Assigned Reading: *Aman: The Story of a Somali Girl* and “African Women Gather to Denounce Genital Cutting”

**Introduction**

Over the course of this semester we have asked questions about otherness, about ourselves, about identity and we have asked ourselves about the role of objectivity vs. subjectivity – the insider vs. the outsider - in our quest for understanding otherness. We have sought to compare absolutism with relativism, and tried to suggest a means of dealing with the “dichotomy” between the two.

It seems to me that the answer to the question posed by today’s title (Aman: Individual or Type?) is obvious. In any case while the lecture may not seem to have as its main focus finding an answer to that question I believe that we will arrive at the answer by the time we have finished discussing the book. At the end of the lecture we will return to that question. What I would like to do is spend considerable time analyzing *Aman* as it relates to some of the ideas we have already introduced and which are important to our quest to inhabit other lives. As we do so I want you to bear in mind the following questions:

- Is Aman insider? Outsider? or both?
- Can we trust her account?
- In the study of other cultures what, if anything is our responsibility?
- Some will say that our responsibility is to simply educate ourselves about the object of study. Do you agree with that position?

I will divide the lecture into two basic parts. The first will examine the story as a 1st person account and discuss its contribution to our understanding of Somali culture. The second will focus on cultural relativity vs. responsibility and how these apply to *Aman*. 
Aman

(Using slide with map) Now I am assuming you have all read the entire book. What is it about?
It is essentially the autobiography of a Somali girl identified by the pseudonym ‘Aman’ during the early years of her life – from birth to about the age of 19. We know from the title that Aman is from Somalia – a country in East Africa just north of Kenya and east of Ethiopia. It has experienced political turbulence (military rule/civil war). Population mostly homogenous: 85% Somali 15% Bantu and other non-Somali including Arabs.

Aman: provides a first person account in keeping with a strong oral history which is the tradition of her people. In this 1st person account we see a Somali observing Somali culture. Does this remind you of anything we have covered this semester?

Persian Letters is somewhat similar in the sense that a Parisian observes Parisians by pretending to be Persian. He sheds some light on Persian culture…but from what perspective? Parisian. He judges/comments on Persian culture – but from his perspective. Some of his comments are good; some are bad.

What about White Castle? Here we have a Turk observing ancient Turk and Italian cultures through interaction between the two…

At the beginning of the semester we asked about the vantage point of the insider vs. that of the outsider. Over the course of the semester that question has recurred as might be expected in the exploration of otherness.

Is the account objective or subjective? Well – let’s just assume that as the story is being told by Aman about Aman’s life…that this is the subjective account of an insider. In my last lecture we discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the latter. One of the weaknesses was based on concerns that the actor/insider is not always aware of the motivations behind his actions. In other words, we are not always analyzing what we do as a people; in general we take our culture (norms, habits) for granted. Is this true of Aman? Why do you say so? What view does she give us of her culture? Is she inside it? Outside it? Both?
I think that Aman, as insider, is a little bit of both. Janice Boddy writes in the foreword that Aman is “equivocal about her culture.” Let’s look at some examples:

**Aman: Outside her culture:**

Boddy also claims that Aman is ambivalent about her rebellion. So Boddy, views Aman as a bit of a rebel. Do you agree? Where do you see rebellion?

- Running away from her husband.
- Dating white boys

Aman is critical about parts of her culture – but what exactly? What is Aman’s view of her culture? She hopes things will get better for girls in her country – that they should have more freedom (what does she mean by “freedom”?).

“I hope for myself and for my people we can give a chance to our daughters so they don’t have to run away to find freedom, but can learn, stay in school. [...] we should trust and respect each other: girls should listen to their parents and respect their parents, but also there should be respect given to girls. It’s about trust: they should get love and a little freedom – otherwise the daughters will suffer like I did.” [p. 288]

She talks about freedom of opportunity: having the chance to learn, stay in school – she had that chance, gave it up. She talks about wanting “freedom” as a young girl: -- freedom from what? Freedom to do what? Choose her life? She CHOOSES to get married – but why?

“…once I was married, I could divorce and they wouldn’t say I was a girl, they’d say I was a woman, a divorced woman. I’d have a little freedom. I could do what I wanted.” [p. 104]

I DO think she was rebelling against the strictures placed on her. She decries primarily the lack of opportunity and freedom for young girls who are expected to marry and depend on their husbands.
But I would argue that Aman is mostly accepting of her culture. In fact she defends various aspects of her culture, some that to Westerners are frankly shocking!

She defends:
- The *diya* system – payback/reparation
- Divorce – a system that she seems to love (her mother/herself) – possible means of freedom
- Tribal/familial support
- Female circumcision – We will return to that later.

