Sisters in Islam. Women's conversion and the politics of belonging: A Dutch case study

Vroon, V.E.

Publication date
2014

Chapter 2
Doing Ethnography

A year after the start of my fieldwork, I gave a guided tour at Museum Our Lord in the Attic. In cooperation with the museum's director, I had developed a museum program, based on my research. Among other things, this program addressed the resentment many contemporary Dutch feel when confronted with visible signs of religion, in particular Islam. With a lecture and a guided tour, I compared the predicament of contemporary Muslims to the circumstances of Catholics in Amsterdam after the Reformation. That afternoon, the tour was for one of the participants in my research and her friends and family. Just before the start of the tour, she quickly whispered in my ear, "Could you tell my mom that conversion to Islam is a change in religion, and not a change in culture?"

When I had interviewed her the year before, she had told me that because of her headscarf, her mother no longer perceived her to be the liberated woman she once was. By now, her mother had become used to her changed appearance but at first, the announcement of her adoption of the headscarf had not been well received:

> I had a strong desire to wear the headscarf, although I know, to many people that sounds bizarre. When I indeed did so, my mom still lived in Amsterdam. We would meet for coffee, which we often did after work. So I said to her [on the phone], "Okay, but as of today I'm wearing a headscarf." That wasn't such a good idea. She hung up, abruptly, [after] saying, "No, I won't do that. Have you lost your mind? Act normal!" She hung up angrily, [probably] thinking, what is happening? My mom [probably] thought, "You are a liberated woman and when you wear a headscarf you are oppressed." While I thought, "I'm still that liberated woman, maybe even more so now, than without a headscarf."

I recount this story here to underline that positionality is a key feature of any social research as "knowledge is produced in a historical and social context by *individuals*" (Sherif, 2001, 437). In the case of the museum tour, the focus was on my positionality as a scholar but in regard to my fieldwork, for instance, also my gender was an integral aspect of

my ability to enter this field. A male researcher could not have carried out this research as the women involved practiced a strict separation of the sexes during their meetings, and men were not allowed. The story also exposes, as Jacob-Huey argues, that "decisions about representation … entail 'cultural brokering'" (2002, 797). In this case, the participant asked me to broker between the image of the headscarf as oppressive versus her convictions about its liberating qualities, and between perceptions of Muslims' *culture* versus the religion of Islam. This points to yet another aspect of this story, participants' expectations of my research and the possible benefits they hoped to gain from it.

A greater recognition and a better understanding of their choice for Islam was for many participants, I believe, an incentive to help me gather the data that informs this thesis. The reasoning behind the participant's request will be addressed in other parts of this thesis. More to the point here is that the question to weave her argument into the museum tour shows the shifting insider/outsider perspective that characterized my fieldwork. Therefore, in this chapter, I will first, further elaborate on my positionality within the Muslim women's groups I participated in. Second, I will give an overview of the research methods I employed to gather the data presented in this thesis. Third, I will elaborate on my attempt to situate my research within a current anthropological debate on engagement. Part of this debate can be summarized as "How to translate one's research findings into representations that can appeal to broader audiences, beyond the walls of the academy?" I will address this question by presenting two museum projects that enabled me to relate parts of my research results to general audiences.

2.1 Positionality

The data presented in this thesis was collected between 2006 and 2011. During this period, I enjoyed enormous cooperation from the women on whose stories and actions this thesis is based. For instance, when I had to end my fieldwork, there were still many women who had agreed to be interviewed but time did not permit it. I quickly became well acquainted with the women's groups central to my research, and opportunities for participant observation were abundant. From the start as well as later on in the course of my research, I was invited to visit the Muslim women's groups by participants themselves which facilitated access that need not be negotiated beyond explaining that I was a student of anthropology, working on research on changes in daily life in the context of conversion to Islam, Islamic sisterhood, and how converts differentiated between *culture* and religion. Since these are fields converts have an interest in and

often talk about among themselves, these questions were met with approval. My overall research question, how women dealt with possible tensions in light of multiple belongings was appreciated as well.[38]

Many participants were very active online, too, and soon I was included in various e-mail lists. This provided me with a constant stream of Islamic moral and educational stories and videos. In addition, I was invited to read blogs, initiated and maintained by some of my interlocutors, and to join forums by and for converts to Islam. I became Facebook friends with at least a dozen participants, and sent flyers announcing upcoming events.

Why were these women so cooperative? First, I believe, their cooperation stemmed from their hope that my research would contribute to a more profound understanding of their choice for Islam. Conversion to Islam is reportedly perceived by non-Muslims to be a more radical choice than converts perceive this choice themselves. Where converts often claim to experience continuity, their social environment experiences conversion as a rupture.[39] This is also the case with changes in daily life, which are interpreted differently by non-Muslims than by participants themselves. Furthermore, converts as well as born Muslims are curious about the conversion experiences of others, which can have contributed to their cooperation as well. A few participants stated that they also helped me because I am a Muslim and "Muslims should help each other."

However, I believe the answer can also be found in the direction of what Becker calls the notion of 'coincidence' (1998, 28). Access to a field of research is not exactly random but it is not completely determined either. Becker relates the coincidences often involved in choosing or gaining access to a particular field to the notion that things do not "just happen" but occur in a series of steps (ibid, 31). I will retrace my steps leading to my welcome at the women's groups by reflecting on starting my research as a relative stranger, how I turned into a partial insider as a Muslim, while remaining a partial outsider as a researcher, and by addressing whether my research can be related to the notion of doing auto-ethnography (Strathern, 1987; Anderson, 2006) as a 'native anthropologist' (Narayan, 1993; Jacobs-Huey, 2002; Bunzl, 2004;

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[38] Usually, my explanation of my overall research question was not exactly phrased like this, but every convert could relate to the conspicuous Dutch "Islam debate" and they approved of my academic attempt to focus on the nuances of their lived realities.

[39] One aspect of perceived continuity between pre- and post-conversion is the Islamic notion of *fitra*, reflected in Muslims' claim, adopted by converts, that in fact all humans are Muslim, as all are in a submissive position vis-à-vis God, and that it is only differences in upbringing whether this matter-of-fact is recognized. In this respect becoming Muslim was envisioned as a realization of a pre-existing state-of-being (see also Ahmad, 2009).

Lechkar, 2012). I will end this section on positionality with a reflection on being a part-time *hijabi*.[40]

2.1.1 Starting Out as a Stranger

The main coincidence informing the course of my fieldwork was meeting my first interlocutor at my place of work, the Amsterdam (Historical) Museum.[41] As I will explain in more detail in the course of this chapter, she provided me with a wealth of information on possible research locations. Meeting her ahead of my fieldwork, also gave me the opportunity to assess my positionality in advance. In many ways, my positionality resembled that of research participants. I shared their gender, in many cases their nationality, ethnicity, their language, and I am a converted Muslima too, since 1996. This is not to say I was familiar with the field. Arguably, I was a total stranger. Before this research, I had never made an effort to meet other converts, never visited any mosque or Muslim women's group, and since I do not wear a headscarf in daily life, I am not easily recognizable as a Muslim.

When meeting this first participant at the museum, I disclosed my Muslimness with the Islamic greeting *as-salamu aleikum*. A few minutes later, we were discussing whether or not wearing a headscarf is obligatory for women in Islam. Since I infrequently socialized with other Muslim(a)s, this topic had never come up. My understanding of modesty as a Muslim woman was that it was as much an inward as an outward disposition, and also that it was dependent on the context. Living in the Netherlands, I had made adjustments to my wardrobe but I had never felt the need to cover my hair nor did I consider it a divine command. The woman I met at the museum, however, was convinced that when standing before God on Judgment Day, the covering of a woman's hair would definitely be part of the judgment. Nevertheless, our differences did not compromise her willingness to help me and we began e-mailing ahead of the start of my fieldwork.

