

A LOOK BACK

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EXCERPT FROM “CIRCUMCISION CIRCUMSCRIBED: FEMALE EXCISION AND CULTURAL ACCOMMODATION IN THE MEDIÉVAL NEAR EAST”

We conclude our celebration of the fortieth volume of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* with an excerpt from another article of yore recommended by a former *IJMES* editor.

The historian monopoly on the editorship continued through the 1990s. Steve Humphreys (University of California, Santa Barbara) took over from Leila Fawaz in 1995, and five years later he was succeeded by Juan Cole (University of Michigan).

In his greetings from the new job (*IJMES* 27 [1995]: 1–2), Humphreys charged himself with ensuring that “a productive scholarly conversation goes in the pages of *IJMES*—that we have a genuine forum and not a Tower of Babel. That is no easy task, for Middle East specialists are trained in very disparate disciplines and deploy a bewildering assortment of theoretical and methodological orientations.” In the journal, they had to speak a lingua franca understandable across the academic spectrum, from economists to literati. “Not that everyone will read every article in every issue,” Humphreys noted, “(would that we had so much time in our lives!) but . . . in principle they could do so.”

Looking back today, Humphreys stands by his valedictory “From the Editor” (*IJMES* 29 [1999]: 503–506). “I would sum it up in three points,” he writes in an e-mail. “(1) I tried to represent as broad a cross-section of the most interesting work in the Middle East arena as I could; (2) I insisted that every article should represent real ‘value-added’ in our knowledge and thinking about the topic it discussed, but I also tried to ensure that every article would be reasonably accessible to specialists in all disciplines; (3) I was determined to allow our authors to speak in their own voices, not a style imposed on them by the editor. [That last principle] required the contributors to engage in an often slow and painful process of revision and re-revision, but it also allowed excellent work to emerge from uncertain beginnings.”

Selecting standout articles more than a decade after publication “is really tough and a bit invidious,” confesses Humphreys. He picks what he remembers well from his five volumes because they “clearly made a strong impression in the first place.” His “most memorable” list:

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- Paul Dresch and Bernard Haykel, "Stereotypes and Political Styles: Islamists and Tribesfolk in Yemen," *IJMES* 27 (1995): 405–31. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/176363.pdf>.
- Jonathan P. Berkey, "Circumcision Circumscribed: Female Excision and Cultural Accommodation in the Medieval Near East," *IJMES* 28 (1996): 19–38. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/176113.pdf>.
- Gayane Karen Merguerian and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zulaykha and Yusuf: Whose 'Best Story'?" *IJMES* 29 (1997): 485–508. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/164399.pdf>.
- Valerie J. Hoffman, "Annihilation in the Messenger of God: The Development of a Sufi Practice," *IJMES* 31 (1999): 351–69. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/176216.pdf>.

During Juan R. I. Cole's tenure, the *IJMES* cover changed slightly, with the gyre drifting right, but the content did not. What stands out for Cole is the special issue on postcolonialism he edited with Deniz Kandiyoti, particularly Sami Zubaida's article on Iraq, which strikes Cole "as having enduring value."

- Juan R. I. Cole and Deniz Kandiyoti, "Nationalism and the Colonial Legacy in the Middle East and Central Asia: Introduction," *IJMES* 34 (2002): 189–203. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/3879823.pdf>.
- Sami Zubaida, "The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq," *IJMES* 34 (2002): 205–15. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/3879824.pdf>.

Plucking one jewel from the crown is doubly difficult. "Given the controversy and polemics over female excision, I might place Berkey first," explains Humphreys, "if only because it is a sober, thoughtful analysis of classical Islamic teaching about a very difficult subject. However, his article is not 'better' than the others in any absolute sense. Its special value is to show how the analysis of medieval thought and practice can throw light on a bitter contemporary debate." (To this day, so many *IJMES* submissions focus on the modern or the contemporary that the medieval period gets shortchanged in our pages.) Humphreys worries that he has slighted other contributions "equally good and, for many readers, perhaps more important and central to their concerns." Although some submissions required more polishing than others, "one way or the other we almost always got there," he recalls.

Jonathan P. Berkey

CIRCUMCISION CIRCUMSCRIBED: FEMALE
EXCISION AND CULTURAL ACCOMMODATION
IN THE MEDIEVAL NEAR EAST (EXCERPT)

In a famous passage in his *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, E. W. Lane described the ceremonies commonly held to celebrate the circumcision of a young boy in 19th-century Cairo.¹ Family and friends of the boy, his schoolteacher, the barber who performed the operation and his assistant, musicians, and other retainers all participated in a celebration of an overtly public character. . . . Modes of celebration may have changed, but festivities surrounding the circumcision of a young boy are still common in the Muslim countries of the Near East.

