Shell-Duncan, Bettina and Ylva Hernlund. 2000. “Female “Circumcision” in Africa: Dimensions

of the Practice and Debates.” Pp. 1-40 in *Female “Circumcision” in Africa: Culture,*

*Controversy, and Change,* edited by Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hernlund. London:

Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000) introduce this anthology of papers focused on the practice of female circumcision in Africa. First, they point out this is a highly debated topic due to concerns of “cultural relativism, international human rights, racism and Western imperialism, medicalization, sexuality, and patriarchal oppression of women” (p. 1). This first chapter in the book first provides definitions of the practice as categorized by the World Health Organization (WHO) and statistics compiled by others, carefully cautioning the reader to be critical of some of the information because some cannot be wholly verified. Furthermore, it is challenging to document the scale of the practice in all regions as well as whether the practice is increasing or decreasing, due to various cultural behaviors (it is a private matter to most) and where the practice is not a traditional one, it has been newly introduced.

Additionally, this chapter highlights the ongoing debates concerning the practice, focusing on cultural relativist and Universalist viewpoints. An interesting observation is their use of the term “circumcision” always in quotes. They state their reasoning for this is because they are “acknowledging the imprecision of the term” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000, p. 7). A person might wonder if they really want to use the term “Female Genital Mutilation” (FGM) but do not want to give the impression of cultural insensitivity; however, placing the term in quotes could give the same impression.

While some resolutions for decreasing or eradicating FC include rites that do not include actual circumcision, the authors warn some communities may feel forced or coerced into changing their traditions due to threats of “withholding economic assistance” which can have far greater detrimental effects (p. 38). Clearly, the whole of a community should be taken into consideration and change should come from within communities. With the debates regarding this practice are highly socio-politically charged, it remains to be seen how to get governments providing economic assistance to understand there might exist better solutions to decreasing or even eradicating harmful cultural practices such as FC than punishing them by withholding much needed help