

Behind Male Circumcision. Medicalization, Gender And Ethnicity In The Life Stories Of Mixed Couples With A Muslim Partner

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BEHIND MALE CIRCUMCISION

MEDICALIZATION, GENDER AND ETHNICITY IN THE LIFE STORIES
OF MIXED COUPLES WITH A MUSLIM PARTNER

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Circumcision in mixed families

- The interviews analyzed in this paper are part of a **broader qualitative study focused on conjugal mixedness** in families where one partner is an immigrant from a majority-Muslim country married to an Italian, Belgian or French partner.
- These couples represent an **emblematic case study of “mixed” within the phenomenon of mixed marriages** and, especially in the countries analyzed, they incorporate “racial”, ethnic and religious differences **represented as ‘strong’ and ‘conflicting’ in the public hegemonic discourse** (Allievi 2006; Saraceno 2007).
- Based on the life stories of the partners gathered by two researchers in France, Belgium and Italy, the paper focuses on the practice of male circumcision to analyze its **meanings and social implications**

Exploring Male Circumcision: negotiations and meanings

- To look at how circumcision is negotiated and signified **is a way to look at the impact of migration on cultural practices** involving the body as a symbolic space in which to inscribe belongings and differences (Douglas, 1966)
- **Male circumcision is seen as a “social fact”** to analyse conjugal “mixedness”. As Collet (2012) points out, “conjugal mixedness is not only a question of different cultures but one of conformity or deviance with regard to social norms” (*ibidem*, 71).
- **Parenting practices** construct conjugal mixedness in everyday family life.
- **Exploring the meanings of circumcision** in intermarriages allow us to see:
 - How a practice as circumcision is managed when Muslims marry non-Muslims
 - How the choice is interpreted by couples
 - What are the meanings that emerge in favor or against it by the partners

Parenting and transmission

- **Parenting** → couple negotiation to children education & influences of social environment on education and transmission.
- **Parents' backgrounds** → variety of forms of **children (non-)identification** (Unterreiner, 2015; Caballero *et al.*, 2007; Song and Gutierrez, 2015)
- Multi-ethnic parents' narratives on children socialisation → “**cultural loss**” and “**ethnic dilution**”, into “**diversity**” (Song and Gutierrez, 2015)

These assumptions are **challenged** when one observes **circumcision**.

Because

circumcision is a parental negotiated choice

that **persist over time**,

even in **migration** and in contexts where Muslims are a **minority**.

What's circumcision ?

- Evidence of male circumcision exists since the ancient Egypt (around 2300 BC).
- Practice used by Jewish, Coptic Christians and the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, but also in Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, Pacific islands (Fiji and Polynesia), and until mid-1900 in UK and USA.
- In **Islam**, circumcision :
 - is an **on-going controversy** for some scholars;
 - is **not percept** (nor in Koran, nor in *fiqh*) → rather a “**recommendation**” of the prophet Mohammed (Sunnah) > an *hadith* refers to circumcision as *khitân*;
 - is associated with the idea of **purification** (*t'hara*, in plain North African dialect);
 - should be performed after baby's birth up to puberty following ritual with specific actors, actions and cutting tools.

The culturalization of circumcision

- Circumcision is a taken for granted practice rooted in Muslim countries → **overlapping of geographical origins, religion and ethnicity.**
- In sociological literature, **lack of analysis on Muslim circumcision and male body.** (attention on women's body and its visibility in the public space).
- **Circumcision as a cultural informed practice**
- **Religion** → major **conflictual dimension** between partners in mixed couples
- **Religion** → “a cultural system” (Geertz, 1973) : power of symbols, meanings, moods and motivations
- **Gender** → circumcision is a **rite of passage** from **female maternal world** and **male** one that **involves families** and **society** at large.

