

"What we think of as the unspeakable pain and suffering of FGM must be shouted and given voice, relentlessly. Khady's account of this all too common practice is wrenching and necessary reading."

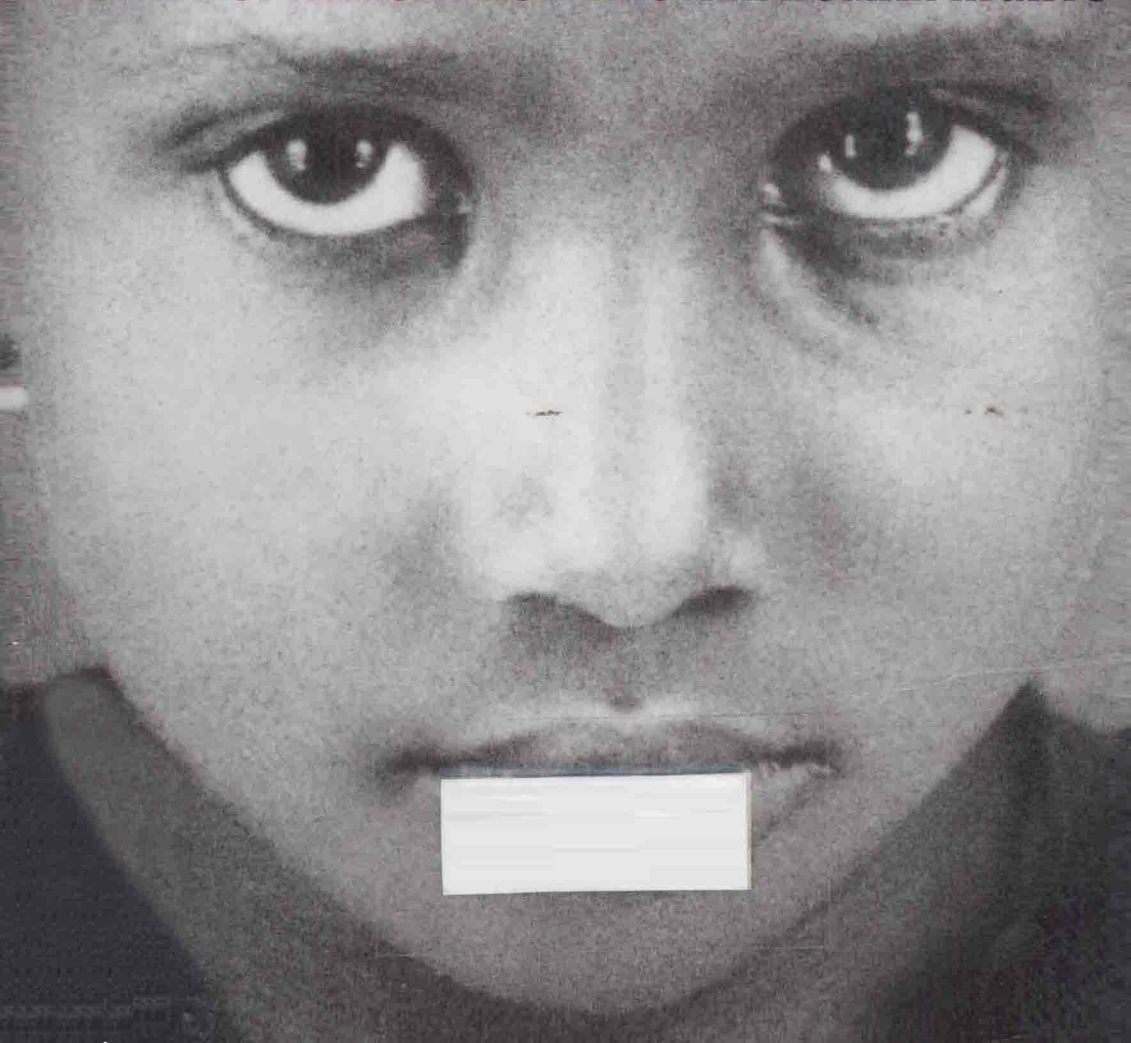
— Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

