

BOOK REVIEW

The Twilight of Cutting: African activism and life after NGOs

Saida Hodzic (2017), University of California Press, Berkeley, 400 pp.
ISBN: 978 0 520 29199 7

REVIEWED BY AKOSUA K. DARKWAH

Over the last two decades, there has been a growth in the body of work that problematises development NGOs (Fisher, 1997; Aryeetey, 1998; Botchway, 2000; Mohan, 2002; Yarrow, 2011; Maes, 2012; Watkins and Swidler, 2012; Gupta 2014), the most easily accessible of which is perhaps Teju Cole's (2012) scathing critique of what he calls white saviours' failure to explore and resolve the larger issues behind the various African problems they seek to address. At this point, therefore, we do know how it is that doing good can be wrong. What we know far less about is the politics embedded in the relationship between white saviours of the West and the Africans who participate in the doing good projects.

Hodzic's (2017) book *The Twilight of Cutting: African Activism and Life after NGOs* addresses this gap using the anti-female genital mutilation (anti-FGM) project as her case study. In this project, she asks not how these two groups (the white saviours and their African compatriots) went about ending cutting, but focuses on the African compatriots and seeks "to account for their work, their historicity, the life worlds and subjectivities they engender, and the modes of reflection, immanent critique, and disaffection they set in motion" (xi). She does so in seven carefully elucidated chapters as well as an introductory chapter which sets the stage for understanding the key questions.

Hodzic begins the book with a carefully documented history of the white saviours involved in the anti-FGM project. She illustrates how the discourse of abolition in imperial Britain ran counter to the discourse of retention among colonial officials in the various colonies. These divergent discourses are evident among feminists and anthropologists of today even if they do not exactly map on to each other. Western academic discussions rarely include cut women as active

participants and Ghanaian activists are generally no different in their dealings with cut women. Having grown up and observed the bifurcated governance of Northern and Southern Ghana that renders Northern Ghana as ‘other’ in relation to the South, these activists are themselves complicit in this process of othering. These activists, the majority of whom are either Northern Ghanaians living in the more urbanised South or Southern Ghanaians, conceptualise rural Northern Ghanaians as “backward masses” (Englund, 2006) and the North of Ghana as the site of harmful traditional practices. This othering, Hodzic points out, has implications for both those who govern and those who are governed by this frame of reference. The African activists who govern with this frame of reference fail to see the ways in which they are then complicit in their own subjectification. In this framing, the real possibilities of being an urbanised Northern Ghanaian who embodied harmful traditional practices is erased. Meanwhile, rural Northern Ghanaians who are governed by this frame of reference are unduly tainted and stigmatised for holding on to these practices even though in reality, the incidence of FGM is on the decline.

Rural Northern Ghanaians do not only find themselves unduly tainted and stigmatised. Their experiences as cut women are also relegated to the background while that of the experts (the NGOs working on these issues, nurses who care for cut women) are foregrounded as the voices of those who can objectively speak to the nature and practice of FGM. In the process, some mis-representations of how FGM takes place and its meanings in Northern Ghana occur. Hodzic argues that these mis-representations should not be read as reflecting a lack of knowledge, for they are intentional, designed to demonstrate what kinds of knowledge and values matter (hint: not that of rural Northern Ghana).

Rather than linking the decline in incidence of FGM to the successful efforts of the activist movement in getting rural Northern Ghanaian women to understand FGM as a cultural pathology, these women locate the causes of the decline in their poor socio-economic circumstances and the endemic blood shortages associated with such poor circumstances. Indeed, Northern Ghana has stayed intractably poor over the last three decades.¹ In what Hodzic calls the blood narrative, she argues that rural Northern Ghanaian women point to endemic blood shortages in this poor zone as the real reason for the decrease in

¹ Data from six rounds of the Ghana Living Standards Survey show that the incidence of poverty in Northern Ghana only decreased from 55.4 percent in 1987 to 55.1 percent in 2013, basically a 0.3 percent decline in a quarter of a century (Darkwah *et al*, 2016:10).

the incidence of FGM. In short, women could no longer afford to lose the blood associated with FGM because they had so little of it in the first place.

The last two chapters in the book under review are the most interesting in the opinion of this reviewer. Read together, these chapters provide a careful critique of punitive rationality. In providing insights into the lifeworld of Ghanaians involved in the anti-FGM movement, Hodzic shows how it is at once possible to be anti-FGM and anti the method that anti-FGMers use to accomplish their goals. The focus in chapter 6 is on the effort in 2007 to amend the 1994 anti-FGM law so as to bring it in line with model laws elsewhere in the world. The chapter provides an analysis of how the more punitive law was designed not to punish perpetrators but to communicate the seriousness with which activists viewed FGM and thus encourage perpetrators to desist from the practice. In a detailed analysis of the two cases that were taken to court prior to the passage of the 2007 law, Hodzic provides insights into the role of various actors in the process and the tensions/internal dilemmas they faced as they reconciled their actions with the societal views of legal punishment. In response to these tensions, as shown in chapter 7, civil servants and NGO officials curtailed the social life of the amended FGM law. Thus it was that even though the new law was passed in 2007, no new cases have been taken to court since then. In the opinion of this reviewer, these activists, unbeknown to them share the same perspective of Bernstein (2010) who cautions against carceral feminism, a view which seems lost on a Western audience that largely views legislation as the means to eradicating the 'harmful traditional practices' in Africa.

Overall, the book was a page turner that offered detailed, careful analysis of a three decade old activist movement in Ghana. While I found the introductory vignettes quite distracting, I appreciate the thought behind it which is to give insights into the ethnographic process that birthed this book. I think, though, that it would have been more useful as a chapter or journal article on the ethnographic process. There are also a few rather minor issues immediately obvious to a Ghanaian scholar such as the mis-spelling of names such as *koko*, a corn porridge commonly served as breakfast in Ghana. While I thoroughly enjoyed the chapter that explains how and why Ghanaian activists chose not to focus on law as the key to eradicating harmful traditional practices, I wondered about the costs of such an approach. The anti-cutting movement is as much African as it is non-African and one wonders what the non-African supporters of Ghanaian activists make of their non-compliance with the logic of punitive rationality. The regional and transnational linkages that shaped the formation

of activist organisations are detailed in the introductory sections of the book but surprisingly absent in the latter part. Such silence leaves readers with a false sense I dare say of complete agency on the part of Ghanaian activists. Nonetheless, these anomalies pale in comparison to the significance of the book.

This book is a gem for it offers insights into issues of interest to a wide range of scholars such as development specialists, anthropologists, Africanist scholars and feminists. As a Ghanaian feminist scholar, I was particularly struck by its illumination of an issue rarely discussed in the burgeoning body of work that critiques the development industry broadly and more specifically women's rights work; the role and place of Africans in this industry.

Hodzic's book reminds us of the fact that Africa must lead both in the conceptualisation of its problems and in the analysis of posited solutions. For far too long, Africa's 'salvation' has come from outside the continent. We know that such an approach has far reaching consequences for not just the Africans who receive 'salvation' but thanks to Hodzic, also to those Africans who work in the shadow of white saviours to deliver 'salvation'. Economists have been discussing economic growth but they must also be interested in Africa's home grown NGOs that seek to deliver home grown solutions to its problems.

About the reviewer

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