



Negotiating Female Genital Cutting (*Sunat*) in Southern Thailand

This chapter examines the performance of a mild form of female genital cutting (FGC) in southern Thailand (locally called *sunat*) and its embeddedness in situational social and family dynamics where religious education, seniority, and gender play a pivotal role in making decisions. The goal of this chapter is to call the reader's attention to the relevance of ethnographic investigation and microanalysis in detecting the existence of plural regional trends that need to be taken into account in planning public health policies. Analyzing selected case studies, this chapter will argue that in this region people following modernist, literalist interpretations of Islam usually reject the practice of FGC. Literalists pursue a direct reading and understanding of the scriptures rather than relying on the traditional interpretations of the Quran and hadiths offered by the major schools (*madhhab*) of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). These individuals can resort to different strategies to resist the requirement to circumcise girls maintained by the local traditionalist Shafii Muslims (the Shafii *madhhab* is the

Sunni school of *fqh* followed by the majority of Muslims in Southeast Asia). The antagonism between different understandings of the practice manifests itself at times within a single family. Specifically, I will examine some of the dynamics I witnessed in Satun, a province of southern Thailand. Here, family dynamics are not isolated from the wider field of political and religious diversification, which has become almost palpable in the region in the last ten years, and should therefore be contextualized keeping in mind the increasing fragmentation of the Thai social and political cosmos. I will address issues that can provide valuable insights for government officials, health agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) when designing policies for gathering information about the actual practice of FGC and eradicating it.

Female Genital Cutting in Southeast Asia

The practice of milder forms of FGC in Southeast Asia was traditionally underreported in comparison to the wealth of scholarly works on more invasive forms of cutting practiced in African regions. This trend has changed during the last ten years with works on Indonesia and Thailand (for Indonesia, see Budihar-sana, Amaliah, Utomo, and Erwinia 2003; Feillard and Marcoes 1998; Newland 2006; Putranti, Faturochman, Muhadjir, and Purwatiningsih 2003; Putranti 2008; for Thailand, see Merli 2008a, 2008b, 2010a). The practice was previously mentioned in anthropological works on Malaysia (Strange 1981; Laderman 1983; Peletz 1996), Indonesia (Snouck Hurgronje 1923–24), and Thailand (Hanks 1963; Lamom 1994), but usually in the context of broader studies on traditional birthing practices or local customs, and not on its own. In Southeast Asia, the cutting is generally limited to an incision in or scratching of either the clitoris or the clitoral hood, what usually is described in the World Health Organization's classification of female genital mutilations as Type IV (any removal of tissue would fall into Type I).

The contentious issue of the possible pre-Islamic origin of FGC in Indonesia (Putranti, Faturochman, Muhadjir, and Purwatiningsih 2003; Putranti 2008) remains unsettled. On the other hand, historical sources as well as contemporary research in Southeast Asia provide evidence for the strong connection between the practice, the spreading of Islam in thirteenth century, and the prevalence of the Shafii *madhhab* (the only Sunni school of law to consider

the cutting of the female genitalia obligatory) (Ali 2006; Clarence-Smith 2008 and chapter 5, this volume; Feillard and Marcoes 1998; Merli 2008a).

Thailand's Southern Region

The southern region of Thailand—consisting of the four majority-Muslim provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun—has been characterized by constant political instability. Muslims constitute the largest minority group in Thailand, although there is much debate on their exact numbers. In 1988 Omar Farouk Bajunid (2005, 4) calculated the Muslim national population as between five and seven million, out of Thailand's total population of sixty-five million. Most estimates of the Muslim proportion are between 5 and 8 percent of the national population, although according to other estimates it would be 10 percent (Omar 2005, 4; Imtiyaz 2007, 323). In the four southern provinces bordering Malaysia, Malay-Muslims make up about 75 percent of the local population (quoted in Chaiwat 1987, 19).