As a general rule, however, no open and public ceremony is held to mark the “circumcision” of a girl in those regions of the Islamic world in which such operations are performed. The practice, along with any accompanying festivities, exists almost entirely within the private rather than the public sphere. . . . The distinction between ceremonies for boys and girls held true six centuries ago, as well. The accepted custom in the circumcision of males, wrote the strict jurist Ibn al-Hajj (d. 1336), is its public announcement and celebration; with females, the occasion should be concealed and kept from public scrutiny.⁴

A similar silence affects the scholarly discussion of ritual female excision. Although the practice of removing a part or all of the external female genitalia has incited a considerable body of anthropological and polemical literature, little attention has been directed to the history of its practice in those parts of the Muslim world where it is common.⁵ Considering the limited number of sources which discuss it in any detail, this lacuna is perhaps hardly surprising. . . . The reticence may stem from the fact that the practice was never universal in the Islamic world, and may indicate that its popularity was indeed extremely limited. However, it certainly reflects the ignorance concerning the custom which must have been shared by those men engaged in the process of collecting and commenting on the sources of law. As in contemporary Egypt, it was women, in general, who actually performed the operation, and medieval women have left no direct testimony to their attitudes toward and understanding of the practice. Moreover, as one medieval Muslim jurist commented, it was simply the case that the result of the operation on men was “more apparent” (*abyan*).⁶

The reticence of the sources is compounded by a certain ambiguity in the terminology used by medieval Arabic authors when discussing the practice of circumcision. It is possible to distinguish between male circumcision and female excision by employing the term *khitān* to refer to the former, and, for the latter, *khafḍ* or *khifāḍ*, the root verb for which means to lower, depress, or abase and, by extension, to make gentle, easy to deal with, compliant.⁷ In fact, however, *khafḍ* and *khifāḍ* appear relatively rarely in the source literature. More often, the verb *khatana* and its derivatives are used for circumcision

in a generic sense, much as treatments of the subject in English often use the word “circumcision” indiscriminately, which sometimes makes it difficult to know whether sources discussing *khitān* are referring to male circumcision or what is more properly referred to as clitoridectomy, or female excision, or both. In colloquial dialects, other terms are used, most commonly *tahāra*, “ritual purification,” which can refer to both practices, although among at least some bedouin Arabs the excision of girls specifically is known as *sirr* (secret).⁸ All of these terms, of course, may be fraught with significance for an attempt to understand the practice.

Scholars and others have been quick to point out that female excision is not an explicitly Islamic custom.⁹ By this they mean several different things. There is, for example, no mention of the practice in the Qur’an, nor did those medieval commentators who approved of the ritual excision of the external female genitalia consistently refer to any specific passages in the Muslim holy book in support of their claims. More significantly, female excision, in any form, is not a universal practice in the Islamic world—there are many Muslim societies in which the custom is unknown and in which there is no historical evidence of its appearance. Moreover, in locales where it is widely known, it is often shared by both Muslims and non-Muslims: in Egypt, for example, excision has been practiced by Muslims and Coptic Christians alike.

The polemical debate as to whether female excision is or is not “Islamic” in fact misses what seems, to a historian’s eye, a far more interesting question. The very language of the debate—that this practice “is” or “is not” Islamic—skirts perilously close to reaffirming the static “Orientalist” picture of Islam which much of the scholarship of the last two or three decades has undermined. It should by now be almost a truism that Islam, like any broad cultural tradition, is engaged in a permanent process of redefinition. Consequently, what interests the historian about a practice such as female excision is the way in which it interacts with different cultural strata within the broader Islamic framework, how it attaches itself to certain values within that framework as a method of legitimation, and finally how it contributes itself, at least in the eyes of some Muslims, to the process of redefining Islam.¹⁰

...

