

The Ritual: Disfiguring, Hurtful, Wildly Festive

By HOWARD W. FRENCH

GRAFTON, Sierra Leone—The women of the Grafton displaced persons camp are in a festive mood these days. After years of fighting, the war that destroyed their villages and made them refugees has ended, and soon they will be returning home.

To celebrate this change of fortune, many felt, it was only proper that there should be a major ceremony marking what they hope will be a resumption of their normal lives. So, since Christmas, as many as 600 women from the camp have hiked off in groups of a dozen or more at a time to a clearing in the bush nearby.

There, the group members, ranging from 4-year-old girls to adult women, have stayed for a week or two at a time, dancing, feasting and sharing lessons about womanhood as part of an ancestral communal ritual known as Bondo, which culminates in having their external genitals cut off—a practice commonly referred to as female circumcision.

In recent weeks, similar scenes have been played out in one refugee camp after another in this sprawling fertile valley that flanks a verdant mountain chain on the outskirts of the capital, Freetown.

One champion of the practice estimates that in the space of less than a month 4,000 or more displaced women may have had their genitals cut by women known here as Soweis, all in preparation for the return to their rural homes. Sierra Leoneans say such numbers would make the displaced women's festivities the largest event of its kind ever seen in the country.

While the ritual of female genital cutting is common within regions and ethnic groups in a number of countries in Africa, Sierra Leone stands out as a society where the practice is nearly universal.

In many other parts of Africa, the practice is in retreat, under the assault of laws prohibiting it, educational drives aimed at women and, in some places, even preaching against the ritual by Muslim clerics.

But in Sierra Leone, where by some estimates as many as 90 percent of women undergo the ritual, the tiny minority of people willing to take a stand against the practice are overwhelmed by militant, if defensive, advocates.

In the middle stand millions of



The New York Times
Refugees at a camp in Grafton will soon be returning to their homes.

women who are, for the most part, willing, and sometimes fervent adherents.

"I decided to go to the bush and have this done now because I am a mature woman now," said Bateh Kindoh, a shy 16-year-old who sat with two other recent initiates to speak with a visitor. "We will go back to our villages soon, and I wanted to become part of the Bondo society first. This is a happy time for us."

In a country where women's rights advocates have recently played an important role in national politics, most Sierra Leonean feminists are reluctant to make a public stance against genital cutting, which is one measure of how sensitive the topic here is.

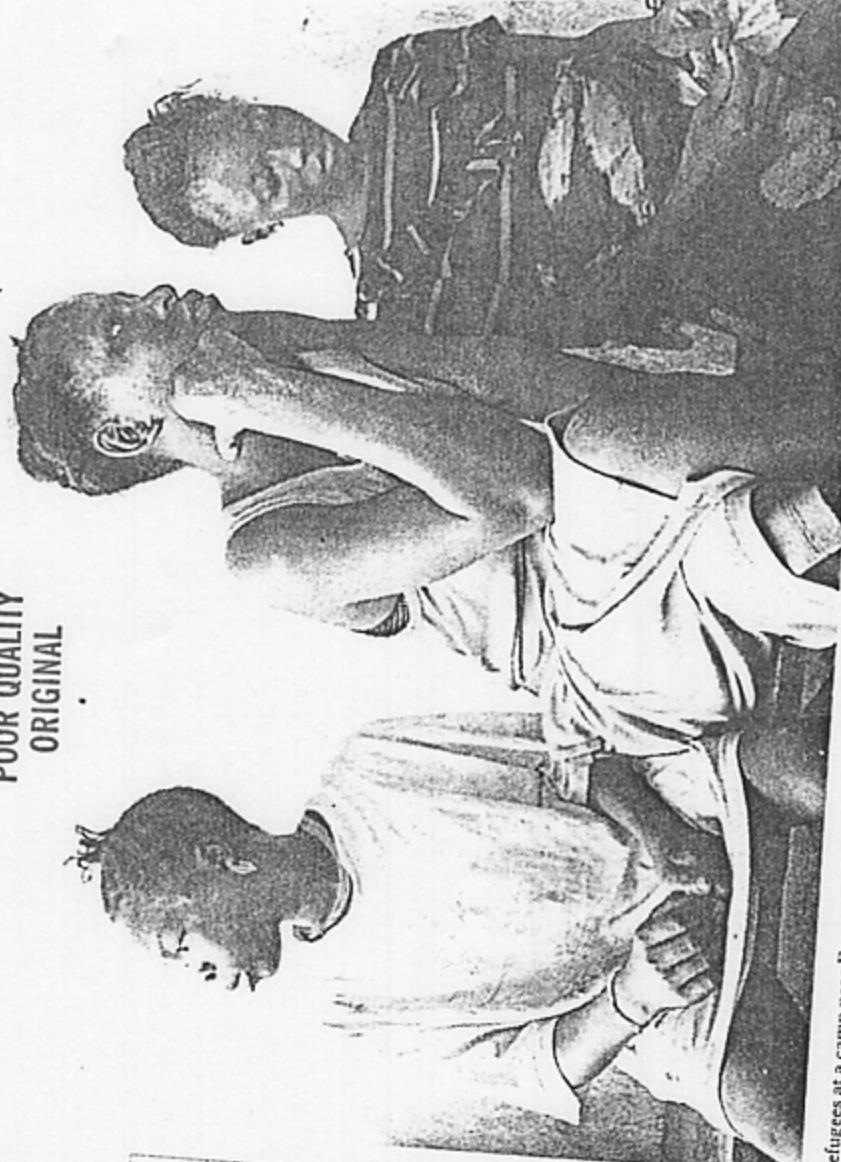
The Sierra Leone Government, too, has no official policy of discouraging the practice.

