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## Chapter 4

### Pious Sociality and Ethical Communalities

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In the previous chapter, I focused on women's conversion to Islam as an individual trajectory. In this chapter I complement this perspective by looking at the social and communal aspects of conversion to Islam. This is important because if the individual is the sole locus of analysis, converted women's agency in respect to forming and becoming part of Muslim *communities* remains unclear. Participants not only engaged in personal transformation processes, they also became connected to the *ummah*, the world *community* of Muslims, usually conceptualized as a symbolic family of brothers and sisters. This Islamic concept of sisterhood, I argue, was a means for participants to take part in and shape their (feelings of) belonging to the *ummah*.

*Community* is put in italics in this thesis because it is not a self-evident concept. That does not mean it is irrelevant. Arguably, the *ummah*, a *community* of faith, is a construction, an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991), but I disagree with Roy that in the Western context, it is a *reconstruction*. No longer based on territory and culture, he argues, the Muslim *community* in the West does not have a real social basis, as Muslims "do not share specific patterns of behavior and belong to different social groups" (2004, 197). As a result of individual choice and free association, he continues, there are "as many *ummahs* as groups pretending to embody it" (ibid, 200). This, however, can be argued of the past as well and is not typical for Muslims in "the West." As Eickelman points out, "by definition, world religions are not confined to one society or cultural tradition" (1981, 201). As my aim is to examine how the *ummah* is produced and becomes a reality for the women in my research, Baumann's suggestion to consider *community* as a concept "to be used and redefined contextually, but certainly...not [to] be written off as an irrelevancy" (1996, 4) is more useful in the context of this thesis. In addition to the public and private sphere, this conceptualization allows me to also address the social sphere (see Hansen, 1994, cited in Clawson 2005, 240).

What entailed the "Muslim social sphere" for participants in my research? Generally, in practice, the converts I met did not aim to become part of Muslim immigrant *communities*. Instead, they formed and

participated in multi-ethnic social networks, emanating from the work of a number of volunteers. In most cases, these volunteers were converts who organized a variety of offline gatherings and events, and online meeting points such as forums, websites, and blogs. Online and offline, these activities were centered around the common goal of learning about Islam and sharing experiences of being a (new) Muslima in the Netherlands. Gathering in the context of “gaining knowledge” [*kennis opdoen*], as it was usually phrased, produced a pious sociality and ethical communality that informed and shaped women’s belonging within the abstract notion of the *ummah*. To address this process, I will first have a closer look at *community* formation.

#### 4.1 Processes of *Community* Formation

Baumann argues that the concept of *community* is closely connected to the concept of *culture*. He points to a dominant discourse in Great-Britain, existing in the Netherlands as well, where culture is equated with community, community with ethnic identity, and ethnic identity with the “cause” of a person’s doings or sayings (1996, 6). The prominence of this discourse is exposed through the social consequences of changes in converts’ daily life, although in a reversed fashion. Converts’ changed doings and sayings, in particular since they occur in the context of becoming/being Muslim, exclude them from thick notions of Dutchness. Born and converted Muslimas alike, are pushed out of the imagined Dutch national *community* and addressed as foreigners, expected to lack the most basic feature of Dutchness: command of the language. Underlying feelings of superiority, I argued, made this experience somewhat different for white converts. Their choice to become Muslim seemed more offensive to non-Muslim sensibilities than for women with other complexions but all converts in my research had some experience with being addressed as belonging to the *culture* of Muslim immigrants.

Equating *culture* with *community*, within the dominant discourse often employed to essentialize the *culture* of immigrant *communities*, or in the context of the ethnification of Muslimness, obscures the simultaneousness of converts’ participation in and shaping of the *ummah*. This occurs, as Baumann points out, because *culture* in the dominant discourse is “filled with standardized meanings... specified as a substantive heritage that is normative, predictive of individuals’ behavior, and ultimately a cause of social action” (ibid, 12).<sup>109</sup> Converts do not have

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<sup>109</sup> As Abu-Lughod argues, the concept of *culture* “is the essential tool for making other” (1991, 143).

such a “substantive heritage” unless the content of Muslimness is considered to be timeless and immutable. The dominant discourse, however, has a demotic counterpart. As Baumann argues, demotic discourses enable drawing attention to the daily processes of “making culture” rather than “having a culture” (ibid, 6). This conceptualization is helpful to analyze the discourse of sisterhood common among participants in my research.<sup>110</sup>

Birgit Meyer offers another option for theorizing *community* formation. Although the interplay between the dominant discourse of thick ethnic/national identity and the demotic discourse of religiously inspired sisterhood, transcending ethnicity/nationality, was certainly present among my interlocutors, the notion of ‘aesthetic formation’ provides an alternative conceptualization. By favoring the concept of ‘formation,’ similar to Baumann, Meyer argues for a more dynamic conceptualization of *community*:

I certainly do not discard the notion of community per se, but indicate that we need to move beyond understanding community as a fixed, bounded social group. In order to get a better grip on the making of communities as a process, it is helpful to invoke the term formation, because it is more encompassing and dynamic. (Meyer, 2009, 7)

Importantly, this perspective takes into consideration the role of things, media, and the body in processes of *community* formation (ibid, 6). The term “aesthetic,” Meyer argues, points at a “shared sensory mode of perceiving and experiencing the world that produces community” (ibid, 10) through a particular, common aesthetic and style. In light of the dilemmas in dress I addressed in the previous chapter, this is a helpful perspective as it also grasps the material dimension of religious modes of forming subjects and communities (ibid).

Sartorial styles are illustrative for the conception of *community* as aesthetic formation (see also Mossière, 2012). If women followed the opinion that clothes should cover the head and body and be loose fitting as not to reveal too much body shape, this could be achieved through a variety of styles. Some participants favored *abayas* and *khimaars*, others preferred pants combined with tunics, yet others dressed in long skirts with jackets or vests (see Moors, 2013, 19-20; Tarlo and Moors, 2013, 10-11). During the past few decades, it has become increasingly easy in the Netherlands to buy imported clothes from Muslim majority countries, online and offline but choices in regard to dress, do influence Muslim’s and non-Muslim’s perceptions of converts. Long veils are more often seen

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<sup>110</sup> Participants’ ambivalence in regard to the concept of *culture* will be discussed in chapter five.

as *radical*, as an expression of being “more royal than the king” (Roald, 2004), or as a possible sign of extremism. Two women who had chosen to wear the *khimaar*, a headscarf covering the whole upper body, however, explained to me that this was most of all an aesthetic choice, with practical concerns in mind, too (see also Moors, 2009b, 187; Moors, 2013, 253). In their opinion, *hijab* could be accomplished with other styles as well, a point of view I found to be common among all participants:

It is my opinion that if it covers what it needs to cover, then it is sufficient. That can also be achieved with a long skirt and a large headscarf. Not a fancy skirt. Skirts with flowers, I don't think that will do. Just a more or less one color skirt, a simple vest on top, and a large headscarf. That covers too. It's just that I find it beautiful, an *abaya* and a *khimaar*. I think it's gorgeous, if I see other sisters with it, too. I find it *masha Allah*, just very beautiful. A big headscarf is beautiful, too, but these are unpractical, with all these pins and [my small] children.

This mix of practical concerns and aesthetic preferences was reflected in the story of the second participant as well:

You often see young Turkish[-Dutch] women in beautiful long skirts but you can see their exact shape. That's not really the concept of *hijab*. A long skirt isn't necessarily a good *hijab*. What's easy about a *djellaba*, for instance, is that it always covers well. You don't have to think about it twice. It's easy. The same with the *khimaar*. I started with a small headscarf but when I switched to the *khimaar*, that was a big relief. [With a headscarf,] I was always twisting and fiddling, or my hair came out underneath. So I thought to myself, “I want to wear *hijab* but I don't want to be reminded, all the time, all day, that I have something on my head. I want to put it on and be done. I want to wear it comfortably.” Well, the *khimaar* was a relief, it is very comfortable to wear. It just always fits so you don't have to worry about it. Especially during *salaat* [prayer]. Very peaceful. It gave me a lot of peace. About Western or non-Western clothes, for me the criterion is: is it Islamic? I'm not crazy about those large dresses and such, I'm not the type for dresses, that's something you like or not. Some people love wearing dresses, Moroccan dresses or whatever, but I'm not a big fan of those. I do have a few, but not many. I prefer to wear just skirts and blouses. That's also practical with breast-feeding, so, of course, there are practical reasons as well.

As Moors points out, in light of the increased sartorial options for Muslim women wearing *hijab*, how women fashion themselves is not simply a matter of conforming to one particular mode of religious subjectivity, as

particular *communities* of style, or “taste communities” have emerged in Europe, over the past few decades (2009b).

While both women cited above felt no restriction in including Western clothes in the category ‘Islamic’ as long as it provided proper covering, a sentiment echoed by the majority of participants, which style is chosen influences inclusion and exclusion by others, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. An example of the impact of style of dress in regard to identifications with particular *communities*, is a story a participant told me about an incident with a long term non-Muslim friend. Her friend came by to see her new apartment. When they stood on the balcony, looking out over Amsterdam-West, they saw a couple of Moroccan-Dutch women below, wearing *djellabas*:

Well [the friend said], “I’m really, very happy that you’re not dressed like that.” So I explained, and I showed her, that I dress like that whenever I feel like it. [So she said,] “But, you don’t mean outside, right?” [So I replied,] “Yeah, duh! Where else? I don’t have to be dressed like that inside the house, right?” And then her reaction was, “But you remain Dutch, right?” ... I felt her constant fear, “You won’t exaggerate, will you? You won’t become like those Muslims who live outside [our] reality.”

Which style of dress converts choose to wear, also influenced how they were perceived by other Muslims. When the same participant changed from occasionally wearing Moroccan dresses such as *djellabas*, and Middle Eastern style *abayas*, to a Turkish style of dress, and changed her headscarf accordingly to “Turkish style,” suddenly, she was greeted in public spaces by Turkish-Dutch Muslimas, who were otherwise, reportedly, notoriously non-greeters outside the Turkish-Dutch circle.

These material dimensions of becoming/being Muslim were very important for most women and a subject of constant talk and deliberation. However, *community* formation was achieved though immaterial means as well. For most women in my research, the concept of Islamic sisterhood functioned as an effective tool for *community* making, online and offline. Practicing sisterhood and the rights and duties it entailed, can be captured by what Abby Day terms “performative belief.” Day uses this term to point out that the use of language and specific tangible acts not only express beliefs but also help to actively claim and shape beliefs to produce socially specific identities (2010, 18).

Discussing the work of Mahmood (2005) and Hirschkind (2006), Anderson (2011, 3) too, emphasizes that the achievement of virtue in the Egyptian piety movement is not solely constituted through worship and ritual practices that discipline the self, but also through social exchange

and interaction.<sup>111</sup> Participation in the Muslim women's groups in my research, as well, was not so much about deploying virtue that one already attained, but about "becoming virtuous – aided by other's words, and aiding them in return" (ibid, 9). Borrowing a metaphor from economic anthropology, Anderson describes this use of words as a "gift-economy" equating the circulation of words with the circulation of goods (ibid, 5). His point is that acts of ethical speaking and listening do not just form selves but also form *communities* (ibid, 8). In the context of my research, this adequately describes the work of lectures and workshops and the use of Arabic-Islamic words and phrases, such as greetings, exclamations, and supplications, in the process of being and becoming part of the *ummah*. Before I further elaborate on this process, first, I will introduce the women's groups that took part in my research in more detail.

## 4.2 Five Grassroots Initiatives

As I have argued in the previous chapter, it is difficult to separate the conversion experience from social engagement with other Muslims. In most cases, for participants in my research, these first social contacts were with born Muslims who came to the Netherlands during the past half century, and/or their descendants.<sup>112</sup> Their generosity and hospitality were greatly valued (see also Lechkar, 2012, 106-114). However, when women began to ask questions about Islam, often, the ability of born Muslims to explain the tenets of their religion proved to be limited. Women then began to search and socialize beyond this first Muslim circle. In other instances, ties with the born Muslims they had first met were severed because of a new job, the end of a relationship, or for other reasons.

Referred to by born Muslims, by other converts, or on their own through searching the Internet, they found the Muslim women's groups in my research, and began frequenting their meetings. Muslim women's groups exist in different areas of Amsterdam but I concentrated my research on the western part of the city, which enabled a focus on the local networks these women formed and participated in. As the first examples of such women's initiatives were found in this part of the city, this approach also provided an insight into the developments of these initiatives over time.

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<sup>111</sup>This approach can be considered complementary to the Foucauldian perspective favored by Mahmood, which puts the transformation of the *subject* center stage.

<sup>112</sup> During the past two decades, there has been a proliferation of Muslim women's groups and lectures about Islam in the Dutch language. Women's first Muslim contacts are now more often other converts than in the past.

