

Female circumcision: Muslim identities and zero tolerance policies in rural West Java

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Synopsis

In the current parlance of the United Nations, female circumcision is often referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM), an act of harm or violence instigated against women's sexuality. Strategically, this labelling has provided an emotional force for universal zero tolerance policies. Yet, in rural West Java, female circumcision is practiced with no intention of harming girls and with no known effect on sexual pleasure. Instead, female circumcision is one of a range of practices that situates the child within the Muslim community as a moral person. In this article, I explore the nature and context of female circumcision as a Muslim practice in rural West Java and argue that the position of zero tolerance may complicate and aggravate socio-political relationships with unintended consequences.

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It was another early morning of participant-observation fieldwork among the Sundanese in the tea plantations of West Java, Indonesia. I accompanied my reluctant midwife-informant to a tiny bamboo house on a round of 7-month pregnancy rituals. The usual elements, including the seven flowers in a bowl of water, a bowl of uncooked rice with Rp 1000 money and an egg on top of it, were set out in front of us (Newland, 2001). As we sat on the floor waiting for relevant parties to arrive, the midwife apologetically said something to me in Sundanese that I did not understand. I nodded and waited for the pregnant woman to enter. Instead, a woman brought out a tiny swaddled baby. While praying in Arabic, the midwife drew a length of cotton thread through turmeric to colour it gold and then loosened the baby's swaddling to reveal the little girl's genitals. Shocked, I realised I was not at a 7-month pregnancy ritual but a baby girl's circumcision.

In this ritual as conducted by this midwife, no knife was used—just a needle. There was no significant bloodletting. The midwife simply used the needle to

scrape the clitoral area. When the baby started to cry, she stopped, pushed the needle through a banana leaf and put it in the flower water. Still praying, she tied gold thread around the baby's neck and then tied the yellowed cotton around the baby's left wrist, the mother's right wrist, the baby's right leg, and finally the right leg of a chicken. Then she held the chicken above the baby's head and drew three circles in the air. Finally, she gave the chicken to the grandmother with a handful of rice, and the grandmother left the room. This, I was to learn, was the *gnahuripan* or ritual blessing that tied souls into and between mother, child, and chicken, but it was the circumcision that impressed itself most upon me. Having had no idea that female circumcision was practised in West Java, it took me some time to accept what I had witnessed.

At the same time as my fieldwork experiences in the mid-1990s, the move to eradicate female circumcision at the international level had escalated to become a major platform for improving the rights of women and girls. At the national level, the Indonesian government had

already ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 (Budiharsana, Amaliah, Utomo, & Erwinia, 2003; Moore & Rompies, 2004). Although this Convention did not specifically isolate practices of circumcision as oppositional to the rights of the child, UNICEF has since counted the criminalisation of female genital mutilation in sub-Saharan Africa as one of its successes in terms of targeting child survival and development (UNICEF, n.d.).

In 1995, the United Nations declared female circumcision a violation of women's rights on the strength of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UNESCO, 2005). The United States Congress later supported this by refusing financial assistance to countries where the government has not taken steps to eradicate female circumcision (Budiharsana et al., 2003). By 1998, a United Nations campaign was launched to eradicate female circumcision worldwide, which many United Nations organisations actively supported (Estabrooks, 2000; UNFPA, 1996; UNHCHR 1994, 1995, 2003). As a result, female circumcision became a highly politicised practice associated with violence against women and girls (sometimes even with torture) or, at the very least, was described as a harmful practice (see, for instance, UNESCO 1995).

Although many UN documents do not differentiate between the different types of circumcision practised, the WHO has distinguished four 'types' and two extra categories in the following way:

- Type I—excision of the prepuce, with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris;
- Type II—excision of the clitoris with partial or total excision of the labia minora;
- Type III—excision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening (infibulation);
- Type IV—pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris and/or labia; stretching 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 given above (WHO, 2000).

While the practices vary widely, the term 'female genital mutilation' is often used as a gloss for all of them. Strategically, the term provides an emotional force behind a policy of zero tolerance towards any cutting

that may occur in the female genital area, other than genital surgery (whether for medical reasons or for sexual reassignment). The label also carries the assumptions that all female circumcision practices intentionally limit female sexual pleasure in order to control women, have a detrimental effect on women's health, and, because they harm women and girls, must be eradicated regardless of the extent of the procedure or the context in which they occur. Moreover, the policy of zero tolerance framed by the UN and advocated for adoption by member states suggests that the educated first world (from which this term emerged) has the responsibility to 'save' third world women—without recourse to their very different histories and 'manifestations of differently structured desires' (Abu Lughod, 2002:783; Walley, 1997; Wood, 2001).