KHADY

WITH MARIE-THÉRÈSE CUNY

BLOOD STAINS

A CHILD OF AFRICA RECLAIMS HER HUMAN RIGHTS



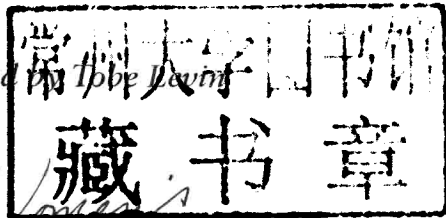
KHADY

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A Child of Africa Reclaims Her Human Rights

Translated by *Jobe Levin*



*To China Women's
University,
with gratitude!
Jobe Levin
15.06.2011*

UnCUT/VOICES Press

About the Author ...

A gifted public speaker, trainer, and dedicated activist, Khady Koïta co-founded the EuroNet FGM, a consortium of NGOs against FGM in Europe that now boasts 37 member organizations. During her eight years as association president, Khady administered several European Union DAPHNE grants including funding for National Action Plans against FGM in fifteen EU countries. In May 2010, working closely with Vice President of the Italian Senate Emma Bonino, Khady was a leading voice in the parliamentary conference “Ban FGM” in Dakar organized by the Senegalese government, No Peace Without Justice, La Palabre, U.S. AID and many UN agencies. Parliamentarians from 19 African countries issued the “Dakar Declaration for a United Nations Ban on Female Genital Mutilation” and presented it in September 2010 to the UN General Assembly at its sixty-sixth session as a Resolution to “Ban Female Genital Mutilation Worldwide.” Khady played a significant role in this and other legislative initiatives and continues speaking out against the injustice of FGM, child marriage and discrimination against women and girls. She lives in Brussels.

About UnCUT/VOICES PRESS ...

Founded in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, on September 16, 2009, UnCUT/VOICES PRESS is the first publisher to focus solely on female genital mutilation. By translating excellent studies of FGM from French, German and other languages into the present lingua franca, English, UnCUT/VOICES Press provides access to these indispensable resources. It also features significant or rare material in English aimed at ending an egregious injury still inflicted on African girls.

The founder, Tobe Levin, an Associate of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, has been an activist against FGM for more than three decades. Co-editor with Augustine H. Asaah of *Empathy and Rage. Female Genital Mutilation in African Literature* (2009), she served as founding president of FORWARD-Germany and has advised the Austrian Parliament, the Bundestag, Westminster, UNICEF and WHO.

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The 2010 Program also includes

Hubert Prolongeau. *Undoing FGM. Pierre Foldes, the Surgeon Who Restores the Clitoris*. Foreword Bernard Kouchner. Trans. Tobe Levin. ISBN: 978-3-9813863-1-8.

Biography of the sought-after pioneer urologist who discovered how to return sensation to victims of clitoridectomy.

Linda Weil-Curiel, Natacha Henry. *The Exciser. Hawa Gréou Speaks Out*. Trans. Tobe Levin. ISBN: 978-3-9813863-2-5.

Unique story of prosecutor Linda Weil-Curiel and Hawa Gréou, the convicted exciser who, upon release from prison, found common ground with the abolition movement and has joined in the fight to stop FGM.

Blood Stains

A Child of Africa Reclaims Her Human Rights

*To all girls and women, wounded in body and soul, who suffer
... and endure.*

Blood Stains

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Salindé

New York, March 2005

The glacial cold is even worse for an African like me, but I walk fast, as I have all my life, so that my mother used to scold, “Why are you always running around? Slow down! The whole neighborhood is watching.”

Sometimes she’d trace an imaginary line across the threshold.

“See that? From now on, don’t cross it!”

