

The Cultural Lens of Genomics: South Slavic Muslim Women

By

Danica Anderson

The paper reviews trauma healing through a cultural lens investigating the Bosnian Muslim women war crimes and war survivors. Over a sixteen period working with the survivors most of whom have little if any formal education revealed their tacit knowledge and sustainability practices thus developing the cultural adjustments. Trauma shapes our genome and is epigenetic-transgenerational. Genomic methods widen the scope for understanding genes/culture as being a co-evolving process. Current research results indicate that human genes are changing due to new and not resembling something known previous environments. The new environments impart culturally learned information (biosemiotics) through oral memory traditions, a science of rituals. According to Mertus (2000), an estimated 80% of the refugees are women, mostly mothers and major caregivers. Refugee large scale patterns are forced movement extending beyond conflict and persecution; abject poverty accompanied with health issues, discrimination and no rights to education and; violence to include environmental degradation. If we can learn from the Balkan War (1991-1993) with the three million refugees that flooded Europe fleeing the war we could impart resources in dealing with the millions of Syrian refugees flooding Europe.

## Background

In this paper we will focus on understanding how women create culture and how their inner resources enable them to survive violence. The complexity of female social relationships and their environment is both natural and cultural despite poverty, illiteracy and secondary status. There has been a dramatic escalation in the scale of violence during wartime, and more and more civilians are ‘collateral damage’, which caused the United Nations to cite targeting civilians as the twentieth century product of genocides with the Balkan War (1991-94) and Rwandan genocides (Brooks 2014; Ballentine 2003). The term civilian fails to point out that women fleeing violence are 80% of refugees (Jansen 2006; Gardam 1997; Mertus 2001).

Human rights laws have not taken account of or addressed the reality of women’s experiences in wars and the aftermath of wars (Gardam 1997; Mertus 2001). There is silence and a lack of outrage at the shortcomings in international law and humanitarian aid institutions, including within the sciences, which often adopt too narrow a focus and exclude the female lens (Gardam 1997; McKay 1998). I discovered that the impacts of genocide, gynocide and wars on culture are rarely examined through a female lens in the research literature (Anderson 2015) and my own work has been focused on remedying this shortcoming.

To be sure, trauma impacts for women are vastly different than those for men. The main impact overlooked is the impact on women’s way of life. My work has been focused on interviewing and gathering other data, over the course of sixteen years, from South Slavic female survivors of war crimes and war located in the central canton of Bosnia- Hercegovina, a half hour ride from the 1984 Winter Olympics site (Anderson 2014; Anderson 2105).

What we do know is that interdisciplinary holocaustic trauma research point to wars involving ethnic cleansing having debilitating and serious impacts on the physical and mental health of survivors (Christie 2012). However, there is a lack of focus on female-specific victimization, although trauma experienced by women impacts their experiences of sexuality, motherhood, general societal expectations, and even their menstruation—a vital biological process that is requisite for the successful procreation of any group of people (Anderson, D., 2014; Fisher, 2000).

Biosemiotic von Uexküll's concept of biology is a postmodern ecological transcending patriarchy and attempts to run past feminism. However, von Uexküll has inadvertently pointed to female biology processes as the universal reality that we are all born of a woman (Beever 2012; Deely 2010). An important point of von Uexküll's concept of biology is how culture is the ecological womb of environment shaping our genome.

Looking back through my research the lack of focus on female-specific victimization will include the realization that culture and her way of life is the target in our world of destruction- climate change and violence (Krug 2002; Silberman 2005). And way of life is the data shaping our genome (Venter 2007; Haleisen 2008; Heckenberg 2012). What this means is that the laws, mandates, policies –humanitarian aid- and institutions are complicit in if not contributing to the holocaustic trauma and negative influence on our genome-transgenerational trauma- by excluding females' capacity to create culture and way of life (Anderson 2015; Mertus 2001). Holocaustic genocide and gynocide is the destruction of culture (Fein 1999, Meharg 2006).

