

# BOOK REVIEW

**Jessica Cammaert. *Undesirable Practices: Women, Children, and the Politics of the Body in Northern Ghana, 1930–1972*.** Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. xv + 288 pp. List of Illustrations. List of Abbreviations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$55.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-8032-8680-1.

Female genital mutilation, nudity, human trafficking, and prostitution are today decried by the international community as detrimental to the advancement of human rights in Africa. However, in *Undesirable Practices: Women, Children, and the Politics of the Body in Northern Ghana, 1930–1972*, Jessica Cammaert argues that few historical studies have explored why and how these practices came to be shaped as harmful to Africans and African development. Because policy makers and scholars focus on demographic, health, and economic data, and tend to quantify their subjects in static models, their work does not always stand up to the rigors of historical inquiry. Cammaert suggests that exploring the history behind these so-called undesirable practices reveals more than policy-oriented studies alone can do.

As a starting point, Cammaert shows not only how colonial state and European social scientists imposed their vision of female genital cutting, child slavery, nudity, and prostitution as “undesirables’ practices” but also how these practices challenged the colonial authority and policy making in Ghana. “Through the lenses of race, gender, colonialism and the nation-state in Africa,” focusing on the period 1930–1972, Cammaert explores why and how these practices come to be rejected by colonizers and viewed as anti-development. She argues “practices were considered undesirable in colonial northern Ghana as a result of the international attention they attracted and the debate they incited over development and social welfare.”

Cammaert focuses on four practices that shared a construction of “undesirability” in Northern Ghana between 1930 and 1972: female circumcision, child slavery, nudity, and prostitution. The author’s choice of these practices was made, first, based on archive locations and the availability of archival findings, and second, because these practices have provoked debate among various participants, including “interests of local, regional, national and international scale.”

Chapter One discusses British colonial policy in West Africa and describes how disorganized indirect rule policies were, to the point that they allowed

certain practices to become terrains of struggle in which different colonial actors competed for decision-making leadership. The author discusses West Africans' responses in the 1930s to a questionnaire titled "Customs Affecting the Status of Women" and reveals how, in their eagerness to reinforce patriarchal control and prevent unrest, colonial officials in West Africa hesitated to address interwar parliamentary concerns regarding female circumcision. For Cammaert, responses to the questionnaire demonstrate exactly the extent to which colonial policy governed (or did not govern) questions concerning women in West Africa.

Chapter Two explains the construction of these practices as undesirable by focusing on the role of anthropologists in British colonial West Africa, and in particular, on an important disagreement between the first government anthropologist, R. S. Rattray, and the Gold Coast administration concerning female circumcision. The author explores Rattray's position on female circumcision and finds the conflict that resulted with the Colonial Office to be exemplary of the tensions scholars pinpoint between anthropologists and officials in colonial Africa. Rattray was labeled an outsider, not only because of his views regarding native authority reform and female circumcision, but also because of his position on land control.

Chapter Three deals with female circumcision in the 1930s and the struggles of those actors who sought to influence policy regarding the practice. In 1930, the Colonial Office declared R. S. Rattray's findings on female circumcision in northern Ghana to be unsupported. British policies dictated that practices such as circumcision should be allowed to "die a natural death." The debates about female circumcision are reminiscent of those concerning the end of slavery.

Chapter Four discusses slavery, and the practice of female pawning in particular, as a persistent undesirable practice in 1940s Ghana. By the end of the 1930s, increasing pressure for revenue led to an increase in pawning and even sales of young girls. The resurgence of pawning in 1930s French West Africa may be viewed as a response to capitalist forces but nevertheless, according to Cammaert, women and girls were still considered to be valuable.

Chapter Five shifts attention to post-independence Ghana, looking at campaigns against nudity in the Nkrumah era and the domestic and international context of antinudity campaigns. Cammaert argues that male officials went to great lengths to manage undesirable practices such as female circumcision in order to distance themselves from thorny questions about women's status and slavery. Rather than abolish these practices through legislation, officials sought to manage them in the hope that they would naturally die out as African societies evolved and developed over time.

Chapter Six describes a range of undesirable practices associated with children and youth in northern Ghana following Nkrumah's overthrow, including the difficulties of postcoup governments in asserting claims to trusteeship over Ghanaian children and youth in the face of increasing international criticism. This strategy was intended to discourage people

from engaging in activities contrary to development and the newly independent country's prestige. Cammaert sees it as the continuation of the colonial policy but just with different explanations or reasoning.

Cammaert's book is well-written and, most importantly, sheds light on the so-called undesirable practices, revealing more than policy-oriented studies alone. What Cammaert has done is to move away from policies dictated by colonial officers and scholars from a Eurocentric perspective, to analyze how local Africans viewed these so-called "undesirable practices." This book gives a voice to a localized group of Africans in Northeastern Ghana and focuses on specific issues the inhabitants had to deal with during the colonial and early post-colonial periods. This is an important contribution to the studies related to female genital mutilation, nudity, human trafficking, and prostitution.

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### **For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Kouba, Leonard J., and Judith Muasher. 1985. "Female Circumcision in Africa: An Overview." *African Studies Review* 28 (1): 95–110. doi:10.2307/524569.
- Winterbottom, Anna, Jonneke Koomen, and Gemma Burford. 2009. "Female Genital Cutting: Cultural Rights and Rites of Defiance in Northern Tanzania." *African Studies Review* 52 (1): 47–71. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0142.