Each of the women's groups shared common features with the other groups. Often, visitors of one group also frequented meetings of other groups, although each group also had its own characteristics. All of them originated from converts' need to learn about Islam in the Dutch language and to share with each other the specific challenges of conversion to Islam within the Dutch context. Formal Muslim organizations in the Netherlands represent Muslims in negotiations with the government but none of them address the specific needs of converts. In order to address this void, at a grassroots level, an increasing number of converted Muslims volunteer their help, based on their own conversion experiences. These groups are local and informal but sometimes affiliated with organizations with a more formal structure, some of them founded by the same volunteers organizing the local groups. I will briefly introduce each of the five groups that were the most important in the context of my research. For reasons of anonymity, I have named them groups one through five and introduce them in the same order as I became acquainted with them.

The first group I was introduced to was the only group in my research affiliated with a mosque. In the early 1990s, the wife of this mosque's imam, herself a convert to Islam, noticed that there were few opportunities to learn about Islam in the Dutch language. To fill this gap, she began to lecture herself. Together with a couple of other converted women, who were also married to Muslims active within this mosque, she organized these lectures for fourteen years. As the wife of an imam, she could easily consult with her husband in regard to the content of her lectures and when questions were posed by attendants, she could discuss them and come back with an authoritative answer. When she emigrated,<sup>113</sup> two volunteers, both converted Muslimas, took over organizing these lectures. Without the back-up of a husband's proficiency in the studies of Islam, the Internet provided ample opportunity to stay in touch with one of the groups' founders for consultancy in regard to content. As one of the volunteers explained,

When she left, we had an agreement that I would check with her first in regard to the content of the lectures. After about a year and a half, I became more confident about my knowledge and more knowledgeable about my doubts. Eventually, I only asked her things like, "How would you approach that topic?"

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<sup>113</sup> When I started my research in 2006, all of the original founders of this group had left the Netherlands and now live in various Muslim majority countries



Usually, the group did not convene at the mosque itself but at a nearby primary school. At the beginning of my research, they came together every Sunday morning. Usually around fifteen to twenty women were present although on special occasions, such as a festive last meeting before the summer break, the attendance increased to about fifty women. Women visiting this group were usually older than twenty-five and in most cases had (young) children which they often brought with them.

The group had been bigger in the 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium. After the founder and the other women volunteering for this group left because of emigration, attendance dropped by half. At about the same time, many other Dutch-language initiatives for Muslim women emerged and the Internet, too. Reflecting on this development, one of the volunteers told me,

[After the founder left,] many women stopped coming. Sometimes, when I ran into them on the street, I invited them to come again but I was told, "Since she left, I don't like it anymore." I thought, "Huh? Why do you attend a lecture? Because of a person or because you want to gain knowledge?" At the same time, there were many new initiatives for Muslim women in Amsterdam. When we started, we were among the very first, there was not much else.

For these reasons, during the time that I visited their meetings, attendance dropped again, to an average of twelve women at regular meetings and about twenty-five women at season's end and religious holidays. The frequency of meetings was scaled back from once a week to once every two weeks. The remaining audience, mostly converted women but consisting of born Muslimas of different ethnic backgrounds as well, highly appreciated the lectures and they were for the most part loyal attendees.

The second group was formed around its founder's lectures at a mosque, starting approximately in 1996. The lecturer tried to emigrate to a Muslim majority country on three separate occasions and each time the group dissolved. When she returned, she began lecturing again, and the group reconvened. The group I visited was the third incarnation, when in 2004 the lecturer, again, had returned to Amsterdam. She gained permission from a mosque to use the women's praying space on Sunday afternoons but was otherwise independent from the imam or mosque board. Her audience mainly consisted of young converts and Moroccan-Dutch girls. After the lectures, she was often approached by attending teenagers who confided in her about their personal problems. To communally address these problems in the context of Islam, in an unused room at the mosque she initiated self-help group sessions in which girls

shared their stories and could find support, advice, and encouragement. Some of them were young converts encountering opposition from their non-Muslim parents because of their conversion. Other girls suffered from domestic violence, unwanted pregnancies, lack of communication with their parents, or had other problems.

The lectures were very popular, attracting over a hundred attendants every Sunday afternoon. However, eight months after the start of my research, the lecturer was banned from the mosque. She blamed the local Muslim *community*, citing envy, jealousy, and gossip as the reasons she was no longer welcome. The (unauthorized) self-help activities, encouraging girls to air their families' dirty laundry, might have also contributed to her fall from grace. But more seemed to be at stake. The content of this volunteer's lectures was often connected to the discourse of the Islamic Revival, for instance, reflected in her calls for a decoupling of *culture* and *religion*. In order to elaborate on this dramatic expulsion, I will briefly digress here from the introduction of the women's groups.

As argued before, encounters between non-Muslims and (descendants of) Muslim immigrants influenced non-Muslims in that they might develop an interest in Islam. However, they also influenced born Muslims in the practice of their religion.<sup>114</sup> A student, for instance, told me how she developed an interest in Islam while working part-time at a pizza restaurant. The delivery boys were all Moroccan-Dutch and every now and then she would ask them a question. Since they had little knowledge of Islam, she got few answers. She then turned to books and took part in a course on Islam. After a while, she brought her books to work and confronted them:

They thought it was scary, I really frightened them. They read the books and went to mosque lectures. They now practice [Islam] seriously. They go to the mosque and acquire knowledge. They have learned many Qur'an verses by heart and have turned around completely. It's peculiar! Like, "Hey, I've contributed to the fact that they now practice."

These books or lectures do not necessarily reflect Islam as practiced by Moroccan-Dutch Muslims. Lectures offered by and for the women in my research were drawn from a multitude of sources, among them prominently the Internet. To give an example, one Sunday morning, a volunteer of group one gave a lecture, titled "To live as a Muslim in a non-Muslim country." She got the lecture from a website by someone of Jamaican origin, living in India. It was translated by her from English into Dutch. The lecture mentioned a few examples specific to Indian

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<sup>114</sup> See chapter five for a more detailed analysis.

circumstances but attendees easily translated the recommendations, the importance of acquiring knowledge and building a *community*, to the Dutch situation. Another example of transnational and global influences on the everyday practice of Islam in the Netherlands is new options in sartorial styles. For instance, until about a decade ago, there was only one mosque-shop in Amsterdam that sold a specific type of head covering called a *khimaar*.<sup>115</sup> These *khimaars* were brought from Egypt to Amsterdam by members of this mosque. Since the mosque was also visited by Moroccan-Dutch women and girls, some of them switched to this type of covering. However, Moroccan-Dutch girls who changed to this style of dress without their parents' consent, often provoked strong negative reactions. Their parents feared that this type of head-wear would hinder their daughters getting jobs or internships or might provoke violence in public space. They also objected because it was deemed not to be a part of their cultural heritage.<sup>116</sup>

Although my research was focused on converts, I spoke with dozens of born Muslimas frequenting their meetings. I extensively interviewed one of them, at that time a volunteer of group four. Her story highlights some of the common familial problems other born Muslimas pointed out to me as well. These problems occurred when their practice of Islam began to differ from what the family was used to. To elaborate on why the lecturer of group two might have ran into problems at the mosques where she lectured, I will present here the story of how this born Muslim participant became a visitor of group two.

At the time of our interview, she was a single mother in her thirties. She told me that when she was in her mid-twenties, and married to a non-observant Moroccan-Dutch husband, her life was all about partying. One day, when she was hanging out with a few friends,

A Turkish[-Dutch] guy came in and brought a few print-outs. Where these print-outs came from, *Allahu alem* [God only knows], because they really were non-practicing people [i.e., non-observant]. They had entirely different lifestyles. So he brought these print-outs and they were about death. I really didn't want to read them because I knew it would affect me. Death is [a] confrontational [subject]. It's the truth, nobody can deny we'll all die. ... [The content] was about death speaking to people. It was a real wake-up call. Like, "Oh people with your expensive clothes, don't you know that soon you'll be dressed in a shroud." That was one thing, and I also wore very expensive clothes. Second, "Oh

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<sup>115</sup> A *khimaar* differs from headscarves usually worn in Turkey or Morocco.

<sup>116</sup> I was told that on holiday, quite often their family in Morocco disapproved as well, for similar reasons.

people with your passion for expensive cars, soon your vehicle will be a plank.” It was all about wealth, living in expensive houses, villas, “Soon your coffin will be your home.” One about meals, “Soon you’ll be a meal for the maggots.” And one I can’t remember.

She felt confronted but also compelled to read further and it inspired her to start wearing a small headscarf. That was uncommon in her family, which made her feel lonely. Her search also brought about a personal dilemma.

I read a *hadith*,<sup>117</sup> or a fatwa [edict], about people who don’t pray. It said that [when people don’t pray] you’re not allowed to live with them, you should not sit at the table with them. Very black and white. My husband didn’t pray at the time and I was very concerned [to learn] that I was not supposed to sit with him at the table, let alone share the bed. I was very upset. It meant we would have to separate. So I called someone [for advice] and she referred me to [the mosque]. There was a lecture, or something. At first I thought, “The mosque? For women? How come? What do you mean?” In my eyes, a mosque was only for men. I thought, “What should I do at the mosque?” But we went, and it opened my eyes. The women’s entrance was open, I saw a lot of girls in gowns, that was what it looked like to me at the time. I was speechless.

She was so impressed, she almost forgot why she came.

I had made an appointment [at the mosque] with a woman [to ask for her advice] but I totally forgot about her. I had brought the girl [who had referred her] and I said to her, “You see that woman, tell her about my situation [that her husband didn’t pray], and I’ll look around because I have never seen anything like this!” Then I heard someone clapping her hands, “Ladies, time to go upstairs, the lecture will start in a minute.” I thought, “What’s happening?” It was [the lecturer of group two]. I thought, “Am I seeing what I think I’m seeing? Is that a Dutch lady in Islamic, traditional clothing [usually the lecturer wore an *abaya* and *khimaar*]? Really?” I followed her upstairs, forgot all about the woman [she was supposed to meet], and sat down in the circle [during these lectures attendants sat on the floor]. There were mostly Dutch sisters [converts], I couldn’t believe my eyes. I began touching them, [asking,] “Are you a Muslim? What do your parents think about it?” I was in shock. It was a beautiful sight.

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<sup>117</sup> Statements or actions of the prophet Mohammad.

She continued reading about Islam and became a regular attendant of group two's lectures. In her enthusiasm, she talked about her new insights with her parents. She explained,

If you read something, you want to talk about it. You do it unconsciously, [things like,] "Hey, that is not allowed, you can't do that, do you know what Islam says about that?" It was all about "Islam says this and Islam says that" while they [her parents] were like, "We have learned this from our ancestors and that is Islam." They really thought it [her new approach] was modernized Islam, lets say, contemporary Islam.  
*Question:* From books?

Exactly. I bought a lot of books. Everything I could find. I took it all home. I didn't look at the source references, just anything about Islam. I also printed a lot from the Internet. I still have a lot of these things from back then. I don't read them anymore because the sources are not right but I do like to see how I evolved.

The attendance of lots of lectures and her changes in wardrobe made her parents very uneasy and her social life began to suffer from her choices. Reflecting on her predicament at the time and comparing it to converts, she continued,

For the [ethnic] Dutch sisters, when they are converted, or if they convert, in general there is a period of loneliness. That loneliness is because they feel others have turned their back on them, right? But that's not always the case. They [their non-Muslim social circle] just have to get used to it. In my case, on top of the loneliness, there was the ridicule. Do you understand? They [her family] know about Islam but differently. They felt threatened by me. For example, I went on *hadj* [to Mecca]. My family thought I was very young, but fine. I came back three months before my brother would get married. The whole family came to pick me up from Schiphol [airport] and, as a matter of speech, my brother saw the light. To his surprise, a lot of his friends (well, friends, you know, partying, having fun) also came back from *hadj* and he was like, "Huh?" I talked a lot with him in those three months. They were planning a huge wedding, with all the extras: a band, a limousine. I guess it cost 26.000 euro or something. It was mixed [men and women]. I convinced my brother [to change the wedding plans to comply with stricter, more sober Islamic precepts] and persuaded him to have an *anasheed* band [religious songs]. I was treated terribly [by the rest of her family]. That really was not a nice period. That's what I recognize with converts.

Group's two lecturer attracted a lot of girls with similar experiences. It may well be that this generational difference of opinion on how to best

practice Islam contributed to the lecturer's expulsion from the mosque. The story of this participant, however, is not an isolated case. All five groups attracted born Muslim girls who (had) ran into problems with their families when they began to approach Islam differently. Many parents objected to the *khimaar*, and the face-veil, *niqaab*, was considered unacceptable by many of them but even a small headscarf could be cause for worries, as veiling is a contentious practice in the Netherlands. Contrary to the stereotypical Dutch image of Muslim fathers and husbands demanding that their daughters and wives cover themselves, many parents and husbands were worried about the negative social implications of wearing any type of *hijab* in the Dutch context.