But I did, dashing off to play with friends or scurry through the market, sometimes pausing to peer at soldiers in formation behind the wall of the caserne. For my mom who spoke Soninké, “running around” meant that I went out too much, that nowhere was beyond the pale, and that my curiosity about the world was far too in-your-face.

It’s true that I’ve gone far in my life, farther than anyone ever imagined. Today I’m in Zurich as a guest of UNICEF; yesterday I attended the 49th session of the United Nations General Assembly urging members to act on women’s rights. Khady in New York at the U.N.! The activist named Khady,

formerly a girl with a sand-belly, like all African kids. Little Khady going to fetch water from the well, toddling along behind the boubou-clad grandmas and aunties, proudly carrying a peanut-filled pot on her head, responsible for bringing back a beautiful glistening paste the color of amber in oil, and suddenly terrified to find her headgear crashing to the ground.

“You dropped it? Just you wait...”

I can still see her bounding down the steps, broom in hand. How her sisters and my cousins laughed while the blows landed willy-nilly on my back and bottom and the awkward little loincloth tumbled to my feet! The girls rushed to the rescue but Grandma, furious, turned on them, brandishing her sheaf of straw: “You’re standing up for her? Watch out or you’ll be next!”

I took advantage of the scene to run and find shelter behind Grandfather’s folding bed. She couldn’t get me there! Grandpa was my anchor, my security. Yet he never interfered with punishments, just letting the women do their thing without raising his voice. Only once did he explain, “Now, Khady, when you’re on an errand, concentrate and do it right! We both know the pot broke because you were fooling around with your friends.”

After the well-deserved spanking, I’d be entitled to cuddles from grandma and the girls as well as curdled milk and couscous to console me. Despite my flayed bottom, the cheeks still smarting, I would play with my doll, seated under the mango tree with my sisters and cousins. Little Khady was

waiting for September to start school, like all her brothers and sisters. My mother insisted on it, and even if she had to go without, she saw to it that we never lacked notebooks and pencils.

Life was sweet in the big house in the suburbs of Thiès, a town whose towering trees lined broad avenues, a peaceful place in the shadow of the mosque where, at the crack of dawn, Grandfather and the men would go to pray.

My father worked for the railroad so he was rarely around. As tradition prescribes, I was given over to the care of a grandmother who took charge of my education, my grandfather's second wife Fouley who had no children of her own. It's our custom not to let a childless woman suffer. My mother's house sat 100 meters away so I made the rounds between the two, filching goodies from both kitchens. Grandpa had three wives: Marie, my mother's mother, and his first; Fouley, the second, to whom I was "given" to be brought up; and Asta, the third, whom grandfather had married, also according to custom, after the death of his older brother. They were all our grandmothers, women of uncertain age who, according to their own unique styles, loved, punished and comforted us.

My immediate siblings included three boys and five girls; the tribe supplied even more girl cousins, nieces and aunts. Where I come from, people are all either cousins, aunts or nieces of someone or everyone! Impossible to count because there are so many relatives we've never met. My family belongs to a noble caste of Soninké, originally

farmers and merchants. In ancient times we traded in cloth, gold and precious stones. Recently Grandfather worked for the railroad in Thiès and had my father join him. In addition to planters, my heritage also includes religious leaders who are the village imams. Among the aristocracy, -- ‘noble’ is *horé* in Soninké whose meaning has nothing to do with the concept of European nobility – education is strict. Honor, loyalty, pride and the sanctity of our good word are values and principles inculcated from an early age that guide us throughout life.

I was born just before Independence, in 1959, and would have been seven years old in October 1966 on first entering school. To that point, I had led a happy life, cushioned by kindness, taught how to garden, cook, and identify the grandmothers’ spices sold at the market. At about four or five, I received my first little bench. Grandmother Fouley gave it to me because each child must have one. We sit on it to eat our couscous and put it away either in our mother’s room or in our grandma’s, the one who brings us up, washes, dresses, feeds, fusses over and punishes us. These little benches are a constant source of squabbles among the children. “You took my bench!” “Give him his bench. He’s the oldest!” You keep it for a long time, until the wood cracks or you get a bigger one. At that point, you can pass yours on to a younger child.

