

# Performing the Eradication of Infibulation Mana Abdurahman Isse at Merka, Somalia

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## Introduction

Perhaps the best known features of the Somali socio-political system are clanism and segregation. Somali society is founded on six pillars: kinship, customary law, religion (Sunni Islam), language, traditional territory and, recently, the State. Traditional legislators are all male and women play no role in the official decision-making, although they wield some power from behind the scenes, as it was the case of Mana Abdurahman, one of daughters of the last sultan of Merka, in the Lower Shebelli valley (southern Somalia).

Although both the colonial powers and independent Somali government have weakened it, customary law still influences greatly the lives of the Somalis. The main societal divisions are between the *waranle* (spearmen or warriors, a term applied to all adult males who hold political power), the *wadad* (pl. *wadaddo*, religious men<sup>1</sup>). These two castes comprise the six major clan-families. The clan groupings are important social units and clan membership plays an important part in Somali culture and politics. Clans are patrilineal and are often divided into sub-clans, sometimes with many sub-divisions. There is a hierarchy of clans: certain clans are traditionally classed as “noble clans”, referring to the belief that they share a common Somali ancestry<sup>2</sup>. The first tier of the clan families is made up by the four noble Samaale clans (Darod, Dir, Hawiye, and Issaq). They make up almost 75% of the population and are nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists. The Saab minority clans (Digil and Mirifle/Rahanweyn) form a second tier in the Somali clan system, because they are more heterogeneous and have assimilated non-Somali elements. They are agro-pastoral clans living along the Jubba and Shebelli rivers, and many have become sedentary city dwellers<sup>3</sup>.

A third tier, the occupational clans (called Sab, “ignoble”, by the Samaal and Bon, “low caste”, by the Saab), live in their own settlements among the noma-

dic populations in the north performing specialized occupations such as metal-working, tanning and hunting and are treated as an “unclean” caste. Other minority clans and ethnic groups, which make up 6% of the population, include non-Somali groups such as the Bantu, and lineages of relatively unmixed Arab or Persian descent. These disenfranchised communities are treated as outcasts and considered as ritually unclean by the other Somalis. They are made of groups which inhabited Somalia before the arrival of the Somalis as well as the descendants of the Bantu-speaking slaves, are connected to the Saab clans as clients, and are known derogatorily as *habasho* or *adoon*.

The State gave birth to urbanization and generations of townspeople, such as the Hamari, the Baravanese, the inhabitants of Merka, etc. Most of those who have grown up with the State believe and try to practice secular law. Hence there are three systems of authority in Somalia: customary law, Islam, and the State (Mohamed 2003:76-78). Today, around 60% of all Somalis are nomadic camel herders, the remainder are farmers and city-dwellers. Almost all speak the Somali language, which had no official script until 1972, and 99% are Sunni Muslim.

If patrilineal kinship ties through patrilineal descent have traditionally served to integrate Somali society vertically, Somali women, by marrying into one clan while belonging to another, have exercised a powerful pull toward horizontal integration. Hence, as Samatar (1993:2) remarks, while the main principle cuts up society into vertically organized, mutually antagonistic lineage units, the female principle cuts across clan lines and creates horizontal blood ties, thereby serving to unify society. At least until the ongoing civil war, when clans tend to intermarry outsiders less.

## Mana Sultan Abdurahman

Mana Sultan (1953-2008) was one of the daughters of the last sultan of Merka,

Abdurahman, a legendary figure with about 400 wives, according to rumours, and an enlightened man who freed his Bantu slaves and educated his children. Daughter of the first wife of the sultan, Mana was also a political referee, who was strongly working to build up a constructive dialogue among the warring factions, in particular between the government and the Islamic Courts. During the Nairobi Conference in 2004, she had even succeeded in obtaining that 12% of the representatives in the provisional Parliament were women.

