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

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Chapter 6

The Politics of Conversion

In hindsight, meeting my first interlocutor in the context of her contribution to an exhibition on Muslim women's headscarves was serendipitous. At the time, I could not imagine how much time I would spend over the next years with women discussing this practice, witnessing their careful plotting, planning, and strategizing, how to introduce their choice for wearing a headscarf to their non-Muslim social circles, and sharing experiences about the best approach. In the Netherlands as well as elsewhere in Europe, discussions about wearing *hijab* tends to be enormously polarized. As Scott argues, the binaries that are at the heart of the "headscarf debate," traditional versus modern, fundamentalism versus secularism, church versus state, private versus public, particular versus universal, group versus individual, cultural pluralism versus national unity, identity versus equality, tend to create their own reality: the notion of incompatible *cultures* (2007, 5).

More than two decades ago, in the early 1990's, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod already noticed that the concept of *culture* operates in discourse to enforce separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy (1991, 138). *Culture* she argued, "is the essential tool for making other" (ibid, 143). Much like its predecessor *race*, she continues, despite its anti-essentialist intent, the *culture* concept retained some of the tendencies to freeze difference. In the context of my research, this aspect is part and parcel of the "culturalist turn." Therefore, Abu-Lughod encouraged anthropologists to pursue strategies of writing *against* culture, by advancing "ethnographies of the particular." Through the language of everyday life, she contends, this mode of making other can be reversed (ibid, 151), as such a strategy allows for drawing attention to "contradictions, conflicts of interest, doubts, arguments, and changing motivations and circumstances" (ibid, 153). In this thesis, that is what I have set out to do.

Abu-Lughod suggests two other avenues to be explored when aiming to write against *culture*: a focus on connections, and on discourse and practice (ibid, 147-157). Attentiveness to connections revolved in this thesis around arguing against conversion to Islam as a radical change from one *culture* to another. Among other problems, conceptualizing

conversion as a radical break with the past obscures the continual relevance of cultural repertoires converts have acquired through their upbringing. For instance, in the wake of conversion, women began to celebrate Islamic holidays and often placed less emphasis, or ceased to celebrate, Dutch-Christian holidays. Nevertheless, when creating a festive sphere, they continued to draw from the example of previously important feasts and incorporated elements that were recognizably festive to them, particularly from the time of their youth.

A focus on discourse and practice, as Abu-Lughod puts forward, is a means to work against assumptions of boundedness and encourages attentiveness for multiple, shifting, and competing statements with practical effects (ibid, 148). In this respect, this thesis is indebted to Baumann's work on dominant and demotic discourses in the context of multiculturalism in Europe. Baumann shares Abu-Lughod's reservations about the use of the concept of *culture* in anthropological writing. He persistently writes it in italics, an epistemological strategy I have copied in this thesis. He employs the same strategy when addressing the related concept of *community*. Based on his research in Southall, London, he argues that there is a discourse "that has come to dominate the representation, descriptive as well as political, of people singled out as ethnic minorities" (1996, 188). In this discourse, ethnic categories are equated with social groups under the header *community*, and each *community* is identified with a reified *culture* (ibid).

I have argued this discourse to be equally dominant in the Dutch context, although, nowadays, this discourse is not only about ethnic minorities as such but also draws on the ethnification of Muslims. Nevertheless, the dimension of ethnicity as the notion of different peoples with different *cultures* has not vanished. Dutch converts are regularly mistaken for Turks or Moroccans, or asked if they have *also* become Turkish or Moroccan. Furthermore, as the dominant discourse represents a hegemonic language within which people must explain themselves, it was as dominant among my interlocutors as it is among the general Dutch public. Participants, too, routinely equated ethnicity with nationality, "real" Dutchness with whiteness, and talked about immigrant *communities* as bounded entities with distinct *cultures*. They narrowly defined "Dutch converts" to mean only ethnic Dutch and labeled converts with other backgrounds by their (former) nationalities, also when they were born and raised in the Netherlands. The same applied to born Muslimas who were addressed, and also referred to themselves, as Moroccans, Turks, et cetera, even though these were mostly young women who were born and raised in the Netherlands and possessed Dutch nationality from birth.