To return to the history of group two, first the self-help activities were banned from the mosque, and then the lecturer herself, too, but the group continued. Since the lecturer was able to reach out to troubled young Muslim girls in ways regular Dutch institutions could not, with some help from the local government, the group was offered a place of its own. To be eligible for support, the group had to become a more formal foundation. However, the relationship with its board became strained, and to their immense regret the girls lost this new space as well. The founder, however, kept lecturing at several other mosques. Eventually, the local government provided a new space for meeting each other, which, like the first two spaces, was decorated as an Arabic-style living room. This new space also had a separate area for confidential talks, a kitchen, and a dining area for communal meals. Over the years, however, the founder and the foundation grew apart and in 2010 a new group of volunteers took over, although they kept the group's name.<sup>118</sup> Because the lecturer changed mosques so often, and also because many new Dutch language initiatives providing access to information on Islam came to light, the attendance of this group dropped too. At first, it fluctuated around seventy attendants; later on in my research there were usually around thirty to fifty attendants and, occasionally, only ten to fifteen.

The third group, too, had been more successful in the past in terms of attendance. Probably, the increased availability of many other groups offering information about Islam in the Dutch language and guidance for new converts, again, was one of the main reasons. The group I met in the context of my research was a local chapter of a national organization for Muslim women. Soon after the start of my fieldwork, all chapters in other Dutch cities closed because of a lack of volunteers. The Amsterdam chapter survived but scaled back their meetings from once a month to once every three months. The average attendance dropped from around twenty women to around ten to fifteen attendees except for special

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<sup>118</sup> The lecturer continued lecturing elsewhere and has her own website.

occasions such as an *iftar* during Ramadan or their annual Women's Day program when as much as thirty to fifty women usually attended.

On the national level, the group had transformed from an organization primarily aimed at converts, being among the first groups providing Dutch language information on Islam, to addressing the position of women in Islam in general, and the position of Muslim women in Dutch society in particular. Their point of departure was the Qur'an verse "There is no compulsion in religion"<sup>119</sup> and their motto was "diversity, freedom, and consciousness." Other groups in my research were inclusive, too, but more often advocated "one, best way of practicing Islam" (i.e., to follow the example of the prophet Mohammed and the first three generations of Muslims, although they differed on the details).

At the local level, in many ways the dynamic of group three was similar to the other groups: a *community* of women, loosely bound together by being Muslim or having an interest in Islam. Similar to the other groups, there was a high level of flux in terms of attendees who gathered to engage with various topics in the context of (practicing) Islam. Some women were "regulars," others visited sporadically, for a short period of time, or only once or twice. Despite these similarities, the content of the meetings of group three differed from the other groups as they were more often related to being Muslim in the social and political context of the Netherlands, and less often to strictly religious subjects. The social-political context of practicing Islam in the Netherlands was an important subject for other groups, too, but seldom the main focus of a lecture or workshop.

As I will address in more detail in the next section, finding a suitable space was a challenge for most groups. When I started participating in group three, they made use of a community center. After a few years, however, government funding for this location was discontinued. This occurred in 2008, at the same time the *Polder Mosque* was established.<sup>120</sup> This unusual mosque, housed in a former office building, was founded with the needs of young, Dutch speaking, born Muslims in mind. However, an all Dutch language approach was appealing for converts as well. Explicitly inter-ethnic, with no commitment to one of the four (Sunni) Law Schools, or other Islamic schools of thought, the mosque-board allowed Muslims with various convictions to use its spaces to gather and lecture. Group three relocated there, too. When the *Polder Mosque* closed in 2010 because of financial

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<sup>119</sup> Sura 2:256.

<sup>120</sup> Named after the Dutch word 'polder' meaning land created by pumping it dry, but also used as a synonym for social-political cooperation and compromise with the verb 'polderen.'

difficulties, group three had to leave as well, and the volunteers found another community center to host them.<sup>121</sup>

The fourth group started at the beginning of the new millennium as an initiative by Turkish-Dutch Muslimas to provide Dutch language information for converted women and non-Muslim women with an interest in Islam. Over the years, attending converts became more proficient, and the need for their guidance receded. The converts did not adhere to the Turkish Hanafi School of Law, which became a point of tension. Instead, they followed the common opinion among participants in my research that Muslims can choose which opinion they deem most suitable from the four (Sunni) Islamic Schools of Law. For these reasons, it was decided that the converts would carry the group forward on their own.

When I began frequenting their meetings, increasingly, this group also attracted young born Muslim women. They, too, wanted to deepen their engagement with their religion and shared with converts the aspiration of coming together to “learn about Islam.” Although the volunteers, explicitly, did not introduce themselves as lecturers, claimed no Islamic expertise, and based their workshop topics on books and magazines they deemed reliable, still, they had to be vigilant not to be bestowed with an aura of authority. As one of them told me,

At first, mostly older Dutch women visited the meetings. Often, they had an Islamic partner and had become Muslim later in life, sometimes after their children were born. They were a critical bunch, doubting everything. Everything was up for discussion. Nowadays we have to be careful not to be perceived as lecturers. It used to be clear: we are women, coming together, talking together. Now I notice that especially the younger girls are often very quiet, carefully listening, while we, the volunteers, aim for the meetings to be interactive.

First using a space provided by the Turkish-Dutch Muslim women who had initiated this group, after the decision was made to go their separate ways, the group moved a number of times, using different community centers to come together. The volunteers noticed that many Muslimas had problems with work and income, or with loneliness and other difficulties. To address these problems, they started a web-based buddy project where Muslim women could sign up to help other women by visiting them or by providing practical advice and assistance. These online and offline initiatives remained separate but did refer to each other.

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<sup>121</sup> This space, again, became unavailable in 2012 because funding by the local government was discontinued. The group has currently no permanent offline location.



Group four had highly fluctuating numbers of attendees, sometimes only five women attended the workshops, other times over fifteen. Once a year, they organized a workshop about conversion to Islam, which always attracted around thirty to forty women. They also organized several all-day events for Muslim women, consisting of lectures about pre-selected topics, which were communally read and then discussed. These “sister-days” attracted dozens of attendants as well. They organized these events in collaboration with an online forum for converted Muslimas and with a Belgium-based organization for converts, thus attracting women from all over the Netherlands and from Belgium as well. Their regular meetings took place once every two weeks.

The fifth group grew out of an online organization, founded by a small group of converts, who also knew each other offline. Their website offered information about Islam for non-Muslim Dutch and personal guidance if someone considered conversion, for instance, assistance in learning how to pray or company when visiting a mosque for the first time. A mosque is a completely new environment for (prospective) converts and many of them feel anxious when visiting for the first time as they do not know what to expect and what is expected of them. Despite the offer of company and advice, some women who had contacted the volunteers, still felt ill at ease with the idea of going to a mosque. They had not converted yet, or did not wear a headscarf and feared feeling awkward. To accommodate these fears, one of the volunteers began to organize ‘sister meetings’ at (born and converted) Muslim women’s homes.

These smaller, private, and more informal settings were intended to make women who were still unfamiliar with Islam feel more at ease. However, this format of gathering at each other’s living rooms, quickly, became very popular and the two non-Muslim women who had inspired the volunteer to choose this format, again, felt overwhelmed by the presence of so many Muslim women. They ceased to come to these events. Nevertheless, the volunteer continued to organize these sister meetings which remained an accessible entry-level opportunity for prospective converts to socialize with already converted and born Muslimas. As with other groups, the constant factor was the volunteer organizing the events, while attendees differed considerably. Convening at each other’s homes limited the number of attendees, usually a maximum of twelve women could fit into the living rooms, so getting to know each other was easier than in bigger groups, as was bringing babies and very young children. Women came together on Sundays, every six weeks.

The volunteer organizing these meetings, too, carefully did not introduce herself as an authority on Islam. As with group four, if there was a lecture, the content was based on books, magazines, and websites

that were deemed ‘reliable’ (i.e., providing the scriptural sources the content was based on, or based on texts by scholars who were considered reliable) and they were communally read, each one a page. Often, activities were interactive and creative, such as an assignment to make each other Islamically inspired paintings, which encouraged attendees to learn new Arabic words and Islamic supplications. Similar to the other groups, quizzes about knowledge of Islam were a popular activity, as was communally discussing how to deal with personal problems arising in the context of being a (new) Muslima in the Netherlands. When the volunteer who organized the meetings emigrated in 2012, the group dissolved.

Presenting these groups as separate initiatives is adequate in respect to their different origins and the different volunteers responsible for organizing events. However, their visitors would usually attend meetings of several groups, within and beyond these five examples, as well as lectures organized by local mosques, Arabic language classes, and classes on Islamic subjects such as learning to read the Qur’an. Visitors and volunteers were often also engaged in online projects such as educational mails about the practice of Islam, forums for converted women, blogs on raising children or about living in a Muslim majority country, and websites aimed at converts or non-Muslims with an interest in Islam. Online and offline encounters resulted in smaller networks of women who became friends and who organized additional activities on their own.

The continuity of the women’s groups in my research depended on a small number of volunteers organizing the activities. When volunteers moved, emigrated, or stopped for other reasons, often the groups would dissolve. Another challenge for all groups, except group one, was finding a space to come together. In the next section, I will give a more thorough overview of the spaces that were used, their properties, and how women turned non-religious space into “sacralized space” through the use of words, and transformed ordinary, social meetings into communal moments of “learning about Islam.”

### **4.3 Geographies of Sacralized Space**

The women groups’ activities were visited by Muslimas with various ethnic backgrounds but all five groups were founded, or in case of group four taken over, by converted Muslimas. While their approaches differed, their goal of providing Dutch language activities in the context of Islam was the same. They provided information for non-Muslim women with an interest in Islam, advice, support for women who wanted to convert, and a space for (new) converts and born Muslimas to come together to learn

more about Islam and share their experiences. Group three asked women to contribute a small entrance fee of a few euros, but, mostly, admission to women's gatherings was free of charge to make attendance as easy as possible. It was common for attendees to bring snacks on a voluntary basis but the basics of having a space, tea/coffee, cookies or a meal, were usually provided and paid for by the volunteers.

As explained in the previous section, free, or inexpensive, spaces were hard to come by, and groups often had to relocate. Since using a mosque is free of charge and provides a proper setting for learning about Islam, many of the meetings I visited took place at various local mosques. Islamic schools, unused during the weekend, were also suitable spaces. Other options were renting a space at a local community center or outdoor public spaces such as parks. As mentioned, group five convened at women's private homes. As women lived all over the city and in smaller, satellite towns, these home-meetings took place in the wider Amsterdam Metropolitan area. The founder, however, lived in Amsterdam-West.

Besides physical spaces, another meeting point was cyberspace as many women were engaged in websites, blogs, and forums, and announced events through e-mail and Facebook. Online platforms were widely used by participants to meet and share stories and experiences, and to teach and learn about Islam. They discussed a multitude of topics, varying from how to introduce wearing a headscarf to your parents to tips and tricks on how to best clean your house, or they used social media to announce offline meetings. Some of these cyberspace meeting points were also meant for non-Muslims. Usually, these websites had unrestricted access, but in most cases the gender segregation that was characteristic of offline meetings, enforced by all five groups, was also upheld in cyberspace by the administrators.

Each type of space had its own characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages. Mosques have mosque boards with their own policies, community centers depend on local government finance that can shift over time, gathering at a park means being highly visible, convening at women's homes limits the number of attendees, and online information is often considered less reliable, unless the administrators were also known offline. But no matter what real or virtual location was used, a constant factor was the *sacralization* of space.

One of the ways in which this was achieved, was through the consistent use of the Islamic greeting *as-salamu aleikum*, occasionally supplemented with the phrase *wa rahmatulahi wa barakatuh*. Another way to achieve sacralization was to start or end gatherings with Qur'an recitation and specific supplications, recited aloud, to signal the transformation from a social gathering to a communal moment of learning about Islam. At picnics, lectures, workshops, conferences, sister days, or any other type of

event, coming together to learn about Islam and to interact with each other in the context of Islam, was considered most important. Chatting, sharing stories, meeting new people or old friends, discussing common difficulties, buying and selling Islamic books and clothes, special events such as a conversion, baby shower, or wedding, were also important reasons to gather. But to learn about Islam, to gain knowledge, as it was usually phrased, was always deemed most important.

Communally learning about Islam was considered a source of virtue and blessing for the women organizing the gatherings as well as for all attendees. As mentioned, learning about Islam as a virtuous activity, required first transforming a social gathering into a religious one. This was achieved through opening the meeting with a specific opening supplication or by reciting from the Qur'an. Through this performance, any space could become a sacralized place. Usually, as the part of "having learned about Islam" was over, again a closing supplication was said aloud, usually but not necessarily by the organizers, before resuming everyday conversation. Both Qur'an verses and supplications were most of the time also read in Dutch. However, preferably, both were first read in Arabic followed by a translation. If no one present was fluent enough in Arabic to perform the task, a prerecorded Qur'an recitation could be used, for instance by laptop or a woman with sufficient proficiency could be called to recite by mobile phone.<sup>122</sup> In the next section, I will elaborate in more detail on the types of spaces used by the women in my research, to provide some insights into their specific properties.

