

partners' former classmates: some of them also practise their professions in the Naqab. All but two of the Romanian women had converted to Islam².

Multiple informal conversations and in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, in some cases with both partners. I had visited most women's homes more than once, and several invited me to visit them at work; two initially preferred to meet in an urban café. Visits and conversations typically lasted at least two hours. I posed questions about migration experience and choices; courtship and marriage; family background; relationships (with family of origin, in-laws and neighbours), education, career and work environment when relevant. I also asked the women about their expectations regarding marriage prior to meeting their husband, and finally their expectations of life in the Naqab. The conversations occasionally digressed, as interviewees themselves raised new themes. Most conversations took place in Arabic with occasional switches into Hebrew, one recently-arrived bride preferred English. The fact that I have been conducting fieldwork in the Naqab over the last two decades, enables me to contextualize the insights gained from these conversations. I have known some of the men who were studying in Romania from a young age, and have access to the reflections and reactions of other relatives and peers to such non-conventional marriages.

MIXED MARRIAGES & LOCAL APPREHENSIONS

All marriages contain aspects of sameness and difference (Waldis 2006), and a proper understanding of their actual contexts requires an examination of what is marked as significant,

when and by whom (Baumann 1999). The marriages discussed here are not across local religious communities³, but are international and interfaith marriages which involve migration.

Arab al Naqab, commonly known as Bedouin, are the Arab Muslim native inhabitants of the Naqab. They make up part of the Palestinian national minority who are citizens of Israel. Within this category the Naqab Bedouin constitute one of Israel's most marginalized minority groups⁴. All Palestinian citizens of Israel suffer from restricted access to higher education due to various forms of structural discrimination⁵. As a result, many Palestinians obtain their degrees abroad. For both economic and historical-geopolitical reasons,⁶ universities in Eastern Europe are still a popular destination for (mostly male) Palestinian students. While increasingly more young Bedouin leave for studies abroad, for many families the investment in such studies is immense. Consequently, these young men are often under a great deal of pressure to succeed and return, as they are indebted to multiple family members. Return rates among these young men are high and they generally comply with their families' expectations in terms of employment, residence and marriage.

Among the Naqab Bedouin roughly half of all marriages are between relatives, often first cousins. It is indeed the case that families, and many young women themselves, consider their cousins to be the most probable marriage candidates. Educated women rejecting such offers or transgressing the boundaries drawn by local marriage regimens, might find themselves under great pressure (Abu Rabia Queder 2008). However, some women also implicitly criticize their relatives returning with overseas brides for neglecting their responsibilities towards their female cousins or to educated Bedouin women more generally⁷. After all, these young professionals are

highly desirable grooms, and marrying a foreigner does not fall within the expectations and hopes of their relatives. Referring to her family's concern about her cousin returning with a foreign bride, one young Bedouin woman explained: "they think she took the place of someone from here, that is how we think".

Marriages across social boundaries do occur among the Naqab Bedouin and some groups have long standing marriage relations. However, brides in unions between Bedouin groups lacking previous marriage relations, not to speak of non-Bedouin brides from elsewhere in Palestine, would be labeled and treated by the groom's family as *ghariba*, meaning a stranger. *Ghariba* in this context serves in opposition to *qariba* referring to being close and related (c.f. Johnson et al. 2009; Eickelman 2002; Abu-Lughod 1993). Such marriages to *strangers* are generally tolerated for men⁸, but considered disadvantageous, and until recently inconceivable, for women and their relatives. Marriages across religious boundaries (i.e. to non-Muslims), however, are especially rare, and generally deemed undesirable. Despite their low numbers, such marriage figure prominently in the anxieties of the families of men leaving for studies abroad.

Khalil was ready to leave, all packed, dressed up and ready to be escorted by one of his uncles to the airport, an hour and a half's drive away. Beside him on the dry-trodden dirt surface of his modest family compound's courtyard, lay a bulging suitcase packed with new clothes, homemade treats and olive oil, to be shared with his relatives awaiting him overseas. In addition to his parents and siblings many of his paternal and maternal uncles were present. He was firmly embraced and shook many hands, all greeting him repeatedly with "may god be with you", "safe journey", and urging him to "keep away

from harm's way", "study hard" and wishing him success. One of his uncles, after the usual greetings, kept his hand and shook it at length in silence. Then he pulled Khalil towards him and added, "and do NOT do as Ahmad did".

Ahmad was one of the first of the village to have left for studies abroad more than twenty years earlier. He had married abroad and initially returned accompanied by his wife. However, after several attempts to build their lives and careers in the Naqab the couple had returned to Romania and settled there with their children: leaving his parents heartbroken, as would be added on the rare occasions when this painful development would be mentioned at all. At the time of Khalil's departure, Ahmad's was the only case of such a marriage from the village and it had obviously made a great impact. I later learned from relatives of Khalil that they, too, had been admonished with such warnings when they took their leave to study abroad.

One young man from another family, who ended up completing his studies in Jordan, told me that his grandfather, the patriarch of his extended family, had said "it is either Jordan or nothing". The reason was explicitly stated: one of his uncles, the first to leave for studies abroad, had wanted to marry and return with a foreign bride. A fellow doctor and relative of another man, who married his Romanian classmate several years ago, explained their relatives' reluctance: "I don't think they [his relatives] have a negative view of him, on the contrary he is successful and respected. But they are afraid of problems". He knows of one case of a Romanian woman who is said to have left with her two young children: "people see the negative. The negative is more salient".

