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How Somalis in Swedish Exile Reassess the Practice of Female Circumcision

2002

Doctoral dissertation
Department of Social Anthropology
Lund University, Sweden

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1 Discourse versus discourse

1.1 Introduction

Somali women are often referred to as one of the most powerless groups in the Swedish society. They are described as stigmatised in several ways: practically all are out of work, they usually have many children, they are Muslims, they are black, and they are genitally mutilated. The irony is that despite massmedial attention, high level political engagement and general interest in the issue, Somalis in Swedish exile are seldom heard.

The aim of this thesis is to study and present the views of Swedish Somalis on female circumcision and to contrast it to the Swedish discourse on the issue. The thesis investigates the values attached to female circumcision among Somalis, and how these values are discussed and reassessed in the Swedish exile situation. It highlights the importance of a processual theory of cultural practices in contrast to the prevalent essentialist perspective.

The issue is important, because despite the Swedish moral panic about female circumcision, encapsulated in the term "female genital mutilation", there is weak or non-existent evidence to show that this practice actually exists in Sweden. This is all the more reason to understand the processes by which the discourse about female circumcision among Somalis in Sweden, a discourse of a declining and changing cultural practice, contrasts with the Swedish discourse of an alarmist panic about thousands of Somali girls who are said to risk being subjected to female genital mutilation.

At a seminar about female circumcision in September 1999, a Somali man held a speech about the cultural aspects of female circumcision. Following the talk, a Swedish woman in the audience asked if he had ever discussed the matter with his wife – whether or not their own daughters were to be circumcised – a questioned he answered with an honest "No". This response aroused strong reactions among many people in the audience, some of them speaking at the same time, intimating that his daughters risked being 'mutilated' any day. An other Somali man, sitting by my

side at the panel, tried to show how prejudiced this attitude was, by asking "Have you asked Sara if she has discussed circumcision of her daughters with her husband?" pointing at me. The negative reactions in the audience grew stronger. Afterwards I talked to the first man, who only now comprehended what the fuss was all about, as the reasoning among the critical listeners was so strange to him. He just shook his head: "I have never discussed it with my wife as it is so obvious to us where we stand. We are both familiar with her suffering through the years… There is simply no reason to even bring the issue up as regards our own daughters."

This incident shows a clash of perspectives: in the Swedish discourse about female circumcision the practice is seen as an unequivocally abhorrent cultural practice about which there is no compromise or understanding. The practice is also seen as persistent, which gives rise to firm expectations that Somalis in Sweden uphold the practice. On the other hand, many Somali immigrants in Sweden also condemn this practice, but without ascribing aspects of compulsive evilness to the issue. The Swedish discourse has developed wholly outside internal discussions about female circumcision within the Somali exile community in Sweden. The Swedes have the hegemony in public discourse on the matter, and Somalis (and other Africans) who want to participate in the work to abolish the practice are more or less forced to adapt to the Swedish (western) perspective.

When one of my Somali female friends read my rendering of the general description of the Somali women in Sweden ("practically all are out of work, they usually have many children, they are Muslims, they are black, and they are genitally mutilated", Johnsdotter 1999:22), she said: "I can see why you mention all those other things, but why circumcision? What has this to do with the rest?" I was as puzzled by her question as she was by the fact that I had mentioned their state of being circumcised in this way. I tried to explain to her that I understood that the fact that most Somali women are "genitally mutilated" is an essential part of the stereotype of the Somali woman in Sweden. She was shocked – and embarrassed. "Do you think, when I talk to Swedes, that they think about my sexual organs? I feel like walking genitals." At its most extreme, this Swedish perspective holds that a Somali woman's whole existence revolves around her physical state of being "mutilated"; she is "walking genitals". In sum, the Swedish discourse on female circumcision is deeply morally charged with the Somali women oscillating between being victims of brutal male domination, and being voluntary participants in a violent cultural practice on their own daughters.

In fact, there is another discourse going on within the hidden sphere of Somali life in which circumcision is also criticised. A critique of female circumcision blends with a renewed commitment to Islam as a weapon to fight a Somali tradition. However, the critique takes place under quite different circumstances and leads to quite different results: while the Swedish discourse designates all forms of female circumcision "mutilation", most Swedish Somalis highlight a distinction between more extensive forms and a mild form of so called symbolic sunnah circumcision (pricking of clitoris to induce a minor bleeding, but no removal of any tissue). While considered illegal in Sweden, such a procedure would be far less harmful than the uncondemned circumcision practised among Muslim and Jewish boys.

This thesis investigates the key themes in the discourse about female circumcision among Somalis in Sweden, and shows that female circumcision is a practice which is negotiated and reassessed by Somalis in Swedish exile. While some traditional

values are maintained, even when in conflict with mainstream mentality of the Swedish society, other values and attitudes are debated, reassessed, and abandoned. The prohibition of premarital sex prevails, while the strategy of female circumcision as a means to prevent unmarried young woman from having sex is abandoned. The most important reason for this is the conviction that Islam bans any form of harm inflicted on God's creation, a view elaborated mainly in exile. Other concomitant motives for female circumcision in Somalia are reassessed as well, due to changing life circumstances in exile.

The reassessment of the religious imperative both for and against circumcision can not be underestimated. An overwhelming majority of Somalis circumcising their daughters in Somalia do it out of a conviction that the procedure is a religious duty. In exile, however, Somalis are confronted with other Muslims, who do not circumcise their daughters. The internal exile debate on an Islamic view on this practice has led Somalis to reassess their understanding of Somali circumcision traditions as non-Islamic: it is a religious duty *not* to harm God's creation. On reaching this conclusion, there is an indisputable motive to dissociate oneself from what was earlier regarded "normal" and necessary.

1.2 Female circumcision as a strategy

A key to a more profound understanding of the practice of female circumcision – and also of its abandonment – has been offered by the British political scientist Gerry Mackie (1996, 1998, and 2000). His starting point is that parents all over the world love their children and want to do what is best for them. Female circumcision is to be understood as a *strategy*, and mothers choosing female circumcision for their daughters in a specific situation are doing this to optimise their daughters' future prospects. This means that mothers choosing female circumcision do so when this option has a better outcome for their daughters than if they (the mothers) decide not to have their daughters circumcised. And this also means that mothers will refrain from having their daughters circumcised, when the option to give it up will lead to a better life, all aspects regarded, for their daughters. Mackie's model is instructive in trying to understand both the persistence of circumcision in Somalia and its abandonment among Somalis in Sweden.

Another aspect inherent in Mackie's model is *ambivalence*; it includes both negative and positive feelings towards a phenomenon. Thus, this model can account for the ambivalence surrounding female circumcision both in Somalia and in Sweden. A critical question I often encounter at presentations of my empirical data is: "Why would Somalis in Sweden so suddenly have changed their minds and become antagonists of a practice they not long ago advocated?" This simplistic view implies that practising female circumcision in Somalia means favouring all aspects of it, and that refraining from practising female circumcision in Swedish exile means disliking all aspects of it. In reality, people's views are much more complex and ambivalent, as emphasised in Mackie's model. A more balanced understanding can account for the feelings of relief experienced by Somalis at the

possibility of *not* having to expose one's daughter to female circumcision, and also for feelings of fear about the negative aspects of raising an uncircumcised daughter.

In this thesis, I show that the specific exile situation makes most Somali mothers in Sweden choose strategies other than female circumcision to optimise their daughters' future prospects, as their life circumstances – for instance the role of the clan system and the relation between the sexes – have changed so drastically in exile. There is not a single documented case of illegal female circumcision in Sweden. This fact, could – if we use Mackie's model – be understood as a result of that a *tipping point* (ibid.) has taken place in Swedish exile: a moment where the advantages of abandoning this practice have become overwhelming, especially regarding the fact that so many other Swedish Somalis have taken the same decision at the same time. The one who intends to have her daughter circumcised is now the outsider. She is forced to defend her view in discussions with her kinsmen and is subject to social pressure to abandon this practice.

Once one has realised that circumcision is a strategy (and not an end in itself; something people do only because it is their 'culture' to do so), and that strategies may change when life conditions change, the idea that this practice is abandoned in exile is not so hard to grasp. However, since the procedure is constantly presented to the public as a meaningless and cruel cultural archaic trait, there are firm expectations, put forward by authorities, activists and journalists, that this practice is upheld on a large scale among Somalis in Sweden. Sweden has had legislation against female circumcision since 1982. Again, not a single case of female circumcision has been authenticated and brought to court. The Somalis in Sweden number about 20,000, and many of them have lived here for ten years or more. If female circumcision were so widely practised as alleged, it would probably have been possible to take at least a few cases to court.

1.3 The absence of a Somali public sphere

Practically all Somalis I have talked to about female circumcision claim that it is important to strengthen internal discussions for a total abolition of the practice (at least all types more extensive than a symbolic sunnah circumcision).

An important aspect of this study is the fact that even if every informant knows a lot about this issue, nobody has all-embracing knowledge of the opinions of Swedish Somalis *in general*. Somalis talk about female circumcision, but only with their closest friends and kin. There are occasions of larger meetings where this issue has been discussed, but these are extremely few and generally do not include both sexes.

Hence, what I refer to as 'an internal debate' in the Somali community should not be confused with the kind of debate conducted in a Swedish or European 'public sphere' of media, experts, politicians, and the public. It is not a debate mainly characterised by open meetings or public writing; rather, the Somali debate is the sum of all the private discussions at the micro-level, involving an individual and her or his closest circle of kin and friends. This lack of a genuine Somali public sphere can explain the curious misperception of the Somalis themselves regarding

circumcision, whereby they insist that while they themselves, their spouse and close friends are opposed to female circumcision, there may be many *other* Swedish Somalis who are in favour. It still remains an open question how many of these Somalis are in fact supporters of pharaonic circumcision, and how they can be found. Information received about people who allegedly could be in favour of female circumcision, was seldom reliable (the few exceptions are included in this study) – or they were opposed to pharaonic circumcision, but found a symbolic sunnah circumcision to be acceptable. I leave these more quantitative aspects aside, as I am more interested in the logic of the practice of female circumcision, and how it applies in Sweden.

My data indicate that an overwhelming majority of the Somalis in Sweden are truly opposed to pharaonic circumcision, but that many of them themselves are unaware of this. They have taken a stand against the practice as individuals, and they have seen their kin and friends take a similar stand, but many of them believe that there are others who still cling to old traditions. These assertions of Somalis about their own community have been based on speculation. This was especially obvious regarding Somali women's ideas about men's opinions and preferences; and many of the men's assertions that the whole issue is dependent on women's opinions. If Swedes have limited knowledge about Swedish Somalis' opinions regarding female circumcision, so have the Somalis.

1.4 Swedish moral panic

The themes of the public discourse on female circumcision in Sweden include a culturalist view ("they keep mutilating their daughters because it is their culture to do so"), and a strong moral discourse where certain views and statements are accepted even if factually wrong, while other views must not be raised in public even if correct. This moral discourse makes open debate about female circumcision hazardous, as its logic divides people not only into informed or uninformed about the issue, but into categories of 'good' or 'bad'. One is either in favour of a total ban of all forms of the practice, regardless of the cost or the means, or one supports the mutilation of women and has a deviant moral standard.

In this particular field the usual logic of political correctness is turned upside down. Generally, in a society characterised by a strong multiculturalist view, any attack on immigrant groups as collectives is harshly criticised in the public discussion. Concerning the issue of female circumcision in Sweden, however, any odd characteristics can be attributed to the African immigrant groups – and the arguments will still be regarded as perfectly 'politically correct'. In this specific case, one is actually regarded politically *incorrect*, if one asks for a more balanced depiction of the issue of female circumcision and the groups under attack. 'Balance' in this case is regarded as a defence of undesirable or oppressive practices for which there must be zero tolerance.

Most Swedes regard female circumcision as so cruel, so barbaric, that there is no room for any kind of understanding or extenuating circumstances. The victims are

female children, the daughters of the perpetrators. This fact is in itself an obstacle to an understanding of the practice: how can mothers let their daughters go through a procedure, which is so inhumane and void of sense? The Swedish (western) mass media is not of much help in the process of trying to grasp this reality: the presentations of this practice most often belong to a certain genre, mixing curiosity, thrill and moral indignation, including as many aggravating circumstances as possible.

As this is the prevalent depiction of *the* custom of female circumcision, or genital *mutilation*, it is self-evident that any form of objection to the description, or any attempt to describe varieties of female circumcision, much less describe why some varieties may be more acceptable than others, is deemed to be regarded as not only politically incorrect, but almost malicious.

A documentary ('The Forgotten Girls') broadcast by the Swedish national television (SVT) in September 2001, and repeated on Danish television in April 2002, will be used as a case in the description of the politics in the field of female circumcision. The themes elaborated in the program included all themes from years of public discourse on female circumcision in Sweden, even if in a somewhat exaggerated form. The program was also very instructive in showing the techniques of how to generate controversy around an already morally charged and politically delicate topic. After the broadcast of this program, the assumption that Swedish African girls are circumcised at a large scale, some of them even in Sweden, seems to be regarded as an established fact by politicians and journalists. Thus, the basis for these allegations needs to be scrutinised. What has emerged is what social theorists term a 'moral panic' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1995), a concept which I use to describe this phenomenon.

We need to scrutinise the implicit theoretical presumptions underpinning this widely held view. For future preventive work, and for the sake of the Swedish African girls who really do risk being subjected to circumcision, i.e., by those parents who have not abandoned the practice, we need to analyse our own society's understanding of the issue. The Swedish public discourse on female circumcision is crucial for the internal process in the Somali exile community: as Somalis lack a public sphere of their own, the 'truths' emanating from the Swedish mass media may complicate a process toward a complete abandonment of the practice among exile Swedish Somalis.

We also need to understand the internal debate on female circumcision in the various immigrant groups. The issue here is not simply female circumcision, but a whole range of undesirable social and cultural practices, practised by immigrants and by Swedish subcultures: honour killing and arranged and forced marriage among certain groups of immigrants; drug taking or crime among immigrant and ethnic Swedish youth. In this sense, the female circumcision debate, what is now called 'female genital mutilation' (FGM), is therefore just one example of a general case with which anthropologists must come to grips. It is a case of cultural practices becoming objects of public controversy, of private considerations and public condemnations, of local anxieties and moral panics.

1.5 Female circumcision as a field of expertise

Female circumcision as a field of study may roughly be divided into four different categories: 1) academic writing; 2) activist writing; 3) information and policies for professionals. Besides these categories of literature, the general public is informed through 4) newspaper articles and reports in TV and radio, i.e. the mass media.

Much of the international activist writing takes its point of departure in radical feminism, a fact that seems to have influenced information and policies directed toward professionals – sometimes these categories (2 and 3) even have blurred boundaries. The source of information for the Swedish public (category 4) is, as well, grounded on radical feminism. The last three categories also involve a culturalist view, which is of crucial importance when it comes to how campaigns against female circumcision among immigrant populations are worked out.

The category of academic writing displays a map of more varying positions. Before the 1980s, few articles on female circumcision were published in the field of social science; most of them concerned medical issues. The American radical feminist Fran Hosken raised the question of so called "female genital mutilation" in wider circles in the West when she in 1978 published the first edition of her book *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*. As her book became such a success, practically all subsequent publications in the field of female circumcision have been forced to take a stand in relation to Hosken's view on this issue: either by following in her footsteps or to criticise her for either scientific or ideological reasons. The academic writing in this field offers a great variety in other aspects as well: geographical areas investigated (mostly African local settings), scope of the studies, theoretical models used, etc.

Positioning this thesis in the field of female circumcision, I hope to be able to make the national discussion on female circumcision wider. In Sweden, there is an urgent necessity to include other perspectives on female circumcision than the prevalent; whether it is a question of activism, information directed toward professionals or supply of material for articles and reports in mass media and for students. It is also a matter of fairness in relation to Somalis living in Sweden. Now they are under constant suspicion from the host society: it is more a question of *when, where* and *how* they are 'mutilating' their daughters than the open question *if* they are.

In the academic field, I hope that this thesis can be informative in a growing corpus on this subject. To the best of my knowledge, no extensive studies but one in Great Britain (Morison et al. 1998, n.d.) and one in Norway (Johansen, in press) have been carried out with the aim to understand changes in the practice of female circumcision in a context of exile. This case, focusing on Somalis in Sweden, can hopefully provide a contribution to this discussion.

In a wider perspective, I hope that the thesis can call some unreflected culturalist presumptions into question; presumptions which underlie much of the public discussion of practices of immigrants in Sweden. The multiculturalist ideology, which permeates the Swedish society's integration policies, cherishes ideas about immigrants settling down in the Swedish society with a backpack of good and bad practices that the immigrants are supposed to maintain at any cost. We need to

avoid models which predefine what people do; and we need to look into what people actually do before we set the agenda and formulate the policies.

1.6 Organisation of the thesis

Chapter Two describes the methods used in this study, while Chapter Three describes the situation of Somalis in Swedish exile. The background of the situation in Somalia is described, and also the issue of exile and repatriation. The clan structure, which is upheld in Sweden even if somewhat transformed, is discussed. The last section of the chapter deals with the challenged gender roles within Somali families in Swedish exile.

Chapter Four is an overview of the practices of female circumcision offered by international academic literature. It includes definitions and classifications, the physical and psychic consequences of the various practices of female circumcision as discussed in the literature. The following section deals with sexuality in association with female circumcision. Conclusions in studies in this field vary to a high degree, which shows that descriptions of sexuality in circumcised women are very susceptible to politically tinted bias.

The following sections deal with the historical background of female circumcision, a field that to a high degree is based on speculations, and with Islam in relation to female circumcision. As Somalis in Sweden generally claim that specific Koranic verses and some hadiths are the most important basis of their opposition to pharaonic circumcision, the discussion will focus on these religious sources.

Female circumcision, as it is practised in Somalia, will be described in the next section, followed by a summary of the motives for circumcising girls in Somalia, from an insiders' perspective. Researchers' analyses including various explanatory models will be discussed thereafter. Analyses on symbolism will be related, focusing on the concepts 'virginity', 'infibulation', and 'defibulation'. Approaches regarding ethnic, socio-economic and psychological aspects will be accounted for, before a section on feminist perspectives is offered. The hegemonic radical feminist view will be contrasted to counter views, some of them criticising the prevalent radical feminist standpoint with arguments based upon feminism as well. The final section of this chapter discusses Gerry Mackie's model of the maintenance of female circumcision as a convention, and also the abandonment of such practices as convention shifts. This is the model used to understand the empirical data of the thesis.

The following chapters provide a presentation of the empirical data regarding attitudes to female circumcision among the Swedish Somalis in this study. Chapter Five discusses Somali attitudes about pharaonic and sunnah circumcision, its relation to control over young girls, and the factors behind the abandonment of the practice, including the resurgence of Islam in the context of exile.

The sixth chapter highlights the role of the men in the field of female circumcision. First there is a review of how Somali women in this study talk about

men and the demand of virginity in women. This is followed by a discussion about how some women believe that men expect and want women to be pharaonically circumcised for the sake of men's sexual pleasure. This view is contradicted, as will be shown in the last section of this chapter, by the women's experiences of their own fathers and husbands, a rendering in harmony with how the men in the study described their own attitudes.

Chapter Seven includes how Somalis talk about the future, seeing a decline of the practice of (pharaonic) circumcision both in Somalia and among exiled Somalis, and conveying a depiction of a future where the practice is completely abandoned. The following sections describe what strategies are used in Sweden, where Somalis face a deviant moral system, for the purpose of making sure that young Somali women do not have premarital sex: dialogue, social control, education and trust. The last section deals with how chaste conduct can work as a proof of virginity in a situation where pharaonic circumcision has been abandoned.

Chapter Eight is a discussion about culturalism and changing cultural patterns. It is argued that the culturalist perspective, which permeates the Swedish public discourse on female circumcision, is challenged by available empirical data in this field.

Chapter Nine presents a discussion about moral panic in the field of female circumcision in Sweden, created by the televised documentary, 'The Forgotten Girls'. While the arguments offered and techniques used in the documentary are analysed in the appendix, the more general public discussion – as it emerged in the mass media – is discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Ten focuses on the tenacity of the belief that thousands of young girls risk being subjected to circumcision in Sweden. In these chapters, the ingredients of the public discourse in Sweden will be analysed (beside the prevalent culturalist perspective discussed in Chapter Eight): its exploitation of Swedish Somalis, who lack means of clearing themselves of suspicion; its moral discourse forcing each and all to talk about the topic in a certain politically correct way; and its voyeuristic bent, where the themes of an exotic evil and of exotic mutilated genitals work as chilling components in public discussion of female circumcision. It will be argued that all these aspects of the public discourse concur to uphold the idea that female circumcision is a practice maintained among Somalis in Swedish exile.

The last chapter provides a concluding discussion of the findings, together with a plea for more enlightened immigrant policies referring to cultural practices, and a more active role for anthropologists in dealing with the culturalism debate.

2 Fieldwork among Somalis

2.1 Fieldwork in Rosengård

The fieldwork began in August 1995, when my family moved to Rosengård, *Rose Garden*. In this neighbourhood in Malmö in the southern part of Sweden, well-known for having a large immigrant population, my husband and colleague Aje Carlbom and I lived for three years. Our then three-year-old son went to kindergarten, which gave further contacts with residents in the area, and we began to practice participant observation, got to know our neighbours and conducted interviews among the inhabitants in the neighbourhood.

Rosengård is a place where the different parts and yards have idyllic names – *The Apple Garden*, *The Garden of Eden* and *The Garden of Sunrise* for instance – but a place generally associated with unemployment, marginalisation and criminality. The area was developed in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the realisation of a state project called "the million programme" – one million new modern apartments within a short time – now looked down upon as just another ugly concrete suburban area. Some 23,000 people inhabit Rosengård, more than half of whom are of foreign origin. The area's most notorious block (Herrgården, *The Mansion*) is almost exclusively inhabited by people of foreign background (93% out of 3,816 inhabitants in 1996, 97% out of 4,462 in 1999). Here, the unemployment rate is extremely high: in 1996, 8% aged 20-64 had an employment in the labour market (7% in 1997).[1]

The largest groups of immigrant residents are people from former Yugoslavia and Arab Muslims. The Somalis amount to less than 300, but still it is the area where the largest group of Somalis in Malmö lives. The mall, the heart of the area, is almost completely arabised – even the Swedish hot-dog stand sells hot-dogs made out of *halal* slaughtered chicken. Rosengård contains a multitude of different voluntary associations, most of them ethnically based, often found in small cellars in the basement of the buildings. The area is also characterised by being a target for public concern: as it is defined as an area of serious problems, innumerable state and municipal projects are carried out – actually most of the activities in the area seem to be part of one project or another.

In the beginning, I was most interested in the relation between the relatively few Swedes living in the most immigrant-dense parts of Rosengård and the immigrant population. Later I took a special interest in Muslim women in the area, particularly

[1] Statistics from Malmö Stad (1996) and (1999).

Arab, Somali and Swedish (converted) women. During 1996, I conducted ten taped interviews (with an interpreter) with Arab women, followed by more scattered interviews with Swedish and Somali Muslims. For more than a year I frequently participated in the activities of a group in the neighbourhood, *International Association of Muslim Women*. Among many other things I took part in Koran studies, Ramadan festivities, and went swimming every Sunday evening in an indoor swimming bath reserved for Muslim women only. This more general approach gave me my first contacts in the Somali group in Malmö.

One of the Somali organisations, located in one of these dark basements next door to us, *Foundation for Peace and Arbitration in Somalia*, was particularly welcoming Aje Carlbom and me. We were invited there to listen to debates – and were given interpreters to be able to follow the discussions – and to partake in any of their activities. In return for this warm and open attitude we volunteered to give classes in Swedish for a period. These classes gave me an opportunity to have focus group interviews. With their knowledge about my role as a researcher and their permission, we used to turn the second hour into a combined exercise in "conversation in Swedish" and a directed discussion where I took notes.

In 1997, collaboration was initiated with a gynaecologist, Dr. Birgitta Essén, who conducted a study on perinatal outcome in Sweden among women from Africa's Horn. We carried out a study of in depth interviews with fifteen Somali women in August to December 1998 (Essén et al. 2000), focusing on the women's experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. The subsequent year I was asked to arrange a seminar on female circumcision, directed toward different professionals in Malmö, by the Board of Public Health in Rosengård.

2.2 A seminar, a course on female circumcision – and a conflict

This one-day-seminar, in September 1999, gave rise to a host of activity in the field of female circumcision, both among Somalis in Malmö and among the professionals. A municipal 'reference group' on female circumcision was formed in Malmö and the officials allocated funds for a ten-week-course on female circumcision directed toward Somali women. I was given the opportunity to be the administrator of this course, to which Somali and Swedish experts were invited to lecture on medical, social, religious and legal aspects of female circumcision.

The course was preceded by a major conflict though. A Somali woman and good friend of mine, Asha Omar, had formed a women's organisation to combat female circumcision and strive for integration of Somali women into Swedish society. The organisation was called *Wadajir*, 'together' in Somali, the name alluding to the fact that these problems can only be solved if all groups work together – accordingly there were at least one woman from each large clan family in the board. I was fascinated by the clan all-embracing approach, and volunteered to be their secretary.

To understand what this meant to the balance of power in the Somali group in Malmö – the fact that one of the Somali organisations had a Swedish-speaking and -writing secretary – one has to be familiar with the tremendous importance these organisations have in immigrant groups where very few have a paid work. While the Swedish state has failed to offer good opportunities for immigrants in the labour market, the state is quite generous regarding financial appropriation to immigrant voluntary associations. These associations then turn into alternative spheres for building individual careers. The competition for financial support from the state and the municipality is enormous, so having a secretary who speaks fluent Swedish gives an association quite an advantage.

This was the background of the conflict arising before the start of the course. Some opponents claimed that I was no longer 'neutral', but in a position where I would favour my 'own' and hand down benefits to women of *Wadajir* alone. The officials in charge tried to solve the conflict in several meetings, explaining that I, in my function as a course administrator, would have no such resources to distribute. When more and more clan fractions became involved in the conflict, as well as local journalists and politicians, the officials took the decision to announce the course and let those women who were interested enough sign up. They realised that with so many fractions in conflict they would never find an administrator who would be supported by all groups. More than twenty women, much more than expected, from different clan families signed up and almost all of them took the course, spanning from March to May 2000. The course participants came to constitute a joint group at the end of the course and they decided to work together in the future, calling themselves the *Astur* group.

2.3 Transethnic research group

In May 2000, a study on female circumcision among the Somalis in Malmö was initiated by me, my colleague and husband Aje Carlbom, and with Asha Omar and Ali Elmi as co-workers and interpreters (Johnsdotter et al. 2000a, 2000b; Omar et al. 2001). It was financed by *Socialstyrelsen*, the Swedish national board of health and welfare, and a local program called *Sexuell hälsa* (Sexual Health).

The purpose of the study was twofold: firstly, to find out the logic behind different standpoints regarding female circumcision among Somali men and women in Malmö. Secondly, we wanted to try to map possible alternative strategies among Somali families who have taken a final decision to never infibulate their daughters.

Aware of the fact that this issue was a delicate matter, we designed the study in a way we thought would enable us to manage these topics in the most sensitive way possible. Asha Omar (the initiator of *Wadajir*), who has a degree in Psychology, worked with me, interviewing and talking to the Somali female informants. Ali Elmi, who is at Master's level in Social Anthropology, worked among the men with Aje Carlbom. Some interviews were conducted by Omar and Elmi in Somali, some by Carlbom and me in Swedish, and some by Carlbom and Elmi in a mix of

Swedish, Somali and English with men and by Omar and me with women. Approximately thirty interviews were conducted, most of them taped and transcribed. The four of us regularly met for continuos discussion on the themes of the interviews. As few studies in the field of female circumcision include the views of men, the cross-gender approach was especially fruitful.

We found it enormously stimulating to work two by two with men respectively women: a special dynamics originated from the fact that we could confront one group of informants with the result from the other group.

Further, having a 'transethnic' research group had numerous benefits. Asha Omar and Ali Elmi contributed with all their 'insider's knowledge' about this tradition and Somali society in general – i.e. all the background information that was needed to really understand the different themes that emerged in the interview material. Moreover, as sexuality is a taboo topic in Somali society, many of the informants felt more comfortable talking sex in the interviews with the Swedish interviewers. Somalis have a firmly rooted conviction that Swedes are tremendously open about sex and accordingly they feared no stigmatisation talking about it with us.

Before and after this study including the four of us, I have conducted many interviews with Somali women with Asha Omar as an interpreter and co-worker. This was a necessary measure, as I wanted to include Somali women with little or no skill in Swedish or English. At the same time as Omar translated the linguistic content during the interviews, she has also been my key informant in clarifying incomprehensibilities in the empirical data. To counteract the risk for bias, her statements about 'Somali ways' have been checked with several other Somalis. Sometimes her views have been confirmed, while other times the result has been a more complex and contradictory view on a certain phenomenon.

2.4 The empirical data

To sum up, the empirical data has been collected in several ways in different contexts, and this has enabled a deeper understanding of the issue. Living for three years in Rosengård, I got at least an idea of every day life in segregation and how it can be to live at a distance from ordinary life in Sweden (access to the labour market, schools were most children speak the language of the majority, etc) – even if I never fully could share the conditions neither of the other Swedes nor the immigrants living in the area. Spending time, participating in activities and conducting interviews with Muslim women from different ethnic groups enabled me to get some insights into what life in Sweden means to a Muslim woman. Conducting the medical anthropological study on pregnancy and delivery among Somali women, planning the one-day-seminar, administrating the course on female circumcision, participating as a secretary in *Wadajir* and working in our research group gave new contacts and offered a great number of situations for gathering empirical data.

Different techniques have been used during these years: the quotations in this text usually are taken from traditional taped interviews, both within the framework of

clearly defined studies and within my own more open-ended research. When a quotation is marked with a letter – e.g. "women L" – the quotation is from a person participating in the study conducted by the transethnic research group. However, a few of the women have been interviewed by me on several occasions, both before and after the study conducted by the four of us.

The informants in this study do not constitute a representative sample in a statistical sense. However, it has been a more general objective of the study to include a variety of women and men regarding background factors: age, years spent in Sweden and level of integration (fluency in Swedish and position in relation to the labour market), marital status, educational level, religiousness, clan affiliation, etc.

Much of my knowledge about Somali social structure, gender relations, clan system, life in exile etc, beyond what I have acquired from literature, originates from informal focus group interviews during classes teaching Swedish in Rosengård, but also from discussions during the course on female circumcision and meetings as a secretary in the association *Wadajir*. Above all, I have learned a lot from merely spending time with people, in friendship, in relations of conflict and hostility, and situations characterised by co-operation in planning different projects. In everyday interaction with people all the aspects otherwise talked about (or described in the literature) are practised: all kinds of variations of gender relations, clan politics, social strategies etc., become tangible in social interaction.

2.5 Reliability

Out of necessity, the key phenomenon discussed in this thesis – the practice, or *non-existent* practice, of female circumcision – has not been studied through participant observation. Cultural practices change, some new ones emerge, while others die out. In this thesis, I argue that female circumcision is a practice which an overwhelming majority of the Somalis in Sweden has abandoned. Hence, there is no other way to study this phenomenon than through an analysis of how people talk about it. Nevertheless, participant observation has been an important part of the study. Data has been gathered in a multitude of settings – Somalis in above all Malmö have been my neighbours, friends, informants, co-workers etc – and the results of the study are based upon this multifaceted research approach.

With few exceptions, the literature about female circumcision lacks the raw empirical data of the informants' own views. This leaves the reader in a position of having to trust (or distrust) the researchers' analyses according to whether they share the same views on the issue. Here I have chosen to allow the informants more space for expressing their views in their own words (even if the quotations have been subjectively selected by me). This enables the readers to draw their own conclusions.

A question that I have been repeatedly confronted with at presentations of the views of the Somali informants in this study is: "How can you be so sure that they haven't lied to you? How do you know for sure that they don't pretend that they have abandoned the practice of female circumcision while talking to a Swede, and then

they keep the custom alive secretly?" The question is naturally based on the assumption that the practice is upheld among many Somalis in Sweden, but the framing of the question is certainly relevant for anyone doing social research on a phenomenon which is stigmatised, or in this case, illegal. I see several reasons to give credence to the Somalis' testimonies. One is that many of them have been very open also with their confidences concerning other aspects, which are not flattering to the general depiction of Somalis as a group: for instance the use of the illegal drug khat (*qaat*) by some of the men, the general repugnance toward giving social, moral and financial support to an unmarried Somali girl who has become pregnant, or negative aspects of social life in relation to a clan structure often denied in public.

Another reason to give credence to Somalis' own views is the inherent dynamics of our interaction. A few times I have talked to (or formally interviewed) people who have been evasive, inconsistent or too eager to please. I have therefore treated their statements with some scepticism. The others I have classified as sincere and trustworthy. While it could be possible for an informant to dupe another person for a while in a single interview situation, the interviewer can keep inquiring until an entire composite view of the interviewee has been achieved, and can compare the deceptive informants' responses and behaviour with others'. Besides that, none of the informants who found a symbolic sunnah circumcision of girls acceptable were afraid to talk about it, even if this procedure is also considered to be illegal in Sweden. The few informants who could be found to be in favour of more extensive forms of female circumcision did not hesitate in any way to speak out. In a surprisingly open way, they, too, were willing to explain the motives of their opinions. Hence, after extensive interviewing with a wide variety of informants, I am confident of the sincerity of their views.

Yet another reason for believing the statements of the informants is the content of their arguments, as will be seen in the extensive quotations. My conviction about a widespread opposition to pharaonic circumcision among Somalis in Sweden – and a general abandonment of the practice altogether – is not only based on my informants' testimonials about their standpoints. It is above all a conclusion based on the logic of their arguments. Forgetting about Swedish ethical views about the circumcision of young girls, we can more pointedly ask: "Why should the Somalis maintain this practice, when they cite so many good reasons to abandon it?"

The process that the two Somali co-workers went through during the study further contributed to my conviction about a general abandonment of female circumcision among Swedish Somalis. When we planned the study, both Asha Omar and Ali Elmi were convinced that we would easily find people in favour of the practice. During the study, however, they realised that their speculations about a broad support for the practice were unfounded. Especially Asha Omar had, at first, a hard time believing that Somali men in Sweden would be opponents of pharaonic circumcision (the most extensive form of female circumcision, traditionally practised by a majority in Somalia). Eventually, reading the interviews with both the men and the women, she came to the conclusion that her own conviction about a widespread support among the men was based upon unreflected ideas from her circle of female friends. Both the Somali co-workers ended up making conclusions about the general trend among Swedish Somalis that contradicted the expectations they had had beforehand.

3 Somalis in exile

3.1 The background of the situation in Somalia

Somalia, situated on the tip of Africa's Horn, had prior to the civil war about six million inhabitants. Nomadic pastorialism has long been crucial for subsistence and today about half of the population live as nomads. About 25 % are settled farmers.[2] All are Sunni Muslims and have Somali as their native language.

Somalia has, like other African countries, a history of colonialism. At the end of the 19th century the Somali region was divided between England, Ethiopia, France and Italy. In 1960, the independent state of *Somalia* was founded, uniting British and Italian Somaliland. French Somaliland became independent in 1977, as *Djibouti*.

In the state of Somalia, Siad Barre carried out a coup d'état in 1969. He governed the country for the subsequent 21 years, the ruling being based on socialism and with support from the Soviet Union. The Somali flag has a pentangle, a star with five prongs, representing five parts of the nation of Somalia: present Djibouti (former French colony), the former British colony in north Somalia (a part which in 1991 was proclaimed independent as *Somaliland*), the former Italian colony in the south, including the capital Mogadishu. The last two prongs represent Ogaden in Ethiopia and parts of east Kenya, areas where many ethnic Somalis live and which many Somalis consider to be Somali territory.[3]

In 1978, the Somali Salvation Democratic Front, SSDF, was formed. During the 1980s, the opposition against the Barre regime increased. Somalis in exile formed *Somalian National Movement* in 1981, a movement gaining growing support during the subsequent years. In 1988, a civil war broke out between the oppositional groups and Barre's military forces in the north of Somalia, where the capital of the north region Hargeysa was bombed. The armed conflict was intensified and spread to other parts of Somalia. In January 1991, Siad Barre fled from Mogadishu.

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[2]Omar (1994:4f). See also Ntiri (1991).

[3]In 1977, Somalia invaded the province of Ogaden. The Soviet Union, up to now supporting the Barre regime, chose to support Ethiopia in this war. In 1978, the Somali units were forced to retreat from Ethiopia, even if the US supported them at this point.

In 1992, Somalia faced chaos with civil war and a growing part of the population in starvation. The UN decided to intervene, flying in provisions to relieve the worst situation of a famine aggravated by severe drought in Africa's Horn. At this point, it was no longer two parts battling for power in Somalia, but four or five clan based fractions in constantly altering alliances.

In September 1992, American soldiers in vanguard initiated the relief action directed by the UN in *Operation Hope*. The idea was to defend the provisions militarily. Quite soon it became obvious that what the US had planned to be a prompt effort turned into a chaotic military operation where the American soldiers in the UN army were involved as an armed party in the conflict. When the first American victims were a fact and pictures of desecrate corpses reached the US, the public opinion turned around and demanded a withdrawal of American soldiers from Somalia. All the UN-directed efforts in peace negotiations failed. The US decided to retire step by step.

At the beginning of 1994, about 35,000 UN soldiers were stationed in Somalia to calm the conflicts. About 5,000 of them were Americans, but the US had started to withdraw units. In March 1994, the last American soldiers left Somalia. A peace treaty was signed by the leaders of the most important combatant parties, and violated within a few days. During the spring of 1994, the UN-troops were reduced to about 16,000 soldiers, most of them from India, Pakistan and Egypt. The UN peace effort in Somalia was now generally referred to as a fiasco. Certainly the worst famine had been relieved, but the country was as chaotic as at the point of the UN intervention.

Somalia was characterised by civil war during the whole decade, even if the situation got a little better in the late 1990s. Even if the number of victims is not as high as in the beginning of the civil war, today's Somalia is a country without infrastructure. There is no government or other official authorities, public institutions like schools and hospitals do not function, or function imperfectly at local levels. The northern part of Somalia, the independent republic Somaliland (even though not officially recognised internationally), seems to be calmer than other regions of Somalia. There the reconstruction of the infrastructure has reached further than in other parts of the country.

Besides the civil war the Somali people have had to deal with other disasters. Vast areas near the rivers Jubba and Shabeele in south Somalia were flooded in 1997, thanks to the weather phenomenon El Nino. Entire villages were covered in water and thousands of people drowned or died from diseases. About two hundred thousand persons fled from the area. In the autumn of 1998, the Juba region once again was struck by a series of floods destroying the crop, resulting in starvation. The subsequent year the whole of Africa's Horn met with drought. Today many Somalis live in refugee camps, both within Somalia and in the neighbouring countries. Somalis in exile hesitate to return to their home country, as the non-existent infrastructure neither can offer their children an education, nor themselves work opportunities. Besides, the situation is still tense in many parts of Somalia. If everything else lacks in Somalia, weapons make the exception. At any moment armed conflicts may burst out.

3.2 Exile – and repatriation?

Before 1990, few Somalis lived in Sweden. After the outburst of the civil war, Somalis became asylum-seekers in Sweden as one of many other countries of the world. During the subsequent years thousands of Somalis arrived to Sweden and got permanent residence permits. Many of them have Swedish citizenship today.

Today some 19,000 Somalis live in Sweden.[4] If some people from Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia, classifying themselves as Somalis, are added to these figures, an estimation is that Somalis in Sweden amount to well more than 20,000. The largest groups live in Stockholm and Gothenburg, while a little more than one thousand live in Malmö, the third biggest city in Sweden.

The matter of repatriation is a delicate topic among Somalis. As an immigrant group, they are often referred to as one of the hardest to integrate into Swedish society.[5] In newspaper articles many Somalis express feelings of being unwanted as citizens in this country.[6]

This became obvious in 1998, when repatriation subsidies were offered, directed specifically toward Bosnians and Somalis. A special program was launched by the state, with the aim at promoting "voluntary repatriation". In 1999, the state department of Integration, *Integrationsverket*, published a report on Somalis in Sweden, observing that "in the Somali group a strong opposition and suspiciousness toward the repatriation program exists" (Integrationsverket 1999:39, my translation from Swedish). The report was presented by staff from the department at several seminars in different parts of Sweden, and in September 1999, a seminar was arranged in Malmö. The question of the repatriation program was raised and the atmosphere became fierce. The officials were harshly criticised and a woman representing the department admitted that the department had handled the whole matter in a clumsy way: they should not have initiated the program without hints from the Somalis themselves, but awaited a request from the target group.

Such a request was made from a local Somali group to the City of Malmö in the spring of 2000. This group was tied to Somaliland in the north of Somalia, where the rebuilding of the infrastructure has had some success. Their idea was to establish a local office, with the double purpose of facilitating for Somalis who wanted to return to Somalia, and for Somalis who wanted to be integrated into Swedish society.

The municipal officials were inspired with enthusiasm and involved the state department of Integration. Financing was approved of quickly, but only if "the whole group of Somalis" in Malmö participated in the process. In a couple of mass meetings the issue was discussed by Somalis: how to arrange the activities and, above all, who to employ in the office. The whole discussion got off the track and ended in one of the largest conflicts for many years among the Somalis in Malmö.

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[4] 31 December 1999: 18 801 persons living in Sweden were either born in Somalia (12 692) or born in Sweden with at least one of the parents born in Somalia (6 109). Figures from SCB [Statistics Sweden], 22 November 2000.

[5] See e.g. Coulter (1997) and Holm et al. (1999).

[6] See also Coulter (1997), Bjärbo (1997) and SIV (1998).

A Somali friend described the situation from his point of view by telling an old joke about how to get twenty Somalis into a Volkswagen, concluding: "It was the officials who threw the crumbs into the car." According to him there can be nothing but conflict when different fractions are supposed to agree on who will get access to the resources. He was also critical to the fact that one office alone should try to both integrate Somalis and push them away. The plans of establishing an office for integration and repatriation were finally realised, when the municipal officials decided to be in charge of who to employ.

My impression is that many of the Somalis would return to Somalia, if it were not for the children. The infrastructure is devastated in Somalia, with few areas where children can attend school and have access to good health care. In Sweden, on the other hand, the children grow up within a good health care system and have all possibilities to get an education for a future career anywhere in the world. What many consider problematic with raising a family in Sweden though, is the fear of losing control over their teenagers here in Sweden. Especially male teenagers tend to soak in to a completely foreign world (from the parents' point of view), and as parents in a strange society with unfamiliar ways of living, they do not know with what means they can recapture control over their young sons (Johnsdotter 2000b). There is a general increased risk for conflict between different generations in exile, according to Aden et al. (1999, see also Merametdijan 1995).

3.3 Clan community: security and control

Clan affiliation, and loyalties associated with it, is well known among Somalis, but often unarticulated. Many Somalis avoid any conversation about their genealogy or clan-affiliation with others, partly because clan orientation was banned after the coup d'état in 1969 and giving information about clan matters could be risky (Helander 1991:18). These issues remain sensitive and are especially delicate in relation to the Swedish society, as many Somalis have the feeling that Westerners' image of the clan system includes associations to war and backwardness.

My own interest in the clan system awakened when someone presented me to a man with the words: "He is a closer cousin of mine than X, who you have met". After this meeting the woman and I outlined her kinship background. Soon I could establish the fact that the cousin of hers who I knew quite well was genetically close to her about ten generations back, while she and her "closer cousin" had a common ancestor about seven generations ago. I realised that the use of the denomination *cousin* always depends on the context, i.e. who is present in a certain situation. A may present B as her cousin in a group where all the others are members of the same clan, if A and B are closer (counting generations back with a common ancestor) to each other than any other in the group. In another situation A may present C as her cousin, sufficing they are members of the same clan family – if it is the case that all the others gathered represent other clan families. Cousinship is a way to express that someone in a group is the person closest to you in a kin sense, closer than any of the others.

The Somali clan system consists of a number of quite large clan families, the most important being *Darood, Issaq, Hawiye*, *Dir*, *Digil* and *Rahanwiin*. People from different clan families are scattered all over Somalia, but still the different branches dominate in different parts: Darood in central and parts of north Somalia; Hawiye mostly in the south; Isaaq is the most numerous clan family in the north, especially in Somaliland; Digil and Rahanwiin in the area of the southern rivers Jubba and Shabeele (see e.g. Helander 1991, Lewis 1993, 1998). In Malmö, there are also a few Somalis belonging to a group said to have Arab descent: the *Reer Xamar*.

The Somali kinship system is based on patrilinearity, which means that affinity runs through the paternal side of the family. A person is related to his mother's family at an everyday level, but the ties of blood exist in one's father's kin. Every child, consequently, inherits his father's clan affiliation.[7]

A Somali woman who is about to marry is expected to marry a man being as close to her own clan as possible. The reasons are self-evident: If a conflict arises, where clan loyalties are challenged, the strains on the woman may be extensive as she is torn between the clan of her own birth family and her husband's clan (and consequently her own children's clan). [8] However, this situation seems to have developed quite lately, with the start of the civil war. Traditionally, marriages with distant clan fractions or even other clans were desirable in some parts of Somalia, as such unions were expected to keep peaceful relations and political stability. Such a strategy was, however, generally only within well-situated families' reach. Poor families had to arrange marriages with closer kin.[9] According to Helander (1991), there is a regional difference in marriage patterns. In the north it has been seen as preferable to marry someone from an other clan; while in the south, a close relative have been seen as the best choice.

In everyday life a woman has to balance expectations from her own husband with expectations from people of her own clan, especially the elders. One of the young women I've met in Malmö explained it in this way:

> *- Coming from my clan… I am expected to marry someone from this clan. But I don't believe in such things…*
> *- Would you consider marrying someone from another clan?*
> *- Yes. If I found that man. If I found the right man in another clan… yes… actually, I would marry him.*
> *- Would it cause problems if you did?*
> *- Yes… it would. It would be problems and conflicts. […] And it is true… when I was nineteen, twenty… I never thought about it the way I do now. I thought the whole thing was silly, why should they interfere? But you do get into trouble. If I marry someone outside my own clan, problems will come. My family would not visit me, or if they did, they would feel uncomfortable. They can not talk the way they are used to, not say what they want to say. If I marry someone from [my clan X], they can*

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[7]The Somali clan system is well described in Lewis (1961, 1998), Mansur (1995a, 1995b) and Hicks (1993). A short account in Swedish is given in Ehlers & Witzke (1992:12ff). For a more anthropological description of how it works in everyday life, see Barnes Lee & Boddy (1994).

[8]For a discussion on this, from a Somali woman's perspective, see e.g. Ahmed (1995:171f). For further discussion on traditional marriage patterns, see also Lewis (1993:14ff) and Helander (1991:23f).

[9]Thanks to Ali Elmi for explaining this situation.

come and talk about [X] and everything we do and our tradition and everything. They would feel relaxed.

I know of a few women who have married someone from another clan family. They seem to manage well, even if they find themselves in a tricky situation if there is a conflict involving both their own and their husbands' clan. In the literature the traditional nomadic relations are described:

> Lewis notes that in Somalia, for example, the strength of the patrilineal affiliation "binds a woman more strongly to her own kin than marriage binds her to her husband's kin" (Lewis 1962:1). Although a woman goes to live with her husband after marriage, she never completely identifies with his kin [Hicks 1993:91].

The western model of the nuclear family, in analyses of non-western societies often transformed into extended family models, is not applicable if one wants to understand a Somali women's relation to their own lineage, Ahmed (1995) points out. This relationship is often a source of great support.

Clan affiliation is of central importance in Somali identity.[10] When one meets or hears of someone the question "Who is this person?" is important to ascertain where in the clan structure he or she is placed. The same moment one has established that, one knows what relation one has to him or her and what reciprocal expectations there can be. The closer one is in a kin sense – even if one has never met before – the more one can expect from him or her, but also have to be ready to give in return. It is a matter of economic resources, but also more abstract support like loyalty in conflicts or favours of different sorts: "The far-reaching ties of kinship and descent provide a latent resource that can be mobilised when the need arises", Helander (1991:27) describes the traditional ways of clanship in Somalia.

In this way, the clan system works as a social network, also in exile. A woman told me she gave birth to one of her children while living in a refugee camp in Sweden, her husband and family remaining in Somalia. In this camp there was a man she had never heard of, but they belonged to the same subclan. When the baby was born he collected money among their common clan members for her to buy the baby kit. If none of her clan members had been present, Somalis from other clans would have arranged for her and her newborn. I have seen other situations where a problem has emerged and the solution is found in clanbased teamwork: someone has to rush to Somalia headlong because of serious family problems and her ticket is paid within twenty-four hours after subscription among clan members. However, even if support mainly follows clan relations, there have also been incidents of women from other clans being helped, at points when these women have had problems with their own kin.

At the same time as the clan system works as a social security network, it also functions as a controlling and confining instance. In Sweden, many Somalis want to tone down the importance of the clan affiliations, but in reality the system persists,

[10] See e.g. Helander (1991), Mansur (1995a, 1995b) and Barnes Lee & Boddy (1994).

even if somewhat weakened and partly with new functions.[11] Eastmond & Thorén (1996) describe it as an oasis in exile: even though the environment is completely unfamiliar, the clan affiliation gives a person a feeling of identity and a belonging without reservations.

In the Somali group in Malmö, there are constant negotiations and internal debates about different people's doings. The social control exists in relation to the ever-present clan structure. The attempts to control and influence others may show in trying to talk sense into someone or, in some cases, plant rumours or start intrigues. It is obvious, however, that Somalis who have lived for a long time in Sweden and are more or less integrated into Swedish society keep themselves at distance from clan business. They see friends and relatives, but seem to try to keep their social life dissociated from clan loyalties.[12]

One of the most important functions of the clan system in Sweden seems to be that one's clan is a potential source of opportunities. According to Helander (1991), the social ties around a Somali family can "be mobilised and used for a variety of purposes" (ibid.:18). Somalis, more than any other immigrant group, are distinguished for having an almost unbelievable number of voluntary associations – in Stockholm alone there are more than hundred Somali associations.[13] In Malmö, there are some ten associations, most of them based in a particular clan. One of the reasons for organising according to clan affiliation is that it is in harmony with traditional ways of distributing resources: handing down benefits to your own kin. Co-operation between different groups always opens up for a misgiving of how resources are distributed.[14] This is the background of the conflict arising when I was asked to be the administrator of the course on female circumcision in 2000 (see section 2.2 and Johnsdotter 2000a).

In sum, Swedish Somalis in general are more oriented toward family than is the norm among Westerners. When an individual Somali violates widely accepted intra-group social norms, his or her entire family will pay the price in terms of lost status. Reputation and respect from others depend to a high degree on the general impression of the whole family: families are categorised as either 'good' or 'bad'. In the social control of young unmarried girls, this aspect is central. The values preserved in Swedish exile – the importance of chastity for instance – involve entire

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[11] See e.g. Eastmond & Thorén (1996) and Coulter (1997). Broms (1998) states that "[knowing one's lineage is] equivalent of our personal numbers or ID tags and the first thing any Somali child must learn, even in diaspora".

[12] The same variation is seen among Somalis in Denmark, according to Kallehave (2001:25f).

[13] Integrationsverket (1999:25). In Gothenburg, Sweden's second city, there are about forty Somali associations (Omsäter 1996:10), many are based according to the clan structure (Bjärbo 1997:25). In Denmark, the Somali associations are not organised according to clan to the same extent as in Sweden, according to Somali informants in a Swedish study (Broms 1998). It is however unclear why this is so.

[14] In situations when people experience fear of extinction, this kind of conflicts over resources can have fatal consequences. The Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* (18 November 1998) reported violent clan conflicts at a Swedish missionary station in Somalia, owing to disagreement about terms of employment at the station: two groups fought about who to be employed and the result, besides a great number of wounded people, was more than twenty casualties.

families in terms of honour and reputation. This will be further discussed in sections 5.3 and 5.4.

3.4 Marriage and family: challenged gender roles

In her article "Finely etched chattel: The invention of a Somali woman", Christine Choi Ahmed (1995) examines how Somali gender relations and Somali women have been described in ethnographic writing. On one hand, she states, anthropologists "have created a myth of the Somali woman as chattel, commodity, and a creature of little power" (ibid.:159). On the other hand, the supposed degraded position of Somali women is contradicted by the same authors, as they admit that in reality this ranking is challenged every day: "[F]ew Somali women will readily admit that men are their superiors. Women constantly question the authority of men" as the Swedish anthropologist Bernhard Helander (1987:7) points out, adding: "The fact that real women deviate from the way they should be, is a fact of great concern to many a Somali man" (ibid.).[15] Ahmed then wonders, with some irony, if men's superiority can be a tenet of society, given that more than half of its population questions this ideology? (1995:166).

Helander offers a symbolic analysis of a folk model of gender and gender characteristics. There seems to be a discrepancy between the gender ideology and everyday life experiences: "real women deviate from the ideal" (1987:8). According to Somali traditional gender ideology, women are supposed to behave in a chaste, decent, shy and submissive way (ibid.). This is, naturally, often challenged in reality. An almost hundred years old reflection is offered by a British author:

> … a clever woman will frequently rule the roost, and her husband will seldom dare to scold her. I have more than once heard a Somali woman severely reprimand her husband, who has slunk away in the most shameful way to escape her bitter remarks [Drake-Brockman 1912, in Helander 1987:7].

Not much has been written about gender roles in Somali society, and Ahmed (1995) observes that women as informants are almost completely absent in ethnography. While she does not deny that Somali society is characterised by a patriarchal structure, the general position of women has to be understood in the Somali context (1995:184). Abdalla (1982), a Somali sociologist with clear feminist starting points, describes their situation:

[15] See also e.g. Lewis (1993:14): "Somali women are often forceful characters who perhaps exercise more influence than appears on the surface", and Lewis (1998:112ff) for a description of traditional gender roles in the Somali pastoral society.

> The traditional women take all these beliefs and customs [seemingly oppressive in a western perspective] for granted and exhibit a curious mixture of humility and dignity and in no way consider themselves to be oppressed [Abdalla 1982:48].

According to Abdalla, the socialist regime established in Somalia in 1969 further elaborated concepts introduced by the women's liberation struggle in the 1950s, as it was seen as a basic factor for social progress and for the foundation of a socialist society (1982:57f). The Amendments to the family law passed in 1975 gave Somali women legal rights in many ways resembling those in most western societies (ibid.:59). However, to most people in Somalia it is still regarded an ideal for men to be able to keep their wives at home, even if middle class women to an increasing degree see it as natural to have a paid work, often as teachers, nurses, or secretaries (ibid.:58f).

A debate about the general nature of the Somali women took place in Sweden's most important daily papers, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, after the publication of a column where a journalist claimed that the civil war in Somalia partly was due to the fact that the women were circumcised: "In this manner broken, both physically and mentally, the Somali women simply do not have the strength to work as omnipresent critical links in social cohesion" (Jönsson 1993, my translation from Swedish). The Swedish anthropologist Helander replied, leaning upon extensive fieldwork in Somalia:

> It seems as if Per Jönsson has never met a Somali woman. He has no idea of the unquestioned authority she has in managing her husband and family. […] Few Somali women I have met would agree that they are inferior to the men in any way. Certainly, they serve the men food first, apparently obliging, but not until they have helped themselves with the most delicious pieces in the kitchen. And which Somali man would dare to not listen to what his wife can tell him about what other women in the neighbourhood have said about their husbands? Neither as individuals, nor in the roles as defined by their society, do Somali women have anything in common with the oppressed, remote role that Jönsson wants to ascribe them [Helander 1993a, my translation from Swedish].

At one of my first visits in a Somali association in Rosengård, a debate between women and men took place. The theme of the event was the divorce rate among Somalis in Sweden, including families in Malmö: what happened to Somali couples in exile?[16] The discussion was fierce, but with undertones of humour. With an interpreter beside me I could follow the argumentation of both sides, which – in a summary account – revealed that the women experienced a change in men's attitudes in exile, letting go of taking responsibility for their families here in

[16]Divorcing is not exclusively a characteristic of Somali matrimonies in exile. Many of the Somalis I have talked to state that it is not very stigmatising to be divorced in Somalia: many women remarry several times during their lifetime. Ahmed describes Somali marriage as "often brittle and easily broken" (1995:172), to a large extent owing to the strong bonds between a woman and her own birth family. Helander (1991) states that every third marriage ends by divorce (ibid.:24). In a survey from a village in South Somalia in the late 1980s, Omar (1994) reports that 30% of the women, at the time of the interview, had divorced at least once in their lives and that half of these women had remarried more than once (ibid.:18). See also Talle (1993:95), Omar (1994:8), Ntiri (1991), Balk (2000:61) and Hicks (1993:82, 91ff).

Sweden (traditionally, a man's first responsibility is to be the breadwinner of the family). The women are left with all duties at home, while the men – those out of school and job – spend hours having coffee and playing cards in cafés. Many women stressed the fact that they would not complain if their husbands had worked to support the family, but when they don't, they have to give their wives a helping hand at home. Today, being married meant having an extra child to take care of – and this without the help from female kin, as women in Somalia traditionally have. The men answered that *they* had not changed in exile, but Somali women had indeed. Women, they claimed, had begun to look after their own interests. It has always been the case that women take care of the children, the cleaning and cooking; and someone uttered that men were neither created nor raised for such work. What will happen in those families when returning to Somalia: is a husband supposed to work at home at the same time as he has his paid work? And even if Somali women in Sweden do not get help from their (female) relatives or neighbours in exile, their work ought to be much easier: here all the houses have taps with hot water and they can buy ready-cooked food from the frozen-food counters in the stores. Many men seemed to experience a loss of authority and a fear of loosing their wives and children, as many women economically can manage quite well in Sweden without their husbands, often owing to social welfare.

According to Helander (1991), there are no "direct cultural barriers preventing a Somali man from cooking or other household chores", but spending too much time at home makes men feel uncomfortable (ibid.:21). Helander's and Coulter's (1997) statements about Swedish Somali men in general, that even those who are out of job prefer to leave the home during daytime (even if only to spend the time at cafés), correspond to my impressions.[17] Giving a similar description of the challenged gender roles and increased rate of divorces among Somalis in Denmark, the Danish ethnologist Tina Kallehave remarks:

> Somalis often explain their family problems by stating that spouses have difficulty recognizing each other in their lives in Denmark. A frequent sign of this problem is that one spouse has certain expectations that the other spouse no longer fulfills. In return, this spouse makes new demands that the former does not understand and therefore does not fulfill. For instance, spouses often disagree about the division of labor that they can expect among husband and wife [Kallehave 2001:26].

When I have discussed the division of domestic work with Somali women in Malmö, many say that things actually have changed in Sweden: most men do give a helping hand at home, if not for other reasons, for fear of divorce. One woman described what had happened in her home in these words:

> *- It takes time. For me… I came to Sweden before my husband, he came later. When he arrived, he didn't even know how to make a cup of tea. So… in the beginning it was difficult, for me too. I wasn't used to ask a man to cook for me or to take care of the children. At that time both of us had a job. In*

[17] Kallehave (2001) refers to interviews about Somalis in Denmark with social workers, who make remarks about Somali men letting their families down: "Even if the men are unemployed, they seem to spend most of their time outside the home and do not support their wives with childcare and housekeeping" (ibid.:25).

the morning I got up before him, made breakfast, helped the children and left with them… After work I came home, cooked, took care of the children and the laundry. After some time I couldn't do it anymore, I told him: 'What do you think I am? You have to help me, you are not disabled! If you had been, things would be different, but you can help me! Let's share the duties.' If he can't cook, I can do that, but he can help the children to wash themselves, he can do the laundry and stuff like that. So… things changed, slowly. Now it's better. If women don't demand it, it will take a long time. And you know, to some women it's unthinkable that they should ask a man to cook for them. They can't do that… [laughs]*… it will take a long time… But today [in Sweden] many Somali husbands help their wives at home. Some have become pretty good at cooking for example*.

Many women talk in a longing voice about their social network at home. Whether they had a paid work or not, women used to help each other. Some of the women could afford to pay domestic help.[18] In Sweden, many claim, they feel lonely and isolated, and even if they look after each other's children now and then, networks as in Somalia seem to be harder to manage in exile. It seems as if some women have better networks than others, at the same time as some women get more help from their husbands than others. Many Somali men leave their wives during the day, the women being left alone with children, cleaning and cooking. A woman explained to me why she had cancelled some of our appointments: every time she had plans with me her husband had promised to take care of their children for a few hours, but he never turned up. "Can't you do the same thing to him, to make him understand?", I suggested. "How could I?", she wondered, "I'm the one in charge of everything. There is no way to pay back." She did not believe in going on love strike, like Lysistrate, in fear of him taking a second wife.[19] Divorce was no alternative to her, as she considered having a father sometimes a better option for her children than having no father at all.

It is hard to make sweeping statements about the gender roles or the sexual division of labour among Somalis in exile. Several women I know of, married and divorced, are in the middle of successful careers in the Swedish society, while many others, hardly speaking any Swedish, may be working at home taking care of their children or may cultivate an alternative career in the sphere of local Somali associations. But a general trend seems to be that marriages have been affected by life in exile. A married woman makes a summary:

In Somalia we live another kind of life. The man works, the woman has her friends… We live in two different worlds, the world of men and world of women… [laughs]. *You have your mother and your sisters and girlfriends and… whoever can help you and give advice. But here… you take care of the children and go to school and maybe a job. It's a new situation. The discussions… and the way the*

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[18] A fact described as "exploiting other women" by the Somali feminist author Abdalla (1982:45).

[19] According to Bjelfvenstam (1982:97) the Somali law against *polygamy* is unnecessary, as polygamy also among the nomads is a declining tradition. Ntiri (1991) shows, in a survey in the Lower Juba region in South Somalia in the 80s, that 40% of the 859 women in the survey were involved in polygamous marriages (ibid.:76ff). It was also a matter of fact that many of the divorces were a result of the husband's decision to marry another woman. See also Omar (1994:27), stating that the practice of polygamy weighs heavily on Somali women. I have heard of a few cases where Somali women living in Sweden have had to face the fact that their husbands have married other women while visiting Somalia, but this seems to be rare and are met with opposition from first wives and families.

men listen to us now… it's different to Somalia. Here a man has to listen to his wife. The woman needs her husband more here, and the man also needs his wife. We talk to each other here, because there is no other to talk to.

It is a well-established fact that Somali families in general have many children. "Why are children important?" was one question asked in the series of interviews in the study on pregnancy and childbirth among Somali women (Essén et al. 2000). One common answer was existential, children constituting the meaning of life. Another frequent answer was socio-economic, children as a social insurance: "We don't have pension insurance funds like you in Sweden, I take care of my children now and they will take care of me in the future".[20] Talking about this, quite a few women expressed that they many times had felt offended by attitudes from different people in Swedish society, how they sometimes got comments about how they multiply to get more child benefits and social assistance.

Many of the Somali women in Malmö seem to be ambivalent about their future in two aspects: firstly, it is not at all clear whether they are going back to Somalia or not. Almost everyone seems to cherish the dream about returning home, but many of them also see their children growing up in this country, with its opportunities of good education for example. Secondly, many have ambitions to get a job in Sweden (some already have positions in the Swedish labour market). To have a good chance of that, they need some fluency in Swedish, which they hopefully will get at sfi-courses (Swedish for immigrants). Many Somali women in Sweden have problems completing these courses, as they give birth to their children quite frequently (see also Coulter 1997, and Wingborg 1998):

- We learn Swedish, attend the sfi-courses and all that… We may learn some Swedish, but soon you're back sitting at home. Without a job, it's worthless! If you get a job, you can practice [Swedish]. […] Those who don't have that many children, they may get a job. But those who never get a job, what are they supposed to do? And their friends keep telling them to have more children… Those who never can expect a job in Sweden, who will they listen to? They will listen to those friends and relatives persuading them to have more children.

In an economic situation in Sweden where many – especially immigrants – are unemployed, many Somali women will continue to consider begetting of children the best way to make life in exile meaningful. This is not a strategy invented in Sweden, as noted, but a continuation of a strategy traditionally prevalent among Somalis.[21] Having many children is desirable and an attitude questioned by few women, even in exile.

Another field where the gender roles have changed drastically is the field of giving birth. Contrary to established gender roles, Somali husbands are present when their wives give birth in Sweden. In an article about a study on Somalis giving birth in Sweden, including both men and women, Wiklund et al. (2000) summarise:

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[20]Omar (1994) states, reporting her survey in a rural village in South Somalia: "…the more children one has, the greater the guarantee is that someone can take care of you when you are getting old" (1994:25). Another reason for having many children (especially sons) is that it strengthens the lineage (Lewis 1993:13).

[21]Thanks to Ali Elmi for pointing this out to me.

> All the participants pointed out that, according to Somali culture, they had gone through something unique and unfamiliar. They had become pioneers in finding adequate role divisions in a new gender structure, going beyond their traditional limits for expected gender behaviour [Wiklund et al. 2000:111]. For some couples, the dual vulnerability caused tensions and weariness in the relationship. But in most cases childbirth implied a prospect of increased unity and dependency on each other [ibid.:113].

Wiklund et al. describe it in terms of that childbirth in Sweden forces both men and women into unknown gender structure (ibid.:114, see also Chapter Eight). As in the sphere of daily housekeeping, the challenged gender roles in the sphere of giving birth cause more stress in some relationships than in others. Some marriages end in divorce due to strain in the unfamiliar exile context, while others seem to consolidate.

Many Somali women become more oriented toward religion in Sweden.[22] There is a superficial sign of islamisation: several women have exchanged their traditional headcloth covering the hair and knotted in the back of the head (*shaash* among women from the south of Somalia and *malgabad* among women from the north), for the traditionally Arab headscarf (*xijaab*) pinned under the chin, sometimes combined with an Arab *jilbaab* reaching to the feet. A small number of Somali women in Sweden who are oriented toward the Islamistic *salafi*-movement use dark flowing clothing, where only the eyes are visible to strangers (*niqaab*).

That this arabised dress code is unfamiliar to traditional Somali ways is confirmed by Helander (1991), in discussing the fact that practising Muslims in Somalia tend to eschew religious excesses, while observing the pillars of faith and generally avoiding things prohibited by religion (such as alcohol and pork): "Women do not wear veils and the fundamentalist groups that now exist in some urban settings are viewed with suspicion" (ibid.:27). Broms (1998) depicts the traditional Somali attitude to religion as "pragmatic and relaxed".

Some women may have changed their looks in Sweden out of social pressure, for fear of deviating too much from their circle of acquaintances.[23] But there seems to be some correspondence to inner individual processes as well. In Coulter's (1997) study among Somali women in Rinkeby, a Stockholm suburb with a large immigrant population, some of the religiously devoted women claimed that "since they now live in a non-Muslim country they have to change and become 'real' Muslims" (ibid.:16). Eastmond & Thorén (1996) note that Swedish Somalis in their study "convey that there is a tendency among the religious [exile Somalis] to cultivate Islam" (ibid.:10, my translation from Swedish). They have conceived this as an approach to an Arabic Islam and, so, a dissociation of some Somali traits.

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[22] Broms (1998) defines a strengthened religious identity (orientation towards an Islamic discourse) as one of the strategies among Somalis for coping with the exile situation it Sweden. The other two main strategies, Broms suggests, are forming an identity through the clan system (a traditional discourse), and towards integration into the Swedish society (a modernist, individualistic discourse).

[23] This is suggested as part of the explanation to the changed dress code by Coulter (1997). Also Broms (1998) discusses the changed dress code among Somali women in Sweden: "What some [Somali] informants describe and condemn as fundamentalist attempts to redefine the position of women, is by those in favour explained in terms of increased knowledge of Islam" (Broms 1998, unpaginated).

Many women I have discussed the matter with state that they have become more religious in exile. Situations and practices which were unreflected in Somalia – the everyday public calls for prayer, the sending of the children to Koranic schools, by way of example – rely on reflected and motivated decisions in Sweden. They claim that they read and reflect upon the Koran and other religious sources in Sweden in a way they never used to do in Somalia, and that they argue with their husbands for not being good enough Muslims. Also women who do not carry visible marks of religiousness (like a headscarf) classify themselves as Muslims, and claim that they live in accordance with Muslim precepts.

3.5 Concluding commentary

Many of the Somalis I encountered in Malmö give me the impression that they live in a limbo, not knowing when, or even if, they will return to Somalia. Even if life in Sweden offers many advantages – education, a high level health care system, a currency which makes it possible to support the family in Somalia to a greater or lesser extent, etc. – many Somalis express feelings of loss and cherish the dream of returning at some point in the future. Over and above that, there are extensive sentiments that Somalis are unwanted as citizens in Sweden.

The Somali community in Malmö is in many ways characterised by a clan orientation, characteristic of social life in Somalia, however adapted to the Swedish context. Demands from the Swedish society – that Somali women are expected to study or be on the lookout for work, by way of example – and the welfare system with social assistance have had, generally speaking, a crucial impact on the gender roles within the Somali exile community. Most Somali men are out of work and, thus, unable to support their families. The women have become economically independent of their husbands, either by employment or thanks to social welfare.

Many Somali women are more oriented toward religion in Sweden than they used to be in Somalia. These women's inclinations for an identity based on Islam seems to be of great importance for changed attitudes to different forms of female circumcision, as will be discussed in Chapter Five. As conditions of living have changed so drastically, attitudes and strategies have changed as well. Cultural practices, like the tradition of female circumcision, are affected by the new social and cultural context in exile. People do not settle down in a completely unfamiliar environment with an unchangeable "cultural baggage" which remains intact, as the culturalist perspective would suggest (see Chapter Eight). Social strategies are worked out in relation to the wider context: what kind of decisions Somali mothers in Sweden make regarding female circumcision, depends to a large extent on experiences and new forms of identification during exile.

4 Female circumcision as a field of study

Chapter Four intends to offer an overview of the international literature on female circumcision, and occasionally my own reflections when my own empirical findings are out of accordance with a widely established view.

This chapter aims at giving an overview of different aspects of practices of female circumcision, the main point of the discussion based on the literature available in the field. The chapter starts out with definitions and classifications of female circumcision (4.1), followed by a review of what is known about physical and psychic consequences of different forms of the practice (4.2). The reports on sexuality in association with female circumcision show a great variety, probably because the elusive character of sexual experience makes it very susceptible to biased descriptions on the part of the researchers. The western discourse, and studies in the field of sexuality, including both clitoridectomised and infibulated women, will be discussed in section 4.3.

A short account of what we know, or rather do not know, about the historical background of practices of female circumcision is given in the following section (4.4). Then follows a discussion on Islam and female circumcision (4.5), intended to provide a background to my informants' views of religious aspects of female circumcision presented above all in section 5.6.

Occurrences of female circumcision, or, rather, the general lack of occurrences of female circumcision in the Western world, are discussed in section 4.6. Section 4.7 deals with female circumcision as it is practised in Somalia. The motives for circumcising girls are accounted for (4.8), before a more general review of researchers' explanatory models are dealt with in the section 4.9. This section includes analyses on symbolism, approaches focusing on ethnic, socio-economic and psychological aspects, as well as studies taking their point of departure in feminist perspectives. The chapter ends with a section (4.9.4) about Gerry Mackie's model of convention, showing how the abrupt abandonment of footbinding in China can teach us something about similar processes in the field of female circumcision.

4.1 Definitions and classifications

Female circumcision is today, western-world-wide, in most cases designated *female genital mutilation* (FGM). The American radical feminist Fran Hosken coined the phrase and has propagated for it since the end of the 1970s. In 1990, WHO changed their official terminology (WHO 1998:60), and most western countries followed (including Sweden).

The WHO definition of female genital mutilation is:

> *Female genital mutilation comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the female external genitalia and/or injury to the female genital organs for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reasons.*

The various forms of circumcision can be categorised in different ways, and often a popular categorisation and an official classification exist side by side.[24] The following list is the official classification of WHO (1998:6):

> *I. Excision of the prepuce, with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris.*
>
> *II. Excision of the clitoris with partial or total excision of the labia minora.*
>
> *III. Excision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening (infibulation).*
>
> *IV. Unclassified: includes pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris and/or labia; cauterization by burning of the clitoris and surrounding tissue; scraping of tissue surrounding the vaginal orifice (angurya cuts) or cutting of the vagina (gishiri cuts); introduction of corrosive substances or herbs into the vagina to cause bleeding or for the purpose of tightening or narrowing it; and any other procedure that falls under the definition of female genital mutilation given above.*

In many studies figures are given from specific areas, how many women have been circumcised according to formal classification. But such estimations are a little tricky, as the boundaries between the categories are not clear-cut at all, neither to the scientists nor to the lay people practising female circumcision. The British anthropologist Melissa Parker (1995) points out how unreliable such studies are, considering the differences in scientific and folk classification, besides the fact that women who have undergone circumcision may have only a vague idea about what was actually done on them. Criticising El Dareer's (1982) study in Sudan among others, Parker continues:

> It is reasonable to suppose that many females in El Dareer's study transgress the three types of circumcision identified in her study, as a substantial number of operations were performed,

[24] For a description of different forms of categorisation, see e.g. WHO (1998).

> without an anaesthetic, by midwives who had never received any formal biomedical training. It is also worth noting that it is difficult to cut with surgical precision when a girl is kicking and screaming and blood is flowing freely [Parker 1995:514-515].

Parker's reasoning seems to fit in well with my impressions from Somali women. In Somalia the folk classification of female circumcisions consists of *pharaonic circumcision* and *sunnah circumcision*. Pharaonic circumcision clearly is equivalent to type III, infibulation. Sunnah is a more vague category, most easily defined as 'everything that is not ended by an infibulation'. As we shall see in section 5.2, the *sunnah* concept is a fuzzy one. A few of the women I have come to know have changed their opinion on what has been done to them (a change of classification), as they in Sweden have got the opportunity to see photos of uncircumcised female genitals. In sum, accounts of how many women in a specific area that are circumcised according to one type or another should be regarded as very rough estimations.

4.2 Physical and psychic consequences

The medical consequences, not least when it comes to infibulation, are well documented.[25] Short-term complications are related to the operation itself. The most frequently mentioned are *pain, injury to adjacent tissue, haemorrhage, septic or hypovolemic shock, acute urine retention, infection*. Most of these appear, or are aggravated, when infibulations are performed.

Long-term complications, like the short-term complications particularly associated to infibulation, that may occur are *difficulty in passing urine, difficulty in menstruation, recurrent urinary tract infections, dyspareunia (painful sexual intercourse*). The risks for some complications are common to other operations as well: *keloid scares, abscesses* and *cysts*.

Some complications are often listed, even if scientific evidence is scarce or other factors may confound: e.g. *infertility due to genital infection due to infibulation* and *obstructed labour resulting in fistulas*. Infertility is said to be a result of pelvic infections in infibulated women.[26] But nobody has, so far, been able to prove the connection between infibulation and pelvic infections.[27] That fistulas should be a result of obstructed labour is also a questionable statement. "No studies have been

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[25] See e.g. WHO (1995, 1998), Abdalla (1982), Dirie & Lindmark (1992), Dirie (1985, 1991), De Silva (1989), Aziz (1980), Muhammed (1986), Elchalal et al. (1997), and Toubia (1994a, 1994b). For a general description of women's health in rural Somalia, see Omar (1994). For a description of medical complications among infibulated Somali girls in Sweden, see Ismail (1999).

[26] See e.g. WHO (1995:7) and McFalls & McFalls (1984:460f), Dirie (1991:14), Koso-Thomas (1987:26), Sanderson (1981:40), Hicks (1993:11, 102f), Abdalla (1982:38), Arbesman et al. (1993) and McLean & Graham (1985:5).

[27] Personal communication with Dr. Birgitta Essén, 12 November 2001.

undertaken on the precise impact of infibulation on perinatal outcome", WHO admits in their report from 1998 (page 30), and continues calling attention to the fact that fistulas rather are due to the fact that many girls in these countries are married and get pregnant when they are very young, before their pelvis is fully grown. Concomitant cause is the suboptimal obstetric care common in developing countries. Fistulae problems are, as a matter of this fact, common in many countries where no female circumcision is practised. WHO establishes that there should be no reason for obstructed labour as a result of female circumcision. Even in infibulated women, the scar tissue will not, if uterine contraction is normal, render delivery more difficult or prolong second stage of labour (WHO 1998:42). This statement is supported by a study conducted in Sweden, including eighty-three women originating from Africa's Horn compared to a group of 2770 non-circumcised women (women in both groups were giving birth to their first child and no twin births were included). A scrutiny of case records showed that the second stage of labour among circumcised women was actually shorter on average than among non-circumcised women: 34 versus 53 minutes (Essén 2001).[28]

Some authors have reacted against the western focus on health hazards, arguing that it gives a distorted picture of how the actors themselves perceive the practice. According to Obiora (1997a), the United Nations found that in a sample of persons who opposed female circumcision, only 12.72% cited "illness and accidents" as a reason for such opposition:

> Some people construe this as reflective of a cult of ignorance that enshrouds the practice. It is somewhat counter-intuitive to claim that the effected groups are unaware of the medical consequences of their actions. If they are as pervasively diabolic and devastating as claimed, the affected societies would not be able to survive with it at its base. The practice must be sustained for some over-bearing reasons other than ignorance of the seemingly obvious health hazards [Obiora 1997a, unpaginated].

Obiora summarises the situation by stating that reports from gynaecologists may overstate the prevalence of complications, as their views reflect their experiences in treating complicated cases. On the other hand, many complications are never reported, as the victims have no access to the formal health care system (Obiora 1997a).

The psychological consequences of female circumcision are just as difficult to establish, not least because of how different the circumstances are in different places: e.g. the age of the girls or women, the motives for circumcising, and the severity of the cutting. It goes without saying that there must be a fundamental difference in

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[28] In other settings, where the health care systems lack the resources of a modern industrialised country, the outcome may be other. Using data from the Somali Family Health Survey, Omar (1991) claims that the effect of intermediate and pharaonic circumcision was strong in neonatal, infant and early childhood mortality, and then declined after the first year of life. It was also found that female child mortality increased in the ages where female child circumcision is performed. These figures are statistical; the connection to female circumcision remains a hypothesis (Omar discusses for instance the possibility that a higher rate of mortality in female children may be due to that in some rural settings sons are given more food than daughters when resources are scarce, but refute this explanation, as this practice is non-existent in urban settings).

going through voluntary clitoridectomy (removal of part of the clitoris) as a fourteen-year-old girl among Kikuyu in Kenya, and being subjected to an infibulation as a five-year-old Somali girl.[29] One may note, however, that an overwhelming majority of the girls who go through female circumcision in the world do not have a choice of their own.

Dr. Mahdi Ali Dirie from Somalia is convinced that infibulated women bear the trauma of the operation during the rest of their lives, a condition that "predispose infibulated women to psychiatric illness" (1985:77). He seems to be sure that most infibulated women suffer from false consciousness, presenting a discussion under the headline *Repressed maturity*:

> At present, many cases manifesting psychiatric disturbance are not recognized because medical services existing in these countries are not equipped to do it. Many other women are potentially sick but since the situation of women in these countries is still so subordinate, they lack any consciously guided orientation of self and therefore cannot reflect the real magnitude of the damage done to them. This, let us say dormant state, will remain only so long as women are not emancipated. Once knowledge unveils the realities and women stand up for their rights, the consequences of female circumcision, including the psychiatric ones, will emerge [Dirie 1985:77].

In one of the most well-informed discussions on psychological consequences in a WHO publication from 1982, Baasher suggests that from the girl's perspective, there are several aspects to consider when trying to grasp the psychological side of female circumcision:

> In evaluating the overall psychological effects there is no doubt that the child as a result of the operative interference of female circumcision is overwhelmed, subjected to excruciating pain and real suffering. Some of the physical and psychological reactions are mitigated by social support and the special family care given the child. However, the outcome of the operation and its effect on the mental state and the well-being of the child in general depend on her psychological defenses, personality formation, past experience, the prepatory phase, the way in which the operation has been performed and the ensuing complications that may take place [Baasher 1982, in Lightfoot-Klein 1989a:61].

A study from Cairo (in Egypt, clitoridectomy is the most common procedure) compared circumcised and non-circumcised women. There it was found that 10% of the circumcised reported feelings of inferiority, physically and psychosexually, 5% reporting depression due to experiences in their marital and sexual life; the divorce rate was 6 % in this group. The other group had a divorce rate of less than 1% and only a fractional part of physical and psychosexual problems reported in the group of circumcised women (Maher 1981, in Lightfoot-Klein 1989a:76).

To my knowledge only one study has tried to look into the psychological consequences for infibulated girls. Gallo & Boscolo (1985) asked 196 girls (aged 8-16) at a primary school in Somalia to do some drawings. Besides, they gathered

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[29] See e.g. Robertson (1996:621f). See also a general discussion on psychological aspects of infibulation in Lightfoot-Klein (1989a:60ff).

data on type of circumcision and age at the time of the operation. The girls were also asked to write comments on their drawings. They conclude:

> In the written comments, the small number of explicit recordings of protest, of fear and of psychological suffering contrast with the characterizations of anxiety and aggressiveness found in the graphic illustrations. Many girls affirm with satisfaction that they did not experience pain thanks to the circumcisor's ability. […] The anxieties and tensions present on the deep level are controlled and/or rationalised while on the verbal level the event is experienced as a festive occasion or a moment of self-assertion because of its cultural and social connotations [Gallo & Boscolo 1985:187].

Observing the enclosed drawings, it is not obvious how to interpret them. It is possible to see what Gallo & Boscolo evidently see: circumcisers depicted with "angry face, pronounced teeth, accentuated eyes, long arms and hook-like hands. […] an overall 'terrifying appearance', a threatening stance towards the victim" (1985:175) – but the drawings attached are extremely difficult to interpret. The appearance of the "hook-like hands", for instance, may have more to do with imperfect drawing ability than with unconscious emotions.

