

Malicounda-Bambara: the Sequel

The Journey of a Local Revolution

In the space of less than four years, a locally-impelled movement to abandon the practice of female genital cutting (FGC) has spread from a single village in central Senegal to over 200 communities nationwide, and to several other African countries as well. The path and mode of its dissemination carry a host of lessons and questions, about how indigenous culture renews itself.

The experience of the village of Malicounda-Bambara in the Thies region of central Senegal and its immediate aftermath were recounted in an earlier issue of *IK Notes* ("Senegalese Women Remake Their Culture," October 1998, no. 3). But the "rest of the story" has proved to be immensely instructive.

A brief reminder of the dimensions of the original initiative, and of the critical events that shaped its aftermath, will help to situate the story.

In at the creation

Between 1995 and 1997, women and a few men in the village of Malicounda-Bambara took part in a nonformal education program sponsored by the Senegal-based NGO "Tostan." The program focused on methods of problem-solving, themes of women's health and human rights, and the beginnings of literacy.

The participants in Malicounda-Bambara decided that they had a priority objective apart from the development of income-generating activities, establishment of well-baby programs, launching village hygiene initiatives and so forth: get their village to abandon FGC once and for all. Bambara people are among the sizeable minority of Senegalese ethnic groups that observe the practice. In the course of the training, women

had shared with each other painful personal experiences on this taboo topic and had confronted them with their renewed sense of women's rights. As a consequence, they approached local authorities and other villagers to win their support for a common declaration of intent to abandon the practice. And they were successful. On July 31, 1997 the villagers of Malicounda-Bambara made a statement renouncing the practice in perpetuity in front of twenty Senegalese journalists invited for the occasion.

The event made a minor splash, perhaps greater through word-of-mouth dissemination in local culture than in print and audio media. There was some immediate vocal opposition to what the women of Malicounda had done, as much in reaction to the "shame" of talking this publicly about a taboo topic as to the substance of the declaration. Despite the controversy, a second nearby village also undergoing the Tostan training program—Nguerigne-Bambara—decided to imitate Malicounda-Bambara's example, led by a woman who was herself a traditional "cut-

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ter"; and yet another, Kër Simbara, began actively discussing the idea. Then a critical event occurred.

The turning point

The Imam of Kër Simbara—a 66-year old religious leader much respected in the region—became very concerned at the events, and he came to talk with Tostan representatives and the women of Malicounda-Bambara. He was not opposed to the abandonment of FGC. In fact, the controversy had prompted him to talk to his female relatives about their own experience and feelings regarding FGC for the first time, and he ended up a strong supporter. But he felt that there were two major problems with the way in which things were being done.

First, a single village cannot do this alone, the Imam said. "We are part of an inter-marrying community, and unless *all* the villages involved take part, you are asking parents to forfeit the chance of their daughters getting married." Second, there was a real problem of language and approach. These are taboo topics, he pointed out, and they should not be discussed lightly or inconsiderately. The people who crusaded against FGC in the past used terms that villagers consider unmentionable and showed images and pictures that shocked them. They treated the

practice as a disease to eradicate and its practitioners as social pariahs. That is no way to change a culture, or to help it change itself, the Imam said.

His interlocutors agreed: It was time to think things through a good deal more carefully. Together, they outlined a strategy:

- Go to all the villages in the inter-marrying community. Start by reaffirming personal relationships.
- Don't tell the villagers what to do. Tell them what Malicounda-Bambara and Nguerigne-Bambara have done, and why. Then let them tell their own stories and make their own decisions.
- Avoid using graphic terms or demonstrations for taboo activities. Refer to FGC simply as "the custom." Everyone will know what is meant. In Senegalese Bambara, "customs" in the plural refers to a whole set of cultural traditions; "the custom" in the singular refers to FGC alone.
- Avoid condemning practitioners either implicitly or explicitly. They have been performing in good faith.

