Why do we have to circumcise our son?' Meanings behind male circumcision in the life stories of mixed couples with a Muslim partner

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'Why do we have to circumcise our son?' Meanings behind male circumcision in the life stories of mixed couples with a Muslim partner

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Abstract

Circumcision is an important symbolic practice that involves parenting and intergenerational transmission. Nevertheless, previous research has not investigated what it actually means to the partners, its significance in countries where Muslims are minorities and — above all — if people marry outside their own religious group. Through an analysis of partners' narratives, the article explores the meaning attributed to circumcision by mixed couples (where one partner has a Muslim background and the other a Christian one) living in Belgium, France and Italy. A kaleidoscope of meanings shapes the choice to circumcise: medicalisation, patrilineality, ethnicity and religion. The findings demonstrate how: 1) through the medicalisation of the practice, partners apparently 'de-culturalise' circumcision, 'universalising' its benefit for the male body. Thanks to the role of a medical expert they legitimate their choice recalling the 'authority of science'; 2) when the Muslim partner is the man, circumcision represents a physical connection that the father wants to maintain; 3) circumcision is a 'strong' marker of ethnicity, often disentangled from religion. It therefore emerges as a tangible act that connects social rites, the family of origin and cultural belonging. These motivations offer a new insight into the partners' practices to counter the 'losing' of the minority background

1. Introduction

Among Muslims, the circumcision of sons is considered to be one of the most impor- tant rites of passage, involving the families and society at large. In spite of the fact that there is no agreement on its origin, according to scholarship on Islamic issues, male circumcision is not a religious precept in the strict sense,[1] but rather a customary prac- tice traditionally traced back to Ibrahim (Abraham), the ancestor of the Jews and the Arabs (Kister 1994). Despite its uncontested symbolic importance, it would be valuable for scholars interested in Muslims in Europe to look at circumcision in its everyday life dimension, in order to understand how it is maintained or re-interpreted in a situation where Muslims are minorities, and above all if a Muslim parent has

her/his own religious group. In the latter case, circumcision may bring into question, in a micro perspective within the couple, the tensions between belonging and trans- mission, cultural sustenance and cultural loss, and, in a macro perspective, the bound- aries between majority and minority groups, above all in contexts where Muslim minorities are particularly stigmatised.

The current article explores the meaning attributed to circumcision by mixed couples (where one partner has a Muslim background and the other a Christian one[2]) living in Belgium, France and Italy. These couples represent a paradigmatic case study of 'mixedness'(Ata 2017; Bangstad 2004; Allievi 2006; Al-Yousuf 2006; Cerchiaro 2016), because in addition to the partners' different religious backgrounds (one has been socialised into Islam and the other into Christianity), the couples are characterised by a migrant partner from a stigmatised minority group being married to a native partner from the majority group.

Literature on mixed couples often discusses parenting and transmission as a choice between the binary categories of 'either-or' (see Törngren and Sato 2021), or as a fixed entity that risks being 'diluted' and 'lost' in generational transmission. For example, Voas (2003) suggests that mixed families are inclined to weaken the transmission of reli- gion to the next generation, while Song and Gutierrez discuss the centrality of processes of 'racial dilution' and 'cultural loss' among mixed race populations, arguing that among parents 'a sense of an inevitable distancing from an ethnic minority culture with the passing of generations was commonly raised' (2015b, 687). Only a few studies concerning mixed families, elaborated within the framework of the francophone literature on mixed couples (Streiff-Fenart 1989; Levy 2007; Le Gall et al. 2003), have marginally addressed the relevance of circumcision. Nevertheless, these studies do not examine what circumci- sion actually means to the partners and, as a consequence, what kind of transmission is concretely involved. Drawing on biographical interviews with parents who did circum- cise their sons, we aim to fill this gap by exploring and disentangling the different mean- ings attributed to circumcision in the parental perspective, in order to answer two specific research questions:

1) Is circumcision, when practised, always considered as a transmission marker?
2) If so, then what do partners want to pass down through it?

Answering these questions will allow us to analyse the broader impact of migration on cultural practices involving the body as a symbolic space in which belonging, and differences can be incorporated (Douglas 1966). It is important to clarify that we do not focus on the negotiations between the partners, because that would have shifted the focus onto the couple's decision-making and power dynamics. Although these issues are relevant and entangled with our aim, they are beyond the scope of the analy- sis here.

In the following section, we frame our analysis within the literature on mixed couples' parenting strategies. We then present methodological and empirical sections to contex- tualise our data. Then our findings explore the meanings of circumcision emerged in the partners' narratives. In the conclusions, we discuss our results in relation to the wider debate on transmission and parenting in mixed families.