4.3 Female circumcision and sexuality

4.3.1 Western discourse

When it comes to sexuality in circumcised women, the issue seems to be highly ideological. One may assume that ability to enjoy sex is a matter of anatomical facts and individual differences, but when it comes to the sexuality of circumcised women, statements are often more political than empirically based. The radical feminist Tobe Levin, for instance, states that "[f]or the victims of genital mutilation, sexuality is associated with torture" (1980:200). In Sweden, the debate on female circumcision was introduced by a series of articles in the daily press and in a weekly magazine, *Vi*, in 1979. The first article in *Vi* begins:

> Suddenly our eyes are opened to one of the most cruel traditions of humanity. Suddenly we start talking about the atrocious fact that millions of girls – above all in Africa – are still circumcised, have their genitals mutilated, are deprived of all lust and joy of their coming sexual life [Lundgren 1979:10]. There will be an opening [after infibulation] with which the girl can urinate, but which will not give her any sexual satisfaction. After cutting away the clitoris, she is practically frigid. Often she must be ripped up a bit for the man to be able to penetrate her [ibid.:11].[30]

[30] *Ugeskrift for læger* (2002:1843).

This is not an unusual description of the sexuality of circumcised women, nor in scientific texts.[31] Westerners' obsession with clitoris, and how this excessive interest in clitoris cause many well intentioned observers to draw prejudiced conclusions about circumcised women's sexuality, has been discussed by Parker (1995).[32] Hinge (1995) suggests that notions about an eliminated ability to enjoy sex for circumcised women reflect exclusively western ideas about sexuality: "Westerners have a problem imagining a sexuality which does not have its basis in the Hite Report" (1995:31, my translation from Danish).

According to Parker (ibid.), the reconquest of the clitoris – after the time when Freud had deemed the clitoris to be an immature woman's tool for sexual enjoyment (a mature woman fulfilled herself sexually by vaginal orgasms) – the clitoris became a powerful symbol of women's liberation and rights.[33] The western perception of clitoridectomy is, according to this reasoning, about more than cutting away a part of the body. It comes to comprise the whole patriarchal system's attack on women and their rights, sexual and other. Here the Sudanese physician Nahid Toubia, today working at Rainbo in London, summarises the sexual consequences along the same line:

> Removal of the clitoris takes away the primary specialized female sexual organ, dense with nerve endings and dedicated only to pleasure. The vagina is an organ of reproduction with minimal sensory capacity for sexual response. In other words, FGM removes the woman's sexual organ and leaves her reproductive organs intact. […] [With infibulation] her reproductive capacity is locked up with a chastity belt made of her own flesh. […] Women who are sexually frustrated may no longer seek sexual contact with their partners and ultimately become sexual objects and reproductive vehicles for men [Toubia 1995:12].

This section about sexuality deals with the field in a superficial way, focusing mostly on the physical aspects of sexuality in relation to female circumcision, leaving cultural context aside. "Culture structures sexual response in fundamental ways", as pointed out by Gruenbaum (2001:139, referring to Suggs & Miracle

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[31] The article, written by a male journalist, has a clear radical feminist perspective. The same conclusions and attitudes are to be found in a folder from SIDA (Swedish International Development Agency) the same year: Most infibulated women become frigid, the author states, consequently they do not derive any benefit from the sexual act (Halldén 1979:30). See also Bjelfvenstam (1982:93f).

[32] See e.g. McFalls & McFalls (1984:460), Thiam (1986, 1998:382-383), and Gunning (1997:353). al-Hadidi argues against female circumcision: "a circumcised wife who has had her organ of sexual sensitivity removed in its entirety is unable to experience any sexual feeling" (quoted in Abdu'r-Razzaq, 1998:39). See also Abdalla (1982:24ff): "It is now believed by many medical authorities that the majority of mutilated women are frigid, especially those with 'total clitoridectomy' and with other complex mutilations such as 'Pharaonic circumcision'" (ibid.:26), and Dorkenoo & Elworthy (1992:9f).

[33] For a summary on the historical politics of female genitals, see also Dellenborg (2001). For a commentary on the ideological aspects of the western discussion on sexuality of circumcised women, see Ogbu (1997), Obermeyer (1999), Johnson (2000), and Ahmadu (2000). According to Toubia (1985:154), who is of Sudanese origin but had her medical training in Egypt, the clitoris as a functional organ is never mentioned in teaching there. She sees this as a result of Freudian influence in British and American gynaecology, which, in turn, has influenced medicine in other parts of the world.

1993). According to Caplan (1987), among others, an analysis of sexuality must take so many other fields into consideration:

> Is it the case that in kinship-based societies sexuality is embedded in other institutions, and cannot be isolated, whereas in modern societies, sex has not only become a form of consumerism, but also a 'thing in itself'? [Caplan 1987:24]. If, then, we look to anthropology for answers to questions about sexuality, it can indeed show us that sexuality, at least in kinship-based societies, is not a 'thing in itself'; but while it can give us a picture of a cultural specific form of sexuality, the lack of historical specificity makes cross-cultural comparison difficult [Caplan 1987:17].

There are few studies focusing on sexuality in association with female circumcision, most of these are based upon questionnaires. Other findings are based upon scattered impressions during fieldwork of a more general nature. These studies will be discussed in a section about sexuality and clitoridectomy, followed by a section about sexuality and infibulation. The aim is to show that western notions about an erased opportunity to enjoy sex of circumcised women is a simplified assumption. The framing of the section is, in this respect, ethnocentric.

4.3.2 Studies including clitoridectomised women

When it comes to clitoridectomies, it is worth pointing out that clitoris is a far-reaching organ, with nerves stretching into the female body. Consequently, it is practically impossible to remove the entire organ. If healing proceeds well, a clitoridectomised woman may very well have a sensitive area in this spot (even if the sensitivity has been reduced).[34] In an early study on the ability to experience sexual fulfilment among a dozen clitoridectomised women in the West (they were classified as hermaphrodites, having excessively big clitorises), Money (1955) could find no evidence of an eradication of the ability to enjoy sex. He reported cases of phantom orgasms in individuals who suffer from paralysis and in cases of penile amputations (Money 1955, cited in Lightfoot-Klein 1989a:91). This seems to be confirmed by a later study about clitoridectomies due to clitoral pathology (like tumours); in the cases reported, there seemed to be no impairment to sexual functioning (Verkauf 1975, in Lightfoot-Klein, ibid.).

The importance of emotional cognitive processes seems to be the clue to an understanding of such phenomena: sexuality is situated in the brain as well as in the various erogenous zones of the body. Lowry (1976) highlights the variation between

[34] See e.g. Anees (1989:108ff) and Gruenbaum (2001:135f) on Freud's notions about the clitoris. See also Geza Róheim (1932) combining his training in Anthropology and Psycho-Analysis in his writings about "primitive cultural types", including the section "The National Character of the Somali". There he states: "Women have to give up their original erotogenicity based on the clitoris and advance to the vaginal type. [---] We might therefore suppose that it [infibulation] fosters the right attitude of women in sexual life" (1932:202). See also e.g. Lane & Rubinstein (1996, unpaginated), and Ahmadu (2000:304), about clitoris as a powerful symbol in the West.

individual women when it comes to sensitivity of different parts of the sexual organs:

> In summary, the clitoris contains, in most women, a large number of receptor nerve endings; in some women, other areas may contain more. In almost all women, the labia minora are also highly sensitive [Lowry 1976; quoted in WHO 1998:24].

Along the same line, Megafu (1983) claims that circumcised women get higher sensitivity in other erogenous zones of the body, so compensating for removed genitalia.[35]

But sexual experiences are also tainted by socially constructed ideas and expectations (Leavitt 1991): "The orgasm is a result of physiological, psychological, and sociological determinants", Lightfoot-Klein argues (1989a:92). Dorkenoo (1994:17ff) and Toubia (1993:17) reach similar conclusions, at a review of the studies dealing with female circumcision and sexuality.

In Ghana, many women go through clitoridectomy. Knudsen (1994:187f) reports, from conversations with some 500 clitoridectomised Ghanese women, that about 70 % said that they experienced sexual feelings, while the remaining 30% said their feelings were "weak".

In a study from Egypt in 1985, including 133 circumcised women and 26 uncircumcised, it was found that seven to eight times as many uncircumcised women experienced sexual excitement on stimulation of the clitoral area than those who were circumcised (Badawi 1989, quoted in Dorkenoo 1994:21f). But Badawi also found that only 50% of the uncircumcised women experienced orgasm with manual stimulation of the clitoral area, compared to as many as 25% of the circumcised women (ibid.).

A study, based on 500 questionnaires, was conducted among Ibo women in Nigeria. There, many girls have lost their virginity before marriage, which is also the time when the women are circumcised by clitoridectomy – this seems to be one of the groups in the world where women in general have the opportunity to compare sexual experiences before and after clitoridectomy.[36] Megafu (1983) concludes:

> [T]he experience of orgasm during sexual activity does not depend on presence or not of the clitoris, although slightly more uncircumcised females admit experiencing orgasm than circumcised ones [Megafu 1983:799].[37]

Contradictory results were obtained by the Nigerian physician Koso-Thomas (1987), in a study including 50 urban women in Sierra-Leone, who had had sexual experience before clitoridectomy: "I found that none had been able to reach the level

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[35]Personal communication with Dr. Birgitta Essén, gynaecologist and obstetrician at MAS University Hospital in Malmö, 12 November 2001. See Ahmadu (2000:305) for a similar conclusion. For a thorough description of the clitoral system, see Dorkenoo (1994:17ff).

[36]See also the Danish Somali physician Fatuma Ali, cited in Sundhedsstyrelsen (1999:13f). She argues that circumcised women's sexuality is oriented towards the vagina, that the experience of orgasm depends on vaginal stimulation, and that other erogenous zones of the body become more sensitive.

[37]Another group is the Masai, as described by Talle (1994) after fieldwork in northern Tanzania.

of satisfaction they knew before circumcision" (ibid.: 11). Both Megafu and Koso-Thomas have, however, clear political agendas in their writings, both striving for an elimination of the practice of female circumcision. Koso-Thomas reflects upon information about women who have become promiscuous in their efforts to find an ideal partner with the words: "It seems ironical, therefore, that the operation intended to eliminate promiscuity in fact could have the opposite effect" (ibid.). Megafu uses his results, showing only a slight difference between circumcised and uncircumcised women in their experience of sexual enjoyment, arguing that attempts to curb the excessive female sexuality through clitoridectomy are made in vain. If the differences in results are due to the authors' bias or due to local differences, I am not able to conclude.

Nelson (1987) offers a complex description of female circumcision among Kikuyu women in Kenya. Women are well aware of their right to sex for their general well-being, but seem to associate their own sexuality more with procreation than with pleasure. The women the researcher talked to "agreed that circumcision, even the most moderate form practised in Kenya, would limit women's sexual feelings" (Nelson 1987:221). Among the Rendille of northern Kenya, sexual activities prior to marriage are acceptable, as long as they do not result in pregnancy. There girls are clitoridectomised at their weddings. When asked about the ability to enjoy sex before and after circumcision, a spectrum of answers was given, ranging from the loss of all enjoyment, sexual fulfilment also after marriage, to insistences that sex was actually better *after* being circumcised (Shell-Duncan et al. 2000:118).

Fuambi Ahmadu, born and educated in Washington, D.C., went to Sierra Leone during a Christmas leave in her final year at the university. She had spent several years in the capital of Sierra Leone as a child. Now, as an adult, she decided to go through the Kono initiation rite, which included excision (removal of the clitoris and the labia minora):

> I asked them [her female cousins/assistants] about the pain and whether I would ever enjoy sex again, and they laughed. One very pretty twenty-one year old said to me, smiling: "When a man really loves you, he will take his time to do it, and it will be very sweet." [Ahmadu 2000:290f]. […] [M]y research and experience contradict received knowledge regarding the supposedly negative impact of removing the clitoris on women's sexuality. Much of this taken-for-granted information may come from popular misconceptions about the biological significance of the clitoris as the source of female orgasms [ibid.:304].

According to Ahmadu, her informants stress vaginal stimulation for sexual pleasure and see the clitoris more or less as "redundant" (2000:304). She argues that the remaining deeper parts of the clitoris may explain the fact that "many women who had sexual experiences prior to excision, the author included, perceive either no difference or increased sexual satisfaction following their operation" (ibid.:305).

4.3.3 Studies including infibulated women

Hanny Lightfoot-Klein has, in her qualitative study presented in the book *Prisoners of Ritual* (1989a), put some effort into trying to understand Sudanese (infibulated) women's experience of their sexuality. She relates that she had some problems at the beginning: the women asked "usually professed a total absence of sexual desire and sexual enjoyment" (1989b, unpaginated). Her translators gave her the advice to ask the women if they employed the 'smoke ceremony' – a Sudanese woman's way to give her husband a hint that she wants him to make advances – and when a woman had admitted using that trick, communication was no longer a problem. A general tendency in her material was that the more severe the circumcision, the weaker were the feelings of pleasure and ability to achieve orgasm (1989a:87). Nevertheless, nearly 90% of some 300 women she talked to said they experienced orgasm (ranging from always to rarely).[38] The women talking about intense and prolonged orgasms confirmed their statements with "happy and highly animated demeanor", according to Lightfoot-Klein. Other women stated they had weak orgasms, or difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, some of the anorgasmic women were educated upper-class women, familiar with the western discourse on female circumcision, full of rage with what had been done to them (Lightfoot-Klein 1989b, unpaginated). This is consistent with findings in a study from Egypt, quoted by Dirie (1985). There it is claimed that Egyptian clitoridectomised women suffer more from psychosexual disorders than Somali infibulated women:

> [T]he Egyptian women live in a society where half of the women are not circumcised, therefore they lack the pressures leading to social conformity and acceptance of the practice that Somali women have in their society. This will make them conscious of their mutilation and they will feel that they are deprived of important parts of their sex organs, which reinforces these psycho-sexual problems [Dirie 1985:73].

Lightfoot-Klein's findings are contradicted by studies done by El Dareer (1982) and Shandall (1967, quoted in WHO 1998:34 and Sanderson 1981:62). Quoting may be risky though: Dorkenoo & Elworthy (1992), stating that "Dr. A. A. Shandall found that *some* of the women he interviewed in the Sudan had no idea at all of the existence of orgasm" (1992:9, italics mine), are quoted in Elchalal et al.: "Women interviewed in Sudan who had undergone female genital mutilation had no idea of the existence of orgasm" (1997:649), a rendering giving the impression that all women in the study were ignorant. Abusharaf (2000), herself originating from Sudan, reports that a number of circumcised women she interviewed in a town near Khartoum conveyed a positive depiction of their sexual experiences (ibid.:161). Also Gruenbaum (2001) reports her findings from fieldwork in Sudan: trying to find out if orgasm was within infibulated women's reach, she asked questions about whether also women 'finish'. A midwife once took her hand, squeezed her fingers, and said: "'Look, Ellen, some of us do 'finish'. It feels like electricity, like this…'

[38] 69% of the uncircumcised women in the study admitted experiencing orgasm during coitus as compared with 59% in the circumcised group (Megafu 1983:795, 797). It is, however, difficult to determine the reliability of the study for several reasons.

and she flicked her finger sharply and rhythmically against my constricted fingers. I was convinced we were talking about the same thing" (Gruenbaum 2001:141).

The general depiction of sexuality described by the authors quoted above does not deviate much from the situation among western (uncircumcised) women. How can this be? Regarding infibulation, the picture is complicated by the fact that there is evidence that clitoris, entirely or partly, often is left intact.[39] One of my informants, who used to work as a nurse with a well established circumcising physician in Mogadishu, told me the story of how the doctor once was confronted with the terrible situation that one of his patients, a small girl, started bleeding excessively from the clitoris artery during the infibulation operation. After this almost fatal incident, in subsequent operations on other girls, he began to cover or hide the clitoris rather than cutting it. The nurse told me confidentially:

> *- The parents believe everything is gone, but it's still there. They say 'Now our girl is [pharaonically] circumcised', but it's almost sunnah. He [the physician] found this one out for himself, and it really looked good. But in some families the girls were observed during the operation, then he had to do what he was told.*

This doctor is obviously not the only one 'cheating' when infibulating. The British gynaecological surgeon Harry Gordon has worked for several years with reconstructive surgery in infibulated Somali women in Great Britain. He has found that about 95 % of the women have had clitoris left intact beneath the infibulated labia majora (Shell-Duncan & Hernlund 2000:17). Several other researchers report that traditional circumcisers often refrain from cutting the clitoris, and instead hide it beneath tissue, to avoid excessive haemorrhage.[40] Thus, it seems as if most infibulated women still have their clitoris intact or almost intact, even if covered by tissue. This fact may have some significance when trying to understand how it is possible that many Somali and Sudanese infibulated women state that they have gratifying sexual relations with their husbands – contrary of western assumptions about an eradicated ability to enjoy sex.

One has to be aware that there often exists a cultural taboo for women to *show* that they enjoy sex (see e.g. Lightfoot-Klein 1989a:80ff and above, and Atoki 1995:231). Johnson (2000) describes how loud noises among Mandinga in Guinea-Bissau are associated with wild animals, witches, spirits, etc., and thus experienced as negative and dangerous: "Screaming during sex – associated with sexual pleasure – is a highly inappropriate mixture of these human/nonhuman realms and thus considered to be dangerous" (ibid.:228).

A similar taboo seems to exist in Sudan and Somalia. According to Lightfoot-Klein, Sudanese women are bound to hide any delight in sexuality: "Custom puts

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[39] Lightfoot-Klein admits the possibility that anorgasmic women tended to exclude themselves from the interviews, and that the statistics therefore may be skewed. However, she finds it more likely that many women excluded themselves for other reasons, maybe even the fact that they strongly enjoyed having sex, a fact that in Sudan is an improper trait in women (1989a:80f).

[40] Gruenbaum (2001) suggests that the so called G-spot (Gräfenberg spot), sometimes called the 'female prostate' may be a clue to a wider understanding of many infibulated women's ability to reach sexual enjoyment and satisfaction (ibid.:151f).

severe penalties on a woman's initiation of sexual intercourse" (1989a:87) and if she finds the sexual act pleasurable, she is expected to hide these emotions from her husband. "She is not required to be sexually active, 'like an animal' [---] If the woman has an orgasm, she tries not to show it, and if she is unable to control her reaction, she denies it was brought on by sexual ecstasy" (1989:89).

When Lightfoot-Klein asked women if they ever asked their husbands to have sex, most often an emphatic "No!" was given with an explanation that this would be very shameful for a woman. However, she often perceived the answer to have a false ring to it, or it was delivered with a suppressed amusement. Not until the significance of the smoke ceremony had been explained to her, she was able to grasp the relation between demands of a chaste attitude and sexual desire for most Sudanese women: "This is what we all do when we want intercourse with our husbands. When he smells that odour, he knows exactly what it means" (Lightfoot-Klein 1989a:23). The women denying the use of the smoke ceremony verified this through a total absence of laughter and smiles (ibid.:24).

Asha Omar (co-author of the reports, Johnsdotter et al. 2000a; Omar et al. 2001), at a recent visit to Somalia, participated in a radio talk show about female circumcision. A Somali man called the radio station and expressed his displeasure with the practice, as "women are deprived of their ability to enjoy sex". Omar responded that the caller ought not jump to conclusions: many Somali circumcised women may very well enjoy sex, but they are reserved in their expressions in the sexual act, as it is generally considered shameful for a woman to show openly that sexual activity is delightful. She received many reactions from women telephoning the radio station, thanking her for bringing this subject out into the open. One woman said: "For the first time in our lives I and my husband talked openly about this. Our sexual relation will probably change drastically."

Among those Somali women to whom I have talked about this, most of them express a positive attitude toward sex. As it is a delicate issue of a private nature, I have often brought it up in a more general manner: either asked about how women joke about sex (and asked them to explain why a certain joke is considered to be funny), or I have asked how they perceive that Somali women in general feel about sex. Most of them think Somali women in general enjoy sex, even if there are exceptions: "Someone may say, 'I wait until very late before I go to bed, and then I hope he won't get any ideas'… But most seem to like it, those who don't are few…" There is a cultural norm stating that it is shameful for a Somali woman to show her husband that she wants to have sex (but she can give him hints through the use of perfume, incense, etc.), but some of my Somali informants claim that they do not care, that they know their husbands well enough to be open about such things. Traditionally though, it seems to be regarded as shameful to talk about sexual matters with one's husband. Among women, it is acceptable to talk about sex in a general manner, but most people avoid talking about own private experiences, with few exceptions. The Somali home society lacks a mass medial exploitation of sexual matters and a woman showing a too obvious interest in these matters run the risk of being stigmatised. Among Somalis in Malmö everyone conveyed the idea

that this topic is taboo, but at the same time most of them were willing to talk about sex quite frankly:[41]

> [I ask:] - *Views of sexuality in Sweden and Somalia… do you see any differences?*
> [Omar interpreting:] - *She says she sees sex in Somalia as something we can't talk about.*
> [I say:] - *I think many women I've met talk quite openly about sex.* […][42]
> [Omar interpreting after discussion in Somali:] - *When we say we don't talk about sex, it's among us. There is a difference between for example asking a doctor about advice in sexual matters and discuss with someone how you feel when you're having sex… […] She says between man and woman we don't talk about sex directly, but we show that we love and we show that we need sex…*
> [Discussion in Somali, and Omar sums up:] - *You never talk about your private life… I mean sexual life… with a friend. And when it comes to your husband… we don't speak directly, we show…*

A WHO report concludes the chapter on sexuality by stating:

> [I]t is clear that all types of female genital mutilation interfere to some degree with women's sexual response but do not necessarily abolish the possibility of sexual pleasure and climax. […] Even women with infibulation often have parts of the sensitive tissue of the clitoris and labia left intact. Some studies suggest that, apart from the external genitals, other erogenous zones in the body may become more sensitized in women with genital mutilation, particularly when the overall sexual experience is pleasurable with a caring partner [WHO 1998:35].

The importance of reciprocity in the sexual act can probably not be overestimated. Dellenborg sums up, discussing discourses on sexuality and clitoridectomy among the Joola in Casamance, Senegal: "From talking to women, I got the impression that their sexual response, or lack of it, had more to do with men's sexual behaviour than with the clitoridectomy" (2001:197). Men interviewed, who had experienced sex with both excised and non-excised women, could generally not tell if it made a difference (ibid.).

Toubia (1999:39) reaches a similar conclusion regarding sexuality of circumcised women: that in many cases, the sensitivity of the husband and the relationship *per se* makes the difference – in the very same way as among western couples – when it comes to feelings of sexual fulfilment. Lightfoot-Klein was thrown headlong into this insight as an infibulated woman started laughing hilariously at her question "Are you able to enjoy sexual intercourse?", the three women present ending up wallowing with laughter on the floor:

> "She says [the interpreter explained] that you must be completely *mad* to ask her a question like that! She says '*A body is a body*, and no circumcision can change that! No matter what they cut away from you – they cannot change that!'"
>
> It was a sobering experience in that it reminded me to remain aware at all times that I was

[41] See e.g. Austveg et al. (1998), in Shell-Duncan & Hernlund (2000:39, n8) and Gruenbaum (1996:462, 469).

[42] A fact which, naturally, can be a result of my ethnic background: as I am Swedish, and thus supposed to be tremendously open about and interested in sex, nobody feared any stigmatisation talking to me about it.

> interacting with real human beings with real lives and real relationships with a multitude of dimensions, not simply with female genitalia in various states of mutilation [Lightfoot-Klein 1989a:25-26, italics in original].

In sum, sexuality seems to be affected in one way or another through the removal of parts of the external genitalia.[43] However, there is no way to establish beforehand to what extent individual women's sexual lust, enjoyment and fulfilment are affected by the various procedures. In Moore's words: "Sexual intercourse and human reproduction are not just physiological processes, they are also social activities" (1994a:816). Sexual gratification is obviously about so much more than what has been taken away and what has been left of the female genital organs. The relation to the partner, psychological expectations, cultural specific norms, etc. seem to play a salient role when it comes to the quality of circumcised women's sexual experiences.

4.4 Historical background

When and where female circumcision in Africa has its origin remains unclear. It is claimed that it existed in the Nile Valley in Ancient Egypt, and according to the historian Herodotus, whose work is dated to the 5th century BC, Romans, Phoenicians and Ethiopians practised it as well.[44] There is some evidence of female circumcision in girls as early as five thousand years ago in Egypt.[45] Many writers point out that Egyptian mummies show traces of infibulation, while others claim that this is a questionable statement. It seems to be clear, though, that clitoridectomy can be found in some mummies.[46] A conventional idea is that the tradition spread from the Nile Valley, along trade routes. When the Nile Valley was Islamised in the 7th century the tradition became incorporated into an Islamic worldview.[47]

It is not perfectly clear what type of circumcision Egyptians practised. One does know, though, that slave girls, imported from areas south of Egypt and bought by rich Egyptians, were infibulated. There are speculations about the motives for this

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[43]Here I told them about when I during the course on female circumcision visited a gynaecological clinic with a group of some twenty Somali women. Caesarean section, among other things, was discussed and some of the women were rather outspoken when asking questions in the presence of the whole group. The nurse told me afterwards that for her their attitude was a pleasant surprise, and that she during study visits involving Swedes never had been bluntly asked: "And how soon can you have sex after a Caesarean section?"

[44]Ivan (1997) points out that "[t]he pituitary gland that regulates sexual drive is certainly left intact in the brain" (ibid.:75).

[45]See e.g. Anees (1989:102f). The ancient Egyptian myths describe bisexuality in the gods. Circumcision of females may have been a way to bring out the femininity in girls. See also Knudsen (1994:26ff), Abusharaf (1998), Kassamali (1998:41), Abdalla (1982:76f) and Ahmadu (2000:295, 307f).

[46]Gallo & Abdisamed (1985:312), and Ntiri (1993).

[47]See e.g. Anees (1989:103), Sanderson (1981:26ff), and Cloudsley (1983:110).

infibulation: it may have been considered a way to confine the girl's sexuality and avoid unwanted pregnancies. A traveller from the beginning of the 19th century stated that infibulated girls ("virgins") commanded a higher price at the slave market (Warsame et al. 1985:2-3, Mackie 1996:103). The first indisputable account of infibulation was given by Pietro Bembo, a historian whose work was published in the 16th century. In countries at the Red Sea, "inhabited by blacks, […] private parts are sewn together after birth, but in a way not to hinder the urinary ways" (in Cloudsley 1983:111). Another account was given by Dos Santos in 1609: inland from Mogadishu in Somalia a group had "a custome to sew up their Females, specially their slaves being young to make them unable for conception, which makes these Slaves sell dearer, both for their chastitie, and for better confidence which their Masters put in them" (cited in Mackie 1996:1003).

Fran Hosken (1993:71) admits that the origin of female genital operations is unknown. In the chapter about the historical background, she discusses a number of historic sources where female circumcision is mentioned, and begins by stating that "[t]he extirpation of sexual satisfaction of women – indeed, the sexual castration of women – is the purpose of the operations, as stated throughout the historic literature" (1993:73), and concludes later:

> What is most striking, perhaps, about these accounts is how little has changed. The descriptions given, the male attitudes revealed from the past are much the same today [Hosken 1993:84].

She goes on to talk about the patriarchal attitudes about virginity, chastity and seclusion, connecting it to sexual assault and rape in the Western world. "Regardless of the diversity of context and meaning", comments Obiora (1997a, unpaginated), "some feminists campaigning against female circumcision explain the origin of the practice monolithically in terms of sexual politics and patriarchal control". She continues by refuting a series of feminist arguments said to support the hypothesis of patriarchal origin, e. g. the idea of female circumcision as a way of controlling female sexuality in a polygyneous society, where the man allegedly would have problems satisfying numerous wives sexually.

A related idea is that in patrilineal societies female circumcision is a way to ensure that the husband is the biological father of his children. Gerry Mackie (1996, 2000) argues along this line, claiming that the origin of infibulation is to be sought in the imperial structure of the ancient societies in the north-east part of Africa. (His theory of the origin will be further discussed in section 4.9.4) Obiora (1997a) points out, to counter such views, that female circumcision exists in some polyandrous and matrilineal societies as well. At the same time there are patrilineal and polygyneous groups where no female circumcision is practised. Thus, these criteria are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for understanding the historical background of the tradition.

Pia Grassivaro Gallo (1992) has an elaborated theory on the origin of infibulation completely void of making accusations against the male species.[48] In a cultural materialist spirit, Gallo speculates about how infibulation once started as an evolutionary response to a climatic change in Somalia, causing an exposed existence to women living by mixed herd pastoralism. To defend themselves from predators

[48]Kassamali (1998:41), and Knudsen (1994:27-28).

(while their men were out herding the camels) they introduced the tradition of infibulation to avoid attracting the animals through their sexually linked female odours.

A more widespread theory claims that infibulation historically was a means to protect young girls from rape when they were out on their own herding animals.[49] Brotmacher claims that the practice of infibulation "is justified by the need to protect young women when they are sent to fetch water, or are away from their menfolk whilst pasturing livestock" (1955:220).

Female circumcision has historically also occurred in the West, but never as a traditional ceremony. The knowledge of Greek gynaecologists was picked up by western gynaecologists in the 17th century, some of whom used clitoridectomy trying to cure hysteria or other forms of neuroses, masturbation, promiscuity, epilepsy and other disorders imagined to be associated with the female genitalia.[50] In America chemical clitoridectomy, by a silver nitrate solution, was recommended in gynaecological textbooks as a means to treat disorders in females (Anees 1989:107f, Dorkenoo 1994:30). The last clitoridectomy intended to cure an emotional disorder known to have been performed in the US took place in the 1940s on a five-year-old girl (Sheehan 1997:333).

The only non-medical occurrence of female circumcision in the West is based on reports about a Christian sect in Russia, the Skoptzy, which was said to practice clitoridectomy and infibulation on some of their women in the 19th century. The verse of St Matthew (19:12) provided the foundation of the idea: "There are Eunuchs, which made themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake" (Sanderson 1981:28, 45, Anees 1989:105, and Knudsen 1994:36).

4.5 Islam and female circumcision

Even if female circumcision is practised in societies with Muslims, Christians, Jews and groups with non-scriptural religions, in western societies there is a tendency to associate female circumcision with Islam.[51] This section will briefly discuss some of the possible positions from a Muslim perspective. As my Somali informants refer to the Koran and the hadiths when they explain their dissociation of any harsher forms of female circumcision (see section 5.6), the discussion here will focus on these sources. This is interesting considering that the Somalis belong to the Shafi'i law school, which is one of the two Islamic law schools (out of five) regarding

[49] There are also the psychoanalytic speculations by the anthropologist Geza Róheim in "The National Character of the Somali" (1932): He sees a connection between infibulation and male castration-anxiety. For a thorough discussion on historical sources regarding the spread of infibulation, see Hicks (1993).

[50] Widstrand (1964:122), Cloudsley (1983:118), and Gallo & Viviani (1988:174).

[51] For a thorough passage on clitoridectomy in ancient Medicine, see Brooten (1996). For a discussion on clitoridectomy in the West, see Sheehan (1997), Duffy (n.d.) and Lightfoot-Klein (1989a:179ff).

female circumcision as required. The form recommended is a mild type. It is a paradox, however, that in many parts of the Muslim world where the Shafi'i law school dominates, the practice is non-existent (Roald 2001:243f).

Islamic law involves five categories according to which all human actions can be classified: 1) *required, commanded*; 2) *recommended*; 3) *permitted*; 4) *disapproved*; 5) *forbidden* (e.g. Lewis 1994:5). The second category, including acts that are deemed to be recommended, is called *sunnah* in Arabic, thereby having the same superficial denomination as sunnah circumcision. This is the main reason behind the fact that some Somali informants in this study merge the two concepts of sunnah-classified acts and sunnah circumcision, thereby concluding that sunnah circumcision of girls is a religiously recommended act (further discussion in sections 5.2 and 5.6).

Muslim researchers and activists have engaged in the debate of whether female circumcision is an Islamic phenomenon or not. There is no way to state a "true" Islamic position, as all of the involved argue from their own interpretations of the written sources. This section will work as a background to the statements made by many of the Somalis in this study, who claim that reflection upon Islam made them reassess the practice of female circumcision.

Female circumcision is not practised in an overwhelming majority of Muslim societies in the world, nor in Saudi Arabia, where Islam had its origin in the 7th century. In 80% of the Islamic world, the practice is unknown (Lightfoot-Klein 1989a:41).[52] As pointed out in the section above, about the historical background of female circumcision, it is established that these practices were firmly rooted in parts of Arabia and Africa thousands of years before these areas were Islamised or Christianised. When so happened, the customs were integrated into these religious belief systems. Some writers argue that the view on women inherent in Islam is very much in tune with the attitude to women expressed in the traditions of circumcising women:

> [A]lthough Islam does not openly favor female circumcision and the operation is not performed in most non-African Muslim countries, Islam may have provided the ideal that reinforced the ongoing process of increasing subjugation of women [Toubia 1985:151].[53]

Other authors question this conclusion (e.g. Ivan 1997:19ff), some arguing for the direct opposite standpoint (see e.g. Anees 1989:112). What can be said for sure, in any case, is that female circumcision is not mentioned in the Koran. The religious

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[52]See e.g. Jordan (1994), who opens an article in *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* with the words: "Female genital mutilation […] is a barbaric, abhorrent and widely criticised custom, although sadly this age-old Muslim ritual is still common in some parts of the world" (ibid.:94). For a listing of different religious groups practising female circumcision, see e.g. Toubia (1995:13); Cohen-Almagor (1996) on Bedouins in Israel; Ghadially (1991) on Bohra Muslims in India; Andersson (1997) on Falasha Jews in Ethiopia and attitudes among the Ethiopian Christians; Abdalla (1982:81f) on Roman Catholic converts in Ethiopia in the 16th century; Johnson (2000) on Madinga in Guinea-Bissau. Abdalla (1982:21) reports on Christians in Sudan practising infibulation.

[53]In spite of this, it is not unusual with very generalising statements about female circumcision and Islam in the literature, for example: "Muslim men hold uncircumcised women in contempt as immoral freaks" (James 1994:8).

sources at hand, then, are the *hadiths*. Hadiths are testimonies about the sayings and doings of the Prophet Mohammed. Hadiths can be either strong or weak, according to how scholars evaluate the given chain of transmission back to the Prophet, or they can gain authenticity and strength through ranking by classical scholarship, i.e. the extent of agreement among religious scholars.[54] The most frequently quoted hadith, both in the literature and among Somalis I talk to, is the one about how the Prophet talks to a circumciser on her way to perform the procedure. The Prophet then says, in one of many possible translations into English:

Do not overdo it, because it [the clitoris] is a good fortune for the spouse and a delight to her.[55]

There is a weakness in the chain of transmission of this hadith, which bring about that some scholars claim that there is no sunnah to comply with in the matter of female circumcision (Al Naggar 1997:7, and Winkel 1995:5).[56]

Strong or weak, it is still not clear how to interpret it. Some Muslims claim that the Prophet propagates for a mild type of female circumcision, a symbolic operation where nothing at all or only a tiny part of the clitoris is removed.[57] Most Muslim scholars believe that the Prophet would have condemned what is today known as infibulation. "Circumcision not carried out according to the sunnah [of the Prophet] is forbidden by all religious circles", says e.g. Abu-Sahlieh (1994, unpaginated).

Yet other scholars understand the hadith as a way for the Prophet to condemn the whole tradition of female circumcision altogether, and claim that his utterances show that he, in time, had the purpose of being more outspoken about his opposition.[58] In the same way as the Prophet step by step dissociated himself from the use of alcohol, Muslim intellectuals in Roald's (2001) study argue that it is possible to believe that he had the intention to counteract the harmful practice of

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[54]See also Hicks (1993:25).

[55]See e.g. Winkel (1995), and Al Naggar (1997:9).

[56]Quoted in Winkel (1995:4, insertion in original). Later he quotes another version: "Do not overdo it, because that [the clitoris] is lucky for the woman and dear to the husband" (1995:5). "Reduce but do not destroy, this is enjoyable to the woman and is preferable to the man" (Kassamali 1998:44) is yet another version, like "Just touch the surface lightly and do not cut deep; her face will grow beautiful and her husband will rejoice" (Anees 1989:111). See also Roald (2001:243), Giladi (1997:264), Abu-Sahlieh (1994) and Abdu'r-Razzaq (1998). The differences in versions are due to translations from Arabic, but also to the fact that hadith collections show variations in rendering the hadiths.

[57]According to the islamologist Jonas Svensson, it is doubtful if the hadith is reliable at all; most Muslim jurists are sceptical to it. Personal communication (2 April 2002). See also Roald (2001:245).

In the research group conducting the study among Somalis in Malmö in 2000, we soon realised that we had to analyse the use of the word *sunnah* among our interviewees. We came to the conclusion that the informants operated with four different concepts, as described in section 5.2. Sunnah, as used in the sentence above, refers a *normative* religious term; to the classification of some acts as commanded or rewarding in a religious perspective.

[58]See e.g. Winkel (1995) for this interpretation. For an interpretation stating that the tip of the clitoris should be removed, see e.g. al-Ghawabi, in Abdu'r-Razzaq (1998:31). For examples of fatwas [fatwas: opinions of Muslim religious scholars] on the matter, see Abu-Sahlieh (1994), and Roald (2001).

female circumcision (ibid.:249f). There is no evidence that the Prophet had his own daughters circumcised; a fact that has been used as an argument against female circumcision by those opposing the practice (Anees 1989:111, Abdu'r-Razzaq 1998:76, and Roald 2001:241).

Another hadith, among the few mentioning female circumcision, includes this instruction:

> *If the two circumcised parts have been in touch with each other, ritual purification [ghusl] is necessary* [Anees 1989:111].[59]

Ritual purification of the whole body, *ghusl*, should be undertaken when a man and a woman have had sexual intercourse. Are these words to be understood as if the Prophet supported circumcision of women? Some choose to understand it this way, whereas e.g. Roald (2001:247) discusses whether the utterance can be regarded as a historical fact rather than a recommendation concerning female circumcision. The statement may be seen as a comment upon the fact that there were circumcised women in the area where the Prophet lived at this point in history, and does not have to be interpreted as an approval of the tradition *per se*.

Finally, another weak hadith, awakening controversy among scholars:

> *Circumcision is a way for men, but is merely ennobling for women* [Anees 1989:111].[60]

The most frequent interpretation of this hadith seems to be that circumcision is a religious duty for men, while it is an honourable act for a woman – "there is no harm if a woman is circumcised whereas for a man circumcision is unavoidable", as a scholar from the 10th century put it (Ibn Babawayh, quoted in Giladi 1997:263). Many scholars, though, seem to ignore this hadith, as it is considered weak. Some scholars are of the opinion that if female circumcision is to be performed – "there is no harm in not doing it, and there is some reward in doing it" (Winkel 1995:4) – then only a mild operation, either a pricking or a removal of prepuce, is to take place. Removal of the whole clitoris in a woman can be compared to removing the penis of a man, according to Winkel (ibid.).

Muslim scholars propagating for an eradication of female circumcision find some support in the Koran. The passages *"Verily, we create man in the best conformation"* (95:4 in the Koran), *"Let there be no alteration in Allah's creation"* (30:30) and *"He perfected everything he created"* (32:7) are often adduced to lay down the fact that genital operations in women strongly conflict with fundamental values in Islam.[61]

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[59] See e.g. Kassamali (1998:43), Al Naggar (1997:8), and Toubia (1995:19f, n4). Also the Egyptian physician and feminist El Saadawi claims this, according to Mekuria (1999:494).

[60] See also Abu-Sahlieh (1994). For a discussion on the hadith including Arabic expressions, see Giladi (1997:262) and Roald (2001:247).

[61] For an extensive account of the position of the four different schools of Islamic law on this hadith, see Roald (2001:242ff). See also Abu-Sahlieh (1994) and al-Hadidi, in Abdu'r-Razzaq (1998:42). See al-Hadidi for an interpretation that the verse shows "the obligation of female circumcision in some rare cases in which the clitoris or labia are abnormal in size or thickness" (in Abdu'r-Razzaq 1998:41). For a discussion covering all the hadiths involving female circumcision, see various contributors in the volume edited by Abdu'r-Razzaq (1998) and Roald (2001:242ff).

These Muslims scholars' attitude is paradoxical, as they at the same time accept male circumcision – such a procedure also changes God's creation.[62] But none of my informants, who claim that they are opposed to (harsher forms of) female circumcision with the argument that Islam forbids any harm to God's creation, have mentioned that they have a problem accepting male circumcision.

The tradition of female circumcision has met with opposition among Muslim scholars also in historical times, e.g. in imam an-Numan ibn Thabit ibn Zuta Abu Hanifah in the 8th century, according to Anees (1989:111). Abusharaf (2000:164f) reports a later example: Noted Muslim leaders in Sudan launched successful anti-circumcision efforts as early as in the middle of the 19th century.

One of the fundamental Islamic values often mentioned in discussions about female circumcision is the Islamic principle of women's right to sexual satisfaction in marriage (see e.g. Winkel 1995, Anees 1989). A well-known and often quoted opponent of female circumcision is the Egyptian physician and feminist debater Nawal El Saadawi, who has argued against female circumcision on the basis of women's rights to sexual fulfilment and within an Islamic discourse:

> If religion comes from God, how can it order man to cut off an organ created by Him as long as that organ is not deceased or deformed? God does not create the organs of the body haphazardly without a plan. It is not possible that He should have created the clitoris in a woman's body only in order that it be cut off at an early stage of life. This is a contradiction into which neither true religion nor the Creator could possibly fall. If God has created the clitoris as a sexually sensitive organ, whose sole function seems to be the procurement of sexual pleasure for women, it follows that He also considers such pleasure for women as normal and legitime, and therefore as an integral part of mental health [El Saadawi 1980:42].

Bullough, specialised in historical attitudes to sexuality in different religions, points out that Islam, compared to some basic traits in traditional Christianity, stands out as a very "sex positive" religion (1995). Among those who have influenced the view on sexuality in the history of Christianity, Augustine (who died in the middle of the 5th century) may be one of the most prominent. He commented with precision on intercourse and propagated that sex should be practised only "between a married couple with the woman on the bottom and the man on the top and only in the orifice (vagina) with the instrument (penis) that God had given humans".[63] All forms of sexual activity, except for the coitus practised for the purpose of procreation, were considered sinful. Saint Thomas Aquinas renewed some of the Christian doctrines in the 13th century, but retained Augustine's attitudes to sexuality. Celibacy was the highest virtue, even in marriage. Among those challenging this view were Martin Luther and John Calvin in the 16th century. Some of the more traditional ideas about sexuality were kept alive in their teachings, but they gave prominence to marriage and to the pleasure of intercourse more than to celibacy (Bullough 1995:446ff).

According to Bullough, Islam was more influenced by Judaism than by Christianity when it comes to views on sexuality. The Prophet considered sexual

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[62] In for instance Sudan, Muslim scholars have based their opposition to female circumcision in the Koranic passages (Roald 2001:238f).

[63] Thanks to the islamologist Jonas Svensson, who pointed out this paradox to me.

intercourse to be one of life's true sources of rejoicement. Many researchers describe the Muslim view on women in general as erotic beings, but like men they have the right to sexual fulfilment within marriage and to sexuality not associated with procreation:

> Muslim jurists […] believed that women had two distinct rights, one to children and another to sexual fulfilment, so that the very concept that Muslims held of sexual fulfilment was alien to the idea that sex within marriage was legitimate only for the purpose of procreation [Musallam, *Sex and Society in Islam* (1983), quoted in Giladi 1997:261-262].

Actually, according to Islamic law, impotence in men and sex too seldom are legally valid reasons of divorce for women. Comparing the view on sexuality in Islam and Christianity, intercourse in Islam does not carry the touch of sin traditionally prevalent in Christianity (Kassamali 1998:43f, and Abu-Sahlieh 1994). Intercourse, always within marriage, is even regarded as a rewarding act in the eyes of God as it keeps one away from committing adultery.

The clitoris, in Islamic tradition, is looked upon as the source of female passion (see e.g. Bullough 1995:448f, and Anees 1989). This fact, in combination with the Koranic ban on damage of what God created, gives rise to conclusions like the statement below:

> The pre-Islamic pagan rituals of clitoridectomy and infibulation must come to a halt in Muslim countries. The dignity, honour and right to sexual fulfilment that Islam guarantees to all women must be by a total ban on all reinforced non-medical surgical manipulations of female genitalia [Anees 1989:113-114].[64]

Yet others claim that a sunnah circumcision is beneficial as it curbs an otherwise excessive and therefore harmful sexuality in women (see e.g. Salim, in Abdu'r-Razzaq 1998: 51, and al-Ghawabi, ibid.:31). Hicks (1993), among others, has a discussion about this image of women as erotic creatures.[65] There are ideas among some practisers of female circumcision that women by nature are oversexualised. In this perspective female circumcision can be seen as instrumental to subdue this sexual drive. But the contrary idea also exists: that a removal of the prepuce of clitoris may increase sensitivity in this area and accordingly be a mean of heightening the sexual response (in Roald 2001:252, and in Gruenbaum 1996:470).

The stand taken by most Muslim scholars on the tradition of female circumcision seems to support mild or symbolic sunnah circumcisions or no circumcision of girls. Roald claims that Egyptian Islamists have an indifferent attitude to the practice or favour it, living in a society where it is widely practised, whereas "Islamists from other Arabic-speaking countries tend to have a strong emotional reaction against it" (2001:252), the strongest being an opposition to female circumcision (ibid.:253).

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[64] Bullough (1995:446) refers the ideas of Augustine.

[65] Anees 1989:113-114. See also e.g. Giladi (1997:264-265): "The consciousness of the inter-dependence of male and female in the context of sexual pleasure and particularly of the woman's right to sexual satisfaction even within a patrilineal-patriarchal family structure may be seen as one of the important factors in shaping the Islamic attitude towards female circumcision."

According to Giladi (1997:266) and Abu-Sahlieh (1994), the position of the *ulama* (the Islamic scholars) today urges the faithful practising female circumcision to adopt the most moderate form of circumcision. Despite this fact, many lay Muslims understand clitoridectomy and infibulation to be religious duties.[66] This makes sense, if one considers the fact that to the great majority of people practising female circumcision religious texts are out of reach. Reflection upon Islamic sources is an activity restricted to the religious elite, and the discussion does not reach ordinary people. Religious texts do not necessarily guide people's practices in everyday life. However, there is reason to believe that legitimating infibulation by means of religious arguments would be trickier if people had access to the religious sources.

This state of things was obvious in a minor fieldstudy conducted by a Swedish theologian, Helena Andersson (1997), in a part of Ethiopia where primarily clitoridectomies and excisions were practised. She interviewed some Muslims adhering to the Islamic precepts at different levels in society on the topic of female circumcision and Islam: a few intellectual leaders at the Ethiopian Supreme Council, an imam in a small mosque and a couple of poor and illiterate women. The intellectuals were firmly opposed to the tradition of female circumcision, classifying it as *haram* (forbidden according to Islam), basing their standpoint on the Koranic ban on destruction of God's creation. The imam pointed out that female circumcision in no way should be understood as a religious duty, but personally he approved of it, as it was good for marriage: female circumcision subdued the oversexuality in women and, thus, decreased the risks of adultery. Finally, the illiterate women were convinced that female circumcision is a religious duty for Muslims, as an uncircumcised woman is ritually impure. Andersson concludes that the religious texts have no bearing at all upon the attitude of these women, as they have no access to them. The tradition in itself is a crucial sign of their piety:

> The women cannot read, and therefore, concrete rituals like FGM are given an important role in passing on their social and religious identity to the next generation [Andersson 1997:21].

Lacking the possibility to read and interpret the Islamic sources, female circumcision to lay people can be comprehended as an authentic way to be religious; it can have a significant meaning as a practice of devotion. In Somalia, 'to be circumcised' is metaphorically interchangeable with 'to become Muslim' among ordinary people, according to Gallo & Viviani (1988:173).

In sum, the Muslim religious scholarship includes various positions in the field of female circumcision. The literature shows no evidence that there are Muslim scholars who are in favour of infibulation (pharaonic circumcision). Some condemn the practice of female circumcision in all its forms. Some are advocates of a procedure which involves the removal of the tip of the clitoris, others claim that it must only involve the prepuce of the clitoris. Yet other favour a symbolic procedure, i.e. a pricking or a minor cut but no removal of any tissue. Some highlights that

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[66] See also e.g. Giladi (1997), Kassamali (1998), Sanderson (1981), Toubia (1985), and Anees (1989).

female circumcision is an honourable act (and ought to be carried out), while others stress the voluntariness and the possibility to leave the practice altogether.

It seems that refraining from practising female circumcision generally is considered consistent with Islamic principles, based on interpretations of the hadiths quoted above. However, it is practically impossible for a scholar to state that *all* forms of female circumcision are *forbidden (haram)* according to the Islamic sources and the position of the law schools (they can, however, say that it is *not recommended*). This will be further discussed in section 10.3.4, as this has consequences in the Swedish context. Swedish activists aim at forcing religious spokesmen to make the statement that Islam forbids all forms of female circumcision.[67] The difficulty in making such a generalised statement makes the position of the Islamic scholars in Sweden vulnerable to accusations implying that they are in fact advocates of "genital mutilation" of girls.[68]

4.6 Occurrences of female circumcision among Somalis in exile

Sweden has had legislation against female circumcision since 1982. In 1999, the law was reformulated to include future cases of circumcision of Swedish girls taken abroad for the procedure (even in countries where the act is not criminalised). Until today, no such case has been authenticated in Sweden. A review of the situation in western countries where exiled Somalis live shows that in no country the authorities managed to take any case to court (except in France, where West African parents and circumcisers have been sentenced). According to Dorkenoo (1994:127), no systematic studies on the incidence of female circumcision have been carried out in western countries. Estimations of how many girls in western countries risk being subjected to circumcision are based upon immigrant figures and estimates of the extent of the practice in Africa (ibid.). To the best of my knowledge, her statement is still valid, with the exception of the study conducted by Morison et al. (1998, n.d.) in England.

All countries mentioned below have either a criminal code, which explicitly prohibits female circumcision, or have possibilities to take proceedings against

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[67] For an example of female circumcision (clitoridectomy) as an integral part of Muslim identity, see Johnson (2000) about the Mandinga of Guinea-Bissau The practice involves "a cleansing rite that defines a woman as a Muslim and enables her to pray in the proper fashion" (ibid.:219). The practice is universally favoured by the women in this group. See also Dellenborg (2000) on female circumcision as a religious (Muslim) act among the Joola in Casamance, Senegal.

[68] "It turned out […] that the contacts with the religious leaders did not give the result we had expected. That is, a clear declaration that all types of female circumcision lack any kind of religious support" says Jamila Said Musse, one of the officials in the Gothenburg Project (in Omsäter 1996:10, my translation from Swedish. See also Omsäter 1996:22f).

perpetrators according to more general sections of the penal code, involving crimes of violence, mutilation, etc (like France).

About 16,000 persons with Somali citizenship live in Denmark.[69] There has not been any report to the police about illegal female circumcision, nor any investigation initiated by the social authorities concerning female circumcision, according the Danish national board of health and welfare. Denmark has not removed the legal principle of double criminality, which means that no cases of female circumcision carried out in a country where it is legal can be taken to Danish court. There are constant rumours in the groups concerned about young Danish African girls being circumcised. Yet there is no substantiated evidence in the form of court cases or social service documentation. This does not mean that the rumours are false, only that they remain unverified. According to the *Danish Ugeskrift for Læger* [Weekly journal for physicians] (2002), the Danish national campaign against female circumcision has been a success. The Danish Somalis affirm that the campaign has led to a striking decrease of the illegal and harming circumcision (ibid.:1842). The situation in Denmark seems to resemble the one in Sweden: Danish African imams are comfortable to speak out about the unnecessity to circumcise girls, while they are reluctant to state that *all* forms are to be considered religiously *forbidden*. The general picture of the Somali exile group is that there seems to be a widespread opposition to pharaonic circumcision, while the attitudes to sunnah circumcision remain unclear or ambivalent.[70]

In Norway, the law on female circumcision was formulated in 1995, and came into force in 1996. From the very beginning it included a prohibition against female circumcision of Norwegian girls abroad, even in countries where the practice is not criminalised. There has been one report to the police concerning female circumcision, when a Gambian woman reported her husband. This report was, for unclear reasons, withdrawn. A Norwegian Somali girl who went to court to escape from forced marriage stated that she had been circumcised, but was not willing to report it formally. Rumours are frequent and a list with anonymous examples of Norwegian African girls said to have been circumcised has been edited by an organisation working to support immigrants in Norway.[71] No case has been taken to court.

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[69]Personally I have met one Somali imam who have claimed *all* forms of female circumcision to be *haram* – in Sweden. Imam Bashir in Stockholm (personal communication, 19 February 2002) has argued for several years that the specific conditions of the exile situation makes it religiously unlawful to let the girls go through any form of circumcision. As the possible outcome may be a disaster for the girl and her entire family – the mother risks penalty and the family risks losing the custody of the girl etc. – it must be considered a bad option from an Islamic point of view and, thus, *haram*.

[70]All information about Denmark supplied by Tove Pietersen at the state project "Forebyggelse af omskæring af piger" (*Prevention of circumcision of girls*), Sundhedsstyrelsen (National board of health and welfare), 8 April 2002.

[71]All information about Norway supplied by R. Elise B. Johansen at the state project against female circumcision "Omsorg og Kunnskap", 5 and 8 April 2002. Johansen states that she has personal knowledge of two girls who were circumcised abroad two years ago. In January 2001, the Somalis in Norway numbered a little more than 10,000 (almost 8,000 were born in Somalia and, therefore, first generation immigrants). Figures from Statistics Norway, *www.ssb.no*, accessed 30 July 2002.

In Germany, there is no authenticated case so far. According to Rahman & Toubia (2000), "the German police have generally been reluctant to investigate reports of FC/FGM. Police tend to see FC/FGM as a matter of religious exercise rather than a criminal matter" (ibid.: 160-161). However, there is no indication of the number of reports to the police. 6,000 girls are said to risk being subjected to circumcision. A press release edited by the German police was published on the internet in 2000, where "cases in Nordrhein-Westfahlen and Berlin" were mentioned. However, no case has been taken to court. In the Berlin case the physician said to be involved in female circumcision was acquitted on account of lack of evidence. The alleged cases in Nordrhein-Westfalen were refused by the public prosecutor, said to have referred to freedom of religion.[72]

In New Zealand, there are some 3,000 women and girls from countries where female circumcision is practised, the majority of whom come from Somalia (figures from 1997; Rahman & Toubia 2000:190). In 1998, there had not been any case of criminal investigation concerning female circumcision (ibid.:192). In Canada, where the population of Somali origin number about 50,000, there are no known instances of arrest for female circumcision (in 1998, Rahman & Toubia 2000:121).[73] In the United States, there are at least a million immigrants from Africa. In 1995, there was an inflow of 42, 500 permanent settlers from Africa (Rahman & Toubia 2000:236). To date, there have been no criminal prosecutions at federal or state level (ibid.:237).

In England there is still not a single documented case of unlawful female circumcision, even if the study conducted by Morison et al. (1998, n.d.) suggests that there have been, and maybe still are, instances of girls being circumcised abroad or at British clinics.[74] Dorkenoo (1994) states that she has come into contact with cases of pending circumcision of girls in the UK, and with second-generation girls who had already undergone the procedure. No figures are given though (ibid.:27).

France is the only western country, to the best of my knowledge, where cases of illegal female circumcision have been documented and brought to court. Since 1978, at least 25 prosecutions of circumcisers and of parents have taken place (Rahman & Toubia 2000:152). Some Somalis from Djibouti (a former French colony) reside in France, but the overwhelming majority of French Africans have their origin in West Africa. As far as I know, prosecutions for female circumcisions in France have concerned only West Africans.[75]

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[72]Information from an activist lawyer in Berlin who co-operates with the organisation "Terre des Femmes" in Tübingen. Her information forwarded by Klaus Jansen at the German police force in Berlin in a telephone conversation (29 April 2002) and by his colleague Ernestine Gohr in an e-mail (3 May 2002). Thanks to Monika Engqvist for helping me to navigate the German websites.

[73]It has been brought forward by Dirie (1985:76ff) that Somali women, due to the trauma of circumcision in early childhood, are predisposed to psychiatric illness (see section 4.2).

[74]The figure of Somalis in Canada is a surmise based upon information from Somalis in Malmö, who have asked their relatives in Canada to estimate the number of Somalis there. After the last census (in 1996), the number of Somalis in Canada was estimated to 30,200 (personal communication in an e-mail from Michelle E. Sauvé at Statistics Canada, 2 August 2002).

[75] See also Dorkenoo (1994). The information about the absence of cases taken to court; personal communication with Nahid Toubia, London, head of the international organisation Rainbo

From the lack of evidence about female circumcision, several conclusions are possible. First, the authorities could be simply ignorant or uninterested in such a cultural practice. Second, the Somalis could be so skilful at concealing this activity that even authorities that actively sought to find such cases could not find them. Finally, it is possible that the lack of evidence reflects a genuine disappearance or abandonment of this practice, i.e., changed attitudes to female circumcision due to migration and exile. In the absence of concrete research on the topic, we are limited to informed speculation in comparing the situation of Somalis and their cultural practices in various countries of exile. The study conducted by Morison et al. (1998, n.d.) indicates that there are some similarities in attitudes of the Somali exile groups in Sweden and Britain, but also differences. These differences may be due to selection of informants (the British study concentrating on young Somalis), but they may also be due to substantial differences between the exile contexts in Sweden and Britain (see Chapter Eight). It is obvious that more research – research aimed at reaching insiders' perspectives of the issue – is needed to reveal what happens to the practice of female circumcision among Somalis in exile in western countries.

4.7 Female circumcision in Somalia

Today female circumcision is practised above all in Africa, between the tropic of Cancer and the equator: from Mauritania, Senegal and Sierra Leone in the west to Egypt and Africa's Horn in the east, and in Yemen in the Arabic peninsula (WHO 1998). In Asia milder forms are performed among some Muslim groups in Indonesia, Malaysia and India, and there is evidence that female circumcision has been practised among a native group in the Amazonas of South America.[76] The variations are enormous concerning type of operation, age of the girls and, not least of all, the motives for performing the act differ immensely.[77]

In Somalia, as mentioned earlier, the folk classification includes *pharaonic circumcision* and *sunnah* (see sections 4.1, 5.1 and 5.2). About 80% of the Somali girls are infibulated, one or a few percent have no operation at all, while the rest go through sunnah circumcision.[78] These figures stem from studies conducted before the

(April 2002). See Dyer (1993) for a summary of the case of the British physician set up by the Sunday Times, arranging for an operation of female circumcision.

[76]These cases will not be further discussed here, as the issue falls outside the scope of this thesis. For accounts of the cases of female circumcision in France, see Gallard (1995), Winter (1994), and Bloul (1996).

[77]WHO (1998) on Asia, Gebhart-Sayer (1987) on South America.

[78]For brief overviews, see e.g. WHO (1998), McFalls & McFalls (1984:456-457), Lightfoot-Klein (1989a:38-41), Dorkenoo (1994:34ff) and Sanderson (1981:19ff). For a description of female circumcision among Okiek in Kenya, see Kratz (1994); in Kenya in general, see Ng'ang'a (1995); among Kikuyu or Gikuyu in Kenya, see Kenyatta (1959), Natsoulas (1998), and Davison (1995); among the Rendille of Northern Kenya, see Shell-Duncan et al. (2000); in Ghana, see Knudsen (1994) and Odoi et al. (1996); in Nigeria, see Ebomoyi (1987), Mandara (2000), Orubuloye et al. (2000), and Caldwell et al. (1997); in Upper Egypt, see Sayed et al.

outburst of the civil war. The figures may be different today, as suggested by Helander (1993b, see Chapter Eight).

Sunnah operations are usually performed some time during the first two years of the girl's life. Pharaonic circumcision, or infibulation, usually takes place when the girls are about seven or eight years old.[79] Infibulation in Somalia is usually not followed by any ceremonies or festivities, as in many other groups that perform female circumcision. It seems, however, as if the operation often is an occasion for having some delicious food the same day and often mentioned is that the girl gets sweets and maybe a gift.

B relates her own circumcision:

> *I was circumcised when I was seven years old. I went to first grade in school. I was sorry, because everyone in my class had been circumcised. I nagged at my parents about that I wanted to be circumcised too. I asked all the time: 'Why don't you do it to me?' When a girl has been circumcised, her girlfriends come to her, they visit her and bring her candy and stuff. I wanted so dearly… Finally my mother said, 'Well, yes, I shall see to it that you are circumcised too.' So finally it was my turn, I was really happy about it, I was very pleased…* [laughs].

> *We were newcomers to the district, so mum didn't know who to turn to in this area. She asked a neighbour who told her where she could find a man who was good at circumcising. Mum and I went together to his place to make an appointment, for me and for the girl next door who was about to be circumcised at the same time. He worked at the hospital, he was a nurse.*

> *It was a Friday. I remember the day so well… We were two girls. She had to go first… because I was scared when we got there. I saw everything he had, knives and stuff, I realised how serious the situation was, so I said, 'No, no, I don't want to be the first one… let her begin!' So she entered the room. Her mother was with her. My mother and I waited outside, mum didn't want me to listen to the other girl crying and become scared. We sat outside.*

> *Mum went with me when it was my turn. I had to lie down and then I got an injection with analgesic.*[80] *I was a little scared, but mum said there was no reason to be, that I wouldn't feel*

(1996); in Sierra Leone, see Koso-Thomas (1987) and Ahmadu (2000); in Gambia, see Hernlund (2000); in Chad, see Leonard (2000a, 2000b); in Sudan, see Williams & Sobieszczyk (1997), Almroth-Berggren (1998), and Almroth-Berggren et al. (2001); in Mali, see Gosselin (2000).

[79] See Gallo & Abdisamed (1985): A survey of 2092 Somali women was done in 1981. 99,3% had been circumcised; 75,7 % by infibulation and 23,6 % had an attenuated circumcision. Dirie & Lindmark's (1991) study on 300 women in Mogadishu: infibulated women in their study amount to 88%. According to the Ministry of Health in Somalia, a survey published in 1983 showed significant differences between different parts of Somalia: in Hargeysa (a city in the north), 21% had pharaonic circumcision, while 78% had intermediate; in Mogadishu (in the south, the capital), 70% had pharaonic and 21% had intermediate; in Burco (a village in the north), 99% had pharaonic circumcision (in Obermeyer 1999:99n15). See also Omar (1991).

[80] For descriptions of the traditional operation, see e.g. Ntiri (1993), Sanderson (1981:14ff), and Brotmacher (1955:220). Gallo & Abdisamed's study (1985) shows that infibulation was carried out between the age of 2 and 15, and the mode was 7,5 years. Most girls were

anything. She told me that she, when she was a little girl, had the operation without analgesic and that they had joined the cuts with thorns. But I wouldn't feel anything, she said. The man also calmed me by saying that everything would be fine. And I didn't feel anything at all when he cut. Afterwards he stitched the wound and said that I had only a tiny opening. He told my mother that it was well done, that there was no need for her to tie my legs, that he had performed it so well that I could soon walk or play football or do whatever without any problems. As an adult I asked another girl from the same area if she knew of him, and it turned out he had circumcised her too. I shall never forget his name.

There is a genre in narratives of female circumcision, especially when it comes to infibulation in Africa's Horn, which may be called *'little horror stories'*. They are often related in activist texts and share some common features according to the principle that everything is as devilish as one can possibly imagine: the circumciser is a half-blind smiling sadist, the razor (if it is not a sharp stone or splinter of broken glass) is old and rusty, nobody in the world seems to care about the suffering little girl (see e.g. Levin 1980:197f). Such narratives, belonging to "the genre of works that have engendered chills and provoked western indignation about female circumcision in Africa" (Obiora 1997a, unpaginated), often open reports in the mass media.[81]

Often, in popular articles and lectures, all the different forms of circumcision are confused into a single lump and then solely represented by the harshest form in its most insanitary form, even though only about 15% of the procedures in the world are infibulations (Levi 1996, Obiora 1997a, Toubia 1993). In its typical form, the anecdote of female circumcision only captures the worst case scenarios (Obiora 1997b:53).[82]

A quite different description is offered by e.g. Lightfoot-Klein in her study mainly on pharaonic circumcision in Sudan:

> Loving relatives, some of whom have travelled great instances in her honor, are with the girl constantly, supporting her, encouraging her, focusing her attention away from the anticipated ordeal, and in the direction of acceptance, love, empathy, and good will that is radiating toward her from all sides. […] At the circumcision itself (I am told) she is surrounded by loved and loving faces that weep for her pain and offer sympathy and encouragement. Whether the child is able to perceive this at the time is a moot point, but I have been in anterooms while circumcisions were taking place, and I have seen the personal torment the women were undergoing, the frantic weeping and wailing that took place as shrieks of terror and pain issued from the other room [Lightfoot-Klein 1989a:73].

In reality the experiences of circumcision vary infinitely. The pharaonic circumcision in rural areas is generally performed in the girl's home, without any analgesic or antiseptic, by a traditional female circumciser, often also working as a traditional birth attendant (*ummulisoyin*). Families in urban areas may have the

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infibulated some time between age 5 and 10. In the bush areas the girls seem to be somewhat older.

[81] Pain relieving substance.

[82] One such account opened the interview with the model and UN ambassador Waris Dirie in the national news program *Aktuellt*, 20 September 1999. Leonard (2000a, unpaginated) calls this kind of account "standard tale". Further discussion in section 10.4.1.

operation done in clinics or at home, by trained medical staff. In such cases analgesic and antiseptic are used, and the cut is closed with surgical stitches.[83]

Regardless of how the operation has been performed – in a traditional way or in a medicalised manner – it seems as if most girls share the experience of a first week of immense pain.[84] B continues:

> *Back at home [after the operation at the clinic] I still didn't feel any pain, but later… it was terrible. After an hour or so it began hurting. I couldn't wee, I didn't want to wee. For two days I didn't wee, I had this sensation that my belly was growing and growing. Then our neighbour came to visit and she said that her daughter had been a good girl, she had weed. She said it was only the first time weeing that it hurts, then it will be normal again. She urged me to wee. I thought, 'Why is her daughter a better girl than me?' So I weed… after two days… The pain was terrible! Every time I weed during the first week the pain was immense. I used alcohol to relieve the pain. I don't remember who taught me, or how I came across this alcohol, but I remember using it. First I bathed down there so I got numb, then it was easier to wee.*
>
> *During this week I asked my mother why people do this. Before I wanted it myself, but now I was in such pain. I cried and asked. Mum said, 'We have to do it, it's our religion. Everyone does it, everyone has to do it.' That calmed me… 'have to'… What else was there to do then? We have to…*
>
> *After a week things went back to normal again. I weed as I used to. I never had problems, not even during my periods.*

Why are girls circumcised in Somalia? In the discussion below a distinction will be made between how the actors themselves explain their motives and various explanatory models developed by researchers.

4.8 Motives for circumcising girls in Somalia

In a survey from Somalia conducted in 1978, where 290 women were asked about their motives for having their daughters circumcised, 69.5 % stated that *religion* was the main reason for doing it. 20 % declared that female circumcision as a way to *remain virgin in order to get married* was their main motive; 9,5 % pointed out *tradition* and 1% *hygiene* (Dirie & Lindmark 1991). In a study conducted by Abdalla in Somalia in 1980, including 70 women and 40 men, protection of virginity and control of sexual desire seemed to be more important reasons than

[83] For critical comments on such lumping together of the different types of circumcision and the various local motives for the practice, see also e.g. Hicks (1993:12), Obiora (1997a), Shell-Duncan & Hernlund (2000), and Ahmadu (2000:284).

[84] See e.g. Warsame et al. (1985), and Kwaak (1992).

religion to those who were in favour of an upholding of the practice (Abdalla 1982:96).

Gallo (1986) carried out a study in Somalia in 1981, including 2 497 questionnaires. Tradition and/or religion seemed to be stated as the most positive aspect of female circumcision, while fewer stated 'beauty of the suture', 'removal of the impure part' and 'preservation of virginity' as the most important factor (1996:136).

The religious aspects of female circumcision have been developed in section 4.5. Practically every Somali is a Muslim, either in an ethnic or a religious perspective. In Somalia, like in many other countries, there is an internal debate on the relation of Islam and female circumcision among Muslims.

The concept of *virginity* is of utmost importance in Somali society. Virginity is not an issue of hymen preserved or not – even if a few of the Somalis I know in Malmö have heard of the existence of a hymen and many of them talk about a 'natural virginity'. Virginity to most Somalis is the artificial maidenhood created by infibulation. The concept of virginity will be further discussed in section 4.9.1, and in Chapters Five and Six.

Hygiene as a motive for female circumcision is a vague concept. Dirie (1991) interprets 'hygiene', when stated as a reason for circumcision, as that the region of the vulva should be without secretions of any kind and that "the real meaning" of hygiene in this context is that the clitoris is seen as unclean and necessary to remove for the girl to be classified as purified (ibid.:13). As the literature lacks definitions and the descriptions are fuzzy, I once asked a group of about fifteen Somali women during the course on female circumcision in Malmö: 'Hygiene' as referred to in many studies – does the concept refer to 1) hygiene (clean/dirty); 2) aesthetics (beautiful/ugly); 3) religion (pure/unpure)? The question caused an intense discussion in Somali, ending up in statements that all the aspects are intrinsically bound together, maybe *aesthetics* being the most important trait. A smooth female organ, with the opening as small as possible, is the most beautiful appearance. Aman, as she tells her life story to two anthropologists, describes her impression when she, for the first time, gets to see an uninfibulated woman in a delivery room:

> It reminded me of when our cows used to have babies, it's similar. Since we got a small one and sewn, when I saw this, I thought, they've got a lot of cow pussy. That's what it looked like to me.
>
> That part of a Somali woman is covered and closed – it looks better. I have brothers, cousins, and friends who have dated European women, or women who have a clitoris, and they say we have the best one – they say it's smaller, hard, it's clean and it's less wet. I know myself we smell better and are less dirty than women who are uncircumcised [Barnes Lee & Boddy 1994:279-280].

It may be surprising that infibulated women – often categorised as victims of mutilation – can find this state of their genitals aesthetically pleasing. Some writers ascribe the male species the ultimate responsibility for this:

> Since women want to please men or at least make an advantageous marriage, perhaps some women can find a mutilated vulva more aesthetically satisfying than impaired genitalia [Sanderson 1981:48-49].

It is my impression, however, that many Somali women sincerely find a pharaonically circumcised vulva preferable to an uncircumcised when it comes to the appearance. Many consider intact genitals to look fleshy and smeary, in contrast to the smooth and 'clean' appearance of a well healed infibulated vulva.[85]

Another motive sometimes mentioned is female circumcision as a response to fear of *clitorihypertrophi* (an excessive growth of clitoris).[86] The Norwegian social anthropologist Aud Talle points out that she doubts that many Somalis really believe that clitoris can grow to resemble a penis, but that the concept anyway can be used as an instrumental argument for circumcision (1993:91). This is similar to my experience among Somalis in Malmö. A Somali woman was interviewed about female circumcision, resulting in an article in a newspaper, where she among other things admitted that she never had been infibulated, but only undergone sunnah circumcision. Some other Somalis, provoked by the fact that she so openly talked about female circumcision to Swedes, declared that as she was not properly circumcised, her clitoris was soon going to grow down to her knees. This statement should not be understood literally, but probably as a jocular way to be insolent, with the purpose of reprimanding the woman for speaking so openly about a sensitive issue.

4.9 Explanatory models

Social scientists have tried to explain the tradition of female circumcision from a range of angles. A functionalist approach was presented by Rose Oldfield Hayes in 1975, in an article where she claimed that the latent key function of infibulation in Sudan is its effect on population growth, as she believed it reduces fertility.

Other writers have stressed other aspects, presented below. The section starts with a discussion about analyses on symbolism, focusing on concepts involving sex, gender and virginity, ending up with a closer look at symbolic analyses of the specific practices of infibulation and defibulation.

Thereafter comes a discussion on approaches focusing on ethnic, socio-economic and psychological aspects. The chapter is concluded with a section about divergent

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[85] In a study in London, including 200 Somali women, 61% had been infibulated by people with no medical training (Cameron & Rawlings Anderson 1998:50). See also Arbesman et al. (1993) for a case study on 12 Somali women in Buffalo, N. Y.

[86] During the training course for Somali women in Malmö in 2000, the course participants were to attend a gynaecological examination of an uninfibulated woman for purposes of study. I had expected them to express the same disgust (mixed with scattered embarrassed laughs) as when they were exposed to photographs, but they reacted with surprise and reflection facing 'live' uncircumcised genitals. Above all the size of the clitoris was news, and they agreed that the clitoris was surprisingly "small and neat". They were also fascinated by the fact that the labia minora had a closing function, so that the genitals could be 'opened' as the labia were separated. As the course participants found the female sexual organ in an uninfibulated woman to be protected behind the closed labia in a very aesthetical way, they agreed on naming their group 'Astur', meaning 'beautifully concealed'.

positions within the field of feminist studies; and a section presenting Gerry Mackie's (1996, 1998, and 2000) model on convention and convention shift, the theoretical model used to understand the empirical data of this thesis.

4.9.1 Analyses on symbolism

Sex and gender

There are some obvious physical differences between women and men. But the cultural concepts associated to these differences differ enormously in the world. These cultural specific notions about men and women are usually referred to as *gender*, to separate them from the more biologically based category *sex*.

All societies in the world deal with the categories 'men' and 'women', as well as 'male' and 'female', but the exact relationship between the four categories are highly cultural specific:

> It is not true to say that *Woman is to Female* as *Man is to Male*. Nor is the relationship *Female to Male* the same as *Woman to Man*. We are dealing with four categories, none of which duplicates or is a mirror image of another. Further, the asymmetry of any pair of these categories must be recognised. Yet clearly the sets are to some extent related: for instance, every woman is a female, and every man is a male. Some of the defining properties of one category may be among the defining properties of another. But the exact relationship between these categories has yet to be teased out. And the relationship is likely to be different in each society [Ardener 1993:20, italics in original].

Next step has been to admit the *local* variety, as emphasised by e.g. Broch-Due & Rudie (1993) and Moore (1994b): there is not *one* single gender system within a 'culture' – complex conflicting views and individual life histories give rise to a multiplicity of possible gender constructions in each society. They also highlight the question of where to find the line between 'culture' (the socially constructed) and 'nature' (the anatomically given):

> [E]ven those who have let themselves be persuaded that most of our practice is culturally determined, often cannot help thinking that there must be a core of 'nature' somewhere [Broch-Due & Rudie 1993:27].

They argue that most feminists choose to leave the analysis at this point, at "the anatomical border of the body", as if they fear that their case would be countered if they involved the biological aspects in their analyses. In that way they can escape essentialism and be able to maintain the constructionist view. If we are to leave the current stand-off between essentialists (women and men are essentially different from each other for biological reasons) and constructionists (the perceived differences between what it is to be a man or a woman are social constructs), we have to consider the multiple ways the body's materiality shapes and are shaped by cultural perceptions and practices, Broch-Due & Rudie argue (ibid.:33).

The feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1990) is one among others who have challenged the biological – *non-cultural* – foundation of the category *sex,* usually taken for granted. She argues that the distinction between gender and sex is deceptive: the category sex is also socially and culturally constituted. There is no sex prior to discourse, sex itself is a gendered category. It can not be seen as "a politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (1990:7). She does not deny the material existence of the body, she points out that at the very same moment that we define what is given by nature, we are involved in discursive construction. The discourse making on body and sex is inevitable – we are unable *not* to think about our body – but our ideas about sex, as a natural biologically founded entity, is nevertheless a construct and has its own history of ideas (ibid.).

Moore has put forward similar ideas, concluding that all cultures have discourses about *sex*; about how we are biologically constituted (1994a). Notions about a biological property or a set of biological processes (including hormones and chromosomes) "is itself the product of the biomedical discourse of western culture" (ibid.:819). She sees the implications of Butler's reasoning as fitting well with anthropological research:

> [W]e cannot assume that binary biological sex everywhere provides the universal basis for the cultural categories 'male' and 'female'. If gender constructs are culturally variable, then so also are the categories of sexual difference [Moore 1993b:197].

Moore also takes yet another step toward highlighting difference. She emphasises that gender differences do not only exist within a local cultural setting, but within every individual (1994b).

Virginity

In her article "The Semantics of Biology" Hastrup (1993) analyses the concept *virginity*. This physical, but above all, *social* state is ascribed different meanings in different societies. In some societies, among them most western societies, a girl's virginity is her own business. In other societies, it is the business of her whole family or the whole wider group to make sure that the women are virgins at the time they marry. According to Hastrup, a woman's state of virginity may then be interpreted as a symbolic expression of social purity (Hastrup 1993:40ff).

After childhood boys usually enter into the category of 'men' (with or without initiation rites). Girls often go through a period when they are categorised as 'virgins', before they marry and become 'women'. This category of virgins differs conceptually so much from the others that in some cultures it is conceptualised as a third sex (Hastrup & Ovesen 1982:228f). Usually there is no specific cultural category attached to sexually inexperienced men; men seducing women sexually seems to be a widespread phenomenon in the world. To men, then, it is not stigmatising to have pre-marital sexual relations, while women are supposed to be virgins at marriage and then be faithful to their husbands. One way to solve this paradox in many societies is, outside the established categories, to have women

outside the social order: prostitutes or the like, women who are not 'real' women (Ardener 1993:21ff).[87]

In societies where women are given away in marriage at puberty, defending a girl's virginity should not be too difficult. But in groups, appreciating virginity in brides, where a long time passes between puberty and marriage, it takes some effort to maintain the state of virginity (Hastrup 1993:41f).[88]

Many authors argue (e.g. Kwaak 1992:777) that infibulation is crucial to the concept of virginity in Somalia, as girls are supposed to *become virgins* through infibulation. The same goes for the practice in Sudan, according to Hayes (1975): "virgins are made, not born" (ibid.:622). It is an imperative in the process of becoming a woman, according to Somali tradition. A physical virginity is fabricated by pharaonic circumcision, and a girl is supposed to stay this way, 'closed', until her future husband opens her at marriage, when she ceases to be a 'virgin' to enter the category of 'women' (e.g. Warsame et al. 1985).

An unmarried girl who becomes pregnant usually has to leave her family and survive on her own, sometimes by prostitution.[89] She is regarded as someone who has failed her family, and she can no longer count on social and financial support from her family or clan. In accordance with the discussion above, one could say that she, as she has obviously had sex out of marriage, violated the symbolic purity ascribed to the category of 'virgins'. Nor can she be a part of the category 'women', as this social label is received through marriage. The question of illegitimate children is further discussed in section 5.4.

Infibulation

In her well-known analysis on symbolism and infibulation, the Canadian anthropologist Janice Boddy presents a study of a small Sudanese village where all girls are infibulated in childhood (1982). Boddy concludes that the women in this village see the tradition as a deeply meaningful act, even a prerequisite for the ability of having children. The symbolic expressions of infibulation are integrated parts in a more encompassing system of symbolic meanings: pain associated with circumcision is also associated to other acts of female *purification*, which as well include elements of heat and pain (e.g. depilatory practices when all hair except the hair of a woman's head is removed before marriage). All forms of enclosedness, for

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[87] A short account is given by Dirie (1985:95-96). See also Sundhedsstyrelsen (1999:14).

[88] In Sudan, uninfibulated women are generally considered to be prostitutes: "without infibulation to prevent sexual license they all would be like prostitutes in their promiscuity", Hayes explains the social logic of the relation between respected women, prostitutes and infibulation in the Sudanese society (1975:624).

[89] Hicks (1993) relates, referring to Leakey (1931), how the concept of virginity was confused among Kikuyu in Kenya thanks to missionary activity in the area. The Christian missionaries, campaigning against the practice of female circumcision and forcing the practice underground, were at the same time promoting the symbol of the Virgin Mary: "the concept 'virgin', even when referencing the Virgin Mary, was locally translated (and interpreted) to mean essentially 'an unmarried girl who has been through the initiation ceremony, and who has therefore undergone the operation of the sex organs'" (ibid.:24). What had began as a clitoral excision turned into a more extensive procedure resembling infibulation as a result of missionary activities.

instance fenced yards, are kept clean and are considered to be socially important and must be protected from evil spirits. Likewise, body orifices are potentially dangerous, as they are openings for evil to enter. The idea of beauty is a small mouth and narrow nostrils – and analogically: a narrow vagina is seen as a sign of purification and enclosedness.

A similar analysis on symbolism of infibulation has been elaborated by Talle (1993), who claims that a Somali child can be understood as an androgyne: the female genitalia contain a male part (the clitoris), as well as the male genitalia contain female part (the foreskin of penis). Through circumcision, female and male, the femininity and masculinity in individuals are brought out – the child is *purified* and now able to become a woman or a man.[90] Helander (1987, 1988) also relates female circumcision in Somalia to the opposition between male and female elements. The parts of the female genitalia that are removed are called *kintir*, which is synonymous with *awle*, meaning something like 'with father'. It is believed in Somalia that the genitalia of the girl and the penis of the boy are both acquired in a patrilineal way. Clitoridectomy removes the hard, male parts and makes the woman forever soft and feminine (1987:9f, 1988:128).

Clitoris, usually associated with masculinity but also with childhood and impurity, is removed first. After that those parts of the genitalia which are pigmented (labia minora and parts of labia majora) are cut, whereupon the vagina is closed and stitched. According to tradition, the girls' heads are now to be shaved.[91] This is done only twice in a girl's life: at birth and after infibulation. Thus, one may interpret their circumcision as a symbolic *rebirth* (Talle 1993:87).

The vertical scar resulting from infibulation can, according to Talle, be seen as a fake penis. The operation implies that the girls are now symbolically transformed into a 'man', 'a pure agnate'.[92] The representation of a symbolic penis at the place of female genitalia is a way to carve the girl's agnatic descent into her body: it is "a forceful symbol of belonging" (Talle 1993:98). Someone breaking this sealing, this symbol of virginity and immaculation, without marrying the girl, has also violated the whole agnatic group. When a girl is married, she is entrusted to another agnatic group, where her husband is to open her and through this act make her a 'woman' (ibid.:99).