On the basis of these agreements, the Imam set out on foot, accompanied by the woman cutter from Kër Simbara and his own nephew, to visit ten other villages in that marriage community. It was a ground-shaking experience. Women opened up—they told stories of daughters who had died from hemorrhage, others who had contracted infections or long-term psychic distress from the FGC trauma. Those who performed the practice talked, too—about why, and about changing customs. Men joined in with their reflections.

Before it was over, all ten villages had decided to join the ranks of those declaring against FGC. With representatives of Malicounda-Bambara, Nguerigne-Bambara and Kër Simbara itself, they met at the village of Diabougou, fifty strong representing 8,000 rural people, and declared "never again" on February 15, 1998. The news continued to spread.

The movement next jumped to the southern region of Senegal below the Gambia, where the Fulani ethnic group has traditionally practiced FGC. A first group of fourteen villages studied the Tostan curriculum, listened to news of Malicounda-Bambara, resolved to take action in their own environment, and enlisted four additional communities within their socio-marital network to make a joint declaration, promulgated in the village of Medina Cherif on June 12, 1998.

An indigenous strategy for dissemination

It is worth stopping a moment at this point to reflect on exactly what had happened because it explains much of

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the rest of the dissemination story—successes, opposition encountered, and lessons yet to be learned.

Essentially, the strategy that developed from local response and input had three distinct elements.

The first was that it was *collective* in nature, rather than—or in addition to being—individual. The approach explicitly recognized that families cannot abandon a long-rooted cultural practice if there is not a collective will to change the incentive structures and at least some of the objective conditions that hold it in place. When thirteen related villages became affiliated, those involved in effect changed the marriage market and created conditions in which people *could* comply, and do so out of solidarity with their own community.

Second, the approach was grounded in the local context and evoked some of strongest values and practices of ambient culture—parental love, Koranic piety—to challenge others. It therefore came across more as a movement for internal consistency and liberation than as an outside condemnation. No one talks of the “eradication” of FGC, as if it were a plague to be stamped out, but rather of its “abandonment”—a conscious act by those most concerned. The presence of an Imam who could remind people that Islam never dictated such a practice was highly instrumental. And men were in no way excluded. In fact, their support was critical to the development of the movement.

Finally, the method was empowering—that is, while rooted in personal testimony and the transmission of new information, it left resolution and action up to the initiative of each community and its members. It cast the problem of FGC in the larger frame of women’s health and human rights, topics with which men too are vitally concerned. The result was not only that people chose to follow of their own free will, but that they were ready to spread the word.

Beating two tracks

From that point on, the evolution of the movement has essentially followed two axes: one out front in the media and international fora, and the other on the ground. For once, though, the out-front publicity has not outstripped the local reality, and the activity has remained largely wedded to its village manifestations.

Media attention was quick in coming, both in Senegal and abroad. Notice appeared in short order in the Senegalese press. In October 1997, a feature article on the “Oath of Malicounda-Bambara” came out in *Le Monde* in Paris. Tostan representatives have since been invited to numerous conferences, assemblies, and events to relate the story of the movement against FGC. In almost every instance, promoters have made sure that local women and men spoke for themselves—through interpreters, where

necessary. The local champions of the movement—the elderly Imam and the women cutters and organizers—have made presentations to the British Parliament, to the German Ministry of Development and Cooperation, to the European Union in Brussels, to a Women’s Rights Conference in Washington, and to committees of the United Nations in New York. More significantly still, they have traveled to neighboring countries, Burkina Faso and Mali, to talk with other women facing similar problems.

But outside attention had its downside as well. Endorsement of the Oath of Malicounda by the Senegalese President Abdou Diouf—significant, even if he was himself from the majority Wolof, who do not practice FGC—was eventually followed by a move in the country’s *Assemblée Nationale* (Parliament) to pass a law abolishing the practice and dictating severe penalties for violators. The allies of Tostan were immediately concerned and went to Dakar to testify against the law, not, obviously, because they wanted to maintain FGC, but because they firmly believed official abolition and sanction were not the way to go. The law, they felt, should *follow* and model a change in practice developed in the field, not attempt to dictate it. As the Imam from Kër Simbara put it in reference to his own ethnic group, “Try to tell Bambara people what they must do about their own customs and you have a fight on your hands.”