The casual and unremarked association of male circumcision and female excision is apparently not unusual in the early Islamic sources, as a number of hadith attest. Of course, since many of the Prophetic traditions were fabricated during the first Islamic centuries to reflect and justify current practice among different groups of people, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about who, and how many, among the first generations of Muslims performed the operation. But a number of traditions indicate its practice in at least some early Muslim societies, including one in which the epithet “son of a cutter of clitorises” (*ibn muqaṭṭi‘at al-buḏūr*) is used as an expression of contempt.²³ Several of the major compilations of hadith include variants of a tradition which states that sexual intercourse—described as “when the circumcision touches the circumcision” (*wa massa al-khitān al-khitān*) or “when the two circumcisions meet” (*idhā iltaqā al-khitānān*)—must be followed by a ritual ablution.²⁴ The point is that the word for circumcision (*khitān*) was understood at an early stage to refer to the female’s operation as well as the male’s.

...

... As has already been noted, the Qur'an makes no mention of the practice of female excision, but neither does it refer to the circumcision of boys—yet that custom has become clearly and almost universally associated with Islam. In some parts of the world, male circumcision is virtually synonymous with being a Muslim; in Turkey, the very word for circumcision (*sünnet*) is derived from the Arabic *sunna*, referring to normative behavior associated with the Prophet Muhammad. It is true that this rite of passage looms larger in the popular Muslim consciousness than in the more sophisticated literature of Islamic jurisprudence, but even the jurists acknowledge the practice. The consensus of the four accepted “schools” (*madhāhib*) of Sunni law—the Shafi‘is, Hanafis, Malikis, and Hanbalis—was that male circumcision was a component of the sunna; most jurists held it to be obligatory (*wājib*), although at least some Hanafis considered it commendable, if not absolutely required.³¹ The scholars marshaled any number of arguments to support the practice of male circumcision. . . . Most interesting, perhaps, was the observation that male circumcision was one of the clearest marks of distinction between a Muslim and a Christian, a useful indicator of communal identity to help distinguish the corpses of Muslim warriors and Frankish crusaders on a medieval battlefield.³³

Although the position of the jurists with regard to female excision was more equivocal, the consensus of the Islamic legal community never objected to the practice, and where, as in Egypt, it had deep cultural roots, attempts were made to invest the operation with all the authority of a religious obligation. . . .

...

In the absence of an explicit Qur'anic statement, discussions of female excision by the Islamic jurists began with those hadiths which deal specifically with the issue. Generally, these traditions fall into one of three categories, the first of which includes those enjoining ablutions after sex (discussed earlier). The second category includes a hadith in which Umm ‘Atiya al-Ansariyya reports that the Prophet enjoined a *khātina* (female circumciser) in Medina: “Do not destroy it completely [i.e., do not cut away too much in the course of the operation], for that is more favorable for the woman and preferable for the husband.”³⁶ This hadith is acknowledged by its redactor, Abu Da‘ud (d. 817), to rely on a “weak” chain of transmitters from the Prophet, leading at least one commentator to conclude that uncertainty over its authenticity obviated the requirement for the operation.³⁷ Whatever its reliability, however, this hadith (as well as several variants) was repeatedly cited by medieval jurists, and, as we shall see, provided the basis for much later discussion of the practice.

...

If the medieval sources display a repeated concern to limit the extent of female excision, why did they encourage its performance at all? The answer lies in the conflicting goals at which the operation aimed, an ambivalence of purpose to match the ambiguity of the terms in which the practice was discussed. Not surprisingly, the assumptions and objectives that lay behind the custom reflected an eclectic mixture of mythology, religious ethics, practical wisdom, and folk belief.

...

... In general, however, the Muslim practice of circumcision has become a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, and so occurs just before the onset of puberty. This, for example, was the opinion of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, who observed that the age of puberty was that at which the Muslim acts of worship (*‘ibādāt*) became obligatory.⁶²

Anthropological investigations suggest that female excision shares a similar, if not identical, genealogy. For example, one recent study put forward the intriguing thesis that, from the viewpoint of the women who perpetuate the practice, the custom serves primarily as a rite to ensure fertility. For the women of a northern Sudanese village, excision is a prerequisite to marriage; without it, a young woman is denied the prospect of bearing children, and particularly sons, her surest path to social status and respect.⁶³ Connecting such conclusions to the historical process by which female excision was accepted and accommodated by medieval Muslims, however, is difficult, given the nature of the surviving sources, in which the viewpoint of the women on whom and by whom excision was practiced is virtually absent.

But the silence of the sources is not deafening, and they do permit certain conclusions to be drawn. One important channel for the cultural accommodation of female excision lay in the category of ritual purity, which the law requires for Muslims desiring to perform a range of prescribed cultic acts, ranging from prayer to pilgrimage. The contemptuous epithet “son of a cutter of clitorises” would seem to indicate that the external female genitalia were in some sense “unclean,” and that their removal, partial or otherwise, was to be recommended. It is significant, too, that medieval jurists often discussed excision, along with male circumcision, under the general rubric of *tahāra*.