1. Circumcision as a synecdoche to analyse transmission in conjugal mixedness

Over the past decade scholars have looked at mixed couples and families as a kind of 'social and cultural laboratory' (Barbara 1993) in which to study the relationships within the conjugal dyad, the socialisation of the children and the reaction of the socio-institutional context to the choice to break the endogamous norm (Cerchiaro 2019a, 2021, 2020; Odasso 2016, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Collet 2012; Song and Gutierrez 2015a; Edwards, Caballero, and Puthussery 2010). Parenting, in particular, has emerged as a privileged space in which to observe how partners cope with their different backgrounds and seek to transmit to their offspring a sense of belonging[3] to one's group (Deirdre 2002; Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005; McCarthy 2007; Edwards, Caballero, and Puthussery 2010; Arweck and Nesbitt 2010; Song and Gutierrez 2015a, 2015b; Cerchiaro, Aupers, and Houtman 2015). Existing data suggests that the identities of the mixed population reveal the fluidity of ethnic and religious boundaries (Cerchiaro 2020; Alba and Nee 2003; Lee and Bean 2004; Qian 2004). While their parents' backgrounds could be of great significance to some people of mixed heritage, they might be less important to the life and self-identity of others along their trajectory towards adulthood (Edwards, Caballero, and Puthussery 2010; Song and Gutierrez 2015a; Odasso 2019; Therrien 2020; Cerchiaro forthcoming). Thus, the birth of a child prompts the parents to deal with transferring a range of symbolic goods (for example the family name), but also in some way a national, religious and ethnic sense of belonging (Varro and Lesbet 1986). In their study into how multi-ethnic parents articulate narra- tives of 'ethnic dilution' and 'cultural loss' in relation to the socialisation of their children, Song and Gutierrez (2015a, 680) highlight the common concern of parents about the diminishing practices connecting parents and their children to their minority ancestry. The authors argue that, while some parents expressed 'sadness at "inevitable" loss' (Song and Gutierrez 2015a, 687); others actively 'countered loss through strategies to connect their children to their minority heritages' (2015a, 680). This notion of 'dilution' and 'loss' in the transmission of ethnic and religious culture remains often vague and blurred, because it implies different processes that usually cannot be framed clearly as involving ethnic, cultural or religious issues. Moreover, we have little knowledge about how these parents try to counter the dilution of their 'minority ancestry' and how this attempt is related to race, ethnicity or religion. To examine the meanings underlying couples' decisions concerning circumcision can inform us about the complexity of trans- mission and allow us to investigate this 'fear of loss' of the parents' minority heritage. In this light, circumcision is not only a private matter, but also a public one. It represents both a collective and an intimate practice, because on the one hand it is intended — in Muslim countries and communities[4] — as a social ritual that involves the enlarged family, while on the other hand, it concerns a sexualised part of the body. As Boon states, 'foreskins are facts — cultural facts — whether removed or retained. Absent versus present, prepuces have divided many religions, politics, and ritual persuasions … (non) circumcision involves signs separating an "us" from a "them" entangled in various discourses of identity and distancing' (1999, 43). In Muslim societies, for a child, circumcision marks the transition from the female world of the mother, in terms of the attachment to her body, to the masculine world and its values, symbolised

by the father (Touhami, Titia Rizzi, and Moro 2017). This transition is depicted as a social promotion that contributes to defining masculine and feminine positions and status (Toualbi-Thaâlibi 2002). It is thus expected that through this practice, parents pub- licly 'reveal' what they would like to pass on to their children in terms of familial and parental identities. This is, however, a hypothesis that needs to be tested. With regard to names (Cerchiaro 2019b), this implies an intimate negotiation for the couple that includes a wider sphere of family and social constraints that influence partners' choices. Social recognition matters. A great deal has been written about the choice of chil- dren's names (see among others, Edwards and Caballero 2008; Finch 2008; Davies 2011; Thwaites 2013; Pilcher 2016; Wykes 2015; Cerchiaro 2019b). Couples discuss the sound of the name, the ease of writing it, the stereotypes associated with Muslim 'sounding' names and other issues that connect with the social perception of Muslim minorities in the majority society. Similarly to naming practices, what makes circumcision particu- larly interesting is its permanent character. For instance, partners can change their decisions about how to religiously educate their children or how to deal with mono or bilingualism, but circumcision is a 'one time' choice, something that remains as a phys- ical marker. Nevertheless, in contrast to the decision about names, circumcision can be hidden or revealed, celebrated as a social issue or kept private between the couple as an intimate matter. To use one parent's words: 'what you choose, remains'. To understand what 'remains'— that is, what partners want to convey through decisions about circum- cision — is the aim of this article.

2. The study: context, methodology and participants

2.1. France, Belgium and Italy

Our study took place in France, Belgium and Italy. These three countries are character- ised by a social context marked by hegemonic anti-Muslim and Islamophobic public dis- courses that cast doubt on the ability of Muslim minorities to coexist harmoniously and integrate into western societies (Allievi 2012; Bayrakli and Hafez 2017; Croucher 2013; Cesari 2011; Kyriakides, Virdee, and Modood 2009; Spruyt and Elchardus 2012). Scho- lars have demonstrated how this increasing resentment and negative attitude towards Muslims is particularly triggered by anti-Islamic political parties (Laurence and Vaisse 2007; Meer 2013; Statham and Tillie 2016; Statham 2016). Drawing on an extensive survey that enquired into how ordinary people view Muslims in Britain, the Netherlands, France and Germany, Statham (2016) highlights how, due to the absence of an openly anti- Islamic party, in contrast to the other continental countries, Britain presents a 'low- level undifferentiated resentment expressed against Islam' (234). In France, Belgium and Italy, on the other hand, the rhetoric of the populist right-wing political parties (respectively *Le Front National, Vlaams Belang* and *Lega Nord* and *Fratelli d'Italia*) has particularly targeted Muslim minorities as 'the enemy within' (Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2017). Since 9/11 and subsequent acts of terror- ism, these political statements have acquired greater legitimacy, creating both widespread anger and hatred directed at Muslim minorities (Cerchiaro 2021) and a general demand that they 'identify with (…) the core values and norms' (Statham and Tillie 2016, p. 179) of the country of residence. In this climate, circumcision tends to be considered a societal

