

Ahed Berakdar

Circumcision as an ethical dilemma

Discuss the global inequality between female and male circumcision.

Emnekode: SANT2900

Antal ord: 6514

Bacheloroppgave i Sosialantropologi

Mai 2023



NTNU

Kunnskap for en bedre verden

Ahed Berakdar

Circumcision as an ethical dilemma

Discuss the global inequality between female and male circumcision.

Emnekode: SANT2900

Antal ord: 6514

Bacheloroppgave i Sosialantropologi

Mai 2023

Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet
Fakultet for samfunns- og utdanningsvitenskap
Institutt for sosialantropologi



NTNU

Kunnskap for en bedre verden

Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Circumcision between cultural relativism and human rights	3
3. The Western meaning of sexual pleasure	6
4. The symbolism of circumcision	10
5. Circumcision and patriarchy.....	14
6. Conclusion.....	16
7. References	18

1. Introduction

Circumcision is a surgical intervention that involves the removal of part of the external genitalia in males and females. Male circumcision involves the removal of the foreskin from the male genital organ, while female circumcision entails the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia (Darby & Svoboda, 2007).

Circumcision practices vary significantly across different cultures, religions, and geographical regions. In certain cultures, circumcision is viewed as a customary practice or a means of cultural expression (Silverman, 2004). However, circumcision can result in various health and psychological complications, such as excessive bleeding, pain, inflammation of the genital organ, or sexual dysfunction later in life (Darby & Svoboda, 2007).

Numerous institutions and organizations worldwide are advocating against circumcision and calling for communities to abandon this practice (Sardi, 2011). Despite ongoing debates regarding the potential advantages and disadvantages of circumcision, it remains prevalent in many societies. For every 13 million males, two million females undergo circumcision annually (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 306).

In many countries and international organizations, female circumcision is considered a blatant violation of human rights and a highly dangerous procedure that can cause significant health and psychological issues for females (Bell, 2005). Furthermore, female circumcision is often more contentious than male circumcision (Lile, 2018).

Many believe that female and male circumcision cannot be compared, as one is viewed as a form of mutilation while the other is considered a minor surgical procedure (Lile, 2018). My problem in this thesis is to explore the underlying reasons for this global contradiction in the handling of both circumcisions. This problem is multifaceted and touches upon a range of concerns, including human rights, the impact of circumcision on sexual pleasure for both males and females and the symbolism of circumcision. As such, my primary objective throughout this thesis will be to gain a deeper understanding of the factors driving the global discrepancy in attitudes toward female and male circumcision.

First, I will delve into a sensitive topic in the field of circumcision anthropology, which concerns the Separation between cultural relativism and moral relativism. This section also examines the extent to which researchers can maintain impartiality when studying circumcision and explores the possibility of separating personal moral values from the phenomena under

investigation (Johansen A., 2011). Moreover, this section evaluates the potential of objective anthropological studies to influence individuals to alter their practices after considering the "emic" point of view according to cultural relativism. By referring to the importance of cultural relativism as a method for understanding the meaning practitioners themselves give to circumcision.

the thesis will examine in the second section the global concept of sexual pleasure for individuals. particularly the impact of the Western understanding of sexual pleasure on public opinion's attitudes toward seeing male and female circumcision. I will draw on Bell's study which shows how a large part of our understanding of sexual pleasure is culturally constructed and varies from one society to another (Bell, 2005).

Finally, the thesis explores the symbolism of circumcision and its cultural impact on reducing female sexual pleasure and reinforcing masculine authority. I will rely on three different ethnographies, which are Talle's, Boddy's, and Bilu's fieldwork. I will link the symbolism of circumcision with the fabrication of ideal masculinity and femininity. I will focus on patriarchal systems in perpetuating the phenomenon of circumcision.

2. Circumcision between cultural relativism and human rights

In this section, I will analyze the importance of using cultural relativism versus linking circumcision to human rights. To do this, I will refer to theoretical articles by Talle, Darby, and Bell.

According to Darby, understanding the cultural context of circumcision is important for comprehending the history of this practice. However, we should not overlook the harm resulting from circumcision, as moral relativism cannot be entirely neutralized. Darby argues that labeling female circumcision as "mutilation" while calling male circumcision simply "circumcision" is the primary reason for the disparate handling of the two practices (Darby & Svoboda, 2007). On another focus, Talle argues that studying circumcision objectively and utilizing cultural relativism is very important (Johansen A., 2011). Talle sees this as particularly crucial when examining the "emic" means used by individuals themselves to describe circumcision. Talle suggests that cultural relativism helps us grasp the meaning of the social phenomenon and why individuals choose to practice it or refrain from doing so. And she argues that neutralizing the researcher's personality and the conceptualization of "etic" contributes to a better understanding of the phenomena (Talle, 2001). Bell argues that circumcision has similarly harmful sexual effects on both males and females. Bell suggests that our continued

focus on protecting females while ignoring males is mainly due to Western sexual concepts. Bell also emphasizes the importance of cultural relativism in reaching a more precise interpretation of the reasons behind both male and female circumcision, rather than solely concentrating on female circumcision (Bell, 2005).