Yet, although many of these documents assume all female genital mutilation results in health issues and therefore harm to women's sexuality, studies conducted in Indonesia suggest there are no significant health risks related to female circumcision and that infection and bleeding seem to be more likely to result from male circumcision than from female circumcision (Darwin, Faturochman, Pranti, Purwatiningsih, & Octavatie, 2002), indicating that these practices are probably less harmful to women than they are to men. If the issue of harm is questionable, the stereotype that female circumcision impairs sexual enjoyment is also undermined by an idea that the practice enhances sexual enjoyment, which seems to be widespread throughout Java (Berninghausen & Kerstan, 1992; Darwin et al., 2002). While the impact of Indonesian forms of circumcision on sexual pleasure cannot be measured, such a response calls dominant and broadly Western notions of sexual embodiment into question.

Although many of the assumptions regarding sexual embodiment and the 'saving' of third world women that are implicit in this term have since been deconstructed (e.g., Bell, 2005; Parker, 1999; Walley, 1997), the term, 'female genital mutilation,' has retained emotive force and currency at United Nations levels, serving to justify the universalisation of zero tolerance policies. Despite ethnographic work in this area (e.g., Abusharaf, 2001; Boddy, 1989), one of the major aspects that tends to be overlooked is the variable contexts in which female circumcision occurs. In this article, I explore some of these issues in relation to my own fieldwork experiences to argue against the notion that female circumcision is universally harmful to women and girls because it does not recognise the diversity of circumcision practises and does not allow for the fact that female circumcision in regions such as West Java is often part of an elaborated

process of socialisation in which a child is embedded within a community. In this regard, I argue that such processes are not necessarily oppressive to women and girls in and of themselves. Nor are they necessarily violent. Rather, they are a representation of parental responsibility towards the child.

Zero tolerance policies and their emphasis on the label 'female genital mutilation' also create problems for administrations such as the Indonesian government because the assumptions behind such terms are foreign to the populations they govern. For example, the commonly used Indonesian terms are *sunat perempuan*, where *sunat* is derived from Arabic meaning 'tradition' (and *perempuan* means female); and *khitlan* which is derived from the Arabic for 'cutting' and is associated with the notion of making a person Muslim (Darwin et al., 2002). If 'female genital mutilation' is translated into one of these terms, it suggests that the government opposes Muslim tradition when 90% of the Indonesian population identify themselves as Muslim (e.g., Kipp & Rodgers, 1987). If the government introduces the notion of 'female genital mutilation,' it is unlikely to be associated with the local versions of the practice because female circumcision here is a minor procedure, varying in my own fieldwork area from a symbolic act to the removal of a piece of flesh the size of a grain of rice.

Hence, the Indonesian government did not respond immediately to the Convention on the Rights of the Child or the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and no immediate national law against female genital mutilation has been implemented (United States Department of State, 2001). Under increasing international pressure, a campaign of zero tolerance towards female circumcision was finally launched in Indonesia in January 2003 (Kompas, 2004), and the Indonesian government's State Ministry of Women's Empowerment undertook a national action plan to address the practice (Budiharsana et al., 2003). Even then, an Indonesian newspaper described the government's response as relaxed (Kompas, 2004). Because of this, a second aim of this article is to explore the way female circumcision in West Java has become part of Muslim identity to the extent that any Indonesian government might be reluctant to enforce such measures.

A common strategy used by various agencies around the world to eradicate female circumcision has been to argue that the practice predates Islam and therefore is cultural and not religious (e.g., Family Law Council, 1994; Religious Tolerance.org, 1998). However, this kind of argument does not acknowledge the complexity of contemporary identities and the way that practices may be appropriated into a tradition and become authentic to that tradition.¹ The extent to which female circumcision is

associated with Muslim identity in Java and Madura has already been suggested in a study (Darwin et al., 2002) which found that female circumcision was more likely to be practised in Madura, where there is a much higher degree of Muslim conformity than Yogyakarta. This report found that about 87.5% of men and 43.5% of women interviewed in Yogyakarta were circumcised. By contrast, 98% of men and 94.7% of women interviewed in Madura were circumcised (Darwin et al., 2002, p. 8). In West Java, where identification with Islam is equated with being a moral person, all my adult women informants believed they had been circumcised. In this article, then, I also explore ways that female circumcision is conceptualised in Muslim terms at village level.

Lastly I argue that, ironically, the position of zero tolerance may complicate and aggravate socio-political relationships with unintended consequences. In the concluding part of this article, I look at some of these complications in relation to the medicalisation of the practice and suggest some of the other likely detrimental outcomes of zero tolerance policies.

