

The Day Kadi Lost Part of Her Life

Kim Manresa, photos; Isabel Ramos Rioja, text
North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press, 1998

Reviewed by Ruthe Thompson

Documentary literature and film on the practice of female genital mutilation may prepare readers for the painful images in this difficult book, but the volume's format makes its content particularly unsettling. Presented as a collection of photographic illustrations with sentence-long captions, the book looks like an over-sized children's book or coffee-table volume. Yet the photographic journey of four-year-old Kadi and her younger sisters on the day of their ritual circumcision is hardly child's tale or display text. This important book depicts in graphic detail the emotion and betrayal experienced by "every little girl who lives in a community where to be loved, married, and held in high esteem requires you to be genitally mutilated," as Dr. Olayinka Koso-Thomas writes in the book's prologue.

Award-winning Spanish photographer Kim Manresa captures Kadi's innocence and foreshadows her suffering. On the volume's front cover, the young African girl looks sideways at the camera, arms open and chest bare as she dresses just after waking on the day she and her three- and one-year-old sisters travel to a remote village to be mutilated. Kadi's expression in the cover shot is guileless, though not wholly trusting of the stranger with a camera. She gains confidence in subsequent photographs, sticking out her tongue and mugging playfully for the photographer. The reader is struck by the young girl's enthusiasm and lack of concern on this day when her sexual organs will be damaged forever: she obviously has no idea what is in store for her.

Journalist Isabel Ramos Rioja's brief captions describe the scene in each photo, while her introductory text gives the history and global incidence of female genital mutilation and a longer narrative of the day spent with Kadi and her sisters. Rioja describes their father's arrangements for the mutilation, despite government proscriptions against female circumcision in their country. Manresa's photographs emphasize Kadi's pain during the cutting rather than the procedure itself, although the book includes close-ups of a woman's hands excising the clitoris of another one-year old girl on a different occasion in the same country. Like the rest of the book, these close-up shots are illustrative rather than clinical. The substitution of a different child in these images is noted opposite the title page and does not detract from the book's documentary quality.

Manresa's final photograph, reproduced on the back cover as well as inside the volume, again shows Kadi looking sideways. But unlike the cover shot, her gaze turns away from the camera towards the wall of the hut where her sexual

organ has been removed with a dull razor, and without anaesthetic. Behind her, the female “buankisa,” or circumciser, washes the girls’ blood from the area. In this photo, Kadi’s formerly open, easy stance has closed. Her arms wind a piece of dark fabric tightly around her naked frame, and her facial features are newly marked with pain, mistrust, and despair. Eyes narrowed, Kadi’s feet stand slightly apart and unsteady on the hut’s dirt floor. Bloody footprints mark the earth behind her. Blood from a chicken sacrificed before the mutilation spatters the walls.

Like this final shot, earlier photographs of the weeping Kadi and her sisters underscore the girls’ suffering. These photos depict the aftermath of what seems from the prefatory text to be a “sunna” circumcision entailing partial or total excision of the clitoris—the type of female genital mutilation most practiced in central Africa where the book’s events apparently take place. A single drawback to this volume is its lack of specific context. There is only a partial indication of where Kadi lives, making it difficult to ascertain what country she is from or what kind of female genital mutilation typically is performed in her culture. It seems to be primarily a Muslim region, though Rioja notes that Christians and animists in the area also practice the tradition. The country is called “sub-Saharan” and Rwanda is mentioned in Rioja’s introduction, but this information is not given straightforwardly. The omission may be deliberate, as Rioja writes that the Ministry of Health in Kadi’s country has “initiated one of the most significant anti-female circumcision campaigns in any African country.” While powerful, the book would be stronger still with more precise information.

Boundary Bay

Rishma Dunlop

Winnipeg: Staccato Chapbooks, 2000

Reviewed by Cassie Premo Steele

In the best of these poems, hawks and herons, wetlands and berries fade, and couples come into focus— a mother and daughter; a daughter and her potential lover; a husband and wife; a woman and her lover. These are intimate poems of love for our daughters’ delicacy (even as they paint their fingernails blue); of longing for a husband’s presence as the years, like tides, wash him away; of the need for grounding in the lives we have chosen, even as we remember those from whom we have walked away.