Disengaging from this dominant equation of *culture* and *community*, Baumann termed demotic discourses. In this second type of

discourse, *culture* is not so much a possession as it is a creative project, a process of making *culture*. The demotic discourse, Baumann warns, is not “an autonomous opposite, or an independent alternative, to the dominant one.” It is used to undermine the dominant discourse when judged useful (ibid, 195). The dominant discourse he contends, as was evident in my research as well, cannot be “switched off,” or it would not be dominant after all. “The very existence of a demotic discourse which separates *culture* and *community* and reconsiders its meanings, is a reaction, arising in a plethora of different contexts, to the dominant one” (ibid).

Baumann offers the example of the incipient endorsement of an *Asian community* among his young, British interlocutors,

...commonly predicated on a shared conviction that all ‘Asian’ are equally subject to racial discrimination and thus find themselves in the same structural position. To render this new collective plausible as a *community*, it is necessary to identify it with a shared *culture*, that is, an *Asian culture* which sets aside the heritages of religion and caste as *culture* markers, and proceeds to construct new cultural commonalities that span these distinctions. (ibid)

In a similar vein, participants in my research employed a discourse of Islamic sisterhood, or Muslim womanhood, which set aside other distinctions such as ethnicity, age, or class. Of course, any of these markers continued to matter, but it allowed for a language and a common bond that superseded these distinctions.

Baumann contends that new *communities* often claim to fulfill potentials that have been extant for a long time, complimented with invoking a future potential, expressed as *community* building and development, thus combining the legitimacy of tradition and the legitimacy of future purpose (ibid, 193). For the women who contributed to my research, this past legitimacy was drawn from the example of the prophet Mohammed, his wives, and other exemplary Muslim(a)s. A focus on an exemplary past was not confined to those participants who identified with the ideals of the Islamic Revival. All women who contributed to my research were interested in Islam’s origins and believed that if the example of the prophet Mohammed was truly lived by his followers, the world would be a better place. At the same time, this meant that there was indeed a future potential and purpose to be realized through acquiring knowledge and building a *community*.

To move beyond polarized conceptualizations, based on a reified Dutch *culture* and a reified *Islamic* culture, when investigating what it means to be Muslim-Dutch, I have opted to focus on the triangle of converts’ ethnic, national, and religious belonging. The concept of

belonging, I have argued, has the advantage over the concept of identity in that it designates a dynamic process. As I found conversion to Islam to consist of a processual form of change rather than a sudden, “radical” change from one “cultural identity” to another, this conception allowed for being attentive to women’s multiple belongings. I noticed that Muslim women struggle to have their voices heard, therefore, being attentive to their agency has also been a vital part of unpacking stereotyped notions of their conversion processes.

As Mahmood argues, the notion of human agency in feminist scholarship, usually, “seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power” (2001, 203). In this form of analysis, agency “is understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)” (ibid, 206). Interestingly, this type of definition can create a paradox in regard to women in the Netherlands who convert to Islam. In respect to the popular view that Muslim women, in comparison to Dutch women, are oppressed by men, women converts often find themselves defending their embrace of this religion. Therefore, changes in daily life that result from this choice, fit the description of realizing one’s own interests against the weight of Dutch customs. However, since these changes can cause, or be perceived to cause, women to move away from liberal thought, their choices are often not recognized as expressions of agency (cf. Scott, 2007).

Women’s involvement in conservative religions, particularly over the past decade, has been researched in new directions by scholars who have critically engaged the assessment of this involvement as a form of “false consciousness.” Nevertheless, in scholarly responses to such claims, common pitfalls are to focus solely on agency as a form of empowerment, as a means of subversion, or to further extra-religious ends. Contributions in the field of women’s conversion to Islam in Europe that take these types of conceptualization of agency as their focal point, tend to either privilege the voices of women who critically engage with the sacred texts, often glossed as Islamic-feminism, or depend on overly functionalistic analyses of conversion motives (see also Jensen *et al*, 2012, 167).

