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Article

Being a 'White Muslima' in the Netherlands Ethnicity, Friendships and Relationships—The Dutch Conversion Narrative

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Abstract: This article, which is part of a larger ongoing project, examines relationships, friendships and levels of belonging in Dutch society, as well as in the Dutch Muslim community in narratives of women converted to Islam. The ethnicity of these women is always visible as 'native Dutch' and shapes their conversion narratives. This ethnography raises a number of questions that form the basis for the analysis presented here: How do Dutch Muslim women shape their identity in a way that is both Dutch and Muslim? Do they incorporate Dutch parameters into their Muslim identity, while at the same time weaving Islamic principles into their Dutch sense of self? The findings show how the conversion narrative can be mobilized by Dutch Muslim women to serve identity formation, levels of belonging and personal (religious) choice in the Netherlands, where Islam is largely considered by the non-Muslim population to be a religion that is oppressive and discriminatory towards women and is associated with foreignness and being the Other. It is argued that, in the context of being Dutch and Muslim, these women express their freedom of choice, which is manifested through friendships, relationships and marriages (Islamic vs. civil), while their ethnicity and conversion experience is a visible component in their identity. In so doing, these women push the limits of the archetypal Dutch identity and are able to criticize Dutch society while simultaneously stretching the meaning of Islam and being critical of Dutch Muslim communities to craft their own hybrid identity.

Keywords: Dutch Islam; conversion; choice; new muslims; marriage; relationships; family; identity; freedom; White Muslims; belonging

1. Introduction

> " . . . and then it was Ramadan again and I thought to myself: 'I don't want to die if I'm not Muslim'"
> (Converted Muslima, 22 years old)

In the past few decades, some well-known celebrities have chosen to convert, including Sinead O'Connor to Islam, Tom Cruise who became a Scientologist, Ivanka Trump who converted to Judaism, Julia Roberts and Richard Gere who are now Buddhists. Many other famous figures, such as Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and Cat Stevens, underwent religious conversion to Islam. What motivated their choice? Is conversion a new phenomenon? How does this decision affect the converts and their families? What determines their status in their new and old communities? This article introduces the reader to individuals who changed their religious beliefs as well as their social, at times geographic, surroundings and in some cases also aspects of their former-pre converted identity, such as taking a new first name or opting for an Islamic wedding rather than a civil ceremony. They did so of their own free will, although clearly there is a percentage of individuals who are led to conversion by force. This text focuses on women in the Netherlands who chose to convert to Islam freely, in some cases without the approval of family, friends or peers. These women transformed their identity to be the

Other, a minority group in their society. Their choice often requires constant justification to their families, friends, and peers and to themselves. Throughout history, conversion has been fraught with controversy. Globalization and the social media revolution have only ramped up the volume on this heated topic. Yet, what do we mean when we speak of religious conversion? Is it an internal spiritual experience or perhaps a social or political one? In Western culture, conversion is generally considered a voluntary act motivated by profound psychological need (Buckser and Glazier 2003; Rambo 1999).

The current paper contributes to scholarship on a key topic in academia and civil society, namely the growing interest in Muslim populations in Europe, and the lives of Muslims in a non-Muslim world, and, in particular, those who convert to Islam in the Netherlands. It takes an innovative perspective on this topic by examining the lives of Muslim women in the Netherlands as manifested through their daily decisions on relationships with friends, family and significant others. Recent developments in Europe, and more specifically in the Netherlands, have raised a number of questions that are explored in this article: How do Dutch Muslim women shape their identity in a way that it is both Dutch and Muslim? Do they incorporate Dutch parameters into their Muslim identity, while weaving Islamic principles into their Dutch sense of self? In the discourse on conversion to Islam and ethnicity, and in the narratives of those who have converted to Islam, their main argument is that they position themselves as "White Muslim women", thus distinguishing themselves from born Muslimas (often with a migrant background in the Netherlands), since they face other challenges that impact their own personal choice in the journey to faith. Some of these challenges are related to relationships with family and friends, finding a suitable partner, and negotiating their sense of belonging to both Dutch society as well as the Dutch Muslim community, as analyzed here in depth. It should be noted that although Muslima is used as an etic concept throughout this article, the term Muslima (or *Moslima*, in Dutch) is also a term used by the interviewees and is thus an emic concept as well. The participants rarely referred to themselves as 'converts'; the word convert (*bekeerd*, in Dutch) was only used when describing the conversion narrative. 'Becoming Muslima' (*Moslima geworden*, in Dutch) was frequently used by the participants as well as by the researcher. In this article, a concerted attempt was made to preserve the words used by the participants. I use the word conversion when integrating the conversion narrative with the literature.

1.1. The Conversion Process

> " … *it was really like a burden was taken off on my shoulders, I found peace* … " (Converted Muslima, 25 years old)

Conversion stories of European women in the literature typically elicit numerous questions. Can these women's stories teach us something new about the tolerance of Islam? What enables religious minorities to be accepted by the larger culture? How do the converts themselves consider this? The conversion to Islam by women in the Netherlands has evoked a range of sensitive issues in the media, politics and among peers and family. It is often claimed that people who convert to Islam are crossing religious and ethnic boundaries, which in so doing upends conventions and can engender hostility. Female converts may foster even stronger reactions because conservative as well as modern and emancipated views often construct women as symbols of ethnic and religious subordination. Scholars have suggested that female conversion to Islam kindles particularly fierce battles because gender issues have been pivotal in the construction of otherness between "Islam" and the "West" (Abu-Lughod 1998, 2002; Arkin 2009; Bowen 2007, 2010; Hass and Lutek 2018, 2019; Hemlow 2011; Mahmood 2001, 2011; Van Nieuwkerk 2003, 2004, 2009, 2014; Vroon 2014).

There are numerous theories in the conversion literature to account for the ways in which an individual arrives at the decision to change his or her religious group affiliation (Austin-Broos 2003; Carrothers 2010; Lofland and Stark 1965; Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Rambo 1999). These range from the structural, involving a passive individual who is chosen for inclusion into a faith by a group or entity, with little conscious decision to make a change (Clark 1979; Dawson 1990) to more recent theories that depict the individual as an active seeker, looking for the right religious fit to complete his/her

life (Badran 2006; Bromley 1997; Cavalcanti and Chalfant 1994; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014). What these theories have in common is that they are designed to explain how religious conversion occurs. However, most fail to address the impact of the conversion on the individual once the process of conversion is complete.

The conversion process is sometimes cast as a crisis-experience that is solved through the act of conversion (Badran 2006; Hass 2011; Hass and Lutek 2018; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014). What Rambo in his stage model (1999) calls "the internal catalysts" for conversion such as the death of a loved one are reported to play a part in the conversion process in some conversion narratives. Vroon, for example, describes how a participant in her study told her how she prayed to Allah even before becoming Muslim to be strong for her boyfriend's surgery (Vroon 2014). Similarly, in the current ethnography, some of the participants experienced traumatic romantic or relational issues prior to conversion (Hass 2011; Hass and Lutek 2018). Scholars have pinpointed issues related to gender, femininity and sexuality, and specifically the crisis caused by traumatic relationships and broken marriages (Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Wohlrab-Sahr 1999). In more recent studies, scholars have argued that the different stages of conversion Rambo presented in 1999 (Rambo 1999) and/or their sequence did not apply or were not relevant to the experiences of all Muslim converts since the conversion narrative is not always linear, but rather is an ongoing process of transformation in the Netherlands (Badran 2006; Hass and Lutek 2018; Moors 2009; Moors 2013; Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019; Vroon 2014), in Germany (Ozyurek 2010; Özyürek 2014) and in Britain (Alyedreessy 2016; Badran 2006). Rambo's model depicts conversion as a series of stages and thus induces a linear conceptualization of conversion (Rambo 1999). Conversion to Islam, however, does not appear to be a process in which converts move from point A to point B, and can even be the opposite, as Geelhoed noted in his work about Dutch male converts to Islam, by pointing out that the conversion process is composed of variability, continuity and a lack of linearity (Geelhoed 2012).

Works on European Muslim conversions have dealt with different aspects of conversion and its different outcomes. Kose's ethnographic work on British Muslim converts examined why and how non-Muslims (most of whom were Christians) embrace Islam in an age of secularism. He argued that the main reason for conversion was an intellectual and spiritual search for meaning, alongside the rejection of moral permissiveness or materialism in society (Kose 1994). Al-Qwidi explored the reasons for conversion and found many similarities with Kose's findings and suggested that conversion is a gradual psychic process. He emphasized the influence that the Quran may have on individuals, in addition to their 'natural' search for true meaning in life (Al-Qwidi 2002). Brice applied a statistical approach using quantitative research methods in the form of online surveys in a study of British Muslim converts. The findings highlighted key areas of awareness related to marriage, identity, Islamic dress and social and personal challenges (Brice 2010). Moosavi interviewed British converts to Islam over a five-year period in north-west England, but investigated Islamophobic behavior rather than motives for conversion. Most of his participants sensed and feared the presence of Islamophobia in the form of the racial and religious abuse they had suffered or anticipated on a regular basis (Moosavi 2011; Moosavi 2015). Suleiman studied the conversion trajectories of female Muslim converts in Britain by analyzing interview narratives and observational data. The results underscore some of the main challenges converts face in their lives and in the relationships they have with heritage Muslims (Suleiman 2013). Alyedressy analyzed the problems, consequences, challenges and influences of the Islamic education converts receive throughout their conversion and identity development processes and argued that some may decide to de-convert at the end of this process. All the participants nevertheless concurred that conversion was an ongoing process of self-exploration and identity development and that the majority of converts were active rather than passive in this exploration (Alyedreessy 2016).

Thus, the findings suggest that the practice of Islam often predates the threshold moment of conversion. At the moment of conversion, the convert utters the words of the *shahada*, which are also part of the Islamic prayer. Before planning to convert, some converts note that they had recited the *shahada* silently many times during prayer and already felt Muslim prior to conversion; in other words,

they already had a Muslim identity without being officially Muslim (Vroon 2014). A stage model, such as Rambo's (Rambo 1999) does not always shed light on a process like this, since the model is composed of a small number of stages and identities are only formed in the later ones, (in the crisis model the first stage is the crisis, which is followed by a stage of quest and then by the stage of interaction where identities are crystallized), whereas for many new Muslims their Muslim identity was present before conversion. This is an example of the lack of linearity in Muslim conversion in the Netherlands.

1.2. White Muslims

In the European history of racism, different beliefs, prejudices and biases have played a role in dividing the world into groups, such as ideas about the skin color of the Other (e.g., black Africans, red 'Indians'), the religion or culture of the Other (non-Christian) and sometimes a combination of both ('brown Muslims' and now 'White Muslims'). This taxonomy can also have various meanings, depending on time and place. The idea that Jews and Muslims are non-Christian, for example, takes a different approach for both groups, but these histories are closely intertwined. Ideas about geography have also played a role. For example, the differences between Christian and Muslim can be formulated in terms of 'Europeans' versus 'non-Europeans'. In other words, the 'us' vs. 'them' classification has a territorial as well as biological, cultural and religious significance. Modern-day racism cannot be separated from the Enlightenment, which, as Anya Topolski rightly argued (Topolski 2018), "paved the way for cultural racism" assuming "a kind of cultural progress [...], linked to certain groups of people (mostly linguistic or national communities)" (Topolski 2018). Van Norden's *Taking back Philosophy* argues that " . . . *Mainstream philosophy in the so-called West is narrow-minded, unimaginative, and at times even xenophobic..*" since the philosophical traditions of China, India, Africa, and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas are almost completely ignored by this discipline (Van Norden 2017). Clearly, racial thinking existed before the Enlightenment, but the construction of taxonomies of human races on the basis of a selection of visible biological characteristics was the work of scientific racism that arose with the Enlightenment. This implies that racism can differ as a function of time and place. The racialization of black people differs from that of Muslims, Jews, Roma or people who are assigned to several categories. However, all taxonomies of 'the Muslim' are grounded in historically nurtured hierarchies and images, essentialization, and hyper-generalization. The aversion and hostility towards Muslims have been features in Europe for centuries (albeit alongside peaceful coexistence, exchange and dialogue).

