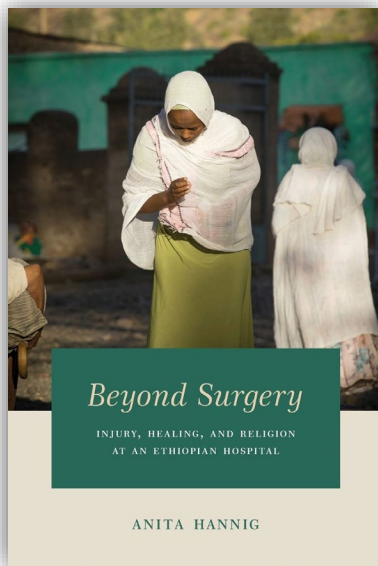


BOOK REVIEW

Beyond Surgery: Injury, Healing, and Religion at An Ethiopian Hospital

By Anita Hannig

Reviewed by Harold Wanton



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In *Beyond Surgery: Injury, Healing, and Religion at An Ethiopian Hospital*, Anita Hannig deeply investigates maternal childbirth injuries in Ethiopia. Women in Ethiopia suffer from obstetric fistula, a childbirth injury caused by a tear in and around a woman's genital tract and urinary tract and/or rectum. This is caused by prolonged and obstructed labor while giving birth without access to emergency medical support, such as c-sections, and often is experienced by very young mothers. In many cases, multiple surgical procedures are necessary to successfully cure or alleviate obstetric fistula. While journalists, non-government organizations, physicians, and celebrities have created a pseudo-narrative which has attributed this torturous childbirth injury to "backward" cultural practices (e.g., child marriage and genital mutilation), the more accurate causes of obstetric fistula, according

to Hannig, are attributable to geographical location and medical accessibility. Hannig's ethnography explores the support given to Amhara women in two medical facilities (Bahir Dar and Addis Ababa) and to Desta Mender in Ethiopia, a rehabilitation center for women with permanent obstetric fistula complications. Hannig's ethnography offers readers' an in-depth experience of the religious and communal culture that surrounds patients in Ethiopia.

In this three-part book, Anita Hannig demystifies the common narrative that women who have developed obstetric fistula are ones who have been rejected and isolated from their families and communities to suffer alone. Her work, in fact, speaks to the great extent that these women have a culture of care within their respective communities. Hannig examines the social, religious and bodily practices that are present in the local responses to fistula prior to surgery, the historical and institutional relevance of fistula repair, and the multifaceted responses to fistula repair and/or therapy. This ethnography describes the authentic and true role of kinship, religion, and culture in the extension of care to women who are incontinent. Hannig adds, "against this background [pseudo-narrative] it becomes evident that the contingencies of a woman's experience with fistula—though exhausting and complicated—nearly always leave room for her [the fistula sufferer] to assert herself as a member of some kind of a collective" (26).

One strength of this ethnography is that it is beautifully written and offers a genuine conviction reminiscent of Nancy Scheper-Hughes with her work in a Brazilian shantytown (1993). Hannig relates the Protestant history of the first fistula hospitals and their ideological notions of uncleanness and ungodliness. These notions were applied to the idea of fistula surgery, not only as a surgical procedure, but as a form of salvation for obstetric fistula sufferers.

Another strength of this body of work is the powerful case that Hannig makes that the problem lies in helper' biases while the critical issues of poverty and lack health care accessibility go unaddressed. One weakness, which Hannig alludes to in her introduction, Is that her ethnography is limited by having only studied in the confinements of the hospitals due to the lack of communication technology and inaccessibility of patients' homes.

A Christian anthropologist's perspective would engage Ethiopian culture, Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, and the biomedical crisis that many Ethiopian women face with the heightened understanding of a Christian theological perspective and the ethnographic data of an anthropologist's view of the unique variations within Ethiopian culture. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church plays an important role in the whole of Ethiopian culture. With the constant tension between cultural traditions and pseudo-narratives by outsiders, it is imperative to have an outside voice that is relatively impartial and stands above the fray of the debate, potentially a voice that is led by the call of God and motivated by a Christian concern for both healing and truth.

Beyond Surgery is a powerful and intimate ethnographic study of one of the oldest Christian cultures and of the biomedical health issues that trouble it. This text is particularly suitable for scholars, and it explores the complexities of Ethiopian culture, Christian Orthodox tradition, and biomedical anthropology. Professional scholars, anthropologists, biomedicine professionals, and global philanthropy organizations will benefit from this body of work, as it provides readers with a considerable understanding of the nature of relations between culture and health.

Reference

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1993. *Death Without Weeping*. Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press.



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