



# Analysis of Circumcision Invitation Cards from The Perspective of Hegemonic Masculinity Building

Sünnet Töreni Davetiyelerinin Türkiye’de Hegemonik Erkeklik İnşası Perspektifinden Analizi

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## Abstract

In Türkiye, a country where Muslims comprise the majority, circumcision is performed on male children due to traditional and religious grounds. In this article, we explored Turkish circumcision ceremonies as a rite of passage related to hegemonic masculinity. Our aim was to uncover the traditionally accepted form of masculinity and analyse how it is reproduced in feast invitations. We conducted a descriptive analysis of 64 circumcision feast invitations obtained from the websites of six printing houses in Turkey. Through coding to examine the messages on the invitation cards, we identified three main topics: traditional and religious motives, the ritual of cutting, and the transition into masculinity. The invitations delineate what it means to be “a man” in a conservative, patriarchal society. In the analysed

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invitations, masculinity was constructed based on three main characteristics. Firstly, it is a state contrary to childhood. Secondly, it is distinct from and superior to womanhood. The third characteristic is courage, often expressed in the form of militarism, emphasized as the “manly” trait. We observed that circumcision serves not only as a religious obligation but also as one of the cornerstones in the cultural construction of masculinity and a significant cultural symbol.

**Keywords:** *circumcision, invitation, hegemonic masculinity, Turkey*

## Öz

Nüfusunun büyük çoğunluğunun Müslüman olduğu Türkiye’de, dini ve geleneksel nedenlerle Müslüman erkeklerin hepsi sünnet edilmektedir. Sünnet törenleri yalnızca dini bir unsur değil geleneksel ve toplumsal hayatın da önemli ritüellerinden biridir. Özünde bir cerrahi operasyon olan sünnet eylemi, Türk toplumunda erkeklığe geçişin sembolü olarak görülür ve sünnet olan çocuğun özel kıyafetler giydiği, eğlence ve duaların yapıldığı, davetlilere ikramlarda bulunduğu ve sünnet çocuğuna hediyeler verildiği törenlerle kutlanır. Kutlamalar aracılığıyla erkeklığe geçiş diğer aile bireyleri ve topluma duyurulur. Sünnet davetiyeleri de bu ritüelin önemli unsurlarından birini oluşturur. Bu makalede, sünnet töreni ritüellerini, Türkiye’de hegemonik erkeklığın inşası ile ilişkilendirerek bir “geçiş ayini” olarak tartıştık ve sünnet töreni davetiyelerinde geleneksel erkeklik kodlarının nasıl yeniden üretildiğini analiz ettik. Türkiye’de sünnet davetiyesi basan altı matbaanın web sitelerinden seçilen 64 adet sünnet davetiyesi örneğini betimsel analiz yöntemi ile analiz ettik. Sünnet davetiyeleri, Türk toplumunda sünnet pratiğine ilişkin önemli ipuçları sunan görseller ve bir davet metni içermektedir. Çalışmada yalnızca davet metinleri betimsel analiz yöntemi kullanarak üç ana tema üzerinden analiz edilmiştir; “*geleneksel ve dini motifler*”, “*kesme ritüeli*” ve “*erkeklığe geçiş*”. İncelenen mesajlarda erkeklığın üç temel özellik üzerinden kurulduğunu gördük. Bunlar; “çocukluktan farklı bir durum” oluşu, kadınlığa zıt ve ondan daha iyi oluşu ve -genellikle militarizmle birleştirilerek- yapılan cesaret vurgusu. Erkeklik, çocukluk ve kadınlıktan farklı bir konum olarak kurulurken “yetişkinlik”le, akıl ve bilinçle özdeşleştirilmektedir. Yine bu karşıtlık üzerinden erkeklik, genellikle kadın ve çocuklara atfedilmeyen korkusuzlukla tanımlanır. Sonuç olarak sünnetin sadece dini bir gereklilik değil, hegemonik erkeklik inşasının temel taşlarından biri ve önemli bir kültürel figür olduğu görülmüştür.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** *sünnet, davetiye, hegemonik erkeklik, Türkiye*

## Introduction

Circumcision is considered one of the world’s oldest and most common surgical procedures. According to demographics and health surveys, 37-39 % of men globally are circumcised. Approximately half of the circumcisions occur in childhood and adolescence for religious and cultural reasons. Data show the male circumcision prevalence of 95-100%

for Muslim and Jewish males (Morris et al., 2016). In Turkey, where 98% of the population is Muslim, “circumcision is performed in 100% of males due to traditional structure and religious grounds” (Izgi, 2014: 4).

This research focuses on the cultural aspects of male circumcision in Turkey. This paper aims to discuss the Turkish circumcision ceremony as a rite of passage by studying ceremony invitations. It aims to reveal the traditionally accepted form of masculinity in Turkey and analyse how they are reproduced in every aspect of the circumcision rite. Invitations analysis will reveal the patterns and codes on which hegemonic masculinity is established.