Since the 1700s, the southern region of Thailand has been the target of, first, armies from Ayutthaya and the Siamese kingdom and, later, the assimilationist policies of the Thai state. The Malay-Muslims, who once belonged to the independent Patani kingdom (which comprised the contemporary provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat), have historically resisted these attempts at assimilation and have organized separatist movements whose activity reached a peak between the end of World War II and the 1970s. When the Anglo-Siam treaty was signed in 1909, Satun territory, located on the southwestern coast and then part of the Kedah sultanate, was assigned to Siam. Satun is nowadays championed as an example of successful integration of a majority Muslim population into the Thai state with no insurgency activity recorded. A period of relative peace in the wider southern region started in the 1980s with effective programs of collaboration with the local population. Since 2000 the area has been in the headlines again with an escalation of violence that cannot be ascribed exclusively to separatist militants. The government of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra responded with tough repression and the enforcement of martial law and a curfew. The military coup of September 2006 that put an end to Shinawatra's mandate did not bring the much-hoped-for resolution of the conflict in the south. The entrenched instability of the

region is paralleled by the deep division at the national level between supporters of the ousted prime minister (called Red Shirts because of their apparel) and the loyalists (called Yellow Shirts).¹ Between 2009 and 2010, Bangkok, the capital city, was besieged by the Red Shirts' mass demonstrations and protests, demanding democratic elections. The situation became untenable and broke into urban guerrilla warfare between demonstrators and the army and police forces in April–May 2010. Although the situation has now returned to normalcy, the 3 July 2011 election which made Shinawatra's younger sister the new prime minister suggests that the calm surface hides an intractable division of opinions and loyalty between the two groups. In the south, the major political opposition overlaps with local fragmentations of the Islamic community, creating a sense of generalized insecurity and lack of trust among people within the local society, and a sort of self-censorship makes the issue a taboo topic in conversations. In the past, a major divide between the Kaum Tua (the Old Group, the traditionalists who follow the local Shafii *madhhab* and Sufi tradition) and the Kaum Muda (the Young Group, the reformists who follow more literalist interpretations) accounted for the major differences of interpretation of ritual activities and social life. Nowadays the proliferation of religious educational institutions and the presence of college graduates and clerics returning to Thailand after spending the years of their education in the Middle East or northern Africa (where they were influenced by Wahhabi and Salafist interpretations of the scriptures) render the situation more complex. This combination of factors explains the polarization of religious discourses and diatribes among local leaders, clerics, and congregations.

According to the latest census, from 2000, the population of Satun Province amounts to 247,900 people, of whom 67.8 percent are Muslims and 31.9 percent are Buddhists. Approximately 10 percent of the Muslims speak Thai and Malay (National Statistical Office 2001). Alongside modern medical practices, literalist Islamic streams contribute to the criticism or neglect of ritual practices once considered uniform among local Muslims (Merli 2008a). The increasing medicalization of birth and the progressive marginalization of indigenous midwives (called *mootamjae* in Thai and *bidan* in Malay) have also affected medical and ritual practices related to reproduction; female *sunat* is traditionally performed by Muslim *bidan* and is not undergoing the same process of medicalization as male ritual circumcision (Merli 2008a, 2010a, 2010b).

Methodology

I conducted anthropological research in Satun Province for a total of eighteen months since 2003. My fieldwork on reproductive health and traditional midwifery revealed that one of the practices performed by indigenous midwives was a mild form of female genital cutting locally called *sunat*, usually performed on newborn babies during the mother's postpartum seclusion period of forty days—therefore considered a perinatal practice because it was performed within the first year of the child's life.

Apart from the material accumulated during this time, in 2009–10 I started a series of more specific questionnaire-based interviews with both men and women investigating their experiences of and attitudes toward male and female genital cutting. This series complements my semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with local Islamic clerics and informants and is not yet completed. The material presented in this chapter is a first analysis of the data collected thus far. I selected cases from a sample of the semi-structured interviews that show how different opinions on the practice of FGC may coexist in the same region. They also illustrate the relevance of seniority in connection to gender for the process of making a decision about performing *sunat*. This kind of authoritativeness may be contested by individuals who can claim a distinct source of credibility. I conducted the interviews in Thai and Malay with the assistance of a local interpreter. There were fifty formal and semistructured interviews on male circumcision and FGC, and the analysis was conducted coding for the decision-making process, arrangement for celebration, season of performance, age of child, reasons for performing the cutting, and its optionality or obligatoriness.