Defibulation

Defibulation is what takes place when a woman is 'opened', either by her husband or by an operation performed by an outsider. In the northern parts of Somalia, it seems to be common to turn to an outsider, to medically trained staff in clinics or to a traditional circumciser, when it is time to open the woman's infibulation. In the south of Somalia, on the other hand, there seems to be a social pressure on the men

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[90]"[T]here is no place for the illegitimate child", Talle (1993:93) points out, when explaining the logic of Somali patrilineal social structure.

[91]See also Sanderson (1981:58).

[92]According to the Somalis I have talked to, this tradition of shaving off the girl's hair may live on in some places in rural areas.

to manage to do it by themselves: "a man has to be a man to open", as a woman from south Somalia told me.

In a study by Dirie (1991), conducted in 1978 in Mogadishu, 87% of the women had been defibulated by their husbands without any instrument (92 women out of 119 married and defibulated, the study population consisting of women admitted to a gynaecological ward at a hospital). 23 % (27 women) had been defibulated with the help of instruments: knives, razor blades, scissors. 17 of these women had been opened in this way by their husbands, the rest by other women. Two of the women had rejected their husbands' suggestions to get help with defibulation from an outsider. Many descriptions depict Somali men without any kind of empathy, like Bjelfvenstam (1982) in a book about Somalia:

> When the woman has married and her husband is about to take possession of his virgin, he can either do it by penetrating by force to split open the labia majora or he can cut them open with a knife. Whatever method he uses, he will make an opening large enough for himself [Bjelfvenstam 1982:94, my translation from Swedish].[93]

Defibulation can be seen as the inversion of infibulation, according to Talle (1993:99). Some authors state that the virility of a Somali man is manifested in the moment he penetrates a closed woman:

> The penetration of an infibulated woman in marriage is an expression of the husband's control over his wife and thus an important proof of his masculinity [Warsame et al. 1985:10].

> The utmost proof of a man's authority and control over a wife and her potential offspring is, in fact, the penetration of her infibulation [Talle 1993:99].

At defibulation, not only a 'woman' is created, then, but a 'man' as well. When the woman is defibulated and ceases to be a 'virgin', she changes into a fertile woman and a potential mother. The man, on the other hand, may now as a married man "join the lineage assembly and become a politically active and full member of his society" (Talle 1993:103).

Tradition dictates that the man should be brave enough to open his wife with his penis. But if he fails, "he should be brave enough to 'take to the knife'", asserts Talle (ibid.:99), as they both can be seen as symbols of male selfhood and power over women. The idea of the penis as a weapon, or a symbolic counterpart to the knife, seems to have one of its first appearances in the writing of Geza Róheim, anthropologist and psychoanalyst, who published an article on "The National Character of the Somali" in 1932:

> From the description of infibulation and of the wedding-night we may already infer that the Somali's attitude to women is strongly sadistic [1932:205]. [...] The woman is nothing but a sexual organ and the penis is a weapon. *The psychosexual attitude of the Somali men is thus*

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[93] *Agnate* is a person related by patrilineal descent.

> *phallic-sadistic with an exaggerated cathexis of their own organ* [Róheim 1932:206, italics in original].[94]

A more up-to-date description of the defibulation act is offered by Talle:

> The wife, when confronted with the pain and the humiliation inflicted upon her through the sexual act, spontaneously struggles against the efforts of the husband to 'open' her. Sometimes the struggle turns into a veritable fight between the two and in this battle the occlusion of her vagina, the fake penis, becomes her weapon. Many women flee or find various excuses for postponing the consummation of their marriage. Others have to be tied with ropes so that the husband may get a fair chance to penetrate them. Occasionally, the husbands may even be aided by his agnates to hold the woman down while he performs his duty [Talle 1993:100].

Talle probably does not intend to generalise this scene into the whole population of Somalis.[95] None of the informants in this study have confirmed this description of the defibulation act, when they have described their own experiences.[96] It is difficult to establish why this depiction is not confirmed among my informants: whether it is a matter of differences between Somalis in exile and Somalis in Somalia (exile Somalis in Sweden may constitute a group which is not representative of Somalis in general; or their experiences of life in exile make them convey this phenomenon in a way they would not, had they still been living in Somalia, for instance because of a general adaptation to western ideology), or if it is a result of cultural change. Early descriptions of *todobo* ('seven' in Somali, the seven days after marriage, when the man is to 'open' his wife) emphasise the male pride:

> In 1937, Villeneuve reported that after marriage the woman stayed indoors for 7 days, while the man went into the village and displayed the knife he used to open his wife. Although men no longer display their knives, women still stay indoors [Kwaak 1992:783].

It is possible that cultural change has developed even further, especially when it comes to young Somalis who decide by themselves who to marry. According to the informants in my study, physical conflicts at defibulation could arise in arranged marriages, which are said to be less common today ("maybe in small towns",

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[94]For an old, but often quoted description of a defibulation in Somalia, see Lantier in McLean & Graham (1985:3), ending with the words: "The morning after the wedding night, the husband puts his bloody dagger on his shoulder and makes the rounds in order to obtain general admiration" (ibid.).

[95]Cathexis, according to Webster's dictionary: "Investment of mental or emotional energy in a person, object or idea". Róheim's ideas ought to be understood within the framework of psychoanalytical theory. In this article, he also alleges that the Somali man frequently suffers from *ejaculatio præcox* ('he spills the milk beforehand') due to castration-anxiety (1932:213) and "in the unconscious, the Somali bridegroom is castrated anally by his father-in-law" (1932:216).

[96]In an article from 1995, McCaffrey (quoted in Ortiz 1998:124) reports couples (where the women have been infibulated) in British gynaecological services who have been married several years and have not accomplished penetration.

someone explained).[97] Coercion and violence may occur in arranged marriages, when the parties are strangers to each other, especially if the man is older (for a few examples in form of cases, see Abdalla 1982). What my informants claim is that violence is not characteristic of marriages consummated when the man and the woman know and fancy each other. The woman above who described her own circumcision, relates her defibulation in these words:

> *- For my part, problems arose when I was married. I got to know my husband when I went to university. He was also a student. We were a couple for many years, and I think my parents suspected it, even if I never was explicit about having a boyfriend. After we had finished our studies we had* nikaax*, which means that our families agreed about us getting married.*[98] *Then we had known each other for five years. After some time we got married. The first night… It was so hard, actually I just wanted to run away… I told him, 'No, I don't want to do it! We can't do it!' Every night I started worrying, 'Oh, he comes closer, what can I do?' I sat watching films on television and my husband came and asked if I was going to bed or not. 'No, I don't want to sleep now, I'm watching this film'. Sometimes, in the small hours of the morning, he came to me and said, 'Come to bed, I won't touch you. Come on and let's go to sleep.'*
>
> *Finally I told him that we had to let a doctor open it. We were abroad then, my husband had got a job in another country. Together we went to a doctor to ask if I could have an operation to be opened. But it cost too much, we couldn't afford it. We decided to open by ourselves. It took months, and I was in pain all the time. If you do it one night, and then make a pause for three or four nights, then you have to start over again. Then the wound has healed and you are closed again. It hurt so unbelievably… but it was hard for him too. He hated it. The whole situation was dreadful. […] For us, it took a long time to open me, because my husband is a good man. When I cried, he said 'I am so sorry' and then he didn't want to touch me there any more. It took a long time to open me, several months.*

The regional differences in how to have a defibulation performed seem to linger in exile. In a study from Norway (Johansen, in press) all the women from the northern parts of Somalia, who had married in Norway, had been defibulated at hospitals. All but one reported that their husbands had respected the approximately six weeks of abstinence in waiting for the wound to heal. Couples from other parts of Somalia faced a more complex situation:

> In the southern regions of Somalia, the cultural norm states that de-infibulation at marriage should be done through male penetration, preferably within the week constituting the marriage ceremony. All informants, however, men as well as women, conveyed that this procedure took longer, usually from two weeks up to two months. Young men (in their early

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[97] However, some women stated that there are Somali men who prefer tight vaginal openings for the sake of sexual pleasure, even if they considered their own husbands to be exceptions. This discrepancy will be further discussed in Chapter Six.

[98] In a Swedish book about Somalia, published twenty years ago, the author concludes: "At the age of 15 the girls usually are married away. Often this is about maintenance or improvement of the relation between two families – at least this holds for the rural population of nomads. In the towns new ideas gain ground. More and more often young people marry out of fancy. But still they take great consideration to their parents' will and they seldom marry without their consent" (Bjelfvenstam 1982:97, my translation from Swedish).

> thirties) claimed that this was a frequent topic of discussion among friends in the form of sharing frustrations and fears, and thus contradicts references to male boasting and prestige frequently described in literature (Lewis 1994, Talle 1987) [Johansen, in press].

The idea that Somali men become sexually aroused by a tight vagina and some resistance, is also claimed by Kwaak (1992) and mentioned in the literature by e.g. WHO (1998):[99]

> The fact that infibulation enhances men's sexual enjoyment – the tighter vagina, the more pleasurable the intercourse is said to be for the man – is certainly not the sole factor to explain the persistence of the practice. But it cannot be ignored [Kwaak 1992:782].

> In societies where infibulation is the norm, it might be assumed that most men are conditioned by a tighter vaginal entrance, by a passive women or by one who is experiencing pain. In Somalia and Sudan forceful intercourse to penetrate a tight infibulation is hailed as a sign of masculinity and virility [WHO 1998:36, referring to Kwaak 1992].

It should be noted that Kwaak conducted her study among women. This representation of male preferences seems not to have been commented upon by any men at all, according to her article in *Social Science and Medicine* (1992). Talle, when pointing out that "it is claimed that Somali men in general are said to find a narrow vagina a source of pleasure, and that his satisfaction and manly pride is increased by a certain amount of coercion from him and resistance from his wife in coitus" (1993:100), does not specify if both women and men state this. WHO ends the discussion by pointing out that other studies, e.g. in Egypt and Sudan, tend to contradict this generalised picture of men (1998:36). According to Lightfoot-Klein, the grandmothers are said to be the origin of these concepts: "They reputedly tell the young woman that the more pain a woman experiences, the more her husband's manhood will be enhanced, and the greater will be his pleasure" (1989a:101).

In Sudan, where infibulation in many parts is as widely practised as in Somalia, this idea of male pleasure seems to be an important motive behind the custom among women of *reinfibulation* after every childbirth (Cloudsley 1983, and Almroth-Berggren et al. 2001). Some writers claim that there also are Sudanese men who express that they derive far greater sexual pleasure from narrowed vaginas (e.g. Gruenbaum 1996:461, 2000:50). This should be compared to the findings of Lowenstein (1978): in his study an overwhelming majority of the men were against the practice of infibulation (and many also against milder forms), while the women with few exceptions were in favour of the pharaonic type. Especially the younger Sudanese men explained their resistance to the practice of infibulation in terms of sexuality: "such operations stood in the way of a mutually satisfying relationship with each enjoying the pleasure of the other partner as well as one's own" (Lowenstein 1978:420). Almroth-Berggren et al. (2001) demonstrate from their study in a rural area in Sudan: "Men were not involved in decisions to perform re-infibulation, but

[99] The Arabic word *nikah* has a double meaning in the Islamic legal discourse, referring both to "sex" and "marriage contract" (Winkel 1995:5).

seemed to play a supportive role when decisions were taken to not perform it" (ibid.:711).

The matter is also discussed by Almroth et al. (2001b), who quite recently performed a survey including 59 men in a rural village in Sudan, aiming at looking into male complications of infibulation. They found that male complications, such as difficulty in penetration, wounds and infections on the penis and psychological problems were described by a majority of the men.[100] A majority of the young men in the study stated that they would have preferred to marry an uncircumcised woman. Two thirds of the men who preferred a circumcised wife were in favour of clitoridectomy, and only one third of infibulation.[101]

In the Norwegian study among exile Somalis, some men reported of wounds and scars on penis. Many also described the trauma of causing pain to their newly wedded wives and "cited the pain of deinfibulation at marriage, as their main grudge against the practice" (Johansen, in press). Lightfoot-Klein reports the words from a psychiatrist in Sudan, who stated that "[men] often felt guilt at experiencing pleasure at the expense of their wives' pain" (1989a:11).

Some of the male informants taking part in this study also emphasised the suffering involved in the act of defibulation, as will be discussed in section 6.2. It seems then that at least some of the general notions about an increased sexual satisfaction for men when their wives are vaginally very tight (or even in pain) arise from the female sphere in study populations or from feminist oriented perspectives. The discrepancy between empirical evidence in different studies may also originate from a failure to discriminate between sexual ideology and individual experiences: the depiction of men as filled with manly pride and a desire for tight vaginas (and even resistance and pain in women) is obviously a cornerstone in the Somali sexual ideology, and may therefore be what is conveyed by many informants in interviews. Many women's and men's personal experiences may, on the other hand, contradict this generalised representation. This will be further discussed in Chapter Six.

4.9.2 Approaches focusing on ethnic, socio-economic and psychological aspects

Ethnicity

To what extent ethnicity is a driving force behind the spreading or the maintenance of the practices of female circumcision is, naturally, impossible to establish. In some local contexts ethnicity becomes more salient as an important factor than in others, and I shall discuss some of these situations below.

Several ethnic groups live in Kenya, among which Kikuyu stand out in number and political strength. Kikuyu traditionally have had elaborated initiation rituals for

[100] See also Sanderson (1981:52) and Gruenbaum (2001:152ff).

[101] See also Dirie (1991:14), reporting incidents of ulcers of the glance of penis due to defibulation among men in Somalia, and Lightfoot-Klein (1989a:95f).

both boys and girls, the girls' rituals including clitoridectomy.[102] These rituals symbolised the transition from childhood to adulthood, integration into the tribe and a confirmation of being a Kikuyu with the bonds to the territory, family and tribe (Natsoulas 1998:138). The missionaries present in the 1920s and 1930s forbid their Christianised adherents to participate in rituals including clitoridectomy – and at the same time they forbade membership in the political organisation Kikuyu Central Association (KCA). This combination of two separate phenomena, coinciding in time with the KCA establishing their own independent schools (independent of the mission and the colonial power), gave the independence movement an enormous support among the Kikuyu. Female circumcision became a highly politicised matter, as KCA used it as a means to highlight ethnic identity. KCA launched a campaign with the basic message that the Europeans were aimed at extinguishing the Kikuyu: "*First the land has been taken from us… and now they attack our most sacred custom, what will they do next?"*(Natsoulas 1998:143). As uncircumcised women had problems finding husbands to marry among the Kikuyu, the Europeans were said to be after the Kikuyu women. This alleged strategy would in the end bring the Kikuyu to obliteration. Female circumcision now became instrumental in an ethnic independence movement, inciting people to react against cultural imperialistic attacks from Europeans.[103] Dr. Helen Dadet, a lecturer at the University of Nairobi, comments on the strong emotions attached to female circumcision in this way:

> By saying that you don't want girls circumcised, now you are getting too close to what holds society together. You are getting too close to what makes a Kikuyu woman feel that she's a full woman. You are touching on people's sense of values, sense of identity, sense of well-being and if you play with what makes somebody feel like somebody you are inviting aggression [Anton 1995, in Wright 1996:255].

When two ethnic groups live in the same area, it is likely that some traditions practised by the higher ranked group will be adopted by the lower ranked group, in an attempt to acquire higher social status. In a discussion about the Rahad area in Sudan, the American anthropologist Ellen Gruenbaum (1991a, 1991b, 1994a, 1996) shows how this social logic works. In this area two major ethnic groups live side by side: the West African group Zabarma, who earlier practised sunnah circumcision, and the socially higher ranked Arab group Kenana, practising infibulation. The Zabarma had, Gruenbaum realised when she returned to do fieldwork in the area in the 1980s after ten years of absence, adapted themselves in some aspects to Kenana ways. They had traditionally fenced their yards, a habit that seemed to be in decline. Women were generally less secluded and worked to a higher extent in the

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[102]A more complex view of male preferences is also offered by the Norwegian anthropologist Simon Rye (2002), who conducted fieldwork on female circumcision in Ethiopia. The more general notion that men prefer tight vaginas for the sake of sexual pleasure was in his study complicated by the existence of contrary notions: female circumcision (removal of the labia minora) was said to facilitate male penetration and conception (Rye 2002:236ff). Men seemed to agree that it is painful and almost impossible to penetrate an uncircumcised women: "since she has not been circumcised her vagina is narrow and not yet ready" as one of the informants expressed it (ibid.:242).

[103]For an ethnographic description, see Kenyatta (1959).

open fields, many of them speaking Arabic. Experimenting with infibulation had occurred. Zabarma girls had been scoffed at, on the sly by adult Kenana women and openly by Kenana girls. Zabarma mothers related how their girls, being mocked, came home asking: *"What's the matter? Don't we have razor blades like the Arabs?"* (Gruenbaum 1994a:8, 1996:468). Infibulation was seen as a sign of ethnic superiority: Zabarma claimed that they had adopted the tradition from the socially dominating Arab Sudanese people. In the area, there was an internal cultural debate about what could be said to be Muslim ways of life:

> Zabarma women who generally pray regularly, wonder why the Kenana Arabs, who claim descent from the Prophet Mohamed, neglect prayer but claim moral superiority with their infibulations. Kenana Arabs generally considered infibulation vital to ethnic and gender identity, male sexual pleasure, and respectability. While in this village scarcely any opposition to female circumcision has been heard, a cultural dialog about Islamic heritage and ethnic identity surrounds the issue of female circumcision [Gruenbaum 1994a:8].

Gruenbaum claims that this trend of affairs is observable in many parts of Sudan. Female circumcision, especially infibulation, plays an important role in the contacts between different ethnic groups as a marker of ethnic differences and ethnic superiority. This aspect is woven into the more encompassing process of cultural debate, also including religion and tradition (Gruenbaum 1991a, 1991b).

Ethnic groups in western and southern Sudan have begun to infibulate their daughters at the same time as these areas have been "arabised", and despite the fact that infibulation has been non-existent until now (Parker 1995:518, Lightfoot-Klein 1989a:48ff):

> As unschooled Islamic people who erroneously believe female circumcision to be part of their religion spread into these indigenous areas, they bring with them their customs which are eventually adopted by less socially and economically advantaged indigenous population in order to make their daughters more marriageable [Lightfoot-Klein 1989a:48].

Also in Uganda, border country to Sudan, there are reports about the spreading of the tradition to infibulate girls. People who Lightfoot-Klein (1989a:50) calls "militant Africans" have returned to Uganda from exile with a new awareness of their cultural inheritance and a strong will to maintain African traditions they claim are about to vanish due to western influence. This resurrection of "African culture" carries in part the same logic as the KCA-controversy in Kenya in the 1920s and 1930s.[104]

When it comes to female circumcision in Somalia, ethnicity does not seem to play a salient role. The only sign I have found of female circumcision to be associated with any kind of ethnicity is the children's song (quoted in section 5.5) starting with the words: "A *gaal* (non-Muslim/white) is not circumcised / Even a mouse is circumcised […]".

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[104] For further discussion on the KCA movement and female circumcision, see Natsoulas (1998), Pedersen (1991), Thomas (1997), Browne (1991), and Robertson (1996). A short overview is given by Sanderson (1981:65ff). For a historical account of the 20th century politics of female circumcision in Sudan, see Bell (1998).

All clans practice some sort of female circumcision, even if some minor groups, at least earlier in history, seem to have done without it.[105] The Arab group *Reer Xamar*, native of Mogadishu, seems to practice only sunnah circumcision, while there are other groups that seem to favour clitoridectomy.[106] Historically, though, ethnicity and quest for higher social status may have been crucial for adaptation to the practice:

> In the southern regions of the country, occupied by the Sab […], infibulation is less consistent. According to the information obtained during the investigation, infibulation has only recently gained a foothold in these regions, therefore it can be reasonably assumed that the Sab acceptance of the practice is only a manoeuvre aimed at gaining higher social status, in imitation of the "noble" northern peoples [Gallo & Viviani 1988:169].

Somalis in Malmö do not mention any major differences in the practice of female circumcision between different clans, except for the Reer Xamar group, which is said to prefer sunnah circumcision. In all clans the importance of virginity is stressed, but what may differ is other traditions associated to circumcision: in the southern parts of Somalia the newly married husband is expected to defibulate his wife (if he fails and the couple turn to an outsider for assistance, they conceal this fact), while in some parts of the North the tradition commands that the bride has her infibulation inspected by the bridegroom's family, before a circumciser or a physician defibulates the bride (see last part of section 4.9.1, and section 5.3).

At a deeper level there is a connection between the clan system and the tradition of infibulation, Talle claims (1993). As Somali society is patrilineal, every clan has an interest in 'controlling' the reproduction of the clan. According to Talle, the tradition of female circumcision symbolically is associated to clan affiliation and maintenance of the clan system. Woman are transformed into 'pure agnates', as discussed in the paragraph above about infibulation (4.9.1), ritually pure members of a clan in a system of patrilineal descent. Female fertility is the fundamental element around which the relations between the agnatic families are constructed (Talle 1993). The children these women give birth to make the patrilineage grow in strength and so the number of children affect power relations between the patrilineages.[107] The symbolism inherent in infibulation is deeply interwoven with Somali society's patrilineal clan structure, according to Talle.

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[105] How female circumcision was spread among different ethnic groups in Sudan in the middle of the 20th century is discussed by Toubia (1995:13f). According to Talle (1979), circumcision among the Masai in Kenya has become increasingly important as an ethnic marker at a time of change.

[106] According to Gallo & Abdisamed (1985:325), the tribes of Dabarre and Lisan do not circumcise their children at all.

[107] Gallo & Abdisamed (1985:325). In this study with data from 1981, 2497 women were interviewed. The authors give an over-all account of forms of circumcision in different tribes in Somalia.

Social status and economic security

Another way to explain the practice of female circumcision is to highlight the aspects of social status and economic security. Gruenbaum is one of the researchers who have emphasised these factors (1991a, 1991b, 1994a, 1996, and 2000). She states that we shall never reach an understanding of the phenomenon of female circumcision, unless we take into consideration the wider context of social and economic conditions women live under.

Gruenbaum reports from a fieldwork at a project in Sudan, concerning irrigation of cotton plantations. This project lead to a change of many women's socio-economic situation, as opportunities for migration, permanent or temporary, increased as the project included many women with good education and many women with a paid job. In this situation discussions on health, religion and tradition were stimulated – including a debate on the tradition of female circumcision. Opportunities to refrain from practising female circumcision, according to Gruenbaum, is a matter of the overall socio-economic situation:

> [W]ithout greater social and economic autonomy for women, the movement to discontinue the practice of female circumcision would prove extremely risky for those who choose to change [...] they [people who choose circumcision] are willing to undertake the health risks because the social and economic risks of *not* circumcising have been too great [Gruenbaum 1994a:2, italics in original].

In most societies where female circumcision is practised, the custom is seen as a requisite for marriage. For the huge majority of women in these societies marriage is the only career available: very few have the opportunity to education, employment or a life economically independent of a husband. Marriage and procreation of children is the obvious route to socio-economic security and a safe old age. Parents wanting their daughters to be successful in marriage and reproduction chose female circumcision: through infibulation the girls bear witness of unquestionable moral status and virginity.

In Gruenbaum's study at the cotton plantations in Sudan, some parents had refrained from infibulating their daughters: they experienced the possibilities of their daughters being able to maintain themselves economically in the future. Besides that, they were aware of the fact that some men, like the ones who had spent some time in Arab countries, did not care so much about whether their future wives were infibulated or not (1994a:6). In other words, when other options for survival than marriage and procreation seemed possible, many parents would consider refraining from female circumcision.[108]

Obiora (1997a) has criticised the statement that an important motive for the maintenance of female circumcision should have everything to do with marriageability and economy, claiming that it rests on a tenuous (or even erroneous) premise:

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[108]For a discussion on the nature of the Somali clan system, see e.g. Lewis (1961), and Mansur (1995a, 1995b).

> To begin with, there is no determined link between circumcision and economic dependence. The allegation that uncircumcised women are not eligible for marriage is not supported by precise documentation. Secondly, it is not established that marriage is a passport to material comfort for circumcised women. Thirdly, claims of acute economic dependence are not borne out in reality; since economic marginalization in the African context is a social reality for both men and women, economic activity is a compelling necessity, and a tradition, for women [Obiora 1997a, unpaginated].

Obiora may underestimate the power of ideas. If parents are convinced that female circumcision will enhance the future prospects of their daughters, this motive will be valid, irrespective of the fact that the factual relation between circumcision and socio-economic security has not been established. We do not make choices out of knowledge about actual conditions, but out of our concepts about how the world works, and we tend to play safe.

Psychological revenge

Some writers claim that among women who themselves once have been exposed to circumcision, there is a compulsion to reiterate against their own daughters what they themselves have suffered.[109] During the trials in France in the 1990s, where circumcisers and parents were prosecuted and sentenced for female circumcision, the prosecutor Weil-Curiel put forward the following argument:

> […] the mothers take some sorts of revenge for their own suffering by inflicting the same thing on their daughters, saying to themselves, 'Well, I had to go through this; why should my daughter be spared?' [in Winter 1994:965].

The Swiss psychologist/psychoanalyst Alice Miller also embraces this point of view. She comments upon the fact that women themselves practice and often defend this tradition:

> Why, one is tempted to ask, do women behave like this? Were they not themselves victims of this custom, based on the inhuman demand that women should not derive pleasure from the sexual act? Wouldn't African women wish to protect their daughters from this mutilation, from the brutal pain and the danger of infection, from which many women die? Obviously they would – were it not for the mechanisms enforcing the repression of anger, the mechanisms by which repressed anger is unconsciously projected onto the next generation [Miller 1997:71].

There are no studies conducted that support this explanatory model. It seems more reasonable to believe that mothers base their decision on how they perceive that their daughters are inflicted with as little pain as possible. A woman, interviewed in a study conducted in Somalia in the 1980s, has suffered from the fact that her own

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[109] Changes in the practice of female circumcision – to milder forms – were also noted after construction of the Aswan High Dam in Sudan, resulting in new socio-economic patterns (Kennedy 1970, in Gordon 1991:11). Boddy (1991) adds in a commentary to Gordon's article that Kennedy does not suggest any obvious causal connection, but points at a complex process (ibid.:15f).

infibulation was not tight enough and motivates her decision to have her daughter well infibulated with the words:

> So you see, I don't want my daughter to experience the same thing, and the only way to protect her from such embarrassment and humiliation is to have her infibulated [in Warsame et al. 1985:9].

One case contradicting an explanatory model stating a need for revenge is a study based on almost 4,000 Sudanese women in a survey with questionnaires. 432 of them were not circumcised themselves, and out of these women, as many as 20 % already had or planned to have their own daughters circumcised. 40% of these women, in turn, claimed the most important reason for this was "custom and tradition". When asked about why they thought the custom survived, one of the most frequent answers was "fear of social criticism". Williams & Sobieszczyk (1997), who conducted the study, speculate on the possibility that these women, themselves uncircumcised, have suffered so much from their lack of social status that they do not want to expose their daughters to the same vulnerable situation.

In another study, conducted in southern Somalia in the middle of the 1980s, 62% of the 859 women were circumcised pharaonically, while the rest was circumcised by *sunnah*. Among the total number, 76% had or planned to have their daughters pharaonically circumcised – among them, obviously, some mothers circumcised by sunnah (Ntiri 1993). These numbers indicate that there is a good reason to question the revenge motive.

This explanatory model is also redundant when it comes to counting for social processes where women, not themselves circumcised, have chosen to incorporate this tradition into their practice, having either themselves or their daughters circumcised. This has taken place, among other places, in specific settings in Egypt, Senegal and Chad.[110] This was also the case in western Sudan: up to the 1950s female circumcision was an unknown practice among the Furs and the residents of the Nuba mountains. Through the presence of administrators, education and health professionals from the educated middle classes of the north practising female circumcision, a new norm was established. A survey from 1979 showed that in most Fur and Nuba families, daughters were circumcised, while their mothers were not (Toubia 1993:21).

In others words, there is reason to believe that women may conceive that they have strong enough reasons to circumcise their own daughters – without having to demonise them by attributing unconscious impulses of revenge.

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[110] See e.g. Abdalla (1982:81), Joseph (1996:16), Dorkenoo & Elworthy (1992:14) and Halldén (1979:34) in a folder from the Swedish International Development Agency. For a critical comment, see e.g. Obiora (1997a).

4.9.3 Feminist perspectives

Radical feminism

The most widespread explanatory model to female circumcision is based on radical feminism. In this view, female circumcision is the most outstanding symbol of subjugation of female to male (see e.g. Mann 1979:32). The most influential activist in the field is, without doubt, the American radical feminist Fran Hosken. She has published a many times updated huge book, *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females,* and was the one who coined and propagated for the term *female genital mutilation,* today established practically all over the world.[111] Apart from claiming that the politics of genital mutilation is designed to affirm the powers of males over female sexuality and reproduction (1993:315), she points out African men, especially Somali men, as the true perpetrators:

> FGM is a training ground for male violence. It is used to assert absolute male domination over women not only in Somalia but all over Africa [Hosken 1993:5].

> [F]or African men to subject their own small daughters to FGM in order to sell them for a good bride-price shows such total lack of human compassion and vicious greed that it is hard to comprehend [Hosken 1993:16].

> Somalia is a classic example of the results of male violence: the practice of infibulation as family custom teaches male children that the most extreme forms of torture and brutality against women and girls is their absolute right and what is expected of real men [Hosken 1994:1].

Other radical feminist writers admit an existing discrepancy when labelling female circumcision as a form of male violence at the same time as everyone can see that women in general are the actors and often the most fervent advocates of the tradition. A way to solve this paradox is to ascribe *false consciousness* to the female actors.[112]

Mary Daly, a radical feminist philosopher, uses the expression ”mentally castrated” to describe the women involved in this tradition. In the end of the 1970s, she wrote *Gyn/Ecology*, where she blames the ”planetary patriarchy” (1979:154, n) for this ”sado-ritual” (ibid.:155). The custom is an expression of ”phallocracy” (ibid.:157) and the crosscultural hatred toward women (ibid.:160). She admits that men generally are not involved as actors, and understands this as an ”erasure of male responsibility”, just another cynical aspect of the syndrome (ibid.:159f). Men *demand* female castration, forcing the already mutilated women into taking an active part:

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[111] See, respectively, Toubia (1995:13f), Dellenborg (2000, 2001), and Leonard (2000a, 2000b).

[112] Obioma Nnaemeka, quoted in Obiora (1997b:52), calls The Hosken Report the ’bible’ for ’jihads’ against female circumcision.

> Mentally castrated, these women participate in the destruction of their own kind – of womankind – and the destruction of strength and bonding between women [Daly 1979:164].

The immanent evil in men as a species is an explicit or implicit theme in many radical feminist texts, even if some writers are willing to accept that there are exceptions:

> These tendencies in the male psyche – ambivalence and fear – which are apparently responsible for clitoridectomy, excision, and infibulation, should be explicitly recognized and denounced. However, it is not my intention to alienate those male readers of good faith, many of whom share the feminist cause and are outraged at the inhumanity of their brothers [Levin 1980:207].

Some feminists of African origin see the practices of female circumcision as the optimum sign of the patriarchate's wish to dominate women, as e.g. the Senegalese sociologist Awa Thiam (1986, 1998): "It [infibulation] constitutes the most eloquent expression of the control exercised by the phallocratic system over female sexuality" (ibid.:1986:60), and "in Black Africa it would seem that males have forced women to become their own torturers, to butcher each other" (ibid.:75). Other feminists of African origins are critical to this discourse, which they see as a purely western (neo-colonialist) product (e.g. Obiora 1997a, 1997b).

One of the most famous African feminists participating in the debate on female circumcision is the Egyptian physician Nawal El Saadawi, a pioneer when she started talking in public about the tradition in the 1970s. Her view is that the root of the tradition is to be sought in the will of the patriarchate to diminish female sexuality and force monogamy upon the women – basically it is a matter of men's desire to dominate women.[113] Nahid F. Toubia, today active at Rainbo in London, claims that the affected women are tools for the acquiring of social honour and in lack of any domain where they can control their own lives (1985). Women do not want to be oppressed for having a sexuality, but as they lack the economic, political and social power to defend their own sexuality, they suppress it themselves. The aggressiveness directed toward their sexuality is but only one way used by the patriarchal society to oppress women in the wider purpose of controlling their productive and reproductive force (ibid.). "Female genital mutilation […] is an extreme example of efforts common to societies around the world to suppress woman's sexuality, ensure their subjugation, and control their reproductive functions" (1995:7).

The most well-known writer propagating for the radical feminist perspective in the public is probably the American writer Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*. Her commitment in the field of female circumcision was first expressed in a novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). It is a fictive story about Tashi, who decides herself to go through infibulation, an operation which causes her immense

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[113] See e.g. Kluge (1996). For a critical discussion on this ascription, see an excerpt from Engle, in Steiner & Alston (1996:955f) and Obiora (1997a, 1997b). For a comparative case, see Abrams' (1997) juxtaposing of allegations of false consciousness among so called "fems" among lesbians and actors of female circumcision. Those African women who have tried to present an alternative discourse on female circumcision to the prevalent western radical feminist one have often been "dismissed as defensive, socially conditioned to accept their victimisation, or as operating on false consciousness" (Ogbu 1997, unpaginated).

suffering for the rest of her life, also after she had moved to live with an African-American pastor in the US. Some writers claim that Alice Walker's novel opened their eyes to the tradition of female circumcision, while a tremendous number of writers criticise her thoroughly.[114] One of her critics is a researcher on female circumcision in Nigeria, Emmanuel Babatunde, here concluding what he claims to be the underlying ideas in her novel:

> Africa is the land of torture and mutilation. America is the center of healing. The intermediaries, as usual, are the missionaries. This time, however, the missionaries are African-Americans. America is also the land of well-motivated female freedom fighters who must take the battle of liberation to other lands on the behalf of all abused women [Babatunde 1998:18].

Babatunde maintains that as long as the efforts to eradicate the tradition of female circumcision is focused on identifying Sub-Saharan culture with barbarity, these efforts will be understood as a cultural war against the African continent – which is rather to prevent the process toward an eradication than to promote it. Several other African activists who work for an end to the custom criticise Walker for the same reasons: Walker's novel may well be used as a "gauge by which to measure the distance between the west and the rest of humanity".[115]

Alice Walker produced, co-operating with the film photographer Pratibha Parmar, a documentary on female circumcision, *Warrior Marks*, in 1993. In connection with the release of the film they published a book about the making of the film, *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993), which also includes interviews with famous activists in the field. Both the film and the book have been heavily criticised for having a highly ideological, simplifying and neo-colonialist perspective.[116]

The radical feminist perspective: a hegemonic understanding

In a great deal of the scientific articles on female circumcision, popular or not, the radical feminist perspective is taken for granted, often as an unreflected starting point.[117] *The Economist* published an article on female genital mutilation in 1996, with the headline "Men's traditional culture" and stated among other things that "men (probably) first imposed FGM in their own imagined interest".[118] In medical articles the same, probably unreflected, perspective is often present. In *British*

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[114]Lightfoot-Klein interviewing El Saadawi, in El Saadawi (1997:65ff). See also Asefa (1998).

[115]Williams (1997:491) is one of those who had their eyes opened by Walker.

[116]Dawit & Mekuria (1993), quoted in Levi (1996:160) and in Walley (1997:427f). See also Mekuria (1999).

[117]For a critical discussion, see e.g. James (1998), Levi (1996), Obiora (1997a, 1997b), Levi (1996), and Kassamali (1998). See also section 10.4.1.

[118]See, among many others, e.g. Potts & Short (1999), Mann (1979), Cohen-Almagor (1996) on female circumcision and murder for family honour among minorities in Israel, Maina-Ahlberg (1998) in a publication for SIDA, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, on female genital mutilation in general, and McLean & Graham (1985), in a Minority Right Group Report.

Medical Journal Black & Debelle (1995) claim, without any attempts to support their statement with empirical evidence:

> Female genital mutilation is supported and encouraged by men; indeed the operation can be regarded as an exercise in male supremacy and the oppression of women [Black & Debelle 1985:1590].[119]

A Swedish head physician and Professor in Medicine defines the roots of female genital mutilation as the subordinated position of women and men's 'right' to dictate the conditions of humiliation (Bergström 1994:153). The perspective is so established, that there is no longer need for empirical evidence to support it.

Some writers get confused when their experiences do not accord with this hegemonic perspective. With a touch of surprise, three medical researchers, in an article on treatment of infibulated women at a hospital in Britain, note that:

> Many myths have been dispelled and no resistance has been met from the men who have, in fact, been very supportive of our policy on deinfibulation [McCaffrey et al. 1995:789].

Other writers feel impelled to excuse their own empirical data, when it contradicts this widespread understanding of female circumcision as a means for men to oppress women. In the Demographic and Health Surveys Program in Sudan, 5,868 women of reproductive age (15-49) were interviewed in northern and central parts of the country in 1989-1990 (Williams & Sobieszczyk 1997). 97% of the women who had gone through pharaonic circumcision, and 96% of the women who had the least severe form of circumcision, stated that they had circumcised or planned to circumcise their daughters. Among those who reported that their husbands were against the practice of female circumcision, 41% stated that they were going to circumcise their daughters (independently of their husbands' opinions).[120] Here the writers use some twenty lines trying to explain away this fact (Williams & Sobieszczyk 1997:974). In another study in the Sudan, showing a broader opposition to coarser forms of circumcision among men than among women, the writer is obviously uncomfortable with how her data may be interpreted by the readers, so she states for the record:

> … the author *feels* that they [the passive fathers] do in fact participate in the subjection of their daughters and the sisters to the ordeal [El Dareer 1983:143, italics mine].

Alice Miller seems to be discontented with the fact that men do not play a more prominent role in maintaining the tradition, a fact that does not stop her from speculating about their motives:

> What in God's name can possibly be gained by shearing off the clitoris of millions of girls? Although it wouldn't lessen the hideousness of the custom, it would make more sense if it

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[119]This idea is prevalent in mass media articles as well. See e.g. Fredriksson (2001): "The motive [for genital mutilation of girls] is that women should lose their ability to enjoy sex, a male outrage."

[120]Later quoted e.g. by Craft (1997:1227), also in *British Medical Journal*.

> were the father who insisted on this female circumcision. Perhaps he once gratified his desire on the girl and wishes to deny the same favor to her future husband. Perhaps, by allowing his daughter to suffer, he is taking symbolic revenge on his mother [Miller 1997:72-73].

To sum up, writers who want to be true to the established radical feminist perspective on female circumcision find themselves trapped in some perplexity when they compare this simplistic explanatory model to empirical data. This confusion is expressed by the anthropologist Lori Leonard, quoted from an article called "'We Did It For Pleasure Only': Hearing Alternative Tales of Female Circumcision" (2000a). Here she is striving with the fact that she can not understand the 'meaning' of the procedure, recently adopted by the women/young girls themselves, facing the situation that the 'meaning' of the practice is of much more importance to her than to her informants:

> Fieldnotes, August 4th. How am I going to write to this? Who am I going to tell? Mary Daly would say that I am participant in the cover-up, a producer of patriarchal scholarship, a victim of the phallocracy. I had a dream that the National Science Foundation revoked my grant, saying it had all been a mistake. I wasn't an anthropologist after all, and so really, I just didn't get it. How will I convey these voices in a way that does them justice? Will people hear them? Will they believe? [Leonard 2000a, unpaginated].

In some cases an alleged scientific discussion has a clear normative bent, as an effect of the underlying ideological basis. Smith (1992), in analysing individual versus collective rights in an article on female circumcision among the Darood clan in Somalia and the Kikuyu group in Kenya, criticises the anthropologists Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz for being unable or unwilling to highlight how gender hierarchy or oppression of women may be a result of the rituals the anthropologists theorise:

> They do not give the women the tools or the language to articulate their oppression in the gender hierarchy of the tribe [Smith 1992:2480].

Most studies on female circumcision, both in Anthropology and Medicine, do not include men's attitudes. In many cases men's attitudes are represented through interviewed women, stating that 'men demand circumcised women'.[121] The few studies showing tendencies to opposition among men in societies where female circumcision is practised are often neglected and left without reflection or any discussion at all. One example of this is a study from the Sudan in the 1970s, including 153 men and 32 women, published in *Social Science and Medicine*. In this study only eight men stated they were in favour of any form of circumcision, among them only three (all older men) were in favour of infibulation. Out of the 32 women,

[121] In numbers (the total number is the sum of the women whose daughters have been or will be circumcised): 2134 women stated that their husbands wanted the practice to continue, 536 women (the 41% mentioned above) stated that their husbands were opposed to the practice, 627 women stated their husbands had no opinion, and 508 stated they did not know anything about their husbands' opinion. Women who stated that they had not/had no intention to circumcise their daughters (with husbands either in favour of or opposed to the practice) are not included in these numbers.

29 were in favour of infibulation (Lowenstein 1978).[122] This article was published in 1978, but seems to have vanished from the scientific field since then.

The Norwegian anthropologist Simon Rye (2002) expresses it in terms of that men have "been muted" in this field, as traditionally only women's voices are heard when it comes to female circumcision (ibid.:185).[123] After his field study on female circumcision among Christians in Ethiopia, he concludes that "men's views are not unitary or necessarily in accordance with the idea that men are the perpetrators of the practice – and supporters of its continuation" (ibid.:186).

Criticism on the radical feminist perspective

Criticism on the radical feminist perspective has primarily been focused on its inherent neo-colonialist or cultural imperialist attitude and as a treachery to basic feminist values.[124] Germaine Greer, who once wrote the feminist "bible" *The Female Eunuch*, argues in her latest book, *The Whole Woman* (1999), that the fact that Westerners fight female circumcision in Africa at the same time as they accept cosmetic genital surgery, episiotomies, hysterectomies and male circumcision in the West is a matter of hypocrisy and cultural imperialism.[125]

The radical feminist explanatory model to female circumcision has also been called into question for scientific reasons. Some writers attack it on logical grounds, e.g. Mackie (1996), claiming that the theory of ascribing female mutilation to patriarchy fails, as it cannot explain the non-universality of the practices under universal patriarchy (ibid.:1000). Another objection concerns the theory's failure to account for societies where extremely painful and mutilating genital rituals are inflicted on boys, but not on girls.[126] Nobody argues that these rituals are results of a matriarchal structure.

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[122]Dr. Marie Assad, one of the prominent persons working against female circumcision in Egypt, answers a question about the relation between female circumcision and girls' marriageability: "I asked whether it is true that men will not consider an uncircumcised girl to be marriageable. She replied that it is not entirely clear. That is the traditional belief, but its truth has not been established by research" (Macklin 1999:75).

[123]See also El Dareer's study from Sudan, showing that far more women are in favour of severer types of female circumcision than men, who tended to be in favour of milder forms (1982, 1983).

[124]Rye (2002) refers to Ardener (1972) who discusses the more general problem of how women's voices generally are muted, and argues that the opposite situation exists in the field of female circumcision.

[125]For criticism on the cultural imperialist attitude, see e.g. Morsy (1991), Scheper-Hughes (1991), Gruenbaum (1994a), Lane & Rubinstein (1996), Anees (1989), Morsey (1991), Walley (1997), Lewis (1997), Gunning (1997), Obiora (1997a, 1997b), Winkel (1995), Browne (1991), and Abusharaf (2000). The criticism on cultural imperialism has, in turn, been criticised by others for its cultural relativism, see e.g. Thiam (1998) and Afkhami, quoted in Spadacini & Nichols (1998:45). For the standpoint that the radical feminist perspective on female circumcision deviates from basic feminist values, see e.g. Obiora (1997a, 1997b), Abrams (1997), Gruenbaum (1994a), and Abusharaf (2000).

[126]*Episiotomies* are surgical cuts to facilitate delivery. A *hysterectomy* involves the removal of the uterus. In the US about a third of all women will have their uterus removed before they have reached the age of 65 (Greer 1999).

Others have called for a more scientific and balanced analysis to account for social processes which seem to contradict the simplistic model of subjugation of female to male: the Swedish anthropologist Lisen Dellenborg (2000, 2001) accounts for the development of events among the Joola in an area in south-western Senegal, where clitoridectomy as a practice was introduced by women in the beginning of the 20th century, as a crucial aspect of women's initiation and secret societies:

> In the last ten years, many men have joined the Senegalese government's action against circumcision, on the grounds that female circumcision is neither a Muslim nor a Joola custom and that it ruins women's health, sexuality and fecundity. Women, on the other hand, especially married ones, fight against their fathers, brothers and husbands for what they perceive as their right to be excised and initiated [Dellenborg 2001:191].

Along this line is the argument that the radical feminist perspective is *reductionist*, as it reduces complex and specific customs in local settings to but one issue, the matter of oppression. As a result, other crucial aspects of high worth to the women involved, are dismissed.[127]

The radical feminist perspective, claiming a universal sisterhood, is reductionist also in its pretension to include all women of the world, regardless of individual background and specific life situation:

> The assumption of a "universal sisterhood" falls short of understanding how multiple factors like class, religion, race, and sexuality converge to produce a diversity of experiences that determines the extent to which sexism will be an expressive force in the lives of women across the globe [Abusharaf 2000:161].

This objection is put forward also by Henrietta Moore in a more general discussion about the feminist enterprise. Moore (1988, 1993a) highlights that anthropological research, generally conducted in local settings, by necessity is oriented toward distinctions and variations. The very nature of anthropology – aiming at an understanding of *other* cultural realities – makes it contradictory to the feminist assumption of a universal identity of "women". Also Marilyn Strathern (1987) has investigated the relation between anthropology and feminism – a relation she calls "awkward" – and concludes that there must be a tension between the fields, as they are differently structured in how knowledge is organised, and have conflicting goals. At a historical point in time – in the 1970s – feminism and anthropology joined forces in attempts to understand the presumed universal subordination of women to men. However, soon enough the project failed, as anthropologists began to question the framing of the problem, arguing that the model used to understand the power balance between men and women was ethnocentric and its categories constructed out of western concepts (Harvey & Gow 1994). One of the conclusions drawn was that

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[127] An objection put forward by e.g. Hicks (1993:xiii). For a vivid description of male circumcision among the Cameroonian Dii – where the young boys' penises are washed with abrasive substances and sometimes peeled lengthwise – see Muller (1993), quoted in James (1998:1041ff). See also description of so called "penis cutting" in Papua New Guinea (Tuzin 1991). The Tiv of Nigeria, the Pygmy of the Kalahari Desert and the Chaga of East Africa are groups where male circumcision practices are more extensive and painful than what the girls go through in these societies' initiation rites (Ogbu 1997).

gender difference not necessarily was the same as gender hierarchy. Most ethnographic gender studies after this period focused on understandings of what it means to be a woman in a specific context, aiming at giving an insiders' perspective of the issue rather than using unreflected western categories pretending to be universal (ibid., Moore 1994a).

The Indian feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty has argued, in response to Fran Hosken's tendency to define women consistently as the victims of male control:

> Male violence must be theorized and interpreted *within* specific societies, both in order to understand it better, as well as to effectively organize to change it. Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender, it must be forged in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis [Mohany 1984, quoted in Morsy 1991:22].

Some feminist scholars have presented alternative approaches in analysing female circumcision. One of them is the American anthropologist Christine J. Walley (1997), highly influenced by postmodernist thinking. In an article called "Searching For 'Voices': Feminism, Anthropology, and the Global Debate Over Female Genital Operations", she describes her difficulties in combining the existing radical feminist framework with empirical data in a fieldwork in western Kenya. Noticing how the adolescent girls (in these two groups, Bukusu and Sabaot, girls were clitoridectomised while in puberty and the ceremony was optional) shifted in their attitudes to the tradition, Walley started searching for their 'real', authentic voices – concluding that such a concept is a western construction and that the 'best interests' of these women were indeed contradictory and dependent on context (1997:411). She concludes by stating that 'lumping together' all forms of female circumcision, a characteristic of western discourse on female circumcision today, is to disregard specific meanings and politics embedded in the practices in different local settings – and so creating a generic 'they' and a generic 'we' (ibid.:429).

Another critical approach, based on ethnography, is offered by the Danish-Ghanese anthropologist Christiana Oware Knudsen (1994) on female circumcision in Ghana. She argues that local campaigns against female circumcision – initiated by "educated Ghanaian women […] who were misled by, mainly western, feminist organizations" (1994:191) – adopted faulty strategies, which have seriously damaged local social life. In Knudsen's view, the tradition has been abandoned in some areas without consideration to its mythical, ritual and social importance. Thereby young girls are lost outside important social institutions, in quite many cases with the result that many 'modernised' girls have 'gone wild', often resulting in unwanted teenage pregnancies, illegal abortions, prostitution and so on.

Yet another aspect showing the weakness of the radical feminist perspective of female circumcision concerns the level of struggle. In the simplified version of this view (represented for instance by Hosken in the quotations above), the level of struggle involves primarily men and women. This implies a structure of individualised actors. In reality, most societies (if not all) where female circumcision is practised are characterised by a family oriented view: the reputation at stake is the family's, not the individual woman's. This means that the level of struggle is to be found between families and clans, not between individual women and men. The radical feminist perspective ignores the crucial importance of clan relations.

Lane & Rubinstein (1996), in an article on female circumcision, warn against generalisations taken too far, calling it "the fallacy of detachable cultural descriptions":

> Especially when such detached descriptions are used to form the basis for analyses that cross social and cultural boundaries, they become simplified, dehumanizing stereotypes of complex, deeply human phenomena. […] The further even a superb analysis is moved from the original investigatory question, the more damage is done by committing the fallacy of detachable cultural descriptions. The quest for stable, generally applicable (universalizable) understandings appears to be an aspect of human cognition, one that works to direct attention away from evidence contradictory to the model [Lane & Rubinstein 1996:37].

It is a reasonable warning, scrutinising especially the popular scientific texts on female circumcision. To a high degree, data gathered from more than thirty countries – and innumerable local settings – are often mixed together to form a hotchpotch presented as *the* custom of female circumcision (like e.g. Koso-Thomas 1987 in chapter two, and Dorkenoo & Elworthy 1992:13ff; for a brief discussion see section 4.7). This holds for many radical feminist texts, but also for some popular scientific texts reflecting radical feminist ideas. 'The custom of female circumcision' is in reality multiple to its nature; the practices are much more complex, full of contradictions, and contextspecific than we usually expect.

4.9.4 Mackie's model of convention

I have found the model of the British political scientist Gerry Mackie (1996, 1998, and 2000) to be the theoretical perspective most suitable to understand the empirical data in this thesis. Most often predictions about a future eradication of practices of female circumcision express that such processes of necessity must be slow, as the practices are so 'deeply rooted' in people's lives. Mackie uses the case of footbinding in China to show that such predictions need not be correct: the case of how Chinese footbinding – practised for about thousand years – was abandoned within one generation shows that such practices, during certain circumstances, may be abandoned very quickly.

Footbinding and infibulation show some basic structural similarities: both practices are traditions which were/are practised for the purpose of giving the daughters as good opportunities in life as possible. They were/are almost universal where practised, supported and transmitted by women, were/are practised even by people who oppose them, performed on girls about six to eight years old, generally not initiation rites, necessary for proper marriage and to assure female chastity and fidelity, considered as an esthetical ideal, having an erotic aspect, etc.

Footbinding ended in many parts of China in a single generation, starting at the later part of the 19th century. Within half a century, the custom was no longer practised in any part of China (ibid.).

Mackie analyses the process with the help of game theory, which can explain both the stability of institutions and traditions, but also rapid changes. A mother who is going to make a decision about having her daughter footbound/infibulated or not is

in a situation where there is an *interdependence of decisions*: what kind of decisions *other* people make at the same time will determine whether the outcome of her single decision will be good or bad for the daughter in the long run. (If the mother refrains from having her daughter undergo footbinding/infibulation while almost everybody else have their daughters footbound/infibulated, her daughter will probably suffer from her decision as the girl will be regarded a deviant. The same goes if the mother decides to have her daughter footbound/infibulated while almost everyone has given up the custom.)

Mackie argues that the origin of footbinding and infibulation may have to do with paternity confidence (females are certain of maternity while males are not certain of paternity) in a social situation where the inequality of resource control reaches a certain extreme. [128] In an ancient empire with a rich centre and a poor periphery, there is a tremendous resource inequality. This situation favours polygyny and hypergyny: a woman is "more likely to raise children successfully as the second wife of a high-ranking man than as the first wife of a low-ranking man" (Mackie 1996:1007, see also 2000:262). This gives rise to a stratified structure with, metaphorically speaking, few men and many women at the top, and few women and many men at the bottom of the society. In a social structure like this, a high-ranked man will attract more consorts than a low-ranked, but at the same time his costs of fidelity control will increase. Among the families offering daughters for marriage, the competition to guarantee paternity confidence (chastity in the girls) will increase as well. "Therefore, families will advertise the honor of their lines, the purity of their females, and their members' commitment to the values of chastity and fidelity, the so called modesty code" (Mackie 1996:1008, see also 2000:262). As women advance upwards in the structure, the conjugal practices are transmitted downwards. No one family can escape it once it has become the conventional sign of decency, even if ordinary people would be better off without it (2000:263). "[T]he convention [i]s locked in place" (ibid.:264) and becomes naturalised, seen as the normal state. Mackie (2000) emphasises that one has to separate origin from maintenance: "The reasons for the *origin* of the practice in fidelity control are distinct from the reasons for the *maintenance* of the practice as a conventional sign of marriageability" (ibid.:269, italics in original).

Both footbinding and infibulation have more or less universally been regarded as optimal markers of chastity among the practitioners. According to this model, dissenters fail to have descendants; they face "reproductive death". Mackie uses the following analogy to illustrate the logic of his argument:

> [I]magine a seated audience where the tallest people have grabbed the front row. The view of the tallest (extreme polygynists) in the front row is obscured by being too close to the elevated stage, so they stand (footbind). Thus the second, third, and all the rest of the rows must stand to regain their views of the stage. The front row is better off, but everyone else is worse off because their view is no better than before, but now they incur the cost of standing. (Behind the first row the advantage of tallness is accentuated by standing, but the tall would still rather sit if enough other people would do so.) [--- I]magine that over time the tallest drift away from

[128] See e.g. Obiora (1997a), Levi (1996), Walley (1997), Ahmadu (2000), and Dellenborg (2000, 2001). See also Johnson (2000) for a case where men are more inclined to think critically about the practice than the women (among Mandinga in Guinea-Bissau).

> the audience and that the ease of sitting (natural feet) is forgotten. Standing is now entrenched as the convention. Visitors tell people that elsewhere audiences sit. People begin to think that sitting may be better, but only if enough other people sit; any person sitting alone gets no view of the stage (reproductive death). If a column (k) can be organized to sit, its members suffers a poor view of the stage but are compensated by the ease of sitting. The members of k then have two incentives, to recruit the contiguous columns and to inform everyone that sitting is better and that standing is worse than people thought [Mackie 1996:1013]. We may each come to believe that sitting is better than standing, but only if enough others make the change at the same time [ibid.:1015].

A few aspects were crucial in the process of abandoning the footbinding practice in China, according to Mackie (ibid.). The first was the escape from the belief trap, the conviction that the footbinding was the natural thing to do ("in other audiences people sit"). Just like medical consequences of the practices of female circumcision are experienced by many circumcised women as "normal" and "natural", footbound women were convinced that this was the "normal" and "natural" state of female feet. Belief traps are "self-enforcing beliefs", according to Mackie (1996:1009): the costs of testing a belief are too high, so the belief "traps" people. Specific beliefs about the fatal power of an uncircumcised clitoris (for instance, that it may kill either a man during intercourse or a baby during delivery) are beliefs that people do not challenge in a careless way. In the case of Chinese footbinding the belief trap was overcome by a campaign stressing that China was alone in the world in binding female feet. This overcoming of a belief trap is a necessary condition for change, but not a sufficient one (Mackie 2000:256).

Second, an information campaign explained the advantages of natural feet and the disadvantages of bound feet ("sitting is more comfortable than standing"). This, Mackie argues, moved the tipping point to an earlier stage of the process. In the Chinese case, the missionaries were the first to launch campaigns against the practice of footbinding. Part of their failure may be due to lack of cultural sensitivity, as claimed by Levi (1996). She gives an example of a missionary who showed slides of "(to western eyes) cruelly deformed feet" (ibid.:169) to Chinese schoolboys, a measure evoking strong reactions among the schoolboys' parents. As bound feet had strong erotic connotations in the Chinese society at this time, "she was actually bringing 'dirty pictures' into the classrooms" (ibid.). Not until Chinese women themselves were in charge of the campaigns, more people became convinced.

Third, Natural Foot Societies were formed whose members pledged neither to bind their daughters' feet nor to let their sons marry women with bound feet (they declared they were going to sit, in spite of that the rest of the audience was still standing). The members of these societies were the pioneers who suffered the most, as they acted against an established norm. The more people who joined, the less the social cost became for taking an other decision than most others, and the wider became the circles where their sons and daughters could marry.

Crucial in a process of change is the *tipping point*, where it becomes obvious to most people that a new attitude or practice is preferable to the earlier. The tipping point in the Chinese case of footbinding was when not only a few pioneers went against the stream and refrained from having their daughter's footbound, but when a mass suddenly realised that so many others had given up the practice. At that point

the advantages of giving up the practice (and the disadvantages of maintaining it) had become obvious to practically all parents.

Based upon the rather drastic abandonment of footbinding in China, Mackie concludes that female circumcision can be abandoned quite rapidly in local settings, if campaigns are formulated in accordance with the lessons learned from the case of footbinding. The process described by Mackie has been realised in parts of Senegal since the 1990s, as will be further discussed in Chapter Eight. I claim that this model – including three aspects; 1) *an escape from the belief trap*, 2) *an increased level of knowledge*, and 3) *public pledges and the appearance of alternative marriage markets* – can be helpful for an understanding of the fact that Somalis in general abandon the practice of female circumcision in Swedish exile.

4.10 Concluding commentary

Chapter Four intended to give a general description of the different themes associated with female circumcision, as described in the literature. A short account of definitions and classifications was followed by a discussion on physical and psychic consequences. It was argued that some of the consequences routinely mentioned in association with female circumcision lack scientific support (further discussion in section 10.3.1). The subsequent section on sexuality in relation to female circumcision also displayed a tension between ideologically tainted statements and empirical findings of different researchers. The assertions in this field range from that female circumcision is a practice which deprives women of their ability to enjoy sexual intercourse, to assertions claiming that the various forms of female circumcision do not have to interfere with women's opportunities of sexual fulfilment at all. These medical assertions are not irrelevant to understanding the power of the discourse and the moral panic surrounding female circumcision in Sweden. Insofar as all question marks are removed, or insofar as the medical assertions are used selectively, the Somali women are indeed reduced to victims of a cultural practice rather than subjects who may either utilise or abandon it.

The historical background of female circumcision was discussed, as well as its relation to Islam. Islamic scholars hold a range of positions concerning female circumcision: some are in favour of a sunnah circumcision for females, some find it acceptable but redundant, others claim it is possible and desirable for women not to be circumcised at all. There seems to be a consensus, though, regarding pharaonic circumcision: everyone seems to hold the opinion that such harsh procedures are in conflict with Islamic principles.

Female circumcision, and the local motives for it, in Somalia were accounted for in the subsequent sections. Most girls in Somalia are *pharaonically circumcised* (infibulated), while the rest is *sunnah circumcised*. A small part of the Somali girls do not undergo any circumcision at all. The conviction that female circumcision is an Islamic duty seems to be widespread in Somalia according to studies in the area (even if there is a lack of recent studies, due to the war). Circumcision for the purpose of ensuring that the girls are virgins until married is another strong motive.

The scholars' approaches have been many in this field. Those highlighted in this thesis include symbolic analyses with focus on the concepts of *virginity*, *infibulation* and *defibulation*. Further, approaches concerning ethnic, socio-economic, and psychological aspects were discussed. Female circumcision as an ethnic marker seems to have played a role in certain local settings during specific times. Approaches focusing the socio-economic contexts of female circumcision emphasise the importance of socio-economic processes for the maintenance of the practices (a mother will let her daughter go through female circumcision as long as it is a safe pathway to social status and economic security for her daughter in the future). A psychologically based motive has been suggested by some writers, who argues that female circumcision include an unconscious wish for psychological revenge ("I had to go through this; why should my daughters be spared?"). There is, however, no empirical evidence to support such assertions – on the contrary.

The subsequent section dealt with feminist writings on female circumcision. The American radical feminist Fran Hosken occupies a central position in this discussion, as she was the one to rouse western public opinion against the practices of female circumcision, and the one who formulated the agenda and the nomenclature, today widely accepted in the entire Western world. The radical feminist understanding of the practices of female circumcision is today prevalent and seldom questioned outside the academic field. Academic scholars, many of them classifying themselves as feminists, have provided a solid critique of Hosken's reductionist perspective. The fundamental ideas of the criticism are focused on the fact that a radical feminist perspective is cultural imperialist and that it denies the reality of the women involved, therefore being treacherous to basic feminist views.

The last section offered a presentation of Mackie's model of the importance of convention, accounting for the stability and drastic change of cultural practices like female circumcision. In the following we shall see that the three conditions for change of a practice like female circumcision highlighted by Mackie are useful in an analysis of the empirical material of this thesis: first, *an escape from a belief trap* (a reassessment of the conviction that female circumcision is the natural, normal thing to do); second, *increased knowledge*, through for instance campaigns emphasising the advantages of abandoning a practice and the disadvantages of holding on to it (in this case raised knowledge about Islam, but also about medical consequences of female circumcision); third, *public pledges and the appearance of alternative marriage markets* (Somalis taking a stand in public against female circumcision and large groups of Somalis living in western exile). Chapter Eight offers a final discussion about the empirical data in relation to Mackie's model.

Presenting this study in different contexts, I have several times been confronted with doubts about how reliable this view – that it is possible for Somalis in exile to revise their views on the practice of female circumcision – really is (see section 2.4). In Sweden, there is a widespread conviction that Somalis in general (among other groups) stick to their traditional views, and that thousands of small girls risk being subjected to circumcision (further discussion in Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten). The statements and reasoning of the informants of this study show that this prevalent view needs to be challenged. With the help of their own words I intend to show that their stated position concerning female circumcision – a crushing majority stating that they will not ever circumcise their daughters – is logical and rational from out of their own premises. The following chapters will focus on the views of exiled

Somalis regarding female circumcision, and the cultural change of values and practice in Swedish exile.

5 Reassessing female circumcision

As discussed in section 4.7, about 80% of the girls in Somalia are infibulated (i.e., have gone through so-called pharaonic circumcision).[129] About one or two percents have no operation at all, while the rest have gone through some kind of sunnah circumcision. Below, attitudes among Somalis in Malmö toward the two different categories of female circumcision are discussed.

The discussion begins with a presentation of attitudes toward female circumcision found among interviewed Somalis in Malmö. The findings show that there is a widely spread opposition against pharaonic circumcision, while a symbolic form of sunnah circumcision – considered just as illegal in Sweden as the pharaonic type – is seen by many as acceptable and, by a few, desirable.

Thereafter follows a discussion on values preserved in exile: values that have a bearing on how people think about female circumcision. Both men and women stress the importance of chastity in women and it is obvious that the concept of 'being a good girl' still is seen as crucial for social life also in exile. Partly this is due to the fact that a *wacal*, a child without a father, is seen as one of the most disastrous things that can happen to a Somali family. Traditionally, pharaonic circumcision has partly been seen as one of the ways to make sure that young girls stay virgins until they are married (thus, no illegitimate children are born outside the patrilineal clan structure).

The following sections concern new perspectives in exile: why and in what way the interviewees have changed their minds about female circumcision, either in exile or already while living in Somalia. This chapter deals with reflections upon what was once seen as "natural" and now is questioned and revised, upon Islam and female circumcision, and various attitudes to the Swedish law on female circumcision. These different aspects seem to be of vital importance when it comes to understanding the processes of new reflections upon female circumcision in exile.

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[129] An urge for paternity confidence based on biological ties of blood is not universal. Talle (1994) describes how a Masai husband (in northern Kenya) may "urge a wife to be impregnated by a certain age-mate of his, whom he admires […] The child strengthens the relationship between the two men [… and] does not in any way challenge his social position as the 'father' of the child" (ibid.:283).

5.1 Attitudes toward pharaonic circumcision

During the first years, spending time with women in the Somali group, all I met were opposed to pharaonic circumcision, and they could instantly present well-founded and carefully thought out arguments for this position. Initiating our study in summer of 2000, we were firmly resolved to find both women and men who were in favour of pharaonic circumcision, in order to map out the logics of their position and their arguments for it. Despite our thorough attempts to find persons who could state this position, we only managed to find one: a woman who was yet not a mother of daughters. Carlbom and Elmi found no man at all in favour of pharaonic circumcision, but only a man stating that he preferred women who had gone through clitoridectomy (Johnsdotter et al. 2000a, 2000b, and Omar et al. 2001).

Most women did not even know of others in favour:

> *- I think that in those families… where the women still want to do it, it is women who are isolated from Swedish society. Women who haven't met other women, discussed with others who are negative [toward female/pharaonic circumcision]… so they haven't heard the reasons for why some women are against it now. That is, they are isolated, also from other Somalis… it's like if they still lived in Somalia. And maybe it is harder for those who have an older woman at home, someone who will have real problems understanding this* (woman C).

Woman F is sure that most women in Sweden are opposed to female circumcision: *"It suffices to think of what we ourselves went through".* She says that there are some that may be critical to Somalis who have changed their minds – *" 'so now you think you have become Swedish'"* – but she has got the firm impression that most women are against it. She also claims that there may be a difference between generations: the younger generation thinking in another way than the older.

The same, the conviction that most people of the same sex are opposed to this old tradition, holds for the men involved in the study:

> [Carlbom asks:] *- Do you know of any other men in your age who are against female circumcision?*
> *- I'm sure that a majority of the men of my age are totally opposed to female circumcision.*
> *- Do you discuss it with other people?*
> *- Yes, actually, I do… Young people, we discuss it between ourselves. And we tend to see it in the same way, independent of if we are married or not. That women should not be circumcised* (man U).[130]

The most important reason for the women involved in our study for being opposed to pharaonic circumcision is that they are convinced that pharaonic circumcision is contrary to basic Islamic principles. The crucial principle seems to be that one must not damage what God created (expressed in the Koranic verse 30:30: *"Let there be no alteration in Allah's creation"*, see section 4.5). This will be further discussed in section 5.6. Other aspects discussed by many women were the medical complications and the pain inflicted in girls at the time of operation:

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[130] Figures from studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Gallo & Abdisamed 1985, Dirie & Lindmark 1991, Omar 1991). There are no current data, including what has happened to this tradition during the Somali civil war.

- Those who are religious are against it for religious reasons, and many know more now, about how the body works. Then they can see no reason… like me, I've had so many problems [because of infibulation], I simply don't want to do the same thing to my girls (woman G).

D, the only woman frankly stating that she thinks pharaonic circumcision is a good practice, is critical to the Swedish law against female circumcision, a law she considers to be interfering with Somalis' internal business (see section 5.7). We keep discussing the law, and I say that the law was formulated to protect girls from harm, girls who are not yet old enough to decide by themselves. She claims that the pain involved in pharaonic circumcision is "normal" and sees no reason for giving up the tradition. She takes a fatalistic position to the whole matter of risks involved. Here she echoes my words:

- '…so the girls are not harmed…' [in a scornful voice]
[I ask:] *- You don't think it's harming?*
- No, it's not harming. [Turns to Omar:] *Circumcision is harming, do you really think that? It's not harming!*
[I ask:] *- What do you think… when you hear what I heard a while ago, that a girl dies from circumcision… Is that harming?*
- Maybe her last hour had come. You can't say that… You have one life, and your time is measured beforehand. If I leave this house now, I can walk into a motor accident. You can't say that it [this girl's death] is due to circumcision (woman D).

Her reasons for being in favour of pharaonic circumcision evolves around themes regarding chastity, virginity and aesthetics:

- What is good about [pharaonic] circumcision?
- When the girl is young, she can't be [have sex] with boys or men, it's good that the mother knows everything. You can control your children [daughters]. And it's good when a girl gets married. And then… I think it's so beautiful when it is cut [shows with a sweeping gesture of her hand, as if she was showing the smoothness of an infibulated vagina] (woman D).

Woman L does not say that pharaonic circumcision is a good tradition, but she admits that the social pressure from older kin and the larger group may be overwhelming if she returns to Somalia with her family in the future. She is the only woman, beside D, who claims that she probably will circumcise her daughters if she returns to Somalia: *"Who will marry her [if she is uncircumcised]?"*

The men also stressed Islam when they explained their opposition to the practice, along with arguments about medical complications. These men are representative of the statements of many men:

- I am entirely opposed to pharaonic circumcision. This thing they do in Sudan and Somalia and parts of Ethiopia and Egypt. Pharaonic circumcision is harmful to women. They cut it [clitoris] away and then they stitch. Women get problems while they have their menstruation, when they give birth … and sometimes they get sick from this circumcision. Pharaonic circumcision is prohibited according to Islam (man P).

[Carlbom asks:] - *Are you familiar with the Swedish law against female circumcision?*
- Yes, this law that forbids [circumcision]… and all the people being opposed to pharaonic circumcision, they are right. It's harmful to women in several ways (man S).

Man Q claims he can see a pattern in his own family: his older sisters are pharaonically circumcised, while his younger sisters went through sunnah circumcision. He believes that this pattern may be recognisable in other Somali families – that there is a general trend toward milder forms of female circumcision.

Man R has five daughters. Three of them were pharaonically circumcised, while the two youngest have been left with no circumcision at all. He came to Sweden in 1992, and says that if he had moved abroad twenty years earlier, the Swedish attitude to female circumcision would have surprised him, as he at that point thought differently about female circumcision. Since then, he has reassessed the practice, and he claims that the genital status of his youngest uncircumcised daughters is a result of this process (his wife's opinion of the matter is unclear). The younger daughters were born in 1986 and in 1989 in Somalia, and are not circumcised at all. The family lived in Sweden when these girls had reached the traditional age of pharaonic circumcision. This man sums up:

- I don't feel bad about the girls who are not circumcised. What I do regret, on the other hand, is that the older girls were circumcised while we lived in Somalia. As I can see the difference, the one who is not circumcised doesn't have any problems. The one who is circumcised gets sick. She can't go to school and she has problems.[131] *She gets more than angry, as she feels that a part of her life has been ruined. It's not only about the pains when the operation was done, but that she has got lifelong problems* (man R).

Man P thinks that most men are opposed to infibulation today, much owing to a campaign in Somalia in the 1980s and to awareness of how painful and medically harmful the operation is to the girls.[132] A couple of men mentioned women's rights as an argument for being opposed to pharaonic circumcision:

[Carlbom asks:] - *There do exist Somali women in Sweden who want to continue this tradition [of pharaonic circumcision]. How do you think that they think about it?*
- They have no clue about the consequences… all the problems arising if you cut a girl there. The purpose is that they want to be able to control if the girl has had intercourse or not. But, in reality, it's forbidden. A woman and a man have equal rights… and how are they supposed to control their sons? Do you see my point?
[Carlbom replies:] - *That the sons shouldn't have sex…?*
- If you control your daughters you should also control your sons. […] I think it [pharaonic circumcision] is a bad tradition in several ways. I think it's a crime, a violation of women's rights to cut in the genitals. Genital mutilation is closing a natural opening and this may lead to problems and diseases. If you close such a natural order… if a woman wees or has her period it [the urine/the menstrual blood] may remain inside her vagina and cause infections (man U).

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[131] Interview conducted by Carlbom and Elmi. All the following quotations from men are taken from interviews conducted by both Carlbom and Elmi together or by Carlbom alone.

[132] His use of the singular form ("she" instead of "they") is probably due to insufficient fluency in Swedish.

Elmi and Carlbom tried hard to find a man in favour of pharaonic circumcision, which seemed to be a realistic enterprise, considering the fact that quite a few of the women stated that Somali men are advocates of the tradition. After months of searching they gave up, as they generally met with the same attitude from most male interviewees:

> *- Do you know of anyone who is in favour of pharaonic circumcision?*
> *- No… I think most men and also women from north Somalia are opposed to this tradition.*
> [Carlbom asks, giving a laugh:] - *We have trouble finding any man at all who can say anything positive about pharaonic circumcision. To complete our study we would really like to talk to a man who is in favour… Do you ever discuss this with other men?*
> *- No, we don't directly talk about this… circumcision… when we see each other, but if we watch or listen to a debate about [female] circumcision, a crushing majority says that they are against it* (man S).

During the interview with S a host of reasons for being against the tradition of pharaonic circumcision were discussed. At the end of the interview Elmi and Carlbom insist on their interest in meeting with a man who is in favour of the tradition:

> [Elmi says:] - *It would be really interesting if we could find a man who is willing to openly state that 'we really should keep this tradition [of pharaonic circumcision] alive'.*
> [Carlbom fills in:] - *Yes, we would really like to meet someone…*

S interrupts with some frustration, evidently wanting to make his point very clear:

> *- You won't be able to find a man who says 'let's keep this tradition alive'. […] Men nowadays know what problems they face with women who are pharaonically circumcised. Nothing of this is in a man's interest. The woman has to be opened at her wedding night. Some girls have to be opened beforehand. Above everything else, this costs a great deal of both time and money. The doctor charges for the operation, transport to and from the hospital costs, the stay at the hospital costs, everything takes time… Nothing of this is in the interest of a man* (man S).

There is no way to establish how much Somalis in general know about other Somalis' standpoints on female circumcision. Some of the statements about others are probably well-informed, while others are likely to be part of slander. A few times we tried to check romours about people alleged to be in favour of circumcision ("she will take her daughter to Somalia this summer to have her circumcised"). Then it has turned out that the information has been unreliable: it has been used by antagonists as a derogatory tool in conflicts concerning quite different matters. Rumours about female circumcision ought not to be interpreted in terms of a "tip of the iceberg"-logic of an upheld practice of female circumcision. Even if a rumour may be true, one has to consider the extreme qualification of this matter as a titillating ingredient in slander, among Somalis as well as among Swedes. There is a widespread knowledge about the Swedish law against female circumcision (and the threat of imprisonment) among the Somalis I have met, a fact which gives slander of this kind a touch of excitement. The fact that it can be used in a

derogatory way can also be seen as an indicator of a general change of opinions of female circumcision in exile.

It can be difficult to assess another person's position, as it may change depending on the specific context.[133] This is brought forward by C, when she says that group pressure may play a role in how people express their view on this matter in a public setting:

> [I say:] *- All women I talk to in private, they are really convinced that pharaonic circumcision is a bad tradition and they have well-founded and well thought out arguments for this opinion. But at the same time some of them indicate* other *women as in favour of circumcision. They say things like "well, she says she is against it, but I'm sure she will have it done to her daughter if she goes back" and things like that.*
> *- Yes, I can see the point. Most women I've met here [in Sweden] and talked privately with, I've heard straight from their hearts that they don't like it [pharaonic circumcision], but in company with many women, it can be hard to say it openly. First you want to know what others say about it. If a few women set the tone, state openly that they are against the tradition, others will follow.* [Pause] *I think that one of the fears… why a woman may hesitate to say openly that she thinks pharaonic circumcision is a bad tradition… is that she doesn't want to be accused of having become Swedish* (woman C).

What became obvious during this study is that perceptions about what other Somalis think about female circumcision to a certain degree rest on speculations and scattered impressions: fragmentary discussions with others, and rumours. There is, however, no reason to doubt the statements and arguments put forward by the informants involved in this study. Except for one interview – the one with woman E – the four of us considered all the interviewees to be sincere and reliable during the interviews. Woman E gave an impression of being somewhat eager to please, and so, some of her statements we have chosen to treat with some doubt. This interview, compared with the others, made it clear that it is an extremely difficult task to succeed in duping during an interview lasting from one to two hours or more, even if it is somebody's intention. It is practically impossible to line out the logics of an alleged (but false) position, if one has to invent and evolve the arguments gradually. Out of this conviction, the conclusion is drawn that the opposition to pharaonic circumcision is widely spread among Somalis in Malmö.

5.2 Attitudes toward sunnah circumcision

'Sunnah' is a rather fuzzy concept, as it includes several closely allied but still separate meanings. During the interviews conducted among Somalis in Malmö, we could establish four different meanings from the ways the interviewees used the word *sunnah*:

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[133] For a brief account of the governmental campaign in Somalia in the 1980s, see e.g. Dorkenoo (1994:118f).

1) *Sunnah*, a descriptive term for different types of circumcision; practically all forms of female circumcision except what is labelled *pharaonic*.

2) *Sunnah*, a normative term for the only form of female circumcision said to be accepted by Islam: a ritual and symbolic operation where no genital parts whatsoever are removed.[134]

3) *Sunnah*, a descriptive religious term (noun) denoting the Prophet's sayings and doings, the *tradition* as it is described in the *hadiths*.

4) *Sunnah*, a normative religious term (adjective) when classifying some actions to be *recommended*, within the framework of the Muslim norm system where actions are divided into categories (e.g. *haram*, forbidden) depending on how desirable they are in a religious perspective.[135]

The following quotations may serve as an example of how these various meanings are expressed and interrelated:

> *- Are you for or against sunnah circumcision?*
> *- It's good. They just take a little blood. They neither cut nor stitch anything.*
> *- Why is sunnah good?*
> *- My daughter will not have to do sunnah. I shall let her be. But sunnah is our religion. The boys have to be circumcised a little. You do it to purify. You don't have to do sunnah, but it's good if you do it* (woman X).

> *- You know what sunnah is? It's a supplement to the Koran. If you want to come closer to God, you can do this little extra… and if you don't, there is no punishment. […] Some [religious people] say that you can do a symbolic sunnah circumcision, a minor bleeding… in clitoris. Others say that you don't have to do it, that it is not requested in Islam* (man R).

On one hand this woman and man let 'sunnah' refer to what is physically done to a girl during a sunnah circumcision: *"They just take a little blood. They neither cut nor stitch anything""* , *"a minor bleeding… in clitoris"*; on the other hand they let the word 'sunnah' refer to a religious sunnah concept: *"sunnah is our religion", " It's a supplement to the Koran".*

Spontaneously, most women interviewed used the descriptive term (1), when asked about sunnah circumcision. As we shall see below, most men chose to talk about sunnah circumcision from a normative perspective (2). A few women (as X quoted above) and most men made a connection between the concepts involving the physical sunnah circumcision (1, 2) and the religious concepts (3, 4).

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[134]For a discussion, see Walley's (1997) article *"Searching for 'voices'"*: during field work in western Kenya, she realised the difficulties in establishing different persons' "true" position regarding female circumcision, as it seemed to vary with context. See also section 6.2.

[135]This form of symbolic sunnah circumcision is, or has been, practised in Yemen (Sanderson 1981:13). It was also propagated in the governmental campaign in Somalia in the 1980s, as a preferable alternative to pharaonic and other more severe circumcision types (Dorkenoo 1994:118).

Most women were confused about what is done when a girl goes through a sunnah circumcision. The forms described by different women included both mild and more extensive operations. Some examples:

> *- What is sunnah circumcision? How much do they take away?*
> *- Sunnah? It's just a little blood, I don't think they take anything away. Just a little blood. That is, you just touch it [clitoris]. You must not take anything away. The result, anyway, is that the women become like Swedes.*
> *- How?*
> *- The way we were created by God. Sunnah doesn't change anything. It's just a tiny bleeding* (woman X).

G mentions that sunnah circumcision is the usual operation among the *Reer Xamar*:[136]

> *- They just pinch a little, to make it [clitoris] bleed.* [Later in the interview G talks about sunnah circumcision in general:] *It's just a little bit of clitoris. I haven't seen it or done it to anyone myself, but they only take a little, so you bleed. You don't have to stitch and that makes it easier to give birth to children* (woman G).

> *- Sunnah is… you just cut a little up her… or, when the girls are really small, you just pinch* [shows with her fingernails] (woman C).

> *- What is taken away in sunnah?*
> *- Just a little. Not even half of clitoris. I've never seen any sunnah circumcision, but I think they've only cut a little* (woman J).

> *- They cut a little in clitoris and then stitch it together… only up there [and no sewing to cover vagina]* (woman B).

One of E:s daughters is sunnah circumcised. She describes the operation as follows:

> *- They take only a little, a little skin.*
> *- Any stitches?*
> *- Some do stitch and others don't, but my daughter has only one* (woman E).

H is herself sunnah circumcised:

> *- There is a difference between sunnah and pharaonic circumcision, but basically I think it's the same… Because when they infibulate they take away a lot, and when they do sunnah, they take just a little, but they still do take something away* (woman H).

The men, possibly because they in general are kept out from the sphere of female genitals, preferred to describe the sunnah circumcision in normative terms:

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[136] See also section 4.5.

- Female circumcision is acceptable if you don't harm your daughter in any way. No cutting away any parts, no stitching. Just a little bleeding, nothing beyond that (man P).

- Sunnah circumcision… it's about bringing about a little bleeding, but no cutting whatsoever. It is absolutely out of the question. It's inherent in the definition of sunnah (man T, sheikh).

- I'm clearly opposed to pharaonic circumcision. But I'm in favour of sunnah circumcision. Firstly, this sunnah type of circumcision is not harmful… it's just a little bleeding. It doesn't harm in any way. Secondly, it's lawful according to Islam, it's sunnah, and I want to follow sunnah.
[Carlbom asks:] *- Isn't there a risk that people say 'pharaonic circumcision is forbidden, but sunnah circumcision is good'… and then more is done to the girl than just the bleeding?*
- Possibly… before people were informed. But now… I think both parents and many children know that it is forbidden to cut anything at all (man S).

One man, though, expressed himself in a more descriptive way, when stating his opposition:

- What do you think about sunnah circumcision?
- I'm opposed to all forms of female circumcision. When you do sunnah, you cut away this thing called clitoris, or a tiny part of it… I think that this makes the person lose her ability to enjoy sex. She will be left with less sexual urge. Like when you take away a little finger, the arm won't function like it used to (man U).

