

# Female circumcision in multicultural Singapore: The hidden cut

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In recent years discussion about female genital mutilation (FGM) has expanded and the UN has recently called for a universal ban of the practice. The practice in Southeast Asia is widespread among Malay Muslims and, although different styles and practices exist, procedures conducted in medical clinics are extremely minor and, according to gynaecological research, have no effect on sexuality due to the clitoris being left totally untouched. One of the states in which Malay Muslims maintain such a tradition is Singapore. Nonetheless, Singapore is rarely mentioned in academic studies or even in reports discussing the ritual. Even inside Singapore, only Malays tend to know of the tradition, while other ethnic groups remain oblivious to the fact that Singapore is among the states that allow such an operation. The present article does not discuss FGM *per se* and avoids contributing to the diatribe about labels and values, although these are, of course, extremely relevant. Instead it focuses on the reasons for the practice remaining hidden and undiscussed in Singapore, so much so that some respondents did not know that they had been circumcised.

**Keywords:** FGO, FGM, Malay, Muslims, Singapore, Identity

## INTRODUCTION

Recently the United Nations General Assembly's human rights committee voted to enact a global ban on female genital mutilation (FGM). All state members supported the motion. At least since the 1990s, the majority of so-called industrialised countries have developed legislation to ban FGM or have reinterpreted child-abuse legislation to cover such practices (Boyle *et al.* 2002; Guine and Fuentes 2007; Piot 2007; Boyle and Corl 2010). In several European countries, Australia and the US, such legislation has brought courts to jail parents and remove children from their families. The legislation has considered the severity of the mutilation<sup>1</sup> irrelevant (Momoh 2005) and treated all in the same way. Anthropologists have reported, described and observed the practice since the beginning of the twentieth century as a part of youth initiation in different parts of Africa (see for instance Gluckman 1949; Turner 1970; Goldschmidt 1976; Richards 1982; Van Gennep 2004) and more rarely in other regions, such as Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, in these first anthropological studies, female genital modification procedures are among the many rites of passage described, and often remain part of larger ethnographies instead of proper case studies. With the increased influence of

the feminist movement and books such as Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (Walker 2011), as well as films such as the literary collaboration *Warrior Marks* (Walker and Parmar 1993), the debate about FGM has become increasingly public. As Silverman (2004) has noted, FGM emerged at the end of the 1990s as a central moral topic in contemporary anthropology.<sup>2</sup> Yet the debate within the discipline registered, and still registers, disagreements affecting many areas of the debate, including terminology, as discussed below.

Most of the anthropological studies concerning FGM focus on African practices, which also tend to be the most traumatic and damaging to health. Other regions, such as Southeast Asia, have received comparatively less attention. Indeed, Nicolas Gervaise's *Description historique du royaume de Macassar* (Gervaise and Duteil 2003) may offer the oldest account of female circumcision practiced in seventeenth century Southeast Asia. Feillard and Marcoes (1998: 340) have argued that it was not until 1885 that a thorough survey of the practice in the region was conducted, by the Dutch ethnographer G. A. Wilken (1847–91). He was the first to draw the conclusion that female circumcision was found exclusively among Muslims, which led him to believe that it was not an indigenous practice but rather one 'borrowed from the Arabs' (Van Ossenbruggen 1912: 34). He also concluded that girls were generally circumcised earlier than boys and that ceremonies generally accompanied these practices although, at least in Gorontalo, ceremonies for girls were much less important than those held for a boy's circumcision.

The anthropological and ethnographic lack of interest in female circumcision, which in Southeast Asia is known as *sunat* or *khitan perempuan* or, more recently, *khifadh*, continues to the present day, with very few studies available.<sup>3</sup> I will discuss *khitan perempuan* as it is practiced in some parts of Southeast Asia later in the paper, yet, as we shall see, before my study, none of the past or current research mentions or describes the practice within Singapore.

I have mentioned the way in which anthropologists, sociologists, and other scholars who have discussed this sensitive topic have disagreed on the terminology. If some find *female circumcision* emically correct, they find it etically unacceptable, since the term is too 'clean' and in stark contrast to the actual consequences for the women who undergo it. Therefore, the WHO has adopted the stronger term *female genital mutilation*, where the term 'mutilation' highlights the unnecessary pain, danger and long lasting damage to the body and psyche of the affected women. Yet FGM is a radically etic description and, more often than not, the ethnic groups and communities practicing it reject the definition as misleading and offensive. Anthropologists such as Gruenbaum (2001) have acknowledged the complexity of this debate (Gruenbaum 2001: 20–35), while others have tried to find a way out from the emic/etic debate and have adopted a pragmatic approach to the labelling issue. Among these anthropologists, Walley (1997) has suggested an interesting solution. She has observed that FGM 'carr(ies) the implicit assumption that parents and relatives deliberately intend to harm children' (1997: 407), which of course is not the case. Quite the opposite is true, as we shall also observe, since parents and relatives aim, through the practice, to

facilitate the integration and assimilation of the child within the social-political and economic life of the group. At the same time, she has rejected 'female circumcision' as a descriptor since it may be misleading to adopt a relativistic approach to such a complex practice that varies greatly in severity. Wally has suggested a 'neutral' terminology by adopting 'female genital operation (FGO)' as a description of the practice.

