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Victorian Clitoridectomy:
Isaac Baker Brown and His Harmless Operative Procedure

Recent publicity concerning the World Health Organization's investigation of the practice of clitoridectomy and infibulation in Muslim countries has served to arouse controversy while at the same time allowing Westerners, including otherwise detached social scientists, to view such practices as being rooted in ideologies totally foreign to those of the West. Criticism too deeply imbued with a sense of ethical and scientific superiority is not only inconsistent with the anthropological perspective but may well be damaging to anthropology in its relationship with the Third World. In an attempt to overcome such negative cultural stereotyping and to examine the persistent connection between belief system and medical practice, this paper will discuss the use of clitoridectomy in Victorian England and its consequences for a gynecological surgeon named Isaac Baker Brown.

The Victorian Context

For many educated Victorians, the nineteenth century heralded a new age governed by science and reason. It appeared to middle-class men such as Isaac Baker Brown that at no other time in modern history was the distinction between savagery and civilization so evident to the intelligent mind. The actions of British gentlemen were viewed as being determined by logic and Christian morality, while those of Africa and India were seen as being determined by dangerous ignorance and myth. James Brain writes that "the apparently bizarre and often bloody features" of such peoples "served to

instill a sense of comforting superiority in the breasts of scholars in the technologically developed countries” (1977:191).

Ironically, during the same period when British anthropology was beginning to catalog the strange behavior of the British Empire’s colonized peoples, British gynecological medicine of the mid-nineteenth century was engaging in practices equally strange, certainly at least as “unscientific,” and clearly ritual in nature. The current reevaluation of Victorian social attitudes, found particularly in areas of research such as women’s history and the professionalization of medicine, provide a new perspective through which to view the role of the “women’s specialist” in a society changing rapidly in the face of scientific development, political awareness, and social unrest. In many instances, professional medical attitudes of the period synthesize wider cultural attitudes of Victorian England. In this context, the brief but dramatic practice of clitoridectomy by British doctors gains significance beyond that of the sensational oddity.

Isaac Baker Brown was an eminent obstetrical surgeon in the London of the 1850s. His practice was devoted to the diseases of women, and even today textbooks still refer to his development of procedures that helped lay the foundations of modern gynecological surgery. Yet his contributions to gynecology were inextricably linked to the Victorian medical theory of biological determinism, and viewed from a contemporary feminist perspective, Brown’s lifework appears to be a classic example of upright intentions combined with medical misogyny. He advocated the use of chloroform to relieve the pain of parturition, but by doing so he ultimately encouraged the development of an obstetrical imperative that removed control over childbirth from women and placed it in the hands of doctors. More questionably, Brown’s acceptance of the mid-nineteenth-century “Psychology of the Ovary” theory, whereby all medical and emotional problems of women were considered to be based on some internal malfunction of the ovaries, rationalized his frequent practice of ovariotomy as a cure for female emotional disorders. Yet while there is no defense of his use of clitoridectomy or of the manner in which he performed this operation, an examination of the material concerning the scandal of clitoridectomy in Victorian England ultimately reflects more on the behavior of the British medical profession in its scapegoating of Brown than on Brown himself.

**Brown’s Practice of Clitoridectomy**

Born in 1812, Isaac Baker Brown grew up in a medical family and, at an early age, qualified as a surgeon. His success as an “accoucheur,” an