Cultural and religious essentialization, in relation to Islam, ensures that people are viewed as cultural or religious objects. People are reduced to carriers of a certain culture or a particular religion that originates in a certain area and can be distinguished from other cultures. This has nothing to do with culture or religion as Muslims see it, but rather outsiders' image of Islam. It is therefore no coincidence that sometimes it does not even matter whether a particular phenomenon actually has to do with Muslims; it is less about what Muslims are or do, but more about the meanings assigned to them by dominant groups. However, biological essentialism also plays a role in relation to Islamophobia. For example, studies in the US on black Muslims and studies in Europe on white Muslims show how white and black Muslims are confronted with Islamophobia in a different way than those who are considered Arabs. In *White Innocence*, Wekker argues that the Dutch have a history of 400 years of colonial rule and that colonialism has left traces in the Netherlands. These traces are found in the language, culture, in the institutions, and in the way the Dutch look at themselves and others (Wekker 2016). Based on Said (Said 1978), Wekker calls this the "the Cultural Archive" and argues that these biases are deeply rooted in culture, including the notion that whites are superior, more intelligent, attractive, naturally part of the elite, in all matters except sexuality. Wekker claims that colonial ideas have taken on different forms. Even people of color have internalized the idea that the Netherlands champions equality of ethnicity and race, even to the extent that people who question the status quo can be called racist themselves. Lately, however, Dutch institutions have come to recognize this latent form of prejudice. The Tropen museum in Amsterdam, together with the Royal Institute of the Tropen, has

held exhibits to raise awareness of Dutch colonialism. The Netherlands colonized Indonesia, known as the Netherlands East Indies, Suriname and parts of the Antilles. One essential part of colonialism was the 'education' of the dominated people, based on the idea that Western civilization was superior. Identity was seen as the answer to the question of 'who am I and who is the other', and was long considered singular, fixed and unchanging. Scientists regarded the identity of colonized people as the product of their culture and ethnicity. This rigid view is currently criticized, as is the use of the concept of identity in general. People can, after all, identify with different aspects of who they are, including gender, sexuality, and religion, or adopt different roles depending on the situation, as recognized by the intersectional approach. When a culture changes, it affects people and how they behave and present themselves. This is particularly true in today's world, where there are so many contacts and influences from elsewhere. For many converts, becoming Muslim eventually entails changing many aspects of daily life and cultural practices that can conflict with their social environment.

Galonnier shows how 'white' converts to Islam are anomalous individuals in a world where race and faith have become closely intertwined. She argues that while they disrupt classic understandings of whiteness and enter a setting where whiteness is neither unmarked nor dominant, white converts to Islam can be characterized as "non-normative whites."(Galonnier 2015a) This is further illustrated by the fact that like their non-white sisters, white Muslims wear all Islamic styles ranging from modest "Western clothing" with a *hijab* or without, to *niqabs* and *burqas*, and everything in between. By altering their whiteness in such a visual manner, white converts to Islam develop a form of reflexivity that sheds light on the underlying assumptions attached to white skin in America and Europe (Galonnier 2015a, 2015b). Husain (2017) argues that black and white Muslims are positioned as either black/white or as Muslim in the US. This suggests that 'Muslimness' and religion more generally shape the construction of blackness and whiteness (Husain 2017). Studies have shown that Islamic fashion can constitute a modification and a challenge to 'whiteness' in majority-Christian civil society (Hass and Lutek 2018).

Identity search, reflections on identity, critiques of identity and the desire to shape one's own identity can be seen as another example of the agency of social actors in social interaction. The current literature and ethnography show that the rejection and acceptance of identities can occur simultaneously. White women who convert to Islam experience a simultaneous rejection in the Netherlands and in their countries of origin. In one, they are too Muslim, while in the other, too Dutch. The painful intricacies of identity were described by one of the participants as follows:

> " . . . *As a white woman, as a Muslim who has experienced multiple identities and also Islamophobic discourse in the media, I can respond to a lot of these Islamophobic claims . . . As a white Muslim you become aware of certain racial attitudes and inequalities in terms of Islamophobia . . . and also resistance and certain privileges . . .* " (Marja, 37 years, converted Muslima)

Golonnier and Husain argue that white converts to Islam develop a form of reflexivity that sheds light on the underlying assumptions attached to white skin in America and Europe (Galonnier 2015a, 2015b; Husain 2017). Moosavi argued that upon converting to Islam, white converts' whiteness is jeopardized, thus showing the precariousness of whiteness. Converts' whiteness can be detrimental rather than advantageous given the unusual context in which they find themselves. Similar to Moosavi's argument that whiteness is not always a privilege, the quote below reveals that, as a white Muslim woman, she felt that her Dutchness made it hard to find a suitable Muslim spouse:

> "...*In my case, I could not find anyone who wanted to help me (get introduced to someone) ... Nobody. I called acquaintances, the imam at the mosque, husbands of my girlfriends... why should I go on hoping if there is no one who wants to help me? ... You are really alone as a Dutch Muslima without a family* (Converted Muslima, age 38)

Similarly, in the British context, Soleiman suggested if a convert is of British descent she is made to feel 'non-British'. A middle-class British woman who converts to Islam may also risk losing her social class, and will drop down a notch or two on the social ladder, regardless of whether she wears

the *hijab* or not. A white female convert may even lose her career, especially if she works in a position that puts her in the public eye. This is why conversion to Islam by white women takes great courage to do and to display in the public sphere; the loss of social status and/or class can have an enormous cost for the convert and her family. From a different angle, this may help explain why the conversion of Asian and Black women to Islam, while still equally courageous for other important reasons, goes unnoticed among the non-Muslim white majority: black converts lack the social prestige white female converts have, since they are already culturally 'other' (Suleiman 2013).

Being visibly Muslim was a different experience for the white women in this ethnography than for women with other backgrounds and ethnicities. When I asked one participant, at the time of our interview a designer in her mid-thirties, if she felt the general image in the Netherlands of the "Muslim woman" was projected onto her because of her headscarf, she answered that once she got divorced, it was expected of her to take it off:

> *"People told me: 'You are divorced so you don't have to wear it anymore'. Then I think wow you really have misunderstood something drastically... I wear the headscarf for me alone. And even if I had been e divorced for a hundred years, it would stay on as long as I choose to do so . . . "(Converted Muslima, 37 years)* (Hass 2020)

1.3. Women in Conservative Religions

The incongruity between the larger numbers of female converts, especially among a population that often considers Islam to be particularly 'oppressive' to women, makes this a topic worthy of research, as it informs not only about gender and religion, but also about agency in conservative religions, and about religion, conversion and so-called 'European-ness' (Hass and Lutek 2018; Hass and Lutek 2019; Hass 2020; Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014).

The interviewees examined here were highly cognizant of the fact that their two identities can appear diametrically opposed in the Dutch media, politics and sometimes by Muslims themselves. Their narratives show how these two personas intersect in the lives of these young, independent, highly educated, professional Dutch Muslim women. Along with the debates on belonging and identity, there have been rapid changes in Europe as a whole, characterized by vastly increased immigration and the rise of the extreme right, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. The analysis below may contribute to accounting for some of Europe's current paradoxes, where, in addition to these changes, more women are converting to conservative religions and living a more traditional lifestyle. Nevertheless, these women often feel as though they do not belong to the national fold (Hass 2011; Hass and Lutek 2018; Vroon 2014), a reaction that becomes stronger when the converted Muslima starts wearing a headscarf (sometimes before the official conversion, and many times while converting).

Specifically, as discussed below, this study was designed to better understand gender norms in Dutch society these women either reject completely or modify. Scholars of religious piety, such as Mahmood, and scholars of religious conversion to Islam in the West, such as Roald and McGinty, have found that women embrace non-liberal religious identities not just out of piety but also to reject other social models (Avishai 2008; Zebiri 2008; Mahmood 2001; Marranci 2008; McGinty 2006; Roald 2003, 2004, 2012). One possible reason for the rejection of a social model may have to do with the concept of 'whiteness' in a Christian society. Is the concept of 'whiteness' applicable to the Netherlands and mainland Europe (Essed and Trienekens 2008; Essed 2001)? Why have these women chosen a religion that is often portrayed in the media and among peers as regressive, both politically and philosophically, and especially concerning women's rights? Muslim women in the West, including in the Netherlands, are regularly perceived as being oppressed (Abu-Lughod 2002; Van Nieuwkerk 2003; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014). They are often depicted as objects, rather than as actors capable of using Islam as a source of empowerment and agency (Bartels 2005; Vroon 2014).

Avishai reports that the women she studied may experience conservative religions as restricting, but they also feel liberated and empowered by their religion (Avishai 2008). Thus, their 'compliance' with religion may not be strategic at all, but rather a mode of conduct and being. Expanding on

Butler's notion of "doing gender" discussed also by West and Zimmerman (Butler 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987), Avishai constructs religiosity by conceptualizing the agency of the women involved in her research as "doing religion." Doing religion is in fact a performance of identity and, insofar as this performativity can be viewed as a strategic undertaking, is possibly undertaken in the pursuit of religious goals (Avishai 2008). Stadler, El-Or, Mahmood and Abu Lughud also showed how members of religious communities in Islam, Christianity and Judaism engage in integrating medieval and holy texts and ways of life with modern ideals and practices (Abu-Lughod 1998; Ammerman 1987, 2005; El-Or 2006, 2017; Mahmood 2001; Stadler 2009). Vroon also argues that adopting a minority religion that is often viewed with hostility takes on another dimension when gender is factored in, since the position of women in Islam is a focal point of the critical stance of Europeans towards Islam. If "Muslim women really need saving" (Abu-Lughod 2002; Vroon 2014), Vroon and Ozyurek argue that while the choice to convert can be considered as a consequence of the pluralism and the individualization of the European, Dutch or German enlightenment religious landscape (Özyürek 2014; Vroon 2014), a woman's choice of Islam is usually not seen as a personal choice, or as a personal agency. Despite the fact that "being yourself" and "finding your own path" are social-spiritual values in the Netherlands, women choosing Islam are suspected to be following their husbands or doing so in order to marry a Muslim man (Vroon 2014). Although, in the Netherlands, decisions with regard to one's religious status and affiliation are considered private, to use this freedom to choose Islam, particularly among women, elicits somewhat puzzled reactions and moves from the private spheres to the public one, especially with the discourse on clothing, veiling and new eating and drinking habits.

The next sections comprise an introduction to the qualitative methodology used in the present ethnography, including a brief description of the context in which this ethnography was conducted, and a brief presentation of the interlocutors. The findings and discussion section, entitled Being a White Muslima in the Netherlands, is organized into subsections corresponding to different types of relationships, including notions of belonging to the Dutch as well as to the Muslim (Dutch Muslim and global) communities and interpersonal relationships with peers, family and significant others. The discussion section also includes a sub section on marriage practices and ideas, because Islamic marriage is clearly related to ideas of belonging and because the topic of marriage and finding a spouse was raised in almost all the interviews, whether the participant was (re)married, single or divorced.

The conclusion examines which qualities comprise the Dutch identity of the (Dutch) Muslim woman, and which qualities comprise the Muslim identity of the Dutch (Muslim) woman. This article contributes to scholarship on the lives of female converts to Islam living in Europe and North America, many of whom confirm what is argued here; that being female and Muslim pushes the boundaries of national and religious identities, and that national, cultural and religious belonging is not always taken for granted.

