

MYTHOLOGICAL, HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE PRACTICE  
OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION AMONG THE EGYPTIANS

*Introduction*

The purpose of this study is to answer some questions pertaining to various aspects of the Egyptian practice of female circumcision. Our investigation, therefore, is divided into four principal parts. Part I: The Mythological Origin of the Egyptian Practice of Female Circumcision. Part II: Some Historical Data Pertaining to the Egyptian Practice of Female Circumcision. Part III: Some Sociological Aspects of the Egyptian Practice of Female Circumcision, and Part IV: Present Concerns for the Abolition of the Egyptian Practice of Female Circumcision.



*Before and after the operation*

In terms of our definition, we understand by female circumcision or excision the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia, varying from a partial clitoridectomy to the full excision of the clitoris, the labia minora and the labia majora.<sup>1</sup> Anthropologists and gynaecologists have distinguished various degrees of the practice of female circumcision as performed in Egypt. Thus, for example, H. A. WINKLER differentiates between two practices of female circumcision. In the extreme south of Egypt, from Garb Aswân to Kelh (north of Edfu), the clitoris and the labia minora are excised, whereas from Kelh northwards to the Nile Delta merely the clitoris is removed.<sup>2</sup> ROLF HERZOG, on the other hand, also adhering to a geographical distinction as to the degree of the practice, remarks that in the Nile Valley three kinds of female circumcision are to be distinguished. From the Nile Delta to the region of Edfu only the clitoris is circumcised, from Edfu to approximately Wâdî Halfa also the labia minora are excised, whereas south of Wâdî Halfa we find the so-called Sudanese circumcision,<sup>3</sup> which, in addition to the labia minora also removes the labia majora.<sup>4</sup> KARIM and AMMAR, studying the practice of female circumcision from a gynaecological point of view, classified "circumcision into four degrees". In the first degree, mainly the labia minora are removed, and perhaps the tip of the clitoris. In the second degree, the labia minora and a part of the clitoris are removed. In the third degree, the whole of the labia minora and the

<sup>1</sup> The organs in question are the clitoris and the labia minora. The former of these is a small organ of erectile tissue with a rudimentary glans and prepuce; it is in fact the female counterpart of the penis. The labia minora extend from the clitoris toward the orificium vaginae and merge on the one side into the labia majora, and on the other side into the wall of the vagina.

<sup>2</sup> WINKLER, HANS A. *Ägyptische Volkskunde*. Stuttgart, 1936, p. 195. In classical Arabic, female circumcision is known as *khafd*, though in the colloquial language of the villagers it is described as "cutting her cockscomb" (*shâshah*).

<sup>3</sup> In the Sudan, the so-called Sudanese circumcision has been prohibited by legislation in 1946, though the Egyptian forms of circumcision are permitted. Cf. HILLS-YOUNG, E. "Female Circumcision in the Sudan", *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, April, 1949. TRIMINGHAM, J. S. *Islam in the Sudan*. Oxford, 1949.

<sup>4</sup> HERZOG, ROLF, *Die Nubier*. Berlin, 1957, p. 100.

whole of the clitoris are removed. In the fourth degree, or Sudanese circumcision, the labia majora and minora are completely removed together with the clitoris.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout many parts of Africa, the practice of female circumcision has been and still is widely adhered to, and the large number of ethnological, sociological and medical studies in this area confirm its cultural extent as well as its religious, tribal, aesthetic and erotic significance.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the interesting possibilities of a cross-cultural analysis of this practice, we have to limit our investigation to the Nile Valley in general and to Egypt in particular.

### Part I: The Mythological Origin of the Egyptian Practice of Female Circumcision

For our understanding of the mythological reasons for the Egyptian practice of female circumcision, it is important for us to remember that the primitive mythology of many African tribes, including that of the Egyptians, has postulated the bisexuality of the 'soul'. For many Africans as well as for the Egyptians, the idea of the bisexuality of the 'soul' is a certain reflection of their belief in the bisexuality of their gods. For that matter, there are numerous gods of the Heliopolitic, Memphitic and Thebaic Pantheon, that are considered to be hermaphrodites.<sup>7</sup> Thus, for example, Atum, Ptah and Amun are masculine gods, who at the same time bear certain bisexual characteristics. KEES even maintains that as regards the major deities it is immaterial in what particular sexual form they are represented, since in principle they possess the creative power of both sexes.<sup>8</sup> Atum, who begets Shu, the god of the air, and Tefnut, the god of moisture, through masturbation and then produces them through this ejection, has distinct androgynous components, just like Ptah of Memphis, who is portrayed in late representations with distinct breasts.<sup>9</sup> These gods, therefore, are both "father and mother". And just as the hand of the Heliopolitic Atum is believed to represent the feminine aspects of his personality, so the teeth of the Memphitic Ptah are considered masculine,<sup>10</sup> and his lips to be the feminine instruments of the world-creating tongue.<sup>11</sup> According to Horapollon of Phaebythis, Neith and Ptah are clearly bisexual.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Neith of Sais (Athena) as well as Mut-Amaunet, the wife of Amun of Thebes, belong to those mother-goddesses, who, though they are portrayed with the symbol of motherhood, were, nevertheless, believed to be both mother and father. Mut was distinctly shown as being bisexual.<sup>13</sup>

Amenhotep the Magnificent was the only pharaoh, who had himself portrayed in female clothes. VELIKOVSKY interpreted this unusual behaviour of his "wearing a type of gown worn by women"<sup>14</sup> as an overt demonstration of his interest in what later was called "Greek love".<sup>15</sup> I wonder whether the overindulgent Amenhotep III may not have intended to have portrayed thus also his bisexuality?

Now, just as certain gods are believed to be bisexual, so every person is believed to be endowed with masculine and feminine 'souls'. These 'souls' reveal their respective physiological characteristics in and through the procreative organs. Thus, the feminine 'soul' of the man, so it is maintained, is located in the prepuce, whereas the masculine 'soul' of the woman is situated in the clitoris. This means that as the young boy grows up and finally is admitted into the masculine society, he has to shed his feminine properties. This is accomplished by the removal of the prepuce, the feminine portion of his original bisexual state. The same is true with the young girl, who upon entering the feminine society, is delivered from her masculine properties by having her clitoris or her clitoris and her labia excised. Only thus, being circumcised, can the girl claim to be fully a woman, and thus capable of the sexual life. It is

<sup>5</sup> KARIM, MAHMOUD and AMMAR, ROSHDI, *Female Circumcision and Sexual Desire*. Cairo, 1965, p. 6. In their study of 331 circumcised women in Cairo, the authors refer only to three degrees. One hundred females belonged to the first degree (30.21%), 167 belonged to the second degree (50.45%), and 64 belonged to the third degree (19.34%).