Women at the Crossroad

The performance of female *sunat* is associated with postpartum practices for the mother, and women are responsible for negotiating and arranging it. Only women can be present during the cutting. If a Buddhist woman converts to Islam, for example to marry a Muslim man, whether or not she will be asked to be circumcised will depend on the view of the matter that the groom's family (especially his mother) holds. I have witnessed one female *sunat* performed on

a baby by the same *bidan* who had taken care of the baby's mother during the gestation.² The women whose cases I discuss below communicated feelings of uncertainty concerning the status of the practice in the contemporary social context, as local religious knowledge on this matter is far from monolithic.

MARYAH

During a fieldwork sojourn in 2009–10 I met a woman I will call Maryah,³ who had resisted female elders' questioning about her younger daughter's *sunat*. Our meeting was born from a coincidence. From my field notes:

Wednesday 6 January 2010. While going for lunch my assistant received a telephone call from a friend in village A who [according to my assistant] sounded quite alarmed. Maryah had received the visit of a female relative who started questioning her about her daughter being already circumcised or not. She did not answer directly because she felt confused; in fact, another woman she knows had not circumcised her own baby girl but now Maryah's own relatives came to ask, implying that she should do it. She wants to talk to the Datok [Islamic judge] to ask what is the correct position to be held [on this issue]. I say I want to talk to her.

I asked my assistant to arrange a meeting for the following day. Maryah was then in her mid-thirties, educated (she had obtained an undergraduate degree), outspoken, and assertive. The day I met her she was dressed in blue jeans, a checked shirt with sleeves rolled up, and a black veil (*hijab*). When I arrived at her shop (in the front of her house), she was attending to some customers with two assistants working nearby. She led us through the shop's corridors into her house. Here, her eight-month-old daughter was sleeping in a fabric cradle hanging from a metal spring. A woman in black clothes sat on the tiled floor and looked after the baby. Maryah has another daughter who was then seven years old. When I asked Maryah what made her call the day before, she said that she was torn between the opposite local views about whether the cutting practice for girls, for which she used the Thai term *dtat* (literally, "to cut"), was *wadjib* (obligatory) or only *sunna* (customary). She added that she knows that *sunat* for the boy is *wadjib*. She was attempting to find a correct and incontrovertible answer based on Islamic law and jurisprudence to provide to those relatives who were questioning her in a rather pressuring way. Until that moment her strategy had been to avoid answering altogether, but this option was not tenable in the long term.

Maryah's first daughter had been cut at the age of one by Tok Moo (the Malay honorific term *tok* is followed by the general Thai term for medical practitioners, *moo*), who was then an elderly woman living in the village where Maryah had resided before marriage and whose name was suggested by a female neighbor. Maryah took her oldest daughter to Tok Moo's house, accompanied by her mother and the neighbor, and bringing along betel leaves (*bai phluu*), a gift often included in ritual exchanges both between people and between humans and the spiritual world. In performing *sunat*, Tok Moo passed one betel leaf over the girl's external genitalia, both the clitoris and the vaginal opening, while reciting a *doa* (or *dua*, meaning prayer in Arabic) in Arabic (to which Maryah referred to as "the *khaek* language").⁴ Tok Moo then took a razor and scratched the skin of the clitoral hood, while pressing the clitoris over a piece of clean bamboo. Maryah described the extent of the area scratched as a triangle shape, one to three millimeters long. When some blood appeared, Tok Moo stopped reciting the *doa* and immediately applied a cotton swab soaked in iodine. At this point, the girl started crying louder. Maryah dressed her daughter in trousers and brought her home. The baby ate and slept regularly, but for two or three days following *sunat*, she cried every time she passed urine. After every urination, Maryah reapplied iodine on the scratch. No *nuri* (a shortened local form of the Malay term *kenduri*, a feast, which includes the accumulation of religious merit—locally referred to as "to make merit") was organized.

