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## Walking away from the past

HOW DOES AN OUTSIDER CHANGE A CULTURE? FROM THE INSIDE, SAYS ACTIVIST MOLLY MELCHING.

By Jessica Reaves | Tribune staff writer

“Are you sure?” came the question, anxious and probing. “You have to be absolutely sure.” Their brilliant heads-carves bobbing like tropical birds, they nodded. They were sure. It was time. And they were ready.

It was the fall of 1996, and the women of Malicounda Bambara, a small village in northern Senegal, were in the midst of a 30-month community education program courtesy of Tostan, a human rights group founded by Molly Melching, a tall, plain-spoken transplant from Danville, Ill.

The most recent lesson covered human rights and health, with emphasis on women’s well-being through puberty, marriage and childbirth. Their teacher, herself a Senegalese woman, broached the topic of female genital cutting, a common rite of passage in the region, describing health risks of the procedure: infections, hemorrhage, fever and death.

For many of the women, this was a revelation: They all knew someone who had suffered, even died, after cutting, but it was in the same way they knew women who had died during childbirth. It was simply something that happened.

Most of them had never consciously linked chronic health problems to genital cutting, which was as much a part of their culture as dancing, good-natured teasing and impromptu singing. Some of the women were angry with the teacher, horrified that such a sacrosanct tradition was being discussed in the open and in such clinical terms.

The months passed and the Tostan lessons continued, three days a week, for two to three hours at a time. The women



tackled math, literacy, problem-solving and management.

But they hadn’t forgotten what they’d learned about cutting. And so they talked, first in hushed voices in private quarters, then in louder, more forceful tones back in their classroom. They talked to one another, to their husbands, their friends, their neighbors. They talked to their imam, who, like many other men in the village, had only a vague idea of what the practice entailed. After some consultation, he confirmed that the practice had no religious basis; nothing written in the Koran required them to cut their daughters, to remove parts of every girl’s labia and clitoris. The women regrouped and talked and thought and talked a while longer.

By June 1997, they didn’t need to talk anymore. Thirty-five women of Malicounda Bambara had made up their minds, and they wanted to tell the world: The last generation of their daughters had been cut. The declaration was made on a scorching July day in 1997. It was the first public announcement of its kind in Africa.

Female genital cutting/mutilation is defined by the World Health Organization and the United Nations as “the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for cultural or other non-therapeutic reasons.” The debate over calling the practice “female genital cutting” versus “female genital mutilation” is ongoing. Some groups, including Tostan, prefer the former term because they believe the practice isn’t carried out in an attempt to mutilate or harm, but rather as a way to preserve cultural homogeneity.

Today, genital cutting is performed annually on 2 million girls and women worldwide—in 28 African nations, some Asian and Middle Eastern countries, and among pockets of immigrants in Europe and in the United States. It is often practiced in secret, away from public view or documentation, which makes exact figures nearly impossible to pin down. Mortality rates are also vague, as many communities have no official register for births or deaths.

Most countries have outlawed female genital cutting, often referred to

as FGC, but laws generally don't make much impact on cultural behavior. Senegal banned FGC in 1999, but more than 2,000 villages, or about 25 percent of the population, still perform it. (The Wolof people, Senegal's culturally and politically dominant ethnic group, do not engage in it, which is why the country's rates are relatively low.)

While the practice may seem barbaric, even cruel, to anyone unfamiliar with its cultural currency, it is not viewed by either men or women here as an act of violence, but rather one of inclusion. Imagine you're a mother, and you've been cut, and every single other girl and woman in your village and all the surrounding villages have been cut. How do you tell your daughter she can't be

cut, because some bureaucrat who's not even part of your ethnic group decided it wasn't a good idea? How do you tell her that she's going to be a social pariah and will never get married, because someone outside your community passed a law? It doesn't work that way.

Tostan is one of the first organizations to understand this, says Ann Veneman, executive director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). "The thing about Tostan's approach is that they respect culture," she says. "So many organizations go in and preach, 'Just Say No.' This is a 2,000-year-old cultural practice, and that's not going to happen. But Tostan gives the population information about health," and goes from there.

Why are women and girls cut? Practitioners cite any number of reasons, including perceived health benefits, an attempt to control female sexuality, for aesthetic purposes (female sexual organs are considered ugly), and to ensure that a girl is acceptable to her future husband and in-laws. It's worth noting that certain forms of female genital cutting were performed by doctors in the U.S.

as recently as the 1950s in attempts to combat "illnesses" like masturbation and lesbianism. A major misconception about cutting is that it's an inherently Islamic practice; in fact, it is linked to culture and ethnicity, not to religion. I spoke to many women who were shocked to learn from their imams that they don't need to be cut to be a good Muslim.



