— I arrived the day before yesterday, but I'm leaving on Saturday, Patrick replies.

— I bet Yéro still talks to you about politics, says the newcomer. You can give presentations everywhere, but this time the people will take back the power.

— No, we weren't discussing politics but a much more serious subject this time, he replies. I'm sure you have something to say about it. We were discussing traditions. Must we always be loyal to them? Are there any traditional practices that should be abandoned for various reasons?

Moctar looks at all three of them, wondering who had argued what, then says:

— Hmm, in any case he who does not know his tradition does not know himself. I think that's what defines us as Fulani. There may be things which can be improved but always remaining true to our values.

Lilly who, while listening had begun to undo her hair, places the hook she uses on the pillow where her right leg is resting. She looks at her cousin

and smiles before saying:

- Everybody knows Moctar's commitment for the preservation of our culture, he's the only one of all the Talibes to learn Fula and defend his cause in the village. I'm sure that female circumcision is among the practices he would want us to keep.

Looking surprised, the young man uncrosses one of his legs, puts his foot against the mat and places his chin on his knee, a faraway look in his eyes.

- It's true that your topic is serious. I don't know if I can talk about it openly in the presence of my sister, Lilly. I recently watched a film where the women and men, some doctors and even an Imam, explained the problems and dangers of the practice. I think it should really be stopped or be done in hospitals to reduce the suffering. Ah here's Bathie, I think he will be more able to talk about it.

Bathie is a griot. Tucked under his arm is the traditional guitar he takes with him everywhere. Never separated from his straw hat which is artistically painted with several designs that evoke loyalty, knowledge and wealth. He is known for his verbal eloquence and genealogical knowledge of all who live in and around the village. Bathie attracts people with *mali sadio*, a traditional song dedicated to fishermen, by languidly picking on his three string guitar. He comes to greet the small circle with a long recital of litanies, in line with interrupting the conversation. His voice attracted a group of young women who are mostly accompanied by their children, but also a few men who were looking for a discussion to kill time.

Yéro hails one of his nephews who has just returned from the football pitch where he had been with some other youngsters. Mboma, as his friends call him, is physically well built. At 17 years old he plays football, wrestles and does weight lifting every evening. Giving him a 2000 francs note his uncle sends him to the shop to buy tea, biscuits, sugar and mint.

Yéro rejoins the group. There are a good 20 people including eight men.

He introduces Patrick to some who don't know him. The griot greets everyone again by their name, his fingers softly strumming the strings of his guitar.

Moctar speaks directly to Bathie:

- When I saw you I said that maybe you have more to say on the discussion between Yéro and Lilly that I've been caught up in. It's a subject a little difficult to talk about in public, but it's spoken about everywhere at the moment.

Bathie lays down his guitar next to him, makes a guttural sound and smiles at the audience:

- My role is to look after you, nobles that you are. If you give a free rein, I'll give my opinion on whatever you want. What are you talking about exactly?

Under the watchful eye of Moctar, Yéro speaks:

- You know very well that your opinion interests us. I think we're lucky to be able to speak about it. Each one can give their point of view. We were wondering if the practice of female genital circumcision should be continued or abandoned.

Bathie says that he prefers to first let the nobles give their point of view. A woman sitting behind the griot, breastfeeding her one year old daughter, spoke out saying it was time to stop this unnecessary suffering. The questioning looks of the two men opposite forcing her to continue.

- People don't want to face reality. They deny the obvious or things they know nothing about. Many people say there are no problems with the cutting, that it is wrong. And all the women here know this. It's just fear that prevents us from saying so. Afraid of what the men will think of women who no longer want to be cut because they say to themselves that they will not be able to satisfy them.

We imagine that an uncut woman is dirty, that she gives herself to the first guy who comes along. But I think if we're bad it's because we're bad. I have uncut friends who are more serious than many of the cut women. I think it's a question of education. We try to justify female circumcision in every possible way, but there's nothing that holds up.

Staring at her with surprise and hostility, one of the men utters:

— It's an upside-down world. Allowing issues of this kind to now be discussed in public. Worse, it questions a redeeming practice for women.

They dare to renounce our values in front of everyone supported by undignified, so called intellectual men. I don't know about anyone else, but I personally, even if the whole village decided to abandon it, would still have my daughters cut.

I would never live with the responsibility of uncut girls in my home. I don't care if the Government puts me in prison. I don't even want to listen to this nonsense because I know the trend is clear; they always finish by getting you to join in with matters that you don't agree with.

Some faces light up at the woman's interruption. A disgusted expression appears on the faces of many of them throughout the man's speech. There are whispers in the audience when, sulking, his reticent wife understands that she must leave before he asks her to.

CHAPTER 9

The woman's place

The man picks up his boubou, reaches out to his friend next to him and then casts a harsh look at his wife sitting on a wooden bench near the door. She gets up, without a word, and follows them.

Aware of his diplomatic role, the griot takes the situation in hand:

- Without doubt, one of those men who carry their wives on their back every night but who don't want it known in public. If their view is different, they prefer to leave the meeting. Decisions will be made without them and they will be obliged to respect them. Whereas if they had presented their argument, maybe their case would have been heard. Serve the tea and let us continue with the debate. The world is what it is because of discussion.

Among the audience there is a girl in her twenties, born to a Gabonese mother and who hasn't been cut. She was fifteen when she arrived in Bito. She is known for being outspoken, and straight to the point. Nobody took offence, they thought it was funny and naive but, loved to hear her accent. She asks:

- Can you explain to me what part is actually cut?

Everyone bursts out laughing. Lilly slaps her thigh and says playfully:

- Go ask your father, he'll even tell you what he had cut off.

Yéro sums up all the different points of view on the different issues discussed and briefly explains what female genital mutilation is.

- Our major problem, says Yéro, is that we find it difficult to discuss things that concern us in an openly. We hide behind pseudo-modesty to avoid any kind of debate likely to bring a change. We fear and reject anything new. We're living with the consequences every day. Those who currently govern us are those who were forced to go to school at a time when it was claimed that any parent sending their child to school would be ensuring their place in hell.

- It's currently the same for women, growls a woman who, until then, has only been listening. Going to school is a pastime because once their breasts begin to grow we marry them off. As if they weren't intelligent.

Moctar evaluates the reaction of the audience. He tries to read everyone's thoughts, nodding, opening and closing his book while glancing discreetly around him. He's a highly respected, humble and pious young man, who always chooses his words carefully; he could even be classed as shy.

- I see nothing wrong with the practice being abandoned, he says finally. What worries me most is marrying off the young girls. They'll do what we hope to avoid by not marrying them anyway They will find ways to do what they want.. They'll stay overnight with boys. Better to marry our daughters than become grandparents to an illegitimate child too soon.

This perception seems to be shared by all.

- This is more than true, they say.

In fact every year, adolescent girls fall pregnant²².

22 It is common to see unmarried young girls getting pregnant

— “Shame that killed yesterday doesn’t even cause illness today”, the griot continues. Changes take place very quickly. Some girls take the pill or have injections to prevent pregnancy and enjoy themselves with young men who do nothing, don’t travel, don’t work, don’t earn enough money to buy the cigarettes they smoke us out with. They steal livestock and squander the income on smoking yamba²³. Strangely enough, everything seems to be tolerated by the parents.

Some in the audience laugh in agreement.

Lilly runs all Yéro’s reasoning on female circumcision through her head. She realises that others also think like her cousin. The practice involves risks and she knows deep down that it’s true. On the other hand, she’s uncomfortable because they were always guided as to what is right or wrong, and she feels that in the community decisions are never taken on their own. She’s more than favourable to the education of girls and takes every opportunity to plead their case. Marriage and studies cannot mix for the girls from the community. Still, the fact that young girls fall pregnant out of wedlock and end up leaving school is a thorn in her side that she doesn’t know how to remove.

She says:

— A child must not and cannot raise a child. Unfortunately this is what happens when young girls are married. We promise to let them continue their studies but in less than a year they’re pregnant and are faced with reality. Those who escape the problems of pregnancy eventually give up. We all know how sad it is for many of them. They’re not ready to conceive. It’s even harder to defend them if they have children out of wedlock. It’s a real problem.

CHAPTER 10

Forced marriages

Bito, Senegal

T eacups twist between hands. Yéro takes a last sip from his cup and thanks his nephew for the dose of sugar and the smell of mint that give a taste appreciated by all. He calmly reflects upon the challenges of the topic but is convinced that people can only fully understand if they are given the freedom to appreciate the advice. He launches into a long analysis:

— There are many preconceived ideas in all domains. These issues we're discussing are no exception to the rule. I'm not going to repeat the justifications for early marriage that you have already stated. The meaning of child marriage has changed throughout history. We have to remember that in the time of our parents and grandparents, the marriage of a young girl was never consummated. The idea was that the husband's family would continue educating the girl and allowing the spouses to get to know each other better. In those days, pregnancies outside of marriage were almost non-existent. Each girl had an escort, or even a guardian angel among the young people of her own age. He was supposed to watch over her. The proof of his loyalty was revealed during his friend's wedding. Preserving her virginity somehow depended on him and he had to honour his task. They could be together whenever they wanted and converse with on morals, proverbs, tales. There were never any sexual relations.

- This is not always true, someone says softly.
- More often than not, Yéro continues, the actual act is realised once the girl is married to the man her parents chose for her. Once married, she could then live out her carnal desire with her former “lover”.

Here we face another problem - that of adultery - strictly forbidden by tradition and religion, but socially tolerated as long as it isn't too publically exposed.

Early pregnancies outside marriage are just the result of adolescents' exploring their sexuality. Sadly they aren't prepared for all the emotional and physical changes. “If home doesn't educate the child, the street will.”

Patrick listens and nods his head.

- The family structure has also changed, says Yéro. In certain families, the relationships are very tense. The consequences show in the education of the children, especially the girls. In the past aunts escorted girls during adolescence. And boys used to put great value on friendship and honour. Unfortunately nowadays this is mostly absent in the current social structure. I think this loss is mainly due to the economic difficulties. We lived off agriculture but with growing desertification, the many hands that were a source of wealth for families have now become burdens. Young people are taken over by idleness and inactivity and temptation increases.
- And many end up at the bottom of the ocean following their dreams of the European Eldorado, says Moctar.
- But there is no adjustment to this situation, Yéro continues. Schooling is introduced in our country. The reluctance is deep-rooted in the mind, ignorance and fear rule the people, not to mention operating systems of an elite few, fearing freedom of the masses. If the parents were closer to their children, talking regularly with them and accompanying them through adolescence, all young people would become aware of the realities around them. They would be better prepared to face all the obstacles that life throws at them. They would talk to their parents

about sexuality and they wouldn't be afraid to bring up the subject of family planning.

CHAPTER 11

In front of a radical; the limits of the dialogue

Bito, Senegal

Someone laughs. It is the Imam's son, Malik. He had followed Quranic education and is now preparing a thesis on the social structure in Fouta at the University of Saint-Louis. He went to Egypt for a year where he studied theology. During the summer holidays, he conducts public meetings to popularise the message of Islam according to the *wahabiste*²⁴ to which he adheres. He's easily distinguished by his appearance; trousers barely ending below the knees, an identical Djellaba²⁵, white turban tied so that a sort of tail hangs down his back, he has a carefully combed, long full beard. It's been more than two years since he led a woman's hand who wasn't part of his family. He criticises the different brotherhoods, which often causes a rift with his father who swears by the *tijaniya*²⁶.

At twenty-five, he has a strong influence among the youth and sometimes replaces his father to preside over the Great Prayer on Fridays. He gives all his sermons in Fula, the local language, unlike the old men who only speak an Arabic that no-one understands. They like his realism. He takes a sip of water, gargles to reduce the flavour of the second cup of tea he had just taken, blesses the prophet for the umpteenth time, wipes his beard and takes the opportunity to remind his countrymen on what the salvation of believers is based.

24 An Islamic line of thought originating in Saudi Arabia and widespread in West Africa

25 A hooded, long loose-fitting outer garment of middle-eastern origin

26 Branch of Sufism founded by Cheikh Ahmed Tidiane in Marocco, and second religious group in Senegal

— Tradition is nothing more than an association, he begins. We must comply with God's Laws. Marriage is the only legal way for a Muslim to enjoy his carnal desires. What you call family planning is rebellion, a sin for those forewarned. Any method used to prevent procreation by using contraceptives or swallowing pills is haram²⁷. Teaching young girls to use them is pushing them towards being unfaithful. We must focus on teaching the believers, especially young people, self-control to neutralise their bodily desires and to cultivate the elevation of their souls to the Lord. This will happen by returning to the sources, by reading the Quran, by the young people. This life is just an illusion, real life is in the Hereafter. By allowing young girls to take the pill, they are also encouraged to have abortions when they fall pregnant. These are pagan ideas put forward in the name of 'rights over the body', as though we created ourselves. A menstruating girl is ready for motherhood, therefore, she should be married if she finds someone she loves. We have to be very careful of the white influences, those who have completely lost their faith and are guided by the devil; those are the signs.

This response fascinates most of the people, particularly the women. However Malick makes no comment on female circumcision. Because he is part of the most respected family in the village, and studied theology and a university student, the uninitiated are scared to contradict him.

Then Bathie, the griot says:

— I hope playing a guitar and entertaining nobles isn't a sin. In any case, I'll follow you wherever you go tomorrow.

Everybody laughs, but Malick doesn't find it funny.