<sup>6</sup> For an extensive bibliography on the African practices of female circumcision, cf. RACHEWILTZ, BORIS DE, *Eros Noir. Moeurs sexuelles de l'Afrique de la pré-histoire à nos jours*. Paris, 1963, p. 151.

<sup>7</sup> BAUMANN, HERMANN, *Das Doppelte Geschlecht*. Berlin, 1955, pp. 192-193.

<sup>8</sup> KES, H., *Der Gottesglauben im alten Ägypten*. Leipzig, 1941, p. 431.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Museum of Leiden.

<sup>10</sup> In Nubiá, the extracting of two or more of the front teeth of virgins was one of the common puberty rites, which permitted the girls to enter the feminine society. This practice is already described by W. C. BROWNE, *Travels in Africa, Egypt and Syria from the years 1792-1798*. London, 1799, p. 347.

<sup>11</sup> KEES, H., *op. cit.*, p. 291.

<sup>12</sup> HORAPOLLON: *Hieroglyphica*. Ed. C. LEEMANS, 1835, I, 12, in BRUGSCH, H., *Religion und Mythologie der alten Ägypter*. Leipzig, 1891, p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> Mut, who together with Amun and Chonsu symbolises the Thebaic triad, is also portrayed with a feminine head and with a phallus. ROSCHER, W. H., *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*. II, 2, 3298.

<sup>14</sup> ALDRED, CYRIL, "Hair Styles and History", *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts*, XV, 6, February, 1957, pp. 141-147.

<sup>15</sup> VELIKOVSKY, I., *Oedipus and Akhnaton*. New York, 1960, p. 48.

the mythological significance of female circumcision which also explains its importance with regard to the girl's virginity. The girl who is circumcised, is declared ripe for the sexual life, and to engage in sexual activity prior to circumcision is held to be improper, not to say immoral, since the girl has not entered the state of full womanhood, which depends upon the partial or complete removal of her masculine organ, namely the clitoris.

There is no doubt that the ancient myth of the bisexuality of the 'soul' is still consciously or unconsciously retained in the *Weltanschauung* of the Egyptian fellahin, and to this day, circumcision is the established and recognized practice by which the young boy and the young girl attain full identification with their respective sex group. In the case of the boys, "just before the operation begins, the boy casts off the girl's headcloth — a symbol of his bisexual 'nature' — and puts on a new garment consisting of an open white shift covered by another green garment. During the operation, the boy is encouraged not to cry or show any signs of pain, otherwise he would be accused of girlishness."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, after circumcision, there is hardly a greater insult than to call a boy a girl, or, what might be even worse, to call him "the son of an uncircumcised woman". On the other hand, the remark can still be heard by Egyptian women, who look down upon the uncircumcised woman, by saying: "You are like a man". The fact that the clitoris has not been removed prevents the girl to attain the accepted status of full womanhood, i.e. to marry.<sup>17</sup>

## Part II: Some Historical Data pertaining to the Egyptian Practice of Female Circumcision

### A. Female Circumcision among the Ancient Egyptians

It is not easy to determine when the practice of female circumcision was generally accepted in Egypt. F. J. CHABAS published a Pharaonic circumcision scene of the New Empire (1350 B. C.), which appears in the little Temple of Chonsu at Karnak, Luxor,<sup>18</sup> and REITZENSTEIN interpreted the same by identifying the two persons assisting in the operation of circumcision as being two mothers. However, it must remain uncertain, whether the circumcised are two boys or one boy and one girl, since the genital organ of the second child is hidden by the arm of one of the mothers. At any rate, the operation was carried out in the same manner in the case of both children.

Among the numerous and various eschatological expectations of the ancient Egyptians, we find an interesting magical formula for the reviving of the dead. This formula includes among other things that he who wants to have understanding of this magic, must, first of all, recite the magical text, after having smeared his body with the . . . of an uncircumcised virgin and with the . . . of an uncircumcised old man.<sup>19</sup> The reference to the "uncircumcised virgin" is of interest in so far as it proves beyond doubt that female circumcision was practised among the ancient Egyptians, though, as ERNST KLIPPEL points out, it is difficult to establish the extent of the custom. Without quoting his source, he maintains that the ancient Egyptians removed both the clitoris and the labia minora (inneren Schamlefzen).<sup>20</sup>

After unfolding the royal mummy of Queen Anhâpou, the wife or concubine of Ahmose I and mother of Honttomih, in June 1886, a group of distinguished scholars carefully examined the XVIIIth dynasty mummy and noted that the external genitalia of the queen could be perfectly distinguished, which showed that the queen was not circumcised.<sup>21</sup> It has been maintained that in the case of male circumcision, there did not exist one general rule pertaining to all dynasties of Egyptian history which included all men. Contrary to the assumptions of R. WENDLAND<sup>22</sup> and W. VON BISSING,<sup>23</sup> A. WIEDEMANN has pointed out that male circumcision was by no means universal and that the extent of its practice depended both upon the

<sup>16</sup> AMMAR, HAMED, *Growing up in an Egyptian Village. Silwa, Province of Asuan*. London, 1954, p. 122. LANE, E. W., *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. London, 1914, p. 58.

<sup>17</sup> AYROUT, HENRY HABIB, *The Egyptian Peasant*. Boston, 1963, p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> CHABAS, F. J., "De la circoncision chez les Egyptiens", *Revue Archéologique*, Paris, III, 1861, pp. 289—300. SUDHOFF, KARL, *Ärztliches aus griechischen Papyrus Urkunden*. Leipzig, 1909, p. 165. WIEDEMANN, A., *Herodots zweites Buch mit sachlichen Erklärungen*. Leipzig, 1890, p. 410.

<sup>19</sup> KEES, H., *Totenglaube und Jenseitsvorstellungen der Alten Ägypter*. Leipzig, 1926, p. 447.

<sup>20</sup> KLIPPEL, ERNST, *Die Pharaonen und ihre Frauen*. Leipzig, 1928, pp. 39—40. RIAD, NAGUIB, *La Médecine au Temps des Pharaons*. Paris, 1955, p. 201.