The Turkish word for circumcision – *sünnet* – has two meanings: the name for the Muslim tradition shares the root *Sunnah* with terms associated with the life and words of Muhammad; secondly, it is the procedure of cutting off the prepuce (Turkish Language Institute/Türk Dil Kurumu, 2006) and circumcision is both a religious obligation and the main symbol of masculinity in Turkish society. Since circumcision in Turkey is practised mostly for traditional and cultural reasons, the medical procedure is usually assisted by a celebration (*sünnet düğünü*<sup>1</sup>).

The ceremony has significant meaning, particularly in more conservative and traditional families. Circumcision is accepted as the first milestone in the journey towards manhood; the second is military service; the third is marriage with music, beverages, and food. Because of the importance given to circumcision itself, the circumcision feast has significant meaning and reflects traditional, patriarchal motives; it is a social event that can be compared to a wedding (Şahin, Beyazova and Aktürk, 2003). The ceremony is important in the cultural construction of masculinity, and each detail -the place of ceremony, the means of transport for a circumcised boy, decoration, boy’s costume, and invitation cards-has a symbolic meaning and praises manhood and Muslim tradition (Toksoy and Taşıman, 2015).

This study uses descriptive analysis of the circumcision feast invitation cards to understand the construction of Turkish masculinity in present-day Turkey. The invitations were chosen because they emphasise the social aspect of circumcision and contain valuable information about the ceremony and the construction of Turkish masculinity more broadly. They illustrate how the traditional elements of circumcision are still practised. The study is important in terms of discovering how various elements of modern Turkish and Muslim masculinity are deeply rooted in traditional values. Ceremony invitations are a neglected area in this field of study, and this research is to broaden current knowledge on circumcision practice in Turkey.

## **1. Hegemonic masculinity, and masculinity studies in Turkey**

In contrast to the notion of sex and sex roles, gender refers rather to social structures, norms, attitudes, activities, and identity. The term depends on the notions of gender roles, socialisation, and opportunity structures (Udry, 2000). Social roles -including gender roles- are learned and naturalised primarily in early childhood. This allows the reproduction of the expected behaviour models and practices in a society. This period is a never-ending learning process involving social interaction and relationship development.

The onset of masculinity studies coincided with the emergence of the third wave of feminism and identity research and the development of gender studies as an academic discipline (Baştürk Akca and Tönel, 2011: 22). Similarly in women studies, in masculinity studies, three waves can be distinguished (Edwards, 2006). The first wave emphasised the surveillance and dominance of men by the “ideal model” of masculinity and saw masculinity as a socially constructed identity. The second wave, more critical of the sex roles theory, developed the notion of hegemonic masculinity and examined relations of power and surveillance. The third wave focuses more on representation and the differing experiences of men of different ages and attempts to reconstruct the entire notion of masculinity. To analyse the development and valuing of Turkish masculinities, this paper uses the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity, which was first introduced by Kessler et.al. (1982) and then developed and popularised by R.W. Connell (1982), Carrigan and Lee (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1985). Connell proposed the idea of hegemonic masculinity as a challenge to the traditional theory of gender roles in his book “Gender and Power” (1987). In the framework of hegemonic masculinity, masculinities and femininities are patterns of practice and are standards rather than norms. When studying the construction of gender as a cultural category, it is necessary to focus on people’s fundamental practices and behaviours rather than the “imagined ideal” or the expected attitude. Since gender identity can be represented differently in different cultures, classes, and throughout different periods, it is more suitable to speak of “masculinities, rather than “masculinity”.

Gramsci is the author who introduced the concept of hegemony to the ideology studies. He discusses hegemony through the concept of class and defines it as the dominance of one class over others. Hegemony is established through consent manufactured by the capitalist state’s ideology (1986). Connell transferred Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to the field of masculinity studies and explained hegemonic masculinity as a domination established not only over women but also over “other” masculinities. While hegemonic masculinity establishes some masculinity practices and forms as acceptable and preferable forms compared to others, it also constructs some as subaltern masculinities. Dominant values in society also create consent to conform to the dominant form of masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity, which is simultaneously a personal and collective project, is both a strategy for subordinating women and some forms of masculinity; while not all men practice it, all men from all social classes benefit from it. Hegemonic masculinity: “is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich, and socially sustained (...) constructed through difficult negotiation over a lifetime” (Donaldson, 1993: 645). While hegemonic masculinity presents itself as a normative character, it does not describe what is “normal” in the statistical sense—indeed only a minority of men attain the “honour” of this hegemonic position in relation to women and other men (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

In this context, hegemonic masculinity can also be considered a cultural construct. In a capitalist system, the “ideal models” of men shown in films, TV series, music, and other cultural texts—which are adjacent to the set of practices—represent different forms of hegemonic masculinity. Because of these models, hegemonic masculinity is flexible and changeable; unlike gender roles, it can easily respond to social changes. In later works, hegemonic

masculinity is defined more as the social domination of some types of masculinities over others (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 846).