Families' main fear is that their sons will not return to the Naqab, and that if they do, the foreign bride will not adjust to local conditions and might eventually divorce; or, as the most dreaded scenario goes, flee abroad with the children. Thus, a Romanian bride is not merely *ghariba* but rather *ghariba* and *ajnabiya*. *Ajnabiya* means a non-Arab foreigner, thus a stranger also in the ethnic-national and geographical sense. I will henceforth use the shorthand translation 'overseas bride'. Families fear that the foreign-overseas bride will not adjust to, or will flee the inconveniences of heat, material conditions, and dense family relations. I will suggest that the gift of conversion is thus meant to soothe precisely such fears.

CONVERSION AS A NORM

The meaning of mixed marriages can differ greatly between the communities and institutions involved, but the markers that define mixed marriages may also shift over time. In pre-1989 Romania, marriages to foreign students were often marked as desirable, considering that they entailed the promise of a better future beyond the Soviet reality, this was true also for foreigners from the Middle-East. However, over time these marriages have increasingly been marked as marriages to Arabs or Muslims⁹. Dominated by stereotypes regarding conservative or even abusive gender relations and Islam, such marriages were increasingly marked as interfaith and undesirable.

At the Israeli end, the marriages discussed here are interfaith marriages before Israeli-family-law and Sharia courts, while they are not primarily marked as such within Naqab Bedouin society. Rather than being primarily concerned with the bride being non-Muslim, for Naqab relatives

these marriages are most significantly marked as marriages to foreign-overseas brides. If these marriages are not primarily marked as interfaith marriages, how can we best understand the fact that the majority of these Romanian women have converted to Islam?

The Romanian women who were my interlocutors considered conversion to be part of the marriage procedure. None of the women made many inquiries about the marriage procedure or about conversion before deciding to marry and accompany their husbands to the Naqab. When I asked the women whether they sought alternatives to avoid conversion, they typically referred to their husbands' or their relatives' inquiries. Most women recounted similar experiences. Sabina and Elena were among the first to marry their Bedouin partners in the early 1990s. They had both accompanied their partners to the Naqab to get married, and eventually converted in the process. Elena mentioned her conversion in passing: "at the sharia court, they said this was the only way. That is what my husband said". Sabina's father-in-law went to inquire at the local Sharia court about marriage: "his father also went and asked and they said: without changing [ones religion] it is not possible". One of the more recently married women told me she was initially surprised about having to convert. Her husband had made the inquiries, and: "was told by the secretary [of the sharia court] that the court was for Muslims and if she is not a Muslim, they don't have anything to look for here".

In the Israeli legal system, the law applying in matters concerning marriage and divorce, is determined according to the religious affiliation of those involved, a principle inherited from the Ottoman legal system. (Halperin-Kaddari 2004; Shahar 2015; Ramadan 2015). Sharia courts have jurisdiction in matters of marriage and divorce concerning Muslims. That conversion was

indeed introduced as necessary for the marriage procedure, was confirmed by the Qadi of the Sharia Court in Bir-as-Saba' whom I interviewed. He clearly stated that conversion was necessary, even if his reasoning was pragmatic rather than religious: "Here at the sharia courts, before marriage she has to become a Muslima, to avoid mixed marriage. That will only bring trouble".

According to most Islamic religious interpretations a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman, provide that she belongs to *Ahel (a)lk-kitab* (Martin 2004). This expression literally means 'peoples of the book' or scripture, and a Jewish or Christian woman may be referred to as *kitabiyah* (كتابية). This interpretation is also applied in the family law of various Muslim majority countries (c.f. Deeb 2017). When I asked the Qadi about the two cases where a Bedouin man had contracted a Muslim marriage in Romania with a non-Muslim Romanian bride without conversion, his responds was : "Yes. According to the sharia a Muslim [man] can marry a *kitabiyah*. But we advise against it: it is not practical! ... Not everything that is written is applied. This is our [the sharia courts] juridical policy". Sharia courts in Israel operating within its hybrid legal system are required to apply state civil family law in some aspects of legislation, while they are permitted some legal autonomy in others¹⁰.

Thus it is not surprising that Romanian brides considered conversion to be part of the marriage procedure. Still, with the exception of two women who had become observant Muslims, converted women did not normally speak of themselves as Muslims. They generally explained their participation in Muslim practice, like their conversion itself, as part of living in a Muslim

community and respecting their husband's family. As will be discussed in more detail below, some women engage in religious mixing but they keep their Christian practice veiled and private.

Irina: "they said I have to convert, otherwise we cannot be registered as married.

This is what god brought me, to marry someone of another religion. It is the same god.

I did not really change my religion, it is all in the heart.

Romanian women's conversion is not predominantly about "Choosing Islam" (to use a phrase from the title of Sultan's (1999) study of Swedish converts). Rather, conversion is an extension of choosing their husbands. I argue that conversion indexes their acknowledgement of their husbands' embeddedness in a larger family and community in which they hope to live upon joining their husbands. Conversion should, however, not simply be understood as compliance with, or submission to, the expectations or demands of the groom's family. It is therefore important to note that the bride's religion is not the groom's family's main concern, and conversion is seldom a firm or even explicit demand. Nevertheless, most of the families I interviewed did take for granted that an Islamic marriage must take place; among the Naqab Bedouin a union without marriage is unthinkable, and marriage is mostly considered a religious matter, thus marriage is by definition a Muslim marriage. This is further reinforced by Israel's family-law that requires marriage to be concluded by one of the recognized religious authorities.

