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Purity/impurity in Islam:
Shifting hierarchies between religious and secular attitudes in the case of female genital mutilation/cutting (khifad) in Egypt

Intersections. EEJSP
12(1): 91–107. (2026)
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v12i1.1401
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

This study delves into the topic of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), referred to as khifador khitan al-banat in Arabic, from a specific perspective. It uses FGM/C as a case study to explore changes in attitudes towards science and the well-being of women in contemporary Sunni Muslim religious law. From a Western perspective, FGM/C is commonly viewed as a practice that reinforces and perpetuates entrenched patriarchal and hierarchical structures within Islam. Traditional Islamic views often associate it with concepts of sacred ritual purity. Nevertheless, while the practice of khifad remains prevalent in Egypt, the surrounding debate illustrates the shift between 'religious and secular' trends within Sunni Muslim law, where significant changes can be observed in the direction of rationalization. The latest trend may offer hope in the fight against FGM/C. Methodology: Qualitative content analysis of 47 related Arabic fatwas from different digital fatwa portals.

Keywords: *Islam, modernization, changing social values, religious law, FGM/C*

1 Introduction

The issue of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) sparks lively debate in Egypt nowadays, revolving around distinguishing this practice from sacred tradition and the reinterpretation of religious law to make possible the abandonment of FGM/C without violating the principle of ritual purity. 'There is no evidence in Islamic law that necessitates *khitan al-banat*,[1] nor is it part of the Prophetic tradition, nor an honorable act' –

as the Egyptian branch of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) summarizes the religious law opinion that bans the custom (al-Al-Awa, 2006, p. 10). However, this position is just one of several conflicting narratives. Despite the prohibitive fatwas, the social practice of FGM/C is still widespread, as rival narratives have emerged and strengthened its legitimacy. To understand the social embeddedness of different narratives and their impact on practice, it is important to briefly review some key elements of the relationship between Arab modernization and classical religious law. It is also essential to highlight Egypt's influence – and the impact of the formulated narratives – on European and global Sunni Muslim diasporas.

[1] "Khitan al-banat" is used here as a synonym for FGM/C (for terminology, see below).

In the nineteenth century, the presence of European states in the Middle East and North Africa highlighted the need for coordination between traditional systems and European modernity. While territorial states alienated traditional society, colonizers acknowledged the importance of integrating conventional institutions into governing practices, including religious authority. The institutionalization of Al-Azhar in Egypt is a core example of this process.

Al-Azhar Mosque is the leading authority on religious law and scholarship, representing State Islam in Egypt and influencing government decisions through its fatwa office (Dar al-Ifta). It actively combats extremism and opposes global political Islam[2]; however, institutionalized state Islam is just one among many actors that influence current narratives.

In Sunni Islam, the opinions of classical religious intellectuals (*ulema' and fuqaha'*) have always been influential in shaping values and social norms. Their legal opinions, which have served as recommended moral guidelines, are not binding; however, they have always been significant in shaping values. These opinions are the fatwas – 'non-binding Islamic Sharia rules' (Salhein, 2018, p. 1).

Sunni Islam did not develop a hierarchically organized church, and specific differences and distinctions have been recorded in religious legal opinions. The four historical schools of religious law (*Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki,* and *Shaf'ii*) also preserve their divisions. Historically, customs were tied to territory, and community members practiced the customs followed by their community as 'Islamic rule'.[3] In modern times, the diversity of opinions has become even more complex.[4] According to individual perceptions, members select among muftis based on their preferences. A new trend, the digital fatwa, has emerged, where State authorities and independent 'influencer' muftis equally share their opinions – an era of 'fatwa-shopping' (Salhein, 2018, p. 1) has begun.

The spread of neo-conservative interpretations via digital fatwas highlights the complex historical ties between Islam and innovation. Throughout Islamic history, views on innovation have oscillated between 'practical innovation' and 'heresy,' with progressivism thriving in prosperous times and conservatism emerging in crises. In the eighth century, al-Shaf'ii, the founder of the madhab, asserted that 'religious ideas must align with practical life' (Goldziher, 1981, p. 215), thus supporting beneficial innovations while rejecting harmful ones. Modern innovations challenge traditional beliefs by affirming the validity of secular science.

The study hypothesizes that *khifad* exemplifies a shift between religious and secular attitudes within Sunni Muslim law in Egypt. While the practice remains prevalent in Egypt, significant changes are evident, including a new rationalization within religious law and the growing recognition of secular sciences.

1.1. The relevance of Egypt

In Egypt, the prevalence of female genital mutilation/cutting is estimated at over 80 per cent in 2023 despite government and religious prohibitions (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2023).

[2] Since the 1990s, Azhar has been actively shaping public opinion but has been criticized for bias toward the state and is challenged by the opposing political Islam (Barraclough, 1998; Brown, 2011).

[3] Asad (2009) describes the phenomenon as discursive traditions.

[4] Sociological (Barakat, 1993; Gellner, 1995) and anthropological (Asad, 2009; Tapper, 1995) literature analyzes the topic.