#### 4.3.1 Mosques

In the late 1970s, early 1980s, it became apparent that Turkish and Moroccan guest workers who had come to the Netherlands in the 1960s and early 1970s, would not return to their native countries. A process began in which their families joined them in the Netherlands. As a consequence of this process, guest workers became immigrants by the late 1980s. When, eventually, mosques were founded by these immigrant *communities*, they were established along ethnic lines.<sup>123</sup> In those years, Dutch was not a primary language at any mosque and Dutch converts clearly faced a language barrier. Perhaps because of this circumstance, group three, one of the first organizations by and for converted Muslimas

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<sup>122</sup> See Fortunati (2002) for more details on the use of mobile phones allowing for new frameworks to experience societal life.

<sup>123</sup> There are many other, smaller, ethnic *communities* in the Netherlands practicing Islam such as Surinamese, Indonesian, Egyptian, or other (North-)African Muslims. Often, they have their own mosques as well.

was not affiliated with any mosque for over two decades.<sup>124</sup> They began to convene at a time when little information on practicing Islam was available in Dutch. Therefore, at first, sharing basic information about Islam was their primary activity as was meeting other Dutch Muslimas. Now, hundreds of books, magazines, and websites about Islam are available in the Dutch language. Perhaps as a consequence, local chapters of this organization have declined but there might be another reason. Over the past decade, in several cities, mosques began to organize lectures in Dutch (see also De Koning, 2008). Although aimed at young born Muslims, this circumstance provided a new entry for women with an interest in Islam and converts to become educated in basic and advanced Islamic practices.

Group one was affiliated with such a mosque. For years, group two was mosque-based as well. As explained in the previous section, over the years, it became increasingly difficult for the lecturer of group two to find mosques willing to accommodate her, although she always managed to find a space, not in the least because of the efforts of loyal attendees. In addition to some of the reasons I already mentioned when introducing group two, possibly, another reason for her difficulties was that, of all the volunteers participating in my research, she was the only one who lectured within the mosque's praying spaces. In the eyes of her opponents, because she lacked formal education in Islamic studies, she was unsuitable for this type of lecturing. She strongly disagreed with these opinions. Since she did not claim to be a scholar, and only used information from books and collections by authoritative scholars of Islam or from the Qur'an itself, and always provided the sources her lectures were based on to her audience, she argued she did nothing wrong. To strengthen her argument, she often invoked the following *hadith* to underline her intentions and to stimulate mosque-attendance: "Someone who goes to a mosque solely for the purpose of learning or teaching something good, will receive an equal award as someone who went on hadj and performed his pilgrimage perfectly."<sup>125</sup>

A unique but short-lived initiative was the Amsterdam *Polder Mosque*. This mosque specifically focused its activities on young Muslims from diverse ethnic backgrounds. They conducted all of their activities in Dutch, including the *khutba*, the Friday sermon, as, increasingly, Dutch is the native language of young Muslims in the Netherlands. Combined with welcoming Muslims from different backgrounds, with different opinions on how to best practice Islam, their policy attracted a high number of

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<sup>124</sup> This changed when the 'Polder-mosque' became available as a Dutch-language oriented mosque.

<sup>125</sup> She provided the following source: At-Tabaraanie in 'Al-Kabier', volume 8, p. 94. Declared sahieh [reliable, authentic] by shaikh al-Albaanie in 'Sahieh at-Tarhib wa-tarhib' 82.

converts. Group three relocated its activities to this mosque, group two's lecturer was allowed to conduct her lectures, while groups four and five occasionally used the facilities to come together. Sharing the building facilitated "crossover" between the different women's groups but differences in pedagogic style and approach to Islam could be too profound to bridge individual converts. Group two's lecturer, for instance, had developed a fierce 'fire and brimstone' style that was part of her success. Women and girls attended her lectures to boost their faith (*imaan*), and to become motivated and empowered to apply Islamic precepts to their daily life. While other groups' activities were mostly interactive, group two's lecturer demanded silence and concentration. Shortly before the *Polder Mosque* closed, I interviewed her for a second time. Reflecting on the success of her style, she told me,

Even when I leave this mosque, I will make sure that there will be a lecture, every week, to listen to on my website,. Even though I'll be lecturing alone in my living room. This way, through listening, people can gain knowledge. Why? The reason is that many youngsters have said [to me], "We can get the knowledge, there are enough books, but it's the way you put it across, with feeling, your facial expressions." [That's what they say,] when they attend. A certain, powerful way of transmittance, "That's what touches us [they say,] that's what we really come for." I understand what they mean because I attended a lot of lectures myself. Sometimes, something is missing, [and] you think, "Hey, come on *aghi* [brother], why don't you know how to touch people's hearts?" When you dryly transmit knowledge, it doesn't enter, it doesn't hit home.

A regular visitor of group three, however, was less enthusiastic when she tried out one of group two's lectures at the *Polder Mosque*,

I attended her lecture during Ramadan but that was a one time event. I wondered, "Where is 'doing what you can,' 'taking small steps,' 'intention is most important'?" The subject was about getting up at dawn for the *fajr*-prayer. I have great difficulties sleeping. I feel guilty about missing *fajr* but I can't work if I don't sleep. If that's the case, then you shouldn't do it. But she said, "You have to," and that was it. She also said that, at work, you should pray when it is the proper time. I have a [converted] friend who is afraid to say at work that she has become Muslim. When she comes home, she conducts all the prayers in a row. She feels bad about it, but she does pray, and one day, she says, she will find the courage to tell her employer. [This lecturer] didn't take that into account. I know that many love her style, but I never went again.

On another occasion, women I was acquainted with through meetings of group four, took offense with group two's lecturer because she lectured in the men's praying space to an audience of both female and male attendees. Although it was also possible to listen to the lecture in the women's praying space, and only women were listening there, this unusual event provoked strong negative reactions among some of the women who considered this a violation of proper Islamic conduct.

These clashes and differences of opinion were made possible by the mosque's policy of welcoming everyone. In general, gender segregation at this mosque was less strict than at other mosques. For instance, at the communal Friday prayer, women could pray at the women's prayer space but also behind the men in the men's prayer space. This practice was not undisputed, causing some to avoid the mosque altogether. Despite these occasional differences of opinion, the closure of the mosque was considered a great loss by participants from all five groups involved in my research, in particular because of its inclusiveness and all Dutch language approach.

#### *4.3.2 Public Space – Private Space*

Besides mosques, the women's groups also used community centers to come together. Space was usually rented by the hour, paid for partially or fully by the volunteers. A volunteer from group four, when asked why not pay for renting the space together, explained that the aim was to make the meetings feel like visiting someone at home. Their homes were not large enough to host so many women so they rented a space. But just like you would not ask for an entrance fee at your home, they did not want money in any way to be an issue for participants to join, as even a small entrance fee could become a barrier. Group three charged a very small fee but provided visitors in return with coffee/tea, snacks and child-care.

Parks and play-grounds were also popular places to meet, especially in summer when women would often bring their kids. The Western part of Amsterdam is an area with a high number of Muslim residents and women's sartorial styles were much less conspicuous there than, for instance, in Amsterdam's historical city center. The few participants living in the city center were excessively stared at when wearing *abayas* and *khimaars* and often photographed without their consent. Again, I will briefly digress here to emphasize the contentious nature of visible signs of Muslimness in Dutch public space.

It is safe to say that for converts, Amsterdam-West was a different experience than for many Dutch journalists and opinion makers who often paint a rather bleak picture of many of these neighborhoods. For instance,

in *Murder in Amsterdam* Ian Buruma analyses the murder of Theo van Gogh by a Moroccan-Dutch Muslim who happened to grow up in Amsterdam-West. He cites Max Pam, a well-known Dutch publicist, who was born and raised in the same neighborhood as Van Gogh's murderer when it was still a white, middle-class suburb. Pam equates the neighborhood in its present state to "the South Bronx," calling it a "hotbed of religious bigotry." Buruma disagrees with Pam's assessment but his own depiction of the immigrants who settled in such neighborhoods, too, focuses on the relative deprivation, although it also provides some insight into their make-up, and sheds light on some of the deeply ingrained Dutch stereotypes about Muslim women.

Slowly, almost without anyone's noticing, old working class Dutch neighborhoods lost their white populations and were transformed into "dish cities" linked to Morocco, Turkey, and the Middle East by satellite television and the Internet. Gray Dutch streets filled up, not only with satellite dishes, but with Moroccan bakeries, Turkish kebab joints, travel agents offering cheap flights to Istanbul or Casablanca, and coffeehouses filled with sad-eyed men in djellabas whose health had often been wrecked by years of dirty and dangerous labor. Their wives, isolated in cramped modern apartment blocks, usually failed to learn Dutch, had little knowledge of the strange land in which they had been dumped, sometimes to be married to strange men, and had to be helped in the simplest tasks by their children, who learned faster how to cope without necessarily feeling at home (2006, 21).<sup>126</sup>

Indeed, the influx of immigrants and "white flight" had changed these neighborhoods but instead of feeling estranged, many converts in my research felt at home and praised the infrastructure that suited their needs such as the presence of many mosques, Islamic primary schools, Islamic stores, etc. However, often quite some time had to pass between the start of visiting women's meetings and really feeling at home. Again, this was often related to women wearing headscarves. Before their engagement with Islam, converts often held similar ideas about the position of women in Islam as their fellow Dutch.<sup>127</sup> For instance, this participant, a woman in her thirties, first married a Muslim and, subsequently, began reading

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<sup>126</sup> Some of these children, now grown up, frequented the women's groups in my research. They were aware of perceptions of them such as offered by Buruma. For instance, as a volunteer for group three, a born Muslima, phrased it when she encouraged her audience of about fifty women to strive to have their Muslim female voices heard, "Perhaps it is true that our mothers had no clue what they were doing here but it is of the utmost importance that we [Muslimas] make clear that we, the next generation, are well-educated professionals."

<sup>127</sup> This was more true for participants converting at a later age than for those converting as teenagers, as the latter had often already extensively interacted with born Muslim girls.



books about Islam. During our interview, she recalled her first visit to a meeting of group three.

I came in; of course I wasn't wearing a headscarf at the time because I wasn't a Muslim, and the first thing I saw was a woman with a headscarf and a long coat. She was making soup. I thought, "No, this isn't me." It was prejudice, you know, I thought she had to stay in the kitchen all the time. Isn't that bad? But these were my thoughts at the time. I looked at her and thought, "No, this isn't for me" and then I left.

In Amsterdam-West, women's headscarves and other 'Islamic' attire were not considered as offensive in public space as elsewhere, or even noticed, since it was such a common sight.<sup>128</sup> As one participant explained

I have a sister in law who is also a [ethnic] Dutch Muslima. She loves Moroccan dresses. I'm not really a dresses kind of woman, so I was like, "Nice, but not for me." But when she went to Morocco, she brought me a djellaba. At first, I only wore it in Morocco but now that I live in Amsterdam, when I quickly need to get some groceries, I'll put on my djellaba. That's not because of my faith but because of where I live, my surroundings. I change the style of my headscarf accordingly. Now I'm wearing a big headscarf but sometimes I wear smaller scarves that look less scary [to non-Muslims]. When I visit my dad, I scale it down, more compact. I just adapt it. I'm very conscious of how I look. I don't want to cause trouble for anyone. But in Amsterdam, I live in Amsterdam-West, well, anything goes there.

Although public spaces had different properties than mosques, private space, or cyber space, meeting each other outdoors or at community centers did not diminish the goal of learning about Islam. A summer picnic at the park could be an excellent moment to hold a lecture about remaining well covered when the sun is shining and it is hot to wear a headscarf, to do a "general knowledge of Islam" quiz, or to discuss preparing oneself for the month of Ramadan.

Women's apartments provided a more private and more informal environment than mosques, parks, or community centers, but the basic tenets remained the same: coming together to learn about Islam and to communally engage with Islam. If this basic tenet was not met, attendees could be disappointed, such as this woman who attended a home-event shortly after she converted:

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<sup>128</sup> See also Özyürek about Berlin (2010, 178-181).

I was invited by a friend. She told me that a group of women regularly came to her house to read the Qur'an. So I went there thinking that was what we were going to do. When I arrived, it was a big mess, children everywhere, everyone chatting. I thought, "This is not why I came here," so I left. What I like about coming together is to discuss faith-related things.

Unlike the experience described by the participant above, the home gatherings I visited were always carefully balanced between socializing and engaging with Islam. The organizer used the different properties of private space to engage attendees in preparing the "learning about Islam" part together, thereby making the experience more interactive.

The intimacy of a home environment was particularly useful for new and prospective converts to meet other Muslimas. Creative assignments such as making greeting cards with Islamic texts and supplications and decorative elements, helped getting to know one another. The art-works that were produced were meant to be exchanged among each other. In order to underline the importance of gift-giving in creating sisterhood, the volunteer who organized these events would often remind attendees of a *hadith* that states, "give each other gifts and you will love each other."<sup>129</sup>

Another means of facilitating meeting new women, was to split up in smaller groups to work on an assignment together. For instance, one afternoon was spent in smaller groups in which each discussed how an (undisclosed) Muslima, who suffered from depression, could improve upon her situation through Islam. When the groups were done writing down their suggestions, these were read aloud and discussed. Then the Muslima was (discretely) called by the volunteer, offered the proposed solutions, and asked which group gave the best advice. That group was offered a reward: an English translation of the Qur'an.