To avoid these pitfalls, I have favored the approaches of religious women’s agency as put forward by Mahmood and Avishai. Their subject-centered conceptualization of agency as a form of performativity, of “doing religion,” provided a helpful framework for addressing women’s choices for an accommodative stance towards religious conservatism, who preferred to remain within the limits of established Islamic jurisprudence, and favored literalist readings of the sacred texts. Agency, in this conception is not so much tied to resistance and liberation, as it is to

Foucault's analysis of ethical formation: the employment of practices, techniques, and discourses through which a subject transforms herself in order to achieve a particular state of being, happiness, or truth (Mahmood, 2005, 28). Besides opening up analytical space to address women's conservative approaches of Islam as a modality of agency too, this perspective allowed me to draw attention to conversion to Islam for religious reasons, as a transformative project of existential reorientation. To complement this analysis of women's individual trajectories, I also focused on women's pious sociality and ethical communality through the formation of, and participation in online and offline Muslim women's groups.

6.1 Dealing with Difference

In respect to the question central to this thesis, how do women in the Netherlands who convert to Islam, deal with possible tensions between multiple, sometimes antagonistic, belongings, I found that they constantly reflect on and negotiate their position as converts to Islam in the Netherlands.¹⁶⁷ As the ethnographic material in this thesis indicates, the converted women in my research negotiated with non-Muslims, at school, at work, and in particular with their parents. They also negotiated with born Muslims, their boyfriends, husbands, and in-laws, who, in many cases, held different positions in regard to the practice of Islam. They even negotiated with God, when weighing the different responsibilities they felt obliged to as Muslims, such as the duty to respect one's parents, and adhering to other Islamic prescriptions as they understood them. To elaborate on these negotiations, I focused on conversion as a process, changes in daily life that precede, accompany, or follow from conversion, processes of *community* formation and the role of Islamic sisterhood, converts' ambitions and ambivalences when learning to practice Islam, and their attempts to distinguish between the *culture* of Muslims and Islam as a *religion*.

Tensions in regard to changes in daily life, in a broad sense, mostly depended on the visibility of choices women made in the context of their conversion to Islam. Changes in dress or diet, celebrations and leisure activities, refraining from socializing in the context of alcohol or with the opposite sex, were often a surprisingly short route to becoming perceived as a foreigner and, consequently, put a strain on feelings of

¹⁶⁷ I do not imply that these negotiations were always conscious or deliberate. As a consequence of conversion, weighing options and negotiating with significant others merely became "a fact of life."

belonging within the national fold. As Göle remarks in regard to questions of European citizenship, when as a Muslim “one makes oneself publicly visible, one also marks the transgression of boundaries and the disruptions of the established frame” (2011, 390). This circumstance fuels, I have argued, perceptions of conversion to Islam as a radical change and a break with the past (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999; Roald, 2004, 2012; Allievi, 2006). My observations of the conversion process unsettles these types of conceptualizations. In many cases, conversion was a distinctly ambiguous ritual in regard to the exact moment. As Abu-Lughod argues, even the performance of rituals turns out to be particular and anything but timeless as it involves unpredictability (ibid, 156).

To illustrate her point, Abu-Lughod offers the example of Bedouin weddings, which were similar yet also distinct displays of drama, anticipation, tension, comparison, evaluation, as “events take different courses” (157). The performance of the *shahada* by my interlocutors is a good example, too. Saying the *shahada* in the context of conversion followed a certain outline, yet each performance was distinct. Some women said the *shahada* alone, others with witnesses, in a private setting, at one of the women’s groups, at the mosque, or at a consulate. Like a wedding, saying the *shahada* is a marker of a change in status, in associations, in daily life, experiences, and the future, yet, as in the example of the Bedouin wedding, the outcome was unknowable in advance. However, unlike a wedding, saying the *shahada* with the intention to convert could occur at multiple occasions, and, as women often began practicing Islam ahead of the conversion, they could spend years at the threshold, practicing Islam without becoming Muslim, or already converted without consciously being aware of it.