Al-Azhar is a prominent institution of Sunni Islam located in Egypt, has a significant impact on Egyptian government decisions, and makes efforts to combat extremism globally. The International Conference of Islamic Scholars, held at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, resulted in a fatwa (Gomaa, 2006) banning FGM/C, which was followed by stricter penalties[5] in the Egyptian Penal Code in 2008 and 2016.

The Muslim Brotherhood, which originated in Egypt, articulates the strongest narrative that challenges Al-Azhar. The Muslim Brotherhood covers a diverse scope of ideas and activities, from fundamentalist political Islam to appeals to local opponents, and promotes its Islamic interpretation globally. A prominent Egyptian preacher, Yusuf Qaradawi (1926–2022), was a strong 'influencer mufti' known for his moderate views within the Muslim Brotherhood. He had a profound impact on European and global discourse on various issues, including FGM/C, as described below.

All narratives related to FGM are closely tied to Egypt and significantly influence both local and global discourses.

2 Methodology

2.1. Digital fatwas as primary sources

The sample presented here was selected by filtering different digital fatwa portals according to specific criteria: (1) encompassing three categories of religious opinions: (a) Institutional state Islam, (b) Non-state Islamist reformist with a global impact; and (c) Hybrid portals mixing state Islamic and non-state elements; (2) possessing both regional and international significance; and (3) playing a significant role in shaping opinions. The following sources were chosen:

1.) Al-Azhar and its Institutional Fatwa Office, Dar al-Ifta (dar-alifta.org), representing the official position of Egypt, supported by state religious law.

2) Non-state Islamic reformist portals, not affiliated with any particular territory, which are often run by civil society organizations. These efforts aim to expand their audience and significantly influence the discourse. In this research, I have chosen to focus on the positions of two such influential opinion leaders:

a) Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926–2022), who preached a moderate form of fundamentalism and was associated with the Qatari branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. He aimed to combat 'misinterpretations' and significantly influenced the Qatari narrative and the concept of minority Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh al-aqalliya) in Europe (Wollner, 2021).

b) Muhammad Saaleh al-Munajjid (1960-), who established the IslamQA portal in 1996. The site advocates for Salafi-fundamentalist reformist views associated with the radical branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is the most popular site of its kind. Non-governmental Salafism poses a strong ideological challenge to the official Saudi state narrative, which is why the Saudi state has banned IslamQA. 3) Hybrid sources, which merge state and non-state aspects of religious authority, like *Islamweb.* The portal claims to provide balanced and moderate views free from bias and extremism. The hybrid portal focuses on both the in-

[5] Punishment for FGM/C under Article 242a (2016) of the Penal Code was tightened: 1) it was changed from a 'crime of desperation' [misdemeanor] to a 'crime' [felony], 2) criminal liability was extended, and 3) it can no longer be settled by agreement. The penalty for performing FGM/C was increased to five to seven years' imprisonment. In addition, persons who request the procedure or escort the victim to the perpetrator may be punished by one to three years' imprisonment. If death results, the punishment is 15 years. Source: Dar el-Ifta'-Sauqi 5832, 6711, 4678/ 14888. (2018:19)

stitutional state's role in Islam and non-state activities, as well as Islamic proselytism (d*a'wa*).

2.2. Methodology of qualitative content analysis of fatwas

The guidance of Sántha (2022) was used to establish the research protocol, profile matrix, and code scheme. For coding, a priori open coding, axial coding, and occasionally in vivo coding were applied, and MAXQDA software was utilized (2022). The time interval of the studied fatwas is from 1998 to 2022. Fatwas were filtered for the keywords and categories *'khifad,' 'khitan al-banat,' 'khitan al-untha,' 'khitan al-nisa,'* and *'khitan al-mara'*. In reviewing the exact number of hits, the most relevant fatwas were added to the sample. When the text no longer generated new codes, or when codes referred to each other, we considered the sample saturated.

Forty-seven fatwas were selected from various sources after filtering out those that did not thoroughly discuss female circumcision. The fatwa selection criteria are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of Fatwas

Khifad fatwas	**islam QA**	**islamweb.net**	**Qaradawi**	**Azhar**	**Target**	**All**
Arab	**12**	**20**	**4**	**8**	**3**	**47**
Further hits on keywords						
khitan al-banat	72	23	3	78	0	176
khitan al-nisa	74	33	3	600	0	710
khitan al-inath	28	18	7	49	0	102
khitan al-mara	70	32	6	600	0	708

Source. islamqa.info, islamweb.net, qaradawi.net, dar-alifta.org, target-nehberg.de (2024)

2.3. Terminology

The World Health Organization (WHO) uses the term 'female genital mutilation' (FGM), while other groups prefer 'cutting' to minimize stigmatization. 'The practice was known as "female circumcision" till the 1980s. In the 1970s, the term Female Genital Mutilation was coined by an Australian-American feminist, Hosken. The WHO recommended the use of it in 1991' (Mukabi et al., 2022, p. 1985). The term 'female circumcision' is avoided in Western human rights discourse due to its anatomical inaccuracy. However, a brief review of the English-language sections of the examined Arabic fatwas proves that the term 'FGM/C' is almost absent. It is mentioned only by Al-Azhar, which summarizes its position to international organizations.