Standards established by the World Health Organization outline four variations of FGC. Type I involves the removal of the clitoral hood with or without excision of part of or the entire clitoris. Type II requires the removal of the clitoris with partial or total removal of the labia minora. Type III is the most extreme, and involves the removal of part or all of the external genitalia as well as the stitching and narrowing of the vaginal opening. This is generally followed by binding the girl's legs together for 10-14 days, which allows scar tissue to form. Girls who undergo this form of the procedure are cut open again after their weddings to allow their new husbands to penetrate them. Type IV is the catch-all for anything not included in the first three categories, and/or the piercing, cutting, stretching, cauterizing or scraping of the clitoris, labia or any vaginal tissue. This iteration can also include the introduction of corrosive substances or herbs into the vagina to cause it to tighten or narrow. In Senegal, both Type II and Type III are performed, although Type II is more common.

"Cutters," female elders in the village who have learned the practice from

their mothers or another female mentor, use a knife, scalpel or other sharp object, often without sterilizing it, and almost always without using anesthesia. In some countries, including Egypt, there is a growing trend toward "medicalizing" the procedure, taking it out of the villages and into local hospitals or clinics. Anti-cutting activists fear this is an attempt to

legitimize cutting by cloaking it in clinical terminology and white coats.

Another trend that concerns opponents of the procedure: Girls are being cut at younger ages. While the age varies dramatically among cultures--some girls are cut as infants, others right before marriage--many

are cut right before puberty, between the ages of 7 and 10.

This risky procedure can lead to blood loss, chronic illness, even death. Short-term consequences can include bleeding, severe pain, shock and anemia. Infections from unhygienic tools and urinary tract disorders are also common, and being cut increases a woman's risk of contracting HIV. Long-term effects range from abscesses, cysts and scarring, which can cause serious problems in childbirth and pregnancy or infertility. Some communities cut open and re-close a woman's vagina before and after she gives birth, dramatically raising her risk for infection and blood loss.

Molly Melching came to Senegal in 1974 planning to study linguistics for a semester or two, then head back to the U.S. Instead, she made the West African country her home, marrying a local man, raising a daughter and creating Tostan, which means "breakthrough" in the Wolof language.

Melching doesn't talk much about her personal life, but she'll expound for hours on the academic minutiae of cultural anthropology, and she's endlessly

inspired by the women she meets in her work. She tells this story about a village meeting shortly after the human rights lesson was introduced into the Tostan curriculum: "One woman stood up and said: 'My daughter is 9, but one day I saw her standing next to the other 9-year-old girls in the village, and she looked 6. Ever since she was cut, she'd had gynecological problems. Can you imagine, that little girl with those kinds of problems? And, I know, I did that to her. That's my fault.' And we all cried that day. It was a turning point in the process."

That's just one of the scores of stories to emerge from the Tostan classrooms.

Women have described losing their daughters, sisters and nieces to the aftermath of cutting. They remember their own conflicted pain -- the searing, slicing agony of the procedure, but also the pride they felt when it was over. They were real women now, ready for husbands, for the rigors of their adult lives.

At the heart of Tostan's teaching method is what Melching calls "organized diffusion," a social scientist's term for harnessing the connections in a social structure. "Our approach revolves around community-based decision-making. When we work with one village, we're working with all the intertwined social networks, and all the villages whose livelihoods are bound up in one another's." Melching and the rest of the Tostan staff learned this critical lesson

the hard way. In the grim days that followed the Malicounda Bambara declaration, Melching was heartbroken by the abuse inflicted on the 35 women who led village's decision to end FGC. They became outcasts in their own community and neighboring villages. They were spat on, ridiculed, harassed. They were accused of taking bribes, of colluding with the white devils, of being unfeminine, or

worse, un-African.

"We went through a terrible period when we were crying all the time," says Mariama Traor, one of the women who attended the original Tostan classes. "You can't believe the noise and the confrontations."

"The people of the [nearby] Mbour village were awful to us," recalls Tako Cissokho, the midwife. "They were furious and would tell us, 'The white people came and gave you money to do this.' And there was no money. This is about knowing our human rights."

Melching was not in the habit of shying away from a fight, but she also knew this wasn't her battle. If the women's groundbreaking announcement was going to stick, it had to be because they were dedicated to an idea, not because she, or anyone else, was telling them what to do.