Islam in West Java

The history of Islam in Indonesia is a long and complex one, first beginning with the arrival of mystical forms of Islam in the fourteenth century. After 350 years of Dutch colonisation that ended with World War II, Muslim identity has come to be conceptualised as directly contrasting with non-Muslim forces, whether colonial or post-colonial. In this way, from the end of World War II to the 1960s, Islam was used as an overtly militant ideology against the Dutch when they attempted to regain their former colony. Since the massacres and detentions in the civil unrest of 1965, Indonesian Muslims have conceptualised Islam as morally opposite to Communism. More recently, Islam has been used as a defence against certain forms of globalisation such as tourism, television and cinema, which are viewed as morally corrupt (Newland, 2000). Because Islam has also been incorporated into Sundanese cultural and ethnic identity and has remained a primary marker of identity, above or equal to ethnic identity, everyone I encountered during fieldwork from 1995 to 1998 identified themselves as Muslim. Urban Sundanese commonly stereotyped the people in my rural fieldwork region as fanatic, but, although they were certainly pious, they accepted my presence as a lone Western woman (and therefore of questionable repute) with a great deal of grace.

While four Muslim organisations operate in Indonesia, only two were active in my fieldwork region—

Persatuan Islam (Persis) and the more popular *Nadahtul Ulama* (NU). Broadly, Persis and NU fit into Geertz's (1976) scheme of modernist and traditionalist, respectively. Where Persis seeks to strip Islam from its local enculturations by returning to and reinterpreting the *Qur'an* directly, NU is mystical and totalistic in orientation, and its leaders draw wisdom from the *hadith* (verses written by Muslim scholars) and their own tradition of scholars as well as the *Qur'an* (Geertz, 1976; Newland, 2000). Formed in 1926 in response to the modernist movement, NU is now the largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia (in fact, the world) with a membership last reckoned at 35 million (Fealy & Barton, 1996 p. xix–xxvi; Nakamura, 1996 p. 69).

Under Suharto (Indonesian President from 1967 to 1998), Muslim organisations were kept out of politics and instead focused on expanding their influence in villages. This resulted in a period of mosque building. Hefner records that the number of mosques in East Java increased from 16,000 to 26,000 from 1973 to 1990 and that mosque building also doubled in the period from 1988 (15,685 mosques) to 1992 (28,748 mosques) in Central Java (Hefner, 1999, p. 88). In my fieldwork region in the mountains of West Java, mosque building began in the late 1950s, but the Muslim schools or *madrrasah* only began to attract significant numbers of students from the late 1970s. This led to an institutionalisation of Islam in a way that had not been previously experienced across Java, which is frequently described as 'Islamisation'.

Indonesian Muslims are subject to Muslim law as interpreted by the Shafi'i tradition and meted out by the courts and, more locally, by the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA-*Kantor Urusan Agama*). However, the courts are used as a last resort because the law of the courts is not always consistent with village teachings of Islam, often referred to as *adat* (culture). While the Dutch colonial administration conceptualised *adat* and Islam as mutually exclusive, in the mountains of West Java, *adat* is often used to mean locally interpreted Islam. However, under Suharto's regime, *adat* became problematised in schools, aggravating a contest of authenticity between Persis and NU (Newland, 2001).

While Islam is both a political and ethnic identity for the Sundanese in the mountains of West Java, it is also continually reiterated, from calls to prayer five times a day that echo from mosque loudspeakers across the countryside to the calendrical observances such as the month of Ramadan and Hari Korban (the Day of Sacrifice related to Ibrahim's preparations to sacrifice his son, Ishmael). Here, circumcision for boys and girls is a way of marking children as Muslims in preparation for the life of prayers, and of positioning them in a

tightly knit rural religious community (*ummat*). Thus, at the time of my fieldwork, female circumcision remained unproblematised: it was simply part of the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977; Mauss, 1973).

The making of persons

Children are highly valued in Sundanese society, not only as agricultural labour in a peasant society (as theorised in the 'value of children' literature in the 1970s and early 1980s, e.g., Nag, White, & Peet, 1978; Hull, 1977), but in a rich cosmology where children link preceding generations with those yet to come. In the simplest sense, having children bestows the status of adulthood on the parents in the titles of *Ibu* and *Bapak* (literally 'mother' and 'father' with usage similar to 'Mrs' and 'Mr'). Children are also closely associated with both material and non-material forms of wealth and well-being as evident in the Indonesia-wide saying, '*banyak anak, banyak rezeki*' or 'many children, much fortune'.

With the high value of children comes the responsibility of giving newborn children a defined position in the religious community that deeply roots them into their social world, away from the world of spirits (cf. Geertz, 1961; Jasan & Hill, 1987).² A child's entry into this world is conceptualised as the beginning of a process of affirmation of a destined personhood, although this personhood will not be complete until after death at Judgement Day. La Fontaine has described this gradual accrual of personhood in the following terms:

The significant feature [of such societies] is that, ideally...each new baby has a position defined at birth which relates it to this structure (genealogical connection to the ancestors) and the succession of generations... As more social relations are added through life, personhood approaches completion, but the critical feature is the social relation with the next generation whereby society is continued into yet another generation (La Fontaine, 1985, p. 137).