Since her younger daughter's birth, Maryah had received visits at regular intervals from her mother and her mother-in-law, who independently asked her whether *sunat* had been performed. Maryah was aware that in old women's opinion, *sunat* for girls is *wadjib* as it is for boys, and she contrasted this position with the presence of "new knowledge" (in Thai, *lakkan mai*: literally, "new principles"). In the beginning, her answer to the female relatives was "I will do it in the future," but the answer had recently shifted to "already done." I asked her what would happen if her mother or mother-in-law decided to check, and she replied that since there is no visible change to the appearance of the genitals, they could not detect the performance of the cutting. Her response is similar to other informants' testimonies, agreeing that there is no "real" cutting.

When talking about the practice in general terms, Maryah said that in the past "everyone must do it." Nevertheless, also in the past the female *sunat* was organized and performed very swiftly and no *nuri* was offered to guests. Under these circumstances, questions arise about the strategies to secure the

performance of a practice which is done without any public acknowledgment in the form of celebration (such as the social meal provided to up to hundreds of guests on the occasion of a male circumcision) and performed without leaving any visible anatomical change. I asked Maryah how people would know that *sunat* had been performed and what consequences would have to be faced if a woman decided not to have it performed. She answered that people are informed “by talking [among women].” Of course, women do not talk of their own *sunat*, which they can usually neither remember nor physically assess, but they do talk about others’ *sunat*. The decision about performing it rests primarily with a baby girl’s maternal grandmother (often also with her paternal grandmother) and depends on residential arrangements. Because she can accompany the baby to the *bidan* or *mho*, she would be a witness, someone who can later report on and guarantee its completion. The practitioner is obviously another reliable source of information.

Maryah is convinced that people nowadays are very “confused” (*sapson*), a term that has a sense of insecurity, indecision) and that “if they can choose,” they prefer not to perform it. This statement hinted at the possibility that some individuals’ agency and decision-making power are limited. According to Maryah, they belong to families that “are not open-minded” and can impose their decision: “they are not modern.”

ROZIAH

Originally from the Isaan region (in northeastern Thailand), Roziah is the woman who was looking after Maryah’s little daughter. She was then in her mid-forties, and she had relocated to the southern region about ten years earlier, when she converted to Islam and married a man from Satun. She was circumcised in relation to her conversion. Roziah claimed that back then she did not know that the practice was not “necessary,” and that to convert to Islam (*khao Islam*, literally, “to enter Islam”) it is sufficient to pronounce the *shahadah*, the declaration of faith. This testifies to the presence in Satun of an established discourse that claims the performance of *sunat* is compulsory for women, especially in relation to becoming a Muslim. *Sunat* marks the entrance in the faith for both newborn girls and converting adult women. Retelling her story, Roziah described her experience of discomfort for two to three days following the cutting; but when I asked her to assess differences in tissues, feeling, and sensitivity, she said she could not otherwise perceive “any change.”

In Roziah's story, it is evident that her recent acquisition of information about the requirements for conversion made her assess critically a practice that she had agreed to perform following local people's directives. The opposition between a traditional and a modern understanding of religious practice emerges.

KOMAL

Komal is a public health officer who was born in Patthalung Province (bordering Satun Province) but who has lived in Satun most of her life. In the Muslim community in Patthalung, not unlike the case in Satun, people do not organize a *nuri* for female *sunat*. Komal's position on the subject stands out from the others I collected, since she claimed that only women who convert to Islam (that is, who were not born Muslim) must be circumcised, not girls born into a Muslim family. Her story identifies regional differences in the performance. According to Komal, about twenty years ago in Patthalung the custom was that the indigenous midwife would use a betel leaf to touch the clitoris, whereby a cut was avoided altogether. As mentioned above, a betel leaf was used by the practitioner who scratched on Maryah's daughter with a razor. Komal contended that in Islam there is a difference between male *sunat*, which is *wadjib*, and female *sunat*, which is not, but there are variations depending on the region and local opinion and practice.