— Nobody can help you if you don't conform to the teachings, he says. We swear by such or such, we hope that he'll erase our sins but he can't even do anything for himself.

The griot provokes:

27 Arabic meaning forbidden

- I'm convinced that Cheikh²⁸ won't abandon us.

Yéro, feeling the fascination of the audience, decides to push the discussion with Malick further:

- We are all believers, Yéro says. We've all been educated in faith by our parents, who have made us who we are today. It doesn't matter where we or what we studied, our roots remain the Futa. No one is doubting the teachings of Islam, maybe we just have different interpretations. But I must tell you immediately that even Islam is based on tradition. We can't just make something exist without relying on a source that once existed. We change it or we adapt to it. I don't, in any way, want to encourage debauchery. I'm just putting forward contemporary ideas. Everyone is free to do as they please.

I don't judge anyone and I am deeply devoted to the word of God, when He said that He created us in different communities, and that He is the guarantor of His Quran. Therefore I leave Him that task. I'll try and answer you point by point, although I suspect we don't share the same ideas. I respect that. Those who listen will judge.

A baby starts to cry and the mother hurries to put him on her breast She's absorbed in the discussion.

- I'll begin with your last statement, Yéro says. All whites are not bad, all Africans are not good. What is good in one place isn't necessarily so in another. Nobody is perfect. Faced with an ideal, reality asserts itself. In life, you always need a Plan B in case the inevitable happens. As believers, we all agree that sex outside marriage is forbidden, but we also see the facts. We live in an open world; we can't pretend what surrounds us doesn't affect us. By all means educate but, also inform, explain to our children who they are, let's give them the necessary information.

Malick's phone rings. He hasn't time to answer; probably someone beeped²⁹. He puts the phone back in his pocket and looks at Yéro who says:

28 Founder of Tidjania

29 Let the phone ring once or twice and hang up, and get called back thus avoid paying for the call.

— Family planning has always existed, even during the time of the prophet. *Coitus interruptus* was one method. Only the processes differ, thanks to the progress of science. Family planning isn't haram. However, it's better that an unmarried girl who doesn't want to abstain has the possibility to protect herself not only against pregnancy but also diseases. Lilly said that a child can't raise a child, you know better than me that it's not because a girl has her periods that she's ready for motherhood. Her body is still developing. If my body doesn't belong to me because I didn't create it, it certainly doesn't belong to anyone else created the same way as me. This also applies to women.

This reasoning doesn't seem to impress Malick, who again begins to smile.

— What you're saying shows that you to want to reform religion with the argument that the world is changing. But you forget that nothing was left by the Lord. They don't stop saying we want to live like a prophet who lived more than 1,400 years ago. But yes, because there lies the salvation of all humanity. If we let ourselves be governed by the devil, we're the ones who will lose. Unfortunately, this is what we see with all the different influences coming from everywhere.

— As long as there are different communities and different nations there will always be influence. Communities influence each other. The important thing is to have an open, critical mind to distinguish the good from the bad. You're forgetting that the oly reason we are Muslims is because Islam is one of the influences our community has undergone.

As believers, we say that those are good influences.

Claiming to live like the prophet without taking into account the developments and the environments in which we live, is ridiculous. You know very well that in his time, he never used a phone or travelled by plane. Why do you take into account these aspects of change that existed between the eras and yet don't want to think about other social phenomena?

Yéro jumps in:

— Let's stop blaming influence. There are so many things that we

do today that seem natural to us. This is because of the influences we previously wanted to refute.

The call to dusk prayer echos through the loudspeakers on top of the top of the minarets of the muezzin³⁰. The voice neutralises the shouts of playing children and sounds of cattle returning from grazing, followed by their tired herders. All rise to purify themselves by the ablutions. Then together, they perform on the spot the prayer led by Malick. At the end they exchange greetings and some, including Malick, go home.

30 The person who makes the call to prayer.

CHAPTER 12

The meeting and the hope

Brussels, Belgium

Kekkeré, Kouro's husband is Mauritanian. He is tall and thin with a brown complexion, always smiling and loves life, which is made to be lived, as he repeats all the time. As a teenager he left school because he was feeling oppressed and went to Nouakchott, much to his father's regret. In Nouakchott he made a group of friends with whom he passed his time drinking alcohol and smoking joints every weekend. The groups' motto was "*Amoulragal*", which means , "no fear". Indeed, they were afraid of nothing. They openly criticised the caste system which forbade young people, so-called nobles, to woo or court girls of the so-called "neeno³¹" caste. They wanted to revolutionise society and, break down the existing hierarchies and defy all prohibitions, including marriage. His character has never changed.

Despite his defiant behaviour Kekkeré was aware that the only way to be independent and live how he chooses to, was to work hard to be self-sufficient. He had a good sense of business. Very cleverly exploiting the slightest opportunity to earn money, he embarked in small business and managed to raise a substantial sum that allowed him to go to Italy before coming to Brussels, where he met Kouro, during a Fulani cultural day:

31
Statuts group of manual labours such as blacksmith, lather workers...

'He was at the doorway of the hall smoking a cigarette with a Spanish friend he got to know during his stay in Italy and with whom he had worked renovating buildings. A car pulls up near them, the door opens. He saw a girl get out, dressed in a slinky dress made of olive green bazin, which highlighted her graceful forms. The two friends stared at her without saying a word. They were both immobilised by her beauty and the elegance of her approach, as if in rhythm with their heartbeats.

The brightness of her eyes seemed to promise the whiteness of her teeth even before she smiled at them. It was a little hot. Kekkere noticed very fine droplets of water on her perfectly straight nose, like early morning dew on a leaf. Her complexion and the two scarification's in the form of 11 on her temples revealed to Kekkere that she was Fulani like him. Eloquent and amusing, especially when he spoke Fula, he winked at Alberto and, running a hand through his dread locks, took a step towards Kouro. With a charming smile, he held out his hand and greeted her in Fula asking her family name. She too was overwhelmed. Just like a fairy tale, she knew that he was her Prince Charming.

*They have been in love ever since, and that love was solidified by the birth of two children five years later: Kannge(Gold) and Piindi (Flower).'*¹

Outside it's raining. Kouro is in the shower. She came home later than usual this evening, her boss had asked her to stay and finish an urgent document. Kekkere had already put the girls to bed after telling them the stories that his grandmother used to tell him when he was a small child. He always read them two or three books, lying in between the two children to tell them about the adventures of *Demba and Bodiél*, and of *Wadou and Rawandu*³² in Fula.

The telephone rings.

— Hello Kek, is Kouro home? asks Kaawis, a friend from his wife's village. Watch on TV5, there's an interesting documentary on Fouta. Yéro is being interviewed.

He grabs the remote control and zaps channels to TV5 Africa. Kouro comes out of the shower wrapped in a towel with another on her still wet hair.

32 The hyena and the hare, the monkey and the dog

“Dedicated men are rallying with the women to raise awareness in the local population about the dangers of female genital mutilation and the extension of the Criminal Law adopted by the National Assembly of Senegal criminalising the practice”, announces the narrator. “One of these men, a teacher from the region, explains why he is involved in this campaign.”

When Yéro appears on the screen, Kouro can't believe it. She sits next to her husband, takes the remote control and turns up the volume.

“Female genital mutilation is not just a women's issue. It concerns us all as human beings. To achieve the abandonment of this practice it's necessary to explain to everyone what it really is and the long-term damage it entails that has been silenced for so long., I became involved in this campaign because it's my sisters and nieces who are likely to suffer. How could I be indifferent to their suffering? It's not an easy task raising awareness about this as you can imagine but with the mobilisation of all, the people will come to understand that the law is made to protect and not destroy traditions.”

Kouro has tears in her eyes. She has been aware of the dangers for many years after attending several meetings and film projections with her husband on the issue with the help of the Group for the Abandonment of FGM-GPAE and other associations, she vowed she would never do this to her daughters.

But she always wonders how she's going to convince her family of her decision. Kekkere only sees one solution, tell them what they've decided and that's it. They can think what they want, he doesn't care. Full stop. She's worried about how her family will react and the impact it could have on their relationship.

This is why she told her cousin, Lilly, that she is going to have her daughters cut during the summer holidays. It was just a ploy she had thought up. She planned to go Nouakchott with her husband and daughter first for 3 or 4 days before going to Bito and tell her cousin that it had been carried out in the capital by an “neeno”, who was an old friend.

She would then tell her family in Nouakchott that Lilly would help her to find a local cutter in the village. Her daughters would be safe and she would have respected the tradition without being confused and criticised harshly by the others.

Kekkere finds this tactic cowardly and futile. He grabs his can of beer, takes a sip and smiles at his wife.

— See, he says. After trying so hard to hide our decision for fear of the reactions of the family, they're finally moving forward by themselves.

With the palm of her hand she wipes away the tears of emotion, relief and joy running down her cheeks.

— Gido³³, she says to her husband, her head on his chest. I'm shocked. I never thought that anyone would dare to speak out in the village, least of all my own cousin.

She rises, picks up the telephone and dials Yéro's number. She's connected directly to voicemail and leaves a message:

— *Thank you cousin, we saw the story on TV about the campaign. You have removed an enormous thorn from my heart. Sending hugs. We won't stay for long in Nouakchott. I want to see you as soon as possible.*

CHAPTER 13

A day in Fouta

Senegal

The holidays are approaching. It's the beginning of the rainy season. The ground is damp and a bit muddy in this muddy area situated between the Doué and the Senegal rivers, known locally as *Hakkunde Maaje*³⁴. The horse is pulling the cart, accompanied by the encouraging *athie athie chi chip* that the horse man is making with his mouth. That the horseman is making with his mouth. Yéro contemplates and admires the beauty of the grassy plain where the cows and sheep are grazing. The shepherds are sitting under the trees playing checkers. The sky is covered with grey clouds hiding the sun. The easterly wind is chilly and Yéro hopes he'll get to Lugge before the storm breaks. It's in this village, thirty kilometers from his hometown on the sandy lands of jeer, that he teaches.

After long negotiations, the School Director has authorised him to stage a play about child marriage and female circumcision using the pupils as actors. They rehearsed for weeks, with the help of a coordinator from the Association for the Promotion of Human Rights (PDH). He was convinced that the time was right to prepare the future generation and make them understand the restraints to development and the respect of human rights from an early

age. The clay must be kneaded while it is still soft³⁵, he constantly repeated.

In the small canoe taking them to Lilly's village where the largest weekly market is held every Saturday, a *talibe*³⁶ sits on a bundle of wood, occasionally leaning over to scoop water into the palm of his hand to drink. A goat lying between two turbaned men, front legs crossed behind the neck to keep it still, bleats incessantly. As soon as they accost, a group moves hastily towards them. Four elegantly dressed women tear the bowl containing fish from its owner's hands before she can even get off the boat. Each has a pile in front of them and are waiting for the woman to state the price so they can start haggling. While some men are already feeling the goat to assess its condition and the profit they could make by reselling.

The atmosphere on the river bank is only a taste of what's happening a few hundred metres away in the market centre. Merchants selling cloth, tea, coffee, cereals, owners of make-shift restaurants, butchers all proposing their services to passers-by. Music and peoples voices mingle with dust kicked up as they walk. Despite the heat and the humidity, people are bustling about seemingly indifferent. Yéro buys some peanuts, sugar and tea before boarding a fast coach, packed with all kinds of merchandise.

While he pays and gets off the coach, the call to prayer resound from the muezzin, amplified by the speakers on the minaret of the Lugge Mosque. A young woman is packing up after a long day of selling iced water to passengers making a stopover. On seeing the teacher, she smiles and gestures with her hand for him to come over. They've been dating for two years. Ndeye is not only his girlfriend, but also his confidante. She is tall with a complexion slightly lightened by the *xessa*³⁷. She's the one who informs him of all that's said about his fight against female circumcision, ever since he publicly spoke out against it.

Apparently someone told the Imam that the teachers are entertaining an activity that encourages debauchery, and he has requested that they come and explain what they are doing to him.

35 Fulani proverb from Futa Toro

36 Quranic student

37 Chemical skin-lightening product very popular among young girls

CHAPTER 14

The seminar

Brussels

When Kouro and Kekkere arrive, the hall is already full. Three quarters were women. Posters were pinned on the walls, Kouro stopped in front of one where it was written, “No to female circumcision!”

— Good day, I’m pleased to see you here, she hears a voice say behind her.

She turns and sees Colette smiling broadly.

— Ah Mrs. Boulamans, the pleasure is all mine. I’d like to introduce you to my husband Kekkere.

They had first met only a week ago. Colette visited the bank to enquire about loans as she was thinking of buying a house. It was Kouro who had dealt with her enquiries.

During their meeting, Colette had emptied her bag on the desk to find something. A leaflet caught Kouro’s attention. It was about a conference, titled: Act against female genital mutilations. She had asked if you could have a quick look through.

- Of course, you can even attend if you have the time, she replied.

They discussed the issue of female circumcision for at least ten minutes after the meeting had finished. Colette explained that she worked in child welfare and is a member of several associations defending women's rights. Kouro promised to go. Today she attends with her husband.