In this research, five thoughts on hegemonic masculinity need to be emphasised:

- (1) Hegemonic masculinity is about the relational position of power both over women and men, but it is fed mostly by dominance over women and supports the social order of capitalism,
- (2) Hegemonic masculinity is naturalised by socialisation, learning models, and practices,
- (3) Hegemonic masculinity is both a process and a construct of cultural interaction,
- (4) Masculinity is a social construct, an “achievement” that is impossible to gain,
- (5) It is constructed both from features seen as negative and positive in a given society—such as homophobia, aggression, racism, courage, or rationalism.

Regarding masculinity studies in Turkey, we could say the emergence of masculinity studies in Turkey dates to the 90s. “It is difficult to theorise about hegemonic masculinity in Turkey given the colossal differences in social structure, income and education, the gap between urban and rural areas, and the different ethnicities in the country. However, the traditional family model, in which men are superior to women and children, is commonly accepted in Turkey” (Boratav, Fişek and Ziya, 2014). In this structure, relationships are defined by respect and fear, emotional distance, and men’s authority and discipline, who are protecting the home and family; however, the “formality-based connection between the father and children is seen to be decreasing and is being partly replaced by less formal emotional ties” (Boratav, Fişek and Ziya, 2014: 303).

Hegemonic masculinity can neither be assigned to young men, who are seen as “unripe”, nor to elder men who are “weak” or “finished”. Ill and disabled men are excluded from this position (Özbay, 2013). A man must be at the pinnacle of his abilities-physical strength, ability to work and save money, and sexual performance. Younger men can be seen as “strong” when they play the role of “head of the family”—for example when a woman raises children on her own and the older son “must be a leader of the house” (Renkmen, 2015: 269).

Although masculinity studies are not new in Turkish literature, it is a relatively neglected subject. In Turkish society, where the traditional values are parallel to the patriarchal structure, questioning the process of the social construction of masculinity is thought to be important academically and in terms of challenging the patriarchal patterns. It is believed that more studies are needed on reproducing hegemonic masculinity, especially in social practices. Circumcision ceremonies are also the most important rite of passage.

## **2. Circumcision as a rite of passage to manhood**

Since circumcision is widely recognized as the rite of passage from childhood to manhood, it will be considered one of the constitutive elements of Turkish masculinity, and the ritual and feast will be analysed for patterns and representations of common codes of manhood.

The term “rite of passage” was introduced by Arnold van Genepp at the beginning of the twentieth century. Van Genepp put forward the claim that human life in society consists

of passages-transitions “from one age to another or from one occupation to another” (Van Gennep, 1977: 2-3). Circumcision is a rite performed in a way that leaves a permanent print (like other forms of modifying the body or giving a new name), making the personality change known or visible to everyone. The new position or status must be higher or “more perfect”, “refined” or “improved”.

Circumcision is a ritual also seen in Judaism, another monotheistic religion. In the Torah, the holy book of Judaism, it is written that the circumcision of 8-day-old boys is a commandment of God “for generations”. Circumcision, performed immediately after birth, is an entrance ritual into the Jewish community. Although there is no specific age limit in Islam, it is generally applied until age 10. Research conducted by Yavuz and others reveals that most children are circumcised between the ages of 2 and 11 (Yavuz vd., 2012). The World Health Organization states that the reasons for male circumcision include easier hygiene, women’s preference for circumcised men, and maintenance of tradition and religious norms (WHO, 2007).

Toksoy and Taşıtman (2015: 161) emphasise the role of rituals like circumcision in Turkish society: as examples of “how the male body is “trained” and turned into a cultural image and as the environment in which codes related to manhood that are protected in the collective memory are regenerated through repetition.”

The preparation for the circumcision starts long before the ceremony; the child’s house is cleaned and decorated (with a particular focus on the boy’s bed) and meals and beverages are prepared for guests. It is not rare for the house to be refurbished or renovated in honour of the ceremony. The circumcised boy’s costume is usually white or blue with gold-coloured embroidery and consists of trousers, a shirt and jacket, a cape, a stylised hat that resembles the Ottoman sultan’s turban, and a sceptre. Decorations commonly include quotes from the Quran, the Turkish flag and the blue “evil eye” to protect the child from hexes. During the feast, which differs from region to region and depends on the family’s socio-economic status, the circumcised boy receives presents from his family. The surgical procedure is usually performed in the boy’s house after the ceremony. In rural areas, circumcision is performed by an “uncle circumciser”, not a doctor; presently, municipalities organize collective ceremonies for families who cannot afford it (Izgi, 2014).

During the surgical procedure, only men are present, emphasising the passage to manhood. The socio-cultural institution of “kirve” expresses this transition from child to man; here, a man-usually an older brother, uncle, or cousin-holds the boy during the procedure and “tells him calming words such as he should be a strong man, he should endure pain and be a real man” (Toksoy and Taşıtman, 2015: 171). Enduring the pain is a very important element of the ritual. A decade ago, most of the procedures were performed without anaesthetics, and pain endurance was strongly emphasised in the transition to manhood. The emphasis on reaching manhood by suffering is expressed in other forms, such as on the analysed invitation cards.