ALTERNATIVES TO CONVERSION

To reject the assumption of simple compliance or submission it is significant to realize that alternatives to conversion do exist, as is evident from the two cases of couples who concluded their marriages in Romania. Both involved a civil as well as a Muslim Marriage: the later was concluded by a registered Imam and did not require conversion.

The historical Muslim community in Romania can be traced to five centuries of Ottoman domination. Islam was and remained one of the recognized religious denominations in Romania¹¹. The Romanian Muslim community is formally represented by a Mufti, who is required to be a Romanian born citizen. The institution of the Mufti has preserved much of the Ottoman configuration, and is generally assumed to facilitate the cohabitation of Muslims and Christians (Grigore 1999; Kozak 2009; Stoica 2011). A Muslim Marriage in Romania needs to be reinforced by a civil marriage and does not require conversion.

Two couples had married in Romania. Sofia recounted her marriage fifteen years ago: "We went to a small mosque [in Romaina], the Sheikh asked me 'do you want to stay a Christian?' and I said 'yes'". Ana and Amir, had only recently completed their studies. Following a long and stable relationship Amir had proposed to Ana shortly before their graduation. After this Ana started making plans for elaborate wedding festivities, which her relatively well-off family was happy to support. Ana : "We choose for Romania because we had all our friends there, both of us. It is more beautiful and I have friends who can help me with everything".

Ana's wish to marry in Romania was not motivated by a desire to avoid the procedure in the Naqab, of which they were not aware at the time. She is clearly also of a younger generation

enmeshed in an elaborate culture of wedding-related consumption. In several thick volumes of wedding albums, the couple appears in three different styles of dress and decor. Ana describes them as Modern, Romanian and Arab. Amir's father and brother attended the wedding festivities in Romania. Amir explained that he had assumed that the customary Naqab wedding celebrations would not have satisfied Ana. His family, despite not being excited about his choice, did not object and did not want to present any obstacles. They did not hold an additional wedding in the Naqab. Ana explained "In Romania we went to the Sharia court, but there it was not required to convert like here". Amir added: "the court [here] is *taqalid* not *sharia*. In fact a Muslim can marry a Jewish or Christian bride."

While Amir was primarily persuaded by Anna's strong desire for an elaborate wedding, his last comment also echoes the words of his (much older) relative Harbi. Who had married in Romania fifteen years earlier. Regarding conversion, as with many other matters, Harbi thought it was all rather absurd.

Describing another Bedouin student who had married a Romanian wife he said: "He wants his wife to become Muslim?! You should have seen this guy abroad, how he was drinking [alcohol]. I do not want to speak badly [of him]...it's *haram*, it is Ramadhan and I am fasting. And in the religion it is not even necessary to become Muslim! On the contrary. I told my wife from the beginning: you stay the way you are, Christian. Become a Muslim for whom? They [my family] do not even accept me!"

Harbi had an unusually antagonistic stance towards what he understood to be conservative and mistaken religious interpretations. For Harbi this corresponded with a more generally uneasy and ambivalent relationship with his family and a more outspoken critique of Bedouin society at large. Nonetheless, Harbi and his wife had initially resided with his family in the village, but that did not work out very well. Eventually they left the village to a nearby predominantly Jewish town and are now contemplating leaving the Naqab and establishing a life abroad.

Clearly these two cases are the exception. Nonetheless, I had also learned of another alternative to conversion, namely one couple had told me that they had travelled all the way to Akka (the seat of another district sharia court in the north of Israel-Palestine) to conclude their marriage nearly twenty years ago. This was after the husband, at the time active in the former Israeli communist party, made determined inquiries as to where marriage would be possible without conversion.¹²

The relevant point concerning the common conversions among Romanian brides is the fact that alternatives did and do exist. Yet only a very few of the couples had actually made any inquiries concerning available alternatives. The few who did inquire pointed to the additional costs and hassle involved in the civil marriage procedure in Romania.¹³ Whatever the reasons that led most couples to disregard the option of an Muslim marriage without conversion in Romania or elsewhere, the existence of such alternatives is significant to conclude that conversion cannot simply be understood to have been unavoidable or coerced.

Moreover, most of the women did not seem to have experienced conversion as imposed; they did what they thought necessary to nurture their relationship and their marriage and to make it happen against all odds. Among other things they had to contend with the earlier mentioned scepticism and anxieties that such a marriage evokes among their partner's relatives: fearing that the foreign-overseas bride will not adjust, and sooner or later will insist to leave.

The marriage procedure thus confronted women with a choice. One option would be to introduce new obstacles – by making further inquiries, searching for alternatives, refusal or negotiations – thereby possibly confirming their future in-laws' anxieties concerning the uncertainties and risks involved in their marriage. Another option was to embrace the opportunity to assert their commitment and the certainty of their choice. According to Mauss gifts "also serve the purpose of buying peace" (Mauss 2002 [1924]:21). While conversion could be read by in-laws as an act of submission to their wishes, it is equally an act of assertion in its attempt to constitute a mutual relationship in which the foreign bride's sacrifices (albeit not foremost religious ones) and efforts are acknowledged. It is in this sense that I find the notion of the gift provides insight into this practice of conversion.