People listened quietly to the presentation by Doctor Zoé Rondelet, representing UNICEF Belgium, she was invited to give an overview of the current situation on a worldwide level. The first PowerPoint slide showed a map of the world with light and dark colours pinpointing the prevalence of female circumcision in such and such a country. Africa held the monopoly. The lecturer explains:

- More than 200 million young girls and women have undergone some form of FGM. Half of those live in three countries. Indonesia, Egypt and Ethiopia. Thirty million young girls are at risk of being victims during the next 10 years. FGM is found in all continents: Africa, Asia, Middle-East and even Latin America.³⁸

Kouro had seen these numbers but was still touched by them because she too was one of those girls. She glances around the hall again and notices that more than three quarters are whites. She leans towards her husband and whispers in his ear:

- It would be better if there were more people who are directly concerned. Kekkere doesn't reply. He's absorbed by the images on the screen showing the different types of female circumcisions and an intact vulva.

There exists several types of mutilations practiced depending on the region and race, continues Dr Zoé. The most common, as you can see on these slides, are cutting of the hood with or without removal of all or part of the clitoris. Removal of the clitoris with or without total or partial cutting of the labia minora (small lips). Total or partial removal of the external genitalia and

38 UNICEF. *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A global concern*. Brochure 2016. Disponible sur http://www.unicef.org/media/files/FGMC_2016_brochure_final_UNICEF_SPREAD.pdf

stitching/narrowing of the vagina (infibulation).³⁹

Even though opposed to female genital mutilation, Kekkere had never realised the magnitude and variations of the practice. The infibulation shocked him so much that he couldn't help imagining his daughters, held down by two old ladies, screaming and writhing in pain, while a third cut their intimate parts. His decision and determination to protect them became even stronger.

He gets up slowly, leaves the hall and lights a cigarette. He's always hated the practice, but never understood how it was done. He had made love to both cut and non-cut women. But never once, had he thought about looking at their genitals to see if they were different.

One thing is certain, he's never met a non-cut woman whose vaginal lips were as big as rabbit's ears, as he had once heard an old woman say.

Before ending her presentation Dr Zoé explains the different complications that thousands of women suffer after being cut. Kouro notes them all:

Immediate complications: *Intense pain accompanied with fear and anxiety which may lead to a state of shock. Haemorrhages possibly leading to death. Damage to other nearby genitalia.*

Long term complications: *Urinary/genital infections, gall stones, tumours. Difficulty urinating, acute period pains, incontinence. Painful scars, cyst, abscess. Problems during pregnancy and childbirth (prolonged labour, tearing, fistula), Sexual disorders (for both partners). Risk of transmitting the HIV virus, Infection of the fallopian tubes, sterility.*

Psychological consequences: *Behavioural disorders. Anxiety, fear (flashbacks, nightmares). Depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder⁴⁰*

As a cut woman, Kouro is trying to pinpoint which complications she suffered. Not being able to remember the day and what happened immediately after, she skips to symptoms in the last two categories. During the ten minute

39 GAMS BELGIQUE. *Types*. Bruxelles. [En ligne]. Disponible sur http://www.gams.be/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=46&Itemid=49&lang=en

40 Ibid

coffee break, she can't relate to any of them. She takes a deep breath and says to herself:

— I'm very lucky!

CHAPTER 15

The rumours. Discussion with the Imam.

Luge, Senegal

In the shade of the straw roof covered terrace where people rest during the scorching heat, Thiérno Bokara Diallo, a man in his sixties, is listening carefully to several students reciting aloud their lessons.

He's wearing a large blue boubou embroidered on the front pocket and a small white cap revealing the sides of his shaved head. Sunglasses hiding his small eyes and bushy eyebrows. Blind since his twenties, he is greatly loved and respected. His human qualities impress people in the area and beyond and he is known as a great teacher.

Yéro and the director of the school take off their shoes before going to shake hands with the marabout. Thiérno Bokara dismisses his students and asks one of his daughters to bring tufam⁴¹ for his guests. After exchanging news about their families, Ibra Ba, the school director says to the religious leader:

— Dendi⁴² let me know that you wished to discuss rumours which seem to concerns us.

41 A milk, water and sugar based drink

42 Cousin

— You were right to come, replies Thiérno. Indeed, it was reported to me that you're planning an activity that, according to what's being said, will encourage debauchery among the village youth. Although I believe that Ba is capable of anything, I gave no credit to this information. As we Fula say, a lie begins with: "they say ", I didn't want to leave it at that to stop it from spreading. The words dance in the mouth of their author.⁴³ I want you to explain to me what it's all about.

Yéro had finished drinking from the calabash that the girl had brought him. He sums up the project:

— We were going to come and inform you before the scheduled date, but apparently the sensationalists have beaten us to it. As part of our end of year activities, I thought that this time we could have the activity in the public square so other children who don't come to school and parents can participate.

This will be a play performed by the students themselves. They will address several topics with different characters: the importance of education and respect of rules and their point of view about forced and child marriages.

But we believe that the rumours you've heard are concerned more with the third part, where they will focus on the meaning of Female Genital Mutilations and the potential dangers it involves according to new discoveries by doctors. We also mention the law that the State passed prohibiting the practice.

As teachers and natives of this town, we think it's our duty to give our fellow citizens all the necessary information to understand what is going on in the State they live. And they'll do what they feel is right, instead of leaving them in total ignorance.

The elders who are used to coming around this time in the afternoon to keep Thierno company caught wind of the teacher's visit, gradually come and sit on mats around the Imam, listening carefully to Yéro's words. Some shake their heads and smile wryly as he is explains.

43 Fula proverb

Thiérno, not in the habit of rushing, stays silent for a while, the atmosphere somewhat tense.

— “He doesn’t even try to deny it” says a severe looking old man with bulging eyes who is sitting a few metres to the left of the Imam. He says indignantly. “He just forgot to talk about the distribution of condoms to the young people so that they can fornicate together”.

Surprised by this outburst, the director, is left open-mouthed with astonishment and questioningly looks at Yéro to see if he understands where the allegations of this octogenarian came from.

Yéro, himself had expected remarks that were even more ignorant.

— “Thiérno, will you allow me to reply quickly to this statement, he says looking at the old man who was biting his bottom lip and manipulating his big wooden rosary.”

The Imam nods:

— “First of all, I would like to thank Baaba Demodou for saying to our face something that is maybe said behind our backs, giving us no possibility to reply. It’s in this way we can clear up any misunderstandings, indeed, the sun can never dry laundry if it’s kept in the shade. Those who imagined the distribution of condoms as a chance to celebrate fornication seem to forget that we are believers like them, and we go to the same places of worship. They forget that we have brothers and sisters who also wouldn’t be spared by any manipulations towards other children. Even worse, they don’t use their brains to question the logic of their arguments that are based on wrong assumptions. How could we plan an activity in the village square in front of everyone, and dare to give out condoms to children in the presence of our fathers, mothers, uncles and aunts? I hope that answers your concern.

Thiérno Bokara’s face lights up with a smile which is pulled even longer when he stokes his long beard. He looks at the director and says not without humour:

- That must be Ceerno⁴⁴ Ba's idea.

Relieved by this small joke, the director who was shocked by the words of the old man who is now disinterestedly leaning on a pillow, replies with a laugh:

- It's an idea that's not even worthy of the Diallo's.

The Imam decides to speak.

- Most ills in a society are based on what "they say" or suspicions. The best way to fight suspicions is through communication. And communicating, if it is not magic, is an art, a technique, a gift. It's necessary for any kind of development, whether economic, cultural or social. It's only through discussion that we are able to construct or deconstruct ideas. To educate is also to inform. The one who provides information initiates communication.

What Ceerno Sarr just explained to us is very clear and completely different from what has been reported to us. We can accept it or not, but his statement is accurate. By wanting to organise an activity in the presence of everybody, he shows that the teachers have nothing to hide and want to share their knowledge with the people of the village. It's an initiative to be welcomed. Each person must live in accordance with their generation taking into account the founding principles of his culture.

My son told me an anecdote that was in one of Amadou Hampaté Ba's⁴⁵ books. In a village somewhere in the middle of Mali, his marabout decided to use a watch for setting the hour of prayer. In those days watches were not so widespread and many thought it was a pagan invention incompatible with Islam. One day, the followers were at the mosque waiting for dusk to perform the evening prayer. The sky was full of clouds that hid the sun, it was dark. Thinking that the sun had disappeared, the muezzin called to prayer. The marabout who had his watch told the gathering that the sun had not yet set. They all mocked him. A few minutes after the prayer ended, the clouds cleared and the sun reappeared.

44 Master or Mister

45 Found in «A Spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar»

If they had listened to the marabout and used the watch as we do today, they would never have been in that situation. This just shows that one should not always reject new ideas without thinking. The topics that your activity is going to touch on affect our identity and our traditions. It's normal that people have doubts about its purpose. There are Islamic recommendations on these themes.

Before celebrating a wedding, the Imam must be sure that both suitors are in agreement; no one should be forced to marriage. Female genital mutilation is considered a *Sunnah*. But even the obligation (*farata*) loses its meaning when there is a health problem for the believer. If it's proven that female circumcision has health risks, then we must stop. That doesn't change anything concerning piety.

As a Muslim I don't think that their activity is inappropriate. They are enlightening the people about the developments that everyone may interpret in their own way. When you live in a State, it's the duty of a Muslim to respect its laws.

Most of the assembly, including the director, were surprised by Thiérno's response. Many expected an unyielding condemnation of any form of awareness raising aimed at abandoning the practice. Yéro, aware of the weight the marabout's views and words and the yet unexpressed reservations of some, speaks again:

— Thank you Ceerno for listening to us. I would also like to reassure everybody here. There is nothing we are more proud of than our Fulani identity. We strongly defend our values and traditions. We are merely bringing all the information we have to our community. Each and every person is then free to think about and decide what they think is useful and put aside information they feel is unnecessary. But it will be done with the person being fully aware of all the known facts.

We don't force our ideas on anyone, we simply share them. If, for example, you don't know that female circumcision is forbidden in our country and get arrested for it, that would be a shame. On the other hand, if you go ahead and do it, knowing it's forbidden, then you have to assume the consequences.

Thiérno thanks them before rising to go and prepare for prayer. As they are leaving, the teachers hear someone say softly:

— They're working for the Government and report back everything that goes on in the village. The women should only do the cutting during the summer holidays when returning for a visit, or send the girls to Mauritania.

CHAPTER 16

Reunions. Zouber's analysis and the awakening of the past.

Nouakchott, Mauritania

The joy of the passengers shows on their faces. Kouro's first breath once outside the plane gives her an unexplainable feeling. The travellers move towards the entrance of the building. The queue is long. Kekkere holds one of the girls by the arm, the smallest is in the pushchair.

After passing through customs, they retrieve their baggage and head to the exit, when a porter offers his services for five euros. In front of the airport, the taxi men and men who exchange currency rush towards them:

— Come over here. If you want to change currency, I don't take commission.

People barter loudly and scream all around. Pindi the little girl starts to panic, she doesn't understand why these people are flocking around her parents, even wanting to grab their suitcases. Kange wants to throw away her empty water bottle and looks everywhere for a garbage bin, but can't find one. Her mother is already being hugged by her paternal aunt who came to meet them with Ousmane, Kekkere's best friend.

- Hayyo Dikko deede⁴⁶, she repeats shedding tears of joy.

She turns to her niece and hugging her tightly, smothers her with kisses. After throwing the empty bottle on the pavement she picks up Pindi, throwing her head backwards so she can see her better. Kekkere and Ousmane hug each other, step back to look at each other and laugh before hugging again. It's a joyful reunion.

On the way to Madina, the grandmother sings to the little one. From time to time she turns towards Kouro asking again and again how so and so is getting on.

Piindi is more interested by what she sees by the side of the road; stalls, carts pulled by donkeys, superb villas, men and women in large brightly coloured boubous. The window is open a little and she can hear different types of music coming from all over the place. Sometimes, she spots bare-footed children playing football on the edge of the road and the drivers brake sharply when ball rolls in front of them. They shout at the children who quickly retrieve the ball before continuing to play as though nothing had happened.

A few relatives have gathered at the house to welcome the *Francenaabés*⁴⁷. Kouro and Kekkere feel at home. The girls seem a little lost but at the same time excited. Kange, the eldest daughter is already surrounded by a group of children when she approaches the women who are peeling vegetables for the meal, next to two men cutting up a sheep that was slaughtered especially for the occasion. The noise is so loud and her pulaar too basic to follow the conversations.

- Hey, leave her alone, says the grandmother. Come and rest my dear, I'll teach to how make good food later.

The second day, the children are already close to their cousins and playing

46 Hayyo is a Fula expression meaning welcoming by showing joy when seeing someone. Dikko deede translates literally by: First born daughter of my eldest brother. In other words, dearest niece.

47 Literally "those from France", general term describing those who immigrated to Europe.

games with them. Kouro and her husband are in the lounge with some friends who dropped by to say hello, some hoping to receive a gift from Europe. Occasionally a telephone, the latest model of a Chinese brand, rings and the person answers moving towards the door. The television is on but no one is watching.

Suddenly, there is a report.

Twenty-eight villages of the Sédhiou Region, South of Senegal had a meeting today and have publicly declared to abandon practices that are harmful for young girls: child and forced marriages and female genital mutilations.

— That's nonsense, says a man sitting next to Kekkere. The Senegalese are hypocrites. They have this kind of event to please the ones who finance it, but in reality they don't abandon anything at all.

— It's the best way to deceive the Westerners who want everyone to live like them and consume their money while keeping our tradition, a woman, Tacko, replies.

Furious, Kekkere says:

— Stop seeing opposition everywhere. We're not fooling anyone other than ourselves. It's this lack of discernment that keeps us in the dark. It's not the Westerners who suffer the damage of these practices!