Thus, the rituals around birth are replete with ideas about how to imbue the child with the values of the preceding generation that will maintain the quality of the family vertically through the generations as well as enhancing horizontal communal relationships.

To this end, female circumcision is performed in one of a series of birth rituals which include the 7-month pregnancy ritual (*tingkeban*), the burial of the placenta, the process of naming, a Muslim *marhaba* when the umbilical stub falls off the child, piercing the ears of girls, the animal sacrifice (*aqiqah*), the tying of the

mother's and child's spirits (*ngahuripan*), and the hair-cutting ritual (*cukuran*).³ The parents participate in the separation of the baby from its companion spirits in the womb, in shaping the baby's character towards desirable gender values and a fortunate future, and in introducing the baby to the values of the Muslim community. While male circumcisions are performed when the boy is around 7 years old and are therefore considered part of the *rite-de-passage* to adulthood, female circumcision has become part of the rituals around birth. In this section, then, I explore some of these rituals to show the way in which circumcision at birth or during childhood is embedded in ideas about the creation of a moral person, which, in this community, means to be socialised into the values of a local version of Islam.

The responsibility of the parent in appropriately socialising the child begins from the 7-month pregnancy ritual (*tingkeban*). Although primarily intended to aid the woman in experiencing a smooth or fluid birth, the *tingkeban* is also an attempt to counter some of the physical and moral faults of the parents that may be later transmitted to the baby. During pregnancy, for instance, *lahir* (outside) and *batin* (inside) mirror each other in such a way that, if a pregnant woman sees a deformed person, the child will also be deformed. This mirroring is not simply physical but also moral as in the case where a man who was obsessive in his persistence to marry a woman was perceived to result in the baby's deformity. The *tingkeban* may counter some of these effects just as it is intended to draw the munificence of the rice spirit and expel the possibility of the *kuntilanak* (a lonely and embittered spirit) killing the mother in pregnancy or childbirth (Newland, 2001, 1999).⁴

In an acknowledgement of gender difference, girl's ears are pierced while they are babies. Although there is no religious function attributed to piercing, several informants noted that it was *haram* (forbidden) or in the very least *jelek* (ugly, waful) if a boy's ears are pieced. One village midwife also made a brief and intriguing association between the piercing of ears and female circumcision, where the first makes holes in the ears with sharpened studs and the second opens the flesh around the vagina. While both effectively reinscribe the baby's sexual destiny onto her body, her first earrings of tiny gold studs predict a lifetime of receiving gold jewellery, from sleepers (looped earrings) to necklaces and rings. Gold jewellery is significant in showing the financial status of the household and gold is also associated with fortune and fertility.

The village midwives also say that through female circumcision and the other rituals around birth the child

can inherit desirable characteristics from ritual objects. Rice, eggs, needles, thread, flowered water, and oil are often used. While these elements together attract certain spirits, repel others, and, as discussed above, tie the child's soul into his or her body, to the mother's soul, and to the home (see Newland, 1999, 2001, 2002b), they may also represent desirable qualities that need to be transmitted to the child. For example, in explaining the symbolism of the *tingkeban* (or pregnancy ritual), one midwife claimed that the roundness of the egg is associated with the roundness of thought (so the child would not be easily influenced by malevolent forces); the needle's sharpness is associated with sharpness of memory and cleverness, and the thread represents its association with wisdom and judgement. Another midwife indicated that a duck rather than a chicken egg should be used to promote harmony as 'there are never fights between ducks'. The fact that this transference of qualities is called an inheritance points to the way each child is born into a highly structured position with mutual obligations within the vertical relationships of the generations.

Likewise, the 'egg' and the 'chicken' are also metaphors throughout the birth rituals, which repeat the theme of being positioned within a cycle of generations and which ties the unborn child to agricultural domesticity. As a few midwives related to me on different occasions, 'The egg originates from the chicken. Life with a chicken, blessed with a chicken, die with a chicken, life with a chicken.' This aphorism thus encapsulates the rural Sundanese construction of agricultural life, where the cycle of life of humans runs parallel with that of chickens: from birth to death and birth again. Appearing in the wedding ritual (where it was broken on the groom's foot), the egg is last seen in the *tingkeban*, and is replaced by a chicken in rituals after the baby is born. At certain stages, chickens are also used as a sacrifice in the place of humans (see below). When one midwife was asked about this, she responded in terms of her primary identity as a Muslim:

I don't know. They say, 'Life with a chicken, blessed with a chicken.' In the past, the tahlilan [the repeated recitation of the confession of faith, 'There is no god but Allah,' said at the grave] was with a chicken. [It must be a chicken]. It's not valid even if you slaughter a buffalo instead of a chicken. It's like that for Sundanese because we're Muslim.