Mana was the soul behind Ayuub, a refugee village born in 1999 at the outskirts of Merka. Helped by a Catholic NGO, Water For Life, Ayuub had grown into a healthy model community of about 600 people, with more than 30 schools linked to it, and promoting rural development projects all over the area of the Lower Shebelli river. From 1996 to 2008 Mana dedicated a great deal of her efforts in supporting the attenuation, as far as the eradication of the operation, while maintaining the ritual part, hence contributing to the campaign against excision as well as infibulation among many Somali women in the district of Merka. Through projects such as that dubbed *Gudnin Usub* (New Rite), Mana tried to convince Somali women as well as traditional and non-traditional health operators to pass from the *sunna gudnin*, the complete female circumcision, to the *gudnin usub*, which simply involves a sting on the clitoris, albeit saving the rituals of this female rite of passage, that is the cultural part, as a compromise by means of these very attenuated form, which should precede the actual eradication of infibulation. Currently this alternative rite has been practised on 3000 girls in 32 villages of the Lower Shebelli valley (Abdurahman Issa and Grassivaro Gallo 2005).

Mana supported her campaign on the attenuation of infibulation and the alternative rite through a number of initiatives: sewing courses and traditional work groups where women could speak of

their experiences with infibulation informally. More formal meetings were held on Fridays, often on the bush; meetings with the *umulissa*, the traditional operators, were also promoted. Mana and her helpers always strove to convince women that infibulation is very dangerous for a woman's health and that good life is possible without forcing their daughters to suffer this terrible ordeal.

### The DVD Video-clip

The DVD presented at this symposium is a part of a videotape recording a number of events occurred in 2007, translated from the Somali language into Italian and English. The opening and closing credits and captions have been added by us.

The videotape has been heavily edited by the producers. It uses footage (two clips and a stump) from tapes recorded by amateurish cameramen with very old cameras, in at least three locations. Then it has been poorly assembled, cutting out some important parts. We could see it analysing the video frame by frame: the gaps in the numbers in the lower right corner of the frames, the different positions of the blackboard and the performer pointing at the poster hanging from different places, the different width of the tents as well as the interior light, the different colours of the dresses of the female audience, and some incongruities in the speech show that there are three tents (one larger, one smaller and one with the UNICEF logo outside), three blackboards, three locations, and therefore three audiences during three performances. Actually, clip one (which is possibly clip two when it was recorded) begins after two minutes of recording which has been cut out; at 2.14.24 the elderly performing woman asks her audience: "Answer me! Where is written? In no book". Then there is a gap showing the audience (2.15.11), and then in clip two the performer asks (2.17.21) a new audience: "What did you reckon of this picture?" and "Speak, I can't see no one replying". There is a cut made by the cameraman (2.24.25 to 2.25.30): he stops after the performer has enumerated only two of the injuries caused by infibulation, and we miss the other two, and possibly other words. After the blur of the new start of the recording camera we get "This razor blade cut everything from A to Z." At the end of the video there is a stump (2.26.40 to 2.26.45), almost impossible to see as there are few frames squeezed between clip two and the closing credits, which

shows the performer during the third performance. In clip two for 9 seconds the numbers on the lower right corner are substituted by a date: 29 July 2007.

The goal of the videotape of which the DVD reproduces one constructed performance, is not anthropological. It wants to send a message and document the activity of the NGO for the sponsors. The editors neither gave the full context of the performances, nor the name of the performer. The Somali translator, moreover, was neither a professional interpreter nor an anthropologist, but a doctor. He sometimes tried to give us a "cultural", Westernised interpretation of the events. Hence, we are working on the message which has been constructed to give the illusion of seeing only one performance with important poetic as well as political-religious qualities, not on the original performances. It seems, from the editing, that an important issue the producers want to stress is the superiority of Islamic law, which discourages infibulation, according to the interpretation of the animal sacrifice, over customary law, infibulation lies with.