Grandma Fouley had it made for me. With dignity, I carried it on my head: it symbolizes leaving behind the status of a baby on the ground to become a child who sits and walks

like the big kids. And did I ever walk! In the fields, among the market stalls, flamboyant trees, courtyard baobabs and mangos, from grandma's to the well, from grandma's to my mom's, I strode safely and protected through a life of tenderness soon to be brutally ended.

I have paraded, since I was seven years old, from Thiès to New York by way of Rome, Paris, Zurich and London, never ceasing to march since the time my grandmothers came and said, "Today, daughter, you're going to be purified."

The night before, my cousins had arrived from Dakar for the school holidays. There was my sister Daba, six years old; Lélé, Annie and Ndaié, cousins on my father's side, and other cousins less closely related whose names I don't remember. A dozen or so little girls between six and nine sat with legs outstretched on the steps in front of one of the grandmother's rooms. You'd be just as likely to find us playing house with dolls made of wood and rags, making believe we were going to market for spices to cook with the little metal utensils our parents had fashioned for us.

That night, we fell asleep as usual in the care of a grandmother, aunt or mother.

The next morning, very early, they roused me from sleep and showered me. My mother slipped me in a flowered, sleeveless dress made of African cloth in a European style. I remember the colors: russet, yellow and peach. I slid my feet into rubber flip-flops. The day was still young. Nobody else in the compound was up.

We took the path past the mosque where men were

already at prayer, their voices spilling out of the gaping door. The sun had not yet arisen but the heat was already intense. The rainy season had begun, but it wasn't raining. In a few hours, the thermometer would hit the high nineties.

My mother took me and my sister to the large house where my grandfather's third wife lived. Around fifty, she was short, slim, kind and very gentle. My cousins stayed with her during vacations and, like us, they were already washed, dressed and waiting, a proper little covey, innocent and mildly ill at ease. My mother departed, leaving us. I watched her walking away, slender and fine-boned – a mixture of Mauritanian and Peul. My mom is an admirable woman, and although I wasn't aware of its importance at the time, she raised her children, girls and boys, without discrimination: school for all, chores for all, punishment and tenderness for all. But she had vanished without telling us a thing.

We sensed something unusual though because the grandmothers kept bustling back and forth, murmuring with an air of mystery and keeping us out of earshot. With no idea of what was to come, I sensed that these whispers meant trouble. Suddenly, one of the matrons called the girls because the lady in a voluminous indigo and midnight blue boubou had arrived. I recognized the petite visitor with large dangling earrings as one of my grandmothers' friends who belonged to the blacksmith caste. Male members of this caste do metalwork and cut little boys while females cut the girls. Two more women accompanied her, heavy-set matrons with

solid arms whom I didn't know. My cousins, the bigger ones, might have been aware of what awaited us, but they didn't say anything to anybody either.

Speaking Soninké, one of the grandmothers announced that we were going to be "*salindé*" which means, in our language, "to be purified for access to prayer." In French: "excised." You could also say "cut up."

The shock was brutal. Now I knew what I was in for, that thing the mothers would mutter about from time to time at home as though it meant acceding to some sort of mysterious dignity. And I remembered, in that instant, becoming aware of things I had previously suppressed. Our older sisters had already gone through it, instructed by the grandmothers privileged to run households and educate children. When a girl is born, after baptism on the seventh day, it's the grandmothers who have her ears pierced with a needle, sliding the black and red thread through the hole to prevent its closing up again. They are the ones in charge of weddings, births, and newborns; and it is they who decide when we're going to be "purified."

The mothers' sudden disappearance left us feeling abandoned and alone, but now I know how hard it is for even the most strong-hearted to see what is done to her daughter, or, even worse, to hear her cries. She knows what it's all about because she's been there, and, the moment the blade bites her girl, her own body bleeds again. Still, she accepts because that's the way it is, and she has no other option but this barbaric ritual of supposed "purification for

prayer” and virginity insurance until marriage with fidelity forevermore.