— Boy, calm down, says his friend. We absolutely don't endure anything at all. They're killing us but not dishonouring us. They need to take care of their own problems and let us take care of ours in our own way.

Kouro follows the discussion and can see just how difficult Yéro's combat must be if even his own childhood friends think this. She knows that her husband doesn't beat around the bush and says exactly what he thinks. He hasn't got as much patience as Yéro. She tries to smooth things over:

— Suffering is neither European nor African. It's felt by all human beings, regardless of their origin. Difference cannot justify violence. The greatness of a society depends upon its people. If warned, it will question its practices to see those that are good and those that are of no value. You cannot desire to go and live in Europe, by any means

possible, to improve our way of living and pretend we want nothing to do with their ideas.

It's been a year since the man asked for their help to immigrate to Belgium. He feels as though these comments are aimed at him and prefers not to reply this statement.

There is another childhood friend in the room. He's harratine⁴⁸ and grew up with his family in a small village where his parents worked for a Moorish family and were considered slaves. He had seen young girls being force-fed before marriage on a number of occasions, wrapped in their molfe⁴⁹ to hide their curves. They're forced to drink whole calabashes full of camel milk so as to *fill out their veil*, a sign of wealth and prosperity. But it causes serious health problems for the girls.

At the University of Nouakchott, he studied social science and had just finished an essay on slavery in Mauritania and became invested in politics to defend the rights of his countrymen. He travelled to the most remote parts of the country to gather testimonies of all types of violence, which he posts on his personal blog. He is respected for his courage despite the many different threats he receives from certain wealthy traders, who consider him as unworthy of his "freedom" as the son of a slave.

But Zouber is convinced that it's by breaking the silence and educating the masses that things will change:

— The issue of female circumcision is, in itself, no different to other traditional practices, he says.

By blindly following tradition, I will never be free as a human being, because the tradition considers me a lesser man. This, I reject totally. When young Mauritanian girls are stuffed like ducks to satisfy owners of a 4x4 bought with the money of the people, nobody cares about their unhappiness. To accept that because it's a custom is to accept that it's legitimate that I'm a slave because it's the custom.

48 Descendants of the black slaves exploited by the Moors

49 Long et large veil wrapped around the body, widely used by women in Arab-Berber countries

In the same way, mutilating a young girl by cutting in the name of tradition and claiming that this ensures that she will remain a virgin for her future husband who enjoyed sexual experiences with all the girls that crossed his path, is something that we can't refuse to acknowledge in the name of influence. There should be no amalgam between the rights and health of a person and the respect of an unnecessary tradition in view of the advanced human reflection.

Kouro is relieved. A few minutes earlier the television went off because of a power cut. Everyone listened to Zouber's reasoning. Many of them understood his fight for freedom and as harratine, especially since the conflicts between Mauritians Moors and Black Mauritians in 1989. Since then most of Blacks hate the Moors. Even so they find it hard to compare this particular injustice with female circumcision, which they consider to be a salvation, protecting society from debauchery.

Tacko, unlike Kouro, remembers the day she was cut very clearly. When hearing Zouber's reasoning, she has images of her mother's sad face when she said to her: "Be brave my daughter," before placing her hand in that of her grandmother. She must have been between five and six years old and nobody asked her opinion. They just told her she was going to cross a river that it was going to be painful but necessary for her life as a woman. Her mother loved her, she knew that. Her grandmother swore only by her, she knew that too. In her childlike mind, she told herself:

"If my mother and my grandmother say it is necessary that means it must be a good thing." Trustingly, she followed her grandmother who had given her two sweets.

For the first time in her life, during the moments following Zouber's speech, images go through her mind like a film. She is thirty years old now. She subconsciously crossed her legs as though protecting herself from the meddling hands of the cutter who she could see sliding between her legs to open them. She feels an urgent need to breathe and vomit when, visualising what happened 25 years earlier, she can feel her grandmother's hands on her mouth to stop her from screaming. She needs to leave.

She gets up and goes to the toilet. She needs to urinate. Surprise. She feels an intense burning in her genitals when she starts to pass water. The

nightmare of the days that had followed her cutting resurface. Her legs tremble. Suddenly she feels sick and vomits. She looks in the mirror above the sink and for a long moment watches the tears rolling down her face. She doesn't understand. She wipes her face with her hand and sees that she really has been crying.

— Why? she asks herself.

In the lounge, the discussion is interrupted by the arrival of two female *griottes*. They are chanting a song of praise in honour of Kouro. The audience listens attentively for a few minutes before Kouro takes out her purse and gives them a two thousand *ougouya*⁵⁰ note.

They stop for an instant, before starting to chant again, this time in honour of Zouber the free, as he's referred to. The Zouber and Kekkere leave the lounge to go and smoke.

Once on the terrace, Zouber pats his friend's shoulders.

— You know, he says, the social injustice that we face in all these issues, requires patience and a good strategy. Only education can help the people to question their beliefs. At the start of my combat against slavery, my parents did everything they could to try and dissuade me. They accepted being slaves, it's all they ever knew. Even if, deep down, they were suffering, they said it was just one of life's burdens that had to be accepted. It's hard to make someone understand something they know nothing about. It's already a good thing that people speak about all these issues.

Female circumcision is so deeply entrenched within them that many don't even feel the need to discuss it. It's just the way it is.

The women believe that if their daughters aren't cut, they won't be marriageable and accepted by society. Men are wary about the common belief that uncut women can't control themselves.

On top of that some of the religious men justify everything with

50 National currency of Mauritania

religion, citing phrases in Arabic as being so-called *hadiths* when in fact they are just popular song. They are just anxious to keep their positions as religious authorities. But people who are not educated don't understand the meaning and they give them an Islamic value. Fed by so-called marabouts' promises of paradise and fear of hell, people think more about their afterlife than their actual life.

Kekkere puffs on his cigarette and lightly wipes his forehead.

— I understand very well that everything isn't going to change in one day, he says, but I don't have patience with those people who see the negative in everything, when they are doing the worst things unimaginable.

— Don't be selfish my friend, replies Zouber. You had the chance to understand, you must let others benefit too.

— I don't know if you've met Kouro's cousin, says Kekkere. He's a guy that's very involved in raising awareness of this issue. He has the patience of a saint. It's thanks to him that Kouro dares to speak about the practice. It's become her main subject of discussion, she even wants to create an association in Belgium and another one in Fouta with Yéro to fight against female genital mutilations.

— That's exactly what's needed, says Zouber, a combination of efforts between men and women. Men have an important part to play. Since it is supposedly their preferences that are put forward as a reason, even if their opinion is never consulted.. It's necessary that they're involved.

I also think that you, as migrants, play an important role to play in terms of financial supporters of the communities. If you manage to create a common front over there in Europe, while discussing with those here back from, things will change faster.

CHAPTER 17

The theatre; the students raise awareness

Luge, Senegal

The rhythm of the drums is all around. One by one people arrive at the village square. The children dance and sing in the centre of a circle that has already been formed. Opposite the artists is a line of tables and benches for the elders and the councilors. Mats are laid out alongside for children and women. Not far from there the pupils have made a dressing room out of sheets and pickets for the actors who are getting into their costumes and receive final instructions from Yéro. It's the end of term party, but most of all, there is a theatre performance. The children are happy and visibly excited.

The school has invited a presenter from the community radio for the occasion. Appreciated by all his listeners, Guelel is standing in the middle of the circle, microphone in hand calling for everyone to come quickly, as the presentation will be starting soon. Many have never seen him, just heard his voice on the radio. They all want to see him with their own eyes.

Yéro knows that besides those who come just for the pleasure of watching their children perform and those who want to see if the rumours are true, there are also those who are coming to see the local star. The strategy has worked. The square is heaving with people. The village chief and the Imam's representative are there too.

Dressed in ragged clothws with a flask in one hand and a hoe over his shoulder, the first character comes on to the stage. He is returning from the fields, walking slowly, slightly bent forward. He pulls a face, his lips drawn back as though he's trying to protect himself from a nasty smell. The audience recognises old Weloyel in these actions, who has the habit of chasing after young people who steal his coconuts. Even the village chief and other councillors can't help laughing.

The atmosphere is relaxed right from the beginning and the young people masterfully secure the audiences attention to the rest of their show.

In the scenario, a man lives with his wife and two children, a four year old girl and 22 year old boy. Between these two children, the wife suffered many miscarriages. Before having her youngest daughter there had been another girl who lived until the age of six.

When she died, the father was travelling. He came back a month later. The death of the young girl affected both of them, they were very sad. Her mother had just told her that the death was sudden and that she had only been ill for three days.

The father is ageing and his health is deteriorating. He calls his son to him and explains that he wants to see him marry before he dies. He suggests the daughter of his youngest brother who lives in another village, but Ousmane is in love with another girl he sees in secret.

However, he doesn't want to disobey his father and accepts his proposal. He confides in one of his friends, who suggests that he tells his father the truth. But Ousmane thinks his father is too weak and he doesn't want to be in any way responsible for his death. He would rather marry his cousin and divorce a few years later to marry the woman he loves or take her as a second wife. The mother is also happy that he's taking a wife, it will be the first party she has organised herself.

The play acting allows for the public to intervene. Each scene ends with questions. Everyone can come and say what they think should or should not be done. Several people think the father has done nothing wrong since it was only a proposition. It's up to the son to tell him what he thinks. A young woman speaks out:

— Parents should stop asking young people to marry such and such, because we all know that the propositions of parents are orders in disguise. We shouldn't oblige someone to get married, it's supposed to be love. In this case it's obvious that Ousmane doesn't love the girl, but we know nothing of the young girl's feelings. More than likely she's not interested either but they will be forced to be unhappy for the rest of their lives because of the principals of tradition. This should no longer exist.

A few young people applaud.

An old man takes the microphone:

— Parents, you know what you need to do. The children believe they're more intelligent than you and want to control their own lives. Either you accept the fact and stay with your children, or you continue to impose your choices and they will continue to ridicule you. They're not wrong either, we won't be here forever. It's only normal that they should be allowed to marry whom they want.

Apart from a few grunts here and there, everyone seems to have the same opinion.

In another part of the play, Coumba the mother talks with her sister Fama who came to visit her. She's married and lives with her family in a village in Mauritania, on the other side of the river. Having heard that female circumcision was forbidden in Senegal she wants to take her namesake to Mauritania with her to be cut. Hearing her sister's proposal, Coumba bursts into tears. Her sister, surprised, doesn't know what to do. She doesn't understand what she said that could have been so bad.

— What's the matter little sister? What did I do or say? Tell me. Have you got problems with Modi? she asks. Coumba pulls herself together.

She confides in her sister:

— I've suffered all of my life. I had five miscarriages before the birth of my late Goppaado. But nothing compares to the suffering I've endured since her death. I know how she died and I'm afraid that the same thing will happen to her sister. I think I've found a way to cope with it but I'm

afraid of the reaction of my loved ones. That's exactly what happened. My daughter died in my arms three days after being circumcised, she bled to death.

She starts crying again. Her sister holds her in her arms and tries to console her a little. The audience is quiet and attentive to the discussion. Compassion can be seen on some faces. A few moments later Coumba continues:

— It's this practice that tore my beloved daughter from me. I swore that if God gave me another girl, I would never let it be done again. But I know that anyone can do it without my knowledge. When the Government passed the law against female circumcision, I danced all around my bedroom. I think that was the only time since Goppaado died that I felt alive and happy. That your namesake would be saved. And now it's you who wants to take my daughter and make her undergo the same practice that killed her sister and robbed me of my happiness ever since.

Touched by her sister's words, Fama starts crying too:

— You know little sister, I have no intention of making you unhappy; not you or my namesake. You know I love both of you. You always told me that Goppaado died of malaria. I didn't know it was because of the circumcision. You know the family won't understand this choice because it's our tradition. Nobody must know that your daughter isn't cut, that would bring shame on you, on her and on your whole family. But we'll find a way.

The public is asked to imagine the rest. There is some hesitation, people look at each other but no-one takes the microphone. Eventually the village chief speaks:

— In my capacity of village chief representing the Government, I must ask you to respect the law of the land. The prohibition is valuable for all citizens, not just for those in Fouta.

Comments come one after the other. First it's Amadou Sampolel, member of the opposition party, who speaks after the village Chief:

— The law is the law, he says. It must certainly be respected, but

the Government should have involved the people more in the process instead of just banning a practice that concerns them.

It's easy to sit in air-conditioned offices and pass laws on behalf of the people. The issue raised by the children in their play is interesting. By just passing a law you are not going to stop people from practicing. The reason, the *why* of this law needs to be clearly explained.

— The sisters only have to pretend, says a young man known for being a rebel. They just have to tell the family that the girl has already been cut. We can't continue killing people in the name of shame when no-one knows what lies between the legs of anyone else. The Government did the right thing to forbid it. If I see anyone here doing it, I'll report them.

Always considered a bit of a dropout, people are rarely annoyed by his remarks. Yéro is sat next to his Director and continues to monitor the different reactions:

— See, this is why the theatre is one of the tools for changing behaviour, he whispers to his superior. What that boy just said was heard by everyone. Only he said it, even if others think it. They wouldn't dare to because of their social status. This young man speaks for them. We all have a role to play in society.

After the event closes, the discussion continues. One group talks about the brilliance of the children who acted their roles so well. One woman explains to another:

— What they have performed here is the reality. Everybody knows but nobody dares to speak out publicly. It's good they have addressed the issue.