Through this initial correspondence, soon, I discovered another feature of her Muslimness that I had never thought of: the notion that listening to music, or playing musical instruments, is forbidden in Islam. I had traveled several times to North-Africa and music was commonplace. During these travels, I had been to concerts and watched street musicians

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[40] A woman who covers her hair and wears loose-fitting clothes, as not to reveal too much of her female shape.
[41] I have been a part-time researcher, first in the context of a MA thesis, later on as a Ph.D. candidate. Besides my studies, I am employed at the Amsterdam Historical Museum, renamed Amsterdam Museum as of 2011.

play. I was familiar with stories of how all public life in Egypt came to a halt when the famous singer Umm Kulthum sung on the radio in the 1960's. It had never occurred to me that there might be Muslims with a different attitude towards music (cf. Otterbeck, 2008). I realized it was possible to do research in the city I was born and raised, among women with similar backgrounds, sharing their conversion experience and hence their religion, speak the same language, and still be unfamiliar with some important changes in their lives. I wondered if women with her outlook on Islamic practice would accept me as a researcher, and as a fellow Muslima, or if they would consider me very different from themselves. Through this initial contact I was reassured that the practice of Islam was considered a personal responsibility. There were no formal requirements for participating in the Muslim women's group she introduced me to. In fact, one did not even have to be a Muslim.

My limited practice of Islam facilitated participating in these groups at an entry level. From a research point of view, being unfamiliar with many of the precepts was in fact helpful since it allowed women to teach me. Besides the extra information this process rendered, it sensitized me to some of the threshold moments for many converts I would later meet and interview, such as learning how to pray or praying communally. This advantage diminished over the years, as I became a familiar face and increasingly knowledgeable about topics of interest to the group members, and Islamic practices. Therefore, continuously explaining my presence in these groups beyond the common motive of "learning about Islam" as also being a researcher, remained important to alert women that I was not just another attendant.

2.1.2 Positioned as a Partial Insider

Research among converted Muslims in the Netherlands is fairly recent. It is a popular topic among Bachelor and Master students but otherwise, not much research has been conducted in this field (Van Nieuwkerk 2003, 2004, 2006, 2008; Harmsen, 2008).[42] Harmsen conducted limited research and does not address the issue of positionality beyond his gender limiting his access to women and women's groups. Van Nieuwkerk, however, reflects on her influence on the narratives gathered in interviews, in particular converts' perception of her as a "non-Muslim Dutch feminist professional" (2006, 96). She recalls that interviewees often began the

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[42] Badran (2006) and Stoica (2012) have conducted comparative research about conversion to Islam in the Netherlands. Badran compared British, Dutch, and South-African converts to Islam, and Stoica compared Romanian and Dutch converts.

interview by stating: "I know Dutch people think that women are oppressed in Islam but…" (ibid). Being a Muslim myself, this pre-emptive attitude, assuming common misconceptions to be present in the mind of the researcher, were absent from my encounters and interviews. Instead, during interviews, particularly on the topic of changes in daily life, an often-used opening or closure of a sentence was "you know" (see also Lechkar, 2012). Although also a researcher, in many respects, I was considered an insider to the conversion experience. However, when discussing more ambiguous topics such as religious authority, ideals and practices, or the difference between culture and religion, more often a sentence was ended with the question "Do you understand?"

Over the years, I met several BA and MA students who had chosen the subject for their theses, as well as a few Ph.D. candidates seeking participants among converted women, as well. Although most of them were non-Muslim, they, too, succeeded in finding women willing to be interviewed. With the exception of some of the women's groups involved in my research, usually, they were allowed access to meetings, lectures, and other social gatherings. Nevertheless, some women's groups refused access to them because, the attendants told them, they felt uncomfortable being 'observed.' These same women, however, often enthusiastically supported my research, occasionally asked for my "expert opinion" during discussions, and accepted me as a "sister in Islam" without question. I often wondered to what degree they understood that writing a Ph.D. thesis would entail an analysis of their experiences that could possibly differ from their own (Abu-Lughod, 1991, 159-160). I therefore have tried to heed Narayan's warning that as anthropologists we

> …must focus our attention on the quality of relations with the people we seek to represent in our texts: are they viewed as mere fodder for professionally self-serving statements about a generalized Other, or are they accepted as subjects with voices, views, and dilemmas - people to whom we are bonded through ties of reciprocity… (1993, 672)

As I will explain in the last part of this chapter, I have taken this focus on reciprocity as an encouragement to aim for partnerships with participants, in light of an engaged anthropology.

2.1.3 Auto-Ethnography as a Native Anthropologist?

It is also possible to regard my positionality as 'doing auto-ethnography.' Arguably, I shared so many features with my research participants that in the definition of Anderson (2006, 279), I qualified as a "complete member

in the social world under study" as my group membership preceded the decision to conduct research on this group (ibid). However, what exactly comprises *complete* membership? In her review of the limits of auto-ethnography, Strathern, for instance, raises the question "how one *knows* when one is at home" (1987, 16). In order to address the shifting grounds of familiarity and distance, she argues, one must know whether the investigator/investigated are equally at home (ibid). For instance, in the first chapter, I argued that wearing a headscarf as a convert, regularly results in being pushed out of the category "Dutch." Arguably, feelings of belonging can shift when a convert is regularly approached as a foreigner. Since not all converts are white women but come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, that too made a difference. These various levels of being at home, as Anderson points out as well, translate into the realization that "significant variation may exist even among members in similar positions" (ibid). This was certainly the case within my research, as Muslim women's groups also held different positions in regard to Islamic practice. Within these groups, too, different positions were found among attendants in regard to the practice of Islam.

Another point Strathern makes in regard to the limits of auto-ethnography is similar to the point Narayan makes about the native anthropologist: it is not the personal credentials of the anthropologist that convey being at home or not, but whether there is cultural continuity between what is written by the anthropologist and what the people being studied produce by way of accounts of themselves. "At issue is the manner in which ethnographic authority is constructed in reference to the voices of those supplying the information, and the part they are given in the resultant texts" (ibid, 17-18). Anderson, too, acknowledges that besides being a member of the group under study, the researcher is also a member of the social science community. "As a social scientist, the researcher has another cultural identity and goals that lead to a secondary (or from the social science view, primary) orientation to action within the social world shared with other group members" (ibid, 380). This realization is, among other things, addressed by current calls within the discipline for a more engaged anthropology but is also connected to the topic of informed consent.

At the beginning of my research, I experimented with the use of informed consent forms to test whether their use would be an advantage or not. All participants involved in the first phase of my research signed the form although I explained it was not mandatory.[43] A positive feature of

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[43] Generally, Dutch anthropologists do not use informed consent forms in their research. Likewise, students are not obliged to make use of such forms. To be able to experiment with their use, I designed the form myself.

using these forms was the opportunity to briefly discuss issues of representation, most notably anonymity.[44] However, I abandoned their use later on in my research, for several reasons. The most important reason was that personal rapport and trust proved more important than presenting participants with a form at the time of the interview. For instance, since informal talk was part of my research too, I often made connections between the conversations and my research, so women would understand that their stories were also important to me in regard to my research questions. In addition, although all women signed the form, instead of regarding it as a means of self-protection they most often thought it was something my supervisor obligated me to do.