'divisive issue'[5] (PACE 2015) – among others (e.g. wearing full-face veil) – whose practice and regulation often provokes political and public debates as it seems to threaten European secular values.[6] In the three countries, circumcision is legal under certain conditions (i.e.: that it is performed by a qualified person in an appropriate medical setting with consent) (Fortier et al. 2016),[7] as concerns exist that its interdiction will drive parents to practise it illegally by unsafe means. De facto the practice periodically triggers a controversy around children's agency and parents' autonomy, opposing, on the one side, those who consider it an irreversible violation of the human body imposed on defenceless children, and on the other side, those who consider it a legitimate practice based on the principles of religious freedom and personal autonomy in the upbringing of children (Roche Dahan 2013).

Despite the increasing Islamophobia and the ongoing contention over the benefits and problems of circumcision, such a conflictual environment is never indicated by the partners in our study as having modified or discouraged their decision to circumcise their sons. They neither mention the anti-Muslim climate in direct relation to their choice to circumcise their son, nor invoke the legal framework in their narratives. In other words, parents use the opportunity granted by the law to circumcise their son but interpret and signify it in their own way. Flowing from this absence of any references to the political and legal debates on the topic in their country, it was appropriate for us to focus on the meanings that partners give to circumcision beyond any claim of contextual comparison among the countries. Hence, our data are analysed with the intent to examine how in their narra- tives — collected in different places, over different periods and concerning diverse types of couples — partners signify circumcision and articulate its relevance for them.

2.2. Methodology and participants

The data analysed in this article comes from biographical interviews gathered separately in three different European countries (Italy, France and Belgium) by the two authors between 2009 and 2019 within different research projects. Our works broadly investigate conjugal mixedness, focusing on a number of topics including partners' intercultural practices, religious negotiations among family members, parenting transmission and children's racial, ethnic and religious identification. For the purpose of this article, we focus on our common findings where partners discussed spontaneously about their decision to circumcise their son. We carried out individual interviews with partners living in the Veneto region in Italy (64 couples), Alsace (20 couples) and the metropolitan area of Paris (20 couples) in France, and in Walloon (metropolitan area of Brussels) and Flemish regions (Antwerp) in Belgium (20 couples). Interviews were conducted using the *récits de vie* method (Bertaux 2016), and took place in the participants' home, or more rarely in restaurants, cafes or meeting places of mixed couples' associations. This quali- tative holistic method allows us to identify general socio-historical dynamics from the singular perspective of a representative range of interviewees. Deeply based on the trust built up in the setting, *récits de vie* are biographical in-depth interviews in which, through the use of a main trigger question, the aim is to allow the interviewees to express themselves freely in order to shed light on their 'world' within their universe of meaning (Bertaux 2016). The adoption of non-verbal interactions and a friendly atti- tude by each researcher helped to increase the respondents' confidence and comfort.

All the interviews were conducted individually, in the absence of other family members. Later, when it was possible, the researchers also spoke to partners together in order to collect the joint narratives of couples.[8] The researchers followed some couples over a period of time, meeting them directly more than once or maintaining contact by phone, email or social media. We did not introduce or 'lead' the interviewees with a specific question on circumcision, but once they had spoken about it, tried to delve into it by raising questions on what it represented for the partner. Hence, circumcision and its meanings emerged during the interviews as an important topic for couples in terms of parenting and transmission, even for those who did not yet have children.

The participants in our research belong to different socio-professional categories and mostly live in urban or quasi-urban areas. The Muslim parent was the father in 105 of the 124 cases,[9] and the mother in 19 of the couples. This numerical gender imbalance has two main explanations: First, the Quranic norm, affecting the orthopraxy, which prohibits a Muslim woman from marrying a non-Muslim man.[10] Second, the marriage market and the characteristics of migration flows. In view of the particularities of the Muslim pres- ence in Italy, France and Belgium — characterised as it is by fragmented ethnic groups — our sample was not limited to couples where the minority partner came from one specific ethnic-national group. Instead, the minority partners came from different African and Middle Eastern countries. Of the total number of children (176), 81 were sons, of whom 68 had been circumcised.

3. Findings

3.1. The intertwined medicalisation, gender, ethnicity and religion behind male circumcision

In this section, we focus on how parents narrate the circumcision of their sons and give meaning to this practice. First of all, it is a general finding in itself that our respondents narrate their standpoint on circumcision, without any precise question being asked about it. This evidences that circumcision is understood by the same partners as a practice with clear-cut cultural implications that they discuss as part of their being 'mixed'; that is, something that is not a shared, taken-for-granted practice and that accordingly needs to be discussed. We have to point out that neither the long time span (2009–2019) over which the interviews were gathered, nor the different countries of residence, emerge as significant variables in our findings for the purpose of this article. We detail some representative cases to illustrate the main meanings attributed to circumcision. We analytically divide them into three sub-sections: medicalisation, patrilineality, and ethnicity and religion.

These three groups of narratives are nevertheless not mutually exclusive but are inter- connected and overlap in the same partners' interviews to testify to the multifaceted aspects of circumcision.