CONVERSION AS A GIFT

The work of Marcel Mauss, and following him Levi-Strauss, underscores the binding nature of the gift; through the obligation to receive and return, the gift forges reciprocity and social relations. In response some attempt to reinstate the possibility of a free or pure gift, of giving without return, and to unshackle gift-giving from exchange (Juillerat in Strathern 2012:406).

Others have further explored and questioned the different forms which gifts, gift relations and gift ideologies can take as they shift between altruism at one end and exchange and commodity at the other (Laidlaw 2000; Komter 2007; Addo & Besnier 2008; Liebersohn 2010; Strathern 2012; Buch 2014; Pyyhtinen 2014). The notion of the gift is thus irreducible to either one of these two dimensions; exchange and giving-up are mutually constitutive. These at times paradoxical dimensions work in quite contrary ways at once (Derrida in Laidlaw 2000; Pyyhtinen 2014). I evoke the notion of the gift precisely because the conversions discussed here function in this tension between exchange and giving-up.

Romanian brides convert with the hope and expectation that they will in return be accepted among their in-laws and their new community. Thus, conversion functions to forge reciprocity and social relations: it is in this sense that I suggest that conversion is a gift of exchange. In complying with the groom's family's expectations they hope to appease their worries. However, they do not merely hope to pacify suspicion and anxiety; they also seek acknowledgment of their sacrifices. Realizing the importance of a Muslim marriage to their in-laws, they comply and convert, often despite their Christian background, or in some cases despite being practicing Christians. They expect their conversion and marriage will be matched and returned with appreciation and acknowledgment, which would mark the beginning of a reciprocal relationship. For many it was an act of asserting that they are committed to engage in reciprocal family relations. Elena said: "I did not expect them to be happy that their son married me. But I did expect them to respect me. And help me adjust ".

It was mostly in such terms of acknowledgment and support that women referred to their expectations of return. As Douglas noted "A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction" (1990: x). However, the question remains: what have Romanian brides given to expect such returns? As Pyyhtinen (2014) points out, using gift and exchange interchangeably would undermine the concept of the gift and erase the giving-up and sacrifice involved. The analogy of the gift then requires identifying both elements of exchange and giving-up involved in these conversions.

Flavia recalled the night of her arrival in the Naqab: "When we arrived there was a large welcome dinner, and many guests and food at the house [of her in-laws]. I was very tired and could not understand any Arabic anyway. I was longing for the moment we could retreat to our own home, only to find out that we had no more than one little room in this very house".

Also Irina did not imagine that she would still be living-in with her parents-in-law for several years to come, dependent on them for basic supplies. Her husband, like many of these returning men, was dependent on their financial support until he could begin to practise and become established professionally.

"Before we left [Romania] Nai'm [my husband] told me: those clothes you are wearing will be of no use to you there. I came with so little. They said: if you need something just ask, but it was not that simple. When I needed money for clothes, Nai'm, he did not dare

to ask, it was hard for him that they had to pay for everything. They had just paid a lot of money for his [Israeli license] exams Eventually his brother gave me some, I had to ask". I had nothing, no money, no food... Even later, when my son needed a baby-potty they thought it was nonsensical. I was upset. All the kids grew up like that, no potty, no Materna [maternal milk powder formula]". Later she said: "You cannot change the environment, I did not come to change anyone".

Interestingly, like religiously motivated conversions (Vroon-Najem 2014) women often distinguish between religion and culture; religious norms were respect as also articulated with conversion. Cultural differences were however, more often presented as challenging or, even if cautiously and discreetly, as obstacles. One of the things many of the women brought up in discussing their sacrifices was their sense of privacy. They had mostly grown up in small nuclear families. It was not just the extended family to which they had to acclimatise, but the different perceptions of intimacy and privacy awarded to family and married life.

"There were no doors here, can you imagine!" said Sabina. "Even now I have to insist with some of their children to knock before they enter. Even kids I do not know would just enter and even make mischievous comments. I come from a different culture, in Romania even if a door is open one does not simply enter".

Husbands have often warned their future wives of how difficult life in the Naqab would be for them. Others have explicitly added that their family would disapprove of such a union. Some relationships had gone through a long process starting with the man's insistence on the

impossibility of returning with a foreign bride. Valeria told me it took her and her husband Nuri a long time to become close. Initially they were both reluctant, she explained:

"He thought badly about the Romanian girls who dated his friends, and I had heard stories about disrespectful Arab students" ... "First we were just friends, nothing serious, we helped each other with studies and became closer. But we had agreed that we would not marry. I was an only child and would not leave. He too did not expect it.

Her husband, who later joined us, confirmed : "I told her: I have many problems here - I cannot marry you. Because I knew what would happen. Also I had no house to live in...

Later I said come for a visit and see for yourself, then take it or leave it. So that she won't blame me and say: you brought me here" ... "I too could not stand many things in our culture"

After spending years abroad, the husbands too often find it difficult to readjust. Even years later they could still appreciate the sacrifices their Romanian brides had made.

Khaled, who returned to the Naqab fifteen years ago accompanied by his Romanian partner, told me: "Even for me it is hard to come back and get used to this life again. So, how about her!" Another husband said: "she left her family and country for me, she has no one here other than me."