The comparison between female and male circumcision can be contentious, as some believe that it diminishes the importance of stopping female circumcision by equating it with male circumcision (Darby & Svoboda, 2007). Moreover, not referring to female circumcision as "mutilation" has been criticized for downplaying its severity (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 305). Those who draw such comparisons are often accused of being misleading and extreme (Bell, 2005, p. 129). Because some view male circumcision as equivalent to ear piercing, and not as harmful or dangerous (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 302).

According to Bell, she argues that the unequal handling of male and female circumcision can be attributed to the Western notion of masculinity and femininity, which assume that men's bodies are strong and resilient, while women's bodies are weak and require protection (Bell, 2005). This dichotomy is further reinforced by the perceived sexual pleasure of men and women, as male circumcision is seen as having no effect on male sexual activity, while female circumcision is believed to hinder female sexuality (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 304). Female genital mutilation is considered a repressive act, and stopping it is the logical action to improve women's health and psychological status (Gruenbaum, 1996, p. 455). Therefore, female circumcision is criminalized as genital mutilation and an oppressive ritual, while male circumcision is often justified for religious and medical reasons (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 303). According to Sardi (2011), a considerable number of advocates for male circumcision as a religious practice maintain that attempts to boycott it represent an infringement of human rights, as it is deemed to be a religious entitlement for those who practice it (Sardi, 2011, p. 304). Darby argues that the routine practice of male circumcision, which is deeply ingrained in Western culture and is mentioned in religious texts like the Torah and Old Testament, has led to its widespread acceptance and even legalization, despite potential risks (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 312). The critics of male circumcision believe that both male and female circumcision have negative effects on sexual desire and violate children's rights (Silverman, 2004, p. 436). Therefore, those critics have raised concerns about the United Nations' focus on denouncing female circumcision while ignoring male circumcision (Silverman, 2004).

The United Nations and the World Health Organization have supported numerous studies highlighting the harmful effects of female circumcision. However, they have failed to conduct sufficient research on the potential psychological and sexual harms of male circumcision (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 305). According to Bell (2005) this contradiction may be due to the criticism of non-Western practices, such as female circumcision, while accepting Western practices, like male circumcision (Bell, 2005, p. 127). According to the World Health Organization and the United Nations, one of the main reasons for opposing female circumcision is the violation of young girls' rights and the harm inflicted on their bodies without their consent. On the other hand, male circumcision is commonly performed on newborns without their informed consent (Bell, 2005, p. 130), raising questions about why the international community prioritizes protecting girls but ignores the protection of young boys (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 303).

Bell argues that this contradiction reveals our cultural and scientific biases and highlights the power of culture in shaping beliefs and attitudes. She suggests that myths persist in our minds, and we seek to legitimize them through religious and legal institutions (Bell, 2005, p. 132). As she believes that both circumcisions are similar in cultural context, symbolism, and violation of human rights and that Western society's focus on female circumcision only results from its scientific biases and its own perceptions of female sexual pleasure (Bell, 2005). According to Bell (2005), it is inadequate to treat practitioners of female circumcision as criminals and African women who have undergone the practice as victims, while expecting them to comply with Western ideals of sexual pleasure, which ignore the harms of male circumcision and instead reinforce it as a cultural identity. Rather than attempting to understand the cultural context behind these practices, the West often views them as barbaric and the people who practice them as victims, leading to the imposition of Western sanctions on cultural rituals that are important expressions of identity (Bell, 2005).

It is important to recognize that circumcision is not just a traditional cultural practice, but also a significant aspect of identity for those who practice it. To gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind this practice, we need to consider its cultural and symbolic context and appreciate its significance for practitioners. In Gambia, there have been demonstrations by Gambian women advocating for their right to circumcise their daughters (Darby & Svoboda, 2007). Many argue that circumcision is an essential element of their identity and a means of bonding women together in their tribe and society. And many women point out the

inconsistency of allowing American parents to circumcise their male children while outlawing female circumcision (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 304).