3.2. Medicalisation

One of the main meanings of circumcision concerns the medical description of the prac- tice, which is used to explain the health benefits of removing the foreskin. The partners'

narratives refer to these benefits, emphasising that circumcision is not only found among Muslim or Jewish communities but is also a routine medical practice in secular countries. This argument emerges in all our interviews, often used as a way to introduce the issue to the interviewer. To narrate circumcision starting from its medical aspects emerge as an attempt to present it in a 'neutral' way, far from its ethnic and/or religious implications.

> When a 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 hygiene reasons for sure. […] I discussed it beforehand with Hélène [his wife]. I said, 'if we have boys, I want them to be circumcised …' and she didn't have any objection to it. It wasn't a problem. Here, religion doesn't matter. This is culture. We have to separate religion from culture. (Amir, 48, Algerian)

> 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 do not suffer at all. […] It is not something religious anyway. It is not practised normally in Europe, but for example in America or the Middle East it is very widespread. (Hélène, 43, French)

In these excerpts, the emphasis on the medical aspects helps the couple to communicate the physical advantages of circumcision and its 'objective goodness' for the male body. The stress placed on hygiene and medical explanations helps partners to introduce their decision to an external interlocutor. Amir (a retail clerk) and Hélène (a schoolteacher) have been married for 15 years and have two children, a boy aged 13 and a daughter aged 10. While they consider themselves to be respectively Muslim and Christian believers, although not practicing, they decided not to transmit any formal religious affiliation to the children. The necessity to divide, in their parenting decisions, what are cultural practices and what are religious ones appear relevant matters for the couple. In emphasising the cultural meaning behind circumcision, they indicate that the medical benefit is not the only meaning they attribute to it. In doing so, the partners argue that, in their view, circumcision does not represent a religious marker and that accordingly there is no contradiction involved in the decision to circumcise their son and yet not to pass on any religious affiliations to their children.

Enrica (30 years old, a commercial agent), in a relationship with Munir (a 37-year-old Jordanian man who runs a kebab shop) confirms that circumcision may be a problematic practice, somehow even dangerous for the child. Nevertheless, Enrica explains the choice to circumcise their 1-year-old boy, Omar, as follows:

> During the last surgery, the doctors asked us about circumcision, and in the end, I accepted this, as there were medical reasons for what they said. I think that my husband would have had it performed in Jordan anyway. Munir is sure that circumcision is correct, but I didn't know. You see, he doesn't agree with baptism, but circumcision yes, because he says the former is a matter of religion and the latter, not at all. (Enrica, 30, Italian)

Omar suffers from a rare syndrome and his immune system leaves him exposed to health risks. Without discussing the implicit benefits of circumcision, Munir, non-practicing but brought up in a Muslim family, clarifies: 'it is not religion, it is a cultural practice. I think that one too often mixes religion and culture.' Medical explanations (five couples stated that there was a physical problem behind the circumcision of their sons) are thus often used to illustrate how doctors or paediatricians play an important

role in convincing the Christian partner about the necessity and/or benefits of circumcision. The fact that a medical expert confirms the potential benefits of the practice helps the partners — more often the Christian one — to further defend their choice to an 'external observer'. However, a medical explanation for circumcision does not avoid the fact that each partner brings their vision of it into the process of parenting. Similar to Munir and Enrica, Myriam (45 years old, a housewife) and Anouar (48 years old, a welder), an Italian Moroccan couple married in 1993, also very differently narrate their appraisal of the circumcision of their son, Samad, born in 2002. Myriam and Anouar grew up in a Catholic Christian and a Muslim family, respectively, but their religious practice was limited to primary socialisation, as during their adulthood they abandoned religious practice, while still claiming to be believers. Myriam stresses the relevant role of the medical expertise in the construction of her vision of circumci- sion, but she also advances her concerns about it:

> My paediatrician agreed about circumcision but did not circumcise Samad when he was very little. Then we discovered that he was asthmatic, and I decided not to do it at all. He was often sick … but my husband decided on it alone, without consulting me. (Myriam, 45, Italian)

When the body and the health of the child are at the core of the discussion, the mothers discuss their protective attitudes, which are rarely encountered in the fathers' narratives. Sometimes, as in Myriam's case, uncertainty about circumcision enhances mistrust, even towards medical arguments. After circumcision was carried out in a Moroccan hospital, decided on by Anouar, Samad became ill. The surgery had medical complications that obliged him to stay in bed for more than three months. The experience was problematic for the couple. Not having made a joint decision to circumcise the baby, in her narrative Myriam shows feelings of resentment about her husband's argument and this pivotal experience strongly confirmed her intuitions about not circumcising her son because of his delicate health. Though she has forgiven her husband, she thus comments dryly: 'No party [for the circumcision]. No! Because one does not party when a baby is ill.' The collective aspect of the ritual — to celebrate it with the enlarged family — typical of the social norms of Anouar's country of origin, was thus avoided. On his part, Anouar presents circumcision as a 'normal' medical procedure with possibly unintended consequences and a necessary recovery period. He produces the doctors' opinions in support of his argument.

> We went to a hospital in Morocco, the surgery was correct and, as the doctors said, it is normal that this takes time to recover from. It depends on the baby's body. Circumcision is important, it is a good thing for him under many points of view … even for his illness, as the specialists have argued too. [After a short silence, he adds] I am circumcised too. This is good! (Anouar, 48, Moroccan)

Through analysing the timing transitions over Myriam and Anouar's family life course, it can be seen how, at the beginning, the partners' narratives converge towards the potential health benefits of circumcision. Later, after Omar's painful experience, their narratives diverge. This excerpt also shows us how meanings concerning circumcision can change over time. While Myriam's perceptions are confirmed and she rejects the medical benefits for her son, Anouar remains attached to medicalisation and its long- term advantage. Furthermore, in addition to this argument — as proof of the 'goodness'

of the circumcision beyond the aspect of medicalisation — Anouar concludes by stating that he is also circumcised. For Anouar, as for the majority of the fathers interviewed, it is essential for the son to follow his model; a masculine affiliation passed down through the resemblance of the two bodies. This brings us onto patrilineality.

