



## Eyes on fire: Illuminating a dark ritual

By Pam Linn  
Feature Editor

If Black History Month is about understanding African culture, then Soraya Mire's documentary, "Fire Eyes," casts a beacon of light on the Dark Continent.

A hit at the recent Sundance Film Festival and the subject of Ted Koppel's "Nightline" on ABC last week, it examines the dark side of Mire's native Somali culture, the ritual circumcision of young girls.

After a screening at Raleigh Studios Saturday, Mire said she was overwhelmed by the reaction at Sundance where the film's premier was sold out and hundreds waited outside in the street. "The question and answer (period) was most painful for me. Men were crying. But I think it opened up a lot of understanding of the culture," she said.

"I was 18 when I decided to find someone to listen to my pain. You don't know who to trust; you can't trust your own mother," she said. "It's a healing film for me. I'm joyful. It's time for women to wake up and say, 'Excuse me, I can say what is done to my body.'"

A Somali woman in the audience said, "There are large numbers of women in my family and we've never talked about it as much as we've talked here."

Talking about it is what it will take if the practice is ever to be abandoned in Somalia and other African and Middle East countries where it thrives on silence, Mire said. "A mother should know that she isn't alone if she doesn't do this to her daughter."

Her goal now is to get the film translated into other African languages with the hope that it will be seen in Ethiopia, Senegal and Sudan. Ironically, it will probably not be shown in Somalia anytime soon. "Somalia will be the last place I can go," Mire said. "Aidid killed four of my family, so it's difficult for me to go there."

That's why she chose to shoot the film in this country using Somali women living here as actors. All had been circumcised as children and some had surgical repair after moving here.

The film presents a compassionate and balanced report through interviews: an Islamic scholar who says circumcision is called for in the Koran, and others who say it is not mentioned; a doctor who explains the four types of circumcisions and the attendant complications; a midwife who had performed many circumcisions.

Though statistics on death from infections are unreliable because they are rarely reported, doctors say women often suffer from recurring urin-

infections, menstrual complications and difficult, often fatal, childbirth.

It is thought to ensure virginity in young brides (many of whom still are sold into marriage) and fidelity in wives, effectively inhibiting sexual desire.

Somali men, who are permitted more than one wife, express views ranging from enlightened to brutal: some are stinging indictments of a culture that treats women as chattel.

In the film, one man likens circumcision to the protection of his property: "You have to have a door on your house... you can't leave the door open."

"When Soraya told me she was going to make a film about this, I thought she was crazy," said Amina Jama, who came to the U.S. for a vacation in 1985 and stayed. "No one ever talked about it."

The practice is so deeply ingrained in Somali culture that mothers insist their daughters be circumcised or they will not be considered fit for marriage. Jama had asked to be "initiated" at the age of five because all her friends in the neighborhood were. The film's re-enactment scene of women performing the rite on a young girl, Jama said, brought back the painful memory. "The women's voices, the smell of the fire, the pain; they used no anesthetic. After awhile it was as if my mind left my



Soraya Mire with ritual white clay on face and hands.