Only one man considered sunnah circumcision to be more than just a minor bleeding, and he found this to be acceptable. Carlbom and Elmi contacted this man after they had heard rumours saying that this man was in favour of female circumcision. Man O thinks that clitoridectomy – performed on adult women and not on small girls – is preferable to no circumcision at all. He was clearly opposed to pharaonic circumcision, which he considered to be harmful to women:

- I'm opposed to pharaonic circumcision. But in my opinion, I think it's good to take away the part of clitoris that sticks out. I've seen both women with clitoris and women without, and I prefer a circumcised woman… where that protruding part of clitoris is gone, but the rest [of clitoris] is left inside. It makes it smooth and neat. It's beautiful (man O).

Many men stated that sunnah circumcision may be good for Muslims, but that it still is optional, like man U: *"Sunnah is not obligatory. If it's just a tiny bleeding, no harm is done, but it's not necessary to have it done."* Two of the men interviewed were sheikhs, i.e. religious authorities. They expressed the same view, here exemplified with a quotation from one of them:

- This tradition of pharaonic circumcision among Somalis… it's wrong. […] The other type of circumcision, the sunnah type, is not important. Islam doesn't recommend that either… that is, it's not obligatory. But under no circumstances it's allowed to do pharaonic circumcision. That will lead to punishment from God.
[Carlbom asks:] *- If you do a sunnah circumcision in a way that would have been accepted by the*

Prophet, will you be rewarded for it?
- Well, this is a dilemma. If you do sunnah circumcision the way the Prophet approved of, this will bring you closer to God. To refrain from doing it at all, won't lead to punishment. The problem is that if you do more to the girl than what is accepted, you will be punished by God. Instead of being rewarded, you will be punished. This is the dilemma… to fix the boundary between reward and punishment (man T, sheikh).

There seems to be only one clan in Somalia were the sunnah circumcision is the rule: in the group called Reer Xamar. But also some people in other clans prefer sunnah to pharaonic circumcision. In discussions about the two options, *education* was mentioned by many:

- Why do some people choose sunnah?
- They have… how can I say this… they have more knowledge. Women who choose this are women who went to school and have more experience and know about the consequences. Some have been living abroad… like in Arab countries where this [pharaonic circumcision] is not known at all. They are careful with what will happen to their daughters' organs. So they always choose sunnah (woman C).

'Being educated' sometimes involved, in the statements of the interviewees, having knowledge about Islam:

- Those who know the Koran well… they are more religious and know what Islam says about it… they do sunnah (woman B).

Another reason for having a sunnah circumcision performed, mentioned by a few interviewees, is that there may be people who refrain from having pharaonic circumcision performed, but who think that it will be hard to leave the tradition altogether. Having *something* done to the daughter is considered better than to have nothing at all:

- Among Somalis infibulation is the popular option. Sunnah they do in Arab countries, not many do it in Somalia. But now I have heard many Somalis in Sweden say that 'I wish I had known in time that it is wrong to [pharaonically] circumcise a girl, I wish I had done sunnah…' So it's something that is becoming popular.
- Why do people want sunnah?
*- I think it's hard to leave [the tradition of female circumcision] altogether. I've discussed it with many who say that it's hard to just leave it to nothing… But personally, with my own daughters, I've chosen to not have anything at all done to them (*woman C).

B thinks that many Somalis are in favour of sunnah circumcision. She herself does not want to do anything at all to her daughters, but she thinks that a sunnah circumcision is more acceptable than an infibulation. This attitude – being in favour of a symbolic sunnah circumcision on grounds of principle, while having decided to leave the daughters with no circumcision at all – was a common attitude among the women in the study:

- How do you think about sunnah [circumcision]?
- Well… you can choose yourself. It's not in the Koran, so it's not anything you have to do. If you want to you can do it, but you can let it be as well. It's up to every person if it should be done.
- Would you consider doing it to your girls?
- No, no… I want to pass this up completely. I don't want them to be touched in any way [down there] (woman K).

J is newly married and has not had children yet. I ask her about the future, knowing that she is opposed to infibulation:

- Would you consider doing sunnah circumcision to your future daughters?
- No… I don't want anything to happen to her, if I get a daughter. You don't have to. Islam says you can take a tiny little part or leave it, you don't have to. I won't [do anything] (woman J).

Some of the women interviewed were of the opinion that sunnah circumcision may function as a way to leave the harmful types of the practice, while still exhibiting that one maintains Somali tradition, a sort of compromise:

- They [those still favour of female circumcision] want to be able to say 'she is circumcised', that's all.
- What do they want to achieve by that?
- [To show] that this girl clings to our culture… (woman X).

This does not mean that the same holds for the exile situation in Sweden, this woman continues:

- Some who live in Somalia have chosen to not circumcise their girls. They have a hard time. But in Sweden… no one will ask 'Are you circumcised or not?' So they don't have to do it here (woman X).

Some of the women discussed the fact that a sunnah circumcision fails in being a visible sign of virginity, a state which is said to be a prerequisite of social acceptance of unmarried girls:

- If a girl is [pharaonically] circumcised she hasn't been with any other men. It's a sign of virginity.
[I ask:] *- But what about sunnah circumcised girls… they can't prove it in the same way?*
- Yes, I think that may create some doubt. There is no way to really know (woman X).

[I ask:] *- Is a girl who is sunnah circumcised just as accepted as a girl who is pharaonically circumcised?*
- No, she is not… to be honest. Maybe those girls who go back [from exile] now… but not when I lived in Somalia, no. That's why many parents chose pharaonic, they want their girls to be completely accepted (woman K).

- A sunnah circumcised girl can lie about if she is a virgin or not… Our men will not know, as long as she doesn't confess (woman V).

V continues by saying that some parents in Somalia may not choose sunnah circumcision, because they feel embarrassed to maybe in the future have to discuss

the matter with a future husband-to-be. As long as their girl is infibulated, there is no reason to bring the subject up.

Woman A, who is sunnah circumcised, tells me that she brought the subject up herself, while dating her husband-to-be. He accepted it without objections and has never questioned her morals in any way. This situation seems similar to what woman H relates:

> *- You told me you were sunnah circumcied when you were a little girl. Was this a problem for you when you got married?*
> *- No, not at all.*
> *- Did you tell your husband before you married?*
> *- No. We had known each other since we were children, we grew up in the same neighbourhood. We never discussed it, there was no need. I also knew that he had been in touch with UN programs about family planning and circumcision… so he had learnt a lot. He never asked about what kind of circumcision I had* (woman H).

D, the woman who is in favour of infibulation, thinks sunnah circumcision is a good second-hand-choice: *"sunnah is good, but infibulation is better".* I ask her how one can know anything about the morals of a sunnah circumcised girl:

> *- How can you know that she is a good woman? Is sunnah sufficient to give a girl good morals?*
> *- Yes.*
> *- How can you know that she is a virgin when she marries?*
> *- Well… she has to tell her husband.*
> *- Tell? She doesn't have to show it in any way?*
> *- No, she can tell him* (woman D).

The resistance to pharaonic circumcision was strong among the Somalis participating in this study (except for women D and L). However, when it comes to the sunnah circumcision the attitudes were more complex, but also more ambivalent. This may be understood as a reflection of the fact that there is poor support for a complete ban on all forms of female circumcision when it comes to interpreting the Islamic sources (see section 4.5). Most informants agreed on the possibility to abandon all types of circumcision, and they claimed that this is what they have decided to do themselves (except for women D and L). On the other hand, most informants were unwilling to repudiate the mildest form, a symbolic sunnah circumcision, as they find it acceptable in an Islamic perspective. The official posture in the Swedish society is that the law against female genital mutilation in Sweden includes a ban on pricking. This will be further discussed in section 10.3.4.

According to a strict culturalist view, people think and behave in certain ways because 'it is their culture'. In exile, it is believed that most people tend to stick to their cultural habits and values even more firmly, to save their original identity in a strange environment (for a discussion, see Chapter Eight). In a more empirically oriented study the question must remain open: what values seem to be cherished in exile, and what values are exposed to revaluation? Even if it is impossible to make categorical statements about an entire ethnic group, it may be possible to discern tendencies within the group.

Before the sections about new perspectives of female circumcision among Somalis in exile, I shall discuss some values that seem to be firmly preserved among almost all the Somalis I have come to know. The reason for calling attention to these values, while others are ignored, is that they are associated with values and attitudes to female circumcision.

The first section below deals with the importance of chastity: the significance of daughters behaving like 'good girls', i.e. show that they have good morals by refraining from having sex before marriage. The following section treats the concept of an illegitimate child, *wacal*, the evident proof of immoral behaviour in a girl. In contrast to how attitudes to female circumcision have changed in exile, these notions seem to be firmly persistent: the importance of chastity in girls and the idea that an illegitimate child has no place in the Somali community.

5.3 'A good girl': the importance of chastity

Often the act of infibulation among Somalis is described as a way to create virgins (see section 4.9.1). The Somalis I have come to know in Malmö describe it in a similar way, but in slightly different words: a woman who is still "closed" at her wedding has proved that she is a 'good girl'. It is not only a matter of pride and dignity for the girl herself, but for her whole family – especially for her mother, the one ultimately responsible for raising the girl and teaching her good morals.

There seems to be a sharp line between the categories of 'good girls' and 'prostitutes' (*sharmutooyin* or *dhilooyin*): either a woman refrain from having sex outside marriage or she is categorised as being a (non-paid) prostitute – there is nothing in between:

> *- Sometimes a girl can lose her virginity behind the back [of her family] and it is such a shame… [if it is known] the family kind of loses completely all pride… So circumcision is seen as a way to make sure the girl doesn't lose this. [Then] it will be a mark on her… that she has had sex and that is not good at all. She will be… a whore* (woman C).

> *- Why is it important for a man to marry a virgin?*
> *- They don't want to marry a… they want a woman who haven't been with someone else.*
> *- Why is it important? If she hasn't become pregnant with another man's child, why is it important that she hasn't had sex with anybody else?*
> *- They believe she will do it again [have sex with somebody else]. Maybe she will do it again while she is married, they think. That's what they believe. They will think she is a woman of bad morals*
> (woman B).

Many talk about infibulation as a way to control the daughters until they are married. I tried to find out if the infibulation is seen as a way to prevent girls from having sex because of the pain inflicted at the moment of defibulation, or because of the girls' fear that an opened infibulation would reveal them. Practically everyone

stressed that young girls are most afraid of that anyone would find out about them having had sex:

> *- Is it easier for infibulated girls to say no to sex?*
> *- I don't think so… but they have a reason for saying no. They know… that it can be seen if you have had intercourse.*
> *- If a girl chooses to not have sex, do you think it is because she is afraid of the pain or is she afraid that someone will discover that she had sex?*
> *- The most important reason is that it can be seen on her, I believe… When she gets married … and if she is opened then she will get into difficulties. Many men will throw such a woman out the very same day* (woman B).

Another woman (D), the only one I have met who is openly and promptly in favour of infibulation, states that infibulation prevents a young girl from having sex, because that girl will be afraid of disclosure, of her family finding out what she has been up to. This woman describes pain linked to infibulation and defibulation as "nothing" and "normal".[137] She describes infibulation as a way to carve good morals into a woman's body.[138] Here Asha Omar interprets what the woman (D) has told us in Somali:

> *- I asked her what you asked: If the woman has pharaonic circumcision, are her sexual feelings diminished? She said no. But yet she states that if a woman is not circumcised, she can't wait [and refrain from having sex] if her husband is away [on a long trip]. That's the way it is, she says. 'So what's the difference?', I asked. 'Because we are circumcised', she answered. 'Okay', I said, 'it doesn't mean that we have less sexual feelings than uncircumcised women?'. 'No', she said, 'we do feel [pleasure] being with our husbands.' […] She says that also an uncircumcised woman may wait [for her husband]. But the circumcised one can wait easily.*
> - [I ask:] *So… if you are circumcised you are supposed to behave better and be faithful to your husband?*
> - [Woman D:] *Yes. Yes… We cannot have sex with anybody but with our own husbands.*
> - [Omar fills in:] *She says that when it comes to sex, circumcised women have better morals, they know where the limits are. But when it comes to sensations, they feel in the same way as the others.*

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[137] Literally: 'People of Xamar/Mogadishu'. Most of them live in Mogadishu. They once descended from Arabs and are often easily recognised as they have lighter skin than the rest of the Somalis.

[138] Some of the women I have talked to spontaneously describe the pain they have experienced at infibulation and defibulation, but many – for reasons I can only speculate about – leave out these aspects. In some situations I have got the impression that pain in this context is seen as inevitable and, thus, nothing to make a fuss about. At a *todobo*-party I attended I was worried about the young newly married girl, who for some reason looked downhearted. I asked one of the women I knew quite well if she knew if the bride had been opened by her husband or with analgesic by a doctor. This woman, who I know as an empathic and considerate person, just shrugged her shoulders as if the question was irrelevant and replied: *"Maybe she did go to a doctor, maybe not"*. I realised that the difference between the two options was of greater importance to me than to the Somali women present, as quite a few seem to think about this kind of pain as something everyone has to endure in her life. *"A good girl is supposed to resist pain"*, one of my informants told me with some irony, when she talked about her sister who did not cry during infibulation and so was very praised by her family and the doctor for being brave.

It is easy to see that infibulation is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve something else: a morally unimpeachable woman. This is confirmed in other conversations, like discussions about what happens if a girl is raped (and so 'opened'). A rape is a social disaster and should be strongly compensated after negotiations between the clans involved: the rapist's clan will collectively bear the shame of the deed. A necessary condition is that the girl who has been raped tells her family the very same day the rape was committed – and not a month or so later, when she has fears of having become pregnant. If the girl becomes pregnant, the families involved will make sure that the couple marry to give the child a name (a clan identity through the father, the one who raped the woman).

> [I ask:] *- So, if a girl is forced to have sex and becomes pregnant, she may have to marry the rapist against her will?*
> *- It can't be in any other way if she is pregnant. If not, how could she live? Where would her child go? That's what matters, you think about the child. The child must have a father.*
> *- If the girl didn't become pregnant when she was raped, is she free from the man then?*
>
> *- If this event didn't make her pregnant, then she is free from the man, but the man has to ask her for forgiveness and compensate for the shame that he has inflicted upon her. […]*
> *- If it is known that this girl has been raped, and so is no longer a virgin, will she have problems finding a husband?*
> *- No, not if it was a rape. If she was into it herself, well, that's another thing.*
> *- Is she infibulated again?*
> *- Some do, others don't.*[139] *Nowadays it's not necessary, as her husband-to-be knows what has happened to her* (woman C).

A woman opened by a man raping her has, thus, not had her reputation devastated. There is another explanation to the fact that she is opened than that she herself has behaved like a prostitute: she is still a 'good' woman, worthy of trust in marriage.

Much of the reasoning around infibulation evolves around the girl's prospect of marriage in the future. Everyone talks about the importance of good morals in relation to men. When I have asked women about what they think men seek in women, most women's answers involve honesty, chastity and faithfulness:[140] *"It doesn't matter if he's educated or uneducated, he will choose a woman who behaves decently, someone he can trust and who comes from a respected family*" (woman H).

The men also mention these characteristics – honesty, chastity and faithfulness – as we shall see below. But the physical proof of chastity, the infibulation, seems to be a matter handled almost exclusively by women. Some women have mentioned a tradition that has existed, and maybe still exists in some families, in the north of Somalia: the one where women from the bridegroom's family control the

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[139] Other informants expressed this in similar ways, i.e. women who are against infibulation themselves. V, among others, explained how infibulation is thought to change girls into morally good women: *"It's a guarantee… for the rest of her life".*

[140] Her statement "Some do, others don't" gives the impression that cases of rape are frequent in Somalia. However, the expression probably reflects the woman's view of the logic attached to the incident of a rape, and ought not be interpreted as a statistical statement.

infibulation of the bride before the wedding.[141] In the south of Somalia, men are expected to open their wives by themselves – with penis or otherwise – and those couples who decide to turn to health care staff for defibulation prefer to be silent about it, as this is seen as a defeat on the man's part (see section 4.9.1). In the north, most women are opened by a doctor, nurse or a traditional circumciser and in some groups this practice is preceded by an inspection from the bridegroom's family. Also this tradition is upheld by women. Woman Y tells me what happened to her:

> *- When you marry, it is hard to do anything the first night, as she is closed, she is circumcised. On the third night she should be cut open, but before that happens, women come to see the girl's organ, how it looks and then they can tell everyone if she was a real girl or if she was a girl who had lost her virginity.* [Discussion about that this tradition only has been practised in some groups.] *My night… I told them I didn't want to see them at all. So one can refuse. I told them 'I don't know you, I won't show you anything, get out of here'. That's what I told them.*
> *- Someone who let them inspect, how do you think that she thinks?*
> *- Well, she gives them a proof, she is proud, she can show them that she hasn't done anything. But for my part, I didn't know these people and I couldn't see it was any business of theirs. It is my body… The man I'm married to, he and I are the ones who should discuss this, talk about… and I even feel that he, he has nothing to do with my body. Either he wants me or not, but I'm the one in charge of my body.*

The integrity expressed by woman Y is a hazardous strategy in a society where the woman's reputation quite easily is called into question. Others I have talked to, who are familiar with the tradition, state that refusing to show your infibulation when representatives of the bridegroom's family turn up may trigger off rumours. The woman may face a situation where her chastity is questioned in public, since she has behaved as if she had something to hide.

Daughters ideally should go through the critical period when they are teenagers without losing their reputation of being 'good girls', and accordingly preserving their own families' standing in the Somali community. A girl's bad behaviour, or rumours about it, affects her whole family. *"If an unmarried girl gets pregnant, she will not be the only one suffering. The whole family will have problems. Other families may object to having their sons marry her sisters… it will not be considered a good family"* (woman G).

The men who participated in this study expressed similar ideas about the importance of girls' behaviour. What men seek in women is chastity and faithfulness. The men often express themselves in a way that expose their vulnerability when it comes to fathering children – there is no way they can be sure of that they biologically are the fathers of their children; this is a matter of *trust*:

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[141] As this study discusses the practice of female circumcision, I focus on the preferred characteristics of women. Of course it is just as relevant to discuss what women seek in men when they are about to marry, in an other study with an other focus. One of the women interviewed answered my question with a counterquestion: *- I think it is important that she is honest… But it should be the other way… You could ask how I want a man to be for me to want to live with him. I could have answered that easily.* [I ask:] *- Yes, what do you think? What should a man be like?* [She replies:] *– He should be… honest… first and foremost. The whole relation must be built on honesty… if not, there is no use in living together* (woman K).

- You must be able to trust the woman you are married to. Otherwise you can't sleep, you can't do anything. You will be depressed if you can't trust her. Maybe jealous… It's important that both the man and the woman can trust each other. That I know that this is my child. There is no man who can forgive if some other man sleeps in his house and takes his woman (man P).

- If an infibulated woman is open when she marries and her husband has expected her to be closed… he will think that she has been out with other men. But if he sees that she is a virgin, mutual trust arises. He sees that she is a virgin, and that she hasn't been with other men. And just the same, she is proud of being able to show that she is a virgin. If she wouldn't be [a virgin], she wouldn't be a complete woman, but more like… half a woman (man R).

[Carlbom asks:] - *What nationality would you prefer in your future wife?*
- I'd prefer to marry a Somali woman… to avoid cultural clashes. But I'd prefer to marry a woman who lives in Sweden, that would be easier than to find a woman in Somalia. […]
- Is it important that she is a virgin?
- No… actually not.
- No?
- There are different types of virginity when it comes to female genitals… A natural one and an artificial one. It's not important that the woman… is mutilated.
- What about a natural virgin?
- Yes, it's good if one can find a girl who is a virgin.
- Would you consider marrying a divorced woman?
- Yes, it doesn't matter. But it's good if she has never been married (man U).

- I grew up with these feelings. In my society… since I was a little boy… this is what you are taught. It's important when you marry… that this girl is a virgin. That she hasn't been with any men before you. It's about religion, but also in a broader sense… about trust. It can also be a divorced woman, trust is the key issue. But if she hasn't been married before, virginity is really important, as it is some kind of a sign of that you can trust her, that she is reliable (man Q).

All men stated that honesty in a woman is the unquestionably most important trait. A few went on by claiming that earlier mistakes may be forgiven, as long as the woman is open and honest about what has happened. Man O starts by expressing the importance of honesty, and later in the interview he goes on by stating that a man may forgive shortcomings in a woman's behaviour:

- One has to find a trustworthy woman. With good morals. I can't watch her day and night so I have to trust her. If you start to doubt her… it can make you mad. If she is honest, if you can rely on her, there is no problem. […] For example, if I meet a woman… who is not married… If she is open about what happened [how come she lost her virginity], you can still trust her. If she has told you the truth (man O).

This is confirmed by some of the women's experiences. When we discussed the role of infibulation, many women stated that if the bride fails to prove her virginity with a tiny vaginal opening at the wedding, she runs the risk of being thrown out by her

husband (for a discussion about this, with more quotations, see section 6.1). This was mentioned by several women (as by woman B quoted at the beginning of this chapter). When asked if they knew someone it had happened to, practically everyone said no. They had heard rumours, it had happened to some distant relative of their mother's etc.[142] Some of the women, reflecting upon their own girl friends, instead told other kind of stories, like G:

> *- I know a girl who was seeing a man. They… were together… He had promised to marry her, but he left her. Then she met another man, and she asked me 'What can I do?'. She wanted to go to the hospital to be closed again. I told her 'Don't lie to him, that lie will come back sooner or later. Just tell him the truth', I said. She told him this story, but she told him as if it had happened to another girl, because she wanted to know how he would react. He said he felt sorry for that girl, and then she told him that she herself was that girl. They are still married today. If there is love, the man will understand and forgive.*

The outcome seems to vary, depending on the couple. Other women telling similar stories stated that the woman would find herself in a vulnerable position, where she will have her lack of chastity thrown at her face every time the couple argues. One woman told me about her ex-husband who had remarried and divorced again: *"He couldn't trust her, he just left her and went abroad… He had sex with her before they were married, that's why he can never trust her."*

The worst thing possible is the incident of an unmarried pregnant daughter. The controlling of the girls, the trouble put in to the moral education of the girls seems to have one overarching objective: to prevent pregnancy before the girls are married.

5.4 The worst thing possible: *wacal*, a child without father

In many societies, including the Swedish, the fact that an unmarried woman becomes pregnant does not necessarily imply a social catastrophe. Among Somalis there seems to be a prevalent and deep fear that one's family should be stricken by this disaster. Every conversation among women about infibulation and chastity seems to end in a discussion about how to make sure that the young girls do not get pregnant before marriage.

The fact that an unmarried daughter gets pregnant not only brings about that the whole family will bear an everlasting stigma, in many cases it implies that the family loses this girl. A daughter, loved and raised by her parents, will most often not be welcome at home any longer:

> *- It's okay if the girls talk about sex, and it's good if they know… about sex, but they can't practice it before marriage. It's our religion and our culture. And in Somalia, we don't have contraceptives… well, if there are, it's not popular. And if a girl gets pregnant… she is out of her family.*

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[142] See also Abdalla (1982:52ff).

- She is thrown out? Why?

- She has… She is pregnant… and everyone will say that this child has no father, it doesn't belong to any clan, nothing. This is the real problem, for the child, not so much for the mother. The child will belong to… nothing. This girl has to leave, maybe she goes to another part of the country where she can claim that her husband has died or something. She can pretend that her child belongs to a certain clan (woman B).

- A child like this, wacal, *cannot play with other Somali children. At the very first moment you are asked who you are, who your father is… and probably it will already be known that this particular child has no father. […] … and that [a child born without a father] is something that will damage the whole family generation after generation… Everyone will know, even grandchildren's grandchildren will take part of that shame. And this child will not be counted, in any way… in no clan* (woman C).

The patrilineal principle of the Somali society is crucial here. As discussed in section 3.3, affinity runs through the paternal side of the family and so every child inherits its father's clan affiliation. A child born outside marriage – marriage being the only culturally and religiously legitimate context for sex to take place – is born with no blood ties.

Sex outside marriage is ideologically forbidden for both men and women, but in reality the girls are the ones who have to face the consequences if sex leads to conception. This is a double standard of morality admitted by most Somalis and criticised by many:[143]

- It's more accepted if unmarried men have sex. They say 'well, he is a boy' and things like that. It's different for the girls. She will carry the proof of her having had sex, when she gets pregnant (woman K).

One of the more outspoken women expressed it in this way: *"Traditionally, a woman who has had sex before she is married is a bad woman, she is a whore… The man can be with anyone. He can screw thousands before he is married. He is never… he will still be seen as a virgin. But the woman has a closed opening, and if she is opened, she must have slept with anybody"* (woman G).

Most people I have talked to admit that young Somali women are more controlled than young unmarried men in daily life:

- A mother has that constant fear… worse than that her daughter is having sex is that her daughter may be pregnant… and that's a matter concerning the whole family. So Somali girls are very controlled… Always you have people around you, aunts and grandmothers and neighbours and everyone is keeping an eye on you… […] The worst thing that can ever happen is that the girl becomes pregnant before she has married. She will be seen as a whore (woman C).

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[143] In a Swedish report on the socio-cultural understanding of HIV/AIDS among exiled Somalis in Gothenburg (Aden et al. 1999), such story is told by a female informant: "It happened that a good girl that had never been with any other man was married off by her parents. When she was brought to her husband, he suspected her virginity and said himself that someone might have used her before him… thus, he left the honeyweek's home… he hastily said it was over,… 'I divorced her.' For her relatives this was worse than if she had been dead…" (ibid.:18).

[I ask:] - *What would have happened to you if you had turned up at home being pregnant at the age of fifteen? What would your parents have said?*
- They would have said… well, first they would have beaten me black and blue… [starts laughing]… *There is no way I could have stayed there, to live in my parents' house* (woman J).

Some of the women interviewed were quite outspoken when asked about this issue. Several used phrases involving words like "die" or "dead". This may be understood metaphorically, as if a girl's unforgivable behaviour leads to the fact that such girl almost automatically faces a *social death*: Some families try to solve the problem – either by arranging for marriage or through helping their daughter go through an abortion – but it happens that families break off the relation with the girl completely and definitely.

At funerals in Somalia, there is a ceremony called *tacsi*. This ceremony can also be performed at occasions when a family intend to officially declare that a family member, usually an unmarried daughter who has become pregnant or has acted like a prostitute, does no longer belong to the family. Then she is metaphorically "dead"; she is called *deyro*, meaning that the family relationship is forever cut. In the future her family will talk about her as if she were physically dead or they will pretend she never existed.[144] Such a young woman, who has been declared dead, is supposed to never contact her family again:

[I ask:] - *What happens if a Somali girl here in Sweden will have a child while she is unmarried?*
- A child? While she is unmarried? She may as well die…
[Another Somali woman, shocked by the other woman's statement:] - *Oooh…*
- Should the girl have a child without a father? It's so horrible, it cannot exist. She has to go, move away, she can't stay with her family. Without a father… it's impossible. […] I know many in Somalia who got into this… these women never returned to their families, ever. They disappeared (woman Z).

Many Swedish Somali girls and young women seem to internalise this value of chastity. In a study on ethnic identity among young Somalis in Sweden (Aretun 1998), including interviews with six girls and four boys aged 13-16, *chastity* seemed to be a core concept in the construction of ethnic identity. It is first and foremost the girls who are "carriers of a Somali ethnic 'marker'. It is carried out by acting, realising and communicating the moral category 'good girl' to those around them – both to Somalis and 'outsiders'" (ibid.:62, my translation from Swedish; see also Visapää (1997:66ff) in a study about young Somalis in Finland). The consequences of having an illegitimate child are adamant, but seem to be perceived by many Somalis as in proportion to what the girl has been up to. F, a young unmarried woman, describes this kind of behaviour in a way that resembles discourses on criminality:

- Girls who behave like this, they must be… kind of outcast right from the beginning, I'd say… What has influenced her to behave like this, to be what she has become? That she has got pregnant… what's the reason behind that she suddenly spent time with boys and had sex without marriage? There must

[144]For a description of this double standard of morality, see e.g. Aden et al. (1999) and Aretun (1998).

be something behind it… If everything is right, if you raise your children well and teach them right from wrong, this shouldn't happen.

Facing a situation where an unmarried girl is pregnant is described as an incredible shock to any Somali family*: "You never thought that this would happen to your own daughter"* (woman F). Some interviewees claim that what happens to a pregnant unmarried girl depends on the family. The first step is to try to bring about a marriage between the daughter and her lover, and if this measure succeeds, the pregnant girl will be freed from shame. If not, some parents may try to find a solution while they try to keep the whole thing secret and they will try to support the girl in different ways. Others will declare that their daughter is no longer a member of the family and has to leave their home, as discussed earlier.

In Sweden abortion may be a way out of this situation, often perceived as a nightmare by those involved. Some mention abortion as an impossible solution, either for ethical reasons or because they are convinced that abortion is forbidden by religion. Others see the opportunity for safe abortions as a way to save Somali girls from being social outcasts in the Somali community in Sweden:

- In Sweden these girls can go through an abortion. They have to do it because of our tradition, and they are protected by professional secrecy. That's good for the girls… if not, how could they live? Maybe this girl wants to have her baby, but there is no way she can. She is forced to stick to tradition and her community. You can never free yourself from that (woman X).

There are no statistics available showing how frequent this situation is among Somali girls in Sweden. Among the Somalis in Malmö, I have got to know indirectly, at least two unmarried girls have become pregnant during the last years and so have been left without support by their families: they are regarded as if they failed their families and their cultural and religious education.

Many Somalis I have discussed this matter with, can not see how this attitude could ever change among Somalis. Attitudes to circumcision may change in exile, and this fact is seen as something natural and inevitable considering new circumstances, increased knowledge and internal debate. But condemning an unmarried woman to be socially dead for lack of chastity is something completely different; this woman has violated basic religious and cultural norms, and let her whole family down:

[Omar interpreting:] - *About circumcision… this can change because it has nothing to do with Islam, but when it comes to a girl who gets pregnant without marriage, she says she doesn't think that Somalis ever will change their idea of pushing away such a girl. This has nothing to do with time or different generations, it has something to do with Islam. That this girl did* zina *[Arabic for having extra-marital sex] and you know, it is* haram *[forbidden according to Islamic principles]. So this can't change* (woman H).

To me it has been quite obvious that Somali women, who have lived for a long time in Sweden and are very well integrated into Swedish society, talk about this aspect of Somali culture with sorrow and helplessness:

- It seems to me as few people can accept that things may go wrong for some people… but we have to find solutions. We can't just state the fact that something has gone wrong, we have to find solutions… and we are bad at that. When I see our social security in other aspects… we don't have a social security system like you, we don't have insurances, but we help and take care of each other a lot. If something bad happens to a family, they need not worry, people will come to offer their help and time and money. If someone dies, everyone will join in, and no one will talk about lack of time or something. But if this other thing happens… it's like all people line up on one side, leaving that little girl alone on the other side… It's like nobody has taken into account that this may happen, and we have no way of handling it. […] A girl should have a friend standing up for her, someone who turns to the man responsible for the pregnancy, someone who can put a pressure on the man to make him help the girl, marry her.

- Do you see any possibility that… if time passes… will Somali families in Sweden look at this in a new way?

- I don't think so… not in my generation, no way (woman C).

These values, requirement of chastity in girls and accepting that illegitimate children and their mothers often are expelled, are in disharmony with today's western emphasis on equality between the sexes and individualism. Even so, the interviewees have been very open about these attitudes. My task in this study, thus, was to understand how these preserved values were connected to changed attitudes toward female circumcision. Pharaonic circumcision is said to enhance the possibilities for the girls to behave like 'good girls', and so, to make sure that no children without fathers are born within one's family. The key issue here, then, is: why have attitudes to female circumcision changed in exile?

Below, the aspects of the reassessment of female circumcision will be discussed. First the matter of how the interviewees began to think differently about female circumcision will be treated; how the tradition, once considered to be natural and normal, was reflected upon and questioned. Many women referred to their first encounter with the Swedish health care system as the moment when they started reflecting upon the tradition. Others mentioned the exile situation *per se* as a triggering factor for reflection, while some stated that the governmental campaign in Somalia in the mid-80s had made them reassess the custom in the first place.

Thereafter there is a section on Islam and female circumcision. This is a key theme, as almost all the interviewees emphasised the importance of Islam when explaining why they are opposed to pharaonic circumcision. The religious argument was seen not only as an explanation to why they had changed their view on female circumcision, but also as an instrumental argument for defending this new point of view: it is hard to critisise somebody for taking a decision in accordance with what is seen as Islamic core values.

The last section in this chapter deals with attitudes to the Swedish law on female circumcision. Many women and men in this study seem to have an ambivalent view: they support the content of the law (the aim to stop a harmful practice), but some are provoked by the interference of Swedish authorities in a matter considered to be an internal concern of the Somali community in Sweden. This feeling of uneasiness is closely associated with a common fear of the social authorities in Sweden. Especially the Somali women interviewed expressed a deep fear of losing custody of their children to the state.

5.5 Reflection upon what was once 'natural'

A gaal *(non-Muslim/white) is not circumcised*
Even a mouse is circumcised
But a mouse does not fly
Birds fly
But birds do not have spots like the leopard

A children's song in Somalia
(when girls are teasing each other and being boastful about small vaginal openings)

"Even a mouse is circumcised" – the wording of a children's song in Somalia shows the perfect naturalness and normality of the state of infibulation (even if the first line points out that non-Muslims are uncircumcised): even such a miserable creature as a mouse is supposed to be circumcised. The literal content of the song is nonsense, yet it reflects the pride in the state of being circumcised. Everyone in this study seemed to be able to determine in what situation she or he began to think differently about female circumcision. It was a moment when the tradition, until that moment perceived of as something 'natural' and 'normal', transformed into being a category reflected upon and questioned.

Many, both women and men, mentioned the governmental campaign in Somalia in the mid-80s: *"I didn't think much about it until I was adult and there was this campaign in Somalia. It said that this [practice of infibulation] was wrong and harmful and that it's not written anything about it in the Koran"* (woman B).

Many women asked about at what moment they began to think of infibulation in a new way, communicated vivid and often distressing descriptions of their encounters with the health care system in Sweden:

> *- I started thinking about it some ten years ago when I got married. Well… then I went to see a doctor [for defibulation]. He thought it was… that it was horrible. It made me ask myself, 'what is it about this that is so horrible?' Well, I did know that this practice doesn't exist in Sweden or Europe… but still… where I come from it's just considered to be something natural. And then I got an admission note for a visit at a gynaecological clinic, and there everybody was really curious… And I kept asking myself what this curiosity was all about. Until then I had thought about it as something completely normal. I mean… you were born into a society where… this is the way it should be, and if you are not shaped in this way, then you are an outsider … 'Oh, she hasn't had it done, how disgusting!' If you haven't had it done, there is no way you can tell your friends, you just try to hide it. So… I didn't really think about it until I came here and was to be opened* (woman K).

> *- The first time I really thought about it, was when I got married [in Sweden]. I realised how painful it is [to be opened by your husband]. It hurt… every night. So I went to hospital to arrange for [defibulation]. I went to see a doctor and he looked at me [gynaecological examination]… and then he called for other people. I had an interpreter I knew quite well… and suddenly there were many, I don't know, maybe five or six persons, examining me. And I can understand that they had a good look at me… I do look peculiar down there…* [laughs]… *No, actually, it was dreadful. I know why they*

looked so closely, I am different, but I was glad to have someone else [the interpreter] to cling to (woman B).[145]

A common trait in accounts about confrontation with shocked health staff is that the women express feelings of violation: several others in the staff were summoned during examination and no one seemed to think of asking the woman if she was comfortable with a bunch of people examining her genitals. Another common trait is that most women did not understand at first what the fuss was about.[146] In ignorance of what was going on, speculations set them in a mental state of fear and shock:

- I thought something was wrong with me and my pregnancy. I felt like I had a stone on my heart. Before the doctor had explained to me why she was upset, she summoned several others. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't talk (woman C).

- The first time I was examined in hospital [a pregnancy check-up] I thought… something was wrong with me. They were struck by panic. Talked to each other, summoned others, alarmed. I was sure that something was wrong, but I was exhausted and felt sick (woman G).

Many of these women had their upsetting encounters with the Swedish health care in the beginning of the 1990s, when many Somalis came to Sweden as refugees and the knowledge about female circumcision still was poor among health care personnel. Attitudes have probably changed a lot today in most parts of Sweden, as *Socialstyrelsen* (the Swedish national board of health and welfare) has allocated appropriations for informing professionals at different institutions about female circumcision. *Göteborgsprojektet* (The Gothenburg Project) has been charged with distributing information to health care staff, social welfare officers, kindergarten and school teachers, policemen and any other group affected and interested in this issue.

One of the women, circumcised by sunnah (which in practice includes every form of circumcision but infibulation, and is usually carried out before the age of one year), stated that she started reflecting upon female circumcision when she herself became mother of daughters:

[Omar interpreting:] *- She has three daughters, and when she washed them she was confused. Once she thought that her daughter was swollen and she thought maybe there was an infection so she took*

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[145]This was explained to me by Asha Omar. In an article in a Swedish monthly magazine, it is described how unmarried pregnant girls used to be killed in Somalia as late as in the 1980s: "For a long time it had been a tradition in Somalia that unmarried pregnant women were to be killed. Preferably by the father. If that was impossible, any of her brothers was to kill her. In the third place the murder was to be executed by someone from the same clan" (Wingborg 2000:25, my translation from Swedish). However, no incident of such a tradition is given in the literature. None of the Somalis I have talked to have ever heard of it. On the other hand, everyone is familiar with the symbolic "killing", when a family "deyro-s" a girl and declares her to be dead.

[146]Two other accounts are printed in Swedish in Johnsdotter et al. (2000a) and in Somali in Omar et al. (2001).

her daughter to the hospital. The nurse there told her that this is normal, this is the way uncircumcised girls look like. She only has sunnah circumcision herself, but now she could see the difference between intact genitals and what she looked like herself (woman H).

An infibulated woman describes her reaction when she once had the opportunity to see a Swedish woman's intact genitals:

- Once I saw a Swedish woman who was completely [genitally] normal. So I thought 'Well, this is what I've lost'. That all this is gone… I had thought that we had most parts, but no, everything is kind of gone (woman K).

Even if many women have had medical complications due to infibulation – most women referred to problems with urinating and menstruating – some of the women also claimed that they had experienced more problems *after* defibulation. These experiences seem to be intertwined with the all-embracing experience of the infibulated state as the *normal* state. K expressed it as follows:

- How can I explain it? The whole time while growing up I was closed, I just had a tiny opening. Suddenly, when I had given birth, I was completely different. Then I thought, 'ugh, what is this?'. Since I was opened I've met with heaps of trouble with infections. Earlier everything was kind of protected… can it be like that? I have many more infections now. One infection after the other.

Several women meant that the exile situation *per se* made them think thoroughly about the tradition, as they were being different from schoolmates and workmates. This experience had strengthened some women in their conviction that their own daughters will have a better life without circumcision:

- In Sweden it's easier for uncircumcised girls, no one will tease them and point at them for being different. Here the circumcised girls are the ones to be different and feel ashamed. That's one of the reasons behind my decision to never circumcise my daughters. In this society they would be the ones deviating if I did (woman B).

The same woman expressed her feelings of embarrassment when there are articles in Swedish newspapers or reports on television about female circumcision. She says she can imagine how Swedes perceive of the tradition: *"'How can they do these terrible things to their own daughters?'… They don't understand… and I can see why".* This feeling of being abashed at the existence of the tradition, looking at it with the eyes of the Swedes, appears to be one of the reasons behind some Somalis' strong reactions when their fellow countrymen have appeared in the mass media talking about circumcision: 'Do they have to insist on paying attention to this practice?' Continuous attention will create a bad image of the Somalis in Sweden: portraying them as monstrous people torturing their own flesh and blood.

Several of the men mentioned the governmental campaign against infibulation in Somalia some fifteen years ago, when asked about their opinions on female circumcision and if their attitudes had come to change at some point. Many men stated that they came to deprecate the practice of infibulation while they still lived in Somalia, a standpoint that had been fortified in exile. Some stressed the difference between Somalis in exile – with other opportunities for reflection as they

are confronted with new experiences – and Somalis who have stayed in their native country:

> *- Many are aware of this about pharaonic circumcision… how Islam forbids it and everything, but one must not forget that many Somalis, some of the people living in Somalia as nomads… and maybe some townspeople… they are not conscious of that this is against our religion. […] The knowledge [of that infibulation is harmful] is not exactly new. I don't think so. It has been there for a long time… the sense of that 'this is wrong'. Doubts…* (man Q).

A man in his 60s described it in this way:

> *- There are several factors influencing your thinking about this… people are not stagnated but follow progress. It is possible for us… society changes… it's possible to raise your knowledge about religion, to understand your religion better. And it is possible to experience and learn from other cultures and traditions… to see that there are things which may be better than some things from your own culture* (man R).

One man, U, claimed that he changed his mind after his arrival to Sweden, when he realised that it was forbidden to circumcise women here, and he mentioned access to scientific knowledge as the main source of new thoughts about this (*"it is as clear as daylight now, that this is a bad tradition"*). One of the men who stated that he had been an opponent of infibulation already in Somalia had got new insights working in the health care system there: *"I met several women who were in hospital care for medical problems due to infibulation"* (man P).

It is obvious that, despite that the topic traditionally is a taboo issue, the exile situation has given rise to an internal debate in the Somali community:

> [Carlbom asks T, who is a sheikh:] *- Do people ask you about female circumcision? Do women ask you what Islam says about this?*
> *- No. People who live here [in Sweden] are informed. They watch video tapes… which inform them about that Islam forbids pharaonic circumcision. They also get to know about the medical complications and that this tradition is harmful to women. They get a lot of information about circumcision, so they don't ask questions about it. Nor are there questions about it in Somalia, because there it's accepted to have it done. That is, there is a kind of taboo when it comes to talking about it.*

This section can be said to reflect what Mackie (1996, and 2000) calls an *escape from the belief trap*, as described in section 4.9.4. All informants can describe at what moment this practice – until then experienced as something natural and normal – became reflected upon and reassessed. This is a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for change of a practice.

In the last quotation above a couple of subjects emerge: the internal debate about female circumcision among Somalis in Swedish exile – even if the topic has been taboo in Somalia – and the importance of Islam for the attitudes to change. In the following section the theme of Islam will be discussed.

6.5 Reflection upon Islam and female circumcision

The importance of Islam for changing attitudes toward pharaonic circumcision was evident in interviews with both women and men. What has struck me during many interviews and informal conversations with Somali women is that it is obvious that many women have reached a more vivid faith while living in Sweden, as discussed in section 3.4. On several occasions I have listened to women relating how they have had discussions with their husbands about Islam – the wives critisising their husbands for not acting well enough according to the idea of what it is to be a good Muslim, and so being bad examples for their children. Many women seem to be very active when it comes to explore the Islamic sources, the Koran and the hadiths, for guidance in various matters, among them female circumcision. Here woman E:

> *- Now we understand more about Islam. Now people have come to understand that it is forbidden to take a part of your body, forbidden in Islam. So now it's not like before.*
> *- When did you start thinking about this?*
> *- In Somalia. Those of my daughters who were born after 1990 have no circumcision at all. I understood that this was only tradition and had nothing to do with Islam.*
> *- Did you learn it from a sheikh?*
> *- No, I began reading about it myself* (women E).

> *- I know many women who have decided to leave this tradition after reading the Koran and pondered upon this* (woman B).

> *- Those who today have decided to leave this tradition of infibulation… what reason for giving it up do you think is the most important one?*
> *- It's not in the Koran. It is something that belonged to our culture, it is absolutely clear that it's not in the Koran. Many who know about this now will leave [the tradition]… as it is not allowed to harm someone else. And it will be hard to accept that I did this to my own girl, 'what will happen to her, I know myself how it hurt and now I have done the same thing to her'… people don't want to have that done and then be asked by God: 'Why did you do this?'* (woman C).

Even the one woman in favour of infibulation, D, is convinced that Islam forbids the tradition:

> *- What about Islam and female circumcision?*
> *- Islam says [female] circumcision is forbidden.*
> *- According to Islam it's forbidden?*
> *- Yes* [uttered with emphasis].
> *- But if you are a Muslim…*
> [D interrupts:] *- Yes, I'm a Muslim. But this is also about culture.*
> *- If you did pharaonic circumcision to a daughter, wouldn't you be afraid of punishment from God?*
> *- Ha* ['yes' in Somali, uttered with emphasis]. *I'm afraid of God's punishment. Yet I would choose tradition.*

Here D, who is an advocate of an upholding of the practice of infibulation, makes a difference between (Somali) culture and (Islamic) religion. This difference was emphasised by almost all the informants as an explanation of how it is possible to just abandon an ancient tradition. Religion takes precedence of culture, according to the interviewees (but woman D). Often this state of things was expressed in terms of that female (pharaonic) circumcision is "only" a cultural tradition – and is therefore susceptible to change, while religiously commanded traditions carry implications of being eternal and unchangeable. In Somalia most people comprehended the two spheres as merged with respect to female circumcision (female circumcision was understood as a Somali tradition *and* a religious duty), but in Sweden this idea has been challenged. When there is a clash between the two spheres, almost everyone seems to place "religion" above "culture". If pharaonic circumcision is classified as *haram* according to Islam, then it must by necessity be abandoned no matter how ancient.

Another aspect of living in exile is the encounter between Somalis and other Muslim groups, which do not practice female circumcision. Among them the Arabs hold an exceptional position, as the Prophet was Arab and the Koran is written in Arabic. In the Muslim community in Malmö, it seems that the various Arab groups have the highest status. At some point, many Somalis seem to have asked themselves how the tradition of female circumcision can be religious, while the Arabs generally do not practise it:

> [I ask:] - *How come that a tradition that for ages has been seen as something religious in Somalia suddenly is questioned in Sweden? How come that people start asking themselves what Islam really says about this?*
> *- I've thought about that too… This campaign in Somalia, I think at least some started thinking about it… but here in Sweden we see the Arabs living here. They are Muslims, but they don't circumcise their girls. And their girls don't get pregnant before marriage… So, I think… that is one of the reasons for people to think about it and try to find out what the Koran and the hadiths say about it* (woman A).

> [Omar interpreting:] -*When we were in Somalia, she says, she talked to people about Islam. She came to know more when she started talking and asking for issues about Islam… some people who know about Islam. Then she came to know other Muslim women… why don't they have?… not even sunnah, you know. So that's how she found out that Islam doesn't accept this* (woman V).

The religious argument was often mentioned as an instrument in defending this new point of view (openly stating that one is opposed to pharaonic circumcision), especially when it comes to accusations about leaving one's ethnic loyalties behind:

> [I ask:] - *Somalis who refrain from circumcising their girls, do they run a risk of being accused of having become less Somali by their fellow countrymen?*
> *- Maybe it happens, but… if this person [who leaves the tradition] is religious, people know what Islam says about female circumcision and what the Koran says. It's tradition you know, and has nothing to do with Islam* (woman F).

- What about your daughters in the future?
- They should stay the way they were created by God.
- Won't they get into problems?
- No, I don't think so. It depends on how I raise them, if I can manage to make them understand. I shall explain to them what circumcision is about and the difficulties and that being circumcised won't give them anything important. I want them to understand what it is all about. That my parents had it done to me because they thought it was Islamic, but my children will know that this has nothing to do with religion. […] There are many religious men who talk about this, that it's not Islam and you know… so I don't think anyone would say that I've become more Swedish than Somali, because I don't circumcise my girls (woman H).

Many women talked about extended knowledge of Islam as the crucial difference between themselves and their parents' generation:

[Omar sums up:] *- Her parents when they were doing it, they thought it was because of Islam, but now she understands that it has nothing to do with Islam.*
[I ask:] *- Help me to understand this… Many women have told me that their mothers had them circumcised because they were afraid that the girls would suffer if they were not circumcised… be teased by other girls and have troubles finding a husband… But then again, many say there is no problem today [for girls to be uncircumcised]. How come? What has changed?*
[Omar interpreting after discussion in Somali:] *- The parents chose to circumcise twenty or maybe ten years ago and people were taught that it was because of Islam… and the parents are changing now [today's parents have other values]. Like her parents used pharaonic [circumcision] and nobody was using sunnah [circumcision]. Now it came to sunnah [many prefer sunnah to pharaonic] and people understand more and more about religion. It will disappear, she thinks* (woman H).

- You can't say 'ugh, I'm mad at my mother, why did she do this to me?'… No, I can't imagine feeling that kind of anger toward her.
- How do you think she thinks about it now?
- I haven't seen my mother for more than thirteen years now, so we haven't had any opportunity to discuss this, but I think that she still… It will be hard to tell her that I won't circumcise my girls… But I think that if I kind of explain that this has nothing to do with religion, but that it is… horrible culture [she will accept it] (woman K).

Among the men, like among the women, it was very clear that reflection upon Islam plays a crucial role when it comes to understanding what the opposition to pharaonic circumcision is about. The internal debate on female circumcision among the Somali men in exile seems to evolve around religious issues and whether God will punish or reward different types of female circumcision. The position of the two sheikhs quoted below is an illustrative example of how many other men reasoned:

- Circumcision is something you do on boys. When it comes to girls there is sunnah… you can either let it be altogether or you can make a minor bleeding. But to cut clitoris and sew up is something cultural and has nothing to do with Islam. […] If you do pharaonic circumcision on women, God will punish you. This is discussed a lot now, also in Somalia. Spreading this knowledge… that this has to stop (man W, sheikh).

- You can make a minor bleeding, but you cannot cut. It is absolutely out of the question to cut anything away. If you are a Muslim and do that, God will punish you. […] The other method, which leads to a little bleeding, it's not important either, it's not recommended… that is, it's not obligatory (man T, sheikh).

There is something imperative about the religious argument against pharaonic circumcision, a fact which was highlighted by some of the interviewees:

- All Somalis are believers… that is, of Islam… and if they are told that this is non-Islamic, they have to leave this tradition. You can't act against your religion (man R).

This man, R, states that the religious argument is in harmony with knowledge about the medical aspects of pharaonic circumcision, and argues that the opposition to the tradition is spreading also in Somalia:

- In Somalia, people are divided into three groups. A minority of people who still clings to this tradition and wants to maintain it. Another group are people who have heard about… medical problems and how it affect women's future health… and they know that it is non-Islamic, but they are still irresolute, they haven't really decided what to do. The third group is the one I am part of… feeling proud of that girls are saved from this… and we have decided to not have anything to do with this [tradition of infibulation]. Religion and modern research in medicine complement each other, so there is nothing to support this tradition. When you know all this, there is no other way than to give it up (man R).

All the Somali women and men interviewed in the study conducted by the four of us (Johnsdotter et al. 2000a, 2000b, and Omar et al. 2001), as well as all the women I have interviewed and talked to on my own, agree on this: pharaonic circumcision is irreconcilable with Islam. Even woman D, who is in favour of pharaonic circumcision, is very clear on this matter.

In this section we could see that increased knowledge, the second aspect described by Mackie (1996, 1998, and 2000), has played an important role. In this case, an internal debate on Islam seems to have been crucial. But the Gothenburg Project, even if not mentioned explicitly by the informants, may have had an impact indirectly. A few women mentioned information received at maternity wards (such information at prenatal clinics, child welfare clinics, and maternity wards is in many places provided by the Gothenburg Project). One may assume that the Gothenburg Project has had an important impact as it has made both Swedes and Somalis more aware of the issue; through information campaigns, which have given rise to articles in the daily press, which, in turn, have given rise to internal debates, etc. In sum, such increased knowledge – whether about religious or medical aspects of the practice – has made the tipping point appear earlier in time.

5.7 Views of the Swedish law on female circumcision

Since all the informants are so agreed on that pharaonic circumcision is forbidden according to Islam, one may believe that they all are positive to the Swedish law on female circumcision; and that criticism of it, if any, would deal with the fact that the Swedish law also includes prohibition of a symbolic sunnah circumcision. This is not the case. The critics reacted against the cultural imperialism inherent in a law directed toward a specific group of immigrants. Even if they themselves were opposed to female circumcision, they considered the issue to be an internal matter of the Somalis in Sweden.

The majority of the interviewees, though, were positive to the law. As long as the Swedish society does not prohibit any truly Muslim custom, many argued, a law directed toward Somalis is acceptable: the law is there to protect Somali girls in Sweden.

> [I ask:] *- What do you think about the Swedish law against female circumcision?*
> *- I think it is really good… or else anyone could just go back home and do it [circumcise] and then come back here.*
> *- Some have told me that they think Swedes interfere with Somalis' business…*
> *- No, not at all. If it had had anything to do with religion, it would have been different. You can't interfere with our religious matters, but it's not about that in this case. This is about maltreating little girls and it's good if others interfere. It's really good* (woman K).

A woman who has worked many years as a professional interpreter described it this way:

> *- I heard from my colleagues that this is considered a crime in Sweden, many years ago, and that families that keep up with this tradition run the risk of being prosecuted in Sweden. I learnt it in my job as an interpreter.*
> *- What did you think, when you first heard of it?*
> *- It made me go even deeper into the issue, what's good about it, what's bad, the consequences… I tried to find out as much as possible. I reached the conclusion that this [circumcision] is something that is not good for us… but it also made me realise that things take time. Some of my fellow countrymen will need time to understand this, the consequences and all that. At the same time I think the law is really good, to save the Somali girls who live in Sweden now.*

Many informants spontaneously talk about the law in a way that reflects their view on it as a real obstruction for those who perhaps are about to circumcise their daughters abroad:

> *- When did you come to know about the Swedish law against female circumcision?*
> *- I think I was fifteen then. When I had been here for a time there was this family who wanted to send their daughters back to have it done… that is, they were going on vacation… They wanted to keep up the tradition, but they couldn't. They said it was illegal in Sweden. That's how I got to know about the law* (woman X).

This woman, as many of the others, continues stating that the law is acceptable as it does not prevent the Somalis from upholding a custom they consider Islamic:

> *- What did you think then [when you got to know about the law]?*
> *- It was good, I thought. Really good. It will protect girls from suffering. […] But if Swedes would say 'You can't be Muslims any more' or 'You are not allowed to use veil' or something like that, then we would have to answer 'No, this is impossible, this is our tradition' and so on. But this [law] is good. They have said something that is good for us* (woman X).

Woman B, in favour of the law, also thinks that the law makes a contribution in preventing Somali people here to circumcise:

> [I ask:] *- Do you remember when you got to know about the Swedish law against female circumcision?*
> *- Other Somalis told me it is forbidden in Sweden when I had been here for a while. I thought it was good.*
> *- What did your fellow countrymen say about it?*
> *- They said it was forbidden, and… some people were against the law, they said 'why?, we are the ones doing it, not the Swedes, why is it up to them to forbid it?' Some said that… Others said that the law is good, that it's good if this law can stop us from doing this to our girls* (woman B).

Woman D, the one in favour of infibulation, also states that the Swedish law prevents Somalis from circumcising girls, a fact that she regrets:

> [I ask:] *- Do you think it's easier for you to be open about your opinion, as you don't have any daughters?*
> *- Yes* [with emphasis]. *If I had had girls, I wouldn't feel free to speak out. I'm free, I can say whatever I want. But others [who have daughters], they can't say anything. They are afraid of the authorities. They believe they will have to go to jail. It's ten years in jail, isn't it?*
> *- Yes, four to ten years.*
> [Laughs and shakes her head:] *- Damn it! Four to ten… we all know about these ten years. If my land will be good [peaceful] again, we'll go back and we'll have it done…* [gives a short laugh]. *There's nothing to do about it here in Sweden* (woman D).

This woman is very critical of the law, but also of her fellow countrymen, who she seems to regard as some kind of traitors in this respect:

> *- This is our tradition, it's something we should do.*
> [I ask:] *- What do you think about Somalis in Sweden who quit doing it?*
> *- They are foolish. They accept Swedish law just like that. […] Those following the Swedish law [on circumcision], they say we cannot do this to the girls… they never said that before we came to Sweden. This is bad, they accept the Swedish [norms], while they leave their own tradition* (woman D).

Some of the women were frankly criticising the law, questioning the moral right of the Swedish society to interfere. Woman L was one of them:

- What do you think of the law [against female circumcision]?
[Omar interprets:] *- She thinks it's wrong to take away somebody's rights. It's our tradition, 'why do they say that [that it's forbidden]?' It's about our rights, as the tradition is ours.*
[L filling in:] *- This I can't understand, how can somebody call it democracy [in Sweden] if you attack our freedom*?

H, herself sunnah circumcised and clearly against any form of female circumcision, is also partly critical of the Swedish law on female circumcision:

[Omar interprets:] *- She asks, why did they do this law?*
[I reply:] *- It's because they wanted to protect children, I would say.*
[Omar interprets after discussion in Somali:] *- The Swedish government accepted us to be here and there is freedom of religion, but still you interfere in different ways. She says she is against that one man marries four women, but still… if they [a man and his wives] have no problems with it, why do Swedish authorities interfere? […] She can accept if the law [against female circumcision] is there if it's only to protect children… but not if it's about putting an end to our traditions* (woman H).

She is against the tradition of polygamy, as she considers the conditions for polygamy (that a man should treat his wives exactly equally) are impossible for any man to comply with. But still she thinks that interference from Swedish authorities is a violation of the Somalis' collective rights to deal with their own problems, in a multicultural society which claims to protect the principle of freedom of religion. Along the same line, Swedish authorities have no right to try to put an end to a Somali tradition (female circumcision), which she considers to be an internal issue. But further discussions made clear that seen in an other perspective, interference may be acceptable: if the intention of the law is to give all the children on Swedish soil – Somali, Swedish or of other origin – the same protection against harmful practices, she could see no reason to object.

When I asked this woman how she felt about the extensive social control among Somalis, she replied with a counterquestion: how I felt about the state control of Swedish citizens. I admitted she had a point, and she went on:

- [In Somalia] nobody interferes with how we raise our children… maybe your neighbour or someone will tell you 'don't do that', but nobody will take your children away from you (woman H).

This fear, that the Swedish state is in a position to take the women's children away from them, is a dread which is prevalent and deeply rooted among most of the Somali women I have talked to. This was one of the subjects discussed with a (female) policeman and a (female) social welfare officer who were visiting lecturers at our course on female circumcision in Malmö in the spring of 2000. The debate was impassioned after the opening question from one of the Somali women: *"In Sweden, the state has more authority over our children than we have as parents. How can you make a family work when things are like that?"* Many Somalis, especially among those who are not that fluent in Swedish, are convinced that the authorities can take the children away from them for just any reason:

- The bringing up of children here in Sweden is a tricky thing for many Somali parents. Many have this fear… if the child is behaving really bad, they have a hard time reprimanding, because the

mother thinks that the children can go to the authorities and report her. […] I met a mother of three children, she had just had her third, and was expecting a home call from the child welfare clinic. She only had one bed for the children, a cot, and there the oldest child slept. The other children slept between herself and her husband. She wanted to buy new beds, because she was convinced that if she didn't have beds for her children she would lose [custody of] her children. I tried to explain that the nurse would never take away her children for such a thing, that her home call was only about to see that her children were getting on well. But she was terrified that she would lose her children (woman G).

Some of the women gave vivid descriptions of what they considered to be offensive treatment from the authorities, and a few stated that Swedish officials throw suspicion upon them as Somali mothers especially when it came to female circumcision:

[Omar interprets]: - *She has a daughter, sixteen years old. Once she [the daughter] left school because she had a headache. When she came back the next day she was told that there had been blood. And they had seen this blood the day before when she had gone home. Now they asked her if the blood was hers, 'is this yours?' and the girl said no. She said she had only had this headache and left because of that. And then they asked her if she had had circumcision. They suspected that she had been circumcised here in Sweden.*
[E fills in:] - *But that was really wrong, you know, to ask her that… How could I have circumcised her here in Sweden? There are no traditional doctors here and I can't do it myself… They sent me to 'socialen' [the social welfare office] and they called us and so on. Why did they do that? Did I kill somebody?* (woman E).

Woman M has the feeling that Somali, or Muslim, parents are unfairly judged by Swedish authorities and wants to stress the fact that life in a Muslim family – ideally without alcohol and drugs – ought to be better for children than a life in a non-Muslim family with problems:

- There are those [non-Muslims] using drugs, and alcohol, who can't take care of their children. It's better to help those children to have a better life, but a Muslim mother who never uses anything, you know… It's wrong… [that we Somalis are the ones they throw suspicion upon]… unless there is mental illness or something (woman M).

Most men were positive to the Swedish law, considering it to be in harmony with the Islamic view on pharaonic circumcision:

- I think it would be successful if people were informed through knowledge about Islam. There is not much of a difference between what the Swedish government… the Swedish law… and what Islam says about circumcising women. My point is that religion and the law are in harmony (man U).

One of the sheikhs even argues that the law can be a good tool for Somali men who want to put a pressure on a wife who intends to have a daughter circumcised:

[Carlbom says:] - *You said before that men must take much responsibility…*
- A father must make sure that his daughters are not circumcised. He must make this very clear. To stop pharaonic circumcision the man first of all has to talk straightly to his wife… and say 'you must

not do this to the girls'. The next step is to talk to the daughter. To tell his daughter 'if your mother wants to have you circumcised, you have to talk to me, tell me about it'. The father has to make the girls protest, to show resistance… to not accept this. And at the same time, make sure that his wife knows that he will report her to the police if she carries through a circumcision (man T, sheikh).

With some of the more integrated Somali women I had lengthy conversations on how they estimate the prevalence of female circumcision among Somalis in Sweden. Woman G, who is quite integrated into the Swedish society, was the only interviewee who echoed some of the discourse on female circumcision prevalent in the Swedish society, bringing forward the possibility that many girls risk being subjected to circumcision:

[I ask:] *- Do you think it happens now [that Swedish Somali girls are circumcised in Somalia during holidays]?*
- Who knows…?
- Nobody knows… but what do you believe?
- I can't even guess… Who knows. We fight against it and talk to people and everything… but who can control it? Who? It makes me worried. Even if there is a law in Sweden, you cannot examine the girls without [legal] permission, there must be strong reasons to suspect and if you are mistaken you commit breach of duty… How can we know about all these girls… thousands of them go to Somalia… and who knows? (woman G).

The others have given a different description of what they perceive to be the general situation. Often the law and the fear of social authorities have been taken into account when they have made the surmise that female (pharaonic) circumcision is practically non-existent among Somali families in Sweden:

[I ask:] *- Do you think that Somalis in Malmö know about the law? Do they care?*
- Yes, people have become aware of it now. They are somewhat afraid… In the beginning, when you come here, you are kind of deaf and blind, you don't know anything about the Swedish society. The longer you stay here, the more aware you become of … 'I can't do this. This is not allowed. This is Swedish law'. It comes with the time spent here. But in the beginning, I think people say 'Well, no, I don't give a damn about that. This is what we do in our country, no one can stop me from going on doing that…' But most Somalis came here in the beginning of the 90s. I think people are more aware now. I really don't think there are many who would dare to do it [female circumcision]. Maybe there are some, but they are extremely few (woman K).

- Actually, I can't see how it could occur… and certainly not in Sweden. There are no traditional circumcisers here. So if there is any circumcision [among Swedish Somalis]… it has to be done abroad. [Pause] *If there are any, they are really not many. And they would choose sunnah, I guess. Even if there would exist someone who'd prefer to have a pharaonic circumcision done to her daughter, she wouldn't dare to do it… she would be too afraid of disclosure… and fear that the Swedish authorities would take her children away from her. If it is done, the girl would probably not return to Sweden* (woman A).

To sum up, it is obvious that the Swedish law on female circumcision has a quite broad support in this group, even if some are provoked by the fact that a specific law

was formulated to prevent people from practicing a tradition strongly associated with Somalis. Most Somali women I have met are well aware of the right of the Swedish society to by force deprive them of their right to raise their children, if officials from the social authorities would consider them to be unfit as parents. This fact seems to be taken into consideration, when the interviewees speculate upon if there are fellow countrymen upholding the practice.

The Swedish law against female circumcision works reinforcing in relation to the result of the internal debate among Somalis. It seems as if both the general increased knowledge about the practice among Swedish Somalis and the Swedish law against female circumcision helped in moving the tipping point (Mackie 1996, 1998, and 2000; see Chapter Eight), where an overwhelming majority of Swedish Somalis decided to abandon this practice, to an earlier stage in time.

The following chapter discusses a phenomenon influencing views of female circumcision towards maintenance of the practice. Notions about how Somali men prefer women who are infibulated work in the direction of moving the tipping point to a later stage in time. If Somali women believe that Somali men prefer women to be pharaonically circumcised, this touches upon the core of marriageability. However, most informants also see the emergence of alternative marriage markets, which is what constitutes one of the necessary conditions for change of the practice, according to Mackie (ibid.).

6 The role of the men

This chapter deals with the state of segregation between Somali men and women, resulting in often unquestioned perceptions of the other sex: especially many women seem to cultivate myths about men and male preferences, which underlie their beliefs about how men think about female circumcision. It was obvious that many women made statements out of a stereotypical image of the Somali men, while considering their own fathers and husbands to be exceptions from that generalised man. Many men and women have emphasised the importance of Somali men openly stating their true opinion on the matter of female circumcision, an action that requires that the taboo surrounding the matter is dealt with.

Even if practically all the women I have talked to are opposed to pharaonic circumcision, they have no problem explaining why *others* (like their own mothers) are in favour of the tradition. Many women were also open about what views they thought Somali men had on the tradition.

Some of the women believed that many Somali men – especially those living in exile – are against the practice of pharaonic circumcision. However, quite a few stated that Somali men in general are in favour of the practice. Men in general, it is believed, prefer to marry infibulated women, as they then can be sure of having married a virgin. Some of the women also stated that Somali men prefer infibulated women for reasons of sexual pleasure.

These female ideas of how Somali *men in general* think about pharaonic circumcision clearly contrast with descriptions of how the women present the views of *specific men*, like their husbands and fathers. The last section of this chapter will deal with the discrepancy between many women's notions of how the Somali men in general view the practice and the individual experiences of specific men, expressed by both women and men.

6.1 Women about men, virginity and female circumcision

Many women put forward the idea that the practice of female circumcision is upheld because of men's expectations that a woman should be able to prove that she is a virgin:

[I say:] - *You say that girls are circumcised because men appreciate it. Why does a man appreciate that a woman is circumcised?*
- In their way of thinking… if the woman is circumcised, she hasn't been with any other men. It's a sign of virginity (woman X).

- What do you think about the men's role in this?
- Well, I think… you do all this for [the men]… Actually I think they are real bastards… Excuse me, but this makes me mad, because you do it, you do all this for them. Circumcise girls… I think more men ought to be against it, because it's not a good thing to do and it's harmful (woman F).

Since so many women are convinced that most Somali men prefer women to be pharaonically circumcised, we decided, during the study involving both men and women, to confront the women with the fact that all men in this study stated they were opposed to pharaonic circumcision. Many women reacted with scepticism and confusion. This statement forced them to develop their thoughts about this, and also to reflect on what made them be certain of the men's view:

[I say:] - *Men interviewed by Ali [Elmi] and Aje [Carlbom] all state that they are against pharaonic circumcision. They say that this is a tradition upheld by women.*
- If they say that, why do they divorce… why do they throw a woman out when she is not circumcised?
- Do you think they are lying?
- Maybe some of them. But it's true… some don't want it.[147] *But this is about our tradition. They [the men] feel sure that if the girls have circumcision, they [the girls] haven't had any sex. But if she uncircumcised, they are uncertain, do you understand? They want to be sure that they marry a virgin* (woman B).

This theme, *an uncircumcised girl runs the risk of being ejected at her wedding night*, recurred in many interviews with the women (see also section 5.3). It constituted one of the most important reasons for women to be sure of to what extent men desire infibulation in women. The woman B, quoted above, is convinced that Somali men prefer women to be infibulated and this conviction is based on the fact that men *"throw a woman out when she is not circumcised"*. I keep asking about her own experiences of this matter, and it soon becomes obvious that her view has a more uncertain basis than it first appeared:

- [---] *If it is discovered that a girl has lost her virginity, she is thrown out.*
[I ask:] - *Can she marry?*
- Maybe. It's possible. She can claim that she has already been married before. That will solve the problem… [laughs]*… I think… I've never really thought much about it. But that would make it easier.* [---]
- A while ago you said that if the bride is not a virgin, her husband will throw her out. Does it

[147] Also many health care professionals seem to have been perplexed trying to understand what they were confronted with. Several women have told me about how they got questions from the doctor trying to understand what had happened to them, e.g. questions about if the genitals had been accidentally burned.

happen often?
- There are men who accept [that his wife was not a virgin at the wedding]… I've heard about that. And there may be girls who are sewn up again. I don't know really (woman B).

She does not know of anyone who this – being expelled at the wedding – has happened to in reality. This recurred in many interviews: the women first stated that men usually turn away from a woman if she can not prove her virginity, "she is kicked out" as G put it, but when asked about occurrences in real life, practically everyone had different, more complex, stories to tell:

[I ask:] *- Do you know somebody who was divorced because she was not a virgin at her wedding?*
- Yes, in Somalia.
- Do you know what happened?
- At first they were… friends… She was circumcised and he made her pregnant. When she told him that she was expecting his child they were married. But he said… later… that he didn't believe in her, so they argued and then they broke up. He said he couldn't be sure of that the child was his. 'If you have slept with me, how can I be sure you haven't slept with hundred [men]?' (woman J).

What is striking in this story, is that the man and woman know each other well at the point of divorce. The more stereotypical image of the situation is that the marriage has been arranged, and that the man finds himself duped: he was expecting a virgin at his wedding, and he now married a woman who is already "open". This theme emerged in the interview with K:

[I ask:] *- Some women have told me that there exist men who divorce women immediately after the wedding, because her opening was too large. Have you heard of anyone who was divorced because of that?*
- No, not really… There are rumours about… a man gets married with a woman, and then he is disappointed, so he divorces and refuses to have anything to do with her. Maybe because she had been with other men, it may be a reason. Yes.
- Do you know anyone it happened to?
*- No, I don't know anyone who experienced this herself, no. But it may happen in Somalia. If a man comes along and asks a girl's parents if he can marry her, and he never talked to the girl [i.e. arranged marriage], and the parents say 'yes, of course' and he pays them a lot of money [*yarad*, brideprice]. And then… he discovers that she is not a girl anymore [but already a woman: vaginally opened].*[148] *She has been with other men, then he is disappointed. But in the generation of young people, they choose [partners] themselves. A man knows what the girl is like, he knows her well enough* (woman K).

Some of the women emphasised that what happens at wedding nights is surrounded by rumours and that it is difficult to really know what has happened:

- Have you heard of it?
- Yes, yes.
- Do you know anyone it happened to?

[148] Later in the interview she claims that those men who are against female circumcision are the young ones.

- Not in Sweden, at least. But I know of a few in Somalia who married and then they had their wedding night and then in the morning or two days later or after a week they divorced. So everyone knows… of course everyone knows. Everyone will think 'Oops, she wasn't a girl then?' That is, she was no virgin. But nobody will ask. He thought she was a virgin, but when it turned out she wasn't, he doesn't want her anymore (woman X).

This aspect in the quotation above, focusing on rumours and speculations, is also apparent in the following, where woman H describes how she comprehend this notion:

[I ask:] *- If a woman gets married and her husband on the wedding night discovers that she is not a virgin, have you heard of any case where he divorced her immediately*?
[Omar interprets after discussion in Somali:] *- She says that no, she hasn't. And if two persons divorce it's not necessary that you know why they divorced. It has happened, but nobody knows the real reason. If this would happen [that lack of virginity was the reason for divorce] you will never hear her declare 'I wasn't a virgin'. He would maybe mention it to some closer friends or he may deny it, but you will never hear it from the woman.*
[I ask:] *- But why would a woman take such a risk? If she has slept with somebody else, how can she marry without telling her husband? It's taking a big risk.*
[Omar interprets:] *– She [woman H] doesn't know. She would have said it in the beginning, so nobody would talk about her as someone cheating, not being a virgin… Maybe such a woman would be confident of that he would say nothing. People are different. Some may see [that she is not a virgin] and never divorce. Some may see it and never talk about it.*
[H fills in:] *- It depends on what kind of a person a man is… There was a man who married a prostitute woman, he thought she had a good personality. And he didn't care about what had happened in the past… so it depends on the person.*
[Omar fills in with her own reflection:] *- It could be that a man marries a woman and sees that she is not a virgin, that she has slept with someone else. He may say 'I shall never talk about this, to protect your dignity', and then he may wait some time before he divorces her. So he may divorce her, but without ever talking about the reason.*

X is one of the women who initially states positively that Somali men in general are in favour of pharaonic circumcision:

[I ask:] *- How do you think most men think about female circumcision? If we start by talking about Somali men in Sweden, how do you think they think about it?*
- To tell you the truth… they really want women to be circumcised. They want that… still they do want.
- Why, do you think, do they want that?
- I wonder too… Those who are thirteen, fourteen years old now, who grow up here now, maybe they will think differently in the future. But men of my age [about twenty-five], they still prefer that a woman is circumcised and virgin (woman X).

When she is confronted with the fact that no men in favour of infibulation have been found during this study which includes men up to the age of 60, she is at first confused, but then she starts reflecting upon her own experiences in life. Here she, for the first time during the interview, makes a difference between virginity and pharaonic circumcision. This distinction was evident in many interviews with the

men, but almost completely absent in the interviews with women. The women interviewed seemed to equal these concepts to a much greater extent than the men did. Below, woman X has moved from a conviction that Somali men are in favour of infibulation to a belief that what they are really looking for in women is virginity:

> *- I can tell you that they [the women] have never asked the men 'Do you still want the girls to be circumcised?'. The mother is the one in charge all the time. It's the mother who wants her girl to be… she doesn't want her girl to be different from others. That's how my mother was thinking, when she had me circumcised. She didn't want me to be different.*
> *- She wanted to save you from suffering?*
> *- Yes, suffering, exactly. That was the most important thing. Not because some man wanted me to be [circumcised], no, as I am the one to persuade this man that he should marry me. That's my task. Those who want to go on [with the tradition], they think that 'if I don't, no one will marry her'. But that is about their fantasies, I don't think that's the way it is. But I do believe, one hundred percent, that Somali men want virgins when they marry. That's the sign of that the girl is good. That he can trust her in the future* (woman X).

Woman F, a young unmarried girl, is the one who in an earlier quotation called the Somali men 'bastards' for preferring pharaonically circumcised women. When she is told that men involved in this study are opposed to infibulation, she has a really hard time believing it. Still it is obvious that there is no way she can really know:

> *- In this study, Ali [Elmi] and Aje [Carlbom] haven't managed to find a single man who is in favour of infibulation.*
> *- Well, I think that is bull, for they are in favour [of it]. They ought to put an end to it, those are the ones having the leading part… that is, in our home country. They play a really important role when a girl… this [circumcision] is done for her to be able to get married. For whose sake is this done? It's for their sake, no one else's. […]*
> *- Do you think that they [the men interviewed] have changed their minds or do you think they are lying during the interviews?*
> *- I think they are lying, because… if they want to help women, they ought to do something about it. For example, give their help in educating people about female circumcision. Okay, they think it's embarrassing to talk about women and genitals… with women [present] they are cowards, they can't say anything. Not a scrap they can say in front of a woman* (woman F).

A little later in the interview she reaches the conclusion that there may be a difference between men when it comes to age and generation. She says that she can imagine that most young men, who have grown up in Sweden, probably are opposed to the tradition. This aspect was brought forward also by several other women: that there is a difference between young and old men, as well as a difference between men in Somalia and men in exile. Woman K, whose own husband is openly opposed to female circumcision, believes this, just like woman M:

> *- What do you think Somali men think about this tradition?*
> *- I think they think it's wrong.*
> *- How do you think men in Somalia think about it?*
> *- I can't answer that. I think that they… still see it in the old ways. Yes… that a woman should be*

circumcised. They haven't had the same opportunity… unlike us, who live here. They haven't taken part of this information and they still believe that this has something to do with religion (woman K).

- There are two different kinds of men. Those who live in Sweden and those who live in Somalia. Those who live in Sweden are just like us, they see [female] circumcision as something bad, because we discuss you know. Those who live in Somalia they still prefer circumcised women (woman M).

6.2 Pharaonic circumcision and male sexual pleasure

Some of the women spontaneously came up with the idea that Somali men prefer infibulated women because they gain sexual pleasure out of a tight vagina:

- The men like it to be a tiny opening.
- Is it because of sexual pleasure or because of that he wants to be sure that she is a virgin?
- Both. But the most important thing is that they feel proud, they have found a virgin. But they do like a tiny opening (woman J).

[I ask:] *- What do you think about the men here in Sweden? Are they for it or against it?*
- They want the girls to have pharaonic circumcision.
- Why?
- Because they want a tight opening, they want it to be tight when they have sex. And he wants to know that he is the first man for the woman. He is proud to be the first man to be with his wife. And then he can show that he is a man, that he can open a woman who was stitched up when she was five or six years old (woman G).

Having heard this statement (that Somali men prefer infibulated women for reasons of sexual pleasure) in some of the interviews with the women, I went deeper into the issue during the interview with woman G:

- How do you know that men are in favour of it?
- It's my experience. When I worked in a hospital, the women always wanted to be sewn up after delivery. I asked my mother why it is this way, but she didn't answer, as this is one of the issues we don't talk about. Once I asked a woman why she wanted to be sewn up again. Then she replied: 'If I don't, my husband will get himself another woman'.
- Was it her idea or do you think her husband had told her that?
- No, I don't think a man would… [pause]*… Maybe the women are the ones who have understood it in this way… I and my husband, we never discuss what feels good [sexually]. We never discuss such things. I've never heard a man say that he prefers a tight opening, but it has its source and I think that the men are those who gave rise to it. When a woman has three or four children, maybe her husband remarry with an other woman…* [pause]*… So maybe we [the women] just interpret… and believe that if you are tight he will never leave you* (woman G).

Here, while she is talking, woman G starts reflecting upon what she really knows about men's preferences, and what the source of her knowledge is. The support for the notion is that she knows that some women want to be reinfibulated after delivery out of fear that their husbands will prefer another woman. At the same time she knows that talking about sexual preferences is a taboo topic in Somali marriages. For the first time she seems to start asking herself if this notion, 'men preferring tight openings', may emanate from the female sphere: *"So maybe we just interpret…"*

Formally interviewing K, I looked forward to hear what she would say about this issue, as we had had an informal discussion some six months earlier. I remember telling some Somali women about what I recently had read in the literature: descriptions of how Somali men are said to like tiny openings and a bit of violence and resistance during intercourse. One of the women present (a woman from the south of Somalia) reacted with scepticism, while K (herself from the north part of the country) started laughing: *"It's true, especially when it comes to men from the South".*[149] When I brought it up again, K did not remember our conversation and she formulated herself quite differently:

> *- I can't answer that question… because I've never met or heard of someone who says that 'My husband likes…' you know, '… to be violent during intercourse' and so on. I've never heard that. If I said that, I would lie.…* [Pause]… *In southern Somalia men prefer to open their women by themselves if she is circumcised.*
> *- Why, do you think?*
> *- I don't know. I'm not from that part of Somalia. The men from north Somalia are slightly different.*
> *- In what way?*
> *- They prefer that the woman sees a gynaecologist… and have it [defibulation] done, before they have sex for the first time. You know, it's so… painful, having it done by yourselves, for both the man and the woman. Not until I came here [to Sweden] I got to know that men from southern Somalia take care of it themselves. Maybe they want to show that they are real men or something* (woman K).

Later in the interview the issue of tight vaginal openings reappears:

> *- I've only discussed it with friends… Somali and Swedish girlfriends… and then when you have been through delivery and the gynaecologist tells you that you have to keep pinching your muscles down there. But this has nothing to do with circumcision. It's about the vaginal muscles, not the opening* (woman K).

This woman, with whom I have had conversations at various occasions, here gives an example of a general tendency in social interaction: she somehow adjusts her utterances according to context. When she referred to Somali men (from the South) as preferring to be a little violent in sexual activities, she said it in a relaxed situation: the kind of conversation where people say whatever is on their minds without critically examining their own words. She knew me quite well, and we were just a group of women chatting while having coffee. Her statements above, on the other hand, are made in a completely different situation: I have come to her house to make a formal interview with a tape recorder. This makes her aware of her own

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[149]"The Somali word *gabar* means both girl and virgin" (Helander 1991:25).

words and she is thoughtful about what she says during the whole interview. Her utterance at the first occasion, I would say, derives from the field of stereotypes and public discourse, while she while being taped searches her mind for what she really knows.

Just like Omar and I confronted women with some of the themes from the interviews with the men, Elmi and Carlbom presented some of the themes from the interviews with women to the men. This notion among some of the women, 'men prefer infibulated women for sexual reasons', was introduced to some of the men:

> [Carlbom says:] - *In the interviews with women, some of them have stated that Somali men prefer tight vaginal openings… and some are scared that their husbands will divorce them because of this.*
> *- If she is pharaonically circumcised… and then she marries and have children… so everything changes and it [the opening] gets bigger. I don't understand… why would a man divorce his wife because of that?*
> *- Well… some women think that a man may want a divorce because of the bigger size…*
> *- This is something going on among women… I had this job at a hospital in Somalia, so I've seen several women with infibulation. Many women who had given birth to their second or third child showed fear of that their husbands would like to marry other women. Those women asked the doctor to stitch them up again. But the men don't demand such things. […] I don't know any man who expects women to be [vaginally] tight. This is about women's ideas* (man P).