<sup>21</sup> MASPERO, G. C. C., *Les Momies Royales de Deir el-Bahari*. Mémoires, Miss. Archéol. Franc., Vol. I, iv. Paris, 1889, p. 533.

<sup>22</sup> WENDLAND, PAUL, "Die hellenistischen Zeugnisse über die ägyptische Beschneidung", *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* II, pp. 13—21, 22—31.

<sup>23</sup> BISSING, W. V., "G. Maspero, Histoire ancienne des peuples de l'Orient classique. Les premières peuples". Paris, 1897—1899, in *Sphinx*, VI, 1903, pp. 158—159.

respective dynasty as well as upon the social status of the persons.<sup>24</sup> Thus, do we have any right to assume that female circumcision was universally adhered to in Ancient Egypt?

A Greek papyrus of the year 163 B. C.<sup>25</sup> makes reference to Nephoris, the mother of Tathemis. Her daughter, who, having reached the age for marriage, has to be circumcised according to the custom of the Egyptians. For this occasion, so we are informed, she would require better clothing as well as a dowry, so that she could be married.<sup>26</sup> This passage clearly indicates that in the II<sup>nd</sup> century B. C., female circumcision was a pre-marital rite in Egypt, which the young woman has to undergo if she wanted to be married.

Strabo, the Greek geographer, who in 25—24 B. C. visited Upper Egypt in the company of Aelius Gallus, the Prefect of Egypt, also mentions that "one of the customs most zealously observed among the Egyptians is this, that they rear every child that is born and circumcise (περιτέμνειν) the boys, and excise (ἐκτέμνειν) the girls, as is also customary among the Jews, who are also Egyptians in origin, as I have already stated in my account of them."<sup>27</sup>

There is no doubt that the practice of female circumcision among the Egyptians was well known to the moralists and physicians of the Graeco-Roman world, and KARL SUDHOFF quotes AMBROSIUS as saying: "Moreover, the Egyptians circumcise the males in their 14th year, and the females among them are brought to be circumcised in the same year, because it is clear that from that year the passion of men begins to burn, and the menstruations of women have their beginning."<sup>28</sup>

One of the more detailed and clinical references explaining the practice of female circumcision among the Egyptians comes to us from the pen of Aetius of Amida (VIth century A. D.), the court-physician at Byzantium, who in the XVIth volume of his *biblia iatrika*, chapter 106, also mentions the reason for the operation. "And, in addition, with certain of the women their clitoris increases in growth and becomes unseemly and shameful, but also being continually rubbed by their garments it excites them and rouses the desire for copulation; wherefore, on account of its increased size, the Egyptians determined to take it off, especially at the time when girls were ready to be married. The surgery is accomplished in this manner. They cause the girl to be seated on a stool, and a strong young man standing behind her, places his forearms beneath her thighs and buttocks, holding fast her legs and her whole body. The operator standing in front of her seizes with a wide-mouthed forceps her clitoris, pulling it out with his left hand, whilst with his right hand he cuts it off with the teeth of the forceps."<sup>29</sup>

#### B. Female Circumcision in Islamic Egypt

The Qurân, the principal norm for matters of faith and morals in al-Islâm, is silent on the subject of female circumcision, which means that female circumcision cannot be regarded as explicitly commanded by God.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, however, there does exist the frequently quoted hadith of 'Umm Attiya, which states that Muhammad the Prophet said to a woman

<sup>24</sup> WIEDEMANN, A., "Beschneidung im alten Ägypten", *Orientalische Literatur Zeitung*, VI, 15; III, 1903. col. 97—99. JONCKHEERE, P., "La circoncision des anciens Egyptiens", *Centaurus, Int. Mag. of the hist. of science and medicine*, 1951, p. 212.

<sup>25</sup> KENYON, F. G., *Greek Papyri in the British Museum*. Vol. I, p. 32, No. XXIV. HOPFNER, THEODOR, *Das Sexualleben der Griechen und Römer von den Anfängen bis ins 6. Jhd. nach Christus*. Prag, 1938, p. 222. SUDHOFF, K., *op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>26</sup> προνεγκαμέ[ν]ης τὴν Ταθήμεν ὄραν ἔχειν ὡς ἔθος ἐστὶν τοῖς Αἰγυπτίοις περιτέμνεσθαι ἀξιώσα[σ]ης τ' ἐμὲ δοῦναι αὐτῆι τὰς αὐτὰς ἐφ' ὧι τοῦτ[ο] ἐπιτελέσσα ἰματιεῖ αὐτὴν καὶ . . . ε . . . ωται αὐτὴν ἀνδρὶ φερ[ν]μειν.

<sup>27</sup> JONES HORACE (transl.), *The Geography of Strabo*. London, 1932. Vol. VIII. καὶ τοῦτο δὲ τῶν μάλιστα ζηλουμένων παρ' αὐτοῖς τὸ πάντα τρέφειν τὰ γεννώμενα παῖδια καὶ το περιτέμνειν καὶ τὰ θήλεα ἐκτέμνειν.

<sup>28</sup> "Denique Aegyptii quarto decimo anno circumcidunt mares, et feminae apud eos eodem anno circumcidi feruntur, quod ab eo videlicet anno incipiat flagrare passio virilis et feminarum menstrua sumant exordia" (de Patr. Abrahamo, LII, cap. 11, 78; ed. Caillou, Paris, 1842, p. 610. SUDHOFF, K., *loc. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> μεγεθύνεται δέτις ν ἐπὶ πλέον τῶν γυναικῶν ἀδξῆσιν λαμβάνον καὶ εἰς ἀπρέπειαν καὶ αἰσχύνῃ γίνεται. ἀλλὰ καὶ παρατριβόμενον συνεχῶς ὑπὸ τῶν ἰματίων ἐρεθίσει, καὶ τὴν πρὸς συνουσίαν ὀρμὴν ἐπεγείρει, ὃ ὅπερ πρὸ τῆς μεγεθοποιήσεως ἔδοξε τοῖς Αἰγυπτίοις ἀφαιρεῖν αὐτὸ τότε μάλιστα, ὅποτε πρὸς γάμον ἄγεσθαι μέλλοιεν αὶ παρθένοι. ἐπιτελεῖται δὲ ἡ χειρουργία τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον. Ἐδραζέτω μὲν ἡ παρθένος ἐπὶ δίφρου, παρεστῶς δὲ ὀπισθεν νεανίσκος εὐτονος ὑποβάλλον τὸς ἰδίους πῆχεις ταῖς ἐκείνης ἰγνύαις, ἀκρατεῖτω τὰ σκέλη καὶ τὸ ὄλον σῶμα. ἐστῶς δὲ ἐναντίον ὁ ἐνεργῶν καὶ μιδίῳ πλατυστόμῳ συλλαβὼν τὴν νῦμφην διὰ τῆς εὐωνύμου χειρὸς ἀποτείνεται τῇ δὲ δεξ.ᾶ ἀποτεμένετο παρὰ τοῦς ὀδοντας τοῦ μιδίου . . . SUDHOFF K., *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>30</sup> HARTMANN, RICHARD, *Die Religion des Islam*. Berlin, 1944, p. 85.