With reference to Talle's argument (Talle, 2001) I believe that this principle should also be used in the study of male circumcision. I think it's important to examine the symbols and contexts surrounding circumcision to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the practice at both a global and local level. I also think that to fully comprehend the negative impact of circumcision; it is essential to neutralize moral relativism and use cultural relativism when studying sensitive phenomena such as this. Cultural relativism does not mean an absolute abandonment of moral norms. Rather, it stresses the importance of appreciating and respecting human rights and universal moral values, but they must be appropriately assessed and applied to different cultures and avoid imposing inflexible assessments (Talle, 2001). In this way, objective anthropological research can help achieve human justice by promoting a greater understanding of people's customs and cultures (Eriksen, 2011)

3. The Western meaning of sexual pleasure

In the following sections, I will draw on two articles to examine how the words we use, and cultural background affect our understanding of male and female circumcision. Darby's article explores the impact of using different terms to describe circumcision. According to Darby, the use of the term "female genital mutilation" reinforces the notion that female circumcision is a harmful and criminal act, whereas the term "male circumcision" tends to portray male genital cutting as a benign and acceptable procedure (Darby & Svoboda, 2007).

Bell's article focus on the cultural context of sexual practices and the influence of cultural constructs on our understanding of male and female circumcision. Bell emphasizes recognizing the diversity of cultural practices and understanding that sexual pleasure is a culturally constructed concept that varies across societies. The article argues that projecting Western ideals of sexual pleasure onto other societies can lead to a misunderstanding of their cultural practices. Bell highlights how feminist efforts to eliminate female circumcision may have inadvertently minimized the harms of male circumcision and created a contradiction in the global discourse surrounding both practices (Bell, 2005).

The disparity in how male and female circumcision is perceived reflects societal attitudes toward gender and sexuality. Therefore, these articles underscore the importance of examining social and cultural factors to develop nuanced and comprehensive solutions that address the potential harms of male and female circumcision.

Darby mentioned that in the United States, for example, male circumcision is often performed as a social and aesthetic practice rather than a religious ritual. This seeking to visual aesthetics for sexual satisfaction reinforces the ideal of a "tough male" (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 304). On the other hand, if a woman voluntarily undergoes female circumcision with the belief that it will make her more sexually appealing and feminine to her partner, she may face accusations of being crazy (Bell, 2005, p. 138). This contradiction in seeing the right of both adult males and females to circumcise themselves voluntarily has to do with the concept of Western sexual pleasure for both sexes (Bell, 2005). In Norway, there is specific legislation that penalizes individuals who perform female circumcision, as well as those who have knowledge of such acts but fail to report them (Kjønnslemlestelsesloven, 2015). However, unlike female circumcision, there is no equivalent law criminalizing male circumcision. Instead, ritual male circumcision is regulated by law (Lov om rituell omskjæring av gutter, 2015). Male circumcision is seen in Norway as legal and does not contradict the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child or human rights (Lile, 2018).

Although biological and physiological knowledge is crucial in understanding sexual pleasure for both males and females, it is equally important for anthropologists to acknowledge the cultural influence on sexual practices and ideas (Bell, 2005, p. 139). The Western view of sexual pleasure cannot be ignored when examining the conflicting attitudes towards male and female circumcision on a global scale (Bell, 2005). This requires not only an understanding of Western concepts of sexual pleasure but also a comparison between global and local perspectives to gain a more nuanced understanding of how culture shapes individual sexual practices and definitions of sexual pleasure. Thus, a comprehensive examination of circumcision is necessary to understand how practitioners perceive sex and how they classify it (Talle, 2001).

Before the eighteenth century, Western society viewed male and female sexual pleasure as equally essential for human reproduction (Bell, 2005). The clitoris was regarded as the organ responsible for female sexual pleasure and readiness for intercourse (Bell, 2005). During the 19th century, it became widely recognized that both males and females experience sexual pleasure through similar physiological organs, specifically the penis and the clitoris (Bell, 2005, pp. 132-133). However, this belief was challenged in 1843 when Bischoff discovered that female dogs could ovulate independently of sexual intercourse (Bell, 2005). Bell argues that this finding devalued female sexual pleasure and relegated it to a secondary role in the process of human reproduction (Bell, 2005, p. 133).

To support the lack of importance of female sexual pleasure, Victorian and moral ideologies emphasized this idea in scientific and social institutions (Bell, 2005). They also promoted female circumcision as a scientific and medical necessity to protect women from diseases and to restrict their sexual desire (Bell, 2005). Scientific and philosophical platforms reinforced the notion that the clitoris was unimportant for female sexual pleasure, and even Sigmund Freud argued that mature sexual activity in women was represented by vaginal pleasure rather than clitoral pleasure (Bell, 2005, p. 133). This further reinforced the idea that clitoral pleasure was childish and unimportant. Similarly, male circumcision was deemed unimportant as long as semen production remained intact (Bell, 2005, p. 136). This belief about the unimportance of sexual pleasure for males and females in the process of reproduction supported the idea of controlling unwanted sexual desires through circumcision, which was believed to contribute to the elimination of masturbation (Bell, 2005). As a result, circumcision became closely linked to societal expectations about the sexual function of individuals and what was believed to be in their best interest (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 304).