In Arabic texts, the most common term is 'circumcision of girls' (*khitan al-banat*). The exact term *khitan* generally means 'male circumcision', but in fatwas, it is usually used to refer to the female version as well.

Another Arabic term, *khifad,* appears in fatwas and translates to 'reduction or appeasement.' According to Lane's Arabic Lexicon (1863), it can also mean 'to make oneself noble, to make life easier.' The IslamQA9412 (2022) fatwa distinguishes between males and females using this sentence. 'Circumcise the boy (ghulam) with khitan and calm the (slave) girl (jariyya) with khifad.' The term *khifad* appears eighteen times in the 47 fatwas that were examined. At the same time, feminine terms for

circumcision, like 'circumcision of girls, – females, – women (khitan al-banat, -al-inath, -mara)' appeared more than two hundred times and were also used by respondents in my primary empirical interviews. Based on the analyzed samples, we can state that the expression 'female circumcision' is still vivid in Arabic terminology.

In the JSTOR database, the term 'Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting' returned 1840 hits, 'FGM' 3439, and 'Female Circumcision' 13,217 hits, as of 2025.07.21. Despite the criticisms of the term 'female circumcision', I also use it for the above reasons.

3 The social practice of FGM/C in Egypt

The practice of FGM is widespread in the Sahel belt and the Nile Valley, where it is common among Muslims, and still occurs in some Christian and Animist communities.[6] Notable studies claim that FGM/C is more strongly linked to ethnic traditions than religion (Farina & Ortensi, 2014; Knight, 2001; Mackie, 1996).

Mukabi et al. (2022, p. 1985) argue that although FGM/C is often embedded in Islamic practice, it has pre-Islamic origins, and it is wrong to interpret it as an 'Islamic custom.'

UN reports (2008, 2018, 2023) describe three main types of FGM/C. Type I: partial or complete excision of the clitoris. Type II: excision of the clitoris and labia minora, with or without removal of the labia majora. Type III: infibulation, removal of the labia majora, narrowing and suturing of the vaginal opening (Mukabi et al., 2022). In urban Egypt, Type I, known as *khitan al-Sunna*, is most common, but other types are also reported.

The typology of FGM/C raises many questions, which I shall discuss in detail in the next chapter.

FGM/C is most commonly performed in Egypt at around the age of seven, most often by female relatives. Since the practice affects children, UNICEF and UNFPA are cooperating to combat it through the Joint Program on FGM/C.

FGM has its roots in pre-Islamic antiquity. There is no evidence for infibulation, but it has been established that some form of female circumcision was practiced in ancient Egypt. Mackie (2000) and Knight (2001) trace the practice's origin to the Kushite-Meroite civilization, which existed in Upper Egypt and historical Nubia between 6 BC and 4 AD. In the Kushite region, both later religions, Christianity and Islam, incorporated local customs and were transmitted as part of religious traditions. Islam integrated FGM/C into the Shafi'i ritual,[7] according to Goldziher (1981).

A wealth of literature has been produced in support of international campaigns (END FGM/C, Joint Program on FGM/C). Mackie (1996, 2000) employs game theory to analyze the feasibility of eliminating the custom and offers an action plan based on game theory models. Khafagi (2001) writes about breaking cultural taboos: 'Research in Egypt shows that the practice persists because of a belief that circumcision will moderate female sexuality, assure a girl's marriageability and that it is sanctioned by religion' (Khafagi, 2001). She refers to the Demographic Health Survey from 1995 and states that 88 per cent of mothers would prefer FGM/C for their daughters, and references a national survey (1999), which mentions an 86 per cent prevalence rate among girls aged 13–19.

[6] Jocelyn Murray (1976) presents a Kenyan Christian community where FGM III (infibulation) is performed
[7] The Sunni school of religious law, founded by Mohamed al-Shafi'i in the eighth century.

Riegg (2009) explores the relationship between Muslim family law, marriage customs, and clitoridectomy. This study examines the economic risks associated with marriage and divorce laws within the framework of rational choice theory. Grande (2010) proposes a rethinking of the critical issues raised by the tension between normative human rights and multiculturalism. Farina and Ortensi (2014) investigated the transmission of tradition from mother to daughter. Mukabi et al. (2022) analyzed the myths and misconceptions that perpetuate customs.

International organizations are making significant efforts to end FGM/C. Global attention to the issue increased due to Arab feminism, which addressed taboo topics (Moghadam, 2004; Tzoreff, 2014) The issue of clitoridectomy was raised at the 1980 UN conference in Copenhagen by Nawal as-Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist activist, prompting UNICEF to add it to its agenda (El Saadawi, 1980). UN Women supports a 2010–2030 Action Plan, under the umbrella of the Sustainable Development Goals, to end FGM by 2030 and address global gender inequalities by funding various reports and initiatives (Carter, 2020).

Intergovernmental organizations such as UNFPA-UNICEF (2017–2020) and NGO-based campaigns like END FGM EU network 2020 are working together to combat FGM/C while recognizing the importance of religious law.

The Matanda report (2022) analyzes 115 peer-reviewed articles on FGM/C prevention from 2008 to 2020, discussing the successes and challenges, and states among its findings that 'health education and community dialogues with parents and religious leaders can change attitudes towards FGM' (Matanda, 2022, p. 17).