whom he met while excising a girl: "Do not cut away everything, it is better for the woman".<sup>31</sup> And, in fact, some Islamic jurists have interpreted this ḥadīth as favouring female circumcision in so far as the Prophet did not prohibit the practice but merely condemned the total clitoridectomy.<sup>32</sup> HAMED AMMAR quotes in this context another ḥadīth, which is attributed to the Prophet, and which states: "Circumcision is my way for men, but is merely ennobling for women", yet, it is also reported that the Prophet told a woman who was just converted to al-Islām and was thinking of being circumcised: "Do not inflict trouble on yourself, because that is painful to a wife, but pleasing to a husband."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the fact that female circumcision was practised in Medina is substantiated by the Sunan Abū Dāwūd.<sup>34</sup>

With respect to the teachings of the four Islamic Schools of Law on this subject, an Islamic journalist interviewed Sheikh Hassan al-Ma'mun, Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar University, for the purpose of receiving clarification. According to Sheikh Hassan al-Ma'mun, the teachings of ash-Shāfi'i (767—820 A. D.) state that the excision as well as the circumcision represent a 'duty', that, however, only a small part of the skin of the most protruding part of the clitoris is to be cut off.<sup>35</sup> The teachings of Aḥmad ibn Hanbal (780—855 A. D.) are amplified in the *al-Mughni* by Ibn Qudama, where in the chapter on general appearance, which is part of the chapter on ritual purity, it is stated that circumcision is incumbent upon men, praiseworthy for women but not obligatory to them, that it is pleasing in God's sight.<sup>36</sup> The teachings of the Hanifites and the Malakites consider the circumcision of boys as well as of girls as praiseworthy (sunna).<sup>37</sup>

In Egypt, both Muslims and Copts practised female circumcision. However, instead of attributing the origin of this practice to their Egyptian ancestors, the Copts maintained that it spread among the Christians on account of the 'victory of the circumcised', i.e. the Jews. Michael, the XIIth century Metropolitan of Damietta, gives us the following explanation for the adoption of the custom by the Copts: "After Sarah had driven away Hagar from her house and her son Ishmael with her, as the Law affirms, Hagar withdrew to Yathrib of the country of the Hiḡāz and to Fārān. And Ishmael grew up, and God beautified him in the eyes of the women of the people of Yathrib, and they asked his mother to give him in marriage. And she said: We are a circumcised people, both the men and the women of us, and we do not marry, except with those like us". And when they (the women) had circumcised themselves, Ishmael married them, and God fulfilled His promise to him, and granted to him twelve princes. And circumcision spread in that country and in that which was neighbouring to it, and it became firmly established among the Copts of Egypt when they witnessed the victory of God for the circumcised, namely the children of Israel. And when the Apostle Mark evangelised them, he did not disapprove it for them, and they continued it . . ."<sup>38</sup>

In fact, the Copts share with the Muslims the view that the "ideal woman" is a circumcised woman. Upon inquiry, Copts from Upper Egypt (Tahta) have stated that certainly also Mary, the Virgin Mother and Theotokos (God-bearer), was circumcised, for to think of her as being uncircumcised would be to question whether she was really a woman.

In the beginning of the XVIIth century, the first Capuchin missionaries arrived in Egypt for the purpose to convert the 'schismatic Copts' to Catholicism and thereby to reunite the Coptic Church to the authority of the See of Rome. It is noteworthy that working with the Orthodox Copts the Latin priests should comment about the practice of female circumcision. Their primary objection to this practice, however, was purely theological rather than ethical or medical. The missionaries assumed, following the theory of STRABO,<sup>39</sup> that the practice of female circumcision was based upon Judaistic customs, and, therefore, they endeavoured to abolish it. JAMES BRUCE (1768—1773) gives the following account of the developments, which, interestingly enough, eventually led to the resumption of the practice among the Copts. "When the Roman Catholic priests first settled in Egypt, they considered by mistake this excision of Cophtish women for a ceremony performed upon Judaical principles,

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by MASRY, YOUSSEF EL, *Die Tragödie der Frau im Arabischen Orient*. München, 1963, p. 38. KARIM and AMMAR, *op. cit.*, p. 4. This ḥadīth, however, is not among the canonically recognised tradition literature (ḥadīth). Cf. WENSING, A. J. and MENSING, J. P., *Concordance et indices de la Tradition Musulmane*. Leiden, Vol. II, IV.

<sup>32</sup> In his commentary of *Faḥ al-bārī fī šarḥ al-Buhārī* by Ibn Hajar of Ascalon (d. 1449), SHEIKH MAWARDI declared that "the excision limits itself to remove the kernel-shaped skin of the upper tip of the organ. One should cut, therefore, merely the protruding epidermis without removing the organ as such. MASRY, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> AMMAR, H., *op. cit.*, p. 120. With respect to the masculine preference for the contraction of the female genitalia, cf. TULLMANN, ADOLF, *Das Liebesleben der Naturvölker*. Stuttgart, 1960, p. 261.

<sup>34</sup> Sunan of Abū Dāwūd, ch. Adab 167, cf. WENSING, A. J. and MENSING, J. P., *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> WENSING, A. J. "Khitan", *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Leiden, 1927, Vol. II, pp. 956—960.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn Qudama (1146—1223 A. D.), *Al-Mughni 'ala Mukhtassar Abu al-Qassim 'Umar b. Hussein b. 'Abdallah b. Ahmad al-Kharqūi*. (ed. Muhammad Rashid Rida) Cairo, 1947. 3rd impr., Vol. I, p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> MASRY, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>38</sup> BURMESTER, O. H. E., "The Sayings of Michael, Metropolitan of Damietta", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, II, 1—2, 1936, p. 123.