Further along, a man of a certain age says to his friends that forbidding the practice is fighting against the identity of the Fulani and promoting the practices of the dirty Wolof.

Another thinks that it's Europe who forced the country to pass the law, because otherwise we'll no longer benefit from their help with development.

Yéro is satisfied. The debate has begun. The activity has taken place without any problems and he's sure that the debate will continue in the village. This was his goal.

CHAPTER 18

Welcoming ceremony for the emigrants

Bito, Senegal

In the middle of the courtyard, under the shade of the mango tree, mattresses are covered with beautiful sheets, embroidered with animals and colourful flowers. Kouro's sisters-in-law excitedly unroll and caress the wax fabrics she brought them, as it is the custom.

Lilly proudly cuts the loincloths with a blade. She takes care to put each loincloth to the side, placing a soap on top before giving them to the griotte who is responsible for handing it to one of the women and saying:

— Here, get rid of your rags and proudly wear this loincloth from Paris on your buttocks that suffer from this heat. And don't worry about where you're going to sit, because Kouro knows that the Fouta sand sticks everywhere, that's why she has given you some soap as well.

Laughter comes from everywhere including the young ones who are playing checkers a little further away. From time to time, a woman executes dance steps and chants a rhythmic song, immediately joined by the others.

Tanoo, Kekkere's mother, thanks the old women sitting next to her for sharing her pleasure of seeing her son, who continues to greet the old people who come to welcome them. Her granddaughters, who are accustomed to the

surroundings, are in the midst of the grandmothers who are hugging and speaking to them non-stop.

Some women are stoking the fire under the third large pot, which will be used to prepare the feast.

A passer by would believe that they were celebrating a marriage or baptism. They wouldn't be far from wrong however, as the event symbolises the reunion of the emigrants to their soil and to their relatives and friends. Even if they fear the expense, they're proud to share their happiness with those with whom they have grown up and some of whom have helped them at a some point in their lives.

Kouro is speaking on the telephone:

— I thought you would be the first to welcome us. Tanno told me that you left early in the morning to water your vegetable plot ... Yes, yes I know ... It's just that I really wanted to see you so much ... OK see you later then.

She hangs up and turns to Kekkere who is talking with N'diaye Bodé, a man who made his fortune in import-export in the USA. N'diaye Bodé also decided to spend a few weeks holiday in the village. He wears a brown/orange outfit consisting of trousers with a starched, well-ironed shirt that makes a sound with each movement.

Around his neck is a gold chain reflecting the rays from the sun, which in turn bounce off his completely black sunglasses. His brows seem larger through his growing baldness, and his robust corpulence is accentuated by a large stomach. His complexion sets him apart from the other men who have pale and rough dry skin, showing the hard work they do from day to day to feed their families.

N'diaye Bodé immigrated to the Congo where he lived for 10 years before moving to the USA where he stayed for five years without contacting any member of his family. Both his parents were already dead. When he returned for the first time with two containers full of spare parts, he received the undeniable respect of many of the youth whose dream was to go and get their share of the pie in the Land of Uncle Sam. In addition, he's also very

generous. A football fan, he supported the village team by buying footballs and kits.

Kouro shakes his hand:

— The big boss, how are you? she says. I was talking to Yéro on the telephone. He'll be here soon. It seems he has a vegetable plot on the river bank. He's a strong believer in agriculture. N'diaye, you should finance him to make a bigger field, I'm sure he'd do well. We have everything we need, only the means and the management are sometimes lacking. But with him, I'm certain that everything would be perfect. I intend to buy him a water pump.

N'diaye puts his iPhone 5 back into his shirt pocket and smiles:

— The bosses are the Francenaabés. It's true that Yéro is a hard worker. We can talk to him and see.

— He sets a good example in any case, says Kekkere

Several people stand up, alerted by the arrival of the second village Imam followed by Malick and other students. The women who were singing and dancing freeze. Some who had knotted their scarves around their hips quickly put them back on their heads. The silence could be felt.

This catches the attention of the three emigrants. They also head towards the group. Old and young alike greet the Imam Jibril with two hands, head bowed. This respect he owes to his rank, his firmness and the occult powers he is believed to have.

When Kekkere shakes his hand, Ceerno Jibril says to him with a smile:

— You still have your dreadlocks? You must give your trousers to Kouro, so that there is a man in the house.

The talibes burst out laughing. A little embarrassed Kouro avoids his gaze. She's deeply relieved when she hears Kekkere, unflappable, reply to everyone's surprise:

- Hey Ceerno I've proved myself, wait you're going to see your little girls.

He calls to Kange and Pindi to come and greet the Imam. One of the boys who is a bit further away whispers to one of his friends:

- This guy is crazy but he did the right thing.

Ceerno Jibril continues to greet the rest of the assembly before being led to the salon, still followed by his students.

CHAPTER 19

Exchange between the young people on sharing tasks

Kouro gestures at N'diaye Bodé and her husband to follow through hallway leading to the back of the house. towards the terrace which is shaded by other buildings at this time in the morning.

Légo, Kekkere's brother, is there with a few friends, listening to music and drinking tea. He gets up and invites N'diaye Bodé to sit and goes to sit next to a girl who is sitting cross-legged with a bowl of bean leaves in her lap. She aligns the leaves until she has a good handful and gives them to one of the two young girls who cut them into small pieces. They'll be mixed with peanuts and meat to make a sauce for couscous in the evening. The boys smoke one cigarette after another. Kekkere takes a few leaves and starts to help the girl. She looks at him and smiles:

- No, don't get your hands dirty, we are almost finished.
- It's not dirty at all, he replies.
- Brother, please don't give us another lecture, says Lego his younger brother hastily. We aren't here to cut *haako*, and even if we wanted to help, they wouldn't let us. It's their job.

— You'll never know anyway if they would let you help or not, because you never offer, says the girl.

N'diaye Bodé crushes his cigarette on the ground and says:

— Don't worry, Souko. He'll do worse things in his life than cutting black-eye bean leaves. He'll understand for himself when he leaves this place.

— If I leave I'll do whatever is necessary. The one who doesn't have a mother suckles on his grandmother. But, I'm certainly not going to do a woman's job in my own home, says Légo.

— Yet when we take a hoe to clear the fields, you never say that it's a man's job, and that we shouldn't do it because we are at home, retorts another of the girls.

— Only incompetent men that let their wives work in the fields, murmurs another. In any case there is almost nothing left to do in the fields. It doesn't rain anymore and the water pumps are broken. We have to seek work in the cities, with all the difficulties that this entails to feed the family. You shouldn't complain about these small domestic jobs.

Kouro follows the discussion without interrupting. She's trying to understand why the division of tasks is so important to these young people. Why don't they just share them all the time as she and her husband do?

— Those who are in a boat have the same wish - to arrive safely, she says finally. In a couple, the man as well as the women wants the best for their family, to take good care of their children, give them the best and let them flourish. Sharing the tasks and helping each other can only increase their happiness. If a man can work in a restaurant washing dirty dishes for hours on end, why can't he wash those of his family?

What would a woman lose by rowing her husband's canoe while he's catching fish to feed her children?

— That's what I tell them all the time, says one of the youngsters. Whenever we go swimming in the river, I wash my own clothes because

I enjoy doing so and it's one less task for my sister. Even the women who pass by have started to make fun of me, or say stupid things like "What did your little sister do for you to insult her like this?" That's rubbish. I'll do anything for my family, they can call me all the names they want, I do it for myself. I prefer washing the dishes for my mother rather than giving her money that I earn in the city washing the clothes of others under the pretext that I'm far from home, so everything is acceptable. There is nothing more hypocritical than that.

Légo gets up abruptly:

- OK, do what you want, we don't care. We're going to the river.

All the boys leave, leaving the girls with Kouro, her husband and the big boss.

- It's normal that they reason in this way since they only know what's around them, says the big boss. But they'll understand eventually.

Kouro pulls her chair closer to him and moves the bowl that Souko put on the small stool. She looks at him:

- Talking about understanding, I want to talk a little about a sensitive subject. I would have liked Yéro to be here, but it doesn't matter we can talk with him another time. I was telling Kekkere that it was lucky to meet you here, because we believe, as emigrants, that we have an important role to play in changing the behaviour of our communities, especially concerning certain traditions. For example, what we have just heard from the youth, but we need to tackle the most urgent issues first. That is to say, we need to make the parents aware of the problems with forced and child marriage, and above all about female circumcision.

She sees a mix of surprise and joy on the faces of the other girls, and amazement on that of N'diaye Bodé, who tries to mask it by taking out his gold lighter and lighting a cigarette. Souko, less self-conscious than the other young girls and participating in the current PDH programme in the village exclaims:

- Indeed, it's time you got involved. We try to speak but nobody wants to listen to us. Maybe with your backing, the adults will listen,

especially the Imam Jibril.

Just when the big boss opens his mouth to speak, Lily's voice is heard:

— Kouro! He's here.

She turns and sees Lily approaching followed by Yéro, arms wide open, a big smile full of joy on his face. She shouts:

— Hayyooo!

She throws herself into Yéro's arms and holds him tight against her before bursting into tears. The others watch in silence. Nobody wants to interrupt this reunion between the two cousins, only Kouro crying and the Yéro's calming voice can be heard:

— Come on, please, don't make me cry in front of Kekkerel!

A few moments later, she pulls away and takes some tissues out of her pocket. She wipes her tears, takes a jug of water and rinses her face, smiling and apologetic. Yéro just as moved sits down between N'diaye Bodé and Souko, in front of Kekkerel who pats his wife's back.

— I thought you were going to swallow him directly when you saw him. You're making me jealous.

Everybody laughs. Lilly teases Yéro:

— Kouro do you really give any importance to this scoundrel? Look at him, he's puffed up like wet couscous.

— Stop it Lilly, replies Kouro somewhat recovered from her emotions. You know very well that he's more than important.

— Oh yes, ever since he allows himself to talk about what is between our legs, it makes him more important. Since he was on the television, Mister Yéro is inspired.

Yéro smiles and pretends to throw his cap at her:

- That's enough now. Stop bleating like a weaned kid.
- I'm going now, I have to go and take care of drinks for those who have just arrived, says Lilly. I'm sure he'll make a speech about his new mission.

As soon as Lilly disappears at the end of the hallway, Kouro continues:

- Anyway Yéro, you arrived just at the right moment. I was wondering, what we emigrants can do to continue the fight against female circumcision. Thank you so much for daring to speak about this problem. I've always wanted to address it to make it clear to my family why I don't want to have my daughters cut. I could never find a way. It's because of your intervention in the documentary that I finally decided to get openly involved. You gave me the courage and the hope. If your nieces are saved from this practice, it's all thanks to you. But they're not the only ones who deserve to be saved.

N'diaye Bodé stirs in his chair and places his telephone on the table:

- You know Kouro? I'm aware that we are members of this community. The pride of belonging I feel continues to grow even after all the years I've spent away. Whether in Central Africa or in the USA, I realise the importance of our values and traditions. I entirely agree that forced or child marriages, the number of children per family are all obstacles to the development of our society, both economically and socially.

However, I have a real problem with female circumcision. I honestly don't think that we should stick by everything we are told. By doing so, we will eventually lose all of our identity values. I'm also concerned that stopping the practice will open the door to other vices.

Surprised, Kouro opens her mouth and eyes wide, as though she had just heard about the death of a loved one:

- What?! What are you saying? No, not you!

Kekkere smiles:

- There's a good ally for the cause. You think that we should continue with this practice to prove we're proud of our identity?

- You know better than I, the big boss continues, that whether in Europe or in the USA, African traditions are not at all highly regarded. While those who claim that our traditions, including female circumcision, are mediaeval, are promoting their own way of life, and can't seem to accept that others may have different ways from theirs. If we are to promote freedom, everyone must be free to live their life as they choose in relation to their own values. It's not because we live in these places that we have to implement their values here in our own country.

CHAPTER 20

The surprise or the conservative emigrant

Bito, Senegal

As well as Kekkere and Kouro, the other girls are shocked. Because he had lived away for several years because of his influence on young people who adored him, they thought they'd found someone in N'diaye Bodé who could play an influential role in the abandonment of the practice. Unfortunately, his speech gives no indication of support in this direction, but rather the opposite.

Kouro feels completely frustrated and angry, defenceless against this man who is ready to paint the West as the source of the devaluation of Africa. She looks at Yéro and her husband desperately hoping that one of them will reply for her. Souko whispers something to her friend pulling her bottom lip upwards. Nobody hears what she says except for her friend but her expression shows disgust at what N'diaye said.

Kekkere, true to his radical way of thinking gets up, puffs on his cigarette and says just before leaving:

— You know what, I'm tired of all these sterile discussion and this unfounded victimisation. Everyone should do what they want. If someone wants to have their daughters cut, that's their problem. If anyone dares to touch my daughters, they'll wonder what's hit them.

Giving it one last shot, Kouro says to “the big boss”:

— You know N'diaye, we won't stop the practice because we're told to. If we decide to stop it's because it isn't right.