A German NGO called TARGET achieved a significant milestone by getting Al-Azhar to organize an International Conference of Islamic Scholars in Cairo. The conference resulted in Al-Azhar issuing a fatwa in 2006 banning the practice.

Despite these achievements, the practice remains prevalent in Egypt today. The Joint Program on FGM/C (UNFPA-UNICEF) publishes reports of longitudinal research (2008, 2018, 2021, 2023) and provides detailed documentation. Annual reports indicate a prevalence rate of over 97 per cent in Egypt in 2021 and above 80 per cent in 2023.[8] The Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS, 2015) also provides detailed statistics, indicating its continued practice among girls aged 15-19, 79 per cent among those aged 15-49, 87 per cent among those aged 45-49, and 97 per cent among women aged 45-49. The Egyptian Family Health Survey (2022) found a prevalence rate of 86 per cent.

My small-scale primary field research in Cairo (2022) complements this study and supports the observations of current practice. It was limited to obtaining primary data from 33 female informants about whether they had undergone FGM/C or whether their small daughters would be subjected to it.[9] Of 33 informants, 9 agreed to tell their whole story (Wollner, 2024). The sample findings are consistent with those of representative survey data, indicating the prevalence of the custom (see the sociometric matrix in Table 2). In the present study, 27 out of 30 participants reported undergoing FGM/C; 14 respondents were between 20 and 35 years old,[10] 21 of 30 live in Subra (a middle-class neighborhood in Cairo), and the rest live in other parts of Cairo or

[8] The Joint Program Report (2023) states that the prevalence rate in Egypt is above 80 per cent, and approx. 20 per cent of women and 30 per cent of men still support FGM/C.

[9] Thirty respondents were adults; data on three children come from their mothers.

[10] The average age of the informants is 33.7 years; the youngest was 5 years old (3 people were younger than 18 years old), and the oldest was 82 years old. Children were not directly involved; their mothers were asked about their preference for FGM.

abroad. Twenty-one participants are married, and 29 wear a headscarf (*hijab*). Twenty participants have children; among mothers, the average number of children is 3.1.

The practice was widespread in the group and was not influenced by economic factors or education.[11] Some oppose it, but others support it and want it to continue. The state ban is leading to a decline in the practice, and signs of change are visible, but the internal motivations for its elimination remain varied.

Table 2 Sociometric Matrix of the Cairo Field Research (2022)

Variable	Category	Number of people	Mean
Prevalence of FGM	Yes	27	**81.8%**
Age	Age mean	33	33.7 years
Age group	20-35 years	14	42.4%
Education	High School	20	60.6%
Job	Housewife	13	39.4%
Have Children	Yes	20	60.6%
Number of Children	Mean number of children (among those who have children)	20	3.1 children
Marriage Status	Married	21	63.6%
Headscarf	wearing hijab	29	87.9%
Living Area	Shubra	21	63.6%

4 Social and ritual purity

This chapter focuses on why FGM/C is a good example of shifts in purity values in Egypt.

Before I present the central claims, I wish to highlight two critical observations:

First, *FGM/C is not generally practiced:* Where it is not practiced, it is seen as an old pre-Islamic custom that is not obligatory. However, where it is practiced, it is linked to fundamental Muslim religious law and ritual purity, and its elimination is not feasible.

Second, *all religious legal narratives reject so-called 'non-Sunnah' (not considered Islamic) practices* known as '*Pharaonic circumcision*'[12] which have pre-Islamic origins and are labeled *'ignorant' (jahil)* by all (even conservative) narratives. The debate focuses on the *'Sunnah method'*, which is believed to have its source in the prophetic tradition. It is classified as a Type 1 method: removal of the *'foreskin'* (with or without the clitoris). (There is debate in fatwas about what exactly should be removed during such procedures – only part or the whole clitoris. Even conservative fatwas do not agree on this. Progressives who want to ban the custom use this ambiguity as an argument for the ban).

Next, I examine the elements that distinguish *khifad* from other issues of ritual purity and use it as an excellent example for reviewing value shifts associated with modernity.

[11] Twenty-one of them come from the same middle-class neighborhood; 20 participants had graduated from high school.

[12] In the Western typology, this may be classified as Type 2 or 3. Mainly practiced in Sub-Saharan Africa

4.1. Khifad is related to a special case of ritual purity – to 'fitrah'

Rich literature (Simon, 2024; Gellner, 1995; Gauvian, 2005. p. 372) defines ritual purity as a 'binder of social cohesion'. The Muslim sacred law (*sharia*) involves prescribed actions in two main categories: i) religious duties of individuals to God (*'ibada*) and ii) rules of co-existence; responsibilities of members to each other (*mua'amala*). The book of ritual purity (*Kitab at-Tahara*) is presented at the beginning of the section on personal duties (*'ibada*) in hadith collections.[13] Several academic sources have analyzed the close relationship between social practices and religious law.[14] Burge (2010), Gauvain (2005), and Strathern and Stewart (2004) explore the role of Muslim ritual purity law in shaping contemporary identity. Mariam Katz (2002) summarizes the emergence, development, and consolidation of ritual purity law, presenting the three main categories of Muslim ritual purity: (1) 'Small impurities' – these refer to minor ritual pollutions (certain bodily fluids, physiological needs), which are mainly removed by performing ritual ablution before prayer (*wudu'*). (2) 'Big impurities' refers to the washing away of major impurities (defilements that require the purification of the whole body) (*ghusl*), e.g., in the case of sexual intercourse or menstruation. (3) The third category refers to things that are impure in their substance with which contact or consumption as food is prohibited, such as alcohol, pork, dog, and carrion. Katz relates the concept of impurity to *losing control* over the body (Katz, 2002, p. 15).