The belief that the clitoris and foreskin have little relevance to sexual pleasure persisted throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, despite evidence to the contrary (Bell, 2005, p. 134). However, as time passed, the focus shifted to promoting the health benefits of male circumcision, which became a widely accepted cultural practice that was legitimized legally, socially, and medically (Bell, 2005, p. 132). Meanwhile, female circumcision, which is a cultural practice in many societies, became recognized as a harmful and criminal act (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 303).

Feminists played a significant role in this shift, working to challenge the negative attitudes toward women's sexual pleasure and advocating for sexual liberation (Bell, 2005). In the 1970s, feminist movements aimed to promote the importance of the clitoris in female sexual pleasure, highlighting women's right to pleasure (Bell, 2005, p. 134). Feminists argued that the clitoris is equally crucial to female pleasure as the penis is to male pleasure. However, they did not differentiate whether this similarity is related to circumcised or uncircumcised penises (Bell, 2005, p. 134). The efforts of feminists were crucial in raising awareness about the clitoris and its significance in achieving sexual pleasure. They pointed out that the clitoris, like the penis, becomes erect during sexual stimulation and that the two organs share a similar structure and function (Bell, 2005, p. 134). Some feminists have argued that men and patriarchy deliberately ignore the clitoris by circumcising it or neglecting it during intercourse to reinforce male dominance over women (Bell, 2005, p. 135). However, the second-wave feminists, in their

focus on women's pleasure and their comparison of female and male genitals, did not study the female body in isolation based on its unique biological and physiological features (Bell, 2005). Instead, they used the male body as the established scientific norm, resulting in a conceptual and terminological issue when examining male and female circumcision. This has led to gender inequality in the study of circumcision (Bell, 2005).

Currently, it is not reasonable to compare female circumcision with male circumcision and treat them as similar procedures (Bell, 2005). The reason for this is that Western sexual discourse, by comparing the clitoris to the penis, has come to believe that there is no surgical procedure that could be equivalent to female circumcision except for castration in men (Bell, 2005, p. 135). Consequently, these comparisons have led to the development of new and widespread views that a female circumcision is a form of mutilation and sexual violence that is worse than male circumcision (Bell, 2005).

The studies supporting male circumcision have historically focused on promoting and legitimizing it, rather than objectively studying the biological changes that occur in the male body during sexual arousal (Bell, 2005). This emphasis on male circumcision was influenced by inherited cultural ideas about the nature of the male sexual activity, which prioritize ejaculation and semen production over the importance of the foreskin in male sexual pleasure (Bell, 2005, p. 127).

According to Butler, sex is a discursive construct. She argues that society and culture have a significant impact on our sexual practices (Johnson, 2018, p. 200). This belief is in line with what Bell argued about the concept of sexual pleasure and how it varies according to different societies (Bell, 2005). According to Bell (2005) Defining the sexual nature of individuals differs according to the cultural context in which they grow up, and we cannot apply a Western view of sex to all peoples' sexual practices (Bell, 2005). She argues that the assumption that all circumcised men achieve sexual pleasure while all circumcised women are unable to reach it is illogical and linked to the Western concept of sexual pleasure (Bell, 2005, p. 138). Opposing female circumcision solely because it deprives women of sexual pleasure, while male circumcision continues to be widely accepted, is contradictory and unfair. Some feminists believe that women who have undergone circumcision and claim to experience sexual pleasure and reach orgasm are mistaken about the true nature of sexual pleasure (Bell, 2005, p. 134). But it is important to recognize that the perception of sexual pleasure is subjective, and some

circumcised women do experience sexual pleasure despite undergoing circumcision, particularly those who have undergone less severe forms of the procedure (Bell, 2005, p. 139).

According to Bell (2005) the Western world's campaign to eradicate female circumcision without considering its cultural context is logically inconsistent because it fails to accord the same level of concern to male circumcision, which also has sexual harms that have not been objectively studied (Bell, 2005). Unlike female circumcision, male circumcision has not received significant attention from liberation movements or become a public health issue. Therefore, it remains a routine practice deeply rooted in Western customs and culture (Darby & Svoboda, 2007). Darby mentioned that some studies have demonstrated that the male foreskin contains numerous sensory cells that contribute to sexual pleasure. In contrast, the glans, which are known to be more sensitive to discomfort, have been shown to have fewer sensory cells in comparison (Darby & Svoboda, 2007, p. 309). Despite these studies that show that male circumcision can diminish sexual pleasure by amputating a highly sensitive part of the penis, namely the foreskin, the cultural significance of the hard glans in male sexual pleasure has prevailed, receiving greater medical and religious support (Darby & Svoboda, 2007). Consequently, it has been challenging to bring public attention to the harm that male circumcision causes to sexual pleasure. It is, therefore, necessary to acknowledge that social realities, including sexual practices, are culturally constructed. As Bell argues cultural conditioning plays a significant role in shaping individuals' sexual practices and preferences, which can become biologically entrenched and integral parts of their identities (Bell, 2005, p. 139).