The passage to manhood requires pain (the actual procedure of cutting off the prepuce) and endurance and courage to face this pain. This must be demonstrated, or performed, to others - hence the social aspect of the ceremony and inviting others to witness the ritual.

Invitations, which are the subject of this research, are a very important part of the ceremony preparations. Cards not only provide information about the place and date of the ceremony but also indicate its status and give information about the circumcised boy. His photograph in the circumcision outfit is often printed on the invitation, so it can also serve as a souvenir for the family.

### **3. Methodology**

The research analyses a sample of 64 invitation cards retrieved from the websites of six printing houses<sup>2</sup> from different regions in Turkey. The sampling was conducted by searching the “circumcision invitations” phrase. For the research, the catalogues of the printing houses that printed circumcision invitations were scanned and the most repeated invitation samples were selected. Although different graphic designs and personal texts can be used for each circumcision ceremony, it has been observed that most of the printing houses in Turkey use catalogues that are very similar to each other in terms of theme and visuals. The most repeated examples in these catalogues were examined through descriptive analysis. The similarity in the catalogues is important as it shows that although a child’s circumcision invitation reaches a limited number of people, similar texts are constantly repeated and therefore similar texts appeal to a wider audience. In this case, invitations are thought to function as a mass communication tool and are suitable for being a research sample.

Cities were added to the search to obtain content from different regions since there is a significant cultural and political polarisation between geographies in Turkey. It is worth mentioning that almost all invitations were written in verse, often rhymed, in poetic language. In Turkish literature, the “mani” genre of short poems, usually performed by bards, gives specific messages to people. Invitations to circumcision feasts (this observation also applies to invitations that are not included in the analysis) often include graphic elements that refer to the circumcised boy and the circumcision tradition. The circumcised boy is portrayed in the costume of an Ottoman padishah, with a decorated turban and a pelerine. After the procedure, he usually wears a more comfortable, loose robe. In this attire, a boy resembles a sultan and a prince. In some families, a boy is taken around the house on a horse or in a car, so all the neighbours can witness his preparation for the ceremony. The invitations often use a photograph of the boy wearing this special costume.

Texts from invitation cards were analysed by applying the descriptive analysis method. Using coding to analyse the messages on the invitation cards, the following main topics have been identified:

- Religious and traditional motives,
- The ritual of cutting as a rite of passage
- Building masculinity via the binary oppositions

### **4. Analysis of circumcision invitations**

Below, the paper will try to analyse how the hegemonic masculinity in the invitations to the circumcision feast is established discursively, through these three basic topics.

#### 4-a- Religious and traditional motives

In Turkish society, circumcision not only carries religious but also cultural and ideological meanings. The rite of passage is performed with friends, family, and a Muslim scholar (*imam* or *hodja*), and it is accompanied by praying and serving refreshments (which is also a *Sunnah* in Islam). The degree of sensibility to the religious obligation of the family shapes every factor of circumcision, starting from the invitation cards. Therefore, many of the invitations contain religious messages or refer to religious elements.

In the sampled invitation cards, there were various religious references. Examples of invitation texts referring to religious tradition, with more specific categorisation, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Religious and traditional motives.

References to the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad	... The Sunnah of our beloved Prophet (s.a.v), The beautiful custom of Muslims, It is our turn, we are getting circumcised, We are awaiting all who love us on our circumcision mawlid (mevl'it).
	Circumcision is the order of his holiness Muhammad. This courage has been also vouchsafed to us...
Circumcision as the order of Allah / Islam	What must be done is Allah's order. The best thing to do is to lie down under the knife.
	The first condition being a Muslim. It is said to be a religious duty to get circumcised.
	With the order of God, an utterance of the prophet(...) should I become circumcised or not?
Other religious words/wishes	Hey, the Ummah of Muhammad... You are all invited
	I grow up now maşallah...
	Come on to my circumcision, I will be a groom inşallah ( <i>if Allah wills it</i> ).
References to the traditional rituals	I kiss your hands ( <i>a tradition as an indicator of respect for the elderly</i> ) and I am waiting for you at my circumcision feast.
	They put a fez on my head, All of sudden I became a prince. I am not afraid, uncle circumciser: cut as much as you, please!

The invitations frequently included words like *inşallah*, (“if Allah wills it”); *maşallah* (“Allah has willed it” or “Praise be!”); this word is also used to express admiration and believed to protect from the “evil eye” – “nazar”). Many invitations described circumcision as an order or *Sunnah*, originating from the prophet Muhammad. Other texts refer to the prophet himself and Allah. There were also religious references to the community of Muslims-the *ummah*. Other traditional Turkish cultural elements are also identified. Kissing hands (a sign of respect in Turkish culture), or the fez, are visible in many invitations, contributing to

the cultural understanding of circumcision in the context of Turkish tradition. Hegemonic masculinity here must be loyal to tradition since tradition eternalizes and sanctifies the patriarchal system. Tradition comes from ancestors-or rather, in Turkish-from fathers.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4- b- The ritual of cutting as a rite of passage

In many traditions, cutting (skin, hair, or slaughtering an animal) carries significant meaning. In addition to sacrificing animals during *Eid al-Adha*, it is customary in Islam to sacrifice an animal on a baby's birth to give thanks and to protect the child (akika kurbanı-akika is an Arabic word describing baby's hair) (Tuşak, 2017). It is a custom to sacrifice one animal for a girl, and two animals for a boy.