— It isn't right, N'diaye repeats. What is right? Letting girls marry each other? Organising swing orgies for men and women in the name of liberty? An abortion when you want, in the name of rights over one's body? Is that what's right? What's good for us is never good in their eyes. Yet they do worse things than us, but they justify it by creating words to describe exactly what they say is from the middle-ages. Recently I even saw on the internet a white man with two wives; and guess what they call this union: *the trouple*, instead of polygamy. If it was an African, he'd be called macho, domineering, disrespectful of women. If it's the Whites, it's a consenting relationship between adults, as if we can't have consent between African adults. In France a woman wearing the veil is dehumanised, if she does striptease she's happy and free. What is this? There are many Western women who go and get cut stating that it's cosmetic surgery.

Kouro is confused. She replies:

— What is the relationship between cutting a two year old or one of only few months and all of what you have just said? An adult woman who chooses to be cut or live with someone out of wedlock, or a man who decides to prostitute himself? I see no relation to a child that has something forced upon them and may suffer the consequences for the rest of her life.

— Obviously it's all related, continues N'diaye Bodé. The practices they do over there are exactly the same as ours, the same ones as they're trying to classify as diabolic.

An adult's freedom to do what he wants shouldn't only be granted those living in the USA or Belgium. We also have to respect the choice of the adult Foutanke who decides to have his daughter cut for his own reasons. You said that a two year old girl doesn't choose to be cut while a grown woman who decides to have here genitals pierced has chosen. You're right but is it your daughters who have chosen not to be cut? No.

It's you who decided; and it's always you who decides everything for them. What decisions have they made in their lives at that age? None.

When you put them into a school or teach them how to swim, as far as I know, it's not them who decided. You'll tell me it's different because it's for their own good. Yes, because you have decided it's good for them. Why then can't I decide that the female circumcision is good for my daughter? What gives you the right to decide what is or isn't good for my children?

Yéro who remained silent until now senses that his cousin is disgusted by this reasoning and tries to help:

— He's not completely wrong however. We can make a parallel between what is seen as archaic or inappropriate in some cultures and what is accepted as "individual freedom" in others. While if we look closely there isn't such a big difference. The objective shouldn't be to compare practices to identify all the bad practices the other is doing. What should happens is that we one should look for is what positive the others are practicing and see if any of that might be useful to us and how get inspired as to how we can strengthen our own ways of doing things for the better.

N'diaye Bodé listens carefully.

— You're also right when you say that a child never decides anything, Yéro continues. Hence, the argument not to cut young girls because they didn't choose to is not a good argument. I'm sure you'll agree with me that every parent wants what is best for their daughter, like whether to send her to school so she can gain knowledge, or for her to do some other training that will help her make something of her life, or to have her cut so she has is accepted and has her place in society. All these things are done initially because it seems to be the right choice for a child.

If certain practices are questioned it's because there are parents who have always believed that they were only doing what is best for their child. In the case of female circumcision, for example, it was eventually seen as doing more harm than good.

Another girl arrives and sits discreetly next to the one cutting the leaves. She taps her on the shoulder and whispers something in her ear. Yéro greets her with a nod and continues:

— Practices change and evolve over time, in part thanks to the progress of scientific knowledge, but also because the influence of others. This means that we share what may be a cause for alarm with others, who like us have always thought that it was a good thing. When we realise that the reasons that push us to have our daughters cut, are not only unfounded but also that they don't produce the expected results and in addition, that the consequences can seriously affect the child that we love more than anything in the world. Sometimes the outcome is so bad that they never talk about it any more. Then we'll realize that there's another way of showing our love for them. We'll give them a place in society without them having to suffer.

Once people recognize this, female circumcision will no longer be one of the decisions we will make for the well-being of our daughters. It will be a decision that was made for the good of our child, which turned out to be harmful for her. What counts is to have the strength to change to what is in her best interest.

No-one, other than yourself, has the right to decide what is or isn't good for your child. But every human being has the duty to make available knowledge and information they have that can help others become aware of the dangers and risks of their decisions that can have an impact on another human being.

N'diaye closely pays attention to this reasoning, but he still sticks to his guns:

— Your argument seems rational but only in theory. This is because none of the explications you gave answer the doubts I have about the merits of abandoning the practice of female circumcision so I continue to think and act in its favour. If having my daughter cut can make her control her desires and not end up like those Gabonese, Congolese or American girls who chase after men, then I congratulate myself for making the decision to preserve it.

Souko claps her hands and laughs and says to him without hezitating:

— Khalas!⁵¹ Yet your second wife is Wolof. We know that they don't practice female circumcision. So, why did you marry her since she's of this category of women that you belittle?

A little embarrassed, N'diaye lights his umpteenth cigarette, takes a puff and looks at the girl to show that she has crossed the line by talking to him like that. There is an age gap of more than 20 years between them. He regains his poise and replies:

— I didn't marry her because she isn't cut. I married her because we love each other, because she is devout and I trust her. Her parents had the responsibility of raising her, which they did. I'm in no way responsible for her childhood. On the other hand, my daughters are my responsibility. I respect the fact that the practice isn't a part of their customs, and she respects the fact that it's part of mine.

That's why our daughter was cut in America by an Egyptian doctor .

Kouro doesn't understand this situation. A man, living with non-cut woman whom he finds devout and faithful but at the same time he criticises women he knew in Central Africa for having doubtful morals, because they haven't been cut. She says:

— In a nutshell, your wife is the only honest uncut woman. Her daughters need to be cut to make them moral/respectable?. You make me laugh. Why can't your daughters be as good as their mother without being cut?

— You don't understand, he retorts. I want my daughters to be cut because it's part of my identity and I can't be certain that they have the same force of character as their mother. Better to be safe than sorry.

— Their strength depends on the education you give them.

— And your wife, she has no problem accepting that? asks Kouro.

— There's nothing to discuss. It's either that or separation. They're my children.

51 What a paradox!

Yéro is coming to the end of his arguments with the big boss. He has one last shot:

- Of course, they're your children. They are also her children. They are a shared responsibility.
- N'diaye cuts him short. Don't bother, there's nothing you can say that will make me change my mind. I couldn't care less about what anyone else does. I won't raise awareness neither for nor against, I shall just do what I have to do.

His telephone rings, he answers and leaves the terrace. One of the girls who has only been listening says softly:

- It's normal that his wife accepts, his pockets are full, she doesn't want to lose her privileges. It isn't just a question of love, but I agree with him that we should just let everyone do what they want.

Deep down Kouro is seething with anger and incomprehension. All of her enthusiasm and hope of being able to do something constructive here before leaving dissolves as she sweats in the scorching heat. Yéro feels her frustration, he looks at her with a sympathetic smile before saying:

- Don't worry, these are the obstacles you'll have to face if you want to commit yourself to this issue. You have to tell yourself that you're not fighting this battle for this one person and don't forget the thousands you can help by opening their eyes. You can even use this situation to explain just how absurd the justifications are. Someone who doesn't want to take responsibility for bringing up un-cut daughters, but lives with a non-cut woman. Don't focus on the objections, the refusals, the mockery, think rather of those who will get your reasoning? Even if you only manage to convince one person in ten during a discussion, be happy! It's the only thing that will keep you going.

CHAPTER 21

Mobilisation Strategies

Kanngé and Pindi leave with their cousins to go to the river bank or corn fields, sometimes they all go to the forest to find dead wood for cooking. The little Europeans, as they are called, are used to the lifestyle here and easily join in with their games. They show the other children the games they're used to playing on the playground at their elementary school in Dachsbeek, Brussels, "little Bobo is sick", "the cat and the wolf", "the little goldfish".

Kouro spends most of her time visiting friends but also discussing strategies Yero thinks would be influential and help raise awareness to support the village's participation in the public declaration for the abandonment of female genital mutilations and child marriages to be held in Sedo Abbas.⁵² Kekkere rarely joins them, he's usually with old friends, playing cards, watching football or swimming back and forth across the river every evening.

They meet the President of the Women's Association and Coordinator of the PDH programme Management Committee. She was elected unanimously by

52 Situated 100 km from Bito, Sedo Abbas is a village in the Fouta Redion, benefiting from the PDH programme. Other villages that followed the same process decided to unite to publicly declare their willingness to abandon Female Genital Mutilations and Bito is invited there.

all the participants in the presence of the village Chief and is always proud to be present at gatherings.

Aminata Fall is a strong, dynamic woman, committed to everything that happens in the village. Tall and sturdy, her aura demands respect despite her ugliness, which she managed to turn into an asset in her relations. She has small eyes, a big nose, hollowed cheeks, her are lips blackened with tattoos, and she has two large scarification's in the form of a cross on each temple, a distinctive sign of being a descendant of a family of slaves once owned by the Sarr family.

Her social status allows her to speak her mind freely without the risk of being judged, which earned her the respect of many people who see her as a spokeswoman. She says out loud what others think without daring to admit it publicly because of their nobility. Soon to be 51, she has certainly passed on messages and arranged secrets meetings for most of the adults since she was a child. She knows their secrets which is why there are some don't trust her. When Kouro and Yéro come to discuss their plans with her, she says to them:

- The majority of people who charm us with values and righteousness, are those who don't look me in the eye when they speak of fidelity, honour, control or whatever. Don't worry, we will participate in this declaration. I'll let you use your own techniques but if that doesn't work I will go and talk to them and ask if they wish to share their exemplary secrets.

This morning, Yéro and Kouro meet with Harouna Boudia, a larger-than-life character who is very involved in politics and governmental administration. On a day to day level he handles administrative procedures such as providing a certificate of civil status, lowering the age, obtain judgements for marriage certificates without going to court, pay half the amount for a pitch at the weekly market without a receipt.

Kekkere offered him a beige jacket that he wears to every meeting outside of the village. He was sought after by nearly everyone. With him, it was a short discussion, he simply told them:

- You know, I'll back anything you're involved in without hesitation. Let me know what your activities are about and if you wish me to speak,

I'll speak.

When they leave Boudia, Lilly is waiting on the corner of the street with two teenagers. One is wearing a cap worn backwards, a heavy golden chain around his neck and a small earring in his left ear. The other is wearing faded ripped jeans. He is standing with his back to Kouro and Yéro who are approaching, they see his jeans worn low on his hips giving a glimpse of red briefs.

Mc Deve and Annore Leniol are passionate about rap. They have composed and recorded songs with the means available to them and shared them with young people. Their music is played on mobile phones. Once they were even the supporting act at a concert for their idol Paco Leniol, a rapper from the region adored by all the girls. They write their own lyrics, and occasionally Yéro proposes some of his own.

CHAPTER 22

Using the means of communication of the youth - Rappers

Bito, Senegal

Yéro had explained the importance of reaching the young people to Kouro and Lilly through methods of communication that they understand. Rap seduces most of them and the two young men are well liked and their music is widely listened to.

- Don't you think you're going a bit far? Lilly said. They're just kids and you want them to talk to their mothers about female circumcision?
- It's not for their mothers, Yéro retorted, it's rather their sisters that they'll sing for, so that they escape the practice.

Yéro explains to the boys:

- I want to show you a new text, but first I'd like us to discuss the theme. I've listened to almost all of your songs. You address a lot of things, love, friendship, drugs, forced marriages etc. You know that I support all initiatives to awaken our community. Right now I'm dealing with issue of female genital mutilations. How do you feel about this practice?

Mc Deve speaks without hesitation, he's very expressive:

- Personally, I don't have a fixed idea, but if you give us the text,

whatever the message, I'll rap it. I know you wouldn't give us anything that's wrong. I've heard that female circumcision has serious consequences, but I've never seen any.

Yéro nods his head and replies:

— I don't want you to sing this text just because I asked you to. I want you to be interested in the topic and understand why you're singing it, like when you sing the other songs that mean so much to you.

Kouro and Yéro spend more than half an hour with the young rappers explaining the serious consequences of female circumcision, the arguments for and against. Lilly listens to the discussion without interrupting. Once they've finished their explanations, Annore Leniol says to them:

— I have a friend in my class who is a rapper, he made me listen to the song by Tiken Jah Fakoly: *No to female circumcision*. It really moved me. I had the idea of writing a text which I started, but hesitated showing it to Mc. It's a difficult subject. We're just starting out. I don't want one of our songs to be received badly and get called every name under the sun. But, now that we have your support, I'm no longer afraid.

— Very good, Yéro says. Here's the text that I've written for you. You can compare it to the one you've already done and adjust it to suit you.

Mc Deve takes the sheet of paper and starts to read out loud:

*« Those who like what we do, listen to us
And listen with your soul
Without letting your emotions get out of control
It's not out of disrespect
That we decided to speak, for us
It's the changing times that push us to discuss
Once considered redeeming tradition
For our loved ones who cherish us no doubt above all
Is shown to be fatal and met with opposition
All traditions aren't good
Some disappear over time
Lipstick replaces tattoos*

*For the privacy of a young couple
The sound of the tam tams become more discreet
Exposing the virginity loincloth publicly in the street
And others so deeply engraved
Become the norm and difficult to change
Female circumcision
Is an example
Let us thank God who has given to man
Science to allow him to understand the effects of his actions. »
(...)*

Kouro's telephone vibrates in her bag. She takes it and reads the text:

- We have to leave. It's a message from Dioula saying that Imam Djibril has returned from the mosque.
- OK, let's go. You two try and memorise the text over the next few days so that you will be ready to sing it at Sedo Abbas.

The young rappers head towards the river, while Yéro and his cousins take the small alley that leads to the marabout's house.

CHAPTER 23

Declaration for the abandonment of Female Genital Mutilations; the meaning and problems

Bito, Senegal

Bito's participation in the public declaration for the abandonment of FGM scheduled in Sedo Abbas, caused a lot of controversy among the villagers. The village Chief, the elders and the management committee decided to meet for a discussion, to calm the spirits and make the right decisions.