3.3. Patrilineality

When the Muslim partner is the man, continuity in the father-son relationship appears to be a central aspect that gives a specific, situated meaning to the son's circumcision. It emerges as tangible transmission marker that exemplifies a symbolic sign of belonging, which marks in the child's body a lineage with his father's kinship. The importance highlighted in these men's words is thus to maintain family continuity over generations — from male to male, from father to son — beyond any other identity markers of belonging. Abdullah and Marine are both engineers. Both are practicing, Muslim and Christian respectively, and decided that their two sons, 12 and 14 years old, would decide when they grew up what religion to follow. Both children were circumcised in Belgium without any party to celebrate it.

> We hadn't yet got 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 […] if they look like their father … I think women know what is best for daughters and men know what is best for sons. Look … they'll see that they're like their father. It makes sense, doesn't it? […] But we didn't celebrate it. It was not like in Morocco. We came to this agreement … in the end. (Abdullah, 52, Moroccan)

> I wondered if it was really necessary. I was worried about causing pointless pain to my children. […] Now, I can say to you that it's not a problem for them [their two sons]. And it's something that can remind them of who they are. […] I got the point. For him [Abdullah], there was something more, related to the fact that he was a boy, and … there is a sort of physical connection in this. (Marine, 49, Belgian)

In Abdullah's words, as with other Muslim men in our sample, the importance of the physical resemblance between the father and his son is stressed. As in the excerpts from Anouar and Myriam, we see that when the majority partner is the mother, it is more likely for disagreements around the different meanings of circumcision to emerge. Marine, indeed, explains how she initially opposed circumcision, which she per- ceived as 'useless suffering' for their children. When she understood that there was 'something more', a gender tie from father to son that passes through this 'physical con- nection', she changed her mind about it.

During the interviews, before a child's birth and even if the woman was not even yet pregnant, some partners autonomously brought into the conversation their future children's education and circumcision. This was the case for Seydou, a non-governmental organisation employee, and Liza, a bank clerk. Seydou self-defines as a believer but not a practicing Muslim, while Liza says she is atheist. They were married from 1995 until 2005, when they divorced.

> I am not a practising Muslim. I am more a spiritual type. I've never imposed any religious education on my daughter. […] We had discussion about circumcision when my wife became pregnant. For me, it was just natural that if our child had been a boy, he would have been circumcised. Because it is normal for men. It is something all men do in my

> country. Even non-Muslims. To look like his father. She didn't agree. Fortunately, we then had a daughter. (Seydou, 48, Ivory Coast)

In Seydou's words, circumcision emerges as a taken-for-granted practice, something 'just natural' that 'is normal for a man', a marker of masculinity that — he specified — does not represent a religious ritual. Similar to Abdullah, he uses the term 'normal' to suggest that circumcision is an internalised, gendered social norm. This conformity with social norms emerges in many partners' narratives. Notably, some mothers from the majority group argue that their children would follow their father's lineage, culture and religion because 'it is normal'. This is the case with Cathy (26 years old, a part-time cashier in a supermarket, brought up in a Protestant Christian family, but defining herself as atheist), who has been married since 2006 to Walid (a 30-year-old Lebanese Shiite Muslim working in restoration who, without being especially religious, respects some Islamic precepts, such as Ramadan). Cathy was pregnant when the interviews took place, but the doctors had not told them the sex of the child yet. During the interview, she wondered about their educational choices and stated:

> My daughter or son will be Muslim. This is important for Walid and for me. There are no problems about that. I know that he isn't an extremist … he will not ask a girl to wear the headscarf, for instance! For a boy, for sure, he would like to circumcise him, but I think this is normal. It will be his son. (Cathy, 24, French)

Italian, Belgian or French mothers seem to easily agree with the option to circumcise if they have already previously decided to privilege their husband's culture. By contrast, when the Muslim partner is the female, the choice to circumcise seems to be less rel- evant. The Muslim woman decided to have their son circumcised in only 4 out of 19 cases. These participants came from North Africa (Morocco) and the Middle East (Jordan), and for all of them their marriage was a hard decision involving some tem- porary ruptures with the family of origin that would have preferred a homogamic mar- riage with a Muslim man. In these cases, circumcision is seen as a compromise to reconnect with the family of origin and as a way to counter the implicit accusation of 'cultural betrayal' that is particularly strong for Muslim women marrying outside their group. Randa (a 28-year-old Jordanian interpreter), married to Davide (a 33- year-old Italian haulier) since 2001, had a baby in 2004 that the couple named Omar. Educated in a Muslim family, Randa self-defines as non-religious (as does Davide, her husband, who for his part was brought up in a Catholic family), explaining that when she arrived in Italy, she stopped practising. After the birth of Omar, she decided to have him circumcised.