"I never dreamed when we created this curriculum that anyone would abandon FGC," says Melching, shaking her

region are connected--through marriage, social groups and culture. For one village to abandon the practice without involving its neighbors wasn't just impractical, it amounted to cultural suicide. "After Malicounda, we knew: Never again," says Melching. "Never again would a village do this alone."

Malicounda Bambara doesn't seem like the kind of place where insurgencies are born. Located 45 miles east of the Senegalese capital of Dakar, it looks just like every other village in the country's dry, northern region. The first part of its name means "In the home of the Malians," a reference to the migratory pattern that brought residents west from neighboring Mali, a country in which some 93 percent of girls are cut; "Bambara" is the town's dominant ethnic group.

The village, home to 3,000 people, consists of a group of low-slung buildings--a school, a meeting house, a communal kitchen space--fanned out around a large dirt field dotted with a few mango



head at the memory of that day a decade ago. "I never thought it. I never dreamed it. . . . I felt so guilty about the situation." The vicious aftermath of the Malicounda declaration served as a valuable lesson for Melching and the Tostan staff. The problem wasn't the declaration itself, it was the fact that the village--and the Tostan approach--hadn't taken into account the extent to which communities in the

trees and one large baobab tree, its thick, ancient branches the sole source of shade from the brutal midday sun. Arid winds bring sand from the encroaching Sahara, coating the cheaply constructed buildings with a thin brown film.

Outside the main village lies a string of small compounds, each consisting of rooms for the head of the family, his wives and their children, a kitchen and

a shared outdoor space. Laundry flutters from clotheslines, children and chickens run from one another, kicking up red dust.

Before the summer of 1997, no one would have guessed this unassuming place would become a national symbol in a movement centuries in the making.

For Cissokho, whose work as the village's midwife had exposed her to the worst of cutting's aftereffects, the women's decision was necessary. "I had been trying to get the village to abandon FGC for years," she said in an interview earlier this year. "I didn't know how to get the message across because no one would listen to me."

But people did listen, she found, when Tostan provided information, rather than lecturing at the villagers. "I'd been saying

these things for years," she says, "but I wasn't giving them the information they needed."

At first, the women of Malicounda didn't get much help from their husbands and brothers. "We were humiliated, and the men in the village told us we had to stop talking about [cutting]. So we said, 'Fine, you can have your opinion, but we are not going back, whether you like it or not.'" "Eventually, the men, many of whom said they were shocked to learn what happened during the cutting ritual, came around.

"We never backed down," says Cissokho. "I am proud that no matter how hard things got, we never abandoned our beliefs."

Villagers in nearby Keur Simbara, another Bambara community, were already taking up the cause. After completing the Tostan program, they were thinking of making their own declaration. But first, the elders insisted, they had to consult the surrounding villages and their villages back in Mali.

In the 12 months following the Ma-

licounda declaration, another 13 villages, including Keur Simbara, abandoned cutting. In 2001, another 173 villages followed suit. From 2002 to 2007, at least 1,820 villages officially denounced the practice. This year, Tostan announced a new goal: ending FGC in Senegal by the year 2012.

Tostan's unprecedented success is based on finding--and pushing beyond--the tipping point in communal behavior. "As the critical mass grows," says Melch-



ing, "and more and more people declare, we have seen that many who initially opposed it are now actively campaigning for abandonment."

Over the years, reports have surfaced charging that the public declarations are simply for show, that cutting continues in those villages, it's just been driven further underground. Like the rest of the Tostan staff, Melching is largely unruffled by these charges. "Tostan knows that 100 percent of the population doesn't always abandon FGC during the public declaration," she says. One woman, Melching remembers, came to see her in 1998 to explain that while her village had declared recently that it would abandon the practice, there were women who couldn't give it up just yet.

"It seems that her ethnic group marries into communities that refuse to intermarry with those who've made the public declaration," Melching says. So the woman recruited others, and they began visiting the resistant villages together.

In April 2000, this new community came out against FGC. This bittersweet

history was very much on Melching's mind in August, when thousands gathered in Malicounda Bambara for a triumphant celebration of "the Amazons who dared."

The crowds moved slowly along the roads of the tiny village, inching like a lethargic snake behind the lumbering pickup trucks, blaring celebratory music and honking their horns. Groups of girls in white Tostan T-shirts carried hand-lettered signs listing the towns and regions

that had made public declarations. As they passed under the entrance to the square, sandy field in the town center, a banner twisted between two poles, its careful lettering rendered unreadable by the wind.