#### 4.3.3 Cyber Space

All five groups used the Internet to communicate information about their meetings. Online, the same sacralization of space took place as at the offline events. For instance, the Islamic greeting, *as-salamu aleikum*, was considered as vital online as offline. Sentences such as that the sender hoped the message would find the readers in a good state of *imaan* (strength of faith) were often included, as were quotes from the Qur'an or *hadith*. These supplements highlighted a Muslim's obligation to learn

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<sup>129</sup> Buchari, transmitted by Abu Hurayrah.

about Islam, as did avatars with references to the same kind of Islamic sources. Blogs, forums, and even Facebook were used to meet online and discuss Islam-related topics and to bridge distances, especially when women lived in small(er) Dutch towns or had immigrated to a Muslim majority country.

Cyberspace was of particular importance for house-bound women, for women who lived in areas with few Muslims, and for women who had emigrated. Many participants, from all five groups, expressed a desire to (eventually) emigrate to a Muslim majority country. This was partly linked to the belief that it was better for a Muslim to live in a Muslim country, and part of it seemed romantic. However, the challenges of being a minority, obliged to constantly explain and defend the choice for Islam and Islamic attire was also a powerful incentive to want to leave the Netherlands. Dutch converts continued to consider themselves Dutch but their sense of belonging could shift, largely because of the rejection of their new faith and way of life they often encountered. In addition, although practicing Islam in the Netherlands is guaranteed by the freedom of religion, participants could relate to Köse's remark that in Muslim majority countries, religion is less eroded by secularization (1999, 309). No more compromises and a chance of practicing Islam in every aspect of their lives were things many participants longed for and wanted for their children. Another reason to contemplate leaving was because women wanted to be buried in a Muslim majority country. In the Netherlands, bones are usually removed from graves after a twenty years period which is regarded as un-Islamic.<sup>130</sup> During our first interview, the lecturer of group two listed all the reasons I heard over the years for why women wanted to leave the Netherlands:

I want to move to a country where you can hear the *adhaan* [call to prayer]. Where I can be buried in peace. I wouldn't like to have my grave here. A place where people accept you for who you are. Here, everyone looks at you in a funny way. That's a fact. You learn how to deal with it, you don't know any better. But when you're somewhere where people accept you, you realize the difference. You understand? [Here,] you are not a 100% at ease, not a 100% relaxed. You need to be tough, close yourself off from all the negativity. That takes a lot of energy. We all do it. We don't know any better. But it can be different. Besides, I believe it is mandatory [for Muslims] to live in an Islamic country. I believe that myself so that is also a reason. Also, it is important because there is no guarantee that your offspring will be safe here and will grow up with Islam. All over the world there are people

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<sup>130</sup> In recent years, Islamic ways of burial have become available at a few Dutch cemeteries, also in Amsterdam.

who come from a long line of Muslims but they are *kafir* [unbeliever], it [Islam] is completely watered down. Perhaps your grandchild, too, will date a *Jan* or a *Saskia* and will let go of Islam. You don't know. That might happen more easily in a non-Islamic country than in an Islamic country. ... So, doing *hidjra* [emigration] has to do with your family, to keep your family safe. Many converts are also going to Arabic countries because they want their children to learn Arabic. We did not grow up with it so we want to give it to our children.

One of the volunteers of group one came to a similar assessment, emphasizing that one of the main differences between Muslim majority countries and countries in which Muslims are a minority, is what is considered “deviant” behavior:

If you are a Muslim in a non-Muslim environment and you are able to cope and practice your religion the way you want to, there is no problem and you can stay. But, especially when you have children and you want to give them an Islamic education, sooner or later you'll encounter limitations. Of course, that's logical, because each country has its own rules and ways of doing things. So then the advice is to look for an Islamic country. Not that Islamic countries are ideal. The ideal society doesn't exist. But the essential difference is that in an Islamic country, Islam is the norm. Everything that deviates, deviates from that norm, whether people live according [to the norm] or not. But in a non-Islamic country, the norm is non-Islamic and if you are Islamic, you always deviate from the norm.

To accomplish emigration, however, was very difficult, not in the least because the husband, usually, had to stay in the Netherlands to earn an income. Despite the desire to emigrate prevalent among many women, only a small minority really accomplished emigration. One of the participants who had emigrated but returned to Amsterdam every year during the summer, often said that in order to successfully emigrate, you had to learn the language, bring a large amount of money, and a great deal of patience. When women indeed did immigrate to a Muslim majority country, the first thing they tried to accomplish was to secure access to the Internet.<sup>131</sup> Through Facebook, Skype, Whatsapp, e-mail, and so forth, they managed to stay connected to the *communities* they left behind, and most of them communicated with their Dutch social networks on a daily

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<sup>131</sup> Due to practical obstacles, the number of women who indeed took the step to emigrate was small. From the forty-seven participants contributing to my research, one had already emigrated and four left the Netherlands during the course of my fieldwork.

basis, whether they now lived in Turkey, Algeria, Egypt, or Jordan, to name some of the countries participants choose as their new homes.

The Internet was also used for sending each other moral and educational stories, for sharing information about Islam and Islamic practice, and for sending links to online videos with the same content. Similar to visiting an offline meeting, sending digital educational and moral stories was considered a virtue in itself. The purpose, however, was to act upon the content and to encourage others to act upon it as well. For instance, when the day of *Ashura*, a day of voluntary fasting for *Sunni* Muslims, approached, an e-mail calling for the observance of this fast circulated the Internet. At the end, the following recommendation was included,

Don't forget to forward this mail to other Muslims, and to post it on Facebook, Hyves, Twitter, Forums, etc. For anyone who will fast on this day because of your call, you will be rewarded, without their reward being diminished.<sup>132</sup> ... See how easy it is to earn blessings by encouraging others to do a good deed?! Don't hesitate and spread this e-mail among as many brothers and sisters; may Allah handsomely reward you with that what is good.

The Internet contains a vast amount of information about 'Islam' and women were cautious in their search for what was usually phrased as "reliable knowledge." One way of ensuring the reliability was knowing the administrators offline, another way was selecting information that provided the sources it was based on, such as this participant used to do,

I often use the Internet to search, I take what is useful and disregard the rest. I usually look for one or two pieces of source-references, if these are correct, I read further, if I can't find the sources, I don't read it. You would be surprised how often the references are not from genuine Islamic sources [such as *hadith*-collections].

However, this strategy required some proficiency and knowledge of the use of Islamic sources and the ability to compare online and offline source-references. Most women involved in my research were cautious about using the Internet when they did not know the organizations or the administrators offline, and could not verify where the information was coming from.

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<sup>132</sup> Based on an often quoted *hadith*: whoever encourages a good deed will receive the same reward as those who follow him/her in that deed, without their reward being diminished. Muslim, transmitted by Abu Hurayra.

Conversion itself, could be accomplished online. As Carmen Becker's study of the possibilities of transference of Islamic religious rituals into computer-mediated environments, revealed, the conversion ritual can be successfully transferred. To illustrate this process, she describes such an online conversion.

During a lecture in May 2010, the imam was informed that a 'sister' in the chat room would like to convert. He asked her to 'raise her hand' and soon the icon of a raised hand appeared to the left of her nickname. The imam decided that the conversion should be done on the telephone while the chat room and those in the mosque should listen and be witnesses. The imam called the potential convert and put her on speakers. Typed exclamations like 'masha'Allah' ('What God has willed') and 'subhan Allah' ('Glory to God') appeared in the window of the chat room. The imam questioned the woman for several minutes in order to affirm her sincerity. He then explained the meaning and the consequences of the shahada. Upon her emphatic affirmation of her decision, the conversion began: he spoke the shahada bit by bit in Arabic giving the woman time to repeat. The congregation in the mosques welcomed her with 'Allahu akbar' ('God is great') exclamations while chat room participants typed the same phrase. People expressed their joy and offered her assistance and guidance on her path as a Muslim. None of those participants in the chat room who I was able to ask doubted the authenticity of the conversion. The woman on the telephone had 'in reality' become a Muslim, although none of the witnesses actually saw the woman uttering the shahada. Participants in chat rooms acknowledge the problem of identity play and sincerity. However, the same problem also pertains to offline environments since the intention of the believer in uttering prayers or the shahada cannot ultimately be verified by any perceivable sign. This problem is usually relegated to the relationship between the believer and God. After all, so they believe, God knows the true intentions of a person. If somebody is lying and cheating, it will fall back on him or her on the Day of Judgment. (2011-12-13, see also Van Nieuwkerk, 2006, 113)

Online chat rooms were not part of my research, but indeed, some of the converts I met had converted by phone. Conversion in cyber space as described above, mirrors conversion as an offline communal event. In the next section I will further elaborate on the properties of publicly declared *shahadas*.

#### 4.4 Conversion as a Communal Event

As put forward in chapter three, for some participants, conversion took place without them consciously realizing it. They recognized having become Muslim after the fact, when someone else pointed it out to them, or they had not realized that the *shahada* was the sole threshold moment. There was a clearer transformational quality to conversion when it was a communal event and converged with becoming part of a *community*. However, saying the *shahada* at the mosque or at a meeting of one of the women's group's did not necessarily negate the ambiguity surrounding the exact moment of conversion. To elaborate on this finding, I will now present two cases of conversion as a communal event.

The first case involves the conversion of a single, forty-year old working mother with two children, who came from a secular family:

When people asked me, "Do you believe?" I always answered, "I suppose there is something but I don't know what it is." My mom always said, "The world has no beginning, it has always been there," but I always said, "How can that be? There has to be a beginning, somewhere." I could never understand what she meant. So I always said, "There has to be something," but I couldn't find anything like "This is it"

Through her work, she became acquainted with a few Muslims. She noticed they fasted during Ramadan, something she had never heard of, and she began asking questions. She told me that one Moroccan-Dutch colleague in particular played a role in her trajectory to Islam. At work, he often confided his problems to her, both personal and work related, and although she did not know how to help him, she sympathized with his situation. One day, he told her he had decided to seriously take up the practice of Islam, something he had been neglecting. She watched him read books and saw a remarkable change in him.

I thought that was beautiful but I also thought, "How can that be?" I told him that I would also buy a book on Islam because I wanted to know what he was doing. I bought *Islam for Dummies*. I read it and thought it was very interesting. So I went to the bookstore and got some more books, that is how I started.

Like many others in my research, she wrestled with existential questions.

I always wondered, "Why am I here?" I couldn't find an answer. I kept going because I have kids, I need to raise them, but I wondered, "Why

am I here? To work, eat, work again, take care of the kids, and one day it's done?" But because of the books [about Islam] I read, I started to feel there is something else. That we're here [on earth] for a reason. So I thought, "Yes, perhaps this is the way to go." I just felt it.

When she talked to another colleague about her developing interest in Islam, she was invited to her house to talk about it some more and, since the month of Ramadan was approaching, for an *iftar*, the breaking of the fast. She decided to join in the fasting during Ramadan out of curiosity, to experience what it is like. That became known among other colleagues, she got more books, and one of them offered to look for someone to guide her in her explorations.

She was subsequently called by a convert, a volunteer of group five, and invited to the women's meetings she organized, and showed to meetings of other Muslim women's groups as well. She attended these meetings for nine months. At one of group five's last meetings before the start of the month of Ramadan, while everyone was getting ready to leave, suddenly she said she wanted to say the *shahada*. To my surprise, she was not invited to say the *shahada* right away. Until then, invariably, the same scenario had played out: once someone declared to be ready, a *shahada* was said on the spot for reasons of existential security. The metaphorical bus to fall under and die could always be just around the corner and being Muslim was assumed to make a big difference in the afterlife. If a woman declared her intention to become Muslim, it was usually deemed better not to waste any time. In this case, perhaps because the volunteer who had guided her had already left, the women checked their calendars to see what would be the best time for everyone to witness the *shahada*. A date was set (two weeks away) and a location (a mosque) was chosen.

Before the *shahada* took place, I interviewed the prospective convert and asked why she had waited until the very last moment of the meeting to state her intention to convert.

I was thinking about it for some time but I couldn't say it and kept postponing it. I thought, "Can I really do it? How to combine it with work? I'm forty years old. They have known me at work for seventeen years. What if I want to wear a headscarf? Would that be possible? How would they look at me?" They [other converted women] said that I shouldn't think of that but I find that very difficult. I wondered, "What would I tell my children? How to do the prayers?" You know. I had many questions. I have ingrained habits. For instance with eating, [as a Muslim] you're supposed to say *bismillah*, but nine out of ten times I already take a bite before realizing I forgot. If that is part of your upbringing, or if you have someone to point out, "You forgot



something,” but I need to do it all on my own and that makes me wonder, “Can I do it? Will I remember what I read?” It takes time. But when Ramadan approached, I felt I was running out of time. I didn’t want to participate in Ramadan, again, without converting. I wanted to participate [in fasting], I’m convinced of it, but I didn’t make the decision to convert. It was a real struggle. Then I thought, “What am I waiting for? If I feel it, and I will participate [in fasting] because I feel I should do it, but I don’t become Muslim....” When everyone was leaving, I thought I should say something.