In some regions of Turkey cutting the boy's hair accompanies circumcision. Both cutting off the foreskin and the hair are elements of a rite of passage in different cultures: shaving hair by Christian monks, cutting the plait as a punishment for adultery in Middle Age Europe, and even changing hairstyles in modern Western societies which "usually coincide[s] with changes in status, such as a first job, marriage, the birth of the first child" (Bromberger, 2008: 27). The first haircut was a rite of passage in many Slavic cultures, like the "postrzyzyny" ritual in Poland, where cutting a boy's hair symbolised passing from childhood to manhood and breaking the bond with his mother (Kostrzewski, 1962). Shaving hair also carried social importance in the Ottoman era, because of the link between hair and libido- the reproductive rights of the Ottoman elites were marked by the right to grow a beard (Aykut, 1999).

Cutting off the skin has two meanings in analysed invitations. First, it is an opportunity for a boy to show courage and demonstrate his ability to endure pain. Secondly, it "improves" his penis, by cutting off "what is too much". The ritual is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The ritual of cutting

Emphasis on cutting	Circumciser liked my type; on Sunday he would cut my willy What can't be cured must be endured!
	It is cut that is too much. It must be endured what comes to the fore.
	It is too much, so they will cut it off...
	Our Son Sinan says: I need to cross the bridge (...)
	They will cut my willy, and I don't know my aftermath.
	Don't cut it off, it will bleed. Don't cut it off, it will be shorter, Don't cut it, my heart will cry, Don't cut...
Reasons for enduring pain	Girls like it this way, they said, They cut off half of my willy
	If you came to my circumcision feast All my pain will cease.

The invitation texts emphasise the procedure of cutting, often in an exaggerated way. Some texts also describe the protest of the circumcised boy, fearing pain or blood. In some invitations, a boy's objections, and fear of the removal of the prepuce are humorously depicted. These objections, however, are characteristic of childhood, and pain and fear must be suppressed by courage as the boy becomes a man. The emphasis on pain makes its role in the rite of passage even more apparent; while some invitations magnify the suffering, others underestimate the pain saying that "it will cease" if the guests come to the feast. This points out the paradoxical and complicated nature of masculinity.

Circumcision is not only the way to become a man, but also the way to become a rightful member of society in Turkish culture. The uncircumcised man is marginalised and does not deserve to own a phallus (Barutçu, 2015) - a sexual organ in a physiological sense, but also a symbol of power and strength. The phallus does not always express masculinity; the connection between men's genitalia and power originates from the social order and relations of power. The penis is just a representation of the phallus; in the Lacanian linguistic approach, the penis serves as a signifier, when the phallus produces the signification (Barutçu, 2015). To maintain the established social hierarchy, uncircumcised men must be made feel "incomplete" and abnormal.

Invitations emphasise that circumcision is a rite of passage, often using the metaphor of "crossing the bridge". It is a passage between two opposite but complementary characteristics: water and land; solid and liquid; stable and unstable; and known and unknown (Badescu, 2007). In this case, childhood is indicated as something old, known, and safe. However, to be a socially accepted adult, moving out of this old and sheltered area is necessary to transition to the new, unknown, and unsafe world of masculinity. Both passage into the unknown and enduring the medical procedure demand courage. This courage must be witnessed, which again points out the social aspect of circumcision and the performative nature of the ritual. Through the celebrations, the passage to manhood is announced to other family members and society. The fact that these celebrations are called "community" in some regions indicates the social dimension of circumcision ceremonies.

#### **4-c- Building masculinity via the binary oppositions**

Since circumcision is described as the surgery that improves the boy's status and welcomes him into the community of Muslim men, it is also important to characterise the invitations' explicit and implicit descriptions of masculinity or manhood. The analysis of the invitations' texts reveals that masculinity is built using opposing categories: 1) manhood and childhood; 2) masculinity and femininity; 3) bravery and fear.

##### *Manhood as the opposite of childhood:*

Historical studies give examples of how rites of passage could "emphasise virility and adult leadership" of European kings when they were crowned as children or mere infants (Ormrod, 2005); therefore, rites of passage, such as circumcision, have the power to change the state considered to be the biological phase of human life.

In the sampled invitations, the passage into manhood is characterised by entering the community of men through cutting ties with childhood. The decision about circumcision is taken by parents and the community, and a child must comply. Atay (2004) emphasises that the circumcised boy cannot refuse the “invitation to masculinity”. The refusal would mean challenging traditional and family relationships, which are extremely important in Turkish society.