Arguably, the use of informed consent forms has its limits. As is also stated in the American Anthropologist Association's Code of Ethics: "it is the quality of the consent, not the format, that is relevant" (1998, 3). As for instance Malone argues, while doing research "we can never really anticipate what will emerge and what we will find interesting, how we will end up interpreting it or what we will eventually do with it" (2003, 797). This observation addresses that consent is obtained at a specific moment in time while the research is a process that continues and develops in ways neither the researcher nor the researched can fully comprehend beforehand. Transparency, reporting back to participants about research results, and seeking ways to engage them in projects for general audiences, became central to my relationships with research participants. This, eventually, replaced the use of formal devices such as informed consent forms.

In regard to the question of whether or not my research qualifies as doing auto-ethnography, that depends on the definition. I am more inclined to consider the limits of auto-ethnography Strathern addresses, which in my research translates into the partial insider perspective, than to position my research as doing auto-ethnography in Anderson's definition. Anderson, for instance, argues for an "enhanced textual visibility of the researcher's self" (ibid, 384) and suggests that "they should openly discuss changes in their beliefs and relationships over the course of

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[44] The most interesting feature of using these forms was the high number of participants who waved anonymity, stating that they had nothing to hide and were proud of their conversion. However, in light of the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (1998), I have decided not to mention their names. As is stated in article III.A.2: "Anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities." As neither participants nor I could fully assess beforehand the consequences of revealing their names, I refrained from doing so. After the initial 21 interviews, I explained beforehand that interview excerpts were to be used anonymously. I have tried to similarly explain this to participants who had already granted me the freedom to use their names.

fieldwork." Furthermore, they "should illustrate analytic insights through recounting their own experiences and thoughts as well as those of others" (ibid). My aim here is not to publicly reflect upon my own conversion to Islam. However, I can relate to his observation that the auto-ethnographer, as a full-fledged member, "cannot always sit observantly on the sidelines" (ibid).

Conducting this research involved a constant rethinking of my own conversion since so many people asked questions about it, participants and others alike. From the start, almost anyone I told about my research would ask me if I was a convert myself, if I was married to a Muslim man, why I did not wear a headscarf, and other personal questions, often within the first five minutes of conversation. Rigorous negotiations with journalists who published about my research were necessary to keep my personal story outside of their report. Participants too, often, considered me a wholesale part of my research, best summarized in the suggestion of one participant for me to interview myself. However, in light of critical ethnography, reflecting upon the impossibility of "always sitting observantly on the sidelines" I believe, is necessary for all social scientists, regardless of being at home or abroad (see also Roald for the specific context of a converted Muslim researcher, 2001, 78).

2.1.4 A Part-Time Hijabi

In light of the data put forward in this thesis, it will surprise no-one that the difficulties and dilemmas I encountered during fieldwork in many respects revolved around the question of whether or not to veil. As I explained in this chapter, I do not wear a headscarf in daily life. Nevertheless, most participants got to know me as a *hijabi*, a woman who covers her hair and wears loose-fitting clothes, as not to reveal too much of her female shape. The reason for this choice was that most of the time one of the five daily Islamic prayers took place during the events that I attended, and Muslim women cover for prayer, even if they do not do so outside of their prayers. If events took place at mosques, which often happened, another prayer occurred, as Muslims pray two *rakaat* upon entering a mosque (see also Lechkar, 2012, 26). As headscarf-wrapping/tying, should preferably be done in front of a mirror, soon after the start of my fieldwork, I decided to put on my headscarf at home.[45]

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[45] See also Lukens-Bull, R. (2007) and Clarke (2012) for a insightful overview of the same kind of dilemmas for non-Muslim researchers when researching Muslims' practice of Islam.

At first, my veiling was somewhat spotty, as I wrestled with the image that covering my hair would project. For instance, when I had my period, I would refrain from veiling, as women are absolved from the duty of prayer during menstruation. However, obviously, this raised questions and I found myself discussing my monthly period more often than I cared to. In addition, if I did not put on the headscarf at home, occasionally, I would forget I was not wearing one, and found myself at the center of considerable consternation when joining the prayer row while still uncovered. These occasions, although somewhat embarrassing, were not without merit in understanding the workings of the women's groups: I was never judged or criticized and women who were absolved from prayer would rush to take off their scarves to properly cover me, or helpfully pulled down my skirt to cover my feet if I had forgotten to bring socks. Nevertheless, after a few such incidents, I decided to fully cover when participating in the gatherings of the women's groups in my research.

To clearly position myself as a part-time *hijabi*, when conducting interviews, or when meeting participants at the museums I worked at, I never wore a headscarf. As participants considered wearing a headscarf a distinctly personal decision, having only religious value as the wearer did so by her own vocation, my lack of covering was never made into an issue. If mentioned at all, it was only as a matter-of-fact, as most women were aware that I only veiled when going to the mosque or to women's gatherings. Although the strategy seemed clear-cut, in practice it was not. For instance, what to do when prayer time occurred shortly before, during, or after the interview? When I interviewed women at their homes, I would usually bring a headscarf and put it on when prayer-time occurred, a strategy that did not raise any eyebrows. However, awkward moments were still inevitable. For instance, one time I arrived covered for an interview because I knew it would be prayer time almost upon arrival. After we completed the prayer, I took off my headscarf. That in itself was inconspicuous but when it turned out I forgot my recorder and decided to go back home to obtain it, it escaped my mind I had already uncovered. Upon opening the door to leave, the women I was about to interview all screamed at once, "You forgot to put on your headscarf!" When I explained I had only arrived covered because of the prayer, all was well again, as it was accepted that everyone had personal reasons for veiling/unveiling.

Only once, before we started the interview, a participant commented on my lack of covering. Offering the often mentioned "a woman is like a pearl/diamond" analogy to stress the headscarf's protective qualities as opposed to its oppressive image in the Dutch context, she encouraged me not to be ashamed of the practice (which I

was not). When I replied with a little joke about being above forty and therefore probably not too attractive anymore, with absolute seriousness, she countered, "Sister, you certainly are still a looker." Since by then, my fieldwork was nearing its end, I should have known better than to even consider such a joke to be appreciated. Among a majority of my interlocutors, there was not a single argument valid enough to refrain from veiling, except "not being ready for it." As that approximated the truth, I usually offered that explanation.

No matter how I handled the issue of veiling, every strategy remained imperfect from a personal point of view as it hardly diminished the discomfort of being forced to discuss it. As the issue of the headscarf is so contentious in the Netherlands, to cover or not to cover remains a politicized decision, one way or the other. For instance, if I would lecture for a non-Muslim audience, usually, first contact was by e-mail or phone. Since people routinely asked if I was a convert myself, often, they were aware that I was, and subsequently were surprised or even disappointed if I came to lecture without a headscarf, or conversely, explained their happiness of my demonstration that one could be Muslim and *not* veil.

Differences in perception also occurred when veiling among academic colleagues. During an international conference at the University of Amsterdam, I was asked to escort a few visiting scholars to a near-by mosque for Friday prayer. The conference was in the Fall so I turned my shawl into an impromptu headscarf in the university bathroom and came back to the lecture room to pick up the visiting scholars. Although the speaker at that particular moment was a close colleague, when I came back a few hours later, she told me that she had not immediately recognized me after I had put on the headscarf. Her first thought had been, "How nice, a *Muslima* is attending our conference!"