2. Methods

This article is part of a larger research project analyzing religious conversion among Dutch women, and more specifically Dutch women who have embraced Islam. It involved a multi-site (Marcus 1995), long-term ethnography conducted in the city of Amsterdam and its suburbs over several periods of time lasting one decade. The first took place in 2009 (focusing on born Muslimas and converted Muslimas who re-discovered their faith) and thereafter once a year from 2017 to 2020. The Netherlands was specifically chosen as a function of the lived experience of the author, who was raised in one of Amsterdam's most vibrant and multicultural neighborhoods as a member of a religious minority herself.

The initial interest in the topic dates back to 2007 and 2008 when I was invited to several Muslim women's gatherings and Islamic weddings as a friend of some of the participants. Approximately a year after, I began my graduate studies and went back to the Muslim communities of my hometown, to interview born Muslimas from Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds, and meeting the converts to Islam, who participated in women-only events and often befriended the born Muslimas. I began my

PhD studies in late 2016, but I have never left the field and remained in contact with some of my informants who then introduced me to more women.

Data were collected and analyzed using various qualitative methods. The author conducted more than 40 in-depth interviews, and participated in Quranic classes, gatherings, lectures and workshops. The interviews were selected to better capture the essence of the lived experiences of these women, since their conversation narrative and its consequences was a major theme in their lives. As Seidman argued in his publications that are often used as guides for qualitative methodology, the purpose of an in-depth interview is not to get answers to questions or to test hypotheses but rather to understand other people's experiences and the meaning they attribute to that experience (Seidman 2006). This can take the form of a conversation or a dialogue, such as was often the case in this ethnography. The technique used was a combination of life story interviews (Bertaux 1981).

The interview technique was inspired by Seidman (2006) starting with One Focused Life History, where I asked my interlocutors to tell me as much as they could about their life today and their earlier life experiences. Then, as described in Seidman's Detail of Experience, I asked for more about concrete details on the participants' current day lived experiences as Muslims in the Netherlands. Finally, I asked the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience (Seidman 2006). I had a set of questions ready for each interview, but as often happens in interviews, each conversation went its own direction and the questions were adapted over the course of the interview.

The larger ethnographic study combines insights from over twenty observations, including participant observations in gatherings for Quranic and religious studies, observations in a Mosque located in a group of neighborhoods with a high percentage of immigrant and Muslim populations, as well as observations in Islamic dress shops in various neighborhoods in Amsterdam and one-time events and workshops she was invited to. The third source of information was cultural artifacts, such as invitations to events, gatherings, distribution materials, photographs, memes, paintings, and posters, exhibitions in museums, websites and material culture (textiles and clothing). To gain a better understanding of Islamic dress and culture, the author also conducted museum ethnography in the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam, a museum devoted to global cultures that have ties to the Kingdom of the Netherlands' colonial past, in the Amsterdam Historical Museum, and in the Museum of Islamic Art in Jerusalem. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study and agreed to a taped interview. Interviews were held and transcribed in Dutch and sent to all participants for review: these interviews were conducted in Dutch, transcribed in Dutch and large parts of each interview were translated into English and integrated into the ethnography. Of all the participants, 30 were converted Muslimas and 14 were born Muslimas with ethnic roots (mostly in Turkey and Morocco but also in Suriname, Somalia, Indonesia and elsewhere). Out of the converted Muslimas, most were white native Dutch; a few were ethnically Indonesian, Surinamese, Brazilian, Colombian, Hindi and others. Most reside in Amsterdam and in the suburbs of the city and ranged in age from 18 to 45. Twenty-five were married or in a committed relationship (leading to marriage) during the ethnography, six were divorced and the rest defined themselves as single (most of them looking for a relationship leading to marriage). Most of the younger participants were enrolled at the time of interview in one of the Netherlands' institutions of higher learning; the 30 year olds and above all had a BA or an MA, a few were PhD candidates and two were Post-Doctoral researchers. Most worked full time (some were independent, small business owners, physicians, academics, social workers, policewomen and others). Their socio-economic backgrounds varied considerably. Some grew up in a single-parent household with siblings, some in migrant families, some came from well-known wealthy Dutch families, but most were middle class children of established Amsterdam families or women who came to the city as students and stayed after obtaining their degrees.

The identities of all participants presented in this article were anonymized and their names changed accordingly. Some are presented with their age and ethnic background (for example, 'converted

Muslima'). A few participants stated that they would authorize quotes but not any other information (age, ethnic background) to avoid identification, in spite of the name change. In these cases, I used quotes, but eliminated any other identifying information.

Guided by the principles of Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990), the interviews and all other data were transcribed and underwent a process of thematic analysis, and division of the text into categories (units of meaning) during the coding process. After repeated readings of the transcriptions of the interviews and the field journal describing all participant observations, I divided the text and re-constructed it according to the categories found. I then continued collecting data (for example, the main theme about marriage was initially not included in the research design, but was added at a later stage after realizing this is was a reoccurring theme in interviews and lectures and workshops for Muslim women). All data was then coded into sub themes that were divided into two main sections that emerged from the texts, according to the principles of Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990).

These two sections are called *The Dutch in the Muslima* and *the Muslima in the Dutch*, based on the assumption that Dutch and Muslim identities have a mutual influence on each other in the lives of these women. There are situations in which 'Dutchness' enters the Muslim identity and modifies it, while in other situations the Muslim identity is emphasized. The three key arguments to emerge in this specific context were identity, belonging and agency. This article discusses the subthemes that arose: relationships, friendships and levels of belonging (to Dutch society as well as to the Dutch Muslim community and the global Muslim *ummah*).

3. Findings and Discussion—Being a White Muslima in the Netherlands

Becoming a White Muslima entails public expression in front of two witnesses of the *shahada*, the declaration of faith, which is the first pillar of Islam (Hass 2011; Özyürek 2014; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014). Future converts declare in Arabic that there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad is his messenger. There are ongoing debates among scholars as to whether not only the nominal conversion but required changes must be made to be entitled to be called a Muslim. These include whether the new Muslim should perform the ritual prayer five times a day, and pay *zakat* (tax/charity) during the month of Ramadan, as is the case for born Muslims (Van Nieuwkerk 2014). Another issue is whether an individual can be considered Muslim when he/she consumes alcohol and pork and non *halal* meat. Although not obligatory, most new Muslims tend to take on Islamic names (Ibid), although sometimes keep their born surname, as in the case of the social activist Meimunah van der Heijde who clearly has Dutch roots according to her last name but an Islamic first name (Hass 2011). Converts, as well as born Muslims, diverge widely in the actual level of commitment (Hass 2011; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014).

Being a White Muslima takes into account the main changes a converted Muslima must undergo. This includes some typical Dutch behaviors the convert will give up, such as alcohol, adopting a *halal* lifestyle and not celebrating Christian and national Dutch holidays, as well as birthdays, in some cases.

This section explores what features emerged as the "most Dutch" in the Muslim (women) interviewed and what features emerged as the "most Muslim" in the Dutch (women), by focusing on some of the predominant themes in the ethnography and in the relationships that were formed after conversion. These relationships covered relationships with family, friends and significant others, as well as more abstract relationships to Dutch society and Muslim communities, as will be explored in the next sub-sections. The choice of converting to Islam is infused with a discourse on freedom, choice, modesty and personal growth and personal journeys. Analysis of these themes suggests the ways in which these women feel they do not entirely belong to the Netherlands or to Dutch society but remain an integral part of it. The findings reveal how these women craft hybrid identities and multiple places of belonging by actively delving into their faith and their choice to practice, while interweaving their Dutch heritage into this discourse, and how sometimes they are not perceived as Dutch after conversion, especially when wearing a headscarf. The following participant described the experiences she encounters in her profession as a caregiver:

" . . . a child once said to me: 'can I say something? I think you speak Dutch very nicely'. I replied to him: 'yes dude, I can also speak Frisian, but I don't think you would understand that (laughs)' ... or when people say: that name of yours, did your husband give it to you? They think that I am Turkish or whatever ... and that I married a Dutch man and that I am still wearing the headscarf, and that I have been given a different name... then I say: dude, were you also given a different first name from your partner? What a stereotype ... and then I think what does it matter ... who are you to be asking me that? I'm here as your caregiver ... I'm not here to be criticized . . . " (Converted Muslima, 40 years old)

Another case in point is Evelien, a 22 year old who converted to Islam at the age of 17 and who is active on social media (as a blogger and vlogger on Instagram and YouTube), as well as on Dutch television and (online) newspapers and in her local Muslim community as an active agent in her mosque. As Evelien explains it, she not only feels as though she came home and found peace after embracing Islam, but also acquired a sense of belonging. Although ethnically Dutch, Evelien has a grandmother who immigrated to the Netherlands in the 1950s and did not always feel she belonged in the new country. These feelings percolated to the next generations, to Evelien's mother and to Evelien herself, who was always looking for a place where she felt she would belong, and after a personal journey that started in her teens, found it in Islam.

"I converted not because I had a Muslim boyfriend, although people often think so. I converted because Islam touched me emotionally. " (Evelien, converted Muslima, age 22)

The now 22-year-old Evelien always had a free and liberal upbringing. That is partly due to her Dutch-Indonesian grandmother. Her grandmother's emigration to the Netherlands was traumatic because she had to fully adapt to the Dutch culture:

"My grandmother always felt that she could not be herself in the Netherlands. It was also a very strange and uncomfortable time for her. She was not even allowed to eat rice, only Dutch meals. My mother and I both inherited her feeling of being displaced and uprooted. We have never really felt at home, maybe that's why I have always had such an interest in other cultures and religions . . . and Islam touched me deeply" (Evelien, converted Muslima, age 22)

Evelien learned a great deal about different religions in her teens. She started with Christianity and then turned to Hinduism and Buddhism. When she was seventeen, Muslims and Islam were debated often in her environment. Her fascination with the Islamic faith continued to grow. She felt that Islam incorporates a great deal of scientific evidence, which appealed to her. The more she learned about the faith, the more it affected her emotionally. She listened to suras from the Quran that were read and recited in Arabic.

"Even though I could not understand it, it struck a chord." (Evelien, converted Muslima, age 22)

It became increasingly clear to her that she wanted to convert to Islam. She took advantage of her liberal upbringing to devote increasingly more of her time to Allah. During our interview, she looked back on how she used to smoke and wear short-shorts and revealing clothes, and said that one day she simply decided that she would exchange all that for Islam:

"The restless feeling that I always had in me disappeared when I became a Muslim." (Evelien, converted Muslima, age 22)

For many participants converting was a spiritual journey, and a response to the lack of satisfactory answers from their Christian upbringing.

" . . . Every time I asked about something there was an answer (in Islam) . . . that was missing in Christianity, I found some things were wrong, and other things contradicted each other, for example the Old and New Testaments that contradict each other on certain points . . . I did not have this feeling with Islam. If I had a question, there was simply an answer to whatever I asked and that satisfied me . . . " (Converted Muslima, 34 years)

In the scholarship on conversion, Allievi defined two main forms of conversion: relational conversions and rational conversions. Van Nieuwkerk also included the Dutch-Muslim context. Rational conversion is not induced by people, but rather by an intellectual search, which can also be subdivided into intellectual, political or mystical orientations. Relational conversion can be either instrumental or non-instrumental (Allievi 1998). Non-instrumental relational conversion is the outcome of relationships with Muslims. Instrumental conversion is usually associated with the marriage of a man with a Muslim woman and does not necessarily entail a religious transformation (Van Nieuwkerk 2014). Using Allievi's terms, van Nieuwkerk argued that the relational type of conversion seems to be more common among women, whereas the intellectual type of conversion is more typical of men (Van Nieuwkerk 2014). However, many female converts to Islam argue that their conversion was of the intellectual type, part of a process of self-search, and deny the importance of marriage as a crucial factor in their conversion, since many new Muslims are single women who are not necessarily dating a Muslim man (Hass 2011; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014). Van Nieuwkerk suggests that a combination of both intellectual search and meeting Muslim peers triggers the desire for conversion (Van Nieuwkerk 2014). It is interesting to note that many new Muslims stress the intellectual route (searching for one's self, wanting to find answers to questions not answered by Christianity) and do not often report the conversion as the impetus for spiritual and mystical experiences. It is argued that Western converts, most likely highly educated individuals, more often detail their intellectual search and the answers to their questions in Islam. The quotes below illustrate this intellectual search in the participants.