Man O, who is about 35 years old, is also familiar with the fact that the idea exists, and just like man P he claims that this idea emanates from women and not men:

> [Carlbom says:] - *Some women in this study claim that men prefer women who are pharaonically circumcised, because they enjoy a tight opening when they have sex.*
> *- No, I don't agree. Not at all.*
> *- Are they wrong?*
> *- Yes, I'm sure. What it's all about is to find a trustworthy woman. I know there are women who believe this… but as far as I know, men don't think about small openings. At least not men of my generation. […] When I lived in Somalia I met many women with pharaonic circumcision… and when they married, the men asked a nurse to open. That was because their husbands didn't want to harm them, to make them suffer. A woman who is pharaonically circumcised… they have this tiny opening. An opening of this size… It's impossible to press… flesh can't force its way into flesh. It's a strange belief [that this is preferable to men]* (man O).

Man O mentions some husbands' wish to have their wives opened by medical professionals, because they don't want their women to suffer. The same aspect is brought up by man Q, who gets upset when confronted with the idea of male pleasure because of infibulation:

> *- Bull, I'd say. This is so sick! It's a problem everyone knows of. All men who plan to marry a woman who is pharaonically circumcised know what kind of hell they are to face. There are men who get into psychological problems because of this, as they are injured. There is hardly anywhere to get in, constantly he has to struggle to make the opening bigger. To talk about pleasure… it's not even close to pleasure. It's torture. It is nothing but a sheer hell. Many people who have moved to the cities and who are confronted with this problem, they choose to go to the hospital and ask for help to open. If it's*

such a pleasure, why don't they stick to the idea that the man should open the woman with his penis? (man Q).

As said, not all women expressed the idea that men in general prefer infibulated women for the sake of sexual pleasure. In a few interviews I mentioned that there exist ideas about Somali men, stating this and also that men may prefer the sexual act of defibulation to be a little violent. To woman E, this kind of reasoning did not make sense at all. She was not willing to comment upon her own wedding night, but said something about it, just to make her point clear:

> [Omar interprets:] - *It was worst that night. It was something you never forget, she says, but after that it was okay. It was painful when it burst, but then it's forgotten. […] I explained what you said [about men preferring tight openings for sexual pleasure] and she says that she doesn't think it's right. No men want to have violent sex inflicting pain… one takes it slowly… and she says she doesn't think anyone enjoys when the other is in pain* (woman E).

When I have talked about sexual matters with Somali women, it seems as if the stereotypical image of sexuality in Somali marriages is very far from the women's own experiences. These women who have been willing to share some of their thoughts about this sensitive topic with me, have expressed not only feelings of joy, but also given an image of tenderness and respect between husband and wife. This theme will be further discussed in the following section (see also section 4.3).

6.3 Men as fathers and husbands

It is a well-known fact that there is an extensive segregation between Somali men and women. This is specially evident when it comes to talking about sexual topics, among them the issue of female circumcision. In this section it will be shown how many women's generalised statements about Somali men and their preferences concerning female circumcision conflict with how they picture specific men in their lives, particularly their fathers and husbands. It will also be obvious that the descriptions of the specific men are in harmony with how men describe themselves in this field.

Among the women interviewed, some of them had a perfectly clear knowledge about their husbands' opinions on the matter, while others had never discussed female circumcision with their partners. Many women's statements about what Somali men prefer in this respect are, accordingly, based upon speculations. F, young and still unmarried, expresses this uncertainty:

> - *This is what men think about, that the woman should be a virgin. Men in Somalia at least, not here in Sweden, I don't know how men living here think about it. Maybe they have changed their opinions on female circumcision, but I've no idea how people… men… here think of it* (woman F).

Also between the men the topic is taboo, even if many mentioned that it happens that discussions arise, often due to mass media articles and television reporting on the subject. While discussing the fact that Elmi and Carlbom failed to find any men advocating the practice of pharaonic circumcision, man S starts talking about the sensitivity of the subject:

> *- But everyone feels this taboo… one doesn't talk about women's stuff.*
> *- Does this taboo concern men and women, or is it between men themselves?*
> *- Between men and women the taboo is complete… nor do men discuss it between themselves very often. Maybe if … for example… there is a program on television, a discussion may start from there* (man S).

Many men were aware of women's general conviction that Somali men demand infibulated women, arguing that segregation and social pressure prevent men from openly stating their true opinion on the tradition:

> *- Many men in Somalia… especially the nomads… they haven't understood that this is prohibited by religion, they are not aware of this issue. So they don't take this step, stating openly that 'No, this is forbidden'… or telling the women that they are not allowed to circumcise [pharaonically]. There are men who are aware of this issue, but they meet this pressure from the women who claim that this is what men demand. So many men conceal their opinion from others* (man Q).

Several men expressed feelings of being powerless when it came to influence in this area:

> *- One of my uncles talked to his wife about refraining from circumcision of their daughters. But his wife made off and had the girls circumcised without his knowledge. It's often like that. If men have an opinion, the women plug their ears and carry out the circumcision anyhow* (man R).

> *- Personally, I've always been opposed to this pharaonic circumcision. It's women's business. I've been present at two occasions, when girls were to be infibulated in Somalia. One of them was my own daughter and the other girl was a relative who I was responsible for. The first occasion… it was decided by others that my daughter was to be pharaonically circumcised. I protested and tried to stop the operation, but I met with resistance. Strong resistance. The women said that men should stay out of women's business, that this was a matter concerning the mother and her daughter. I never entered where my daughter was lying down, I was outside. According to our tradition it's out of the question that a man interferes with the sphere of women. In Somalia it's associated with shame to do that. […] The other girl whose circumcision I tried to stop… I met with negative reactions then as well* (man S).

The depiction of fathers as being opposed to pharaonic circumcision is confirmed by many women interviewed. J was circumcised by a female neighbour, who she claims she still hates this very day. She believes that most Somali women she knows are against it. Women in favour of any kind of circumcision prefer sunnah, she says, not pharaonic circumcision – whereas the men in general, she believes, are in favour of infibulation. Her own father, though, has always been opposed to pharaonic circumcision:

- My father didn't know when it was done to me and my sisters. We cried the whole night and I told them [the women taking care of it, not including her mother] that I was going to tell my father about it. They replied that it had to be done, if we wanted to be married.
- Did you tell your father?
- Yes, I did. My father doesn't like [pharaonic] circumcision. He thinks one can do sunnah… or just leave it altogether (woman J).

Woman X tells me how she was circumcised behind her father's back, as he had claimed that he did not want her to be infibulated:

- It was my mother who… she had to do it. She said 'We have to do it, you are a girl, and there is nothing we can do about it'. She was thinking about tradition and the future… you know, when a man comes and wants to marry you, it will be hard [if you are not circumcised]. That's why you have to… But my father didn't agree, he was well-educated and he didn't want me to be circumcised. But she said we had to do it. Anyway, while my father was away, we went to a doctor [in a country in the Middle East]. Some there know how to do the pharaonic [circumcision] also. So we went to a doctor and he told my mother that we didn't have to do it and 'I can give you a book, which you can give to her future husband, this is not necessary'. She said 'No, she has to' (woman X).

In other families the fathers managed to have an impact on the decision. Woman A, for example, states that she is sunnah circumcised (and not infibulated) thanks to her father, who interfered and declared that only sunnah circumcision, at the most, was acceptable.

A general trend in the interviews was that many women stated that Somali men *in general* are in favour of pharaonic circumcision, while *specific* men – as their own fathers and husbands – are against it. The interview with woman G was especially clear in this aspect. About her ex-husband she confided to me that:

- Because of the children I have some contact with my ex-husband. The one thing he keeps asking me, is to make sure that I keep our daughters away from circumcision. Every time he writes a letter he ends it by reminding me about this. He knows that I am against it, but still he worries… (woman G).

In her account of her own circumcision her father plays an important role, when he is trying to stop the pharaonic circumcision of his daughters. In this quotation woman G relates what happened the morning when the girl next door was circumcised and G:s family woke up due to the cries:

- 'When is it our time, mum? Can't you tell her [the circumciser] that we too want to be circumcised next Friday.' […] And dad said: 'No. My girls shall not go through the same thing as that girl.' No, he said. And then he went to his room and my mother was sad and I was furious. I went to him and said: 'Dad, we can't play with other girls… How can you say like this? We want to.' No, he said. My mother became really upset, because… according to tradition it's the mother who is in charge of the girls… and dad is a man. She thought it was humiliating that he interfered with her business, so she was really sorry. She took her clothes and everything that belonged to her and went to her brother's house. […] … [Dad said to his brother-in-law:] 'The children is not only hers, they are mine too, and it's my right as well as hers to make this decision.' […] Dad wasn't present [when we were circumcised], he didn't want to… he didn't want to. He said to her: 'Can't we wait?'. 'No.'

To solve the conflict G:s father agrees to a compromise, involving the demand that the circumcision is performed by a trained doctor. To the very last he tries to stop or at least postpone the circumcision, unsuccessfully. G was pharaonically circumcised at the age of six.

It is near at hand to imagine a double agenda in Somali men: that men in general prefer to marry pharaonically circumcised women, but feel sorry for their own daughters and want to spare *them* from suffering. In my empirical material, however, there is no support for such an ambivalent attitude in the men, described by the women. Yet another quotation from G may illustrate this. As earlier quotations have showed, her father was opposed to pharaonic circumcision and her ex-husband constantly reminds her of his position against circumcision when it comes to their daughters. Still G – at least at the beginning of the interview – firmly states that Somali men are in favour of pharaonic circumcision, and that they prefer to marry infibulated women for sexual reasons, as described elsewhere.[150] Here G describes her experience of defibulation, and her ex-husband's attitude:

> *- I was eighteen when I married. I was young when I met my husband. I loved him a lot. We were here in Sweden, when we were going to have sex for the first time. The first night my husband said: 'We are married now.' 'I know', I said. 'And we can begin…' He was so kind. He went to the pharmacy where he bought a softening salve… but it didn't work. The opening was too small. They had stitched all over. How would he make his way through that? You know that he really wants to. He had never had sex before either, so you know that this is really difficult for him. I understood that, but I also wanted him to understand me. 'Let's wait', he said, 'and take things as they come'. He also got into touch with a doctor. He thought that I'd better be opened at the hospital. But I didn't want that. I felt it was better to wait. We strove to make the opening bigger, but it was hard. It may take months. Some men are selfish and try to open it all at once. But my husband said: 'No, I don't want to cause any pain'. So we ceased trying to have intercourse. But I was pregnant in spite of that the opening was so small. It was when my first child was born that I was opened* (woman G).

It is a well-known fact that conflicting views inhabit people in general, and this may be exposed in taped interviews. My intention of showing G:s conflicting statements is to point at a general tendency in the interviews: the discrepancy between statements about Somali men *in general* and descriptions of *specific* Somali men – men as fathers and husbands. I argue that this discrepancy has its basis in the relation between the *sexual ideology* (Leavitt 1991) and factual experience.[151] When G, like several other of the Somali women interviewed, states that *Somali men prefer women to be pharaonically circumcised*, she renders a general view among Somalis, a public discourse on the subject – a part of the sexual ideology, which guides people when it comes to understanding the relation between men and women in the Somali society. This solid and widespread common sense is not questioned out of a few exceptions (like the own father's and husband's opposite positions). What I can gather from my empirical material is that the greater part of the women interviewed express

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[150] Personal notes.

[151] As quoted earlier: *"Because they want a tight opening, they want it to be tight when they have sex. And he wants to know that he is the first man for the woman. He is proud to be the first man to be with his wife. And then he can show that he is a man, that he can open a woman who was stitched up when she was five or six years old."*

generalised statements about Somali men, belonging to the sphere of the sexual ideology, while picturing their own fathers and husbands as exceptions.

There were both men and women who talked about men's responsibility to put an end to this tradition. Even if the practice of female circumcision belongs to the sphere of women, several interviewees stressed the fact that men also have a moral obligation to take part in the decision-making concerning daughters and to work against the practice in a broader perspective:

> *- A man is responsible for his family, and that means that he must take some of the blame if pharaonic circumcision is done. Parents should discuss this* (man O).

> *- We want the men to declare openly that they don't want women to be circumcised. So the mothers can stop worrying. If the men declare that they will marry our uncircumcised daughters, this fear [in mothers] will disappear* (woman G).

Among the men, also one of the sheikhs, man T, emphasised that Somali men must state openly that they do not demand that women should be pharaonically circumcised, and that they as well have a responsibility in the process toward change: *"Men must begin to take part… half the part… in the work to end this tradition".* Every man has a moral obligation to make sure that his own daughters are not circumcised, as he emphasised in an earlier quotation.[152]

He was one of the men stressing the difference between natural virginity and infibulation: *"virginity is not sewing up, but there is a natural virginity".* This was a strong tendency in the interviews, as will be discussed in section 7.4: many women equal virginity with infibulation, while several men stressed a distinction between the two concepts. Thus, men in this study, fathers and husbands or husbands-to-be, prefer women to be *virgins* when they marry – but not pharaonically circumcised.

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[152] Having done fieldwork among the Bumbita Arapesh of Papua New Guinea, Leavitt (1991) discusses the relation between the *sexual ideology*, the *sexual experience* and the *sexual behaviour*. In his view, the sexual experience (how people understand and experience sex) is a synthesis of the sexual ideology (what people know about sex from public discourse) and the sexual behaviour (what people actually do when having sex). Their actual experience of sexuality differs fundamentally from the public discourse. See also Caplan (1987), who in her discussion about cultural constructs of sexuality provides an example of the discrepancy between sexual ideology and actual behaviour in a study on western women in the 19th century (ibid.:3f).

7 Instead of female circumcision

In the last chapter of this section, *Instead of female circumcision*, assumptions about the future are discussed. Practically everyone interviewed states that it is possible to leave the tradition of female (pharaonic) circumcision; practically everyone says that this can be done without problems while living in Sweden, but a large majority also states that returning to Somalia with uncircumcised girls is possible. Those staying on in Sweden in the future will have to keep handling a deviant moral system, a fact that all Somali women and men experience to be very problematic. They refrain from infibulating their daughters, but at the same time these daughters are to grow up in a society with an explicit sexual emancipation. The strategies used to handle this situation involve dialogue, education (including religion), but also some increased social control of the girls, described as a general fact by some of the interviewees. But the importance of trust is also emphasised by many: trust either as a result of necessity or as a conscious strategy. As virginity in young unmarried girls still is a vital requirement for social acceptance among Somalis – and as pharaonic circumcision traditionally has been seen as a physical evidence of such a sexual immaculation – chaste conduct as a proof of virginity is discussed at the end of this chapter.

If one makes the presumption that the Somalis I have met and interviewed in Malmö, some of them informally and some formally with tape recorder, have stated their true opinion and are representative of the Somalis in Sweden on a large scale, one question arises: If Somalis in Sweden refrain from circumcising their daughters, how can they achieve what was earlier achieved by circumcision?

This question is based on an other presumption: that Somalis traditionally, in an emic perspective, have had good reasons for circumcising their daughters. As discussed in Chapter Five, practically all Somalis I have talked to still cherish the values of chastity and condemn extramarital sexuality (in women), often claimed to be the crucial reason for female circumcision. If the means is removed, what about the end? How is it possible to preserve these values in the exile situation, if one leaves one of the most important means behind?

In this chapter several themes regarding this question will be dealt with. The themes are well illustrated by a quotation from one of the interviews with woman K:

> *- I shall tell my girls… and they were born here and will grow up here, uncircumcised… that I don't want them to have sex before they are married. It's about my religion, my culture. But I have to*

explain it in different ways… that, yes, it's about religion and culture, but there are also other reasons for not having intercourse, like diseases and stuff like that, and pregnancy. In time, they will understand, I believe that. […] It would have been easier for me to raise my children in Somalia, where the whole system is different and the parents play an important role. I would like my daughters to be virgins when they marry. It would make me incredibly happy. But what can I do, when I'm just a parent? You don't have that kind of power any longer, when your children are teenagers… and they grow up in a foreign country. You have kind of lost that power (woman K).

The chapter begins with a discussion about the future, both among Somalis in Sweden and on home ground in Somalia. These reflections are surmises, as nobody is in the position to really know for sure about other people's standings. Here the interviewees express their impressions and relate what they have gathered in discussions with other Somalis.

The next section will deal with how to handle a deviant moral system in the exile situation. Most Somalis in Sweden were raised in a society characterised by a strict sexual code and a widespread notion of the practice of pharaonic circumcision as something natural and good. Here they are to raise their uncircumcised daughters in a society characterised by sexual liberty and moral tolerance, or – depending on perspective – decadence. Many Somalis experience the Swedish society, in this respect, as menacing, encouraging young people to have sex. The solution at hand, expressed implicitly in many interviews, is encouragement of segregation to a certain degree: acceptance of the Swedish way of life on grounds of principle, while urging Somali children and adolescents to live according to Somali (Muslim) social principles.

The means for success, suggested by the interviewees, are social control, education and dialogue – and, of necessity – trust. The key concept in these discussions was Islam: If one manages to educate one's daughters to be good Muslims, they will have an inherent self-restraint in the sexual field while unmarried.

If parents succeed in raising a daughter into a good Muslim (and thereby a 'good girl'), she will behave in a chaste manner, showing men – presumptive suitors – that she is a woman with a good and trustworthy personality. An infibulation to show her reliability then becomes a redundant proof. This will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

7.1 Surmises about the future

During the years of investigation I have managed to find only one woman, not yet a mother of daughters, who openly stated she is in favour of pharaonic circumcision – and that she will have her daughters infibulated in the future, in case she gets any. All the other women dissociated themselves from the tradition of infibulation. Some of them thought of sunnah circumcision as an acceptable option, even if most women declared that they would leave their own daughters with no circumcision at all.

All women agreed (also woman D, even if she was critical) about that Somalis' general view on circumcision has changed in exile, exemplified below:

- How do you think most Somali women here in Sweden think about it?
- They won't do it [circumcise their daughters]… Time changes (woman E).

- Will you do it to your daughters?
- No.
- What will happen when it's time to get married?
- It's not the same any longer… the culture, I mean. It's an old tradition, but it's normal that tradition changes (woman V).

Also the men, most often spontaneously, pointed at a general change in this field:

[Carlbom asks:] *- Can you marry whoever you want, or do you think your father wants to discuss the matter with you?*
- No, I'm the one to decide whom I marry. I'm quite sure he is familiar with the problems attached to marriage with a woman who has been mutilated.
- Do you think he is against it [the tradition]?
- I don't know… I don't know how much he knows about such things, about problems associated with circumcision. But I'm sure he would understand if we talked about it.
- Hypothetically… If you want to marry an uncircumcised woman, and your father declares that he wants you to marry a circumcised one… How will you deal with that situation?
[Elmi fills in:] *- If the reason for your father's standpoint is that he wants to avoid slander about you and your wife…*
- I don't think it could ever happen. A majority of Somalis living in Sweden think about this in the same way that I do… there is no risk that anyone would talk behind my back (man U).

- It's always the mothers who are in charge of this. They are the ones who make sure that their daughters are circumcised. Once it was like that, but I think things are changing.
[Carlbom asks:] *- In what way?*
- All women who are young now, and even grandmothers, have understood what pharaonic circumcision is about… so they won't do it (man O).

Most of the women I have talked to have experienced that attitudes have changed among Somalis in exile, heading toward a fundamental opposition to female circumcision in general, and absolutely when it comes to infibulation:

[I ask:] *- Somalis who have lived in Sweden and return to Somalia… how do you think people will do if they go back?*
- I haven't discussed it with many women, but those I know well, I know they haven't done it to their girls. They won't do it, because they know how they have suffered from it themselves. And they know what staff at gynecological clinics here has told them. Any woman who is intelligent will refrain from doing it. If she is not intelligent, she might think 'Yes, I shall do it'. But women living in Sweden nowadays… and then I'm not talking about women of my mother's generation… they may not think about this in new ways. But even my mother has changed her mind. My nieces are in age for circumcision, but my mother says 'Don't do it to them', she doesn't think circumcision is good. So I asked her 'Why did you do it to me?', and she replied 'It was another time then' (woman X).

Here K relates her general impression, claiming that even the few women she knows who may be in favour of circumcision are for various reasons prevented, she thinks, from having their daughters circumcised:

> *- Do you discuss this issue with other Somali women?*
> *- It happens… when we sit chatting about this and that. Most people I know are about my age and got married here in Sweden and we often share viewpoints. It happens… that there is someone who says 'Well, but I think that…', but I don't think they would dare [to have circumcision done] and their girls are still small, so they have to wait, and I think that they will have time to change their minds. I think so. The more we talk about it… I think it's important that we do talk about it. There are still people who want to cling to the old tradition, but they are few* (woman K).

Living in exile with uncircumcised daughters involves some problems, but excludes others. One disadvantage with the state of non-circumcision in Somalia is absent in Sweden: an uncircumcised girl in Somalia may run the risk of being a social outcast, while in an average Swedish school class she will, in this respect, resemble her female classmates.

But if the family decides to go back to Somalia in the future, what will happen to the uncircumcised girls? Will they meet with problems? Is there a pressure to have Swedish Somali girls circumcised to secure their future, if the family aims at returning to Somalia? This issue was discussed with some women, and practically all of them claimed that the more than one million Somali refugees in the world today will make a difference when some of them return to Somalia in the future:

> *- Because of the war, we can… many of us have left the country. Many Somali girls are not circumcised because of the situation we live in. If we are many coming back it won't be a problem. If there were just a few [uncircumcised], they would have problems* (woman V).

> *- In the future, there will be no expectations of circumcised girls. Girls who are born now and grow up… the men they are to marry are not the men who are adults now. Those men [who are to marry the girls who are born now] they grow up now in Canada or London. I don't think it will be any problem. Look at me, I'm about to marry soon, but the man I marry won't ask if I'm circumcised or not. This is not the problem. The thing that really matters is virginity* (woman X).

> *- If you returned to Somalia with your girls, would you have any problems then?*
> *- No, I don't think that.*
> *- Have things changed in Somalia?*
> *- No, not in Somalia, but here in Sweden. Here there are not many who want to keep up this tradition. Like my husband… he knows I haven't done it to our girls and he knows that this [tradition] was something wrong in the first place. I think that most Somalis here… in all families… know that this happening when we were children is something that is wrong. When we return… there will be new generations, people who were born here, that return. There won't be any problems.*
> *- Will they find men to marry?*
> *- Yes, they will be met with understanding… They were not born in Somalia, neither the girls nor the boys, they come from Sweden or Holland or France, wherever, they were not born in Somalia and*

didn't grow up there, so they will know from the very beginning that this [tradition] is wrong. So I can't see that there will be any problem in the future (woman K).

Even if all women (but D and L) firmly state they will refrain from circumcising their own daughters whether they stay in Sweden or go back to Somalia, a few of them expressed a more general fear of that some girls risk being subjected to circumcision if they go back to Somalia:

- Those families who move back to Somalia… what do you think will happen?
- There are always some who will do it… I've also heard about a few families who have moved back already and who have had it done, but it's rare. I think the campaign [against pharaonic circumcision] in Somalia has started again, but it's not as much as in Europe or other [western] countries we [Somalis] live in. So there is a big risk that some girls will be circumcised (woman C).

Almost everyone asked is of the opinion that views on female circumcision have changed radically among Somalis in exile. But quite a few also state that views are changing also in Somalia, towars an eradication of the practice, or at least toward its milder forms of sunnah.[153] The women L, J and B represent many interviewees' reasoning:

- If we go back to Somalia… many go back to Somalia… there are many who are against it and don't want to do it anymore (woman L).

- What do you think about the future, when it comes to female circumcision? What will happen to uncircumcised girls who return to Somalia?
- In Somalia I don't think it will create any problems, because many people stopped doing this pharaonic circumcision about ten years ago. They just do sunnah (woman J).

- What do you think will happen to the Somali girls if there are families moving back to Somalia?
- If the girls are small… maybe they will do something. Maybe sunnah, maybe nothing at all. I don't know, it depends…
- What will you do?
- I won't do anything, no.
- Nothing?
- No, nothing at all.
- Aren't you afraid of what can happen to your daughters?
- When we go back? No, I'm not afraid. Not nowadays. There will be many young men who will say that they prefer uncircumcised girls. Today… already… many leave the pharaonic [circumcision] and they just do sunnah. It will be much easier in the future (woman B).

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[153] As was evident in an earlier quote: *"A father must make sure that his daughters are not circumcised. He must make this very clear. To stop pharaonic circumcision the man first of all has to talk straightly to his wife… and say 'you must not do this to the girls'. The next step is to talk to the daughter. To tell his daughter 'if your mother wants to have you circumcised, you have to talk to me, tell me about it'. The father has to make the girls protest, to show resistance… to not accept this. And at the same time, make sure that his wife knows that he will report her to the police if she carries through a circumcision"* (man T, sheikh).

Not even the woman in favour of pharaonic circumcision sees any problems for uncircumcised Somali girls in the future, when it comes to social acceptance (as long as they do not break the more general taboo of talking openly about sexual matters):

> *- What will happen to Swedish Somali girls moving back to Somalia? What happens to them, when they are not circumcised?*
> *- Nothing. They have grown up, nothing happens. Who could say anything about it?*
> *- Will they be able to tell? To say 'I have nothing'?*
> *- That's a problem really. They will not be accepted if they talk about it, if they are virgins or not… Others can't do anything, but it will be hard for them if they walk around declaring that 'we are not circumcised'* (woman D).

Many of the men expressed a similar view of the ongoing process in Somalia, mentioned by several of the women. In the interview with man R, he seems to be sure that the opposition toward pharaonic circumcision increases both in Somalia and among Somalis in exile:

> *- I'd say that about three quarters of the Somalis are against the pharaonic circumcision. They don't want it any longer. It has started, and every year… more and more people join in. And nowadays the young girls know that this is not about Islam… and they also express resistance.*
> [Carlbom asks:] *- Are you talking about Somalis in Somalia or in the diaspora… globally among Somalis?*
> *- Well… this movement against pharaonic circumcision exists in Somalia as well. […] It will come to an end eventually. The more people know… the easier it will be to get rid of this tradition. There are many uncircumcised girls who are now eleven, twelve, thirteen years old. They will refuse to have it done on them because of Islam* (man R).

In sum, Somalis in Malmö in general have the experience that the practice of female circumcision – particularly the pharaonic type – is in decline. Nobody sees any problems at all when it comes to returning to Somalia in the future with uncircumcised daughters, not even D and L, who are the only women who may have their daughters pharaonically circumcised in the future (D because she thinks it is a good tradition and L because of prospective social pressure from kin). Hence, the Somalis in Sweden experience that in the present-day situation, as well as in the future, there are alternative marriage markets for their uncircumcised daughters.

7.2 Handling a deviant moral system

When Somali parents raise their daughters in Sweden and refrain from having them pharaonically circumcised ("closed"), a traditionally accepted way of controlling the unmarried girls are lost.[154] Thus, in Sweden Somali parents are faced with the

[154] In a book published by *Sundhedsstyrelsen* [The Danish national board of health and welfare] (1999), it is argued that: "Within the course of the last 5-10 years the situation [in Somalia]

challenge to handle an unfamiliar and completely deviant moral system, which includes sexual liberty, while leaving behind one of the means to make sure that their daughters behave in a chaste manner. This is described in many interviews:

> *- If you have uncircumcised girls, you will be more worried than if they are circumcised. And it's even harder to live here in Sweden with uncircumcised girls. It's worse than in Somalia. You don't worry so much there, as everyone knows each other in a neighbourhood. If your girls go somewhere, the neighbours will turn up and tell you, 'I know your girl has gone there and there' and you will know. But here the parents don't know anything of their children's friends and the parents [of these friends], and where they are and such things. It's much more difficult* (woman B).

Many women and men interviewed experienced Sweden to be a morally menacing environment, where parents run the risk of losing their daughters to decadence. Here I have asked woman D, the one in favour of pharaonic circumcision, what happens if the girls are not circumcised:

> *- Other women will walk around saying that your girls haven't good morals [because they are not circumcised].*
> [I ask:] *- But in Sweden? What happens to uncircumcised girls here?*
> *- Oh! It's tough. It will be problems, it will be hard for the Somali girls. The mothers can't do anything, they [the girls] can go wherever they want, they can do whatever they want here in Sweden. It would be better if all could go back to Somalia. As soon as the war is over, then we must go back, everything will be much better.*
> *- But those Somali girls who will stay in Sweden?*
> *- They cannot become like the Swedes… go and visit boys and sleep in their beds and have boyfriends* (woman D).

This fear, that some Somali young girls will behave like many Swedish girls, is present in every reasoning about the upbringing of Somali children in Sweden:

> *- And then the girls go to school and hear their Swedish girlfriends talk about that they have been to night-clubs and they have been together with a guy… so the Somali girl wants to experience this too, and not only stay at home… or do the same thing as young girls used to do in Somalia. It's really difficult to raise a child here, it's really difficult* (woman X).

Many women were frustrated when discussing how the Swedish society seemingly encourages young people to have sex – distributing condoms at school, was an example mentioned by several – and directing adolescents' mind toward sexual matters: [155]

> *- Many [Somalis] say that the Swedish society encourages [sex]… Like one of my girls, when she was thirteen years old she came home from school with a bunch of condoms. Damn, she was thirteen and given condoms! I was an adult the day I got to know about condoms. My younger girl also knows quite*

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has changed in a positive way. Among other things, the newspapers in Somalia write about how harmful circumcision is, and there is an increasing openness and discussion about the issue among both men and women" (ibid.:25, my translation from Danish).

[155] For a discussion on pharaonic circumcision as a way to achieve both social control of *and* religious purity in girls, see Johnsdotter et al. (2000a:16f).

a lot about it [sexual matters], from TV and papers. So, we [Somalis in Sweden] have to find a way in all this. It's hard for us, because we grew up so completely differently (woman G).

One may be led to think that these experiences cause condemnations of Swedes and Swedish depraved morals, but I have never met with such attitudes among the Somalis in Malmö. Most people I have talked to seem to reason in a quite pragmatic way, confining themselves to state the fact that we have different habits.[156] Woman C explains it in this way:

- How do you think Somalis in general think about Swedish girls and sex?
- I've not heard Somalis criticise Swedish girls in this aspect. It's like it's accepted… 'well, she is Swedish, it's their culture, it's their way of life…' But to see a Somali girl do the same thing… It's not acceptable. It's hard to understand and accept. But Somalis are traditionally very tolerant when it comes to accepting other ways of living, in other cultures. But the very moment a Somali starts behaving in the same way, he or she will be harshly criticised (woman C).

What is implied here is a willingness among many Somalis to maintain the two moral systems apart from each other. The challenge, from a parental point of view, is how to keep their daughters (children) within the Somali, or Muslim, moral system – while still living in Sweden:

- Will you accept that your daughter has sex before she is married?
- No.
- But how can you…?
[Omar interprets:] *- She will explain to her that it is wrong to have sex before marriage. She can have a boyfriend and talk to him, but no sex. […] She will talk about sex… and about Islam, why it is forbidden, why she can't go to bed with anyone.*
- If your daughter replies 'I have girl friends and they have sex, and nothing bad happens to them'…?
[Omar interprets:] *- She says she will explain that her friends have their homes and we have our own home [with different rules]* (woman V).

All Somalis I have come to know really wish that their children, especially their daughters who may get pregnant, postpone their sexual activities until after they have married. As discussed in Chapter Five, an illegitimate child is a social disaster to any Somali family. Still there is room for steps to take, if things do not develop in a way that the parents wish. One can arrange for marriage, if one's daughter has committed herself to premarital sex and become pregnant (see section 5.4). This pragmatic view is expressed by woman H, among others:

[I say:] *- It seems to me that it often happens that teenagers at a certain age want to live their own lives, independent of what their parents think about it. Obeying their parents is not given that much priority… What about your daughters when they are a little older?*
[Omar interprets:] *- She says she can't control them, but she can raise them well and talk to them. If one of her daughters wants to talk to a man, she's welcome to do that. If she wants to have sex, she can marry.*

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[156] One organisation distributing condoms to schoolchildren (teenagers) is RFSU (Riksförbundet för Sexuell Upplysning, *The National Association for Sexual Information*).

- If she gets pregnant while she is still attending school?
- [Omar interprets:] *- She can have* nikaax *[announcement of that the couple is engaged to be married, in a legal sense equivalent to marriage]. A teenager will do mistakes, it happens in Somalia also, it's not only here. If the parents get to know about a boyfriend, they can try to make sure that there is* maher *[a man's gift to his wife-to-be] given… so then if she is pregnant, there will be no abortion and no* wacal *[illegitimate child]* (woman H).

Women I have asked have explained to me that if such a girl can through a *nikaax* before it is obvious to everyone that she has had premarital sex, she will not be labelled in a derogatory way by anyone. If marriage or *nikaax* can be arranged, the girl is freed from shame.

Many interviewees, both men and women, compared Somalia and Sweden regarding the social control of young people, concluding that it is a much more difficult task to keep an eye on what young sons and daughters are up to in their spare time in Sweden:

- It's so much more difficult to raise children here in Sweden than in Somalia. You don't know what your children are up to. […] In Somalia a young person is watched by the neighbours, and they go and tell her mother or parents. The whole society assists in this… (woman J).

- Things are easier in Somalia. You are surrounded by aunts and grandmothers and neighbours and everybody checks each other, and they turn to your mother immediately, 'I've seen your girl down at the corner'. Everything is under control. All the adults have a common interest in controlling the young people. But here in Sweden, a mother has no way whatsoever to control where her daughter is or what she is doing (woman C).

Below it will be discussed how Somalis try to deal with this situation in Sweden.

7.3 Dialogue, social control, education and trust

Considering that social control is harder to maintain in Sweden than in Somalia, where relatives and neighbours consider the supervision of young girls a public task, some informants are of the opinion that these circumstances lead to a harsher control of young girls in Sweden. Others stress the fact that Somali parents in exile have to start trusting their daughters in a way that they are unfamiliar with, and also enter into a dialogue with their children about matters not usually discussed in a Somali family. A majority of the informants stressed the importance of Islam in this context, where the Islamic ban on extra-marital sexuality is congruent with what the interviewees often refer to as "Somali culture".

Most of the Somali women I have come to know, who are in charge of unmarried daughters, worry about the risk that the girls will become pregnant before they are married. In the taped interviews I brought this issue forward, if not mentioned spontaneously:

- What will you do if one of your daughters comes home when she is fifteen, telling you 'I have a boyfriend'?
- If she has a boyfriend… I never had a boyfriend before I married… almost… we didn't [have sex]… It was some sort of… [starts laughing]. *Well, I must explain to her that she cannot have a boyfriend* (woman B).

While B is saying this *("I never had a boyfriend before I married… almost…")*, she seems to recall that she has told me about her boyfriend in a former interview. They were a couple for several years, but refrained from having sex until they married. In the former interview she stated that her parents probably suspected that she had a boyfriend, even if she never told them. One can imagine, thus, that part of Somali mothers' worries – and the same likely holds for most parents in the world – is based on recollections of their own youth and what they hid from their parents. The interview continues:

- But you will never know if she has a boyfriend or not?
- No, I will never know for sure. But I have to talk to her. That's really the only thing I can do. Tell her about Islamic norms, about our tradition… and what kind of problems there can be. It's difficult to know how to handle this, how to explain it. It's really difficult (woman B).

Fear and anxiety based on one's own experiences was mentioned by woman X, she too stressing the importance of a trustful dialogue with the children:

- You have to talk to your children all the time and make them feel that they can share their thoughts with you. There is a problem if you say 'I was a good girl, I stayed home, I didn't fool around and now I want you to be like that'. Every mother has made her mistakes, you shouldn't try to conceal them. You have to say 'I made many mistakes, I did this and that, and I don't want you to do the same mistakes. You are the one I care about, I want you to be better than I was'. All mothers once spent time with men… They went dating and chatting and kissing… You have to admit this to your children and say 'I did all this, but I want you to behave better than that'. They can learn from your mistakes, but to talk about such things are completely taboo among Somalis (woman X).

Despite the difficulties, everyone is agreed on the significance of maintaining the moral values associated with Somali culture and Islam. Few interviewees admitted that they themselves exercised a harsh social control of their daughters, but some testified that they had seen it in other families. This harsher control may lead to conflicts within some families, as was claimed by C and X among others:

- Somali mothers in Sweden are struck by fear because of their daughters. If a girl tells her mother that she will go out to see a friend, the mother won't believe it, she often suspects that something else is going on. This has given rise to a host of conflicts in many families. It's something constantly going on between mothers and daughters. The girl may adapt very well in Sweden, be well-behaved and successful in school, but as soon as she is a teenager and wants to spend some more time with friends and such things, problems arise. And the mother seldom explains to her daughter what the worries are about, 'I'm afraid of that this will happen to you'. So the mother keeps these thoughts to herself, and her daughter doesn't understand what it's all about. And then there is conflict, because they are not used to talk about what's really on their minds. The girl doesn't understand why she can't spend time

with her friends… especially when her brothers are allowed to be out much more… and the mother doesn't say straight to her face that 'I'm afraid that you are going to have sex' (woman C).

- There will be differences between me and my [future] daughter. It will be hard to keep up our tradition here [in Sweden], but one has to give it a good try.
[I ask:] *- Is there any risk that Somali girls will be more controlled here in Sweden, what do you think?*
- Yes. There are many conflicts going on. The mother is raised in Somalia and she wants her daughter to be a … so-called 'good girl'. Most mothers want their daughters to feel free, but not free in the same way as Swedish girls… it makes it really difficult here. So the result is more and more control. The mother says 'You can't go'. They are afraid of letting go of their daughters. […]
- You said before that many Somali girls are held back by their mothers… Do you think that most mothers explain their worries to their daughters?
- No, that's the problem… we don't talk. Most mothers just say 'You must not go out'. But if you talk to your children, they will learn and respect and understand. We haven't grown up with this… like the Swedes, you talk about everything. We never discussed anything with our parents. The parents just make a decision, and there's the end of it. They don't explain why (woman X).

Quite a few of the women mention the unfamiliarity with discussions on sensitive topics within Somali families. Especially the young women interviewed expressed their intentions to manage these matters in a different way in the future, carrying out more open-hearted relations with their own children than they themselves have had with their own parents. This quotation proceeds a discussion about how the social control is impossible to maintain in Sweden, even among Somalis themselves:

- If I tell my neighbour… who is from Somalia too… that 'I've seen your daughter necking with some guy outside', I'd get the answer 'So? It's none of your business'. I think the best way is to talk sense and explain things to your children instead of shouting and hitting them.
[I say:] *- Some say that it can be tough to talk about sex with your children…*
- It has been taboo, it has always been. My mother… she was shocked when I got my first period, she didn't have the guts to talk about it with me. Instead my older sister turned to me and told me 'You have to buy sanitary towels'. The only thing I heard my mother say was 'Well, now she has become a woman, now she can get pregnant'. It was that kind of fear. But I won't be like my mother… it's different now. I shall talk openly to my daughters (woman K).

The men as well stressed the importance of dialogue, not the least regarding the conveyance of Islamic values. Here a male informant has explained to the interviewers why it is important that Somali girls in Sweden refrain from having sex before marriage in a broader discussion about moral issues and "good behaviour":

[Carlbom asks:] *- How can you stop Somali girls from having sex in Sweden?*
- It's important to explain… if she has sex, what happens then? Tell her about the problems if she has sex. It's impossible to completely prevent her from having sex [if she intends to]. The only thing I can do is to tell her. One has to think about it in a psychological way. If I want to prevent my daughter from having sex, I have to tell her about what's good and bad. I have to explain what may happen if she has intercourse. That's the best way, I believe. Some fathers think that circumcision is a precautionary measure. I don't agree. She has to understand… understanding is what it is all about.

She needs to know what is good behaviour. This is how Islam enters the discussion. If you do something that is haram *[forbidden according to Islam], what happens then?* (man O).

When it comes to trust, some interviewees talk about trust as a necessity, as there in reality is no other way to handle the situation: *"How can I supervise my three daughters every time they have business downtown?"* one man asked the male interviewers with some irony. But trust can also be seen as a strategy: Some of the women, both younger and older, have told me about how their own mothers once showed them trust. They seemingly see their own mothers' attitude as an example of how a good relation between mothers and daughters can be formed:

- How can you prevent your daughter from having sex before marriage?
- I can't, I shall trust her.
- How can you be sure of that she is trustworthy?
- I shall trust her the same way my mother trusted me (woman J).

- I've been partying, I've been to night-clubs, my mother has let me spend time with my friends. I've never smoked, I've never drunk any alcohol, I've never slept with any man. Yet I had the freedom to do all that, thank heavens my mother gave me that freedom. Those things bore me now. My mother let me be, she let me go out with friends… but if you force a young girl to always stay at home, 'you can not go to parties', that will be tough for the girl. She will always keep wondering, 'what happens over there?'. That's why Somali women marry so young, they want to leave their homes because of this. They want freedom. But they don't get that because they marry. [Pause] *I want my [future] girl to have these experiences that I had. My time and her time won't be the same. She will have more freedom than I had, just like I had more freedom than my mother had* (woman X).

Here an experienced mother relates how a relation of trust has developed during the family's time in exile, resulting in more freedom for the younger daughters than the older:

[I say:] *- Some have told me that Somali girls in Sweden are very controlled by their parents…*
- If we talk about 1990-92, then the control was harsh! You see, we didn't know anything about this society. Personally I had no idea about how to raise a teenage daughter. I panicked. I kept calling her and chasing her at friends… she was so fed up with me that she almost didn't want to come home. Now I am more flexible. Nowadays my daughters tell me about their plans. I decided to agree to everything that is not dangerous. I've bought a phone card and a cell phone. I give them freedom on condition that I can trust them… but if they lie to me it's over. It's a tough deal, but so far it has worked (woman G).

Constantly recurrent themes in interviews and dialogues with Somalis have been the significance of a good upbringing, of educating the girls about religion and good morals:

- My girl will not be circumcised, I am hundred percent sure of that. But if I've raised her the right way, she will wait [and not have sex] until she is married (woman X).

F, young and still unmarried, admits that sexual matters are delicate within the family, but emphasises the importance of upbringing:

> *- The best thing you can do is to show your children the right way, to tell them that this is not good and it's against our religion and so on. To teach your child discipline… not a discipline that forces things upon them, but a discipline to see what is good tradition to pass on to children and grandchildren. […] And that is tradition, that the girl stands by her virtue until she is married… and this tradition exists for her sake, so she is accepted. So circumcision is not necessary. If you raise your daughter well, she will be a good girl… she will follow the right way and… follow her parents* (woman F).

The aim of the good upbringing and education is to achieve that the social and religious norms are internalised. If one raises the children well while they are small, there will be no need for a harsh control when they are adolescents, as they themselves then are capable of distinguishing right from wrong:

> [Omar interprets:] - *When the children are small, she says, she has to tell them and control them and teach them what is right and wrong, but when they are sixteen, seventeen… They have to choose themselves, then they should be able too see for themselves what's right and what's wrong. So she says it's about how they are raised. […] It's okay to have a boyfriend, but only to go to movies, she says, not to have sex* [everyone starts laughing].
> [I ask:] - *Many have told me that it can be a little difficult to talk to your own children about sex…*
> [Omar interprets after discussion in Somali:] - *She says she is different, she talks to her children about these matters. She says she teaches her [teenage] daughters about how they were born women and that God has created men for them. Then the rest is about teaching them what is good behaviour* (woman E).

F reflects upon her Somali girl friends, uncircumcised and unmarried, and claims that there is really no need for a harsher control of the girls:

> *- No… I don't think so, I know quite a few who are not circumcised, and they have been here [in Sweden] for many years, and I can't see that they have changed and become more Swedish… It's not like they think 'well, now I live in this country and I am free to do whatever I want' and so on, it's not like that* (woman F).[157]

Some informants were somewhat annoyed at the suggestion that female circumcision would prevent young girls from having sex. Education is what it is all about, they claimed, irrespective of the state of the genitals:

> [I ask:] - *Those girls who grow up in Sweden, who are uncircumcised, how can you prevent them from having sex before marriage?*
> *- When it comes to sex, it makes no difference if they are circumcised or not. Sexual desire is not situated where we have cut and sewn… It's up here* [points at her head]. *A better way is to inform*

[157] This also goes for my use of snuff and chewing tobacco. Many Somali women have been obviously amused and made jokes about it. Some have also explained that if I had been a Somali woman, I would have been met with disgust for using such "male" substances. Now, it seems, it is accepted as a Swedish custom, not for Somalis to judge of.

the girls. Not only sexual education from the Swedish society, but from their parents. The children have to know how one gets pregnant, what the risks are and that there are diseases. If we educate the girls, there is no reason whatsoever to think about cutting (woman G).

- I don't think it will cause problems if I don't circumcise my girls. I don't think so, because I see things so differently, if I compare myself with my mother. My daughters were born here and I know that they… that there is no way I can raise them in the same way I was raised by my mother. It would… turn out wrong. Completely wrong. They were born here and will grow up here in Sweden, and they will have the opportunity to learn a lot of things I never learned. It's so different, entirely different.
- Will you be worried about pregnancy while they are unmarried?
- Yes… are there any parents who don't worry? Swedes or Somalis… I can't imagine there exist parents who'd say 'I don't care if she becomes pregnant'. All parents want the best future possible for their children. It holds for you as well as for us. I'd worry whether they are circumcised or not. I know several girls who became pregnant in spite of [pharaonic] circumcision, circumcision is not the point. It's simply about raising you children as well as you can and hope for the best (woman K).

To sum up, Somali parents in Sweden have to deal with raising their children in a morally unfamiliar context, where some of the traditional Somali and Islamic values – like the ban of premarital sexuality – are not in accordance with the rest of the society. The strategies used for handling this situation is an upbringing based on education and trust, but also, apparently, a harsher social control of the girls.

7.4 Chaste conduct as a proof of virginity

In trying to explain why mothers once had them circumcised, many women have mentioned the importance of showing a future husband that the girl is a virgin at her wedding. Even if some girls have been "open" – sunnah circumcised or not circumcised at all – when they married, and even if it seems to be a well-known fact that it is possible to reinfibulate a girl who has had intercourse to make her resemble a virgin (generally one can not tell from the sight of a scar when the infibulation was done), a pharaonically circumcised vagina seems to be the ultimate symbol of virginity (see sections 4.9.1, 5.1 and 6.1).

Since practically all the women declare that their own daughters will remain uncircumcised, the question of future husbands appears: how can uncircumcised Swedish Somali girls prove their good nature and virgin state before marriage?

This question did not seem to cause as much anxiety to the women in this study as the issue about unwanted pregnancies. Women, when asked, thought that this has ceased to be a problem, considering the fact that their daughters probably are going to marry men influenced by new views on this custom: Somali men who have grown up in exile or men in Somalia affected by processes toward change going on

there.[158] Besides, most marriages nowadays are entered by two persons who know each other well: the man will know from the woman's conduct that she is a 'good girl':

> *- In reality it doesn't matter if you are circumcised or not, or if you have sunnah… It's about how you behave, if you have self-confidence and show that you are someone who deserves respect. You have to be proud and act accordingly* (woman G).

Virginity is still a key concept. Thus, the most important thing for an unmarried girl is to show that she cherishes her own virginity and always refuses to let herself into sexual activities:

> *- Women who live in Sweden should think about raising their girls well, so the girls respect themselves. No circumcision and stuff like that. But make the girls understand the importance of virginity. She can tell the man 'I won't sleep with you until we are married', and then he'll know she is a good girl. If she is a good girl she should not [have sex]… the most important thing is that she is a virgin. That's what matters. You should wait until you are married, our religion and culture demand that. 'I'm not circumcised, but I am virgin and I won't sleep with you until I'm married'. I don't think there is any man who would reply 'No, I don't want you'… no* (woman X).

The first time I was introduced to this line of reasoning was during my first interview with woman A, who told me she was sunnah circumcised. I asked her about her marriage: how could her husband know for sure that she was a virgin? They knew each other well, she explained, she had shown her personality to him in innumerable situations. But she told him about her sunnah circumcision in advance, to avoid the risk of a discussion at the wedding night, fearing that it might be an unpleasant surprise to him, in case he had expected her to be vaginally closed. And, perhaps the most important thing of all, she had denied him sex before they were actually married:

> *- Yes, we kissed and fondled and stuff like that…* [starts laughing]. *But no sex. And I believe that… Well, when I said no to him, he kind of knew that I was a girl who does not have sex before marriage* (woman A).

Omar and I talked to woman H about the same topic, as she is sunnah circumcised, asking about her husband's reaction to the fact that she did not have the traditional sign of virginity. She answered that the matter was never even brought up between the two of them. She and her husband knew each other from early childhood and she was familiar with the fact that her husband had been involved in programs managed by the United Nations, including public health and family planning (as quoted in section 5.2). It never even occurred to her that he would be disappointed or critical to the fact that she had no infibulation.

Talking about these issues, some women were upset about the double standard of morality existing in the Somali society. According to Islamic principles, extra-marital sex is *haram* for both men and women. Yet, as discussed in section 5.2, the

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[158] See Aretun (1998) and discussion in section 5.2, about a tendency among young Somali women to internalise the norm of chaste conduct.

fact that a young unmarried man has sex does not cause the same indignation as if an unmarried woman does.[159]

> *- I don't think that Somali men will ever change when it comes to sex. They want to sleep with a girl or a woman, but it's not sure that they are willing to marry her. And that's actually unfair… that the man can do whatever he wants and the woman can't. He is a Muslim and I am a Muslim and we are both obliged to do what our religion demands… If you are dating a man, finally he will ask you 'Do you want to sleep with me?' and such things… he will ask you that. Then you should reply 'No, I have never slept with anyone and I don't want to', that's a sign…*
> *- A sign of what?*
> *- That you are a good woman* (woman X).

As mentioned in section 7.3, more men than women spontaneously made a distinction between pharaonic circumcision and virginity. If the men interviewed in this study are representative of Somali men in Sweden in general (there is no reason to believe otherwise), there will be no problems on their part to accept young women for marriage even if the women can not prove in a physical way that they are virgins. The quotation below reflects very well how many men reasoned about this:

> [Carlbom asks:] *- If you don't do pharaonic circumcision to the girls, how can you be sure of that these girls are virgins at marriage?*
> *- Firstly, virginity is not about sewing up, but there is a natural virginity. Secondly, there is no way to guarantee that a girl remains virgin. Pharaonic circumcision is no guarantee. Every individual has a choice… in reality she can do whatever she wants. It depends a lot on her family, but basically, it's up to every woman to make this decision. Both Islam and Somali tradition state that it's forbidden to have extra-marital sex, whether or not one is married. But it's up to the individual to decide if she wants to… be promiscuous.*
> *- If a girl has a natural virginity… such maidenhood may burst spontaneously… without sex. How can you know that a girl tells the truth about being a virgin?*
> *- There is no reason to distrust her… if there is no rumour telling opposite things. You don't question a woman without reason* (man S).

The interviewer continues by asking if one way to know for sure is to ask the girl's family about it. This is a matter one can not bring up easily, this man claims:

> *- According to Somali tradition, when a man is about to marry, and he wants to marry a girl from a certain family, he never asks if she is [genitally] closed or not. One just doesn't… it would be shameful. One takes it for granted… that she is a virgin. One knows about her family and background, and her personality, one knows what reputation she has. There is nothing else to it* (man S).

The man concludes by stating that such questions about somebody's daughter – if she is pharaonically circumcised or not – may trigger off a real conflict and perhaps

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[159] A young Swedish Somali woman, interviewed in Omsäter (1996), claims: "The modern guys prefer to marry girls who are uncircumcised. But of course they can't ask about this when they propose. I think that they simply take it for granted, that girls who have grown up in Sweden are uncircumcised" (ibid.:25).

lead to no marriage at all. Bringing up such issues is, according to him, a serious social blunder.

In Sweden today, there are adult Somali women, most of them pharaonically circumcised since childhood, and there are many small girls growing up who will remain uncircumcised due to new views on this custom in the parental generation. But some of the Somali women, young and unmarried, were already circumcised when they arrived in Sweden. Talking to some of them, I was struck by the fact that they on principle were opposed to the practice of pharaonic circumcision, but still unwilling to have a defibulation exercised at a hospital or a clinic.

Woman J, newly married and a fervent opponent of pharaonic circumcision, is illustrative of this ambivalent attitude:

> *- When I went to hospital because I had problems with my urine, they couldn't see anything, but they wanted me to be opened. I said I would think about it. Then I said 'no, I shall wait until I get married' and I took some pills [to cure the infection]. I was told I could get a certificate [stating that defibulation had taken place for medical reasons]. But I don't think that this [certificate] is a good idea, because if we love each other and I haven't done anything [had sex], he must trust me.*
> *- But even so, you yourself chose to not be opened?*
> *- Yes.*
> *- Why?*
> *- Because…* [laughs]*… I waited.*
> *- Why is it important for a girl to be closed at her wedding?*
> *- Well… if not, many will not believe that I was opened because of infections. They will believe that I've slept with many men and things like that* (woman J).

She was opened at hospital, but first she let her husband see her infibulation: *"I wanted him to know for sure that he can trust me."* I can only speculate about the grounds for this ambivalence. If one reflects upon it superficially, one is led to believe that if completely uncircumcised girls are accepted as trustworthy women, also women defibulated for medical reasons would feel safe. But it does not seem to be in that way. Among Somalis in Malmö, I only know of a few cases where the young women have chosen to be opened in the health care system before they have decided whom to marry, while I have heard of several women (and also talked in person to a few) who will postpone this procedure until they are married.[160] Fear of doubts seems to carry a great weight:

> *- I have a friend who is twenty-four years old and still unmarried. She has never had sex. Every time during menstruation she has incredible pains, she has to report sick for a couple of days every month. Just a tiny tiny opening. I've told her to go and have it opened, but she refuses. She is afraid that it will be believed that she had sex before marriage* (woman G).

Another reason could be that the purpose of the pain and complications attached to pharaonic circumcision would be lost if the woman is opened 'in advance': all this suffering for nothing? If she endures to be closed only a few more years, the

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[160] As quoted earlier: *"Traditionally, a woman who has had sex before she is married is a bad woman, she is a whore… The man can be with anyone. He can screw thousands before he is married. He is never… he will still be seen as a virgin"* as woman G expressed it quite frankly.

operation done to her will not have been carried out in vain. She will be able to demonstrate that she has a trustworthy personality, even if she lives in a society characterised by sexual liberty.

A chaste conduct, according to most informants, can replace pharaonic circumcision in the social interaction among Somalis. And it seems as if these attitudes have already influenced many Somali marriages:

> *- I've met many young girls who came to Sweden when they were little girls, they haven't had any circumcision… they have met boys and they are married now and everything is fine. […] To men it's not important that women are sewn up… the only thing that really matters to them is that they can feel sure that they are the real fathers of their children* (woman C).

7.5 Strategies for the future

As been discussed in the Introduction and in section 5.1, there is no way for individual Somalis to know how Swedish Somalis *in general* think about female circumcision. They may know of the views of people closest to them, and they may speculate about the rest on the basis of scattered discussions and rumours. Nevertheless, the issue of strategies for a total eradication of the practice among Swedish Somalis were discussed in many interviews. Two themes emerged frequently, one focusing Islam and another focusing a more open debate between Somali men and women.

Islam was seen as the most powerful instrument in changing people's minds, both in Somalia and in exile:

> *- The best way to handle it, I think, is to build a strong campaign out of Islam, because… Somalis obey Islam and Islamic norms. If people get a clear idea that this is non-Islamic, they will have to stop. But this will take time. It may take a quarter or a half of a century before we have got rid of this [in Somalia]. But among Somalis in diaspora, it's much easier… no problem at all* (man R).

> *- 'What says Islam about female circumcision?' If you talk about it from a religious angle… you know, there may still exist people who believe that this has something to do with religion. It's necessary to involve people who are well-informed in these questions. It's a good starting point, religion* (woman F).

Some of the informants emphasised the importance of an increased dialogue between men and women:

> *- I think it would be good if women and men could meet… maybe once a month or something… and discuss this matter. Much time will be needed. It's not a small thing, this about circumcision. It's not enough to just gather men and women once and tell them 'this is wrong'… it takes time to get used to new ways of thinking. And spreading information, it takes time. […] The women are the key persons*

in this. Often she hasn't even asked her husband what he thinks about it, she has no idea if he thinks it's good or bad… so women need to be encouraged to discuss this matter with their husbands (woman X).

These two themes, of Islam and of a cross-gender dialogue, will be elaborated below in a concluding discussion of the empirical material in this study.

In Chapter Five, we could establish that almost all informants in this study had taken a clear stand against pharaonic circumcision. After some pursuit, two women could be found who deviated from the others: one who had the opinion that the practice of pharaonic circumcision is a good tradition and ought to be kept alive, and one woman who was not in favour of it, but thought that she would yield to kin pressure if her family decided to move back to Somalia. One man was found who was in favour of clitoridectomy in adult women for esthetical reasons. All the other informants stated they would not let their daughters undergo any form of circumcision, even if they found a symbolic sunnah circumcision to be an acceptable option for those who are not ready to leave the practice behind altogether.

The crucial aspect in the process of changed views was Islam. Whether or not the informants had changed their minds about female circumcision before or after they arrived to Sweden, reflection upon Islam had had a strong impact. Even the woman in favour of pharaonic circumcision claimed that Islam bans this practice. The difficulties in classifying *all* forms of female circumcision as *haram*, religiously forbidden, according to the Islamic sources (see section 4.5) are reflected in the fact that many of the informants said that a symbolic sunnah circumcision is acceptable, even if not necessary. Thus, most informants based their argumentation with the help of religious categories explaining their standpoints. The Islamic ban on extra-marital sex was also put forward in discussions about the importance of chaste conduct in unmarried young women. It seems, then, that what many Somalis apprehend to be the basic Islamic norms are used as guidelines living in a new and unfamiliar environment. From this follows that some values are preserved in exile; like the importance of chastity in girls, and the repugnance toward an unmarried girl who has failed her family through an illegitimate pregnancy. On the other hand, attitudes to the practice of female circumcision have been reassessed through a filter of reflection on Islam, a process that has led to change. Generally speaking, a widespread belief that Islam demands girls to be circumcised has turned into a conviction that God forbids any harm inflicted on God's creation, including drastic changes of small girls' genitals.

One of the motive powers behind a maintained practice of female circumcision in Somalia is the absence of dialogue between men and women. Sexuality and genitals are tabooed topics, a fact which has led to a boundless space for speculative ideas about the opposite sex to thrive. Men are generally passive when it comes to female circumcision, as the subject is so intimately associated with the sphere of women. A man who "pokes his nose" into this runs the risk of being stigmatised; those who dare are met with resistance.

Among Somali women there is a generalised knowledge about men's attitudes, stating that men in general are in favour of pharaonic circumcision. Some women claim that men prefer infibulated women for the sake of their own sexual pleasure, and even more women believe that Somali men in general prefer infibulated women as the closing of the vagina is seen as a proof of virginity. This is often the case also

with many Somali women who have personal experiences of husbands who have been obvious exceptions. Also their fathers have been experienced as exceptions: opponents in contrast to men in general. We can therefore identify a clear discrepancy between the level of sexual ideology (Leavitt 1991) and specific individuals' personal experiences.

Hence, besides the moulding of opinion through discussions about female circumcision and Islam, those Somalis in exile who privately oppose harsher forms of circumcision would benefit immensely from a more open dialogue involving both sexes and the various themes attached to the public discourse on sexuality.

The non-existence of documented illegal cases of female circumcision in Sweden, in addition to the findings about a change of values among Swedish Somalis in this study, could with the use of Mackie's (1996, 1998, and 2000) model be understood as if a *tipping point* has been reached. "[I]f enough families abandon footbinding, then their children can marry each other", he comments (2000:256) while describing the process of Chinese abrupt abandonment of footbinding. In this thesis we can see how parents see alternative marriage markets for their daughters, pointing at the fact that innumerable Somalis live in western exile, and that young Somali women state that Somali men in exile, of their own generation or younger, will not care about whether their future wives are circumcised or not.

The fact that the values among the Swedish Somalis concerning female circumcision seem to have change so drastically (in contrast to expectations that such a 'deeply rooted' practice needs the passing of generations for an abandonment) gives some support to the suitability of using Mackie's model for an interpretation of the findings. The three key aspects of a drastic abandonment of a practice like footbinding are, according to Mackie (ibid.): 1) an escape from the belief trap, 2) an increased level of knowledge, and 3) public pledges and the appearance of alternative marriage markets. If we use Mackie´s model to interpret the empirical findings in this study, it is possible to argue that:

1) the *belief trap* has been overcome among Swedish Somalis (see section 5.5), as the practice of pharaonic circumcision is no longer considered as 'natural' and 'normal' to Somalis in exile;

2) increased knowledge has been reached, especially religious knowledge (see section 5.6), but also knowledge about the harmful aspects of the practice;

3) public pledges take place, at the same time as *alternative marriage markets* have appeared (see above in this chapter). Most informants – including the one advocating infibulation – claimed that the prospects of marriage for their daughters in the future do not any longer depend on whether the girls are circumcised or not.

The informants see the advantages of abandoning female circumcision exceed the advantages of maintaining the practice in exile, practically all using Islamic arguments for their changed standpoint. All three conditions for a rapid change, formulated by Mackie (1996, 1998, and 2000), have then been met: there is reason to argue that there has been a convention shift in the field of female circumcision among the Swedish Somalis. This will be further discussed in the following chapter.

The segregation between Somali men and women and the taboo surrounding the issue of female circumcision, resulting in uncontested views of the opinions of the opposite sex (Chapter Six), may work as an obstacle in the process towards a complete abandonment of the practice. On the other hand, the Swedish law against female circumcision, well-known among the Swedish Somalis in this study (section 5.7), can be seen as a factor contributing to a quicker abandonment of the practice (in Mackie's terms: the tipping point is moved at an earlier stage in time).

Yet another factor complicating the process toward a rapid and complete abandonment is the public discourse in Sweden, stating that this is a practice widely maintained in Sweden. This state of affairs will be discussed in Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten.

8 Culturalism and cultural change

8.1 'They do it because it is their culture': our era's concept of race

Culturalism can be understood as a perspective characterised by an understanding of the relations between ethnic groups (majority and minorities) in western societies in terms of their 'culture' (Duffield 1984, in Schierup 1993:165). "All of a sudden, everyone got 'culture'", as the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1999:401) has framed the general tendency of cultural politics in different settings all over the world.

A kindred aspect is when the notion of culture is ascribed properties of agency. 'Culture' is seen as an independent intrinsic force in people, a specific set of values which they will not reassess and which guides them toward a specific behaviour almost impossible to change.[161] Furthermore, culture is seen as more important in the specific social situation known as 'exile', or 'migration', because it is something the immigrants 'hold onto' in the face of their difficult social situation. Presumptions that immigrants maintain the practice of female circumcision are in the culturalist view explained as a way in which people tend to strengthen their traditions living in a foreign country: *they do it because it is their culture, and culture gets more important in exile*. Such reasoning seems to underlie some Swedish

[161] In Ismail's study on medical complications due to female circumcision among Swedish Somali girls and young women (1999), half of the 12 girls who had urinary complications because of infibulation had not sought medical advice, as they did not want to be opened before they had married: they were afraid that others would know that they had 'lost' their infibulation, that no man would like to marry them, or that they would bring shame on their family (ibid.:19, 21). In an other study including twelve Swedish Somali girls aged 16-22 (Nath & Ismail 2000), only two of the eight with infibulation stated that they were willing to be opened before marriage.

academic scholars' explanations of the persistence of female circumcision (despite the lack of concrete reported cases). The theologian Hedin (1994) is an example:

> While there is a [cultural] development in the native country, it ceases among the emigrants. They often lack power and education for changing themselves when confronting the new [circumstances]. Instead they stand up for the old [habits/values]. To eliminate all kinds of change, the national traditions are raised to religiously commanded rules. Female circumcision is an example of this [Hedin 1994:143, my translation from Swedish].

In the televised documentary discussed in Chapter Nine, the culturalist view was the perspective underpinning the whole narrative. A clip from the trials in France, where West African immigrants were sentenced for female circumcision, was used to illustrate the logic of maintenance of the practice in exile:

> [A black man shouting in French into the camera:] What has been sentenced here in France is the African culture. Eight years – for what? This is not a crime. They haven't killed anybody. She [the circumciser] has not killed anybody. Are you supposed to get eight years for circumcision? This is the culture we have![162]

The selection of pictures strengthened the impression of evil Africans, obsessed with cultural ideas, hiding their faces. The Swedish broadcast made no mention of the fact that the trials in France were held with West African immigrants, while the African groups in Sweden come largely from Africa's Horn; or that exile groups in France are generally not political refugees but labour immigrants from ex-colonies and, thus, have another history in another host country; or that there are large numbers of French West Africans who bitterly and openly oppose female circumcision.[163] The program gave the impression that if one is African, coming from a country where female circumcision is practised, one is forced to stick to this cultural practice.

Culture, it seems, inhabits people and forces them to live in accordance with old traditions, especially when groups live in segregation abroad. "There are indications that the strong force of tradition leads parents, coming from countries where genital mutilation is practised and who have children in Sweden, to persist in maintaining the custom", it is brought forward in a government bill presented to the Swedish Parliament (Prop. 1998/99:70, my translation from Swedish). This view gives 'culture' a property of agency; 'culture' in itself is regarded sufficient to explain why people do certain things. The anthropologist Jonathan Friedman has argued that: "[C]ultural specificity can never be accounted for in terms of itself. It can never be understood as an autonomous domain that can account for the organization of behavior" (1995:81).

In Friedman's view, culture is about *difference*: "different ways of doing similar things" (ibid.:80), and he argues that the tendency to transform these differences into essence is a product of western modernity. According to Friedman, an area of

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[162]See e.g. an article in *Aftonbladet* (19 October 2000) with the headline: "Social worker: One does not stop mutilating women, only because one moves to a new country".

[163]The televised documentary 'The Forgotten Girls' (SVT1, 6 September 2001). My translation of the Swedish subtitles. Further discussion in Appendix.

investigation ought to be how these differences, cultural specificities, arise and become homogeneous in a population (and to what degree). He suggests that socialisation, authority and identity are key concepts for an understanding of how these specificities become "naturalized" for people involved (ibid.:81). To further emphasise that the understanding of culture must be based upon what people do (and not a notion of culture as an object), Friedman suggests a reformulation of the concept of culture in terms of a "return to the verb" (ibid.:80).

Friedman's view contrasts to the essentialist view, seeing culture as having a 'deeply rooted' static existence inside people. The contrast between the essentialist and the dynamic understanding of culture is also made by Gerd Baumann (1999). According to Baumann, there are two basic theories of culture: the *essentialist* one, which is popular in the media and in much political rhetoric, but also among minorities; and the much less popular *processual* theory. Basically it is a question of whether we see culture as something people 'have', or if culture is a process shaped by people:

> Until now, the more influential of the two theories is the essentialist one, which regards national cultures, ethnic cultures, and religious cultures as finished objects. Their features, it is thought, have been worked out through long historical processes, and they are thought now to influence and even shape the actions and thoughts of all their so-called members. In this view, culture, whether national, ethnic, or religious, is something one has and is a member of, rather than something one makes and reshapes through constant renewing activity [Baumann 1999:83-84].

The Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz argues that there is reason to see culture as a process, to avoid static images of cultures as 'species', where Swedes, Arabs and Zulus become like elks, camels and zebras: "they are born and die, but during their lifetime they do not exchange any characteristics", like a leopard never changes its spots (1999:371, my translation from Swedish). But on the other hand, Hannerz argues, there is no constant change either. He sees the role of culture as a continuous instrument for adjustment to changing circumstances in life, where various forces may cause slow or dramatic sudden cultural changes (ibid.).[164]

With culture being the key organising concept of anthropology, it has undergone continual assessment and critique. The entire historical discussion will not be related here. However, I shall shortly discuss a critique of the prevalent concept of culture brought forward by the Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan (1995, 1999), as her views are relevant in a discussion about culturalism.

Wikan argues that the concept of culture has become our era's concept of race:

> What is racism? Yes, it is to treat a group of people as inferior due to ethnic characteristics. "Culture" works in a racist way when it is a *model for human behaviour used to understand "them", but not ourselves*, and when this model implies a *depreciation of others*. And this is my assertion: While we treat Norwegians as people with various personalities and with an ability and will to think by themselves, immigrants are to a great extent seen as *products* of their culture – as if they have fallen into the power of culture and lack self-governed judgement. By that we deprive

[164] For accounts of the cases of female circumcision in France, see Gallard (1995), Winter (1994), and Bloul (1996).

> them of motivation and purpose, even stupidity and folly, essential traits of mankind [Wikan 1995:18, my translation from Norwegian, italics in original].

Wikan also emphasises, like the writers quoted above, that we often mistakenly regard 'culture' as a static phenomenon, while 'cultural stuff' in reality, as all human activity, is highly dynamic.

Ellen Gruenbaum, who has conducted research about female circumcision for decades, focusing on Sudan, has come to the conclusion that the culturalist perspective – "'tradition' as the sole explanation" (1996:456) – is problematic when it comes to efforts to change circumcision practices:

> When reformers assume that people follow "tradition" for no conscious reason, they overlook the complexity of decision-making processes within a culture and the competing demands on individuals [Gruenbaum 1996:456]. Culture is always dynamic, and that is even more the case when the issue at hand is the subject of international controversy, health education, and political discord [Gruenbaum 2000:51].

It is an essentialist view on culture that lurks behind the culturalist conviction that the practice of female circumcision is maintained in exile, with the only argument used is that 'they do it, because it is their culture'. In the following section it is argued that this perspective is challenged by empirical findings regarding female circumcision, but also through analogous examples.

8.2 A clash with empirical findings

In a discussion about female circumcision, and of assertions claiming that 'culture' demands that girls are circumcised, Wikan points out that 'it', culture, always consists of people's opinions, people's choices and people's decisions.[165] Wikan is critical of the fact that the culturalist perspective has been utilised in the courts in attempts to justify or 'explain' criminal acts, as defenders have pleaded for lenient sentences or verdicts of not guilty as the acts are said to be part of the defendants' 'culture'. According to Wikan, in a western society where there are laws against female circumcision, there is no reason to accept justifications of incidents of female circumcision when formulated in terms of 'culture' (1995, 1999).[166]

Turning her argument upside down, it is possible to argue that there is no reason to make assumptions about what entire (exile) groups are up to, from what is supposed to be their 'culture'. In a study conducted by Aden et al. (1999) among exiled Somalis in Gothenburg, the authors conclude, discussing gendered relations, that: "When Somali refugees came to Sweden some of them came to adopt much of

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[165] See also Lane & Rubinstein (1996) for a discussion of cultural knowledge as dynamic and contingent, in relation to the issue of female circumcision.

[166] Wikan (1995:37ff). The word "stemmer" in Norwegian has double meaning, and may be translated either into "voices" or into "votes"; therefore I use the word "opinions".

the modern lifestyle and cultural norm systems, preferably young people and some of the females" (ibid.:20).

The Norwegian anthropologist R. Elise B. Johansen (in press) explores experiences of pain in a study among Norwegian Somali women. She highlights the importance of change in the exile situation for some cultural models to be explicit and questioned:

> The identification with cultural models varies between individuals and situations. At some points, cultural models are taken as self-evident realities (*doxa* in Bourdieu's term), whereas they in other situations become objects of reflection (*heterodoxy*). The dynamic relationship between cultural models and personal experiences may be particularly visible in periods of change. My exiled informants find themselves in a situation where many "taken for granted" cultural and social norms have become explicit and questioned, thus calling forth a more articulated and conscious consideration of personal experience, cultural models and the relationship between the two [Johansen, in press].

Living in exile means that some aspects of life never or seldom reflected upon become verbalised. Female circumcision, traditionally a tabooed topic in Somalia, has been defined as a problem in Western Europe in connection with African immigration, and, thus, become a practice reflected upon and debated among exile Somalis (see section 5.5). The first step for a change of a practice is that the practice is moved from the sphere of unmentionable phenomena, and explicitly named and discussed, according to the islamologist Jan Hjärpe.[167]

My own field data, and the interviews carried out by the trans-ethnic research group, can help elucidate some aspects of Somali life in Sweden. In the list below, the left column could be seen as the traditional 'culture' of Somalis, as described in academic writing on female circumcision in Somalia (e.g. Talle 1991, 1993, Gallo & Abdisamed 1985, Dirie & Lindmark 1991, Omar 1991, and Ntiri 1991, 1993), while the right column represents my own conclusions about what Somalis are faced with in their exile life in Sweden. The purpose of the table is to emphasise how altered circumstances and experiences in exile lead to altered values, strategies and opinions.[168] The statements in the two columns are made at a general level. The motives for circumcision of girls in the left column are not universal among Somalis in Somalia; nor do the statements to the right about experiences of exile Somalis in Sweden pretend to include all Somalis on Swedish soil. It is, however, an attempt to illustrate general trends.

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[167] For a review of the culturalist arguments used in the French trials on circumcision, see Winter (1994).

[168] Statement at the panel in a never televised recording of the program *Mosaik* (12 September 2001, see section 9.2). See also Talle (2001:30f): "Other places, other meanings", about Somali women in London.

Motives for circumcision of girls in Somalia	*Circumstances behind changed attitudes in Sweden*
• An experience of being circumcised as the "normal" and "natural" state	• The "normality"/"naturalness" of the state becomes questioned living in exile
• A conviction that Islam demands circumcision	• Encounters with other Muslims (especially Muslim Arabs) not circumcising their daughters –> reflection upon Islam and circumcision
• A fear that the daughter will be rejected at marriage	• Changed marital patterns: Nowadays young people know each other before marriage Future husbands can be found among Somali men who have grown up in western exile
• The fact that practically all other girls are circumcised, which leaves an uncircumcised girl exposed to stigmatisation	• In Sweden girls are generally not circumcised –> if circumcised, the girl would be the one deviating from most of her peers
	• A deep fear of Swedish social authorities and the risk of losing custody of the children

Other aspects of Somali life have changed in exile as well. One example concerns circumstances during delivery (see also section 3.4). According to tradition, giving birth is an activity exclusively restricted to the women's sphere. During the interviews about experiences of pregnancy and delivery (Essén et al. 2000), practically all the women who had given birth in Sweden stated that their husbands were present at delivery. Most of them claimed this to be a positive experience; some conveyed that it was a good thing sharing this moment, and a few stated that it was good for the husband to really know what women go through during childbirth, a fact which they claimed had made the husband more sensitive to his wife's need after delivery. According to one of the midwives involved in the Gothenburg Project, about 99% of the husbands in these groups (groups coming from countries where female circumcision is practised) are present when their wives give birth: "The reason may be that he does not want to leave his woman alone in such an important situation, in a foreign country. Alternatively, the husband may want to be on hand to provide language interpretation during delivery" (Wenche Johansson, in Omsäter 1996:29, my translation from Swedish). Wiklund et al. (2000) discuss the abandonment of traditional practices in this field, reporting both positive and negative reactions to the husbands' presence in the delivery room among the female and male interviewees in a study about Somalis giving birth in Sweden:

> Both women and men explained that childbirth in Somalia is strictly female business in which no men were allowed to participate. Because of the special cultural and social circumstances in Sweden, the Somalian men often behaved as the women's primary support in contact with Swedish maternity and delivery care. In other words, both the woman and the man broke the strong Somali tradition of clear division between female and male spheres [Wiklund et al. 2000:109] … childbirth in Somalia is a strictly female matter, carefully hidden by a strong female culture [ibid.:111].

Here we see again that cultural patterns – even time-honoured customs – do not need to be preserved at any cost in new social contexts, even though they have seemed well-founded and rational in an other context not long ago (and even still are considered so by many). Customs do not even have to change slowly, but a change may occur quite drastically. This perspective is clearly in conflict with the often prevalent culturalist perspective, which tends to see immigrants as "uniform carriers of culture conceived as a static object", or "bereft of agency […] and the ability to change or adapt to new circumstances" (Wikan 1999:58). Most Somali women and men seem to have adjusted very well – and quickly – to these new ways in the context of giving birth, void of any fixed ideas about how they ought to behave in terms of 'culture'.

The overall conclusion of this thesis, that living in exile influences the cultural practice of female circumcision, causing it to be abandoned, is consistent with the results of a British study by Morison et al. (1998, n.d.), who state that campaigns to eliminate female circumcision should target "males, older generations, new arrivals and those who show few signs of assimilation". In England, 43% of the males stated, filling in questionnaires, that they would definitely or probably circumcise any daughters they had, while only 18% of the women stated such intention.[169] The general tendency was that men and women who had decided not to have their daughters circumcised had stayed longer and/or were more assimilated than the others. The data, gathered in 1996, included men and women aged 16-22:

> Living in Britain from younger age was associated with more assimilation (language, dress, socialising), lower risk of being circumcised for females, less agreement with the assumptions about sexuality that underpin the continuation of female circumcision and less likelihood of wanting to continue the tradition on any daughters. Living as an ethnic minority appears therefore to be associated with abandonment of traditional practices such as female circumcision, rather than with intense efforts to preserve traditions [Morison et al., n.d.].

In the British study quoted above, assimilation toward secular ideas leads to changed attitudes regarding female circumcision. Religious assimilation may also

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[169] This is confirmed by a qualitative study including nine circumcised (Somali and Afar) women in south Sweden. All of them had changed their views of female circumcision. Some of the older women were in favour of a mild sunnah circumcision, while everybody was opposed to infibulation (Moussa, 1998).

Chris Coulter discusses the matter briefly in a report about Somali women in Rinkeby, Stockholm, and relates a discussion she was present at: "Three of the [five] women said that they knew that there was nothing written in the Koran about the infibulation of young girls, while the other two thought it said something about the smaller circumcision, *Sunna*" (Coulter 1997:30). All women stated that they were opposed to pharaonic circumcision. All of the women interviewed in her study claimed that they had not had their daughters circumcised, except one, who had had her daughter sunnah-circumcised.

In a study about medical complications due to female circumcision, 29 Swedish Somali girls aged 13-20 were interviewed (Ismail 1999). 22 had been circumcised (14 out of them infibulated). "The remaining four [of the uncircumcised girls] had been born in Somalia but had left the country at an early age before they would normally be circumcised (2-5 years old). The 22 girls who had been circumcised had migrated when they were older (7-16 years old)" (ibid.:16). Even if it is impossible to draw any conclusions from such a limited number of informants, the obvious tendency in the material is that growing up in Sweden from early age enhances the girls' opportunity to escape the procedure of circumcision.

have an impact. According to Kassamali (1998), Sudanese and Egyptians who have migrated to Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and other Muslim countries for economic reasons give up the practice of female circumcision, as they recognise that it is not integral to Muslim identity:

> Such knowledge may prove to be a powerful disincentive for those who have previously used religious justifications for the practice. The influence that Saudi Arabia exerts in the religious practices on the rest of the Muslim world should not be underestimated [Kassamali 1998:49].

Gruenbaum (1996) has observed a similar state of affairs doing fieldwork in Sudan, where the groups she studied were affected by Islamic movement processes, resulting in modified or abandoned female circumcision practices. She concludes: "[C]ultural arguments favouring the practice as part of a 'Sudanese heritage' will become less acceptable under a hegemonic interpretation of Islamic heritage" (ibid.:465). However, in the Swedish discourse on female circumcision, the culturalist view overshadows all other perspectives. This view is inherent in the multiculturalist ideology, most often advancing the view that other traditions and values (other 'cultures') *enrich* western societies.[170] The labelling of both benign traditions and harmful practices as 'cultural', leads to the assumption that immigrants – including second generation immigrants[171] – will stick to these traditions as if they were brainwashed.

Changes in the form of a decline of this custom are also possible in countries where it is widely practised.[172] In Somalia, it is difficult to tell what has happened to the practice of female circumcision during wartime. In a debate article from 1993, Bernhard Helander, Swedish anthropologist and author of books and articles on Somalia, argues:

> There is reason to assume that the enormous transfers of people which have taken place during wartime will lead to an increased share of young girls who will be spared circumcision altogether. Being refugees, both inside and outside the country, means that they land outside the traditional control of the elder women of the family, and, consequently, there is nobody to see to that the circumcision is carried out [Helander 1993b, my translation from Swedish].

In a study conducted in Somalia more than twenty years ago, 42 women out of 70 and 23 men out of 40 (roughly about 60% in both groups) stated they were of the opinion that the custom should be abolished. Many younger couples reported that

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[170]It is somewhat risky to 'translate' these figures and apply them to the Swedish situation. Somalis in Sweden and Somalis in England live under different circumstances, even if connected by global social networks (and the ever-present clan structure). In Sweden, it seems, the issue has been debated for at least a decade now, with the start of the Gothenburg Project in the early 1990s. The view of the Swedish society on this practice is very likely to be known by most exile Somalis in Sweden, through the Gothenburg Project and its ramifications, and through recurrent internal debates among Somalis after articles in the mass media. For a discussion on female circumcision in the UK, see also Dorkenoo (1994).

[171]For a discussion, see e.g. Schierup (1993), and Wikan (1995).

[172]Quoting the Swedish EU-commissioner Maj Britt Theorin on Great Britain: "3,000 female genital mutilations are performed every year, mainly by first generation and *second generation immigrants* from Africa" (2001a, my italics and translation from Swedish).

they had chosen sunnah circumcision for their daughters. Nearly half of the men (17/40) opposed any type of circumcision for their daughters (Abdalla 1982:94). Alternative rituals for girls have been carried out by the Water for Life Project in Somalia, involving symbolic infibulations (Shell-Duncan & Hernlund 2000:37). According to my informants in Malmö the general trend among people in Somalia is toward milder forms of sunnah circumcisions.

In a survey carried out in a rural area in Sudan (where infibulation in many parts is as widespread as in Somalia), 120 young parents were randomly selected for interviews about female circumcision (Almroth et al. 2001a; Almroth-Berggren 1998). All female respondents had been circumcised. 50 % of the young women had decided not to let their daughters undergo any form of circumcision and 38% of the young men.[173] The young fathers seemed to be more involved in decision-making than what have been known previously, especially those men who were opposed to the practice. The study noticed several positive signs concerning the practice. Before the social consequences of not letting daughters undergo the procedure had been perceived as worse than the physical consequences of actually having infibulation. The results from this survey suggest that this is changing (Almroth et al. 2001a).

