

**Launch of the Innocenti Digest No. 12,
“Changing a Harmful Social Convention: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting”**

**LOCAL RELIGIOUS LEADER IN SUDAN HELPS CHANGE OFFICIAL
AND COMMUNITY VIEWS OF FGM/C**

In Sudan, a consortium of civil society groups, government offices and UN agencies is making communities aware that FGM/C is not an Islamic practice and that there are serious health consequences of the practice. Some local religious leaders are now questioning the deeply-held convictions about FGM/C in their communities, and are urging other leaders to openly support an end to the practice. Here, Sheikh Ali Hashim al Siraj, Director of the Population Enlightenment Programme in the Ministry of Guidance and Endowments, explains his reasons for opposing FGM/C.

“I was teaching Islamic religion and *Fiqh* to villagers in the summer of 1985. It was one of the remote villages of the Northern Rural Council of Omdurman, one of Sudan’s major cities.

As I was discharging my duties, I heard loud cries and wailing coming from a hut. We abandoned our lesson and rushed to the direction of the noise. It was the hut of Sheikh Hajj al Basher, a respectable, good-hearted man who was married to a woman by the name of Zainab. Four years after their marriage, Allah had granted them a baby girl, whom they named Amna. Amna brought security, tranquility and happiness to their life.



Sheikh Ali Hashin Al Siraj with his nieces UNICEF/2005/Nur El Din

When the girl was eight years old, Zainab convinced her husband that Amna should undergo female genital mutilation as it was a known custom and would be a purification. They believed it was in line with their religious dictates.

The midwife came carrying her “black box.” Amna regarded her parents with apprehension. Then there was the noise of signing and of jubilation as everyone examined the future bride, the one with a pious family and good ancestry. In the midst of the noisy crowd, the midwife proceeded with the cutting despite the cries and wailing of the small girl calling on her mother to rescue her. ‘Please mother, rescue me please!’ And then calling on her father, ‘Please father, rescue me!’ Tears of sad happiness rolled from the eyes of the mother, hoping to see her only daughter a bride.

All of a sudden the girl fell silent. There were no cries ...no wailing... the mother called her daughter ‘Amna, Amna, talk to me,’ but Amna did not respond. She was dead and never became a bride because of this harmful custom. She went to the hereafter because of the circumcision and with her, all hopes of the family seeing her a happy bride died away.

Amna’s body was taken to the cemetery in a huge procession. Hajj al Basher followed the body calling on his daughter, ‘Forgive me, my daughter.’ His sobs broke our hearts.

Amna’s story spread throughout the neighboring villages. And during the mourning days the villagers who came to offer their condolences asked me, being their sheikh and their teacher, about the view of Islam. Did this practice belong to our religion in any way?

This question and the story I witnessed made me do my best to try to find out the origin and the reference for this practice. I searched for a long time in the Islamic texts and I have come to this conclusion: this practice has nothing to do with the Islamic religion. It was a practice that came into being in the Horn of Africa before Islam arrived and people have stuck to it since that time.

The story of Amna was an impetus for me to dig deep in the *fiqh* (Islamic jurisdiction books) and into the sayings of the Prophet so as to come out with a ruling on this practice. I even searched in other religions and could not find a reference to FGM/C in any of the divine religions.

In 1992, the government began to focus on some harmful practices, in particular FGM/C. A special programme was established in the Primary Health Care Department in the Ministry of Health. I was selected as a member of the steering committee to that programme.

The first workshop was a roundtable on girls' circumcision from the viewpoints of language, religion, history and law. The venue was Sharja Hall at the University of Khartoum. It had wide participation from scholars and *Ulema* in the country. The linguists were led by the late professor Abdullah Al Tayeb, a renowned scholar.

There were gynecologists, psychiatrists and historians. Fate made it that I was asked to present a paper on any religious basis for FGM/C. I came up with uncontested proofs about the falsehood of the practice and showed that it has no relationship whatsoever with Islam. The paper was greatly appreciated by the scholars and the participants at that time.

Later, Professor Abdullah Tayeb asked me to write a book that would be a guideline for researchers on the roots of the practice and the role of religion. Seven years later, thanks to Allah, the book was printed, the first of its kind in the Sudan, the Arab world and the Islamic world. It is titled, *Circumcision: Killing girls alive*. The book was published in 2002 with support from UNICEF in Sudan. It answers many questions and addresses the legality of the so-called Islamic circumcision or the circumcision of girls.

For 20 years, I have been working to end the practice of Female Genital Cutting in the Sudan. Yes, we have made some progress in de-linking this practice with Islam. But so many parents in thousands of communities still put their girls through this agony. It hurts the girls and their future husbands and children. With more attention being given to ending FGM/C globally, maybe 2006 will see a dramatic fall here in the Sudan. Truly, we can end the practice in less than a generation if at all levels, from top Government official to village leaders and midwives, we say 'no' once and for all."

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