When someone said the *shahada* within one of the women’s groups, whether sudden and improvised, or planned in advance, it was always a joyous occasion. Perhaps because converts were running the women’s groups that I participated in, how to create a festive environment in the case of an Islamic holiday or a *shahada*, reminded me of Dutch birthday parties. Spaces would be decorated with festoons and balloons and there were festive foods and soft-drinks. In the case of conversion, there would be presents for the woman saying the *shahada* and on Islamic holidays there were presents and candy for the kids. Such forms of cultural continuity among women who convert to Islam have been pointed out by other researchers of conversion to Islam as well. Shanneik, for instance, argues that, unlike Roy (2004) who observed a characteristically Protestant approach among *Salafi* Muslims, the Irish women converts in her research rather displayed a Catholic approach to *Salafism*, “exemplifying that conversions do not necessarily entail a radical rupture from the past but often a continuation of existing beliefs and practices” (2011, 503).<sup>133</sup> Converts in my research, too, often drew from cultural repertoires acquired through their upbringing, in this case related to how to throw a party.

Since this woman’s *shahada* was planned in advance, one of the mosque spaces was festively decorated and everyone brought plenty of cakes and other foods, while Moroccan mint tea was prepared in the mosque kitchen. As members from group four and group five, jointly, organized the *shahada* party, a great number of presents were put on a table, varying from educational material and headscarves to beauty products, candles, and flowers. As is customary in the Netherlands on other occasions, for instance for a marriage or a farewell party at work, a booklet was filled with women’s personal stories and good wishes. All women, twelve converts and two born Muslimas, wrote down their advice

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<sup>133</sup> Shanneik refers to Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* when reflecting on the interaction between social structures and individual lives, as she argues that the individual’s past is reflected in present and future dispositions (e.g. perceptions, thoughts and actions) (ibid, 504).

about how best to proceed after the *shahada*, for instance, warning against engaging in too many new practices at once.

The volunteer who had helped the prospective convert bridge the gap between talking about Islam with colleagues over lunch and visiting the meetings of converted Muslimas, the same meetings where she had met the women now about to witness her *shahada*, brought a self-made gift. It was a framed certificate declaring the name of the convert and the date of the conversion. In order to be allowed entrance into Mecca when on *hadj*, converts need a *shahada* declaration. Only group three had been recognized by the Saudi-Arabian government to issue these formal, written *shahada* declarations. Usually, these were obtained at mosques or, if women were married to a born Muslim, at the consulate of a Muslim majority country. In this case, the declaration only had symbolic value, a reminder of a special day. Meanwhile, the woman who was about to become the center of attention was kept in a separate room, accompanied by her teenage children, so as not to spoil the surprise of all the festivities that were being prepared to celebrate her entrance into the *ummah*.

The *shahada* took place after the communal Friday prayer. When the prayer was over and the imam had delivered a sermon about the upcoming month of Ramadan, everyone was asked to stay a little bit longer. A female mosque-board member approached the prospective convert with a microphone to say the *shahada*. As was customary in any setting, after the *shahada* was repeated by the convert, in Arabic and Dutch, all present said *Allahu Akbar*, three times. Wherever women would publicly say the *shahada*, attendees then formed a single row to hug and kiss the new convert, much like congratulating someone at a Dutch reception, and welcomed her into the *community* as a sister in Islam. Her two children were applauded for attending this important occasion for their mother and a huge exception was made: her teenage son was allowed to join the festivities. In all my years of fieldwork, this was the only time an exception was made to the women-only rule, customary among all the groups in my research.

After the party was over, the women washed the dishes and vacuumed the mosque spaces they had used. They noticed that the mosque was in need of a more thorough cleaning and as spontaneously as the *shahada* party was planned, they decided to come back the next week to communally clean the mosque. This small group of women, who gathered every six weeks at someone's home to engage with Islam, who had organized the *shahada* when one of them had declared to be ready for it, and as a consequence had communally visited a mosque for Friday prayer, decided to extend their commitment. Although none of them was asked to clean the mosque, using its space induced a sense of responsibility. Cleaning the mosque was also considered a virtuous act, as it was serving

the mosque and its visitors, as was visiting the mosque in itself, as mosque visits invite prayer and serve as a reminder of the religious duties of being a Muslim.

Six months after this *shahada* event, at a meeting of group four, there were so many new visitors that the volunteers started with an introduction round. One of the last to introduce herself was a thirty-six years old, first time visitor. She had found the group through an online announcement. She explained that she had decided to convert to Islam but currently did not know any Muslims. After a lecture about *salaat al-istikhara*<sup>134</sup> was communally read, as usual, the women chatted about personal issues related to Islam and to being a (converted) Muslima in the Netherlands. For instance, one of the attending women found it difficult that, at parties, her Dutch family drank alcohol. One of the other women responded that she had stopped visiting her relatives if they drank alcohol. Another woman joined in and told that when she had just converted, she still visited family parties. There would be alcohol, from which she refrained. At the time, she recalled, she thought that was quite an accomplishment. Nowadays, she no longer attended birthday parties and if at other family gatherings someone would say, "I'm ready for a glass of wine," that would be the cue to go home. A few other topics were discussed in a similar manner and then the prospective convert was invited to tell a little bit more about her decision to become Muslim.

The woman told that she came from a secular background, was not baptized, and had been thinking about conversion to Islam for a few years. Islam appeared to her to be a clear and practical religion, something that she missed in Christianity. The well worked out role of Islam in daily life in particular, appealed to her. The day before, she continued, she had told her Dutch boyfriend that she wanted to become Muslim. He had answered that if that was what she wanted, she should go ahead. The women who were listening to her story reacted with a collective *Masha Allah*.<sup>135</sup> That went easy! She went on and told that she had said the *shahada* last night. All women replied that this meant that she was already Muslim. She told them that she did not know whether saying the *shahada* was all that was required, and that she did not know how to proceed. A volunteer explained that saying the *shahada* sufficed but that it was also possible to say the *shahada* again, with witnesses, or at the mosque. If you say the *shahada* at the mosque, the volunteer continued, at least you have already been there once, the women there have seen you, they know that you are a new Muslim, and they can help you, for instance, with learning

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<sup>134</sup> A special prayer which can be performed at any time. In the prayer, a subject of deliberation is mentioned and God is asked to make it happen if it is a good thing, and to prevent it if it is a bad thing.

<sup>135</sup> Meaning "God has willed it" expressing appreciation, joy, praise, or thankfulness.

how to pray. If you say the *shahada* at a mosque, the woman was told, it will be clear for the *community* that you have converted.

The volunteers offered to help her say the *shahada* again, at the mosque, but she choose to repeat it at the following meeting, two weeks later. After a short lecture about *Abu Bakr*, the first Caliph, it was time for her *shahada*. The volunteers first discussed whether or not to include the phrase “Jesus is not the son of God.” In my experience, at a communal performance of the *shahada*, this additional sentence was only included if someone had a Christian background, which this woman had not.<sup>136</sup> To stay on the safe side, it was decided to include the phrase, but only in the Dutch translation. After the *shahada* was performed, all were invited to give the new convert advice. One of the attendees, a born Muslima, for instance, emphasized the importance of finding good company. She also warned “to watch out for the *shaitan*” [Satan] as the *shaitan* would try to create doubt in one’s mind about the choice for Islam. The next girl, in the spirit of the lecture of a few weeks ago, recommended the new convert would perform *salaat al-istikhara*. Another born Muslima told that although she was Muslim by birth, still, she had to make a choice between “Moroccan culture” and “Islam.” As many other born Muslimas I met during my research, she suggested that she dealt with a similar transitional process as converts went through. In her case, this occurred not because of conversion but as the result of a search for a “pure” Islam, in some instances in opposition to what she called the “cultural” Islam of her parents. Her advice to the new convert was to proceed at her own pace. Another converted woman concurred: gaining knowledge was most important but she should take her time. The next woman, also a convert, reassured her that she would not be alone. Everyone would help her and the women without a Muslim family were there for each other as sisters. One of the volunteers recounted that she had converted ten years ago. She told how attending the meetings of this group had helped her stay committed. Her second advice was to be patient, with oneself, as well as with others.

The new convert told that since the last meeting, she had discussed her conversion with her mother. Her mother had replied that she had to get used to it, but would like to hear more. All women replied with a collective *Masha Allah* to voice their content that the mother had responded in such a positive way. One of the more seasoned converts advised to show her mother a headscarf and ask her what style she would like, because if a mother was included in the changes in appearance it would be easier to accept them. If the new convert was planning on

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<sup>136</sup> None of the women who said the *shahada* at home, reported to have included this sentence.

choosing an Islamic name, the advice was to make an exception for her mother. Then there were congratulations, presents, and snacks.

Flexibility seemed key when someone said the *shahada*, as evident in the first case when allowing the son to be present at his mother's conversion party. Usually, there was not a heavy emphasis on all the Islamic tenets Muslims are supposed to adhere to. Invariably, the advice was to proceed "step by step" and "at your own pace." In the second case, the woman had put forward that she was living with her boyfriend while being unmarried. That did occasionally happen. Strictly speaking this was not considered to be allowed as a Muslim and even if the new convert would marry her boyfriend, in this case, that would still be insufficient. To comply with Islamic law, he would have to convert, too. These were delicate issues. Dealing with these dilemmas, however, was usually up to the women themselves, unless they specifically asked for advice. Another example of flexible attitudes in regard to the practice of Islam by attendees, was that most women in my research thought it was an obligation for a Muslima to wear a headscarf. Although often mentioned in lectures and discussions, it was seldom mentioned to new converts. Instead of an obligatory package of rules, conversion was understood as a lifelong learning process. Often, converts referred to themselves as children in respect to their knowledge and understanding of Islam. Appreciation of conversion as a process prompted these women to applaud the boyfriend's support of his partner's choice for Islam.

Collective utterances such as *Masha Allah*, or the customary *takbirs* after a *shahada* (3x saying *Allahu akbar*), underscored the communal understanding of the world as a place where nothing, including conversion, happens without the will of God. The antagonistic *shaitan* was believed to test the convert's conviction by creating doubts in her mind about the wisdom of the step to convert. Adversity, such as the realization that a changed appearance or refraining from alcohol might estrange you from your non-Muslim social circle, or the thorny issue of how to make your non-Muslim parents, children, and/or partner understand and accept your choice for such a controversial religion, all these questions could cause a convert to second guess her choice for Islam. The convert was usually warned that saying the *shahada* was only the beginning of the process of becoming Muslim. At times, this process would be challenging and difficult.

A new convert publicly saying the *shahada* induced reflection on and the reliving of one's own conversion in the women witnessing the event. Born Muslimas, too, expressed having similar difficulties as non-Muslim converts when they practiced Islam differently from their parents. In both cases, the entrance of a new convert into the *ummah* reaffirmed the choices of the women witnessing the event. This was reflected in the

advice the new Muslima was given about how best to proceed after the *shahada*, drawn from personal experiences. Advising the new convert encouraged pondering one's own choices in light of having become Muslim. A *shahada* was always an emotional moment and, usually, many tears were shed.

Performance as an affirmation of religious identity points to the importance of credibility-enhancing displays (Lanman, 2012). Based on signaling theory, Lanman explored the influence of credibility-enhancing displays on the beliefs of observers. He argues that a small but growing body of evidence suggests that whether an individual comes to explicitly believe in the existence of non-physical agents depends on the extent to which that individual is exposed to such display, as "religious actions make religious concepts more believable to others" (ibid, 60). Lanman hypothesizes that the degree of exposure to religious action is one of the most important variables in determining whether an individual will explicitly believe in non-physical agents (ibid, 51-52). Evidence indicates, he argues, that rather than mere professions of belief and "indoctrination," actions are needed to encourage explicit beliefs in the existence of nonphysical agents (ibid, 52-53).

Expanding on the notion of "doing religion," Avishai comes to a similar conclusion under the heading "doing community, doing continuity" (ibid, 423). Drawing on her research among orthodox Jewish-Israeli women and their practice of the Jewish laws of menstrual purity, *niddah*, she argues that in light of all kinds of ambivalences, her respondents grounded themselves in "a historically continuous community of observers" (ibid). In a similar vein, converts as well as born Muslimas, often referred to the first Muslim *community* from the time of the prophet Mohammed. From these examples, women drew the courage to convert, or to practice Islam different from their parents. It placed their struggles and adversities in a context of being part of a historic *community*. In comparison, their plight was certainly less extreme than the hardships of the first converts to Islam, who were verbally and physically attacked and even had to flee in order to escape death, including the prophet Mohammed himself. The first converts, too, had to deal with angry parents, non-converted spouses, or children opposing their choice for Islam. This circumstance freed contemporary hardships from confinement to the present day, by placing them in the context of the history of the spread of Islam among different peoples, and around the world.