At the mosque we visited that afternoon, however, my improvised headscarf was interpreted entirely different. Usually, Amsterdam mosques have distinct national/ethnic identities and the nearest-by mosque I took them to was of Turkish origin. I had not visited this mosque before but I knew Turks pray slightly different than I was used to within the women's groups in my research, in particular in terms of tempo and the number of *rakaat*.[46] Recognizing we were not Turks, a young woman offered her help by explaining that since we probably prayed *Wahabi* style, we should pray in our own fashion and should not feel obliged to try to follow the Turkish style. Although neither the female scholar accompanying me, nor I, understood why our Western clothing communicated a *Wahabi* orientation, the incident points out yet another thorny problem for a veiled researcher. Particular styles communicate particular orientations,

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[46] One prayer sequence consisting of bowing and prostrations.

sometimes national/ethnic in nature, sometimes indicating distinct religious belongings (Ünal, 2013). In the Dutch context, I usually choose the *amira* headscarf because it requires no pins and is most easy to put on and take off. This headscarf is usually worn by children, indoors, and by women who have just started practicing Islam. This helped me to avoid projecting an overly pious image. Occasionally, I wore plain scarves "Moroccan style," which in the Netherlands are least tied to a particular *community*, or way of practice (ibid).

In sum, starting my research as a stranger to local Islamic sociality, I felt extremely anxious at first. As became clear in the course of my fieldwork, my anxieties were fairly common. Fear of being rejected, feelings of awkwardness when visiting mosques for the first time, and being unfamiliar with some of the religious precepts other Muslims take for granted, is typical of any convert who starts to explore local Muslim religious sociality. In fact, it was particularly helpful, for instance during interviews, to be sensitized to the importance of these threshold moments. Simultaneously, I started as a partial insider since I was a converted Muslima as well. This particular positionality facilitated quickly establishing rapport and helped avoid discussing common misconceptions about Muslim women "being oppressed" or having "denounced women's liberation." Participants took for granted that was not my opinion of them. Often we shared experiences, such as the never-ending questions of non-Muslims about the involvement of a Muslim husband in the decision to convert. It also avoided disappointment when a non-Muslim researcher does not eventually convert during the course of the research (cf. De Koning, 2008a; Baer, 2008; Geelhoed, 2012; Clarke, 2013).

After I got used to the women's groups' workings, I often felt at home and could relate to the importance of these networks in regard to Muslim converts' predicament of being a minority within a minority. Strathern's argument that "whether the anthropologist is at home *qua* anthropologist … is decided by the relationship between their techniques of organizing knowledge and how people organize knowledge about themselves" (ibid, 31), remained a topic of reflection. In the context of my research, "being at home" in this respect was realized by participants' interest in my research. In addition, I incorporated topics into my research they found important (as well as being relevant to my research questions). Finally, I invited them into my professional field through making museum programs and presentations about their practices, and engaging them in the realization or the end results. In the last section of this chapter, I will reflect on this cooperation in more detail.

2.2 Doing Fieldwork

My entry into the field coincided with the 2006 exhibition "My Headscarf" at the Amsterdam Historical Museum.[47] Thirty-five young headscarf wearing women were invited to loan their headscarves and tell the story of their considerations of style, fashion, and piety. Three of them had converted to Islam. One of them became my first interlocutor. Soon it became evident that she was exemplary for the type of grassroots volunteer work that was central to the Muslim women's groups that contributed to my research. With her assistance, I gained a basic understanding of activities such as meetings and lectures that were relevant. She pointed out which mosques attracted high numbers of Dutch converts and what other spaces were used by women and girls to come together. These explorations resulted in being invited to participate in two Muslim women's groups. As it turned out, these two groups approached practicing Islam from a conservative angle. To include women with different views on the practice of Islam, I approached a third, more liberal oriented group on my own. They welcomed me, too. In 2008/2009, I was invited to join two other women's groups by the (converted) volunteers organizing their meetings. I welcomed these opportunities to broaden my experience and it allowed me to observe two additional pedagogic styles: the interactive workshop, and the "sister-meeting," which meant coming together at each other's homes, in the context of Islamic sisterhood.

As a part-time researcher, I was able to do fieldwork over an expanded period of six years. During this time, I lived at the edge of my research area and since women's gatherings were timed sensitively to demands of work and study, and usually took place in the evening or weekend, fieldwork was easy to combine with other obligations. My proximity to the research area facilitated flexibility so that if an interesting event would occur outside of the women's regular meetings, I could quickly adapt. Since some events were more rare than others, for instance conversions, weddings, the month of Ramadan, and other festivities, this prolonged fieldwork period allowed me to be part of these events on multiple and consecutive occasions. This enabled a deeper understanding of their meaning for participants. It also meant that there was time to develop relationships with participants, enhancing the quality of the interviews.

At the same time, this lengthy fieldwork period allowed me to observe the conversion process over time. While most of the women had already converted when I met them, for various amounts of time, other

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[47] Since January 1st 2011 the Amsterdam Historical Museum is renamed the Amsterdam Museum.

participants were not Muslim, yet. Six participants converted while I already knew them, allowing for the interview to take place just before or after the conversion and providing me with the opportunity to observe how patterns of practice developed in the context of social relations with other (converted) Muslims.

Although the converts contributing to my research differed in terms of age, social and ethnic background, how long ago the conversion occurred, or the preferred practice of Islam, they cannot be considered representative of all converts to Islam in the Netherlands. Since there are no formal records, aiming for a representative cross section of converts to Islam would be questionable in any event due to the absence of an overall picture.[48] Therefore, my research can best be considered a local case study of conversion to Islam in the Netherlands. My local research, however, was complemented with online data such as flyers for events, and moral, educational, and conversion stories, transcending the local context. Complemented with data gathered through interviewees' experiences at other locations, I argue my research to be representative at the level of the basic structural patterns of these women's groups (see Bertaux,1981), which can be found all over the Netherlands and in other European countries, too. Converts who do not participate in these types of women's groups are not included.

2.2.1 Observations & Conversations

Between 2006 and 2011, I participated in over two hundred meetings, lectures, workshops, conferences, and home-events. These regular occasions for gathering were complemented with festivities such as religious holidays, the birth of a baby, conversions, weddings, picnics, or other reasons for gathering. Attending these various events was of vital importance in order to observe the process of conversion, the following changes in daily life, as well as the process of building and/or becoming part of new social networks. As became evident, the topic of differentiating between *culture* and *religion* was a priority for any convert, no matter how they practiced Islam. This topic was also very important

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[48] I have been asked numerous times how many converts to Islam there are in the Netherlands. This, however, is unknown. The Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) calculated in 2007 that there are 12.000 *autochthonous* Dutch Muslims, including converts to Islam. However, as I explained in chapter one, this includes children of 2nd generation *allochthones* who are not converts but born Muslims. In addition, conversion by women who classify as *allochthones* cannot be accounted for in this type of counting because it is implied that converts to Islam are always *autochthones*.

for the born Muslimas that were part of the women's groups involved in my research. Therefore, I added this subject in the course of the research.