Among the sub-cases of personal ritual purity, one category is a prerequisite for all further ritual activity: *fitrah.* According to Qur'anic anthropology (cf. Qur'an 30:30), God created man in a pre-existing state after a contract acknowledging God's divinity. *Fitrah* can be defined as the innate inclination towards the original 'religious human nature' that God created. Following the actions described by the *fitrahs* prepares the body for further ritual purity. In religious law, *fitrahs* are covered in the chapter on ritual purity (*tahara*) and believer duties (*ibadah*), which include five purification methods, including circumcision.[15] Religious law generally views male circumcision (*khitan*) as *fitrah* and part of personal ritual purity. The female version generates debate. If female circumcision is considered similarly to male circumcision and linked to *fitrah*, it may be seen as a contributor to ritual purity, making prohibition unfeasible. But if it is separated from *fitrah*, it can be prohibited without harming the principle of ritual purity.

4.2. Khifad includes all elements of purity value – social, ritual, and even hygienic

While the male *khitan* is associated with *fitrah* and personal ritual purity, the female version combines ritual purity with social purity. It ensures a *ritually pure female body* and a *pure marital and social life*. The value of social purity (and its subcategory, female modesty) is more likely to be linked to the other branch of religious law – the rule of co-existence (*mu'ammala*). This branch includes family law, marriage customs, issues of honor, and the protection of virginity. These are often analyzed as aspects of FGM/C,

[13] Al-Ghazālī's Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn (Būlāq, 1269 AH/1853 CE) provides a classical discussion of ritual purity. Hadith collections consulted via Sunnah.com: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Nasāʾī, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah, al-Muwaṭṭaʾ, and Musnad Aḥmad (sunnah.com).

[14] The literature on Muslim society (Barakat, 1993; Gellner, 1995) analyzes the relationship between legal systems and practices from a sociological perspective. The literature on the anthropology of Islam (Asad, 2009; Tapper, 1995) interprets the different representations and social embeddedness of Islam.

[15] 1. circumcision (khitan), 2. cutting the nails (taklim al-adzfir), 3. pulling out the armpit hair (nataf al-ibt), 4. shaving the pubic hair (istihdad), and 5. trimming the mustache (qass as-sarib); Sunan an-Nasai 5044, Jami at-Tirmidhi 2756, Sunan Ibn Majah 292.

embedded in the group's traditions and customs.

4.3. The clash with Western universalism (human rights) in religious debates is significant

The clash appears in the debate about religious law, not 'outside' it between Islam and the West. Institutional state Islam in Egypt is more aligned with Western human rights values in that it rejects the analogy of *khifad* with male *khitan*, separating custom from ritual purity. In contrast, the traditionalist position emphasizes the analogy linking *khifad* to ritual purity and *fitrah*.

4.4. Significant disagreement in Sunni Muslim religious law

Differences (*ikhtilafat*) between schools of jurisprudence *have been a fundamental feature of legal interpretation* throughout Islamic history. The strength of arguments is determined by the level of consensus (*ijma'*) or differences (*ikhtilafat*) among the dominant *madhabs*. The possibility of differences is slight in cases with a high consensus rate among earlier scholars – e.g., in the Quranic cases. Variations are greater in the case of prophetic stories (*hadith*) or interpretations of analogies (*qiyas*).[16] The issue of individual interpretations (*ijtihad*) sparks debate. Historically, rites were tied to territory; in modernity, competitive narratives have emerged.

The historical Cushitic region, in the Nile Valley, is where pre-Islamic customs originated. This region historically follows the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam. The Shafi'i school considers female circumcision to be similar to male circumcision and obligatory (*wajib*)(al-Al-Awa, 2006, p. 8). Historically, the other three *madhhab*s consider *khifad* desirable (*mustahabb*) or an honorable right (*haqq muhtaram*), a privilege that allows women to participate in the Abrahamic covenant, just like men. Al-Azhar also held this position during the tenure of Grand Imam Jad el-Haqq in the 1990s (Barraclough, 1998, p. 248).

The significant changes in religious law began at the turn of the millennium. International campaigns influenced state Islam and moderate religious leaders. Scholar Yusuf Qaradawi reclassified it from desirable (*mustahabb*) to permissible (*mubah*), and Al-Azhar, the institution of state Islam under the leadership of the Grand Imam, Sayyed al-Tantawi, declared FGM to be forbidden (*haram*).

In the fatwas, we can detect a shift toward secular science; simple religious arguments are no longer sufficient to address complex issues. Actors like Al-Azhar as an institution and Qaradawi as a moderate scholar are exploring ways to harmonize them with Western values and scientific ideas. In contrast, conservative scholars like Muhammad Saaleh al-Munajjid rely on legitimizing myths.