**Table 3. Manhood as the opposite of childhood.**

Literal farewell to childhood	Goodbye, childhood! Welcome, adolescence! Add colour to our day, Come, my friends, to the ceremony (party).
	I have grown up now mashallah. Goodbye, childhood!
References to growing up	Our son Efe kan says: I have grown up; I am becoming a man...
	I am not a child; I grow up every day. I got in the car; I am coming at full speed. Don't let anyone have not heard it. I want to see all of you by my side.
The first step to manhood	Hey, grown-ups! Finally, I am becoming a man, too!
	We will be honoured by the presence of our beloved friends and family. On this special day, when our son Barış will step into manhood.
	Come and see, I will be circumcised! Let everyone know how a man is made.
Circumcision as a fulfilling parents' wishes	Our son says: I am a little cub. Right in every work I do. I am the only boy in the family who will be circumcised. I am waiting for you too on my circumcision feast.
	Mum and dad made their decision: My childhood is over.
	Our son Selcuk says: You will get circumcised, they said, They brought me up petted, They waited 7 years to feel the joy and pride.
	Circumcised asks: is it your final decision, son? ... I consult mum and dad... Time is up, they say.
	I was forced to obey, please friends, and come to my circumcision feast to cheer me up.

In the messages about childhood, there are not only references to this “finished period”, but to the contrast between manhood and childhood. but also, those showing strong bonds between the child and his parents. The boy who is about to be circumcised-even though he is

about to become a man-is still “the little cub”. The “little cub”, “little one”, and “dearie”, will become a “grown-up man” after a small surgical procedure. In the invitations, however, the farewell to childhood is not an active process. It is not the child growing up, but the mother and father bringing up the child.

### Manhood as opposite to womanhood and relationships with women

In the analysed invitations, a circumcised boy distances himself from behaviours and attitudes perceived as feminine as well. In a society built upon opposites, men and women are described using mutually exclusive characteristics, and a man is not like a woman. Examples of invitation texts which describe manhood as opposite to womanhood are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Manhood as opposite to womanhood.

Manhood as a value	Men do not wear skirts. How could you call men? Those who have not been circumcised?!
Man choosing woman; presenting “good news” to the girls	Good news, girls! I am becoming a lad.
	Don’t be sad, girls! It will be cut just a bit.
	Please come to my circumcision feast, İnşallah (if God allows) I will become a groom.
Circumcision as a women’s preference	A rose wants a nightingale; a nightingale wants a rose, Girls from Cyprus <sup>4</sup> want a circumcised boy.
	Circumcision, circumcision – they nag me. Without getting circumcised, there are no girls for you, they say.
	Our son ..... says: They said girls want it this way, They cut half of my willy. If girls don’t like my willy, I will chase the circumciser.
Traditional, binary gender associations	Our son Ali says: I am the only boy in the house. The right hand of my father, the apple of my mother’s eye.
	Did you hear? Ah!!! Do you know my dad? He got obsessed. This summer they would cut my thingy.
	With the (...), approval of my grandfather, the permission of my father and with prayers of my mother; should I become circum- cised or not?
	[Maternal] Auntie, maternal uncle, paternal uncle. Brother-in-law [or aunt’s husband], sister-in-law [or uncle’s wife], paternal auntie! My dear dad decided to get me circumcised.

By breaking the bond with his mother and following the traditional division of roles and labour in the family, a circumcised boy will disown behaviours and appearances that belong to women. The best example is wearing a skirt, which means being excluded from the community of men. In Turkish, wearing a skirt is synonymous with breaking one's word, being untrustworthy and dishonest qualities traditionally associated with women, and expressing disregard and disrespect.<sup>5</sup> This expression not only reproduces the opposition of manhood and womanhood but clearly associates later with the negative characteristics.

The invitations support the traditional, binary gender associations. While the men (father and grandfather) make the decision (as ones who can change social reality), the mother can only pray. Manhood and masculinity are associated with action and rationality. On the other hand, the mother, who prays, represents irrationality and passivity. In some invitations, she is completely excluded. These differences are also apparent in how the attitudes of the mother and father and their relationships with their son are depicted in the invitations. A boy must help his father, be his "right hand", and prepare to take over his duties. In his relationship with his mother, there is more emphasis on the emotional bond, which is only permitted as the boy has not yet reached manhood. "Many boys (...) at some ages are forced to distance themselves from women and continue newly mowed roles. If they refuse, they are mocked with names such as "hen-pecked", "mama's boy", or "mollycoddle" (Onur and Koyuncu, 2004: 34).