She judges herself and others by her cultural values – accepting them

- rich kids are spoiled: “They didn’t want to date Somalis.”
  “These girls were educated, they had finished high school, but
- they still brought shame to their daddy.” “…their kids all ended up bad…alcoholic, or with white men.” [p. 223]
- value of virginity: she is ashamed when she is disvirgined (raped!):
  “I lost everything I had, so easily.” [p. 179]
  “I had killed my name.” [p. 180]
- being *nashuusha, sharmuuto*: feels shame, lies about being nashuusha, lies about her behavior to her family. Also: rationalizes (?) her behavior: describes how there are “different levels” of *sharmuuto* among those others call *sharmuuto* and how these distinctions are important. [p. 241]. She doesn’t consider herself a prostitute really – except at end, with baby that dies. But she doesn’t ask for money from men, she just hopes that afterwards, they’ll give her something. “I was doing it a different way, but I was one of the prostitutes.” [p. 283]
- thinks circumcised women are better: “That part of a Somali woman is covered and closed—it looks better.” “I know myself that we smell better and are less dirty than women who are uncircumcised.” [p. 280]

So in a sense she is both outside and inside of her culture. As outsider she is able to criticize the aspects of her culture that she finds objectionable. As insider, she displays a sort of passive acceptance of how things are. She says more than once: “that’s our culture”.
Aside: Does the above duality help you answer the question about whether Aman is individual or type? Do you see a bit of both perhaps?

Let’s continue to examine *Aman* as an insider’s account. We have heretofore raised questions about the validity of the subjective account of the insider. The foreword claims that the book: “…expose(s) the hidden framework of culture, religion, and morality that shapes her own and others’ acts.”

How successful is the book in this regard? What do we learn about Aman’s culture?

- Somali society is patriarchal – rule of the father; male dominance; women are generally subordinate to men (ask for examples)
- Somali society is patrilineal – Aman says “father is your main blood” (ix) (Interesting note: but mother’s relatives (unofficially) supportive. Can find cousins/family anywhere – strong support.
- Society is nomadic, tribal: camel economy,
- chiefs are negotiators, judges
- religion: Islam – important to be “clean”; no marriage to infidels
- female circumcision is a firmly rooted custom

Much of the above can be easily tested against “objective” empirical data. In fact, my research has shown that the society that is described by Aman did exist – and in some ways still exists today. However it is important to note that the account was given in a foreign context, and written for foreigner and by (except for Aman of course) foreigners. It is not written for a Somali audience of insiders. For this reason we must assume that some issues will be emphasized more than others to benefit audience. Ask: Think about it, have you ever told the same story to two entirely different people and found that you modified it a bit for each person? Perhaps because you instinctively knew that one person might not appreciate or approve of certain parts?

We are told in the foreword that Virginia Lee Barnes who began the work but died before she could publish, had long searched for a Somali woman who might tell the story of her life. She wrote:

I knew that if I found such woman, she would tell a wonderful story, because Somali culture has its own high narrative tradition; Somalis
are known throughout the world as a nation of poets – a people who are masters of the verbal art.” (viii)

Boddy writes that the tale is “…life-as-lived into life-as-told.” And Aman claims: …”this is my story. It is also the story of many, many other girls.” [288] The question is – how well does this story represent reality?

Some readers at Amazon.com don’t agree that the story represents reality. Here are two examples:

“Not a good start for anyone working with Somali people as the book distorts the whole truth of how Somalis treat "their" women. This was a girl who at her young age, fell in love with an Italian boy and slept with many different men mostly Italian settlers while roaming around Mogadishu's red lights. The book does not give even a bird's eye viewpoint of what life a Somali woman has in Somalia and the way she is treated in her community. Readers should consult with more other books or observe the Somali community in their country.”

“As I said in my summary this story lacks the reality [sic] for the life of millions of somali womans [sic], It is a baseless story which I believe made up by this girl and those who help her writing this book.”

Here are some contrasting views that I found:

"A rare feat: a glimpse of traditional and modern Africa from a female point of view." --Maclean's (Canada)

"An intimate, personal account, beautifully eloquent, gripping, and illuminating.... Even more compelling than the ups and downs of Aman's life is what she manages to unveil about her society, religion, and culture." --Detroit Free Press

I will leave you to choose your viewpoint. But bear in mind my earlier point: Aman is speaking to foreigners, the book is written for a foreign audience, the two writers are foreigners and we must ask ourselves how much of what we read is affected by all of this.

Pt. 2 Cultural Relativism, Ethnocentrism and Aman – Responsibility?
I’d like to move on to the second part of the lecture.