There may be differential impacts on women's co-evolving processes of female biological and psychological issues that depend on the types of trauma endured, including direct and indirect trauma (Anderson, 2014). This paper examines the traumatic experiences of two

groups of South Slavic Muslim women who survived the Balkan War and relates them to unique aspects of women's way of life.

In order to focus on the effects of war trauma on female biological processes and culture, this paper will focus on two specific groups of women from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since March 1999, the current author has provided somatic psychological trauma treatment and training to two groups of females from the South Slavic region. The first group of women is from Ahmici-Vitez, a rural village where war crimes were committed by the Croatian military upon a Muslim enclave on April 16, 1993 (Nations, 2001). The second group of women lived just two kilometers away in Novi Travnik, a village that once housed a small munitions factory that operated before the war. Both of these communities had distinct pre-war boundaries dividing the Croatian and Muslim populations.

The women in these communities survived a legacy involving a century of war and holocaust (i.e., WWI, WWII, and the Balkan War). While providing cross-cultural and engendered trauma treatment and training, the current author discovered that neither the women's experiences with war nor their embodied experiences have been clearly identified in order to attempt to improve their lives and thus their way of life (Mertus 2001; Stiglmayer 1993; Totten 2009). The dehumanizing neglect endured by the two populations of women warrants somatic cultural-psychological research, "on inquiring into issues common to anyone working in this field: to think out actual human problems" (Johnson, 1998).

Culture- Female Tacit Knowledge Co-evolving Processes

Culture is often defined as a way of life. Researching a society's way of life reveals cultural transmission mechanisms at play that highlight the reality that we are all born of a woman. Her biological processes, from conception, menses, peri-natal processes, pregnancy, birth, and child rearing to learning languages- constitute culture- a way of life (Davis 1990; Enger-Hicks 2007; Knight 2013). This is not to say that all genders and males do not play a role in creating culture. The difference lies in the creator of culture versus actors in the transgenerational perpetuation of culture (Moola 2006; Shiva 2016).

As creator of culture, women impart cultural socially learned information where the storage and transmission of knowledge in a nonliterate environment is biosemiotic in nature (Wheeler, 2006). Women's female tacit knowledge an outcome of biosemiotics easily translates our environment for our genome (Abel 2006; Favareau 2008). We do know that biology requires co-evolution of all life forms and their environments over vast lengths of time. What was evident in the female survivors' experiences were their three generations of war survivorship was able to move through the multiple webs of connections that are iconic of the complex systems features (Anderson 2016; Lakoff 1999; Ravasz 2002).

According to Wendy Wheeler, biosemiotician, "biology also taught us important lessons about the nature of the intimately 'coupled' relationship between organisms and their environment" (Wheeler, 2006, p. 31). The female survivors, through research and great attention to details in their environment, are the influencers of our genome, and operate through a female lens and perspective which is shown in the epidemiology of the importance of natural and social environments that produce our social and collective nature (Wheeler, 2006). What would be called co-evolution's short intervals can pertain to each South Slavic generation in each war experienced.

Transgenerational trauma, not the transmission of culture, has occurred since each war in the past century, WWI, WWII and the Balkan War. Each war experience are short epigenetic transgenerational intervals repeated to the point of contributing to our genome both good and bad. Some may refer to this as a meme, a fad, or a generational phenome which basically tells us that what we do daily is critical (Knight, 2013). But scientists loaded with linear and rationale find it difficult to associate the web mixtures found in culture and environment.

Filtering through the narrowed down sciences, Biosemiotican von Uexkull (1999) reports the newborn's skin – an ecological flesh- is an atmosphere for touch, taste and smell, a brain for encountering knowledge (Hoffmeyer 2008, von Uexkull 1999). Biosemioticans are skipping past the fact that newborn skin, the brain for encountering knowledge, was created in the mother's womb. Although, biosemiotics theory is based on 'umwelt' the whole, it fails to take into account that the womb is the foundation and center of biosemiotics and our genome thus the creation of culture. The ecological flesh is created by the ecological womb, the only organ not found in the male body nor resembled (Angier, 1999).