The premonitions proved right. The law was passed, despite these words of caution from the field, and a general outcry ensued. In protest, one traditional cutter in the region of Tambacounda made a point of performing no fewer than 120 “*circumcisions*” in the days following.

Keeping the local movement alive

Developments on the ground pursued quite a different path. The Imam and former cutter from Kër Simbara and Nguerigne-Bambara launched out into another group of twelve villages in central Senegal. The local women who had been ringleaders in the Kolda region expanded their efforts to neighboring communities, parlaying support from the Imam of Medina Cherif into a religiously endorsed movement. At the same time, they undertook to transpose the effort to the Futa Toro region of northwestern Senegal, an area of Toucouleur culture over 250 kilometers away that speaks the same Fulani language.

In addition, one of the villages that had participated in the Diabougou declaration—Samba Dia—took initiatives of its own. Samba Dia was in fact of “SerereNiominka” lineage, an offshoot of the Serere ethnic group that had historically commingled with Mandinka and Bambara speakers. The women of Samba Dia decided that the word had to be spread among their own people, fisherfolk inhabiting the islands of Sine Saloum on the Senegalese coast south-

east of Dakar. Women and men got some support for transport costs from Tostan and started canoeing around from island to island, visiting twenty-six insular communities throughout the archipelago.

In the Futa Toro, there was fierce opposition from some traditional religious and cultural authorities. The women and their allies felt that they could not make a proclamation about FGC under these circumstances, but they found a dynamic alternative. No less than eighty-seven villages sent representatives to a meeting at Aere Lao in the Podor region (east of St. Louis) where, on November 4, 2000, they signed a solemn declaration forswearing all practices harmful to women's health and development. By "retreating" to the ground of human rights, they effectively outflanked the opposition.

Farther south in the Sine Saloum islands, representatives of the twenty-six villages contacted by boat—none of whom had yet undergone the Tostan training program— assembled of their own volition on the island of Niodior on April 7, 2000 to draw up their own declaration of abandonment of the practice and to make arrangements for starting their own classes. And in the region of Kolda, the number of communities making declarations and undertaking training has continued to grow, progressing from the original eighteen to thirty that took part in the Tostan program and, by the end of last year, to an additional seventy-five neighboring communities. Tostan representatives report that in February 2001 word came in from yet another group of local women who had completed the training and succeeded in aligning all communities of their entire rural "county" (the *communauté rurale* of Mampatim) behind the effort: nearly 100 additional villages, which have scheduled their proclamation for March 2001.

Following the local lead

No one can say exactly what subsequent stages in this local groundswell will bring. As the Director of Tostan puts it, "Much of this caught us by surprise. We are following them." But a number of results beyond the simple statistics of villages mobilized and groups renouncing FGC are already evident:

- Connections are being made everywhere between the locally motivated abandonment of FGC and concerns of democracy and human rights. In fact, the key issues have progressively been cast in these larger terms and have led to a variety of associated efforts: public examination of domestic violence, local assertion of girls' rights to schooling, requests for increased accountability in local governance.
- Men have become a vital part of the effort, both in classes and out "on the campaign trail." Even in programs focusing in good part on women's health and rights, male participation remains at nearly 30 percent.
- The public declaration model has been adopted in a number of other areas of locally driven rural development, from resolutions about domestic violence to others renouncing the practice of brush fires as a land-clearing technique.
- And the effort has begun to go continent-wide. Initiatives modeled on the Senegalese example, but modified for each cultural context, are now underway in Burkina Faso, Mali and Sudan, and there have been inquiries from as far away as East Africa. The women and men working on the ground in Senegal have been the principal ambassadors, while Tostan is itself planning a training center in Thies for those from other countries who would like to visit, share with and learn from the women's rights cohorts in Senegalese villages.

As a West African proverb succinctly says, "Once the sun has risen, the palm of your hand can no longer cover it."

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