What a scam to have forced African women to maintain a tradition having nothing to do with religion! On our continent excision is practiced by animists, Christians, Moslems and the Beta Israel who are Jewish. Centuries old, the custom existed before the advent of Islam. But men have several bad reasons for wanting it: to guarantee their power, to believe other men won't get their wives pregnant, and to protect the excised from enemy rape! Other explanations, even more absurd, hold that a woman's sex is impure and diabolical; that the clitoris, devilish in itself, can cause all sorts of harm, up to and including death if it touches the infant's head at birth. Some have also thought that the impostor, that miniature penis, menaces virility.

But domination is the real motive. And men have passed responsibility for execution onto women, because it was out of the question that a man should see, let alone touch that intimate part of female anatomy, even on a child.

At age seven, like all girls, I didn't even know I had a clitoris, let alone the purpose it served. I had never noticed it before and now I never would. The only thing that really counted on that particular morning was the prospect of a horrifying pain whose vague echoes I had caught but that had seemed then not to concern me. I remembered my mother and grandmother threatening a naughty boy with a knife or a pair of scissors. Pulling on his diminutive appendage they would gesture – snip! – and utter those terrible words:

“Behave or it’s the blade for you!” The kid would take to his legs as fast as he could, recalling the sting that, unlike the girl’s, would soon subside, besides real circumcision being essentially hygienic. But I spied the boys waddle like ducks, sit with difficulty and whimper for two or three days, sometimes for a whole week, afterward. And I thought I was safe because I was a girl!

In 1967, I had no idea of what the intimate bloody cutting would mean for the rest of my life. But it bequeathed me a hard and sometimes cruel fate that led, in 2005, all the way to the U.N.

My heart beat fast and faster. They tried to convince us not to cry during ‘purification’. Have courage, they said. The grandmothers well knew how young we were and that there was no way we weren’t going to shriek and whine, but they barely mentioned the pain. They said: “It doesn’t last long. It hurts for a second and then it’s over, so be brave.”

It was then I noticed that the men had disappeared, taking refuge in the mosque or the fields. So you couldn’t turn to anyone for help; grandfather was nowhere in sight. At that time, village traditions remained strong and, for our mothers and grandmothers, you had to cut. That’s all there was to it. They didn’t ask questions, even though doubt might have logically arisen now that we lived in town where, in Wolof households for example, customs were different. In my street, only two families practiced *salindé*: the Mandingo from Casamance and we, the Soninké. In other streets, in secret, the Toucouleur and Bambara did it, too. But you just didn’t

talk about it, especially not to the Wolof. Some things simply couldn't be said. Later, our parents intended to marry us off to our cousins, and these men would want 'real' traditional Soninké wives. Who ever heard of mixed marriages? Spouses never came from different ethnic groups.

Like most immigrant families, the Soninké, Sérères, Peuls, Bambara and Toucouleur, ethnicities that had settled in town, tried not to forget their village roots but to teach inherited ways to their children. Some conventions *are* good, but this one is horrifying.

The girls were silent, rigid with such intense fear that a few most likely wet their pants, but no one tried to run away. Unthinkable, even if we strained to find a pair of eyes belonging to someone to spring us. Grandfather, maybe? If he had known what this act would do to me, he would have stopped it. But I really don't think he knew. Women accuse men of instigating it, and on a certain level that's true, but in many villages no one tells the fathers anything except when everybody knows about it anyway because excision is celebrated publicly. In larger cities, however, they do it deep inside the house, hiding it even from the neighbors. My father wasn't there, and no one had asked his opinion, no more than they had let my maternal grandfather in on it. It's a woman's thing, and we would become women like them.

They rolled out two large mats, one in front of the door and one at the entrance to the shower -- an indentation in the cement wall containing a jar of water. Another door led to the pantry. The room looked like all the wives' spaces: