"Lemen Girzat?" (Why Circumcise?)

Negotiation and Change of Female Circumcision and Gender in Harar, Ethiopia

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June 2011
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http://www.duo.uio.no/

Trykk: Oslo Kopisten, Solli Plass, Oslo
Abstract

The conundrum of female circumcision is a topic of heated ‘global’ debates on human rights and the health of women and children. Considering the attention this topic receives internationally, how does the discourse of circumcision look on the local, subjective level?

Based on a six months fieldwork in the town of Harar in Eastern Ethiopia, this thesis explores the local meanings of circumcision, and further, how these are intricately connected to local processes of change.

For girls and women in Harar, circumcision seems to be connected to the fulfillment of a gendered identity, of becoming fully woman. It has enabled the embodiment of particular feminized skills, the construction of female bodies, sexuality and the ability to identify as respectable, pure Muslim women. This further led to an exploration of the construction of gender, which retrospectively called for theories on gender that stress its social dimensions, and simultaneously avoid the assumption of bodies as fixed entities. The uncircumcised body, I argue, appears as incomplete and constantly ‘in the making’.

In relation to change, the stories of girls and women in Harar, and my time spent with them, revealed discussions on the validity of female circumcision. There seems to be an ongoing change in gender relations, ideals of marriage, virginity and religious ideals, where circumcision is no longer an inevitable mechanism. Consequently I apply theories on change and agency that identifies potential for change of tradition and religion within the social context from which they derived. In this I combine a discursive approach, which explores debates of religious concepts and ‘legitimate’ social bodies, and theories of embodiment, which focus on individual experiences and agency through everyday conduct.

Considering the intimacy and politicization of the topic, this thesis relates to anthropological debates on representation and writing. It agrees strongly with anthropologists who have argued that condemnation of certain practices will render any efforts of communication insurmountable. Hence, I argue for modes of writing that neither condemns nor condones the practice. Consequently, I do not attempt to offer any ‘solution’ to the complex question of change, and the thesis aims for an articulation of individual experiences and strategies for change.
Acknowledgements

To all the people in Harar who hospitably invited me into their homes and openly told me their stories, without your honesty and friendships this thesis could not have been written. To Adisu for teaching me about the joys and hardships of life in Harar, you taught me lessons of life that will never be forgotten. And to Abay, for treating me as family, your home was always a safe harbor. Mulukan, thank you for invaluable assistance in a difficult start-phase, despite my clumsiness, you were always willing to help. Ayanto, thank you for many nice conversations and cups of coffee. You learned me a lot about being a woman in Harar.

To my ‘family’ in Addis Ababa, your support throughout my fieldwork was invaluable. Fasil, a special thanks to you for many enlightening and fun conversations and birtchas, your knowledge and creativity was an inspiration for this thesis.

I am also grateful to all the people at different offices who took of their valuable time, and showed interest in the project. A special thanks to Ato Samuel and Alfiya at the Woman Affairs office of Oromiya, and Yassin at the Woman Affairs office of Harari, and to Save the Children Norway in Addis Ababa, for well informed advices.

To all of you in Harar I have not mentioned (and those I have), I will never forget ‘the Harar hospitality’, and I hope from the bottom of my heart that I have managed to write this thesis in a way you find both rightful and respectful.

To my academic supervisor, Aud Talle. Your knowledge on this topic is unique and was an inspiration before this master was even planned. You did not only assist with invaluable academic contributions, but with personal concern and support when times were tough. Without you this thesis would never have been started and you were the one who ‘saved me’ from giving up. Thank you.

To my second academic supervisor, Knut Christian Myhre, thank you for taking the time, on so short notice, to engage in this project. You challenged me to refine my analytical perspectives and writing, and provided ‘fresh’ perspectives to the material. Thanks to you, also the last months of writing was inspiring.

To all the classmates who have been an incredible inspiration through their hard work; you made this two, hard years extremely fun.

To my friends who have tolerated my absence the last years. Thank you for all your wonderful support! A special thank you to Mari, for dealing with my many sorrows, lots of good times and proofreading.
Finally, to my mum and dad, for always supporting me in my choices, and for breeding my interest for anthropology from early on.

Betam Amaseghenalu!
I dedicate this study to my mother and grandmother.

For your strength and inspiration.

That man over there say a woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me a best place...

And ain’t I a woman?

Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well!

And ain’t I a woman?

- Sojourner Thruth (Url: Feminist.com)
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1. Introduction

*It is infinitely easier to take up a position for or against an idea, a value, a person, an institution or situation, than to analyze what it truly is, in all its complexity.*

- Pierre Bourdieu (in Jackson 2005:11)

The topic in question

Female circumcision, the removal of parts of genitals of girls and women, has caught the attention of feminists, human rights workers, international NGOs and anthropologists, and many are entering the ‘battlefield’ with strong opinions. While it is a tradition packed with local meaning, this ‘global’ debate entails several interesting implications and assumptions. Critics have not hesitated to call it mutilation, and even torture. Such accounts portray people as barbaric, and assume that mothers in practicing communities do not want the best for their children. Furthermore, a debate on Human rights based on the rights of women and children and their bodily integrity and health entails assumptions on certain universalities of motherhood, health and childhood.

From a feminist point of view, female circumcision has become a symptom of female victimization, understood as the deprivation and mutilation of female sexuality under male authority (e.g. Hosken 1993). This carries specific assumptions about sexual pleasure and intimacy. Further, if western feminist tends to assume the universal oppression of women, it seems quite problematic to assume that in a world of poverty, food-shortage and global inequality, issues of gender if is necessarily ‘at the top of the list’.

Currently, an increasing number of women from practicing communities have engaged in the debate, and seek to nuance these assumptions of lost sexualities, brutalities and health complications. But as Fuambai Ahmadu (Ahmadu & Shweder 2009) argues, studies concerned with this approach has received less attention, and in short, one might say that the debate over circumcision (from the ‘west’) has been marked by a lack of will to listen. In which African traditions have been portrayed as “abstract entities, without real human beings who think and act, doubt and consent.”¹ (Talle 2010: 24)

¹ My translation.
As it will surface, any comment on female circumcision position itself somewhere within the debate, also this thesis. As I apply a perspective of subjective meaning and action this thesis will comment on a few of the aforementioned assumptions.

A case of radical relativism?

I anthropology, the controversy of female circumcision touches upon central debates of the discipline. Cultural relativism (in the tradition of Frans Boas) refers to a methodological stance where the anthropologists ideally enters and participates in the field in a way that enables her or him to explore local practices and how they carry meaning in terms of the social context in a non-judgmental manner (Talle 2010). However, confronted with the ritual of female circumcision, some anthropologists have also argued that cultural relativism does have its limits, and female circumcision is where we should all draw the line (Konner in Gordon 1991:4). Some groundbreaking studies on female circumcision, such as the Hosken Report (1993) and Lightfoot-Klein’s Prisoners of ritual (1989)\(^2\) represented an unyielding position of immediate eradication in which nothing could excuse what was understood as a crude violation of human rights. While Hosken’s multicountry account provided extensive information, and opened the debate on circumcision, she pleaded strongly for international intervention by any necessary means (for instance withholding aid).

Other anthropologists have entered the debate, arguing for a contextual analysis that includes the voices of practitioners, and offered a different perspective on change that did not assume that the only answer was intervention from the ‘outside’ (e.g. Scheper-Hughes 1991, Gruenbaum 1996, 2001, Talle 2003, 2010). These works offered experience near studies and descriptions. Several have also been present at circumcisions themselves (Rye 2002, Gruenbaum 2001, Talle 2003). Consequently, they have occasionally been accused of being radical cultural relativists that have “left their values at home” (VG 2002, Talle 2010)

What seems to be happening in this debate is that the ‘Boasian’, methodological sense of relativism, when popularized, it is stripped for its analytical worth and reduced to a personal, simplified matter (ibid). As Tord Larsen (1979) writes, radical cultural relativism is a utopian project that does not exist in practice. All communication consists of exchange of meanings, and even the most experienced anthropologist cannot leave all her values at home. The

\(^2\) Hanny Lightfoot-Klein’s book is a widely sited, relatively early, work on circumcision from 1989. As the title implies, her focus is on the strength of the custom and how it seems difficult for people to defy. For current anthropologists this title has been a provocative disacknowledgement of the agency of women and men ‘suffering from mutilation’ (see Gruenbaum 2001).
several accounts by anthropologist on the personal challenge of being present at circumcisions are in themselves revealing (see Rye 2002, Talle 2010). Female circumcision may be the perfect example of the paradox of relativism; it both necessitates and challenges it. Thus the point here is that relativism is an analytical tool, not a personal stance. Further coupled a with a focus on change, one might able to reach an analysis that do not condemn those people who practice circumcision, but neither endorse its continuation (Gruenbaum 2001: 23).

Furthermore, I keep in mind that this debate depicts the relation between the west and the (previously) ´colonial world´. It is another topic on which we can allow ourselves to ´educate´ others. Thus I agree with Nancy Scheperv-Hughes´(1991) argument; the debate on circumcision is very much part of ´postcolonial relations´. To me the argument of (among others) Scheperv-Hughes (ibid) and Gruenbaum (1996) is a crucial one; let the women argue this one out for themselves.

**Terminology**

The terminology is itself illustrative to the debate on circumcision. As David Palmer has written “language is the stage on which consciousness makes its historical entrance and politics is scripted” (Palmer in Abusharaf 2006: 5). Female genital mutilation (FGM) have become the standard terms used by anti-circumcision activists and international organizations such as the World Health Organization, UNICEF and UNFPA (WHO 2008: 3). FGM is also widely used among organizations in Ethiopia, and seem to be common in the national debate. Anthropologists have though criticized the use of this term for being condemning and hindering dialogue with practicing communities. I agree that this should be taken into consideration and in this thesis FGM will not be used, unless with direct reference to contexts where it is mentioned. Agents I met in Harar appeared to be aware of these implications of language and often referred to local language and terms.

FGM´s counterpart, female circumcision, has been accused of neglecting the severity of the matter, and juxtaposing it with male circumcision, although, it seems to be the term that most directly translates into local languages (Abusharaf 2006: 6). This is also the case in Ethiopia, where the term in Amharic girzat is used for both male and female circumcision. The Oromo and Harari term, absurne, as I will discuss later, does not at all refer to ´mutilation´, but rather, pride. Taking this into consideration, I will use female circumcision, as well as the Oromo term absurne.
The aim of this thesis

The debate over circumcision is very present also in Ethiopia, where both the government and NGOs are very engaged in anti-circumcision work. Furthermore, a law against circumcision was passed in 2005. According to a survey from 2005 the estimate of circumcised women in Ethiopia was about 80% in the age group 30-49 and about 65% in the age group 15-25 (CSA & ORC Macro 2006: 253). Considering this decrease, and the presence of anti-circumcision arguments I find it interesting to pose the question of the ‘status’ of local beliefs and meanings connected to circumcision. The objective of this thesis is thus twofold in type. Firstly, it explores how female circumcision has been and is connected to the continuous production and reproduction of gender and the female body, sexuality and female identities. Secondly, if this is so, how are local and global debates on circumcision received and manifested in the individual lives and beliefs of people in Harar? What factors might enable change, and what factors may defy? Thus throughout my exploration of its local significance, I will explore how the discourse on female circumcision is affected by and affects local notions of femininity, the body, health and sexuality as well as religious ideals of purity and marriage.

Considering the aforementioned debate, I will in be inspired by some works on circumcision that has aimed at understanding circumcision by contextual meanings and further recognize contextual conditions and efforts for change. I think of Ellen Gruenbaum’s studies from Sudan, and the anthologies edited by Bettina Shell Duncan and Ylva Hernlund (2000) and Rogaia M. Abusharaf’s edited volume Female Circumcision: Multicultural perspectives (2006). Especially connected to the region is Aud Talle’s (2003, 2010) studies from Northwestern Somalia, and Simon Rye’s (2002) study from Addis Ababa.

Types of incisions and medical issues

Before I move on with discussion, a few notes on the medical circumstances of circumcision should be made. Infibulation is the removal of parts or all of the external genitalia. The wound is then stitched together by needle or acacia thorns, which leaves only a small opening for urine and menstruation. Despite its widespread attention in global debates, infibulation is estimated to constitute 10 percent of female circumcisions worldwide (Url: WHO 2008). The milder forms of circumcision are often referred to as clitoridectomy and excision, in
correlation with the classification by the World Health Organization (WHO 2008: 4). Type I, Clitoridectomy, is the removal of parts or all of the clitoris, or sometimes only the prepuce. Type II, excision, is the partial or complete removal of the clitoris together with all or parts of the labia minora (Toubia 2000 7-8).

The two latter types of circumcision are hard to distinguish completely as they grade into each other. While conducting studies it is important to keep in mind that the types are not easily classifiable, and uncritical reference to the WHO classifications may simplify a quite complex situation. Sunnah can refer to anything from removal of only the tip of the clitoris to removal of the whole clitoris, and sometimes also the cutting of labia. Furthermore, the types of cutting vary extensively across and within national groups, borders and regions.

The different types of circumcision involve different degrees of medical consequences. Documentations of infibulation have found that short-term impacts may be hemorrhage, infections, urine retention, shock and excessive bleeding. Long-term consequences may involve continuous urinary tract infections, dermoid cysts, vesico-vaginal or recto-vaginal

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3 Infibulation is classified as the most severe circumcision, type III in WHO’s terms. This is mainly performed in Somalia, Sudan and areas of Egypt. WHO have also added a type IV, which involves all other alterations of female genitals such as pricking, burning, stretching and minor incisions (Toubia 2000).
fistula, accumulation of menstrual blood, postpartum sepsis and excessive growth of scar tissue that may cause painful intercourse and obstructed labor (Toubia 2000). Research on medical consequences is still lacking in number and there is uncertainty about the rate of health complications directly connected to circumcision (Shell-Duncan & Hernlund 2000). In Ethiopia, surgeries are often done in private spaces under poor sanitary conditions, maybe without access to medical equipment and disinfectants, which increases the danger for infections and HIV transmittance in all types of circumcision. The uncertainty surrounding medical consequences of the two milder types of circumcision are even greater, as the long term effects are not very apparent. Studies on clitoridectomies have found that women do not necessarily suffer any long-term medical or sexual complications (Morison et al. 2001).

This was not a topic among most women I talked to in Harar, however, the potential medical consequences of circumcision seems to be an important part of anti-circumcision work in Ethiopia, and this will be discussed in the final chapter. In short, women in Harar with milder forms of circumcision did not seem to be concerned with the types of long-term obstetric complications related to infibulation, and I suggest that this might be one of the reasons why infibulation in the area has been almost totally abandoned and why people have favored a transfer to milder incisions, which I will argue, seems more resistant to change among some Oromo women.

“Writing against culture”: Tours and detours

"In the actual use of expressions we make detours, we go by sideroads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed”

-Wittgenstein (in Stoller 1989: 142)

‘Doing anthropology’ is about theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, but also modes of writing. My wish to move away from a hortatory, judgmental perspective has implications for the way I have written this thesis, the modes of representation. According to Paul Stoller (1989) one of the dilemmas in ethnographic writing is that we seldom describe

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4 Obstetric fistula is a widespread health issue in Ethiopia, usually caused by prolonged or obstructed labor. If not resolved, continuous pressure from the baby’s head causes a tear from the woman’s vagina to bladder, and sometimes, rectal opening, which leaves the woman incontinent. Many women with fistula are victims of social exclusion as their incontinence disables them and causes an unpleasant odor (Url: Hamlin Fistula International 2009). Research stresses that clitoridectomy and excision cannot be connected to fistula, but infibulation may cause obstructed labor if the woman is not assisted and opened sufficiently (ibid).
the many detours taken during fieldwork but present it as if it was a highway moving from inquiry to result. In Harar, my plan of moving along a path of exploration trying to understand female circumcision was not at all a straight road. A lot of time was spent trying to find (what I thought was) appropriate fields and persons, just being and sensing Harar, and often doing chores and engaging in conversations seemingly irrelevant to my topic of study. Some of these detours point to restrictions and problems of access in the field, others to fruitful conversation and unexpected revelations. By attempting to describe them in an experience near manner, the hope is to describe the field as conversations and personal relations, where the field is initiated by dialogue and diversities, individuals and feelings and thus hopefully move towards a more open-ended ethnography (ibid: 145).

Lila Abu-Lughod (2006) argues that anthropology has been caught in the assumption of a fundamental distinction between self and other inevitably intervened in power relations of the known and the knower, “the west and the rest”, the uncivilized and the civilizer. Her suggestion, I would argue similar to Stoller, is applying textual strategies that unsettles this distinction. Her three suggestions for writing against culture involves: 1) A theoretical terminology and discussion that enables an analysis not dependent on the coherence assumed by culture. 2) Reflexive writing delineating local connections; historical development, the position of the anthropologist in the field and in the global and contemporary connections of the local and global. 3) Writing ethnographies of the particular; realizing that no language, description or generalization are neutral. Describing the specificity and variety in people’s experiences, arguments, interests and doubts might hopefully bring us closer to describing “life as lived” and thus reducing the degree to which communities studied appear as “other” (ibid: 160).

This thesis touches upon all three points. The theoretical base deals with Bourdieu’s practice approach and a Foucauldian theory of discourse, which stresses strategies, interest and improvisations contra more static cultural models, and concurrently opposes a distinction between ideas and practice, or text and world, but focuses on discursive formations (ibid 159). Secondly I attempt to write ethnography in a way that stresses the particular and versatile experiences and actions of people I met in Harar. Writing ethnographies of the particular reveals that in this study of female circumcision in Harar there is no box to close the lid on by some refined conclusion. The experiences, attitudes, stories and arguments are multifaceted, and it is impossible, and for me undesirable, to reach any generalizing culmination based on my research. In the terms of Stoller, there is no box, but a world in continuous flux consisting of ongoing processes (1989: 148). Thirdly, although my focus here is on the local, through the
analysis I wish to say something about the connections between global and national work on circumcision and gender and the local and subjective exegesis, without dichotomizing ‘the global and the local’ as contradictory, separable entities. The understanding of circumcision and gender in Harar is constantly developing and challenged by local discourses, media, governmental work and ‘a global community’ with strong opinions on local matters. But more importantly, as this thesis argues, local realities challenge these external factors and work to reproduce and invent socially acceptable contexts.

**An anthropology of the body**

In the following chapters of this thesis, I argue that the meaning of circumcision has been, and is, important to the production of female identity and gender. Thus to achieve some understanding of circumcision it should be clarified which perspective on gender and the body we think with, think we observe in the field, and make use of in writing and analysis. In the following I discuss some of the anthropological approaches to the body and the subject that I find useful in this thesis.

I would say that gender in a ‘contemporary (populistic) Scandinavian context’ is often understood and portrayed as part of an individual and autonomous subject. Terence Turner argues that historical developments of politics of personal empowerment and liberation, such as various critiques of patriarchal, sexual, economic and political domination, has worked towards ideals of personal freedom and a fundamental “right” to appropriate one’s own body. Including production of identity, sexuality, reproductive powers and the ability to ‘choose’ the life-style, and I will add, the gender, one desires. (Turner 1994: 28). In such contexts, circumcision is often understood as violent abuse of women and their individual and bodily autonomy.

As argued by both Turner and Thomas Csordas (1994), this has also affected the anthropology of the body, where the focus on the body as a bounded and individual conceptual object of discourse misrecognize its social dimensions, and material activity. In the words of Csordas, anthropologies of the body has favored a textual view on the body as an objectified abstraction at the expense of being-in-the-world, of lived experience and existential immediacy (1994:10).
A Foucauldian perspective: Discourse and power

One central theorist that has been subject to this critique is Michel Foucault. Foucault’s theories on the relations between the body and the social is concerned with its discursive production through power and propagation of knowledge. For instance in *the History of Sexuality* (1984), Foucault seeks not merely to uncover the historically changing notions of sexuality, but how bodily practices turn into reflective techniques, take part in a discourse and come to be seen as true (Rabinow 1984: 6), “under the authority of a language that had been carefully expurgated so that it was no longer” (Foucault 1984: 20). For Foucault this discourse defines the appropriate sexual bodies and relations, and also its taboos, leaving no room for illegitimate sexualities. Thus the discourse on sexuality is for Foucault tightly connected to morals, as it defines its legitimacies and restrictions. Interestingly, Foucault shows how its tabooing, rather than removing unwanted sexualities, constituted them as possible and even desirable (since forbidden) (Mills 2003:84). In short, discourses ‘naturalize’ certain bodies as legitimate, and the body for Foucault is as much an object of construction as anything else. It is a historically and culturally specific illusion of substantial unity.

There are elements of Foucault’s theory on the body that I find useful to the discussion on circumcision. Thus, before discussing possible critiques, I will elaborate on its potential contribution. Firstly, his focus on the discursive mediation of the physical bodies articulates how the body is never purely natural, but always subject to social construction (ibid: 83). With circumcision it becomes clear that the understanding of the clitoris is historically and contextually specific. While in Scandinavia it is now seen as a source of pleasure, freedom and a symbol for sexual ‘rights’ (see Ahmadu 2000, Talle 2003), it is in Ethiopia potentially pollutive, or considered a male attribute threatening to grow.

Secondly, for Foucault the production of knowledge about the body is inseparable from power. Through his focus on the body Foucault seeks to avoid a top-down model of power, but focus on its relationality. Here, he makes a distinction between the control of the individual body (anatamo-politics), and the control of the social body en masse (bio-politics) (Jones 2003: 125). For discipline of bodies to be possible, there has to simultaneously exist a contemporary theory of the body that depicts certain disciplinary types as suitable. It was the analyzable (social body) and the manipulable (individual), body which together made possible

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5 As implied here, I will refer to Foucault’s definition of discourse when used in this thesis. This term refers to all utterances and statements that have meaning and some effect (Mills 2003:53): “the general domain of all statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements.” (Foucault in ibid)
the docile body (Foucault 1991a). It is important that this refined idea of power is different from asceticism. The difference lies in the refined ability to portray utility for the individual. It was the art of the human body (ibid). What I find useful here is that Foucault’s focus on the body allows an analysis of power (and change) “at the most basic level of the social order” (Smart in Mills 2003:82) of subjects and bodies.

I will argue that the circumcised body illustrates historically changing discourses of the body. Until recently, the circumcised body was the norm in Harar. The closed vulva, or the removed clitoris, was the symbol of the respectable, marriageable woman. But authoritative discourses and knowledge have changed. The circumcised body is for official campaigns, governmental offices, NGOs and ‘a global society’, the symbol of oppression, lack of human rights and self-determination, poverty, controlled sexualities and health complications. Thus the social body, the authoritative discursive bodies⁶, has gone from being cut, to uncut or from infibulated to mildly cut. This clearly puts the female body at the center of changing discourses, to the extent that it physically changes accordingly. For this reason I find Foucault’s microphysics of power quite useful as it puts the body as one of the central places where power is enacted and resisted through discourse. I stress that the argument of this thesis is that change in circumcision is not only about official debates and a developing discourse, but also about personal (bodily) experience. Not only do the individual bodies change according to discourse, the ideals of the social bodies can change as the personal experiences are articulated. Hence, my use of Foucault has its limitations. I will return to this shortly.

The third issues concern the possibility to read potential for change in Foucault’s focus on the illegitimate and silenced categories. In his essay We “Other Victorians” (1991a) he puts it as follows: “(…) a person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming of freedom.” (ibid: 295) It would be too extensive a task here to enter into a debate on how much Foucault actually enables his subject to ‘act outside’ or enable change within this system of an all-encompassing power.⁷ Concerning circumcision, this perspective underscores

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⁶ I write of bodies in plural to stress that discourses involve several legitimate bodies. And further, that these bodies are constantly changing.
⁷ Foucault’s notion of power has been criticized for granting little potential for resistance. For him, where there is power, there is resistance. Resistance is a necessary part of power, which consequently contributes to the maintenance of power. In this lies the argument that resisting is much more difficult than collaborating. From this, Foucault’s perspective may seem to diminish the potential resistance from individuals, as they always act within this all-encompassing power (see Mills 2003). Though, as will be discussed, Foucault might also enable some sort of individual resistance.
my argument that any fruitful discussion on circumcision should not assume that the practice is understood as simply oppressive power enforced on women as passive objects. As I will illustrate, by acting within current discourses and on the outskirts of its legitimacies there is a constant production and negotiation of authoritative discourses, enabled by individual participation in everyday life and bodily practices.

**Embodiment: taking the body seriously**

"It is not the case simply that human beings have a body, but they are involved in the development of their bodies over their own life-cycle; in this respect, they are bodies.”

(Turner 2000, p. 489)

By this short introduction to some of Foucault’s theories, some problematic parts were also made visible. For Foucault, we are always and already constructed by discourse, as apparent in the following quote: “All of my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities of human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions.” (Foucault in Turner 2000: 495) Thus there seems to be no body except that which is constructed by discourse. In the words of Turner; “Foucault’s body has no flesh.” (Turner 1994: 36) Taken to this extreme, Foucault is criticized for not taking seriously the potential of the body as a source of subjectivity, misrecognizing the being-in-the world and disregarding the body’s role in the social, consequently leaving little room for identity and agency. In my opinion female circumcision is a lucid example of how also bodily experiences affect the discourse and take part in a production of social contexts. A discursive approach is thus only half the story. I am inspired by Csordas argument that there is a need to recognize the centrality of the body, and thus to make use of a theory that can be a dialectical partner to textuality and a discursive approach (1994: 12).

Csordas’ calls for a fortification of a theory of embodiment. Embodiment as a theoretical paradigm deals with the critique between subject and object, and attempts to move beyond the dichotomy of biological determinism and cultural representation. Such an account takes seriously the experiences of the body and shows that “the process of self-objectification is already cultural, prior to the analytical distinction between subject and object.” (Csordas 1990: 6) Hence, the body should not be studied as an object in relation to the social. Rather, he argues, it should be considered subject to ‘culture’, “and the existential ground of culture” (ibid: 5)
Thinking with Bourdieu: doxa, heterodoxy and change

In his discussion on embodiment, Csordas makes use of two central theorists, Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu. I will be inspired by a few of Bourdieu’s terms in this thesis. From my understanding, Bourdieu’s theory on power is comparable to Foucault’s focus, in that domination is understood as all-encompassing and has ‘the hypnotic power’ to establish and legitimate itself in individual bodies (e.g. Bourdieu 2000: 48–49) and thus, can only be understood by avoiding the dichotomy between force and submission. As such, Bourdieu’s focus on socialization of bodies may supplement Foucault’s focus on discourse, and thus enable and clarify a focus on practice and embodiment.

Habitus, for Bourdieu, connotes a theory of a system of dispositions, of social structure inscribed in the bodies of individuals through acting within it, so that it appears opaque and naturalized (Bourdieu 2000). These implicit ‘rules’ of conduct then direct the strategies⁸ and choices of actors (Moi 2002). This habitualized world for the subject is termed doxa. Symbolic models that become subject to reflection are on the other hand heterodoxical. In Masculine Domination (2000), Bourdieu elaborates on a gendered habitus; how relations between men and women, both socially and sexually (e.g. the body) are the result of a contextual production and reproduction of gendered categories through everyday practices.

Hence his theory on habitus includes the intricate dialectical relation between the body and the social. (Thus if Foucault neglects the body, Bourdieu allows for an inclusion of it.) In the process of producing categories of gender, he says, this can be fulfilled by the work that is done to separate the boy from his mother or in the symbolic effects of the gendered division of labor in production and reproduction. Through psychosomatic efforts occurs the somatization of social relations. (2000: 32). One of the most articulated arguments for circumcision in Harar was its significance to the social construction of womanhood. This argument led me to a further exploration of gender and my argument here is that among people in Harar, being fully woman was partly about the learning of certain skills through everyday life and actions. Circumcision, I argue, is thus a mechanism that has contributed to the successful fulfillment of a specific gendered habitus.

In the context of circumcision, using the approach of habitus, stresses the argument that people at all times, in all places, act in relation to certain conventionalized or habitualized social systems. In short, habitus allows us to include the most trivial parts of daily and bodies

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⁸ Strategies for Bourdieu are actions of which the habitus is the source. These moves are organized as strategies, but they are not the product of genuine strategic intention. (Bourdieu 2010:73)
into analysis (Moi 2002:254. Everywhere, and at all times, constructed bodies are turned into a gendered reality. 9

I will argue in this thesis that to get some understanding of circumcision, gender and change in Harar, the role of individuals in the production of symbolic models is crucial to understand both the continuation of the practice, and processes of change. Critics who are skeptical of using Bourdieu’s habitus term, argue that if bodies and experiences are always directed by some dominating symbolic power, the subject seems to be trapped in historical, inescapable reproduction work. (Not unlike the critique of Foucault.) Thus Bourdieu has not been known for dedicating much space to change (Bjørnhaug 2002). However, in *Masculine Domination* (2000) he has devoted the last part of his discussion to change and endurance.

Bourdieu stress that habitus involves that subjects experience similar influences or symbolic systems differently, hence the individual habitus of subjects within the same context are not identical (2010:86). It may seem an obvious statement that all individuals experience the same thing differently, but general debates on circumcision have tended to generalize the experience of women. They tend to assume that women within circumcising communities act ‘blindly’ according to some oppressive ‘culture’, but by including the body, Bourdieu opens for variation within the symbolic structure. As illustrated by anthropological works on circumcision, experiences of circumcision is as various as there are individuals, and women will experience circumcision differently at different stages and places. A girl may eagerly await her circumcision and then be shocked by the pain involved. Afterwards she may feel pride of coping with it and being on her way to become a woman. Then as a mother, she may feel agony and even remorse as she sees her daughter suffer in the moment of circumcision. Even though the habitus of these women can be said to involve the importance of circumcision, it does not mean that they are ‘prisoners of ritual’ who’s perception of the world always correlate with the symbolic models.

Bourdieu’s theory on change further involves that any break in the reproduction has to involve a radical change in the premise for production of the habitus, the symbolic order, an altering of the mechanisms that produce the rules of the game (Bourdieu 2000: 51). Bourdieu further writes that consequently, an analytical understanding of change can only be reached

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9 Bourdieu writes that habitus is ”history turned into nature” (2010: 78). In this sense Bourdieu’s project in *Masculine Domination* is similar to Foucault’s project in *The History of Sexuality* (1984). As Bourdieu recognizes himself, they both attempt to connect the unconscious, which constructs sexual and gender relations, to the (re)production of this history. But as Bourdieu argues, it is not enough to understand the historical conditions which affects gender at certain historical moments (discourse), but also ”senses, lust, perception, instincts and passions” (2000: 112).
through an analysis of the change in mechanisms and institutions that endorse the gendered order (ibid: 93). If circumcision, as I will argue, can be seen as one such mechanism contributing to a certain gendered order, then this study of change is also a study of change in the gendered order, and habitus.

Bourdieu further notes especially three domains in which this production of symbolic models is constantly occurring: the family, in the educational system and in religion. This argument carries with it another analytical point. That any genuine effort to understand the establishment of gender relations, and hence change thereof, has to recognize that these relations are produced in the entirety of ‘social rooms’, family, work, media, bureaucracy and educational institutions (Bourdieu 2000:111). Circumcision and issues of gender in Ethiopia is now very much part of an official debate, which is present in the media (through media covered happenings and focus on women’s and children’s rights), the state (through national anti-circumcision campaigns) and in schools. I will in this thesis attempt to explore the connection between the discourse of these different social domains, and the experience and opinions of the people I talked to in Harar.
Ethiopia (Url: Africa Dreamer)

Map of the old town, Harar. The brown line marks the city wall (url: Google Maps)
2. Circumcision and Methodology

“It doesn’t matter if you go there when the coffee bushes are in flower and the air is heavy with their strong, bitter scent, or when the ripe fruit of the orange trees glow in the sunlight, it is always lovely in Harer; there is always something blooming, always something harvested.” (Buchholzer in Zekaria 1999: 18)

Harar, the city ‘par excellence´

The city of Harar lies on the Hararge plateau of Eastern Ethiopia, about 500 km from the capital Addis Ababa. If you, as visitors often do, enter Harar from the Addis Ababa road, the bus will drop you off in ‘the new town’, right by the shopping mall and the street café serving machiatos and bombolinos (donuts). The streets are full of people, some dressed in suits, sellers of all kind, beggars, and some just roaming the streets. It all gives the impression of a thriving ‘new’ Ethiopian city. Watching the hillside where the town is situated you can see the contour of the city wall that encompasses the manmade beauty of the old town, Jogul. As one enters Jogul, the small narrow streets in shades of white and grey is in itself breathtaking as it reveals houses, marketplaces, mosques and beautifully carved doors in lively colors. In the main street Meki na Girgir, shops provides fabrics in every color imaginable, and in the street, men sit by their sewing machines. Women in their colorful dresses sit along the streets selling fruit, and ch’at.\(^\text{10}\)

Harar has a long and multifarious history of religious conquering and Muslim scholarship, which I could not give justice within the scope of this thesis, but I will briefly mention a few central points. Sheikh Abadir Umar Al-Rida is believed to have arrived in Harar with 43 holy, Muslim men, around the 12\(^{\text{th}}\) or 13\(^{\text{th}}\) century.\(^\text{11}\) Sheikh Abadir is still highly recognized and worshipped as the organizer of Harar’s inhabitants and the spiritual protector of the city and his tomb is considered one of the most holy places in Harar.

\(^{10}\) Catha edulis; (in Ethiopia pronounced ch’at), the green leafy plant with amphetamine-like stimulants are widely grown in the Hararge area. One myth believes Harar to be the origin of ch’at, and (whether true or not), it is to this day clearly central to social life in Harar, and widely chewed at social gatherings, for work purpose (as is it believed to enhance concentration) and for religious (Muslim) prayers, and rites (see Rushby 2003). For many, ch’at is used on everyday basis, and it affects family relations and income, eating habits, opening hours of offices, and the general movement of people in the city

\(^{11}\) For extensive accounts on the history of Harar, Christian and Muslim conflicts and Oromo settlement see e.g. Zewde (2002), Zekaria (1999), Braükamper (2002) and Võ V An & Guleid (2007).
Emir Nur ibn al-Mūjahid is another central name in the history of the city. He is believed to have arranged the building of the city wall of Harar, Jogul in the late 15th century (Vô Văn & Guleid 2007: 4). Jogul served as a protection of the trade and immigration to Harar, it protected it’s people from intruders and consequently caused the language and traditions of the city to thrive (Waldron 1975). Today Jogul divides the narrow streets, unique architecture and mosques of the old town, from the rapidly growing more Orthodox Christian oriented ‘new town’. Because of its central religious history, some have considered Harar the fourth holiest city in Islam after Mekka, Medina and Jerusalem (url: UNESCO). With about 90 mosques within the relatively small area of Jogul, and over one hundred shrines (graves of saints), inhabitants termed it Madinat al-awliya, the city of saints.

The strong relation of the inhabitants to their city, is further exemplified in the language of the Harari peoples, the original inhabitants of Harar: Gey refers to the city, gey usu is ‘the people of the city’ and gey ada ‘the traditions of the city’, ‘the women of the city’ gey qahat, the clothes gey iraz and ‘the circumcision of the city’ gey absume. The uniqueness of its architecture, special religious strength as a Muslim center in a predominantly Orthodox Christian area, and its maintenance of the gey ada in close contact with other national and religious groups put Harar on the UNESCO world heritage list in 2006 (url: UNESCO).

The people of the city

The Harari are no longer the majority of the old town, and as the rest of Ethiopia, Harar is marked by a great variety of ethnic groups. According to the population and housing census from 2007, there were 99321 inhabitants in Harar, 24587 of these resided in the old town (CSA 2008). The ethnic composition was: Amhara 40,5%, Oromo 28%, Harari 11,5%, Gurage 7,9% and Somali 6,8%. Of these 48,6% were Orthodox Christians and 44,6% were Muslims. Although there are many Orthodox Christians resident in Jogul, the concentration of Muslims is higher within the old town where many Harari and Oromos are resident.

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12 The wall contains five gates, which today has given name to the five sections of Harar. At the time of Emirs these gates were closely guarded during the day, and closed at dusk.
13 Jogul covers an area of 48 hectares (Zekaria 1999).
14 In Ethiopia at large 43% are Orthodox Christian, and 33% Muslims (CSA 2008).
The narrow, bricked streets of Harar
In this thesis I concentrate on circumcision among the Oromo. This is partly because Oromo women were accessible as the largest group in the area. Also, there was recently done research among Harari women in the area (Lindner 2008), so the choice was also made in the interest of expanding knowledge and enable comparison.

The Oromos are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. By 2007 Oromo were 25,5 million (34,5%) of a population of 74 million Ethiopians that consist of over 80 ethnic groups and languages. The language of Oromo is called Afaan Oromo or Oromifa, and belongs to the eastern Kushitic language group. The Oromo spreads across a large area in Ethiopia, and they are dominant in several regions, such as Hararge. Because they are so widely spread across the country, Oromo traditions are highly diverse and developed in contact with neighboring ethnic groups (Melba 1991). As I will return to shortly, female circumcision is one example of such variation. The Islamized Harar plateau was struck by a large Oromo immigration from the 1570s onwards. The Oromo were mostly regarded as pagans, as they were pastoral nomads organized in their own Gadaa system.15 The Oromo started to settle down in the area as sedentary farmers, and became subject to a long history of islamization up to the late 20th century, and now, most Oromo in the area are Muslims. Currently, Oromo peoples in Harar engage, among other things, in farming and trade of coffee, ch’at, spices and vegetables.

Circumcision and methodology: Politicized narratives and the ideal fieldwork

As discussed by many anthropologists researching female circumcision (e.g. Rye 2002, Gruenbaum 2006), I instantly experienced that circumcision, as research topic is intricate and methodologically and ethically challenging. The circumcision ritual is not an action one can observe as ‘everyday behavior’, but an occasion that happens maybe a few times in each generation of a family. Nor is it the most common topic of conversation in social settings. This may especially be the case when there are visitors like a newly arrived anthropologist (e.g. Gruenbaum 2001). Studying female circumcision specifically thus relies strongly on spoken material and a reduced opportunity to see what people do in relation to what they say.

15 The Gadaa was an age set system among Oromo that provided different responsibilities for the individuals of each age set. Entailing strong guidelines for administration and organization, this system has guided all aspects of political, economic and social life. The Gadaa system has slowly lost its position among the Oromo (Melba 1991).
In addition, because circumcision is now illegal in Ethiopia, I feared that people would hesitate to talk openly due to a potential legal risk. Not to forget a potential fear for condemnation from the outsider. People I met were conscious of the common view of the *forenjo* (foreigner) on circumcision as brutal and unnecessary. As pointed out by Gruenbaum (2001), for these reasons, circumcision may for the outsider appear as ‘taboo’.

Consequently, my material is based partly upon narratives, and all narratives are political (Rye 2002: 130). The implications of this have for the analysis (during and after fieldwork) should be taken into consideration. People working in government offices in Harar told me that circumcision did not occur any more Harar, but only in surrounding rural areas and they advised me to do fieldwork in these areas if I wanted to study ‘practicing communities’. During fieldwork I learned that circumcision was not at all ‘dead’, but still supported and performed also by urban dwellers. The information from government officials might be due to a lack of empirical knowledge (both my closest acquaintances in these offices resided in ‘the new town’). It may also have been caused by an interest to communicate the merits and success of their campaigning. I will argue that the authoritative narrative of ‘the official Ethiopia’16 is to stress the awareness of the harmfulness of circumcision, the many efforts on eradication, and the current decrease.

This also affected my possibility to talk to circumcisers. As will be elaborated, there is a certain fear for juridical pursuit among practicing circumcisers in Harar. I was not able to locate any practicing circumcisers during my short stay, and many questions were left unanswered. Their current views on circumcision, and knowledge about the current situation of *absume* in Harar would have been interesting to the exploration of change and their role in the process. But due to limitations this will be discussed only briefly. On the other hand, as Wikan mentions, these politicized narratives offers opportunity to discover what the multiple, sometimes conflicting, concerns of people are (Wikan in Rye 2002: 134).

As I believe these conditions and my experiences in the field are central to the analysis and understanding portrayed, I find it difficult to write about circumcision without discussing some methodological principles. I will therefore devote space in this chapter to discuss the relation between individuals studied, the researcher, the field, analysis and representation.

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16 When I refer to ”the official Ethiopia” in this thesis, I think of the generalized view on circumcision as I experienced it in NGOs and Governmental programs.
Translation of language and gender

As I arrived in Harar I immediately started my search for an interpreter. My Amharic\textsuperscript{17} skills are very limited, and because I was working with Oromos, I needed someone who spoke English, Amharic and Oromo. Many people in Harar are fluent in several languages, and while English are now taught in school, English language skills are somewhat limited. Thus, it proved more difficult than I had expected to find a female interpreter. The girls that I met during my stay who spoke English fluently were either students or employed (or both!).

Naively, I had not arranged for someone to help me find an interpreter, and as I understood that this might be a challenge I made arrangements with a male friend I met when I arrived in Harar; he could be my assistant until I found a female interpreter. I will call him David. We became good friends and I expected our temporary work relation to function well, but as time went, he did not want to let go of the advantages and prestige that came with having a Norwegian (female) ‘employer’. Our relation became marked more by friendship than professionalism and he made efforts to take some control over the situation. He showed little understanding for my need to get a female interpreter and managed to sabotage some of my appointments and efforts to find someone by direct interference and by appealing to my conscience and dependence on him and the contacts I had gotten through him to finish my work. How could I just leave him all to himself so suddenly? He tried to convince me that if I did not work with him, I would have to start my research anew in a different town. So despite several attempts to end our work relation, I never succeeded in loosening the grip.\textsuperscript{18}

The implications this has on my material are manifold, and it is difficult to say what it would have looked like had I found a female assistant. While it did have positive implications to get perspectives on absuame from close male friends and cross-gender discussions, his presence might have impaired conversations with women. Spending much time with David, and consequently being associated with him in the town also affected my access to girls and women and is part of the reason for my lack of ‘interaction data’. On the other hand, some of the girls I knew best were also friends of him, and it is my impression that his presence did not necessarily affect their answers as much as they could have. It might in some cases have been an advantage that he was an acquaintance. In short, the limitations of having an interpreter became especially marked during my fieldwork and posed challenges personally.

\textsuperscript{17} Amharic is the official language of Ethiopia.
\textsuperscript{18} While our experiences in the field were different, Eva Moreno’s article from Ethiopia, Rape in the field: reflections of a survivor (1995), portrays relevant reflections on being a female researcher dependent on a male assistant.
Without elaborating further on the methodological debates on the use of translator, my experience point to practical challenges, but more importantly, how I experienced being a female researcher in Ethiopia, which is relevant for my experience of gender in Ethiopia.

**In between genders? The body doing fieldwork**

*Through fieldwork at the pleasure of the host culture, one learns one’s place there, and that is one’s only vantage point for penetrating the culture. Mistakes and mishaps in the field are great lamps of illumination if one survives, friendships there are the only greater source, besides being a divine comfort.* (Landes in Moreno 1996:219)

I am both methodologically and analytically inspired by an approach that includes the bodily experiences of people in the field and of me as a researcher. Particularly by Stoller (1989) who argues that the anthropologist should let her or his senses be penetrated by the world of the other. It is with our body that we sense the world we take part in. This is related to my discussion on embodiment, which also includes the body of the researcher in analysis. It is a recognition of that “Every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere” (Abu Lughod 2006:155) As pointed out by Ingrid Rudie, the dangers of an epistemological approach like this is that it becomes an exhibitionist project of “watch me watching the natives” (1997: 121). The project of including the researcher in the writing and analysis still seems somewhat controversial (Stoller: 1989) My experiences and social relations in Harar, my mistakes, predispositions, challenges and transitions is central to my understanding of the context studied, and this approach enables reflexivity and a critical view of my gaze. Which brings us back to the introductory discussion on relativism.

During fieldwork, I experienced that my movement became partly restricted. I learned that to move around on my own, or meet men in more informal settings could lead to inappropriate approaches, and my intentions could be misunderstood. In the beginning, this was quite uncomfortable, and I feared the implications this might have on my work. As Moreno notes, female anthropologists act outside the bounds of their own gendered order (1996: 218), and meeting the expectations of this ´other order´ might be a thought challenge. As I communicated my frustration to David, he did not offer moral support but said I should not move around as I wanted, and that I should not be so nice and smile to people all the time. I clearly lacked some embodied knowledge about ´proper behavior´, body language, how to move around and modes of dressing among women in Harar. Furthermore, I was
My appearance was neither proper female nor male but someplace in between. Somehow I appeared as what Roy Wagner might call an unconventionalized symbol. My own contextual experience of being a woman was brought to the field, a 25 year old unmarried girl, neither Muslim nor Christian.

As the fieldwork progressed, I also went through a personal transition. I became comfortable wearing the duriya (a common dress), felt almost awkward without it. In the beginning, I did not spend much time at the house as I moved around town to find people to talk to. I seldom cooked or spent much time on house chores. As time progressed my female neighbors seemed more at ease with my presence when I spent the days at the house, and they saw me doing things such as washing clothes and cleaning my room. In the beginning I was almost obsessed with running around trying to gather information about circumcision, but as time progressed I felt genuine wish for people to see me as a respectable woman. It was a realization that most of the information was right there in my home and personal relations. I went from being stressed about not getting enough done each day, not finding enough people to talk to, to spending a lot of time for instance at my ‘grandmother’s’ house trying to contribute a little as a member of the household.

**Methodology in sum**

I spent six months in Harar from January to August 2010. Due to personal reasons I had to take a two-month long field break during May and June. Despite the unplanned challenges, I returned to Harar with more specified questions and reflections after the months away from the field.

The intimacy of the topic and its methodological challenges, more than being limitations, were factors that affected my choice of approach and methods in the field. In the words of Rye this can be understood as a triangulation-like process where pre-defined research interests, analytical perspectives and the specificity and experience of a social reality constantly influence each other (2002: 109).

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19 I do off course bisect and simplify the gender relations in Harar here for the sake of the argument. As it goes I hope to illustrate that it is off course not as dichotomized as portrayed but full of variations and ongoing change. 20 Roy Wagner defines symbols as elements whose meaning constantly vary and develop. But the expression of such symbols are meaningful within a context in which parties share and understand these contexts, and they are conventionalized through the everyday production and reproduction in relations. Thus unconventionalized symbols bear meaning from a non-conventionalized context. In my understanding of Wagner, it is in this intricate dialectic between the conventional and unconventional that the constant ‘invention of culture’ occurs and in which new symbols are created and the conventional context is continuously developing. (1981: 37-38).
Due to the intimacy and politicization of the topic, I found it especially important to show respect for the privacy of my informants. Most of the conversations and more ‘formalized’ interviews were done in relaxed settings of people’s homes, while drinking coffee, having lunch or birtcha.\textsuperscript{21} The half structured interviews enabled an open conversation, where the respondents could lead the conversation in a direction they felt comfortable with (see Rye 2002:115). When discussed in an environment where people felt comfortable, circumcision did not at all appear as taboo. I got several pictorial explanations and illustrations of the incision itself, and I learned that both my fear of intruding and my shyness was stronger than that of my friends. Further, I attempted as clearly as possible to communicate my interest in the topic, which was to achieve some understanding of circumcision in Harar through respectful listening, not to argue against it. I was careful not to impose the topic and I got most information at times it seemed appropriate or people themselves initiated the conversation. I chose not to use my recorder out of concern that people might think the takes would be used for other purposes than transcription. And in conversations among friends about quite personal topics it did not seem appropriate to bring a recorder to the table. I have tried to maintain this respect in writing, by anonymizing the people I talked to.

In relation to my focus on change, I wanted to talk to young girls in Harar to get an understanding of their current relation to female circumcision. I made the assumption that middle and upper class people in Harar might relate differently to circumcision, and for that reason I focused on ‘average’ households in and around Jogul. I also spoke to elder women to explore any possible difference or correlation between generations. Finally, I talked to several boys and men to include the male perspective on female circumcision.

I also spent some time at Women Affairs Offices (WAO) in Harar and joined them on a few excursions to surrounding rural areas. But I deliberately chose to spend as little time as possible at these offices, as I did not wish to be connected with their campaign-work. I believe this was important in order for me to gain trust and honesty among people in the city. Written materials have also been collected from these offices and NGOs, which gives important insight to their policies and work with local communities.

\textsuperscript{21} Birtcha is Amharic for a ch’at session, usually from around mid-day.
3. *Gey Absume: ‘The circumcision of the city’*

Female circumcision appears in a great variety of social contexts across the African continent. Stretching all the way from Dakar in west, to Mogadishu in the east (see appendix) it is performed with or without ritual, in connection to or independent of initiation, during early infancy, related to marriage or at pregnancy (e.g. Mackie 2000). Further, it is connected to a range of different meanings. Some connect it to religious beliefs (Johnson 2000, Rye 2002), in Sudan and Somalia its role in the construction of womanhood, female bodies, fertility and sexuality has been accentuated (Boddy 1982, Gruenbaum 1996 & 2001, Talle 2003). For others it is explicitly connected to initiation rituals (Ahmadu 2000, Hernlund 2000). Thus, before I go on to explore the social significance of circumcision, this chapter will shortly introduce the context of circumcision as tradition in Harar.

**A recorded circumcision**

Towards the end of my fieldwork it became clear that I would not get the chance to be present at a circumcision ceremony. I was aware that there were some films about circumcision from the area and told David that I would like to watch and buy a copy if available. So, one day he had found someone with a movie. While I was thinking to just look around the video stores and organizations in Harar, this man, Abate, insisted that we came to his house to watch the film before I decided if I wanted to buy it. This was my first time seeing a full circumcision on film and I have to admit the seemingly ‘hard skinned’ anthropologist-to-be, did feel a little anxious about what was to come. We arrived at the house, clearly the house of a wealthy Ethiopian, with a neat living room full of flowers, family photos and comfortable sofas.

Abate was a photographer, and about two years ago he had participated in the arranging and filming of a circumcision. This was a raw tape of the ritual that might be used in anti-circumcision work by interested organizations. It is quite common in Ethiopia to use recorded circumcisions in anti-circumcision work to raise awareness about the circumstances.

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22 In this short introduction lies a great simplification. Within in each context circumcision exists within a complex set of meanings. Different places are thus not simply distinguishable by different meanings. The above is thus a fragmentary account of what some central anthropologists have focused on in certain fields.
Interestingly, I was offered to buy the movie for 20 000 birr (around 10 000 NOK). This was apparently because Abate was the one sitting on the rights to this film, and he was very interested in what intentions I had of using this movie if purchased. I suspected that my assistant had not explained my role and interest for the movie properly, and I tried to communicate that I needed it for my master thesis, worried that I would miss important points and symbols this first time. As expected, my note taking during my first view of a circumcision was limited by my personal reactions. Further, I was quite shocked by the man’s demand for 20 000 birr. As politely as I could I rejected his offer and gave him a last price, twenty times less than his price. The business was unsuccessful, and I did not get a chance to see the film again. After this business was discussed the situation became rather awkward and there was little ground for an in-depth conversation about the film, and I left his house with many questions unanswered. Who were the women present? What is the current situation of circumcision in the area? How did they experience being present? How did they finance the project? How much, or with what did they pay the circumciser?

My experience with Abate introduces interesting issues concerning the role of individuals engaged in anti-circumcision work, the strategies they use and their position in relation to communities they work with. And it illustrates that NGO, and ‘humans rights work’ interestingly is a potential source of income for certain parties. Due to my choice of focus in this thesis, anti-circumcision work will only be discussed briefly, and these topics will for now be left ‘up in the air’.

The film was from a Peasant Association (PA) about forty-five minutes drive from Harar town. The inhabitants of this area are Oromo people, and retrospectively I saw that the film resembled what I was told by people in Harar, when I asked them about the circumstances of the day. Although lacking relevant details due to circumstances, it will serve as an introduction to circumcision in the area.

*A day of Absume*

The scene of the circumcision was a little square mud-house, typical for the rural areas around Harar. The main room was full of women who were busy preparing the ceremony, and one could easily understand that something special was going to happen. The activity in the room was steadily increasing as they ensured that everything was in place. At the rear end of the
room a coffee ceremony was prepared, with the *jebena*\(^\text{23}\), incense and popcorn in place. There was also *achara*, the characteristic Oromo tea made out of the peel of coffee beans. Some of the women took care of the two girls who were the center of attention for the day. They were sisters, seven and nine years old. Especially the youngest girl seemed extremely agitated and scared. As the camera focused repeatedly on her face the fear in her eyes showed that she understood what was about to come. It seemed impossible for the women to calm her down.

As everything was arranged, and the girls prepared, the circumciser came into focus. A woman in her, I would guess, sixties. Her face revealed a long life, her dark skin marked by roughness and wrinkles. Her hair was gathered in two knots in the back of the head, and covered by a black cloth, a typical Oromo hairdo. As she prepared for the circumcision, we could see her spraying perfume on the girls, herself and around the room. The two girls were then dressed in new clothing; two beautiful dresses, and placed on an elevated area for everyone to see. Words of cheer came from the crowd. Next, the circumciser brought two chickens from outside, which she slaughtered in front of the two girls. Some of the blood was collected in a cup, and applied to the hands and feet of the two girls.\(^\text{24}\) The chickens were then waived three times above the girls’ head. The circumcision could begin.

The youngest girl was brought forward first. She struggled, tossed and turned to get away from the grip of the women. Calm, but firmly, several women got the little girl into position while she continuously tried to get away from their grip by kicking, tossing and screaming. Finally she was seated in front of a woman in the elevated area of the room. The woman was sitting with her legs apart so that the girl could sit in between them with her back against the woman’s upper body. A long scarf was tied around their waists and thighs to prevent any movement. The girl continued screaming, praying to Allah for them to let her go. The circumciser was now seated in front of the girl, with the razor blade in her right hand. The camera zoomed in on the area of cutting. As the cutting started, the blood started to flow, and it became difficult to see what was actually taken away. The exterior of clitoris was definitely removed, and one could see how the circumciser pulled the skin to get parts of the labia majora and labia minora, and then cut through. But the wound was not closed, as it would be during an infibulation. All the way through, the screams were like nothing I have ever heard before. They were loud and unbridled and bluntly filled the room with her fear and pain. It was a constant reminder of the agony she was in. After a couple of minutes the

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\(^{23}\) Black clay pot used for serving coffee.

\(^{24}\) A former circumciser later told me that this was done (partly) to distract the girl from her fear of circumcision.
procedure was over. The girl at once became silent, and the look in her face showed a great relief, but constant pain and utter exhaustion. Kohl\textsuperscript{25} was then put on the wound, and she was carried and put on a mattress in the room next door to relax.

Then, it was the older sisters turn, and the same procedure was repeated. The girl, a little calmer than her sister, was also tied to a woman behind her. The circumciser, still with the blade in her hand, began to cut. From the film it was not possible to see all the activities and as far as I could see the circumciser quickly washed the blade in some water, not using boiled water or disinfectant. This time she struggled a little to cut through the skin, and again it was difficult, due to all the blood, to see what was actually removed. A few minutes later it was all over. The wound covered in black coal, the girl was placed next to her sister on the mattress, and the clip showed their mother with a smaller child on her lap, sitting next to her daughters. The look on her face expressed concern and worry for the two girls.

A successful circumcision was completed and the celebration could begin. The removed clitoris was put up on the wall and covered by dirt. I was told this was for good luck in marriage.\textsuperscript{26} One could see the men who were present during the filming in conversation with the circumciser. As I was told, they were talking to her about using the same blade for both the girls. The film ended with the view of women serving the coffee, and outside children were jumping and struggling to get pieces of candy handed out by one of the women.

After the film was finished I looked at David. This was also his first time to see a female circumcision, and I knew that his knowledge about the topic before working with me was limited. He had done his own circumcision in the safe environment of a hospital, and male circumcision being less dramatic; I could see on his face that he had not expected the ‘brutality’ the film revealed. He immediately exclaimed: - I did not know it was this serious. It is horrible! - I don’t understand how they can do this. He had especially noticed how the circumciser was struggling a little to cut through the skin, as the razor blade was seemingly quite dull. Shivers went down my own back; the close-up pictures of the scared younger sister, and her screams had burned into my memory.

I have described this film with clear reference to the painful experience of the girls. It is not the intention here to stress the ‘brutality’ of the procedure and the women present. Rather, as I will discuss later, the pain of circumcision can be understood as meaningful, and thus

\textsuperscript{25} Kohl is a black coal-like substance. This is often mixed with incense, ash and local herbs and applied on the wound to stop the bleeding and enhance the healing process.

\textsuperscript{26} I will return to the issues of marriage and circumcision in the chapters below.
women would not necessarily define this situation as very brutal. Rather, this is a result of my experience seeing the movie. In relation to the methodological discussion above, I believe description cannot and should not attempt to escape the storyteller for the aim of some ‘objective’ description. Both the experience of my interpreter and my self says something about the effects such screenings may have on people, whether it is a forenjo or a Harar resident. The similar reactions of David and me, and the overt concern of the mother in the film are interesting examples that work against any simplified portrayal of mothers and fathers as cynical mutilators. Thus, this film touches upon many issues in this thesis, such as pain, representation and anti-circumcision work. For now it will be the background for a further discussion on the circumstances of circumcision in Harar. I should stress that also within Harar, the tradition of female circumcision varies both within and across ethnic groups and religions. The following is a clarification of its circumstances as explained by my informants, also communicating its diversity and change.

Types of circumcision: from infibulation to clitoridectomy?

Oromo people generally described to me the ideal (Muslim) circumcision as removal of parts, or the tip, of the clitoris. Along with excision, these are the most common types of circumcision among the Oromo in Ethiopia, and in the Hararge region specifically.\(^{27}\) In a master thesis from Jogul 38% of the Oromo women reported to have undergone excision, and 28% clitoridectomy, while 8% reported infibulation (Linder 2008: 50).

These numbers suggest that excision and infibulation has a higher prevalence in Harar than among Oromos in general.\(^{28}\) As found by EGLDAM, the types of circumcision that are performed by ethnic groups are affected by their contact with neighboring ethnic groups. In Harar, Oromo circumcision is probably affected by close contact with the Somali, Harari and Afar national groups, which all have performed infibulation (2008a: 100).\(^{29}\)

\(^{27}\) According to the baseline study of EGLDAM, 90% of circumcisions in Hararge are clitoridectomies and 5% excisions (2008a: 101).

\(^{28}\) The Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) found that 2.5% of women in the Oromiya region had undergone infibulation, while 12.5% of women in the Hararge region was infibulated (CSA & ORC Macro 2006: 253). Since I am dealing with Oromo women living within the Hararge region, a specific study of the Oromo women within Hararge would have to be conducted for more accurate numbers.

\(^{29}\) Dealing with statistics and circumcision, care should be taken, as it is impossible to verify which incisions are done and the exact numbers of this decrease (see Talle 2010, Rye 2002). There is also a chance of underreporting, due to juridical risks and fear of condemnation.
Illustration of infibulation with ch’at leaves, made by Badriya

Acacia thorns
According to an extensive survey and follow-up survey done by EGLDAM, the Hararge region had a general decrease in circumcision of 17% between 1997 and 2007. Coupled with Lindner’s study and my own experience in Harar, there seem to be a quite rapid ongoing change in Harar. More specifically, recent studies from communities that perform infibulation also suggest a significant transition to milder incisions (Talle 2010). I believe that this has probably been the case also in Harar.

Talking about circumcision in Harar, infibulation never appeared as strange or unknown. Workers at the WAO of Oromiya were confidant that there was a significant decrease of infibulation in the region, maybe even a full stop. During one of my first visits to Badriya, a former circumciser, she helpfully illustrated how she used to circumcise girls. She put two leaves of ch’at together to illustrate the vulva. She then removed the top where the leaves conjoined to illustrate the removal of the clitoris. Then she explained how they would cut the labia to get a smooth surface. One of Badriya’s daughters then went to some bushes in their backyard and got some thorns from an Acacia tree. Badriya pierced the thorns horizontally through the conjoined ch’at leaves to complete the imaginary infibulation. Finally, she told me, kohl, often mixed with local herbs like feto (Lepidus sativum), and sometimes one raw egg is applied on the wound to stop the bleeding and enhance the healing.

Another point that is illustrative here is the Harari terminology for circumcision. In Harari, infibulation is gey absume; “the circumcision of the city”. This may indicate that infibulation was more widely performed among the Harari earlier. Gey absume connects this specific type of circumcision with the city and their valued gey ada. Clitoridectomy is referred to as arab absume, which points to an origin from Arabia. (See Lindner 2008)

I do not wish to speculate or exaggerate the previous prevalence of infibulation in Harar, but it became apparent that my informants were very aware of the type and knew that it had been common among the elder generations. Discussing change, this transition to milder incision is interesting to take into consideration. In Harar infibulation seems to have decreased dramatically, while clitoridectomies seem slightly more resistant to change. As mentioned, among Oromo women I talked to there was a tendency to support clitoridectomy, while disagreeing with infibulation. Possible reasons for these attitudes towards continuation, and change will be discussed throughout this thesis.

30 Talle’s research in Hargeisa, which is only a few hours drive away from Harar on the other side of the Somali-Ethiopian border, also finds a change to Sunnah in an area where infibulation used to be the norm. (Talle 2010)
The age at circumcision

Spread in such a big part of the country the age that Oromo girls and women get circumcised varies throughout Ethiopia. Muslim Oromos generally circumcise girls from four years of age until marriage (EGLDAM 2008a: 96), but where there is contact with Orthodox Christians circumcision might occur at an earlier stage.\(^{31}\)

In Harar the girl is usually circumcised between seven and twelve years of age. I was presented with several reasons for this: In relation to religion it is believed that girls should be circumcised to become clean. According to the erudite Muslim men I talked to, a girl cannot be considered unclean until she has reached a certain age, when she has gotten her menstruation and is potentially sexually active. Hence the most important thing is for her to be circumcised before she reaches that age. Secondly, Badriya, as a former circumciser explained that if one performs the circumcision at a too early age it is difficult to know what to cut. Thirdly it is believed among some that if cut to early the genitalia might grow back.

In relation to change, Talle suggests that a decrease in circumcision and a transition to milder forms might affect the age at circumcision. Milder circumcisions make it possible to circumcise younger girls, as they can better handle the less severe incisions (2010: 110). In Harar some people said that the girls in Jogul could be circumcised from around the age of three. As there is some fear in Harar of the law on circumcision now introduced, it is probable that some circumcise girls at a younger age in the effort to get it done as quietly as possible. A growing knowledge among young girls of its illegality and possible consequences may also make it preferable to perform it as early is as possible according to tradition. In short, this illustrates that anti-circumcision arguments affect the performance of the tradition as it is adjusted in relation to local beliefs.

The circumcisers

Female circumcision in Ethiopia is usually performed by women that often function simultaneously as traditional births attendants (See Rye 2002: 170).\(^{32}\) It is stated in several

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\(^{31}\) Among Orthodox Christian Amharas circumcision of girls ideally occurs 7 days after birth (Rye 2002). Accordingly, some Muslim Oromo in Ethiopia circumcise at a very early age (EGLDAM 2008a: 95).

\(^{32}\) Men do also sometimes circumcise girls in Ethiopia. According to Rye this might be because among those groups who perform circumcision at infancy, the girl is said to be not fully human and hence the notion that a man should not ‘see’ a girl, does not apply when she is as young as a few days (or months old), she is not yet considered to be fully human (Rye 2002. 171). I was told that there were male circumcisers also in Harar,
studies that the skills of circumcision are typically a kind of knowledge that are passed down through generations (Rye: 171). Already introduced above, one of my closest acquaintances during the fieldwork was Badriya. She started her work as a professional circumciser when she was 25 and decided to quit about seven years ago, which meant about 17 years in the profession. When I asked Badriya how she had started as a circumciser, the story began with her grandmother. They had been neighbors with a circumciser, and her grandmother had been called once to assist holding a girl during a circumcision. Her grandmother had shown herself as a capable woman and became experienced as this woman’s assistant. She had been able to watch how the woman was working, and when the neighbor died, Badriya’s grandmother started working as a professional circumciser. Badriya then learned her skills through observing and assisting her grandmother.

However, the skills of circumcision do not have to ‘travel’ in a linear transfer of knowledge through generations. The story of the grandmother implies that several factors influenced the choice of profession. As Badriya said, a woman who becomes a circumciser has to be strong. It is a profession that requires certain personal skills (See Johnson 2000, Rye 2002). For instance she has to handle the incision on girls who are often quite scared, and endure the spilling of blood. As Talle (2010) and Rye (2000: 175) writes, circumcisers inhabit a particular, ambiguous, position in the society. They are exposed to bodily fluids that are considered impure and perform work that is potentially dangerous in several ways. Simultaneously they possess knowledge that has been crucial to the moral upkeep of society (ibid).

As mentioned, finding circumcisers posed a serious methodological challenge during my fieldwork. Compared to countries where circumcision is not illegal there are more at stake for circumcisers in countries where there are legal risks. Talle (2010) recently did a follow up study in Hargeisa, Somalia, where she was able to do research among as much as eighty circumcisers, who gave her valuable information about ongoing change, types of incisions and who these circumcisers actually circumcise currently. I suggest that the law in Ethiopia, while succeeding in persuading many circumcisers to change their profession, may also have caused some to ‘go underground’.

Badriya welcomed me warmly into her house, and openly answered my questions. I frequently visited her daughters and Badriya usually came home late afternoon from work at although I was never able to talk to any, or to verify this information, or to check if this applied for Orthodox Christians or Muslims.
her farm, often with a bundle of ch’at for her goats and some for the guests. She was honest about her support for the continuation of the practice. About the official anti-circumcision campaigns she said: -If they (government officials) knock on my door I will welcome them and listen politely. But I would still take my children to the countryside to get circumcised. There is thus no reason for me to believe that Badriya still works as a circumciser.

Considering her continuous support for the practice, I asked her why she chose to quit her work. She said that she feared the law. Concurring, many of my friends said they knew circumcisers in Jogul and it was clear that it is still an active profession in the town. But now performed in secrecy, circumcisers work at night and ‘sneak around the town’ when it is dark. Girls are also more frequently taken to the countryside for absume. Consequently, more circumcisers are from, or reside in rural areas.

The circumcisers are often central to anti-circumcision work, as they are considered potential agents of change. Thus this is relevant to my current exploration of change in Harar. The Ethiopian government now provide educational programs for traditional midwifes and circumcisers, where they are taught about the health consequences of circumcision. While this has been a profession loaded with valued traditional knowledge, being a circumciser now involves fear and secrecy. They are put in a position of ‘cultural discomfort’ (Rye 2002). The question then arises if circumcisers are the obvious agents of change or if they may be ‘custodians of culture’ (ibid). There is of course no simple answer to this question, but in tune with the argument of Rye; that circumcisers may still function as keepers of tradition (ibid: 183), the stories of practicing circumcisers sneaking around in the dark do suggest that some still play an important role in its continuation. Whether or not they quit their work seems to be dependent on their possibilities for other sources of income, and on their attitudes towards arguments that are communicated in educational programs.

**The decision-makers**

Women are not only central as the majority of circumcisers and several studies have discussed the position of women as the primary participants in the ritual (e.g. Talle 2003, Gruenbaum 2006). As seen in the film, it is women who are responsible for most of the practical preparation of the circumcision (Even slaughtering of the doro, which is usually ‘men’s work’). Circumcision often takes place at the house of the girl or alternatively at the house of the (coming) mother-in-law (Lindner 2008). Men are often excluded from the actual circumcision, and the only men present in the film described were the ones doing the filming.
As pointed out by Rye, when circumcision is done on girls who have passed the infant stage it is inappropriate “for a man to ‘see’ a girl (...) that is no longer a child.” (Rye 2002: 171) This ‘exclusion’ can also be connected to Muslim regulations on cross-gender interaction.

Among my informants in Harar it became clear that mothers also play an important role in the decision on whether or not to circumcise daughters. Fikr, a friend of mine, is from an Orthodox Christian family in the neighboring town Dire Dawa. She told me that her mother had her circumcised when she was about 7 days old, while her father was away, unaware of the happening. In a campaign movie about circumcision that I was shown at the family planning office in Harar, the father of the girl who was circumcised was interviewed, saying it had been done against his will. The mother had insisted on their daughter’s circumcision. Lindner also states that the main facilitator and initiator among all her informants is the respective mother (2008: 61), who receives support from female family members, neighbors and close friends.

While the role of women was stressed in the information I got one should not underestimate the influence that men have over this decision. It is also in the interest of a father that his daughters are respectable, polite towards her parents and others, a ‘good Muslim’ and a desirable, marriageable woman. Furthermore, religious knowledge is, at least traditionally, accentuated by men. The tombs of Harar are where much of the religious and social interaction is conducted. From my experience, those closest to the sheikh, and most openly discussing the religion are the men. The women stayed in certain parts of the room, or at some bigger tombs, in separate rooms during celebrations. Men’s importance as bearers and communicators of religious knowledge are hence crucial.

In short it is tempting to conclude, as many have done, that female circumcision is a brutal way for men to control their wives, daughters and marriage transactions, and so retain some patriarchal power. I will in this thesis seek to nuance this picture by elaborating on the several functions of circumcision that I argue have been central to the fulfillment of a female identity, in which women and men’s participation enables its upkeep and change.

**In sum**

This chapter has, apart from the short clarification of certain circumstances of *absume*, illustrated that anti-circumcision work may, rather than eradicating it, result in changing the performance of the ritual. The incisions done, the scope of the celebration, and the changing meanings of symbols are all affected by the anti-circumcision discourse. Since I have not
been able to observe ‘the ritual’ as such, an extensive discussion on this is out of reach. However, with my focus on change and the individual experience, this study seeks to move away from any anthropological understanding of ritual and religion as static.

Some classical anthropological works on rituals and religion have focused on its function for the social integration. In Victor Turner’s (2002) study of rites de passage among the Ndembu of Zambia, he poses that the initiation rites of chiefs involves a liminal phase of isolation which entails elements, symbols and experiences for the initiates that alternate existing structures and social relations. Hence within the ritual lies potential for a creative phase of anti-structure. But as he poses, after the liminal phase, the initiate is reintroduced to community and returns to a relatively stable state and a consequently strengthened communitas. As Mitchell (2002b) argues, what is problematic with such theories is that it seems to end up allowing a continuous reproduction of social orders through ritual.

The ritual of circumcision seems to entail certain elements that alternate the social order, such as the pain, which will be discussed further. Thus I will attempt to illustrate that circumcision rituals in Harar are both subject to and place for change, in which the participation and experience of individuals is one potential source for change.
4. In the City of Saints: Female Circumcision and Islam

One of the main arguments of absume I encountered in Harar concerned its necessity in the fulfillment of ideals of purity, and women´s ability to enact religious dedication. As several people told me, an uncircumcised woman is impure and unable to perform her religious deeds. Simultaneously, many Muslims are now aware that female circumcision is not mentioned in the Qur´an (Gruenbaum 2001, Abusharaf 2006). It is also argued in Harar (and `globally´) that female circumcision is a non-religious act against Allah´s good will for all people. Nonetheless, some women and men in Harar still believed female circumcision to be a recommendation by the Prophet Muhammad.

Thus, in extension of my discussion on discourse and embodiment by Foucault and Bourdieu, with Csordas´ call for a dialectic approach, this chapter will firstly explore the relation of circumcision to embodiment of gendered religious ideals of purity and virginity and the religious conduct of women in Harar. Secondly, this will be connected to the discourse on religious concepts among religious scholars, sheikhs, governmental offices and religious followers in Harar.

In relation to change I argue that individuals take part in the development and change of religious ideals through their bodily experiences and everyday religious conduct. As further argued by Csordas, religion is one domain of society that clearly shows the body as a phenomenon shaped by contexts (1994: 3). People in a specific religious context will endow themselves with certain types of bodies in order to come in relation with the deity they relate to (Feher in Csordas: 3). I argue that the circumcised body has been one way for people in Harar to enable their relation to Allah, but as more Muslims question the necessity of circumcision, the legitimacy of the circumcised body is questioned and enables the legitimacy of the uncircumcised body in religious conduct.

While I now devote significant space to the relation between absume and Islam, this is not to say that it is the sole reason for circumcision, neither is religion analytically separable from local ideals of gender, the body and social relations. Further, while there are great doubts among researchers about the origin of circumcision, there seems to be agreement that Islam cannot be it. Circumcision is estimated to predate Islam and had practical functions that suggest a non-religious origin, such as protecting women from sexual assault when working out in the fields (Van der Kwaak 1992: 781) or control of marriage relations (Talle 2003).
Still, religion was an important part of the exegesis in Harar, and debate on religious terms surfaced.

**Islam in Harar:**

*Qu’ran at the museum of Bureau of Culture*

*Sufi tomb, outside Harar*
**A visit to the saints**

Before I move on to elaborate these arguments a short introduction to the tradition of Islam in Harar will ‘set the scene’.

Across the street from the room I rented in Harar, somewhere right outside the north end of the city wall of Harar, rests one of the many ‘saints of the city’. From outside the bricked wall, one can spot the top of the grave with its characteristic rounded roof. Connected to the tomb was the home of a sheikh, a place where believers would come day and night to pray and take part in religious and social activities. I was told that the sheikh of this tomb was a very known and wise man. So one Friday David, his friend Daniel, and I decided to visit the tomb.

The house, situated across the yard from the actual grave, consisted of one big room. The sheikh was seated in one end, on the floor leaning his upper body to one side on a stack of pillows. In front of him were bundles of ch’at. There were about fourteen other people in the room all seated on the floor, facing the place of the sheikh. The women were sitting at the back of the room, except for his wife who was sitting by the entrance of their bedroom, close to her husband. The floor was covered with straw mats and the walls decorated with religious paintings and Arabic writings, and the smell of etan, the incense often used in religious (and more casual) settings, filled the room. On the floor were piles of ch’at, and everyone was eagerly chewing while listening to the chanting of the sheikh.

Stunned by the peacefulness and almost divine atmosphere of the room I carefully took off my shoes and found a place together with my two friends in the middle of the room, between of the colorfully dressed women in the back and the men taking up most of the room. As we sat down the sheikh seemed to be in the middle of a praying session. The rest of the crowd listened carefully to his chants and replied with confirming sounds. Unable to understand anything as it all went on in Oromo and Arabic I could only get a feel of the importance of the words and prayers. There was a certain rhythm to the prayers and the replies, making it resemble a song.

As this visit was not planned I was not prepared for what met us inside, and I was rather shamefully dressed in trousers and t-shirt, with my hair uncovered. The women behind me made me feel a lot more comfortable when they kindly gave me a fota (scarf) big enough to cover both my hair and my upper body and feet as they wrapped it around me while sitting on the floor. We could now join the people respectfully in the chewing of ch’at.
The sheikh warmly welcomed us and asked where I was from, and for what purpose I came to visit their tomb. My friends explained that I was in town for research and wanted to learn more about the Islamic traditions in the area. He gave me good wishes for the research and said I was welcome to ask any questions I wanted. Followed by the saying; “the person who is interested will not be hungry”. Throughout our stay, the praying and chanting by the sheikh continued sporadically. Especially one man sitting close to us, Abdi, kindly answered my naïve and curious questions and this morning’s impulsive visit became more informative than I could ever imagine. The discussions this morning will be referred to throughout this chapter.33

Islamic as discursive tradition

Across and within the different law schools of Islam worldwide, fascinating variations vouch for its local specificity (e.g. Gruenbaum 2001). As illustrated above, religious practice in Harar is no exception, marked by worshipping of saints at tombs, communal musical chanting of Allah with drumming, the religious relation to the chewing of ch’at, and blessings by local sheikhs. Some of these practices are said to be unconventional to Islam, but these variations are locally legitimized fusions of Islamic readings and pre-Islamic beliefs and practices.

Consequently, my discussion on circumcision and religion entails a certain perspective on religious practice. I am here inspired by Talal Asad’s (1986) concern with writing against the idea of Islam as a historical totality apt for anthropological inquiry, generalizable into an ‘anthropology of Islam’. Rather, he argues, through a continuous negotiation of orthodox traditions in the relation between texts, scholars and practice, arguments over the significance of practices is an integrated part of Islam. It is a fundamentally discursive tradition.

Thus, circumcision is as such a negotiated practice, where the different Muslim schools of thought worldwide also affect interpretations, which explains why female circumcision is not a universal Muslim practice. Islam in Harar belongs to the shafi’i, a school of law (fiqh) within the Sunni branch of Islam (Url: Law Emory 2002). Shafi’i gives authority to four main sources of jurisprudence. The primary and most important is the Qur’an. Second is the

33 I might be guilty of exoticising my visit to the sheikh through this description, and for a forenjo entering such a setting for the first time definitely evokes certain impressions of ‘holiness’ and sacrality. For the people I met though, this was very much an everyday setting where one shares personal concerns, chat about everyday life, eat and pray together. The description is hence more a declaration of my meeting with a world I had never before encountered.
**Sunnah**, traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, which is the life and ways of the Prophet written down in form of Hadiths. Third is consensus among sheikhs and religious scholars, and fourth the use of deductive analogy (qiyas), a process of comparing the Qur’an and Hadiths to create new injunctions to solve new problems (Mohamud 2010). The Sunni focus on Hadiths as second source might partly explain why there has been a tendency among its followers in eastern Africa to perform female circumcision under the umbrella of religion, as it was believed to be advised by a Hadith. (This will be elaborated below.)

**Najash: circumcision as rite of purification**

*You who believe, do not come anywhere near the prayer if you are intoxicated, not until you know what you are saying; nor if you are in a state of major ritual impurity – though you may pass through the mosque – not until you have bathed; if you are ill, on a journey, have relieved yourself, or had intercourse, and cannot find any water, then find some clean sand and wipe your faces and hands with it. God is always ready to pardon and forgive.*

- Qur’an 4:43 (Haleem 2004)

All the people I talked to in Harar who supported absume, or those with knowledge on the topic, confirmed the belief that a girl cannot do her selat (prayers) or enter the mosque unless she is circumcised. She is considered to be dirty, najash. For such a girl, it was said, no one would even want to visit her grave. As Abdi elaborated, bodily fluids like urine, menstruation blood, semen, and situations like birth and intercourse, are considered unclean and pollutive. According to him, there are especially three things that are important for both men and women before selat, clean clothes, a clean body and a clean praying place. Consequently, he continued, - The Islamic laws tell us everything about what to do, how to wash, how to walk and even how to go to the toilet. The rites of purification in Islam as advised by The Prophet include the five norms of the Fitrah, “the shaving of the pubis, the circumcision, the cut of moustaches, the shaving of armpits and the size of the nails.” (Al-Sukkari in Abu-Sahlieh 2006) Hence, absume can be considered part of this rite of purification.

Believers should be pure in order to share with Allah, but the ideal of purity is not only physical; you also have to have a pure and faithful heart. As Abdi elaborated he told us a story from the time of The Prophet: There was a man who had no arms, and consequently he was not able to keep himself clean. For this reason he had given up his prayers to Allah. Muhammad met this man and noticed that he was not praying and asked him why he did not pray, implying that his faithfulness to God, his pure heart, is more important than his inability to keep physically clean. In the words of Abdi; - to be pure is also about having a complete mind.
Neither is \textit{absume} only about physical purity, but (ideally) secures a woman’s virginity, respectability and faithfulness in marriage, which are important religious deeds. (I will elaborate on this shortly.) Thus, through enabling spiritual and bodily purity, \textit{absume} contributed in bringing women closer to Allah, as more fulfilled religious persons.

Saba Mahmood argues that religious virtues are created in a process of socialization and disciplinary techniques that act in the conceptual relationship between memory, bodily acts and the constitution of the self (2001: 214). Thus through religious actions women’s desires and religious deeds are shaped. She learns to value an appropriate ‘shyness’, and she feels genuinely uncomfortable without a veil. This is in concordance with my discussion of embodiment and habitus, and I argue in this chapter that female circumcision has been a tradition partly aiming at the socialization of religious virtues of premarital virginity and respectability.

As such, circumcision in Harar is somewhat comparable to Michelle Johnson’s (2000) studies among Muslim Mandingas in Guinea Bissau. She argues that circumcision among Mandingas can be understood as a rite of purification that establishes a woman’s Muslim identity. The following quote might very well fit to the context of Oromos in Harar: “If you cannot pray, then you are not a Muslim, and Mandingas are Muslims.” (Ibid: 219) If religious integrity is assumed to be an important part of women and men’s identity, in worst case, impurity means inequality and exclusion from the religious and ethnic group one belongs to. Furthermore, Johnson also found that as a girl’s body matures, she becomes closer to polluting substances of menstruation, birth and intercourse, and her ‘status of purity’ changes. As already mentioned, for this reason girls in Harar get circumcised before they reach this age of maturation. \textit{Absume} then seems to mark the first step in initiating the segregation of the sexes, and the construction of a gendered identity partly based on religious ideals. (See Van der Kwaak 1992) In my understanding, young girls can be said to be ‘not fully gendered’ before they reach the age of impurity and have gone through this rite of purification.

But, in my opinion, caution should be taken when discussing circumcision and religion as it risks simplifying circumcision within a religious frame, defiant to change. Johnson argues that because circumcision is performed among Mandingas long before marriage, it is different from where it is performed at a later age in connection with adulthood, marriage or gender initiation. Rather, she argues, because it is not directly linked to the above, the main function of circumcision is the construction of religious identity (2000: 219). I would argue that even though circumcision in Harar is not directly connected to marriage or initiation rituals, \textit{absume} facilitates marriage relations and credibility as well as socialization into
womanhood in a more ‘general’ sense. For instance female sexuality is based on local beliefs about the body, the clitoris and female sexuality. In other words I agree with Mary Wangila that even though religion is tightly connected to society at large, it does not mean that everyday lifestyles are inseparable from religion (2007: 170). Thus female identity is not solely a religious identity, and circumcision has several functions that together constitute a female identity.

Furthermore, it appeared during my fieldwork that ideals of purity were negotiable and debated. The quote from the Qur’an above and the story told by Abdi shows the forgiving spirit of Allah. The most important thing is the faithfulness of the heart. If one were to take the demand for purity literally, female circumcision becomes a religious obligation important in efforts to achieve purity. On the other hand, if the nuances of religion, people’s lives and practices are taken into consideration, purity appears as an ideal rather than obligation. Aisha, a fourteen-year-old Muslim girl and a close friend of my neighbor Iman, told me that she was not circumcised. A decision made by her parents. Apart from being uncircumcised, Aisha always dressed decently with her hair covered and, contrary to the ideal, she spent a lot of time during Ramadan in the mosque. Her visits to Iman’s compound became less frequent as she was busy preparing and taking part in religious activities during this festive month. Aisha seemed to be an acceptable young Muslim woman despite not being circumcised. As there is a significant decrease in circumcision among Muslims in Harar, it becomes clear that being a Muslim and being uncircumcised is not at all mutually exclusive identities.

For one, this case shows a discrepancy between religious theory and everyday practice. Furthermore, this highlights another central point in this thesis. In her studies of urban women’s mosque movements in Egypt, Mahmood (2001) writes that a problem with many feminist studies of women’s movements is the assumption of a universal desire to be free from structures of domination, in this case Islam. Mahmood argues that studies of agency should avoid comparing self-realization with autonomous will. Agency does not equal overt resistance. Rather, she argues, power is not only domination but also provides the means by which a self-conscious identity and agency is created. This is also in tune with my previous discussion on Foucault’s theory of power.

Inspired by Mahmood’s point I argue that absume has been one mechanism that has enabled a female religious identity. As an increasing number of girls in Harar disagree with absume and are uncircumcised, stories such as Aisha’s do not depict acts of overt resistance. They still wish to fulfill ideals of respectability, womanhood and religious gendered demands, but disagree with the means by which it should be accomplished and negotiate its content. It
illustrates that women in Harar, as elsewhere, autonomously articulate their own discourse (Mahmood 2001: 207)

**Absume and respectability**

“[Prophet], tell believing men to lower their glances and guard their private parts: that is purer for them. God is well aware of everything they do.

And tell believing women that they should lower their glances, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should let their headscarves fall to cover their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons, their husbands’ sons, their brothers, their brothers’ sons, their sisters’ sons, their womenfolk, their slaves (...) “

- Qur’an 24:30-31 (Haleem 2004)

During fieldwork in Harar it appeared to me that how a woman presents herself, how she behaves and relates to the ideal of virginity at marriage, were important to her family. The challenge, as I attempt to get to terms with these observations, is that during conversations people did not put words on this apparent responsibility of the individual to her/his family and kin. My failure in getting the local terms for this may very well be due to my limited language skills or inadequate questions and translation. Despite this, I believe a short discussion on the term honor might prove it useful as an analytical tool in order to understand relations in Harar, also because the notion of honorability is present in religion, as in the quote above.

In studies of honor and shame, it is argued that maintenance of individual decency and dignity is not only a personal matter but depends on the members of one’s family, as well as oneself (See Gruenbaum 2001, Wangila 2007, Abu-Lughod 2008, Wikan 2008). I do not wish to depict my findings in Harar as a typical case of honorability or to enter extensively into that debate. That would be outside the scope of this thesis. Although, whether termed honor, respectability or something else, this depicts an understanding of the individual as not only responsible for her or his own actions, but for the credibility of family and kin. In such understandings of relationality, the practice and continuation of cultural practices (e.g. circumcision) become “of primary importance to all members of the community” (Wangila

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Shame can easily be confused with guilt. In relation to my argument on the embodiment of gender ideals, I understand shame here as a more deeply embedded discomfort with one’s self, or actions, than what guilt often refers to. An interesting further discussion could be to hypothesize that since more girls now disagree with circumcision and some of the gendered demands, potential consequences of ‘being unconventional’ might be more connected to guilt rather than shame.
2007:36), as they ensure the upkeep of religious and moral values, and the continued respectability of families. In this, the subjectivation\(^{35}\) of individuals occur in specific relations to the surroundings.\(^{36}\) In the words of John Mbiti, “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am” (Mbiti in Wangila 2007:36).

Writers have further argued that honor and shame is a gendered dichotomy. As in Anton Blok’s (1981) work on the Italian code of honor, men are more connected to honor, while women are understood as the vulnerable part, connected to shame. This might be exemplified by the Oromo proverb: “Women make things for fame, men fight for reputation.” (Cotter 1997: 83) Further, women are portrayed as more likely to indulge in ‘risky’ behavior (due to the ‘nature’ of their sexuality) and pose a risk to the honor of men. Female circumcision, as a mean to enable virginity and premarital chastity, puts a great responsibility for the upkeep of morality on women, and it seems to be a clear example of the embodiment of religious ideals. Thus, as suggested by Blok (1981: 434), it seems plausible to turn to terms of honor to understand why men have been so concerned with the virginity and chastity of women.

Before I move on, it should be noted that using the ‘code of honor’ analytically involves certain risks. ‘Classical’ anthropological studies of honor in the Mediterranean have been criticized for portraying honor and shame as the number one denominator from which everything derives. Hence contributing to stereotyping a whole area of anthropological study as ‘Mediterraneanism’ (Mitchell 2002a). Nancy Lindisfarne (1994) argues that honor-studies have portrayed an official version of gender, not taking account for endless variation and discrepancy between theory and practice. Virginity, she argues, has often been understood as an ‘all-or-nothing attribute’ and women have been depicted as either honorable or dishonorable. Illustrated by several studies on circumcision, the manifestations of gender ideals are far more complex in practice than ideal images of an unbroken hymen and penetrative sex (Lindisfarne 1994). Furthermore, my exploration of absume in Harar revealed changing perceptions and great variation in the ideals of virginity and respectability.

Hence I strongly agree with this critique, but it is tempting to argue that a certain gendering of decency is present also in Harar. For instance are Muslim women in Harar generally expected to dress in a certain way. The usual clothing for women from the city is the duriya, a foot-long, loosely fitting, comfortable dress in all colors imaginable. Under is

\(^{35}\) By subjectivation I refer to the discussion on embodiment by Csordas, in which I understand the process of subjectivation to occur in the dialectics between the body, subject and the social. As Csordas argues for an understanding that seeks to escape the dichotomies of mind-body, subject-object (1990: 6)

\(^{36}\) This is not to say that the ‘western, individualized self’ is independent of social relations. Rather, the specific relations of respectability are based on specific responsibilities of individuals towards their family and kin.
worn a t-shirt and a *googera*, a plain petticoat that often matches the *duriya*. As well, a *fota* is often worn to provide extra cover for the hair and upper body when moving around. According to Abdi, Muslim women should not wear clothes that reveal the shapes of their body, and they shall cover their hair. The only thing that should be revealed is her face and hands. Needless to say, men in Harar do not meet the same degree of demands concerning clothing. There are though great variations in the clothing of Muslim women in Harar, and few of my acquaintances were as ‘orthodox’ as Abdi. Nowadays it is not unusual to see young Muslim girls in Harar wearing fitted jeans and a *sash*, clearly nuancing certain religious instructions.

*Aamina*

One of the stories in Harar that I suggest depicts a contextual notion of relationality and respectability, and its diversity, is that of Aamina, my friend and neighbor in the compound across the tomb. She lived in one room together with her eight-year-old son Asad and worked as a ‘bar girl’ to make the ends meet. In the afternoons my assistant, friends and I would sit in our backyard, and I used to see Aamina, busy with domestic chores, outside the house cooking, cleaning house materials or washing clothes. But she was fond of her afternoon *birtcha*, and often joined the neighbors or us in the backyard for the afternoon chewing session.

A black sash usually covered her hair and when she was at home she would commonly wear a *duriya* and draped a big colorful *fota* over her head and shoulders when she went outside. Thus, there was little on the surface that revealed the nightly work of Aamina. Except from her face. 25 years old, one could almost see years of rough experiences in her face and narrow eyes. In her forehead, between the eyes, she had a tattoo that resembled a moon, which revealed her Muslim faith.

One of these days in the backyard, the wind and sand forced us to leave the company of the goats and oxen outside, and we moved into Aamina’s hospitable shelter. The room consisted of an elevated area where mattresses were placed along each wall. Aamina’s spot was on the right side by the entrance, and she seated herself with the bag of *ch’at* and cigarettes in front of her. The charcoal senser, was placed in the middle, where she occasionally added small flakes of incense, which filled the room with smoke and the smell of sandalwood.
Aamina was in a talkative mood that day. Not to say that she usually wasn’t. She always greeted us with a smile, and welcomed us into her house. But some days I could see that she was a little more thoughtful or quiet than usual. David once expressed concern that she might be badly treated by men sometimes, but if I ever heard Aamina complain, her main concern was that her son had to cope with the profession of his mother. She sometimes had to bring the men to her house to save the expenses for a hotel room, and Asad had to sleep in the same room as she worked in. Secondly, people in the neighborhood would know which kind of job she had. Being a prostitute in Harar is maybe as low as a woman can get in status, and the word for it, *shermota*, is frequently heard as a curse word when one wants labels someone negatively. While I saw the caress and care of Aamina as a mother who provided food for her son, followed him to school, and made sure he was neat and clean for the Friday mosque prayers, she was worried about how he coped with her profession.

However, this day, the conversation turned onto family life and religion. Aamina was born in the countryside, about 100 kilometers from Harar. She told me that when she was born her mother’s brother died at about the same time and her mother had left and her father raised Aamina. She moved to Harar when she was about ten years old, as she had some family in the area. This was also where she was circumcised at the age of twelve. After both her parents died, she was involved in a conflict with her siblings. They did not agree about her choice of husband, and neither did they approve of her profession. Aamina chose to marry a man out of love, the father of Asad, who apparently did not treat her well. According to David, who knew Aamina from before, her husband ran off with some money and abandoned her. Aamina continued the story: In the family feud, her family had turned to religion; - you are Christian, we are Muslims. Even though she is raised, and identifies as a Muslim, they pointed to her behavior as more Christian. I asked if she could elaborate on this. -If you look at it as a body, the Muslims are the front and the Christians are the back. By this they labeled her behavior less morally sound than that of ‘proper Muslims’. Aamina does no longer have much contact with her family. She refuses to accept such judgment. – I consider myself to be free. I am my own person and don’t care what people think.

Aamina further told me about her experience with circumcision and sexuality, which I will return to in the next chapter. In the current, her family relations introduce notions about family and religion. By their comment on her ‘Christian behavior’ they clarified what they considered to be proper Muslim behavior for a woman. Further, I believe that their ‘rejection’ of her suggests that how she behaved was important for the reputation of the family. For her family, Aamina had lost her religious integrity by her marriage and occupation. She also
smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol. This is behavior generally not common to see among women in Harar, and I suggest that her behavior indicates that she no longer had parents and kin to ‘represent’. Her behavior now only portrayed her own choices, which, as she said, she was willing to defend. In relation to Mahmood’s theory on agency (2001), there were still opportunities for Aamina to enact womanhood as a good mother who dressed respectfully. She portrayed the ability to define herself as a religious woman while neither virgin nor married. As noted by Lindisfarne (1994), the content and construction of gendered identities are not reducible to ideals of virginity and honor. Again, I argue, it is within this multifariousness women find opportunities to negotiate gendered ideals.

The virgin bride

Time to return to the ideal of virginity. The premise here is that *absume* have been understood as means to ensure premarital virginity. Several studies of circumcision (especially infibulation) show how it has served to protect the respectability of the girl and her family by preventing premarital sexual intercourse, promiscuity and in turn out-of-wedlock children (Gruenbaum 2001, Abusharaf 2006, El-Saadawi 2007). This is not only a Muslim demand as request for virginity and chastity are found in societies all over the world. However, adultery is also prohibited by the Qur’an and is a demand for both men and women. (e.g. *Sura* 24) While infibulation ideally functions as a physical hinder for premarital intercourse, also the removal of clitoris is believed to reduce a woman’s sexual desires and hence prevent licentious sexual behavior, a view widely reported to me in Harar. Thus, I argue that both infibulation and clitoridectomy in Harar can be understood in connection to ideals of virginity (see Gruenbaum 2001: 79).

Nawal El Saadawi’s (1980) studies from Egypt, where she ran a clinic as a medical doctor, reveals countless clients that were concerned about the hymen of a young bride or daughter. The concerns were so strong that the experienced doctor on a regular basis was asked to check if the hymen was intact. According to El Saadawi, the honor of the family was partly dependent on this very fragile membrane, and if broken before marriage it led to an almost unbearable shame.

The state of the vagina, in any types of circumcision, has depicted a woman’s way of life and been a prerequisite for marriage (Gruenbaum 2006: 128). In Harar, *hoda absume* was

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37 *Absume*, sexuality the socialization of gendered ideals are elaborated in the next chapter.
earlier performed to secure the virginity at marriage. Before the night of the wedding, a circumciser or traditional birth attendant would come to check that the circumcision was unbroken. This was crucial to the involved families, and if it was revealed that the girl was not a virgin, it was the right of the bridegroom’s family to cancel the marriage and reclaim the bride price. According to my friends, this physical check is not done nowadays, and the groom’s family rely more on the word of the girl and her family. And as there are mostly excisions and clitoridectomies performed one cannot check the ‘status’ of the circumcision. Nonetheless, virginity still appeared as quite important, at least for parents and grandparents. Rawdah, the mother of Iman and my neighbor for parts of my stay in Harar, told me that elder people have experience and can see from a girl’s appearance if she is a virgin or not. By this, Rawdah stressed that virginity is not simply a physical thing but also about how women present themselves.

*The making and unmaking of virginity*

What is notable here is that when virginity is about the appearance of the girl, and it is possible to reconstruct it through hymenorraphy, a simplistic understanding of virginity as a single, nonnegotiable demand is challenged. Where infibulation, or circumcision in general, is performed, re-infibulations and ‘performance’ enables a woman to reconstruct and negotiate her position as a respectable woman no matter broken or unbroken hymen or opened infibulations. There is a possibility to create an illusion of virginity (ibid 129). This brings us back to the Foucauldian understanding of the body as created by discourse, in which the bodily concept of virginity take different contextual forms. As in the widely sited words of Rose Oldfield Hayes; “in Sudan, virgins are made, not born” (1975: 622) In extension of this I argue that ideals of virginity in Harar is constructed and challenged in the intricate relationship between embodiment, performance and physicality.

During the last weeks of my stay in Harar, the month of Ramadan started and the atmosphere of the old town became marked by this holy month. Quiet during the day, the city ‘woke up’ after sunset. This was the time for the evening meals, evening prayers at the mosque, and many will stay *katira* socializing with family and friends until the morning. In

38 Hymen reconstruction operation.
39 *Katira* is the word for a nightly *ch’at* session. The chewing of *ch’at* has its hours. A ‘normal’ *ch’at* session in Harar goes on from around noon, after lunchtime, and lasts for a couple of hours. This is ‘the time for *ch’at*’. But for religious purpose (and sometimes for people studying), one can start the chewing after supper in the purpose of socializing and praying (or studying).
relation to this, Iman told me a little story: During Ramadan, a suitable dress for women is a foot-long, loosely fitting black dress with long sleeves, sometimes matched with a black headscarf. Then, she said, girls her age would put on this typical dress, and tell their parents that they were going to the mosque for evening prayers. But underneath they would wear fitted jeans and t-shirts, and sneak away to a secret place to meet boys, apparently to explore their sexual curiosity.

While this was a story I was unable to verify it seems that the ideal of virginity in Harar is exactly that, only an ideal. Especially among the young people this ideal of pre-marital chastity is changing. One of my friends in Harar, Hakim, was a very outspoken young man of nineteen who I found it easy to discuss all kinds of issues with. One day discussing the current situation of youths in the old town, Hakim expressed a slight frustration about today’s youths. According to him, it is common among youths to have boyfriends and girlfriends, and hence premarital intercourse. They no longer have a hurry getting married, but have several different partners before they settle down, and most girls are not virgins when they get married. In his opinion, – today’s youths are not in a good condition. They don’t know what marriage means anymore.

In short, this exploration of circumcision highlights a discourse and ongoing change of the ideals of virginity. Youths in Harar challenge it, both by avoiding it (by secret cross-gender interaction) and by being part of a general change in marriage practice, in which the meaning of virginity and pre-marital chastity decline.

**Sunnah: Duty or tradition?**

In extension of these variations and changes in ideals of purity and virginity in Harar, I also encountered a debate on religious teachings and texts. Considering that female circumcision is not written down in religious texts, the question then remains: is it part of Sunnah, as the traditions of Muhammad? Muhammad is believed to have said “circumcision is Sunnah for men, makrumah for women” (Al-Sukkari in Abu-Sahlieh 2006: 56), makrumah referring to meritorious or noble deeds, thus not obligatory. Others again, have documented that several places followers believe female circumcision to be a religious demand.⁴⁰ (see Johnson 2000, Boddy 1982, Talle 2003)

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⁴⁰ In many Muslim areas where circumcision is performed, the milder forms (excision or clitoridectomy) are called Sunnah. This inevitably connects it to the religion, and presents it as a religious obligation.
I also met these different views in Harar. Several people I talked to told me that Sunnah is good deeds and actions commendable by Allah, but not punishable if not performed. With this in mind I asked Abdi if he could explain what Sunnah is. For him, Sunnah consists of two parts; one that is duty, and one done by interest. Certain parts were obligatory, such as dress codes and daily prayers. I specified my question and asked if he considered female circumcision to be duty or interest. For him circumcision was a duty because a Muslim woman cannot be considered clean unless she is circumcised. But, he continued; the Qur’an tells us not to hurt the woman. To take too much is not allowed by our religion, but something has to be removed. As Sheikh Mohamud writes, one of the most important principles of Islam is, “do not accept that you are caused harm upon, and do no harm to others” (Mahmoud 2010: 72). Sheikh Mohamud uses these verses and principles to argue for a total abolition of circumcision, considering all kinds of circumcision as causing harm to the woman. Abdi used the same perspective to argue for a milder form of circumcision.

Without going further into a discussion on terminology, suffice to note that the understandings of Sunnah are not at all monolithic, but rather complex. For some it is all by interest, for some it is both interest and duty. This may result in very different outcomes in the question of female circumcision. Although strongly contested by some Muslims, Abdi’s view represented the view of several Muslims I talked to in Harar; that circumcision, in one way or the other, is required by religion.

Another example of terms nuanced is haraam, the Arabic term for forbidden. It refers to certain kinds of behavior, foods, and objects that are prohibited by the faith. (Its antonym is Halal) This term is also widely used in Ethiopia and in the Amharic language, referring to a similar idea of prohibition and religious action. As I was told by people in Harar, if not circumcised the girl is haraam, referring to her consequently unsuitable behavior and impurity. On the contrary, as WAO workers informed me, there is now a wide spread argument that circumcision harms the girl and consequently it is haraam to perform circumcision. This is one of the arguments proclaimed by Imams who take part in anti-circumcision work in the mosques. Interestingly, what happens here is that religious law and prohibitions are connected to state laws within a legitimate religious debate that enables a fruitful discussion on change in circumcision practice. It also denotes implications circumcision might have on women’s health, as harmful. (This will be discussed further in the last chapter.)

41 My translation
The Hadiths

At the tomb, without me asking explicitly for it, Abdi presented an argument for a continuation of circumcision in some kind, and an explanation for a change from infibulation to clitoridectomy or excision, where severe forms of circumcision (such as infibulation) are not allowed by Islam but milder forms can be supported. On the history of circumcision he shortly explained that Muhammad is said to have advised a woman about how to perform circumcision.

The Hadith\textsuperscript{42} Abdi probably referred to here, is the one that seems to be the center of discussion on female circumcision and religious teachings (See Abu Sahlieh 2006, Gruenbaum 2001, Mohamud 2010, Wangila 2007). This is a folk Hadith that tells about how Muhammad instructed a midwife who also performed circumcision (Gruenbaum 2001: 64). It exists in various versions:

\begin{quote}
Do not go deep. That is enjoyable to the woman and is preferable to the husband.
Do not go deep. It is more illuminating to the face and more enjoyable to the husband.
Circumcise but do not go deep, this is more illuminating to the face and more enjoyable to the husband.
- Folk Hadith (ibid)
\end{quote}

The different versions of this Hadith illustrate how difficult it would be to agree on any interpretation, but considering that The Prophet does not seem to totally reject it, it can be understood as if he does recommend the milder forms of circumcision as religiously preferable.

Muslims (and others) in Harar that argued against circumcision put emphasis on the nonobligatory form of Sunnah. Following the traditions of Muhammad is a way of getting closer to God, of seeking religious spirituality, but they are not obligations and will not lead to any chastisement. The executive head at the Women Affairs Office of Oromiya, Alfia, is a well-educated Muslim woman who works on (among other things) the eradication of female circumcision. In her work Alfia sometimes travel to rural areas outside Harar to arrange community discussion groups on circumcision. Alfia once told me about the discussions on absu\textsuperscript{42}me she used to have with Muslims. Her argument was: if Sunnah is good deeds and customs, for who is circumcision good? –Who does it do well according to religion, the child,...

\textsuperscript{42} Hadiths are based on the oral tales from the life of The Prophet, which are written down, also in years after Muhammad’s death, and long after the occurrence of different episodes. Hadiths can therefore be strong or weak, dependent on who the writer is, and the chain of oral transmission. If the chain is broken the Hadith are considered to be “mursal”, weak. (Mohamud 2010: 70)
the mother, the father? In Alfia´s opinion the answers to this question were never based in religion, but in ´culture´. It is about ideals of a good, marriageable woman, which differs among Muslim societies in the world. It is about local marriage traditions and local norms of sexuality and gender.

**Religion ´in the making´**

I have argued that *absume* in Harar have been constitutive in the formation of a religious identity, in which it has taken part in the embodiment of ideals of purity and virginity. However, my material from Harar clearly illustrates that individuals not always act according ideals, rather they contribute in debates and negotiations of religious terms through everyday religious practice, within a religious context characterized by great variation in religious practice and individual action. In accordance with theories that understand agency and change as occurring by means of certain conventional terms, the young women included in this study challenged certain principles while concurringly on their way to become respectable young women.

In relation to general religious discourse in Harar, debates on female circumcision bring central religious terms into question. And vice versa, debates on religious principles such as *Sunnah* and *haraam*, put female circumcision into question as a religious practice.

I have also argued that gender identity is not solely a religious practice, but connected to diverse local beliefs about bodies, sexuality and gender relation. The construction of gendered identities will be the topic for the next chapter.
5. Fire age: *absume* and changing ideals of gender

In Harar it was said that when girls reach the age of thirteen or fourteen, they enter *fire age*, in Amharinya, *fundata*. (A general term for this stage in the life of youths, also confirmed by my friends in Addis Ababa.) At this age girls become inquisitive about the world outside and acquire an emerging interest in boys and intimate relations. It is believed that if not circumcised as they reach this age these feelings potentially disturb the conduct of young girls: They will become unruly, disobedient towards their parents and will not be able to perform the domestic chores properly but become clumsy, break house utensils and gain poor cooking skills. I was explained several times that a girl who is not circumcised “break all the materials in the house”, and *absume* supposedly cools her down. There is a term in Amharic for such uncircumcised girls, *kinteram*, which derives from the Amharic word for clitoris *kinter*, and refers to a woman with a clitoris.43

*Fire age* illustrates that *absume* in Harar was believed to enable the learning of certain skills and qualities valued in women. As such *absume* has been significant to the process of ‘making’ girls ‘fully woman’. In his study among Amharas, Rye found this explicitly, as uncircumcised women were said to be *mulu sou eydellum*, not fully human (2002: 218). While I did not meet this Amharic expression in Harar, I believe the exegesis of people in Harar lead in the same direction, an uncircumcised woman is not fulfilled as a gendered individual. This also includes my previous discussion on Islam and the ‘religious incompleteness’ of uncircumcised girls.

In this analysis of gender socialization I will apply a focus on individual experiences and bodies, which evokes the notion of embodiment by Csordas and the production of gender in everyday practice in relation to Bourdieus’ gendered habitus.

43 These beliefs strongly concur with the findings of Simon Rye’s work from Addis Ababa, Hirut Terefe’s (2000) on the Arsi Oromo and Mandy Lindner’s (2008) thesis from Harar (see also EGLDAM 2008a), and unruliness appears significant to an understanding of circumcision among several groups in Ethiopia.
Bunna and doro wat: signatures of a ´proper woman´?

“Where there is no woman, the feast is not tasty”
– Oromo Proverb (Cotter1997: 9)

During my many visits to Ethiopian homes, some chores appeared as ´feminized´. Among my neighbors and friends in relatively poor households where mothers and grandmothers were still fairly uneducated, the presence of women was generally stronger than that of men, and I have seldom seen men do the cooking of injera and wat or preparing bunna (coffee).

Doro wat is the signature dish of Ethiopia, a dish with chicken, egg, niter kibbeh, spices, vegetables and the characteristic berbere, often used for festive occasions. Cooking it takes days of preparation and it demands skills and knowledge to get it perfect. In Ethiopia it is said that one can check if a woman is a good wife by her doro wat, and traditionally she should invite her potential husband for dinner before an engagement is concluded. In terms of Bourdieu, I believe that this ´division of labor´, that men will come home for lunch (often) cooked by a woman, and is served coffee by his wife, can be understood as habitualized, seemingly unquestioned social practices. Consequently, the way women manage their home and their cooking skills become central to their embodied knowledge, their habitus and are an important part of how they present themselves and are perceived as women. I would not do justice to Ethiopians and the hospitality of their homes if I neglect to mention the bunna, and it will be the site for further elaboration of my argument.

The coffee ceremony is an important part of socialization among many Ethiopians. The Ethiopian coffee is known for its high quality (due to optimal growing conditions in highland areas) and when visiting a home you will often be invited for a coffee ceremony. In Harar this is said to be mainly a tradition of Orthodox Christians, and Muslims tended to drink chai or Ashara (Waldron 1975), but nowadays many Muslims also practice this tradition. In wealthier Harari and Oromo homes the main room consists of seats organized for socializing and birtcha. Mattresses are placed along the walls of the elevated areas of the room. One space is then saved for the woman of the house, where a small chair, the coffee pot and coffee

44 Clarified, spiced butter.
45 A hot spice mixture central to the Ethiopian cuisine.
46 Doro wat is common especially among orthodox Christians, and its traditional connections to marriage would not apply to Oromos as it was not a part of their ´traditional diet´. This example is however illustrative of the connection between cooking skills and gender. And, nowadays, Oromos also prepare the traditional doro wat.
47 Tea made from the cover of the coffee beans.
cups are in place, ready for use. While most of the homes I visited were not this wealthy, there was always a coffee pot and cups available.

Traditional Harari House

Jebena

Young girl preparing coffee
From my experience in Ethiopia, the coffee ceremony usually contained certain elements: The woman is seated on a low stool behind the fire or kerosene burner where she roasts the coffee beans on a thin iron plate. When the roasting is done she puts a little water on the hot coffee beans and walk around the room and wave the smoke towards the guests, so that they can smell the wonderful, freshly roasted beans. She then goes outside the house to grind the coffee in a mortar. The powdered coffee is carefully added in the *jebena*, which already contains water. It is then put on the fire or kerosene burner to heat. In the meantime the woman places the small porcelain cups on a tray used especially for the coffee ceremony, and sugar is added to each cup. The coffee is then carefully distilled by pouring it into the cups from a distance, keeping the pot high above the cup. Coffee is served. But not in any random order, traditionally elders and distinguished visitors should be served first. Ideally and importantly, three cups shall then be served each guest.

Why all this space devoted to coffee? As an important part of socialization and Ethiopian homes, this is a central task for many women. Maybe several times a day, women and wives invite friends, neighbors or their husband’s business partners for coffee in their home. It is also common to hear people praising the coffee of women, or keeping noticeably quiet when not fully content.

My own experience and attempt at participation as a woman is illustrative here. I had a little project during my fieldwork; I wanted to learn how to make Ethiopian coffee ‘the proper way’. But it was not as easy as it might sound. The coffee beans must be roasted to perfection, the grinding requires a certain strength, technique and rhythm, and it often astounded me how they would get the finely grinded coffee elegantly through the thin tip of the *jebena* by one hand without spilling any coffee. Several of my closest friends tried to teach me to make *bunna*, but I never got a clear answer when I asked about the ratio between water and coffee. As they said, - we just know it. Consequently, I appeared rather clumsy as I handled the coffee. I was told I distilled the coffee to quickly, and had a tendency to spill *bunna* all over the tray, and I never quite understood which order to serve it. Making coffee one day with my interpreter and his friends I was quite ‘lost’ and he jokingly asked me; - Are you not circumcised?

In connection to *fire age* and the function of circumcision, this ‘art of coffee-making’ is an illustration of the kind of skills circumcision was supposed to enable and encourage. The women should not be ‘clumsy’, but be able to perform these skills with a certain grace and to
perfection. Before I move on with analysis I will introduce some of the women I had close relations with in Harar.

**Generations of women**

During my last month in Harar Abay, the grandmother of David, invited me to stay in her house. She was a small, thin and aged woman, with a long life of experiences and hospitality to share. There was uncertainty about her age but by her own estimate she was around eighty years. Despite her health condition Abay refused to sit still. She would do the things she managed; wash clothes, prepare *injera*, make tea and sweep the floor. She seemed to enjoy the company of us youngsters in the house. Her grandson spent more time at the house now that I was there, and she insisted that we blow the dust of the *jebena* and coffee cups, which appeared to not have been in use for years. She had missed the smell of *bunna* in her house, she said. Sadly, Abay fell seriously ill during my stay and David and I spent quite some time at her house, before I finally moved in for the last weeks of my stay.

Her humble home consisted of one room, with one bed at one end, and next to it, closer to the door an elevated area with a mattress where she slept, sat, had her meals and welcomed visitors. The walls were covered in faint green paint, and the house contained well-used, basic utensils such as a kerosene burner, cooking utensils, one plate to eat from, a radio and a coffee ceremony set. A few family photos decorated the walls.

Situated in the middle of the old town, Abay’s house was within a compound resided by several other families. In the largest house lived an Oromo Muslim family with three sons and two daughters. Across this yard lived Iman. At the time of my fieldwork Iman was fourteen years old and lived in a single room with her mother and two younger sisters, Hafsa seven years old, and Najiya ten years old. When I visited Abay I used to see Iman in the backyard, sometimes cooking, behind the metal washbasin doing laundry, or socializing with friends. She also helped taking care of her two sisters while her mother was at work, selling fruit at the local bus station. During my first months in Harar, Iman was busy with school and family and for long I was unaware of her story. When I returned to Harar, summer\(^{48}\) approached and the two month long school break started. As we spent more time at Abay’s house Iman often came over to chat and kindly made us coffee.

\(^{48}\) The summer in Harar refers to the main rain season that lasts from around May/June until August/September.
Fourteen years old, Iman was about to become a young woman. Not only with the responsibilities and bodily changes this involved, she had also entered a potentially sexually active age. But as she told me in one of the first conversations we had, she was not circumcised. Her mother, who is a Muslim Oromo, had insisted that her daughter should get circumcised when she was young. But her father who is Orthodox Christian did not want his daughter circumcised. This dispute apparently resulted in her not being circumcised.49

Considering her age, Iman can be said to be a girl at the peak of her fire age. She usually dressed respectfully whenever she left the house, with long dresses or skirts and sash or fota to cover her hair, and she used to embellish herself before going out; combing her hair and putting on lip-gloss. At the same time she sometimes challenged certain limits. There was especially one skirt, reaching just below the knees, and a matching, tight t-shirt in a leopardy kind of pattern with a slightly inappropriately short sleeve. One time she wore this outfit when we were sitting at Abay’s house making bunna, I heard Abay commented on her clothes. Iman respectfully covered up with a scarf, and with a smile on her face, she said; - you know, it’s fundata. Concuringly, Iman was taking responsibility of her sisters and performed her domestic chores to the fullest. Contrary to what might be expected of her as an uncircumcised girl now in her fire age, she did not seem particularly unruly or blunderous. Indeed, her coffee tasted wonderful, and she made it as gracefully as any other (circumcisced) Ethiopian woman. Abay, as an Orthodox Christian, praised Iman for her beautiful coffee. After the three cups were served she thanked Iman heartedly for the nice bunna, and continued with a small blessing: – Xavier yistesh, edme yistesh, injera yistesh. May God give you, may God give you long life, and may God give you food. By this, Abay blessed her skills, and connected this to Iman’s personal gain and wellbeing in the future. That she will continue on her path as a successful woman. Furthermore, as Abay fell sick, Iman showed great consideration. She swept her house, brought food and made sure she had what she needed.

What is especially interesting to my discussion is that Iman, despite not being circumcised, did in many aspects show herself as a ‘respectable young woman’. Thus, it seems that as more and more girls and women grow up not being circumcised they challenge local beliefs in what it means to be an uncircumcised woman through their everyday action. Through her skills and embodied knowledge, Iman challenged the belief that fire age necessarily makes a girl almost uncontrollable. She was able to fulfill many tasks and expectations of being a woman even though she is not circumcised. In relation to Mahmood’s

49 I will return to this family’s discussion in the last chapter.
(2001) theory on agency, this case once more stress that resistance does not always take the form of outright opposition and more or less ‘conscious’ counteractions. Iman wanted to become a respectable woman, with an education, and at the same time meet the requests from family. Thus, although she was not circumcised and disagrees with the practice, she does not wish to subvert or oppose current gender relations. Rather, her ability to act respectfully and gracefully, although not circumcised, enables arguments and raises questions about the necessity of circumcision in the raising of girls.

**The gendering of morality**

So far, the argument is that female circumcision contributes to the embodiment of morality, and certain skills especially connected to marriage and gendered relations and ideals of purity and respectability. In her article *the Virgin and the State* (1978) Sherry Ortner is concerned with how different forms of women’s purity are connected to the family honor, and why is it that female sexual purity is such a “widespread and virulent phenomenon?” (Ibid: 19) Ortner’s argument is that notions of purity are based on efforts to marry the girl to the best family possible to obtain vertical alliances (ibid: 31). If we return to the chapter on Islam, Ortner’s theory may articulate the connection circumcision and ‘the virgin bride’ had to efforts in marriage in Harar. (A pure virgin secured a reasonable pride-price and hopefully a respectful groom.)

There are certain aspects of Ortner’s theory that might be more problematic. It implies a certain perspective on power, in which societies concerned with purity and honor depict systematically stratified, paternalistic state-type structures. As elaborated by Talle (2003), it might be that circumcision as control-mechanism for marriage of the most honorable girls may be an explanation for its origin. But as Talle and other anthropologist have illustrated, circumcision is not understood locally as a patriarchal control-mechanism. As I argued with reference to Foucault, it is important to avoid assuming a top-down model of power in analysis. Thus current local understandings of circumcision involve a range of meanings that seem to be separated from its assumed origin. Thus the origin of a tradition is not necessarily interesting in itself, as Talle argues, it is in the “crossroads between social meaning and power that we find the explanation for circumcision as a social phenomenon” (ibid: 47). However, with this brief discussion on Ortner, one issue relevant to the analysis of *fire age* is raised.

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50 Paternalistic because it is men who engage in the upkeep of honor and exchange of wives.

51 My translation.
The question posed by Ortner highlights that somehow the ideals of purity and morality seem to be especially connected to women and the female body. In relation to fire age boys are also understood as unruly at this age, but according to my friends, and to my knowledge through stays in Ethiopia, boys do not meet the same demands to ‘cool down’. There is no need for a remedy for their unruliness.

Frigga Haug (1990) understands morality as a set of regulations on human behavior that exists outside written laws and principles. Morality as such refers to values in a given society, such as completeness, progress, sympathy and ‘humanity’ (ibid: 15). Furthermore, definitions of a ‘decent morality’ constitute a contextual understanding of a ‘good human being’. In tune with my use of Bourdieu, the theory is that for all people these values are incorporated in the body through a process of socialization in which morality and gendered ideals are habitualized in a bodily behavioral repertoire. Haug argues that apparently the process of socializing these moral values are different in the case of boys and girls, because gender socialization works at establishing ideal dichotomized gender categories. For Haug, the socialization of morality is for women especially connected to the body. Her moral integrity is more connected to gracefulness, and her ability to nurse and cultivate her body. Consequently this is also where she finds the power to define herself. Haug uses the term kroppssentrering,\(^52\) which comprises a notion of the body as both place for, and goal of integration into society (ibid: 25). Again the link can be drawn to my discussion on Csordas’ (1990) theory of embodiment.

If we accept this argument in accordance with circumcision, it becomes interesting to ask, as Haug does; what does it mean when the body becomes the center for socialization? The body then becomes the primary investment in socialization, and the symbol of normality. In other words, as argued by several anthropologists (Talle 2003, Gruenbaum 2001), a girl who is circumcised expresses through her body that she is ‘normal’. A girl who is not circumcised risks being seen as impure, with an unsuitable bodily and moral behavior, which inhabits the risk of social exclusion. If the premise is that the majority of humans wish to be perceived as good, and to be included in a ‘moral community’, it becomes comprehensible that circumcision has constituted an important part of female identity. Because morality is embodied, it results in feelings in the individual of sadness, frustration and loss if one is excluded from the community one is a part of, or feel ‘abnormal’.

\(^{52}\) Body focus or ‘a body centered approach’.
Illustrated by Lynn Thomas in the article *Ngaitana, I will circumcise my self* (2001), the ban of clitoridectomy by colonial campaigns in Kenya, saw the rise of communities of girls who sought to circumcise each other. They defied the ban and wanted to hold on to excision as a mean for adolescent girls to initiate into womanhood. From my own material in Harar, stories of women and circumcisers who continue to perform *absume* in the darkness and secrecy of the night is a clear expression of the importance circumcision has for them.

I will in the following elaborate on the significance of circumcision to female identity. Part of this argument is that an important source of subjectivation lies within women’s ability to *represent* themselves, and that circumcision is part of this representation. I should stress that this is only a part of my argument. There is a risk of falling into the trap, already discussed in the introduction, of analyzing the body as only representation. Again, I wish to avoid depicting women as mere ‘prisoner’s of ritual’, trapped in a wish to do as they are told by social moral codes. The point I wish to stress is that what is considered morally good, the ideal social bodies, ideals of beauty, and legitimate sexualities are manifold, ambiguous, constantly negotiated and in a continuous flux. The body is the site for representation, guided by discourse. Simultaneously it is the place for individual experiences.

**Circumcision as beautification**

“A girl who is beautiful can be recognized by the heels of her feet” (Cleanliness is one indication of beauty)

- Oromo proverb (Cotter 1997: 8)

Taking seriously the importance of circumcision for subjective identity, we can understand accounts of girls who beg their mothers for circumcision. In her autobiography Somali supermodel Waris Dirie (2001) recalls her own circumcision. Five years old, and even considered a little too young to get circumcised, she pleaded her mother for circumcision. She had felt how it was to be excluded from the older, circumcised girls and was thinking that no one would ever want her if she were a dirty, uncircumcised girl. This also introduces another issue that needs further exploration, circumcision’s connection to body ideals.

Especially studies from Sudan and Somalia, where infibulation was traditionally performed, discuss how the smooth, closed vulva has been a symbol of beauty. Gruenbaum argues that in Sudan the ideal of beauty is connected to a pure and virtuous woman by means of the infibulated vulva. The open vulva is unclean and repulsive. “We don’t want the girl to be dirty, open, with smelly underwear.” (Gruenbaum 2006: 131) What Gruenbaum illustrates
is that the circumcised body is just as much part of the cultural expectations of beauty as any other, more visible parts of the body (ibid 125). And, I will add, as any other body part that is emphasized in relation to beauty in any other social context. Thus, circumcision clearly illustrates that notions of beauty and what is considered aesthetically beautiful varies in relation to contextual discourses.

Among my informants in Harar notions of sexual aesthetics were not made explicit to me, which may have been caused by my relatively short stay and the intimacy of such topics. Furthermore, because they now perform excision and clitoridectomy the notions of a smooth, closed vulva does not apply. This does not mean that absu me’s connection to beauty should be dismissed. As emphasized in the Oromo Proverb above, ideals of purity are also connected to beauty. In relation to religion, people in Harar stressed the impurity of female genitalia. A woman who was not circumcised was considered dirty, more sexual active, and less attractive. Circumcision has then been connected to the local ideals of an attractive female body.

This approach enables useful comparison to aesthetically motivated cosmetic surgeries, a comparison that has been done by several anthropologists (Gruenbaum 2001, El Guindi 2006). One might ask what the usefulness of such a comparison might be. For one, this perspective narrows the gap between women that perform circumcision, and women that engage in plastic surgery, breast implants, facelifts, liposuctions and other alterations on their physical appearance. In both cases, women claim beauty and self-expression as motivation (Gruenbaum 2001: 73). In her article Whatever happened to women and men? Gender and other crisis in anthropology (1999), Henrietta Moore argues that the body is always part of the representation of a person, and practices like plastic surgery constitutes an important part of non-verbal communication of identity. While circumcision is not as visible as a smooth, lifted face, girls and women communicate female identities through being circumcised or uncircumcised. As absu me in Harar was important to marriage relation and reputation, it seemed to be part of ‘the word of mouth’, as an issue discussed among family and groups involved.

Furthermore, in relation to my discussion on judgmental and ‘colonial’ elements of some anti-circumcision debates, this comparison importantly narrows the gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and gives us the opportunity to view ourselves critically from the ‘outside’.
**Circumcision and sexuality**

I have already argued that circumcision highlights contextual discourses and understandings of the physical body, as accentuated by Foucault. This is made explicit in relation to sexuality. The argument and assumption often posed by feminist, and anti-circumcision activists is that female circumcision deprives women of sexuality and intimate satisfaction. Ethnographic studies on circumcision tell different stories, in which circumcision has been important in the making of a female sexuality. But let me start in Harar.

The five gates of Harar provided control of what came in to the city, and what was taken out. The physical closing of the city protected its people from intruders, enabled some control over trade and consequently strengthened the sustainability of its traditions and language. This makes an interesting analogy to notions of sexuality among people in Harar. I would argue that this comparison is further stressed in gey absume ‘the circumcision of the city’, which gives connotation to both the enclosure of the city and of the women.

People I talked to agreed that women were believed to have a ‘naturally’ more intense and uncontrollable sexual desire than men, and if not circumcised she would not be faithful, but “jump over all men”. Thus, an explicit function of absume was to alleviate female sexuality. In relation to marriage it supposedly ensured her virginity, which enabled a certain control over who had access to women, a control of ‘what goes in’. Furthermore, infibulation was believed to function as a physical hindrance, protecting women from rape when they were working in the field. In terms of what ‘comes out’, it was intended to ensure that sexuality was connected to marriage, and consequently that babies were born in wedlock. Thus, the first argument is that absume is not about control and deprivation of female sexuality, but rather connects intimacy to the ideal context of marriage.

Issues of sexuality also highlight local understanding of bodies and sexual complementarity. One day a man at the house of Aamina was teasing her about her work. Jokingly he said that since she had intercourse with many men, her genitals must have grown out again. This clearly illustrates the point of Foucault, that the body is never simply biology, but always constructed by discourses. Different from the centrality of the clitoris for sexuality in a Scandinavian context, people in Harar understood the clitoris as a source of uncontrollable sexual desire, not suitable to local ideals of femininity and sexuality. In other parts of the area and Ethiopia the clitoris is further understood as a masculine body part that may grow and become similar to a penis if not removed (see EGLDAM 2008a & b). The clitoris then represents unfeminine qualities, and its removal can be understood as central to
the completion of individuals into fully gendered categories. Removal of the clitoris is then not about deprivation of sexuality, but about the fulfillment of female subjectivity and sexuality.

It seems that *absum* in Harar is an example, almost *per excellence*, of what Marilyn Strathern has termed ‘making incomplete’. Strathern (1993) argues that as a product of both parents, the child is at birth an androgynous being that need to be ‘made’ more one-sidedly female or male, and in that sense incomplete. Together, the two parts make a whole (ibid: 48). Similarly, the girl child in Harar is understood as having both male and female attributes, and she needs to be made more female by removing male attributes. This surfaced also in relation to *fire age* and religious beliefs of purity. As girls grow up they are gradually connected to gendered ideals, and become more gendered.

Rye (2002) argues for a similar understanding of circumcision in which both male and female circumcision contributes to a sexual complementarity. Among the Amharas in Addis Ababa, removing the prepuce of the penis enables sexual potential and release of semen, while the removal of superfluous parts of female genitalia make a woman more accessible. Hence, Rye’s argument is that understanding circumcision should take both genders into consideration. In this case circumcision of men and women existed in a symbiosis that ensured the fertility of couples. This is congruent with Janice Boddy’s (1982) argument that circumcision is not about restricting female sexuality and enhancing male pleasure. Rather it moves the attention from female pleasure to a focus on her fertility and her role in reproduction. As I have argued, circumcision in Harar also seems to be more concerned with the completion of sexual categories, than about restriction.

In short, assumptions of circumcision as simply control and annihilation of female sexuality portray a narrow understanding of sexuality and sexual stimulation and desire as centered in and on the clitoris. Furthermore, implicit in such arguments is the assumption of a universal gender identity based on biological differences. In the case of circumcision it becomes overtly clear that gender in general and the gendered body is not complete at birth, but is fulfilled and produced continuously.

**With the strength of a lion: Circumcision and the significance of pain**

Another issue in the process of subjectivation and completion of womanhood through circumcision is the pain involved. Accounts from circumcised women (Dirie 2002, Ahmadu
describe the circumcision as extremely painful.\textsuperscript{53} Also in the film described above, the experience of pain was excruciatingly palpable. Could it really be that women would choose to let their children go through this pain if it was considered completely negative?

As Talle writes from her work in Somalia and Kenya, the experience of pain seems central to women’s memory of their circumcision and “no one says they will ever forget their own circumcision” (2010: 50).\textsuperscript{54} Safiya Abdi recently recorded the story of her circumcision in Somalia (Url: Cynergi film & NKVTS 2010). This day was carved into her memory: It was expected of a girl who was becoming a ‘proper woman’ to not let her voice penetrate the walls of the house. Safiya bravely tried not to scream, but the pain made it too difficult. After she was cut the circumciser poured spirits on the wound to stop the bleeding. It caused an unbearable burn. The wound was then closed by several stitches with needle and thread. The process of sewing felt like hours, she recalls. Then, a healing mixture was added to the wound. It caused more agonizing burn. When it was all over, Safiya’s feet were tied together, and the healing process could begin. The pain was so strong that for days she refused to pass urine, and she finally had to be forced, by women pressing on her augmented bladder.

From this, we understand that the pain of circumcision, and especially infibulation, is not only about the incision itself. Mainly focused on infibulation, Elise Johansen (2002) divides this pain into three stages. First is the circumcision itself and the period following, until she is married. This is marked by immediate complications of bleeding and infections. Second is marriage, where the infibulation has to be reopened, either by continuous painful efforts by the husband, or by the assistance of knives and surgical opening. Third is the pain connected to labor.\textsuperscript{55} Because most of my acquaintances were concerned with excision and clitoridectomy, the two latter points were not central in our conversations. In the following I will be concerned mainly with the pain of the circumcision itself. However, the extensive pain of infibulation is though relevant to the discussion on change, and will be discussed further below.

I was not able to go into depth on the experience of pain and circumcision with women in Harar, but certain elements did surface. One day discussing \textit{absuume} at Badriya’s house, one of my young male friends stressed how girls are given gifts and praised for their endurance

\textsuperscript{53} This is not to say that the circumcision is a trauma for the girls (Talle 2010: 50). As I will return to shortly, this pain has meanings that contextualizes it and make it comprehensible retrospectively.

\textsuperscript{54} My translation

\textsuperscript{55} The extent to which women associates complications and pain during labor with circumcision varies according to their knowledge. Some studies have found that before the introduction of health education and campaigns, many women were not aware of the correlation between circumcision and complications for instance at delivery (Talle 2003, 2010).
after a circumcision. As pointed out by Lindner (2008), the loss of blood, and the pain, is to be replaced by happiness and pride. They are considered to be strong; my friend said, strong as a lion, *anbessa*. This analogy to the lion caught my attention, and I asked him what the lion symbolizes to him. He answered that the *anbessa* is the strongest animal. - If a warrior brings home the skin of a lion he is the king. He can conquer anybody. 56

The lion in this manner has at least a dual meaning in my current concern. Firstly the lion by his invincible strength, beauty and power is the ultimate animal, he is the king. In Ethiopia, the lion has a very significant and explicit symbolic value in the form of the Lion of Judah. 57 It is the symbol of Emperor Haile Selassie and his reign, where he showed himself to be almost invincible as leader when he resisted the Italian attempts of colonization. Without taking this analogy too far from its origin, this does illustrate that the lion in a unique manner symbolize an almost sacred kind of strength in Ethiopia. As such the *anbessa* can be understood as a threat. The girls who get circumcised are in the moment confronted with a physical danger, I will say, not unlike Dirie’s encounter with a lion: The experience of circumcision pain seems to evoke instinctive reactions of fear, and a notion of encountering something invincible.

Secondly, as my friend Negasi said, in overcoming this encounter a woman can be said to have endured a valuable kind of strength. Having faced a potential threat, after *absume* she is the one who has shown ‘the strength of a lion’. In other words, I argue that enduring this pain is understood as a meaningful part of womanhood in Harar. From my experience, the life of relatively poor women in Harar involved long days and hard work. Those who had work often got up at the break of dawn to prepare food, clean the house and take care of children, and this work continues when they get back from a long day of work. Due to limited health assistance and a newly developed attention towards family planning, families have had a relatively high number of children 58 and births unassisted or done by traditional birth attendants without full access to medical equipment. Hence, I suggest that strength and

56 This quote from Dirie further exemplifies the relation between humans and lions: “He was a beautiful male with a golden mane and a long tail switching back and forth to flick away flies. He was five or six years old, young and healthy. I knew he could crush me instantly; he was the king. All my life I’d watched those paws take down wildebeest and zebras weighing hundreds of pounds more than me” (Dirie 2001: 2).

57 The Lion of Judah originated as a Christian symbol of the Israelite tribe of Judah. Rastafarians believe that H.I.M. Selassie was a direct descendant of this tribe through the lineage of King David and Solomon.

58 According to the EDHS the Oromiya region had a fertility rate of 6,2 children per woman, Hararge 3,8 and the national average was 5,4 (CSA).
endurance are highly valued qualities of women in Harar. The pain of *absuume* is then understood as an educative experience that function as a test of endurance.\(^59\)

In her work among the Kikhome of Western Kenya, Christine Walley (2006) argues that the pain of circumcision is socially significant as part of socialization. Pain should therefore be understood as a means in fulfilling the positive transformation of individuals (ibid: 347). Further, efforts to understand local meanings of pain and acceptance of its formative functions importantly makes it implausible to label circumcision ‘torture’ or mutilation. Terms that imply a purely negative understanding of the pain involved. What this reveals is that pain is contextual, and not always understood as something to be avoided. Pain can be culturally meaningful and formative. In terms of Foucault, meanings of pain and bodily experiences are constituted through discourse. I am further inspired by Elise Johansen discussion, which highlights that “pain is never a purely physical experience but should be understood as an intensive and all-encompassing physical and mental experience. (...) Thus the meaning attached to pain, constitutes a part of the experience.” (Johansen 2002: 314) I argue that the instant experience of pain, and its social meaning exists in a dialectic relation in which the social meaning of pain affects the subjective perception of it. Concurringly, the instant, individual experience of it may affect its social meaning. I will elaborate on this in the following.

*Pain as a counterpoint to ’culture’*

Further inspired by the work of Johansen, and also by Thomas Csordas’ focus on embodiment, the body is here understood as both place for the personal and the social. What I have discussed above is the social meaning of pain, but if we leave it at that, we risk that the social meanings of pain appear as static ’cultural models’\(^60\) immune to change. As Johansen argues, while providing fruitful insight to cultural meaning, studies which have this focus on pain has missed an inclusion of the individual experience of pain. Although packed with cultural meaning pain is in the moment a bodily experience of individuals, which

\(^{59}\) There is a significant difference in the continuous potential complications of infibulation, and the pain experienced in milder excisions and clitidectomies. The women involved more often describe the pain of infibulation with concern and worry. (e.g. Johansen 2002, Gruenbaum 1982) This connection between infibulation and negative, painful consequences are present in anti-circumcision work in Harar, ad will be discussed in the final chapter.

\(^{60}\) A term Johansen has ’borrowed’ from Bradd Shore, defined as socially accepted ways of ”seeing, experiencing, interpreting and expressing personal experiences” (Johansen 2002:314).
simultaneously exists within its social meaning and outside of it (Johansen 2002: 321). This is made clear in several accounts of circumcision.

I heard the sound of the dull blade sawing back and forth through my skin (…) My legs were completely numb, but the pain between them was so intense that I wish I would die. I felt myself floating up, away from the ground, leaving my pain behind, and I hovered some feet above the scene looking down (…) watching this woman sew my body back together while my poor mother held me in her arms (…) Since the moment (…) nothing could frighten me. I simply lay on the ground like a log, oblivious to fear, numb with pain, unconcerned whether I would live or die. (Dirie 2001: 45-46)

As this account reveals, the pain can in the moment be explicitly negative. In terms of Bourdieu, symbolic models can be both part of a naturalized world (doxa) and object to reflection (heterodoxy). The meaningful (doxical) pain is in the moment challenged by an individual heterodoxical experience that challenges the doxa. In the film described above the girls fought to get away from the grip of the women. As argued by Talle (2003), it is this immediacy of pain, and the fear of it, that make girls fight and scream. Not some fundamental, existential opposition towards the social context. Hence it is exactly in this ambiguity that the pain bears a potential for change.

This was also clearly illustrated during my stay in Harar. Aamina told me that she had a complicated healing process, and was in bed for almost two months. When she gave birth to her son the doctors wanted her to have cesarian section. They were worried, as she was infibulated. She refused because she believed it to be dangerous. They then opened her infibulation, and she gave birth ‘normally’. After the birth she was not able to have intercourse for one and half year because of excessive scar formation that made penetration painful and she still had problems with painful urinating and with holding urine. In this conversation, she also told me that she had lost her sister, who died giving birth. Aamina believed this was because she was infibulated. When I later asked her if she would have circumcised her daughter, if she got one, her answer was very clear. No, she would not want any daughter to experience what she had gone through.

The pain of circumcision as individual experience can in many ways appear as meaningless. As illustrated by Johansen, through factors such as intensity, and duration, the pain looses its meaning and has the potential to act as a counterpoint to ‘cultural models’. The body becomes a potential site for change. Thus, as the practice of circumcision is changing, so is the local meaning of pain, and vice versa.
Gender ‘in the making’

*Absume*, I have argued, contributes to the fulfillment of female identities, sexuality and gender categories. Concurringly, the production and reproduction of social gender categories involves constant change in the content of the ‘contextual genders’, and the mechanism for production of social bodies and embodied identities. In which circumcision, as one such mechanism, is put into question and slowly loses its meaning. In this was also revealed a potential for change in the multifarious mechanisms that contribute in the socialization of gendered categories. In short, this reveals that change in circumcision practices is intricately dependent on a simultaneous change in gender relation, marriage and sexuality, which renders legitimate the ‘uncircumcised female identity’.

Further I have suggested that processes of change, and agency is revealed in the ability of girls like Iman and Aisha to simultaneously balance their clear negotiation of certain ideals – like disagreeing with circumcision or defying the ideal of virginity – with their wish to become young respectable and skillful women.
6. Change

“Let’s study good ways of stopping it and let the people who still practice FGC know what we and their neighbors in Africa have found out about ending it.” (Mackie 2000: 280)

This quote will introduce the perspective for this last chapter. Together with the anthropologists I have been inspired by in this thesis, and as stressed by Mackie above, it is not my aim to provide and advocate some solution to the conundrum of female circumcisions, but through the tools available, to understand and communicate something about the continuous local processes of change. These processes of change are in various ways apparent both on a national level, in regional governmental offices, in mosques, homes, families and in the experiences of individuals. The current chapter explores how certain efforts and processes are received and manifested at the local level, in relation to the beliefs and opinions of the individuals I talked to in Harar.

Perspectives on change

Gerry Mackie (1996, 2000) has presented a theory of change based on a ‘convention approach’. Mackie argues that female circumcision can fruitfully be compared to footbinding in China in that both conventions were connected to ideals of fidelity and purity of women, important to marriage relations and family honor. Both, in the areas where performed, were believed to be strongly sanctioned by tradition and widely practiced even by those who disagreed with its continuation. Thus, both conventions involve risks for individuals; not circumcising or binding feet could result in social exclusion, disapproval or reduced ‘marriage value’. Social conventions, he writes, are self-enforcing and for single individuals to oppose it is potentially more destructive than effective – in a place where people drive on the left side of the road “any person driving to the right to demonstrate its advantages would end up dead.” (Mackie 1996: 1007) By his convention theory, Mackie examines how change in conventions might successfully deal with these risks. By exploring

61 Mackie use Thomas Schelling’s understanding of convention as a contextual solution to recurrent coordination problems (Mackie 1996: 1000).
the campaigns and successful ending of footbinding in China, Mackie identified three main strategies. There was an educational program that explained that the rest of the world did not bind feet, secondly they were explained the disadvantages of binding feet, and the advantages of natural feet in locally comprehensible terms. Thirdly, natural-foot societies were formed, where they pledged not to bind the feet of daughters or let sons marry women with bound feet (Mackie 2000: 256). As I embark on this chapter on change Mackie’s perspective on conventions as strong, but also alterable is useful to keep in mind.

Efforts to change circumcision in Harar seemed to be concerned with especially the two first strategies. In brief, there are now various clubs in schools that educate children from primary to secondary school about the universal human rights of women, and the position of female circumcision as a specifically African tradition. Secondly, a lot of media coverage and leaflets about circumcision concern the disadvantages of circumcision and the medical and personal advantages of not being circumcised.

**Interface: a ‘meeting´ between different social bodies**

Through my choice of theoretical, analytical and methodological perspectives in this thesis I have been concerned with the stories of individuals in Harar. A different approach could have focused on the work of WAOs and NGOs, their arguments and attitudes towards circumcision and their encounter with local communities. This would have evoked a quite different discussion. Consequently, this last chapter touches upon topics that would deserve more extensive discussion. Such as the interface between national and international organizations and local communities, which opens up a broad debate on ‘development´ and aid. Another issue is the strong presence of a human rights discourse, and their applicability in social context.

I have explored the local meanings of circumcision as connected to notions of gender, and bodies. Furthermore, I have tried to illustrate that these meanings are diverse and constantly changing and challenged by experiences and knowledge. Thus, looking at this from an individualized perspective also says something about how the ‘official arguments´ are manifested and perceived locally. Because circumcision is intricately connected to subjective gendered identity, work against circumcision and efforts to understand change, have to engage in a range of topics, and specific arguments against circumcision will necessarily affect and depend on a simultaneous negotiation of these issues. In the terms of Norman Long (1989), I would say the work on circumcision entails a meeting between notions of gendered
social systems with different normative values. As I will discuss below, the circumcised body are connected to values and social relations variant from (but not necessarily incomparable to) those of the uncircumcised body. Long (1989) argues that as these systems interact, the goals and perceptions of various parties may be reshaped as a result of interaction. Thus 'development projects' cannot simply impose their arguments upon individuals. They will have to adjust their interaction and strategies according the interests of other parties. Local workers on circumcision many places have had to continuously assess the question of medicalization contra abandonment. Or, whether it is desirable to advocate milder types where it seems to be the most effective argument in a transitional phase towards abandonment. As different studies have shown, there are several other possible outcomes of anti-circumcision campaigns besides their goal of full stop. The women in Harar circumcising in secrecy are a telling example of this individual response. As well is the change from hoda absume to arab absume.

Long further argues that studies of such interaction should contextualize these meetings within larger power fields and frameworks that affect this specific interaction. Suitable with my discussion on power and agency in terms of Bourdieu, Foucault and Csordas, this again stress individual agency and choice within a larger context.

I argue that people in Harar constantly evaluate arguments against circumcision critically. If people agree or disagree to abandon circumcision and how they perceive the arguments vary widely among people in Harar. Subjects will assess their choice in relation to their religious views, social economic position, knowledge and bodily experiences. Hence, 'solutions' and change in circumcision practice develops within, and in relation to, these contextual understanding. I will try to illustrate this in the following by three main topics: educational efforts, legislation and local notions of health and sexuality.

62 In some countries the growing focus on the “dangers of circumcision” have caused a debate on medicalization, as some people involved argue that reducing pain and possible risk is a necessary intermediate position on the way to abandonment that should be seriously considered (See Shell-Duncan et al 2000). On the other hand, anti-circumcision activists argue that medicalization will contribute to an endorsement of the tradition, undermining efforts towards eradication. (For extensive accounts on the debates over medicalization see Mandara (2000) and Shell-Duncan et al. (2000)). To my knowledge, medicalization has not been a major discussion in Ethiopia (EGLDAM 2008a). As it is now illegal it would not be possible to perform it in hospitals.
Lemen girzat?! (Why Circumcise?)

“The girls of old baked bread for others. Those of today cook up quarrels”

Oromo Proverb (Cotter 1997: 3)

The previously mentioned discussion on absume in Iman’s family illustrates aspects of change, and this will be the starting point for further discussion.

Early in my stay I had a talk with Iman’s mother, Rawdah. She was a very open and talkative woman, and warmly welcomed the new and curious visitor. Aware of my field of enquiry she several times told me I was free to ask about anything. Because she was often out of the house working, I did not spend as much time with Rawdah as I would like to, but we sometimes got the chance to discuss certain topics briefly. When I asked her about circumcision today, and if she was going to circumcise her daughters, she vaguely answered that the youths of today are much more free than her generation was, and that she was also a part of this current change. In addition, the children now get education on birth control in school and can have intercourse without worrying about out-of-wedlock pregnancies and venereal diseases. Consequently it is more difficult for parents to notice promiscuous behavior.

When I later talked to Iman I learned that her mother was planning to circumcise her two younger sisters, now in a suitable age. She also wanted Iman to get circumcised and told her that she did not want to stay in the same house as her as long as she was not circumcised. Iman told me that her mother’s sister was a circumciser, and that she would come to their house late one night to perform their circumcision. It was also said that it is going to be infibulation. According to Iman, her father was trying to convince their mother that it was unnecessary to circumcise the girls. But Rawdah insisted. She even offered Iman a mobile phone if she agreed to circumcise. According to Iman circumcision was important for her mother for two main reasons; if not circumcised she would not listen to her elders, and be clumsy in the house. Secondly she would not be able to stay with one man. When I asked

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63 This ‘rumor’ implies that even infibulation is still performed in the old town. If Rawdah did want infibulation, this might very well be an atypical case, and my material from Harar cannot verify whether infibulations are still occurring. Either way, this case stresses my point that anti-circumcision work has very different outcomes, and experiences by NGOs, surveys or anthropological studies cannot say with certainty at which rate cases are decreasing, or which incisions are done.

64 Iman’s father did not live together with them in the house, and seemed to be quite absent, so I did not get the chance to discuss this matter with him. Thus it has to be taken into consideration that most of the information about this conflict is from Iman. But, also Abay confirmed this conflict. In one of our conversations she said she thought Rawdah was to hard on the girls in this discussion.
Iman if they talked about this often, she said; - oh, hulum gize! All the time! In her opinion circumcision was a very vibrant and rather tiresome debate.

Iman was an 8th grade student and also attended the HIV/AIDS club at her school. It is now quite common in Ethiopian schools to arrange clubs where students get the opportunity to discuss different community issues, often focused on health, women and human rights issues. In Iman’s school the HIV/AIDS club was a place where students, girls and boys, got the chance to meet an adult and discuss issues of sexual transferable diseases and other topics connected to sexuality. According to Iman this was voluntary for the students as it was not acceptable in all families to talk about issues such as birth control and reproductive organs. They learned about procreation, genital functions, transmission of diseases and condom use. Further, she told me, they learned about how absume may lead to complications during birth and marriage.

This knowledge surfaced one day while Iman and her friend Aisha were visiting Abay. While discussing the complications of circumcision Abay engaged in the conversation. She said that circumcision could not be that harmful. She had circumcised all of her children without any problem. She also recalled that not long ago the girl next door was circumcised but - We could not hear anything, and - she is fine now. The girls eagerly tried to explain that the complications does not necessarily come during the procedure, but might occur while giving birth, or in intimate relations. They knew that women might suffer due to excessive scar formation, in worst-case scenario tearing of the vagina sometimes resulting in fistula. I then asked the girls if they would circumcise potential daughters. Iman promptly exclaimed; - lemen girzat? - Why circumcise? She seemed shocked that I could even think she would. Aisha did not give such a concise answer, but said that even though this is changing, it is still believed to be required if she is going to be a good Muslim. I repeated my question; -would you circumcise your daughters? Her answer - I don’t think so.

This ongoing discussion in Iman’s family point to several issues concerning continuity and change, and illustrates that circumcision is by no means a silenced topic, but that there is now heated discussions going on within and across families, and between and within generations. Their knowledge of pain and complications also points back to my previous discussion on the articulation of pain, which might render it meaningless. As I argued in the previous chapter on fire age and gender relations, Iman and her age mates participate in a continuous production, reproduction and negotiation of gender ideals through their everyday practices. In the discussion above, it becomes apparent that youths may find themselves in an even more overtly visible, ambiguous position, where they balance the inputs from parents.
and family with the impulses they receive from peers, education, media and their own experiences. My perspective here draws on the argument of Bourdieu (2000), that efforts to understand change has to take into consideration that relations and the gendered habitus are produced in the entirety of social rooms.

**Education**

When I asked the two girls if they were planning to circumcise their daughters, both Aisha and Iman based their answers on their knowledge, gained through schooling and other experiences, on the possible severe complications. Schools have been one of the main arenas for awareness programs on human rights and issues concerning women in Ethiopia. The EDHS, as well as several other reports on female circumcision and 'HTPs' in Ethiopia, recognize the importance of education in the eradication of female circumcision and in women’s empowerment in general.\(^65\) In the EDHS, and in EGLDAM’s extensive survey, statistics also focus on prevalence according to education. The surveys found that occurrence of circumcision decreased with the rising level of education of respondents.\(^66\) They concluded that educational measures are highly recognized and noticed among people and that further efforts to reach effective change could be achieved through “extensive, consistent and continuous education” (EGLDAM 2008b: 57). In short, this part of the anti-circumcision work in Ethiopia seems to be in tune with the arguments of Mackie and Bourdieu; changing conventions and the gendered habitus involves education on advantages and disadvantages, and the articulation of heterodoxical symbolic worlds.

The knowledge Iman and Aisha had gained appeared rather unconventional to that of their mothers and the context of the home: While Iman stressed the possible negative consequences, Abay insisted that these consequences were not severe enough to make any valid argument against circumcision. Also for Rawdah, the potential consequences were secondary to all the reasons why her daughters should be circumcised. The girls had learned that the pain of circumcision was meaningless or negative. For Rawdah it still appeared as formative. In the HIV/AIDS club Iman was taught about reproduction, contraceptives, and the

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\(^{65}\) In EGLDAM’s follow up survey, ‘mass education’ was listed as the number one effort towards eradication. Participants listed religious forums, educational institutions and health institutions as important fora for educative efforts.

\(^{66}\) According to the EDHS found that among those with no education, 77 percent of women were circumcised, while among those with secondary and higher education, 64 percent were circumcised (CSA & ORC Macro 2006: 253).
function of the body and genitalia. In her regular curriculum, which is national, they were also taught about universal human rights. Abay and Rawdah were clearly not unaware of the possible consequences, but they chose to value the information differently, which highlights my previous argument, that the reception of anti-circumcision arguments are perceived and evaluated subjectively.

**Changing social bodies**

There seems to have been a change in the content of the social bodies the schools in Harar articulate and advocate. There has been a tendency in Ethiopia for women to engage in low or non-income generating work to a larger extent than men (CSA & ORC Macro), such as domestic work, childcare and in-kind based farming. Furthermore, according to numbers from UNICEF (Url: UNICEF), even though participation of girls in schools increases, their enrolment is still 20 % lower than for boys. I believe that the previous gender ideal in Harar was more centered on the role and value of women in the home and family organization. Currently, the schools in Harar are actively participating in the articulation of a gender ideals with a somewhat different content, that of gender equality in education and work. Youths now learn about family planning and the individual and bodily rights of women ratified in Human rights conventions and Ethiopian law.

I have argued that the ´circumcised body´ is interconnected with social relations of family and respectability, which again defines the individual body as part of a social community or kin group and the ability to establish marriage relations. The currently portrayed social bodies of schools, and in the anti-circumcision and human rights work at large, involve a greater focus on individual rights. What Iman had learned, challenged the necessity for her to go through circumcision for the sake of family and kin. Hence this ´individualized´ body seeks to enable different social relations, which include and allow the uncircumcised body in both family and cross-gender relations.

In terms of Bourdieu, the school seems to be going through a radical change as far as its function in production and reproduction of social mechanisms is concerned. Its place in this (re-) production seems to also be changing. Participating so clearly in this advocacy of certain bodies, and of specific family and intimate relations, the schools seems to have entered the domains of home and family in a very direct manner. The information that the girls acquired in school challenged the premises for reproduction of a gendered habitus that includes the
circumcised body. Girls are no longer sure that circumcision is a necessary part of their initiation into complete womanhood.

Not only in Iman’s family but also among several women I talked to was there a tendency towards differing attitudes among daughters and mothers. One day I was having a conversation with a group of elderly women who hospitably invited me in for a conversation about *absume*. These women were all mothers and grandmothers and while we were talking, the daughter of one of the women came home. She was now herself a mother to one son and I asked her if she would circumcise a daughter if she had one. She instantly said no. Aware of the consequences she did not think it was necessary to circumcise girls. The elderly women had told me they still supported circumcision. Their opinion was congruent to that of Badriya, as they said, they would take their granddaughters out of the city to get them circumcised, if they could. So when the daughter said she disagreed I asked the women what they think of this decision, and in such a situation, who has the last word? They wished they could get the girls circumcised, but nowadays there was not much they could say.

My material is too limited for any extensive discussion on the power relations between elder and younger generations in Harar. However, this discussion on education highlights the potential and importance of including educational institutions in work and studies on change. It has equipped young girls and boys with knowledge that they will use when it is time to make a decision for their daughters. Mackie (2000) concludes from his work on anti-circumcision campaigns in Senegal, that for anti-circumcision work to be successful one needs to take an holistic approach that does not only focus on propagating the arguments against circumcision. In his opinion, the basic education program of Tostan in Senegal could be advantageous because it did not directly intend to end circumcision, but “to provide skills and information that helped people better define and pursue their own goals.” (ibid: 261) From my experience, this may be one of the strengths of the approaches of schools, as well as other educative programs in Harar.

Discussing education, there is a danger of falling into ‘the trap’ of modernization theory. As pointed out by Mackie (2000), increased urbanization, education and mass communication does not in itself automatically reduce the demand for circumcision. This approach entails the presumption that women would want, and are individually able to, abandon the convention of circumcision (ibid: 270). As shown in the works on circumcision referred to, including this thesis, women have perpetuated circumcision and considered it desirable. Thus the impact of education depends on a simultaneous change in the possibilities for women to be fully accepted as uncut.
From my experience in Harar, it seems that education may highlight the ambiguous situation of young girls in Harar. Iman used her gained knowledge and opinion to negotiate with her family. I believe it is doubtful that she will be able to resist the request of her family. Again, as argued by Mackie, the price of fighting a convention individually is too high. In Iman’s case it would mean leaving her mother, sisters and her valued position at the house, and to jeopardize home, schooling, marriage possibilities and family relations. Education seems to highlight the ambivalent position Iman was in, but as I have stressed by this discussion it provided important tools and arguments for future decisions. Another topic for discussion in this regard is that of legislation.

**Taking legal measures**

The new Criminal Code of 2005 (Url: ILO) made female circumcision illegal in Ethiopia. The articles concerning circumcision specifically are the following:

- **Article 565: Female Circumcision**
  Whoever circumcises a woman of any age, is punishable with simple imprisonment for not less than three months, or fine of not less than five hundred birr.

- **Article 566: Infibulations of the Female Genitalia**
  1) Whoever infibulates the genitalia of a woman, is punishable with rigorous imprisonment from three years to five years.
  2) Where injury to body or health has resulted due to the act prescribed in sub-article (1) above, subject to the provision of the Criminal Code which provides for a more severe penalty, the punishment shall be rigorous imprisonment from five to ten years.

These articles refer to the punishment of circumcisers. In addition article 569 state that parents or guardians who participate in criminalized traditional practices are punishable with imprisonment not exceeding three months, or fine not exceeding five hundred birr (ibid). As stated by The Ethiopian Woman Lawyers’ Association (EWLA), which assisted in the formulation of these laws, the intention of these legal measures was to assist in the gradual eradication of ‘HTPs’. EWLA recognizes that much of the weight of these practices rests on the shoulders of women, and in their report from 2005, they state that the aim of law reforms is to ensure the implementation and fulfillment of Human rights conventions ratified by

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67 500 Birr currently (April 2011) converts to about 29 USD or 163 NOK. (Url: XE 2011)
EWLA further acknowledge that combating ‘HTPs’ should be approached in a holistic manner, as the key is transformation in the attitudes of individuals (EWLA 2005: 1). Furthermore, that a top-down approach cannot be effective, but must enable “grass root participation” (ibid: 2). Hence they stress that laws may not be the sole remedy, but believe that laws will have a significant impact in the fight against ‘HTPs’.

Criminalization of circumcision has not proved very effective in the past (Gruenbaum 2001) and its effectiveness in combating HTPs has been questioned, for several reasons. Mackie argues that one of the basic principles of any system of criminal law is that wrongdoers are a minority of the population, which the state can afford, and wish to pursue. (Mackie 2006:276). Furthermore, it works on the premise that a majority of the population agrees that the offence is unacceptable and should be punishable. This quote pinpoints the debate:

“What suppose that a law professor is charged with the task of eliminating automobile usage in Los Angeles and proposes this strategy: legal prohibition enforced by serious penalty. Because the professor has provided no alternative method of transportation, no one can stop driving. Because no one is able to stop driving, police and prosecutors will not waste their time picking out some poor Joe Blow for punishment. But there will be black marks on a white page to satisfy the irate Oregonians and Bangladeshi who demand that the Angelenos stop their destructive driving habits” (Mackie 2000: 278)

What makes criminalization of circumcision (and other ‘HTPs’) quite special is that it regulates an intimate sphere of bodies, and as illustrated by Mackie’s analogy, it regulates naturalized, embodied knowledge. Secondly, laws cannot function in themselves if no alternative is provided. (E.g. social acceptability and marriage opportunities for uncircumcised girls) Further, while the aim of laws against circumcision is to provide freedom and empowerment for women, it may at the same time feel like a restriction of their means to define themselves as women, in religion and as part of ethnic identity. Consequently, if the majority of inhabitants disagree on the legislation, it might just result in ‘black marks on a white page’, to (superficially) satisfy legislators.

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I suggest that my observations point quite strongly towards these limitations of the law, but some people did communicate the potential of legislation. There is also a difference between those countries that had early legislation, and countries with a relatively late implementation. In Ethiopia, the human rights discourse, focus on ‘HTPs’ and women’s issues were present for decades before legal measures were taken. (e.g. the National Policy on Ethiopian Women from 1993). Hence, as illustrated by ELWA’s approach, anti-circumcision workers in Ethiopia have been able to connect implementation of laws with a general human rights discourse and already established work on attitudinal change. By this I do not wish to argue for or against legislation. This nuancing is simply a possible explanation for why the legal system was seen as somewhat successful among some of my informants. It further illustrates the point of Gruenbaum (2001) and Mackie, that for legal measures to work it should come after a thorough work on attitudinal change. Even then, criminalization of circumcision does not necessarily work according to the goal of eradication. My experience in Harar depicts a quite complex situation.

**Applying the law**

I asked Ato Samuel from the WAO of Oromiya what he thought about the introduced law. Samuel was of the opinion that laws have contributed to the fact that circumcision now can be spoken more openly about. Including circumcision in the legal system has moved circumcision from the private spheres of homes to a public debate on laws and human rights. As he said, the law has functioned as a support for their campaign work and, he continued, because of the severe punishment in connection to infibulation, the law has been vital in the fight against the most severe forms of circumcision. In relation to the transition from infibulation to clitoridectomy and excision, it seems probable that the law has assisted in the dramatic decrease of infibulations in the area. The articles point to the severity of infibulation by the dramatic difference in punishment, and recognize its potentially severe medical consequences, punishable with as much as five to ten year’s imprisonment. Ato Samuel’s experience thus point to the potential support and gains of having a legislative system in place.

One day, my friend Getahun took me to Babile, a city about half an hour from Harar. After speaking to the head of the Women Affairs Office there, I was lucky to meet a friend of Getahun who was a judge in Babile. I will call him Mulatu. When he heard about my project, he told me that he occasionally have cases of circumcision in his court. This caught my
attention, and I seized the chance to ask him some more questions during a chat session that afternoon. I was especially interested in how these cases find their way to court. Mulatu said that cases become known partly because the WAOS have local health agents in communities. Neighbors and acquaintances can report cases to these agents who will further inform the police. Then, how can one prove that the crime has actually been committed? According to Mulatu they never check physically if the girl has been circumcised. The court has to base their judgment on the narratives of girls, families and circumcisers. From his experience circumcisers often admit their work in court. It would be difficult for them to deny anything, when they are likely to be renowned locally for their profession. In short the enforcement of the law on circumcision seems to be dependent on the local community, ‘the word of mouth’, and ‘engaged souls’ that dare to raise their voice. Further, how does the court reveal the responsible family members? Mulatu said the court consults the girls themselves to find out whom in the family that was responsible for arranging the circumcision. I cannot draw a discussion on the situation in court very far, as my knowledge on this is based mainly on the experiences of Mulatu. But certain aspects are interesting in the discussion on change.

Firstly, the stories in Mulatu’s court and his points so far refer to the rather ‘successful’ part of the story from a juridical perspective on implementation. He stressed that any excuses from parents about the religious meaning of circumcision or lack of knowledge about the law is not considered in court. Further, the court in Babile was seemingly quite engaged in their cases of circumcision, Mulatu estimated that they had about one case every fourth month. The court also seems to have an educational function, as more people learned about the potential consequences. As he said, more people are now aware of these laws, and fear them. The law has clearly established an additional argument for abandonment.

**Experiencing the law: taking it elsewhere?**

Secondly, some limitations to the legislation of circumcision did surface during my stay. It became clear from Mulatu’s stories that some parents still did not agree with the criminalization of something considered part of their tradition. Despite awareness about illegality, some people still wished to perform circumcision. As already mentioned this was

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69 Due to time limitations and choice of focus, I did not have the chance during my fieldwork to go extensively into the legal matters and procedures concerning circumcision. Neither, to my knowledge, did any of my informants in Jogul have experience with the court and HTPs. Thus it was not a central topic for discussion.
also the case in Harar. While women I talked to in Harar feared the law, for instance Rawdah wanted to circumcise her daughters in secrecy. Badriya also said she would defy the legal prohibition and take girls out of the city. Several women I talked to expressed this view, and also those opposed to circumcision were aware that people would take the daughters out of the town or get the circumcision done secretly.

Not only did some people disagree. They expressed discomfort with being told what to do by people from ‘outside’. In my conversation with Mulatu, he quite early asked me inquisitively about my opinion on circumcision. He was very interested to know what approach my anthropological study was going to have. Before I had the time to answer he continued, and made it clear that circumcision is a culturally meaningful action that, as he said, belongs to Africans. – We have our culture and they [Europeans/Americans] have theirs. By this statement, Mulatu stressed the contextual meaning of circumcision and how intervention from NGOs, international and national campaigns can be experienced as arrogant admonishment, from people who think their own society is more prosperous, and believe that they have the right to intervene and “educate” others on what is best for their own good. As Mackie (2000: 278) writes, propaganda and prohibitions may result in defiance, and an uncomfortable feeling of being denied one’s freedom to act. Lindner describes a similar experience during her fieldwork in Harar. She met a woman who quite angrily stated to the European researcher: “We are not accepting any prohibition from outside (western world). It is our culture; never we will stop practicing Sunna!” (Lindner 2008:80) Even though Mulatu did not support circumcision to the same extent as this engaged woman, their message was coordinate: No one should come and tell them what to do.