There are, however, themes that are common to the two performances in both clip one and two, which make us think that these issues are routinely repeated, and that gave the editor/s of the video the possibility of creating the illusion of only one performance. The refrain song is repeated in both clips, and forms a leitmotif as well as a powerful trio of slogans; another issue is the difference between male circumcision and infibulation, albeit the arguments developed are not the same (in clip one "men instead do it not to get germs", in clip two "Even Christians say that circumcision is good for health, but they don't become Muslim for that !"). The association between the girl and the animal on the butcher's block is repeated in both clips, although clip one is more explicit in connecting the sacrificial victim to the sacred texts ("It's a sin. Mothers are to blame for it. The Child girl is like an animal to be butchered. The sacred books don't order to do it. Neither Christianity nor Islam"). There is an explicit allusion to the Festival of the Sacrifice, when Ibrahim (Abraham in the Bible) was ordered by God to substitute the victim, his son Ishmael (Isaac), with an animal. Clip two was badly cut by the cameraman stopping recording for a while and we can't know how the performer fully developed the theme. One more issue is the blame placed on

mothers (although the refrain says "parents"), skipping the fact that women are the powerless genre both by customary law and Islamic law. Only the State tried to modernize their condition during the first years of the Somalian Socialist regime.

We know that Mana cured and directed the meeting events, but the reasons behind her choices or the video editors' ones were not considered important enough to be recorded in order to understand the context. In the DVD the performer, an elderly woman we will call Habiba (a pseudonym), keeps pointing at a poster which has been produced by a boy student chosen by Mana for his graphic skills. In the DVD we notice the blend of Western and traditional Somali cultural traits, which cooperate to make the performance effective.

The setting is a village school, which is a large tent (actually three different tents, as we have seen), a step further to Western-style education in comparison to the traditional sitting in the shade of an acacia tree in the bush of the nomads and the traditional farmers. The poster itself is interesting as an innovation: in fact, until recently the Somalis, as a Muslim people, were iconoclasts. Moreover, the sentences "Beware of the [health] harm to the girls", and "Mom, don't do the pharaonic cutting to me" are written in a language which was first written in 1972, and that most Somali, women in particular, cannot read. The image of the girl, on the other hand, is influenced by the pictures in the schoolbooks published by the international NGOs, which are made of paternalist and somewhat colonialist do-gooders. The outcome is a light-skinned girl with pigtails whose skin and hairdo bears scarce or no likeness whatsoever to a Somali girl, but it has been evidently perceived as positive by the schoolboy artist, and Mana, and at least as non-negative by the female audience in general.

The positive notion of the light-skinned girl can be ascribed to the cumulative effects, on current Somali imagery as well as educational methods, of the former Italian colonial rule, the Socialist regime dictatorship, the colonizing cultural aspects of both religious and secular NGOs and the UN operators, to which the influence of the Somali diaspora in the Western and Arab countries should be added. The razor blade itself, instead of the traditional knife and blades, as well as the references made by Habiba to con-

cepts of Western medicine such as “syphilis”, “tetanus”, “germs”, witness the composite nature of today’s Somali culture. Also the idea of sexual pleasure a woman can expect from an intercourse is, in our opinion, a Westernised trait, since the infibulation itself is made to discourage women to stray from strictly controlled sexual reproductive activity. The performance, on the other hand, at least as it was conceived by the videotape editors, which constructed one performance from at least three of them, shows how strong the traditional cultural traits are and how right Mana was in relying on women such as Habiba. She is an elderly woman who, as such, enjoys authority on the audience; she is also known as a poet and most of the performance relies heavily on poetry and song. Before analysing the constructed performance itself, we will spend some words on the cultural importance of poetry in a Somali context.

### Female Somali Poetry

Somalia’s poetic tradition differs markedly from the Western one. An English explorer who travelled through Somalia in 1854 noted that “the country teems with poets, poetasters, poetitoees, poetaccios.” In the 1980s Somali scholar Said Sheikh Samatar remarked that even a casual observer could notice the remarkable influence of poetry in the Somali cultural scene. In fact, Somali poetry has been the country’s chief means of mass communication, substituting for history books, broadcasting and newspapers. Modern communications, such as radio and audio-cassettes, and transportation, have spread the art more efficiently from one area to another. Poetry is an all-pervasive part of nearly everyone’s daily experience and, historically, Somali bards, both men and women, have mobilised public opinion in support of war or peace (Cerulli 1964, Andrzejewski and Lewis 1974, Jama 1991, Hultman 1993, Orwin 2002).