Informally, I talked with all attendants of the meetings of the groups involved, on multiple occasions. Taking notes of lectures was encouraged and writing down subsequent discussions or questions was allowed. Many meetings started with an introduction round in which I could present myself as doing research on conversion to Islam. If no such moment occurred, I would explain my research to attendees individually. Most attending women were aware I was a researcher but since at meetings there were usually also first time visitors, explaining my research to them remained an ongoing process.[49]

Over the years, I talked to over a hundred converts and dozens of born Muslimas about their lives and about their participation in Muslim women's groups. With forty-nine women I conducted in-depth interviews, on average lasting for two hours. Two of them were born Muslims, a volunteer for one of the women's groups, and the chairperson of the *Polder Mosque*. With three exceptions, I recorded and transcribed these interviews verbatim.[50] Eleven participants were interviewed on multiple occasions, in most cases with intervals of several years, in particular the volunteers responsible for organizing local Muslim women's groups' activities. In total, I conducted sixty-one in-depth interviews. I interviewed participants without a specific list of questions, allowing the interview to take the form of a conversation. However, adopting a biographical approach[51] did provide a chronological structure. For instance, I asked everyone about their place and date of birth, education, occupation, civil status, religious background, and about the place and date of their conversion. Also, I asked them about changes in daily life in the areas of dress, food & drink, and leisure activities, on becoming part of Muslim *communities*, and, later on in the research, about how they differentiated between *culture* and *religion*. These were all topics converts had an interest in and felt comfortable talking about. For instance, changes in daily life was an easy topic to discuss and a whole range of other issues, such as relationships with family, friends, the opposite sex, classmates,

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[49] At the end of 2010, I organized an evening for participants to inform them about some of the research results and to provide them with an opportunity to ask questions. This event was attended by thirty women, from all five women's groups. It was highly appreciated that I reported back to them some of the research findings.

[50] On two occasions I did not bring a recorder. On one occasion the interviewee asked for the interview not to be recorded. In all three case, I was allowed to take extensive notes of the interview.

[51] I adopted a biographical approach, as for instance Bertaux argues, collecting life stories is a means of discovering "patterns of *practices*" (1981, 36).

colleagues, and strangers could be discussed without a heavy emphasis on the difficulties participants often encountered.

During these more formal interview moments, I would sit down with participants at their homes, at the mosque, or at their place of work or mine, recording the interview. All interviewees were linked to one of the women's groups involved in my research, although in varying degrees of closeness or distance. This meant that, in most cases, I had multiple opportunities for informal talks with them, before and after the interview, and to revisit some of the topics over time. In my experience, converts as well as born Muslimas love to hear conversion stories, and how the non-Muslim social environment reacted to the decision to convert and I heard many interviewees tell the story of their personal journey to and within Islam on different occasions, allowing for a more complete and nuanced picture of their conversion processes. To provide more insight into the backgrounds of participants, I will present a brief overview of variation a mong participants:

Age at the time of the interview

< 20	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	> 60
2	21	8	8	4	4

Age at the time of conversion

< 20	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	> 60
12	20	6	6	2	1

Education

University	HBO	MBO	High school
13	13	14	7

Marital status at the time of the interview

Married	Single	Boyfriend
26	19	2

Marital status at the time of conversion

Married	Single	Boyfriend
13	22	12

Previous religious affiliation

Catholic	Protestant	Orthodox	Jewish	Agnostic
12	8	1	3	5
Atheist	Non-descript			
1	17			

When presenting excerpts from the interviews with participants in this thesis, I will briefly introduce them, but I have chosen not to assign participants pseudonyms. Because of my focus on a relatively small number of women, the use of pseudonyms would be insufficient to guarantee participants' anonymity. This strategy is meant to provide extra protection for the personal lives of participants, in light of the contentious nature of women's conversion to Islam. Of the forty-seven converts participating in my research, forty-two are quoted in this thesis, at least once.

2.2.2 Online Sources

Next to face-to-face interactions, part of my research took place in cyberspace, through websites, blogs and forums, and through e-mail contact. Addressing the growing phenomenon of Internet-based groups and collectives, Wilson *et al* (2002, 449) argue "that the technologies comprising the Internet, and all text and media that exist within it, are in themselves cultural products." They suggest that anthropology is "uniquely suited for the study of socioculturally situated online communication within a rapidly changing context." (ibid, 450). Indeed, it would be a great omission in studying the workings of the groups that participated in my research if their online activities were not to be included since online and offline interactions turned out to be highly intertwined.

This dialogical relationship between online and offline sociality is also emphasized by De Koning (2008b, 4). Addressing the production and consumption of Islamic knowledge by Moroccan-Dutch youth, De Koning argues that online experiences become meaningful "against the backdrop of offline experiences." This was also the case for the women involved in my research. Online, women discussed issues and topics that were related to their offline experiences as converts and as Muslims. The difference with De Koning's research is that the women in my research did not only visit already established websites and online platforms, some of them created their own websites and forums, started blog sites, web-shops, social foundations, and/or made their own digital flyers for offline events. Therefore, besides adding online content, they also added to the infrastructure and formats used online, and helped to create social networks. Often, these initiatives were started by converts but maintained and enjoyed by Muslimas from different backgrounds, including born Muslimas. In congruence with online-offline continuity, with few exceptions, online environments created by participants were intended to be women-only as well.

Research participants' Muslim social networks often originated in offline interactions. My research indicates that when non-Muslims develop an interest in Islam, born Muslims often refer them to other converts. For instance, a volunteer from one of the women's groups told me about her first visit with the group she now volunteers for:

> I can't remember who referred me, it was someone who heard I might be interested and told me that there were Dutch women who were Muslim. That was a real eye-opener, I liked that. It made it accessible. So I went to have a look [but] I was scared to death by all the headscarves; I didn't come back for three months. I felt out of place, lost. But I thought that the lecture was very interesting so I kept coming back for the content.

About five years later, she decided to convert. Like many converts I talked to, this resulted in being in between social circles for a while. Conversion to Islam is not a reason to disengage from existing friendships, but sometimes friends cannot accept the change, and other times conversion results in less common interests. When I asked about this subject, she continued,

> There are many reasons why a group of friends disintegrates, it doesn't have to be because of Islam. Moving to another city, different interests. Some people remain [after conversion] but if there is nothing more to talk about but gossip about people you used to know, you grow apart, have different interests. That's a difficult phase. There's not a new circle of friends just waiting for you. If it was only that simple! Building friendships takes time. For me, most important was to gather in small groups, preferably at people's homes. Engaging in religion by talking, or just drinking tea together, studying the Qur'an, and Arabic. Over the years, that provided the best contacts.

However, this strategy depends on proximity to offline women's circles. Online interaction can create another entry. For instance, noticing that many converts experienced loneliness, members of another women's group started an online buddy-project to connect women with one another. Another group of converts who had experienced a lack of guidance in their early years as Muslims started their own website, offering online support by answering questions and offline help with practical issues such as learning how to pray.

Yet another example, a convert's initiative to start an online forum, indicates that online experiences can also become meaningful against the backdrop of other online experiences. At first, when she became interested in Islam, the Internet was her primary means to become

more knowledgeable about the religion. Since the Internet had been so important in developing her interest in Islam, especially since at that time she had no local opportunities for offline socialization with other converts, or born Muslims, years later, this motivated her to start her own forum:

> I was always busy with the Internet and active on forums. However, I wanted to create a place for myself, smaller than other forums. So I thought: "Why not start one myself?" At first, I started with a simple format but I got good responses so I thought, "Why not do something bigger, more official, an online platform for Muslimas?" So I asked another Muslima to build the site and together we organized it.

To get to know the women who joined this forum, she organized a yearly offline "sister day." New converts were particularly welcomed,

> That's why it feels so good to do it, I see myself. I try to help them [new converts]. I invite them to lectures and to our sister day so they can taste and experience [sisterhood] for themselves. You got to wish for your sister what you wish for yourself.

Her other target group was "stay-at-home moms" for whom the Internet was also a very important means to stay connected with other Muslimas:

> I see sisters chatting with each other and having fun. These are sisters who sit at home with their children, every day. If they can have a chat with each other in the evening, they love it. It makes them feel good and that makes me feel good.