What is described here is a situation of parents assessing the pros and cons of two options (the advantages and disadvantages of having a daughter go through female circumcision; and the advantages and disadvantages of having a daughter *not* go through female circumcision). In this particular situation, the advantages of refraining from having a daughter circumcised will increase, if several *others* form a similar opinion *at the same time*. Gruenbaum, who is hopeful about future changes in Sudan, emphasises the dynamic character of culture:

> [C]ultural variations are the products of thinking human beings who actively search out their best interests and who argue and decide, alone or in groups, whether to preserve one way of doing things or to invent others [Gruenbaum 1996:51].

Obiora (1997b) expresses a similar line of thoughts, arguing that "it stands to reason that the value and utility attached to circumcision are predicated on its burdens not exceeding its benefits" (ibid.:67). This situation of rational choice in relation to female circumcision is what has been elucidated by Gerry Mackie (see Introduction and section 4.9.4). In a 1996 article, Mackie argued, with no empirical evidence at all, that infibulation has structural similarities with Chinese footbinding and, hence, may vanish just as abruptly as footbinding did in China about hundred years ago.

After publishing his article, Mackie was contacted by the organisation *Tostan* in Senegal, whose activists affirmed that the local decline in the practice of clitoridectomy followed the logic described in his article. An educational program aimed at raising the general level of education among village women resulted in an

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[173]For local examples, see e.g. Sanderson (1981:63ff) and Lightfoot-Klein (1989a:51). Ogbu (1997) claims that: "[I]n most parts of Africa it [female circumcision] is dying or disappearing because of forces of social change; including formal schooling, Christianity, urbanization and the like" (unpaginated). Ogbu argues that estimations of the prevalence of female circumcision cited by anti-circumcision writers are exaggerated (Sudan and Somalia may be the exceptions) and that many researchers report a sharp decline in all African regions (ibid.). See also Leonard (2001b:176) for a similar conclusion, even if she herself describes a case of introduction of the practice.

official declaration from the village as a whole, that no more girls were to be circumcised in that village. At the same time, the village urged other villages to follow its example. The initiative led to a process where village after village in the area made similar declarations. Mackie has since developed his ideas, including the experiences of abandonment of this practice in parts of Senegal (2000).

Mackie's reasoning, based upon ideas from game theory about the interdependence of decisions and the idea that marriageability is the main engine of continuation (e.g. 2000:265), may be illustrated by the study in Somalia mentioned above, conducted more than twenty years ago. This study showed that more than half the 110 female and male interviewees were in favour of an abolition of the practice of female circumcision. The author makes concluding reflections:

> There is a very strong impression that both men and women would willingly see, specifically, the practices of circumcision and infibulation abolished. But by whom? Who will make the first move? If our daughters are not traditionally mutilated who will marry them? [Abdalla 1982:102].

The lesson we can learn from this is that female circumcision has to be understood as a strategy, and not an end it itself. The culturalist view, claiming that people who 'have' a certain culture are bound to stick to their tradition, disregards the flexibility inherent in social life. Somalis do not have their daughters circumcised simply because of some mechanical tradition. They have their daughters undergo circumcision because they are convinced that this is the best option for their daughters in the long run.[174]

Living in Swedish exile has led to a great number of changes in the parameters of social life among Somalis, which in turn have led them to consider a host of other circumstances before a decision to circumcise is made. The 'naturalness' of the state of infibulation is challenged (nobody can stay on in a belief trap); new information about the religious and medical aspects of the practice is available (moving the tipping point where most people realise that infibulation is a bad option at an earlier stage); and new markets for prospective marriage partners are opened, as so many young people grow up in western countries where infibulation is seen as something horrifying and harmful. Young Somali women will now be able to marry, even if they are uncircumcised.

According to Mackie's model, a public pledge is necessary to trigger this process of change (Mackie 2000:243). In the context of exiled Somali parents in Sweden, the situation is slightly different from the case of Chinese parents in China hundred years ago, or Senegalese parents in local villages in Senegal today. In the Chinese and Senegalese cases, the public pledges are made in situations where the social context remains basically unchanged. Swedish Somalis face a completely different social context marked by the experience of life in exile in a modern welfare state.

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[174] See also Gruenbaum (1996) about recent changes in Sudan: "…although much has changed in the past decade, including some reduction of the incidence and a shift toward the less severe forms, pharaonic circumcision has not been displaced as the operation of choice among the majority of families. Still, there is every reason to believe that the cultural debates that have been stirring for the last several decades have accelerated, and that a fairly dramatic process of change is underway" (ibid.:463).

In the cases of China and Senegal, public pledges are necessary to spread the word that alternative marriage markets (offering marriageable girls who are not footbound or circumcised) are opened; in the case of the Swedish Somalis, many view optimistically a general trend of abandonment among new generations growing up in the West: "*Those men [who are to marry the girls who are born now] they grow up now in Canada or London. I don't think it will be any problem. Look at me, I'm about to marry soon, but the man I marry won't ask if I'm circumcised or not",* as woman X expressed it. Even if Swedish Somalis lack a public sphere, as discussed in section 1.3., numerous articles have been published in Swedish newspapers through the years, showing individual Somalis who have declared that they will never circumcise their daughters.[175] Many Somali voluntary associations have the issue of female circumcision on the charter, a measure that can be said to resemble the declarations of the Natural Foot Societies in China. According to Mackie, a *critical mass* of opponents is required, which definitely need not be a numerical majority: "the more genuinely influential the individuals, the fewer that might be needed" (2000:253). For the individual Swedish Somali mother, who generally only discusses the matter with close friends and kin, opposition in her own circle may be sufficient to tip her own decision over to the non-circumcision 'camp' (or, at least, to postpone the decision).

In sum, expectations that female circumcision is a practice which is maintained among Somalis in Swedish exile, based on the idea that they probably maintain it because it is their 'culture' to do so, need to be challenged. This thesis, as well as studies from other parts where exile Somalis live, shows that there is reason to believe that female circumcision is a practice which is questioned, renegotiated and reassessed in exile contexts.

[175]In the traditional Somali context, kin pressure may have a significant importance for the choice of the individual mother. This aspect complicates the theoretical model used here.

9 A case of moral panic: 'The Forgotten Girls'

If Mackie's (1996, 1998, and 2000) model, as described in section 4.9.4 and Chapter Eight, is a good tool for an understanding of the reality among Somalis in Sweden, it follows that the process of abandonment of female circumcision in exile is facilitated by a general understanding that 'everybody else' among the Swedish Somalis abandons the practice. It also follows that public discussions rendering that there is a general maintenance of the practice complicate this process.

A documentary on female circumcision in Sweden was sent on the 6th of September 2001 by the national broadcasting company in the highly prestigious series *Dokument inifrån* (*Report From Within),* "De glömda flickorna" ('The Forgotten Girls'). In this chapter I shall argue that this program initiated a 'moral panic'.[176] Such moral panic may well be a complicating factor in the process toward a complete abandonment among Somalis in Swedish exile, as they get faulty signals about what is going on within their own community.

'Moral entrepreneurs' are key actors in creations of moral panics. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1995) define moral entrepreneurs as "organizers, activists, do-gooders, movement advocates who push for a given cause" (ibid.:20). Moral entrepreneurs are the creators of a *moral crusade*: when a form of behaviour is defined as a problem by certain officials, authorities, moral crusaders, and/or segments of the public. The concept 'moral crusade' implies, according to Goode and Ben-Yehuda, that activists who are working to bring about a change have a *moral* motivation first of all, a fact that does not exclude the presence of rational and protectionist motives as well.

In some cases there is an outburst of *moral panic* connected to a moral crusade.[177] A moral panic is characterised by a fear or a concern which is out of proportion to the threat posed by the behaviour (or supposed behaviour) of a certain group of people (ibid.:11):

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[176]Public meetings may work as fora for public pledges. In Whyte (1991:18) it is described how 65 Somali women at a meeting in Britain all spoke out against female circumcision.

[177]It may be a good idea to state for the record that there is no logical opposition in concerning about the well-being of small Somali girls at the same time as claiming that there is a moral panic attached to this issue. One may be of the conviction that exaggerations in this field (claiming that thousands of girls risk being subjected to circumcision, that female circumcision is likely to be going on a large scale among Swedish-African groups, etc) serve a good cause: if the panic leads to measures which save even one or two girls from circumcision, the end justifies the means. This is, however, a different matter.

> Moral panics […] are often, even usually – but not *necessarily* – initiated by activists. […] It may have been initiated anywhere – by crusaders, by the general public, by political or economic elites, by the media [Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1995:20, italics in original].

The discussion about the documentary 'The Forgotten Girls' is somewhat lengthy, and therefore enclosed as an appendix. The program is central in the discussion about politics in the field of female circumcision. It was sent at a time when the discourse on female circumcision in Sweden had entered some kind of 'empirical vacuum': most actors claimed that female circumcision was going on to some extent in Sweden, but there was no evidence – not even cases to support allegations about circumcisions taking place abroad on Swedish African girls. After the program was aired, it seems to be widely accepted that there is now strong evidence, perpetuated in this documentary. Consequently, the program must be analysed and discussed. What kind of evidence is offered in the program, and are there other possible explanations to incidents presented? These issues will be further discussed in the appendix.

In this chapter the concept of 'moral panic' is central. The chapter opens with a description of how the documentary was launched in the mass media, and concludes with a discussion of the aftermath of the documentary: the reactions among politicians, journalists and the public. This discussion does not constitute a traditional mass media analysis. It is an attempt to illustrate the general discourse on the 'stage of the drama', with examples from the mass media.[178] I shall argue that the public discussion after the documentary displayed all the indicators of a moral panic pointed out by Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1995).

9.1 The media launch

The broadcasting of the documentary 'The Forgotten Girls' seems to have been a well-planned media happening. It is doubtful if the arguments presented in the program would have had such an impact, if it had been sent without a pre-defined framework of background information. The Swedish public knew nothing or very little about this subject. Now, a couple days before the program was aired, people were offered background information, which could help them to sort the information given in the program. At the same time this background information worked as an obstacle to critical thinking about the argument and the actual support for it.

Two days in advance of the broadcast the reporter gave a piece to the mass media: that a list of eleven Swedish Somali girls had been handed over anonymously to *Barnombudsmannen* (ombudsman for the children) almost a year

[178]Moral panic may, of course, break out in situations where there is no crusade.

earlier.[179] The girls were said to have recently been circumcised abroad. Barnombudsmannen had not reported the letter to the police, a fact that forced the new head of the office to give a public apology and state that she herself, if she had been the head of the office when the anonymous letter arrived, would have taken action.[180]

Most morning papers and all evening papers, among them TT, reported this incident with focus on the suspicion that eleven Swedish Somali girls had been genitally mutilated.[181] TT is the Swedish central news agency, whose news all other media subscribe to. TT published the subsequent day an article with formulations almost identical to the wording of the speaker's script of the documentary, thereby establishing the perspective of the program even before it was sent.[182] The horrors of the procedure finish the article: "Many girls die in connection with the genital mutilation."[183] The same style characterises other articles published these days, like one in the evening paper *Aftonbladet* with a headline: "The whole lower abdomen may be cut away".[184]

The next day the reporter released the news-item of the religious leaders: "Religious leaders encourage mutilation". The Swedish television's own news editorial office framed it this way:

> Religious leaders secretly encourage families with a foreign background to genitally mutilate their daughters abroad, but officially they are opposed to these procedures.[185]

Both these assertions were recurrent especially in the evening papers, many of them dedicating several pages and placards to the issue. The news agency TT, as well as journalists from several newspapers, had access to the documentary (or transcripts) in advance and could quote plentifully. Nobody questioned the information given, but instead seemed to make the most of the situation: here was some 'juicy stuff' offered, ready-to-print.[186]

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[179]Most quotations from the news paper articles in this chapter originate from articles downloaded on the website *www.mediearkivet.se*, (keyword used: 'könsstympning', genital mutilation), and articles published by the Swedish news agency TT.

[180]'Ombudsman', according to the dictionary at *www.yourdictionary.com*: 1) a government official (as in Sweden or New Zealand) appointed to receive and investigate complaints made by individuals against abuses or capricious acts of public officials; 2) one that investigates reported complaints (as from students or consumers), reports findings, and helps to achieve equitable settlements.

[181]See e.g. TT, 6 September 2001; *Expressen*, 6 September 2001; *Aftonbladet*, 5 September 2001; *Nerikes Allehanda*, 7 September 2001.

[182]TT, 4 September 2001. Quoted in e.g. *Nerikes Allehanda*, 5 September 2001; *Borås Tidning*, 5 September 2001. See also *Göteborgs-Posten*, 6 September 2001.

[183]TT, 5 September 2001.

[184]TT, 4 September 2001. Quoted in e.g. *Nya Dagen,* 5 September 2001.

[185]*Aftonbladet*, 6 September 2001. The word used in Swedish is "underliv", literally "below waist" (virtually impossible to cut away), in lexicon translated into "lower abdomen, female organs of reproduction".

[186]SVT Text-TV, 5 September 2001. See also TT, 5 September 2001: "Religious leaders in Sweden encourage genital mutilation".

To the best of my knowledge, only one article deviated from the more general picture, where information from the reporter was passed on uncritically. It was the Malmö-based paper *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, presenting an interview with Asha Omar and another Somali woman the same day the documentary was sent on TV.[187] There they called attention to the fact that, in contrast to the general description given in the documentary, opposition to the practice is widespread among Somalis in Sweden.

The EU-commissioner Maj Britt Theorin had the opportunity to see the program in advance, and she had an indignant article published in one of the most important evening papers the same day the documentary was sent in TV (Theorin 2001c). A clip was shown in the national newscast and commented upon, as if astounding news were going to be demonstrated in the documentary later that night.

Viewers of the program, when it was sent on the 6th of September, had consequently a stable frame of reference, with which they could interpret the new information presented in the documentary. Two things were established before the program had even entered the ether: first, that many girls in Sweden are circumcised and the authorities seemingly do not care, and second, that religious leaders in Sweden encourage mutilation.

These ideas were further confirmed by the announcer, who just before the program began stated that:

> Female circumcision, or genital mutilation, is an illegal tradition in Sweden. But yet it is carried out here. And in spite of that our legislation has been a model in the world, nobody has been sentenced yet. In tonight's *Dokument inifrån* we shall among other things hear the girls themselves tell their stories.

This beforehand statement by the program announcer about "the girls themselves" – in reality only one (Egyptian) woman tells her story – probably had an impact on the way many viewers assessed the information given in the program. They were provided a frame of reference, which could guide them through the program. Then the events of the documentary unfold, apparently confirming the expectations built up by the news the days before.

In the analysis of the content of the documentary I claim that the arguments put forward by the reporter carry serious fallacies. These will be discussed in detail in Appendix. The following section focuses on the public reactions to the allegations made in the documentary. This is of interest, as these reactions in the future will form the basis of public measures in the field of female circumcision. They also represent a public attitude toward the Somali exile group in Sweden, in terms of what kind of 'signals' Swedish Somalis receive about their own community.

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[187] See e.g. *Aftonbladet*, 6 September 2001; *Expressen*, 8 September 2001. These articles offer extensive excerpts from transcriptions of the documentary.

9.2 The aftermath: indicators of a moral panic displayed

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1995) have discerned five indicators involved in cases of moral panic: Concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility. These concepts will be discussed below in relation to the public discussion about female circumcision following the documentary 'The Forgotten Girls'.

Concern

> First, there must be a heightened level of *concern* over the behavior of a certain group or category and the consequences that that behavior presumably causes for the rest of the society [Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1995:33, italics in original].

This concern may be manifested in e.g. media attention and/or social movement activity. In this case the concern has been most obviously expressed in newspaper articles and radio programs, highlighting the subject especially during the first week after the program was sent. The attention was interrupted by the terror attack on the World Trade Center five days after the broadcast of 'The Forgotten Girls'.

Many cases of moral panic imply the experience that the society as a whole is threatened in one way or another. When using the concept of moral panic in the case of female circumcision, it is not obviously perceived as a threat to the whole society in the same way that drug abuse or juvenile delinquency may be experienced. The victims are not *any* young Swedish girls, but (Swedish) girls of African origin. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is experienced as hostile and threatening to society. As the perpetrations are said to take place in Sweden, or on Swedish girls abroad, they may be experienced as menacing to how we want to see our own society: as a democratic society where all citizens are to be protected by the same law and order. This view is expressed in an editorial article published two days after the program had been sent:

> The TV-program sent on Thursday evening about genital mutilation of young girls in certain ethnic groups has, for understandable reasons, given raise to a host of agitated reactions. What was shown on television were the worst aspects of Welfare-Sweden: Authorities leaving their responsibilities, an order of law neither respected nor controlled, and compliancy and indulgence in facing fanaticism and terror of sexuality.[188]

The general concern was brought forward by all the articles in daily and evening papers, and by radio programs dedicated to the issue after the program. Official statements were made and measures were proposed.[189]

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[188] 6 September, 2001. The background was that Asha Omar and I had called *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* and asked if they were interested in writing an article with a somewhat different content than what the other papers produced.

[189] *Göteborgs-Posten*, 8 September 2001.

Hostility

> Second, there must be an increased level of *hostility* toward the group or category regarded as engaging in the behavior in question [Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1995:33, italics in original].

A division is made between 'we' and 'they', between good and bad people. Stereotyping is at work in dichotomizations of this kind, generating "folk devils" (ibid.:34), personifications of evil. This process is characterised by the stripping of all favourable characteristics and the ascribing of negative ones to a certain group of people (ibid.:28f).

This process as well can be exemplified by the editorial article quoted above:

> The victims are the most defenceless: young girls who sometimes not even have reached the school age, in the hands of parents, who, in their turn, are in hands of bigoted religious leaders and exposed to a collective cultural group pressure.[190]

Few writers direct their agony straightly toward the parents of the victims, most of them taking a roundabout way via the religious leaders, who are depicted as the real perpetrators. Nevertheless, Somalis or Africans in general are pictured as if they lacked empathy, even if they themselves are victims of the even more evil religious leaders. The EU-commissioner Maj Britt Theorin formulates it in terms of "Swedish citizens mutilate their daughters in Kenya and Somalia during summer holidays" and she refers to an imam (Bashir) "advising parents to carve out clitoris of their daughters'", condemning these holy men's "support of this torture" (Theorin 2001c).

Politicians and journalists are after all, as members of the elite, expected to show a certain degree of cultural sensitivity. The process of *demonology* (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1995:28) and the division between "us" and "them" may be more discernible in letters-to-the-editor columns, where 'ordinary people' express their views. Here an example, signed by "Father of two girls":

> In Oscar Hedin's highly revealing SVT-documentary about female genital mutilation on the 6th of September, there was a feature with a little girl, of the same age as my oldest daughter, who in Somalia was exposed to this disgusting and irrevocable encroachment.
>
> She cried in a heartbreaking way to her parents, to make them stop the man from cutting in her clitoris and genitals, but instead they held her arms firmly and separated her legs even more. I wanted to jump into the TV set and drag the girl away from these monsters and embrace her tightly and defend her from the world.
>
> Almost blinded by powerless tears I went into my daughter's nursery and watched her sleeping in her bed. I sobbed like a lunatic at her side. I placed her little hand in mine, and promised that no – no matter how old and well-established – tradition in the world would ever hurt her so badly.[191]

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[190] See e.g. TT, 6 September 2001, 7 September 2001, 8 September 2001, 9 September 2001; *Aftonbladet*, 7 September 2001, 8 September, and 12 September 2001; *Dagens Nyheter*, 8 September 2001; *Svenska Dagbladet*, 7 September 2001.

[191] *Göteborgs-Posten*, 8 September 2001.

This man had a profound experience of shock and disgust watching the program. His letter is included here to show that programs in this genre may give rise to an apprehension that Somalis are "monsters", and that they are essentially different from 'us', who love and protect our children. Even if the reporter/speaker never claims the universality of this practice among exile Somalis, he never mentions the widespread opposition to this practice among Somalis in exile. The "Father of two girls", and other viewers, will never be able to discriminate in everyday life between those among the exile Africans who are "monsters" and those who are not – and therein lies the stigmatisation of whole groups. This reasoning does not imply that harmful practices never should be discussed. It is an argument for a balanced and realistic depiction of categories of people in our society, for leaving simplistic dichotomizations of good and bad people behind.

Consensus

> Third, there must be substantial or widespread *agreement* or *consensus* – that is, at least a certain minimal measure of consensus in the society as a whole or in designated segments of the society – that the threat is real, serious, and caused by the wrongdoing group members and their behavior [Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1995:34].

The consensus about how to describe reality after this program was indeed overwhelming, practically all papers describing the subject in similar ways: "People take their daughters abroad during summer holidays and mutilate them. Contacts with persons who execute the mutilations are forwarded by the imams in the film" it is argued in one article.[192] Many articles use the expression "summer holiday mutilation", often already in the introduction (for a critique of this concept, see section B in Appendix): e.g. in *Expressen*, opening an article: "It is called summer holiday mutilation. During summer holidays the daughters are taken to foreign countries where they are genitally mutilated."[193]

A few incidents follow the documentary and are reported in several papers. The demand from the EU-commissioner Maj Britt Theorin, that the religious leaders ought to be prosecuted, is referred to in many articles.[194] Some people report these religious leaders to the police, on the basis of the allegations in the documentary.[195]

Fatima Nur, right wing politician of Somali origin, reports *Barnombudsmannen* to the Swedish parliamentary ombudsman (*JO*, *justitieombudsmannen*), stating that

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[192] *Göteborgs-Posten*, 12 September 2001.

[193] TT, 6 September 2001. Quoted in e.g. in *Nerikes Allehanda*, 7 September 2001; *Nya Dagen*, 7 September 2001.

[194] *Expressen*, 6 September 2001.

[195] See e.g. TT, 6 September 2001. Quoted in e.g. *Nerikes Allehanda*, 7 September 2001. The chief district prosecutor did not initiate any investigation concerning the religious leaders: "There was no risk of accomplishment, since the woman had no intention to carry out the act. No crime has been committed. Thus, there is no reason to initiate an investigation" (TT, 12 November 2001).

the list of the eleven Swedish Somali girls ought to have been reported to the police.[196]

Ingela Thalén, minister responsible for matters concerning children, states that she is convinced that genital mutilation is a big problem and admits that she used to think that former campaigns aimed to inform had made a profounder impression.[197]

Leaders of the Swedish Muslim Council (*Sveriges Muslimska Råd*) dissociate themselves from female circumcision in an official declaration: "We are opposed to all forms of genital mutilation of girls. We consider it a criminal act and beg all Muslims to refrain from this tradition. Those practising it must be informed about its physical and psychic consequences for girls."[198]

Journalists, and politicians asked about their standpoint of this issue, seem to follow the tide:

> The party leader of *Moderaterna* [the conservative party] Bo Lundgren is distressed by the information in the documentary:
>
> "This is a serious crime of violence. The fact that it is directed toward children doesn't make it less serious. Everything that is possible to do to have the offenders legally registered ought to be done", he says.
>
> Ulla Hoffman, spokesman of women's-rights issues for *Vänsterpartiet* [the left wing party], is of the opinion that all the Swedish religious leaders of foreign background officially have to condemn mutilation.
>
> Ingela Thalén, minister of the children's rights, said after the documentary that she takes for granted that authorities, not least the police, will act. "The law is very clear, children should be protected – even if it sometimes conflicts with the interests of their parents."[199]

Establishing the fact that practically all journalists and politicians seem to react in a similar way after this program is not to state that they behave in a faulty way. My point here is to make clear that no voices at all are heard questioning the allegations or debating the perspective. All react according to a pattern which almost seems to be settled beforehand: everyone condemning and calling for measures, nobody standing still to bring up the question of the range of the problem or the consequences of the fact that whole groups are stigmatised while evidence is weak. In a discussion about youth offences in Britain, Goode and Ben-Yehuda, referring to Cohen (1975), concludes:

> Politicians and other groups aligned themselves against a devil and on the side of angels […]. What counted was not the target but what side they were on and what they were against. Such symbolic alignments represent one defining quality of the moral panic [1995:28].

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[196]See e.g. TT, 7 September 2001; *Aftonbladet*, 7 September 2001, and 8 September 2001; *Svenska Dagbladet*, 8 September 2001; *Borås Tidning,* 8 September 2001; *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, 8 September 2001; *Göteborgs-Posten*, 8 September 2001.

[197]See e.g. TT, 6 September 2001; *Expressen,* 6 September 2001 (see also *Expressen*, 5 September and 8 September 2001); *Dagens Nyheter*, 6 September 2001.

[198]SVT Text, 7 September 2001. Quoted in e.g. *Göteborgs-Posten*, 7 September 2001.

[199]TT, 8 September 2001. Quoted in e.g. *Aftonbladet*, 8 September 2001; *Göteborgs-Posten*, 9 September 2001; *Nerikes Allehanda*, 9 September 2001; *Borås Tidning*, 9 September 2001.

Very few articles deviate from this pattern. One exception was published in *Göteborgs-Posten*, including an interview with a Somali imam, Rashid Mohamed. His main point is that Islam forbids female circumcision. He claims that he has never been asked (by country fellowmen) about female circumcision, partly because his standpoint is well known, but also because circumcision, male or female, is a matter very seldom discussed with imams. He says he feels attacked by this excitement about female circumcision caused by the program, as a Somali and as an imam: "A crime is a crime. Specific incidents should not be dealt with in a way that affects innocent people, or be connected to the whole group of Somalis in Sweden." Finally he claims that also in Somalia the tradition is in decline since fifteen to twenty years.[200]

In the evening paper *Aftonbladet,* Dr. Kangoum (2001) has his debate article published (see Appendix, section C2), and later replies are published, from Maj Britt Theorin (2001d) and from the editorial board of *Dokument inifrån* (Hedin et al. 2001). Both replies refute Dr. Kangoum's version. Practically no other articles even mention the possibility that some information in the documentary may be dubious.

About a week after the documentary (12 September 2001), eleven people (including me) who in one way or another are engaged in this issue were gathered in the studio of *Mosaik*, the immigrants' own televised magazine.[201] Nobody present subscribed to the version of reality presented in the documentary. Right after the studio recording we were told that the broadcast of the program was postponed a week because of the terror attack against the World Trade Center, but was to be sent the subsequent week. This program was, however, never broadcast. According to the television presenter one week later, we were all "too much of cowards to speak honestly about what is going on". They could however reconsider, if there was any possibility to include an interview with a young woman who had stated in an evening paper that every second girl, born in Sweden by parents having their background in Africa's Horn, is mutilated: "At least she has the guts to talk straightly about this".[202]

The expected content of the program is presented in a paragraph in an evening paper, obviously formulated and then printed before the program was recorded and withdrawn:

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[200] TT, 7 September 2001. Quoted in e.g. *Borås Tidning*, 8 September 2001; *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, 8 September 2001.

[201] *Göteborgs-Posten*, 7 September 2001.

[202] Among the others were the president of RISK, the initiator of Wadajir Asha Omar, the president of the All African Association in Sweden, a group of African teenage girls from the suburbs of Stockholm, a professor of Islamology, and a school nurse from Rinkeby working with circumcised young girls.

Tips about programs tonight

Genital mutilation is discussed in "Mosaik"

20.00 SVT2

A week ago SVT broadcast a shocking documentary about genital mutilation of young girls in Sweden. Now "Mosaik" follows up with a discussion about this in double meaning ulcerous subject [*sic*], where western humanity thinking clashes with deeply rooted African traditions. Among African immigrant families in Sweden it is estimated that at least 5,000 girls risk being subjected to genital mutilation.[203]

Considering the heaps of articles published rendering the allegations of the program as established facts, the perspective established in 'The Forgotten Girls' is probably what is going to be regarded as the 'truth' about the situation in Sweden in the future (see discussion in previous section). Someone criticising the perspective established may run the risk of being accused of having a defective moral attitude or of committing to "ethno-fondling".[204]

Granskningsnämnden, the committee in charge of controlling among other things the objectivity and impartiality of programs in the national television and radio, acquitted the program on all points (a formal report, filed by Asha Omar and me, included twenty-one items of factual errors, biased statements, cases of partiality, and other examples of violations against the rules attached to the privilege of broadcasting). The committee issues critical judgements on about ten programs every month, after reports from viewers and listeners (it covers three national TV-channels and four national radio channels). The committee is obliged to pay special regard to the strong impact of media when it comes to the rendering of people of other ethnic background than those of the majority society.[205] This means that the demands for objectivity and impartiality should have been set higher at assessing the statements and judgements in the program 'The Forgotten Girls', compared to most other programs. Obviously, this has not been the case.

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[203]Personal notes after communication with Othman Karim (20 September 2001). The young woman he refers to, an activist in Stockholm, was interviewed in *Aftonbladet*, 5 September 2001.

[204]*Aftonbladet*, 13 September 2001. In the tableau of TV programs for the night, the program to come is presented with the words: "The discussion about female genital mutilation has given the public Sweden a shaking. How does the dialogue sound between the society and immigrant groups with deeply rooted traditions?" (ibid.).

[205]The expression "ethno-fondling" (in Swedish: "etnogullande") is borrowed from a TV column reviewing the program. The writer states that Oscar Hedin succeeds in making an objective film about female circumcision of Swedish girls (circumcisions said to most often take place during holiday trips to Egypt, Kenya or Somalia, but also in Sweden) "without condemning whole national groups, but also without an ethno-fondling of these horrible encroachments committed". *Svenska Dagbladet*, 8 September 2001.

One can only conclude that the idea that there exist young girls who are genitally circumcised works as a moral warrant for a reporter to allege anything in this field, even if the allegations are unfounded or highly speculative. The social pressure forces politicians and journalists – and members of a committee set to control the objectivity of nationally broadcast programs – to follow the tide and agree with every accusation made against the evil perpetrators. Nobody dares to question the allegations, let alone the perspective as a whole. Who wants to risk being accused of not caring about suffering Swedish Somali girls?[206]

In a discussion about the documentary as heavily biased and carrying factual errors, the formally responsible reporter at the editorial board of *Dokument inifrån* argued that I – besides the fact that I, according to him, was opposed to an open debate about a sensitive topic – did not care about the sufferings of small Somali girls in Sweden.[207] The moral logic associated to the issue of female circumcision will be further discussed in section 10.3.

Disproportionality

> Fourth, there is an implicit assumption in the use of the term moral panic that there is a sense on the part of many members of the society that a more sizeable number of individuals are engaged in the behavior in question than actually are, and the threat, danger, or damage said to be caused by the behavior is far more substantial than, is incommensurate with and in fact is 'above and beyond that which a realistic appraisal would sustain' [Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1995:36, quoting Davis Stasz 1990].

"In Sweden there are approximately 5,000 girls under the age of 15 who risk being subjected to genital mutilation" it is claimed in an article in Sweden's most important daily paper *Dagens Nyheter* (May 2001).[208] This figure stems from estimations made at the Swedish national board of health and welfare.[209] One of the employees who is responsible for the question on this board further states:

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[206]Rules attached to the privilege of broadcasting, *www.grn.se*.

[207]There is reason to criticise me for not taking a stand in public. I was quite overwhelmed by the documentary and spent the first two weeks transcribing the whole program and discussing it with Somalis and others. After that, Asha Omar and I formulated a formal report to *Granskningsnämnden*. Then we wrote a debate article, which was accepted by the daily paper *Svenska Dagbladet* some three weeks after the documentary had been sent. After additional three weeks they suddenly told us that they were not going to publish it after all, as it had lost its news value. At that point, the article had no news value to any daily paper.

[208]Personal notes after communication with Johan Brånstad (18 September 2001).

[209]*Dagens Nyheter*, 30 May and 31 May 2001. It is also argued that "8,000 girls are at risk of mutilation", also a figure said to stem from the Swedish national board of health and welfare (e.g. *Nya Dagen*, 20 October 2001). In an earlier article, it has been claimed that about 5,000 girls under 15 risk being subjected to genital mutilation; "However, the number of girls originating from countries where genital mutilation is practised is many times as many" (Tiina Meri, *Dagens Nyheter*, 2 June 2001).

> - Everyone familiar with the matter is quite sure that female genital mutilation occurs in Sweden and in the rest of the EU, but nobody knows of the extent. We don't even know if it is 20 percent or 90 percent of the women in some groups who have been mutilated.[210]

A social worker in Stockholm claims that female circumcision is taking place on the quiet: "There are rumours that it's going on in Sweden and we cannot control every apartment. I'd say, however, that the absolutely most common way is that the parents take their daughters to England, Egypt or to their home countries to have it done."[211] This view on the matter is recurrent in practically everything of what is written about the issue. In a quite recently published book about Islam in Sweden, by way of example, it is claimed that Sweden has a black market of female circumcision (Stenberg 1999). In a newspaper article about female genital mutilation the Swedish EU-commissioner, Maj Britt Theorin, states that it is "likely that a substantial share of the Swedish Somali girls are being mutilated" (Theorin 2001a, my translation from Swedish). As the entire group of Somalis in Sweden amount to about twenty thousand, it is a considerable number of girls she refers to.

In the articles surrounding the program, estimations of the number of girls who risk being subjected to circumcision vary hazardously. In one article it is said that 2,000 of the 16,000 women and girls in Sweden, who have their background in countries where the tradition is practised, are under the age of two years and therefore risk being subjected to circumcision.[212] Some journalists stick to the quite established figure of 5,000 (probably due to the fact that the news agency TT publishes this information), while other writers claim that the girls at risk in Sweden amount to 12,000.[213] In one article about the religious leaders in the program it is claimed that "thousands of girls in Sweden have been mutilated or risk being subjected to mutilation."[214] In yet an other article a young Eritrean woman claims that every second girl in Sweden, if her family has its background in Eritrea, Somalia or Ethiopia, is being circumcised.[215]

Incidents presented in the program seem to multiply – both the Linköping case and Dr. Kangoum are now mentioned in the plural – and become generalised: "The documentary 'The Forgotten Girls', sent on Thursday night in SVT1, told about some encroachments which have taken place in Sweden, about 'summer holiday mutilations' in native countries, about religious leaders and doctors who speak with

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[210] In the book about the Gothenburg Project, it is stated that: "In Sweden there are about 40,000 persons from 33 countries where female genital mutilation is practised. A little more than 5,000 of them are girls aged 0-18 years, and about 2,000 of them are younger than seven years. The greater part of them originate from Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea" (Omsäter 1996:16, my translation from Swedish).

[211] *Dagens Nyheter*, 30 May 2001.

[212] *Dagens Nyheter*, 31 May 2001.

[213] TT, 5 September 2001. Quoted in e.g. *Nya Dagen,* 5 September 2001; *Expressen*, 5 September 2001.

[214] *Göteborgs-Posten*, 7 September 2001.

[215] *Expressen*, 8 September 2001.

two voices."[216] The news agency TT states that "TT has earlier reported that imams and Christian Coptic leaders in Sweden encourage families of foreign origin to mutilate their daughters."[217]

Yet, as has been discussed above, the evidence is weak. The figures are most probably exaggerations, typical in cases of moral panic. But what about "threat, danger and damage" (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1995:36)? Is it described as being far more substantial than "a realistic appraisal would sustain" (ibid.)? If we talk about the subjective experience of each girl suffering the procedure of female circumcision, "damage" is not measurable. Suffering is suffering, whether one or thousand girls are exposed. One can not defend a harmful practice by claiming that "only one or two girls have suffered from this". The question then is if the possibility (and actually, the probability) that there are girls who are exposed, can defend the exaggerations. If a moral panic leads to measures which save one or two girls from suffering, is it worth the price to stigmatise whole groups to achieve it? The answer to this question is of a political more than scientific nature.

If one sees the "threat, danger and damage" in a social context – the alleged maintenance of female circumcision among exile Africans in Sweden as threatening the society and our perception of Sweden as a country where all citizens are equally protected by law and order – there are reasons to believe that the depictions of authorities and officials are excessive in the program, and, consequently, in the rendering in the mass media afterwards. This is not to argue that officials and other professionals who come in contact with African families do not need increased knowledge about female circumcision, or that they do not need to establish better networks or routines to deal with suspected cases. But I do argue that part of the criticism is unfounded: the criticism has its basis in a view stating that innumerable girls in Sweden are circumcised, allegations so far without verification.

Volatility

> And fifth, by their very nature, moral panics are *volatile*; they erupt fairly suddenly (although they may lie dormant or latent for long periods of time, and may reappear from time to time) and, nearly as suddenly, subside [Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1995:38, italics in original].

The interest in female circumcision was intense the days before and after the broadcast of the program. Very soon after that, the issue had lost its immediate news value, much due to the terror attack on September 11. Still, the question must be regarded as having a sort of topicality, as all the measures proposed by politicians, among others, are to be implemented on the long term.

What seems to be lost in many discussions is that there is an established work against female circumcision (even if it suffers from insufficient appropriation). To state that it is highly probably that there are cases of female circumcision among exile Africans, and that the preventive work against the tradition in Sweden is

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[216] *Aftonbladet*, 5 September 2001.

[217] *Svenska Dagbladet*, 7 September 2001. In reality the words of two imams and one doctor, secretly recorded, were exposed in the program. Further, it is not obvious how to assess their standpoints on female circumcision (see discussion in Appendix).

valuable, are not components of a moral panic. The moral panic in this case is about an abrupt overexposure of the issue, saturated with exaggerations, moral indignation and condemnation of more people than are in reality involved.

This is not a matter of liking or disliking the work against female circumcision, or even the tradition in itself. Goode & Ben-Yehuda frame it this way:

> It does not matter whether we sympathize with the concern or not. What is important is that the concern locates a "folk devil", is shared, is out of synch with the measurable seriousness of the condition that generates it, and varies in intensity over time [1995:41].

The incidents initiated by the program 'The Forgotten Girls' display every indicator of a moral panic.

10 The politics of female circumcision

There are several possible scenarios if one wants to speculate about what is going on with the practice of female circumcision among immigrant groups in Sweden. One extreme view is that *no* female circumcision is taking place in exile. The other extreme is one which sees female circumcision as widely practised among immigrants in their new environment, leading to the alarming conclusion that thousands of girls risk having to go through the procedure.

In fact, not a single illegal case has, as yet, been authenticated in Sweden. Yet, the general understanding is that the practice is maintained among Somalis in exile. The question here, then, is why such a belief is so firmly rooted? This is the view elaborated in the documentary program 'The Forgotten Girls'. And it is a view so strongly accepted that criticism of it is simply unacceptable; stigmatised as either naive, unmoral or as a bizarre product of cultural relativism.

The main ingredient of this hegemonic view, I argue, is the culturalist perspective as discussed in Chapter Eight. This culturalism is combined with a thorough moral discourse, and a voyeuristic bent. Such views reflect a structure of interests, whereby actors benefit from keeping the belief alive. These latter aspects of the public discourse will be discussed below.

10.1 A political exploitation

The moral mission to expose the evil of female circumcision, and to save the thousands of girls who risk being subjected to circumcision, is carried out by a host of actors. In this section I shall present the actors in the field of female circumcision in the Swedish context.[218] It will be shown that many of these actors articulate positions which tend toward preserving of the idea that the practice of female circumcision is widely upheld among exile Africans in Sweden. Each one of these positions is tied up with moral elements. However, in the description which follows,

[218]TT, 8 September 2001. Two imams and one Coptic priest were included in the program. See further discussion in Appendix.

I have deliberately downgraded these moral characteristics, like sincere interest or true devotion to the cause, in order to make the structural conditions of each position more evident.

The official posture is, as have been discussed, that female circumcision is a practice widely maintained in exile; at least this is the conclusion to be drawn as the Swedish national board of health and welfare officially declares that 5,000 girls risk being subjected to circumcision.[219] I argue that this public posture involves a political exploitation of the Somalis in Sweden, as there are actors who benefit from stating this. Moreover, Somalis as a collective have no way to defend themselves against such allegations. It is technically impossible, and would be deeply unethical, for all Somali parents in Sweden to simultaneously gather all their daughters and have the girls' genitals examined.[220]

10.1.1 The actors in the field

Processes of change often require human commitment – people who want to change a social evil and act accordingly. In Sweden, collective action is organised around voluntary associations, which may receive public funds for all or some of its activities, if the state shares the opinion that their objectives fall under the rubric of dealing with a social problem or cultural issue. This is certainly the case for organisations which work for an elimination of female circumcision, as they touch on the key vulnerable groups or issues of immigrants, children, young girls, and what is regarded as sexual violence.

When it comes to the issue of female circumcision in Sweden, there exist both large and small organisations working for change. Some organisations deal with the question as one among others, often within a scheme of women's rights. RISK ('The national association Stop female genital mutilation') has initiated projects with informants: Swedish African women who are experts in matters associated with female circumcision, and who work as moulders of opinion in their own native exile groups. Without the intention to denigrate their work in any way, it is in their interest to claim that many girls in Sweden are at risk for circumcision. If a problem is not serious, then they might risk a decrease in their financial support. When an activist from such an organisation tells a journalist that every second girl in Sweden, whose parents come from Africa's Horn, is mutilated, she is at the same time optimising the possibilities for future financing for her organisation. Her only risk is a loss of credibility in case someone disproves her statement as an exaggeration. Yet in the morally charged atmosphere of female circumcision there are few people who feel the need to investigate such claims, as they would hardly entail positive picture in the massmedia or parts of the academic world. No

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[219] "Actors in the Drama of the Moral Panic", according to Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1995:24ff), are the press, the public, law enforcement, politicians and legislators, action groups and so called "folk devils".

[220] One of the later estimations from the national board on health and welfare suggest that 7,500 - 8,000 girls in Sweden are at risk. The basis for the figures is the number of girls aged 0-20 in Sweden who come from countries where more than 60% of the women are at risk for circumcision (Olsson 2000:4694).

journalist or historian achieves prestige by trying to downgrade the scope of a disaster or human tragedy.

Another group of actors in this field are the journalists. While not trying to make generalisations about a whole occupational group, there is nevertheless a general tendency within the mass media that sensational news items give more publicity than balanced common sense statements. Today's competitive news reporting often demands sharp and plain angels and easily comprehensible messages. The titillating story of how the horrible practice of female circumcision is going on right among us is, to many journalists, an irresistible topic, approaching the voyeuristic.

The authority ultimately responsible for the female circumcision issue in Sweden is a department at the national board of health and welfare, Unit for Individual and Family (*Individ- och Familjeenheten*). This unit is one among many voices moulding the public opinion, but the official statements coming from this department have, naturally, a certain authority. The department allocates funds for a variety of activities concerning women's rights and is, like all state departments granting funds, under constant pressure from various lobbying groups. Lower level local authorities may support activities in this field. In Malmö, a municipal project called *Sexual Health* (*Sexuell hälsa*) has had the issue of female circumcision on its agenda for several years. This project, together with the national board on health and welfare, financed both the trans-ethnic study (Johnsdotter et al. 2000a, Omar et al. 2001) and the training course aimed at educating Somali informants in Malmö. Local authorities may be engaged in this issue, like when the council of public health at the district administration of Rosengård hosted the seminar on female circumcision (see section 2.2). All authorities involved must be able to point out an urgent problem, if they are to spend tax revenues, and they must be able to defend the expenditure to higher quarters. Again, it must be reiterated that not a single case of illegal female circumcision has so far been authenticated and brought to court in Sweden, which means that the authorities have to use speculative arguments to justify financing of projects and activities. Stating that thousands of girls *risk* being subjected to circumcision is a quite safe stand, as there is no need to support the statement with identifiable examples. The category of girls who are "at risk" is very extensible.[221]

Among the Swedish politicians involved in female circumcision issues, the EU-commissioner Maj-Britt Theorin is the one most active. As discussed in previous sections, the logic inherent in this issue more or less forces a politician to take a moral stand based on the idea that this practice is maintained in Sweden. Relatively few voters seem to care as much about African girls in Africa as about African girls in Sweden: if there are any political points to be made, the issue must be presented

[221] Why simultaneously? After the Gothenburg case, Swedish authorities have been told to pay attention to the fact that there is a risk that a family under suspicion of female circumcision may take some other family's daughter to the genital examination at the gynaecologist's. In the Gothenburg case, the girl was summoned to several examinations. The third time the parents took their daughter to a private doctor, who could see no reason to suspect any circumcision at all. It was concluded (by e.g. the prosecutor involved, interviewed in the program 'The Forgotten Girls') that the family had borrowed someone else's daughter the day the examination was to take place. This allegation has, however, never been substantiated. Nor is it clear why the first gynaecologist(s) was/were unable to draw any conclusions from the first examinations.

as relevant to the Swedish society and its citizens. For her as a politician, the reward is not to be measured in votes as such, but in a gain of moral capital (taking a clear stand on a matter of basic human injustice; this generally leads to a rise in prestige).

There are also some people, project staff and researchers (including me), who may obtain grants or lecture fees for diffusing information about female circumcision in various settings.[222] Obviously, issues that generate social indignation demand experts who can interpret them, and these experts have an interest in keeping the issue alive.

Clinging to the belief that there are a huge number of girls who risk being subjected to circumcision is beneficial for all those who work in one way or another with the issue. Many people put a lot of effort into this work, most of them idealistically with no economic gain, and I am quite sure that a vast majority are convinced that there really are thousands of girls at risk.

But no matter how people think about this at heart, declaring that many girls in Sweden risk being subjected to female circumcision is also a statement which produces short- and long-term benefits for those who propagate such views. In Rosengård, this process became evident after the one-day-seminar about female circumcision (see section 2.2): several Somali voluntary associations declared their intentions to work against female circumcision as soon as it was obvious that the Swedish society allocated funds for activities aiming at an elimination of the practice. At the time some associations were even founded for this purpose (Johnsdotter 2000a). Conversely, if authorities were to be convinced (by, say, a group of anthropologists) that this practice more or less vanishes in exile, the resources given today – for activities aiming at an elimination of the tradition in exile – would probable cease.

Subsidies from the state and other public institutions contribute in many ways to sustaining female circumcision as a field of political and economic interests as well as scientific inquiry. However, in applying for funds, some statements are more lucrative than others. Claiming that 'resources are needed to help Somali Swedish women who live with medical complications due to infibulation' is not as alarming as 'resources are needed to rescue small Somali Swedish girls from genital mutilation'. The belief that there are thousands of girls who risk being subjected to circumcision will probably prosper as long as it is the most profitable statement in applications for public funds.

10.1.2 The impossibility of defence from allegations

Sweden passed the first law on female circumcision in 1982, and became the first western country to legislate against the practice. In 1998, the law was revised with a change in terminology, from "female circumcision" to "female genital mutilation"

[222] However, the Swedish national board of health and welfare has recently published an extensive guide to schools, social authorities and the health care sector on female circumcision. In this publication, the practice is described and discussed without statements about thousands of girls said to risk being subjected to female circumcision (Socialstyrelsen 2002).

and more severe penalties were imposed.[223] The law was further reformulated in 1999, to allow prosecution in a Swedish court against someone carrying out female genital mutilation even if the act was performed in a country where it is not declared criminal.[224]

There is a basic legal principle holding that an individual is presumed innocent until found guilty. For the Somalis in Sweden, however, the entire exile group is tacitly accused of being potential torturers of their own children, with weak or non-existent support for the epithet. The Somali imam Rashid Mohamed in Gothenburg argues that possible cases of female circumcision should be regarded as incidents detached from the group as a whole, as discussed in section 9.2.[225]

Mohamed's statement is a reaction to the culturalist perspective prevalent in Sweden, where the behaviour of ethnic Swedes is judged on the basis of their individual characteristics and personal social situation, while behaviour of people of Somali origin are judged *and predefined* on the basis of the culture they 'have' (see discussion in Chapter Eight).

After the broadcast of the documentary 'The Forgotten Girls', the assumption that Swedish Somali girls are being circumcised at large scale, some of them even in Sweden, will probably be regarded as an established fact. The Somalis have no forum for rejecting the depiction of them and no way to clear themselves of suspicion. It is technically impossible, and would be deeply unethical, for all Somali parents in Sweden to simultaneously take all their daughters and have the girls' genitals examined. Further, the group, seen as a collective, has come to Sweden relatively recently and has very few representatives within the Swedish political system; nor has the group advocates with access to the debate columns in the papers. Thus, they have a weak position struggling for views which may countervail the hegemonic discourse on them as a group.

While female circumcision is depicted as a moral issue defending children in Sweden, it is also a forum for the political exploitation of the Somalis in Sweden. It is a *political* matter because it is an attitude that downgrades or dismisses facts and scientific evidence. The belief is created and upheld in a political relation involving moral activists on the one hand, and politicians and administrators of funds on the other. The general tendency toward a special interest in sensational news, the spectacle of evil people victimising defenceless girls in a horrific manner, supports the belief.

It is a case of *exploitation*, insofar as certain actors and groups benefit – economically, morally or otherwise. And there is no way that Somalis in Sweden can defend themselves from such labelling. How can they refute the statement? Certainly not by refraining from circumcising their daughters. Whether they stick to tradition or not, in the public eye they are found guilty.

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[223] I am an activist as well, as I am a member of the activist organisation RISK. (*Riksförbundet Stoppa Kvinnlig könsstympning*: 'The national association Stop female genital mutilation'. The acronym "RISK" has the same ring in Swedish as in English.) I am also secretary of the Somali-Swedish local association Wadajir, with the issue of female circumcision at the top of the charter.

[224] *Socialstyrelsens meddelandeblad* nr 5/2000, March 2000.

[225] See the government bill Prop. 1998/99:70.

10.3 A moral discourse

There is an implicit and sometimes explicit moral discourse attached to the issue of female circumcision. Almost any critique can be made if its purpose is to act against a tradition that is deemed harmful or evil. It is not surprising if analyses concerning social and cultural conditions have a moral undertone (as such reasoning is always highly dependent on subjective experience and interpretation). But in the field of female circumcision, also "hard facts", like statements about medical consequences of the practice, are often presented within a moral context.

10.3.1 Moral and medical statements intertwined

In the greater part of the literature on female circumcision – in activist texts as well as many scientific texts – there is this 'laundry list' of medical complications, where some assertions are made without scientific support.[226] A thorough scrutiny of the medical articles in this field has been made by Carla Makhlouf Obermeyer (1999). She concludes that many sources, which have acquired "an aura of dependability through repeated and uncritical citations" in reality suffer from serious shortcomings when it comes to e.g. method used in the studies. She had expected to find a wealth of studies documenting mortality and morbidity due to female circumcision, but has to conclude:

> This review could find no incontrovertible evidence on mortality, and the rate of medical complications suggests that they are the exception rather than the rule. This should be cause to ponder, because it suggests a discrepancy between the forceful rhetoric, which depicts female genital surgeries as causing death and disease, and the large numbers of women who, voluntarily or under pressure, undergo these procedures [Obermeyer 1999:92].

Obermeyer asks herself why the harmful effects of female genital surgeries so often are assumed to be indisputably true, while their occurrence is so poorly investigated. Beside the scope of the article, she suggests that "they have to do with political, economic, and ethical factors at both the local and international levels" (1999:97).[227]

The British anthropologist Melissa Parker (1995) presents a similar critique – posing the question of why researchers in this field accept other scholars' deficient studies – and goes on to speculate about what the acceptance of this misuse of scientific tools is really about. She blames the "emotionality of Euro-American-Canadian culture" (1995:506). She argues that we have to pay attention to the strong emotions attached to the issue of female circumcision, as these emotions influence

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[226] *"A crime is a crime. Specific occurrences should not be dealt with in a way that harms innocent people or be associated with the whole group of Somalis in Sweden."* Imam Rashid Mohamed interviewed in *Göteborgs-Posten*, 7 September 2001.

[227] The expression 'laundry list' from Shell-Duncan & Hernlund (2000:15), discussing the "recitation of short-term, long-term, and obstetrical complications" (ibid.:14) in the activist literature. (See the version offered in this book in section 4.2).

fieldwork and data analysis. Her own view is that the European and North American conceptions of sexuality include "a tendency to define the self in sexual terms" (Parker 1995:518). She points at the symbolic importance of clitoris among Westerners, a point made also by Obermeyer (1999:96) and Shell-Duncan & Hernlund (2000:21ff) among others, and concludes that these "intense emotions aroused by the subject among western researchers are, to a large extent, influenced by Euro-American discourses and debates which have little or nothing to do with the study populations" (Parker 1995:520; see also section 4.3.1). Her point is that research about the biomedical and social aspects of this tradition has to accept these intense emotions and deal with them.

But it is a difficult task to sift out the unquestioned and often recited "facts", which give evidence of the harmfulness of the practice. The complicated situation may be illustrated by the following example: Parker criticises the clinical research in this field, as discussed above, using El Dareer's study in Sudan as an example of faulty methodology. In the introductory paragraph of this discussion, she summarises possible medical consequences of infibulation:

> Child-bearing can also be hazardous. Accumulated scarring, for example, may contribute to a protracted and painful labour and haemorrhage may result from tearing through scar tissue or through the cervix and perineum. Moreover, women have to be disinfibulated to enable the newborn to pass out and there is an increased risk that the infant will be brain-damaged or suffer malformations [Parker 1995:513].

Here she falls into the same trap that she herself warns against. She uncritically refers findings without scientific support (even if her point is that data collected and reported do not convey any information about the proportions of females suffering from these complications, i. e. the overall effects of female circumcision for female morbidity and mortality).

The idea that infibulation leads to prolonged labour, which in turn leads to an increased risk of brain-damaged or malformed infants, is a hypothesis whose casual connection remains to be demonstrated.[228] An attempt to scrutinise some of the facts often cited – perinatal mortality and prolonged labour induced by scar tissue of infibulation – has been made in a study by Dr. Birgitta Essén, specialist in Obstetrics and Gynaecology at MAS University Hospital in southern Sweden. She found no support for these assertions; at least they are not valid in a country with a high level of medical emergency resources, like Sweden. (As discussed in section 4.2, WHO (1998:42) states that there should be no reason for obstructed labour as a result of female circumcision.) Cases of perinatally dead infants of infibulated women were more associated with incidents of mothers refusing Caeserian section or with insufficient obstetric care, like misinterpretation of intrapartal CTG (Essén 2001:145ff, Essén et al. 2002).[229] In yet another study, Essén compared the actual

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[228] See also Obiora (1997a, 1997b) for critical discussion.

[229] This alleged causal connection has been widely spread by Fran Hosken among others (e.g. Koso-Thomas 1987:27). In "The Universal Childbirth Picture Book" (Hosken 1995), translated into French, Arabic and Somali, there are pictures in the study material included: a drawing of a hand holding a vigorous newborn, below there is a drawing showing a hand holding a lifeless baby: "In the top row is a happy, lively, newborn baby delivered by a mother

time of second stage of labour, and found that this period of time was actually shorter among infibulated women in comparison with a controlled group of non-circumcised women (Essén 2001:157ff, Essén et al. 2002).[230] Being an experienced obstetrician, these findings were not very surprising to her. The scar tissue after an infibulation, provided that the scar has healed well, is more elastic and thinner than scar tissue after episiotomies (where the cut is made in the vaginal birth canal through muscular tissue), regularly performed at Swedish hospitals in non-circumcised primigravidae women. Nobody expects *them* to have prolonged second stage of labour due to scar tissue in the actual birth canal.[231]

Pointing out that the medical complications of infibulation may be undocumented or exaggerated is not uncontroversial given the moral discourse on female circumcision. Essén's remarks were presented at an oral defence of a doctor's thesis in September 2001 (Essén 2001), about two weeks after the television broadcast of 'The Forgotten Girls' documentary. The whole issue of female circumcision had been highlighted and charged with indignation due to the TV-program, and some colleagues at the hospital advised Dr. Essén to tone down her remarks, as the subject was somewhat delicate. Her colleagues implied that in the eye of the public, she might be categorised as a supporter of a harmful practice. Questioning well-established, but poorly supported statements might lead to one being seen as an advocate of this harmful tradition. Medical research highlighting the bad outcomes of this harmful practice is welcomed and seldom questioned, while studies with results contradicting our intuitive (and often morally charged) ideas may be associated with feelings of uneasiness and suspiciousness about the researcher's moral standard.

Certain things should *not* be said, it seems, as the speaker runs the risk of being suspected of inability to grasp the horrible reality of the traditions involving female circumcision. At a conference on FGM in Stockholm (12 October 2000), a midwife showed pictures of a vagina before and after a defibulation to demonstrate that it is a minor operation at a gynaecological clinic. A woman in the audience, who had met many infibulated women in her work in public health, stated – completely unconscious of the prevalent moral discourse surrounding the issue: "Circumcisers seem to know what they're doing, they don't damage the birth canal and so on, this area often looks fine." I interpreted her utterance as stating an experience from her field, at the same time as trying to console infibulated women in the audience. Immediately another woman stood up to reprimand her, talking about half-blind circumcisers cutting through urethra, vagina and rectum. Turning to the audience she

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with natural genital organs. The pictures below show a baby delivered by an excised mother. She had to be cut open to let the baby out. The baby is limp and its head is flattened. Will it be able to live?"

[230]CTG: CardioTocoGraphy. A technique for monitoring the rate of the baby's heart in relation to the contractions of the delivering mother's uterus during labour (personal communication with Dr. Birgitta Essén, 18 September 2001).

[231]An average of 34 minutes was found in the group of circumcised women, 53 minutes in the group of uncircumcised women. Se also discussion in section 4.2. In our study (Essén et al. 2000) the women did not associate their circumcision to experiences during delivery. This overall depiction is supported by a study by Wiklund et al. (2000): "All the women in the study were circumcised and the majority did not relate complications during delivery to this fact" (ibid.:108).

rebuked the woman as if she were an errant child: "Your description sounded so good. But it *must not* be described in that way".[232]

In the program 'The Forgotten Girls' it is claimed about infibulation: "The girl may die at this procedure, and common complications are [problems with] letting out urine and menses, and psychic problems." In a preliminary draft of the formal complaint to *Granskningsnämnden* (the committee in charge of controlling the objectivity of the national television), Asha Omar and I argued that it was irrelevant to state that infibulation gives rise to "psychic problems" as studies in this field are lacking and scattered evidence shows that psychological reactions are highly depending on circumstances before, during and after the procedure (see section 3.2). Otherwise the generalised statement would lead the audience to conclude that practically all Somali women suffer from psychic disorders, which is definitely not the case.[233] We also criticised the highlighting of death caused by circumcision, as there so far only exists anecdotal evidence and no established relation between female circumcision and mortality.[234] We argued that Swedish viewers were offered the idea that African parents letting their daughters undergo female circumcision do not care whether their children live or die. After having shown this preliminary draft of the formal complaint to a number of friend for comments, we decided to exclude this paragraph as it evidently made us appear as people completely indifferent to the suffering resulting from this practice ("of course going through something like that gives a girl psychic problems!" and "isn't it bad enough if only one girl dies?"). It seems, then, as if it is acceptable to allege anything about the horrifying consequences of this practice without evidence to support it – those who question the statements and refute them with actual findings will automatically appear to be devoid of empathy.

10.3.2 Anthropology and moral models

Anthropologists dealing with the issue of female circumcision are, according to Salmon (1997), faced with an ethical dilemma: Does their responsibility end with describing the custom and placing it within a cultural context? Or are they obligated to protect the custom from outside interference; or should they be of assistance in trying to end such practices?

When it comes to anthropology and moral positions, the American anthropologist Roy D'Andrade (1995) has argued for an anthropology based on a model of objectivity, and not a model of morality. If one uses a moral model, one is occupied with identifying what is good and what is bad, and the description is

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[232]Personal communication with Dr. Essén (15 December 2001).

[233]Personal notes.

[234]Hicks goes through population statistics from the regions in Somalia and concludes that: "Were infibulation deadly one would expect this to be reflected, at least to some degree, in these figures" (Hicks 1993:105). "Although some studies and reports document the occurrence of death among girls who have recently undergone genital mutilation, and there is considerable anecdotal evidence to suggest that it is by no means rare, there has been no systematic investigation of the scale of the problem", WHO concludes (1998:41). See also section 4.2.

aimed at saying something about the person describing, as well as about the object described. In the field of female circumcision, researchers using a moral model is easily identified through their use of a specific vocabulary, including terms like "encroachment" or "mutilation" instead of more objective words like "cutting" or actor-oriented terms like "circumcision".[235]

The use of the word "encroachment" not only refers to the event described, it also describes the observer as a person who can distinguish right from wrong and good practices from evil deeds; "a subjective description tells how the agent doing the description *reacts* to the object" in D'Andrade's words (1995:399, italics in original). He goes on by stating that an objective account does not need to be value-free or even unbiased:

> [T]rying to be objective does not preclude investigating other people's subjective worlds. One can be as objective about what people think as one can be about the crops they grow [D'Andrade 1995:400].

D'Andrade claims that the moral authority of anthropology (what is anthropology good for?) rests on empirical truths about the world: "moral models are counterproductive in discovering how the world works" (1995:402), and he exemplifies this reasoning in a discussion about studies aimed at localising *oppression*:

> It becomes very difficult to define what oppression is except by one's *reaction* to the situation – whenever it seems to be a bad use of power call it "oppression", and whenever it is a good use call it "justice" or something else. This is a central doctrine of subjectivity; what one truly feels is bad *is* bad. Of course one can say that this is just quibbling, and that everyone – or almost everyone – can tell a good from a bad use of power. However, because of the complexity of human life we often find ourselves vehemently disagreeing even with people we respect about exactly this. The experience of people trying to find out about how the world works is that you find out more when you avoid the use of evaluative terms – otherwise you spend all your time arguing about the use of the terms, trying to make the bad things get the bad words and the good things get the good words [D'Andrade 1995:406].

D'Andrade seeks to keep politics out of the model for how to conduct science. In the field of female circumcision, the question of politics and morality is omni-present, to the extent that one's choice of tone and terminology, as well as the very decision to write or not write about the topic itself, has become a political statement (Gosselin 1996, in Shell-Duncan & Hernlund 2000:2).

In the politics of *naming* (basically whether to call the practice "circumcision", "mutilation", "surgery" or "cutting", all terms having their pros and cons) a researcher must consider that she or he will be an actor both in the academic field and in the wider society. If one uses the evaluative term "mutilation" among other scholars, one will be extremely vulnerable to critique for the very reasons brought forward by D'Andrade above. If one chooses a more "objective" term, like cutting or circumcision, one will be suspected of unhealthy relativism and defective

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[235]For a discussion on conditioned aid in the field of female circumcision, see e.g. Levi (1996).

morality in the society outside the academic world.[236] The prevalent perspective there – the public sphere here represented mainly by the mass media and writing within the field of popular science – is soaked with moral propositions. A scholar seeking to write objectively about female circumcision, for example to highlight the fact that some of the data about harmful consequences are exaggerated due to the moral aspects of this issue, is constantly walking a tightrope. Terminology is an obvious mark of approach: A researcher who use the term ”mutilation” and is openly taking a stand against the practice will be accepted in the public eye, but risk being rejected among colleagues as too politically correct (and maybe even unscientific). A researcher who use the term ”circumcision” and strive after a non-evaluating style of description will be accepted among other researchers in this specific field, but risk being ridiculed by scholars in other academic fields and in the wider society as a kind of ”holocaust denier”.[237]

Further, when it comes to the field of female circumcision, the issue seems to evoke western urges for correcting injustices in other parts of the world: “Western culture is intrinsically bound up with doing something about the other” (Harvey & Gow 1994:4). If ethnography once was used as a cultural critique of western societies (e.g. Marcus & Fischer 1986), Westerners are more concerned with changing the Other today, through for instance conditioned aid (Harvey & Gow 1994:4).[238] But holding such a moral position as a researcher in the field of female circumcision means that the possibilities for grasping an emic perspective of the practices are diminished, as Sahlins has pointed out:

> [T]here are also good reasons to suppose that knowing other peoples is not fully accomplished by taking the proper attitudes on colonialism, racism or sexism. These people have not organized their existence in answer to what has been troubling us lately. They do not live either for us or as us. And the main anthropological drawback of making them such moral objects is just that it makes their own cultural logics disappear [Sahlins 1999:406].

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[236] It complicates the discussion that some of the actors (that is, those who have their origin in groups that practice female circumcision) actually prefer to call the procedure ‘mutilation’ (Talle 2001). However, also these women probably discriminate between the *purpose* of the practice and the *consequence*.

[237] Shell-Duncan & Hernlund (2000) choose the term ”circumcision” – using quotation marks every time – while most academic writers during the last years seem to stick to the term with the least charge: *female genital cutting*. Unfortunately this term has no euphonious equivalent in Swedish. For a discussion on the politics of naming, see e.g. Shell-Duncan & Hernlund (2000), Leonard (2000), Ivan (1997), and Obermeyer (1999).

[238] For an example of an academic from an other field (Medicine) who harshly criticise the use of other terms than *female genital mutilation*, see Macklin (1999:70f). My personal way of dealing with this fact is that I, writing and lecturing about this issue, always use the term ”circumcision”, explaining the motive for this choice. Besides that, I often mention that I am an activist as well, a member of the national activist association RISK. A sincere interest made me sign up, but at the same time I can see the advantages of being a member: The membership works as a counter to those accusing me of being a cold-blooded relativist.

10.3.3 Symbolic sunnah: a political minefield

An example of the moral-ideological-political tension in the discourse on female circumcision is the discussion about (symbolic) sunnah in Sweden. The official posture in the Swedish society is that the law against female genital mutilation in Sweden includes a ban on pricking. According to the law, all procedures leading to permanent changes of the female genitals, performed for other than medical reasons, are illegal irrespective of age.[239] There is no way to know what this law exactly permits and forbids, as it has never been applied. The law in Norway, with basically the same wording, seems to be interpreted as if it should permit pricking (symbolic sunnah).[240]

This seems to be the most reasonable interpretation, if one reads the law text in a literal way. Pricking the clitoris to induce a minor bleeding does not, generally speaking, lead to permanent changes. Besides that, such a procedure is far less invasive than what is done to male infants at Swedish hospitals during male circumcision and what is permitted on young women who have their genitals pierced and also on women who go through genital plastic surgery.[241] Strictly medically, then, there is no reasonable motive to forbid pricking of girls while permitting male circumcision, genital plastic surgery and genital piercing for aesthetic or erotic reasons. Yet the public posture in Sweden is stating that pricking is forbidden, according to Swedish law.[242]

At a hospital in Seattle in the middle of the 1990s, symbolic sunnah operations were performed – consisting in "'a symbolic blood-letting' on the prepuce or hood

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[239]Law (1982:316) with a prohibition of genital mutilation of women. Revision of the law took place on the 1st of July 1998 (SFS 1998:407): 1§. A procedure involving the external genitals aiming at mutilating these or at bringing about other permanent changes of them (genital mutilation) must not be performed, whether or not there is a consent to the procedure. (My translation from Swedish.)

[240]Personal communication with the anthropologist R. Elise B. Johansen (10 October 2001), in charge of the Norwegian national campaign against female circumcision "Omsorg & Kunnskap", in many ways similar to the Gothenburg Project in Sweden in the 1990s.

[241]Thanks to R. Elise B. Johansen for highlighting this paradox to me (10 October 2001). See also Atoki (1995:233) and Ivan (1997:71) for a similar argument. Regarding piercing, the Swedish national board of health and welfare *recommends* the piercing establishments an age limit of 18 years. The undergraduate student of Social Anthropology Karin Nolke wrote an excellent paper highlighting this inconsistency in Swedish rule regulation (in December 2001).

The general acceptance of male circumcision at the same time as symbolic pricking is labelled "mutilation" is discussed by the Danish historian of religion Helle Hinge (1995) as a result of the fact that the Western world accepts the religious fundament of the practice of male circumcision, i.e. Judaism – while female circumcision is established outside the Judeo-Christian cultural sphere (ibid.:30). In an article named "Cut in the body: From clitoridectomy to body art", Salecl (1998) highlights the importance of cultural context when it comes to what is seen as body art and what is seen as mutilation.

[242]"According to the law all types of female genital mutilation are illegal, ranging from the most extensive, where large parts of the genitals are cut away and the vaginal opening is stitched together (infibulation), to pricking of clitoris with a sharp or pointed object" (information sheet from the Gothenburg Project, my translation from Swedish). See also Omsäter (1996:13, 23, 40) and the government bill Prop. 1998/99:70, page 8.

of flesh above the clitoris" (Obiora 1997a, unpaginated). The staff at the hospital considered this procedure a better option than taking the risk that American Somali girls would be infibulated, and an 'operation' far milder than male circumcision. However, the Harborview Medical Center abandoned this practice. It was unclear whether it violated any law, as no tissue was removed, but the practice did clash with the WHO definition of female genital mutilation, including 'pricking' in category IV.

In Holland a similar situation arose, when "the Ministry recommended a distinction between mutilating or tissue-impairing circumcision and non-mutilating ritual incisions" (Obiora 1997a, unpaginated). According to Obiora, "some African immigrants in Holland circumcised themselves in often unhygienic and harmful circumstances" (ibid.) and in an attempt to meet the needs of women who really wanted to be categorised as circumcised, it was suggested that doctors would be allowed to perform ritual perforations of the clitoral covering.[243] The recommendations were withdrawn, as they met with a storm of protests (ibid.; see also Hicks 1993:197 and Hinge 1995).

The motive behind the choice to label pricking as a form of mutilation seems to be ideological, originating from feminist politics. The Swedish law is formulated in accordance with the WHO classification (see section 4.1), a classification which is a result of radical feminist lobbying. There are some practical reasons for taking a stand against symbolic sunnah circumcision, for example that if the legislation allows a symbolic pricking, there is a risk that more extensive operations will be performed, pretending to be just 'symbolic'. There would probably not be much risk if these procedures were performed at a western hospital. The reason for allowing and performing male circumcision at hospitals while forbidding female symbolic sunnah circumcision is, then, purely ideological. It reflects a prohibition against any contact with girls' genitals, by which any such contact is an abuse. In the Dutch case, the chairperson of the Inter-African Committee stated that an official approval of a symbolic sunnah circumcision "would have set a dangerous precedent, reconfirming the subjugation of women" (Obiora 1997a, unpaginated). The Dutch case is mentioned in a report from the Swedish national board of health and welfare (1992) with the wording: "In Holland there is a discussion *in all seriousness* about the introduction of a law which would permit sunnah mutilation in hospitals" (Nath 1992:5, italics mine).

Another aspect of the public attitude has to do with a desire among some of the activists and officials to morally educate African immigrants in Sweden, often expressed in terms of what kind of "signals" the Swedish society ought to give the exile communities.[244] Activists and officials dealing with the issue of female

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[243]The Danish historian of religion Helle Hinge (1995) does not mention any Somali women "circumcising themselves" when explaining the background of the report in Holland. According to her, the study was initiated when the public health care system had met with requests from Dutch Somalis about performing female circumcisions at hospitals (ibid.:28).

[244]I was confronted with this attitude also during the discussion with the formally responsible reporter at the editorial board of *Dokument inifrån* (personal communication with Johan Brånstad, 18 September 2001). When confronted with factual errors and heavily biased statements in the program 'The Forgotten Girls', he asked me: "Do you realise what kind of signals you give Somalis in Sweden?" One possible way to understand his decision to send the

circumcision sometimes articulate the idea that "we" have to teach "them" basic facts about bodily integrity. This whole discussion about symbolic sunnah circumcision, and the comparatively prosaic way in which male circumcision, genital piercing and plastic surgery is dealt with, complicates the enterprise of teaching this basic morality. In discussions about my Somali informants' views with Swedish activists – particularly the Somalis' opposition to genital *mutilation* but more acceptance of symbolic sunnah circumcision – I sometimes encounter reactions stating that if I talk about a widespread opposition to female genital *mutilation*, while not including pricking, that I may be sending "hazardous signals" to the Somalis. Revealing the nuances of the circumcision debate may be interpreted as condoning an immoral practice.

We thus see the potential explosiveness of the circumcision issue. Some things need to be said; other things must not be said for fear of giving the wrong signals. Symbolic sunnah circumcision is not illegal in Sweden. Yet no Swedish official or activist could ever publicly say: "If you want to have your girls go through a symbolic sunnah circumcision, go ahead". The public posture then, is to *pretend* that the legislation includes a prohibition of pricking.

10.3.4 Lining up among the righteous

The discourse on female circumcision in Sweden seems to be characterised by a pessimistic anxiety: *Nobody knows what is going on behind closed doors in the African exile families. Thus, something is probably going on.*

As we do not know for sure if the practice is maintained or not, the safest position is to cling to the morally agreeable position: the one defending the potential victims. Once in that position it is easy to find arguments (even if not evidence) and allege that all other positions are "naive".[245]

This is rather enigmatic, since Sweden devotes enormous sums of money and administrative organisation for studying, documenting, educating and integrating its immigrant populations and promoting their culture under the rubric of diversity. With the Somalis, however, it seems that not only do we not know what is going on in several key spheres of their lives, we are even unwilling to listen to the

program is, consequently, that it might have been part of the more general enterprise of morally educating Somalis in Sweden.

[245] See e.g. Maj Britt Theorin's debate article (2001b) with the headline "Naive to believe Sweden would be spared"; and the islamologist Leif Stenberg, interviewed in *Sesam* (2001), a Swedish newspaper for immigrants, stating under the headline "Naive report", referring to our report (Johnsdotter et al. 2000a, 2000b), that he does not believe in what is said in the report; "Everywhere where there is a group from a country where women are circumcised, this group continues to do it. It is going on in Holland, France and Norway. It is naive to believe that it is not going on in Sweden too" (my translation from Swedish).

information which may contradict some of our ignorance. Instead of documentation, we are dealing with the power of belief in a moral discourse.

There is an overwhelming force attached to the belief that thousands of girls risk being subjected to female circumcision. A person who criticises a harmful practice will automatically be categorised by most people as a *good* human being, on a high level of morality. This logic holds, irrespective of whether there are any victims at hand or no. Claiming that 5,000 girls in Sweden risk being subjected to female circumcision, is an act of moral goodness. There is no need to scrutinise the figures, it seems, as the estimations are made for a good sake. This state of affairs was evident after the program 'The Forgotten Girls', as discussed in Chapter Nine; all politicians and journalists lining up and talking about the situation in Sweden in the same way.

10.4 A voyeuristic bent

There is a tradition within this field giving vivid descriptions of incidents of female circumcision; among the writers those having their background in Medicine. Early medical accounts have provided a "voyeurist western gaze … sanitized through a medical discourse" (Kirby 1987, in Shell-Duncan & Hernlund 2000:18). The most famous example is perhaps the article published by Worseley, a male gynaecologist who worked in Sudan in the 1930s, in *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*:

> The naked girl is laid across a bed, being securely held by the arms and ankles, while the midwife, with a deft sweep of the razor, removes the anterior two-thirds of one of the labia, together with the clitoris. The unfortunate girl's shrieks are drowned by loud shouts of "That's nothing to make a fuss about!" – and the midwife proceeds the other labium in the same way. There is always a sadistic smile of delight upon the face of the operator, and the whole business is thoroughly enjoyed by the privileged spectators [Worseley 1938:687].

This description displays several themes central to a discussion about voyeurism. Traditionally the term *voyeurism* is applied to describe a sexual perversion: some people get sexually excited by watching other people's sexual activities. The term as used here will have a wider meaning. Here the subject does not aim at *sexual* excitement; it is a more general state including sensations of curiosity, amazement and thrill. The object is not purely sexual by nature, but involves traits of exoticism and evil as well.

I argue that our conviction that this practice is maintained among Somalis in Swedish exile is related to this irresistible attraction of the topic of female circumcision. Our interest for the issue of female circumcision, an interest of an unmistakable voyeuristic bent, can only be explained if we can claim that it has its basis in a true concern about Swedish African girls. Being a voyeur is an unpleasant trait, while being committed to the saving of girls who risk being subjected to mutilation is a respectable mission. If it could be proven that the practice of female

circumcision tends to vanish in Swedish exile, our tremendous interest in the topic would seem somewhat misplaced and rather perverse.

A couple of years ago a Norwegian TV team planned to film an illegal circumcision in Norway, but did not succeed.[246] Instead they showed stills of a circumcision taken place abroad, illustrating a Norwegian Somali woman's story about her own circumcision. In the Swedish version 'The Forgotten Girls', a circumcision filmed in Somalia was shown, introduced with the words "this is the reality that many Swedish girls live in" (see Appendix). So, even when no evidence that the practice is maintained in exile can be presented, material from other parts of the world can be used instead. There is an abundance of films, pictures and narratives of female circumcision at an international level which can be used to thrill Swedish citizens with the claims that this is what is going on right in our own society.

10.4.1 The theme of the exotic evil

The quotation above from Worseley's article contains all the ingredients mentioned: it is focused on a girl's genital parts (even if described in a medical wording), it is exotic and indeed unfamiliar to western tradition. These traits are explicitly commented upon by Worseley, when he says in his concluding comments: "One hopes that, with the passing of the older generation, this evil may cease to be the curse of a splendid and lovable race" (1938:690).

The Swedish state aid agency SIDA published an information booklet on female circumcision in 1979. It is one of the few texts written on female circumcision in Swedish, and is therefore, despite its age, widely used by the innumerable students all over the country who write their papers in anthropology, public health, cultural studies, etc. about female circumcision. The descriptions of circumcisions carry morally charged formulations like: "Analgesia and hygiene are not any priorities" (Halldén 1979:22, my translation from Swedish). This specific article continues by quoting an other article by Jacque Lantier, commenting that most descriptions of operations in the literature "are as good as identical" (ibid.):

> The little girl screams from extreme pain, but nobody cares. […] If the girl faints, the women blow pilipili (spice powder) into her nose to wake her up.
>
> But this is not the end of the torture. The most important part of the operation starts now. After a short break the operator takes up the knife again and cuts away the labia minora, without taking the slightest consideration to the tremendous pain she inflicts on the girl [Lantier, in Halldén 1979:22-23, my translation from Swedish].

One may claim that these stories are 'true', they portrait real events and mirror the horrifying reality of many girls. Yet, there are as many stories about female circumcision as there are girls being circumcised. Postmodernist critique of

[246] The producer contacted me asking for tips. Instead of an illegal circumcision they filmed imams discussing female circumcision with a young Somali woman, carrying a hidden camera. This televised documentary seems to be the original to the Swedish version 'The Forgotten Girls'.

generalisations in social science has lead to an upswing of narratives in ethnographic writing. Commenting upon the apparent particularity of such narratives, D'Andrade (referring to Burke 1945) argues that "the world is 'summarised by' and 'reduces to' the story one tells about it" (1995:405); that is, we are here dealing with 'reductive anecdotes'. A story in this genre – about a specific girl at a specific point of time – makes generalising statements about what takes place at circumcisions: a single anecdote represents the entire spectrum.

In its typical form, the anecdote of female circumcision only captures the worst case scenarios (Obiora 1997b:53). It is little wonder that descriptions involving sadistic circumcisers are popular ones. They have elements of mythological tales of innocent victims and evildoers. These 'horror stories', while illustrating a practice and entertaining or thrilling the reader, also serve to localise and personalise the source of the evil: A practice involving so much suffering and pain must have an evil agent.[247] Fran Hosken and other radical feminist writers, who entered the stage before the researchers in this field, announced the global male collective as the source of the evil, and this explanatory model has still a strong hold in the public understanding of these practices. In a simplified version of the radical feminist model, the mothers involved are not the real co-conspirators: they are victims with false consciousness.[248] So, the descriptions of African womanhood range, according to Mekuria (1999), from "passive victims to malicious child abusers" (ibid.:489). She is especially critical to Alice Walker's depiction of the practice and those involved:

> A scene [from Walker's and Parmar's film *Warrior Marks*] in which a chicken is sacrificed in honour of the circumcised girls is given a particularly barbaric significance. In it, a man […] cuts the throat of a white chicken, and tosses it toward the initiates' stretched legs. The camera lingers on the dying chicken at the girls' feet. No comment is offered. But in the book Walker writes: 'I understood the message [to the girls] of the sacrifice: next time we cut off your head' [Mekuria 1999:496].

Mekuria highlights how Walker imposes her own interpretation, and so foreclosing the inner meaning of this ritual. She gives other examples of Walker's biased understanding of the course of events, including a small child's curious stare: "I felt she knew I had come for her sake" (Mekuria 1999:497, quoting Walker). Analysing this genre of film making about female genital mutilation, Mekuria points at the techniques used for a demonisation of African parenthood. Academic descriptions of instances of female circumcision often convey a more nuanced depiction of the procedure, as in an article by Shell-Duncan et al. (2000): "A skilful circumciser is considered to be one who cuts quickly and accurately. […] And often the mother of the bride waits outside as well, to avoid the torment of watching her daughter suffer" (ibid.:166). Generally speaking, it is possible to discern a difference between

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[247] This very common first reaction when people are confronted with descriptions of this practice may be summarised in the question: "But how on earth can they subject their own daughters to *this*?" See Gruenbaum (1994b), in a review of a film by the Inter-African Committee, making "the unsophisticated viewer believe that Africans are rather cruel and uncaring about their children" (ibid.:488). The 'horror stories' are also shortly discussed in section 4.7.

[248] For a discussion, see section 4.9.3.

academic and activist writing in this respect. Unfortunately, like in many other fields, activist writing is more available to the public and the mass media than academic writing.

The closer the perpetrators, or practisers of evil, come, the trickier it gets to label them as evil. This is what happens when African groups, like Somalis, come to live in a western society like Sweden. What made the program 'The Forgotten Girls' politically correct, in spite of its obvious attack on an already marginalised group in the Swedish society, was its localisation of evil: it did not in any explicit way ascribe the Somali parents the evilness. Instead the program emphasised that "the religious leaders" and the evasive "mutilators" were the ones to blame for these evil deeds – picturing the ordinary Somalis as victims of religious submission and socio-cultural pressure.[249]

In Somalis' own accounts of circumcision, the case of B for instance (see section 4.7), there is no intent to localise the evil. B's account describes pain, suffering and agony – but her mother is 'good', her father is 'good' or absent, and the circumciser infibulating her is just doing his job and seems to be a quite nice guy. My Somali informants' accounts reveal a more nuanced experience of circumcision practices in all their complex dynamics. What makes Swedish and Somali discourses about circumcision so different is their attribution of agency and power. Swedish, and western, public discourses on this practice desperately seek the source of evil, while narratives of Somali origin, and also most scientific rendering, generally display a more varied and complex depiction of what happens when girls undergo this procedure.