In Somalia poetry is the currency of conversation and it is used as a platform for everything from education and entertainment to politics and debate, disseminated all over the country through the use of cassette tapes and players. With no pervasive written language, Somali culture is indisputably oral, and Somali population is mostly made up of non-literate nomads. “As Islam provides a way of life and defines a relationship with God, so poetry provides a way of speech and thought and defines a relationship with

the things of this world” (Lark 1988:36). Four criteria – scansion, melody, topic, and function – act in concert to differentiate one genre from another. Scholars group the various genres (more than fifty) into three basic categories<sup>4</sup>. As for the form, Somali verse is marked by alliteration (*xarafraac* or *kikaad*), and an unwritten practice of meter (*miisaan*) (Samatar 1982:60, Orwin 2002).

“In more recent times traditional gender roles, tribalism, female circumcision, and especially the civil war, have been the subject of fiery poetic disputes. In poetry the use of violent diatribe is entirely acceptable, and poetic license provides the socially marginal with a powerful tool to reclaim their honour and challenge existing power structure. [...] Somali women have their own classical poetic genre called *buraambur* and, although its memorization and transmission has traditionally been restricted by social convention, it is no less socially and politically engaged than the men’s genres. Shifting social norms as a result of war and exile have now permitted many Somali women to play increasingly active public roles, including the public recitation of their poetry at political and cultural events. At the largest Somali peace initiative yet, the Carta Peace Conference in Djibouti in 2000, women took centre stage with the performance of peace-promoting poetry and song. In many Diasporic communities, women are spearheading the revival of the Somali cultural heritage and actively participate in debates surrounding the war and their status as refugees. [...]” (Bavelaar 2006)<sup>5</sup>.

Given the discriminations of female poets, whose poems are not memorized by male professional memorizers/reciters because it is considered demeaning and insulting, women do not receive exposure through the traditional network, but has circulated through audio tapes and radio transmissions, as well as public performances to larger audiences, made available in the refugee camps (Jama 1991, Hassan et al. 1995). While the composition of a poem may vary widely, the content and the message always appeal to ideas and experiences shared by the audience. Poetry remains a preferred medium for the communication of sensitive social messages, while poetic license allows people to address issue that may cause embarrassment when discussed in ordinary conversation. One of these issues concerns speaking about pain.

Both the meaning of pain and pain behaviour are associated with values in a person’s social and cultural context. Culture also provides models for how to treat and relieve pain. Finnström and Söderhamn (2006:421-22) point out that the word for “pain”, something deeper than “hurt” (which involves both body and mind), in the Somali language is *xanuun*, which also covers discomfort and illness. In spite of the fact that participants were requested to give examples of painful situations, only two women mentioned infibulation, or pharaonic circumcision, which includes the removal of the clitoris, labia minora and majora (Rableh 2001). Johansen (2002) remarked that most Somali women do not talk about their experiences in connection with infibulation with other Somali women. Johansen could not find an explanation, and Finnström and Söderhamn (2006:421) suggest that maybe that is too difficult for them to acknowledge the memory. Moreover, Somali women express a stoical attitude to pain, which is considered a natural part of their lives, which is simply the truth, given that the complications are numerous and all painful (Pieters and Lowenfels 1977:731). Even if in Hosken (1993:114-115) the reports of the gruesome operation show that the torture is far from noiseless, the circumcisers tell the girls not to scream because it is a cowardly behaviour, a cultural aspects common to most societies practising FGMs (see, for example, WIN News 1978:24). Although FGM continues to be practised throughout Somalia, people now discuss FGM, which is a sign of social change started in the 1980s. Hence, the fact that the audience in the DVD openly condemns pharaonic circumcision shows that a number of women are more and more aware of the harm caused by it.