> The birth of my son has stirred up a lot of things for me, and especially the issue of the break-up with my family of origin, mainly with my father because of my marriage … Then, I realised that it was important for me to give Omar a sense of belonging to my family history, and circumcision appeared an obvious thing. It was a form of reconciliation with my father. In any case, Omar is his grandson. (Randa, 28, Jordanian)

Thanks to her son, Randa rekindled the relationship with her family, mainly with her father. Circumcision may become a way to mitigate non-conformist behaviour for some Muslim women who marry outside their group. An attempt to convey a sense of ethnic belonging therefore underlies their choice to circumcise. The excerpt above

allows us to explain how patrilineality is strictly intertwined with ethnicity in its sense of a family's ancestry. In the next section, we examine this last aspect in greater depth.

3.4. Ethnicity and religion

To complete our kaleidoscope of meanings, in this section we focus on narratives where partners refer to 'kinship', 'culture' and 'family heritage' to communicate what circumcision means to them. The analysis of this constellation of references permits us to disentangle the concepts of ethnicity and religion, and in general our findings indicate that above all, Muslim men in these couples interpret circumcision in a secular way; that is, as a practice strongly linked to kinship and culture but disentangled from any religious ritual of affiliation.

Circumcision is indeed agreed to by couples where the partners do not transmit any religion and in those where they decide to baptise. Deeply intertwined with masculinity, ethnicity emerges as a central narrative. Some nine out of the 124 couples had circumcision carried out in the minority partner's country of origin. This is motivated by the way in which circumcision is practised in a Muslim country and by the desire to celebrate the event with the family of the Muslim partner. To shed light on how the connection between ethnicity and religion is elaborated by the two partners, below we examine the meaningful narratives of Mohammed (an employee of a local waste disposal coopera- tive) and Giovanna (a teacher in a primary school).

> My children are both circumcised. For Samir [the first son], we took him to Morocco to be circumcised. At first, Giovanna didn't agree. But it was a very important thing and she accepted when she understood what it meant for me. And with the other son … luckily … we found a Syrian doctor here who did it in a Muslim way. For Samir it was done very well in Morocco. While with Omar [the second son] here … the doctor didn't cut as well as it's done in the Muslim way of circumcising. Anyway. The level of the cut is the right one. […] But religion has nothing to do with it. As I told you, they were not educated as Muslims or Christians. But we decided to leave something of my culture too. Because they're also half Moroccan. (Mohammed, 48, Moroccan)

> I didn't want it at all at the start. 'Why do we have to do this thing?' I asked. […] I don't remember the precise moment when he told me: 'Look. I'm circumcised and I want my children to be circumcised.' I understood it was something rooted in his culture. […] As we decided to leave something of our culture without imposing our religions, in the end I agreed. This is his sign, part of his culture … we can say. […] Since we are in Italy and it is more difficult for him to transmit his culture, we agreed that this was something to provide balance and to remind them that part of their family origin is not Italian. It is a sign of this. (Giovanna, 47, Italian)

Mohammed tells us about his search for a 'Muslim way of circumcising' that led him to have it carried out in Morocco for the first son, and in Italy — but through a Syrian doctor — for the second. Circumcision is interpreted as part of his ethnic sign, discon- nected from religious affiliation. Both Mohammed and Giovanna self-define as religious, but not practising, and express their attempt to 'feed' their sons' spirituality without imposing any formal religious affiliation. In their daily life, they do not practise religion in a Church or in a Mosque, but at home. They define this decision as a 'neutrality choice' and 'spiritual path' that consists of transmitting to their sons some notions of both their cultural and religious backgrounds without any formal religious affiliation. The meaning

of circumcision thus becomes an eloquent example of their parenting strategy. To discern what practices imply a religious affiliation and what are intended as 'cultural but not religious', therefore becomes an important element to be discussed between the couple. Giovanna, indeed, realised that circumcision was important to balance her partner's fear of being more exposed to 'cultural loss'.

In Strasbourg, Clémentine (head of a children's centre) and Amir (an agronomist), a Moroccan man the same age as her, have been married since 2005 and explain how the decision to have their child both circumcised and baptised involved two strictly connected issues:

> Circumcision, it's a hell of a thing (*sacré truc*)! We'd already talked about it a lot before marrying. […] So, basically, we agreed that it was not up to us to decide the religion of our child, but we could at least explain our religions … But circumcision is also a religious ceremony in a way, and it is likely we are passing on a religion to him. So, we decided to baptise him too. (Clémentine, 35, French)

Neither Clémentine nor Amir practises religion, but they grew up in a mildly religious culture, and circumcision becomes a matter where ethnicity and religion overlap. According to Clémentine's view, both baptism and circumcision are interpreted as social ceremonies to mark their son's incorporation into both parents' social environments. These rituals are seen as moulded by some religious culture, but not as a way to convey a religious identity. Nevertheless, the two practices — circumcision and baptism — have a substantial difference: circumcision is a corporal mark. Such corpor- ality perturbs some partners, not only due to the pain that may be caused to the baby, but also because of its permanent character. Eleonora (42 years old, a tour operator and now a housewife) married to Nabil (a 42-year-old Palestinian who runs an ethnic restaurant), clearly describes this: 'Circumcision is a visible thing, you can see it. But baptism, no. It is not equally embodied and permanent.' Such visibility has an intimate, personal dimension for the child's future relationships, and a collective one associated with the public aspect of circumcision. Many partners indeed indicate the intervention of the extended family — mainly of grandparents — in the final decision to circumcise. The decision in this regard is thus informed by the relationships between the couple and their respective families, and vice versa.