In his last lecture Prof. Garrote asserted that we are by nature evaluative beings-creatures who have particular values, and who make evaluations. Our evaluations and values, he said, are context–driven as they are influenced by our cultural inheritances. How then, he asked, can we “legitimately pass judgment on moralities other than our own?” We may choose the absolutist position which assumes “that of the various moral positions at most one can be true, the rest must be false”. Or we may choose the position of moral relativists who assert that there is no “single, absolute, moral truth.” For moral relativists “‘right and wrong’ or ‘good and bad’ are discriminations which may be made only from within a particular cultural perspective…”

In his lecture Professor Garrote also distinguished between “moral relativism and cultural relativism” While not identical to moral relativism, cultural relativism also rejects universalism in the evaluation of other cultures. Cultural relativists reject the notion that any one culture is superior to others; cultural relativism asserts instead that all cultures are of equal value. The ideas that were eventually subsumed under the title “cultural relativism” were introduced by American anthropologist, Franz Boas early in the 20th century. Though Boas never actually used the term (it was coined and popularized by his students after his death in the late 1940s) it is essentially based on the principle that the beliefs/customs/activities of any one culture make sense in only terms that culture. Any attempt at evaluation of that those beliefs or activities therefore can only be done as they relate to that particular context.

Examples:

1. Yol – scene at the end when one character commits to marrying his brother’s wife (brother has just died) even though he is in love with someone else. Our reaction is based on our belief in marriage for love. But for women in Turkey at that time (who were not educated and could not work) this was a means of protecting and providing for women.

2. Students of anthropologist Marvin Harris asked for an explanation for why Hindus in India who are often desperately poor refuse to eat beef.
Drove Harris to further study and he discovered:

- Cows provide about 500 pounds of milk a year – critical for family diet.
- Cow’s manure is the only fertilizer that poor farmers can afford.
- When dried the manure serves as a primary cooking fuel
- Cows can give birth to a calf that when castrated will develop into an ox – highly prized animal for dry-field plowing.

(Sociology: An Introduction, 86)

So while not used for meat, cows perform important functions that relate to survival!

Cultural relativism is in a sense, a response (or perhaps an alternative) to what is commonly known as ethnocentrism. While I believe we all understand what constitutes ethnocentrism I’ll offer a definition for students who may not be quite sure. Coined by Sociologist William Sumner Graham in 1906 (Schaefer 2001), the term “ethnocentrism” is defined by one of Boas’ students Melville Herskovits as “…the point of view that one’s own way of life is to be preferred to all others” (Herskovits 1973:21).

One might say then, that ethnocentrism is exactly what it sounds like…ie the idea that one’s own ethnic group and the sentiments/values/customs of that group are superior to those of any other ethnic group. If I asked (and I am asking) how many of you would honestly say that you are ethnocentric…what would you say?) I expected every hand would be raised…as I frankly believe that ethnocentrism is one sentiment that we all share…but of which we may not even be aware. But I realize I may be wrong. I am certain that not one of us here watched the movie Yol and said “Boy am I glad that I am American” or “Boy am I glad that I was raised in America”. I am even more certain that none of us in this room has ever traveled to another country and criticized everything we observed or experienced based on American standards.

And as for us immigrants! I am certain that not one of us in this room who is an immigrant (or an international student intending to return home after graduation) has viewed aspects of what we deem to be American culture with disdain, simply because it is NOT the way we do things back home!

However, I do not wish to spend too much time here discussing ethnocentric attitudes. Rather I wanted to show that Boas, Herskovits and others who have held to cultural relativism have done so as part of their rejection of the ethnocentric ideas and attitudes shared by early anthropologists. For such
individuals any claim to the existence in any culture of absolute standards by which other cultures may be judged is just another form of ethnocentrism.

So what does all of this have to do with Aman? We have been talking about Aman as an insider and we have said that as insider she both criticizes and defends her culture. Does the insider have more authority to judge his/her culture? Does their insider status seem to give their views some validity?

How then about the outsider? We have just heard that according to relativists – one cannot judge another culture using the standards of another. Do you agree?

Increasingly scholars (some of them anthropologists) and human rights activists have challenged relativistic policies that advocate non-interference in other cultures partly on the grounds that it leads to apathy. I will share one example. Professor Henry Bagish writes in an essay he titles “Confessions of a Former Cultural Relativist” challenging two conclusions which he says that relativists have drawn in error:

- all cultural practices are equally valid
- all cultural practices are equally worthy of tolerance and respect

Let’s look at the first conclusion: all cultural practices are equally valid. According to Bagish this conclusions is based on two assumptions:

1. That all cultural practices by performing positive functions meet the needs of that society and are thus valid. Bagish disagrees and argues that most practices perform both positive and negative functions. All cultures are therefore imperfect and all cultures can be improved.