4. The symbolism of circumcision

Different societies assign varying symbolic meanings to circumcision. In this section, I will refer to three studies that examine the symbolic aspects of circumcision. These studies investigate the cultural, social, and symbolic meanings of different forms of circumcision within specific communities. They also illustrate the intricate ways in which these practices are intertwined with broader cultural beliefs about gender and sexuality.

Moreover, these studies demonstrate that circumcision is a practice deeply rooted in cultural traditions and beliefs, which is used as a means of social control over an individual's body and sexuality. They reveal that cultural attitudes towards gender and sexuality are reinforced during the practice of circumcision, particularly during rites of passage that reinforce the concepts of masculinity and femininity in patriarchal societies.

The first article by Boddy (1982) argues that the practice of female circumcision is not simply a violent act against women, but rather, it is deeply rooted in cultural and symbolic meanings that are important to the people who practice it. She suggests that the practice is linked to the idea of the "womb as oasis," which represents the source of life and fertility. According to Boddy (1982) the practice of female circumcision is a way for women to "purify" themselves and become more fertile, which is highly valued in the local region where having many children is seen as a sign of wealth and prestige. Additionally, the practice is seen to control women's sexuality and preserve their virginity until marriage (Boddy, 1982).

Talle's article (1993) argues that infibulation, which involves the removal of the clitoris and labia and the sewing up of the vulva, is a way to control women's sexuality and ensure their virginity before the marriage. This, in turn, reinforces patriarchal power structures by ensuring that women's sexuality is controlled and that their virginity is seen as valuable. Talle also argues that circumcision is a way to transform women into pure. And reinforces the idea that women are inferior to men and must be controlled to maintain social order (Talle, 1993).

Bilu's article (2003) examines the ultraorthodox community, where male identity is closely tied to religious rituals, particularly those performed during childhood. These rituals serve as a way of reinforcing gender roles and social norms, and they help to shape the way that boys see themselves and their place in the world. Specifically, Bilu examines two key rituals: circumcision (milah) and the first reading of the Torah (milah). He argues that these rituals serve as markers of identity, helping to define what it means to be a Jewish male in the ultraorthodox community (Bilu, 2003).

The cultural significance of male and female circumcision is similar, although male circumcision may be less painful than female circumcision (Talle, 1993, p. 89). Male circumcision aims to produce mature men who embody ideals of masculinity and fertility, enabling them to marry and engage in ideal sexual activity (Silverman, 2004, p. 421). Female circumcision is intended to prepare girls for a more feminine and fertile lifestyle (Boddy, 1982). Overall, the symbolic value of both types of circumcision centers on transforming individuals into pure expressions of femininity or masculinity, which may vary depending on the society in which the practice is performed.

According to Boddy (1982) the community in Hofriyat practices Pharaonic circumcision and believes that female circumcision has multiple reasons, including protecting girls' honor and purity by reducing their sexual desire and preventing masturbation. The community considers

circumcision an aesthetic practice that enhances a woman's sexual appeal by narrowing the vaginal opening, which increases the likelihood of circumcised girls getting married (Boddy, 1982, p. 685). Similarly, Talle argues that Somali women consider circumcision to narrow the vaginal opening and enhance their sexual attractiveness, as newly circumcised girls compare their surgeries and aspire for a "perfect" circumcision that makes the vaginal opening as narrow as possible (Talle, 1993, p. 100). According to Talle (1993) the local Somali population considers such a circumcision more desirable, while a wide circumcision opening is viewed as unappealing (Talle, 1993, p. 96).

Talle argues that some men express their preference for marrying girls who have a narrow vaginal opening. This preference is closely linked to the girl's honor, which is beyond doubt if she has undergone circumcision (Talle, 1993, p. 100). Talle sees that this cultural belief has led to a perception of a narrower vaginal opening as a source of pride and security for Somali women. She argues that this obsession can be distressing, as some women seek to reduce the opening after their first circumcision because they feel their circumcision was unsuccessful and left them with a wide or unattractive opening (Talle, 1993, p. 97). Talle mentioned one circumcision surgery in this preference for a narrow vaginal opening was observed in the circumcision of a ten-year-old girl, where her mother expressed great happiness at the success of the procedure because her daughter's opening was deemed to be perfect and narrow enough (Talle, 1993, p. 89). The belief that a narrower vagina is an indication of an ideal circumcision allows circumcised Somali girls to marry appropriately and obtain social acceptance by proving their chastity and purity (Talle, 2001)