Some scholars employ the somewhat similar label of 'genital cutting'. Yet we have also to notice that some of the procedures are indeed conducted in hospital and/or by medical practitioners—such as, for instance, in the case of Singapore. Hence, I consider the term 'female genital operation' to be appropriate for both the study I have conducted in Singapore and for general usage. We should note that 'operation' does not imply that the procedure is necessary. Even in the West, children and teenagers are exposed to medical operations which are not necessary to their health or wellbeing. This includes the increasingly popular use of *labiaplasty*, which is an example of a FGO that is even performed on teenagers (Jeffreys 2005). Hence, in this article I shall refer to FGO, except in instances where I am referring to works that use a different terminology. In doing so I wish to avoid entering the complex ethical debate that is inevitably linked to the topic but not discussed in this paper. This paper does not discuss FGOs in Singapore per se,<sup>4</sup> and doing so would take valuable space away from the focus of this study.

Indeed, this paper aims to explain what I can describe as a double mystery: the continuation of such a practice in the most globalised, modernised and highly educated Southeast Asian state as well as the total silence, both academic and in the mass media but also within the Muslim community itself, about FGO among Malay Muslims in Singapore compared to the rather visible and openly discussed same practice in Indonesia and Malaysia (Newland 2006; Clarence-Smith 2008; Merli 2010).

The article argues that Singapore, with its strongly state-controlled form of multiculturalism (i.e. hard multiculturalism), a city state in which modernisation has a central role in the social-political identity of the Lion City, the continuation of a tradition such as FGO among the Malay Muslims can be explained as a religious ethnic resilience within an environment affected by an increasing push towards globalisation and national identity. I have used Hetherington's revised concept of 'Bund' (1992) to explain the reasons for such a controversial practice remaining 'hidden' in the context of Singapore, so much so that some Muslim Malay women had no idea the operation had been performed on them.

I conducted the research during 2011, with the assistance of two Malay Muslim women who conducted parts of the interviews and assisted with information by often acting as gate keepers. While the overall data collected is wider, this article has a narrower focus and is based on 15 interviews with Malay Muslim women aged between 19 and 63, four of whom were mothers and daughters from the same family; two doctors who perform the FGOs; ten Muslim men, and three religious teachers (1 woman and 2 men). Some of the interviews were conducted by me where female respondents felt comfortable with it, and where respondents were male I also conducted the interviews myself. All respondents had completed secondary education; however, the

majority of younger respondents were university students or graduates. Strict anonymity has been granted and all names, unless specified, are pseudonyms.

## FGO IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

It can be argued that FGO reached Southeast Asia as part of Islamic traditions linked to the Shafi'i school of thought (Feillard and Marcoes 1998), since other theories suggesting an autochthon pre-Islamic origin appear to be rather weak (Merli 2010: 15). FGO is widespread in Southeast Asia among Muslims (Feillard and Marcoes 1998; Clarence-Smith 2008), particularly in Indonesia (Newland 2006), Malaysia (Isa *et al.* 1999), Singapore and South Thailand (Merli 2008, 2010). Yet as Clarence-Smith has noted (2008: 14), scholars have, up until recently, ignored the practice. Indeed, an entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Women and Islamic Culture* discussing 'female genital cutting' (Kassamali 2006) does not mention Southeast Asia (cf. Ali 2006). Feillard and Marcoes (1998) provide an extensive historical and comparative documentation of the practice, with particular reference to different regions of Indonesia. In general, we can find similarities in FGOs practices and rituals, although not without many variations, throughout Southeast Asia. Today, FGOs in the region tend to be a minor procedure, so much so that in a study of 262 circumcised women who underwent gynaecological clinical examination, the authors reported 'no clinical evidence of any injury to the clitoris or labia, and no signs of cutting, burning, scarring or any form of mutilation to the clitoris, or the labia minora and majora. No damage or alterations to the clitoris were detected' (Isa *et al.* 1999: 141).<sup>5</sup> In my research in Singapore, gynaecologists confirmed such lack of scars or other damage to the women's genitals and sex life.