In Hoffmeyer's book *Biosemiotics*, he states “-the idea of the “true I” – for the most part is cultural bias” (Hoffmeyer, 2008, p. 17). While Hoffmeyer points out the cultural bias, he follows the narrowed down to its smallest parts science and the exclusion of females as creators of culture. Although Hoffmeyer acknowledges that we need to avoid placing personhood outside the purview of natural science, in so doing any mention or inclusion of female biological processes will be stymied (Hoffmeyer, 2008, p. 18). Yet, it is only by adopting a female lens that we will include female biological processes loaded with female tacit knowledge, and thus culture.

I had numerous encounters with both Ahmici war crimes and Novi Travnik war survivors' elderly grandmothers, who presented with their female tacit knowledge perspectives. The survivors prompted my research and the underlying structure of my efforts and their own efforts focused on healing their trauma. As with other Bosnian women, they had very little if any formal education. What was universal in their sharing was the tradition and ritual of the grandmother giving eggs (Conrad 1985, Durham 1909). This South Slavic memory custom is considered the most precious symbolic generativity (Gimbutas, 1987). The meaning behind the custom, according to the grandmothers, was that the mother carrying a daughter in her womb also holds the womb of her daughter containing the eggs of grandchildren, and the future (Christ, 1996).

One grandmother who experienced all three 20<sup>th</sup> century wars reports on how the farmer or the woman who kept her chickens saved humanity. When I inquired more about how chickens 'saved humanity' all the survivors stated what their grandmothers did before, during and after the war was enacted over three generations. "We had no super markets, microwaves let alone a kitchen, but most of us had a wood stove in our hovels- apartments or homes if we were lucky," reported Susana Koric of Novi Travnik, Bosnia.

It was their daily life practices that healed their trauma and evoked a collective memory, allowing for the female survivors to create culture (Anderson 2014). Many female social collectives were formed during the war, even in rape camps where the older women with medical backgrounds and professional status performed midwifery or abortions, taking back their biological locus and the 'egg' (Skjelsbaek, 2006).



Taking in the 'biological locus' opens us to female tacit knowledge; "we know more than what we can tell" (Wheeler, 2006). Biosemioticians report a code for memory basically describing tacit knowledge in living systems being digital and epigenetic in its transgenerational properties. If we look at our cellular structures digitalizing codification of our DNA then we can note that tacit knowledge is present in the egg cell because the cellular structure passes on the conditions of life (Grant 2007, Hoffmeyer 2008 p. 83). This is intangible inheritance.

There is evidence of passing down the conditions of life; we can name quite a few inherited genes that influence everything from eye color to diseases. A recent Finnish study showed paternal grandfathers at 28.9% and paternal maternal grandmothers at 22.3% who smoked will reach across three generations (El-Amin, 2015). Interestingly, the South Slavic women survivors reported the cost of cigarettes after the Balkan War as being cheaper than a candy bar, inciting economic factor for another three generations to commit to the habit even if their grandfathers were no longer alive.

Following the Balkan war the black market flourished, with cigarettes being the most sought after item- the cost increased by 800% - but they were still cheaper than a chocolate bar (Hajdinjak, 2002). More importantly, the female survivors stated that repetitive behaviors are passed to future generations (Anderson 2016; Christie 2012). The grandmothers- survivors- gave as an example of generationally transmitted behaviors the Slavic folk round dance called the kolo (Serbo-Croatian for circle or to dance) as what should be the most repetitive steps and behaviors. Their reasoning was that the dances were done by their ancestors and are still done now because transmission of this cultural tradition is important for maintaining a harmonious social collective (Anderson 2015; Christie 2012).

A majority of the survivors (93%) reported an intention to find a way to live a meaningful life in the aftermath of war crimes and war. Describing how the conditions of life are passed on to future generations by pointing to the impacts of maternal fright, the female survivors discussed how the impact of the sieges, starvation, snipers accompanied with bullets and bombs has been transferred to future generations that never experienced the century of wars (Christie 2012; Bahtijaragic, 2015; Anderson 2016).