On the other hand, Male circumcision is viewed as a symbolic rebirth for boys (Silverman, 2004, p. 422). Bilu argues that in Orthodox Judaism, it is believed that a male fetus possesses a masculine consciousness while in the mother's womb, capable of perceiving sights, and sounds, and even reading the Torah (Bilu, 2003). Bilu argues that during birth an angel strikes the infant's upper lip, causing the loss of memory and preventing the contamination of the child's masculine thoughts by the mother's femininity and impurity from the birthing process (Bilu, 2003). As a result, the first week of a male's life is regarded as a period of mourning due to the association with feminine rituals related to the mother's femininity and blood (Bilu, 2003). To restore some of the infant's masculinity, circumcision is performed on the eighth day after birth (Bilu, 2003, p. 183). In some cultures, such as in Somalia, the circumcised boy is prohibited from showing his circumcision to women during the healing period to avoid infection (Talle, 1993, p. 90) and is instead separated from his mother and sisters to learn about

the lifestyle and activities of men (Silverman, 2004, p. 423). That helps the circumcised boy to develop an understanding of what it means to be masculine and fosters a deeper relationship with his father (Silverman, 2004, p. 422).

In other societies, newly circumcised boys may be isolated in special gatherings to undergo rigorous societal challenges (Eriksen, 2019). In the highlands of New Guinea, newly circumcised boys practice fellatio with grown men where semen, represents male milk in these cultures (Lorentzen, 2020, p. 37). For Jewish communities, the blood that is shed during circumcision symbolizes the purging of negative femininity from the boy's body (Bilu, 2003). This shedding of blood is likened to the impure and negative blood of girls' menstruation, and the newly circumcised boy is thought to emerge from the ritual with a heightened sense of masculine identity (Silverman, 2004, p. 424).

According to Talle (1993) the act of male circumcision is seen as a source of pride and a symbol of the transition from boyhood to manhood, (Talle, 1993, p. 90). On the other hand, Boddy mentioned that female circumcision does not signify sexual maturity in girls, since they are considered immature until they get married (Boddy, 1982, p. 683). Talle argues that, unlike male circumcision, female circumcision is often performed secretly, and its significance is considered less important than that of male circumcision. Although practitioners of female circumcision are aware of its importance for the social and marital life of girls, the event is usually confined to women, and all men are excluded from the house (Talle, 1993, p. 88). Talle explains that female circumcision is considered Embarrassing for the local community, and it should be performed quietly, without verbal discussion among the men of the family, like other feminine issues that are not given value in social ceremonies (Talle, 1993). Consequently, female circumcision rituals are usually less dramatic (Lorentzen, 2020, p. 36). Boddy mentioned that female circumcision involves the relative women who present gifts and money, as well as drinking tea in the backyard of the house as a festive ritual (Boddy, 1982, p. 683). In Sudan, the circumcised girl may also receive special ritual ornaments called "jirtig," which protect her from harm and evil spirits during the healing period of the circumcision wound (Boddy, 1982, p. 684). While Somali women ritually change their hairstyle twice in their lives, once after birth and once after circumcision (Talle, 1993, p. 87).

We can see after studying different fieldwork that circumcision is a deeply rooted practice in cultural traditions and beliefs, with different symbolic meanings and purposes depending on the society in which it is performed. Studies have shown that circumcision, whether male or

female, is used as a means of social control over an individual's body and sexuality, and reinforces cultural attitudes towards gender and sexuality, particularly in patriarchal societies. The practice of female circumcision, for example, is rooted in cultural and symbolic meanings, which aim to control their sexuality and preserve their virginity until marriage (Johansen & Elise, 2019). Similarly, male circumcision is a way of producing mature men who embody ideals of masculinity, enabling them to marry and engage in ideal sexual activity (Boddy, 1982). Circumcision, whether male or female, is a practice that deeply affects the lives of those who undergo it, and its symbolic value centers on transforming individuals into pure expressions of femininity or masculinity, which may vary depending on the society in which the practice is performed. To fully understand circumcision, it is necessary to examine it within the context of patriarchal systems.