Turkish society can be defined as primarily patriarchal, traditional, and conservative. This structural tendency, together with systematic and institutionalized male dominance, gives more value to boys and makes having a son who can continue the family line a source of pride (e.g. Ökten, 2017; Özmen and Dönmez, 2013). Additionally, the messages stress that the next step after circumcision is marriage ("I'll become a groom"). This shift can again be interpreted as a reference to continuing a family line through sexual maturity and as stressing the boy's heterosexual identity by pointing out that he will soon have his own family. Since circumcision is understood as the first step for reaching sexual maturity, it is presented as "good news" to the community and is often "announced" to girls. This kind of expression is common in the traditional approach to sexuality and the imbalance of power in sexual relations. Sexuality and libido are the basic signs of "being a man" and therefore, they are a source of pride. For women, especially unmarried, having a sexual life is perceived as a sin and a source of shame, and speaking of women's sex and sexuality is still taboo. In extreme cases, the custom of so-called honour killing is still a real fear for some women, particularly in Eastern Turkey (Ilkcaracan, 1998). In sexual relations, the imbalance of power is in favour of men, and the analysed invitations naturalise this inequality. A man or boy, according to the invitations, is the one who actively "obtains" or "wins" girls. The messages "sent" to girls in the invitations, even jokingly, present the idea that men can be sexually active and involved in relationships with more than one woman; in invitations, the word "girls" is always written in the plural (*kızlar*). However, without circumcision, a boy would be incomplete and therefore not

liked by the girls, the invitations explicitly present circumcision as women's preference. The connection between reaching potency and circumcision is also visible in the use of the word "groom" (*damat*) to describe a circumcised boy.

### Courage as the manly characteristic

Many characteristics of a "real man" are expressed in the invitations, but bravery or courage is the most prominent. As already discussed, hegemonic masculinity is constructed on positive features such as courage, and rationalism, but also from negative features such as homophobia or aggression. There are many reasons to focus on courage when analysing circumcision invitations. The male heroes of the popular Turkish "Dede Korkut" folk tales were often given tests of courage and fearlessness, like Bamsı Beyrek's fighting enemies. To be accepted as rightful members of the community, worthy of their fathers, sons needed to express both bravery and aggression in fighting (cutting off enemy's heads) and chivalry or compassion (paying off someone's debts or feeding the hungry) (Uckun, 2015). The importance of courage is also visible in Turkish male names (Saltık Özkan, 2009). As the names express parents' wishes and expectations, many male names are either drawn from the warriors in folk stories or heroes or can be translated directly to English adjectives such as brave, valiant, strong etc. (Uca, 2003). Therefore, demonstrating a lack of fear is an important part of the rite of passage. The analysed invitations express a strong contrast between fear and courage, making the latter the most prominent "manly" characteristic, as the following quotes clearly show.

**Table 5.** Emphasis on courage.

Emphasis on fear or cry	I surrender, uncle circumciser, I give up! Please, please cut without hurting me.
	I will fear a bit, I will blench a bit, too...
	I cried a lot, but they didn't listen; you've grown up now, shame on you.
	If I cry don't blame me, I am waiting for all of you on my circumcision feast.
	I feel fear, I use my joker, I consult mum and dad, Time is up, they say.
Demonstrating courage	I'm not afraid, uncle circumciser, Cut as much as you, please!
	They have waited 7 years to see my courage. What can't be cured must be endured.

Trial / Punishment	Our son Cahit says: Today is my trial. My crime is to be a man, and my punishment is circumcision.
	The circumciser became a judge, and my <i>kirve</i> is my prosecutor. The trial is on, the decision has been made. On 2 September my execution will be carried out.
Militarism/ Nationalism	I need to pass a bridge, I am a Turk, son of a Turk, not a coward. Come and see how I become circumcised.
	Our son Koray says: There are two conditions of manhood: The first one, become circumcised. Second, become a soldier. Now I'm getting circumcised, Then I'll become a soldier.

The passage to manhood requires pain (the actual procedure of cutting off the prepuce) and endurance and courage to face this pain. At the “appropriate age”, a doctor makes a small cut on the penis to make it bleed and to give the boy a chance to show courage and “become a man”, accompanied by a festival given to the family (Ataseven, 2005). Even in this case, courage must be demonstrated or performed. As Atay (2004) notes, the struggle for manhood is never-ending. Constantly needing to be proved and expressed, masculinity resembles a theatrical act, which requires an audience - hence some invitations include “Don’t let anyone have not heard it”.

There is also a direct link between manhood (seen as social status) and nationalism in Turkey, also expressed in the form of militarism. In Turkey, military service is directly associated with bravery and fulfilling one’s sacred duty. A soldier must display courage and physical strength. Men with health conditions that classify them as unfit for the army are often not considered men at all. Their health reports classify them as “bad/rotten” (“çürük”). Military service brings together hegemonic masculinity and nationalism (Açıksöz, 2016). It has been compulsory in Turkey and is often described as the second most significant passage rite after circumcision. Completing military service creates a distance between those who cannot serve in the military such as the openly non-heteronormative, with health conditions, and women.

Those who avoid military service often face sanctions, such as being taken into military custody or losing citizenship. There are also socio-economic sanctions, such as issues in obtaining employment or getting married, since many families will not accept a son-in-law who failed to perform his military service (Açıksöz, 2016; Altınay Gül, 2004). The sanctification of military service is part of Turkey’s nationalist identity, particularly its values and discourse. Serving in the army is considered a duty to one’s nation and a significant phase in the journey to manhood. Circumcision and the army are described as the “two conditions” for becoming a man in one invitation text.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

It is remarkable how such a minor element of the circumcision ritual—namely, the invitations—provides so much information not only about circumcision and hegemonic masculinity but the structure of the society and the imbalance of power. Short, often jokingly written verses give us information about gender discrimination and the place of tradition in modern society. These attitudes are visible in verses that describe family roles that present the father as the decision-maker and in fragments referring to religion or military service.

