























However, at the same time, a substantial number of participants were discontent with other Muslims, particularly those of immigrant backgrounds. Similar to my experience, many of her interlocutors underscored that Muslims and Islam are two different things. She writes: “Like non-converted, non-Muslim German intellectuals, many converts believe that immigrant Muslims need to be educated, integrated, and transformed.” This could be accomplished, it was believed, by “making immigrant Muslims leave their Middle-Eastern or African cultures and traditions behind and persuading them to apply fundamental Islamic teachings in their everyday lives. In other words, the German converts argue, it is Muslims who need to change, not Islam” (*ibid.*: 174)

I found the same approach in the Netherlands. Indeed, at many gatherings of the women’s groups I attended, the “deplorable state of the *umma*” was lamented, as well as born Muslims’ “ignorance.” The importance of learning to distinguish between *culture* and *religion* was stressed over and over again, no matter what type of Islamic practice women adopted. In these views, the “real” content of Islam was to be found in books, foremost in the founding texts of the Qur’an and Sunna. Since these scriptural sources are interpreted by various Islamic scholars, after this initial consensus, participants’ opinions and practices diverged and could change over time. Nevertheless, book knowledge, in particular from texts that also provided the source references, was implicitly or explicitly considered superior to the traditions of immigrant Muslims in the Netherlands.

Converts were also critical of information offered by other converts. For instance, soon after her conversion, a participant received an uninvited comment from another convert. When recounting the incident, she used the common narrative that, in order to learn about Islam, it is better to turn to books, and even then, a critical eye remains important.

Usually, I wear socks that are slightly see-through. A woman [at a women’s group], came up to me and [said] in a thundering voice, “You should wear thick socks! ‘Cause God said so!” At the time, I didn’t even wear a headscarf! I thought, “This is not the way to correct someone, or to point out the good.” Later I told my husband [about it] and he said, “Didn’t you ask her to show you where it says so?” Because, of course, there are different opinions [on the subject of wearing socks] [...] Often, I discuss this with my husband: it’s always [imperfect] people who practice [Islam], you know. You should not look at people who are Muslim, you should look at Islam. Like in books, books and the explanation, and remain critical of the explanation, too. If in my perception it’s not right, I’ll keep searching in other books.

In contrast to Özyürek’s findings in Germany, the women’s groups in my research were inclusive and welcomed anyone, born/converted/non-Muslims alike. The young, “born” Muslim women, often with a Moroccan-Dutch background, who frequented meetings, used vocabulary similar to that of converts. When not proficient in the doctrines or practice of Islam, they would say when introducing themselves that they were “cultural Muslims.” Often, they compared their predicament to that of converts in explaining that although they

came from Muslim families, this did not mean they knew much about their religion. Once among likeminded women, critiques of the practices of “born”

Muslims on a wide array of topics, were often voiced by “cultural Muslims” too.

In Spain, Rogozen-Soltar (2012: 616) found a similar strategy of separating Islam from Muslims among converts. Focusing on differences in the representation of Islam between converts and Moroccan immigrants, she argues that since Muslim immigrants and converts in Spain have different access to social and political resources, they are incorporated differently as minority subjects. This, she continues, is most powerfully expressed in the ways convert and immigrant Muslims disassociate from one another: “Converts often claim to practice a ‘culture-free’ Islam, which they contrast to Moroccans’ ‘traditions,’ using a discourse that cloaks convert religiosity within an unmarked category of ‘European’ and marks migrant Muslims as outsiders. Migrants, on the other hand, largely accuse converts of exclusionary social practices, and both groups worry about the other’s potential contribution to public perceptions of Muslim extremism” (*ibid.*)

In the Netherlands, I found the divide to be situated between women in search of a scripture-based “true Islam” (whether through an Islamic feminist discourse or an Islamic revival discourse) and some immigrant Muslims’ habitual practice of Islam. Rogozen-Soltar also acknowledges that “the discursive sifting of ‘true’ or ‘pure’ Islamic beliefs and practices from culturally based ‘traditions’ is not unique to Granada’s converts.” She adds that “similar distinctions are common to much of the heterogeneous yet globally reaching Islamic revival, in which Muslims involved in piety and reformist movements increasingly participate in the active study of Islamic texts and theological debates, often in search of the ‘truest’ forms of Islam” (*ibid.*: 619). This is an important observation because the women’s groups in my research welcomed converts, “born” Muslims, as well as non-Muslim women. Ethnically, the groups were diverse, comprised of women from different backgrounds. The search for the “truest” or “purest” Islam, therefore, affected them all.