Fields, methods and participants

- **Over 10 years of empiric research** → two researchers and several fieldwork (2 PhDs, 2 post-docs)
- **Contexts of research** → Italy (Veneto), France (Alsace) and Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia) : different historical migration background, but similar actual Islamophobic and anti-migrant contexts
- **No comparison** → **identification of recurrences** in the narratives
- **Qualitative methods** → «*récits de vie*» (Bertaux, 2016)
- **More than 100 mixed couples** formed by at least one Arab-Muslim partner (male and female, both parents and children) → **heterogeneous sample**, but **circumcision is transversal to all couples!**
- **The gender of researchers matters?** No impact on data collected during fieldwork on circumcision (no a taboo sexualized topic)

Social context

- **The position of Catholic and Islamic religious authorities, openly suspicious about this type of relationship**, and the weight of the rhetoric of the hegemonic political discussion on Muslims in Europe are important in understanding the context of external pressure and hostility which characterize the everyday lives of these families.
- **Roman Catholic Church in 2005** with an official document from the Episcopal Conference of Italy (CEI) officially “strongly discourages these kind of marriages because they are a threat for woman’s freedom and for the transmission of Christian faith”.
- **Imams openly discourage Muslims to marry a Catholic partner** above all if in a non-Muslim country.
- **In Italy, the right wing political party Northern League (LEGA)**, firmly established in Northern Italy, has explicitly built its political actions round the public visibility of Islam. Examples are the daily disinformation campaigns appearing in the party’s newspaper “La Padania”, anti-Muslim demonstrations ridiculing the prophet Mohammed, and protests against the building of mosques. In **Belgium NVA** and in **France Front National...**

FINDINGS

Three not-exclusive arguments justify the on-going circumcision performances in the couples interviewed:

- **Medicalization**
- **Patrilineality**
- **Ethnicity**

Medicalization

*When one man pees, it is the first thing that gets **dirty**. That piece of skin. It gets dirty and it is better to cut it for **hygiene**. It had started for hygienic reasons for sure. [...] I discussed it before with H  l  ne [his wife]. I said “if we have boys I want them to be circumcised...” and she didn’t have any objection about it. It wasn’t a problem. **Here religion doesn’t matter**. This is culture. We have to separate religion from culture.*
(Amir, 48, France)

*I had no problem on that side. We discussed it before they were born. It is **healthy** and I knew it was important for him because it is part of his culture. As I told you, it was something that, maybe, was also **good for medical reasons** because the doctor said that when they are young **they don’t suffer** at all. [...] **It isn’t something religious anyway**. It isn’t practiced normally in Europe, but for example in America or Middle East it is very diffuse.*
(H  l  ne, Amir’s wife, 46, France)

Patrilineality

*We weren't married when I said to Marine... "listen...I won't impose my religion. They'll decide. But I want my children to be circumcised. [...]" **It's normal for a man, for me. I think women know what is best for daughters and men know what is best for their sons.** Look...they'll see that **they're like their father.** It makes sense, doesn't it? [...] If a man do the hammam with his son they have **to look the same...***

(Abdullah, 43, Belgium)

*I wondered if this was really necessary. **I was worried about causing useless pain to my children.** Then I had a son...and I said once more...why do we have to impose this useless sufferance to our son? [...] Now I can say to you that it's not a problem for them. And **it's something that could remind them who they are.***

(Marine, Abdullah's wife, 38, Belgium)

Ethnicity

*Look... my children are both circumcised. And it's also one of the things Giovanna struggled with me... especially with the first child. We brought him to Morocco and made the circumcision. At first she didn't agree. But it was a **very important thing for me**, so she accepted. For Samir [the first son] **it was very well done in Morocco**. While with Omar [the second son] here... the doctor didn't cut as well as it's done in the **our way of circumcising**. Anyway. The level of the cut is the right one. [...] **But religion has nothing to do with it**. They'll choose about it. **But we decided to leave them something of my culture. Because they're also half Moroccans.***

(Mohammed, 56, Italy)

***Circumcision is followed by a big party.** Something that puts together your family and relatives and grandpa and grandma... **and that's celebrated by everyone.** It's something that **you can't understand if you aren't there.** We did it there and we celebrated it with my parents too...*

(Jamal, 45, Belgium)

Concluding remarks

- Circumcision still appears as a practice that testifies **the attempt to contrast this “loss”**
- The taken for granted of circumcision is questioned in migration context
- We highlight **3 main arguments**: medicalization, patrilineality and ethnicity. Each argument is *not exclusive*, but **they usually coexist and often vehicle the other**.
- **From father to son → body marks imply the entrance into “male community”** (Muslim cultural educated community), **belonging** and **father resemblance → Gendered transition from childhood to adulthood**
- **Ethnic heritage →** circumcision persists as a sign of the father ethnic background

THANK YOU for listening!

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