Traditionally, midwives or *dukuns* (healers) in Indonesia and Malaysia performed FGO in several different ways. As William G. Clarence-Smith derived from several studies, the midwife or *dukun* made 'a minor cut, prick, scratch, rubbing, or stretching, to the clitoris or the labia minora, or to both' (2008: 16) with a sharp object, which could be a traditional piece of bamboo, or even pandanus thorns, needles, penknives as well as other kinds of knives, razor blades and scissors. The operation aims to obtain a single drop of blood as symbolic evidence of the success of the ritual. In some procedures, a very small piece of skin, no larger than a grain of rice, was removed (in others the skin was only pricked or scratched for the same purpose). Some women told Feillard and Marcoes (1998) that the tip of their clitoris was cut, yet no corroborative evidence was provided. Indeed, I had the opportunity in Singapore to understand a possible point of confusion in the use of terminology to describe the various specific parts of women's genitalia. In the Malay and Indonesian languages, the word 'clitoris' (*kelentit*) exists but both lack a term for 'clitoral hood' or 'clitoral prepuce'. Malay or Indonesian women, then, may describe such parts as 'the tip of the clitoris' (as did many of my respondents). This explains why Isa *et al.* (1999) in their study, as well as the gynaecologists and physicians I spoke to, did not find any scar or other evidence of an operation. Young girls normally have their FGOs performed at a very young age and the removal of skin equivalent in size to a grain of

rice from the clitoral hood would heal leaving no traceable scar and, of course, would not affect her future sexual life. In other words, the operation can be compared—as many respondents did in my research—to the ear piercing of female infants, a practice which in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore is often offered to the parents as a package together with FGO (Feillard and Marcoes 1998: 356).<sup>6</sup>

Feillard and Marcoes report an interesting historical aspect of FGO in pre-independence Indonesia (1998: 343):

the amount of secrecy surrounding the event varies from strict secrecy (in Aceh and Selat-Panjan; among the Malay in Sintang and in the Upper Kapuas of Borneo; in Cimaes, Sunda); the Javanese santri<sup>7</sup> often held a simple ceremonial meal; among the Javanese aristocracy (priyayi) or in various sultanates, ceremonies as important as for boys were held for the girls.

William G. Clarence-Smith has suggested that the colonial authorities' disapproval or even opposition to FGO may have increased the 'secrecy' of the ritual (2008: 17). If secrecy in some cases was the norm, today exposure seems to be more common. This is particularly true in Indonesia, where it is not unusual to find photos of the operation uploaded by proud fathers and mothers to Facebook or other social media; in Bandung, mass circumcisions of girls have been held and are still held periodically.<sup>8</sup> Yet Feillard and Marcoes observed in their own research that many female respondents in their thirties informed them that they had to ask their own mothers about the circumcision since they had no memory of it (1998: 358). Again, we shall see that even during my own research in Singapore I encountered the same situation: some respondents claimed that their families had not circumcised them, or expressed doubt, until they asked their mothers and were corrected.

## THE HIDDEN CUT: FEMALE GENITAL OPERATIONS IN SINGAPORE

It is a sunny day during the eternal Singaporean summer; Nur<sup>9</sup> has washed and prepared Hana, her 2-month-old daughter. Nur's sister awaits them in a taxi parked close to the void deck, which is an open communal space underneath most public housing blocks in Singapore. A muted yet excited happiness accompanies the two adults during the short journey from Nur's HDB block<sup>10</sup> to the clinic. After a short wait, a nurse invites Nur, her sister and the baby to enter the Malay female doctor's office. Some formalities are completed and then Hana is placed on a bed. While the nurse distracts the child and disinfects the part, the doctor, with a *bismillah*<sup>11</sup> and a quick snip of the surgical scissors, removes a minuscule piece of Hana's clitoral hood. Hana cries briefly, but a few seconds later she intently looks up at the nurse while gurgling. Cotton is applied together with a haemostatic cream, yet no more than a drop of blood is shed. Hana, along with the majority of Malay women in Singapore, has been circumcised. Her mother, who reported the story, reminds me how 'her [Hana's] brother was less lucky. It took the boy some weeks of discomfort to recover completely from his circumcision,<sup>12</sup> while his sister had little pain and no discomfort at all'.

MUIS (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura)<sup>13</sup> strongly endorses FGO as part of the Islamic tradition: 'According to the majority of ulama, circumcision is compulsory for men and women. It should be done early in life, preferably when still an infant, to avoid complications, prolong [sic] pain and embarrassment if done later in life. Any good Muslimah doctor can perform circumcision for women. It is just a cutting off the thin membrane on the top most part of the clitoris'.<sup>14</sup> 'Membrane on the top most part of the clitoris' refers to the prepuce.