Already bound to women (and particularly to the lineage of its mother) through blood and milk,⁵ the

child must also be bound to the family and then to the wider community. This is done with three main *selamatan* or ritual feasts: the *marhaba* after the child's umbilical stub drops off, in the goat sacrifice (*aqiqah*), and the haircutting ritual (*cukuran*). While the *marhaba* is a small family occasion, according to the *ulama*, on the third or the seventh day the parents should also sacrifice a goat in a thanksgiving called an *aqiqah*, which is linked with circumcision. The *aqiqah* is also a type of compensation and, if the goat meat is cooked so that it is sweet, it is thought to give the child a sweet character. However, this ritual is often not practiced because many households cannot afford to own goats.

The *aqiqah* and circumcision are both connected with sacrifice, although more seems to have been made of this association in years past. Ma Eha, the midwife who became one of my chief informants, noted that:

[At the time of female circumcision, I use] *rice water, the jawer kotok flower and an egg. For boys you can substitute that with a chicken or goat. For girls it's enough with an egg. It substitutes the blood that comes out. If it's for a boy you cut a chicken. So it's to substitute the blood. The mother cuts the chicken and later the blood will be wiped here [on the stomach of the mother] and here on the baby to substitute the blood that comes out. It's the same for both girls and boys. Now it's rare that people do it. Back then, nearly everyone did it.*

If the *aqiqah* is a celebration of an individual's circumcision, the *aqiqah* and circumcision are also linked calendrically to the annual goat sacrifice on *Hari Korban*, the Day of Sacrifice, when Ibrahim prepared to sacrifice his son, Ishamil, which, with Allah's mercy, was transmuted into the practice of circumcision and submission to the Covenant. On *Hari Korban*, the more wealthy villagers sacrifice goats and then distribute the meat to all the households in the community. In this ritual, the symbolism of sacrifice of oneself for the community is clear. It also expresses the idea that Allah is perceived to be acting through the Muslim community or the *ummat*.

The last of the *selamatan* is performed at 40 days after the birth as this is the time both mother and baby are considered out of danger. This *selamatan* is called the *cukuran* or 'the cutting' because several of the baby's locks of hair are cut. This ritual is meant formally to introduce the baby to the male community for the first time. The men pray and sing while the father carries the baby to the centre. Three different men then cut the

child's hair and, between each cut, they dip the scissors in a bowl of water, containing flowers of seven colours. The symbolic resonances between cutting hair, prayers, and circumcision are significant. Cutting the hair is a symbol of submission to the Covenant and a sacrifice of individuality in order to conform to the community's values. In the same way, circumcision and its cutting of flesh, the cutting and covering of hair, the sacrifice of chicken and goats, blood from humans, chickens and goats all refer to the same set of ideas about submission to Allah and the Muslim community.

These *selamatan* place both male and female circumcision in a context where babies must be made socially acceptable, by undergoing both a physical and ritual separation from the mother's body and spirit in order to be incorporated into the broader Muslim community. Clearly, none of these rituals are intended to violate the child. In this context, female circumcision is perceived as roughly equal to ear piercing in its physical effects, but absolutely essential to the embodiment of Islam.

Female circumcision

When I asked the Sundanese villagers why women should be circumcised, many were quite shocked that women should go uncircumcised. For example, Ibu Acih replied, 'If you're Muslim you must be circumcised, because circumcision is the direction given by Islam. If you're outside Islam, it's not necessary to be circumcised. If children aren't circumcised, they're not permitted to participate in the prayers at the mosque.' Likewise Imas responded, 'Circumcision is the identifying feature of Islam. Boys must be circumcised, girls also. The old people said circumcision is for throwing away what's dirty. I often heard that at *pengajian* [meetings for recitation of the *Qur'an*].' For them as for the *ulama* (religious leaders), circumcision positions the child in the Muslim community by physically tracing Islamic identity on to the body. It is also an expression of the idea that both men and women are considered equal before Allah.

For boys, circumcision occurs when they reach the age of seven. A specialist removes the foreskin, and then the boy sits on a chair greeting guests. The mother and female relatives cook a feast that includes fish, chicken, and cakes. While boys have a public circumcision, the timing of a girl's circumcision occurs shortly after childbirth and therefore is a quiet affair, entailing the presence of a midwife, mother and child. The exact timing varies according to the midwife: one midwife performed circumcisions on babies between 7 and 15 days old and

a second circumcised girls from between 40 days and 2 months.⁶ The extent of the practice also seems to depend on the midwife. Ma Eha, for instance, merely scratches the clitoral area with a needle: 'You circumcise the girl with a needle and scrape a bit off. It's like this: what's taken is only a little bit from the end of the vagina [the labia minora]. After the circumcision, there's a little bit of blood. It's picked out with a needle and requires [the application of] rice water.' By contrast, Ma Juju scoffed at this practice:

A girl is circumcised by knife. If it's by a needle, she will get sick. With a knife, you pry off a little. For Muslims, if they're not circumcised, they're not allowed to go into a mosque. There are women who come here after being circumcised with a needle and when they're checked [the piece of flesh concerned] is still there. If they're adult and already schooled in prayers, I give it to them as a trading amulet. [Because of her amulet] Nyi Nunung [now] has a big shop in a lot of demand.