Gerry Mackie's theoretical model on female circumcision is consistent with my empirical material also in this aspect, as its basic premises include the consideration of caring parents:

> The people who practice FGC [female genital cutting] are honorable, upright, moral people who love their children and want the best for them. That is why they practice FGC, and that is why they will decide to stop practicing it once a safe way of stopping is found [Mackie 2000:280].

10.4.2 The theme of the exotic mutilated genitals

It is highly doubtful whether a practice involving the scarification of shoulders or knees would attract such a tremendous interest as the practice of female circumcision in its various forms. If one takes into consideration the enormous variety in different parts of the world when it comes to age of girls going through circumcision, the various types of procedure, motives for circumcision, and all other possible circumstances involved in different localities – there is only one common denominator: the fact that these practices are localised to the genitals of girls.

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[249] Speaker: [143] "Genital mutilation is not like other crimes against children, like child abuse or incest. This is about [144] parents who follow the prevalent cultural norm."

It is practically the only topic which can be discussed in detail and illustrated with close-up pictures of vaginas outside the world of pornography or gynaecology and obstetrics. The recurrent illustrations are commented by Obermeyer (1999):

> These visual images elicit contradictory responses. The reader is both voyeur looking at sexual organs and clinician assessing damage. Revulsion at the evocation of the cutting and scraping of an exquisitely sensitive part of the body is somewhat allayed by the clean simplicity of the diagrams. The text is technical, enumerating as it does specific anatomic parts, surgical procedures, and the extensive list of short- and long-term complications, but at the same time emphasizing the unsterile environment, the crude instruments – razor blades, thorns – the untrained operators, the blood, the pain, and the screams. The mixture of detachment and horror that is thus evoked expresses a profound ambivalence toward an Other that is both human and object [Obermeyer 1999:90].

The western interest in these practices has often been expressed in an objectifying way, rendering an image of a circumcised woman as someone essentially different from 'us', as she is 'genitally mutilated' and often even alleged to be 'deprived of her sexuality' (see section 4.3). It is a process of objectification which in a way reduces the woman to the mutilated organs (see e.g. Shell-Duncan & Hernlund 2000). Talle (2001) also highlights this, when she describes the experiences of Somali women in London. Being circumcised was once a sign of social solidarity and has now become a sign of difference:

> In their circumcised state they are pointed out and marginalised as incomplete and inferior women. In the streets of London, the Somali women "are" no longer "in the world" (Merleau-Ponty in Csordas 1994) with a body perfect in form, as they used to be in the savannah in Somalia. Now they walk around as 'defects', a mutilated soul in a mutilated body [Talle 2001:31, my translation from Norwegian].

For individual women this experience of being outsiders is most tangible and painful (Talle 2001:31). With the migration from African countries to western countries this process of objectification, from a western perspective directed toward African women, takes place in the same geographical area; it is no longer a matter of 'us' here describing 'them' over there. A debater and stand-up comedian, Shabana Rehman (2000), comments in a column with the headline "Glittering Journalism or Gleaming Victim Porno?" upon the Norwegian televised documentary about female circumcision among Norwegian Africans: "They used to believe that we were beaten black and blue every day. Now they believe none of us has a clitoris" (my translation from Norwegian). Some scholars have reacted to this situation:

> Can it possibly be a good thing for thousands of African immigrants who must soak in images of their nether regions literally spread open in 'education' pamphlets, women's magazines and so-called documentaries for the modern world to ponder? [Ahmadu 1995, in Shell-Duncan & Hernlund 2000:19].

This everyday voyeurism is excused by a need to inform people about this practice: only if we know about it we can fight it – we must not hush this issue up, that would

be to let potential victims down.[250] In much of the western discourse it is not only a matter of indicating Somali exiled women as 'mutilated'; there is also the image of them as 'mutilators'. There are allegations about disgusting practices taking place in our very midst, among 'our own' citizens and residents.

I argue that this kind of interest in the topic is voyeuristic, because it involves certain ingredients specific to the realm of peeping on the sly: the issue involves genitals, it is exotic and spectacular. It assists in keeping the conviction alive, the belief that there are thousands of girls who risk being subjected to circumcision. A couple of years ago a Somali man in Rosengård called me and asked if I wanted to help him arrange a seminar on female circumcision (see section 2.2). I agreed and started reading about this subject, a process that ended up in this thesis. I was fascinated, thrilled and sincerely committed. In the invitation to the seminar – the invitation with program was sent to hospitals, clinics, schools, nursery schools, local authorities, etc. all over Malmö (Sweden's third city) – I wrote:

> In 1982, Sweden legislated against female genital mutilation.
>
> Those families who still choose to have their daughters circumcised have it performed abroad, and there are indications of that some choose to have it done when the girls are only three to four years old.
>
> Now a draft law is discussed, aimed at preventing that young girls are taken abroad for this procedure.
>
> How is this fact regarded by nursery school teachers, teachers, health care staff and social workers in Malmö? How can this problem be dealt with?
>
> The public health council of Rosengård invites to a seminar about…

That African (Somali) girls probably were taken abroad – some as young as three or four years old – was, for certain, something I had been told by sources among Swedes.[251] I subsequently realised that I was actually spreading unfounded speculations. Moreover, my engagement with this topic gave me the moral mandate to delve into the most personal aspects of my Somali neighbours: their genitals. Arranging that seminar, highlighting that kind of topics, could have been considered unethical, if it were not for the urgent need to deal with this issue. My fascination with the subject, and the interest among the more than two hundred participants at the seminar, was justified by the allegation that this is a practice maintained in exile. The same moral warrant was at work when the Swedish national television exploited the subject with a poorly researched program: they broadcast this program for the sake of the 'forgotten' girls.

This is not to argue that seminars on female circumcision should be abolished, or that no programs or popular articles ought to be published. Nor do I claim that we

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[250] In the Swedish context, one of the most loudvoiced activists is the EU-commissioner Maj Britt Theorin. See e.g. her debate article (2001a), with a reply by Fatima Nur and me (Johnsdotter & Nur 2001) and a later reply by Theorin (2001b). Here she goes on about clitoris and labia being "carved out" in this "torture" and implicitly she describes African mothers as evil, while emphasising that shutting one's eyes to this torture would be to abandon all the girls who are at risk.

[251] The statement that the practice of female circumcision now had reached girls aged three or four comes from the idea that girls of this age are too young to tell their nursery school teachers about what they have been through.

can know for sure that no Swedish Somali girls are circumcised. I only wish to state that we need to be aware of the connection between everyday voyeurism and our moralistic attempts to excuse this interest by invoking some higher purpose. The practices of female circumcision are associated with titillating ingredients involving ideas of evil, the exotic Other, sex and genitals. The locally based interest in these components becomes socially acceptable only when we can legitimise it by talking about thousands of girls who risk being subjected to circumcision. We take on a mission, before we have analysed the range of the problem.

10.5 Concluding commentary

This last part of the thesis has dealt with the politics of female circumcision in Sweden. Using the televised documentary 'The Forgotten Girls' as a case of moral panic, I intended to show the logic inherent in the field of female circumcision. The program, and the storming in the media it gave rise to, had all the ingredients of years of public discourse of female circumcision in a refined form: a culturalist perspective underpinning the narrative, a moral discourse adhered to all allegations and conclusions, and a clear voyeuristic bent aimed at thrilling, upsetting and agitating the senses of the viewers. It was, consequently, a case of political exploitation of Somalis (and other African groups mentioned) in Sweden, as they have had no way to defend themselves, neither collectively nor individually, from the stigmatisation which followed the broadcast.

Today's policies and measures all over Europe are concerned with anxious estimations of numbers of girls who risk being subjected to circumcision. Before more campaigns are launched, there is an obvious need for more insights into what happens to female circumcision in different exile contexts – and there is a need to sort out the discourses about the issue. Renouncing culturalist, morally charged, voyeuristically tinted, stigmatising standpoints will certainly facilitate a complete abandonment of female circumcision among Somalis in western exile.

11 Summary and conclusions

This thesis has sought to investigate the internal debate on female circumcision among Somalis in Sweden, the public discourse on the issue, and the relation between the two.

It has been argued that the practice of female circumcision is reassessed and abandoned by Swedish Somalis, principally on the basis of a reassessment of the religious imperative: what used to be considered a religious duty in Somalia is in the exile situation re-evaluated and experienced as a violation of basic Islamic principles. It has further been argued that the Swedish public discourse, claiming that female circumcision is a practice upheld by Somalis in exile (resulting in thousands of young girls in Sweden at risk of being subjected to female circumcision), is built upon false premises and lacks factual base. As a matter of fact, there are good reasons to conclude the contrary: that an overwhelming majority of the Swedish Somalis refrain from maintaining this practice and that they have weighty motives for this standpoint.

In Chapter Three, we saw that despite Swedish incentive programs to return home, that many Somalis consider the opportunities for their children to be better in Sweden, when it comes to education and health issues. Clan identity and its expected loyalties live on in Sweden, even if somewhat transformed; the clan structure having a role of being a source of both security and social control. Transformed relations within in the family were also shown to be characteristic for the exile situation in Sweden. The traditional Somali gender roles are challenged in Sweden, as women can manage financially quite well without their husbands in Sweden, at the same time as most Somali men lose their status and traditional role as breadwinners of the family.

Chapter Four reviewed the literature on female circumcision. International definition and classification of the concept of 'female genital mutilation' were accounted for, as well as the popular Somali classification including only the concepts *pharaonic circumcision* (infibulation) and *sunnah circumcision* (all other types). The physical, psychic and sexual consequences were discussed, including a critique of many of the statements routinely offered in this field. There was a short rendering of theories of the historical background of the practice, as well as historical incidents of clitoridectomies in the West.

Islam in relation to female circumcision was discussed in the subsequent section. In western societies female circumcision is often associated with Islam, even if the

practice is also found in groups of Christians, Jews, and people with non-scriptural religions – and even if female circumcision is not practised in an overwhelming majority of the Muslim societies in the world. As the practice is not mentioned in the Koran, the *hadiths* (accounts of the sayings and the doings of the Prophet) are the sources remaining in the search for an 'Islamic view'. The hadiths concerning female circumcision, however, are disputed among Muslim scholars when it comes to authenticity and interpretation. No Muslim scholar defending the practice of infibulation could be found in the literature. However, there are those who advocate different forms of sunnah circumcision. The general trend seems to be that Egyptian scholars (clitoridectomy is widely practised in Egypt) are more in favour of the practice than other Arabic-speaking scholars. Most religious authorities claim that female circumcision is a redundant practice, which is affirmed by the fact that most Muslims in the world do not practice female circumcision. Those who are proponents of a total abolition of the practice base their argument in Koranic verses about the ban on changing or harming God's creation. But the existence of the hadiths, even if disputed, complicates the matter. A Muslim scholar who is opposed to all types of female circumcision may face problems if he states that *all* forms of female circumcision are *forbidden (haram)* according to the Islamic sources. He may claim that the practice of female circumcision is neither necessary nor desirable, but it is a far bigger step to claim that it is *haram*. This situation makes Swedish imams – also the true antagonists – vulnerable when accused of being advocates of "genital mutilation".

This thesis focused on female circumcision among Somalis. In the subsequent section the procedures of circumcision in Somalia were described, as well as the traditional motives for the practice in Somalia. The conviction that Islam demands girls to be circumcised is the most important one. But other motives influence as well, when it comes to the most common type pharaonic circumcision: it is seen as a means to make sure that the girls are virgins at marriage, and there are also aesthetic values attached to it.

Thereafter, a rendering of explanatory models of female circumcision, provided by academic scholars, was offered. First there was a discussion on analyses on symbolism, focusing the concepts of 'virginity', 'infibulation' and 'defibulation', including a critique of the description of Somali men often present in the literature. Then followed a section about approaches focusing ethnic, socio-economic and psychological aspects of female circumcision, as discussed in the international literature. The subsequent section dealt with feminist perspectives of the practice. The feminist approach to the issue of female circumcision has its own history, as one perspective (the radical feminist one) among many entered the scene at an early stage and became hegemonic, and is still today established in popular science and in the descriptions offered by the mass media in the West. The American radical feminist Fran Hosken formulated the agenda in the West, and was the one who coined and propagated for the term *female genital mutilation* (FGM), today adopted by both the WHO and several governments of the western world (including Sweden). Other feminist scholars have, however, followed in Hosken's footsteps and provided a profound critique of her perspective, among other reasons for its inherent cultural imperialist view and its treachery to basic feminist values. In the last section of this chapter Mackie's (1996, 1998, and 2000) model on convention was presented, the model used to analyse the empirical data of this thesis. In his

perspective, the practices of female circumcision (and Chinese footbinding) can be seen as results of conventions, and he also explains the logic of convention shifts.

In chapter Five, it was established that almost all Somalis in this study had taken a clear stand against pharaonic circumcision, while many of them found sunnah circumcision to be an acceptable procedure (an attitude based on grounds of principle with references to the religious sources), as long as no genital parts are removed.

Here we saw that some traditional Somali values are preserved in Swedish exile: the idea that a girl of necessity must be a virgin at marriage for her to be regarded a trustworthy and 'good girl' by the rest of the Somalis. The worst thing possible for a Somali family is the incident of an unmarried daughter becoming pregnant. A child born "without father" (*wacal*) has no place in the Somali community, mainly due to the system of patrilineage. Unmarried girls who become pregnant face a situation where they have to marry the father-to-be immediately, or they risk a total rejection from most other Somalis, including their own family. The reason given for this attitude was the Islamic ban on extra-marital sex. However, many informants admitted a double standard of morality in this respect, with no stigmatisation of young men involved in pre-marital sex.

Furthermore, we could see that new perspectives on female circumcision had been achieved due to the exile situation. Many Somali women had, at some point after their arrival in a western country, been faced with a situation where their state of being circumcised had ceased to be considered "natural" and "normal" to them. To many this took place during gynaecological examinations at Swedish hospitals or clinics, where they (or the look of their genitals) were met with shock and abhorrence by medical staff. Those women related how these encounters made them question this practice for the first time of their lives. Others claimed that they achieved a new view on the practice already in Somalia.

The inevitable reflection in exile upon the practice of female circumcision led the Somalis in this study to ask themselves and each other about the religious foundation of the custom, resulting in a total repudiation of pharaonic circumcision among almost all of them. When it comes to the sunnah type of circumcision, there were several opinions on the matter. Most Somalis seem to have reached the conclusion that sunnah circumcision is acceptable (if no harm is inflicted on the girl), but not necessary. We could also see a general support of the Swedish law against female circumcision, the few critics reacting against the cultural imperialism inherent in a law directed towards a specific group of immigrants. Many informants expressed a deep fear of Swedish social authorities and were well aware of the right of the society to take over the custody of their children by force.

Chapter Six dealt with the role of the Somali men for the maintenance of the practice. Many women believed that Somali men prefer pharaonically circumcised women, as the infibulation is considered to be a proof of virginity. Some claimed that men prefer infibulated women also for sexual reasons, as a tight vagina is believed to enhance men's sexual pleasure. This idea was rejected with emphasis by the men interviewed in this study. We could identify a clear discrepancy between what many women stated about Somali men *in general* (said to be in favour of pharaonic circumcision) and what they stated about *specific* men – as their own fathers and husbands (said to be against it). It was established that this discrepancy

between the sexual ideology and the individual experiences could be upheld due to the fact that sexual matters are a tabooed topic between the sexes.

Chapter Seven discussed the strategies to achieve a chaste behaviour in young Somali women in Sweden, and to avoid illegitimate pregnancies, in a situation where a general abandonment of pharaonic circumcision has taken place. This task may even be more difficult living in Swedish exile, as the Somalis have to face living in the midst of a deviant moral system: many Somalis experience the Swedish society as menacing, encouraging young people to have sex. The strategies used to prevent young people (especially daughters) from getting involved in premarital sex include dialogue, education and social control. We could see the importance ascribed to the upbringing of children in accordance with Muslim principles: if one succeeds in turning the girls into good Muslims, they will, out of their own conviction, refrain from having sex while still unmarried. This chaste attitude was also suggested as an indirect proof of virginity: a 'good girl' proves her moral character by denying her fiancé sex before marriage. A majority of the Somalis in this study saw the fact that an enormous number of Somalis live in exile in the world as a factor facilitating future marriages for uncircumcised daughters.

It was argued that the empirical data of this thesis is in accordance with the parameters presented by Mackie (1996, 1998, and 2000). From my study among exile Somalis in Malmö I concluded that female circumcision is a practice which is abandoned in exile, which would support a use of Mackie's model to understand the empirical data. It is possible to argue that among the Somalis in this study, there has been as a general *escape from the belief trap* (few Swedish Somalis experience the state of infibulation as 'normal' and 'natural'); there has been a general *increase of knowledge* (about the religious and medical aspects of female circumcision, thanks to internal debate and possibly due to the Gothenburg Project); and finally, *public pledges* take place (in newspaper articles and in open meetings) and *new marriage markets* where uncircumcised women can find husbands have emerged (among other things due to the fact that hundreds of thousands of Somalis live in western exile).

The matter of culturalism and cultural change was discussed in Chapter Eight. It was shown that the prevalent culturalist view is contradicted by empirical evidence, through studies indicating that the practice of female circumcision to a great extent is questioned and renegotiated among Somalis living in exile, whether in western or Arab countries; but also through evidence of changing customs regarding female circumcision in local settings. The culturalist perspective was also challenged through an analogy with footbinding: this ancient Chinese practice, structurally similar to infibulation, was almost universally practised for a thousand years – yet it was abandoned within a generation.

In chapter Nine, the public reception of a televised documentary ('The Forgotten Girls') on female circumcision in Sweden was discussed. (The program itself was related, analysed and criticised in Appendix, where it was demonstrated that the program was heavily biased, and that it founded its conclusions on a set of false premises.) It was argued that the program is instructive in teaching us the techniques of how to manipulate apparent empirical facts with the aim of creating moral indignation. The launching of the program in the mass media the days before the actual broadcasting, and the reactions of journalists and politicians after the sensational allegations, displayed every indicator of moral panic, as described by Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1995).

In Chapter Ten, the logic behind the public discourse on female circumcision in Sweden was explored. According to official statements, about 5,000 girls in Sweden risk being subjected to 'female genital mutilation'. No case has ever been brought to court, and no studies have been carried out to investigate attitudes among exile African groups in Sweden. It was suggested that the public discourse, claiming a maintenance of the practice of female circumcision among Somalis in Sweden, is based on the culturalist perspective discussed in Chapter Eight ('they do it because it is their culture'), that it carries a forceful moral discourse, and that it has a clear voyeuristic bent. As the Swedish Somalis have no way to clear themselves of suspicion, it was argued that the public posture implies a political exploitation. It was shown that all the actors in the field of female circumcision benefit, in one way or another, if they claim that a huge number of girls are at risk. An activist optimises the possibilities for future financing for her organisation working for a total abolition of the tradition; a journalist gets a sharp angle and a titillating story; a national, regional or local authority can present initiative facing a social problem; a politician gets an opportunity to display his or her moral standard; an expert keeps the issue alive optimising for future commitments.

In the subsequent section, we saw that in the moral discourse attached to the issue of female circumcision some scientific findings are highlighted, while others are neglected. The moral model inherent in much of the literature in this field is most obvious when it comes to the politics of naming; basically whether to call the practices 'circumcision', 'mutilation', 'surgery' or 'cutting'. In western discourse, all forms of female circumcision – including pricking/symbolic sunnah – are labelled 'mutilation'. Such a moral ideological stand makes national rule regulation tricky. The Swedish law against 'female genital mutilation' prohibits all procedures leading to permanent changes of the female genitals, performed for other than medical reasons. A pricking/symbolic sunnah circumcision hardly leads to permanent changes – and if it would, to a much lesser extent than changes imposed on male infants' genitals during circumcisions at Swedish hospitals. Besides that, nobody has brought a charge against anyone for performing piercing of female genitals or genital plastic surgery for aesthetic or erotic reasons. Yet, it is officially declared that the Swedish law, still not applied in any case, includes pricking in this prohibition. The result of this situation is that a symbolic sunnah circumcision (pricking) of girls is considered a criminal act, while it is perfectly acceptable to remove genital tissue from boys. It also seems acceptable that (Swedish) schoolgirls pierce their labia or clitoris and insert a ring, while Muslim scholars, who have a hard time stating that *all* forms of female circumcision is *forbidden* (haram) according to Islam, are categorised as advocates of 'mutilation'.

It was concluded that the discourse on female circumcision in Sweden is characterised by a pessimistic anxiety: Nobody knows what is going on behind closed doors in the African exile families. The assumption, then, is that something is probably going on. As we do not know for sure if the practice is maintained or not, the safest position is to cling to the morally agreeable position: the one defending the potential victims. The moral discourse has a strong hold on the public discussion of the issue in Sweden. As long as all actors feel the urge to line up among the righteous, the myth of thousands of girls on the point of being mutilated will remain. This myth is associated with moral panic and political correctness, which

involves saying the right thing, and making sure one remains quiet about any doubts or nuances.

The last section of Chapter Ten discussed the voyeuristic bent inherent in the western interest in the issue of female circumcision, arguing that the fact that practically all of us are voyeurs to a greater or lesser extent contributes to the upholding of the view that thousands of girls in Sweden risk being subjected to circumcision and need our protection from their own people: our curiosity can turn into concern. The phenomenon of female circumcision thrills us in two ways: there is a theme of the exotic evil (how can mothers be so cruel to their own daughters?), and there is a theme of the exotic mutilated genitals (how can people possibly get the idea to cut away parts of the female genitals?). Being a voyeur is an unpleasant trait, while being committed to the saving of girls at risk of female circumcision is a respectable mission. If it could be proven that the practice of female circumcision tends to vanish in Swedish exile, our tremendous interest in the topic would seem somewhat misplaced.

In the specific case of female circumcision in Sweden, the prevalent morally charged discourse combined with the culturalist perspective are overwhelming to the groups affected, as these groups lack resources of defence. Even the largest group, the Somali, has only weak and fragmented lobbying organisations; Somalis do not constitute an financially important group for the Swedish society to keep in with; very few have been in Sweden long enough to have the political position and, in Bourdieu's terms, the symbolic capital to fight the moral discourse on female circumcision. Those few who have obtained such a position after a struggle can easily lose it, if they were to go against the tide in such a delicate topic as female circumcision. More than any others, those with their background in African groups have to side with the 'good' forces if they are to keep their positions in the Swedish structures.

Fortunately, this is not a status quo situation. New generations of Somalis and other Africans, who are born and grow up in Sweden, will obtain perfect fluency in Swedish and a complete familiarity with the Swedish cultural codes. Hence, in the future there is hope for a more balanced public discussion on female circumcision and a merge of different perspectives.

In the meantime, Swedish authorities need to sort out what the law against female genital mutilation intends to include, and its implications for practices already existing in our society. If not, the principle of all citizens' equality before the law is disregarded. From the Swedish society's point of view, there is also a need to scrutinise what implicit theoretical models are used when campaigns, such as the national campaign against female circumcision, are worked out without insights of internal processes in the target groups. This case shows the importance of initiating research about internal processes within immigrant groups before campaigns are launched.

The campaigns in Sweden may have had considerable effect in the Somali groups, when it comes to e.g. informing about medical consequences of the practice and spreading the awareness about the Swedish law on female circumcision. However, no follow-up studies to see the results – whether attitudes in the target groups have changed or not – have been made. Consequently, the figures of girls who risk being subjected to circumcision in Sweden have rather been adjusted upwards than downwards during the years; adjusting for influx of African immigrants but not

taking into consideration the effect of campaigns and, even less, what internal debate within the Somali community has resulted in.

Such an attitude from official quarters may be counterproductive in the preventive work against female circumcision in Sweden. One aspect of Mackie's (1996, 1998, and 2000) model on footbinding and infibulation, an aspect that deserves some reflection, is that the tipping point – the moment when the great mass becomes aware of the overwhelming advantages of giving up a practice – is advanced to an earlier point in time through educational campaigns. But the motive power of the process itself, resulting in a convention shift, depends on estimations about what decisions 'all the others' take at the same time. In Sweden this process may be complicated by the fact that official authorities and the mass media constantly assert that female circumcision is a practice upheld among Swedish immigrants, and even takes place in Sweden. A better way to deal with the situation would be to establish – through research – that an overwhelming majority of the people involved had reached the conclusion that female circumcision ought to be abandoned. Such a public message (what kind of "signals" to give to the exile groups) would probably facilitate for the minority of Somalis still in favour of the practice to tip over and dissociate themselves from the practice.

When it comes to future research, there is a multitude of questions to investigate in association with the practice of female circumcision among Somalis in exile: What happens to the relationship between women and men in exile, and how does this affect the internal debate about practices as female circumcision? We also need a more profound investigation of the relations between generations, where several aspects must be included: the influence of older generations living in exile, of older kinsmen still living in Somalia; the situation of young people growing up in exile, and of those returning to a Somali society they have never lived in.

At an international level, comparative research would be valuable: What happens to the practice of female circumcision among Somalis in Norway, Denmark, Great Britain, Germany? How do national campaigns and public discourse affect the internal debates?

There is reason to further investigate the impact of Islam in exile settings, regarding the issue of female circumcision. According to the culturalist perspective, 'culture' is what gets increased importance living in exile and segregated environments, implying that both pleasant and harmful cultural practices are maintained and cherished by the immigrant groups in attempts to fortify identity projects. Among the Somalis in this study, the general process seems to be a different one. When it comes to practices in the field of female circumcision, those Swedish Somalis I have met during these years draw a clear line between 'culture' and 'religion', giving the preference to what is conceived as religious precepts. Western ideas about good reasons to abandon the practice of female circumcision – arguments based on feminist or human rights discourses, by way of example – may be beside the point or even counterproductive among those still in favour of the practice. Obviously, Islam has a key position in preventive work against the customs of female circumcision among Somalis, among whom the Muslim identification seems to be crucial to a great majority.

Finally, this thesis is not an attempt to guarantee that no Swedish African girls undergo circumcision. Nor is it an attack on national campaigns aimed at abolishing the practice among African immigrants. But I do argue that it is

possible, and desirable, to work out campaigns and have public discussions which do not stigmatise entire immigrant groups. It is possible, and desirable, to allocate funds for a preventive work against the practice among Africans in exile without enforcing unfounded allegations that thousands of African girls in Sweden risk being subjected to circumcision.

If we are to take immigrants seriously, we must be willing to truly listen to how they understand their own situation and the strategic contexts of their action. Only by pursuing this understanding without taboos and political correctness, can we better understand why not only immigrants, but also the rest of us, stubbornly maintain certain undesirable practices while rapidly abandoning others.

Hordhac

Turjume: Ali Yassin Dahir

Daraaso cilmiyeedkani waxaa lagu baaray sida Soomaalida dagan dalka Isweedhan ay uga doodaan gudniinka dumarka iyo sida guud ahaan looga doodo gudniinka dumarka bulshada Isweedhiska dhaxdeeda. Waxaa jira kala fogaansho dheer labadaan siyood oo ay dooduhu u socodaan.

Gabagabeynta (Afjarida)

Gabagabeynta lagu afjari karo daroos cilmiyeedkani waxa weeye in Soomaalida Isweedhan guud ahaan ay joojiyeen guditaanka dumarka markay soo qaxeen. Haba ahaatee mida ugu muhimsan oo ah dib u baarida waxa ay diinta islaamka ay ka oraneyso su´aashaan: Midii ahayd in dad badani u fahmaan in ay tahay mid waajib diineed markii Soomaaliya la joogay (in gabdhaha la gudo) loo fasirto halkaan Isweedhan in ay tahay dambi laga galayo asalraacii mabda´a diinta (in aan la dhibaateen "dhaawicin" waxuu rabi abuuray).

Isla markaasna waxaa ka socda Isweedhan dood guud, taasoo ay badanaa wadaan war baahiyayaasha "raadiyaha, teleefishinada, jaraa´idyada", kuwaasoo ku andacoonaya in ay si xad dhaf ah ay soomaalida halkaan dagan ay wali u wadaan gudidda dumarka. Inkastoo aysan jirin hal dhacdo oo lagu xaqiijiyay sharci daro gudniin dumar, ayaa waxay halgamayaasha, siyaasiyeenta iyo shaqaale dawladeedkuba yiraahdaan waxaa socda halgan weyn oo guditaan sharci daro ah oo qarsoon iyo in kumayaal gabdhood ay qatar ugu sugan yihiin in la "naafeeyo" (mutilate).

Sidee Soomaalida Isweedhan u arkaan gudniinka dumarka?

Sidee ayey Soomaalida ku sugan "u soo qaxday" Isweedhan ay oga munaaqishoodaan gudniinka dumarka (haweenka)? Daraasadaan inta ugu badan waxaa soo aruuriyay koox aqoonyahano ah kuwaasoo isugu jira labo aqoonyahano Soomaaliyeed (Asha Omar iyo Ali Elmi) iyo labo Isweedhish ah (Sara Johnsdotter iyo Aje Carlbom). Asha Omar iyo Sara Johndotter waxay wareysteen dumarka (haweenka), Ali Elmi iyo Aje Carldom waxay wareysteen ragga. Deyrtii 2000

waxaa la wareystay qiyaastii 30 Soomaali ah oo dagan magaalada Malmö. Kooxdu u jeedadeedu waxay ahay in ay helaan shaqsiyo kasoo hor jeeda gudniinka dumarka, shaqsiyo laba labayn (hesitation) ay ku jirto iyo shaqsiyo taageersan gudniinka dumarka.

Waxaa soo shaac baxday in ay aad u adagtahay in la helo shaqsiyo taageersan gudninka farcooniga ah. Dhinaca dumarka waxay Asha iyo Sara ugu dambeyntii heleen haweyney taageersan, halka dhinaca kale Elmi iyo Carlbom ay waayeen mid qora oo taageersan raga dhaxdooda (aanan ka ahayn nin yiri dumarka waaweyn waxay ku qurxoon yihiin markii kintirka intiisa kore qaar la jaro). Badankood inta kale waa ay ka soo horjeedeen gudniinka farcooniga, waxayna sheegi kareen oo kale sababo wacan oo ay aad oga fikireen halka uu go´aankooda tagan yahay.

Laakiin kuwa badan ayaa waxay muujiyeen gudniinka sahlan ee sunnada ah in ay tahay mid mabd´ahaan aqbal ah ayna waafaqsan diinta islaamka. Shuruuduhuse waxey ahayd in aan xubin "tissue" la goyn ama aan sina loo dhaawicin gabadha. laakiin inta badankood waxay go´aansadeen in aysan gudin gabdhahooda, kadib markii aysan muhiim ahayn diiniyan in la gudo.

Ma u badelmi karaa dagdag dhaqan "qotadiisu dheertahay"?

Waxaa badanaa la yiraahdaa gudniinka dumarka waa dhaqan "qoto dheer" oo waxay qaadaneysaa jiilal badan inta koox gudeheeda ay isbadallan oo ay dadku iska daayaan ku dhaqankeeda. Aqoonyahan biritish ah, Mackie (1996, 1998 iyo 2000), ayaa waxuu cadeyay in aysan u baahnayn in ay sidaa ahaato. Waxuu isu barbar dhigay gudniinka dumarka iyo lug dabridda ee Shiinaha, kadib markii labadan dhaqan ay aad isugu dhawyihiin.

Waxaa lagu sameyn jiray gabdhaha markay yihiin lix ilaa siddeed sano (lug dabarka). Waxaa loo arkayay in ay daruuri tahay si gabdhahaas ay u guursadaan iyo hab fiican oo gabdhaha looga dhigo kuwa aan sineysan oo aay dhawsanaadan. Labadaba waxaa loo sameeyaa in gabadhuhu helaan mustaqbal fiican. Waxaa sameeya qofkasta, xataa kuwa u arka in uusan dhaqankaan fiicnayn, Waxaa sameeya dumarka, waxaana si xad dhaf ah u taageera dumarka.

Dalka Shiinaha waxaa lagu xirfadeynayey lug dabrida xanunka miiran in kabadan kun sano, sidaas ay tahay waxaa dhaqankani u ku baaba´ay in u dhaxeesa hal jiil gudihiisa.

Mackie waxuu kawadaa sidaan dhaqsada badan oo loo dhaafay dhaqankaan "qotadiisu dheertahay" in lagu micneyn karo in waalidku uu gaaro go´aanka u fiican gabdhahooda haba ahaado "lug dabrid" ama guditaanka gabdhaha, hadii kuwa kale ay ku camalfalaan - hadii kale gabdhahaasi "kuwa aan la gudin" waxay dareemayaan in ay ka duwan yihiin (kuwa gudan). middaasoo u keenayso qasaaro.

Sidee u bilawdaa dhaqdhaqaaq isbadel? Sida ay la tahay Mackie waxaa loo baahan yahay sadax xaaladood:

1. Iyadoo la joojiyo in loo arko dhaqamo qaarkood si "caadi ah" ama "dabiici ah".
2. In saro loo qaado cilmiga waxa uu ku xun yahay hadii dhaqanka sii socdo iyo waxa uu ku fiican yahay hadii uu joogsado.

3. Iyadoo ay ”sahniyayaal” qaarkood ay joojiyaan dhaqankaa iyo iyagoo bulshada dhaxdeeda ka cadeeya in ay iska daayeen. Kadib waxaa halkaa ka dhalanaya isbedel suuqa guurka, halkaasoo ay heli karaan in la aqbalo gabdhaha aan raacin dhaqanka ”la gudin” oo ay ahaadaan kuwa la guursan karo.

Daraasadani waxay ku andocoonaysaa in kuli sadaxdaan xaaladood ay gaareen Soomaalida intey u soo qaxeen Isweedhan:

1. Soomaali badan oo Isweedhan u soo qaxday waxay heleen garasho ”fikrad” cusub oo ku saabsan gudninka dumarka, midaasoo keentay in ay jogsatay in loo arko in ay tahay wax ”caadi ah” ama ”dabiici ah” (gudniinka). Dumar badan oo ka qeyb qaatay daraasadaan waxay noo sheegeen in ay kala kulmeen dareen argagax oo ay muujiyeen shaqaalaha caafimaadka ka shaqeeya, kadib markay aad uga argagexeen sida uu u eg yahay cawrada dumarka oo gudan. Midaasoo keentay in dumarka ay ka baaraan dagaan dhaqankii iyo sababtuu uu u jiro. Waxaa joogsaday in loo arko mid caadi ah ama dabiici ah.
2. Dood ayaa ka dhax dhalatay Soomaalida Isweedhan u soo qaxday, midaasoo wali socota, haba ugu horeysee waxa diinta Islaamka ay ka oraneyso gudniinka dumarka. Qaxootinimo ”markay dibada ay yimaadeen” waxay Soomaalida kula kulmeen muslim kale, kuwaasoo u badan carabta muslimiinta ah oo aan gudin gabdhahooda (kuwaasoo badanaa gabdhahooda aysan uur qaadin xataa iyagoon gudneyn). Waxaa la dareemayaa in la helay garasho sare oo diineed iyo ilal kale oo furmay, tusaalo ahaan sida dhaqanku (gudniinku) uu u keeno dhibaatooyin caafimaadeed.
3. Waxaa jira jaaliyado iyo ururo badan oo Soomaali ah oo ka shaqeeya ka soo horjeedka gudniinka dumarka, iyo Soomaali badan oo kali kali ku cadeeya in ay ka soo horjeedaan gudniinka dumarka iyagoo maqaalo ku qoraya jaraa´idayada. Kadib markii intii badneyd ay iska daayeen in ay gudaan markay u soo qaxeen Isweedhan, waxaa furmay suuq guureed oo cusub, kasoo yimi markii dibida loo soo qaxay. Dhalinta raga ah ee Soomaaliyeed waxay ku korayaan bulshada wadamada galbeedka, iyagoo ka qaba aragti kale gudninka dumarka. Waalid badan oo Soomaali ah ayaa waxay dareemayaan in ay gabdhahooda ay heli karaan rag guursada, xataa hadii aysan gudnayn. Loomana arko wax dhibaato ah hadii gabdhaha ay mustaqbalka ay u noqdaan Soomaaliya iyagoo aan gudneyn.

Xaaladaan ay waalidka Soomaalida oo u soo qaxay Isweedhan waxay tusaale calaamadeed ay u tahay sida:

- *In la gudo gabdhaha khasaariheedu uu badanyahay;*
- *In aan la gudina faa´iidadeedu ay badan tahay.*

Waxaa lagu soo afjari karaa daraasad cilmiyeedkani in soomaalida Isweedhan ay intooda ugu badani ay ka joogaan in ay gudaan gabdhahooda.

Maxay Soomaalida Isweedhan ka ogyihiin sida Soomaalida Isweedhan ee kale ay arintaan u arkaan?

Soomaali badan ayaa waxay ku andacoodaan in ayaga nafsad ahaan tooda, oori yadooda ama odayadooda, ehelkooda u dhaw iyo saaxiibadooda ay talaabo fag ka qaadeen dhaqankaas, laakiin ay jiraan kuwa badan oo kale oo wali wada gudniinka dumarka, xataa kadib markay kasoo tageen Soomaaliya. Badanaa habkaan u hadlidiisa waxuu ku dhisan tahay malayn: waxa la qiyaasayo waa inay sidaa ay ahaataa kadib markii dhaqankani uu aad ugu fidsan yahay Soomaaliya. Xataa hadii Soomaali badan ay wax badan ka og yihiin hab dhaqankaan, majirose qof og dhab ahaan sidey inta badan ee soomaalida dagan Isweedhan ay oga fikiraan arintani. Majiro mashrax furan oo dood balaaran leh. Kadib markii mawduucani ka hadelkiisa uu xaarintiman yahay iyo iyadoo uu Isweedhan ka yahay sharci daro ayaa gudninka dumarka uu soo maraa dariiqa xanta. Waxaa dhici karta in Soomaalida badankood ee Isweedhan ay kafogaadeen gudniinka dumarka, laakiin aysan ogayn in ay arintaa saameyso "in ay ka fogaadeen gudninka dumarka!" badankood. Waxaa go´aanka la gaaray kali ahaan, macquul in lagala hadlay dadka kuu dhaw, iyadoon waxba laga war qabin sida ay Soomaalida Isweedhan guud ahaan ay oga fikiraan dhaqankaan "gudniinka dumarka".

Waxuu xiriirkani uu fasiix noqday markii raga iyo dumarka Soomaaliyeed ay sifeeyeen sida ay latahay in ay u arkaan jinsi jinsi "lab iyo dhidig" Soomaalida kasoo horjeeda gudninka dumarka. Ragu waxay yiraahdeen su´aashu waxay ku xirantahay siday dumarka u arkaan dhaqankaan, Rag badan ayaa waxay ku hanqal qaadeen in dareen ahaan ay arintani ay dareemayaan awood daro. Dhinaca kalena dumarka badankood waxay ku andacoonayaan in Soomaalida ragooda ay guud ahaan ay waafaqsan yihiin gudnIinka farcooniga ah oo ay rabaan in ay guursadaan haweyney u gudan fircooni, markaa ninku waxuu hubaa in uu gursanayo gabar bikro ah, ayay kawadaan "dumarku". Dumarka qaarkii waxay yiraahdeen ragu waxuu ka helaa dumarka gudan kadib markii ay saro u qaadeyso raaxada galmada. Dumar badan oo marqaati ka noqday in ay jiraan rag badan oo taageero gudniinka fircooniga ah ayaa isla markiina ku sifeeyay ragooda iyo aabayaashooda kuwa ka duwan kuwa kale: ayagu waa kuwa ka soo harjeeda gudninka fircooniga ah.

Waxaa loo qaadan karaa aaminaada dumarka dhaxdiisa taal oo ah in raga Soomaaliyeed ay ka helaan dumarka u gudan fircooniga, ay tahay ra´yi midkaasoo ku dhisan malo sida ay dumarka dhaxdooda ay oga doodaan gudninka iyo waxay guud ahaan ay ka yaqaanan arintaan. Aaminantaan wax su´aal galinayo ma jiraan, aan ka ahayn in yar (tusaalo ahaan ragooda iyo aabayaashooda).

Hadeynu fiirino daraasadaan waxaynu sugi karnaa in ay jirto sabab wacan oo balaaran oo ay ragii wareysiga galay oo idil oga soo hor jeedaan gudninka fircooniga ah.

Dareemo isqalifsan dhinaca gudniinka dumarka

Waxaa marmarka qaarkood la kulmaa su´aasha ah "Maxaay soomaalida oo goor aan fogeyn ahaa kuwa u dooda gudninka dumarka ay sidaan dhakhsada badan ay ugu noqdeen kuwo ka soo horjeeda?" su´aashani waxay dhinaca dhigeysaa "iloobeysaa" in

dhab ahaantii dadku markey go´aan adag hor yaalo ay badanaa dareemaan hubnaan sho la´aan.Waxay dadka markaa dareemaan dareemo iyo fikrado iska soo horjeeda islamar ahaan. Hooyo Soomaaliyeed oo dooratay "ogolaatay" in gabadheeda gudniin marto waxay dareemi walwal, xanuunka iyo qatarta ka imaankarta, isla markaana iyadoo dareemi istareex "dabac" in la guday. Hooyo Soomaaliyeed oo Isweedhan dagan hadii ay ka joogsato in ay gudo gadheeda waxay dareemaysaa dabac "istareex" in aysan marin gabadheeda gudninkaan xanunka miiran, iyadoo isla markaa ka walwalaysa siday gabadheeda ugu edbin lahayd gabar fiican kadib markaysan gudneyn.

Soomaalida ka qeyb qaatay daraasadaan waxay sheegeen in ay go´aansadeen in aysan gudin gabdhahooda (aan ka ahayn labo: haweyney taageersan gudninka fircooniga ah, oo aan laakiin aan dhalin gabar iyo haweyney kale oo aan rabin inay gudo gabadheeda laakiin ay la tahay in ay gudeyso hadii reerkeda ay rabaan iyo hadii ay dib ugu noqdaan Soomaaliya). Badanaa waxay sheegeen in ay dareemayaan walwal sidey ugu korin lahaayeen gabdhahooda sidii "gabdho fiicfiican" dal sida Isweedhan oo kale. Kuwa badan waxay u garteen Isweedhan sidii beel dhiiri galineysa galmo guurka kahor iyo iyagoo aad oga cabsanayey in gabdhahooda ay uur qaadaan intaysan guursan kahor.

Xeelada lagu maamulayo xaaladaan kuma xirna gudniin, laakiin edbinta gabdhaha si sax ah. Hadii gabdhaha lagu abaabiyo edbin muslinimo iyo xataa in lagu tacliimiyo (labaro) anshaxa cilmiga galmada, ayagaa ka joogaya galmo ilaa ay guursadaan, sidaa ayay kuwa la wareystay ay u fikiraayeen.

Kuwa badan waxay ka wadaan oo kale "akhlaaq fiican" waxay u shaqeyneysaa sidee cadeen bikrinimo, hadii gabadhu aysan muujinkarin bikrinimada fircooniga ahayd. Hadii gabadhu ay u diido ninkii guursan lahaa galmo intaysan guursan, waxay halkaa ku cadeyneysaa in ay tahay "gabar fiican", markaas uma baahna in ay ku cadeyso midii gudninka fircooniga ahayd.

Dooda guud ee Isweedhan

Sharcigii ugu horeeyay oo mamnooca gudninka dumarka waxuu soo baxay Isweedhan 1982. 1999 waa la xoojiyay sharcigaa si uu u qabto qofkii (dagan Isweedhan) ku soo gudo gabadhiisa/dheeda dal la ogolyahay in lagu gudo gabdhaha, in la soo saari karo maxkamad Isweedhish ah

Wakaalada arimaha bulshada waxay shaaca ka qaaday in ugu yaraan shankun oo gabdhood ay qatar ugu suganyihiin gudniin dumar. Tiradani waxaa laga soo qaatay tira koobka shacabka: hadii ay tahay gabar, waalidkeed ku dhashay mid kamid ah dalalka afrikaankan ah oo gudninka dumarka ka jiro, waxaa lagu sifeynayaa in gabadhaa ay qatar ugu sugantahay (gudniin). Sidaas oo ay tahay wali lama hayo hal dhacdo oo sharci daro gudnin oo maxkamad la horkeenay.

Isweedhan majiro ilaa iyo hada daraasad baartay sida Soomaalida Isweedhan ay oga fikiraan gudniinka dumarka. Sidaas aytay ayaa waxaa kullano badan lagu andacoodaa in Soomaalidu ay wali gabdhahooda qarsoodi ku gudaan. Waxaa ku

andacooda aqoonyahanada, siyaasiyeenta, shaqaalaha dawlada, halgamayaasha iyo wariyayaasha "suxuufi".

Dukumentaariyihii "Gabdhihii la iloobay"

Sibtembar 2001 ayaa waxaa laga sii daayay teleefishinka Isweedhan dukumentaariyo. "Gabdhihii la iloobay", ku yimid barnaamijtaxanaha sida wacan loo daawado ee *Dokument inifrån* (Dukumentigii gudaha). Barnaamijku waxaa lagu andacooday:

- In hogaamiyayaasha diimeed ee Isweedhan (ugu badnaan muslimeenta) ay ku dhiiri galiyaan reeraha afrikaanka ah in ay gudaan gabdhahooda.
- In kumayaal gabdhood oo ku nool Isweedhan la gudo ama ay qatar ugu jiraan; in badankood kuwaasi lagu soo gudo fasaxa deerta dalal kale iyo xataa halkaan Isweedhan in lagu gudo.
- In qof afrikaan ah oo wax guda la keeno Isweedhan oo ay dalka ku wareegto si ay u gudo gabdhaha.

Akhbaartu waxaa badankeed lagu soo aruuriyay iyadoo lagu duubayo sawir qaade qarsoon:

Haweyneey Gaambiyaan ah ayaa waxaa loo diray iimamada, dakhtar Suudaani ah iyo haweyney Soomaali ah oo dagan magaalada Göteborg. Waxay sheegatay in ay tahay qof raba in ay gudo gabadheeda intay rabto haku qaadatee. In arintaa lagu caawinana waa ay weydiisatay.

Baaritaan lagu sameeyay sida dukumentaarkaan loo sameeyay waxuu tusayaa in uu muujinayo sawir been ka sheegaya nolosha dhabta ah. Sidaas ay tahay majiro mid dacaayadeeyay dukumentaarka. War bixiintii faraha badneyd oo soobaxday dukumentaarka ka dib, majirin mid isa su´aalay muuqaal ahaan iyo bayaan ahaanba waxii la soo saaray. Waxaa lagu fasiri karaa waxa uu dukunmantaarka uu tusay in ay tahay waxii awalba lagu andacoonayey sanooyin badan: in afrikaanku (kuwaa soo soomaalidu ay yihiin kooxda ugu badan) uu si qarsoodi ah uu wali u sii wadaan gudniinka dumarka. Xataa hadii aysan jirin Isweedhan dhacdo sharci daro gudniin dumar oo la xaqiijiyay, waxaa in badan la aaminsan yahay in hidahaan uu yahay mid baahsan. Sidee ayay sidaan u ahaan kartaa?

Maxay beesha Isweedhishku ugu andacoonaysaa in gudniinka dumarku uu si baaxad leh ugu socdo?

Daraasadaan waxay ku andacoonaysaa in beesha Isweedhan aaminaadeeda ah in ay jiraan koox qatar kusugan (in la gudo) uu ka imaanayo afar xaaladood. Xaaladahaan kala duwan waxay caawinaysaa in kuligood ay saro u qaadaan tuhunka ah in Soomaalida Isweedhan ay si xad dhaf ah ay u wadaan gudniinka dumarka.

1. Siyaasad dhiigmeerasho

Yaa weeye kuwa jila (u hadla) dooda ka socota Isweedhan? Kuwa ugu horeeya waa halgamayaasha (dadka ka shaqeeya in ay caadadaan ay joogsato). wariyayaasha,

shaqaalaha dawlada, siyaasiyeenta iyo khabiirada. Kuli jilayaashaas oo idil waxaa faa´iido ugu jirtaa in laga hadlo in ay jiraan koox badan oo qatar kujirta (in la gudo). Macnaheeda ma aha in aysan run ka sheegeyn balanqaadkooda (in ay arintaa wax ka qabtaan). Mida lagu andacoonayo waxaa weeye in ay faa´iido badan tahay hadii lagu andacoodo in dhaqanku wali socdo, taasoo kuli (inta andacoonaysa) ay noqonayaan kuwa faa´iida (raaya).

- *Halgame* ku andacooda in dhaqanku uu wali socdo iyo in gabdho badan la gudo, waxuu sare u qaadayaa fursada ah in uu ururkiisa/keeda helo macaawino. Markii la yiraado gabdho badan ayaa qatar ku sugan, waxaa sare u qaadmaya fursadii ahayd in loo soo ogolaado macaawino firfircoonidooda (hawlahooda).
- *Wariye "suxufi"* ku andacooda in ay kumayaal gabdhood ay qatar kujiraan(in la gudo) oo dhaqanku wali uu ka socdo Isweedhan, waxuu helayaa war bixin xiiso leh markii loo fiiriyo midka sifeeya ka soo horjeedida (in la gudo gabdhaha) ee soomaalida dhaxdeeda. Warbaahinta waqtigaan waxay u baahan yahay xaglooyin si fiican u muuqda iyo hadal nuxureed waasacan. Sida "xanxantada" miiran oo loo fasiro sida ay (u arkaan wadamada galbeedka) dhaqankaan cawaaniga ah uu wali ugu dhax noolyahay Soomaalida u soo qaxday Isweedhan waa mid ay wariyayaal badan ay iska calinkarin (ka faa´ideystaan).
- *Siyaasi* waxuu heli karaa kutiri-kuteen fiican hadii uu isku taxluujiyo arinta gudniinka dumarka, kabid markii lagu tirinayo "sifeynayo" mid "Anshax wanaagsan". Kadib markii Isweedhishku uu doorto in uu ka naxo gabadha afrikaanka ah ee joogta Isweedhan markii loo fiiriyo gabdhaha afrikaanka ah oo joogta Afrika, waa in arinta loo xaglaa si ay u taxloojiso codbixiyaha Isweedhishka ah: Waxaa lagu andacoodaa in dhaqanku si xoog leh u ugu socdo Isweedhan. Midaa waxay keyneysaa in qofkaa (siyaasigaa) ku andacooda, oo wali raba in uu ka shaqeeyo ka soo horjeedka caadadaa loo arko mid wacan oo wanaagsan.
- *Shaqaalo dawladeed* go´aamiya qarash galin dhaqaaleed waxaa mar walba heyta culeys oga imanayo kooxaha codsanaya lacagta. Isla markaa waa in shaqaalo dawladeedku uu ka difaaci karaa kharashkaa u bixinayo qeybta ka sareysa ee maamulkiisa/keeda. Hadii deeq la bixiyo waa in maamulka uu ku andacoodaa in xaalad qatar ah ay jirto (tusaalo ahaan: "kumayaal gabdhood ayaa qatar kusugan").
- *Khabiirku/tu* xataa waxuu ka faaíidayaa markey socoto in la yiraahdo koox weyn ayaa qatar ku sugan (in la gudo). In alale intey feejignaanta arintaan ay hesho waxay dhalinaysaa in ay casuumado badan la helo, tusaalo ahaan casharo bixin in uu qofkaa (khabirku/tu) helo oo uu shirar badan qabto.

Sidaas darteed: Si alaale sidey jilayayaasha ay u fikiraan gudo ahaan hormarka (in aan la gudin), waxay kuli ay faaíidayaan hadii la sii wado in lagu andacoodo caadadii ahay in gabdhaha la gudo wali waa uu socdaa xataa markii loo soo qaxay Isweedhan.

Midani waxaan ku magacaabaa dhigmiirasho siyaasadeed, kadib markii soomaalida iyo kooxaha afrikaanka ah ee Isweedhan aysan lahay si ay isaga difaacaan hab soo bandhigida noocaan oo kale. Majiro si Soomaalida kali kali

ahaan ama jamac ay ku cadeeyaan mid ka soo horjeeda andacoonidani. Soomaalidu waa koox ku cusub dalka Isweedhan, qof qof Soomaali ah ayaa ku guuleysatay in ay ka dhax sameystaan awood xukun maamulka Isweedhan ama ka shaqeeyay in uu ka qeyb qaato oo wax ku soo qoro dhinaca dhaqan ama dooda ee jaraaíd maalmeedka. Kuwa ku guuleystey in ay sameystaan jagooyin hormarsan bulshada Isweedhan dhaxdeeda, waxay ku jiraan xaalad xasaasi ah, markii warbaahintu ay wax badan ay wax ka oraneyso gudniinka dumarka, culeysku waa uu badan yahay sidii dhinaca "saxan" loo raaci lahaa: Iyagoo tusaya in ay u digayaan in dhibane aan dambi laheyn si axmaqnimo ah "loo ciqaabayo" iyo in aan laysku dayin in laga horyimaado sida loo maleeyo in ay "sax" tahay oo la yiraahdo ama ay u fikiraan Isweedhishku.

Dhiigmiirashadu waxay ku jirtaa in ay Soomaalida iyo kooxaha kale aysan jirin hab ay uga andacoodaan dambi la´aantooda. Iyada oo aysan jirin hal dacwo oo gudniin dumar oo sharci daro ah, waxaa guud ahaan loo heystaa in ay si xoog leh uu u socoto (gudniinka), laakiin si qarsoon. Haba ahaato in Afrikaanka Isweedhan dagan in ay sii wadaan gudniinka dumarka ama aragti ahaan horay loo xukumo bulshada Isweedhishka dhaxdeeda.

2. Dhaqan

Waxaa loo heystaa in dadku ay u sameeyaan waxyaabo qaarkood "in ay tahay dhaqankooda": in la gudo gabdhaha waa "dhaqan" Soomaalidu leedahay-sidaa darteed Soomaalidu wali waa ay sii wadaan "dhaqankaa" xataa markay soo qaxeen.

Markii shacabka aqlibiyada badan ay galaan dambi ama ay si wax u dayacaan waxaa qofkaa loo xukumaa kali ahaan oo waxuu sameeyo laguma sifeeyo sidii "Isweedhish dabeecadii". Laakiin markii ay arinto ay quseyso kooxaha kala duwan ee qoxootiga ah waxaa jira u janjeerid in dhacdada loo micneeyo in ay ka timid "dhaqanka". Dhaqanka waxuu u dhawaadaa in uu noqdo dabeecad ku dhax nool dadka, midkaasoo ku qasba in ay si qaarkoo u dhaqmaan. lagama filaayo in qof ku dhashay dal kale uu dhaqanka iska badali karo.

Sidaa ay tahay waxaa jira calaamado badan oo tusaya in Soomaalida ay u badalmayaan hida ahaan habab badan si loogu noolaado qaxooti iyo malooyinka (hababka) cusub ee loo soo qaxay. Tusaalo ahaan qiyaastii kuli aabayaasha Soomaaliyeed oo caruurtooda ku dhalatay Isweedhan wey lajoogeen xaarkooda markay dhaleysay, midaasoo hido ahaan ay tahay mid aan macquul ahay Soomaaliya.

3. Anshax

Indhaha dalalka galbeed waxaa dhaqankaan gudida gabdhaha loo arkaa mid aad iyo aad u xun oo cawaanimo ah. Hadii la rabo in la tuso in la yahay qof anshax wacan, habka u fiican waa in iyadoo aad sare loogu qaado xumaanta iyo cawaanimada gudniinka dumarka.

Midaa waxay dhalinaysaa in aan la dacaayadeyn karin qaladaad badan oo laga sheego gudniinka gabdhaha (tusaalo ahaan waxaa laga bad badiyaa dhibaatooyink caafimaadeed ee ka yimaada gudninka dumarka). Laakiin hadii la dacaayadeeyo andacaada been abuurka iyo ka bad badinta ah, waxaa laguu arkayaa in aad tahay qof aan ka naxayn gabdhaha ay heysato.

Sidoo kale ayay qatar u tahay in la dacaayadeeyo waxii laga soo daayo Isweedhishka teleefishinkiisa ("gabdhihii la iloobay"), midkaasoo ku candacooday in qaxootiga Afrikaanka ah, qaasiyan Soomaalida ay si xad u gudaan gabdhahooda. Midkii dacaayadeeya waxuu qatar ugu sugan yahay in lagu andaceeyo sidii qof aan fahmayn sida uu dhaqankaan uu u xun yahay:

Sidaas darteed wariyayaasha iyo kuwa kaleba waxay rabaan ayey ku andacoon karaan gudniinka dumarka iyo inta heysataba: midka su´aal galiya andacoodooda waxaa loo arkayaa qof aan anshax lahayn oo aan dareen u lahayn dadka kale dhibkooda.

4. Voyeurism (qarsoodi u daawade)

Isweedhish badan iyo kuwa kale oo galbeedka dagen waxay la tahay in ay tahay gudniinka dumarka mid xiiso leh. Waxaa isku yimid mowdoocyo "xanxanti" farabadan leh: waxay ku saabsantahay galmo iyo caawro, Waxay ku saabsantahay oo kale gurracnaan (wickedness) (ayaa loo maleeyaa) iyo iyadoo ah mid qalaad oo aad qariib ugu ah dhaqanka wadamada galbeed. In la aqriyo ama la maqlo gudniinka dumarka waa mid murugo leh isla markaana "xanxanto" leh.

Laakiin xiisaha noocan ah ma aha mid "fiican" (akhlaaq wacan). "Qarsoodi daawashadu" ma aha mid aqbal bulshanimo. laakiin hadii lagu andacoodo in xiisuhu uu xambaarsan yahay u jeedo sare, markaa waa aqbal bulshadeed. Hadii la yiraado waxaan ka qayb qaataa in la fakiyo gabdhaha yar yar oo qatarta ugu jiro in la "naafeeyo" (mutilate), markaa waxaa loo arkayaa xiisahaas mid anshax wacan oo qiimo leh - oo aan ahay mid ogaansho jaceyl aan dhadhan laheyn.

Gunaanud ahaan waxay kuli afartaan sifood caawinaysaa in loo heysto in dhaqanku si xad dhaf ah ugu socdo Isweedhan – iyo in aan qofna ka hadal sida xoogan iyo ka hor imaadka balaaran ee gudniinka dumarka ee ku fidsan Soomaalida u soo qaxday Isweedhan.

Sinaansho sharciga hortisa?

Isweedhan waxuu sharciga naafeynta cawrada dumarka oranayaa fara galin allale oo keeni karta in uu isbadal ku dhaco cawrada dumarka waa xaaraan (mabnuuc), da´allaale iyo dadey ahaadaanba gabdhaha/dumarka. Rasmi ahaan waxaa lagu andacoodaa in sharcigu uu mabnuucayo nooc walba oo gudid dumar: Ilaa iyo midka noociisu yahay (gudninka fircooniga) ilaa iyo midka fudud (summadeenta sunada/ daloolinta).

Sidaan loo fasiranayo sharcigu (kaasoo aan wali lagu qaadin dhacdo la xaqiijiyay) waxuu keenayaa labo dhibaato:

- Ma laga yaabaa in lagu xukumo maxkamad qof hadii uu sameeyo daloolin (kintirka), kadib markuu sharciga Isweedhan uu oranayo "isbadal joogta ah"?
- Maxaa loogu xisaabayaa daloolinta "kintirka" sidii "sharci daro naafeyn cawreed" markii bulshada Isweedhan ay ogoshahay gudniinka wiilasha (in la gooyo buuryada), daloolin (markii la galinayo kuulal ama faraanti faruuraha

cawrada dumarka ama kintirka) qurux ahaan ama sabab ahaa dareen kacsi abuurid awgii iyo qaleenka isqorxinta (tusaalo ahaan iyadoo la yareeyo faruuryaaha cawrada) isqurxin awgeed.

Ilaa iyo hada majiro qof ashtakeeyay sharaxaada lagu sameeyo daloolinta (kintirka) ama qalitaanka qaarkood oo loo sameeyo si leyskugu qorxiyo, iyadoo la fiirinayo sharciga naafeynta cawrada dumarka. Midaani waxay la micno tahay in gundhigidii xeerka ahaa in loo siman yahay sharciga hortii qatar uu ku jiro: Waxaynu leenahay sharci toos u qabta kooxaha afrikaanka ahoo kaliya laakiin aan qabanayn kuwa aan afrikaanka ahayn ee bulshada Isweedhan.

Gabagadeyn munaaqisho

Hada waxaa koraya jiil cusub oo Soomaali Isweedhish ah, mid si fiican ugu hadli karo oo u qori karo luqada Isweedhishka iyo midkaasoo la soconkara baaqyada dhaqanka midka Isweedhishka iyo kan Soomaaligaba. Kuwaas waxay awood u helayaan in si kale looga maqlo bulshada Isweedhishka dhaxdeeda markii loo fiiriyo jiilka waaweyn ee qaxootiga soomaalida ah. Sidaa darteed waxaa jira rajo in ra´yiyo kale duwan in ay mustaqbalka kulmayaan iyo in midaa ay keento in dooda gudniinka dumarka ee Isweedhan dib u habeyn loogu sameeyo.

Daraasadu kuma andacoonayso in gabdhaha Soomali Isweedhishka ah aan la gudin. Mida lagu andacoonayo waxa weeye in ay jirto hab kala fogaansho sida ay Soomaalida dagan Isweedhan ay oga doodaan su`aashaan iyo habka Isweedhan guud ahaan loo soo bandhigo doodaan. Shaqada gudninka dumarka waa muhim, xataa markii la soo qaxay, laakiin waa in la wadi karaa iyadoo kooxdoo idil laga dhigin ”caruur silciyayaal”. Iyo in laga faaíidaysto hab muuqaalka ay soomaalida ka soo horjeeda gudninka dumarku u socdo. Midaa waxay keeni kartaa in uu saro u kaco in dhaqanku uu istaago.

Sammanfattning

Den här avhandlingen handlar om hur kvinnlig omskärelse diskuteras av svensksomalier, men också om hur kvinnlig omskärelse diskuteras offentligt i det svenska samhället. Det kan konstateras att det finns en stor klyfta mellan dessa diskussioner.

Slutsatser

En slutsats som dras i avhandlingen är att svensksomalier i allmänhet upphör med kvinnlig omskärelse i exil, inte minst på grund av en omvärdering av hur islam bör tolkas i denna fråga: det som av många uppfattades som en religiös plikt i Somalia (att flickor måste omskäras) omtolkas i Sverige till att uppfattas som ett brott mot grundläggande religiösa principer (man får inte skada det Gud har skapat). Detta är inte ett påstående om att kvinnlig omskärelse överhuvudtaget inte praktiseras i några svensksomaliska familjer. Däremot pekar studien mot att det finns ett brett och välgrundat motstånd.

Samtidigt pågår en offentlig diskussion i Sverige, främst i massmedia, som hävdar att kvinnlig omskärelse upprätthålls i stor skala bland somalier här. Trots att det saknas bekräftade fall av olaglig kvinnlig omskärelse fortsätter journalister, aktivister, politiker och tjänstemän att tala om en utbredd dold verksamhet av olaglig omskärelse och om att flera tusentals flickor är i riskzonen för omskärelse.

Utifrån den teoretiska modell som används i avhandlingen (Mackies modell som beskrivs nedan) dras slutsatsen att den stora klyftan mellan diskussionerna – den diskussion som förs av somalier och den offentliga diskussionen i det svenska samhället – är ett hinder för den fortsatta processen mot ett fullständigt avståndstagande från traditionen inom hela den somaliska gruppen i Sverige.

Metod

Avhandlingens empiriska material har samlats in under ett treårigt fältarbete som boende i Rosengård i Malmö (1995-1998), känd som en av de invandrartätaste stadsdelarna i Sverige. Kontakterna och insamlandet av empiriskt material inom den somaliska gruppen fortsatte under en längre tid efter fältarbetet: genom arrangerandet av en konferens om kvinnlig omskärelse (Rosengård, 1999); samarbete med en specialist i gynekologi och obstetrik, Dr Birgitta Essén, som forskar om perinatal dödlighet hos kvinnor från Afrikas Horn (1997-); administration och ledning av en informatörsutbildning inriktad på kvinnlig omskärelse för ett tjugotal somaliska kvinnor (2000); samt en studie med en tväretnisk forskningsgrupp bestående av två somaliska akademiker (Asha Omar och Ali Elmi) och två svenska (Aje Carlbom och jag själv). Asha Omar och jag intervjuade kvinnor och Ali Elmi och Aje Carlbom intervjuade män. Omkring trettio somalier i Malmö intervjuades sommaren 2000. Därutöver har mer spridda intervjuer med somaliska kvinnor i Malmö med omnejd utförts av mig under årens lopp. En målsättning vid urval har varit deltagande av svensksomalier med så olika bakgrund som möjligt. Sålunda har stor spridning eftersträvats när det gäller ålder, civilstånd, klantillhörighet, grad av religiositet och grad av integration i det svenska samhället.

Avhandlingens resonemang om den svenska offentliga diskussionen är baserat dels på en analys av en dokumentär sänd i SVT, *Dokument Inifrån,* den 6 september 2001, ”De glömda flickorna”; dels på artiklar om kvinnlig omskärelse (könsstympning) publicerade i dagspress under de senaste åren. Intryck från ”fältet”, som exempelvis konferenser om kvinnlig omskärelse, ligger också till grund för analysen.

Hur ser svensksomalier på kvinnlig omskärelse?

Traditionellt skiljer man i Somalia på två olika former av kvinnlig omskärelse:

- Faraonisk omskärelse (infibulation; typ III i WHOs klassifikation)
- Sunna-omskärelse (alla ingrepp som inte är infibulation; typ I, II eller IV)

Faraonisk omskärelse är den mest omfattande typen av kvinnlig omskärelse, där stora delar av de externa genitalierna avlägsnas och vagina sys ihop med undantag för en minimal öppning. De flesta somaliska flickor har traditionellt omskurits faraoniskt – enligt studier utförda före inbördeskriget i Somalia handlade det om ca 80%. Några procent av flickor omskars inte alls, medan resten omskars i någon form av så kallad ”sunna”. De viktigaste motiven för faraonisk omskärelse, enligt studier som kartlagt hur somalier i Somalia ser på traditionen, är att man gör det för att flickorna ska kategoriseras som religiöst/rituellt rena (i princip en religiös plikt och en förutsättning för att flickan en dag ska kunna räknas som vuxen) och att man ser det som ett sätt att garantera att flickan är oskuld tills hon gifter sig. Ett

sunna-ingrepp gör att flickan kan ses som religiöst ren, även om det inte utgör samma synliga tecken på en bevarad oskuld.

I den studie som utfördes av den tväretniska gruppen fanns från början ett uttalat syfte att finna personer som var motståndare till kvinnlig omskärelse, personer som var tveksamma och personer som var positiva.

Det visade sig vara mycket svårt att finna personer som är positiva till den mest omfattande formen, faraonisk omskärelse. Bland kvinnorna hittades till slut en kvinna som var förespråkare, medan de manliga intervjuarna inte fick tag på en enda manlig förespråkare av faraonisk omskärelse (bara en man som tyckte att vuxna kvinnor var vackrare efter att klitoris yttre del hade avlägsnats). De övriga intervjuade var motståndare till faraonisk omskärelse och kunde ange mycket genomtänkta skäl för sin ståndpunkt.

Däremot ansåg många att en mild sunna-omskärelse på flickor är principiellt acceptabel och förenlig med islam. Villkoret var då att ingen vävnad tas bort eller att flickan skadas på annat sätt. De allra flesta hade ändå bestämt sig för att avstå helt från kvinnlig omskärelse, då det inte anses vara nödvändigt enligt islam.

Kan "djupt rotade" traditioner plötsligt förändras?

Det brukar anses att kvinnlig omskärelse är en så pass "djupt rotad" tradition att det kommer att ta många generationer innan attityderna inom en grupp förändras och människor väljer att avstå. En brittisk forskare, Mackie (1996, 1998 och 2000), har visat att det inte alls behöver vara så. Han jämför infibulation (faraonisk omskärelse) med fotbindning i Kina, eftersom dessa traditioner är mycket lika varandra:

De utförs/utfördes på flickor som är sex till åtta år gamla. De ses/sågs som nödvändiga för att flickorna ska/skulle kunna gifta sig och som ett bra sätt att göra flickorna kyska och trogna. Båda utgör/utgjorde ett estetiskt ideal och har/hade en erotisk aspekt. Båda utförs/utfördes för att ge flickor så bra framtidsutsikter som möjligt. De utförs/utfördes av i stort sett alla, även av dem som egentligen inte tycker/tyckte att traditionen är/var bra. De utförs/utfördes av kvinnor och har/hade sitt starkaste stöd bland kvinnor.

I Kina praktiserade man den mycket smärtsamma fotbindningen på små flickor i mer än tusen år – ändå övergavs traditionen av alla inom loppet av en enda generation. Mackie menar att ett sådant snabbt övergivande av en "djupt rotad" tradition kan förklaras med att föräldrar tar sina beslut utifrån gissningar om hur *andra beslutar samtidigt*. En mammas beslut att fotbinda (omskära) sin flicka är bara ett bra beslut om "alla andra" också gör det – annars kommer flickan vara ensam om det, vilket bara ger nackdelar.

Hur börjar en process mot förändring? Enligt Mackie handlar det om tre omständigheter:

1. att man upphör med att uppleva en viss tradition som "normal" och "naturlig";
2. att man får ökad kunskap om nackdelarna med att upprätthålla traditionen, och fördelarna med att upphöra med traditionen;
3. att några "pionjärer" är de första som avstår från traditionen, sluter sig samman och offentligt deklarerar att de avstår. Då kan det uppstå en alternativ

äktenskapsmarknad, där också flickor som inte genomgått traditionen accepteras som äktenskapspartners.

I denna avhandling hävdas att alla dessa tre omständigheter föreligger bland somalier i den svenska exilsituationen:

1. Många somalier som lever i svensk exil har fått en helt ny uppfattning om kvinnlig omskärelse och har upphört att betrakta den som något ”normalt” och ”naturligt”. Många av kvinnorna i studien berättade om chockartade möten med svensk sjukvårdspersonal, som reagerade häftigt vid åsynen av kvinnornas omskurna genitalier. Detta fick kvinnorna att reflektera över traditionen och varför den finns. Den upphörde att upplevas som normal och naturlig.
2. En intern debatt har ägt rum, och äger fortfarande rum, bland somalier i svensk exil, främst om hur kvinnlig omskärelse förhåller sig till islam. I exil möter somalier andra muslimer, framför allt arabmuslimer som inte omskär sina döttrar (och vars döttrar generellt inte blir gravida även om de inte är omskurna). Man upplever att man ökar kunskaperna om islam, men också om andra aspekter, som exempelvis medicinska komplikationer av traditionen.
3. Det finns en mängd somaliska föreningar och organisationer i Sverige som arbetar mot kvinnlig omskärelse, och många enskilda somalier deklarerar i tidningsartiklar sitt motstånd mot traditionen. Då många avstår från att omskära döttrarna då de lever i svensk exil har en ny äktenskapsmarknad uppstått som ett resultat av exilen. Unga somaliska män växer upp i västerländska samhällen med en helt annan syn på kvinnlig omskärelse. De flesta somaliska föräldrar upplever därför att deras döttrar kan hitta män att gifta sig med, även om flickorna inte är omskurna. Inte heller ses det som problematiskt att återvända till Somalia i framtiden även om flickorna förblir icke-omskurna: många somaliska män kommer att återvända från västerländsk exil. En del intervjuade vittnade också om ett växande motstånd mot faraonisk omskärelse i Somalia.

Den situation som somaliska föräldrar i svensk exil befinner sig i kännetecknas alltså av att *fördelarna med att avstå från omskärelse överstiger nackdelarna.*

Det finns andra aspekter som väger in, då somaliska föräldrar tar beslut om huruvida döttrarna ska omskäras (främst mödrarna ansvarar för denna fråga). De olika aspekterna kan sammanfattas schematiskt på följande sätt:

Motiv för kvinnlig omskärelse i Somalia	*Omständigheter som leder till förändring i svensk exil*
• En upplevelse av att ”att vara omskuren” är det normala och naturliga	• Det ”normala” och ”naturliga” med kvinnlig omskärelse ifrågasätts i exilsituationen
• En övertygelse om att islam kräver att flickor är omskurna	• Möten med andra muslimer (speciellt arabmuslimer) som inte omskär sina döttrar –> debatt om hur islam förhåller sig till kvinnlig omskärelse
• En rädsla för att en icke-omskuren dotter inte ska accepteras vid giftermål	• Förändrade kulturella mönster kring äktenskap i exil: Nuförtiden väljer unga människor varandra inför äktenskap. Framtida män kan sökas bland somaliska män som vuxit upp i västerländsk exil (och är motståndare till traditionen)
• Det faktum att nästan alla andra flickor är omskurna, vilket gör att en icke-omskuren flicka riskerar att bli stigmatiserad	• I Sverige omskärs inte flickor –> här är det en omskuren flicka som riskerar att bli den som avviker från jämnåriga flickor
	• En stor rädsla för svenska sociala myndigheter och medvetenhet om risken att förlora vårdnaden om barnen

Den aspekt som tydligast genomsyrar det empiriska materialet är den religiösa. Studier visar att en stor majoritet av somalierna i Somalia anser att religionen är ett av de viktigaste motiven för att upprätthålla traditionen att omskära flickor. Enligt de somalier som ingått i den här studien blir det i princip omöjligt att förespråka traditionen, då man i exil berörts av de diskussioner om islam som kommit fram till att religionen förbjuder alla skadliga ingrepp på Guds skapelse.

I Somalia uppfattas kvinnlig omskärelse av många som en religiös plikt *och* en somalisk tradition. I den svenska exilsituationen ställs ”religion” mot ”kultur”, och då ges religionen företräde. Flera intervjuade uttryckte saken i stil med: ”Kvinnlig omskärelse handlar bara om tradition. Om det strider mot religionen, måste vi lämna traditionen.” De värden man uppfattar som centrala inom islam upplevs som eviga, medan man ser på kulturella traditioner som föränderliga.

Vad vet svensksomalier om hur andra svensksomalier tänker om det här?

Många svensksomalier hävdar att de själva, deras make eller maka, och deras närmsta släktingar och vänner har tagit avstånd från traditionen, men att det nog finns många *andra* som fortsätter med kvinnlig omskärelse också efter att de lämnat Somalia. Ofta bygger den sortens uttalanden på spekulation: man gissar att det måste vara så, eftersom traditionen är så utbredd i Somalia. Men även om många somalier vet mycket om den här sedvänjan, så finns det ingen som vet säkert hur majoriteten av somalierna i Sverige tänker om det här. Det finns ingen arena för en

bred diskussion, och då ämnet traditionellt är tabubelagt och ingreppet i Sverige dessutom olagligt, vandrar påståenden om kvinnlig omskärelse ryktesvägen. Det kan alltså vara så att de allra flesta somalier i Sverige avstår från kvinnlig omskärelse, men att de själva inte vet att detta gäller en stor majoritet i gruppen. Man har tagit sitt beslut på en individnivå, kanske efter diskussioner med sin närmaste krets, men utan vetskap om hur svenska somalier i ett större perspektiv tänker om traditionen.

Detta förhållande blev mycket tydligt då somaliska män och kvinnor i denna studie beskrev hur de trodde att somalier av det motsatta könet ser på kvinnlig omskärelse. Männen menade att hela frågan är beroende av hur kvinnor ser på traditionen. Många män uttryckte i detta sammanhang känslor av maktlöshet. Många kvinnor, å andra sidan, hävdade att somaliska män i allmänhet är positiva till faraonisk omskärelse och att de bara vill gifta sig med faraoniskt omskurna kvinnor. Då kunde männen vara säkra på att de gift sig med oskulder, menade de. En del kvinnor sade också att män föredrar faraoniskt omskurna kvinnor för att det ökar den sexuella njutningen. De flesta kvinnor som vittnade om ett starkt manligt stöd för faraonisk omskärelse beskrev emellertid ofta sina egna män och fäder som undantag: just de var sådana som var emot faraonisk omskärelse.

Man kan alltså antaga att övertygelsen bland kvinnor om att somaliska män föredrar att kvinnor är faraoniskt omskurna är en uppfattning som bygger på hur kvinnor sinsemellan diskuterar omskärelse, vad kvinnor allmänt ”vet” om saken. Denna övertygelse ifrågasätts inte enbart utifrån några få undantag (som t ex den egna maken och fadern). Utifrån denna studie kunde vi konstatera ett brett och välmotiverat motstånd mot faraonisk omskärelse bland alla män som intervjuades. Motståndet var alltså väl grundat både bland kvinnorna och männen, men då frågan så sällan diskuteras offentligt, kunde obekräftade föreställningar om hur det andra könet ser på saken frodas.

Motstridiga känslor inför kvinnlig omskärelse

”Varför skulle somalier som för inte länge så sedan var förespråkare av kvinnlig omskärelse plötsligt ha blivit motståndare?” är en fråga jag emellanåt har mötts av. Frågan bortser från det faktum att människor inför svåra beslut ofta känner ambivalens: de bär på en mängd motstridiga känslor och synpunkter samtidigt. En somalisk mor i Somalia som väljer att låta sin dotter genomgå omskärelse kan känna oro för smärtan och komplikationerna, samtidigt som hon känner sig lättad över att ingreppet blir gjort. En somalisk mor i Sverige som avstår från att låta omskära sin dotter kan känna lättnad över att hon slipper utsätta sin dotter för denna plågsamma procedur, men kan samtidigt känna oro för hur det ska gå att uppfostra dottern till en bra flicka trots att hon nu inte är omskuren.

De somalier som ingår i den här studien uppgav att de bestämt sig för att inte låta omskära sina döttrar. (Undantagen var två: kvinnan som var förespråkare av faraonisk omskärelse, som ännu inte hade egna döttrar; samt en kvinna som inte ville låta omskära sin dotter, men som trodde att hon skulle komma att ge efter för sin familj om de återvände till Somalia.) De flesta uttryckte stor oro för hur man kan uppfostra sina flickor till att bli ”bra flickor” i ett land som Sverige. Många uppfattade Sverige som ett samhälle som uppmuntrar till utomäktenskaplig

sexualitet och var framför allt rädda för att deras döttrar skulle bli gravida innan de var gifta.

Det somaliska klansystemet är patrilinjärt uppbyggt, d v s blodsbanden löper genom faderns släktskapslinje. Ett barn som föds utanför äktenskapet, ”utan far”, hamnar helt utanför den sociala gemenskapen, då ett sådant barn saknar blodsband och därmed klantillhörighet. Detta är något av det värsta som kan hända i en somalisk familj, även i exil. Somaliska mödrar, som har huvudansvaret för flickornas uppfostran, lägger följaktligen ned mycket energi på att se till att döttrarna inte blir gravida innan de är gifta.

Strategier för att hantera situationen i Sverige handlar inte om omskärelse, enligt de intervjuade i den här studien, utan om att uppfostra flickorna på rätt sätt. Om man kan ge flickorna en bra muslimsk uppfostran, men också utbildning om moral och sexualitet, så kommer de självmant att avstå från sex tills de är gifta, resonerade de intervjuade.

Många menade också att ett moraliskt uppförande kan fungera som ett oskuldsbevis för flickor som inte kan bevisa sin oskuld genom faraonisk omskärelse. Om flickan vägrar sin tilltänkta make att ha sex innan de är gifta, så kan hon på det sättet visa att hon är en ”bra flicka”. Då behövs inte den faraoniska omskärelsen som bevis.

Den offentliga diskussionen i Sverige

I Sverige kom den första lagen mot kvinnlig omskärelse 1982. År 1999 skärptes lagen, så att även en person (som bor i Sverige) som låter omskära sin dotter i ett land där det är tillåtet kan komma att dömas vid en svensk domstol.

I Sverige deklarerar Socialstyrelsen att minst fem tusen flickor är i riskzonen för kvinnlig omskärelse. Siffrorna är beräknade utifrån befolkningsstatistik: är man flicka och har föräldrar som är födda i något afrikanskt land där kvinnlig omskärelse förekommer, så är man i riskzonen för att omskäras. Ännu har svenska myndigheter inte kunnat ta ett enda fall av olaglig kvinnlig omskärelse till domstol.

Inga studier har hittills gjorts för att kartlägga hur somalier i Sverige tänker om kvinnlig omskärelse (bortsett från den tväretniska studien beskriven ovan, som Socialstyrelsen delfinansierade). Ändå hävdas i många sammanhang att somalier fortsätter att omskära sina döttrar i hemlighet. Det hävdas både av akademiker, politiker, tjänstemän, aktivister och journalister.

Dokumentären ”De glömda flickorna”

I september 2001 sände Svensk Television (SVT) en dokumentär, ”De glömda flickorna”, inom ramen för programserien *Dokument Inifrån*. I programmet hävdades:

- … att religösa ledare i Sverige (främst imamer) uppmuntrar afrikanska familjer att omskära sina döttrar.
- … att tusentals flickor i Sverige omskärs eller är i riskzonen; att de flesta av dessa omskärs i andra länder på sommarlov, men att omskärelser också äger rum i Sverige.
- …att afrikanska omskärerskor tas till Sverige och åker runt och omskär flickor.

Påståendena stöddes främst av klipp från inspelningar med dold kamera: en gambisk kvinna sändes ut bland annat till imamer, en sudanesisk läkare och en somalisk kvinna i Göteborg. Kvinnan med dold kamera uppgav att hon ville låta omskära sin dotter och bad om hjälp.

Utifrån en kritisk analys av dokumentärens innehåll argumenteras för att den ger en oriktig bild av verkligheten (se Appendix). I den diskussion i massmedia som föregick och följde sändningen av dokumentären var det ytterst få som ifrågasatte perspektivet eller de uppgifter som framfördes. En möjlig förklaring till det är att dokumentären visade det som redan hävdats i den offentliga diskussionen under flera år: att afrikaner (varav somalier är den största gruppen) fortsätter med kvinnlig omskärelse i stor skala och i hemlighet. Även om inga fall av olaglig kvinnlig omskärelse finns dokumenterade i Sverige, tycks många vara övertygade om att sedvänjan är utbredd.