### The DVD’s Poetry and Song or The Language of Traditional Authority

The idea and practice of performance have a particular import for oral expression (Finnegan 1992) and one influential approach centres the idea of performance round the concept of “social drama” (Turner 1982, 1986). Social drama, Turner says, is defined as a aharmonic or disharmonic social process, arising in conflict situations (1974: 37; 1985: 180). Social drama is defined by Turner (1985: 196), as “an eruption from the level surface of ongoing social life, with its interactions, transactions, reciprocities, its

customs making for regular, orderly sequences of behavior.” Turner’s social drama theory has four phases of public action: *Breech*; *Crisis*, *Redressive action*, *Reintegration*. In the liminality of the ritual, there is also room for the critical<sup>6</sup>. René Girard (1977) thought that rituals tried to contact power to exercise control over it and to ‘canalize’ it. Closer research into the liminal phase of rituals (not only sacrificial rituals) however shows that besides ‘canalising’ there is also a free use of powers prohibited outside the ritual, not only to channel these powers, but also to benefit the community from new beneficial dynamics. In this part of the paper we will adapt Turner’s notion of social drama (1974) and his analysis of symbols (1967) to Habiba’s constructed performance in the DVD.

Every social drama alters, albeit minimally, the structure of the related social field. Hence its “liminal” or “threshold” character, which according to Turner (1993:174-75) transforms the social drama into a limited area of transparency on the opaque surface of social life. In the performance of the DVD video-clips Habiba starts immediately *in media res*. Her oral performance, however, can be divided into four parts, made up of recited verses in the opening, sung refrain, spoken verses, sung verses and refrain, recited verses in the closing. On the other hand, the poem/song is made of a chant and counterchant, where the crude description of the operation of the infibulation is alternated by exclamations (such as “Mom, don’t do the pharaonic cutting to me!”), or by the refrain “Mothers are to be blamed for it”. When the first description of the operation, which starts somewhat backwards with the girl’s tied legs, ends in a circular way with the girl sealed by thorns, a song proper erupts: “We have refused it, we don’t want the pharaonic one. Parents who still do it are to blame”. The song is then sung by the audience as a chorus, the first time even clapping their hands (unfortunately, we cannot know whether it was repeated with different audiences, because of the editing). A group of sung verses follows, which sums up a second time the girl’s ordeal forcefully, each sung verse alternated by the refrain sung by the women’s chorus. A fourth part of recited verses, interrupted only by the sung question “Where did we get this practice?”, concludes abruptly, with performative force: “If you find someone doing it, advise her not to do it”. Through recited verse and

song, that is through the formalization of language typical of rituals, which we will deal with later, Habiba has created a space which, if it cannot be properly called “liminal”, is at least “liminoid” in its characteristics.

Two are the main arguments against infibulation dealt with by the performer: health and religion. Using the very strong metaphor of syphilis for clitoris, that is one of the traditional arguments in favour of the operation, Habiba counterattacks mentioning tetanus, to which she adds the other painful consequences during menstruation, urination, sexual intercourse and parturition. Yet, the religious argument is even stronger: the child becomes the kid or the lamb on the butcher’s block, ready to be sacrificed. In Somali culture listeners enjoy poetry not only for the message, but also for the way it is encoded (Orwin 2001, Jama 1994), while poetic license provides the socially marginal with a powerful tool to reclaim their honour and challenge existing power structure. This is such a case, where the sacrificed animal and the child are both associated and opposed symbolically: on the one hand, they are opposed because the former has its throat slit open, the latter has her genitals slit to be closed, as in the very gory, but detailed descriptions by de Villeneuve (1937) and Lantier (1972). On the other hand, also the girl will be slit open: “Infibulation replaces the vulva with an almost solid wall of flesh that joins the thighs from the pubis nearly to the anus, with the exception of a small orifice at the inferior portion of the vulva. [...] No matter how virile the husband, consummation of the marriage is nearly impossible because of the surgically created barrier. Therefore, in most marriages, the husband or one his female relatives will enlarge the vaginal opening with a small knife so that sexual intercourse can take place. It is the responsibility of the husband’s female relatives to examine the bride a few weeks after the marriage, and if necessary, to enlarge the vaginal opening to permit intercourse. The enlargement made when the marriage is consummated is too small to allow normal vaginal delivery. Therefore, at the time of childbirth, the infibulation must again be opened, and this time opened widely. In the villages, the grandmother, who functions as midwife, passes a small knife between the head and the inner wall of the infibulation, completely separating the labia. As soon as delivery takes place, the infibula-