By analysing the invitations, it is seen that circumcision is a significant passage rite since the invitations clearly show that the social aspect of the ceremony is more important than health or religious reasons. The invitations are a multivalent announcement: of the boy, who will become a man; of the family, showing that they are raising a boy to social, patriarchal standards; and of the community, which earns a new member willing to reproduce the existing social order based on patriarchal roles. Circumcision is a significant way for a boy to attain his hegemonic masculinity—as an individual and cultural identity and its ceremonies show the common acceptance of the patriarchal culture and normalise the manhood myths.

Hegemonic masculinity and its characteristics are a prominent part of the invitations. The attributes of a “real man”, as presented in analysed texts, are having an interest in (multiple) girls, courage, not expressing emotions, nationalism, militarism, and remaining loyal to traditions. Other studies on Turkish hegemonic masculinity reveal similar attributes. As this study and others have demonstrated, this hegemonic model of masculinity has been built on contrasting pairs of qualities: childhood – manhood, feminine – masculine, and fear – bravery.

Hegemonic masculinity is also a performance that must be undertaken repeatedly; to gain masculinity once and for all is impossible. This masculinity needs to be performatively reproduced, and it is out of the control of the subject (boys and men themselves). The person who decides to become or not become a man is not a boy; only the community has the power to determine who can be named a “real man, in patriarchal-traditional societies. Therefore, circumcision is much more a significant social event than medical surgery. Masculinity must be displayed and shown almost theatrically to the audience.

The analysis also shows that the five fundamental elements of hegemonic masculinity can be observed through circumcision ceremonies. In the messages of the invitations, it can be seen in the relational position of power both over women and men, how hegemonic masculinity is naturalised by socialisation and social practices, how a boy can “achieve” the level of man, the emphasis on the heterosexuality and the construction of masculinity by cultural interaction.

As a result of the research in this study, it can be said that circumcision is a passage to manhood or rather a position to aspire to hegemonic masculinity. As hegemonic masculinity, it is vulnerable to crisis, but it is also dynamic and able to react to social changes. The ceremony of circumcision has changed over the years-the boys' invitations have changed from horses to sports cars, the circumcision is often said to be motivated by hygienic reasons rather than religious reasons, and the surgery is more often undertaken in hospitals than private houses or public circumcision halls. Despite all these changes, the main principle of the circumcision ceremony-its status as a rite of passage-remains the same. Losing a part of the penis in the physical sense is more than compensated by the significant, social gain the rite of passage provides-phallus, masculinity, and authority.

The analysed texts were copied from the websites of printing houses. Unfortunately, no data tells us which messages are the most popular since most designs can be personalised. Requests for sales statistics for specific procedures were sent to the printing houses we used, but they remained unanswered. However, it is significant that there were more humorous templates than those that contained more serious or religious messages and imagery.

This study analysed the text of the invitations. The invitations' graphic elements complement and support their written messages. Usually, they show a boy in the circumcision outfit, the word "Mashallah" ("praise be!") in decorative font, "Evil Eye" talismans, signatures of Ottoman sultans (tuğra), and they are often accompanied by characters from famous cartoons, the logos of football clubs, and sports cars. Analysing visual materials (layout, photograph, fonts, and other graphic elements) could also be a topic for another study.

## Endnotes

- 1 In Turkish, the festive/ceremony assisting the medical procedure is called the "circumcision wedding" and is usually very similar to Turkish weddings. However, in most English papers on circumcision, the phrase "circumcision feast" is used (e.g. Toksoy and Taşıtman 2015).
- 2 Sedef Cards Matbaası, <http://www.sedefcards.com/>, Bursa Nikah Şekeri, [http://www.bursanikahsekeri.com.tr.](http://www.bursanikahsekeri.com.tr;); Sünnet Sarayı, <http://www.sunnetkiyafeti.com/>, Koza Davetiye, <http://vankoza.com/> ; İsbah Matbaası, <http://izmirdavetiye.com.tr/>, [www.dugunmagazine.com/](http://www.dugunmagazine.com/)
- 3 In the Turkish language the word "ancestors" is directly translated as "fathers" (*atalar*).
- 4 Refers to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which comprises the northeastern portion of the island of Cyprus.
- 5 According to Turk Dili Kurumu (Turkish Language Institute): Wearing a skirt (or putting a skirt on): "Falling into a position where one has no characteristics such as modesty [shame], honour, morality" ([http://www.tdk.gov.tr/index.php?option=com\\_gts&arama=gts&kelime=etek%20takmak%20\(veya%20giymek\)&cesit=4&guid=TDK.GTS.5bc49205548f09.79825320](http://www.tdk.gov.tr/index.php?option=com_gts&arama=gts&kelime=etek%20takmak%20(veya%20giymek)&cesit=4&guid=TDK.GTS.5bc49205548f09.79825320))

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**Research and publication ethics statement:**

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