When the country held its first democratic elections last year, Sierra Leoneans say, female genital cutting was an important factor in the vote, although it was unmentioned in any campaign. Many women expressed their suspicion of one of the leading presidential candidates because his wife, an American, would not have been subject to the ritual.

The winner of the election, President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, felt heat on the issue himself, when his choice of a presumably uncut woman as Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs was held up for months in Parliament because, as one member said, "she would not be familiar with our adored customs."

Traditionally, the Bondo ceremony

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Refugees at a camp near Freetown, Sierra Leone, are celebrating the approaching return to their homes by holding festive ceremonies at which genitals of young girls and women are cut. Three girls, including Bateh Kindoh, 16, center, rested last week after taking part in the ritual

places where they are free to go on their own," said Dr. Olayinka Kosso-Thomas, a gynecologist who is Sierra Leone's leading campaigner against genital cutting. "Marriage in this patriarchal society bears a resemblance to slavery. When the women go into the bush for this ceremony, it is just about the only time they can drink and dance, let their hair down and enjoy a bit of freedom."

"What we are telling people is not to end the secret societies, but not to make these rituals revolve around cutting of the girls' genitals," Sierra Leone ranked second-to-last in the world in a measurement of quality of life. Among the country's lowest indicators are female literacy, and maternal and infant mortality rates.

For Dr. Kosso-Thomas, whose life was threatened by the advocates of genital cutting, who marched last year, these two facts are closely bound up in the ritual.

critical of the practice last year, Mrs. Sasso led what observers say was the largest march the city had ever seen, bringing several thousand angry women into the streets to denounce and threaten the publication. Defenders of the ritual, who range from intellectuals in the capital to illiterate displaced women, talk of preserving a tradition against an onslaught of alien cultures.

"I am only doing this to protect our culture," Mrs. Sasso said in an interview at her Freetown home. "I don't want to see this ceremony eradicated, because it binds us, we the women, together. We respect each other in this way, and we feel free together because of it."

Critics here say the rituals of genital cutting persist because they are a rare female preserve in a society otherwise heavily dominated by men.

"When women marry here according to native law and customs, the Bondo society is one of the only

Dr. Kosso-Thomas said the Leone had one of the highest miscarriage and pregnancy deaths in the world, in large part because of infections, scarring or damage brought on by mutilation carried out in primitive and unhygienic conditions.

But here, amid the closely-situated mud huts that have most of the displaced residents the last year, a group of women some of whom recently had their genitals cut, stepped forward to defend the practice, making it clear that they were eager to resume practice once the Muslim holiday Ramadan was over.

"I have grown to the age of 50 years, and this is the first time anyone has come forward to ask me to do these ceremonies," said A. Kindoh, a leader among the initiates. "It doesn't matter what other people think because we are happy with our customs. We will try to go with our lives."

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When a Freetown newspaper, For Di People, began writing articles