What I observed in the South Slavic female survivors in creating culture during and after each war is that their focus is on creating a code for meaningful activity. Via their female tacit knowledge, the survivors transmitted cultural traditions, even in the aftermath of wars, with the application of oral memory traditions. This indicated the women understood the coding involved in the digital part of living systems without an external aid or formal education (Anderson 2015). Since the digital part of living systems is female tacit knowledge, it allows for coding of our genomic engineering, the transfer of data through a sign system employed in oral memory traditions housed in culture (Nöth, 2000).

Oral memory traditions are defined as memory without external aids. Here, we can understand that oral memory traditions trigger our genome with data derived from our way of life specific to the environment and its codes. Knowing the code and the repetitive nature in our genome and daily life acts, the digital component of living systems allows an in-depth cultural phenomenon to be studied in all the diversity present in life. The code is a semiotic resource allowing the creation and expression of specific types of meanings such as body language (Deely 1990; Taborsky 2008).

I was guided by these women to approach science and research as a part of the whole and not just as science being supreme. Instead of struggling to fit into the circumscribed science

discipline, I included female biology and how females create culture (Klimczak 2016; Doerr 2001). Science has begun to support these elderly South Slavic grandmothers and female survivors' female tacit knowledge, along with that many other women whose life experiences are carved from the bloody killing fields I work in. Their 'more to be known' knowledge, female tacit knowledge, determined that we are born with an instruction manual. This flesh and blood instruction manual can be evoked for global refugees and violence against women.

### Oral Memory Traditions- Epigenetic Heritability Propensities

The question often posed by researchers is how exactly are genetic memories transgenerational? The critical question I ask is how do memories encode our genome. When I have inquired about memories encoded into our genome I gained insight into why our ancestors' oral memory traditions are known as an ecological conduit between environment and our genome (Anderson 2015; Sheridan 2014). Our ancestors ritualized memories in order to pass them down, thus creating culture across the generations in the same fashion as our repeating replication of our mitochondria (Paas, 2012). More importantly, ancestors' gift is intangible cultural heritage preserved within our genome rather than in books or external aids (Van Dyke 2008; Anderson 2015).

According to Vikis-Frieberg, oral memory traditions are human memory without external aid with a cast of thousands across the generations (Rubin, 1997). The study of human memory is "a science about long term retention and retrieval" (Rubin, 1997, p. 6). Therefore, oral memory traditions- human communications- is a ritual science (Assmann, 2011). According to

Rubin “the social nature of the repeated transmission should also produce an art form that is easier to study,” (Rubin, 1997, p. 10).

Researchers study the heritability of memories perhaps due to memories being indelible within the body and genome. Indelible memories are better described as intangible cultural heritage; reaffirming the social communities’ worth in their way of going about things and thus their culture (Cameron 2008; Kearney 2008). According to a Tel-Aviv research team, the key meaning in intangible cultural heritage which shapes our genome is “understanding the principles that control the inheritance of epigenetic information [that] is crucial for constructing a comprehensive theory of heredity for all organisms, humans included” (Leah Hour-Ze’evi 2016).

For both groups of survivors traumatic memories appeared to replace culture and at the same time wiped out their oral memory traditions. The Mesolithic Kolo, Serbo-Croatian for folk round dance or to be in a circle, was rarely done during the century of wars. We can see how violence is the norm across the globe (Anderson 2010). We need to ask is this culture or is this violence (Appadurai 2011; Pandey 2006). Since a recurrence of violence tends to normalize its occurrence, even when it takes the form of repeated genocide and gynocide, culture and oral memory traditions are hijacked into violence (De Mel 2007; Cruz 2014).

Many of the survivors spoke of attempts to update and make adjustments to their oral memory traditions. In one case, a thin South Slavic Bosnian-Herzegovinian pregnant woman in her late twenties had big dark circles under her eyes and her hands shook constantly even at rest (Anderson, 2016). When she began sharing her maternal fright, she seldom spoke, but her nonverbal communication was over 98% of her sharing. She said maternal fright is contagious. In other words, heritable and epigenetic.