Besides creating their own Internet platforms to meet and discuss, to teach and to learn, and to stay in touch with each other while being house bound, or after emigration, participants also made extensive use of content created by others. In fact, so many stories and videos circulate the Internet that studying them in more detail alone, would suffice for a thesis. Since the main emphasis of my research was on the offline sociality of local Muslim women's groups and on offline/online interactions, this more general data stream is viewed as a complementary source of information and not a focus of analysis by itself.

2.2.3 Visual Methods

Another complementary research method I employed was the use of visual means such as photographs and video. In addition, seven

participants took part in a creative assignment. They decorated a white kitchen plate with words and symbols of importance in the context of fasting during the month of Ramadan, to be displayed in a museum exhibition. These were important additions. As Clark-Ibáñez argues in regard to the use of photographs, researchers can use visual methods as a tool to expand on questions, while participants can use them as a unique ways to communicate dimensions of their lives (2004, 1507). Indeed, photographs were a means to discuss consequences of conversion I might not have thought of otherwise. For instance, five participants made photographs of objects symbolizing changes in their daily life. Besides taking pictures of Islamic objects such as prayer mats, or the Qur'an, one of them also made a photograph of her television to signify that her conversion changed what she watched on TV. Another photograph displayed a few coins, reflecting how conversion had changed how she spent her money. I also asked a few participants to photograph their Ramadan meals to gain more insight into my observation that their meals were usually much more sober than the festive meals born Muslims usually serve during Ramadan. Photographs were also an asset in terms of presenting my research to a wider audience .

Visual methods are valuable for representational purposes and to be able to report back to participants. With the help of some of my museum colleagues, I made a short video of changes in daily life after conversion, based on quotes from the interviews I had conducted at the time. In addition, I worked with visual anthropologist Roswitha Eshuis. During the month of Ramadan (2009), we were allowed to film at a gathering by one of the five groups involved in my research. This footage conveyed the group's sociality of breaking the fast and praying together. We were able to interview the group's founder before the camera about the topic of Islamic sisterhood, and we were allowed to make a photo series of the evening's event, creating a communal collage about the meaning of the month of Ramadan.

While writing this thesis, I started a collaboration with photographer Saskia Aukema. She was able to photograph many aspects of the conversion process as described in this thesis. Our communal goal has been to combine this footage with an accessible textual overview of the main themes of this thesis, to communicate our findings about the conversion process in the Netherlands to a general audience through a museum exhibition and a book.

2.3 Engaged Anthropology

In the last section of this chapter, I will elaborate on my attempts to place my research within a current debate among anthropologist on engagement

(Rylko-Bauer *et al*, 2006; Low and Merry, 2010) particularly the question of how to connect research findings to a general public (Lamphere, 2003; Eriksen, 2006; Pelkmans, 2013). My interest in this subject was in many ways a progression from the projects I had worked on as a management-assistant at the Amsterdam Museum, a city museum about the past and present of Amsterdam. Presenting historical and art-historical knowledge to a general public, the museum was a stimulating environment for thinking about the possibilities of anthropological projects engaging a wider audience. Before my research was completed, I was invited to participate in a project by Museum Our Lord in the Attic (2007). I also initiated and took part in an exhibition at the Amsterdam Museum (2010).[52] These two museum projects can be situated within the increasingly prominent focus of attention within anthropology on issues of engagement, addressing, among other things, how anthropologists could improve efforts to reach out to the general public.[53]

From the start of my research, I was interested in finding ways to communicate my research results to a broader audience than solely other academics. Without comprehending the full breadth of the field of contemporary engaged anthropology, I made an effort to incorporate possibilities for a public exchange of my findings, for instance, in respect to the research topic and in the operationalization of my research question. I took Lamphere's definition (2003) of engaged anthropology as my point of departure because of its applicability to my research circumstances. In her definition, engaged anthropology possesses three characteristics: 1) it reaches out to the public, 2) it aims to establish ongoing partnerships with *communities* anthropologists work with, and 3) it examines topics which have relevance to public policy.

Reaching out to the public involves "determining what the public knows and wants to know" as well as the translation of anthropological knowledge into language and concepts that are meaningful to the public that one wishes to reach (158). The increased presence of Muslims in the Netherlands, the contentious nature of visible Islamic symbols in Dutch public space, and conversion to Islam as a transgression of cultural boundaries, received enough public attention prior to my research to judge

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[52] I also worked with Kosmopolis Rotterdam, on behalf of ISIM, on organizing a public debate about "Muslims as a Market" in the context of El Hema (2008), and with the IKON radio-program De Andere Wereld, resulting in three radio-shows, *Moslima's met blauwe ogen*, and a publication, *Hollandse Moslima's* (2010).

[53] Among Dutch anthropologists, there have been several online anthropological initiatives to connect research to a broader audience, for example Martijn de Koning's exploration of Public Anthropology through his weblog Closer, or "Standplaats Wereld," a weblog platform, with contributions from students and staff of the department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at VU University Amsterdam. Another example is Joris Luyendijk's Banking Blog, elaborating on his research among people working in the banking business, in collaboration with the Guardian.

it a topic of public interest. This first goal, translating the research findings into a narrative a general public could relate to, is closely related to the second goal of establishing partnerships with (members of) my research groups. I considered the partnership-component of my research to primarily consist of offering a platform for the women involved to have a voice and the opportunity to tell the story of their conversion experience. Muslim women in the West in general, and in the context of my research in the Netherlands in particular, are regularly perceived as being oppressed (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Van Nieuwkerk, 2004). As a consequence, women's conversion to Islam is mired in stereotypes, for instance the persistent image that conversion occurs because of marriage to a Muslim husband, disregarding women's agency (Bartels and Vroon-Najem, 2007, 22). This perceived lack of Muslim women's agency can also be observed in Dutch policy debates on the face-veil (Moors, 2009) and on Islamic marriages (Moors, 2013). Furthermore, as some of the women who participated in the museum programs might fit the label "Salafist" or "Fundamentalist," frequently used in academic and popular reports for categorizing Muslims who opt for a literalist practice of Islam, their enthusiastic participation in these projects nuances the so often assumed automatic opposition between piety and participation in civic society.[54] Thus meeting the third goal of choosing a topic with a relevance to public policy, this avenue enabled me to "present an anthropological voice among the many others who claim expertise on a critical social issue" (Lamphere, 2003, 162). I will illustrate my approach with two museum projects based on my research results.

2.3.1 Our Lord in the Attic: Spiritual Virgins

Some museums, too, seek ways to improve their engagement with the public. The Amsterdam canal house museum 'Our Lord in the Attic' is such a museum. A religious heritage institute, harboring a well-preserved "hidden church" in the attic of a canal house, built during the Reformation when Dutch Catholics were forbidden to hold public services, the museum has sought ways to link this history with the present day. In addition to preserving and exhibiting the Catholic history of Amsterdam and the unique building, the museum aspires to be a hospitable and inspiring meeting point where visitors can share knowledge and experiences. Upon meeting at a conference, the director and I decided to collaborate in the

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[54] This participation depends, however, on the extent of accommodation of religious principles such as respect for dietary rules, or creating the opportunity for single-gender activities. This, however, was similarly true for some of the Jewish participants.

context of their exhibition "Spiritual Virgins" (*Verborgen Vrouwen*, 2007).