I have already mentioned that circumcision has been included in the “pride of the city”, emphasized as part of the gey ada. In statements as the ones above, it was also expressed that circumcision can be part of an ethnic or group identity. Introduction of laws can then be experienced as an intervention into the group identity, which defines that group in relation to neighboring groups. Traditionally, Harari and Oromo would marry the circumcised women of the city within their own groups, and as such ensure group alliances. This group identity may have been part of the cause of the resistance among some women in Harar to the intervention from elsewhere.

Legislation also highlights the current position of young girls in Harar. As youth are now aware that absume is illegal, the law is an additional argument in their negotiation with parents, and potentially a tool that enable girls to resist the request of their parents. As in the stories from Mulatu, the law gives girls and women a chance to prevent absume from
happening. One day while I was getting my hair braided at Tibka’s house in the old town, the conversation touched upon legal aspects. Tibka told me that girls now even go to the police to escape their circumcision. She knew a girl who had gone to the police, because she feared her absume so much. The police had gone to her house to instruct her parents about its illegality and harmfulness. After this incident, the parents had gotten quite upset with the girl, and managed to persuade her that absume had to be done. She could not resist the will of her parents, despite her attempt to involve the law. As I have argued, these youths seems to be in an ambivalent position. They now possess knowledge and education that most of their parents did not have access to, but it might not be until they become parents, that impacts of education and law will be fully implemented.

**Pain and issues of health**

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to understand circumcision through perspectives of contextual meaning, embodiment and social convention. This implies that knowledge about the body and health is habitualized. As discussed above, anti-circumcision work has involved a change and development of local understanding of pain. Several of the recent works on circumcision and change (e.g. Shell-Duncan & Hernlund 2000, Talle 2003) shows that efforts to cause lasting attitudinal change has to involve discussion on local understanding of health. For instance in relation to infibulation, Talle shows that in Somalia, people themselves do not express a direct correlation between the physical incision and medical consequences (2003: 119). It is my impression that also in Harar, and Ethiopia generally, many of the arguments on circumcision build upon issues of health.

As mentioned, medical consequences of circumcision is a topic up for debate. As I argued in the discussion on pain, it should not be assumed that people experience pain and potential post-incision complications as traumatic or negative. In relation to excision and clitoridectomy, studies have shown that the focus on medical consequences in the “anti-FGM movement” may have been exaggerated. Linda Morison et.al (2001) did an extensive study on the health consequences of excision and clitoridectomy in The Gambia. They found that frequently cited consequences of circumcision such as vulval tumors, excessive keloid formation, painful sex, reproductive tract infections and infertility were not significantly more common among those women who had been cut than among uncut women (ibid: 643). Thus I argue that studies of change should not take for granted that these potential consequences are present, and the obvious ´common ground´ for discussion. Many women who have been
circumcised by clitoridectomy or excision have argued that it has little impact on their sexual experience and involves few later complications in life (see Ahmadu 2009). Neither did I hear anything of health complications in relation to excision and clitoridectomy in Harar.

That being said, focus on health and pain is central in anti-circumcision work in Ethiopia, and through the discourse on circumcision, local understanding of women´s and men´s general and sexual health is being negotiated.

“No change can happen without pain”

In the autumn of 2010 I attended a conference in Oslo on female circumcision, where women and men from different immigrant societies were present. One of the speakers and organizers of this meeting was Safiya Abdi, a nurse from Somalia and the north of Norway. Abdi is well known for her work on female circumcision among immigrant societies in Norway, and to me, her work is marked by her personal experience, and utter devotion. Her film referred to in the previous chapter, is a telling example. As we watched her recorded story during the conference it was clear that this evoked strong feelings among the many women present, and several of the women sitting close to me were crying. The atmosphere in the room was strongly marked by the honesty and intimacy of the film, and the many women in the room remembering their own experiences. As Abdi said during this day, she believes that change in circumcision is painful because in her opinion, what is needed is for women to remember their own experience. The pain of memory has to be pursued.

Abdi’s approach can be seen in relation to Haug (1993) who talks about minnearbeid (‘memory work’), as articulation of bodily experience. This articulation she says, unveils how women are socialized through their own body. Or as Talle puts it, there is the necessity of the open conversation: “It is in people´s own knowledge and experience that we find the strongest arguments in the fight against circumcision”. (Talle 2003: 127) Which again brings us back to the idea of pain as heterodoxy.

During one of my visits at Badriya’s house appeared another pinpointing statement. A friend of Badriya’s daughter told me she had watched a program on TV where the president of the Afar region talked about circumcision. He had discussed the severity of infibulation

70 Aksjonsdag mot omskjæring, Oslo Kongressenter 27.11.2010. (Arranged by: NKVTS, NAKMI, PAWA, Amathea, African Youth in Norway.)
71 My translation
72 The Afar are a (traditionally) nomadic tribe living in the eastern part of Ethiopia and the only people inhabiting the inhospitable environment of the Danakil desert. The Afar has had a high rate of circumcision,
among the Afar. As my friend said, the Afar are a nomadic people and usually ride camels. But when a girl is circumcised she cannot sit on the camel, and if the family is forced to move due to water and food accessibility she will have to walk the long distances in the burning heat before the wound has healed properly. Reflecting on the issue, the president then said: - to live is difficult, but to die is also difficult. In other words, sometimes it is easier to live with a certain kind of pain, than to confront that pain to end whatever that is causing it.

“\textit{No mother should die giving life}”

While we were sitting at Getahun’s house, talking to Mulatu, by luck the TV was on and there was a program from the Millennium Hall in Addis Ababa. This hall contains a grand stage used for the biggest concerts in Addis Ababa (and Ethiopia). On the wall behind the stage hung a big banner that said, “No mother should die giving life”.\textsuperscript{73} We soon learned that what we were watching was a big concert and happening arranged to raise awareness about maternal health in Ethiopia. In between music and dancing, some people came on stage to talk. At one moment, Getahun grabbed a pen and paper. They were talking about circumcision and he wanted to write it down for me. The woman on stage was telling her own story and this is what he wrote:

\textit{Females in the south circumcise 15 days before she is going to marry, and she is going to marry with her blood and pain. Today there is only 3 percent circumcision in the region. Before, this had been 100\% as of UNICEF’s findings. The girl: When my mother gave birth she felt serious pain. She (the daughter) then moved from her hometown to avoid her circumcision. Then, she got married, and gave her first birth freely, without any serious complications. Her mother told her; “why do you get married without circumcision?” The second time she gave birth in her mothers house, and when she saw that it went easy, her mother was happy. And she got no circumcision for her two youngest daughters. Her husband asked her why she married him without circumcision. But the husband got some training from skilled people in the community. The woman now gives education for her local society and was awarded by a local doctor for her efforts. They decided not to circumcise their daughter.}

This major event is one example of how strong the presence of this work is in the official Ethiopia. It further illustrates one of its central strategies – the focus on maternal health. The story of this girl articulates how it is possible and advantageous to live with an uncircumcised

\textsuperscript{73} “No mother should die giving life” is an international campaign by UNFPA promoting maternal health and prevention of maternal deaths (url: UNFPA).

\textsuperscript{88,9\% of girls circumcised with only a 0,5 decrease from BSL to FUS) and they have been central to anti-circumcision work in Ethiopia (e.g. EGLDAM 2008b, url: UNFPA 2010).}
body. She will be able to give birth with less complications. Furthermore I believe that this campaign strongly appeals to one issue central to Ethiopians: the highly valued position of women as mothers.

Another example of how painful experiences are articulated lies in the works WAOs. Ato Samuel told me that about ten years ago in the town of Babile a fourteen years old girl named Safiya had died during infibulation. The WAOs now arrange Safiya-day every year to remember the sad incident and to remind people of the dangers of circumcision. The ‘slogan’ is: “She should be the last girl mutilated.”

Lastly, these examples underscore another argument of this thesis. Women in Ethiopia or elsewhere do not need ‘education’ from outside, but react as mothers, sisters, family and friends to pain and grief. This, I have argued, clearly illustrates (to anyone who might doubt) one local mechanism of change.

**Men, health and sexuality**

The main focus of this thesis has been on the experiences of women. However, with my perspective on gender it follows that men are equally important in the production and change of female bodies and female circumcision as tradition. As discussed above, some writers entering the debate of circumcision from a feminist standpoint have portrayed women as oppressed ‘prisoners of ritual’, and consequently men simplistically as patriarchal, authoritative husbands and fathers victimizing women. Lightfoot-Klein’s (1989) famous book has been subject of this critique. I believe Abusharaf rightfully argues that these works have little to say about African adaptability and responsiveness to change (2006: 13), and they seem to exclude the potential of men’s experiences and their diverse roles in family and intimate relations. The simplified focus on male dominance and gendered dichotomies may serve at the expense of other differences (ibid), factors in social structures such as family, social and economic relations and so forth: Female Circumcision relates not only to gender relations, but to poverty, socioeconomic situations and religious discourses. Thus it is not reducible to some patriarchal structure. I argue that the differences in experiences among men are too manifold for such a simplification, and as fathers, brothers, and husbands their experiences are crucial to any efforts to understand change. Thus, including men is important to an understanding of female circumcision, in local efforts to change, and in efforts to understand change.
My friend Negasi made this clear to me when he told me his own story. Negasi has a younger sister, and one day while he still lived at home he understood that his parents were arranging the circumcision of his sister. According to Negasi it was the father who had decided that this had to be done. Negasi started to work with tourists in the south at a young age, and as soon as he heard about the circumcision he went to an Italian woman he knew to ask for assistance. He was worried about his sister, and did not want her to go through the painful circumcision. Negasi told her sister about his concerns and with the assistance of the Italian woman he took his sister and the neighbor girl to the closest town before their circumcision. The girls stayed away for almost two weeks, and when Negasi returned to the house, he had to answer to his father, who got angry when he understood his son had helped the girls escape from the circumcision. He had said that the children should listen to the elders, and he did not like that forenjos came to interfere. While his sister was away Negasi also tried to talk to his mother about the harmfulness of circumcision. Apparently his sister did not get circumcised and they succeeded in their mission. When I asked Negasi why he had gone through so much risk to save his sister from circumcision, he told me that because he had spent time in town, he had learned about its harmfulness through television and the many forenjos.

Negasi had acted from the knowledge of potential complications, and an immediate concern for the painfulness of the circumcision. Thus, as brothers, fathers and husbands, the pain of circumcision may also reveal itself as meaningless in the moment. In Gruenbaum’s extensive study from Sudan, she shows that anti-circumcision work that also include men revealed that men have been unaware of the severity of the incision and lacked knowledge about the details of this ‘women affair’. The technique of screening films with close-up pictures evoked strong feelings of sadness, shock and repulsion with the men present (2006: 135). This was also revealed in the reaction of my interpreter when we saw the film referred to above. He had never known female circumcision was so severe.

One should be careful not to overestimate the impact of such instant reactions. It does not necessarily lead to a long-term attitudinal change. That fathers wish to protect their daughters does not mean that they would like to marry a kinteram. In their study from Sudan, Abdel Magied and Musa (2004) found that many men wish to protect their daughters while they still want to marry circumcised women. The meaning of circumcision is too intricate to entail such a plain solution to this complex controversy. But for some men, this can be the ground for a new, articulate opposition to the practice (Ibid). Negasi indeed wanted to marry an uncircumcised girl.
Female circumcision and male sexuality

Sexual pleasure has also become part of the discussion on circumcision. Several studies found that female circumcision was believed to be preferable for male sexuality and for both male and female fertility (Rye 2002). The tight vaginal opening of infibulation has been believed to enhance male pleasure (Talle 1993, Boddy 1982). This is illustrated for instance in the reinfibulation of women after births. By doing this, the woman will be able to continuously offer her husband a tight, vaginal opening. Women in Gruenbaum’s (2001) study tell of the sexual pleasure they enjoy with their husband after a reinfibulation.

Gruenbaum’s study importantly stress that Somali couples have happy sexual relationships, enjoyable to both husband and wives, but evolving research on men also reveal possible male complications of infibulation: difficulty in penetration, wounds and infections on the penis and psycho-sexual consequences. Successful penetration of an infibulated woman may take weeks or months, and may have to be facilitated by surgical opening. Recent studies find that these issues not only distress women, but also affect men. Continuous efforts to facilitate coitus might cause feelings of failure, dejection, aggravation and fear of impotence (Abdel Magied & Musa: 2004).

Because infibulation is not common in Harar anymore, these arguments are not explicit in my material. This discussion is still relevant because studies from Sudan and Somalia suggest that articulation and debate on the experience of men is likely to be one of the reasons for the decrease of infibulation, and again pinpoints the knowledge of individuals and the importance of articulating and including the experiences of both men and women.

What my young male friends in Harar did tell me is that they know that girls who are circumcised may experience pain or be uncomfortable during intercourse. Some of my friends had experienced sex with uncircumcised or förjen girls, and said that uncircumcised girls were more “hot in bed”. Almost all the men I talked to during my fieldwork said that they wanted to marry an uncircumcised girl because they did not see absume as inevitable, and they did not want their future partners to be uncomfortable. Rather, they were aware of the value of female pleasure in relation to their own experience. Negasi wanted a girl that did not have absume. He did not want her to be in pain. Further he said, circumcised women may encounter health problems, and he did not want to spend an unnecessary amount of birr on medical bills.

The advocacy of female pleasure aims to change women and men’s perception of the female body, pleasure and intimacy. Gruenbaum terms this “the new model” (2006: 132).
Currently, there are not many women in Harar in the generation of my male informants (in their early twenties) that are uncircumcised, and for “the new model” to grow up and become sexually active will take years. Although, in tune with Gruenbaum, it seems that the introduction of this new model did have significance for my male acquaintances in Harar.

**Change ‘in the making’**

This discussion on change has been about local strategies for change, but also about analyzing change. In this, I have argued that understanding change should be based on recognition of local meanings of circumcision and the mechanisms for change already present. Through the examples of legislation and health, a top-down approach proves itself neither effective nor necessary. Thus I argue that an analytical, and political, approach caught in the assumption of ‘outside influence’ as inevitable, will neglect continuous processes of change occurring on individual and local level. I do not seek to ‘romanticize’ the local and the processes of change. Rather, I argue that change occurs in the dialectic, intricate relation between individual experiences, local discourses, media and global discourses.

The material from Harar further illustrate that circumcision is intricately connected to understandings of health, religion, subjectivation, bodies and group identities. If I have posed a suggestion here, it is that analysis and efforts to change circumcision cannot neglect this intricate relation, in which discourses on these different topics are intervened and constantly influence each other.
Afterword: Becoming fully woman

“‘Yesterday they circumcised me; today they clipped the tonsils; I am finished with cutting,’” said the girl.”
- Oromo proverb (Cotter 1997: 157)

Throughout this thesis I have argued that *absume* has been important for the making of gendered identities, of becoming fully woman in a process of ‘making incomplete’.

In relation to religion, female circumcision in Harar enabled the religious conduct of women as pure and respectable, thus partaking in the formation of a religious identity. However, I have argued that even though part of the local exegesis, Islam should not be applied as a simplified explanation. This thesis has therefore commented on analysis of religion. By use of the theories of Asad, Mahmoods’s theory of agency and an approach combining textuality and embodiment, I have attempted to avoid portraying religious meanings as an apriori totality (Asad 1979: 607). My material from Harar portrayed religious ideals and practice in constant flux, where terms and practices were debated and where individuals through everyday religious conduct engaged in the negotiation of religious meanings. The largely Muslim area of Jogul is in itself an image of the multifariousness of Muslim practice. And the women of the city, with their colorful dresses overtly visible in the city picture, present in social and economic activities, and by their subjective relation to religion and tradition, deny stereotypes of Muslim women as ‘imprisoned’ or suppressed by religion.

Exploration of female circumcision further led to an exploration of ideals of gender, which in analysis necessitated theories of gender that do not see gender or the body as fixed entities. As I have argued, girls and women constantly participate in the production and reproduction of gender ideals through their everyday actions. Further, that the body is both the center for socialization but also of experience, and consequently should be analyzed as a “subject to culture” (Csordas 1990: 5). Thus, the creation of habitus, of social ideals and of gender, is ‘invented’ in the dialectics of the intricate relationship between individual experience and social context.

In this I have made use of, among others, the somewhat canonical theories of Bourdieu and Foucault. The intention here has not been to force some grand, ‘Western’ theoretical framework on the bodies of women in Harar. Rather, I hope the theories used have contributed to an understanding of one central argument of this thesis: That an analysis of circumcision requires that we are willing to understand issues such as gender, bodies,
sexuality and power differently from what ‘we’ (e.g. in a Scandinavian setting), may be used to.

This is further stressed by Strathern’s theory of ‘making incomplete’. By this approach, Strathern challenges assumptions of some anthropological work, which have analyzed rites of initiation and passage as reintroduction to society as complete beings (1993: 45). This, she argues, builds on another assumption; “that society is collective life” (ibid: 41). For studies concerning the initiation of gender, this has great implications: Anthropologists have often found female initiation rituals to be more enclosed and concerned with the ‘private’. If the assumption is that completeness is in the social, and the social is the collective, then the easily accessible (and dangerous) conclusion could be (and has been) that girls are initiated to ‘silence’, suppression and the home. But as Strathern stresses, by making the single body the focus of attention, male and female initiation are not more or less concerned with the collective. Inspired by Strathern (1993), and Rye (2002), I also argue that absense as ritual is not so much about the display and integration of ‘society’ in the individual, but is concerned with enabling individual and bodily capacity and fertility, constituting a female identity.

Which brings us to the issue of change. I started with a discussion on the potential for change in the theories of Bourdieu and Foucault. The stories from Harar, I suggest, portray processes of change in gender and circumcision practice within and in relation to the contextual understandings of religion, bodies, gender and ‘socialization’. Thus, in the terms of Bourdieu, the possibilities for negotiation of social practices and meaning exist within the social contexts from which they derive. Further, Bourdieu’s argument is that transformation in and of symbolic contexts and the habitus lies exactly in the alterations of mechanisms that are the premises for its production. I suggested that change in circumcision practices might articulate a change in one of the mechanism for production, thus intricately connected to change in a range of topics within the gendered habitus, such as ideals of virginity, sexuality and the socialization of gender. Based on my material from Harar, I aimed at using theories that enabled analysis of processes of change, and implicitly, power, on the level of subjects, localities and everyday practices.

I have claimed that considering the political implications of the topic, (and my position as a Norwegian anthropology student), this thesis would not offer any ‘solution’ to the conundrum of female circumcision or any evaluative analysis of anti-circumcision work. This might seem contradictory, when I then strongly argue that the potential for change lies within the articulation of local discourses and experiences. But this is not so much intended to be a suggestion (and it is indeed a very vague one), as much as it is a political statement, and a
clarification of the position argued for in thesis: As stated by Gruenbaum (1996): women can argue this one out for themselves. This thesis has thus been an attempt to articulate the mechanisms and arguments of change in Harar.

I started this thesis with devoting space to a discussion on writing ethnography, and of the inclusion of the ethnographer in methodology and in writing. One of my intentions with this literary ‘move’ was to reveal my learning process in the field. Further, to write ethnography centered on the individuals and personal relations. In his widely debated article *Ethnography Without Tears* (1989), Paul A. Roth expressed concern that the growing trend in the 1980s of self-reflexive writing ends up claiming authenticity through claiming feelings and focus on human interaction as more ‘true’. For writers of this ‘new era’ the intention was to avoid domination through representation by including the ethnographer. But in Roth’s opinion, the ‘new’ modes of writing ethnography risks excusing any authoritative position by just stating one’s standpoint and recognizing its partiality.

I should mention that it was not at all my intention with the attempt at self-reflexive writing, to escape ‘the power of representation’ or to label my understanding of gender in Harar as ‘more true’. While in the field and in the text, I am still a Norwegian student speaking from the ‘outside’. Hence, I agree with Strathern’s and Clifford’s reply to the article, that the knowledge one might gain from this approach is how this particularity engineers perspectives of a certain kind (Roth et.al 1989: 566). Thus, perspectives are not only partial, they are political (ibid: 562). My hope has been to combine pieces of self-reflexive writing with theoretical perspectives, that have clarified my particular position on a highly politicized issue, and how this produced a certain perspective.

In sum, I have argued for an understanding of circumcision that is both politically and analytically specific: In my opinion, the debate on circumcision raises dilemmas of western interference, and the ‘colonialism of knowledge’, and my main concern has been with understanding local processes. Hence, this is what shaped my choice of theoretical and analytical perspective, through which I have attempted to argue for an approach that neither condemns nor endorse the practice.

Women in Harar find their own strategies for dealing with the current debate on circumcision, whether it is by reducing medical consequences by milder incision, getting it done in secrecy or by abandoning it. Simultaneously, local meanings of gender seem to be changing, (slowly) allowing for the legitimacy of the uncircumcised body.

Many of the anthropologists I have been inspired by here have done extensive, significant studies on processes of change, and such studies seem to be rising in number. So are the
contributions from African women themselves. But considering the debate as a whole, I agree with Abusharaf who argues that there does seem to be a need for documentation of the changing attitudes, and of the symbolic systems changing over time (2006: 16). I hope this thesis might be a small contribution to this perspective, that my attempt to describe the people, the thoughts, doubts and evaluations may be a contribution to a nuancing of the debate.
Glossary

(am = Amharic, ha = Harari, or = Oromo)

Anbessa (am): Lion

Arab Absume (or): Word for female circumcision, except infibulation.

Absume (or): General term for female circumcision.

Ashara (or): Tea from cover of coffee beans especially used among the Oromo.

Birthcha (am): Ceremony for the chewing of ch´at, usually from mid-day.

Bunna (am): Coffee

Ch´at: Khata Edulis, widely grown in the Hararge region and now often chewed in social gatherings in Harar (by both Oromos and Hararis) and for Muslims prayers and celebrations.

Doro (am): chicken

Doro wat (am): The Ethiopian 'national' dish, made of doro and a stew with the hot spice berbere.

Duriya (or): Common, loosely fitting and colorful dress worn by women in Harar.

Fota (am): Big scarf used by women, often draped loosely over head and shoulders.

Fundata (am): fire age, denoting the years of youth from around 13, 14 years-of-age until 18.

Gadaa (or): Ancient age-set system of the Oromo. Now replaced by party dependent political organization and Muslim social organization.

Gey (ha): 'The city', referring to Harar as the city par excellence.

Gey absume (ha): 'the circumcision of the city'

Gey ada (ha): 'tradition of the city'

Gey qahat (ha): 'girl of the city'

Gey usu (ha): 'the people of the city'

Gey sinan (ha) 'the language of the city' popularly called Adere, Aderegna (am) or Harari.
**Girzat**: Amharic word for circumcision

**Googera (am)**: Petticoat worn under the *duriya*.

**Hoda Absume (or)**: Oromo word for infibulation.

**Injera (am)**: Ethiopian, pancake-like sourdough bread made of *tef* or sorghum. Used for most main meals by Amharas and Oromos.

**Jebena (am)**: Clay pot used for serving *bunna*.

**Kinter (am)**: Clitoris

**Kinteram (am)**: Uncircumcised woman.

**Sash**: light-fabric scarf for covering hair.

**Selat**: Arabic word for the Muslim prayer.

**Sunnah**: Arabic term for religious tradition as guided by the Prophet. Also refers to the milder types of female circumcision by those who believe it is a religious instruction.
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