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FGM and the need for Islamic scholars

by GWYNNE DYER

There was a small victory in The Gambia this week, when a proposed law to legalise female genital mutilation (FGM) was defeated by human rights campaigners. It was a quite small victory, however, because the great majority of little girls in The Gambia are still being mutilated by the professional ?cutters' who move from village to village.

The World Health Organization estimates that about 230 million women and girls have undergone this traditional procedure, in which at least the clitoris but often also the inner and outer labia are cut away by a knife, usually without anesthetics, antiseptics or antibiotics. Infections, some of them fatal, are commonplace.

Most girls are ?circumcised' in this way in Egypt, Sudan and the Horn of Africa, in the Muslim countries of West Africa, and in Indonesia, usually under the age of five. It is less common in the eastern Arab countries (e.g. Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen), and rare in Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, but the victims are overwhelmingly Muslims. So are the perpetrators.

This poses a real problem for the anti-FGM campaigners, because most of the people who do this to their girl children are convinced that it is an Islamic practice, or even a religious obligation. It particularly appeals to men who are obsessed about female ?chastity', because it takes the fun out of sex for women, including even masturbation.

These attitudes are common even in the farthest reaches of the Islamic world, like the Muslim-minority parts of Russia. When a 2016 report revealed that the practice is widespread in the mountain villages of Karachayevo-Cherkessia, for example, Ismail Berdiyev, the Mufti of North Caucasus, declared: ?It would be very good if this were applied to all women.?

?All women should be cut,? he explained, ?so that there is no depravity on Earth...? There it is, naked and unashamed: FGM is needed to control women because of their voracious sexual appetites.

Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, a Russian Orthodox neighbour of Berdiyev's, warmly defended his colleague's pro-FGM views, while pointing out that genital mutilation was not necessary for Orthodox Christian women ?because they're not promiscuous anyway.? With friends like Chaplin, Berdiyev doesn't need enemies.

But there's more to the story than just misogynistic men and weaponised religion. FGM is at least a thousand years older than Islam ? it has been found in the mummies of upper-class Egyptian women from 500 BCE ? and it is still widespread (over 50%) among both Coptic Christians in Egypt and Orthodox and Protestant Christians in Ethiopia.

As Sada Mire, an archaeologist of Somali origin and a survivor of FGM, wrote in ?The Guardian' four years ago, ?the notion of sacred fertility was critical to the social order of north-east Africa, past and present. FGM was most likely originally meant as a collective human sacrifice to the gods to avoid a curse from the ancestors.?

?These beliefs were strong and deep-rooted enough to survive first Christianity and then Islam ? religions which acknowledged its ?cultural? value and simply aligned it with their own concepts of chastity and virginity.?

You can't get much more deeply rooted than that, so it was no real surprise when the (overwhelmingly male) legislators of The Gambia voted to repeal the 2015 law banning FGM in the country. Most Muslim clerics approved, and the fact that 73% of Gambian women and girls have been cut made no difference: older women are the main enforcers of this custom.

When the Gambian parliament voted on Monday to maintain the ban on FGM, the members were not responding to popular demand. They were yielding to the protests of an educated minority at home and of horrified onlookers in other countries. Most Gambians still believe that it is an Islamic religious obligation.

So here is what Islamic religious scholars say on the subject. There is no mention of female circumcision in the Holy Quran, and only five hadiths (reports of what Mohammed actually said) refer to it. None of them states that it is a religious duty, and there is no evidence that the Prophet had any of his wives or daughters circumcised.

Even the hadith which states that circumcision is ?an act of Sunna (obligatory) for men and an honourable act for women,? is judged to be ?weak? by scholars. That is, the attribution of this statement to Mohammed is doubtful.

Why do the hadiths mention it at all? ?It is as if Islam deemed it necessary to regulate this practice which was already performed by the Arabs prior to the advent of Islam,? suggests Egyptian Islamist scholar Dr. Mohamed Selim Al-Awa, founding General Secretary of the International Union of Islamic Scholars.

I am no fan of organised religion, but what the world needs now is more and better Islamic scholars.