The amount of flesh cut is described as a *mata holang*, the size a grain of rice and white, unlike the surrounding flesh.

Yet another midwife, Ayah Enjum, one of the rare males who served the poorer villages, espoused another view, saying that: 'Women can be circumcised, but they don't have to be. But if they're not circumcised they must have a ritual ablution when they reach adulthood.' He also interpreted circumcision fairly broadly, saying: 'If you cut the umbilical cord while reciting the confession of faith, it's the same as being circumcised with the confession of faith. Girls whose birth I assist shouldn't be circumcised because when I cut their umbilical cord, the baby girl becomes a Muslim straight away.' Here, circumcision is displaced through a visual metaphor where the cutting of the umbilical cord is a conscious analogy for the cutting of the clitoral area. What matters for Ayah Enjum is that the confession of faith has been recited and an organ has been cut, not the excision of a specific organ or the removal of any flesh.

Clearly, all the village midwives see some sort of actual or symbolic female circumcision as necessary, although the extent of the practice varies significantly. Further, throughout their explanations, female circumcision is explained in relation to Islam. Despite arguments that female circumcision is cultural rather than religious, this is clearly not how Muslim Sundanese experience the embodiment of their religion. Circumcision is considered to inscribe the major distinction between Muslim and heathen: as indicated above, only the circumcised may enter a mosque to pray.

Circumcision for boys and girls is also one of several measures strongly associated with the notion of cleanliness or purification. The *ulama*, Bapak Syamsudin, described circumcision to me this way:

*Circumcision is included in the five types of cleanliness. Firstly, **khitan** or circumcision is given as an example by Prophet Abraham who came before the Prophet Mohammed. Prophet Abraham was circumcised at 80 years old at the governing of Allah. At that time, there was no equipment, so Prophet Abraham was circumcised by an adze of stone.*

*Circumcision originated from the word **khotana**, that is, throwing away the bud, so that the defiling filth that sits in the bud is thrown away. So circumcision is cleansing... [The second type of cleanliness is] shaving the armpits. The third type is cutting finger and toenails, the fourth is shaving the genitals, and the fifth is shaving the moustache. With shaving the genitals, [cleanliness] is assured for 40 days.*

The notion that circumcision was the most important in a range of cleansing acts to remove dirt or filth is commonly emphasised. Indeed, both men and women are barred from the mosque when considered polluted by semen or menstrual blood which are considered dirty and which cancel out the effect of prayers. From this perspective, Islam treats both men and women equally in that both must rid the 'defiling filth' from their bodies in order to come before Allah.

Yet, it is also true that such injunctions have wider consequences for women than for men (while, I argue, female circumcision in this context has not). In the mosques, women are partitioned away from men and are often physically further away from the front. Because of the duration of menstruation, women are also prevented from entering the mosque for greater periods of time, which hampers women's practice and has resulted in far fewer female Muslim leaders. Women are also more affected by dress codes and notions of modesty. Both men and women must cover their genitals, torsos and upper legs at almost all times, but, on the street, women are expected to cover themselves from their necks to below their knees. Their dress should also cover shoulders and upper arms, with the intention of never revealing the armpits. Older women tend to wrap their hair in headscarves or fitted headcloths but not the *jilbab* (the Arab headdress which covers the hair and falls to the shoulders). At the time of fieldwork, most young women did not cover their hair although one *ulama* (religious leader) was arguing that they should, and

veiling was never mentioned as an appropriate form of dress, in public or in the mosque.

Religious leaders' ideas about the place of women in relation to men depended on whether they were from Persis (the modernist organisation) or NU (the traditionalist organisation). While Persis leaders viewed husband and wife as a team where the wife has the potential to be brighter than the husband and to earn a living for her family, the two NU leaders I interviewed both strongly felt that men must always perform the role of household head. Said one:

The sexes are the same [in worth before Allah]. Only the work is different. The woman cannot be allowed to lead but a clever wife can give input. However, the husband can't be subordinated. He is like the king to his people.

In this *ulama's* view, women were more likely to go to Hell because of their disobedience to their husbands and their tendency not to show proper appreciation for their husband's work, but the second *ulama* focused on problem men, saying that, 'If women think about the consequences of economic problems, men become lazy. According to Islam, Allah will torture the husband because he hasn't been responsible.' Clearly, then, in the eyes of the NU *ulama*, while equal before God, men and women are not considered equal before each other, but are expected to form complementary roles and have a clear set of guidelines regarding appropriate behaviour.