From the many examples I encountered in my fieldwork, I choose the cases presented in this section to illustrate conversion as a communal event because they allow for insight into the workings of the Muslim women's groups involved in my research. In the first case, I already knew the participant as a visitor, I interviewed her, and then witnessed her

conversion. In the second case, I did not know the woman prior to the moment she announced her decision to convert. Since at that time she had already said the *shahada* at home, I only partly witnessed her conversion when she said the *shahada* again, a few weeks later. Since I did not interview her, I remained unaware of the details of her background and trajectory to Islam beyond what she shared with the group. I have included her case because, over the course of my research, I witnessed many such *shahadas*. In some cases, I became familiar with these women because they became or remained visitors of the women's groups, others I never saw again. Similarly, one of the volunteers of group one told me,

Sometimes we have women here [visiting meetings of this group] who I don't really know. They want to do the *shahada*. Enthusiastically, they say that from now on they will come every week but then we never see them again. It often makes me wonder, "How is she doing? How did it turn out? Has she let go of Islam?" Sometimes you hear, later on of course, that people set out on a completely different road.<sup>137</sup>

In itself, saying the *shahada* in a communal setting did not seem to make a difference in regard to the sustainability of the conversion over time. Whether or not the new convert received help in learning how to practice Islam, seemed much more important. Interestingly, as in the second case, the communal setting of the conversion did not necessarily negate its ambiguity in regard to the exact moment. The volunteers saw no contradiction in organizing the *shahada* for a second time, while acknowledging its redundancy, including gift-giving and festive foods to underscore that a conversion is a joyous occasion. Most importantly, saying the *shahada* in a communal setting with the intention to convert, seemed to facilitate a sense of belonging that was lacking in the individual trajectory. This is exemplified in the concept of Islamic sisterhood. In the following section, I will elaborate on how this concept informed the ethical communality I found to be common among the Muslim women in my research.

## 4.5 Sisters in Islam

If women said the *shahada* at the mosque or at a meeting of one of the women's groups, the notion that conversion marked now being a "sister in

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<sup>137</sup> My research does not address the question of women choosing different roads after saying the *shahada*. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are indeed women who stop calling themselves Muslim, sometimes after years of practicing Islam, and end their practice of Islamic tenets such as prayer, fasting, or wearing *hijab*.

Islam” was usually explained. Converts who converted alone, often, learned about such specific aspects of conversion after the fact.<sup>138</sup> If women started attending these meetings after they already had become Muslim, the notion of sisterhood became implicitly clear as women often addressed each other as *sister* face to face and used it on flyers announcing “sister meetings” or “sister days.” The title “sister” was also used in e-mails, on websites, blogs, and forums and (lack of) sisterhood was frequently mentioned in lectures. When I asked a young convert when she became aware of the idea of sisterhood, she explained:

I didn’t know that they called each other sister. I just noticed that they did. I went to a lecture and I heard, “Sister this” and “Sister that,” “Sister can I ask you a question?” So, okay, everyone there calls each other sister. I thought, “That’s fine, then I will call everyone ‘sister’ as well.” Often, I don’t know someone’s name so it is easy to say “sister.” It’s a friendly approach.

In general, participants did not couple the concept of sisterhood to the amount of Islamic tenets a woman practiced, or not. However, women who were restricted in their practice, for instance because they had not come out to their non-Muslim social environment, sometimes regarded the women who were fully covered, did all their prayers on time, or adhered to other obligations they felt not ready for, as *real* sisters. The young woman cited here above, for instance, continued to explain her idea of sisterhood by saying,

For me, a sister is someone who motivates me to work on Islam. That I feel, “I want to be like that, I should do that.”

Volunteers were aware of the risk of being looked up to and often took measures to counteract that idea. The woman organizing the lectures for group two, for instance, told me,

My attitude is always, “I’m just like you.” That is why all the young girls confide their problems in me. I never wear these clothes [an *abaya* and *khimaar*] if I sit with them. I take off my headscarf so that the girls don’t think, “Whoa look at her with her big veil.” People tend to look up to a certain image but appearance should not matter.

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<sup>138</sup> Another example of learning about aspects of conversion retrospectively is that at the time of their conversion, not all converts in my research were aware of the belief that the act of saying the *shahada* was considered to wipe out all previously committed sins.



This lecturer saw no contradiction in telling her audience that it was an obligation for Muslim women to wear *hijab*, while emphasizing that wearing it should be a personal choice and no one should feel pressured. She could fume about girls wearing their headscarves “pirate style,” tied at the back, as an insufficient form of covering, while, with the same breath, condemned judging people by their appearance. Clearly, the norm was to be covered, but women and girls who did not, were made welcome nonetheless. One participant told me during our interview how that approach had made an impact on her, when, as a non-Muslim, she first attended one of this woman’s lectures.

My [born Muslim] girlfriend had asked me several times to go with her to the mosque, but I was like, “What am I supposed to do at a mosque?” sitting there among the headscarves, “Why would I be there?” However, another [Dutch] girlfriend was involved with a Turkish[-Dutch] boy and she wanted to know more about Islam. So we all went to a lecture. The girls [at the mosque] were all very nice. They talked about personal things and a few girls cried. My [Dutch] girlfriend suddenly cried too. It was about her boyfriend, her relationship was breaking up. These girls, who didn’t know her, they all came to [comfort] her. I mean, she was sitting there, a Dutch girl, blond curls, jeans, you don’t expect such girls... [to care]. Everyone has a certain image of Muslimas, you know, like, “She’s wearing a long headscarf so she probably won’t notice a girl in jeans.” She might think, “Oh she’s easy, let’s not get involved.” But they were all very kind. They came to her, and comforted her, even though they didn’t know her and had never seen her before.<sup>139</sup>

Another example of women’s constant attention to what they communicated by way of dress was a meeting of group five, where, after a short Qur’an reading, the volunteer announced that there would be no lecture that afternoon. Instead, we would do an interactive exercise called “What’s behind the veil?” She explained that she had noticed that there were always many questions about the things women told about themselves during the introduction round. Everyone seemed interested in how others dealt with problems, for instance, telling your parents about your conversion. This had given her the idea of the exercise: an activity to learn from each other’s experiences.

She told the group that when she had just converted herself, she had looked up to women wearing a *khimaar* or *niqaab*, and who were married to husbands with beards.<sup>140</sup> At the time, she had thought these women had it made and she had wanted this for herself. She explained

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<sup>139</sup> About a year after this event, the girl who told me the story said the *shahada*.

<sup>140</sup> Practicing according to orthodox Islam considers a beard to be mandatory for a man.

that she had thought that if that was accomplished, everything would be alright. Now she had all that but, of course, she still faced adversity. Dealing with the strain that puts on one's *imaan* (strength of faith), the so called *imaan dip*, would be the subject of today's meeting.

The *imaan dip* was often mentioned at meetings as it was considered a normal feature that one's strength of faith fluctuated. During an *imaan dip* it would, for instance, be harder to pray, to do the prayers on time, to wear a headscarf, or to refrain from activities that seemed inappropriate in light of conversion. This conceptualization, for instance, was reflected in the story of a student who converted a few years prior to our interview:

If I don't feel strong, everything [about practicing Islam] is difficult. It's easy to fall back to old habits. Everything you used to think was fun is appealing again. Last year, it was my first summer wearing a headscarf. I found that very difficult. The stronger you feel, the less difficult it is. It's not only about being strong, it is also about what you feel is most important: this world, the *dunya*, or the afterlife. That summer, I was thinking about the *dunya* and then it is difficult to remain strong. ... I remember, I was on a bus and we drove past a swimming pool that I used to go to every summer. For a moment I thought, "Shall I take off my headscarf and go for a swim? There's no one there who knows me." Of course, it is the *shaitan* who is asking you to do that. I didn't give in but it was difficult. Sometimes, things like that pop into my head.

Although "staying strong" is a personal struggle, the *imaan dip* can be countered by seeking an *imaan boost*. Visiting meetings in which ethical communality, coming together in the context of gaining knowledge about Islam, is put center stage, is considered to provide such a boost. Other means are, for instance, listening to a lecture on the Internet (see also Hirschkind, 2001, 2006) or seeking the company of women with a strong *imaan*.

The ideal of sisterhood was usually summarized by participants with the *hadith* that states that as a Muslim, one's faith is incomplete until you wish for the other what you wish for yourself.<sup>141</sup> Sisterhood embodied a range of positive attitudes towards each other. For instance, during an interactive exercise at a meeting of group two, the young women were asked to name a word that exemplified sisterhood. They came up with: love, friendship, affection, support, warmth, respect, understanding, helpfulness, and encouragement.

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<sup>141</sup> Included in *hadith* collections such as Bukhari and Muslim, transmitted by Anas ibn Malik.

This ideal induced a sense of responsibility towards other converts. Many converts had experienced a lack of help and guidance in the early years after their conversion. For instance, a participant who was a professional in her early thirties at the time of our interview, and a twenty-one years old student at the time of her conversion, told me a common story. She had become interested in Islam because of what she had learned from a few Muslim classmates. She went to the library for books on Islam, read the Qur'an, and looked for information on the Internet. Gradually, she began contemplating becoming Muslim herself. However, by the time she felt she wanted to convert, she had lost touch with her former classmates and did not have any other social contacts with Muslims.

[At that time,] it was not so much a question of whether I believe in it [Islam], the question was, "Can I live accordingly? Do I want to choose this? [Being Dutch,] is that possible?" Then Ramadan was approaching and I knew, "I will participate." I was already hesitating for a while whether I would convert but then I thought, "I'll just plunge in at the deep end." I had no clue [about fasting in Ramadan]: I didn't know when I could eat or drink, I couldn't pray yet. So, what did I do? I waited until it was completely dark and then I ate, and I waited until it was completely light to stop eating. Well, my intention [to do it right] was there, for sure, but I had no idea and I didn't have anyone to help me.

To celebrate Islamic holidays without having a Muslim family or social context, too, is quite difficult. As one participant recalled from the time she was unmarried,

With the *eid* [feast] I usually sat on a bench at the square next to the mosque. [After the *eid* prayer] I saw everyone coming out of the mosque, congratulating each other. I sat there and watched, [thinking] "Oh, everyone will now visit their relatives." Of course, I got text messages from girlfriends but there is not something [a *community*] or someone [other Muslims] where you belong.

For most volunteers, the feeling they had been left on their own to find out how to practice Islam, and in celebrating Islamic holidays, was an important motive for organizing support.

Mosques in the Netherlands, as I mentioned before, tend to cater to the needs of the immigrant *communities* who established the mosque. Usually, the imam has the same ethnic background as the mosque visitors. Mosques for the Turkish-Dutch *community* have Turkish imams and mosques of the Moroccan-Dutch *community* have Moroccan imams.

During the past decade, however, converts, too, have increasingly been organizing events taking place at mosques. These range from small-scale lectures to large events such as the yearly National Convert Day.<sup>142</sup> During these events, often, non-Muslims take the opportunity to say the *shahada*. This means that for born Muslims conversion to Islam has become an increasingly familiar phenomenon. However, it does not mean that there is a program in place that informs the role of the mosque in the convert's trajectory and, often, it is the convert *community* that provides company and guidance for new converts. For instance, one participant, together with a few other converts, had started a website. They sent information packages to non-Muslims with an interest in Islam, new converts received a welcome package, and they offered their personal assistance and guidance.<sup>143</sup> She recalled,

As converts, we noticed that if you convert, you're on your own. Everyone is happy for you at the mosque but as soon as you walk out the door, you're alone. But that is just the beginning. That's when you need support.

Born Muslims, it seemed, often considered converts the best source of guidance for new Muslims because converts experienced the conversion process themselves. One of the older participants in my research, sixty-eight at the time of our interview and fifty-six when she converted, told me that the first ten years after her conversion, she had studied Islam on her own. After she had said the *shahada* at home, she had bought books about how to pray, the basic principles of Islam, and the position of women in Islam. She told me that after she had learned more about Islam, she had experienced a transformation.

My posture, my mind, my body, my intellect, it all changed. A whole new world opened up to me. I tried to pray, to fast during Ramadan, and to put my life in the hands of Allah.

She did all that on her own but then she moved to a new town in the Amsterdam Metropolitan area. She decided to call the local mosque and ask to see the imam. She explained to him that she had converted to Islam and was looking for a coach. He promised to help her and referred her to another convert. The ethnic diversity I encountered in my research was

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<sup>142</sup> *Nationale bekeerlingendag*. Organized since 2008, attracting up to a thousand visitors, depending on the size of the venue.

<sup>143</sup> Between 2007 and 2010, this volunteer sent 250 welcome packages to new Muslims. The content of these package differed but contained items such as a DVD about learning to pray, books/magazines about Islam, etc.

exemplified in this arrangement. The mosque belonged to the Turkish-Dutch *community* and the imam was of Turkish descent. The convert who asked for help was Native-Surinamese.<sup>144</sup> The convert asked by the mosque to guide her was of Antillean descent, married to a Turkish-Dutch man. Together with a neighbor, a Moroccan-Dutch born Muslima, they met from time to time to study Islam together, or to visit women's group meetings.

