

## *Abstract*

**Multiple Meanings of Female Initiation: "Circumcision" among Jola Women in Lower Casamance, Senegal.** By Liselott (Lisen) Dellenborg. Doctoral dissertation 2007, Department of Social Anthropology, School of Global Studies, Göteborg University, Box 700, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden. ISBN 978-91-628-7229-8

This anthropological study examines the meanings and practices of female "circumcision" and initiation in relation to identity and social change in contemporary Muslim Jola society, Senegal, West Africa. During the 20th century, clitoridectomy spread – allegedly as part of Islam - and became essential for a Jola woman's identity as a "real" woman and mother, and an important aspect of the women's initiation ritual. The rites are orchestrated by the female initiation associations popularly known in the social science literature as secret societies. The study analyses the female rites in relation to women's life cycle and Jola female gender ideals, and also male initiation rites. Both male and female initiation rituals are salient cultural expressions in Jola society that mirror and parallel each other in symbols, semantics and ritual process, yet the rites differ in meaning. Contemporary Jola society is marked by gender dissonance. Jola men are considered superior to women in legal and political domains but, as initiated mothers, women also have considerable power inside and outside the family realm. This gender disjunction is reflected in the initiation rituals: on the one hand, the female rites affirm the gender order, according to which women should be docile wives and self-sacrificing mothers. On the other hand, controversial as it may seem from a feminist and/or activist perspective, clitoridectomy in its wider cultural and social context actually provides individual women with self-esteem, cultural recognition as moral female persons and space for agency. At present, initiated women ardently support the rites in opposition to the growing internal Jola criticism voiced by adult and young men. Ethnographic fieldwork carried out over a period of eighteen months in Lower Casamance has provided insights into the extent to which the meanings of the female rites are multiple, contested and negotiated by various male and female social actors. Recent decades of global and national campaigns against "female genital mutilation", the recent Senegalese law forbidding the practice, religious revival, regional ethnic relations and a political situation that often pits the Jola against the Senegalese State and the South against the North further affect dynamic local negotiations on the meanings of female "circumcision" and initiation.

**Key words:** Anthropology, Senegal, Lower Casamance, Kalounaye, Jola, initiation, female circumcision, genital cutting, identity, gender, motherhood, Islam, ethnicity, agency, social change.