> " ... I was 19 when I became a Muslim.... that was during my college education ...I grew up Dutch Reformed (Protestant). My parents were not churchgoers ... but I did read the Old Testament and I knew all the stories of the prophets and so on ... I also attended the girls' club of the church ... I always had many questions.... I actually took it for granted that there was a God. But how exactly that is, I have been consciously searching on it ..." (Converted Muslima, 40 years)

3.1. Relationships after Conversion

Because conversion to Islam is so simple, it has been argued that many women who take this step to do so alone, by themselves (Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014). One woman pronounced the *shahada* while walking down the street, carrying groceries (Hass 2011; notes from my fieldwork), others make this affirmation in a communal setting at a mosque or at women-only gatherings. At the same time, conversion is also quite complex. In Europe, as is the case in Germany or in the Netherlands, it means adopting a minority religion that is under intense, often critical and hostile scrutiny (Ozyurek 2010; Özyürek 2014; Vroon 2014). As Ozyurek argues: " ... Germans who choose to embrace a minority religion in a context where Islam and Muslims are feared, hated, discriminated against, marginalized and forced to assimilate ... " (Ozyurek 2010, p. 173). Sisterhood and the desire to belong to a particular group can compensate for the cultural and social loss, especially for converts who have voluntarily or involuntarily severed previous social ties with non-Muslims, and sometimes feel distanced from their Dutch culture as their Muslim identity becomes more prominent in their lives (Vroon 2014). This may ease their sense of living as a minority group and their lack of belonging. One participant stated that as a Dutch Muslim woman, as a doctor, she feels that women ask specifically for her, and sometimes ask her for her opinion as a Muslim woman about global issues:

> " ... when something happens in the world and people ask me, 'so, what do you think of that?' ... I think to myself: "did you come here to have your baby examined, or did you come here out of curiosity about me and my life? ... I don't have to justify things that happened somewhere else ... that's why I also used to say that I was completely unaware that my identity was so visible externally ...nowadays there is a stamp on the Muslim identity. and you really have the idea that you have to prove yourself ... " (Converted Muslima, age 40)

3.1.1. Relationships with the Dutch society

The Netherlands has specific sensitivities that can be traced to the historical and collective memory of the country as one of tolerance, as well as historical events related to society and immigration, religion and immigration (Entzinger et al. 2014). The Netherlands was characterized by what is known as the pillarization model throughout the first half of the 20th century. Pillarization (*verzuiling*, in Dutch) is the division of a society into groups based on shared philosophical or socio-economic groundings, so that these groups are shielded to a certain extent. This can be achieved by creating institutions various societal groupings, including schools, associations, parties, trade unions, broadcasters, newspapers and hospitals. The rise of the welfare state, the youth revolution, rapid de-confessionalization and the sexual revolution in the 1960s brought about the end of pillarization. Although this model has ceased to be a formal driver of society, there are still remnants of the pillar division. Good linguistic examples are the terms that differentiate people born in the Netherlands (*autochtoon*) from those not born in the Netherlands (*allochtoon*). Within the term allochtoon, further distinctions are made between Western and non-Western *allochtonen*, where the former implicitly signifies closeness to Western civilization, and the latter refers to groups that are considered disadvantaged or less integrated into 'modern' societies. As a consequence, some claim that the pillarization model still characterizes perceptions of Muslims and non-Muslims in the Netherlands (Entzinger et al. 2014). In this discourse, Muslims are framed as non-modern subjects who may be opposed to female and gay emancipation and sexuality (Vroon 2014), who also would like to have (and in some cases, have) their own hospitals, schools, media and political parties (Vroon 2014). No less importantly, the Netherlands has a colonial past, which has affected the considerable immigration to the country from Suriname, the other Dutch Antilles, and Indonesia (for more details, see Wekker 2016). In addition, the country experienced a more recent kind of immigration. In the 1960s, various industries needed more workers than were available in the Netherlands. Big corporations recruited immigrants from countries such as Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Yugoslavia, Tunisia, Turkey and Morocco. This is one of the reasons behind the rise in the number of Muslims, but it also resulted in the growth of the number of Christians (Bakker 2014; Entzinger et al. 2014). After 1973, when the recruitment of workers abroad was stopped, the number of Muslims grew further because of the immigration of the wives and children of resident migrant workers. Since the beginning of the 1990s, a large number of Muslims have also entered the Netherlands as asylum seekers and under the aegis of family re-unification (Bakker 2014; Entzinger et al. 2014; Nicolaas and Sprangers 2007). This, combined with negative ideas in the Western hemisphere about Islam, the combination of waves of post-colonial immigration, and the rise of Islamophobia, have historically contributed to a dichotomy and difficulties in reconciling Dutch and Muslim identities. In short, Muslimness is associated with being Moroccan or Turkish *and* foreign, and is not yet a Dutch identity.

The transformation of the Dutch pillar system, as Peter Van der Veer notes, can be concretized by the fact that, in particular, the wearing of headscarves by Muslim girls *"is regarded as a total rejection of the Dutch way of life"* (Van der Veer 1996, 2006). So, what happens if a blonde, blue-eyed Dutch girl chooses to wear a headscarf? Does she confuse her peers as she transitions through different identities and levels of belonging where she is Dutch and Muslim, yet not born into Islam?

These women convert to a religion that is thought to be 'foreign', which makes their position in Western societies complex. Moreover, even though in most Western countries it is considered important for people to make their own choices, exercising one's freedom to choose Islam is seen as puzzling at best and treason at worst. As mentioned above, it is often assumed that people make that choice because of a romantic relationship with a Muslim, whereas most Dutch Muslim converts describe their conversion as an informed and personal choice. In her book 'Veils and Wooden clogs don't go together' van Nieuwkerk deals with Dutch cultural and national identity and what converts can teach us about the construction of the Dutch 'self' by contrast to the Muslim 'Other' (Van Nieuwkerk 2004). She concludes that Dutch identity is constructed as modern, tolerant and open; a kind of 'universal non-identity' (Van Nieuwkerk 2004, p. 245). It is this 'universal nonidentity' consisting of tolerance, freedom and emancipation against which converts are evaluated and are considered to

fall short because they have converted to Islam. By converting, they are now perceived as belonging to the undistinguished category of the Other. Van Nieuwkerk describes this as cultural racism and shows how Dutch female converts to Islam are often considered traitors. To paraphrase, you cannot change race, she states, but you can betray your race. Since Islam is seen as the belief system of immigrants, converts become foreigners by becoming Muslim. Female converts become especially visible as foreigners (if/when they decide to wear a headscarf), since veiling is often considered to be the most forceful symbol of Islam. (Van Nieuwkerk 2014). Galonnier confirms this image by arguing that Islam is not only perceived as violent and oppressive, but also as 'brown' or 'non-white', foreign and non-Western (Galonnier 2015b). Hence, one cannot be both 'Muslim' and 'European'. Jensen adds that an important facet of current European nationalist discourses entails the idea that political values such as secularization are essentially cultural values (Gudrun Jensen 2008). In other words, secularity is a European value that Muslims supposedly lack. In this context, she quotes a Danish nationalist politician who argued that when Danes become Muslims, they are no longer Danish: 'They leave their Danish background behind because they abandon central concepts in Danish identity like liberalism, democracy, equality' (Gudrun Jensen 2008). Jensen states that in her studies, many converts dissociated themselves from what they called the 'Danish culture' (Gudrun Jensen 2008).

Belonging

> *"You do not belong to Dutch society any more, but you can participate"* (Converted Muslima, age 37)

This ethnography often documented the dichotomies the participants explored as a result of their transition to Islam between 'us' and 'them', between born into Islam versus converting to Islam, between their national identity (Dutch) and their religious identity (Islam). Vroon suggests that ethnic identity also contributes by forming a triangle of identities (Vroon 2014). These fuel the inherent tensions between being Dutch and being Muslim. In popular discourse in the Netherlands, national belonging and Muslims' religious belongings are often pitted against each other. Therefore, converts to Islam have attracted popular and academic interest, since their life stories provide an opportunity to gain a better understanding of how these two seemingly mutually exclusive forms of belonging are combined within one individual (Gudrun Jensen 2008; Zebiri 2008; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014). Zebiri's comparison of converts to "indigenous people", however, does not quite capture the whole range of backgrounds of converts to Islam in the Netherlands (Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014), or in other European countries. For instance, in the British case, Suleiman noted that non-Western converts to Islam are a neglected topic (Suleiman 2013). This is a key point since non-Muslim immigrants and/or their children convert to Islam as well.

In the Netherlands, Islam is often characterized in popular discourse as a foreign religion, but contemporary conversion in the Netherlands has a historic precedent that goes back to the 17th century with the Muslim presence in the country and stories of people 'who went Turk', i.e., converted to Islam (Kaplan 2007; Vroon 2014). In spite of these examples, conversion to Islam is still an emotional issue and ethnic Dutch Muslim women today are still more often confronted with hostility than Muslimas with an immigrant background. Van Nieuwkerk argued that, whereas veiled converts experience forms of discrimination, non-converted Muslimas must also cope with the way they are perceived (Van Nieuwkerk 2003, 2014). 'Being a foreigner' or choosing to 'become a foreigner' have different repercussions. The latter often evokes greater contempt and hostility (Van Nieuwkerk 2003, 2014; Vroon 2014).

However, as Vroon argues, instead of a betrayal of "God, truth and church," conversion to Islam is more often regarded as a betrayal of progress in the fields of women's liberation and emancipation resulting from processes of secularization (Vroon 2014). Tensions arise, for instance, when converted women decide to wear a headscarf (Hass and Lutek 2019). Even though Dutch Muslims are often addressed as though they formed one bloc, and my interlocutors argued that there is only one Islam, Muslims' practices differ and are inspired by cultural and ethnic influences. Converts need to find

their way among these different practices Muslims term 'Islam' and make choices in light of how to practice their new religion. Choices in these matters influence women's sense of religious belonging. As Yuval-Davis stated, belonging is always a dynamic process (Yuval-Davis 2006), which, in this case, fits the dynamic character of conversion to Islam among Dutch women. It is here worth adding that Yuval-Davis also refers to the politics of belonging: while belonging expresses what people feel and their orientations, the politics of belonging often indicate those contestations who does and who does not belong (Yuval-Davis 2006; Anthias 2018). Belonging could be belonging to a religious or cultural group, or to one's national fold (Vroon 201A Dutch Fatima).

> *"Once, a teenager screamed: "Fatima" at me when I was ice-skating... I didn't even realize it was aimed at me; my mother told me. I thought it was sadder for her. It did have some impact on her..."* (Converted Muslima, age 31)

The name Fatima is loaded with stereotypic and symbolic meanings and implications. In addition to being a Muslim female name, a few participants stated that they immediately experienced name-calling once they decided to wear a headscarf in public.

> *" . . . I often get comments like "look, that woman has become Moroccan". Or that someone yells at me: "hey Fatima!" That is a bit denigrating and of course everyone turns their heads to look . . . "* (Converted Muslima, age 37)

> *"I just feel Dutch, so if someone yells at me: Fatima! Then I just say: "No, my name is Nienke de Vries". De Vries, for that matter, is the most Dutch name you can think of . . . . So, I think it's funny too. I talk back to the people taunting me like that . . . "* (Converted Muslima, age 36)

Thoughts about belonging and different levels of belonging were themes that arose again and again during the interviews. The participants discussed feelings of belonging to Dutch society, as well as feelings of no longer belonging to the Dutch national fold after conversion and also 'talking back' to the stereotypes aimed at them (Hass and Lutek 2018; Vroon 2014).