## Defining “Dutch Culture”

Contrary to the perception of converts as having embraced not only a new religion, but also another ethnic-national background, the vast majority of Dutch converts claim that they still feel Dutch. When I asked participants how they would describe “Dutch culture,” however, they often struggled to articulate an answer. Usually, the concept of *culture* reminded them of norms and values. The norms and values they retained after conversion, however, were mostly attributed to their upbringing, without necessarily considering these (part of) Dutch *culture*. As a young convert, a student in her early twenties phrased it,

I very much respect the way my parents brought me up. They taught me respect for other people, that’s something I see reflected [in Islam]. But you don’t see that [respect for other people] with all the Dutch, so I can’t say that I got that from the Dutch.

Alternatively, “Dutch culture” was contextually defined, in opposition to other cultures

What makes me Dutch? That’s a difficult question Well, I think, perhaps, my Dutch culture But what is Dutch culture? Look, there are things that are typically Moroccan culture, right? For instance pride, pride towards each other, I don’t have that When you go to a wedding, they are all wearing gold, they all look at each other, and you come without [wearing] gold Then I feel really Dutch Then I think, I’m happy to be Dutch and I don’t care how much gold you have Perhaps with such issues, at such a moment, but [to define being Dutch] towards someone Dutch... well, that’s difficult

Another participant, a teacher at an Islamic primary school, divorced, with grown-up children when she decided to become Muslim, tried to carve out what she liked about Dutch *culture* when she described to me that she still felt Dutch, while also comparing her behavior to other Muslims’ *cultures* and reviewing both in light of Islam

My first reaction is: Islam and Dutchness go well together I know there are things that do not fit: drinking culture, acting crazy during soccer tournaments, I know many more things from Dutch culture that I don’t like, but other than that, I always say, “I’m still all Dutch” I am very Dutch, even when I wear a *djellaba* Well, that’s not really Dutch culture but I think that, without them realizing it, Muslims and strict Protestants have very much in common Hospitality is not Dutch, so that doesn’t fit well with Islam, and people wearing shoes inside the house, I cannot imagine doing that anymore, so that doesn’t fit either So, well, haha, why do I still feel completely Dutch? I feel Dutch because of things that have nothing to do with Islam Music from the *Jordaan* [an Amsterdam neighborhood] can make me very happy, Rembrandt’s *Night Watch*, wind mills, green meadows, a line of trees in the distance with a church tower But that’s not culture and it has nothing to do with Islam I do not live like someone Dutch, I feel Dutch, but why? I don’t do anything Dutch anymore I don’t celebrate my birthday, I don’t like Dutch food, I don’t drink anymore Pfff... I cycle! Ha! But what does that have to do with Islam? Nothing I don’t know But it is very Dutch that I cycle And that I earn my own money, that is very compatible with Islam, but to say that it’s a similarity [between Islam and Dutchness], no Well, at staff meetings [with other Muslims], I’m not shy to open my mouth I just voice my opinion, I don’t care about cultural agreements about age, or men-women, or saying things in an indirect fashion, no I’m really blunt I call a horse a horse

An example of how multi-ethnic Muslims’ practice of Islam in the Netherlands is being influenced by aspects of “Dutch culture” came from the story of a converted woman in her late twenties, whose young children attended an Islamic primary school<sup>19</sup> These schools have teachers of Islam and one afternoon, the teacher lectured the attending parents The topic touched upon

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<sup>19</sup> There are around fifty Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands

the third “Dutch custom” that the mayor, mentioned above, had put forward at the naturalization ceremony: how Dutch people deal with time. The objective of the teacher was to encourage parents, of various backgrounds, to follow the Dutch example. He framed his advice in a moral story, in a lecture titled: “Time is *hasanât*” (blessings, a reward for good deeds). She recounted:

The religion teacher said, “We Muslims are always late.” The lecture started fifteen minutes late because people were still arriving, so he said, “See? With the Dutch... [they would have been on time],” He gave an example: “A brother [in Islam] went to see a non-Muslim man. He was late so the non-Muslim said to him, ‘have you been on *hadj*?’ The man answers, ‘Yes.’ So the other man says, ‘Did you do the Friday prayer on time?’ and the man answered, ‘Yes.’ ‘Do you pray five times a day when it’s time for prayer?’ ‘Yes.’ And then he [the non-Muslim man] said, ‘But it seems you have not understood your religion.’ So the brother was very upset, he felt like he was being called a *kafir* [a non-believer], as a matter of speech. But he was late and the man wanted to make him feel that it was wrong not to keep an appointment.” So the religion teacher said, “If you make an appointment with someone Dutch at five o’clock, he’ll be at your door at five o’clock. We Muslims, we are always late.” The lecture was about the fact that our children see that behavior, too. He said, “You don’t take time seriously.” That was what the lecture was about. The Dutch are really good with their time, “time is money” is a well-known expression, that’s how he got the title, “time is *hasanât*.”