The women of Malicounda Bambara, who had been preparing for this day for months, had dressed carefully in matching bright

blue boubous, a traditional, draped shift dress. They stood watching the throng make its way toward the center of the village. The sun was relentless, and the women were eager to find a spot in the shade.

They wore their celebrity with typical, unsmiling composure, greeting the strangers who had come to celebrate their audacity. This included a large group from Mbour village who had vilified the women after their declaration in 1997, and as recently as last year had refused to even discuss the subject.

"I am 60 years old. I was a cutter for 30 years. It was a practice I inherited from my mother, who inherited it from her mother. And I taught it to my own daughter . . . I can't even count the number of girls I've cut. Ten years ago, I stopped."

Oureye Sall, an ebullient, compact woman, was speaking to a well-dressed crowd on the roof of New York's Waldorf-Astoria hotel. She is there with Melching, who was receiving the \$1.5 million Hilton Humanitarian Prize,

awarded to Tostan from a group of 250 applicant programs.

"I was married at 8 and had my first child at 15. Many of my children have died," she told the room, now silent, the sound of forks against china replaced by the rise and fall of Sall's voice. "It was only when I went to the Tostan classes, and we began studying human rights and health and hygiene, that I began to think more about cutting, and about the things that had always bothered me instinctively, but that I could never quite articulate."

Since then, Sall has become one of Tostan's star emissaries, traveling with fellow elders to far-flung villages. She carries one of her old razor blades with her and will sometimes elaborate, in a low, even voice, on the procedure itself and the pain it causes. She has experienced it firsthand, not only as a woman who was cut as a child, but as a mother who nearly lost her daughter to hemorrhage. This experience, and her role as a former cutter, gives her credibility when she answers those who wonder: Did Tostan pay her to stop cutting girls? Didn't they come in and force her village to give up the practice?

"Money could not have encouraged me; there was no way I could have been paid to end this practice," Sall said in New York. "I was making far too much money as a cutter for Tostan to replace that money. It was only the education, the knowledge of the consequences . . . [that] confirmed my sense that the practice was not the right thing to do."

In a conversation about cutting, someone invariably will introduce the issue of cultural relativism--the idea that there are no universal absolute definitions of "right" and "wrong." Instead, the argument goes, each culture or society has the right to determine its own code of conduct. Who are we to force our Western ideas on people who have lived for centuries without the benefit of our intrusive, culturally imperialistic "help"?

Gerry Mackie is an assistant professor of political

science at the University of California at San Diego and an authority on normative political theory and social choice. Mackie, along with University of Chicago professor Martha Nussbaum, is widely credited with creating the model upon which Tostan's methodology is based.

For many years, Mackie says, "Anthropologists insisted that human emotions are relative from culture to culture. That belief has been robustly falsified. I argue that if one lived in the circumstances, one would have one's daughter cut as well, but that is not the same as saying that it is 'right for them.' " "It simply means, he says, that the key is for everyone to give up the practice together, so that girls' marriageability is preserved.

Mackie remembers asking a group of Senegalese women about the idea of preserving tradition in their village. "The women said they did not want to be a museum exhibit for European tourists," he says. "They want better lives for their children. They also say that they love their traditions, just as we do, but will change any that they discover to be mistaken."

Melching is a tall, solidly built woman, with short chestnut hair and a smattering of freckles across her nose. She often wears traditional Senegalese clothing, and when she's in the villages, she's surrounded by a group of chattering women; she chatters back at them in their language, her loud, staccato laughter rising above the din.

At our first meeting she's in Western

garb, a turquoise wrap sweater draped over a black shirt and pants. Her large hands are in constant motion, heavy silver rings flashing in the sunlight that bounces into her office on the second floor of Tostan's headquarters in Yoff, a fishing village located at Dakar's northernmost point.

The offices feel more like a home than a place of business. Everyone--staff, volunteers, drivers--eats lunch together, sitting on the floor around platters heaped with spicy rice mixed with meat and fish. It's the most democratic of meals, typical of both Senegal and the environment Melching cultivates.

She was raised in a working-class family in Danville, a blue-collar town 120 miles south of Chicago. Her sister, Diane Gillespie, now a professor of arts and sciences at the University of Washington-Bothell, remembers that their parents nurtured their daughters' creativity.

"They gave us both piano lessons, and we were always surrounded by music," says Gillespie. "I remember 'Tristan and Isolde' was always blaring through the house."