However, in the village, this seemingly straightforward hierarchy is diminished by traditions of bilineal inheritance and uxorilocal residence. Because women inherit their own wealth and because the husband lives in the area of his wife's relatives, women maintain a chief role in decision-making within their households. Such traditions also lead to a reluctance to register marriages at the KUA (Office for Religious Affairs) or to use the courts, institutions which have charts on inheritance based on notions of men as household heads. Thus, both men and women have room to manoeuvre, according to whether they base their judgements on *adat* or on official institutions, although it does suggest that women's reliance on unlegislated traditions and on their families is more vulnerable to pressures of state.

Unlike the injunctions on dress and body substances, circumcision does not limit women more than men and nor is it used to mark gender difference but rather it reinforces the idea that both sexes can attain equal purity. Nor is circumcision in this context intended to control female sexuality. On the contrary Bapak Syamasudin, an *ulama* for the Muslim organisation, Persis, explained:

Rasulullah [Mohammed] governed his wives should be circumcised. Circumcision for women is the getting rid of 'the eye of holang' or a little bit inside the vagina. Circumcision for women is connected with [their] sexual enjoyment. So for circumcision, there is sexual enjoyment, cleanliness, and performance of acts of devotion.

As previously mentioned, the notion that female circumcision enhances sexual enjoyment seems to be widespread throughout Java (Berninghausen & Kerstan, 1992; Darwin et al., 2002). Certainly, women do not perceive female circumcision as harming their sexual desire. In my own fieldwork, Ma Eha who had married twice noted that:

All women must marry. I know the reason for marriage. I wanted it because Allah gave me passion. The religious leader says that there are many more passionate women than men. Women's desire is nine while men's is one, so women's is bigger.

Another study also noted that many of their informants in various locations throughout Indonesia associated female circumcision with the *hadith* or saying where Mohammed tells the circumciser to 'Cut off only the foreskin... and do not cut off deeply... for this is brighter for the face (of the girl) and more favourable with the husband' (cited in Budiharsana et al., 2003, p. 8). Even if such ideas play into Muslim notions that the wife should be sexually available to her husband, they show that this availability does not entail the lack of sexual pleasure on her part.

In this way, female circumcision is not perceived as a physically or emotionally harmful act against women and girls. While some argue that girls are unable to give or refuse their consent or even that it is a form of child abuse (e.g., Family Law Council, 1994), in this region circumcision is considered a parental duty through which to position their child in the *ummat* or Muslim community. To refuse to do this would amount to neglect of parental responsibilities, a fact reflected in another study conducted in several sites in Indonesia which showed that 20% of women interviewed suggested that social sanctions should be placed on uncircumcised women (Budiharsana et al., 2003).

In this light, suggestions that the practice may have increased because of Islamic revivalism (Hull & Budiharsana, 2001) are difficult to substantiate, given that in West Java the practice had remained unquestioned and unproblematic during my fieldwork in the

mid-1990s. From my own informants, it seemed that female circumcision had been practised throughout the aging midwives' careers and probably for many generations.

Zero tolerance

Despite the fact that the United Nations had launched a campaign to eradicate female circumcision worldwide in 1998, a report notes that in the year 2000: 'public awareness is low. The subject is not addressed in schools and rarely in the media' (United States Department of State, 2001). In Indonesia, various arrangements were made to commit the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Ministry of Religion to study religious teachings that obstruct women's rights and the agreement of the National Ulama's Council had been given to eliminate female circumcision in stages (United States Department of State, 2001). Yet, little more seems to have been done until the government campaign of zero tolerance towards female circumcision was finally launched in January 2003, which was also met with a relaxed attitude (Kompas, 2004). It seems that there was little inclination among the citizenry to support such campaigns. If this is the case, then the concerns about female circumcision are perceived at state level to be foreign and inappropriate for the vast Muslim population in Indonesia.

However, one of the effects of the campaign of zero tolerance towards female circumcision seems to have resulted in the medicalisation of the practice (despite the WHO recommendation against it in 1982), which has ironically led to more invasive procedures being performed (Budiharsana et al., 2003). Although the hospitals were considered more hygienic places in which to conduct the procedure, the medical practice involved the use of scissors to cut away more of the genital tissue than the village midwives ever removed using needles and penknives (Budiharsana et al., 2003; Moore & Rompies, 2004). Moreover, the hospital clinic midwives were not trained by the Health Department in such procedures but relied on information given by senior staff or village midwives (Budiharsana et al., 2003). Thus, in 2004, female circumcision was being offered as part of a package of surgical procedures performed in hospitals for just-born girls. Girls could be vaccinated, have their ears pierced and be circumcised at the same time for prices between Rp 15,000 and Rp 95,000 depending on the hospital (Moore & Rompies, 2004). The Indonesian health authorities announced a ban on medics (presumably meaning the clinic midwives) performing female circumcisions by mid-2005 in an effort to prevent hospitals from continuing the

practice (News Unleashed, 2005), but the effect of this ban is not yet known.