> *" . . . I have a leather studio at home, I design handbags... There are, of course, a lot of people who do not care at all about me being Muslim, but there are some who think: "Well, I will not buy an expensive bag from this headscarf". It certainly has some limiting factors, yes . . . "* (Converted Muslima age 36)

> *"I don't belong anymore ... I don't belong to Dutch culture anymore. I have my own little subculture"* (Converted Muslima, age 35)

Taunts such as "are you Turkish now?" or "have you become Moroccan?" simply underscore that being Dutch and Muslim is still incomprehensible for many people, as though someone can only be Muslim if they are from a migrant background and another ethnicity, but not native Dutch:

> *"I have also been asked things like: "Have you become a Moroccan?" ... from children ... even this generation is still being raised with the idea that you are a Muslim because you are Moroccan and not because you are Islamic and that very much ... it still prevails ..."* (Converted Muslima, age 37)

However, as shown in the quote below, belonging to a Muslim community does not compensate for the feeling of not belonging to Dutch society. This theme is discussed extensively in the next sub-section, since new Muslims often do not feel that they belong to the Muslim community, since these are often divided into Moroccan communities or Turkish communities.

> *" . . . I have the feeling that I really do not belong anywhere anymore ... I do not belong to the Moroccan community or to the Turkish community ... or whatever ... because for them I am really Dutch. But I also do not belong to the Dutch anymore, because then you are a Muslim, but I actually all my friends are Dutch Muslims. Then you have your own little network. The Netherlands is so weird: . . . in the Netherlands, you no longer belong but you can participate"* (Converted Muslima, age 37)

Being addressed as a foreigner is a new experience for ethnic Dutch converts and impacts their sense of belonging. One example was provided by a participant in Vroon's study, who said that, in the current public debate between "us" and "them" (i.e., Dutch versus non-Dutch), she increasingly felt she belonged to "them." This happened not because she felt less Dutch as a result of her conversion, but because her son was excluded by his classmates because his mother wears a headscarf (Vroon 2014).

3.1.2. Relationships with the Muslim Communities

It is crucial to take a combined social and communal perspective on conversion to Islam since if the individual is the sole focus of analysis, converted women's agency with respect to forming and becoming part of Muslim communities remains unexplained. Converted individuals not only engage in personal transformation processes, but they also become connected to the *ummah*, the world community of Muslims (Vroon 2014). Long before the internet emerged as a means to communicate and interact globally, Muslims participated in this global community, which was imaginable through the medium of a sacred language and written script (Anderson 2016). The world community of Muslims is usually conceptualized as a symbolic family of brothers and sisters. This Islamic concept of sisterhood enables people to take part in and shape their feelings by belonging to the world Muslim community (Anderson 2016). Similarly, in Judaism, upon finishing conversion, *Giur*, the individual becomes part of the larger global Jewish nation (*Ha Am Hayehudi*) (Kravel-Tovi 2012, 2017). The term community (the world community of Muslims, the *ummah*) is not always a self-evident concept or mentioned by participants in ethnographies (Hass and Lutek 2018; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014), but rather a term that reflects an "imagined community" (Anderson 2016). Roy, in his book *Globalized Islam, the search for a New Ummah*, suggests that, in a Western context, the imagined community of Muslims is a reconstruction, since it is no longer based on territory and culture. Thus, the Muslim community in the West no longer has a real social basis, since Muslims do not share specific patterns of behavior and belong to different social groups (Roy 2004) Moreover, as a result of individual choice and free association, there are as many *ummah*'s as groups pretending to embody it (Anderson 2016).

This was true in the past as well, and is not typical of Muslims in the West, since "by definition world religions are not confined to one society or cultural tradition" (Eickelman 1989). Vroon reports that few of her participants aimed to become part of the Muslim immigrant communities, but instead formed and participated in multi-ethnic social networks emanating from the work of volunteers who were in most cases converts who organized a variety of offline events and gatherings, as well as online meeting points, such as forums, websites and blogs. These online and offline activities were centered around a common goal of learning about Islam and sharing their experiences of being a (new) Muslima in the Netherlands (Vroon 2014). These gatherings were usually in the context of "gaining knowledge" (*kennis opdoen*, in Dutch) and thus produced a pious sociality and ethnic communality that informed and shaped women's belonging within the abstract notion of the *ummah* (Vroon 2014). Özyürek noted that in her ethnography not many converted Muslims aimed to feel a sense of belonging to born Muslim (mainly Turkish) communities, and that there were even tensions between converted Muslims and born Muslims. By the mid-1970s, most Muslim territories had gained independence and established independent nation-states, but the Islamic ideal of Muslims speaking one language (Arabic) and belonging to one *ummah*, the global Muslim community, continues to exist and has been a central demand of Islamic movements. The concept of the *ummah* calls Muslims not only to unite across national boundaries, but to place Islam above all national and other identities in Muslims' everyday lives. However, Alyedreessy argues that despite the *ummah*, the influences of colonialism have continued to shape the economies, politics and societies of Muslims in their countries, as a result of the spread of colonialist languages, literature, culture, ideas of social hierarchies, nationalism and educational institutions that have endangered the socio-cultural roots of indigenous peoples who have struggled in the post-colonialist era to establish a new identity (Alyedreessy 2016) (for more details, see Milton-Edwards 2006).

Virtual Islam (Cesari 2009) and Islam in cyber space (Vroon 2014) and Algorithms of Allah (practicing religiosity online by posting suras, talking to Allah on blogs and watching live streams of prayers at mosques worldwide) are examples of transnational Islam. "Electronic religiosity" is enabling Islam to expand globally through the dissemination of audios and videos, on independent television satellite shows, but primarily through websites, bulletin boards, chatrooms and discussion forums on the internet, which are promoting alternative, sometimes contradictory takes on Islam that rival previously monolithic and national interpretations (Cesari 2009). Although transnational forms of Islam often include inclusive returns to fundamental principles and texts, it is just as important to note that, in most cases, they do not encourage a critical approach to source materials such as the Quran or Hadith.

Many of the converts described in these studies stressed that Muslims and Islam are two different things. As Ozyurek argues, many non-Muslim Germans as well as German converts to Islam believe that immigrant Muslims need to be integrated (into German society), educated and even transformed. This transformation does not involve leaving Islamic practices behind, but rather by making immigrant Muslims abandon their cultural backgrounds (north African or Middle Eastern) and by persuading them to adopt a fundamental form of Islam, disassociated from cultural traditions and practices (Özyürek 2014). In the Netherlands as well, the importance of distinguishing between "culture" and "religion" was stressed frequently, in women's groups, in lectures at mosques, and in other events with a Muslim audience (Hass 2011; Vroon 2014). As Vroon adds, in this context, the "real" content of Islam is found in books, and primarily in the founding texts of the Qur'an and Sunna. Although interpreted by Islamic scholars, thus making their opinions open to change over time, knowledge from a book is considered superior to the traditions of many of the immigrant- born Muslims in the Netherlands (Vroon 2014). Born Muslimas who attended mosque or Qur'anic classes often referred to themselves as being "cultural Muslimas" (Vroon 2014), as a way of indicating that even though they came from Muslim families, did not know much about their religion and for example did not learn how to pray at home. These Muslims are sometimes termed "newly practicing Muslims", and were shown to often encounter similar challenges as new Muslims, in that they have to learn the basics of the Islamic faith (Hass 2011). In both Vroon's and the current ethnography, the women's groups, Qur'anic classes and lectures at the mosque welcomed converts and born Muslimas as well as non-Muslim women. In other words, those groups were always diverse, and were comprised of women from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The search for a true or pure form of Islam therefore affected them all (Hass 2011; Hass and Lutek 2018; Vroon 2014).

Vroon claimed that by being ethnically Dutch, but now Muslim, this struggle is perhaps connected to the culturalist turn in the Netherlands where the concept of culture was a reminder of norms and values. Perhaps as a remnant of the Dutch history of pillarization, the norms and values her participants retained after conversion were mostly attributed to their upbringing, without necessarily considering them as part of Dutch culture (Vroon 2014). It also became clear that when talking about distinguishing culture and religion, most of the time it was meant to differentiate between Islam and the born Muslimas' cultures (Vroon 2014). Often, the meaning converted Muslimas attributed to their choices, from the choice to convert to Islam, to the changes in daily life that resulted from this choice (dress, food), greatly differed from how these women were perceived by their non-Muslim environment. Whereas the women were usually pleased with the emphasis on women's rights in Islam, they were perceived as taking a step backward from Dutch and global progress in women's emancipation. For example, whereas these women claimed to be following Islam, and not Muslims, a strong influence of a (presumed) Muslim husband was assumed. Vroon and Ozyurek agree with the aspiration of European Muslim converts to adopt a culture free Islam, as a way to distance themselves from notions of "Muslim backwardness" and other negative perceptions about Islam. Vroon makes the case that the discourse about ethnic categories that are equated with social groups under the notion of community is dominant in the Netherlands. She considers that this discourse is not only dominant in the Dutch context, but has taken on another dimension in that it is not only about ethnic minorities,

but about the ethnicization of Muslims. The notion of ethnicity as defined as different peoples with different cultures still exists (Özyürek 2014; Vroon 2014). Dutch converts are regularly mistaken for Turks or Moroccans, or asked if they have also now become Turkish or Moroccan, as the following participant in my fieldwork in 2009 claimed:

> *"People let's say at the doctor's office are surprised to see me get up when called by my (Dutch) name".*
> *or ... "people often say to me, your Dutch is so good! Why wouldn't it be? I was born and raised here. If I am wearing a headscarf it does not immediately signal that I am a foreign".* (Converted Muslima, 26 years old)

Thus, members of a new generation of European Muslims are creating a globalized Islamic identity that has distanced itself from the ethnic cultures of their parents. Kundnani claims that this process is more likely to lead to new forms of democratic activism than to political violence unless diverted from this course by counter-productive policies. The social exclusion of ethnic groups who happen to be majority Muslim is seen as either a failure of Islam to integrate itself into secular Europe or as an Islamist rejection of integration. In the former case, what is emphasized is the supposed absence of a distinction between religion and politics in Islam; what is ignored are the myriad ways in which ordinary Muslims have resolved the theological challenges created by living in a secular society (Kundnani 2008). In the Netherlands, Paul Scheffer's widely read essay *"Het multiculturele drama"* (the Multi-Cultural Drama), which was published in 2000, warned of the danger of social disintegration caused by a Muslim underclass separated not by social and economic exclusion, but by an Islamic rejection of the basic "Dutch values" (Scheffer 2000).

> *"... I was alone for many years, then I have had my son (with me) for the last 3 years ... but holidays are not really a celebration... A very difficult thing about Islam, is that if you really follow the rules then you are separated. On holidays I can't really say oh I'm going to visit a girlfriend because she is with her husband. I can't expect her husband to just sit in another room because I'm visiting. I find that really difficult and it means I'm alone with my son during the holidays ... really alone. I could also meet with other single sisters and we all could feel sorry for ourselves ... but I am not really happy about that ... so that ... I would like to say that Eid el Fitter is my favorite holiday now, but it is not like before on Sinterklaas [St. Nicholas' Eve/Day, when the Dutch give presents] or Christmas because I celebrated with my whole family. And I miss that now. I don't have a family to do that with now ... I regret that . . . ."* (Converted Muslima, 35 years)

Thus, tensions not only exist between those who are "Dutch" and those who are "Muslim", but also within the Muslim community itself. As noted earlier, it would be erroneous to refer to a single Muslim community in the Netherlands because the community is highly diverse and includes Muslims with a background of immigration from Morocco and Turkey, Muslims who came to the Netherlands for political reasons (Algerian, Tunisian, Iranian and Somali Muslims) and Muslims from the former Dutch colonies, Muslims from Suriname and a small minority of Indonesian Muslims living in the Netherlands). In some of the interviews I conducted in 2009 and 2010, the speakers talked about other Muslims in a tense and stereotypical manner. For example, one participant praised Moroccan women as educated and progressive as compared to other Muslim women. In the literature, there is statistical data showing that young Moroccan women, unlike Moroccan men, tend to have degrees in higher education and have integrated into the Dutch labor market in key positions and even in political positions, and in larger numbers than Turkish women (Curl and Doomernik 2003).