<sup>39</sup> JONES, H. (transl.), *The Geography of Strabo*. London, 1932. Vol. VIII.

which they forbade upon pain of excommunication that excision should be performed upon the children of parents who had become Catholics. The converts obeyed, the children grew up, and arrived at puberty, but the consequences of having obeyed the interdict were that the man found, by choosing a wife among Catholic Copts, he subjected himself to a very disagreeable inconveniency, to which he had conceived an unconquerable aversion; and therefore he married a heretical wife, free from this objection, and with her he relapsed into heresy. The missionaries, therefore, finding it impossible that ever their congregation could increase, and that this accident frustrated their labours, laid their cause before the College of Cardinals de propaganda fide at Rome. These took it up as a matter of moment, which it really was and sent over visitors skilled in surgery, fairly to report upon the case as it stood. They, on their return, declared that the heat of the climate, or some other natural cause, did, in that particular nation, invariably alter the formation, so as to make a difference from what was ordinary in the sex in other countries; and that this difference occasions a disgust, which must impede the consequences for which matrimony was instituted. The College, upon this report, ordered a declaration being first made by the patient and her parents, that it was not done from Judaical intention, but because it disappointed the ends of marriage. "Si modo matrimonii fructus impediret id omnino tollendum esset", that the imperfection was, by all manner of means, to be removed, so that Catholics, as well as the Copts in Egypt, undergo excision ever since. This is done with a knife, a razor, by women, generally when the child is about eight years old.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout the centuries, female circumcision remained the standard procedure in Egypt for both Muslims and Copts to prepare girls for marriage, and, at the same time, to subdue their passions. Many of the Occidental travellers of the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries referred to the custom in their observations about Egypt. CARSTEN NIEBUHR (1762) remarks only briefly about the practice of female circumcision in Cairo, and states among other things that the women who are thus engaged in this operation are known as the *sages-femmes*, and that their profession even led to the naming of a Cairene street after them. According to NIEBUHR, the young girls were circumcised at the age of ten.<sup>41</sup> After quoting STRABO on this subject, JAMES BRUCE (1768—1773) mentions that all the Egyptians, the Arabians and the nations to the south of Africa undergo this operation, though at no fixed time, but always before they are marriageable. It is practised from necessity so as to avoid a deformity which nature has subjected to particular people.<sup>42</sup> A more analytical account of the Egyptian practice of female circumcision is provided by C. S. SONNINI DE MANONCOUR (1777—1780), who maintained that female circumcision was practised among the ancient Egyptians, who transmitted the custom to their descendants, because the foreigners who have come to inhabit this country are not obliged to undergo it, because they have no need for it.<sup>43</sup> SONNINI then inquired from the Turks in Rosetta as to the reasons for the custom and was informed that it was practised on account of aesthetic considerations as well as of moral reasons so as to subdue the temperament of the girls. Moreover, to satisfy his curiosity, SONNINI examined an eight years old girl and provides the reader with a detailed description of the process of the operation. In Upper Egypt, he remarks, the custom is accompanied with great rejoicings, when the villagers run through the streets and shout "A la bonne circonciseuse".<sup>44</sup> In Chapter XXI, which is his medical remarks, W. G. BROWNE (1792—1798) comments briefly upon the practice of female circumcision in the Nile Valley and ascribes its use to the physiological characteristics of the Egyptian women. "The excision of females is a peculiarity with which the Northern nations are less familiar, yet, it would appear that this usage is more evidently founded on physical causes, and is more clearly a matter of convenience, than the circumcision of males, as it seems not to have been ordained by the precept of any inspired legislator. A practice so widely diffused, it may be said, was hardly invented but to remedy some inconvenience commensurate in its extent . . . The excision is termed in Arabic *Chafadh*. It consists in cutting of the clitoris a little before the period of puberty, or at about the age of eight or nine years."<sup>45</sup>

Among the many scholars, who contributed to the *Description de l'Égypte*, DE CHABROL commented briefly upon the practice of female circumcision, without, however, adding any new insight or idea.<sup>46</sup> JOHN LEWIS BURCKHARDT (1813—1814) refers to the practices of

<sup>40</sup> BRUCE, JAMES, *Travels to discover the source of the Nile in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772 and 1773*. Edinburgh 1804. Vol. V, pp. 34—35. It should be noted that the French edition provides more details as to the operation.

<sup>41</sup> NIEBUHR, C., *Description de l'Arabie*. Paris, 1779. Vol. I, p. 114.

<sup>42</sup> BRUCE, J., *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 32.

<sup>43</sup> Dr. MAHMOUD KARIM (Cairo), however, informed me that in Egypt also some Arabophone (Arabic-speaking Greek) women are circumcised.

<sup>44</sup> SONNINI, C. S., *Voyage dans la Haute et Basse Égypte*. Paris, Anno VII de la Rep. Vol. II, p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> BROWNE, W. G., *Travels in Africa, Egypt and Syria from the years 1792 to 1798*. London, 1799, p. 347.

<sup>46</sup> DE CHABROL, "Essai sur les Moeurs des Habitants Modernes de l'Égypte". *Description de l'Égypte*. Paris, 1826. Vol. XVIII, p. 61

infibulation as well as female circumcision. "Daughters of the Arabs south of Qena and Esna as far as Sennaar undergo circumcision or rather excision, at the age from three to six, and girls thus treated are called *Mukhaeyt*, though they are not to be confused with the slave-girls who arrive in Sioût (Asyût) to be sold." These slavegirls, BURCKHARDT points out, underwent an operation, which is described by W. G. BROWNE.<sup>47</sup> EDUARD RÜPPEL (1822), though speaking more about Dongola than about Egypt, states that all girls at approximately the age of eight submit to the operation of excision, which also reduces significantly the susceptibility to sexual stimulations.<sup>48</sup> ED. CADALVÈNE and BREUVÉRY (1829) provide the reader with an exact and detailed description of the Sudanese circumcision,<sup>49</sup> which is also fully quoted by EDMOND COMBES (1833).<sup>50</sup> HERMANN LUDWIG VON PÜCKLER-MUSKAU (1835), while also discretely describing the details of the operation, which removes almost all natural feelings among women, entitled this paragraph "Nicht für Damen", and adhering to the puritanical modesty of his age, he caused his description to be printed upside-down, thereby indicating that matters of this kind were hardly suitable to be read by the European ladies of the XIXth century.<sup>51</sup>

This rather arbitrary selection of reports by the travellers of the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries may be sufficient to show that in those days the custom was universal in Egypt, and that it was adhered to by members of all social classes extending from Lower Egypt to Aswân.