SUMMARY

Women in the cases presented above explained the existence of diverging opinions on the practice of female *sunat* as related to Islamic modernity, to the introduction of new knowledge or principles. In contrast, families and especially elderly women holding fast to the Old Group view try to exert control over younger women to secure their compliance with the practice. The open-mindedness that Maryah referred to can be backed with religious authority, as literalist interpretations of the scriptures contrast with interpretations of traditionalist schools.

Influential Men

From the interviews and conversations I collected, it was evident that men shared the opinion that female *sunat* was not necessary. Some even opposed it

as not belonging to Islam. They based this consideration on the lack of reference to female circumcision in the *Quran* and the lack of agreement on the interpretation of hadiths among the schools of jurisprudence. The deeper a man's knowledge of religious texts, the more likely he was to consider female *sunat* unnecessary, even un-Islamic.

SULAIMAN

During a meeting with the chairman of the local Islamic committee to discuss the practice and organization of group male circumcisions, he pointed at different views held by the four major Sunni *madhhab* on the matter of *sunat* for girls. Deciding whether or not to perform the ritual on a daughter would primarily depend on the specific *madhhab* followed by a family. This kind of awareness is displayed by men who have a broader knowledge of the differences existing among the various schools of jurisprudence. Another example is Sulaiman, a man in his late thirties who studied Islamic law in the Middle East. He is a much respected person, and his opinion is considered authoritative. His firm position is that *sunat* is not *wadjib* for women and therefore does not need to be performed. During a conversation we had, I made reference to the famous scholar Abu Zakariyya Yahya bin Sharaf al-Nawawi (1233–78) and his position on the matter (from his work *Tahara*) that female *sunat* is obligatory, *wadjib*. Sulaiman replied that al-Nawawi cannot be taken as representative of the Shafii *madhhab* in its entirety, since the school comprises different opinions. Moreover, he emphasized that Muslims in Thailand are very influenced by Sufism and that it would be reductive to consider them exclusively as Shafii. His position comes across as not merely doctrinal. When the time arrived to circumcise his daughter, he refused to let *sunat* be arranged, defending this decision against his own mother, who wanted to arrange for the ritual. His resolution became known in the village; in fact, Wati, a female neighbor who was not certain about having *sunat* performed on her own daughter, asked his opinion. Despite his reiteration that female *sunat* was not obligatory, Wati yielded to the pressures exerted by her relatives and decided that, since the practice was considered compulsory in the village, she had to abide by the tradition. Wati finally organized the cutting a few weeks after her daughter was born, summoning from another village an indigenous midwife whom her family trusted. Although Sulaiman could stick to his decision, in the same social context Wati could not. She was married to the youngest son of the household and was living with her in-laws, so her position

was particularly weak.⁵ Sulaiman's position was strong because it was based on his personal prestige and widely recognized knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence.

AHMAD

As I discovered during my research, individual doctrinal positions on the issue of female *sunat* are not immutable. Ahmad is a teacher in a local *madrasa*. He is fluent in Arabic and obtained a master's degree in Egypt. I have known him for several years, and in the course of our acquaintance, influenced by the public debate in Egypt, he has changed his position on the issue of female *sunat* and FGC. In April 2009, I visited Ahmad while he was finishing an Arabic language class with three female students, all wearing the *niqab* (a long veil covering a woman's face except her eyes, and locally worn by women who use a cloak to cover their body down the thighs, a sign of the increasing influence of more literalist streams in southern Thailand). Explaining my present research project to the students, he went on to explain that the Arabic term *khifaton* refers to female circumcision and *khitan* to the male procedure. Our conversation on the topic thus turned into a lesson for the students. He used the expression "girls must do it in secret and only a little bit" and specified that according to the Maliki *madhhab*, it is not compulsory but only *sunna*. However, immediately afterward he firmly stated that in his opinion women "must" do it, since it is *wadjib*.