...

... In the medieval period as well as the modern, female excision was and is practiced—at least in part—in an attempt to control women’s sexuality by limiting their sex drive or, more precisely, by limiting the physical pleasure which they can receive from sexual intercourse. The root of the problem lay in certain critical assumptions, common to patriarchal societies, about the nature of female sexuality. In Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies, many shared the misogynistic conviction that women are possessed of an extraordinary sexual appetite, a condition linked to a presumed deficiency in their capacity to reason and consequently, to behave in an ethical fashion. This conviction inevitably shaped the cognitive framework of much medieval Islamic literature; reflections of it can be seen in texts ranging from interpretations of the Qur’an (in particular, its retelling of the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife) to the *Thousand and One Nights*. It also ensured that these societies would seek to *restrain* the sexuality of their women: that, in other words, male honor could be preserved only by preserving the modesty of those women for whom a man bore responsibility.⁶⁸ The jurists who wrote about the practice of female excision shared with the common people a nexus of assumptions about the nature and character of women. As a contemporary Egyptian woman explained, “We are told that circumcision is necessary because drinking the water of the Nile as a child makes a girl passionate when she grows up. So this helps her get hold of herself so that she doesn’t tire her husband or need these things if she’s a widow or divorced.”⁶⁹

...

A certain tension permeates Islamic sexual ethics. On the one hand, the sexual desires of both men and women are recognized, even approved, while on the other, it is insisted that they be channeled into particular, licit categories.⁸⁸ Islamic jurists recognized a wife’s—that is, a free, legally married woman’s—right to be sexually satisfied by her husband. Al-Ghazali, for example, urged husbands in his wide-ranging treatise *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūrn al-din*, to strive in sexual relations to bring their wives to climax; anything less

could be harmful to the woman. . . .⁸⁹ However, he also cited with approval the tradition which identified excision as a “noble deed” for women, as well as the one urging that the operation be limited.⁹⁰

... The ambiguity which al-Jahiz and the jurists perceived in the sexual passion of women—that the enforcement of ethical standards demanded both attempts to restrict it, through excision, and efforts to preserve it, by limiting the operation—is crucial. Their remarks on the positive role of a woman’s passion offer an insight into one of the fundamental attitudes by which those Muslims who received and accepted the practice of female excision related it to their ethical universe. They clearly recognized that both men and women are endowed with exceedingly strong, potentially disruptive, sexual energy. Both need to be restrained. It is the woman, however, who in effect is expected to assume the burden of restraint for both: for the man, by remaining an object of his sexual passions; for herself, by practicing female excision.

NOTES

¹Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 5th ed. (London, 1860), 57–59 and 505–509.

⁴Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal al-shar‘ al-sharif*, 4 vols. (Cairo, 1929), 3: 296.

⁵For recent anthropological discussions of female excision, see Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, 49–75, and the sources cited there; for a brief survey of historical and contemporary practice, see “KHAFD,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960–), and Paula Sanders, “Clitoridectomy,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito, 4 vols. (New York, 1995), 1: 298–99. Among the most important polemical tracts and studies of contemporary practice: Henry Harald Hansen, “Clitoridectomy: Female Circumcision in Egypt,” *Folk* 14–15 (1972–73): 15–26; Scilla McLean, ed., *Female Circumcision, Excision and Infibulation: The Facts and Proposals for Change*, Minority Rights Group Report No. 47 (London, 1980); Raqiya Haji Abdalla, *Sisters in Affliction: Circumcision and Infibulation of Women in Africa* (London, 1982) (on Somalia); Asma El Dareer, *Woman, Why Do You Weep? Circumcision and Its Consequences* (London, 1982) (on Sudan); Olayinka Koso Thomas, *The Circumcision of Women: A Strategy for Eradication* (London, 1987) (on Sierra Leone); Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Genital Mutilation in Africa* (New York, 1989); Nahid Toubia, *Female Genital Mutilation: A Call for Global Action* (New York, 1993); Sami A. Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *Mutiler au nom de Yahve ou d’Allah: Légitimation religieuse de la circoncision masculine et féminine*, Cahiers du Monde Arabe 103 (Paris, 1993).