> *" . . . . Some people choose the headscarf to identify with the group correctly ... but I don't really identify with Muslims in The Netherlands ... but maybe that's just a disadvantage for me. I don't have much to do with obligations, I find that not so interesting for myself . . . ".* (Converted Muslima, 31 years)

There are also inequalities within the diverse Muslim community. The following participant talked about her experience as a white, upper middle class, highly educated Muslim woman:

"The diversity of all Muslims and the power inequalities among the Muslims are often based on race, ethnicity, gender or class or sexuality . . . " (Converted Muslima, 35 years old)

The literature on converts to Islam reveals this quest for a de-culturized Islam. In the Netherlands, in 2009 during the beginning of my fieldwork, and as described in Vroon's study in 2014, there were tensions concerning the perception of Islam as a perfect religion, a religion of peace, and the significant problems of Muslims worldwide. V. Nieuwkerk (Van Nieuwkerk 2014) Vroon (Vroon 2014) as well as Ozyurek (Özyürek 2014) both noted in their studies on the Netherlands and Germany that, paradoxically, all the converts they met and talked to, as well as the convert narratives they read online, stated that conversion to Islam took place in a context of positive social contacts with Muslims. However, at the same time, a substantial number of participants were discontent with born Muslims, particularly Muslims from immigrant backgrounds, and sometimes even seemed disappointed with the way these born Muslims practiced Islam (Van Nieuwkerk 2014). Many of the converts described in these works stressed that Muslims and Islam are two different things.

" . . . I only just realized something, I talked about it quite recently with my husband ... we still feel weird, we still feel less at home with the Muslim community in the Netherlands .... My husband says regularly: "I am a Muslim, despite the Muslims." I am happy that I first got to know Islam and only then the Muslims... we are both very happy with our religion and we feel more and more .... yes.... me I often feel more comfortable with non-Muslims than with Muslims ... it is very difficult to feel this, to notice it this way, we should actually form a community and strengthen each other. but I always have the feeling with Muslims that I can expect a knife in my back any time .... Trying to knock you down or something . . . " (Converted Muslima, age 37)

" . . . I notice a lot of racism from within the Muslim community ... I am of course married to a dark man, and I notice a lot of discrimination" (Converted Muslima, age 37)

" . . . I can also point to Muslims who discriminate . . . " (Converted Muslima, age 40)

" . . . If you have a somewhat dark skin, especially for the Moroccans. You also see it within the Moroccan community ... if you come a bit too far from the south and you are dark ... then yes ... you are less or something ... I went walking with my husband and people said "oh nice, she converted, and then looked at my husband with disgust ... what is she doing with such a man? Sometimes my husband has had it, he prayed at the (University in the Netherlands). There is a prophet in Islam, he was black and he was a slave and he was then redeemed ... and he got a very important role ... so my husband was praying and then wanted to take his shoes off and said to the men who were there can I go inside ... yes, they said .... in the name of the prophet ... in a very denigrating way . . . " (Converted Muslima, age 37)

The outcome is that some participants argue that they do not want to feel affiliated with the Dutch Muslim community. One example is wearing a headscarf to affirm their relationship with Allah but not to identify with fellow Muslims:

"I want to say something about the headscarf and the reason I wear it . . . For me, it's about me ... it's really a reminder of my faith. It is really between me and God ... it has no added value for me that people see it ...it is ... not to identify me with a group, because I often don't (identify with the Muslim community) ... I don't have to be identified as a Muslim." (Converted Muslima, age 31)

3.2. Relationships with Friends

" . . . . I can have Dutch, Surinamese, Jewish- all kinds of girlfriends. It is not that I am only drawn to one kind of person, because then I would have the idea that I am no longer part of Dutch society ..." (Converted Muslima, age 40)

For many converts, becoming Muslim entails changing many aspects of their daily lives and cultural practices that can conflict with their social environment. Galonnier argued that 'white' converts to Islam are anomalous individuals in a world where race and faith have become closely intertwined. She suggests that while they disrupt classic understandings of whiteness and enter the different setting of the Muslim community where whiteness is neither unmarked nor dominant, white converts to Islam can be characterized as "non-normative whites."

> "... *most of my girlfriends are converted ... converted Muslimas*" (Converted Muslima, age 31)

In their narratives, the majority of the women felt that, after converting to Islam, they were often alienated from their families and friends, but did not feel completely at home in the company of native-born Muslims and then sought emotional support from groups of Dutch Muslim women. This is evident in the scholarship about conversion to Islam in the Netherlands (Badran 2006; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014) and in neighboring countries as well—Germany (Özyürek 2014), Sweden (Roald 2004, 2012), Denmark (Gudrun Jensen 2008), the UK (Alyedreessy 2016; Inge 2016) and Ireland (McGinty 2006).

> "... *among best friends, there is a colleague of mine who helped me a lot with when I was not allowed to wear my headscarf at work. His wife is also converted, but she is actually more of an acquaintance.... they live quite far away, but she introduced me to other women who live more in the area, and they are converts too. They (my friends) are all actually converted (laughs). Yes, we have had the same experience and also the same culture ... I think that also plays a part ... what we all have in common is that we made this change and that we come from the same culture ...* " (Converted Muslima, age 30)

For many converts in this study, conversion resulted in being in between social circles for a while. Conversion to Islam is not a reason to disengage from existing friendships, but sometimes friends cannot accept the change, and other times conversion results in fewer common interests with old friends. A network of new Muslim friends, often referred to as sisters, often compensates for the loss of friendships from pre-conversion times:

> "*I met one of my sisters at the mosque and then was invited to a sisters' evening. We do that about once a month with all the converted sisters ... we usually read Quran and sometimes there is a lecture, someone gives a lecture but it's just also ladies' night (laughs) where we talk and eat ...*" (Converted Muslima, age 22)

> " ... *I also often go to a friend's house in xxx (big city in the Netherlands) also a Dutch sister, married to an Algerian man ... we have been friends since the beginning of my conversion ... our husbands have also become friends. That's so nice, we are each other's family...*" (Converted Muslima, age 37)

The quest for a de-culturized Islam attracts a very diverse group of converts and an equally diverse group of born Muslim women and girls to Quranic classes, Arabic lessons and workshops. Native Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch women and girls form the majority of the audience but women from all kinds of backgrounds come together during lectures and meetings. This allows for friendships to emerge across divides of ethnicity and class, within a pious sociality where connecting with each other through Islam can take place.

> " ... *With friends I see that too ... I have an acquaintance, she has an Egyptian father and a converted mother ... she was born Muslim, but still has that Dutch behavior (laughs) ... Actually, when I come to think of it, all my girlfriends are all converted .... I also have a girlfriend who is Kurdish ... I have to say, I think that it is a huge added value that I have them*" (Converted Muslima, age 31)

Yet, for some participants, having fellow Muslims as friends was not important:

> "*I do not need girlfriends of the same origin as mine ... I have a Jewish best friend, another who is Christian ...* " (Converted Muslima, age 40)

> *"... In my friends' circle, one friend is a friend from high school ... she was always there ... she is not a Muslim ... but not everyone sticks with you after conversion . . . "* (Converted Muslima, 31 years)

3.3. Relationships with Family Members

Similar to friendships, relationships with family members can change to a certain extent after conversion. Lieke's story is a good example of how one family reacted to their daughter's conversion. During our interview Lieke recalled that when first taking a deep interest in Islam, it was during the month of Ramadan and her friends asked her if she also intended to fast. She replied that she was not Muslim, but deep in her heart she was considering it. She decided not to start converting to Islam during the month of Ramadan, but to experience it a bit more, so she learned to pray, began to eat *halal* and actually lived like a Muslim before officially converting. She would utter the words of commitment to Islamic faith silently, because she was afraid to say it out loud, since then she would actually become a Muslim. She was waiting for the right time to convert to Islam, and preferred not to do it in a mosque to avoid public scrutiny, so she waited for her heart to guide her. One day when she came home with groceries, she passed by a park and said to herself: *"Lieke, enough with the denial, it's you ... it's become part of you ... maybe there are things in Islam that you do not like, but that does not mean you do not believe in God and His Prophet ... "*.

She did not immediately share the news with her parents, but only did so during the month of Ramadan when it came round again, and she, as a new Muslim, wanted to experience her first full Ramadan. She did not know how her parents would react, nor did she want to be casual by saying: *"By the way, I converted to Islam."* The next Ramadan Lieke announced that she was fasting. By saying so, her parents understood that she had converted to Islam, and her mother made it a bit hard on her, reacting with lots of emotion and tears, and talked to her about the oppression of women in Islam. Her father respected her choice; he had made peace with her decision. Lieke remembers his exact words: "There is no problem with Islam, for those who were born into it, but those who were baptized in the church are not supposed to convert." As the tempest subsided in Lieke's family, her mother told her that as long as she did not take on the external trappings of a Muslim, she could get used to the idea; that is, she hoped Lieke would not choose to cover her head. Her father feared a boyfriend had influenced her into converting to Islam, but he then realized that the boyfriend was not part of the decision and was even opposed to it. Years later when I met Lieke again, she remained a pious woman, was the mother of two children and had eventually married her boyfriend who also re-discovered his faith.

Badran argues that in converting, women exercise agency, bravely and decisively, in going against the grain of their background, family, and culture and in opting for something strange and new. If their degree of agency is measured by their resolve in the face of family and societal reactions to conversion, this agency is indeed more intense among women in Europe ([Badran 2006](#)).

> *"(when I became a Muslim) she (my grandmother) thought it was absolutely fine... my grandfather told me 'you do what you feel comfortable doing and if you think you should look for more, you should do that' . . . "* (Converted Muslima, age 37)

> *" . . . , I did not immediately tell my family that I had become a Muslim ... I had already gotten to know my future husband . . . but he was not practicing, so at a certain point everyone thought I was converting for him. And he said for me? It wasn't because of me ... we got married in church ... he only started practicing later, because of me . . . "* (Converted Muslima, age 40)

> *"My mother has always accepted me the way I am and two uncles of mine too, and so have my sisters. They all accepted me the way I am . . . they did find it a bit exciting in the beginning, especially when I had a daughter, I got questions "what will you do [with her upbringing]" Well, not much different than with a boy (laughs) ..."* (Converted Muslima, age 40)

She continued:

"...Converting is one thing, the headscarf is something else ..." (Converted Muslima, age 40)

As shown in many narratives, numerous participants felt that their families did not have a problem with the conversion per se, but could not accept the outward manifestations once the converted Muslima started wearing a headscarf:

" ... My parents asked if I could wear it (the headscarf) tied from behind ... I did that for a week and then I just started wearing it from the front ... until one day my mother went with me to go buy headscarves (laughs)" (Converted Muslima, age 37)

Wearing the headscarf is a public statement of private conviction

" .... about a year after (my conversion) I started wearing a headscarf... for my family that was just as difficult as my conversion, or perhaps even more difficult because... I think because it broadcasts it publicly ... ". (Converted Muslima, age 31)

3.4. Romantic Relationships

Friendships and relationships are issues that concern many young women. This is especially true of young Dutch women who are expected to be liberated and aware of their sexuality. On the other hand, in Muslim society (sometimes in addition to the cultural influences of the country of origin), young women are not allowed to date casually but only for a serious purpose: that is, for the purpose of marriage. Cohabitation is forbidden among almost all Muslims, even if they are very liberal. Of the 40 women I interviewed, fewer than half were in a relationship: that is, married (two were in their 40s and one was 27, married half a year earlier). A few were in serious relationships. However, more than half of the women were single and talked about how difficult it was to find a suitable mate. Religion and Islam are very important in their lives, so they tend not to want to date non-Muslim Dutch men (some said it would not bother them if they fell in love). On the one hand, there is a desire to find a Muslim partner, because, for example, in the case of the born Muslim women, they often seek partners through the eyes of their parents, but many Muslim spouses are considered by their families to be too religious, too macho or too fundamentalist, and by others as not religious enough. For the converted Muslim women, it is a more complex story, which I will try to describe in this subsection.