Traditional midwives or *bidan*,<sup>15</sup> at least until the 1990s, provided FGO for girls, before hospitals and Malay clinics succeeded them in being considered the safest choice. The age of the girl undergoing FGO may vary, although today (and certainly after the 1980s) our interviews confirmed that the majority is performed after the *masa dalam pantang*,<sup>16</sup> as in Hana's case. The young age at which the operation is performed prevents young women from remembering the details of the procedure, or even remembering the procedure at all, so mothers and grandmothers sometimes provide accounts of the operation. FGO in Singapore has such little impact on the girls that, as I have mentioned, several respondents lacked knowledge of the operation until they discussed the matter with their mothers. There were, however, a few instances in which a young woman, under 30 years of age, had the operation performed after having turned eight, and in such cases we could collect direct memories of the event. Such women described a sharp but brief pain, which was often compared to having one's ears pierced; they described the discomfort as negligible and in the worst cases the discomfort continued for about 2 days.<sup>17</sup>

Many suggested that male circumcision is likely to be far more traumatic than female circumcision and surely, reflecting on the experiences of brothers, more painful. Circumcised women reported that they could not locate the exact scar of the circumcision; this explains why some were unaware of their own FGOs. Gynaecologists, as in Isa *et al.*'s study (1999), have confirmed that FGO, as it is practiced in Singapore, has no lasting effect on the genitals, either in appearance or function. Married respondents reported a normal and satisfactory sexual life, which is unsurprising considering that no nerve-rich tissue is removed.

In Singapore, as in the rest of Southeast Asia, *sunat perempuan* celebrations are rare when compared to those held for a boy's circumcision, which is characterised by gifts and a communal meal called *kenduri* (Nagata 1974). Traditionally, when the girl undergoing FGO was aged 6 years or older, she received a glass of milk afterwards. As in Indonesia and Malaysia, men in Singapore do not partake in FGO arrangements, although they may know about them and may expect that their daughters undergo FGO. During my research, two fathers reported that they had no idea when their daughters' operations took place and required their wives to provide the details. Some fathers, in contrast to their spouses, opposed the FGO because they believed it to be unnecessary and un-Islamic.

Unmarried Malay men I have spoken to, both formally and informally, insisted on their ability to detect whether a woman had undergone FGO or not. When asked to explain how they do this, their answers revealed contradictions with the actual FGO

practice in Singapore which, as we have discussed, does not leave a visible scar. The lack of such a scar has sometimes created tensions between newly married couples, although these are easily resolved by the intervention of the bride's mother who may confirm that the ritual took place. FGO, in other words, is expected to be a mark of Malay Muslim identity. Indeed, while other non-Malay and non-Muslim males in Singapore are circumcised for a number of reasons, only Muslim Malay women undergo FGO, which makes it a real mark of distinction even among other Muslim non-Malay women.

Male and female respondents mentioned a variety of reasons for the practice of FGO. We can categorise them as religious, health-related and sexual reasons and they are similar to those discussed in Feillard and Marcoes's article (1998: 25–27). For instance as Fatima, a 26-year-old Malay Muslim graduate, explained, 'My mother told me that it is done for hygiene. Yet I know that this cannot be the case. I think it is more for marriage; it is a Malay thing since other Muslim women do not have the circumcision done'. Another reason expressed, for instance, by Adiputri, is related to sex: 'I think the reason is to prevent women from thinking about men before marriage. I have to admit that with teen pregnancy being so high, this may not be the reason [laugh]'. On the other hand, Hayati, who is 56-years-old, told me, 'many do not know, but circumcision is good for women, good for when they marry. You know what I mean, right?' Although a few mentioned religion as being a reason, giving explanations such as: 'it is what you should do as Muslim'; 'the child becomes Muslim, it is the same as for the boy'; many more emphasised the link to a specific Malay Muslim identity: 'we do this because it is our tradition'; 'It is something that all Malay Muslims share both here in Singapore and in Malaysia'; 'Malay Christians are not circumcised, Malay Muslims, both male and female, must be. It is a mark that makes you part of the community'. As I have argued above, some female converts, in particular before a marriage, decide to have the operation performed so that they can 'masuk Melayu'. Here it is evident that it is not just about religion or religious norms. Rather, FGO is a mark of community identity—so much so that my informants had issues in distinguishing the identity components between Malay and Muslim (with some even denying that Malays can be other than Muslims).

FGO is a legal practice in Singapore, but only a single newspaper article, published in 2002, mentioned FGO.<sup>18</sup> In this article, Yaacob Ibrahim, the Minister of Muslim Affairs, declared that he had not circumcised his daughter since 'it is not a religiously required practice', thus openly contradicting the position of MUIS. The contradiction had no effect. There is no public debate, no statistics or any recorded data concerning FGO in Singapore.

AWARE, a leading gender equality advocacy group in Singapore, provides the only, rather indirect and generic, opposition to female circumcision through a specific webpage.<sup>19</sup> The AWARE webpage, which has been changed recently, mentions FGO in Singapore and the support it receives from MUIS, but its focus is on the most radical forms of mutilations in Africa. FGO remains unchallenged in Singapore and mostly unknown. Many of my Chinese and Indian friends were surprised to hear that

FGO was performed in Singapore. Even non-Muslim female students were unaware of the practice, despite the fact that some of them had close female Malay friends.