An industrious student--at least in the subjects she loved--Melching was president of the high school French club and spent a summer in France. After graduating with a B.A. from the University of Illinois, she spent a year teaching in an inner-city public school in Toledo. "That really affected her," says Gillespie. "She'd always had these really principled ideas about education--you can't do any-



thing from the outside-in, change has to come from the inside-out,” but that year in the trenches brought the theory to life.

In 1974, as a graduate student at Illinois, Melching became the first participant in the university’s fledgling exchange program with the University of Dakar. Her goal was to study Franco-phone African literature under famed anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop.

“She’s always told the same story about the moment she set foot in Senegal,” says Gillespie. “She just fell in love. And she’s never really come back.”

Melching was initially drawn to the question of language in Senegal, a particularly delicate subject for an indigenous people expected to function in a colonial language--in this case, French--while local languages, most notably Wolof, were either suppressed or ignored.

Stunned by the lack of reading material available to schoolchildren, Melching wrote a book in Wolof called “Anniko.” She later helped create a children’s center in Dakar, where kids could learn, sing and perform in Wolof.

This was a critical moment for Melching’s future in Senegal, says Michael Gibbons, a Washington, D.C.-based education consultant and Tostan board member.

“The language you were born into and grow up speaking is the language you can learn in, feel powerful in,” he says. In 1982, Melching and other volunteers began developing an educational program based on their collective experience and, more critically, feedback from village elders and participants. The three-year immersion formed the roots of Tostan.

Twenty-five years later, Tostan is widely considered the blueprint for all campaigns to end female cutting. The organization also addresses other issues, including the lack of adequate educational opportunities for girls, the mounting problem of the talibes (children in certain religious schools who beg in city streets as part of their education) and creating financial opportunities for women.

She has spoken to international management groups, to health consortia, to the UN--all eager to understand how this woman from Illinois created a program

that fits seamlessly into the Senegalese way of life.

Melching counts among her supporters some big names in Washington, including Sens. Hillary Clinton and Dick Durbin, who has pushed for increased foreign aid focused on female health issues.

“I’m very impressed with Molly,” Durbin says. “She is not in Senegal to dictate U.S. policy to the Senegalese. She’s there working with communities to help them make choices to safeguard the well-being of girls and women.”

If you ask Melching to explain Tostan’s success, she’ll never mention herself as a critical factor. She says that all she did was push “a snowball,” and the programs gained speed and power. Her goal, she says, is to make every Tostan regional office--in Senegal, Somalia, Gambia, Guinea and Mauritania--autonomous.

“We want them to be equipped to meet the needs of their region,” she says. “To be strong enough in management and in grant-writing to see what their needs are and translate that into proposals. And then we can support them in helping their local populations.”

It also means Melching and her husband, Malick Diagne, Tostan’s deputy director, can concentrate on fundraising and big-picture plans, which include expanding Tostan’s global reach. When I point out that handing over the reins to local offices isn’t part of the MBA playbook, Melching laughs. “That’s why so many [non-profits] in Africa have failed,” she says. “They’ve had all these management problems.” A lot of their money, she notes, goes to big offices and big salaries in the U.S. “So I wondered how to do this in a way that puts all of the money in Africa. I’m the only paid American staffer in Africa, and I keep my salary low.” (Public tax records show she earns less than \$50,000 a year.) “We decided . . . to run [an] organization, where people are empowered at all levels.”

Melching also takes pains to remember that while she may feel Senegalese, she’s still perceived by some in her adopted country as a privileged white foreigner.

“She’s expended a lot of effort to overcome that obstacle,” says Gibbons, the Tostan board member. She’s fluent in two African languages, including the purest form of Wolof, which once moved her housekeeper to tears. “She couldn’t get over it,” says Gillespie. “She just kept saying, ‘You speak Wolof like my grandmother did.’”

By the end of the long, celebratory weekend in August marking the Malicounda Bambara declaration, Melching looked drained, her usual exuberance slightly dulled by 48 hours of nonstop activity. She’d attended meetings, held press conferences and danced under the hot African sun. She’d been embraced by crowds of men and women and scores of children, including girls who will never be cut, thanks to Tostan.

“I know she’s so proud of what happened in Malicounda,” says Gillespie. That pride came at a steep price, paid by both Melching and the women of the village, whose determination to stand by their decision to end FGC caught even Melching off guard. “Molly called [me] and said, ‘I told them they didn’t have to do this.’” her sister recalls.

“And so I told her, ‘Do you know what, Molly? Where there are two women, there is hope. And where there are 35, they can change the world.’”