Indeed the sacrifice of Romanian Naqab brides is mainly for the sake of their relationship, love and husbands. Rather than breaking a loving relationship they join their partner, whom they

understand to be indebted to their families and obliged to return. However, relatives often fail to appreciate sacrifice-for-love, as they mostly do not perceive love to be irrefutable. Alternative brides - to their liking, and presumably to their sons' liking - are readily available, definitely for desirable grooms as these educated young men generally are.

I had once made a comment about marriage related to one of the boys in the village still studying abroad. This was after his mother had shared with me the details of how the engagement of one of her other sons had become a major worry. "It is not easy to marry your children these days" she sighed. Out of empathy I commented that she still had two more sons to worry about. "Worry ?!" she looked at me with amazement as her face brightened up in delight upon thinking of her future dentist son: "[he is] like ka'ek (a)'id! [the most festive holiday treat كَعْكَ العيد] – every girl will want him! educated and handsome."

It is in the context of abundant and promising marriage possibilities that the unsolicited Romanian brides are received. Moreover, their' giving-up of home and family are not necessarily perceived to deserve special appreciation as such; in a predominantly patrilocal society all brides leave their home and family. Thus, while most of the husbands seem to appreciate the difficulties and sacrifices of their Romanian wives, for the in-laws, the wives' migration and arrival are hardly a gift, but rather a disappointment and, as pointed out earlier, a source of anxiety.

Elena recalled: "his family said there is no future in marrying a foreign woman. But I was attached to the person not to a place." While none of the women expressed deep attachment to

Romania, the pain of leaving their parents behind was most explicitly expressed. In particular for those women who were single daughters, this sacrifice became naturally more pronounced as parents aged or became widowed. Valeria recalled the responses of friends and family when she decided to marry:

"Not even one person supported me, saying it was a good decision or the right thing to do. There is even one [relative] who was very mad at me, she still does not talk to me, that I married an Arab and left. That I left, that was the problem. That is the responsibility to your parents, how did you leave your mother? This is indeed so painful."

Sabina too expressed this loss as most painful: she was close to her mother and pained at causing her grief. Sabina came to the Naqab to marry her husband in the late nineties. Following our first interview at her workplace, Sabina invited me to visit her home. Which I did few weeks later on a desperately hot summer afternoon. The broad streets of this dusty township were empty, other than an occasional plastic bag, dry thistle or sand soaring with a hot desert gust of wind. Garbage was piling, or spilling from containers, on the not-so-old but often broken sidewalks along the walls that surround the houses. When I finally found Sabina's house, a lavish green garden awaited me behind the large metal gates; in the centre stood a little snow-mountain-like fountain producing the gentle sound of trickling water. It was all the product of her efforts, she explains. The garden makes it cooler and beautiful, it made her feel at home. Especially the flowers, you don't see them too often here, she said. In the shuttered cool house I was delighted to meet her mother, who was visiting from Romania. As Sabina and I retreated for conversation

in one of the quiet rooms of the large house, her mother was entertaining her two youngest daughters.

"My parents did not think it was wise [to come here]. I never complained to them from here. They did not realize how hard it was for me here, I did not let them feel it, and did not tell them about the conditions. After two years my mother came to visit for the first time; she burst out in tears when she saw how I was living!"

When I asked her about her parents' initial response to her conversion, she said:

"My parents do not know, I try not to upset them. It would greatly upset my mother"

Later I learned that Sabina was not the only one who choose not to share the fact of conversion with her parents. Some reflected on having been young and in love at the time they decided to follow their partners, and not having considered the actual sacrifices and difficulties ahead: what it would mean to raise children or practise their profession in a new language. Their sacrifices and giving-up were not an event, but a process which in some respects eased and in other respects deepened with time.

In addition to the ongoing challenges and efforts that life in the Naqab presents to these women, it is important to remember the alternatives and voluntary dimension to conversion – also essential to gift giving. Strathern, discussing the gift in the very different context of organ donation, writes that it is the recognition of the giver as "an active agent, as someone who might have acted otherwise", that sustains "the expectation that acknowledgement would be appropriate" and that "Appreciation of the action taken would be a return." (2012:402). It is on

the basis of this agency, recognizing conversion as voluntary giving-up AND consequently a claim for acknowledgment that conversion embodies the tensions of a gift.

Thus, despite conversion itself being a single event in the relationship and lives of Romanian brides in the Naqab, which does not necessarily mark an ongoing religious process, it may come to stand for their commitment and efforts more generally. Considering who explicitly makes reference to these conversions, and in which contexts, can provide evidence for the role of conversion in gaining acknowledgment for the Romanian brides' commitment and efforts. It was often precisely those in-laws who did acknowledge their efforts and sacrifices, who referred to their conversion. As one of the sisters in-law of a Romanian woman told me: "She is really remarkable. It is not easy but she did become one of us, you should hear her Arabic....and, she even converted and became a Muslim!"

The woman referred to had by then been living in the Naqab for over fifteen years. She dresses modestly but unlike all her sisters-in-law and nieces, she does not wear a headscarf, nor does she fast during Ramadhan. Thus, while she is not an obviously practising Muslim, her conversion is still praised and acknowledged as noteworthy after all these years. Possibly the giving-up of one's religious affiliation (and language), unimaginable for many in-laws, is more easily identified as a sacrifice and extraordinary, unlike giving up one's home and family, which is more routinely expected from brides.