This example is quite different from Özyürek and Rogozen-Soltar’s findings. The teacher, a Turkish-Dutch Muslim, invokes the image of a non-Muslim berating a Muslim for being late, accusing him of not understanding his religion, as a lesson for Muslim parents of various backgrounds to convey that they should follow the Dutch example of taking time seriously. In regard to the prevalence of the dominant discourse though, he also reinforced the binary “We Muslims” versus “The Dutch,” while converted mothers also send their children to Islamic primary schools, and the vast majority of his audience possessed Dutch nationality.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed conversion to Islam within the specific context of the Netherlands, and participants’ struggle to find their place among other Muslims, in particular, their realization that although they believe in the unity of Islam, in practice, Muslims differ. In order to deal with these differences, I argue, converts tend to emphasize the importance of differentiating between *culture* and *religion*, which I term a quest for a “culture-free” Islam. They often idealize the first Muslims, conceptualized as a multi-ethnic group of converts, whose struggles somewhat resemble their own predicament, unified within a framework of Islamic brother/sisterhood. I argue that this framework functions as a counter discourse to the conflation of *culture* and *community* that converts often encounter.

Becoming Muslim marks one's entrance into the *umma*, expressed as becoming a "brother or sister in Islam" Islamic brother- and sisterhood potentially functioned as an overarching principle, minimizing differences, although in practice, divides between different ideas about how to best practice Islam remained Following Baumann (1996: 195), I have termed this a "demotic discourse" A demotic discourse, however, is not "an autonomous opposite, or an independent alternative, to the dominant one" It is used to undermine the dominant discourse when judged useful The dominant discourse, as was evident in my research, cannot completely be switched off, or it would not be dominant after all This is most apparent in the fact that when participants distinguished between *culture* and *religion*, they meant "born" Muslims' *cultures*

While this is similar to accounts made by other scholars in Germany, Denmark and Spain *inter alia*, in my research in the Netherlands, I found in comparison that there are many opportunities for interaction between converts and "born" Muslims White-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch women and girls formed the majority of attendants in the women's groups that I followed, but a variety of women, from all kinds of backgrounds, came together during lectures and other events, and the same is true for men This allowed for friendships across divides of ethnicity and class, within a pious sociality where connecting with each other through Islam could take place These continual interactions between Muslims from different backgrounds, reflecting global trends, transnational influences, and local translations, are a promising field for further research on contemporary Islam

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## **Muslim Converts in the Netherlands and the Quest for a “Culture-Free” Islam**

*Through a focus on questions of ethnic, national, and religious belonging among converts to Islam in the Netherlands, this article addresses the interplay between “born” Muslims and converts in their quest for a “culture-free” Islam. Converts are often critical of Muslims’ habitual practice of Islam, which they term “cultural Islam.” This trend has been observed by several scholars on conversion across Europe. Different from these studies, in the Netherlands, this quest seems to be a joint effort of converts and young “born” Muslims alike. Using a discourse of Islamic brother/sisterhood, Muslims from a variety of backgrounds come together, in search of “true Islam.”*

*Keywords: conversion, Islam, belonging, Dutchness, brother/sisterhood.*

## **Les musulmans convertis aux Pays-Bas et la quête d’un islam « aculturel »**

*Cet article traite de l’interaction entre les musulmans « nés » et les convertis, dans leur quête d’un islam « aculturel », en s’appuyant sur les questions d’appartenance ethnique, nationale et religieuse parmi les convertis à l’islam aux Pays-Bas. Les convertis sont souvent critiques à l’égard de la pratique habituelle de l’islam par les musulmans, qu’ils appellent « islam culturel ». En Europe, cette tendance a été observée par plusieurs spécialistes de la conversion. Contrairement à ces études, aux Pays-Bas, cette quête semble être un effort commun aux convertis et aux jeunes « nés » musulmans. Par le truchement d’un discours faisant référence à la fraternité/sororité islamique, des musulmans d’origines diverses s’unissent à la recherche du « véritable islam ».*

*Mots-clés: conversion, Islam, appartenance, culture des Pays-Bas, fraternité/sororité.*

## **Los musulmanes conversos en los Países Bajos y la búsqueda de un islam culture-free**

*Este artículo aborda la interacción entre los “nacidos” musulmanes y los conversos en su búsqueda de un islam culture-free, centrándose en criterios de pertenencia étnicos, nacionales y religiosos. Los conversos a menudo critican la práctica habitual del islam llevada a cabo por los musulmanes, a la cual denominan “islam cultural”. Esta tendencia ha sido observada por los especialistas en materia de conversión en toda Europa. A diferencia de estos estudios, en los Países Bajos, esta búsqueda parece provenir de un esfuerzo conjunto de los conversos y los jóvenes “nacidos” musulmanes, por igual. Sirviéndose de un discurso de hermandad/fraternidad islámica, los musulmanes provenientes de diversos contextos se reúnen en la búsqueda del “verdadero islam”.*

*Palabras clave: conversión, Islam, pertenencia, neerlandés, fraternidad/sorodidad.*