Overall, FGM serves as an excellent case for examining the value shift in Islam through the analysis of religious legal narratives. The method employed for this research is the content analysis of fatwas.

5 Results of qualitative content analysis

The traditional structure of fatwas is question-answer. Fatwas can be categorized either by the questions they address or the answers they provide. Below, I present a typology based on answers. Three distinct narratives emerge:

[16] A religious legal interpretation technique used in similar cases.

1) The *conservative, khifad-supportive narrative,* represented by Muhammad Saaleh al-Munajjid (IslamQA) and Islamweb. This position considers *khifad* part of ritual purity and fitrah. Certain restrictions regarding the extent of cutting are conceivable, but complete prohibition is not possible according to this position.

2) A *moderate fundamentalist position*, represented by Yusuf Qaradawi: In his initial fatwas, 2006–2009, he considered *khifad* permissible (*mubah*), which is a sharia category that refers to things that are permissible but can be prohibited in justified cases. In a later fatwa in 2012, he shared Al-Azhar's position and committed to the ban.

3) A progressive narrative, represented in this case by Al-Azhar and its Grand Mufti, Ibrahim Sauqi al-Allam. This narrative prohibits this practice, distinguishes it from ritual purity and *fitrah*, and rejects the Abrahamic analogy. Al-Azhar committed to the related ban after 2006.

Across the three narratives, the answers can be organized into four key thematic 'panels'.

Panel 1 contains the religious legal argumentation:

a) Qur'anic interpretations of the Abrahamic covenant, especially the 'millet of Ibrahim' in the Qur'an 16:123

b) Questions regarding the authenticity and reliability of the prophetic traditions (hadith) attributed to Aisha, Um 'Attiya, and Umm Habiba

c) Explanations of sharia categories that classify actions as permissible (halal) or forbidden (haram) (Qaradawi, 1999). The halal category is further divided into subcategories: obligatory (wajib), recommended (mustahabb), permissible (mubah), and disliked (makruh). The shifts in these categories conceal essential aspects of values. Panel 2: Legitimizing myths and fixed beliefs that maintain customs explain the regional differences.

These texts reveal another layer of *rationalization* associated with 'European modernity.' The traditionalist position uses *myths* as system-justifying stereotypes, which rely on modernity (Jost & Banaji, 1994).

The fatwas refer to myths like 'extreme female desire,' 'oversized clitoris,' and 'differences between Western and Eastern women,' portraying them as dangers that *khifad* can prevent.

Panel 3 contains arguments regarding the immanent principles of religious law and explores the internal reasoning. The panel highlights key principles such as the *'prohibition of changing God's creation*' or the '*public interest*' (*maslaha*), which is often linked here to the interests of women.

The most significant legal principle is the *'prohibition of harm'* (*darar wa dirar*), which is closely aligned with Western human rights argumentation. This panel presents the internal principles of Muslim religious law and the pursuit of harmonization with Western values.

Panel 4, the focus of this study, analyzes the shift between religious and secular attitudes in the case of FGM/C. It illustrates how religious reasoning responds to the challenges posed by secular science. It presents a general perspective linked to the narrative of secular science and summarizes specific medical arguments about *khifad*. This panel highlights the growing recognition of secular science and the challenge traditional religious law must also address.

6 Shift between religious and secular attitudes in the case of FGM/C

The analysis shows that all arguments emphasize the importance of modern science and its increasing credibility. In cases of contradiction between science and religion, the analysis shows diverse reasoning techniques. Two main characteristics may be observed: (a) varying perspectives on the primacy of religion and science, and (b) discursive reasoning (selective rationalization). Secular scientific discoveries cannot easily undermine the legitimacy of sacred texts, but all narratives face unprecedented challenges.

6.1. Conservative response: Primacy of religion

IslamQA and Islamweb represent the conservative, pro-*khifad* narrative. Generally, fundamentalist-reformist Islam advocates for religious law '*reform*', even if they claim a more rigid re-interpretation of *sharia* on issues such as statehood and social norms. Traditional religiosity, in general matters, supports traditionalism (*taqlid*) and rejects changes or 'reformist demands.' However, concerning FGM/C, the positions are reversed. Traditional religiosity, in this case, promotes progressive change, whereas fundamentalist reformism supports the preservation of established traditions.

1) Science-Religion in general

Scientific reasoning and so-called 'medical reflections' are prevalent in conservative fatwas as well. From this perspective, secular science supports religious arguments. In cases of contradiction, religious arguments take precedence, emphasizing the authority of sacred texts. 'We are certain of its benefits and lack of harm because if it were harmful, God Almighty and His Messenger would not have legislated it. (...) It is not right to leave [the prophet's] guidance and teachings to someone else's word, even if he is a doctor, because medicine is only a science that evolves and constantly changes its perspective' (IslamQA60314, 2005). 'We all know the practice of our true religion, and there is no doubt that everything in it is good, including the health aspects. Even if we do not see its benefits today, we will surely understand them later' (Islam QA 45528, 2005). 'The opinions of doctors are not final; every day brings new inventions that should change our views' (IslamQA60314, 2005). These arguments favor adherence to traditions and the primacy of religion. Medical insights are essential, but only as long as they do not contradict sacred texts. The role of secular science is to support religious arguments.