Another reason why conversion in many cases was a slower and more ambiguous process than is acknowledged in much of the literature on conversion to Islam in Europe, is that women continued to socialize with non-Muslim Dutch, in particular with their families. In the early days of post-conversion, especially in the case of young women still living with their parents, women were often constrained in their practice, either because they had kept their conversion a secret out of fear of rejection, or because their parents opposed practicing Islam under their roof.

Within the women’s groups in my research, too, a radical change was not advocated. On the contrary, dozens of times I heard new converts given the advice to proceed step by step, to start with the basics of prayer and fasting, gradually adopting new Islamic practices along the way. The conception of conversion as a radical change and a break with the past, seems to lie primarily in a mismatch between the message converts intend to convey and the interpretations of their actions by non-Muslim Dutch.

Particularly changes that occur in the context of Islam, I noticed, tend to be classified as *radical*.

For many participants, becoming Muslim was a private affair but acting upon their new faith meant new forms of visibility. Therefore, I critically assessed the privatization of religion thesis in the context of conversion to Islam. In light of the pervasive emphasis on authenticity reflected in the crucial weight placed by my interlocutors on the importance of the intention of an act of faith in order for it to have religious value, there was an observable individualization of religion. However, as expressions of “who I am” and “who I choose to be” (Jacobson, 2011, 76) are not forged in isolation, I have argued to include attention for pious sociality and ethical communality in research of conversion to Islam. As the converts’ social context is often more or less absent from research of conversion (Jensen *et al*, 2012, 161), this thesis is also an attempt to ameliorate this empirical deficit.

Therefore, I foreground in this thesis processes of *community* formation; the creation, attending, and maintaining of a “Muslim social sphere.” I found that central to the sociality of my interlocutors was the act of “gaining knowledge.” Instead of adopting regional practices of Islam brought to the Netherlands by immigrant *communities*, they formed, and participated in multi-ethnic, women-only, social networks, online and offline. These networks emanated from the work of a number of volunteers, who, although not officially scholars, through their status as “knowledgeable women,” mediated many of the tensions converts wrestled with in the form of personal advice, in the context of lectures, workshops, and other events, and online through forums, blogs, or Facebook *communities*.

Through this sociality, an ethical communality emerged, exemplified by the concept of Islamic sisterhood. Sisterhood functioned as a means to neutralize differences, allowing women from widely different backgrounds to find each other in the context of a creative process of pious sociality in which becoming/being Muslim in the Netherlands could be communally explored. At the same time, as Özyürek and Rogozen-Soltar point out, and I observed in my research as well, in their efforts to carve out a *culture* free Islam, converts run the risk of slipping into an Orientalizing grammar (Baumann, 2004), pitting a textual based “pure” Islam against the “cultural” practice of Islam by Muslim immigrant *communities*.

Islamic sisterhood, potentially, functioned as an overarching principle, minimizing differences between participants, and helped to produce an inclusive environment in which each convert could feel free to follow her own path. In practice, however, divides between converts with different ideas about how to best practice Islam remained. Although the

majority of my interlocutors did not confine themselves to attending just one of the women's groups in my research, the volunteers did experience processes of fission and fusion. In many instances they invoked the discourse of sisterhood to lament the fissions and work at fusion, but cleavages between different approaches did exist. Nevertheless, within the "Muslim social sphere" created by participants, encompassment, informed by the notion of sisterhood, was clearly visible, too, for instance in the emphasis placed on the duty to greet every Muslima, also in public space, even if you did not know each other. However, as this inclusive conception of sisterhood excluded non-Muslims, some participants rejected the notion of the privileged social bond of being "sisters in Islam" altogether, as they felt it was in fact not encompassing enough.

Another major focus in this thesis centers on tensions in regard to questions of religious belonging. I found that these were often phrased as differentiating between *culture* and *religion*, a tendency observed among converts in Scandinavia (Roald, 2004), Germany (Özyürek, 2010), and in Spain (Rogozen-Soltar, 2012). This circumstance, for instance, was reflected in the heavy emphasis I found among participants on "acquiring knowledge" instead of unreflectively emulating the example of born Muslims. However, it was evident that the ways in which the participants discussed and tried to implement Islamic tenets in their daily lives was strongly influenced by the Islamic Revival with its calls for a return to the high ethical values of the first generations of Muslims. This included an emphasis on Muslim women's rights, be it within a more conservative-literalist framework or encompassing what some researchers call an Islamic feminist re-interpretation of the Qur'an and *hadith*. As Jensen *et al* (2012, 164) observed in the Danish context as well, a majority of my interlocutors did not perceive themselves as belonging to any particular Muslim grouping.