> The crazy thing is that my mother invited us to baptise our son, because certainly this is a habit more than a belief. She is not even a practising Christian, yet she argued for such an extremely important rite [laughs]. I am Christian, and I know the importance of Holy Water. But we [Nabil and her] are so sure that we do not need to impose a religion on our son, we do not care about her opinion … Similarly, Nabil's family would have loved a circumcision, many photos and a party, but for him it is not central. At the end, it is more an issue of tradition. (Eleonora, 37, Italian)

According to Eleonora and to Clémentine, circumcision is similar to baptism in the sense that they consider them as two symbolic cultural practices inscribed in a specific socio-cultural universe to which the respective families of origin demand alle- giance. The decision of Eleonora and Nabil not to circumcise their son is thus con- nected to their choice of avoiding any formal religious affiliations. They indeed argue that they both grew up in religious and practising families but their spirituality evolved towards atheism over time. To perform a baptism or a circumcision is intended

by the couples as an act to seek recognition within their family groups, so a way to pass on a sense of ethnic belonging rather than within a religious community. Circumcision therefore represents recognition with regard to the families and the community. For the same motives — to maintain a balance with the two family groups — the couples took two opposite decisions (to accept both baptism and circumcision, or to accept neither of them). In the above cases we show how, in non-religious or non-practising couples, the issue of circumcision emerges as a relevant ethnic marker that is intended as a sign of family lineage. Although for these couples, the disentanglement between religion and ethnicity is central to understanding their decision to circumcise, it is important to note how — by contrast — for other couples, religion and ethnicity tend to overlap. In our sample, this is the case for 18 women who converted to Islam before or after marriage, and who addressed circumcision as being at the same time an ethnic and a religious precept. Gaëlle has been married to Mohammed (a Moroccan informatician) since 1992, when she was 19 years old. She runs an Islamic library and the encounter with religion completely transformed her life. She self-defines as a progressive militant Muslim.

> I read the Koran and it spoke to me, as for some years I had been questioning myself about everything, then the Koran came … it was my book and this religion, Islam, was mine. It was an announcement of my way! I started to pray … and this was before meeting Mohammed. […] for me, as for my husband, there was no doubt Samir would be circumcised, as his father is. I know that this is a controversial practice, for my job, I study and read a lot … but for us, it was clear according to Islam that the son follows the religion of his father … that is my feeling too. (Gaëlle, 38, French)

As one of the women who had converted to Islam, Gaëlle's understanding of circumcision recalls a normative interpretation of the patrilineal precept according to which, in Islam, it is the father who passes down his religion. As a consequence, for women who have converted, gender (patrilineality), ethnicity and religion are strictly connected. As a consequence, circumcision is part of a wider 'divine picture', a rite that signifies the inclusion of their son into the male Muslim community.

4. Conclusions

In our analysis, we have presented Muslim circumcision as it is interpreted in the life stories of mixed couples with a Muslim partner. In light of the lack of systematic discussion of this topic in previous literature, our article represents a pivotal attempt to uncover the meaning(s) attributed to circumcision and to position it within the sphere of parenting strategies. We have highlighted how circumcision represents a meaningful symbolic issue to grasp how partners deal with their different backgrounds when discussing what to pass on to their children. For mixed families living in France, Belgium and Italy, the taken-for-granted status of circumcision as a practice usually carried out on all sons in Muslim countries is questioned as a meaningful practice and a matter that needs to be discussed. Medicalisation, patrilineality, ethnicity and religion thus emerge as the main arguments used to explain what circumcision represents for the partners. These factors are nevertheless not mutually exclusive, but instead often overlap in the same couple's narrative.

Our findings demonstrate in particular:

1) That through the medicalisation of the practice, partners apparently 'de-culturalise' circumcision in an effort to decontextualise it from a particular culture and 'universalise' its benefits for the male body. Through this argumentation, partners can more easily justify their decision to an external interlocutor and, above all, Christian mothers more concerned about causing pointless suffering to their sons, can justify their choice. The role of the 'medical expert' (a paediatrician and/or a family doctor) emerges as a way to seek legitimacy through the 'authority of science' and to decentralise any potential marital conflict.
2) That circumcision reveals a strong gender component. Our findings suggest that, especially when the Muslim partner is the man, circumcision represents a strong connection that the father wants to maintain. 'Making the body of the son similar to that of the father' exemplifies the connection between masculinity and patrilineality. Circumcision is understood primarily as a way to mark a permanent physical continuity from the male body of the father to the male body of his son.
3) That circumcision is a 'strong' marker of ethnic transmission, often disentangled from religion. The body becomes a vehicle to signal ethnic boundaries and concretely balance the majority and the minority culture implied in transmission. Its trans- mission becomes even more important precisely because it represents a permanent marker that counters the fear of loss of the parent's minority heritage. Circumcision is thus a tangible act that symbolically includes the three components of ethnicity: ancestry, 'which entails belief in common descent, or kinship', culture, 'which includes the symbols and practices around which ethnicity coalesces and that epitom- ises group belonging', and history, which refers to 'a shared or inherited past' (Jiménez 2010, 1757).

In our analysis, thus, circumcision emerges mainly as a secularised sign of cultural transmission that connects gender, kinship and familiar history. That is why circumcision is also considered important in couples where the Muslim partner is non-practising. Despite this evidence, it is also shown that partners move the borders of ethnicity and religion according to their religiosity. For instance, in couples where the majority partner (woman) converts to Islam and the entire family display a clear religious- Islamic identity, circumcision is signified as a coherent symbol of affiliation to the Muslim community of the husband. In these cases, religion and ethnicity tend to overlap and circumcision emerges as a symbol of both ethnic and religious belonging.