Our Lord in the Attic is Amsterdam's second oldest museum, only the Rijksmuseum is older. The history of the spiritual virgins, however, had remained hidden. For centuries it was believed that the church's priests had worked alone, until a handwritten account of several life-stories revealed that a group of about twenty women had aided the church's first priest in his duties. These women were called "spiritual virgins" (*geestelijke maagden)*. They were Catholic women in 17th century Amsterdam who had aided the house church's priest by doing volunteer work. These works ranged from assisting with the Mass to helping the poor through a wide variety of charitable works.

In countries in which Catholicism was the dominant religion, or in earlier times in Holland, women could find spiritual fulfillment by living within a religious order. However, becoming a nun was no longer an option for Dutch women because practicing Catholicism, although tolerated, was officially banned in the Dutch Republic until the late 18th century. Becoming a spiritual virgin became an alternative option. These women remained unmarried as long as they choose to be spiritual virgins, but, unlike becoming a nun, it did not need to be a choice for life. Interestingly, in some ways, their way of life, resembled the pious lifestyles of some of my research participants.

One similarity between the past and the present, was that although the priest was male these women were vital in assisting him and in doing community-work. Therefore, this story provided an opportunity to nuance the secular narrative that patriarchal religions, such as Catholicism and Islam, marginalize women. In addition, the hidden religious function of the building, the exterior of which resembles any other canal house, relates to the difficulties contemporary Dutch Muslims experience when they want their mosque to have minarets or other obvious Islamic symbols. For instance, the 17th century law against visible Catholic churches or ringing the church bells for Mass, mirrors contemporary public resistance to mosque-building or an audible call to prayer.[55] Questions about Muslims' loyalty to the Dutch nation-state, as immigrants continue to have transnational ties and remain involved in their former

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[55] As Cesari puts forward, "The arguments put forward on the local level to justify refusal [of mosque construction] are the same throughout Europe: noise and traffic nuisance, incompatibility with existing urban planning, non-conformity with existing security norms. But beyond these technical obstacles, the resistance to new mosques is always linked to a meta-narrative about Islam. This narrative, prevalent on the international level, also exists on the national level, and in many European countries; Islam is systematically conflated with threats to international or domestic order" (2006, 1019).

homelands, are not unlike the questions once posed to Dutch Catholics about their allegiance to the Pope in Rome (see Sunier, 2005, 317-318).

My research focus on changes in the daily lives of women who converted to Islam provided a useful starting point since, for example, modest dress was important for both the historic spiritual virgins and the contemporary Muslimas. Both groups, occasionally, were called names in public space because of their identifiable affiliation with either Catholicism or Islam. Furthermore, some of the converts in my research shared various pious aspirations with their Catholic Amsterdam ancestors. For instance, both groups of women emphasized the importance of doing good deeds, such as helping the poor and visiting the sick. Their shared pious outlook also included covering their hair and avoiding the company of men. To underscore this point, all religious art on display at the museum showed women wearing veils.[56] The practice of veiling became the focus of a guided tour on the broader topic of women and religion and the above mentioned points were also included in a televised documentary, aired by the national broadcaster AVRO.[57]

For the museum, this collaborative project was a chance to engage with their public by asking contemporary questions. All of these endeavors engaged the general public as well as a new public comprised of converted and born Muslimas. Both types of visitors were offered guided tours, but in order to have them also meet and interact, the museum organized two public *iftars*. These *iftars*, evening meals to break the fast at sunset during the month of Ramadan, were accompanied by a lecture about my research, and a visit to the exhibition.

The project was considered a successful pilot and a means to further develop the museum's policy pertaining to their role as a neutral meeting point for different audiences. Through the use of contemporary anthropological data, it was possible to think through and disseminate knowledge about both groups of women and eras in an innovative way. The project addressed all three levels of engagement in Lamphere's definition. It engaged the general public through guided tours, a televised documentary, lectures, and two public *iftars*. It strengthened my partnerships with research participants through inviting them to the museum for special tours and by encouraging them to bring their non-Muslim relatives to discuss their choices in the museum's context. This enabled them to view these choices in a new setting and in a historical perspective. It also furthered the museum's policy of being an open and

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[56] The New Testament, for instance, states: "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with [her] head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven" (I Corinthians, 11:5).

[57] The documentary can still be watched online: http://www.opsolder.nl/nl/museum-publicaties.php, last accessed on February 15th 2014.

welcoming space for different audiences to meet one another, promoting diversity.

2.3.2 The Amsterdam Museum: I'm Fasting

My second collaboration was with the Amsterdam Museum, a city museum about the past and presence of Amsterdam. The orphan lockers in one of the museum's courtyards are regularly used for partnerships with schools, artists, or social organizations, inviting them to participate in creating the content for an exhibition.[58] In 2009, I proposed an exhibition in these lockers on the subject of fasting during Ramadan. The exhibition proposal was accepted and expanded to also address fasting in Judaism and Catholicism.

At that time, every convert I had talked to had already experimented with fasting during Ramadan *ahead* of the actual conversion. Often, fasting in Ramadan had been a first step in contemplating becoming Muslim themselves. It also appeared that just before, during, or right after the month of Ramadan, was a preferred moment for saying the *shahada*.[59] Converts, however, displayed a somewhat different approach to fasting in Ramadan than many born Muslims do (see also Jensen, 2012). For instance, there were differences in preparation. As Buitelaar (2002) found in her research about Ramadan in Morocco, women extensively cleaned their houses as a means of preparation. Most converts participating in my research did not. As one of them explained in the exhibition: "I don't do anything special as a means of preparation, if the month starts, I just begin fasting." More often, participants emphasized the spiritual properties of fasting: as a means of worship, to improve one's character, to overcome bad habits, reign in one's temper. It explicitly also included watching one's tongue, not raising one's voice, not getting angry, or aggressive. For converts, I observed through this project, Ramadan was most of all an annual moment of reflection. They often emphasized soberness in food and drink, and were critical of the elaborate meals many born Muslim families prepare for breaking the fast. Many trained their reading skills in advance in order to be able to read the entire Qur'an during Ramadan.

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[58] A remnant of the time the museum buildings functioned as the city's orphanage: the lockers were originally used by the boy-orphans to store their tools. The lockers are currently used for collaborative exhibitions.

[59] Another reason for contemplating an exhibition on the topic of fasting in Ramadan, was that after the murder of Theo van Gogh, which caused a considerable shock in the Netherlands (Buruma, 2006), initiatives such as the yearly *Ramadan Festival* had become a means to bridge divides. During Ramadan, Muslims had opened their doors for hospitality dinners and many institutions, among them museums, began hosting public *iftars*.

The most important difference with born Muslims, however, was lacking a Muslim family to break the fast with and celebrate the feast at the end, *Eid al-Fitr*. The festive side of Ramadan was often the most difficult to reproduce for converts. As they acknowledged that adopted feasts cannot become as emotionally charged as feasts that are connected with one's childhood, when they had families, most of their efforts were aimed at creating a festive environment for their children. For instance, in the exhibition, one participant explained that she wanted her son to feel the same excitement at *Eid al-Fitr* she used to feel when she was a child and it was her birthday: "You wake up, your parents are still asleep, everything is festively decorated, and there are presents!" To do so while unmarried, for many women, was quite a challenge. As another exhibition-participant, a divorcee, explained:

> For my in-laws, Ramadan was, besides a religiously important month, in particular a festive month, a month of being together as a family. When I tell non-Muslims about Ramadan, I usually compare it to Christmas. The atmosphere is comparable. Visiting relatives, eating together, extras for the children. For me, that aspect has been less important because I didn't grow up with it, so I had to consciously figure out what it means for me. … The last Ramadan [after she divorced] was difficult, in particular mentally. I had to work, feed the children, and then, late in the evening, by myself, break the fast. It forced me to reflect on why I'm fasting and even on why I'm Muslim. Existential questions arose. Why am I doing this? Why did I choose this? Do I really want this? Last year, Ramadan, truly, was a month of reflection, day after day. In hind-sight, I feel like I was born again as a Muslim that month. This was the first year there was no social pressure in any way. In every aspect it was my own, free choice. I want to serve Allah. I am endlessly grateful for everything He gave me. No one made this decision [to fast] for me. I do it for Him.

