

Social & Legal Studies

<http://sls.sagepub.com/>

**Book Review: YLVA HERNLUND AND BETTINA SHELL-DUNCAN (eds),
Transcultural Bodies: Female Genital Cutting in Global Context. Piscataway,
NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007, lix + 373 pp., ISBN 0813540259, £67.50
(hbk)**

J. Steven Svoboda

Social & Legal Studies 2010 19: 258

DOI: 10.1177/09646639100190020503

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://sls.sagepub.com/content/19/2/258.citation>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Social & Legal Studies* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://sls.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://sls.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Aug 10, 2010

[What is This?](#)

demonstrate, therefore, is that restitution is an 'acceptable' solution to offending; he is not seeking to convert anyone (pp. 2–3, 217). This is perfectly understandable, as the latter action would require a far longer (if not entirely separate) book. It is still, however, somewhat disappointing – particularly given all of the work Boonin puts in to dismissing theories of punishment in the second part of his argument (Chapters 2–4).

Given the points above, this book would probably be of most use to those who are not already accustomed to the various theories of punishment discussed, as these are dealt with in a particularly accessible way. For readers who are acquainted with the existing literature, this book is unlikely to do more than restate familiar problems. Nevertheless, it is still well worth reading: the arguments Boonin presents (although sometimes in insufficient detail) ought to be taken seriously, even if the occasional lack of structure referred to above makes it unlikely that they will change many minds.

FINDLAY STARK
University of Edinburgh, UK

YLVA HERNLUND AND BETTINA SHELL-DUNCAN (eds), *Transcultural Bodies: Female Genital Cutting in Global Context*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007, lix + 373 pp., ISBN 0813540259, £67.50 (hbk).

Ylva Hernlund and Bettina Shell-Duncan, the editorial team from the University of Washington that produced the superlative 2000 book *Female 'Circumcision' in Africa: Culture, Controversy, and Change* (published by Lynne Rienner) have done it again. *Transcultural Bodies: Female Genital Cutting in Global Context* marginally surpasses even *Female 'Circumcision' in Africa* in originality, quality, and sheer page-turning interest. The book contains a preface written by the two editors that deftly summarizes each of the 13 chapters that follow.

The leading article by the two editors starts us off with a bang. Hernlund and Shell-Duncan have created a fantastic, far-ranging piece that shows that both culture and human rights are continuously evolving and undergoing redefinition. They contest the popular notion that human rights is a Western construct imposed by First-World countries on the rest of the world, arguing that human rights has relevance and robustness throughout the world. In fact, they question whether female genital cutting (FGC) is best approached as a human rights issue. Support for this query may come from the fact that the vilification of a practice that can ensue from its declaration as a human rights violation can stop scholarly inquiry. Hernlund and Shell-Duncan (pp. 17–18) note that a simple prick of the clitoris is probably illegal under US law while 'much more invasive procedures' on males are entirely legal. They devote a full page to a not unsympathetic survey of intactivism (the movement to stop male circumcision) that mentions Dr. Robert van Howe repeatedly (while getting his name wrong). Next they survey the greatly expanded interest since their last book in 'designer vaginas', cosmetic operations that developed-world women are having performed on their genitals. The authors analyze in depth the consequent ironies and double standards. Toward the end of the article, male circumcision is mentioned again, when they note that after the AAP's 1975 statement finding 'no health benefits whatsoever' (p. 41) to the practice, the practice was not outlawed.

Instead, 'deep-seated religious, aesthetic, and cultural norms' were allowed to influence a decision to instead take an educational approach.

The reliable Janice Boddy contributes a perceptive analysis of the FGC controversy in cultural perspective. 'Much popular writing on female circumcision', Boddy writes, 'is polemical, preachy, advocacy driven, and endlessly self-referential'. The author asks, 'Why is there no outrage [regarding male circumcision] remotely parallel to that which leads some women to insist that circumcised women are entirely alienated from the essence of the female personality? Is it because these excisions are performed on boys, and only girls and women figure as victims in our cultural lexicon?' (p. 58).

Next the reliably brilliant L. Amede Obiora contributes a vibrantly written analysis that usefully builds in an extended analysis of Ousmane Sembene's wonderful film about FGC (don't miss it!), *Moolaade*. 'Women give into [FGC] presumably to gain something else for their lives, and there are substantial trade-offs' (p. 69). Norwegian anthropologist Aud Talle contributes a study of 'the anthropology of a difficult issue' (p. 91). She waxes poetic in describing the plight of Somali émigré women living in London. 'Now they wander forward as "lacks"—mutilated souls in mutilated bodies. They are signs of a story they have not written themselves; in fact, their bodies have become sites of a world-wide discourse on morality' (p. 103).