Before 2009 whenever we had talked about this topic, he had claimed that the female *sunat* was not necessary, supporting his view by mentioning that there were authoritative legal opinions against it issued by influential Islamic clerics and academics in Al-Azhar University. To my great surprise during my fieldwork sojourn in 2009, I discovered that he had changed his mind and now deemed the procedure compulsory, *wadjib*. He had discovered other hadiths that he had not previously known and whose interpretation can support the practice. On theological grounds, he still opposed severe degrees of cutting (excision) such as the one performed in Egypt. He stated that the hadith Abu Dawud (the one most commonly referred to when disputing the requirement for female circumcision and one that he had mentioned on previous occasions) specifies that the cut should be limited.⁶ He also claimed that there is no mention of female *sunat* in the Quran, whereas male circumcision is referred to in the form of Ibrahim's (Abraham's) sacrifice.⁷ Local people do usually discuss female and male circumcision practices as associated topics by describing the differences between them, and for this reason I believe it is necessary to con-

duct research on both practices and related local discourses when both forms coexist (Merli 2010a). One hypothesis I have to explain Ahmad's change of opinion is that he had recently assumed a responsible role in one of the local mosques and therefore was strongly influenced by the doctrinal interpretations that were prevalent in that specific context. He had passed from a more literalist, modernist view to a more traditionalist one.

TOK IMAM MUSA

Another example I want to discuss concerns a Malay-speaking village that I visited in 2010 on the occasion of a group male circumcision organized under the banner of public health authorities. According to the village imam, female *sunat* is not compulsory and is a matter of choice for the family. He reported that a publication from Malaysia stated that uncircumcised girls would be more at risk of committing *zina*—having sexual relations out of wedlock. He stated that in his village, girls are usually circumcised between the age of two and five, and that if *sunat* is performed on the same day of *akikah* (the name-giving ceremony) there is a celebration with a *nuri*.⁸ If performed on its own, no celebration follows female *sunat*. People in the village would not know when a girl is circumcised because there is no public celebration or discussion of it. Tok Imam Musa also claimed that male circumcision is not *wadhib* if it must be performed on an adult man converting to Islam and who fears the operation, whereas it is *wadhib* for Muslim boys. This description is the opposite of the one expressed by Komal and described above, according to which female *sunat* is compulsory only for converts.

PAK OSMAN

An episode that aptly illustrates the existence of complex familial dynamics on the subject of female *sunat* occurred in December 2009, when I went to visit an elderly Islamic scholar and teacher in a *madrasa*. He is recognized as a local authority on religious issues, highly respected, and considered a very pious man. He studied in the Middle East and still travels abroad on a regular basis. His children pursued higher education in the Middle East as well. He is a calm narrator, answering questions very clearly and plainly, using illustration and vivid metaphors. During our interviews, family members usually sat nearby and joined the conversations. In discussing *sunat* for girls, he thought we should start by sorting out the vocabulary used. He distinguished between:

(1) *sunnah* (the way of the Prophet), that which is considered preferable but not compulsory; (2) *sunahiti*, literally, “my own way,” which would not be as important as the way of the Prophet; (3) *wadjib*, that which is compulsory or obligatory; and (4) *sunat*, a term used locally for circumcision. “*Sunat* is *wadjib* for the boys but *sunnah* for the girls,” he said, and for girls the cutting must be limited. Although he agreed that al-Nawawi considered it *wadjib* also for girls, he stated that there are different opinions about what is required for women and therefore there is the possibility to choose, whereas there is no choice concerning boys’ circumcision. On both boys and girls, *sunat* would have the effect of lessening *nafsu* (passions), helping to control sexual desire.

During this conversation, his wife and daughter intervened, first by hindering my assistant’s translation, then by making statements and interrupting the narration of the *alim* (cleric). The two women strongly contended that female *sunat* is also *wadjib*. Reiterating that I should convert to Islam, they added that if I converted and had *sunat* performed on the same day, all my past sins would be forgiven and my life would begin anew. With the intention of supporting the *alim*’s scholarly view, I observed that his opinion was in opposition to theirs. Since the young woman insisted on her position, her mother tried to dissuade her from being so vigorous in her argumentation, lest I be unnecessarily scared. The atmosphere was rather tense, and I had not anticipated ever witnessing this sort of open disagreement, which was very unusual in Thailand’s social context. My assistant was addressed directly in Thai by the two women, who were aware that my understanding of Thai was very limited compared to my knowledge of Malay, the language of my dialogue with the *alim*. For the remainder of the interview, which I refocused on the topic of past ritual male circumcisions in the village, the two women maintained the same obtrusive pattern, managing to prevent our conversation. The situation proved difficult for me to manage, while the *alim* remained very still and aloof, observing. The *alim*’s wife even stated that her husband “was not saying the correct thing.” The assertion left me dismayed, given Pak Osman’s authoritativeness. In deciding to counter the two women’s position, I championed the aged man’s unique experience and knowledge of local history by saying “he is the memory of this land.” I was implicitly saying that they should stop talking.