2. That there is no scientifically valid way of evaluating cultures. In response to this assumption, Bagish says while there may be no scientifically valid way of evaluating whole cultures, it is possible to evaluate specific practices on a non-ethnocentric basis. (42)

Bagish proposes solution: The Pragmatic Principle

By this principle evaluation is done based on what works better. He says:
Any belief or practice that enables human beings to predict and control events in their lives, with a higher degree of success than previous beliefs or practices did, can be said to “work better.” (43)

Share example of the Dani in New Guinea and the stone adze vs. steel axe. The Dani deemed the steel axe to be more effective in chopping trees and chopping wood therefore sought to acquire the latter.

To the second of the two conclusions – all cultural practices are equally worthy of tolerance and respect, Bagish suggests that the solution is to establish a hierarchy of values in which compassion is at the top. He asserts that while tolerance is one of his most treasured values, if there are cultural practices that evoke our compassion, if we suffer with those who endure such experiences, if we wince at the thought of the pain, then tolerance and respect become lesser values.

So let me ask you that question: are all cultural practices worthy of tolerance and respect?

What about practices like:
- Human sacrifice?
- The Dani practice of chopping off little girls’ fingers? (Bagish)
- Female circumcision (Female Genital Mutilation)?

Do you think the practice should be eradicated? How many say no? How many say yes? If you said yes then you are a moral absolutist. It is wrong to you because of your value system. Let’s look at some “objective” facts that surround this practice:

See Handout:

We noted before that Aman defends circumcision. What does she say about her own?

Identity/Belonging:

“... I wanted everyone to be proud of me.” [p. 55]
“They did it because they love me.” [p. 57, said to Mama]
“Several times a week you can see girls in a crowd, checking each other’s circumcisions. If you weren’t circumcised, the other girls wouldn’t talk to you or play with you.” [p.76]

Purity/Chastity

“A girl who is sewn won’t play around, because she is scared of the pain, and she’s scared her family will be able to tell when they check her every week.” [p. 59]

Aman on efforts to eradicate female circumcision:

Europeans are “trying to educate Africans about circumcision. But would they accept it if I educated them to circumcise? This is my culture, my religion, and I don’t believe another nation can take away another nation’s culture.” [p. 280] (Relativistic?)

Why would Aman (whom you might recall is critical of and rebels against certain aspects of her culture) support a practice that for most of us in the Western world seems so barbaric (not to mention painful, dangerous and even deadly!) And Aman is not alone in her support of FGM. Read interviews from Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar’s *Warrior Marks*

Whether we can *identify* with the sentiments expressed here or not it is clear that this practice is extremely important to members of the societies in which it is performed. If you read the article in your coursepack that was assigned for today you know there is a growing outcry among African women against the practice. However, based on the figures reported, it is still a widely accepted and practiced procedure. How do you feel about the reasons some supporters have given (it’s our tradition; it’s our religion; it’s a way of belonging.) Do these seem trite to you? Is tradition not important? Is a sense of belonging not important? Aminata (from Warrior Marks) was disowned by her family because she refused to be circumcised. She broke down in tears as she described her estranged relationship with her mother. Her fiancé refused to support her. Her mother (who was later incorrectly accused of helping) was also excommunicated and at the time of the interview still resented Aminata for bringing this ‘shame’ to her and the family. How much of that pressure could you stand? Is it still difficult to understand why so many girls and women continue to support the practice?
I want to return to the question I asked earlier: in the study of other cultures, do we have a responsibility? Or is it enough to simply say: It’s all relative? Does FGM fall into the category of “equally tolerable cultural practices?” Can you even find an easy answer to these questions?

Recall Bagish’s proposed solution to establish a **hierarchy of values** in which compassion is at the top.

What do **YOU** think? How effective will such a hierarchy be in convincing millions of practitioners that what they are doing is a violation of basic human rights? Especially as one of the reasons given by mothers who support the practice is **love for their daughters**!

This might be one good topic for your discussion papers.

I’ll close with the question posed by our title. Is Aman individual or type?

I know it may seem that I am choosing the easy way out by saying so but it seems to me that she is a bit of both. She is representative of her culture in her general acceptance of most of the mores, and values shared by Somalis. She is an individual in the sense that she questions – even criticizes aspects of her culture of which she disapproves. It is the individual who chooses to marry, so she can divorce and find ‘freedom’. Yet to do so she participates in the custom of marrying (for economic reasons) and she seeks to participate in the relatively easy system of divorcing. She is individual when she runs away to Mogadishu, parties and sleeps with different men. But she participates in her culture when she lies about her status to her family – ashamed of being considered a **sharmuuto**.

You may disagree with me. You may think that Aman is more individual than type or more type than individual. Another possible topic for your discussion papers!