2) Medical Benefits: Pro-FGM/C Argumentation

In conservative fatwas, the medical arguments related to male and female circumcision are often unclear; examples of this include references to secretions accumulated under the foreskin and odors, as well as arguments about urinary infections. Medical arguments in favor of the practice are mentioned in 14 of the 23 analyzed conservative fatwas. The most significant one, titled 'Medical Benefits of Girls' Circumcision' (*Fawa'id al-Tibbiyya min Khitan al-Banat*) (IQ45528, 2005), has the highest number of views (over 1 million) in the category. 'Accumulated discharge from the labia minora in the foreskin becomes rancid, has an unpleasant smell, and can lead to inflammation of the vagina or urethra (...) Circumcision reduces clitoris hypersensitivity, which can grow up to three centimeters (...), and prevents the appearance of the so-called female erection (*ana'az al-nisa'*), which is a harmful enlargement of the clitoris that causes repeated pain' (QA45528, 2005).

These medical arguments legitimize myths rather than reflect actual medical sci-

ence. Although religion prevails in these fatwas, there is an attempt to support their claims with science.

6.2. Yusuf Qaradawi: The cautious position

Qaradawi remained cautious and took no stance in 2006. He considered *khifad* permissible (*mubah*) but stated that it originates from customary law (*'urf*), not religious law (*sharia*). In his 2012 fatwa, he rejected the practice. In his opinion, the Qur'an does not justify the custom. He considers the part concerning Abraham's religion (Q16:123) proof of monotheism (*tawhid*) and, at most, justification of male circumcision. In some cases of necessity (*darura*),[17] he is willing to make concessions, even in the case of male circumcision, if the practice would deter new followers of Islam (Qaradawi 10079 (2007), Pos. 80).

Qaradawi rejects the analogy between men and women, viewing them as fundamentally different in inheritance, marriage, and testimony. He recognizes *khifad* as a right or privilege for women in some instances, allowing them to share the Abrahamic Covenant equally with men.

1) *Science-Religion in general*

In Qaradawi's argument, science is central. Even his other works, such as *Permitted and Prohibited in Islam* (1999), underpin the arguments of religious law with the results of modern science. In the case of contradictions, he advocates considering scientific arguments and carefully revising religious law: 'We may have an excuse for contradicting the scholars who came before us because their era did not give them the information our era has given us. For this reason, they stated that the fatwa evolves with the passage of time, place, and circumstances. If what we have seen had become apparent to those before us, they would have changed their opinion because they were guided by the truth wherever it led' (Qaradawi5121 (2006) Pos. 202-203).

This argument pertains to secular rationalization practices and shares similarities with Al-Azhar's argument.

2) *Medical Arguments*

In his earlier fatwas (2006, 2007), he argued in favor of the permissibility of *khifad*. He required the procedure to be carried out under supervision and specified three criteria: 1. no exaggerated procedure (only a moderate process according to the *Sunnah* would be acceptable); 2. it should be performed by a doctor; and 3. in a sterile environment. He disagreed with banning the practice from healthcare facilities, as it may be performed anyway. He reflected on the legitimization of myths (the danger of growing an oversized clitoris, extreme desire) but left it to doctors to judge. 'Some jurists – and some doctors – prefer female circumcision for fear that sexual desire arises during adolescence or puberty, and this will lead to falling into sin' (Qaradawi 5121, 2006, Pos. 211).

Qaradawi takes a cautious stance, emphasizing the importance of scientific arguments. His view is close to Al-Azhar's: that one should separate specific issues from religious law and assign them to the competence of secular science.

6.3. Al-Azhar's progressive stance

The key document supporting the Al-Azhar argument is the 2006 Conference recommendation (*Tawsiyat al-Mu'atamar*), which aligns with the Cairo Declaration on Hu-

[17] Necessity (darura) and common interest (maslaha) in Islam are explained by Jany (2018).

man Rights in Islam (CDHRI, 1990). The main principles of the Al-Azhar recommendation are: 1) Human dignity is derived from the Qur'an (17:70). 2) Female genital mutilation/cutting is an ancient pre-Islamic practice not supported by Sunna, and 3) FGM/C should be prohibited based on the Islamic principle of the prohibition of harm (*darar wa dirar*), as it is harmful to women, thus classified as *haram* in sharia. Fundamentalist reformist Islam accuses and strongly criticizes Al-Azhar's position for being biased towards Western values and foreign influence.

Dar al-Ifta' issued eight fatwas on FGM/C in the examined period. DI5832 (2021) and DI6711 (2022) deserve special attention. Al-Azhar boldly removed FGM/C from the category of *fitrah*, distinguishing it from ritual purity.

1). *Science-Religion in general*

Azhar highlights the significance of secular science in Islamic law, creating a framework for religious regulations that incorporate modern scientific findings, all rooted in the Qur'an. Although this method is not new, the challenge of integrating secular science is unprecedented.