tion must be restored, using thorns or simple sutures to hold the tissues together. Once again, the legs are tied together to promote healing. With each subsequent delivery the entire process must be repeated” (Pieters and Lowenfels 1977:730). Another pastoral people, those of the classic Greek myths and tragedies did not miss the symbolic relationship between female throat and genitals (Loroux 1985).

Slitting the throat of an animal in the prescribed way (*udhya*, Arabic) is correct, because it conforms to the religious texts, but female circumcision is not. “It’s a sin”, Habiba immediately points out. “The child girl is like an animal to be butchered. The sacred books don’t order to do it. Neither Christianity nor Islam”.<sup>7</sup> Mothers, who should conform to tradition, on the contrary, are those to blame. Mothers are guilty of putting their girl children’s lives at risk. Another layer of symbolic meaning also lies in the relationship between girls and sacrificed animals: at the Festival of Sacrifice (*Eid al-Adha*, *Ciidwayneey* in the Somali language) after God tested Ibrahim’s faith, an animal has its throat slit, not a human being. Hence, the sacrifice of the girls should not occur, according to the sacred texts. This is the theological argument Habiba supports, which puts modern interpretations of Islamic law against customary law and states the former superior. Actually, in Ayuub and other villages women have experimented with the Gudnin Usub, the New Rite of substitution of infibulation with a symbolic feast. Habiba stresses her words and song by means of sweeping arm movements, which ideally connect the audience with the girl in the poster, and by a hint of swaying dance steps.

In his discussion on the “language” of traditional authority, Maurice Bloch (1989:19-45) remarks that formal speech making, intoning spells, and singing are but different steps in the same process of transformation from secular discursive language. The same linguistic modification occurs in religious as well as political oratory: “in a highly formalized or ritualized political situation there seems no way whereby authority can be challenged except by a total refusal [of all political conventions][...] The ceremonial trappings of a highly formalized situation seems to *catch* the actors so that they are unable to resist the demands made on them” (Bloch 1989:24, original italics). Formalized language, that is the

language of traditional authority, is *impo-  
verished* language, a kind of restricted  
code, according to Bloch (1989:28), who  
also notes that in formalized speech the  
features of articulation “have been rende-  
red arthritic, and so the possible answers  
are dramatically reduced perhaps to  
one.” The propositional meaning poten-  
tial of language is lost by formalization,  
but speech acquires an illocutionary or  
performative force. Intoning a poem is  
but a further move in the process of for-  
malization of speech, which is very close  
to a third linguistic manifestation at the  
end of a continuum, song. “Song is, there-  
fore, nothing but the end of the process  
of transformation from ordinary language  
which began with formalization”  
(Bloch 1989:35). Singing a song invol-  
ves an almost total lack of creativity  
(although it does not completely rule it  
out). Yet, the fact remains that the propo-  
sitional force of all songs is less than that  
of spoken words in an ordinary context,  
especially when songs are sung by  
groups of people in unison, which charac-  
terizes so much of ritual. In a song,  
however, the illocutionary or performative  
force is at its most, because, as Bosch  
(1989:37, original italics) puts it, “*You  
cannot argue with a song.*” As with spee-  
ch, the formalization of body move-  
ments implies ever-growing control of  
sequences of movement, and when this  
has occurred completely, we have dance  
(Bloch 1989:38).