During the ethnography, I heard stories about women who fell in love with men outside of the Netherlands, who were more than happy to go to Europe, but when they got to the Netherlands, they had problems with the language, finding work, and obtaining citizenship. Many relationships also failed because some spouses left after they obtained citizenship. Many young women in their twenties and thirties know all about these stories and are concerned about their romantic future, but in the meantime, they continue to study until they meet someone, or in the words of one of the girls: *"When Allah sees that this is the right time for me, he will send me a match."* The patience of some of the girls (at least in the interview) is reminiscent of the concept of *Sabr* that Mahmoud described in her work. Mahmoud discusses how women cope with the difficulty of finding suitable partners in Egypt, and the difficulty of being a single woman. Religious girls deal with this pressure through *Sabr* (patience and faith), while more secular young women invest in their careers and personal development ([Mahmood 2001](#)). The Dutch participants in this ethnography found similar ways to cope with being single, Muslim and Dutch as shown below.

"... I'm not really actively looking for a partner ... but it is in my head ... I want to let it come to me, it will happen to me ... because when you look too hard for something, you will not find it.... but when you really do not look for something and do not expect it, so I hope I'll meet someone inshallah, and if not ... then it's probably my destiny not to meet anyone ... if Allah says it's time ... all is in the hands of Allah ... and if Allah decided, God forbid—that I should live without a man, without love, then so be it, then I will accept my fate..". (Asia, converted Muslima, age 22)

As Buitelaar argued, this participant is saying that, for many young Muslim women, finding a partner who shares the same religious identity and ethnic identity may be very important but what

these educated women who grew up in the Netherlands basically want is a "modern," "open," "liberal" and "liberated" man, and "someone who will accept me as I am." (Buitelaar 2006) These criteria seem to be the most important and powerful when women think of an ideal partner. Most of them would also be very happy if their partner was Muslim, because it would facilitate the future, such as marriage, raising children and the practice of religion at home. On the other hand, the partner's ethnic identity was perceived as less important for most of the interviewees (only a few wanted to meet a convert like themselves; see below). Being with a Muslim partner was not just a matter of shared religion and religious practices in a shared life. Rather, a Muslim partner connects them to a particular cultural heritage, whether Suriname or Moroccan origin (Buitelaar 2006). They have something in common, and even if they are not really devout Muslims who live according to Islamic law, they have a deep connection to history and another place, and the possibility of joining the Muslim nation, and if they are thinking about children in the future, they too will be part of the nation.

Some converts were already in a relationship with a Muslim man when they became interested in Islam. As Moors and Vroon-Najem note, their increased familiarity with Muslims more generally triggered their interest in Islam (Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019), including friends and co-workers and not only romantic partners. Moor and Vroon report that tensions can emerge when a non-Muslim woman starts to express her interest in Islam. Some of their participants actually hid their growing interest from their partner. They first wanted to figure out for themselves whether they wanted to become Muslim and be certain it was their decision alone, without raising expectations too soon (Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019). The following participant stated something similar:

> " ... I have had a Muslim boyfriend since I was 17, but that has nothing to do with it (my conversion) he does not practice at all, his mother is Dutch, non-Muslim, so it was absolutely no problem that I was not (Muslim). When I started my degree in Middle Eastern studies, I had no idea that I wanted to become a Muslim myself ... " (Converted Muslima, age 27)

3.4.1. A Married White Muslima

Most of the married women in this ethnography were married to born Muslim men (and not converted men), whether these men were born in the Netherlands (Muslim men of Moroccan or Turkish descent) or born elsewhere, and in some cases, as in the quote below, the couple met online and decided to be together before meeting face to face:

> "(I met my husband) online (laughs). He is Egyptian, but also really lives in Egypt (laughs). So, he is going to come here (to the Netherlands) ... yes, that is really nice.... the hassle of a long-distance relationship that I really could not bear it anymore ... but yes (laughs). sometimes it happens ... when you meet someone, you meet him ... I always make things difficult for myself, I have to say (laughs) ... I feel that I just have no choice but to follow my heart ... and go for it ... " (Lydia, converted Muslima, age 36)

For the born Muslimas, marriage often created more challenges and questions: should they marry a man who is from a similar background as their parents? What if he is more religious or less observant? This was addressed in my work in 2018 (Hass and Lutek 2018). However, the converted Muslimas faced other hurdles. Their lack of Muslim network and the loneliness stemming from not having an extended Muslim family were often motivators for wanting to find a spouse. Because it is harder to get introduced to someone when one's network is relatively small, many Muslim women turn to online dating sites. It is here that ethnicity, Dutchness and even whiteness become significant. As one participant stated, the fact that she was Muslim and Dutch made her highly desirable to Muslim men worldwide she otherwise would not have encountered.

Online marriage is an example of an informal Islamic marriage. Moors and Vroon-Najem state that converts often prefer to start with an Islamic marriage prior to a civil marriage. They are aware that religious marriages are not legally binding but value the existential security such marriages provide, as it helps them adhere to new religious norms such as engaging in sexual relationships only within a marital

framework (Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019) and in this case, the Islamic wedding allows the participant and her husband to engage in an online relationship until they can meet in person. The Islamic marriage can be an alternative to a civil marriage, as in cases where they cannot marry according to Dutch law, such as when the spouse is not yet a Dutch citizen (as in the quote above), or when the partner is already married (an older 40+ convert shared the fact that she often gets proposals to be a second or third wife) or when the Muslima is still young, living at home and not economically independent, but does not want to live in *zina* (sin) with her partner (i.e., have a relationship that includes sexual intimacy). However, often it is simply a step towards a Dutch civil legal marriage. Moors and Vroon-Najem found that, after the Islamic marriage, their interlocutors wanted to make the marriage official, which would make the recognition of future children easier (Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019).

Not all marriages in this ethnography complied with Dutch law. Some were purely Islamic marriages that were not preceded by a civil marriage and they were concluded in a highly informal manner, not always with the involvement of the family of the Dutch Muslim bride. Some took place online as in the quote above, whereas others were conducted in a mosque, as the following participant described:

> " . . . *I had a Moroccan colleague, with whom I had a relationship, and eventually I married him. I had already been Muslim for quite a while, we had an event in the mosque with both families ... my family, the in-laws and the Imam, who also told me something, like he married us... but that was more for our families* . . . " (Converted Muslima, age 31)

This participant referred to her marriage in the mosque as 'an event'. Perhaps as a Dutch convert who had seen her non-Muslim friends and family wed, it did not feel like a 'real wedding', but rather a religious ritual that would allow her to live with her husband. She also emphasized how this event was more for the parents on both sides. Moors and Vroon-Najem (2019) call these transnational marriages. They analyze the effects of the criminalization of particular forms of marriage (non-civil, performed in a mosque, etc.) and how the notion of the 'freedom to choose whom to marry' is politically instrumentalized to authorize or prohibit certain kinds of marriages. They spell out the tensions between the problematization of Muslim marriages and the experiences of the converts themselves, since it is their positionality as converts that affects them most strongly (Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019). Often, the term 'transnational marriages' is used for a particular category of immigrant marriages that brings people together who have grown up in different countries with which they continue to keep ties. This term is often used for marriages that involve people from the same national or ethnic origin, such as when Moroccan Dutch men or women marry someone from Morocco (Hooghiemstra 2003; Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019). Moors and Vroon-Najem's work indicate that marriages of converts to Islam in the Netherlands are often transnational. Some of these converts themselves have an immigrant background, and still feel connected to their or their parents' countries of origin. In other cases, their marriages turn out to be transnational because they marry someone who is either a post-immigrant or a new immigrant from a Muslim majority country. Hence, many converts are not only affected by the discourse on Islamic marriages but also by that of transnational marriages (Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019). As shown in the next quote from a Dutch Muslima married to an Egyptian man (a new immigrant), they live in a western neighborhood of Amsterdam. She states that at this point she does not see herself immigrating to Egypt, even though it is a Muslim country:

> "*My husband is from Egypt and he also says that Egypt is not free and safe at all and that if you really want to live Islam, it is actually much less safe than here and much less free than here* . . . *for that matter* . . . *I don't believe there is a country right now I could move to* . . . " (Converted Muslima, age 29)

Only a few married women were married to a converted Muslim man and had the conversion journey in common as a couple:

> " . . . . *when I went abroad for my research work, I was introduced by a friend to my husband. So, at that time we had only email contact ... and it clicked between us through the emails (laughs) so when I*

came back, I immediately agreed to meet him and the following week he asked me to marry him. For me that felt really good ... he was also converted ... When I told my sister about it, she was really in shock, she couldn't understand the fact that we had only met once she said "you don't know him, how can you be so sure that you want to marry him?" (Madelon, converted Muslima, age 37)

One participant stated that she and her husband were more orthodox at the beginning of their marriage:

"We used to be much more orthodox than we are now, much stricter in a lot of ways, we don't do this, we don't do that ... no photos, no shaking hands, no music .... we threw away a lot of things. Some things I even regret sometimes, that we don't have any pictures of our eldest daughter. Yes, a lot of steps made a lot of sense for me at the time, because I grew into it, but for my parents it seemed very sudden . . . " (Converted Muslima, age 33)

3.4.2. Single or Divorced White Muslima

The Dutch women in this ethnography who converted to Islam stated that it is difficult for them to be in a relationship for various reasons. The prime one was that they are looking for a man who converted to Islam like them, but these are few and far between *"The mosque was not intended to be a matchmaking platform,"* as one of the interviewees stated. Women who converted to Islam sometimes feel they lack a social network of Muslim women, in particular those who have lost social ties from their pre-conversion period. Others are still in touch, but many feel they are missing the family ties and social life of those born into Islam. In addition, after converting to Islam, many women do not feel connected and do not feel they belong to Dutch society any more (a finding reported in several studies), and they do not always feel they belong to Muslim society, despite it being a global Muslim nation (*ummah*). Recently, many aid organizations have been set up for newly practicing Muslims and new Muslims. Finally, unlike the pre-conversion period, women who are now Muslim cannot really date or go out with a man. Dating is intended (mainly for the more religious) to institutionalize the connection to wedlock and to the establishment of a family. Being a single or divorced Muslim woman increases these difficulties, and Muslim women's organizations and some mosques have made efforts to draw attention to the issues of unmarried women among Muslims, especially those who are Muslim women themselves. The problems are even more difficult for older single women. It does not come as a surprise that converts consider marriage as a solution to the multiple problems they may be facing. They expect that marrying a practicing Muslim will enable them to live a more fully Muslim life, with both partners supporting each other in their religious commitment (such as praying and fasting). At the same time, they also hope that such a relationship will provide them with a family of their own, and perhaps even with supportive in-laws (Vroon 2014). As many converts take religion quite seriously, they may express considerable hesitation about anything similar to Dutch dating practices and avoid public dating sites such as bars and discotheques. However, since they do not have a Muslim family that can help them, they may ask their friends at the mosque, or try online Muslim dating platforms such as muslima.com. Whatever the trajectory, once they find someone they consider a possible partner, they often prefer to meet a small number of times, sometimes only in public venues, or/and with others present. It is not simply that they will not have sexual intercourse before marriage, but they also try to avoid other forms of pre-marital intimacies, such as dating or even being together in public and friendship between someone of the opposite sex (Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019).