It is often in such contexts of appreciation and praise, acknowledging Romanian brides' efforts and commitment, that conversion is mentioned by others when speaking of them. The Romanian

women themselves, however, rarely refer to their conversion, and when they do it is mostly in a matter-of-fact way. Indeed, when the giver speaks of the gift, it runs the risk of being spoiled; whereas when others speak of it in confirmation, the gift is enhanced.

RELIGIOUS AFFINITIES & MIXING

Time and delayed reciprocity are a key feature of the gift, in fact gifts are essentially "long term investments" (Bourdieu 1990). Indeed, the acknowledgment that the Romanian wives were hoping for often becomes evident only much later, as some in-laws gradually grow closer and can communicate in new and creative ways. Temporality is key to the nature of these conversions: as suggested earlier it is precisely the hope of triggering a long-lasting binding relationship that is key to conversion as a gift. The joint cultivation of a discourse of monotheistic affinity, underscoring the basic moral common ground and affinity between Islam and Christianity as monotheistic religions, can be read as another indication of the gift being reciprocated with acknowledgment and acceptance.

While the majority of the Romanian brides have converted to Islam, they do not entirely distanced themselves from their previous religious affiliation or even practice. Most of them did not consider conversion and the observance of some Muslim religious practices to be in contradiction with being a Christian. It is interesting to consider that some of the women interviewed were born in the Soviet era and reached adulthood during the time of post-Soviet transition. As Valeria explained, "My father was in the army, there it was not even allowed to be religious. But my mother is observant, Sunday and church... I too indeed am a believer. I follow principles of being good and helpful".

Even among the generation of Soviet-born women, only a few explicitly identified as being atheist or agnostic. But also those who did, cultivate a discourse which brings religions closer together, perceiving God as a universal entity and underscoring similar religious lifecycle transformations:

Elena: "In recent years my husband is more religious, but not too much. They say it comes with age. I see it with my mother too. [and how about you? I ask] "For me...if there is a god, it is more like an energy that we do not understand."

However, most women did consider themselves to be Christian, and did not normally speak of themselves as Muslims. Some even pointed out that they doubted such transformation would have been fully accepted, or that it would be feasible to erase one's background: "Surely few expect me to really become a Muslim". Their participation in Muslim practice and conversion itself are often framed in terms of social expectations and are explained as part of living in a Muslim community and respecting their husband's family.

"I fast during Ramadhan out of respect" says Clara. I visited Clara on a hot August Ramadhan day; Clara was urging me to eat and drink, just like my other fasting Bedouin hosts would insist on doing. Given that non-Muslims do not have to fast, proper hosting was equally important and insisted upon under these circumstances. Clara's mind rested only after I had assured her that earlier that morning I had enjoyed a most generous *Sahur*. A few years ago, after many years of living with her in-laws and hard work at her husband's clinic, Clara and her husband had finally built their own private home where they now lived with their three children, a few streets away from her in-laws. With the shutters closed it was relatively cool in the entrance hall of her

comfortable villa where we were seated in rococo-like armchairs, under a colorful wall-carpet depicting *al-Ka'bah*.

We were talking about language and the names they chose for their children. From previous interviews I had learned that most of the women had little contact with other Romanian brides: I had therefore now asked Clara whether she did not miss talking or reading in Romanian (She does speak Romanian with her husband and children). She then said: "I have also taught my children to pray in Arabic as well as Romanian."

She did not distinguish between religions but rather simply between languages. When I asked on which occasions they pray in Romanian, she said: "When they were little, I taught them to pray before they go to bed" as she joined her hand-palms in a praying posture. "I do have a Maria figure, but I keep it in my private room". Clara then noticed I was looking at the wall decoration depicting *al-Ka'bah*. "it does not disturb me, as long as it is for a good thing".

As our conversation unfolded I learnt that this religious mixing was not entirely private or hidden: "My husband's father, he likes religion and not just Islam. He talks to me about Issa [Jesus]. It makes me feel good that he talks to me about my religion, then I do not feel alone. This is what god brought me, to marry someone of another religion. It is the same god".

Jansen & Kühl (2008) analyze Muslim pilgrimage to Marian sites as a form of integration bringing Muslims and Christians together in shared practices, values and beliefs, and as a rejection of Muslim–Christian antagonisms. While the Naqab examples do not involve shared mixing of religious practices, like pilgrims they do expressed a similarity in religious feelings and perceptions while acknowledging distinct religious traditions or identities. Clara was not the

only one that spoke of her Christian identity. Also Irina was explicit about remaining a Christian in her religious practice:

"It is the same god. I did not really change my religion, it is all in the heart. He [my father-in-law] knows that I converted and signed, but that I did not get rid of my religion. ... I have a picture [icon] of Maria, but it is not visible to others. They do not like images.... He [my father-in-law] says you must pray. I say I have my way, many were born in your religion and do not pray. He accepts that I am this way. I believe god accepts every good thing you do".

Interestingly in both of the above dialogues the women refer to a bond and affinity with their fathers-in law. While gender and the mother figure of Mary play a central role in religious integration among the Marian pilgrims studied by Jansen & Köhl (2008), in the above discourse of religious (monotheistic) affinity gender plays a different role. Several other women mentioned their fathers-in-law in particular for their acknowledgment and acceptance. This is less remarkable when considering that in other contexts Romanian brides often recall having experienced most hesitation from their mothers-in-law. One of the mothers of a still-studying son had put it simply: "Of course, for me it is better if he marries from here". For a groom's mother, a close relationship with a daughter-in-law of her liking can be a vital asset in daily life, be it for household chores or social networking, and therefore of potential practical social and political value. A foreign bride thus poses a challenge and introduces increased uncertainty with regard to how and indeed whether such a relationship can materialize. Grooms' fathers, on the contrary, are not expected to build a personal relationship with their daughters-in-law, beyond reserved respect. However, their authority as heads of large families makes their acknowledgment particularly valuable.