Overall, the immediate response to the zero tolerance campaign continues to be muted. A report in the Indonesian newspaper, *Kompas*, in 2004 raised the concern that, if the 'calm' attitude of the government continued, Indonesia would be grouped with countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Yemen, and Malaysia, many of which practise more intrusive forms of female circumcision. To be grouped with such countries would give Indonesia a questionable reputation, but, on the other hand, enforcing zero tolerance would entail legislating against parents who take their girl children out of the country to have them circumcised (Kompas, 2004). For many Indonesians, such a ruling would come as a shock, because taking their moral responsibilities as a parent seriously could lead to a confrontation with the law. Yet, for the Sundanese in West Java, there is no correspondence between such arguments for zero tolerance and the values in which female circumcision is locally embedded. Instead, such legislation criminalises parents if they proceed with any type of female circumcision, and, if enacted, could cause harm greater to the child than the practice of female circumcision through removing and imprisoning parents.⁷

During the 1990s when I conducted fieldwork, the Sundanese had an ambivalent relationship with the state as institutionalised and led by the Suharto regime. In its early years, the regime had depoliticised Islamic parties and distanced itself from Muslim influence in its pursuit of development. Moreover, state programs such as the family planning campaign, which dictated that '*Dua anak cukup*' ('Two children are enough'), were widely perceived to be in contradiction with rural Sundanese values (Newland, 1999, 2002a). However, when President Suharto's wife died, she was given all the traditional death rites according to NU theology, which were viewed by many at the time as courting Muslim loyalty in the face of increasing uncertainty with regard to the presidency. By 2003, there had been successive changes in government and successive problems with unrest in the provinces (e.g., East Timor, Aceh, Ambon, Kalimantan, and Irian Jaya). Given such upheavals, it would seem that any Indonesian government would be wary of antagonising Muslims by overtly supporting and legislating zero tolerance policies that might be perceived as anti-Islam in a country that hosts the largest number of Muslims anywhere in the world. Indeed, any policy that is perceived as a foreign imposition helps contribute to local stereotypes of the Western world as rich and corrupt. Because of Sundanese colonial history, the rural Sundanese in my fieldwork area continue to view Westerners with suspicion since, in their eyes, Westerners

have the power to perpetuate new forms of colonialism. International law and international campaigns such as that regarding genital mutilation exacerbate such images, especially when they fail to understand the variety of practices that are glossed by labels such as female circumcision or female genital mutilation and the very different contexts in which they occur. Universalising prohibitions on female circumcision disregards the more immediate needs of women and their kin groups and thus may be interpreted as simply another imposition from outside.

While my fieldwork experiences shocked me at first, it quickly became clear that female circumcision was not performed with any intention of violence, abuse, or even harm towards girl-children and did not seem to have any measurable effect on their lives. Instead, parents were fulfilling their obligations by circumcising boys and girls to conform to a moral order deeply identified with Islam and to position them appropriately in the Muslim community. In this context, zero tolerance policies towards female circumcision seem out of touch with the realities experienced at the grass-roots level.

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Endnotes

¹ Much historical and anthropological literature has explored the way this happens. One classic example is the coining of "the invention of tradition" by Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm, 1983). The example I use in my classes is the fact that the Christmas tree comes from a tradition outside of Christianity but, despite this, most Christians would identify the Christmas tree as part of the 'Christian' tradition and therefore part of what it means to be Christian.

² In local terms, if certain ritual procedures that separate the child from the 'sibling' spirits are not properly done, the child will suffer from deformities. Although never voiced, the suggestion seems to be that, having come from the spirit world (a notion which is itself under contestation from differing Muslim interpretations) the child must be grounded in the actual world to aid in the avoidance of infant death, which entails the child's return to the spirit world.

³ Due to space considerations, not all of these rituals are discussed here, but an elaboration of them is available in Newland (1999).

⁴ Other themes of the *tingkeban* are dealt with in Newland (2001, 1999).

⁵ While being born to a woman is a primary factor in kinship, kinship ties are further set by breastfeeding, as made evident by old ideas about cross-sex twins. Cross-sex twins are considered to be

married (*dijodohkan*) in the womb. If the twins are separated at birth and breastfed by different mothers, they will be encouraged to marry in adulthood as they are considered a destined and ideal match (Newland, 1999).

⁶ Age at circumcision seems to vary throughout Indonesia. Two different research teams have since noted that the girl can be anywhere from roughly 7 days to 9 years according to the district they live in (Budiharsana et al., 2003; Darwin et al., 2002).

⁷ In other countries, parents have already faced such rulings. A case that came before the courts in France led to a Gambian mother being gaoled for having her daughters circumcised, despite having no other carer for her children (Pitt, 1993, p. 29).

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