

CHAPTER 3

PREPARATION OF GIRLS FOR MARRIAGE

The interviews with women were largely devoted to questions about their youth. Assuming that FGC was considered part of the coming-of-age process for girls, information was needed on how girls were prepared for marriage. The researchers wanted to know if women would mention FGC as part of the social context of instruction and training that, along with other events, marks childhood and adolescence. Women were invited to share their memories of their education and training, knowledge and skills acquired, initiations and any other events that had had an impact on them. The basic question asked was: What are the events, ceremonies, and experiences that most marked your life before marriage?

The researchers believed that women would speak more freely about their experience with FGC if they first shared other aspects of childhood and growing up, and that they might be offended if asked about FGC at the start of the interview. The women interviewees agreed that this seemed the most sensible way to proceed. Therefore, the interview began by asking women what they had learned at home and at school, with the subject of FGC broached last.

3.1 Girls' Training and Education at Home

All the Sosso women interviewed reported that they had received a basic education (*khuri*) and learned household tasks (*giné wali*) in their parental home. This education is the responsibility of the girl's social network, which includes close relatives (*barimukhie*), neighbors (*dokoboré*), and allies (*khabilé*). The basic education emphasizes respect for elders, discipline, hygiene, and the importance of the social network supporting the girl.

This education is generally accompanied by training in domestic tasks, continues through the girl's adolescence. The training consists of learning household tasks (identifying and cleaning kitchen utensils, sweeping the house, washing clothes, etc.). According to an elderly woman from Bangouya.

A girl being educated has one watchword: they talk, you listen. I helped my mother in the house, I stayed next to her, everything she told me to do, I did. There's not a single household task I can't do. I learned to dye fabric, which allowed me to become involved in a trade cooperative.

Usually these household tasks begin in childhood (*dimédiya*). Growing food was rarely mentioned as an activity learned in childhood. Only nine of the older women from Bangouya stated they had learned field tasks at the same time as household tasks.

All of the respondents interviewed in Maninka, from girls to older women, reported that they had received a basic education from their parents, who taught them to respect their elders and to obey their parents. According to the interviewees, following upon this basic tenet of a girl's education was training in maintaining a household. Domestic tasks learned included cooking, keeping the courtyard swept, and doing laundry. During this formative period, girls also play with dolls and imitate their mothers in such activities as dressing, braiding, nursing. Many Malinke women also mentioned learning to grow food.

All the Fulani women interviewed reported learning domestic tasks (*gollé nder suudu*), that is, cooking, laundry, sweeping the yard, fetching water, ironing clothes, fetching fire wood. As to the value

attributed to the child's basic education, it is summed up in proverbs such as "*Bullal ka è baggal seebhata*" (good habits are acquired during childhood) and "*Needi ko feffyère dewal*" (a good education constitutes half of religious values). Gardening and field tasks were rarely mentioned as part of childhood education in the Fulfulde interviews.

In the forest region, the Guerze women interviewed spoke of learning domestic tasks (washing dishes, cooking, sweeping, laundry), but they also cited agricultural tasks as being part of a girl's early training. According to a woman from Gouécké, her mother followed her closely in her tasks, saying all that she was learning she would do for her husband just as she had for her mother.

Summarizing the responses to the question on what they had learned at home, all the women interviewed cited basic moral education and household tasks; a small proportion included growing food as part of their early education. The description of the domestic tasks taught during girlhood corresponded closely to what women later did in their own households [and probably directed their daughters to do].

3.2 Girls' Training and Education Outside the Home

Women interviewed spoke of three types of education outside the home: 1) Quranic school where they learned to recite verses in Arabic as prayers; 2) Public school where they learned to read and write in at least one of the Guinean national languages or in French; and 3) classes, internships or informal instruction where they learned a trade. These categories are not exclusive and it is possible for a young woman to receive any combination of the above, or little or no instruction outside the home.

The importance of Quranic school varied according to the ethnic group. Coming from a region where Islam is less prevalent, only two Guerze women mentioned Quranic instruction, whereas 90% of the Malinke and Fulani women said they had attended Quranic school. In Sosso country, 35% of the women interviewed had attended Quranic school. Twenty percent of the Guerze women said they had received Christian instruction.

About half of the Guerze women reported they could read and write, whereas for the three other groups the proportion was less than 25%. About a third of the Sosso and Fulani women said they had learned a trade, whereas the interviews with the Malinke and Guerze women barely mentioned this. The trades most often cited were small commercial operations, sewing, embroidery, knitting, and fabric dying.

The general opinion of the women interviewed as well as those doing the interviewing was that girls learn domestic tasks from their mothers at the same time they learn how to behave toward others, their friends, their parents and elders. School teaches them how to recite or read, but does not dispense moral education, which remains the duty of the family.

3.3 FGC in the Girl's Social Context

To understand the social context of FGC from the woman's point of view, the respondents were asked what events had had the greatest impact on their passage from childhood to adulthood. A few women—particularly among the Guerze—spoke of family events, such as the death of a mother or a relocation, but for the most part women cited events occurring around puberty, such as the appearance of breasts, the first menstruation (menarche), or having undergone FGC.

Responses to this question varied by ethnic group. Among the Sosso, 60 of 108 women cited menarche and 89 mentioned FGC as important events. Among the Fulani, 39 of 108 women spoke of menarche and 40 of FGC as noteworthy events. Four of these women mentioned excessive bleeding in

connection with FGC as an event marking their coming of age. The responses of Malinke women correspond roughly to those of the Fulani women, with 21 citing menarche and 49 their experience with FGC. In Forest Guinea, only 13 Guerze women mentioned FGC as an important event, while 30 mentioned menarche. In general, Malinke females appear to undergo FGC at a younger age than females in the other three ethnic groups.

Consideration should be given to why so many more Sosso women than other women regarded FGC as an important event. This may be partially explained by the fact Sosso girls appear to spend more time “on the mat”—i.e., the period of healing and instruction which follows FGC—than other girls. The Sosso women offered three explanations for the primacy of FGC in their memory.

- 1) On the level of traditional customs, female circumcision is considered a major factor in the socialization of the girl, allowing her to leave the status of a neophyte (*bilakoré*) for that of the initiated (*sungutunyi*).
- 2) FGC is a painful experience, sometimes resulting in complications such as hemorrhage (*suusu*), fever, or infection.
- 3) The teachings surrounding the circumcision ceremony forge the girl’s character and make her more mature.

It is also possible that the team interviewing the Sosso women was more adept than other teams at drawing out information concerning puberty and FGC. The Sosso women cited menarche as an important event twice as often as women in the other three groups.

3.4 Images of the Ideal Husband

In addition to questions on their upbringing and circumcision, unmarried girls were asked to describe their concept of what in Western terms is referred to as an “ideal spouse.” The girls interviewed from the four regions identified three things they valued in a husband.

- 1) ability to support his family (provide food, clothing, housing, and health care)
- 2) education and intelligence
- 3) generosity (an accepting spirit and willingness to share material possessions)

The social nature of this image of the ideal husband is noteworthy. The model husband would behave in a benevolent way toward his wife and family, and he would be capable of fulfilling his conjugal and paternal responsibilities. Neither the sentiment of love and romance nor physical attraction seemed to play a role in shaping this ideal image. There was little divergence in the responses among the four ethnic groups.