### Part III. Some Sociological Aspects of the Egyptian Practice of Female Circumcision

Anthropologists and sociologists have rightly considered the practice of female circumcision as a puberty — or pre-marital rite, by which the girl is fully initiated into female society. As the Revd. FR. HENRY H. AYROUT, S. J. states: "Not to submit to this mutilation would be an obstacle to marriage."<sup>52</sup> In fact, at one time, this practice may even have been connected with a religious or magical fertility rite as suggested by the observation that in Upper Egypt, the circumcision of girls is left to two or three days before the new moon.<sup>53</sup> or as SONNINI DE MANONCOUR states, to the time of the inundation of the Nile,<sup>54</sup> both periods being closely associated with fertility.

MAGNUS HIRSCHFELD, the famous sexologist, maintained that the practice of circumcision or excision was related to the religious sacrificial idea that of sacrificing the clitoris or the labia, the most erotic parts of the female body, to a god or a demon for the purpose of special blessings or protection.<sup>55</sup> There is no evidence, however, that in Egypt either the full or the partial clitoridectomy was ever consciously performed for this particular purpose.

At one time, the operation was carried out by men, as is evident from the description of AETIUS, who explicitly refers to "a strong man" standing behind the girl to hold her while "the surgeon" who operates stands in front of her,<sup>56</sup> and the account of the practice by PLOSS-BARTELS also states that "the operator, who is more often than not a barber, uses his fingers dipped in ash to get hold of the clitoris, which he pulls several times from back to front so as to cut it off with a single stroke of the razor, when it appears as a simple fibre of skin."<sup>57</sup>

Nowadays, however, in sharp contrast to the circumcision of boys, which is everywhere a great public ceremony and feast, the circumcision of girls is carried out either in complete secrecy and privacy, or in the presence of a few invited women. The men, even the father of the girl, are not supposed to show any interest in it.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, YOUSSEF AL-MASRY

<sup>47</sup> BURCKHARDT, JOHN LEWIS, *Travels in Nubia*. London, 1819, p. 332. Following the custom of his time, Burckhardt quotes W. G. Browne in Latin. The following is the English translation of the passage. "I had the occasion to examine certain black girls who had undergone the operation. The lips of the pudendum (vulva) sewn together with a needle and thread, were plainly visible to me, and there remained a narrow opening for the passage of the urine. At Esna, Asyût and Cairo, it is the barbers who remove the covering with a sharp knife, but not infrequently the wound turns out mortal".

<sup>48</sup> RÜPPEL, EDUARD, *Reisen in Nubien, Kordofan, etc.* Frankfurt, 1829, pp. 42, 45.

<sup>49</sup> CADALVÈNE, ED. and BREUVÉRY, *L'Egypte et la Turquie*. Paris, 1836. Vol. II, pp. 158—159.

<sup>50</sup> COMBES, EDMOND, *Voyage en Egypte*. Paris, 1846. Vol. II, p. 11.

<sup>51</sup> PÜCKLER-MUSKAU, H. L. v., *Aus Mehemet Ali's Reich*. Stuttgart, 1844. Vol. III, pp. 30—31. In the middle of the XIXth century, Dr. Alfons Bilharz concerned himself with the Egyptian practice of female circumcision, cf. BILHARZ, A. "Beschreibung der Genitalorgane einiger schwarzen Eunuchen, nebst Bemerkungen über die Beschneidung der Clitoris und kleinen Schamlippen", *Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Zoologie*, Vol. X, Leipzig, 1860, pp. 291—294.

<sup>52</sup> AYROUT, H., *loc. cit.* PATAI, RAPHAEL, *Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East*. New York, 1959, p. 206.

<sup>53</sup> For the girl not to be operated at the given time might cause her to be sterile. AMMAR, H., *op. cit.*, pp. 103, 122.

<sup>54</sup> SONNINI, C. S., *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>55</sup> LEWANDOWSKI, H., *Ferne Länder, Fremde Sitten*. Stuttgart, 1958. TÜLLMANN, A., *op. cit.*, p. 261.

<sup>56</sup> SUDHOFF, K., *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>57</sup> PLOSS-BARTELS, *Das Weib*. Leipzig, 1908. Vol. I, p. 265.

<sup>58</sup> PATAI, R., *op. cit.*, p. 206.



states that whereas men are not permitted to be present at the operation, nevertheless, all female relatives and friends of the family are invited to witness and to help in the mutilation of the girl.<sup>59</sup>

HAMED AMMAR speaks of the midwife "with her surgical instruments provided by the Ministry of Health", who seats the girl on a chair or vessel, while three women assist her by holding the girl's legs apart as well as supporting her back, a posture very similar to that assumed at childbirth. After the operation, the legs are tied together at the thighs and ankles to prevent violent movements. After a week or ten days, the ties are undone.<sup>60</sup> In fact, for the *dayah* or midwife the performance of the operation constitutes one of the significant sources of her income.<sup>61</sup>

The principal argument in defense of the practice of female circumcision is linked to the idea of pre-marital chastity and virginity. It is widely maintained that the partial or complete removal of the clitoris, which is regarded as the centre of sexual excitement, is deemed necessary for ensuring pre-marital chastity.<sup>62</sup> For that matter, the conservative advocates of the practice see only the alternatives of either excision or prostitution. In this connection, HAMED AMMAR points out that "the need for the control of any sexual excitability is understandable in a religiously puritanical community which considers any form of emotional stimulus, either through glance or touch from any member of the opposite sex, other than the husband or wife, as sinful".<sup>63</sup>

With regard to masturbatory practices, KARIM and AMMAR have shown that circumcised girls (average age of 18) masturbate considerably less than the non-circumcised females of the KINSEY Report. In a questionnaire given to 120 circumcised girls it was found that only six girls practised masturbation, i.e. 5%, as compared to about 25% of the females of the KINSEY study.<sup>64</sup>

Another reason for maintaining the practice of female circumcision is to please the man, whose sexual feelings are increased by the artificial contractions of the female genital organs, as already intimated in the above quoted hadith. At the same time, it should be remembered that this sense of pleasure for the man is paralleled by acute anxiety, frustration and repulsion by the woman. In studying the cases of repulsion among circumcised women, KARIM and AMMAR interviewed 200 circumcised females, of whom 88 women suffered from one form of repulsion or another.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, it is generally held that the clitoridectomy is desirable for purely aesthetic reasons. Thus, H. A. WINKLER states that in the mentality of the Egyptian people, the circumcision is primarily an aesthetic matter in so far as the uncircumcised organs are regarded as ugly and disgusting.<sup>66</sup> AETIUS already referred to the hypertrophic developments of the clitoris and the labia (whether congenital or acquired through excessive masturbation) among the Egyptian women, and states that such unseemly and shameful growth of the clitoris merely excites them and rouses the desire for copulation.<sup>67</sup> At any rate, there is no question that the aesthetic considerations should not be belittled in our appraisal of the reasons for this practice.