Sara Johnsdotter examines discourses regarding FGC by Somali men and women now living in Sweden. Johnsdotter notes that 'an implicit and sometimes explicit moral discourse [is] attached to the issue of female circumcision' (p. 123), rendering reasoned discussion virtually impossible. She comments that a symbolic pricking to satisfy Somali cultural requirements while not removing tissue 'is far less invasive than what is done to male infants at Swedish hospitals during male circumcision . . .' (p. 126). Thus, 'In a strictly medical sense, then, there is no reasonable motive to forbid pricking of girls' genitalia while permitting male circumcision' (p. 126).

Juliet Rogers writes a trenchant critique of Australian approaches to legislating against FGC. Women are described as 'mutilated' and 'represented as objects to be managed' (p. 137). As do other authors in this volume, Rogers regards the focus of some feminists upon the clitoris as problematic. Charles Piot checks in with a brief yet perceptive, provocative, and brave analysis of the *Kasinga* case (*Matter of Kasinga*, 21 Immigration & Naturalization Decisions 357; Board of Immigration Appeals, 1996) in which US political asylum was granted to a Togolese woman based on her alleged fear of FGC. Corinne A. Kratz next provides an in-depth review of both *Kasinga* and the other precedent-setting US asylum case based on fear of FGC, *Abankwah* (*Abankwah v Immigration and Naturalization Service*, 185 F.3d 18 [2d Circuit 1999]). Kratz shows us that both cases involved substantial fraud by the immigrants applying for permission to remain in the US. Kratz asks, 'Did political lobbying and media outrage short-circuit judicious reasoning?' (p. 194).

Michelle C. Johnson gives us an interesting case study of the interactions of culture, religion, and FGC with the Mandinga people of Guinea-Bissau and Mandinga immigrants living in Portugal. Johnson fascinatingly shows that Mandinga women affirm what they see as 'the fusion of ethnicity and Islam by inscribing it onto their bodies' (p. 220). Mansura Dopico provides us with a study of the sexual experiences of the often varied, vibrant infibulated Eritrean women in rural Eritrea and in Australia, demonstrating the great

variety and unknowability of sexual response. Contrary to common belief, '[t]here is some evidence that removal of the clitoris cannot inhibit either arousal or orgasm' (p. 229).

R. Elise B. Johansen writes penetratingly about Somalis and infibulation in Norway. She shows us intriguing counterpositions of views on sexual matters in Western and Somali cultures. Next is the irrepressible, brilliant iconoclast Fuumbai Ahmadu. Her unique (as far as I know) status as an African-born, Western-educated academic on the topic of FGC who voluntarily returned to her homeland to be circumcised, naturally gives her a unique perspective on the huge cultural prejudices that are the beams in the West's eye. She refuses to accept her definition by ostensibly enlightened others as 'mutilated', forthrightly affirming, 'I have not experienced any change, either elimination or reduction, in sexual response following my own initiation' (p. 298).

For all the riches that have come before, the editors leave the best for last. Henrietta L. Moore contributes a truly awe-inspiring tour de force meditation on culture, difference and power, gender and agency, pulling all the authors who have come before her together in an integration that nevertheless transcends the FGC issue and embraces much more general topics of concern to all humanity—culture, justice, gender, understanding difference. In fact, Moore concludes, new 'forms of hybridization, cosmopolitan consciousness, and emerging secularism...are everywhere accompanied by new forms of cultural fundamentalism, nationalism, and religious intolerance' (p. 329) – as we saw with Fuumbai Ahmadu. Regrettably, well over a score of typographical, grammatical and reference errors not present in the earlier volume crop up here. For a book of this type, this is not a level of imperfection that calls the validity of the authors' conclusions into question, though it does indicate a certain laxness in editing. This masterpiece, which has achieved what I would not have thought possible, exceeding by a nose its illustrious predecessor volume, is not just for people interested in genital cutting, or human rights, or anthropology, or feminism, or culture. It is so well-done that it transcends its ostensibly narrow but in fact (as Moore in fact suggests regarding FGC in her closing article) broad and far-reaching topic. To my mind, this is one of the best books published in 2007.

J. STEVEN SVOBODA

Attorney for the Rights of the Child

SIMON HALLIDAY AND PATRICK SCHMIDT, *Conducting Law and Society Research: Reflections on Methods and Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 304 pp., ISBN 9780521720427, £19.99 (pbk).

There appears to be a certain point in the development of any field of social science, where a younger generation asserts a fascination about how established figures really came to do their classic work. This genre can certainly be dated back to Hammond's (1964) *Sociologists at Work* and its British imitators like Bell and Newby's (1977) *Doing Sociological Research* or specialist texts like Elling and Sokolowska's (1978) *Medical Sociologists at Work* and Walford's (1991) *Doing Educational Research*. Now we have a contribution from socio-legal studies, where, through interviews with the editors, 27 leading scholars describe the 21 projects for which they are, arguably, best known. Each project gets a chapter, together with an introduction from the editors and a