As a matter of fact, Habiba's performan-  
ce created a ritualized, non-ordinary  
space in the school tent by means of the  
progression of formalization of speech  
through poetry and song as well as a hint  
of dance. The formalization of language  
creates a quasi-ritual space, where the  
propositional meaning of the speech is  
weak, and its performative force is  
strong. Habiba actually does not put for-  
ward a line of argument, but creates a  
quasi-ritual con-text, where the pre-text  
is represented by the poster. She elicits a  
typical response from the female audien-  
ce by means of the progressive formaliza-  
tion of her speech and repetition. As  
Bosch (1989:42) points out, units in  
ritual do not follow each other logically,  
but sequentially. A frozen statement can-  
not be expanded, it can only be made  
again and again, and by means of repeti-  
tion, it becomes understandable. More-  
over, formalization not only removes  
what is being said from a particular  
time and a particular place, but it has  
also removed from the actual speaker, and it

becomes a source of traditional authority.  
The Turnerian breach at the beginning of  
the performance is highlighted by the cri-  
sis described in the first verses intoned  
by Habiba, a tradition which is contested  
and felt as harmful by more and more  
people. The creation of a ritualized space  
through poetry and song defies argu-  
ments to the contrary. The audience is  
challenged through well-known, tradition-  
al cultural forms. The formalized spee-  
ch leaves only a yes/no option, that is  
either utter acceptance or refusal. The  
female audience replies to the challeng-  
ing refrain song by repeating it and  
clapping their hands as well (at least in  
clip one). Each verse in the third part of  
the performance is sung by Habiba and  
welcomed by the audience/chorus repea-  
ting the refrain song, *because they can-  
not argue with a song.* They can only  
accept it or not. Hence, the redressive  
action phase starts going back to the into-  
nation of the poem, which reintegrates  
the participants into the community reas-  
suring them that, if they refuse infibula-  
tion, they conform to both the sacred  
texts and science.

### Conclusion

Two autobiographies by Somali women  
(Barnes and Boddy 1994, Dirie and  
Miller 1999) have shown that circumci-  
sion does not protect women from sexual  
abuse. This is even truer in the context of  
decades of civil war. Moreover, Somali  
infibulated women are almost twice as  
likely to have lower fertility and more  
than twice to be divorced. Hence the vic-  
tims are blamed for the consequences of  
this practice, which is justified as making  
girls marriageable and safeguarding their  
fertility (Ahmed 2006). Among many  
difficulties, however, people is beginning  
to question the wisdom of this practice.  
The experiments with the *Sunna Gudnin*  
Project, as well as later forms of attenua-  
tion of female circumcision, such as the  
*Gudnin Usub* (New Rite) promoted by  
Mana Sultan Abdurahman and her colla-  
borators, have met a good success in  
Ayuub and other villages in the area of  
Merka. The DVD shows that, in order to  
succeed in attenuating, or even eradica-  
ting FGM, it is extremely important that  
the intervention is performed according  
to the socio-cultural norms of the popula-  
tion involved. Poetry remains a preferred  
medium for the communication of sensi-  
tive social messages in Somalia, while  
poetic license allows people to address  
issue that may cause embarrassment

when discussed in ordinary conversation.  
Habiba's performance, albeit constructed  
in the edited videotape, accords with  
Somali cultural norms; in this context,  
however, the contribution of a number of  
reformist *shaykhs* cannot be underesti-  
mated. The DVD, moreover, shows that  
Mana found valid collaborators and fol-  
lowers to continue her work, and, in  
addition, that they had gone a step further  
*Gudnin Usub*, possibly following today's  
trend which has mostly abandoned any  
ritual during the operation, where it exi-  
sted, all over the area practising FGM  
(Moen 2008). This step forward, beyond  
*Gudnin Usub*, is bolder and points to the  
prevention of FGM: the women in the  
audience seem to accept this proposal,  
although whether they will be able to  
carry it out is to be seen.