In light of the question Lamphere puts forward, what does the public already know and what does it want to know, the project revealed that the general Dutch public knows very little about fasting during Lent and close to nothing about fasting at Yom Kippur. Of the three annual fasts, surprisingly, Ramadan was by far the most well-known. However, the fact that during Ramadan, one should also refrain from drinking during the day, including water, is surprising to many and something that Dutch Muslims need to explain again and again. As I argued in chapter one, there is a difference in non-Muslim Dutch's perception of converts compared to born Muslims. In the context of fasting, for instance, one participant told me how at work, her supervisor treated her different from her Moroccan-Dutch colleague:

> We had a Moroccan[-Dutch] girl in our team. With her, [Islam] wasn't an issue. They left her alone. With me, they wanted to know everything, asked many questions. I don't mind but for instance during Ramadan, they asked a hundred times, "Can't you drink a glass of water, either?" Then I think, "Guys, for how long now are there Muslims in the Netherlands? Should we publish a paper, explaining what is allowed and what not? Would you read that?" They never asked her such questions. She was just a Moroccan[-Dutch] girl, and I remained that Dutch woman [*Hollander*] with a headscarf.

The experience of the participant cited above, in similar words but by another participant, indeed, became part of the exhibition. Elaborating on one of the five themes of the exhibition, *restraint*, one of the Muslimas portrayed in the exhibition expressed the same sentiment,

> When I think about restraint, I think about how people react to my fasting. Not about restraining myself, I don't find it [fasting] difficult, but about how people react to it. The standard comment is, "Can't you drink either?" You'll have to repeat that eighty times a month, "No, not even water." You need to constantly explain that you won't die if, for one day, you don't eat. Or if, for a little while, you don't drink as soon as you feel the need to. People [non-Muslims] ask themselves, "How does she do it?" But you either do it or you don't, that's it.

In 2010, three years after the project accompanying the exhibition Spiritual Virgins, and again during the Islamic month of Ramadan, the exhibition "I'm Fasting" opened at the Amsterdam Museum. Again, the focus was solely on women. Five Jewish women, six Catholic women, and seven converted Muslimas, the latter all participants in my research, were portrayed. As part of the production of the exhibition, the women met each other at the museum, bringing with them personal objects connected to their fasting. They enjoyed a tour of the museum and were invited to take part in a creative workshop where they all decorated a white kitchen-plate with symbols and words that were meaningful to them in the context of their fasting. They all had been interviewed on the five themes of the exhibition: preparation, restraint, awareness, reflection, closure/completion,[60] or had written contributions themselves. Fragments of these interviews/contributions were shown in the exhibition, with photographs of participants holding their personal objects. This material was also featured in a publication for a general audience, complemented

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[60] The Jewish and Catholic women were interviewed by Ardjuna Candotti, the Muslimas by me.

with two articles based on a more elaborate review of the women's personal stories.

Just as Museum Our Lord in the Attic, the Amsterdam Museum proved to be a neutral meeting point (see also Malt, 2005). The women shared stories about their backgrounds and religion with each other and with the museum staff. When the exhibition opened, they met again during an *iftar* at the museum restaurant.[61] This *iftar* was part of an evening program, specifically designed for religious and non-religious people to meet and discuss lifestyle choices, exchange and test knowledge of each other's traditions, and to share a meal.

The exhibition enabled the Amsterdam Museum to engage a new segment of visitors with an interest in religion and religious experiences. It also strengthened the museum's policy of being a platform for diverse audiences. Because the Amsterdam Museum worked with Museum Our Lord in the Attic and the Jewish Historical Museum, the project also strengthened inter-museum collaboration. The exhibition resulted in several new additions to the museum's collection: all the decorated plates made by the participating women and several of their personal objects that had been on display, were permanently added to the collection of the city of Amsterdam.[62]

The project also resulted in additional data for my research project, for instance the women's choice of words and symbols for decorating the plates, the extra interviews about the importance of fasting or their written contributions, and participants' choice of objects representing their convictions and religious life. Inviting participants to the museum to work on the project, and, subsequently, inviting them to the opening of the exhibition, created a chance to discuss the subject of the importance of fasting in Ramadan and conversion to Islam in a new environment and strengthened my collaboration with them. The publication resulting from the exhibition was well received and distributed among participants, academic colleagues, and the general public in the widest sense.[63]

Through my experiences with these museum projects, I agree with Haas that if the academic community of anthropologists fails to recognize and capitalize on the potential of museums to communicate anthropology to the public, they are neglecting a vital opportunity "to play a part in the

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[61] Sponsored by the Rotary Club *Nachtwacht* and Imagine Identity and Culture (center for the visual representation of migration and cultures: www.imagineic.nl).

[62] http://amsterdammuseum.nl/collectie, last accessed on December 9th 2013.

[63] The publication was given to Secondary Schools in Amsterdam, to attendees of the AISSR seminar "Women's Conversion to Islam and the Politics of Belonging," to readers of the IKON newsletter, and to the staff, volunteers, and the general public of the three participating museums.

public dialog over the issues that confront us all on a local, cultural, national and global level every day" (1996, S12). My attempts at disseminating research results through museum programs or exhibitions, indeed, produced a dialogical effect. In both projects, this dialogue was brought about through comparison. In the program I did with Our Lord in the Attic, the comparison was historical. I compared 17th century women choosing a pious Catholic lifestyle at odds with the wider, Protestant Dutch society, to contemporary (converted) Muslims, also, often, portrayed as clashing with the now secularized, Dutch society. Comparisons between historical and contemporary times should be approached with caution. Nevertheless, I believe that the contentious nature of Catholic visibility in earlier times, and similar resentment of Muslim's visibility in our time were fruitfully compared.

In the Amsterdam Museum, the comparison was not so much historical, as well as between women from different religious traditions engaging in a similar practice of fasting at set moments. This comparison nuanced the politicized dichotomy of an imagined "Dutch Judeo-Christian civilization" pitted against the unwanted newcomer Islam. It also nuanced the patriarchal image of religion as it explicitly brought women's experiences to the foreground. Both projects created opportunities for people from different walks of life to meet, discuss, reflect, exchange, et cetera. The projects also greatly nuanced some of the popular narratives of "orthodox" Muslims living in a "parallel" society. Some of the women who participated in these projects favored a strict practice of Islamic (or Jewish/Catholic) precepts, but enjoyed the cooperation, and welcomed the opportunity to convey their religious experiences.

Initiating, developing, and producing these projects has been a rewarding experience. However, they were time-consuming and therefore not always easy to combine with also pursuing an academic career. Another hurdle is that museum funds are limited and recently have been cut back even more. Many worthwhile initiatives are proposed to museums on a regular basis and competition is fierce. Therefore, anthropologists' chances to initiate or contribute to museum programs, will probably be enlarged by seeking collaboration at an early stage of the research and by being attentive to museums' long term programming.