5. Circumcision and patriarchy

Bell posits that the contrasting handling of male and female circumcision has its roots in the patriarchal system (Bell, 2005, p. 125). Anthropologists have connected circumcision with the idea of kinship and the paternal tribe, reinforcing the patriarchal system through male circumcision rituals by demonstrating the father's loyalty to the group, relatives, and higher political formations through the circumcision of his son (Silverman, 2004, p. 422). In contrast, female circumcision is a manifestation of patriarchal control over the bodies of girls, shaping their sexuality and social identity (Talle, 2001). Talle (2001) contends that circumcision is a tool for creating morally upright individuals who conform to social norms, shaping their genitals to conform to ideas of purity and chastity. The act of circumcision serves as a direct means of binding members of the tribe together and establishing a relationship between the female body and the patriarchal clan (Talle, 2001)

In cultures where female circumcision is practiced, virginity holds significant symbolic value. In Somalia, for instance, female circumcision is closely associated with kinship relations according to Talle (1993). The responsibility of forming strong relationships lies with men, while women form friendly relations with their relatives through marriage (Talle, 1993, p. 94). Talle argues that the preservation of virginity is particularly crucial for circumcised girls, as it leads to faster marriages and larger dowries, which are essential social values for girls and their families (Talle, 1993). On the other hand, losing one's virginity may result in reduced social value, making it challenging to find a suitable partner (Talle, 1993). Therefore, it is essential for women to maintain a pattern of reliable relationships that promote flexibility in society,

which is achieved by preserving their virginity and adhering to circumcision practices (Talle, 1993). Talle mentioned also that Maintaining the girl's virginity before marriage is a significant factor in preserving the family's honor and social value, which is the responsibility of male family members and relatives who monitor the behavior of circumcised girls (Talle, 1993). When a girl is known to be a virgin, it enhances the family's social value, and her marriage serves as a social gift that strengthens relationships between relatives (Talle, 1993, pp. 95-96).

The marriage of a man to a virgin girl is a reason for boasting among the residents of the local Somali community (Talle, 1993, p. 91). According to Talle (1993) it is considered a privilege for a man and an affirmation of his masculinity by being the first man in his wife's sexual life. Thus, all girls should preserve their virginity until they get married, as their husbands should be their first sexual partners (Talle, 1993, p. 96). The circumcision guarantees the girl's virginity a lot, so the patriarchal society seeks to practice it to preserve the honor of the family, the girl, and the tribe (Boddy, 1982). Those who practice this circumcision believe that "virgins are made, not born" (Boddy, 1982, p. 687). Often, the patriarchal system seeks to recreate virginity whenever necessary, as women often restore and beautify their circumcision after childbirth and divorce to appear as pure women who have not had sex before (Boddy, 1982).

In Somalia, the significance of female circumcision is strongly tied to the honor of both the girl and her family, due to the close interdependence of moral values and kinship ties in tribal societies and the "agnatic group" (Talle, 1993, p. 99). According to Talle (1993) female circumcision serves as a clear and direct manifestation of male domination. While females are circumcised to confirm their virginity, men take pride in their own male circumcision and the manifestation of their rugged masculinity (Talle, 1993). For a circumcised man, breaking his wife's circumcision is a crucial matter, as it serves as evidence of his masculine potency and ability to penetrate his wife without any medical assistance and in a relatively quick manner (Talle, 1993). Hence, men in local Somali communities often boast about their ability to break their wives' circumcision, either by tearing it with their penis or by using a knife, if necessary (Talle, 1993). Some couples even demonstrate their power and dominance by dancing with daggers on their wedding day (Talle, 1993, p. 99).

The act of penetration is excruciatingly painful for the circumcised wife, and thus, some relatives offer assistance to the husband by positioning his wife in a suitable manner, enabling him to fulfill his masculine duty effectively (Talle, 1993, p. 100). Boddy mentioned that in Sudan, some husbands secretly summon the woman responsible for circumcision at night to

help break their wives' circumcision (Boddy, 1982). Failure to prove one's masculinity by breaking his wife's circumcision is viewed as shameful for a man (Boddy, 1982).

When examining the beliefs of the local population in Sudan regarding reproduction, it is found that most believe that the man provides the child with its external skeleton, while the mother contributes flesh and blood (Boddy, 1982). According to Talle (1993) this belief aligns with the concept of solid paternal lineage, which is similar to bones. She argues that just as bones protect the human body, the patriarchal system safeguards the village, women, and tribe members (Talle, 1993). This reinforces the notion that the patriarchal system derives its hardness "its bones" from men and its softness "its blood and its flesh" from women (Boddy, 1982, p. 692). According to Talle (1993) in most societies that rely on kinship systems, the concepts of hardness and softness are similar (Talle, 1993). She argues that strong and deep kinship relations are viewed as solid and an indication of the importance of the male and the father in their formation, while women play a crucial role in promoting friendly relations between relatives (Talle, 1993, p. 93). Here virginity is linked to the patriarchal system, according to Boddy (1982), and preserving it becomes a societal and familial responsibility. The honor of the family and tribe is linked to the behavior of the girls, making female circumcision an important societal issue (Boddy, 1982, p. 686).