The courtyard fills up little by little. Some are relaxed but most of the men have a harsh look on their face. Moctar, the Imam's son who had attended a discussion at the front gate of Yéro's house, signals the women to go to the left and the men to go to the right. The village Chief is in the middle next to the Grand Imam and his assistant Ceerno Jibril.

Kouro and Lilly begin to laugh as soon as they reach the women. Aminata Tokala mocks the seriousness of the men, comparing each of the elders to an animal or suchlike. The village Chief is sulking like a donkey that refuses to cross the river in winter, the Imam lowers his gaze like someone caught by surprise in a woman's bedroom.

A few minutes later, the courtyard gets more and more crowded. There are four times more men than women. The Imam prays for the meeting to go smoothly, and the village Chief begins the introduction:

— There are no strangers amongst us. Those pounding millet should not hide their armpits. What brings us together today is very important, since it starts to sow the seeds of hatred between us. It is our duty to do everything possible to find a solution as our ancestors have always done. There are people here who wish to abandon the practice of female circumcision, as required in accordance with the law passed in the national assembly. Others think that it's out of the question to follow the public declaration in Sedo Abbas on behalf of the village because they don't want it abandoned. Therefore we should not commit the whole village. All the reasons are valid according to one party or the other. Now, as I said, we have to try and find a solution between us, this subject is not worth us killing each other over. The elderly, notables and all people of good will must tell us what needs to be done, and it must stay just between us, because if this ever goes beyond the village boundary, it's clear that there won't even be a debate. We all know it's forbidden by the law and the State won't hesitate to get involved.

— It should never have been allowed to get this far, a man throws in. Let those who want to abandon it do so and let those who don't continue. I don't see the problem. Everyone is master in their own home, nobody will come and force you to either continue with the practice or to stop. We're just making ourselves look ridiculous.

Around the assembly. A few, '*Really!*' and '*well said*' and '*that's rubbish*' can be heard.

The women also raise their voices. For a minute everyone talks to their neighbour until Malick starts to speak:

— The situation isn't as simple as that. It's normal that we discuss this between us, we live in a community. We would no longer be a community if we didn't live by the rules that unite us. If everyone does what they want, it'll end in anarchy. We have to have the courage to say to those who brought this idea to the village, that they're the ones responsible for this situation. We must not bend to the will of those associations who supposedly come to help us while their goal is nothing but to destroy our values. I know what I'm talking about. Sadly many fail to see the scheming going on behind this desire to help. Anyway we must not rule against the Sunnah of the Prophet.

- There is nothing more impolite than someone asking the people to stop female circumcision when their own mother has been cut, says an old man who is known for his insults.

The young ones giggle. Kouro, sitting in the middle of the women, watches her cousin Yéro and wonders how he dares to face the crowd and their offensive remarks. Imam Jibril leans towards the Grand Imam, they talk amongst themselves for a moment and finally he speaks:

- In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful, we ask for more restraint. As the village chief said, we are all one family, the Prophets family (Peace and Blessings upon Him). By order of the Grand Imam, I give you our position on the problem based on the teachings of our Beloved. Female circumcision is not forbidden by the Prophet, hence we won't allow ourselves to forbid it in his place and we will follow his words, his Sunnah. Now if the State forces us to do so we aren't responsible, because Muslims are no longer responsible when they are forced to do something against their will. Those who wish to abandon the practice are free to do so but it won't be in the name of the village because we are part of the village. Anyway is there any reason to go and be seen? We can abandon it without making a big song and dance out of it, no?

Yéro feels obliged to react:

- I would like to remind everyone here that I and those who are raising awareness on this subject have neither sold out nor become militants trying to destroy the foundations of our community. What we do to promote our culture, is in no way comparable to those who only talk and do nothing for our culture. The reason I decided to talk about this practice is in no way to insult anyone, let alone my own mother.

What I'm trying to do is inform people about the dangers of this practice by showing them that the justifications don't hold up. In addition we live in a State under the Rule of Law, a country for both Muslims and non-Muslims. It's important that we know what is prohibited and avoid breaking the rules which we haven't got the possibility to change anyway. Each and every one is free to make their own choice.

As to whether it's worth just giving up, the answer is no. But if

there are people who want to publicly announce their decision, it's their right. We will go to the declaration to show our support, not in the name of the village but as the sons and daughters of Bito.

CHAPTER 24

Men are also affected by FGM: how Yéro came to understand?

Bito, Senegal

It is dark. An oil lamp is lit in the middle of a group. Kouro heads towards them. She can only distinguish the eyes and white teeth accentuated by the darkness of the skin.

Arriving next to the group, Kouro notices two young girls putting their books away. They have just finished the maths exercises that Yéro has given them. He helps his nieces prepare for their CM2 exam twice a week during the summer holidays

Before she has the chance to say good evening, Moctar exclaims:

— Ah there you are Kouro! We're going to put you to the test to see if you haven't forgotten your childhood.

Yéro turns and sees his cousin just behind him, she joins the circle.

— What have I got to do to prove to you that I haven't forgotten my childhood? she says.

- Tell us the story of Hamadi Manna⁵³ for example, replies Yéro, or solve this puzzle for us, “ten holds four⁵⁴”. He starts to laugh.

Moctar managed to get a lot of young people interested in the Wednesday evenings, when they all meet to, as he says, relearn how to tell stories and play guessing games as we did when we were children, so as not to lose the moral and intellectual gymnastics that oral tradition offers.

- A very good initiative, but you should also think about writing, otherwise we'll end up losing everything, Kouro says. Unfortunately I can't stay for long because I have to pack, we leave tomorrow. I just came to say goodbye.

She turns to Yéro and says softly:

- Can I see you for a minute?

He gets his torch, gets up and Kouro follows. They pass through the courtyard, guided by the light from the torch. They sit on the bamboo bed at the left corner of the building dimly lit by the solar lamp on the neighbour's wall. Bugs attracted by the light fly into the lamp and fall. A small lizard welcomes their distress and enjoys his last evening meal. One man's loss is another man's gain says Kouro, pointing to the lizards little round stomach.

- Are you ready to go back to work? Yéro asks.
- Not really but duty calls, Kouro replies. This trip has done me the world of good. I think this holiday has been the most significant in a very long time. I've got the impression that I'm part of very important changes. I've got a question for you that's playing on my mind. In fact I appreciate enormously everything you do, your approach to things, but I can't help wondering what it was that drove you to become so involved in this fight. For me, it was because I couldn't bear the idea of my daughters being cut, it saddened me.
- It's a long story, Yéro begins. I had never really thought about it.

53 A popular Fulani tale

54 Response : the ten thingers holding a cow's udder

I didn't even know what it was. Then I took part in a training course on human rights in which the different ways in which a person can be violated were addressed. A lot of different things were mentioned such as war, arbitrary arrests, racism, assassinations, forced marriages, etc.

At some point I heard someone say that female genital mutilation is one of them. Some of us were so surprised and it put us on our defence. I turned to where the voice was coming from at the same time the as the trainer noted the word on the blackboard. It was a woman. Chairs started to grind on the floor and raised voices could be heard from all around the hall. From here and there you could hear people say "really, since when?" and "What right are you speaking about?" "Ah of course, it's the greatest violation of rights, etc" could be heard.

I was confused, skeptical and angry all at the same time. I believed that female circumcision was a noble practice and I could see nothing unjust in it. On the contrary, I thought, like everyone else, that it was a necessity because in my mind, a non-cut woman was an, open door and anybody may enter.

There were some very vocal exchanges between those taking a part in the session, eventually the whole discussion was all about this issue. The facilitators listed a number of health problems associated with the practice. But the majority of us didn't believe it. At first I rejected everything they said, but deep down I was trying to understand why some people thought it was bad for women's health. I was certain that it was an obligation for all Muslims, I didn't know, for example, that it wasn't practiced by the Wolofs. I started by asking the Imams to be sure, and I learnt that it wasn't an obligation. My beliefs started to crumble but I still wasn't convinced that it was dangerous for women's health, nor that it was a form violence or a violation of rights. I thought that if my mother decided to have my sisters cut then there must have been a reason. So I continued to check with doctors and read up on the subject.

Kouro rubs his back with her left hand and listens carefully to her cousin.

— However it was a personal story that I lived through with a girl that really opened my eyes to the consequences, Yéro says. I was in love with a girl, and she loved me unconditionally, but it was impossible to

live this love in a joyful physical way. She was a teacher and she was also Diola, we worked in the same village. At the beginning, every time I wanted to sleep with her, she found an excuse not to, and I couldn't understand why. I began to have doubts about her love for me. I told her I didn't understand how you could love someone and yet not want sexual relations with the person you're love. She said to me, "it's not what you think. If I didn't love you nothing obliges me to go out with you. You don't understand."

Of course I couldn't understand, she didn't explain anything to me. Seeing that I had doubts about her feelings, she tried to please me. We had sexual intercourse. I had fantasized so much about the first time with her so much that when it came to it, I lost my erection during the act, for the first time in my life. She was, tense and uptight, she cried. That frustrated me and I lost my erection. We stayed in the dark for a while without speaking, finally she got up and said to me: "Now you know why I've been dreading this day".

I didn't say anything because I felt confused, sad and ashamed. I listened to her.

She continued: "Sexual intercourse has never been a pleasure for me. When I was married, my husband had to force me to sleep with him. Ever since my wedding night when they had to open me to be able to consummate the marriage, having sex has been a nightmare. At the beginning he spoke to my best friend who told me that I had a jealous lover⁵⁵ and advised me to go and see a marabout. I followed her advice but nothing changed. In the meantime I became pregnant. During childbirth I had so many problems. That was when the doctor explained to me that all the sexual problems I had were linked to female circumcision. I had been cut at a very young age. Since my husband and I got divorced almost five years ago, it's the second time that I have tried to have intercourse."

It's hard to explain the anger I felt. That experience really opened my eyes. Since then I made my decision to help others to understand.

55 Sexual problems are often blamed on jealous spirits who prevent the woman from having intercourse with their husband.

Kouro takes his hand and squeezes hard without saying a word for a while, then gets up and says:

- I have to go and finish the packing. Thank you for sharing all of that with me.

Yéro gets up and walks with his cousin to the door. He says to her:

- I'll come by later to say goodbye to my nieces.

Summary of justifications for FGM and the counter-arguments in favour of the abandonment (not exhaustive)

Possible justifications

Deconstructive arguments

We can't speak about that, taboo (difficult to speak about sex)

- De-demonise sex
- Address the value of women in general (break the ice)
- Use metaphors (adapt the language in function with the public) when talking about the genitals (e.g. say private part)

Complicated

It's a religious obligation

- Question the evidence in the Quran or in the Bible
- Practicing and non-practicing Muslims (Morocco, Senegal with the Wolofs)
- Non-Muslims who practice (e.g. the Diolas in Senegal)
- Not a condition of conversion

We do it so that the girls can control themselves, stay a virgin, get married and once married stay faithful

Controlling sexuality

- Female circumcision does not assure virginity
 - Non cut women also stay a virgin until marriage.
 - Cut women get pregnant outside marriage (frequent unwanted pregnancies)
 - Education
 - Self-respect through an education permitting to understand sexuality.
 - On the contrary, a girl who has been cut can engage in more adventures in the search for pleasure - unmarried mothers
 - What would happen if the woman reach a real climax with her husband? Once cut we can't put the organ back in place even in a 'legitimate' framework. Loss of their man also. An unsatisfied man looks for another woman.
-

It's a woman's issue, she's the one in charge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A daughter is the child of two people, a man and a woman. If the girl has health problems, her father is obliged to help in her support. • The cut girl is destined for a man with who she must found a family, the possible effects will affect their life.
It's our tradition our culture, our civilisation, our identity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abandon other traditions (Tattooing – exhibiting the virginity loincloth, scarifications, etc.) • Develop knowledge in Health matters (vaccinations, ultrasound...) • Cause and effect. (E.g. the cause of malaria had, for a long time, been equated to unhealthy minds, fermented milk or green mangos)
We do it for our daughter's honour.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This isn't a simple act whatsoever representing honour in itself. In what way can the misery of a loved one make us happy?
Subordination-Obedience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight the advantages of cooperation and mutual support within a couple.
Telling us to abandon the practice is wanting us to adopt the ideas of the whites.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We use daily products made from the ideas of whites (telephones, television, planes...) Why welcome these ideas yet reject the issue of female circumcision?
We do it because it's cleaner and more aesthetic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To compare two things you must first know about both • What is portrayed is always different from reality, e.g. the groundwater table • Intimacy: part not visible publicly. What is the point, as a parent, of claiming to make more aesthetic an intimate part that we will never see ourselves?

They say there are problems but our parents have practiced since the dawn of time and we haven't noticed any problems.

- It's not because the parents have done such and such a practice that we must necessarily reproduce the same thing.
- We practiced dangerous things (bleeding) without realising the danger.
- Contact a doctor when we're sick and follow his instructions to the letter and yet won't accept his opinion about the harms of FGM
- The fact of not being ill with malaria does not mean that the dangers of malaria don't exist.

We do it because it's the equivalent of male circumcision, it removes the masculine part of a girl.