The success of Mana's work notwithstand-  
ing, any attempt to export the format of  
the DVD to other communities, in  
Somalia or elsewhere, should be wei-  
ghted against the cultural prejudices it  
has to overcome in a different context.  
The status of Mana, as the daughter of a  
legendary sultan's first wife, and hence  
her social and political prestige coming  
from her pedigree as well as her own  
political action, was in fact undermined  
by the low social standing of Mana as a  
woman from Merka, an Arabized town  
in the Lower Shebelli area of southern  
Somalia. A video, which in 1999-2001  
presented the alternative *Sunna Gudnin*  
ritual (Grassivaro Gallo et al. 2001) pro-  
moted by Mana in places as different as  
a number of universities and conferences,  
was severely disparaged by Somali vie-  
wers, even before discussing the content  
of the project, on the basis that, Mana  
belonged to a low status group, members  
of the that caste collectively dubbed  
*habasho*. The Somalis in the audience  
could not give credit to a woman who  
belonged to a people of “slaves”  
(Grassivaro Gallo et al. 2003, Grassivaro  
Gallo 2008).

The intervention towards the eradication  
of infibulation and other types of FGM  
must be entrenched within the culture of  
the people practising it. Moreover, the  
different strategies such as alternative  
rites, attenuation initiatives, and religious  
as well as health arguments must be devi-  
sed from within the communities invol-  
ved. But the experience of the video tape  
presented from 1999 to 2001 has shown  
that diaspora communities are even more  
difficult to deal with, since they in gene-  
ral tend to cling together and reproduce

even tradition which in their homelands may be fading away. In the case of stratified, caste-like, xenophobic societies such as the Somalis, the messenger is as important as, if not more than, the message: thus it has to enjoy a prestigious social standing to be influential and to promote that virtuous memplex, that is "a cluster of related and interconnecting cultural units that are transmitted by imitation (memes), as well as language" (Young 2006:1), which may lead to the prevention and utter eradication of FGM. It is possible that the editors of the videotape from which the DVD was made, were trying to construct a tool which could be used in different contexts, relying on the prestige of a performer such as Habiba. Unfortunately we currently cannot say whether Habiba, as an obvious source of traditional authority because of her qualities as a performer and a poet, has been effective outside her socio-political environment, due to the lack of information on her. Let's hope, however, that many other Somali women will follow Mana's and her collaborators' examples.

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#### Notes

1. Religious functionaries or members of religious brotherhoods, or of a hereditary lineage of religious figures, which hold sway over the communities; the Arabic term *shaykh* is sometimes used.
2. All Somalis trace their origin to two brothers, Samaal and Saab, said to have been members of the Arabian tribe of Quraysh, to which the Prophet belonged. The descendants of these two brothers constitute six clan families or tribes.
3. They speak a group of Somali dialects (Coastal Somali or Af-Maay), which has recently been classified as a separate language, so they have been to some extent isolated from the mainstream Somalis.
4. First, classical poetry (*gabay*), which deals with politics and serious issues such as interclan relations, consists of texts composed in private and memorized verbatim for public performance. Second, work poetry (*hees*), which is specific to particular tasks such as herding camels or churning milk. Third, recreational or dance poetry (*cayaar*), composed and recited simultaneously.
5. Since the 1940s, the introduction of radio and audio cassettes has contributed incalculably to the popularity and dissemination of poetry, which until then had travelled solely on the nomad's tongue. Today, from Mogadishu to the inner cities of London and Toronto, Somali shops offer a wide assortment of cassettes and CDs, adorned with images of the latest stars. The poetic forms of expression allotted to women are the *buraambur*, which is the highest of women's literary genres, the *hobeeyo* or lullaby, the *hoyal* or work song, and the *sitaat* or religious song.
6. Liminality inverts the reality external to the ritual situation in order to produce alternatives for the world of everyday. This frequently gives an impression of chaos for the participants in the ritual. Acts are possible or sometimes even ordained which are prohibited in normal day to day living.
7. Contrary to the facile correlation of Islam and female circumcision, extensive ethnographic studies and demographic reports have demonstrated that people across religious affiliations share the notion that female circumcision is an act of cleanliness and self control.