Journalists<sup>68</sup> and gynaecologists<sup>69</sup> have maintained a definite relationship between the consumption of hashish by men and the clitoridectomy. Taken as a kind of aphrodisiacum, the consumption of hashish enables the man to prolong the coitus so as to increase the possibility of orgasmic satisfaction of his circumcised partner. This fact has been recognised by many Arab women, who, therefore, demand from their husbands to take hashish.<sup>70</sup> As Dr. YUSSEF RIZKALLAH HANNA said: "The man takes hashish mainly in order to satisfy his wife sexually, since the clitoridectomy causes a certain loss of sexual sensativity in the woman. The man is forced to consume hashish, in order to prolong the sexual relationship sufficiently".<sup>71</sup> This

<sup>59</sup> MASRY, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>60</sup> AMMAR, H., *op. cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>61</sup> HABIB, SAMUEL, "al-Dayah", *Risalat an-Nür*, Cairo, Oct. 1965, pp. 8-9.

<sup>62</sup> TÜLLMANN, A., *loc. cit.*

<sup>63</sup> AMMAR, H., *op. cit.*, p. 121.

<sup>64</sup> KARIM and AMMAR point out, however, that their results may be doubtful as many women who most probably practise it did not answer this part of the questionnaire. KARIM and AMMAR, *op. cit.*, p. 36. For the comparative data on uncircumcised females, cf. KINSEY, A. C., POMEROY, W. B., MARTIN C. E., GREBBARD, P. H., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Philadelphia, 1953.

<sup>65</sup> KARIM and AMMAR, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>66</sup> WINKLER, HANS A., *Ägyptische Volkskunde*. Stuttgart, 1936, p. 196.

<sup>67</sup> SUDHOFF, K., *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>68</sup> *Al-Tahrir*, Aug. 20, 1957; Oct. 28, 1958. MASRY, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-27.

<sup>69</sup> KARIM and AMMAR, *op. cit.*, pp. 14 ff.

<sup>70</sup> MASRY, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.



means, to quote Dr. KAMEL AL-MINIAMI: "To condone the clitoridectomy means to destroy the physical health of the man, who is forced to seek refuge in hashish so as to satisfy his wife and thereby maintain his sexual marital life".<sup>72</sup> In their study of 331 circumcised women, 62 husbands were taking either hashish or alcoholic beverages. Interestingly enough, however, the results of KARIM and AMMAR's investigation showed that, in fact, the wife does not get more sexual satisfaction when the husband takes either hashish or alcoholic beverages. "However, few cases admitted that they had better satisfaction and that may be most probably due to the accompanying circumstances and sex preparation. On the other hand, others admitted non-satisfaction and even repulsion when the husbands were doped or drunk."<sup>73</sup>

#### Part IV: Present Concerns for the Abolition of the Egyptian Practice of Female Circumcision

In a society of rapid social change, certain established religious and cultural customs undergo noteworthy changes, alterations and transformations, both in terms of the extent as well as in the cultural significance of the practice. In many spheres of Egyptian life, ancient customs, magic and superstitions have closely followed and sometimes even attached themselves to modern progress, either by adapting themselves to the radically new needs or sometimes by changing their social or cultural purpose. The "rite" of female circumcision, however, has more or less survived the vicissitudes of social and economic progress, and both motivations and purposes of this practice have hardly changed. If ever it had a religious significance in Egypt, one thing is certain, that this motivation is completely lost. For that matter, it is retained "as the thing to be done", and thus, as a kind of puberty or pre-marital rite it is being passed along from generation to generation. Though there are no statistical data available, it can be said with safety that in the country the overwhelming majority of Egyptian women are circumcised. In the cities, especially in Alexandria and Cairo, the frequency, of course, is considerably less. From 200 circumcised women, 116 women agreed to circumcise their daughters. In 44 cases they said it is a tradition 26 women said that it will decrease the sexual appetite of their daughters, 10 women wanted their daughters "to be clean", 10 women said "it will give a good appearance", and 42 women gave no explanation.<sup>74</sup> The majority of the women who want to maintain the practice of female circumcision by circumcising their daughters belong to the lower class, while more than half of the women of the middle and upper classes refused to have their daughters circumcised. This means that as a woman gains in education, she becomes more and more convinced of the drawbacks of circumcision.<sup>75</sup>

But not only the educated and emancipated women of the Egyptian middle and upper classes are opposed to the practice of female circumcision. A growing concern among journalists, physicians and religious spokesmen is noticeable, who, recognising the dignity of the Egyptian woman, are dedicated to abolish this practice.

One of the chief spokesmen for the abolition of the practice of female circumcision is YOUSSEF AL-MASRY, the author of *Le drame sexuel de la femme dans l'Orient arabe*. "The clitoridectomy encroaches upon the sexual pleasure, which nature has bestowed upon the woman. The removal of the clitoris not only eliminates the ability to experience pleasure, but it decreases considerably the possibility to experience an orgasm. It is a wicked mutilation of nature, and because it is against nature, it is an evil, which under all circumstances must be abolished."<sup>76</sup> KARIM and AMMAR, also aware of the physiological and psychological consequences caused by the clitoridectomy and the removal of the labia in connection with the woman's ability to achieve an orgasm, studied 331 circumcised females. Of this group, only 136 or 41.1% are reported to have had any orgasmic experiences as compared to the 70.77% of KINSEY's sample of uncircumcised females. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that the various degrees of female circumcision show a definite relation to the woman's ability to reach an orgasm. The results of the study establish beyond doubt the importance of the clitoris to reach full sexual satisfaction, moreover, it has been shown that the presence of a part of the clitoris and the labia minora provide a greater frequency of orgasm than would be the case of a complete excision.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> KARIM and AMMAR, *loc. cit.*

<sup>74</sup> KARIM and AMMAR, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> MASRY, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>77</sup> KARIM and AMMAR, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

The above-mentioned book by YOUSSEF AL-MASRY was dedicated to Ihsane 'Abd al-Quddus, the editor of *Rose al-Youssef*, a weekly magazine appearing in Cairo, and to 'Abd al-'Aziz Sadek, the editor of the former weekly magazine *al-Tahrir*. For both journalists have made their magazines available for articles dealing with various aspects of the Egyptian woman's emancipation in general and the practice of female circumcision in particular.