Even more surprising, however, is that the Singaporean government appears to ignore FGO despite the international debate and strong condemnation. In Singapore, religions, and Islam in particular (Turner 2007; Nasir *et al.* 2009; Marranci 2012), operate under strict regulations although special allowances are made to Muslims to accommodate their cultural and religious traditions such as, for instance, in the case of polygamy (Rahman 2012), teen marriages (Rahman 2009) or Shari'a courts (Bin Abbas 2012). In contrast, FGO in Singapore enjoys a lack of regulation or direct state supervision. Should we then speak of FGO as being a secret practice? I prefer the term 'hidden', since Malays do not actively conceal the tradition. To explain the social, cultural and political reasons for this, we need to understand Singapore's unique kind of multiculturalism.

## MULTICULTURALISM IN SINGAPORE

The most modern and globalised country in Southeast Asia, Singapore is home to a native minority, the Malays, of whom the great majority is Muslim. They live under a Chinese majority as part of a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-faith state. I have discussed Singaporean multiculturalism in other publications (Marranci 2011, 2012) and other recent studies have provided in-depth analyses of the complex social dynamics.<sup>20</sup> Hence, I will only highlight some essential points of what Goh refers to as the 'racial grid of state multiculturalism' (Goh *et al.* 2009: 217). The Singaporean state categorises its citizens by race through the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) administrative identities (these are marked on ID cards). Inherited from the colonial British administration (Chua 2007a), the CMIO classification serves two essential components of the Singaporean state: multiculturalism and religious harmony (Sinha 2005). The state strictly enforces religious harmony through legislation that severely limits types of expression which may displease major religious or ethnic groups and cause tensions, or even riots.<sup>21</sup> This form of highly centralised and state-regulated multiculturalism (i.e. hard multiculturalism) contributes to the social and political stability necessary for Singapore's impressive economic development and modernisation project. Nonetheless, the over-emphasis on race as a social identity marker facilitates racial stereotypes, since 'creating a category requires that it be filled with content' (Vasu 2008: 29; see also Marranci 2012). Stereotypes about race and religion, although often not openly declared, remain socially widespread (see Marranci 2011, 2012).

The Singaporean government provides general statistics, particularly when focusing on development indicators (i.e. education, status, productivity, and so forth) through the comparison of the various CMIO categories. Such a way of understanding society and the performance of various communities within it inevitably creates hierarchies among the different groups. In this social competition, the Malay community scores less than the others. Although there is no space here to discuss the so-called 'Malay problem', the fast and, in particular, enforced modernisation affected the life



and social structure of the Malay community, and Malays still struggle to match the government targets. The Malay community is often represented as not modern enough (Pung 1993; Nasir 2007; Marranci 2011), in need of guidance, special support and supervision.

As we have observed, FGO in Singapore, although not essential in Islam (as the Minister of Muslim Affairs pointed out), is traditional among the Malay Muslim community. The majority of my Malay respondents who opposed the practice argued that the practice was another example of 'Malay backwardness', thus accepting and replicating the stereotype of the 'backward Malay'. For instance, Abdul, a 42-year-old Malay teacher, observed:

Singapore, as you can see, is one of the most global and modern countries in the world. But we Malay are full of superstitions, taboos and rituals that have nothing to do with Islam, but everything to do with our past and incapacity to adapt to changes. Circumcision for girls is one of these cases. It is against modern conceptions of reproduction and health.

Non-Muslims (but also Muslims who are not Malay) often expressed the same stereotype. Ms Liao, a 42-year-old Chinese Singaporean social worker, explained that FGO in Singapore was the result of '[Malays'] kampong mentality'; while Muhammed Shafir, a 54-year-old businessman of Egyptian origin, stressed:

Circumcision for girls is something performed also in my country, yes, but by people living in the countryside and the extremely uneducated. Here I have been told that even educated and upper middle class Malay families opt for the circumcision [of girls]. It is something to do with being Malay, and not being Muslim. I can tell you, Malays in Singapore live in a very modern city, but many of them are not modern.

The over-emphasis on modernity, as both an idea and ideology, supports the formation of such stereotypes about Malays and their culture, which of course people project on Malay customs and traditions, if not Islam as religion, as in the case of Lee Kuan Yew's recent comments.<sup>22</sup>

The Singaporean state maintains strict control over ethnic communities' social life and religion (Chua 1995; Lee 2002; Trocki 2005). Nonetheless, FGO remains an unregulated—indeed, neither the state nor MUIS control the procedure or the clinics in which it is performed and decisions remain with the parents—yet rarely private, space of *ethnic religious* identity action. Considering the aggressive UN campaign against any form of genital manipulation, a lack of state regulation is noticeable, particularly when it has succeeded in starting debates in Indonesia and even legislation—albeit much of it unenforced—in Malaysia (Putranti *et al.* 2003; Newland 2006).