Dar al-Ifta 6711 cites the following section of the Qur'an to underpin the relevance of experts: '[Do not follow blindly what you do not know to be true]: ears, eyes, and heart, you will be questioned about all these'[18] (Q17:36). 'Ask those who know (ahl adz-dzakri) if you do not know' (Q16:43).[19] 'None can inform you [Prophet] like the One who is all aware' (Q35:14). Sections of the Qur'an, and the concept of innovation (*bida'*), can be interpreted in various ways, as already mentioned by Goldziher: 'The concept of useful innovation (bida' hasana) allows the adoption of new institutions to be theologically justified' (Goldziher, 1981:217).

In the way these Qur'anic passages establish respect for science, we can observe the method of harmonization within institutional Islam. The Al-Azhar argument provides a lengthy philosophical introduction about *'creation,' 'command,'* and the *'primacy of the Qur'an'* through a passage referred to as *'written among the lines'* (Q4:82). This method is, on the one hand, faithful to the sacred texts, but on the other hand, it opens the door to discursivity. It expands the scope for action without permitting individual interpretation (*ijtihad*). 'Everything in the sharia follows custom, and when the custom changes, so does the rule, which introduces a renewed custom. This is not a renewal of individual effort (ijtihad), which involves imitation and the question of eligibility for ijtihad. Still, these are rules in which jurists make efforts (ijtahada fiha), and if they agree on them, we will follow them without reference to ijtihad' (DI, 6711:94, 2022).

Azhar does not deny tradition and continuity; however, in cases of significant disagreement between schools (*madhab*), it shifts from adherence to conservative ritual rules. 'The jurists of the Madhabs established that if a new custom occurs in infinite time (zaman dun zaman), then the mufti has the right to issue a fatwa appropriate to the time. Even if it conflicts with what is contained in the books of his school, the latecomers, who violated what was written in the books of those before them, did so only because the custom changed according to the changing times. They knew that those who preceded them had the same circumstances in their time; they themselves give [new] fatwa' (DI 6711:73, 2022). Al-Azhar generally creates space for new, even secular institutions while maintaining continuity and limiting individual interpreta-

[18] DI6711 (2022), Pos. 20: the fatwa cites only the second part.

[19] '[Prophet], all the messengers We sent before you were simply men to whom We had given the Revelation: you [people] can ask those who have knowledge if you do not know' (Q16:43).

tion (*ijtihad*). Al-Azhar's argument reminds us of McBain (1927)'s secular concept of a 'Living Constitution': realities must be considered when interpreting a fundamental law, focusing on its spirit rather than literal interpretations.

2.) *Medical Arguments*

The Al-Azhar jurisprudence and its outstanding performance are evident in the fact that, while it does not explicitly recognize the primacy of science over religion, it excludes questions related to science from the domain of religious law and refers them to secular science. 'The jurists have determined that it is essential to consult doctors on many jurisprudential questions concerning the human body. Thus, they based many of their decisions on current medical knowledge' (DI5832:60, 2021). DI 5832:66 (2021) fatwa lists the severe health risks of *'female circumcision'*, based on secular medical science,[20] establishes the validity of the legal principle of prohibition of harm (*darar wa dirar*), and prohibits the custom.

Questions about the female body – in Sauqi's words – must be 'returned to the temporal life (wujud) and dealt with under its domains, such as medical research, monitoring, and surveillance' (DI5832:62, 2021). Al-Azhar does not legitimize myths. It recognizes the authority of secular science and incorporates it into religious law.

7 Conclusion

Female genital mutilation/cutting, as a case study, presents an example of a still vivid pre-modern connection to the system of sacred hierarchies in Egypt. Changes in attitudes are seen in the following areas:

1. The social debate surrounding it in empirical research demonstrates the individual choice between values. The empirical study shows that although the practice remains common today, the debate over it and the diversity of opinions are also reflected in social practice.

2. In religious debates, the power and role of scientific reasoning are increasing, alongside religious legal arguments. Rationalization is occurring, consistent with a central pillar of Western modernization theory.

The novelty of this rationalization lies in its systemic, long-term, all-encompassing nature. (Historical rationalization affects individual cases.) Ritual purity designates the points of attachment to the deep layers of identity. Pure religious argumentation is no longer sufficient, even in religious argumentation. The growing credibility of secular science appears in all narratives.

3. These narratives have a significant impact not only on practices in Egypt but also on Muslim diasporas in Europe and worldwide. Egypt plays a crucial regional role, influenced by Al-Azhar. Reformist fundamentalist perspectives on ritual purity are vital in shaping responses, such as reactive identity. Even the changes in FGM can be interpreted as a case study of Egypt; this analysis offers an insightful model of change in Muslim jurisprudence more broadly. The challenges of secular science and the pressure of human rights discourse are evident in every narrative. Religious law narratives play a significant role in ending FGM/C, and the key is to separate the latter from the category of ritual purity. The investigation of *khifad* reveals a process

[20] 'Excessive pain, heavy bleeding or serious infections are short-term; long-term narrowing or blockage of the urethra, difficulty with menstrual bleeding or severe pain during marital relations, psychological and social problems, harm of difficult natural childbirth, which can lead to the death of the mother or the child' (DI 5832:66, 2021).

of internal change in Islam.

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