Cultivating a discourse of monotheistic affinity and shared values carves a space for the foreign bride to participate in local traditions and engage in discreet religious mixing. It also provides those fathers-in-law entertaining such discourse a space to articulate a sense of worldliness. Most significantly – to return to the main focus of this article – practices and discourses of religious affinity serve as a vehicle to convey acknowledgment and acceptance. Also Iulia, after many years in the Naqab, says: "I take care of his parents. They learn that I am a good daughter. Now they say: leave her the way she is. I celebrate Christmas and they celebrate with me"

Not only is the foreign bride accepted as a bride, she is engaged with and accepted as a daughter-in-law, and in some cases acknowledged as a Christian. In this shared discourse being a Christian does not merely create distance, it is a basis for affinity to god - the same god - and thus affinity to Muslims. It is also a source of affinity and respect for the Romanian bride as a good daughter and for the shared value of respecting one's parents. Thus, not only is the foreign bride accepted as a bride and daughter-in-law, she is acknowledged as a good daughter to her own parents: a daughter who did not turn her back on them or their values, the same values that assured her husband's return and brought her to the Naqab in the first place. Paradoxically, conversion being a gesture oriented towards the in-laws, remains for some of the women most painful vis-a-vis their own parents.

CROSS-CULTURAL GIFTING: GESTURE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Whether a gift is acknowledged and reciprocated may depend on various factors. Gifts might remain unrecognized, or rejected because they are perceived inappropriate. It may also turn out that a gift has been granted to an ungrateful receiver. Indeed, despite its presumed predictability

the gift is inherently uncertain (Bourdieu 1990). Mauss (2002 [1924]) himself indicates the dangers inherent in the gift, its potential to buy peace or incite war. In other words, gifts may fail or go wrong.

If gift-exchanges operating within given cultural idioms are inherently uncertain and unstable, what can we make of acts of gifting that operate across cultural contexts? While it has been suggested that the underlying principle of gifting can be universally recognized (Douglas 1990; Adloff & Mau 2006; Komter 2007), the rules and expectations involved in its practice are strongly rooted in specific cultural contexts. In the context of an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world it is surprising that little attention has been devoted to gifting across unfamiliar cultural contexts¹⁴.

The gift has been considered in several cross-cultural contexts. Anthropologists have reflected on donations and reciprocity in fieldwork relations in terms of gifting (c.f. High 2010; Borbieva 2012). Sykes (2005:18) even suggests that "the logic of gift exchange lies at the center of the discipline" as anthropologists exchange and produce knowledge and set a chain of interaction into play upon starting fieldwork. Several authors have written about instances of failed cross-cultural gifting (c.f. Caldwell 2004; High 2010; Venkatesan 2011; Borbieva 2012). One of the few studies that focuses on cross-cultural gifting concerns the monetization of hospitality in Kyrgyzstan, when the added value of gifts is nullified as they are returned by money or simply paid for (Borbieva 2012). Others have applied gift theory to discuss acts of reconciliation and reparation in contexts of international development-aid and other post-colonial relations (Kowalski 2011; Gaertner 2014). Such acts of giving are often also cross-cultural, but are notably overshadowed by power relations, extreme inequalities, and a past and present context of domination. Using the notion of the gift in these contexts reveals that such acts of giving are

mainly oriented towards closure rather than towards generation-reciprocal relationships (Gaertner 2014). While in some instances studies have suggested that gifts are not necessarily meant to make relationships¹⁵, we are here concerned with gifts whose primary aim is to forge relationships.

I here further consider this aspect of conversion as a gift referring to cross-cultural gifting, occurring between those who lack previous transactions and interactions. In such a context the gift is often the first of its kind. Whether it is provided based on an assumption about what is expected and appropriate, or whether it is an original initiative, such initial gifts enjoy a special value and freedom¹⁶. Or in Simmel's words, "in the first gift which is not occasioned by any gratitude, there lies a beauty, a spontaneous devotion to the other" (Simmel 1996 [1950]:47).

Whether the gift of conversion is recognized as such, how and when it is acknowledged or reciprocated, will much depend on the circumstances under which the relationship between the Romanian bride and her in-laws was initially founded and cultivated: for instance, the degree of initial discontent, rejection or acceptance by the in-laws. However, I here point to a possible limitation of my conceptualizing marriage conversions as a gift. This limitation or obstacle rests in the lack of a shared cultural idiom, not only those related to the gift but also those concerning kinship, religion or marriage.