This taxing encounter gave me some insights. First, the exchange made it evident that the two women could effectively halt the interview process by obstructing the work of my assistant, a younger, educated woman from

the area who was well acquainted with them and perceived her position in those circumstances as subaltern. On a subsequent visit my decision to be accompanied by a male assistant partially prevented the same pattern from being repeated. Second, the encounter led me to reconsider the degree of authoritativeness that women can derive from being related to respected male figures. As described in the stories above, women who searched for supportive legal or theological arguments were not able to use these if they occupied a weaker position in respect to other women in the household or family. Third, the episode with Pak Osman demonstrated the degree of control women can exert on conversation, openly challenging even authoritative male figures, and by way of these, a female anthropologist who is engaging local men in debates and scholarly research.⁹

Conclusion

Maryah's case is important because it raises a series of issues. The strategy she decided to adopt was to not tell the truth. This option was feasible only because the degree of cutting was unnoticeable. When Maryah needed an answer to the pressures of her mother and mother-in-law, she made two immediate resolutions: to find a good reason (and an appropriate way of communicating it) to refuse the insistence of her relatives and to make sure this reason was correct from a religious point of view—that is, incontrovertible. Her final choice was to let people believe that she had complied with the requirement, without presenting them with new knowledge (usually considered the position of the Young Group). She was initially looking for an authoritative source that would be accepted by her female relatives—specifically a male authority, educated and extremely respected at the local level, a *kāḍī* (doctor of the law or Islamic judge), rather than an *alim* or imam. Clerics and imams in the local social context may have very different views on religious and social issues depending on their congregations and mosques; a certain degree of internal division extends into political positions. The opinion of a man of Sharia would be above local disputes and is indeed the one authority people resort to have disputes settled and cases adjudicated.

Religious knowledge and authority are respected, but two problems need to be considered: first, knowledge of and expertise in Sharia are fragmented

because of the plurality of jurisprudential interpretations available (in the four major Sunni *madhhab*); second, in facing conflicting opinions, women who want to avoid having *sunat* performed on their daughters run into other factors that have an impact on their final decision. The most relevant aspect is almost certainly the existing pattern of postmarital residence. Neolocality ensures a margin of autonomy in case like Maryah's, whereas patrilocality or matrilocality would give the elders of the household, especially the elderly women, a notable degree of authority. The arrangements to perform *sunat* at home rather than at the *bidan*'s house are equally pertinent in relation to residence.

During our conversation, Maryah asked my opinion of the performance of *sunat*, attributing to an anthropologist (specializing in the region and with extended fieldwork experience with indigenous midwives on the topic of reproductive health and perinatal practices) the required knowledge to influence local opinion, whether individual or collective. The anthropologist is required to assume a position in a situation similar to what Michael Peletz cogently described for Malaysia: "The key debates—and certainly the ones that are most intensely felt—in other words, bear on *intra*-civilizational clashes not those of an inter-civilizational variety" (2005, 243). The problem is therefore related to specific positions held by local groups on the more general understanding of sources of Islamic practices. I can very generally pose it as mapping onto the opposition between traditionalist Shafii and the literalists. This opposition is locally characterized as *Kaum Tua* versus *Kaum Muda*, respectively, and several informants referred to the people considering female *sunat* not to be obligatory as "young Muslims" (in Malay, "Islam *muda*").