- The initiation which accompanied FGM no longer exists. Once, girls were taught for weeks beforehand about the role of a woman in society, the same with boys, they were taught about their place – problems of such sort. Nowadays FGM is practiced at a very young age.
 - Female circumcision (organ, clitoris removed) – male circumcision (foreskin). Recommendations of the WHO for men. Unanimity of the problems of FGM in the scientific community – divergence of opinions for circumcision. No religious amalgam concerning circumcision (Muslims and Jews), concerning FGM some practice, others don't.
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Legislations

The practice of Female Genital Mutilation is punishable by law everywhere in Europe and in certain African countries.

In Belgium

Art.409 of the Penal Code.

« §1. Anyone who practises, facilitates or promotes any form of mutilation of the genital organs of a person of the female sex, with or without the latter's consent, shall be punished by three to five years' imprisonment. Any such attempt shall be punished by imprisonment lasting between eight days and one year.

§ 2. If the mutilation is practised by a minor or to make a profit, the punishment shall be five to seven years' confinement.

§ 3. When the mutilation has caused an illness which appears incurable or a permanent work-related disability, the punishment shall be five to ten years' confinement.

§ 4. When the mutilation practised without any intention of causing death nevertheless causes death, the punishment shall be ten to fifteen years' confinement.

§ 5. If the mutilation referred to in § 1 has been practised on a minor or a person who, owing to her physical or mental state, was not able to look after herself, by her father, mother or other ascendants, any other person with authority or custody over the minor or incapacitated person, or any person who cohabits occasionally or habitually with the victim, the minimum punishment provided for in §§ 1 to 4 shall be doubled in the case of imprisonment and increased by two years in the case of confinement.»

Professional secrecy may be lifted for those facing cases of sexual mutilations.

Art. 458bis Code of Criminal Law. «Anyone who by reason of their status or profession holds secrets and thereby has knowledge of an offence as described in Articles 409, (...), committed on a minor, a person vulnerable either by age, pregnant, domestic violence, illness, physical or mental handicap may, irrespective of the obligations imposed upon them by Article 422bis, inform the Public Prosecutor of the offence, provided that they have examined the victim or have been taken into the victim's confidence, note a serious and imminent danger to the mental or physical integrity of the person concerned and cannot protect this integrity themselves or with the help of other people

Any person can be punished when he voluntary fails to help or to bring assistance to a young girl threatened with genital mutilation.

Art. 422bis Code of Criminal Law "Failing to render or provide assistance to anyone who is in serious danger, whether they have noted the person's situation themselves or this situation has been described to them by the persons requesting their assistance, is liable for a term of imprisonment of eight days to one year. For the offence, the person who failed to provide assistance must have been able to assist without serious danger to themselves or to others. If the persons who fail to provide assistance did not themselves observe the danger threatening the person requiring assistance, then they cannot be punished, if they had reason to believe, on the grounds of the circumstances in which they were requested to assist, that the request was not serious or that it involved danger. The punishment referred to in the first paragraph is increased to two years if the person who is in serious danger is a minor.

Art.422 bis of the Criminal Law. «Failing to provide assistance to a person in danger applies to everyone, professional or simple citizen, who fails to signal the danger of a young girl threatened with sexual mutilations, whether they are planned in Belgium or abroad. »

In case of a crime as described in art. 409 Code of Criminal Law, the period of prescription of the criminal proceedings, covering a lapse of time of 10 years, only starts on the day that the victim has reached the age of 18 years.

Art. 21bis Preceding Title Code of Criminal Procedure "In the cases referred

to in Articles 372 to 377, 379, 380 and 409 of the Code of Criminal Law, the period for the preclusion of criminal proceedings by reason of lapse of time only begins as of the day on which the victim reaches the age of eighteen [...]”.

In order to permit the extra-territorial application of art. 409 Code of Criminal Law, the offender must be found on the Belgian territory, but this does not mean that the offender has to reside effectively in Belgium. Even if the offender is only passing through the Belgian territory, he can be pursued, prosecuted and punished in Belgium

Art. 10ter Preceding Title Code of Criminal Procedure “Anyone can be prosecuted in Belgium if they are guilty, outside the territory of the Kingdom, of: 1° [...]; 2° one of the criminal offences referred to in Articles 372 to 377 and 409 of the same Code, if this is perpetrated on a minor; 3° [...]».

Art.10ter must be applied in conjunction with Art. 12 of Criminal Procedure.

Art. 12 Preceding Title Code of Criminal Procedure. “Except in the cases of Article 6, Number 1 and 2, Article 10, Number 1 and 2,(crimes or offences against the security of the State, serious violations against Human Rights, terrorism) and Article 12bis (breach of a rule of International Law if this rule imposes Belgium to continue),as well as Article 10bis, (violation of military law) legal proceedings are instituted in the case of the criminal offences referred to in this chapter only if the suspect is found in Belgium. [...]

In the United Kingdom

The UK has ratified a number of international human rights instruments addressing FGM, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, signed 1950 and ratified 1951), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, ratified 1986), the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT, signed 1985 and ratified 1988), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, signed 1990 and ratified 1991), the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, signed 1950 and ratified—except

Protocol 1–1951). All of these reinforce the principle of the equality of women (and girls) and demand that state parties take steps to ensure that equality of the sexes is promoted. The UK government has also signed the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), although it has yet to be ratified.

Criminal law

The first FGM-specific legislation in the UK was the 1985 Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act, the provisions of which were repealed and re-enacted by the 2003 Female Genital Mutilation Act. The 2003 law increased the maximum penalty for performing FGM to 14 years' imprisonment and introduced the concept of extraterritoriality, providing protection for UK nationals or permanent residents anywhere in the world, irrespective of their age.

The Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 and the Serious Crime Act 2015 only applies in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. The Prohibition of FGM (Scotland) Act 2005 is closely aligned with the 2003 Act.

Legislation on FGM was strengthened with the enactment of the 2015 Serious Crime Act (SCA 2015), which amended the 2003 Act to extend extra-territoriality to apply to habitual, as well as permanent, residents and nationals of the UK. The 2015 Act also introduced four new laws.

- The offence of 'failing to protect a girl from the risk of FGM' which is applicable to parents who fail to protect their daughters from FGM
- The introduction of 'life-long anonymity for victims of FGM', prohibiting the publication of information that would identify a victim of FGM.
- Legislation on FGM protection orders (FGM POs), which can be used by judges to prevent, compel and restrict actions in relation to FGM.
- Legislation on mandatory reporting for regulated health, social services and education professionals in England and Wales came into force in October 2015, requiring the reporting of all known cases of FGM in girls under 18 to police in the first instance, ideally within 24 hours.

Child protection law

A number of UK laws are applicable to child protection, similar laws apply in Scotland and Northern Ireland. All these acts aim to protect children from any form of harm—physical, sexual and emotional. These include:

- Children Act (1989 and 2004),
- Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act (2006),
- The Protection of Freedoms Act (2012),
- The Children and Families Act (2014),
- The Adoption and Children Acts (2002 and 2006),
- The Keeping Children Safe in Education: Statutory Guidance for Schools and Colleges, the FGM Act (2003)
- The Children and Young Person Act (2008).
- Multi-agency Statutory Guidance on Female Genital Mutilation (2016),
- Working together to Safeguard Children (2015) and Safeguarding Children:
- Working together under the Children Act 2004 (2007-Wales).

Professional confidentiality

General legislation on professional codes of conduct, secrecy and disclosure applies to reported cases of FGM. The 2004 Children's Act requires all professionals with statutory responsibilities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. In the 2015 "Working Together" guidelines, all professionals are required to contribute to whatever actions are needed to safeguard and promote a child's welfare....' In addition, the 2015 mandatory reporting requirements detail the sanctions to be imposed on members of regulated professions who fail to report to police a known case of FGM in a girl under 18 years of age.

In Holland

FGM is treated in the Netherlands as a very serious and damaging form of child abuse. It is prosecutable under general criminal legislation (section 300-304, 307, 308 of the Penal Code), with a maximum imprisonment of 12 years or a fine of maximum € 76.000.

In case FGM is done by one of the parents, imprisonment can be increased with one third. In case the parent(s) gave the assignment, pay for it, provide means that will be used for FGM or assist during FGM, they will be unishable as well. This is seen as instigation, aiding and abetting. An adjustment of the law in February 2006 makes FGM performed abroad punishable too, in case the suspected person has a Dutch nationality or lives in the Netherlands.

An adjustment of the law in 2013 makes FGM performed abroad punishable too in case the victim has Dutch nationality or lives in the Netherlands. This also applies if the suspected person does not have Dutch nationality and / or domiciled in the Netherlands.

In July 2009 the period of limitation is prolonged. The period of limitation takes effect with the 18th birthday and amounts to 20 years with serious forms of FGM.

Medical professionals who are involved in FGM can be judged, based on medical disciplinary rules and based on unauthorised practice of medicine (Penal Code).

On July 1, 2013 a law making the reporting of domestic violence and child abuse mandatory (Law reporting code) in enforced. This means from this time the professionals must use "the reporting code" to report suspicious domestic violence & child abuse. Since 2001 minor girls can apply for asylum based on serious threatening in their home country for FGM.

Verklaring tegen Meisjesbesnijdenis / Statement Opposing Female Circumcision

This statement is developed by the Dutch Secretary of State for Health,

Welfare and Sport and the Ministry for Security and Justice, launched in 2011. This Statement declares that FGM is illegal in the Netherlands, outlines the penalties for it and provides a portable document signed by Ministers, medical association directors, directors of immigrant organisations, etc. to help parents resist family pressure related to FGM. It has been translated in several languages and also provides a space for the parents' signature.

In Africa

FGM is punishable in these African countries⁵⁶. But the application of the law remains a challenge.

Benin (2003),

Burkina Faso (1996),

Central African Republic (1966, amended 1996),

Chad (2003),

Ivory Coast (1998),

Djibouti (1995, amended 2009),

Egypt (2008), Eritrea (2007),

Ethiopia (2004),

56 Trésor Kibangula. *Après 10 ans de lutte contre l'excision, où en est l'Afrique ?* Jeune Afrique. Disponible sur <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/177400/politique/apr-s-10-ans-de-lutte-contre-l-excision-o-en-est-l-afrique/> ;

No Peace without Justice. Status of African legislations on FGM. Disponible sur <http://www.npwj.org/FGM/Status-african-legislations-FGM.html> ;

Jean Michelle Hauteville. *Excision : les résultats inégaux de la lutte contre les mutilations génitales en Afrique*. Disponible sur <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/165763/societe/excision-les-r-sultats-in-gaux-de-la-lutte-contre-les-mutilations-g-nitales-en-afrique/>

Gambia (2016),⁵⁷

Ghana (1994, amended 2007),

Guinea (1965, amended 2000),

Kenya (2001, amended 2011),

Mauritania (2005),

Niger (2003)

Nigeria (certains entre 1999 et 2006)

Uganda (2010)

Senegal (1999),

Guinea-Bissau (2011),

Somalia (2012)

Sudan (certain States between 2008 and 2009)

Tanzania (1998)

Togo (1998).

The practice was also prohibited in Yemen and Iraq respectively in 2001 and 2011

57 Claire Arsenault. *En Gambie, l'excision est mise hors la loi*. Disponible sur <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20151125-gambie-excision-est-mise-hors-loi-mutilation-genitale-unicef-yahya-jammeh>

Biography

Born in Senegal in 1975, Seydou was educated at the Lycée Seydina Limamou Laye of Guédiawaye, in the suburbs of Dakar, where he obtained his Baccalaureate in 1996. He then leaves school and tries to get into the job market via the informal system (small business and others).

In 2003 he decides, without any real conviction, to take part in the training of facilitators for the Community Empowerment Programme of the NGO Tostan. At the time he rejected all non-governmental organisation's help and support for the local populations. These organisations are just another form of imperialism, he said to himself, they are supposedly there to help development but don't take into consideration the needs of the population, they are just the implementers.

Tostan, he understood, is an organisation promoting literacy in local languages. During the training he discovered an approach that corresponded to his vision of development aid summed up in the saying "it's better to teach someone to catch fish rather than to give him one every day".

During his training, Seydou is confronted with the issue of Female Genital Mutilation, which he thought was normal, coming from a family and community that adhered to the practice. He is seized by a feeling of anger and misunderstanding because he feels that a judgement on the values of his community is being made. However, this aroused his curiosity and he began to examine the basis of the practice through its various justifications.

In the field, as facilitator for the programme, trust is established between him and some women who speak to him about their problems. The testimony of these women confirms the problems linked with the practice that he had learnt during his training. Ever since Seydou committed himself to helping his community to understand.

He arrived in Europe in 2010 and continued the same fight with Tostan in France by raising awareness in the African diaspora and by giving training to professionals to help them better address the issue, taking into account

the socio-cultural references of the concerned communities.

In 2015 he joined GAMS Belgium in one of their innovative projects « Men Speak Out » whose goal is to mobilise men and involve them in raising awareness against Female Genital Mutilations.

He uses his experience in the field, his passion for reading and his openness to bring out the cognitive dissonance linked to the justifications of violence in general, and female circumcision in particular.

He is currently training as a Social Worker with the support of GAMS, at the Free University College Ilya Prigogine in Brussels

Seydou NIANG

THE SUN CAN NEVER DRY LAUNDRY IF IT'S KEPT IN THE SHADE

(Peul proverb)



«What I still don't understand is why, when you consult the doctors and are prescribed medicines where you can't eat this or that, you listen to them, yet when they tell you there are risks involved with genital mutilation, you say you don't believe it. It's contradictory, no? Patrick you're keeping up, aren't you?»



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