Overall, these women are concerned with finding a partner, building a home and establishing a family. These issues were brought up often during the interviews with women who were single. Women who converted to Islam sometimes want to meet a Dutch man who converted to Islam, but when they cannot they go to Muslim dating sites or other sites and start searching online, which sometimes leads to a relationship with a Muslim person from another part of the world that does not always end positively:

"My single or divorced girlfriends are waiting for the right one to appear ... and when I said that I was about to remarry it was often like "oh if you want to remarry then I know someone" .... Suddenly they had someone (rolling her eyes) . . . I only said I have a man in Egypt afterwards. I also got proposals to be a second wife ... very often. That is often the case in the Netherlands ... when you are divorced and a bit older . . . you get asked to be a second wife ... I said that I had absolutely no interest in it ... if you are the perfect man, a perfect man who does not exist, but well, suppose you are almost perfect, then I have you for 50 percent, then I prefer a man who is slightly less, but then I have him 70 percent only for myself. Something over 50 ... since no one is 100 percent; I still have less than 50 percent ..." (Converted Muslima, age 38)

Another participant explained that as a single, thirty-something-year-old converted Muslima, she would actually prefer to meet a Dutch converted Muslim man, like herself:

"Single and divorced Muslims of course would prefer a converted Muslim man, I wanted that too ... you still have a lot of things in common. But you do not meet men like that ... where would you meet them? Yes, maybe by chance at lectures or workshops, but are you going to say to them "I'm single ... are you too?" And in my case, I always have my child with me so they will probably assume that I am married ... so it's very difficult.... I used to be on a converts group on Facebook and then received a message from a Somalian man ... he was looking for a Dutch woman to marry ... huh? just because I'm Dutch you want to marry me? Well, no interest on my side (laughs). Just look for someone else ... that's it. Dutch women are very popular, but how to find the right man ... people are now meeting a lot online, I think that's a very good idea ..." (Converted Muslima, age 36)

Another participant also mentioned Dutch converted men:

"I would prefer meeting a Dutch man, preferably a converted Dutch man. I feel like I just have no choice but to follow my heart ... and go for it ..." (converted Muslima, age 38)

Another divorced participant talked about Dutch converted men and revealed the difficulties and challenges of a thirty- something single or divorced Muslim woman who has no Muslim family or connections who could introduce her to someone, so she and her friends in the same situation go online:

"Lately, a lot of men are also converting ... in the past maybe less but now I think there are a lot. It's really a thing though ... as I see it, Dutch women who have converted really are a hot item (laughs). Dutch converted men often ask "how do I meet women? How do I get to know women in a normal way?". Normally it goes through family, you get introduced... but if you are converted ... and we do not have ... that family ... so it often goes through the internet ... as I did, but yes, then you also come across the weirdest things . . . all my girlfriends who are divorced or single will tell you that. I've also received pictures and messages that totally shocked me . . . First you have a nice conversation with someone, and then they send a picture of body parts that you wouldn't want to see (laughs). Or ask about your body and then I think "what is this about?" I just want to get married . . . "

She continues:

" . . . Online dating has its risks. You can't say 'let's get to know each other for a little while first, together at home on the couch, it's very different from Dutch culture ... first get to know each other, try it out ... and then we'll see if it clicks and if it doesn't click we will put an end to it, and next year we will start again, but that is of course not Islamic at all". (Converted Muslima, age 37)

Similar to non-Muslims, not all Muslim single women are looking for a relationship. The only difference is that Muslims cannot date to see whether it will evolve, according to Islamic law, and all introductions are marriage-related.

"If I am looking for a relationship? I feel that 'looking' is a big word. I am not on the internet and I am not going to ask the imam if he has a nice boy for me ... no so not ... I expect to do so the moment that I feel that I really want it ... and just to meet someone is maybe naive ... but I don't feel like doing something actively now. It will happen to you ... or not (laughs)" (Converted Muslima, age 31)

Another participant expressed her attitude toward finding a suitable partner:

" . . . I have one friend who died at the age of 40, without a man ... It is because she never looked for anyone, and no one crossed her path ... You cannot know what will happen, so we say "trust Allah." For you, that's what it will be ... but it's easy to say, it's a bit hard to do (laughs). I have friends a little older than me, I see them: one engaged and getting married, and my older sister ... and I wanted to [do so] too! (Laughs) My Dutch sister got engaged, the wedding day is still in the future, and sometimes I catch myself thinking, "Well, now it's time for mine to come sometime!" But I still think we need patience, we have to wait "... (Asia, age 22)

Some women were aware that certain choices in their lives related to their religion and how they experience religion make it difficult for them to find the partner they would like or to find a partner at all. It does preoccupy them but does not stop them from living the way they chose. This is reflected in their agency:

" . . . but I have not really been concerned with it (finding a partner) at all. I have been alone for three years now .... in the beginning I was not at all concerned with that anyway .... and it took quite a long time before I really thought of ... now I am open to it but in the end, it will also become clear whether that is really the case. Or that you are going to work against it in a certain way because you do not have that much faith or desire ... but I see myself ... I hope I do not stay alone ... but as I see it, whatever happens will happen, that's ok too . . . " (Converted Muslima, age 31)

4. Conclusions

This text is part of a larger ongoing project based on the author's Ph.D. dissertation, entitled *"Is being Dutch enough? Women's conversion to Islam and the politics of belonging and identity"*, that involves multi-site and multi-year ethnography. This article presented Dutch Muslim women who are defying their perceived position as Muslim in relation to various voices in Dutch and Muslim society. They feel Muslim, and most of them have always felt Muslim, which is the most important thing for most of them. These young women who converted to Islam justify this decision as emanating from their own rational choice. Some of them regularly visit mosques and have recently begun to delve deeper into Islam. Others read and seek out knowledge about Islam. As part of the experience of being newcomers to their communities, these women often find that they have no aptitude for the Arabic language, so they use Dutch translations of Islamic verses and laws. However, as seen in the quotes throughout this paper, they do use words in Arabic in their conversations. Many young women start wearing headscarves to confirm their new Islamic identity, especially when they feel lost and not entirely part of Dutch society after conversion, as one participant stated:

" .... I am both ... Dutch and Muslim.... am I just very, very Dutch, I guess I don't have to transform myself now. I do not need to assimilate into another people or something ... certainly not ... I just have a different religion than most of the people I meet ... it is no more than that. If we were not wearing headscarves, nobody would see it, nobody would know (that we are Muslim) so that makes a big difference . . . " (Converted Muslima, age 40)

The objective of this article was to examine relationships with family, friends and romantic connections through a case study of Dutch Muslim women, specifically among converted Muslimas. I focused mainly on the narratives of the converted Muslimas as being newcomers to their faith and oftentimes to Muslim comminutes in the Netherlands.

This Dutch case study was extended to the broader phenomenon of conversion narratives, and more specifically those of white Muslims. The core finding is rooted in the concepts of identity, belonging and agency. Islam allows these women to acquire an identity that is not entirely Dutch, yet not foreign (by embracing a religion of a minority group). Their identity is not only Dutch-Moroccan or Moroccan-Dutch; it is simultaneously both and neither. Islam in their lives allows them to be Dutch and Muslim, a white Muslim woman, a Dutch Muslim woman, a true Muslim, someone who has found

peace, someone who finally feels at home, as the participants in this study often said. The appeal of pure Islam allows these women to formulate gender critiques, including criticism of born Muslims and how they practice Islam, criticism of Dutch society and the areas where Dutch society is not as tolerant as it seems. The findings suggest that the convert identity is a hybrid identity, consisting of Dutchness and other components that are Muslim. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" (Bhabha 2012) can serve to revisit and reshape existing categories. 'Dutchness' and 'Muslimness' thus move beyond their imagined boundaries and are turned into new identity positions. Consequently, the binary opposition between Muslim and Dutch can quickly vanish, since being Dutch can include being Muslim, and practicing Islam can be an expression of Dutch identity. The participants in this study, Muslim women representing a range of different stages of (religious) observance, argued for the definition of the boundaries of meaning attributed to a symbol of their religious belonging. Their narratives shed light on how these women deal with possible tensions sparked by their multiple identities and multiple belongings and reveal different themes connected to their (old and new) identities, levels of belonging, a quest for a de-culturized Islam and relationships with peers and family post-conversion, including romantic relationships, how these develop and play a certain role in the identity and belonging of white Muslim women in the Netherlands. As argued in Vroon (2014), conversion to Islam consists of a processual dynamic form of change rather than a sudden, radical switch from one identity to another. This perspective makes it possible to be attentive to women's multiple belongings and hybrid identities in their narratives (Hass and Lutek 2018, 2019; Vroon 2014). Feelings of belonging can change when a convert is regularly approached as a foreigner. The fact that not all converts are white women but come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds can also make a difference and calls for further research.

Belonging and identity are often seen as two sides of the same coin, or as Anthias argued, as two concepts that belong to the same "family" of concepts (Anthias 2018). As confirmed in this study, both are used politically in similar ways, since identity is seen as belonging to the individual, and belonging enables a greater engagement with place and location and the structural and contextual features of life. Yuval-Davis made the point that belonging is always a dynamic process (Yuval-Davis 2006), which clearly characterized the dynamic nature of conversion to Islam among Dutch women and the lived experience as native Dutch Muslim women who deal with questions of belonging (to Dutch society, to the Dutch national fold (see Vroon 2014) or to Muslim communities as an insider), and that of a hybrid identity that includes being a Dutch Muslim woman and a Muslim Dutch woman.

Dutch culture and a reified Islamic culture are important factors to consider when investigating what it means to be Muslim-Dutch or Dutch-Muslim. The findings show that some Muslim women struggle to have their voices heard, while others engage in what they call "talking back" to the stereotypes they encounter. Some state that it is their privileged place in society that allows them to engage in "talking back". Therefore, being conscious of their agency is a critical part of denouncing/disclosing stereotyped notions of their conversion processes.

In certain respects, the women studied here felt privileged to be native Dutch, but in other areas their Dutch background was a shortcoming, in particular when the lack of a Muslim network can make it hard for these women to find a suitable partner. Since observant Muslim women cannot date casually, and for many of them starting a family is an important value, Islamic marriage is clearly related to notions of belonging. The example of Islamic marriage discussed in sub chapter 3.5.1 is an example of this trans-locational perspective (Anthias 2018).

To explore dimensions of belonging, perceptions of identity and agency, Anthias called for a more intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1990) that does not treat people purely in ethnic, migrant, or racial terms but considers the different angles of people's social locations. A transnational intersectional approach, unlike the more common nation-based approach, takes the broader social context into account that includes different positions of belonging (including virtual belongings, such as belonging to a global Muslim community, the *ummah* that is not connected to geographic belonging, space and time).

Many Muslim women in the Netherlands are also much more than just Muslim, in that their identities are also shaped by Dutch culture and society. The exploration of this complex dynamic suggests that their expression of agency and choice to convert does not occur in reductionist or stereotyped ways. Rather, it involves a complex interplay of many factors, each deserving of its own story.

Another point worth mentioning is that, in scholarship, media and politics, the term conversion is widely used. I propose to re-construct this term and not take it for granted, since not all the converted Muslimas here referred to themselves as "converted" or as "New Muslims". Other popular terms in the narratives of my interlocutors were "always felt a Muslim", "white Muslima" (the title of this paper), "coming home", "finding peace" and "finding one's own true self" (as also seen in this paper). This is evident in other ethnographies on Dutch Muslimas as well, whether born into Islam or converted at a later stage in life (Badran 2006; Bartels 2000, 2005; Buitelaar 2006, 2014; Moors 2009; Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019; Van Nieuwkerk 2003, 2004, 2014; Vroon 2014)

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