Her husband lost 18 relatives in the Ahmici-Vitez genocide on April 16, 1993 (Anderson, 2015; Christie & Pim, 2012). The expecting mother asked what to do to protect her unborn child from her maternal fright. Seeking a tradition or rituals for Slavs is second nature, but there was no practice to prevent an unborn child from being afflicted with the transgenerational trauma of maternal fright that resulted from violent genocide, gynocide and rapes during the war (Anderson, 2016).

She took a green magic marker that I had placed on the kitchen table with an art pad in the beginning of her sharing. She used the green marker to draw a spiral on her pregnant belly. At the end, she pronounced what appears to be Slavic thaumaturgy – miracle making - that she had added a new ritual and practice to the Slavic oral memory traditions to eradicate maternal fright (Anderson, 2016).

I have observed many Bosnian mothers and their children unable to circumvent the transgenerational trauma or to eradicate maternal fright. Even years after the Balkan war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, many young children display transgenerational trauma as if they were alive during the war (Anderson, 2015; Anderson 2016). This was evident when I did a projective art project for the Novi Travnik, Bosnia Hercegovina Muslim grammar school. The children's pictures often showed guns, murdered family members and dismembered bodies. I was intensely curious how these young children could know the violence that was in the past so intimately. This brought me to spin through interdisciplinary fields of psychology, trauma, genomics, culture and oral memory traditions.

Bioculinary; the culinary oral memory traditions arts alignment with neurobiological processes

Basically, we are what we eat, what we grow and how we live in specific environments around the globe or with chickens and eggs evolving humanity as opposed to saving humanity which violence demands. According to a steadily increasing body of research, our stomach is central to the trauma process (Barclay 1949; Sledjeski 2008). Since the gut is where the bacteria and flora flourish, probiotics shore up the immune system (Aggarwal 2013; Blijlevens 2000). It is understandable that our stomachs have the same cellular structure as brain cells to accomplish adjustment and balance in the face of trauma events. Science has stated that the stomach is the second brain of the body and most of the feel good hormones originate from our gut and migrate to the brain (Sonnenburg, 2016). However, while this information comes from a recent study, our ancestors already knew this for thousands of years.

What I have observed with the South Slavic women survivors is their female tacit knowledge that continues to correlate with our neurobiological processes, especially with their agriculture-gardens-herbs to culinary arts (Anderson D. , 2015). The bioculinary oral memory traditions involve practices of foraging, growing food, and culinary applications that heal ailments, and these practices are engaged in by these survivors who at most have an elementary school education (Anderson, 2015). The question arises of how do these survivors have an in-depth knowledge of our bodies and how do they know culture is what we eat and grow.

According to *Trends in Immunology*, our personal history and environment represents nearly 60 to 80 percent of the differences between individual immune systems, while genetics is responsible for the remaining 20 to 40 percent (Marker 2016). Given that our personal history and environment accounts for 60 to 80 percent of differences in individual immune system, we are observing the genomic lens of culture comprised of families.

For South Slavic female survivors, the healing of trauma and resulting physical ailments centered on the stomach and auto immune issues. In interviews with the South Slavic survivors, the majority spoke of their families' stomach and autoimmune issues (Christie, 2012). Research shows that families and two or more cohabiting individuals do tend to have more similar immune systems than the rest of the human population (Marker 2016). We can ask again how is it these survivors knew this without any formal education.

Families and two or more cohabiting individuals are according to the South Slavic survivors the fabric of culture. We have only to look at oral memory traditions practices such as bioculinary approaches, including diverse ways of growing food and culturally specific foods, to observe the fabric of culture activated in our lives daily (Parasecoli, 2011) . What scientists are calling “intrinsic drivers of immune variation” play a much bigger role than genetics in determining the content of the human immune system, and this discovery makes clear the importance of the South Slavic females' tacit knowledge (Marker, 2016 Oct 4). What is obvious with the South Slavic survivors is their understanding of the immune system and trauma being a codependent process (Anderson, 2016; Anderson, 2012).