## ETHNIC RELIGIOUS IDENTITY, STRATEGIC SILENCES, AND ORDINARY LIFE

Why have many Malay Muslims' mothers decided to circumcise their daughters? Why will their daughters, in majority, go on to follow the tradition? Why are some Malay

Muslim women in Singapore unaware of the details of their own FGOs, or even of having had it performed at all? As mentioned above, Singaporean Malay Muslims provide explanations similar to other Southeast Asian communities to rationalise FGO: cleanliness, sexuality, and so on. Nonetheless, FGO also has a strong link to the idea of a specific Malay Muslim community and identification. Indeed, a considerable number of highly educated women (and men), even non-practicing or openly secular Muslims support this tradition; in this case they know that it has no medical or spiritual reason behind it. Yet they reproduce it solely because it marks and gives access to a community identity. Latifa, a 50-year-old mother, whose daughter was also a respondent, observed:

We know that some ulemas say that it [FGO] is not Islamic; but we are Malay and the circumcision is a very important part of our Malay traditions. I do not think I would consider a Malay woman without *sunnat* to be a real Malay woman. She may be a Muslim, but she cannot claim a proper full Malay identity. Circumcision of girls is our tradition and also very important for a correct Malay marriage.

Her 22-year-old daughter confirmed that, although nobody pays too much attention to FGO, things change when marriage approaches: 'If the girl is not circumcised, this can embarrass the groom's family, or, in the worst of cases, the [groom's] family may ask that she has circumcision as an adult'.<sup>23</sup> The pressure to do so is real, as we have seen in the case of female converts. The use of 'Malay' instead of 'Muslim' to mean 'Muslim' should be noted again. Indeed, the identification between 'Malayness' and being Muslim is so strong for the great majority of my respondents that the ethnic and religious identification conflate into a single entity. This will be relevant for the following analysis.

FGO is transmitted generation after generation as an ordinary act of Malay Muslim identity. Indeed, in Singapore, it has lost its folkloric or magical references, like the practice of ritual baths or eggs pressed on the head of the circumcised child alongside other actions clearly linked to ancient fertility rituals. Today, a simple short visit to a clinic provides the symbolic act that is so relevant in Singapore to a Malay Muslim identity. FGO in Singapore can be considered an integral part of Malay Muslim birth rituals. This explains why some young unmarried Malay Muslim women remain unaware of their own circumcision. Birth rituals remain, in a majority of cases, undiscussed with the child. For instance, the majority of Malay Muslim Singaporeans would have difficulty locating where the placenta they were born with was buried.<sup>24</sup>

If many Malay Muslims perceive FGO as a strong marker of ethnic identity, why do events such as those organised in Bandung, Indonesia, not exist? Why have no newspapers discussed or featured stories about the tradition? Why has not one single TV series on Suria<sup>25</sup> even hinted at the existence of FGO when, for instance, serial dramas often touch on potentially sensitive topics such as polygamy?

We need to look at some dynamics of Singaporean multiculturalism if we wish to understand the reasons behind such silence. Stereotypes, tensions and, often, mistrust among the ethnic/religious groups exist (Marranci 2012), despite the government's

enforcement of racial and religious harmony. Beyond the basics, many Singaporeans have little knowledge of other communities' religious practices, which is acquired at school (Tan 2008), or from friends. Indeed, in Singapore, religion is not an easy topic of discussion.

The Singaporean government avoids interfering directly with religious practices when it is not considered necessary to maintaining religious and ethnic harmony, preferring to use self-regulated bodies such as MUIS. Furthermore, the few times the Singaporean government has intervened to restrict or regulate religious ritual, tensions have surfaced such as, for instance, in the case of the 2011 Thaipusam procession,<sup>26</sup> where specific regulations prevented the use of boom boxes, drums and gongs.

If the Singapore government were to issue regulations concerning FGO, the Malay Muslim community might have a stronger reaction than that provoked by the so-called school hijab affair (Law 2003), in which some parents tried to defy the ministerial ban on wearing headscarves at state schools. Furthermore, any attempt to ban FGO in Singapore would inevitably attract international mass media attention. Few people know that FGO exists in Singapore, and the idea of attracting attention to a practice so severely condemned by the UN is surely unpalatable to the government. The solution is a strategic silence and ambiguity. The result is that FGO in Singapore is relatively hidden from non-Muslims and the majority of non-Malays.

## **FGO, SINGAPORE, MODERNISATION, AND ETHNIC RELIGIOUS RESILIENCE**

The Malay community in Singapore has paid a high price for the forced, fast and top-down modernisation that Lee Kuan Yew imposed upon the country (Chua 1991; Rahim 1998; Seng 2009). One example is the forced resettlement of Malays in HDB blocks (Singapore public housing estates), which has also involved the introduction of regulations aimed at controlling the overall number of Malays in each block (Stimp 1997). This caused a disruption of traditional kinship networks which for a long time supported the Singaporean Malay community and aided in maintaining its identity (Sim *et al.* 2003). The challenges continued with the development of Singapore, fast changing industries and related job markets, the education system and the centralisation, under MUIS, of the teaching and legal aspects of Islam. Even the khutbah (Friday sermon) became increasingly centralised, being written by the Office of the Mufti of Singapore and delivered by mosque imams (Tan 2009).