To provide a context for women's attentiveness to teaching and learning within what Mandaville terms "the politics of translocal space," where "meanings are transplanted and rearticulated from one context to another" (2001, 90), I adopted his notion of Islam as a traveling theory. This allowed me to concentrate on processes of travel, encounter, and transformation of Islam within the Netherlands, and the back and forth movement between born and converted Muslims within a Dutch, transnational, and global framework.

6.2 Local Forms of Global Belonging

From the local case study presented in this thesis, the contours of Dutch ways of living Islam can be discerned, from the soberness of converts' Ramadan meals, to the notion of "time as *hasanaat*." Amidst tensions, there was also cultural continuity between converts upbringing and new insights that arose in the context of conversion (see Jensen *et al*, 2012, 168, for a similar conclusion in the Danish context). For instance, the participant I cited at the beginning of chapter two, argued that despite her mother's misgivings about her headscarf, she was *still* that liberated woman that she once was. In a similar vein, another participant, cited in chapter five, told me that the reason she preferred group one's prescriptive approach, perhaps was related to her age, as she found the approach of group three too modern for her taste. Raised as a Catholic, she had not appreciated the modernization that occurred in the Catholic Church in the wake of the 1960's, either. Another example is that converts already concerned with animal welfare before conversion, continued to seek ways of securing meat from free-range animals, although now in a *halal* variety. Typically Dutch snacks such as the *kroket* and the *frikandel* are nowadays available in *halal* versions, and have even become a Dutch export product. Dutch pedagogic styles, with an emphasis on interactivity, dominated converts' meetings. In congruence with the current emphasis on authenticity in the Netherlands, as reflected in commercials (Houtman, 2008), TV shows (Aupers *et al*, 2010), or in discourses among New Agers or Evangelical Christians (Roeland *et al*, 2010), practicing Islam as a personal responsibility was the dominant position among my interlocutors as well.

This brings me to my closing remarks. Writing about global risk, sociologist Ulrich Beck, puts forward the idea of the *cosmopolitan state*, founded upon the recognition of the otherness of the other, with an emphasis on the necessity for solidarity. He warns that the alternative could be the *surveillance state*, in which security and military concerns will loom large and freedom and democracy will shrink (2002, 46-50). Contemporary research and media attention focused on Muslims in the Netherlands, however, has been lopsided as it has been primarily concentrated on Muslims' possible radicalization, lack of integration, or on *Fundamentalism* and *Salafism*. Ethnographies of the everyday, as Abu-Lughod favored, are a less frequently employed mode of researching Muslim life in the Netherlands, despite the potential of such studies in discerning global connections from local forms of belonging.

In terms of national belonging most converts in my research belonged to the ethnic majority population. They often emphasized that they continued to feel Dutch after conversion. However, choosing a

conspicuous minority religion tends to push them outside the national fold. When other ethnic belongings are taken into account, the narrow confines of the “imagined” Dutch *community* (Anderson, 1991) become even more exposed, as women who were considered “ethnic minorities” before conversion are less noticed as converts and more often othered based on ethnic background. All these women need to find their way within Islam and come together with other women to teach, learn, and advise each other. What these women shared, each in their own context, is the need to be flexible: in regard to their non-Muslim families, the specific challenges of the society within which they live, and in finding their way as new Muslims when learning how to practice Islam and incorporate Islamic precepts into their daily lives. On their own, and together with other women, they need to find out what it means to be a Muslim and to practice Islam in today’s world. The same is true for born Muslims, as new media technologies and migration implicate their practice of Islam as well. Born Muslims and converts in the Netherlands do not live isolated from each other, and influence each other’s practice of Islam. These continual interactions between global trends, transnational influences, and local translations, are a promising field for further research on conversion to Islam.