It should be noted that the concept of sisterhood was not embraced by all converts in my research. The majority of participants were used to always calling each other sister but some converts felt ill at ease with this convention. Some of them associated the use of the title with a certain type of Muslim look and (conservative) practice. As one participant explained,

They [women addressing each other as sister] always address you as “dear sister” when they want something from you. I feel it expresses the wrong kind of loyalty. Everyone is your brother or sister, not just Muslims.

Another participant told me that she felt that converts dressed in *jilbabs* or *abayas*, wearing a *khimaar* or *nikaab*, communicated a sense of superiority with their style of dress.

I used to run into [a volunteer from group one] at a neighborhood center. She wore a *nikaab*. She is a Muslim sister so I greeted her but I really had to remind myself to be open minded because the *nikaab* freaks me out. She did say *wa aleikum salaam* back but, I don't know, there was a kind of disdain, that's how it felt. She didn't give me the time of day.

However, none of the women I spoke with who wore this style of dress coupled sisterhood with a specific look. On the contrary, explaining sisterhood as loving each other *fi sabilillah*, for the sake of Allah, another volunteers of group one, who also used to wear a face veil, expressed an inclusiveness that I found to be common.

*Fi sabilillah* means doing something that pleases Allah. So it means it pleases Allah if you live in harmony with each another, reach out to one another, always open your door for each other, and wish for the other

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<sup>144</sup> A very small part of the overall Surinamese population, consisting of the remnants of the native population before Dutch colonialism, slavery, and the influx of laborers from the Dutch East Indies.

what you wish for yourself.<sup>145</sup>

Women who disliked calling each other “sister” were all affiliated with group three. However, not all women within this group were opponents of its use. I heard women address each other as “sister” on many occasions during meetings of group three, although this salutation was not used in their announcements, magazine, or on their website.<sup>146</sup>

Sisterhood was considered a right as a well as a duty by most of the Muslimas I met. As the volunteer of group two explained,

It means a Muslim is not allowed to look down on the other, should not feel jealousy in his heart towards the other, should not harbor hate or display arrogance towards the other. He cannot spy on him, or hurt his honor, his blood, or his possessions. He is not allowed to turn away from his brother in Islam but should have a relationship of brotherhood. Brotherhood, or sisterhood, means that you have duties to one another.<sup>147</sup>

The following duties were often mentioned by all volunteers: when you meet a Muslim, you greet her with the words *as-salamu aleikum* (peace be upon you), when she invites you, you accept, when she seeks your advice, you advise her, when she is ill, you visit her, and when she dies, you go to the funeral prayer. Within the women’s groups, women also communally addressed these duties. When someone was ill, a postcard was sent, signed by all, wishing for a speedy recovery. In case of death, the time and place of the funeral prayer was announced, usually by e-mail. Regularly, there were fundraisers for charities but also for women with financial difficulties. If a young convert needed to leave her parental home when a conversion caused too much tension, or if a woman divorced, they were helped in the search for housing and several women took in girls needing a place to stay.

Sisterhood, and the rights and duties it entails, can be captured by what Abby Day terms “performative belief.” Emphasizing the social and relational location of belief, Day stresses the combined effect of language and embodiment (*ibid*, 28). This can be illustrated with a discussion on the right and duty to be greeted and to greet others. In addition to their regular meetings, group four organized a “sister day,” consisting of several workshops. One was about the topic of sisterhood. The volunteer opened

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<sup>145</sup> She continued to say that the same is true for social interactions with non-Muslims.

<sup>146</sup> However, in 2013 they introduced a new buddy project. It was announced on their website as “by sisters, for sisters” as a means to help and support new converts.

<sup>147</sup> This list was recounted in the masculine form. However, all participants regarded brotherhood and sisterhood as exactly the same concept and used male and female form interchangeably.

the workshop with the often-heard statement that there was a lot of room for improvement of the current level of sisterhood. She told the dozen women attending the workshop that a lack of sisterhood was an indication of a low level of *imaan*. The sweetness of *imaan*, she explained, is loving what Allah loves and Allah, loves it when Muslims are loving each other for His sake. This love, she continued, can be expressed through greeting each other. Practicing sisterhood, she told attendees, therefore, involved always greeting other Muslimas, including in public or between strangers.

Her statement received mixed reactions. Some women said it was painful to greet someone and then not be greeted back. The volunteer replied that these feelings were understandable. In that case, she explained, the angels will return your greeting. The greeter would always receive blessings from Allah (*hasanaat*), regardless of whether the greeting was returned. Other women contributed to the discussion by reminding everyone that “patience is a virtue” and that you should try to find excuses for those who did not greet back.

The conversation then turned to how to approach the duty of greeting if women did not wear headscarves. In that case, should one guess if someone was Muslim or refrain from greeting? Some women argued that if you did not know someone and she was not wearing a headscarf, it would amount to “ethnic profiling” to greet. How could you know for sure that someone was really a Muslim? Greeting someone just because of their Moroccan or Turkish appearance would in fact be discrimination. Other women argued for a “benefit of the doubt” approach: better to Islamically greet someone who is not Muslim than to accidentally not greet someone who is. All could agree that it was much easier to give Muslim sisters their rights, in this case the right to be greeted, if they were visibly Muslim. This could, of course, be accomplished through wearing a headscarf, but, for instance, a participant of group three explained that she wore a necklace with “Allah” as a means of being identifiably Muslim. After her divorce she had temporarily moved back to her mother’s house, who did not want her to wear a headscarf.

I would like to wear a headscarf [because], I always have to say that I am Muslim, but I do always wear my necklace with Allah written on it. That is my headscarf now.

Perhaps because of the circumstance of being a minority within a minority, after the *shahada*, the giving and receiving of the *salaam*, the Islamic greeting, seemed a threshold moment for new converts. It signaled that they were now a Muslim, too. Describing her *shahada*, a student, twenty-one years old when I interviewed her, nineteen when she

converted, told me about her first *salaam* that followed shortly after her *shahada*.

When I thought about saying the *shahada*, I thought about doing it at the mosque. But I changed my mind because I went to a lecture about “intention.” [The lecturer] said that many people do things because they want to be praised by others. That made me wonder, “Why do I want to do it at the mosque?” Do I want it so people will praise me or solely for Allah? I couldn’t figure it out. Of course, I wanted to become Muslim for the sake of Allah but why did I want to do it at the mosque? To be sure, I decided to do it at home, alone. Then I would know for sure that my intention was pure and that I would not do it so people would say, “*Masha Allah*, beautiful,” but just for Allah. Looking back, I chuckle at my approach. I wore a Moroccan nightgown with a long sleeved shirt and pants underneath, and an improvised headscarf. Dressed like that, I sat on a prayer mat. I had already learned how to pray before I said the *shahada* because I wanted to pray from day one [as a Muslim]. For three weeks, I had studied hard and then I mastered it. So after that, on a Friday, at about noon, I sat on my prayer mat, facing Mecca, and I said the *shahada*, first in Arabic. Then I thought, “Hey... is this really enough?” So I decided to say it again, and then also two times in Dutch. Then I thought, “It’s done. This is enough.” I felt so weird. I just sat there, wondering, “Is it enough?” So I decided, “Yes it’s enough.” Some people say, “Where did you do your *shahada*? At the mosque?” “No, [I reply,] at home.” “Did you have witnesses? [they ask]” “No [I reply].” “No imam?” “No.” “But then it’s not valid.” I have heard that many times. But I really checked it out. I wouldn’t do something without knowing it’s correct. The *shahada* is just saying that you believe in God and that Mohammed is his messenger. You don’t have to do that in front of eighty people. You can do it all by yourself. I thought that was very beautiful. ...Then my [Muslim] girlfriend came by. I had asked her to come pray with me so I could watch her in case I forgot something. She didn’t know I had said the *shahada* that morning. She thought that I would do it when she was present. So when she came up to me, I said “*As-salamu aleikum*” and she replied, “You did it!”

Although saying the *shahada* at home helped this woman to determine her sincerity, the same participant explained to me that without a headscarf, becoming Muslim did not result in being greeted as such in public space. When we talked about changes in dress, she explained what it meant to her to wear a headscarf, and came back to the subject of greeting.

Of course, the first meaning is obedience to Allah. He has prescribed that women should cover themselves. But I also wear it as an expression of



identity. Perhaps that was one of the main reasons to start wearing a headscarf. My girlfriend was wearing a headscarf and I didn't like that when we were walking outside, other Muslims said *as-salamu aleikum* to her and not to me, thinking that I wasn't Muslim. There's nothing wrong with not being Muslim but I am, and I'm proud of it. I don't need to hide it. It's identity, obedience, and it's a form of self-protection.

Giving each other the *salaam* as a form of pious sociality that in itself grants God's blessings, irrespectively of the greeting being returned, can be considered a performance that informs and shapes becoming part of the *ummah*. It is a form of worship because the intention should be to do it "for the sake of Allah," it is also a standardized ritual, but I agree with Anderson's emphasis on transaction and exchange. Similar to Egypt's piety movement, for participants in my research, the exchange of words facilitated a non-secular sociality and belonging.

Religious belonging had to be actively pursued and new patterns of practice emerged as a result. Greeting any Muslima in public space is uncommon among born Muslimas.<sup>148</sup> The ideal of all Muslims belonging to one *ummah* and the duty to greet other Muslimas regardless of their ethnic background meant establishing new forms of ethical communality, that reached beyond the women's groups in my research. Persistent greeting, often, resulted in eventually being greeted back:

I like greeting. It is charming and why not? It's no effort. I'm the kind of Muslima that thinks these things are important. Good manners. Presenting yourself in a good way. I think that as an *ummah*, you should make an effort. According to the *hadith*, smiling or greeting is a form of *sadaqa* [charity]. I think that's beautiful. What's easier than smiling? Or wishing someone the *salaam*? Why pass on that chance? ... I got really annoyed by a few Turkish[-Dutch] women. During Ramadan, I often eat at my sister-in-law's. Usually, at the time we go home, *salaat at-tarawih* [Ramadan prayers] is over and large numbers of Turkish[-Dutch] women [also] go home. I greeted them and no one greeted me back. While they just came from the mosque! That is a matter of culture, I suppose. For me, it's second nature. I greet everyone, if I see a headscarf, I just greet. I have a Turkish[-Dutch] neighbor and now she greets me back.

To conclude this chapter, I will briefly come back to the dominant discourse in regard to the subject of *community*. As Baumann points out, in the dominant discourse culture is equated with community, community with ethnic identity, and ethnic identity with the "cause" of a person's

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<sup>148</sup> Judging from the stories of participants, it is particularly uncommon among Turkish-Dutch Muslims.

doings or sayings. The data put forward in this chapter indicates the flaws in this often used sequence. Being new Muslims, converts cannot make a claim to *having a culture* that informs their choices in their transformational process. Contrary to popular conceptions of their choice for Islam as “turning” Turkish or Moroccan, after their initial interest was kindled by born Muslims, they learned about Islam from books and through meetings and lectures organized by other converts. The converts in my research were either married to a Muslim at the time they converted or aspired to be married to a Muslim, but they were not absorbed into existing immigrant *communities*. Invariably, they were quite critical of certain aspects of the *culture* of these *communities*. In the next chapter, this will be examined in more detail.

Equating *community* with ethnic identity did not capture the variety of backgrounds of participants in my research either, as the women’s groups were comprised of white Muslimas, ethnically mixed *halfies* (Abu-Lughod, 1991), and born Muslimas from various backgrounds. Ethnic background was a constant subject of talk among the women, as the diversity spurred continuous inquiries and comparisons. Although the ideal of sisterhood surpassed the notion of ethnicity, participants often employed the same thick notion of Dutchness prominent in the dominant discourse. When they referred to a “Dutch sister” this always meant an ethnic Dutch Muslima. Other ethnicities were referred to as “Surinamese sister,” “Moroccan sister,” and so forth, referring to ethnicity as if it were the same as nationality and in disregard of the fact that in most cases these women and girls were not immigrants but born in the Netherlands.

The demotic discourse of *making culture* provided a more promising framework for examining the workings of the women’s groups in my research. Born out of the necessity to learn about Islam in Dutch, women communally explored how to be a (converted) Muslima in the Netherlands. There were differences between the women’s groups but the concept of Islamic sisterhood, or as some women from group three would rather phrase it, Muslim womanhood, encouraged and facilitated inclusiveness. This conceptualization allowed women from very different backgrounds in terms of age, ethnicity, class, etc. to find common ground, without necessarily negating the dominant discourse. However, local processes of *making culture* are, of course, part of a larger, transnational and global context as Muslims engage in competing discourses about what is “true” Islam. In the next chapter, the aspirations and ambiguities involved in this process of *making culture* will be examined in more detail through looking at women’s search for “reliable knowledge” about “real” Islam.