The discussions in the Cairo press, the abolition of the Sudanese circumcision in the Republic of the Sudan, and the growing concern among Egyptian sociologists, physicians and religious representatives eventually led to the formation of a "working committee" to study the various aspects and implications of the practice of female circumcision. On January 27, 1959, the Egyptian daily newspaper *Al-Ahram* reported under the heading: "To Forbid the Circumcision of Women" the following news item: "Yesterday, a study committee of both the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Waifs agreed by majority vote to prohibit the circumcision of women for social and health reasons, and to announce legislation pertaining thereto. Sheikh Said Sabek, Director of Culture in the Ministry of Waifs and the representative of the Ministry in this committee, and Dr. Ali al-Said, Director of the Research Section in the Ministry of Public Health, and Dr. 'Abd al-Hafez Naguib of the Hospital Administration agreed to the decision. Dr. Hamed al-Badri, a member of the committee and Inspector for the Welfare of Children in the Ministry of Public Health objected to the decision".

It is interesting to note that no further definite legislation has followed this report. For all practical purposes, therefore, the practice of female circumcision is being continued irrespective of the majority decision of the study committee. In the meantime, however, both Protestant and Catholic agencies working in the Nile Valley are voicing concern about the continuation of the mutilation of young girls.

Whereas three hundred years ago, the Latin priests intended to abolish the practice of female circumcision on account of purely theological considerations, nowadays, emancipated churchmen not merely realise the psychological and emotional consequences of the operation, but are also aware of the divine rights of womanhood. It is this serious concern which is expressed by the Reverend SAMUEL HABIB of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Service (CEOSS) in Minya in an article entitled "The Midwife". "There is a very serious part of the work of the midwife which pertains to the circumcision of the girls. The sexual feelings between a boy and a girl are natural and holy and are created by God. Do you know that when you circumcise a girl you prevent her from experiencing sexual feelings? Does any father think that circumcision prevents a girl from falling morally? Sexual feelings are not found in merely one place of the human body, so that when you cut that part the sexual feelings are lost. Actually, the sexual feelings cover the whole person and you cannot destroy them easily. The problem is that by circumcising your daughter you prevent her from experiencing the height of satisfaction (orgasm) when she is married. Circumcising a girl does not mean that she is pure, and an uncircumcised girl may be purer than a circumcised one. Added to this are the diseases which are caused by circumcision. Let us stop the midwives from practising the circumcision of girls, and let the parents keep in mind that this is serious, for they are preventing their daughters from attaining their greatest pleasure after marriage. Our battle with the midwife is to stop her from practising the circumcision of girls and from deflowering the brides at the wedding."<sup>78</sup>

The reaction to this article in this village periodical is informative, and, therefore, I have selected some excerpts of letters to the editor.

"I refused to give the October issue of *Risalat an-Nûr* to my daughter". "This article is more outspoken than it should be". "Without such frankness we can never solve the village problems. A friend wanted to prevent his daughter from reading the article, but she said: 'There is nothing shameful in this article'." "Circumcision merely delays rather than prevents the reaching of the sexual climax."<sup>79</sup> The Rev. FR. HENRY H. AYROUT, S. J., wrote: "I appreciated the article on girls' circumcision and brides' deflowering in the October issue. You have to face the rural problems frankly."<sup>80</sup> "Girls' circumcision is an awful habit. I liked the article on it". "Girls' circumcision is an ancient custom, which must be abolished."<sup>81</sup>

It is impossible, of course, to expect any effective change of attitudes among the conservative village population just by means of legislation, although legislation, whether enforced

<sup>78</sup> HABIB, SAMUEL, *loc. cit.* A similar concern was expressed by Dr. Housam Chaker of the Medical Centre Mankabad near Asyût. See the article "Fellahates", *Eux et Nos*, Catholic Association for Upper Egyptian Free Schools, 1953.

<sup>79</sup> Letters to the editor, *Risalat an-Nûr*, November, 1965, p. 5.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, January, 1966, p. 8.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, February, 1966, p. 6.

or not would demonstrate to the enlightened public the concern of the respective ministry. In fact, only by a patiently and convincingly presented public health program of education, which must be endorsed by the religious leaders of the community, can one hope to enlighten the attitudes of the villagers. This educational program must be directed to both the women as well as the men. It must demonstrate to the mothers the unnecessary physiological and psychological pains and injuries in terms of their daughters' eligibility for marriage. It must convincingly show to the men, the future husbands, that it is sexually better and more satisfying for them to marry uncircumcised rather than circumcised girls. Moreover, it is important to provide a meaningful substitute for the practice of female circumcision in terms of its significance as a puberty or pre-marital rite. Indeed, as educational demands increase and new domestic skills are gradually required among the villagers, it may not be impossible to discover a more useful point of reference to mark and to establish the marriage-eligibility for the girls in the eyes of the community.

Furthermore, it is of greatest importance to divert the concern of the midwife from the practice of female circumcision to other functions within her competency. Again, it is not sufficient just to prohibit the midwives to practice female circumcisions. On the contrary, it would be desirable to transform some of the ancient tasks and responsibilities of the midwife in such manner, that she, instead of suffering an economic loss by not circumcising the village girls, may, in fact, profit by doing something else, *i.e.* in her capacity as midwife.

The relationship of the consumption of hashish to the practice of female circumcision has been briefly mentioned. From the social-psychological perspective, it seems plausible that with a decrease in the practice of female circumcision one may eventually expect a decrease in the hashish consumption. This argument led to the headlines of a Cairene magazine: "No battle against hashish without the prohibition of the excision".<sup>82</sup>

In fact, it is hoped that in the course of the rapid social and economic transformation of Egyptian society, a greater concern for the rights, privileges and responsibilities of women will be manifested, which then may lead to a natural emancipation, through which *ipso facto* the practice of female circumcision will disappear. In the meantime, however, it is important to think in terms of some suitable means of substituting and transforming such an ancient custom into a rite, which is dignified, meaningful and acceptable to the mothers and the future husbands of the girls.

OTTO MEINARDUS

The American University in Cairo

<sup>82</sup> *Al-Tahrir*, August 20, 1957.

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