Although, as we have seen, Singapore has policies to maintain cultural diversity, its fast globalisation and modernisation has affected the lives of Malay Muslims. In the last 10 years, the state has reinforced the idea of a national identity that is superior to ethnic or religious ties (Velayutham 2007). Westernisation, with consequent changes in values, has affected young Malays and their ideas about religion and Malay culture in general, which has progressively widened the generation gap (Thomas 1990). For the older Malay generations, the fact that their youth increasingly identifies with a national Singaporean identity induces fears, not faced since colonial times (Stimp 1997), of a watering down of Malay Muslim identity, which should be, according to

them, expressed through tradition. During conversations I had with Yaqub, a 72-year-old Malay retired teacher, the topic of 'disappearing' Malay Muslim traditions surfaced often. For instance, Yaqub pointed out how celebrations such as *kenduri* for boys' circumcisions are less common than before. However, he offered another interesting observation:

Malays at my time knew where they came from. The kampong and its mosque was a point of reference but also of identity. You knew to whom to go to resolve a dispute, if you needed something, and money were used to organise celebrations that saw the entire kampong take part. You knew who you were and your position within the group.

In a state where modernity is an ideology and the majority of religious rituals are subject to state supervision, the Malay Muslim's FGO acquires a different meaning to that which it has in other parts of Southeast Asia, which are not so modernised and dependent upon global visibility and reputation. The reason why even well educated women and families continue the tradition, despite, as we have seen, challenging the traditional explanations, is an emotional attachment to one of the few acts of Malay Muslim identity that, in a cosmopolitan city marked by standardisation, defines and identifies only them and, by its nature, is unchangeable in its physicality. Even within the larger Muslim community, FGO in Singapore is seen as exclusively Malay. FGO becomes an instrument of *ethnic religious resilience*, a virtual space of community self-control, which goes beyond the individual and brings back the family as the main agent and guardian of the tradition in a society where the relevance of 'family' has become, as in any modernised country, more of a rhetorical tool rather than a reality. The tight community nexus that was characteristic of the Malay Muslim community during the colonial period has been replaced today by what Hetherington, following Maffessoli, defines as *Bund*, 'an intense form of affectual solidarity, that is inherently unstable and liable to break down very rapidly unless it is consciously maintained through the symbolically mediated interactions of its members' (1992: 93). Hetherington also observes that a particular *Bund* can survive only through an individual's continuous effort towards its preservation. FGO in Singapore can be read as such an effort.

## CONCLUSIONS

FGOs are still very common among the Malay Muslim populations of Southeast Asia. The practice is not homogeneous, and scholars have identified various regional styles of the procedure that differ in severity. In a majority of cases, medical professionals perform FGOs in Southeast Asia, and certainly this is the case in Singapore. As gynaecological studies (Isa *et al.* 1999) have verified, FGO in Southeast Asia, as for instance in Singapore, does not affect the sexuality or health of women and does not put children at risk. Often, given the small amount of skin removed from the clitoral hood, no scar can be detected later in life.

Southeast Asian Muslims provide various explanations for the ritual. In Singapore, reasons for performing FGOs range from the folkloric to the pseudo-scientific as well as to the overtly religious. Yet all respondents acknowledged the ethnic religious value of the practice, considering that non-Malays are also part of the Singaporean Muslim community. Surely, compared to other religions, Muslim Malays are a minority, strongly controlled through government policies and regulations. Yet, as we have seen, FGO remains undiscussed within Singaporean society. I have explained that the reason behind this silence is twofold. Firstly, from a government viewpoint, to acknowledge or attempt to regulate FGO would open a debate in Singapore that would not only involve the Muslim Malay community, but all Singaporeans as well as international observers. Any ban of the practice would be perceived as an attack on the already threatened Malay identity. However, a decision not to outlaw the practice would attract strenuous criticism from international organisations such as the UN, NGOs and, of course, local feminists. It should be considered that such debate might risk dividing the Muslim community itself, due to divergent opinions of the practice.

The second reason why FGO is rather hidden in Singapore may be found in the Muslim Malay community's attitude towards it. Many Muslim Malays see it as an ordinary part of birth rituals. It is not discussed, it is simply done. Indeed, some of the interviewees did not know themselves that they had had the operation performed on them since nobody felt the need to tell them about their experience of a well-known ritual (similar to the cutting of hair, the burial of the placenta and so forth). FGO, in fact, appears to be an extended family matter rather than a nuclear family decision.