Varför hävdas det i den svenska offentliga diskussionen att kvinnlig omskärelse pågår i stor skala?

I den här avhandlingen hävdas att den utbredda övertygelse om en stor riskgrupp, som ofta lyfts fram i den offentliga diskussionen, bygger på fyra komponenter. Dessa olika aspekter bidrar alla till att upprätthålla föreställningen om att kvinnlig omskärelse utövas i stor skala bland somalier i Sverige.

1. Kultur

En form av *kulturalism* innebär att man förväntar sig att människor gör saker för att ”det är deras kultur”: det tillhör somaliers ”kultur” att omskära flickor – alltså fortsätter somalier med sin ”kultur” även i exil.

Den mångkulturalistiska politiken i Sverige har gynnat ett speciellt synsätt på invandrare: de kommer hit med sitt kulturella bagage, innefattande både trevliga traditioner och skadliga eller otäcka sedvänjor. De förväntas upprätthålla sin ”kultur” till varje pris, i synnerhet med tanke på att de lever i ett främmande samhälle. Med ett sådant synsätt blir kultur nästan som ett levande väsen inom människor som tvingar dem att handla på ett visst sätt: människor som är födda i ett annat land förväntas inte kunna (eller vilja) förändras kulturellt, åtminstone inte förrän efter ett par generationer i det nya landet.

Ändå finns det många tecken på att bl a somalierna kulturellt förändras på flera sätt av att leva under helt nya förhållanden i exil. Exempelvis är nästan samtliga somaliska fäder med då deras barn föds i Sverige, trots att detta är kulturellt otänkbart i Somalia.

2. Moral

I västerländska ögon betraktas sedvänjan att omskära flickor som något oerhört barbariskt och frånstötande. Då man lyfter fram allt som är skadligt och otäckt med kvinnlig omskärelse, så visar man samtidigt att man är en person med god moral.

Det här förhållandet gör det riskfyllt att kritisera saker som påstås om kvinnlig omskärelse som är felaktiga eller överdrivna (till exempel överdrivs ofta de medicinska komplikationerna av kvinnlig omskärelse). Om man kritiserar felaktiga eller överdrivna påståenden, riskerar man att framstå som en okänslig person.

En följd av detta är att det blir möjligt att offentligt påstå nästan vad som helst om kvinnlig omskärelse och i vilken omfattning flickor drabbas: den som ifrågasätter överdrivna eller ogrundade påståenden löper risken att stämplas som en person som har bristande moral och saknar förmåga till inlevelse i andras lidande.

3. Voyeurism

Kvinnlig omskärelse är, trots de otäcka aspekterna, ett fenomen som många upplever som spännande. Flera ”kittlande” teman förenas: det handlar om sex och genitalier, det handlar om ondska (tror man), och det är exotiskt och väldigt främmande i ett västerländskt perspektiv. Att läsa eller höra om kvinnlig omskärelse gör att man upprörs och ”kittlas” på en och samma gång.

Men den sortens intresse – utifrån det faktum att fenomenet rör genitalier, skulle man kunna kalla det ett slags ”smygtittande” – är inte socialt accepterat om det inte finns ett högre syfte. Det svenska samhällets intresse för saken, som bland annat yttrar sig i detaljerade beskrivningar i massmedia, blir bara ”rumsrent” – eller politiskt korrekt – om det samtidigt visar ett djupt engagemang för offren. Föreställningen att traditionen upprätthålls i stor skala i Sverige, att massor av offer finns mitt ibland oss, gör intresset för fenomenet till något moraliskt försvarbart – och till och med ädelt.

4. Politisk exploatering

Vilka är aktörerna i den svenska offentliga diskussionen? Det är främst aktivister, journalister, tjänstemän, politiker och experter. Alla dessa olika aktörer gynnas av att tala om en stor riskgrupp. Det betyder inte att de inte är uppriktiga i sitt engagemang. Vad som här hävdas är att det är *fördelaktigt* att hävda att traditionen upprätthålls, att aktörer i dessa positioner har något att vinna på det. Framställningen syftar alltså inte till att beskriva specifika personer, utan *positioner* på fältet.

- En *aktivist* som hävdar att traditionen upprätthålls och att massor av flickor omskärs, ökar chanserna för att få bidrag till sin organisation. Ju fler flickor som påstås vara i riskzonen, desto större chans att få den egna verksamheten finansierad genom anslag.
- En *journalist* som påstår att tusentals flickor är i riskzonen och att traditionen fortlever i Sverige får ett mer spännande reportage än den som beskriver motståndet bland somalier. Dagens massmedia kräver skarpa vinklingar och

tydliga budskap. Den ”kittlande” beskrivningen av hur denna (i västerländska ögon) barbariska tradition lever vidare mitt ibland oss är för många journalister oemotståndlig.

- En *politiker* kan få ett bra rykte genom att engagera sig i frågan om kvinnlig omskärelse, eftersom denne då kategoriseras som ”moraliskt god”. Eftersom svenska väljare i allmänhet bryr sig mer om afrikanska flickor i Sverige än afrikanska flickor i Afrika, måste frågan vinklas så att den engagerar svenska väljare: det hävdas att traditionen upprätthålls i stor skala i Sverige.
- En *tjänsteman* som beslutar om finansiella medel är konstant utsatt för påtryckningar från grupper som ansöker om pengar. Samtidigt ska tjänstemannen visa initiativkraft och kunna försvara utgifter inför högre nivåer i strukturen. Om anslag ges, måste instansen kunna påstå att ett allvarligt problem föreligger (t ex ”tusentals flickor är i riskzonen”).
- En *expert* tjänar också på att föreställningen om en stor riskgrupp hålls levande. Ju mer uppmärksamhet frågan får, desto fler inbjudningar till t ex föreläsningar kommer personen att få, desto fler konferenser kommer att hållas.

En stor mängd aktörer arbetar seriöst med förebyggande arbete, ofta ideellt, och framställningen avser inte att nedvärdera det arbetet. Men faktum kvarstår: oavsett hur aktörerna innerst inne tänker om utvecklingen, så vinner alla på att fortsätta hävda att sedvänjan att omskära flickor upprätthålls i stor skala i svensk exil.

Beskrivningen av den politiska strukturen som omger frågan om kvinnlig omskärelse är inget försök att bannlysa artiklar, reportage eller seminarier i ämnet. Resonemanget syftar inte heller till att argumentera för att ingen olaglig omskärelse drabbar flickor inom den svensksomaliska gruppen. Resonemanget är en ansats till att förklara varför den offentliga diskussionen till stor del är så ensidig och inte intresserar sig i särskilt hög grad för andra, mer nyanserade, beskrivningar av vad som händer inom afrikanska exilgrupper.

I avhandlingen kallas detta en *politisk exploatering*, eftersom somalier och andra afrikanska grupper i Sverige inte har några medel att försvara sig mot den sortens framställningar. Det finns inget sätt somalier, varken som individer eller kollektiv, kan motbevisa sådana påståenden. Somalier är en så pass ny grupp i Sverige att väldigt få personer med somalisk bakgrund har lyckats skaffa sig maktpositioner i svenska strukturer eller etablerat sig på kultur- och debattsidor i dagspressen. De som har lyckats skaffa sig framstående positioner i det svenska samhället befinner sig i en känslig situation: när kvinnlig omskärelse diskuteras i massmedia är pressen stor att de ställer sig på ”rätt” sida, att de visar att de värnar om oskyldiga offer och inte uttalar sig stick i stäv mot vad som anses ”rätt” att säga och tänka enligt de normer som är allmänt accepterade i det svenska samhället.

Exploateringen ligger i att det saknas sätt för somalier och andra att hävda sin oskuld. Trots att det inte finns ett enda fall av olaglig kvinnlig omskärelse dokumenterat är det den allmänna uppfattningen att traditionen upprätthålls i stor skala – fast i hemlighet. Vare sig afrikaner i Sverige fortsätter att omskära sina döttrar eller inte, är de dömda på förhand i det svenska samhällets ögon.

Sammanfattningsvis bidrar dessa omständigheter till föreställningen om att traditionen upprätthålls i stor skala i Sverige – och att få aktörer intresserar sig för det starka och utbredda motstånd mot kvinnlig omskärelse som vuxit fram bland somalier i svensk exil.

Moralisk panik i Sverige

I den här avhandlingen hävdas också att den dokumentär (”De glömda flickorna”) som sändes av SVT i september 2001, och som orsakade starka reaktioner i massmedia, bar drag av alla de fyra aspekterna ovan: ett kulturalistiskt perspektiv genomsyrade framställningen, påståendena och slutsatserna var färgade av moraliska ställningstaganden, det fanns en dragning åt det voyeuristiska som ville både uppröra och kittla tittarna. Med detta program skedde en exploatering av den somaliska gruppen (och andra afrikanska exilgrupper), då de saknar redskap för att försvara sig mot dylika framställningar.

Programmet gav upphov till vad som brukar kallas ”moralisk panik”. Enligt Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1995) kännetecknas moralisk panik av fem aspekter: *concern* (ung. oro, omsorg), *hostility* (fientlighet), *consensus* (enighet, samstämmighet), *disproportionality* (brist på proportioner) och *volatility* (flyktighet, ombytlighet).

Med hjälp av exempel från tidningsartiklar, men också erfarenheter av kontakter med SVT, argumenterar jag i mitt arbete för att dessa fem kriterier för moralisk panik passar in på skeendet kring sändningen av ”De glömda flickorna”.

- Flera artiklar och ledarkolumner behandlade frågan om kvinnlig könsstympning i Sverige som ett utbrett problem som kräver omedelbara åtgärder (*concern*);
- Framställningar i massmedia, och deras språkliga uttryck, kunde med lätthet tolkas som att somalier (och andra afrikaner) är essentiellt annorlunda än ”vi”, bl a i det att deras ”kultur” gör dem kapabla att ”tortera” sina egna barn (*hostility*);
- Journalister och politiker från alla läger tog klar ställning i frågan, på så sätt att alla efterlyste omedelbara åtgärder – medan ingen ifrågasatte perspektivet eller ville undersöka problemets omfattning (*consensus*);
- De flesta artiklar höll sig till den ganska etablerade siffran 5 000 svenskafrikanska flickor i riskzonen, men i en del fall angavs långt högre siffror. I vissa artiklar uppgavs att tusentals flickor ”har könsstympats eller är i riskzonen”, i linje med vad som hävdades i dokumentären (*disproportionality*);
- Intresset för frågan var intensivt under dagarna före och veckan efter sändningen av dokumentären (fem dagar senare skedde terrorattacken mot World Trade Center). Därefter har frågan massmedialt i stort sett lämnat scenen (*volatility*).

Det är *inte* komponenter i en moralisk panik att påstå att det troligen finns flickor i Sverige som trots sin uppväxt här genomgår omskärelse, eller hävda att det förebyggande arbetet är oerhört viktigt. Den moraliska paniken i det här fallet ligger i det att det skedde en plötslig överexponering av frågan, en offentlig diskussion som präglades av överdrifter, moralisk indignation och utpekande av långt fler människor än vad som sannolikt omfattas i verkligheten.

Likhet inför lagen?

I Sverige säger lagen mot kvinnlig könsstympning att alla ingrepp som varaktigt förändrar de kvinnliga genitalierna är förbjudna, oavsett flickans/kvinnans ålder, och oavsett om hon har lämnat sitt samtycke eller inte. Officiellt hävdas att lagen förbjuder *alla* former av kvinnlig omskärelse: från den mest omfattande formen (faraonisk omskärelse/infibulation) till den mildaste (symbolisk sunna/prickning, d v s ett stick i klitoris eller klitoris förhud för att framkalla en droppe blod).

Den här tolkningen av lagen – som ännu aldrig tillämpats i något konkret fall – ger upphov till två problem:

- Skulle det vara möjligt att döma någon i domstol för att ha utfört prickning, då den svenska lagen talar om ”varaktig förändring”?
- Varför räknas prickning från officiellt håll som ”olaglig könsstympning”, då svenska samhället tillåter omskärelse av pojkar (borttagande av förhud från genitalerna), piercing (att man sätter in en pärla eller en ring i blygdläppar eller klitoris) av estetiska eller erotiska skäl, samt genitala plastikoperationer (t ex förkortande av blygdläppar) av estetiska skäl?

Den troliga anledningen till att förbud mot prickning anses omfattas av den svenska lagen mot könsstympning är att WHO i sin klassifikation inkluderar prickning (typ IV). En annan aspekt är att kvinnlig omskärelse oftast utförs på barn eller unga flickor, medan genitala plastikoperationer utförs på vuxna kvinnor som själva tagit beslutet. Men lagen ska gälla ”oavsett om samtycke har lämnats till ingreppet eller inte”. Ingen har hittills anmält någon av de inrättningar där man utför piercing, eller någon av de kirurger som utför plastikoperationer av estetiska skäl, utifrån lagen om kvinnlig könsstympning. Detta innebär att den grundläggande principen om likhet inför lagen är satt ur spel: vi har en lag som riktar sig till afrikanska grupper, men inte omfattar icke-afrikanerna i det svenska samhället.

Att många av de svensksomalier som ingått i den här studien anser att en prickning är *acceptabel* är inte detsamma som att de uttryckt önskemål om att det svenska samhället ska acceptera sådana ingrepp på flickor. Den principiella ståndpunkten gör emellertid dessa personer sårbara för påståenden om att de förespråkar ”könsstympning”. Frågan om lagens skrivning och tillämpning är principiellt viktig, då den nuvarande situationen präglas av en offentlig dubbelmoral: exempelvis imamer i Sverige, som inte är villiga att klassificera prickning som *haram* (religiöst förbjuden), riskerar att stämplas som förespråkare av ”stympning” – medan tonårsflickor kan få en ring insatt i klitoris genom piercing på inrättningar, som enligt gällande föreskrifter *rekommenderas* en 18-årsgräns.

Slutdiskussion

Den här avhandlingen har velat belysa hur kvinnlig omskärelse diskuteras av somalier i svensk exil. En slutsats är att förändrade levnadsvillkor i exil leder till en

omvärdering av traditionen inom gruppen som helhet, och att en intern diskussion om islam spelar en central roll.

Det hävdas inte att omskärelse av svensksomaliska flickor överhuvudtaget inte sker. Det som påstås är att det finns en stor klyfta mellan hur somalier i Sverige diskuterar den här frågan och hur fenomenet beskrivs i den offentliga debatten i Sverige. Det förebyggande arbetet och ett offentligt samtal om kvinnlig omskärelse är viktigt, men det bör kunna bedrivas utan att hela grupper drabbas av stämpeln att vara ”barntorterare”. Om också genuint somaliska perspektiv kan tas tillvara på den offentliga arenan, så ökar chanserna att traditionen kan upphöra helt.

Jag har funnit Mackies modell (beskriven ovan) vara ett bra verktyg för en förståelse av hur kvinnlig omskärelse omvärderas i exil, och hur en sådan ”djupt rotad” tradition relativt plötsligt kan överges. Den process som leder till ett alltmer utbrett motstånd mot kvinnlig omskärelse bland svensksomalier kompliceras av att somalierna i Sverige saknar en egen offentlig sfär; de är i stället hänvisade till ”signaler” från den svenska offentliga diskussionen. Om Mackie har rätt i att beslut om kvinnlig omskärelse tas utifrån antaganden om hur ”alla andra” i gruppen beslutar samtidigt, är det oroväckande att de signaler svensksomalierna får om sin egen grupp är att traditionen upprätthålls i stor skala.

Det skulle troligen gynna det förebyggande arbetet mer om somaliernas egen diskussion fick ett större utrymme i det offentliga samtalet. Kärnan i det utbredda motståndet utgörs av en övertygelse om att skadliga ingrepp på flickors genitalier är religiöst förbjudna. Om detta perspektiv kunde lyftas fram också i den svenska offentliga diskussionen, skulle det kunna fungera som ett starkt incitament för de svensksomaliska föräldrar som ännu är tveksamma inför vilket beslut de bör ta när det gäller de egna döttrarna. ”Signalen” till den egna gruppen skulle då vara att kvinnlig omskärelse är något som de flesta svensksomalier har valt att ta avstånd från.

Nu växer en ny generation svensksomalier upp, en generation med större förutsättningar att tala och skriva svenska flytande och röra sig lika obesvärat i svenska kretsar som i somaliska vad gäller kulturella koder. De kommer att kunna göra sig hörda på ett annat sätt i det svenska samhället än vad den nu vuxna invandrade generationen somalier har kunnat göra. Därför finns det hopp om att de olika perspektiven kan sammansmälta i framtiden.

Avhandlingens uppläggning

Kapitel ett innehåller en inledande diskussion, som bl a introducerar Mackies modell, berör den svenska moraliska paniken och frånvaron av en somalisk offentlig sfär i Sverige.

Kapitel två beskriver metoden och fältarbetet i den somaliska gruppen i Malmö.

Kapitel tre handlar om förändrade livsvillkor för somalier i svensk exil. Efter en beskrivning av bakgrunden till inbördeskriget i Somalia, konstateras att många somalier i exil känner en ambivalens inför återvändandet: man känner stark hemlängtan, samtidigt som man inser fördelarna med att stanna kvar i Sverige.

Tanken på uppväxande generationers tillgång till utbildning och god sjukvård gör det svårare att ta ett beslut om att återvända i framtiden. Klanstrukturen fortlever i exil, men förändras i det nya samhället. Relationen mellan man och kvinna i äktenskapet, och de traditionella somaliska könsrollerna, sätts på prov i exilen, och leder generellt till förändring.

Kapitel fyra utgör en genomgång av hur kvinnlig omskärelse i dess olika former diskuteras i litteraturen. Kapitlet innehåller definitioner och klassifikationer, ett avsnitt om kvinnlig omskärelse och sexualitet, historisk bakgrund, och en diskussion om islam och kvinnlig omskärelse. Ett avsnitt behandlar frågan om kvinnlig omskärelse bland somalier i västerländsk exil i ett internationellt perspektiv. Därefter följer ett par avsnitt om kvinnlig omskärelse såsom den praktiseras i Somalia. Följande avsnitt redogör för forskares olika förklaringsmodeller: hur kvinnlig omskärelse beskrivits utifrån symbolanalys, utifrån diskussioner som fokuserat på etniska, socioekonomiska och psykologiska aspekter. Feministiska perspektiv diskuteras därefter. Kapitlet avslutas med en presentation av Mackies modell.

Kapitel fem utgör en diskussion om hur traditionen att omskära flickor omvärderas av somalier i svensk exil. Attityder till de olika formerna – faraonisk omskärelse och sunna-omskärelse – presenteras. Därefter belyses frågan om kyskhet hos flickor som ett centralt värde för somaliska familjer, då förekomsten av ett utomäktenskapligt barn är något av det värsta en somalisk familj kan drabbas av. De följande avsnitten återger hur traditionen upphört att betraktas som ”normal” och ”naturlig” i exil, hur den har diskuterats i förhållande till islam, samt hur de intervjuade i den här studien såg på den svenska lagen mot kvinnlig omskärelse.

Kapitel sex belyser männens roll. Här återges hur kvinnorna diskuterade män och mäns syn på kvinnlig omskärelse, också i förhållande till sexualitet. Det kunde konstateras att det ofta fanns en diskrepans mellan hur somaliska kvinnor diskuterade somaliska män i allmänhet, och hur de framställde sina egna män och fäder.

Kapitel sju handlar om framtiden, såsom den diskuterades av de informanter som ingått i den här studien. Här fanns en utbredd övertygelse om att flickor i Sverige kan växa upp utan omskärelse, om de bara får en bra muslimsk uppfostran. Genom dialog, en viss social kontroll men också tillit, kan man uppnå att somaliska flickor avhåller sig från sex innan de har gift sig. Det ”rätta” förhållningssättet, att tydligt visa att man är en ”bra” flicka, kan också fungera som ett oskuldsbevis – vilket gör en faraonisk omskärelse överflödig.

Kapitel åtta handlar om den kulturalism (”folk gör saker för att det är deras kultur”) som råder på många håll i den svenska offentliga debatten. Det argumenteras för att ett sådant perspektiv inte är hållbart då det prövas mot den empiriska verkligheten.

Kapitel nio är en beskrivning av hur dokumentären ”De glömda flickorna” behandlades i det offentliga samtalet och hur den utlöste en moralisk panik. En kritisk analys av programmet i sig finns som appendix.

Kapitel tio utgör en analys av varför frågan om kvinnlig omskärelse diskuteras i Sverige på det sätt som sker: utifrån en övertygelse om att traditionen upprätthålls i det fördolda och i stor skala. Jag argumenterar här för att föreställningen gynnas av en moralisk diskurs som har det kulturalistiska perspektivet som grund, och att

diskussionen bär drag av voyeurism. Vidare argumenteras för att framställningen utgör en politisk exploatering av de utpekade grupperna.

Kapitel elva innehåller en sammanfattning och en slutdiskussion.

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Appendix: 'The Forgotten Girls'

SVT 1, 6 September 2001

In this appendix the narrative will be presented in section A. Thereafter follows a discussion about the various techniques used in the making of the program in section B. Section C offers an analysis of the arguments put forward in the documentary.

Reading this rendering of the documentary and its arguments, it is important to bear in mind that I am an actor in the field, and that all actors are positioned (see e.g. Barth 1989:139f). The reporter and I are participants in the field we both study, and, furthermore, our perspectives are in conflict.

All film making includes the use of cutting, selection of clips and sound effects, and all films can be critically analysed regarding these aspects. The point here is not to state that it is possible to describe this issue in an objective way without having a specific angle – all descriptions of reality are biased in some way or another. My aim here is to show how these techniques were utilised to the very limit in this program, in order to convince the viewers of the reporter's argument.

Thus, the program is instructive in teaching us the techniques of how to manipulate apparent empirical facts with the aim of creating moral indignation. If only the end is morally unimpeachable, all means seem to be acceptable. It is possible to create a false description of reality, to have it aired in national television and escape criticism, if it is done with the purpose of acting for the moral good (see discussions in Chapters Nine and Ten). In other words, this program is informative in displaying the tools for the creation of a moral panic.

The documentary has been transcribed by me in two versions: one transcription of the visual content (with a new number for every clip, in total 295), and one transcription of the sound and spoken words (all of it translated by me). The numbers attached to the quotations from the documentary refer to clips. The journalist Oscar Hedin is both reporter and speaker in the discussion below.

A. The narrative

The frame story is about Diana (the only woman telling her story), a woman of Egyptian background, who was born and grew up in Sweden. Thirteen years ago, at the age of twelve, she was taken to Egypt by her parents who had her clitoridectomised at a clinic in Cairo. Parts of the interview with her opens and ends the program and she also appears at a point in the middle of the narrative.

After the introduction with Diana, some basic facts about female circumcision are presented: geographical distribution and an estimation of the number of circumcised women in the world. The Swedish law is mentioned; as well as the fact that nobody up to today has been prosecuted.

A clip from a conference in Stockholm is showed, where I appear, stating the fact that we do not have one single confirmed case in Sweden. Fatima Nur, right wing county politician of Somali origin and present at the conference, is interviewed. She states that she knows of one girl who was born in Sweden and taken back by her family to Somalia for circumcision.

> Speaker: [51] Nobody has helped the girl who turned to Fatima. And this is the same as for Diana [the Egyptian woman], when she returned to [52] the Rinkeby school from Egypt. Neither teachers, school nurse nor gynaecologist understood what had happened to her.

The speaker presents the Gothenburg Project, initiated in the early 1990s by the Swedish national board of health and welfare. One of the heads of the project, the Somali woman Jamila Said Musse, states that many people believe that religion demands that girls are circumcised. The people working in the project wanted imams to state that female circumcision is wrong, not permitted by religion and not mentioned in the Koran. The imams were not willing to collaborate, according to Said Musse.

> [56] Speaker: The religious leaders, the imams within Islam, have an extensive power. They make an important informal leadership for Muslims in Sweden. Today five years have passed since the project was closed down and still no imam has dissociated himself publicly from female genital mutilation. Can it be that there are imams who in fact are in favour of the encroachment?

Suspense music accompanies the first visit of a Gambian woman with a hidden camera. She calls on Imam Kafi, originally from Sudan, saying that her husband wants their eleven-year-old daughter to be circumcised. They discuss the various procedures (infibulation and clitoridectomy), and as a viewer it is difficult to determine whether Imam Kafi is normative or descriptive.

> Speaker: Imam Kafi here talks about two different forms of mutilations. The mutilation he [61] recommends is called sunnah. Most often this means the cutting away of clitoris or its foreskin, but it may include a considerably harsher procedure. The other form referred to by Imam Kafi is infibulation. [62] One cuts away clitoris, labia majora and labia minora and stitch together. The girl may die during the procedure, and common complications are to get out urine and menses, and psychic problems. [63] How come that a religious man like Imam Kafi encourages mutilation? The answer is that he finds support in Islam.

The speaker talks about ”Islam’s complicated relation to female genital mutilation”, mentioning the hadith involving the Prophet and the circumciser (see section 4.5). The meeting with Imam Kafi ends with a discussion about the Swedish law. Imam Kafi tells the Gambian woman that Swedish authorities will not have to know about the circumcision of the girl if it takes place in Gambia.

The speaker relates how the film making team continues to search for ”religious leaders in favour of the encroachment”. After a few unsuccessful attempts they get the opportunity to secretly record a meeting between the Gambian woman and a Coptic priest, Father

Bachoumious. This priest tells the woman that "if you can change tradition it is better". However, he says that he understands that female circumcision is seen as a requirement for marriage in Gambia. Discussing the two forms of circumcision, he claims that "little is better" if the girl is going to be circumcised. He also adds that the hot climate (in Africa) affects the sexuality in women, implying that female circumcision is a way to calm women's desire. When Father Bachoumious is confronted with the secret recording for a comment, he claims that he was talking about circumcision for boys and not girls.

> [89] Speaker: Sunnah circumcision, the milder form that Father Bachoumious recommends, is practised in great parts of the world. Infibulation, the more extensive mutilation, is most common in Somalia, Yemen and Oman, and in Mali. During the Gothenburg Project one had the feeling that more and more people abandoned infibulation, but continued to practice sunnah circumcision. [90] Maybe Imam Kafi [91] and Father Bachoumious are examples of this change.

Jamila Said Musse from the Gothenburg Project states that "some people" say that they understand the risks (of infibulation) but that they want to continue with sunnah, unwilling to leave the tradition altogether.

The next part, involving recording with hidden camera, is borrowed from a documentary sent in Norwegian national television in year 2000. There a Somali imam living in Sweden tells the Somali Norwegian girl with a hidden camera that he intends to have his daughter in Gothenburg circumcised in the future, preferably in Somalia.

> Speaker: [99] Sheir Mumin is in favour of genital mutilation and he says that he will carry out the encroachment on his own daughter. [100] Do the authorities in Gothenburg protect Sheir Mumin's daughter in any way today?

A social worker from Gothenburg is interviewed. She claims that she does not know of the case and is not really sure of who may be in charge of questions of this kind.

> Speaker: [102] Of course one can not blame the social welfare system for not watching [103] Norwegian television. But it is a fact that nobody has a responsibility for these girls. [...] [105] Those Swedish girls who are being mutilated or are at risk are a silent, weak group not given that much priority.

The speaker tells us that the social welfare office in Gothenburg has had yet another case of female circumcision: in 1995, there were suspicions that a six-year-old Somali girl had been circumcised. Both the police and the social welfare office started investigations. The girl was examined by a gynaecologist at the hospital and in the medical certificate the physician stated that the girl's labia were missing. However, the gynaecologist wanted to examine the girl again. At this point the parents had turned to another gynaecologist, the interviewed prosecutor tells us, and this other physician stated that the girl was normal. The prosecutor claims that the parents must have taken an other girl to the other gynaecologist. The prosecutor, the speaker and a social worker all comment upon the fact that the girl never turns up at hospital again. The period of limitation expires and the case is closed, due to lack of proof.

> Speaker: [132] Swedish authorities have difficulties in handling genital mutilation of girls.

Now the speaker introduces the list of the eleven Swedish Somali girls, handed over anonymously to *Barnombudsmannen* (ombudsman for the children) in October 2000. The girls were said to have been circumcised recently abroad. Barnombudsmannen had not reported the letter to the police. The new head of the office, when interviewed in the program, talks about how to raise the educational level in the organisation when it comes to female circumcision. She also says that the list should be reported to the police.

The speaker establishes the fact that not one single case has been discovered by the police, the medical care system or the social welfare system during all these years – even if Sweden has had a legislation since 1982, including a removal of the principle of double criminality, and been a model abroad.

Jamila Said Musse from the Gothenburg Project, and the politician Fatima Nur, both comment upon the law and the importance that the law is obeyed.

> Speaker: [143] Genital mutilation is not like other crimes against children, like child abuse or incest. This is about [144] parents who follow the prevalent cultural norm.

Diana, the Egyptian woman, says that her parents did not do this to her out of hatred, but that they were influenced by idiotic customs. She also claims that she would never want to be the one having her parents go to jail for this.

The speaker discusses the court cases in France, where both parents and circumcisers have been sentenced. A black man, very upset, shouts in French into the camera: "What has been sentenced here in France is the African culture. Eight years – for what?"

In Sweden, the reporter claims, another path (than prosecutions) has been chosen to deal with the issue: information and the moulding of opinion. The non-profit-making association RISK is presented as one of the actors in this field, working against the custom among immigrant groups. One of the RISK informants is interviewed, claiming that this custom will be hard to eliminate, and that it probably will be maintained also in the next generation.

In a meeting arranged by RISK, informing officials of various fields about female circumcision, an imam working against female circumcision is mentioned. Imam Bashir is now introduced by the speaker as being the leading modern imam of the Somalis in Sweden today. He is interviewed and states that many Somalis were concerned about female circumcision in the beginning of the 1990s, but that questions about this have ceased now: "… this is an issue that was solved a long time ago".

Now the Gambian woman, accompanied by suspense music, visits Imam Bashir with her hidden camera. At first Imam Bashir claims that Islam is opposed to female circumcision, but in the end he gives the girl the name of a man in Egypt who may be of help. He also accentuates the importance for the girl to keep quiet about this and that they all have to be very careful. When Imam Bashir gets the opportunity to see the recording and reply, he emphasises that he never encouraged the woman to circumcision, but clearly advised her against it.

The speaker says that after this incident, the Somali national association (*Somaliska Riksförbundet*) demanded that the documentary should not be broadcast. In a secretly recorded conversation by phone with the reporter, the president of the association asks for a formal request for meetings with imams who are willing to discuss this matter.

> Speaker: The association gets a formal request. But no imams want to [196] speak openly. The imams keeping up the practice of female genital mutilation of Swedish girls are not willing to

> stand up for their opinions. [Suspense music] We have seen four religious leaders who are a part of this structure. Sheir [197] Mumin is in favour of mutilation and is going to do it to his daughter. [198] The other three are opposed to infibulation, but Imam Bashir volunteers to be of help in arranging for a sunnah circumcision. [199] And Father Bachoumious and Imam [200] Kafi recommend the procedure.

The Gambian woman contacts Imam Kafi again, and he says that he will help her to find someone who can be of help in the sunnah circumcision of her daughter. She goes to visit him, again with the hidden camera, and he makes a phone call. When nobody answers, Imam Kafi gives the Gambian woman a telephone number to a woman in Gothenburg. This woman claims, in a secretly recorded telephone conversation with the Gambian woman, that many Somalis living in the area goes to Somalia or Kenya for circumcision when their daughters are thirteen or fourteen years old, since the custom is illegal in Sweden.

> Speaker: [210] The woman describes what is usually called "summer holiday mutilation": that one goes [211] away with the girls during holidays to countries where one can have it carried out easily. Summer holiday mutilation is a crime in Sweden, irrespective of if one goes to a country where genital mutilation is legal or not.

The Gambian woman and the woman in Gothenburg agree to meet. The Gambian woman pays a visit to the other woman in her home, again with a hidden camera. They have a conversation including the statement of the anonymous woman (her face hidden by flicker) that she had her oldest daughter circumcised in Kenya. The girl was ten years then, three years ago. The woman claims that she will have her younger daughter, aged six, circumcised on a trip next summer.

Showing the interior of an airport, the speaker introduces a film shot in Somalia, claiming that "this is the reality that many Swedish girls live in". Then follows a heart-rending child's cry and a circumcision of a small girl, who seems to be three or four years old. The girl is surrounded by some women who hold her arms and legs in a firm grip, while a male person is cutting away a piece of flesh from her genitals.

> Speaker: [225] In Sweden it is estimated that five thousand girls and young women risk being subjected to genital mutilation. Somali girls are the largest group. [226] In England, research has established how the encroachment lives on among Somali immigrants. Forty-five percent stated that they keep on mutilating. [227] Perhaps an inquiry of this kind can give a hint about how many of the five thousand Swedish girls who have been genitally mutilated or are at risk of it. In that case it could involve a couple of thousand girls. [228] The majority of the girls mutilated are exposed to summer holiday mutilation, but some of the mutilations take place here in Sweden. Imam Kafi reports one of those.

Imam Kafi tells the Gambian woman, who secretly records it all, that two years ago a Kenyan woman was brought to Linköping to circumcise a girl. She cut too deeply, Imam Kafi explains, so they had to call a doctor to stop the bleeding. The doctor, a friend of Imam Kafi's, was very angry when he saw what had happened, but he stopped the bleeding and gave medicine. Imam Kafi says he will help the Gambian woman to get in touch with this Dr. Abdelmoula Kangoum.

In a secretly recorded telephone conversation the Gambian woman brings this subject up with the physician. He avoids all questions about it and is not willing to talk about the case.

Later she turns up at his office, again with a hidden camera. Dr. Kangoum talks about female circumcision as a torture, where sound organs are removed. He gives the woman five reasons for giving up the plan of having her daughter circumcised. He also tells the woman that it happens that people collect money to pay a foreign circumciser's visit, pretending before the authorities that she is somebody's mother or daughter. Then he comments upon the Linköping case: Last year a Somali woman was brought to Linköping to circumcise a girl. They called for Dr. Kangoum, but he never turned up, as he is tied to act in a certain way according to the law (in this case an imperative to report this case to the public health committee and the national board of health and welfare).

> Speaker: It is a criminal act to not disclose genital mutilation. [245] Everyone has an obligation to report a suspicion of crime. Moreover, a physician submits to [246] *Socialtjänstlagen*, which implies that he has to report violence against children to the social welfare committee. [247] Dr. Kangoum ended up at crossroads at this point. On one hand he has his responsibility as a Swedish physician, a role with pronounced rules concerning violence against children. On the other hand he has his loyalties toward those Africans who mutilate their girls, and he chooses loyalty toward his group.

The reporter calls Dr. Kangoum and is told that three weeks earlier five women and their daughters called on him and offered him twenty-five thousand crowns per circumcision.

> Speaker: Mothers who are willing to pay twenty-five thousand crowns to have their daughters maimed – and a physician [251] protecting them. Exactly like he has protected those responsible for the circumcision that went wrong, when an eight-year-old girl almost bled to death a night in Linköping last year.

The speaker says that Dr. Kangoum is unwilling to be interviewed with a film photographer present, but that he is willing to meet the reporter. So the reporter pays him a visit – with a hidden camera. It seems as if Dr. Kangoum has accounted for his work against female circumcision, when the reporter again brings up the Linköping case. Dr. Kangoum refuses to answer any questions about it.

> Speaker: Dr. Kangoum does not want us to talk about the girl, [259] but he dissuades us from publishing, out of consideration for her. So he confirms the existence of the girl. [260] Thus, we know that an eight-year old Swedish girl was seriously injured by a mutilator flown here, and almost died. [261] Imam Kafi says that Dr. Kangoum saved the girl's life. Today Imam Kafi refuses to be interviewed and talk about [262] this. Dr. Kangoum says that they called him in the middle of the night, but that he didn't want to be involved, and so he did not help the girl. We ask Kangoum for an interview.

The TV team calls on Dr. Kangoum. When he opens his front door, the reporter starts asking about the Linköping case. Dr. Kangoum shuts the door almost immediately.

> Speaker: Nobody has been sentenced for genital mutilation in Sweden. Swedish authorities [265] have not succeeded investigating even one single case. [266] Nobody understood that Diana had been mutilated. [267] And nobody has helped the girl who turned to [268] Fatima. Nor the thirteen year old girl in Gothenburg, [269] and not her little sister who is to be mutilated next summer. [270] The Swedish police have not discovered the mutilators who

have come to Sweden. And nobody [271] has seen the girl who almost died one late night in Linköping last year.

The program is brought to an end with a few comments by the RISK informant talking about how girls in the future probably will stand up against this custom, the politician Fatima Nur emphasising the importance of the law and Diana saying that her father wanted her to be circumcised out of love.

B. The techniques

Some visual methods used to create emotional involvement of the viewers emerge clearly in the program. Much of the narrative of Diana's own circumcision is illustrated by sharply illuminated close-up pictures of rotating razor blades, scalpels and rubber gloves. A majority of the clips – almost all 'background clips', not directly connected to the content of the speaker's comments – show dark views: night pictures or scenes shot in twilight or dusk.

Almost all features with hidden camera is preceded by clips shot in nightlight, showing swinging mysterious streetlights as the Gambian women is on her way to secretly record conversation with the Africans involved – even if some of these meetings obviously took place in daylight, as there is sunlight through windows.

Some clips are repeated and work as recurrent themes. One of these is a clip showing an aeroplane leaving or coming in the blue sky above a house roof. It is introduced the first time when the speaker says: [241] "But he [Dr. Kangoum] knows that families gather and pay mutilators to come to Sweden". The second time is when the speaker says: [260] "Thus, we know that an eight year old Swedish girl was seriously injured by a mutilator flown here, and almost died." It is used the last time with the speaker's words [270] "The Swedish police have not discovered the mutilators who have come to Sweden". It is a striking device, as the picture in itself is innocent: a peaceful plane heading somewhere in a lovely blue sky. The discrepancy between the harmless picture and the shocking statements works, as it probably makes most viewers experience (consciously or not) how treacherous our perception of reality is.

This device, which could be called the theme of illusionary stillness, is noticeable in the visual composition of the rest of the program as well. A recurrent clip shows a sole window lit up from inside in a suburban house at dusk, the light from the window calmly being reflected in water below the house. This illustrates for instance a phone conversation between the Gambian woman and the anonymous woman in Gothenburg, stating that many Somalis in her neighbourhood take their daughters to Somalia or Kenya when they are thirteen fourteen years old to have them circumcised. The message here could be understood as follows: behind these windows giving a peaceful impression, the sight of them so well-known to all of us, atrocities are taking place – and we do not have a clue about it. This technique works as a mystification of everyday views.

The auditive message involves a piano theme, relatively monotone, which creates a suspense effect. It is sometimes introduced a while before the clip with the hidden camera is presented, possibly creating an unconscious sense of uneasiness in the viewer, before the actual unpleasant occurrence has taken place. At some points another sound effect is used to create these feelings of discomfort: a high noise, but at a moderate volume, is added to accentuate the abominable content of the narrative. It is a noise difficult to discover if one does not

listen for it carefully, but nevertheless it is a sound that may affect the listener, as it seems to speed the pulse.

Some sequences in the program are made out of a great number of clips. The secretly recorded conversation between Imam Bashir and the Gambian woman is representative in this respect. The following sequence involves eight clips:

> [178] The Gambian woman: My girl is eleven years old. My husband [179] he wants us to take her to Africa [180] and have her circumcised. And… [181] I don't know what to do, so I thought I should ask you [182] as a Muslim.
>
> Imam Bashir: I think it is opposed to Islam too. This is not something that is good for the girls. And especially this circumcision that we do in our countries. [183] One takes away parts, the whole body, and then one stitches it together.
>
> [184] The Gambian woman: I thought, if I can get help to do the other one only, the simpler one.
>
> [185] Imam Bashir: This girl, how is she, her contact with school and so on? Can she hide this thing?
>
> The Gambian woman: Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes. . .

The woman's introductory utterance is illustrated by four clips showing her way into the building, the fifth clip showing Imam Bashir while he starts talking. At that point the viewers are used to the technical form of the narrative, most people probably not reacting to the rigorous editing of the subsequent course of events. There is no explanation to what has happened in the gaps which were edited out: how come that Imam Bashir left his first standpoint that female circumcision is opposed to Islam, and ends up (it seems) by helping the woman to a contact in Egypt for a sunnah circumcision? The reporter gives no explanation. He simply summarises a while later: "At first Imam Bashir dissuade, but when sunnah circumcision crops up he volunteers to be of help." As there is no account for what has happened in the gaps, or how long these gaps lasted, there is no reason, from a viewer's perspective, to question the reporter's allegation that Imam Bashir is a pleader of female circumcision and even an upholder of the practice in exile. When the man living in Egypt is mentioned, a beep hides his name, to protect his identity. At the same time as the man's identity is protected, this is also an effective signal to make people categorise him as a criminal, as Swedish ethical rules for reporters and journalists are strict when it comes to revealing the identity of criminals: a protecting beep then becomes a stigmatising label, suggesting a criminal status.

The man's name is Muhamud Geele. According to him and Imam Bashir, he was present when the Gambian woman visited Imam Bashir. When the woman started to talk about going to Egypt to have a sunnah circumcision performed, Imam Bashir referred her to Mohamud Geele (living in Egypt in periods), being in the next room at the time. He hoped that they both could talk the woman out of her plans in time, as he knows Geele to be a fervent

opponent to all forms of female circumcision. After the secret recording, the reporter was offered, according to Muhamed Geele and Imam Bashir, to go Egypt at their expense. They offered to pay the tickets for both the reporter and a Swedish physician, who could examine the genital status of Geele's two daughters (aged 9 and 14). The reporter, however, turned down this offer. Nor was he interested in recording a comment from Geele. (Information given at a meeting with Imam Bashir, 19 February 2002. Muhamud Geele, who we stumbled upon leaving this meeting, confirmed all information given by Imam Bashir.)

At some points in the program the technique of *not* cutting is used, now to ridicule social workers. A woman working at the social assistance office in Gothenburg is asked by the reporter if there is anyone who is responsible at a national level for the safeguard of the African Swedish girls when it comes to female circumcision. The social worker refers to the more general section of *Socialtjänstlagen*, stating the responsibility of every authority and citizen to safeguard children. When pressed, she admits that she does not know for sure if there is anyone in particular in charge of female circumcision, and after a few seconds of silence she glides away from the eye-catcher of the camera, probably hoping that this behaviour will be edited out.

Another social worker in Gothenburg is asked about the Gothenburg case. The reporter keeps asking the man almost the same question over and over again: "Is it of interest for you to know how the labia disappeared?" The social worker keeps answering the same thing, with few variations: "What we know about this is what was written in the certificate after the medical investigation." Probably few viewers know that what is displayed here is a journalistic cat-and-mouse game. I found out afterwards, discussing the sequence with a person who now and then, as an investigator in the police force, is exposed by the mass media. He explained this technique to me: "They are up to upset you so well that you get rude. You can only answer the same question politely so many times. If you get insolent when answering the same question for the twelfth time, you know for sure that this will be the clip used in the program." The reporter chose to include the whole sequence, thereby presenting the social worker as a person with a shameful secret to hide: unable to converse about a matter, but repeating himself like a parrot.

The appearances of the social workers in Gothenburg are hardly flattering. Picturing them as incompetent officials, seemingly with no serious commitment and no empathy for suffering African Swedish girls, most viewers probably agree with the reporter's implicit inference that it is due to muffing officials that the Gothenburg case did not end up in a sentence of guilty, or even went to court. "Swedish authorities have difficulties when it comes to the handling of genital mutilation of girls", the reporter states and continues a while later: "[Despite a high profile] not one single case has been discovered by the police, the medical care system, nor the social services departments during all these years". After the sequences showing the social workers, the viewers are to understand this statement as a fact having its basis in incompetent Swedish officials.

Yet another technique used to guide the viewer into acceptance of the reporter's argument is the use of clips added at a certain time in the narrative, seemingly shot at that specific moment (while in reality not). One of these instances includes me, speaking at a conference in Stockholm (May 2001), answering a question from the audience about the presence of female circumcision in Sweden:

> [38] Sometimes it seems to me as if there is a picture created by the Swedish society, making this into a bigger issue than it actually is. [39] By way of example, when it comes to the Somali group, [40] some twenty thousand Somalis live here in Sweden, and they have lived here for

> almost ten years, and still we don't have one single confirmed case. [41] One has to make sure that whole groups are not stigmatised.

At the conference only one camera was used, directed toward the person speaking at the moment. All clips put into the narrative must, as a technical necessity, have been recorded at some other moment. The reporter chose to illustrate my statement with a clip showing a Somali woman with a facial expression displaying distrust and contempt.[252] This could for technical reasons not have taken place while I was talking. However, a clip used in this way gives a signal to the viewers how to assess my perspective.

Another example of this cutting technique can be seen as an extension on the theme of naive Swedes (introduced by the use of me in the example above). The RISK activist Siv Hamring is speaking at a meeting, claiming that RISK has had good help from Imam Bashir:

> We have [170] had men involved in our training, we have found an imam from Rinkeby, Bashir Aman Ali, to be a really good help, as he has lectured on Islam and Islam's view [171] on female genital mutilation.

Her utterance is an introduction to Imam Bashir, who is the next person to be exposed and disclosed by the reporter with the help of a hidden camera. The viewers get a hint of what is to come, as there is a clip at the end of Hamring's utterance, showing two Somali women present at the meeting leering at each other. Behind the edge of the veil one of the women seems to giggle to her friend in secret understanding – a scene that perfectly well can be interpreted as if they, Somalis like Imam Bashir, know what he really stands for, even if they hide this fact in public. Their facial expressions can not have been shot at the same time as Hamring made her utterance about Imam Bashir, as there was only one camera at the meeting. Maybe the women, at the moment their behaviour was recorded, were only displaying exhilaration at the presence of a TV team. But used the way it was used in this sequence of the program, their appearance is to be understood quite differently. Instead of shy, they seem to be deceitful.

A technique to call attention to certain circumstances is to let the reporter himself mention them during interaction. This method is used during the replies of Father Bachoumious and Imam Bashir. While recording Father Bachoumious' reply, the reporter says to the priest: [87] "You clearly say on the tape 'I recommend you to do the cut'." If Father Bachoumious really said this, this was edited out in the version the viewers were offered. As an average viewer is unable to remember exactly what has been said at previous moments, the words of the reporter are accepted as the words of the person ascribed them.

When Imam Bashir defends himself by claiming that he never proposed to the woman to have her daughter circumcised, but instead clearly told her that not even sunnah is necessary, the reporter replies: [193] "But you actually advise her to do sunnah circumcision, and you even extend it to advise about how to manage it. Why do you say things like these?" The last words of the reporter, Why do you say things like these?, asked with a voice used for troublesome children, removes the attention from the fact that the reporter establishes facts he can not support in the secret recording. We have not heard Imam Bashir advise the woman

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[252] I had a telephone conversation with this woman some week after the program was sent and she brought this up, really worried about my reaction: "I swear I did not put on an air of that while you were talking."

to have a sunnah circumcision made on her daughter. The viewers have seen Imam Bashir at the beginning of their meeting, trying to explain to the woman that Islam is opposed to female circumcision, and we have seen him at the end, talking about a man in Egypt who he (for some reason or another) can put her in contact with. What has happened in between, the viewers do not know. Yet the reporter creates a reality when he claims that Imam Bashir *advises* female circumcision.

A semantic device is to operate with unclear categories. The statements can not be said to be false, if interpreted literally, but used in a specific context they come to carry a meaning beyond the actual words.

> Speaker: During the Gothenburg Project one had the feeling that more and more people abandoned infibulation, but continued to practice sunnah circumcision. [90]

Jamila Said Musse from the Gothenburg Project fills in, apparently confirming the speaker's statement, when she says that "some people" say that they understand the risks of infibulation, but want to continue with sunnah. We do not know how many Said Musse refers to when she talks about "some". We do not know what kind of sunnah these people refer to – a majority may be talking about a symbolic sunnah circumcision, like most of my informants in Malmö.

But when the speaker claims that "more and more people abandoned infibulation, but continued to practice sunnah circumcision", this statement runs the risk of being interpreted in the context of the whole argument of the program: it is understood that people in general have decided to leave infibulation for sunnah circumcision (already defined by the speaker as a clitoridectomy or worse). The statement gives no room for people who have left the tradition altogether.

The same goes for the speaker's statement [105] "Those Swedish girls who are being mutilated, or who risk being subjected to mutilation, are a silent, weak group not given that much priority". The categories seem to have blurry boundaries, as if not much differs between a girl being mutilated and a girl who is at risk. According to the Swedish national board of health and welfare, almost all girls with parents from Africa risk being subjected to circumcision. With the help of a linguistic word game, the speaker depicts practically all African girls in Sweden as being real or potential victims of circumcision any day.

The boldest semantic trick takes place when the speaker talks about "summer holiday mutilation", a concept never heard of before:

> Speaker: [210] The woman describes what is usually called "summer holiday mutilation": that one goes [211] away with the girls during holidays to countries where one can have it carried out easily. Summer holiday mutilation is a crime in Sweden, irrespective of if one goes to a country where genital mutilation is legal or not.

The phrase does not exist in Somali, neither in Swedish nor in English in the literature. In a telephone conversation (24 September 2001), the reporter states that he is willing to provide me with both verbal and written evidence of the use of the term "summer holiday mutilation". At a later request (9 November 2001), he has changed his mind; there are no written sources after all. But he claims that the politician Fatima Nur uses the expression during a recorded interview. However, this was not included in the program.

A new phrase is coined, possibly by the reporter, and treated as if it were an established concept. An established concept demands an established activity (an activity would not be

”usually called” anything if it did not exist). By claiming that there is an established concept, the reporter supports his allegation that this is something we know for sure is going on.

C. Shortcomings

In this section the statements of the program ‘The Forgotten Girls’, and the support for them, will be scrutinised. But first a few factual errors will be discussed, as some of them are crucial for the support of the reporter’s argument.

C1. Factual errors

Stating that infibulation ”[89] is most common in Somalia, Yemen and Oman, and in Mali” is hardly cracking the argument of the program, but it may give a hint about the level of deficient initiation into the subject.[253]

Another factual error takes place when the speaker comments upon Father Bachoumious’ utterance about climate and women’s sexuality:

> Speaker: Then Father Bachoumious claims that the reason is Africa’s hot [85] climate. By the cutting away parts of the woman’s genitals, she is calmer. This is a common argument for female genital mutilation.

Nor is this statement crucial for the bearing capacity of the reporter’s argument, but still it supports the more general description of (exile) Africans as irrational and trapped in ancient tradition. In fact, in no country the climate is a prominent reason for female circumcision. The few reports of this idea in the literature refer to Egypt, Father Bachoumious’ home country.[254]

Even if the reporter mentions the fact that Sweden removed the principle of double criminality in 1999, he makes judgements of Diana’s parents, declaring them to be criminal: ”Diana’s parents could have been imprisoned when they came back to Sweden. Today the period of limitation for the crime has run out.” One may find them guilty in a moral sense (for what they inflicted on their daughter when they had her circumcised), but not in a legal sense, as the law was reformulated as late as 1999.[255] The same goes for the woman in Gothenburg and the case of her oldest daughter:

> Speaker: [215] The mother has genitally mutilated her oldest daughter, a girl who grew up here in Sweden. The mutilation took place during a trip to Kenya. The girl was ten years old at the time. Today she is thirteen. If the Swedish police choose to act, the period of limitation has not run out.

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[253] See e.g. Shell-Duncan & Hernlund (2000): “Infibulation is largely confined to Sudan, Somalia, northeastern Kenya, Eritrea, parts of Mali, and a very small area in northern Nigeria” (ibid.:9). WHO (1998) refers to a study from 1992 claiming that type I (the mildest form) is practised in a few ethnical groups in Yemen. However, there is no documented evidence of any kind of female circumcision in Oman (ibid.).

[254] See e.g. Sanderson (1981:51) and Muhammad al-Banna, in Abdu’r-Razzaq (1998:50).

[255] Thanks to R. Elise B. Johansen for pointing this out to me.

This woman, as well as Diana's parents, may be criticised for moral reasons. However, she has not committed a crime in any legal sense.[256] It may be different when it comes to her younger daughter, who she claims she will have circumcised in the future. Here the police or the social welfare office may act, since the mother admits an intended crime. But only the TV team knows who the woman is, as they have hidden her face with flicker. They could choose to report her (anonymously or not), according to §71 of *Socialtjänstlagen*, stating the duty of citizens to report suspicions of child abuse. As the woman is secretly recorded, and so not deliberately giving information to a journalist, there is no reason for the reporter to follow the rule of communication freedom, i.e. the right to not reveal his source.[257]

An attitude of vital importance for the argument of the documentary, is the lack of criticism of the sources. The argument involves quite a few statements, uttered by secretly recorded persons, which would have had to be excluded if the reporter had checked their reasonableness. One example is the woman in Gothenburg, stating that many Somali families take their daughters to Africa when the girls are thirteen, fourteen years old to have them circumcised. Somali girls are not circumcised after entrance into puberty. Circumcision traditionally takes place when a girl is five to ten years old, an overwhelming majority being circumcised around the age of seven (see section 4.7). After this program I have discussed the matter with several Somalis, who claim that if a circumcision would be carried out on a girl who is a teenager, exceptional circumstances are at work (e.g. the girl is an orphan and nobody has realised that she is uncircumcised until she herself mentions it). It is extremely unusual with such a circumcision and it demands a co-operative attitude of the girl. The anonymous woman's statement ought to have been edited out, or at least been commented upon, as it is unreasonable. Instead it is used as support for a speculative argument.

Another of this woman's statements is that the doctor in Kenya who circumcised her oldest daughter charged 150 dollars. In reality, the price does not even amount to a tenth of that sum. This statement should have told the reporter that the woman was not reliable.[258]

The same goes for some of Dr. Kangoum's statements. One of them is when Dr. Kangoum tells the reporter by phone, unaware of the fact that he is being recorded, that:

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[256]It is doubtful whether the girl's mother was involved in her oldest daughter's circumcision at all. According to Somalis who know the family, this girl came to live in Sweden only a few years ago, at that point already circumcised (the decision made by relatives in Somalia).

[257]The reporter Oscar Hedin claims that he has given sufficient information to a social worker in Gothenburg, so that this person can act (personal communication with Hedin, 9 November 2001). However, no legal action has been taken in this case until today, which suggests that the depiction of this family was biased in the program.

[258]I do not know this Somali woman in Gothenburg. My personal interpretation of her statements was that she might have had a hidden agenda. All she knew was that a Gambian woman planned to have her daughter circumcised and was willing to spend some money to achieve it. Playing her cards right – even pretending that Somalis *en masse* in her neighbourhood usually go to Somalia or Kenya to have their daughters circumcised – this acquaintance could be profitable for her, if she could make the woman believe how much only the doctor charges and that she would be the right person to arrange for the girl's trip to Africa. Her statement about thirteen fourteen-year-old girls is, however, mysterious. Perhaps she wanted to make the Gambian woman understand that the age of the daughter (eleven) would not be a problem. All this, I want to emphasise, is pure speculation, as I have no idea who this woman is.

> [249] Dr. Kangoum: … Three weeks ago five women called on me with their daughters, they don´t live in Östergötland [a county]. They offered me 25,000 crowns [more or less equivalent to £ 2,500 or $ 2,500] per circumcision.
> Reporter: How many children were concerned?
> Dr. Kangoum: Five.
> Reporter: What did you say then?
> Dr. Kangoum: That this is against the law. That I would lose my authorisation, that I would go to jail, and that they too would go to jail.

This is an amazing story. It is not reasonable to believe that five women – one by one or together – with one daughter each, would offer Dr. Kangoum such a sum, at the same time. To begin with, if a person has the intention to make sure a daughter is circumcised, it would be much *cheaper* to have a trip to an African country arranged. Besides, it would be much *safer*. Maybe it could pass as a possible story, but still not probable, if it included one or two women – but five?

How does Dr. Kangoum afterwards explain this statement? At an interview with Dr. Kangoum in Linköping (16 February 2002), he affirms its authenticity: this was the reality as he experienced it. The first woman to offer him 25,000 crowns was the Gambian woman calling upon him personally in Linköping (as instructed by the TV team). Later several other women called him on telephone and offered him the same amount of money if he could circumcise their daughters. When Dr. Kangoum tells the reporter this, he has no idea that there exists any connection between the reporter and the Gambian woman (or for that matter: he has no reason to suspect any connection between the various telephone calls, the visit of the Gambian woman and the reporter). Abdelmoula Kangoum's wife Åsa, who was present at parts of the interview, commented her husband's story: "This was exactly what we considered to be so peculiar about the whole thing. Abdelmoula [Kangoum] has worked as a physician here for so many years, but nobody has ever asked him to perform a circumcision. And suddenly, later in spring after this woman's visit, several women called him practically at the same time. We were actually quite shocked. But after that, nobody has asked him again."

A possible explanation to the statement in the program is, thus, that events created in the process of program making are used as evidence in the final version of the program. Of course, this possibility is not suggested by the reporter/speaker. The information given to the reporter by Dr. Kangoum, about several offers to pay him for performing circumcisions, is commented upon in the documentary by the reporter/speaker:

> Speaker: Mothers who are willing to pay twenty-five thousand crowns to have their daughters maimed – and a physician [251] protecting them.

A statement, which really inspires confidence, is the one about research carried out in Great Britain. It forms the basis of the reporter's estimations of thousands of Swedish girls mutilated or at the point of being mutilated:

> Speaker: [226] In England research has established how the encroachment lives on among Somali immigrants. Forty-five percent stated that they keep on mutilating. [227] Perhaps an inquiry of this kind can give a hint about how many of the five thousand Swedish girls who have been genitally mutilated or are at risk of this. In that case it could involve a couple of thousand girls. [228]

The only systematic scientific study carried out in England is the inquiry by Morison et al. (1998): "Attitudes and Experiences Relating to Female Circumcision of Young, Single Somalis Living in London", which includes some hundred Somali men and some hundred Somali women. Out of 94 women aged 16-22 at the time of the study, 70 % claimed (in a quantitative inquiry) that they had been circumcised. Out of the girls who were born in England or had come there before the age of nine, 47 % stated that they had been circumcised in some way (8 of the girls stated that they had gone through the procedure in England). That means that more than half of the girls were left with no circumcision at all, even if their parents were newly arrived immigrants, ten to twenty years ago.

The study points out that the longer a person lives in exile, the bigger the chance that he or she will take a stand against female circumcision. This study shows then, contrary to what the reporter alleges, the tendency of this tradition to vanish in exile. In an article, where the authors discuss the importance of age at arrival to England when it comes to attitudes to female circumcision, the authors conclude: "Living as an ethnic minority appears therefore to be associated with abandonment of traditional practices such as female circumcision, rather than with intense efforts to preserve traditions" (2001:2; further discussion in Chapter Eight).

This conclusion is supported in an article on Somalis in British exile, written by the social anthropologist Aud Talle (2001). She claims that it is obvious that there are families where the daughters are circumcised abroad, but that the lack of reliable observations indicates that these families are few.

Up until today there is no identified case on British soil. The report on 3,000 UK girls mutilated being every year in Great Britain, according to the EU-commissioner Maj Britt Theorin (2001a, 2001b, and 2001d) among others, may stem from an article on a BBC-program: "3,000 girls risk being subjected to circumcision every year". This is an estimation probably based on population statistics (see section 4.6).

This BBC-article is published on a website of the Norwegian national broadcasting company.[259] There it is also claimed that Dr. Faith Mwangi-Powell, the president of the British activist organisation Forward, has stated that forty to forty-five percent of the Somali girls, who are born in England or have come here before they have been circumcised, are exposed to circumcision. Where she got her evidence is not clear, and it is evidently contradicted by scientific estimations.[260] Yet it is alleged in the documentary that: "In England research has established how the encroachment lives on among Somali immigrants", and that "forty-five percent stated that they keep on mutilating".

This is a serious misuse of facts, in the name of science. As it is presented as scientific evidence and expressed in such a highly prestigious TV series as *Dokument inifrån*, a program supposed to be carefully scrutinised for factual errors before it is sent, viewers hardly question this allegation. Still it constitutes the key support of the reporter's argument.

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[259] *www.tv2.no/riketstilstand/*

[260] The reporter Oscar Hedin (personal communication, 9 November 2001) claims he has got the information from an undated report named "Female Genital Mutilation: A Case Study in Birmingham", written by Faith Mwango Powell at the activist organisation Forward. Attempts to order the report have failed. Oscar Hedin has not been willing to supply me with a copy. Hence, I have not been able to read the report to see what kind of empirical evidence there is.

C2. The frailties of the argument

The argument of the program includes the following statements:

> I. There is a structure of religious leaders in Sweden who keep up the practice of genital mutilation of Swedish girls. (In the information given beforehand to the mass media, it is even claimed that religious leaders *encourage* mutilation.)
>
> II. A couple of thousand girls in Sweden have been mutilated or risk being subjected to mutilation.
> The majority of these girls are exposed to ”summer holiday mutilation”, but some of the mutilations take place here in Sweden.
>
> III. African mutilators are brought to Sweden.

The reporter also makes several implicit statements, among them are:

> i. Among exile Africans, there is a prevalent cultural norm promoting female genital mutilation.
>
> ii. The explanation to the fact that no case is known in Sweden is that…
>
> a. … Swedish officials lack competence.
>
> b. … the Swedish society has chosen the path of information and moulding of opinion, instead of enforcement of the law.

Below these explicit and implicit statements will be discussed in more detail.

> I. There is a structure of religious leaders in Sweden who keep up the practice of genital mutilation of Swedish girls. (In the information given beforehand to the mass media, it is even claimed that religious leaders encourage mutilation.)

This first statement is a recurring theme in the program. If one scrutinise the evidence, the empirical base is weak. The reasoning is, of necessity, based on the version the viewers are offered, as we do not know what has been excluded in the editing process. One may suppose that all utterances supporting the argument of the reporter are included, while there is no way to know about utterances contradicting the reporter's argument.

Imam Kafi does not seem to have too many objections, when the Gambian woman presents the idea of having her daughter undergo a sunnah circumcision. What is a bit mystifying is the fact that he sends the woman both to the Somali woman in Gothenburg, who may help her to arrange a sunnah circumcision, at the same time as he makes sure she gets into touch with Dr. Kangoum, a well-known opponent of the tradition, who Imam Kafi knows will try to dissuade the woman from circumcision.

Father Bachoumious starts by saying, ”If you can change tradition, it is better”.

Sheir Mumin, in a clip borrowed from a Norwegian documentary, seems to be a true advocate of female circumcision (unclear what type).[261]

Imam Bashir is a well-known adversary of female circumcision. When the Gambian woman comes to him, he says that all forms of this practice are against Islam and bad for the girls.

If one summarises the religious leaders' first reactions to the Gambian woman's request for help – is it reasonable to conclude that they constitute a "structure" of advocates for female genital mutilation? (Or that they – Sheir Mumin excluded – "encourage" mutilation?)

Theoretically speaking, it could be the first time they are faced with this situation. How they reacted when a Gambian woman came to them and asked for help to carry through a circumcision does not prove anything at all beyond what actually happened in these specific situations. They may be criticised for not holding out when facing this Gambian woman's pleas for help. But the fact that they do not, is no evidence of a *structure* for maintenance of the tradition. And certainly not if one takes into consideration the fact that several "religious leaders" were visited by the television team. These were not presented in the version broadcast, as they turned the woman's pleas for help with circumcision down immediately.[262] Thus, there may be reason to speak of a structure of religious leaders who are *opponents* of female circumcision.

What is difficult to realise while watching the program for the first time, is that the religious leaders (again excluding Sheir Mumin) in reality do not talk in a recommending style at all. It is the reporter, in the voice of the speaker, who lay down 'truths' like: "How come that a religious man like Imam Kafi encourages mutilation?"; "Father Bachoumious hopes that female genital mutilation will disappear in course of time, but he recommends genital mutilation, for the sake of the girl's marriage"; "sunnah circumcision, the milder form which Father Bachoumious recommends"; the reporter to Imam Bashir: "But you actually give her the advice to do sunnah circumcision", etc. As a viewer, it is practically impossible to not buy these allegations, since they are repeated by the speaker so many times, even if not supported in the secretly recorded sequences. The words of the religious leaders, if read literally, point at spontaneous dissociations of the practice of female circumcision, as exemplified above.

A final comment on the "structure" of religious leaders upholding the tradition of female circumcision: The argument rests on a notion of the imams' incontestable power:

> Speaker: [56] The religious leaders, the imams within Islam, have an extensive power. They make an important informal leadership for Muslims in Sweden.

This may seem to be a well-founded view, but in reality it has more to say about the reporter's prejudice than about reality. It is of utmost importance to ask the questions: Even if imams in Sweden all were in favour of female circumcision, would they have the power to uphold the tradition in Sweden, contrary to changing views of people in exile? Are

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[261] Sheir Mumin uses the Somali word *gudniin*, which means "circumcision" and is applied to both male and female circumcision. When used about girls it designates both infibulation and sunnah circumcision.

[262] Communication with Mustafa Kharraki at the Stockholm Mosque at a personal meeting (22 February 2002).

'Muslims' a homogenous group, all relating to religious authorities in a similar way?[263] The statement is naive and has no support at all in the program – still it is crucial to the argument.

> II. A couple of thousand girls in Sweden have been mutilated or risk being subjected to mutilation.
> The majority of these girls are exposed to "summer holiday mutilation", but some of the mutilations take place here in Sweden.

When it comes to so called "summer holiday mutilations", the reporter's strongest support is the existence of the phrase itself, probably coined by himself. Sweden has only had legislation against such a procedure for a few years, but despite constant rumours there is so far no identified case.[264]

The list anonymously handed over to *Barnombudsmannen* (the ombudsman of the children) was said to indicate eleven girls who should have been circumcised in Somalia during summer holidays in year 2000. There are reasons to doubt the credibility of these allegations. The greater part of the list consists of lines like "2 girls from the same family, domiciled in Halmstad, or perhaps in Hallstahammar" etc. Those lines were, naturally, not exposed in the program. Somalis I have discussed the matter with, and showed the list to (the few names erased in the official document) have explained the enterprise of gathering that kind of information during a trip to Somalia as practically impossible. Thus, one has to at least consider alternative motives behind the fact that such a list has been written.

Diana was circumcised in Egypt thirteen years ago. Fatima Nur says that she knows of a girl who was born in Sweden and taken back to Somalia for circumcision. The woman in Gothenburg says she has had her oldest daughter circumcised in Kenya, and that she will have her younger daughter circumcised in the future. Sheir Mumin states that he also will have his daughter circumcised in the future.

All cases are sad, whether the circumcisions have taken place in the past or will take place in the future. Still one has to ask how representative these cases are of what is going on at a large scale in African exile groups. We are talking about fifty to sixty thousand people of African origin in Sweden.[265]

In Sweden, professionals like health care staff, teachers, employees at day care centres and nursery schools, etc., are obliged to report to the social authorities *any suspicion* that a child or a young person is abused or maltreated.[266] This legal obligation takes out the usual professional secrecy in e.g. the health care system. In Stockholm one case was discussed in the

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[263] I thank the Norwegian anthropologist R. Elise B. Johansen, who brought this objection up at a workshop in Oslo (12-14 October 2001).

[264] According to Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1995:105ff) a **rumor** should not be defined by its falsity, but by its lack of substantiation: "… rumors are told without reliable factual documentation; at some later point in time, they can turn out to be verified, or be shown to be false – what counts is that they are unverified" (ibid.:105).

[265] 55,138 persons born in Africa live in Sweden (1 January 2001). In these figures "second generation immigrants" (persons born in Sweden, with one or both parents originating from an African country) are not included. (Personal communication, State Department of Migration, 1 August 2002.)

[266] *Socialtjänstlagen*, Chapter 14, §1.

1990s, when staff at a day care centre alarmed the social authorities about a suspected case of circumcision of a small Somali girl. The girl was taken to a clinic for a genital examination by a physician, who declared the suspicions to be unfounded.[267] Since the law was formulated, i.e. during the last twenty years, there has not been one single report from physicians or nurses about suspected circumcision inflicted in any young Swedish Somali girl (nor from any other ethnic group). Either Somali girls in Sweden do not benefit from any gynaecological health care at all, or the total body of health care professionals in Sweden constantly violates the law (see cases of circumcision in young patients, but do not report them), or the alleged number of girls at risk in Sweden is an exaggeration.[268] If the practice were generally upheld in Sweden, it would be reasonable to believe that at least *one* case would have been reported from the total body of health care professionals in the country. This is not claiming that no circumcision at all is going on. It is simply stating the point that this state of affairs – no identified cases – tells us something about a widespread opposition to female circumcision in these exile groups.

When it comes to the reporter's statement "some of these mutilations take place in Sweden", his only support is the Linköping case. It is highly doubtful whether this case can be seen as evidence for the existence of female circumcision in Sweden. Dr. Kangoum had a debate article published in *Aftonbladet*, where he tells his version of the information given while he was secretly recorded. I have chosen to include the better part of his article, as it is practically the only text published which emanates from an other perspective – even if biased – than all the other writing during this period of mass media excitement:

> No, alas! We can not always trust our media. Most of us are spared from worries about manipulations behind headlines and TV-programs. But we, who have been involuntarily involved, may have reason to be amazed. The last week's drive in the mass media ought to be informative also to ordinary viewers […]
>
> In the TV-program it is claimed that I saved a circumcised girl from bleeding to death. Maj Britt Theorin [who published an article, "Prosecute the Swedish genital mutilators" (Theorin 2001c), the same day the documentary was sent] can be calm. The girl alleged to have been circumcised has never existed! And for this simple and plain reason I have never had the slightest obligation to report anything to the national board of health and welfare.
>
> All started in February. An imam in Gothenburg [Imam Kafi] got a visit from the woman *Dokument inifrån* had sent out with a hidden camera. She pretended that she needed help to have her eight-year-old daughter circumcised.[269] The woman persistently repeated her request and refused to listen to any arguments at all from the imam. That is why he tried to divert her attention in the same way one diverts a child.
>
> The imam gave the woman addresses of mine and others' who he hoped could stop the woman in her intent. He tried to scare the woman with a white lie about a little girl who almost bled to death at a circumcision.
>
> - The doctor was really upset, the imam said and gave the woman my address. Then he

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[267] Prop. 1998/99:70.

[268] See e.g. the governmental bill Prop. 1998/99:70, page 12. The general rule about secrecy for health personnel is revoked in cases of crime which may give a sentence of two years in prison. It suffices with a *suspicion* of crime. Also personnel in other areas concerning children and youth has a duty to report suspected cases.

[269] In other situations it has been said that the Gambian woman's daughter is eleven years old. The real age of the girl is not known.

called me and forewarned me. Sure enough, the woman contacted me, and she was exactly as blocked as the imam had premised. Say what you want about this lady. In any case she is an actress worthy *Dramaten* [the national theatre scene].

- My husband will kill me if the girl is not circumcised!, she said. For nearly four hours I strived, trying to get the desperate woman to see reason. I avoided questions about 'the bleeding girl'.

Among all the material that the producer edited out, it is clear that I succeeded in persuading the woman to let her daughter stay with my family during summer. In that way we could trick her husband into believing that the girl had been circumcised in the country.

Then the woman seemed to calm herself a little. I dared to say openly that the imam's story about the little bleeding girl was a pure fantasy. But this denial was, of course, edited out by the TV-producer, in order not to crack 'hot news'.

It is honourable that Mrs. Theorin reacts against social evils. But one must not be naive and believe everything shown in television. Mrs. Theorin should of course have contacted me and others for additional views and for the double-checking of 'facts' before she wrote her pompous trash.

Mrs. Theorin has offended and insulted not only me and others who are pointed out and named in the program. She has also calumniated all Swedes of African background. She has promoted in replacing communication with mistrust, shame and hatred. She ought to apologise.

Certainly I do work against female circumcision. But I do not use methods that stigmatise and create gulfs between Africans and other Swedes. The method I use in working against female circumcision is direct communication and information. It is hardly a glamorous work, and it is preferably carried out without involvement from TV. This is why I have chosen to not participate in any TV-programs. Possibly will also Mrs. Theorin enjoy being in the limelight with better judgement from now on [Kangoum 2001, my translation from Swedish].

What supports Dr. Kangoum's version is the fact that Imam Kafi really sends the Gambian woman to Dr. Kangoum, a well-known opponent to female circumcision. Besides this fact, there are some differences between the stories told by Imam Kafi and Dr. Kangoum about the girl in Linköping, details like point of time and nationality of the circumciser involved: According to Imam Kafi the circumciser was a Kenyan woman and all this happened two years ago, while according to Dr. Kangoum the circumciser was a Somali woman and the incident took place one year ago.

On the other hand, if Dr. Kangoum's version is true, it is a complicating fact that he seems to ask the reporter not to publish this information: "[257] …for the sake of the family, for me, for the girl". Dr. Kangoum claims he never uttered those words to the reporter, but to the Gambian woman during a telephone conversation. For various reasons – among them exhaustion at the woman's persistence and a will to create a sense of trust between them – for a moment he slipped into her description of reality, a fact he deeply regrets today.[270] But he claims he never discussed 'the Linköping case' with the reporter, as presented in the program. His statement is supported by the fact that we, as viewers, never see his face saying this. Another cut is offered during this sequence, pretending to be part of this secretly recorded meeting between Dr. Kangoum and the reporter.[271]

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[270]Personal communication (16 February 2002).

[271]In the program we are offered the following dialogue, while a clip with an opened book (with normal and infibulated vaginas) is shown:

In an article published in a local paper, *Östgötacorrespondenten*, Dr. Kangoum tells his version of the origin of the Linköping case.[272] Some days later a local policeman interviewed states that no investigation will be initiated concerning the Linköping case:

> Detective chief inspector Rolf Holstein says that he at first intended to call on the physician, but that he then, after having read the interview with Dr. Kangoum, estimated that he would not get any other information from the doctor than what had been stated in this interview. […] - We don't even have a victim. We haven't heard from even one person about a little girl being away from school or nursed under strange circumstances. We have, in short, nothing to start with.[273]

Structurally, the story told by Imam Kafi and commented upon by Dr. Kangoum reminds of a *contemporary legend*, as described by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1995):

> Contemporary legends are stories that are told as true, and are widely believed, but lack factual verification – which means that they qualify as rumors. On the surface, they seem to be about specific people and events; in reality they have an abstract, general, or cartoonlike quality. In the run-of-the-mill-rumor, what counts is the details of the subject of the story – the fact that the story is about specific events or a particular person [1995:108].

The authors claim that the contemporary or urban legends pretend to be about actual real-life individuals and that they often include an element of threat: it is usually a dramatic story with a meaningful or moral massage, it is associated to what is currently believed and does so contain a grain of truth. It supplies supportive detail or local colour and has often a credible source. All these characteristics are in accordance with the structure of the story about the girl in Linköping. If the story lacks basis – that is, if it was really made up by Imam Kafi to scare the Gambian woman – the viewers were in reality offered a glimpse of how contemporary legends may arise.

"Moral panics are the perfect breeding ground for urban or contemporary legends", the authors conclude (1995:109). They argue that a special type in particular expresses the moral panic – the "atrocity tale":

> The ideology of specific social categories, subgroups, or social movements provides a framework that makes certain horrifying (but empirically unlikely) events seem possible, plausible, or even likely; tales about such events are believable because, in certain circles, they give life to fears and threats that have been articulated on a more abstract and general level [1995:110].

The Linköping case, in the form of an "atrocity tale", complies with the criterion of infusing horror, as one is truly put in a state of shock as a viewer merely at the possibility that this should have taken place on Swedish soil. Yet, the ideology ascribed to the Somalis in the

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[Reporter:] … I know what happened to this girl in Linköping. And I also know that you became involved.
[Dr. Kangoum:] It is very dangerous. For the family, for me, for the girl. I don't want to talk about it.
[Reporter:] But you have to understand me. I know that you were involved in this.
[Dr. Kangoum:] I was not involved at all.

[272] *Östgötacorrespondenten*, 8 September 2001.

[273] *Östgötacorrespondenten*, 14 September 2001.

program (they are people following a prevalent cultural norm forcing them to mutilate their own daughters whatever the costs), makes the incident suddenly seem likely, and even logical.

Word stands against word in the Linköping case. After the Norwegian documentary had been broadcast, the secretly recorded sequences edited out were later transcribed and published.[274] The Swedish television will not offer the public access to what really happened during these secretly recorded meetings.[275] This means that we will never know for sure if Dr. Kangoum really denied the story and explained to the woman why it had been invented, while he was secretly recorded.

A Somali man in Linköping told me that he and some of his fellow countrymen living in the same town had discussed the possibility of a collective action: what if they all brought their daughters to Swedish authorities for genital examination? This suggestion ought to be seen as a sign of desperation among the Somalis in Linköping, who feel they lack means of repudiating suspicions.

However evasive, this girl in Linköping has reached some kind of ontological status. Before the repeat of the program, the national broadcasting company announced it with the words:

> In the program we meet, among others, a girl in Linköping who nearly bled to death, after she had been subjected to genital mutilation [SVT Text, 10 September 2001].

III. African mutilators are brought to Sweden.

"[270] The Swedish police have not discovered the mutilators who have come to Sweden", the speaker claims, leaning toward one utterance from Dr. Kangoum:

> Dr. Kangoum: [240] Yes, there are those who collect money, and each pays two thousand, or two thousand two hundred and bring [a circumciser]. But this is very secret! They bring, collect money, and bring a woman from Somalia. They pay her, travel expenses, they say that she is mother or daughter or somebody else, and she travels around circumcising the girls.

According to Dr. Kangoum and his wife Åsa, this quotation deals with the situation in France, as described in an article in a British magazine. They had discussed this piece a short time before Dr. Kangoum had the visit from the Gambian woman; and during the meeting with her, he related the content of the article while they were discussing female circumcision.[276]

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[274] *www.tv2.no/riketstilstand/*

[275] Personal communication with the reporter Oscar Hedin (9 November 2001). After the broadcast of the documentary, there were several persons reporting the religious leaders to the police. How-ever, no such report led to further police investigation. Imam Bashir, who claims that his appearance in the documentary was heavily biased, says that he prayed to God that the police would choose to investigate his case: "Then the Swedish television would have been forced to hand out the unmanipulated recordings, and that would have cleared me of suspicion" (personal communication, 19 February 2002; see also interview in *Expressen*, 8 September 2001).

[276] Personal communication (16 February 2002).

The entry permit rules for Africans (resident in Africa) to Sweden are extremely restrictive.[277] A visa for tourists is practically impossible to obtain. There are some basic prerequisites, which must be complied with for both the visiting and receiving parties:
1) The receiving person must have a permanent employment and a solid income. (A vast majority of the Somalis in Sweden lacks permanent employment.) If not, the visitor must be able to prove that he or she has a permanent employment and solid income in his or her home country – and good reasons to return.
2) Over and above this, there must be weighty reasons for the visit, like severe illness.

Relatively few Africans in Sweden have the opportunity to let a relative, resident in Africa, come and visit them during their lifetime. Those who would have a chance if applying, are probably not those who still cling to the tradition of female circumcision, according to my study.

Among the implicit statements, the following is one:

> i. Among exile Africans, there is a prevalent cultural norm promoting female genital mutilation.
>
> Speaker: [143] Genital mutilation is not like other crimes against children, like child abuse or incest. This is about [144] parents who follow the prevalent cultural norm.

This could be said to be true in one way, if it is read literally, then interpreted as if it states that where this tradition exists, it is culturally acceptable and seen as something good for the girls. But here it comes to carry meaning from the surrounding context, particularly the fact that during the whole program nobody is included to state the opposition to female circumcision in exile groups. As there is no reasoning about changing practices in exile, nor about African parents who have abandoned this tradition, there is a big risk that the implicit conclusion of an average viewer is that there in fact still exists a "*prevalent* cultural norm" forcing Africans in exile to stick to tradition. (This culturalist view is further discussed Chapter Eight.)

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[277]Information from *Migrationsverket*, State Department of Migration, 20 September 2001. That these very restrictive rules really are applied has been confirmed by Somalis in my circle of acquaintances. A Somali woman planning her wedding has little chance to get visas for her own parents.

The Somali author Nuruddin Farah, one of Africa's most prominent writers and often mentioned as a candidate of the Nobel prize, was given the Kurt Tucholsky Award by the national association of Swedish authors, *Penklubben,* in 2000. It implied an invitation to stay for a limited period in Sweden to rest and write. At first he was denied temporary visa for more than three days, a fact which was of huge embarrassment to the inviting association. Not until the head of the association, a respected author in Sweden, had pursued the case in national news, the decision was altered (personal communication with Ljiljana Dufgran, journalist at the daily paper *Dagens Nyheter* and one of the chairmen of *Penklubben,* 19 November 2001)

ii. The explanation to the fact that no case is known in Sweden is that…

> a. … Swedish officials lack competence.
>
> b. … the Swedish society has chosen the path of information and moulding of opinion, instead of enforcement of the law.

Here an ambivalence is exposed in the program. Leaving out the possibility that no cases are known in Sweden because there are few cases to discover, the reporter chooses to present two different explanatory models:

iia) One explanation offered is about the incompetence of the Swedish authorities. The speaker states that "[132] Swedish authorities have difficulties in handling genital mutilation of girls" and "Nobody has been sentenced for genital mutilation in Sweden. Swedish authorities [265] have not succeeded investigating even one single case". The conclusion to be drawn, then, is that we should have had knowledge of (many) cases if only the Swedish officials were competent.

At the same time the program offers a contradictory explanation, stating that

iib) Swedish authorities have chosen *not* to deal with this issue through judicial procedures. When discussing the trials in France, the speaker announces that:

> [152] In France no specific law [against female circumcision] has been instituted as in Sweden. [153] Instead one has relied on a [154] functioning judicial system and sentenced for battery. [155] In Sweden an other path has been chosen. One concentrates on information against female genital mutilation.

Here the reporter explains the scarcity of identified cases as a result of a conscious strategy.

Two contradictory explanatory models are offered, but the most probable one – no identified cases, because there are few cases to discover – is left aside.