Rather than being caught up in a cycle of reciprocity that delineates expectations, conduct and counter-gifts, cross-cultural gifting of the kind discussed here is performed in a context where neither side knows what to expect. In the case of Romanian Naqab brides, incomprehension and possible apprehension go far beyond the context of gift giving and, at least initially, dominate this entire encounter between strangers who typically do not even share a common language, yet

are forced into kinship. Such a context can account for numerous misunderstandings but can equally result in a hyper-attentiveness to potential gestures. Conversion is such a gesture, the gesture of giving in an attempt to soothe anxiety, express commitment and generate obligation: a gesture meant to forge and define new social relations. This does not mean that such a gesture of a gift will not generate cross-cultural negotiation of that which is given. In fact, as the study of diverse gift practices shows, gifts are seldom a fixed entity: in given social contexts or across different social groups such as class, gifts can serve as a means of negotiating the meanings and implications of social transactions (Algazi 2003). In this way, marriage conversion can be read as a statement concerning the meaning of conjugal love, marriage, kinship and even religion. The marriage conversion of Romanian brides brings liberal romantic ideals into dialogue with marriage in a context invested with collective obligations. While conversion indexes Romanian brides' acknowledgement of their husbands' embeddedness in a larger family and community, they hope in return to be accepted and acknowledged for their sacrifices and efforts.

Considering marriage conversions as a gift can provide new insights into the study of conversion as well as the study of the gift. The study of conversion, often deeming marriage conversions trivial and insignificant, can benefit from studying such cases to recognize new functions and meanings of conversion. With the existing scholarly focus on spiritual transformation, marriage conversions may seem irrelevant, yet the study of less religiously motivated conversion may uncover functions and meanings which also figure in otherwise religiously-motivated conversions. Some Romanian Naqab brides were found to cultivate practices of religious mixing and discourses of monotheistic affinity with their in-laws. These practices were considered above mainly as conveying an acknowledgment of the gift of conversion. However, notwithstanding this function, such practices might be a covert but common outcome in other conversions. After

all, they emerge from the encounter between different religious traditions, inherit to the context in which most conversions occur.

Romanian brides' marriage conversions are oriented towards the other, a religious and often also a cultural other. Conversion as a gift is a form of cross-cultural gifting that is not (yet) part of established gift exchange. The study of this gift might suggest that such initial cross-cultural gifting, as long as it is meant to inaugurate a reciprocal relationship, will always remain a gesture of giving. This might well be the case, too, when involving actual material gifts. In such a context, where the symbolic or even the material value of things is not shared, it is not the gift itself that needs to be acknowledged. What seeks recognition is the gesture, and thus by extension the giver itself.

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ENDNOTES

* I dedicate this article to my dear mother in acknowledgment of her wisdom, commitment, and sacrifices.

¹ This emphasis was partially a response to the erroneous common assumption that marriage is the primary reason for the conversion of European women to Islam.

² Two of the documented cases ended in divorce. Two of the women had become pious practising Muslims.

³ Despite Israel being a multi-religious society, remarkably few interfaith marriages take place, be it between Christian and Muslim Arabs, or between Jews and (Muslim or Christian) Arabs. In Israel such marriages often provoke moral panic and politically laden confrontations.

⁴ As manifested for instance in the unemployment and poverty rates among the Naqab Bedouin being the highest in Israel (Gharrah 2016)

⁵ Ayman K. Agbaria, "The New Face of Control: Arab Education Under Neoliberal Policy," in *Israel and its Palestinian Citizens: Ethnic Privileges in the Jewish State*, ed. Nadim Rouhana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).; Sami Khalil Mar'i, *Arab Education in Israel*

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⁶Such trajectories were established during the Cold War era. While the Soviet based scholarship schemes that supported these trajectories no longer exist, Eastern Europe remains a relatively affordable destination for mostly students from the Global South.

⁷ Interesting historical parallel can be found in the writings of feminists in the Ghanaian nationalist movement. While promoting companionate marriage, also across local so-called tribal and ethnic lines, they strongly condemned African men –who return from abroad with European wives (Ray 2015). Like the Naqab-Romanian marriages discussed here, these interracial couples attracted such attention despite being a tiny minority among the colonies' elite.

⁸Occasionally marriages across group boundaries serve to forge new alliances. In such a case an exchange marriage (*badal*) can balance the disadvantages for the bride and her relatives, perceived to be on the dominated side.

⁹This process also involves another shift in increasingly identifying Arab migrants as Muslim, a shift not unique to Romania or Eastern Europe (c.f. Allievi 2006)

¹⁰This "legal hybridity" (Ramadan 2015) not only results in "legal schizophrenia" (Shifman 1990:537), but simultaneously constitutes "a site of state intervention and control" and "a site of agency, autonomy, and opposition" (Shahar 2015:84; Ramadan 2015).

¹¹Islam is one of the 18 religious denominations recognized in Romania, a recognition reinforced by the post-soviet (2006) "Law on religious freedom and the general regime of the cults" (Andreescu 2008).

¹² This case, involving a man who had studied in Russia and his Russian wife, was not included in this study.

¹³The administrative procedure in Romania requires producing various documents, including for instance issuing a medical certificate that assures neither one of the spouses has any incurable, communicable diseases.

¹⁴I realize that the term 'cross-cultural' is not without problems, yet here I use it to underscore the fragmented nature of such acts of giving, as opposed to what Mauss labels "total social fact". For Mauss the gift was part of a cultural system and along with other "total social facts", a phenomenon that was at once religious, juridical, moral, economic, and so on (Mauss 2002 [1924]:3)

¹⁵Laidlaw (2000) suggests that certain religious gifts are not meant to make human relationships and Wilson (2016), following Strathern, suggests that some gifts are structured to break some relationships while they make others.

¹⁶The term "free" here does not refer to Derrida's notion of a free or pure gift and its impossibility (as explained in Laidlaw 2000; Adloff & Mau 2006; Venkatesan 2011)