Maffesoli has suggested that identification in a group is based on the expression of sentiments, feelings, and the capacity of sharing them, through 'affectual forms of sociation' (1996: 52). FGO in Singapore, when carefully analysed, goes beyond the following of a religious norm—since some Singaporean Islamic scholars oppose the practice—or folk medicine; rather, FGO contributes to maintaining, even within the Muslim in-group, an ethnic religious resilience that is increasingly threatened by globalisation, immigration, and state nationalism.

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## NOTES

- 1 The WHO (World Health Organisation) classifies genital mutilation into three different typologies, with the last one being a very un-descriptive one (WHO 2008).
- 2 See for instance Kratz 1994; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000.
- 3 Isa *et al.*, 1999; Putranti *et al.*, 2003; Newland, 2006; Clarence-Smith 2008.
- 4 It is my intention to devote future publications to such topic.
- 5 There are in the region, and some even reported in Singapore, more radical procedures that would be regarded as deviant by the majority of Malay Muslims, in which the labia are entirely removed, leaving the clitoris untouched. Personally, I have never interviewed or met with an individual who has reported having such form of operation.
- 6 These packages were also offered in Singapore in some Malay clinics and sometimes the operation was performed automatically as part of the child's delivery services, together with vaccinations and ear piercings.
- 7 According to Geertz (1988), they are a class of people, normally urban dwellers who tend to be pious in their Islamic practices when compared to others.
- 8 See the ceremony organised by Assalam Foundation (Budiharsana *et al.* 2003: 10), also more recently Abigail Haworth has published on the Guardian her views about the mass FGO she photographed in 2006 (Haworth 2012).
- 9 All names have been changed.
- 10 Housing & Development Board, which provides public housing in Singapore where 80 percent of Singaporeans live.
- 11 'In the name of God'.
- 12 He was circumcised at 6 years of age.
- 13 Islamic Religious Council of Singapore.
- 14 MUIS's website, [http://www.muis.gov.sg/cms/oomweb/oom\\_faq.aspx?id=15104&terms=circumcision](http://www.muis.gov.sg/cms/oomweb/oom_faq.aspx?id=15104&terms=circumcision), accessed 5 March 2013.
- 15 An old Malay lady who provided pre and post-natal massages as well FGO and ear-piercing services. Since Independence in 1965, all births are supposed to take place in hospital and midwifery has been professionalised as part of nursing.
- 16 'Confinement period'—normally about 44 days in which mother and child are required to rest and are not allowed to leave the house. The mother also receives special massages. The usage of herbs and heat are part of the tradition.
- 17 It is important to note that the performance of sunnat on an adult woman marrying into the Malay community represents a physical marker through which one may masuk Melayu or 'enter Malyness' even if one is not born within the community (Siddique 1981).
- 18 Los Angeles Times, 2002 'Singapore Muslims Invoke a Remnant of Surgical Tradition' 17 November, <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/nov/17/news/adfg-circum17>, accessed 5 January 2013.
- 19 Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) 2008 Female circumcision 8 February, <http://www.aware.org.sg/information/female-circumcision/>, accessed 4 April 2013.
- 20 See, for example, Chua 2003, 2007a,b; Goh 2010, Goh *et al.* 2009.
- 21 See, for instance, the case of the prominent Christian Evangelical Pastor, Rony Tan (Goh 2010: 32).
- 22 For a discussion of the comments, see 'Strict, less strict, restrict: the diatribe on Muslim integration in Singapore', <http://marranci.wordpress.com/2011/01/30/strict-less-strict-restrict-the-diatribe-on-muslim-integration-in-singapore/>, accessed 10 February 2013.

- 23 I can mention that I have interviewed a Muslim female convert who underwent the operation as an adult in order to marry a Malay husband. She reported little discomfort from the operation and a day or so to fully recover.
- 24 This is an Austronesian ancient tradition. In the case of Malays, the ritual is known as Menanam uri (literally 'planting the placenta'). Non-Malay Muslim scholars see this ritual not as Islamic but as cultural. The placenta is seen as the baby's spiritual twin and some people believe it has a spiritual and protective value for the child. Traditionally the placenta is ritually buried or 'planted' beside the house or under the house floor and the ritual is generally the responsibility of the father. There is a strong link between the placenta and the symbolism of the home, a place to return to (see Carsten 1997: 84).
- 25 Suria is a Malay TV channel that screens Malay dramas as well as news and documentaries. Many of the dramas are written as part of the Singaporean government's effort to educate Malays (Kwek 2010) and often the stories describe what are perceived to be common social illnesses and issues within the community, such as single motherhood, gang culture and other real life issues.
- 26 Thaipusam is a Tamil Hindu festival held in January or February in which a procession is organised and where devotees insert hooks in their skin that support elaborate metal frames as a part of their acts of devotion (Kong 2005).

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