The immune system is central in fight/flight responses, often triggering stomach and autoimmune issues. As a result of fight/flight responses to trauma, blood flow is lessened in the brain while blood flow to the stomach is shut down (Martin, 2015). Another example of the relationship between trauma and stomach issues is a study with mice. The researchers were investigating therapeutic practices to manipulate hypoxia pathways (Majno, 1998). Hypoxia - a condition of low venous oxygen and/or increased carbon dioxide in the blood – was induced in the mice, and it was found that it can produce a reduction in IBD (Irritable Bowel Disorder) symptoms; thus, it holds promise of helping to promote resolution of inflammation in patients

with IBD (Jackson JR, 1997). *“Inflammatory process, to a point that angiogenesis and inflammation become chronically co-dependent processes”* (Jackson, 1997, Majno, 1998). *“We’re shifting away from the simplistic idea that there is only one type of immune system,”* Liston said. *“Diversity isn’t just programmed into our genes; it emerges from how our genes respond to the environment”* (Marker 2016).

Foraging, according to women survivors, is for diversity in tandem to the season (Moszyński, 2004). In fact the Slavs are ethnobiological pioneers, especially in the application via foraging during wars. This is an adaptation to the new environment of wars and manmade climate change. A common aspect of South Slavic female survivors’ foraging for mushrooms is that it is done when the sun comes out after a rain. During the Balkan War knowing the medicinal herbs and when to forage saved many lives (Łuczaj, 2004) (Yamin-Pasternak, 2011).

In both the sense of saving lives and evolving lives, the Ahmica-Vitez grandmothers were the ones that tended the cows and fields. Their bioculinary practices (oral memory traditions) saved their lives as they went out at dawn to do their work on April 16, 1993 (Anderson, 2015; Christie, 2012). During the call for early morning prayers, the Croatian Military attacked a small hamlet, murdering 150 Muslim families (Lee, 1998). The day before, the Croatian Military evacuated the Croats living across the road from their Muslim neighbors. Their doors were painted with a cross so that the soldiers knew which home to attack.

In one home, an elder grandmother survivor’s wood stove that heated and cooked for the entire family was used to bake her infant grandchild to death during the Ahmica-Vitez attack. Another grandmother’s house, which sat next to the destroyed Mosque, was completely in ruins. When her house was rebuilt, the foundation of her former home became the grounds of her garden (Anderson 2015). Nearby stood a shed where twelve disabled people huddled to hide



from the attackers. Both the shed with twelve inside unable to flee and the home were burned to the ground. In the same footprint of the shed, perennial flowers and a grape vine grow.

What is being presented is how violence with the targeting of ways of life, mostly women's work and service, is normalized amidst enormous collateral damage. The use of icons such as the cross painted on doors to the hearth, and wood fires where an infant was burned, are extreme examples of violence hijacking culture and thus oral memory traditions. Yet, in face of a century of wars, these survivors and their female tacit knowledge returned to creating culture and repeating oral memory traditions that healed trauma in their families and thus their communities.

## Conclusion

Presently, women continue to face escalating violence where their capacity to create culture is thwarted due to politically affirmed corporate demands. Reductionist scientific perspectives that have mostly excluded women, female biology, and women's relationships found in culture and oral memory traditions, have been complicit in negating rather than empowering the social significance found in women creating culture. At the same time, oral memory traditions, an outcome of culture, signify collective recognition of each diverse group of peoples and their environment that has evolved humanity and the human species.

The escalating violence can be shown with the statistic of three million former Yugoslav refugees flooding Europe in the 1990s, and more recently 22 million Syrian refugees needing urgent humanitarian assistance (Mercy Corps 2016; Mertus 2001). Despite the good biological and scientific work and research that could promote maximization of creativity where culture is in harmony with our biosphere, we are not employing our knowledge to foster social

connectedness to influence our way of life in face of genocides and gynocides. I note that the difference lies in the creator of culture versus actors in the transgenerational perpetuation of culture; women are the resources needed. If we asked what we learned from the Balkan War and the refugees and then attend to the current global refugee crisis utilizing what we learned we could evolve humanity and approach violence with culture and oral memory traditions.

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