Female circumcision serves not only as a symbol of the husband's masculinity but also represents the transfer of a girl's kinship ties from her natal family to her husband's family. This transfer of allegiance renders the girl and her future offspring reliant on her husband's family (Talle, 1993, p. 99). Therefore, we can note that female circumcision is a highly significant issue in tribal communities because it is closely intertwined with moral values and kinship ties (Johansen & Elise, 2019). Within patriarchal systems, the practice of female circumcision is seen as essential for preserving a girl's virginity before marriage, which enhances the family's social standing and serves as a social gift that reinforces relationships between relatives.

6. Conclusion

Research in the field has shown that the meaning of circumcision varies between males and females. Female circumcision aims to reduce sexual desire and encourage adherence to traditional norms, while male circumcision aims to promote a certain ideal of masculinity without thinking of sexual desire. Although both types of circumcision are considered forms of parental authority, men tend to benefit more from circumcision within patriarchal societies.

Perceptions of circumcision became influenced by a global discourse on sexual desire, where female circumcision is seen as the only form that impacts sexual pleasure. This led human rights organizations to prioritize protecting women from circumcision as a direct injustice to their bodies and denial of sexual pleasure while neglecting the objective study of male circumcision.

Therefore, it is crucial to give equal consideration to both male and female circumcision and to conduct more comparative studies to comprehend how both forms represent the intervention of patriarchal systems in the will of individuals and alterations to the structure and function of their genitalia.

7. References

- Bell, K. (2005, June). Genital Cutting and Western Discourses on Sexuality. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 19(2), 125 - 148. <https://doi.org/10.1525/maq.2005.19.2.125>
- Bilu, Y. (2003, Jun). From Milah (Circumcision) to Milah (Word): Male Identity and Rituals of Childhood in the Jewish Ultraorthodox Community. *Ethos*, 31, 172-203. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3651935>
- Boddy, J. (1982, Nov). Womb as Oasis: The Symbolic Context of Pharaonic Circumcision in Rural Northern Sudan. *American Ethnologist*, 9, 682-698. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/644690>
- Darby, R., & Svoboda, J. S. (2007, Sep). A Rose by Any Other Name? Rethinking the Similarities and Differences between Male and Female Genital Cutting. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 21(3), 301 - 323. <https://doi.org/10.1525/maq.2007.21.3.301>
- Eriksen, T. H. (2011). Fra misforståelse til irrelevant? – Noen refleksjoner om antropologien og mediene. *Norsk antropologisk tidsskrift*, 3-4, 257–266. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1504-2898-2011-03-04-09>
- Eriksen, T. H. (2019). *Små steder store spørsmål*. Universitetsforlaget AS.
- Gruenbaum, E. (1996). The Cultural Debate over Female Circumcision: The Sudanese Are Arguing This One out for Themselves. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 10(4), 455-475. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/648655>
- Johansen, A. (2011). Aud Talle: Kulturens makt. Kvinnelig omskjæring som tradisjon og tabu. *Norsk antropologisk tidsskrift*, 22(2), 144–146. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1504-2898-2011-02-06>
- Johansen, B., & Elise, R. (2019). Fra tradisjon til overgrep – nye forståelser av kjønnslemlestelse ved migrasjon. *Universitetsforlaget*, 49–66. <https://doi.org/10.18261/9788215032320-2019-03>
- Johnson, J. (2018). Feminist anthropology and the question of gender. I M. Candea, *Schools and styles of anthropological theory* (ss. 195-208). Routledge.
- Kjønnslemlestelsesloven. (2015). *Lov om forbud mot kjønnslemlestelse*. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLO/lov/1995-12-15-74?q=kj%C3%B8nnslemlestelsesloven>.
- Lile, H. S. (2018). Omskjæring – et spørsmål om folkerettslig metode. *Kritisk juss*, 44(2), 79–90. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN.2387-4546-2018-02-03>
- Lorentzen, J. (2020). Etnografiske fortellinger om kjønn. I J. Lorentzen, & W. Muhleisen, *Kjønnsforskning* (ss. 32-41). Universitetsforlaget.
- Lov om rituell omskjæring av gutter. (2015). *Lov om rituell omskjæring av gutter*. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2014-06-20-40>
- Sardi, L. (2011). The Male Neonatal Circumcision Debate: Social Movements, Sexual Citizenship, and Human Rights. *Societies Without Borders*, 16(1), 304-329. <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1101&context=swb>
- Silverman, E. K. (2004). Anthropology and circumcision. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33, 419-445. doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.33.070203.143706

Talle, A. (1993). Transforming women into pure agnates: Aspects of female infibulation in Somalia . I V. Broch- Due, I. Rudie, & T. Bleie, *Carved Flesh/ Cast Selves. Gendered symbols and social practices* (ss. 83-106). Berg Publishers.

Talle, A. (2001). But it is mutilation. *Norske antropologisk tidsskrift*, 12(1-2), 25-33.
https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/sv/sai/SOSANT2760/h10/Talle_But%20it%20is%20mutilation.pdf