People identifying themselves as Shafii would also consider changes in the local practice of *sunat* for girls as *bid'a* (unwarranted innovation).¹⁰ But innovation with respect to which tradition? According to the *Encyclopedia of Islam*,

Al-Shāfi'ī laid down the principle that any innovation which runs contrary to the *Qur'ān*, the *sunna*, *idjmā'*<osq>, or *athar* (a tradition traced only to a Companion or a Follower) is an erring innovation, whereas any good thing introduced which does not run counter to any of these sources is praiseworthy. On this basis innovations have been classified according to the five categories (*ahkām*) of Muslim law. . . But a number of traditions condemning innovations are found in the collections of *Ḥadīth* as statements of the Prophet. (Robson 2010)

Since the interpretation of the hadith Sunan Abu Dawud is contentious, positions on female *sunat* are not homogeneous.

The point is that female circumcision is already a very controversial issue at the level of *sunna*; only a few hadiths mention the practice, and these are controversial at best. A male informant in 2009 told me that there is a reaction against the influence of other *madhhab* reaching southern Thailand through the experience of people who had studied abroad. To this trend corresponds a reaffirmation of the Shafii *maddhab*, with the growing number of supposedly traditional celebrations, even in mosques not previously known as associated with the Kaum Tua. The modernity Maryah referred to as linked to open-mindedness is also to be ascribed to the modern religious education pursued abroad, in countries where the scholarly traditions of other *madhhab* and literalist interpretations are prevalent. These new ideas can easily be perceived as unwarranted innovations by the more traditionalist Shafii. This opposition is partly generational.

In a social landscape characterized by oppositions between groups that go beyond the simply religious opinion and have consequences on affiliations to specific mosques and therefore also political activity, it is of paramount importance to identify local influential figures in the debate. Far from suggesting that women resort to male authority to influence female decision making, I recommend weighing the influence these men's opinions may have when solicited to address family disagreements on issues such as the performance of female *sunat*.

From the perspective of applied medical anthropology, four issues should be considered in designing policies to eradicate FGC. First, it is necessary to gather the results of up-to-date ethnography and deepen the understanding of local sociopolitical contexts and changes in attitudes in order to implement and achieve any durable change in the practices. Second, long-term fieldwork-based research will provide an insider's knowledge to identify key authoritative figures whose opinions can make a difference in the local community. Third, to design a successful policy it is necessary to endorse strategies leading to micro-projects that are focused and spatially limited. Fourth, it is of paramount importance to devote specific attention to established intrafamilial (gendered) dynamics. In Muslim southern Thailand where this research was conducted, one of the facts that surfaced was that women have decision-making power

on internal family matters, a picture that is very different from the allegedly one-dimensional patriarchal myth of compliant Muslim women.

Notes

1 For an excellent political analysis of the southern situation, see McCargo 2008. For an appraisal of the national political crisis, see Funston 2009.

2 For a description of the ritual, see Merli 2008b.

3 All the names of informants in the text are pseudonyms.

4 In Thailand the term *khaek* (literally, 'guest' or foreigner) is used to identify the Muslims, who often resent it. It is also used by local Thai speakers to refer to both Malay and Arabic languages. In the case mentioned in the text, I asked Maryah to clarify the meaning.

5 In the region, it is customary for the youngest child (whether a son or a daughter) to remain in the paternal house to care for the parents as they become old.

6 Sunan Abu Dawud, book 41, number 5251, Narrated Umm Atiyyah al-Ansariyyah: "A woman used to perform circumcision in Medina. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said to her: Do not cut severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband."

7 There is no explicit reference to male circumcision in the *Quran*.

8 The *akikah* is usually performed shortly after birth, and in any case before the age of one.

9 I would not stretch this interpretation so far as to say that women can always challenge authority in public discourse (however useful the public-private dichotomy may be in this case), although I would be inclined to consider the conversation with a Western anthropologist as not a private domestic talk. I have mentioned elsewhere (Merli 2008b, 2010a) how outspoken elderly women may challenge male views on female *sunat* even in a public setting.

10 One example of a practice pointed to as *bid'a* in Satun is the use of beads to recite the names of Allah, which recent interpretations shun as opposing tradition (which uses fingers to reckon).

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