Even if our analysis has neither a comparative aim nor a claim of generalisability, the findings discussed here suggest that the presence of anti-Muslim public discourses in France, Belgium and Italy creates a similar context that pushes partners to 'de-culturalise' circumcision (by introducing it as a medicalised hygienic practice not limited to the Muslim countries) and 'privatise' it (by, for instance, avoiding any party to celebrate the event publicly in the country of residence). This suggests that the social context has an influence in the way partners particularly highlight some universal aspects of circumcision while downplaying others, in order to protect their choice and prevent any form of stigmatisation related to the transmission of Islamic religious symbols.

Our findings contribute to the debate on transmission and mixedness by confirming and expanding on the findings of Le Gall and Meintel (2014) that show circumcision to be less a religious marker than an ethnic custom. In our analysis, circumcision emerges as an important marker precisely because it is symbolically tied to a multiplicity of factors: gender (father-son), kinship (the ritual aspect and family heritage), ethnicity and religion (for example, for secular parents, circumcision is claimed as a sign of cultural belonging, while for religious parents, it is intended as a religious signal). The overall motivations that lie behind circumcision give us a deeper insight into the 'variety of strategies to "keep the story alive" both in terms of the everyday socialisation of their children, and also through more symbolic, occasional cultural expressions' (Song and Gutierrez 2015a, 696). In this regard, circumcision is part of a wider attempt to counter the min- ority parent's fear of 'losing' or 'diluting' his or her background and a practice to balance the majority and minority context within the couple itself (Cerchiaro 2020). Lastly, we have highlighted how circumcision is just one piece of a puzzle situated at the borders between collective affiliations and individual choice. In so doing we hope that our analy- sis will raise interest in further work aimed at deepening the study of transmission through the everyday cultural practices that inform us about the strategies partners adopt to counter the apparently inevitable 'ethnic dilution' and 'cultural loss'.

Notes

1. According to Kister (1994), there is no specific verse about circumcision, but commentators have attempted to find some indications in the holy book that God wanted Ibrahim (Abraham) to perform it, such as verse 124 in *sūrat al-baqara*: 'and (remember) when his Lord tried Abraham with certain commands which he fulfilled', 'One of these commands, *kalimāt*, was, according to some scholars, the injunction of the circumcision' (Kister 1994, 12). For others, no evidence of circumcision exists in the *fiqh*, the scholarly interpret- ations of the divine law. Instead, circumcision would be a *Sunnah*, one of the practices that have become customary models to be followed by Muslims. The term *khitân* is used in the *Ahadith* — which provides the documentation of the *Sunnah* — to refer to male circumcision.
2. We refer to the parents' different religious backgrounds and not to their current religious identifications, since these last may have varied over time, due, for instance, to the loss of religiosity or to the religious conversion of one of the two partners. However, in the text, we discuss the issue of the level of religiosity and how this may (or may not) be connected with the parents' decision to circumcise their son. In order to avoid longer descriptive labels to indicate one of the two partners we sometimes use 'Muslim partner' and 'Christian partner' even when they are not practicing. We do not use this distinction when one of the two partners has converted.
3. In line with Anthias (2008), we believe that: 'belonging emerges in relational terms: both in terms of the construction of we-ness — i.e.: those who can stand as selves — and the con- struction of "otherness" […]. Belonging therefore tends to become "naturalized" and thus invisible in hegemonic formulations' (p. 8).
4. Circumcision is a widespread practice in many regions of the world, not only in Jewish and Muslim communities. For example, the Coptic Christians in Egypt and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians perform male circumcision, having apparently retained it from the practices of early Christianity.
5. To employ the expression used by the 2015 resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on freedom of religion and living together in a democratic society.

6. See for instance the 2013 resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) that listed non-medically justified circumcision of young boys among those practices that violate children's right to physical integrity (together with female genital mutilation; PACE 2013).
7. Although its regulation is not clear-cut. In France, circumcision is neither banned nor explicitly permitted, merely tolerated (Fortier et al. 2016; Conseil d'État 2004, 331–332). It can be performed for medical reasons. Ritual circumcision requires the prior consent of both parents. In Italy, circumcision is accepted as an expression of the right to freedom of religion which must be guaranteed to all on an equal basis (Angelucci 2016). It has to be carried out by a doctor, who, however, can refuse to perform it on the grounds of conscientious objection. Even in Belgium, circumcision is not subject to any specific legislation; rather it is a matter of applying common law (Christians, Delgrange, and Lerouxel 2016). Nevertheless, in 2017, the Belgian Bioethics Advisory Committee declared that its non-therapeutic practice has to be regarded as unethical.
8. The average duration of each interview was between one and three hours. All the interviews were recorded (notes were taken in parallel during interviews) and fully transcribed to be analysed without using any qualitative data analysis software.
9. In 18 cases, the mothers belonging to the majority group (Italian, French or Belgian) had converted to Islam.
10. According to the Quran, only the father's religion can be passed down. This is because Muslim women cannot marry a non-Muslim while Muslim men can marry women of 'the people of the Book' (*kitabiyya*), i.e., Jewish or Christian women (Quran 5,5).

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