⁶Shams al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Tuhfat al-wadūd bi-ahkām al-mawlūd* (Cairo, 1986), 158.

⁷Edward W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London, 1863); *Lisān al-‘Arab al-muḥīṭ* (Beirut, 1970); s.v. “khafd.” Cf. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath al-bārī bi-sharḥ saḥīḥ al-bukhārī*, 28 vols. (Cairo, 1978), 2: 204.

⁸P. Antonin Jaussen, *Coutumes des Arabes au Pays de Moab* (Paris, 1908), 363–64.

⁹See, for example, in very different venues: Rana Kabbani, *Letter to Christendom* (London, 1989), 16; Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, 1992), 176; and Abdellah Hammoudi and Lawrence Rosen, “Islam Doesn’t Sanction Female Circumcision,” *New York Times*, letter, 5 February 1993.

¹⁰Cf. the approach taken by the anthropologist Richard Antoun in his discussion of related issues bearing on female “modesty” in a modern Islamic society: “On the Modesty of Women in Arab Muslim Villages: A Study in the Accommodation of Traditions,” *American Anthropologist* 70/4 (1968): 671–97. In this article, Antoun seeks to describe and explain the “accommodation” between the demands of “high” Islamic traditions for female modesty and particular local customs and circumstances. After concluding that one can rarely determine whether or not a particular practice was specifically Islamic in origin, Antoun moves on to the

more interesting question of the ways in which different cultural values and imperatives, emanating from different cultural strata, have interacted and accommodated themselves to one another.

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²³Muhammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 4 vols. (Leiden, 1862–1908), 3: 85 (“Kitāb al-Maghāzī,” no. 23).

²⁴See, for example, Abū Dāʾūd al-Sijistānī, *Sunan*, 4 vols. (Cairo, 1935), 1: 56 (“Ṭahāra,” no. 216); Muhammad ibn Yazīd ibn Māja, *Sunan*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1954), 1: 199–200 (“Ṭahāra,” no. 111); Muslim ibn al-Hajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 5 vols. (Cairo, 1955), 1: 271–72 (“Ḥayḍ,” no. 88); Aḥmad ibn Shuʿayb al-Nasāʾī, *Sunan*, 8 vols. (Cairo, 1930), 1: 110–11 (“Ṭahāra,” no. 128). Cf. A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane*, 8 vols. (Leiden, 1936–88), 2: 11, s.v. “khitān.”

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³¹Ibn Qayyim, *Tuhfat al-wadūd*, 137; cf. “KHITĀN,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

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³³Ibid., 139. Cf., in a modern context, Ammar, *Growing Up*, 120–21.

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³⁶*Lā tun hiki fa-inna dhālika aḥzā li'l-mar'a wa-aḥabb ilā 'l-ba'ī*: Abū Dāʾūd, *Sunan*, 4: 368 (“Adab,” no. 167); cf. Abū Bakr Aḥmad al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, ed. Muhammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭāʾ, 11 vols. (Beirut, 1994), 8: 562. In another version of this tradition, also recorded by al-Bayhaqī, Umm ʿAṭīya herself is identified as the *khātina*.

³⁷Muhammad Shams al-Ḥaqq al-ʿAzīmabādī, *ʿAwn al-maʿbūd sharḥ sunan abī dāʾūd*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ʿUthmān, 14 vols. (Medina, 1968), 14: 190.

...

⁶²Ibn Qayyim, *Tuhfat al-wadūd*, 149.

⁶³Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, 53–56. Ironically, of course, complications arising from the procedure may actually contribute to higher levels of infertility. See Lightfoot-Klein, *Prisoners of Ritual*, 79.

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⁶⁸On the story of Joseph, see Sura 12 of the Qurʾān, and the interpretation in Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam* (London, 1985), 20–29; for further remarks on this general subject, see Antoun, “On the Modesty of Women,” *passim*. On the Mediterranean cult of male honor, see, of course, the classic *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (Chicago, 1966).

⁶⁹Nayra Atīya, *Khul-Khaal: Five Egyptian Women Tell Their Stories* (Syracuse, 1982), 11. Cf. Lightfoot-Klein, *Prisoners of Ritual*, 64–66 et *passim*.

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⁸⁸On this subject generally, see Bousquet, *L'Éthique sexuelle*, 43–50.

⁸⁹Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, 2:64; cf. Madelain Farah, *Marriage and Sexuality in Islam* (Salt Lake City, 1984), 107.

⁹⁰Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, 1: 191–92.