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DUTCH AND ROMANIAN MUSLIM WOMEN CONVERTS:

INWARD AND OUTWARD TRANSFORMATIONS, NEW KNOWLEDGE PERSPECTIVES AND COMMUNITY ROOTED NARRATIVES

PhD Thesis Summary

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Summary

I first entered a mosque in the spring of 2010. It was in Romania, in Cluj-Napoca, and was hosted by an Islamic centre, situated in the vicinity of the university campus and mainly frequented by Maghreb students and Romanian female converts, otherwise a generally invisible presence or hardly noticeable in public contexts. Talking to a 21-year-old woman about her motivation of entering Islam and particularly about what she stressed to represent the privileges she enjoyed in her marriage as a Muslim woman, and also watching her interact with other Romanian converts were the first elements that triggered my interest in the topic of women's conversion to Islam. My research approaches it in a twofold environment, considering the Netherlands, a context in which Muslim minorities are present in high numbers and accordingly where conversion has a high incidence among Dutch natives, and Romania, where Muslims are present to a lesser extent and consequently conversion is assumed to have a lower incidence.

Islam conversion produces shifts in the individual's (non)religious, cultural and sometimes social belongings when occurring in non-Islamic settings; it imprints new rhythms on daily lives, as well as a precise structure in what concerns religious observance. It stimulates the adoption of new knowledge perspectives and the new Muslims' involvement in circuits and networks of religious learning and practice, prompting lifestyle transformations and biographical rearrangements. The topic has been intensely discussed in scholarly literature in Western European contexts, particularly in countries with significant Muslim migrant communities, touching aspects that concern conversion and its motivations, relations between religious, national and ethnic belongings, and the functions it fulfils in individuals' biographies. Other Islam conversion related aspects concern newly embraced values and models, undergone lifestyle changes, redefined perspectives on gender equality, and critical stances adopted by converts against their original societies and cultures.

Conversion takes place against women's personal, social, cultural, and religious backgrounds, with which it is presented as having either antagonistic or complementary rapports, producing radical lifestyles transformations, or on the contrary, only minor changes and adjustments. These occur at various intensities, which are reflected in a consciously adopted inner discipline: the five mandatory daily prayers or the continuous religious learning process to which converts commit individually or together with the members of the Muslim communities they join. The transformations brought about by conversion are also externally mirrored by the newly abided by dietary restrictions, the adopted modest dress and Islamic veiling or by Muslim women's limited contacts with men and sometimes with non-Muslims. When Islamic learning occurs inside the newly joined Muslim communities, converts become active members of Islamic knowledge circuits, inside which they closely debate,

redefine, and internalize aspects related to reliable information sources and the application of Islamic knowledge in quotidian life, to women's sexuality and corporality, to feminine roles and models.

Ranked among the European states with the highest expected growth rate of the Muslim populations, with a number of up to 14.000 Muslim converts, according to the estimations of Islamic organisations[1], the Netherlands is among the countries where new Muslims have been the objects of research (van Nieuwkerk 2004, van Nieuwkerk 2006b, Badran 2006, Vroon-Najem 2007). In turn, Romania has a modest Islamic population, mainly consisting of ethnic Muslims living in the South Eastern Dobrogea region, but also of Arab origin migrants, who first arrived in the country during the 1970s and the 1980s, to pursue their graduate studies. Romanian Muslim converts have hardly received any attention whatsoever in academic work and no statistics are available in what concerns the occurrence of Islam conversion among Romanians. Yet, the existence of Romanian Muslim converts is highly noticeable on online interactive platforms – websites, blogs, and social media – that are available nowadays and are employed by local Muslims as alternatives to the scarce available Islamic knowledge infrastructure in the country. They also contribute to content management and are actively involved in an ongoing Islamic topic information flow. Online available data covers normative religious aspects, advice and debates concerning religious observance, and facilitates connections with broader Muslim communities, at both national and international levels.

The study focuses on the Islam conversion experience of Dutch and Romanian women and pays attention to three main aspects, along three research questions:

1. How do Dutch and Romanian Muslim women converts express their affiliation to Islam in terms of inward and outward transformations, considering their personal backgrounds?

2. How do Dutch and Romanian Muslim women converts acquire, articulate and enact their perspectives on Islamic knowledge?

3. Which are the narrative patterns discernable in the articulation of the conversion accounts of Dutch and Romanian Muslim women, given the fact that these are regarded as rooted in a broader community narrative?

The research reflects first on Dutch and Romanian women's perspectives on the inward and outward transformations they undergo through their conversion to Islam, in relation to their personal backgrounds, as articulated by discursive means. Second, it considers these women's perspectives on

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[1] tabeksirah.wordpress.com/2012/03/16/189/ [Accessed 16 March 2012]

the acquisition, internalization and enactment of Islamic knowledge, also in relation with turning point experiences or epiphanies. Third, it regards conversion accounts as rooted in a broader Muslim community narrative and identifies the patterns defining them. Approaching this topic from a double national perspective, the study operates with two sets of feminine biographies, shaped by different external social, cultural and economical dynamics, yet reunited by the shared experience of Islam conversion. Despite the structural differences between the broader contexts shaping their conversion experiences, both Dutch and Romanian Muslim women recall having entered Islam either after a long religious study endeavor, or after a consciously led research for existential answers and confirmations, for life structure and discipline, or for new belonging groups. Sometimes, conversion followed an interval of religious exploration or even a period of different religious options testing, or on the contrary, it emerged as a sudden transformation, after a briefly deliberating and reflecting, a change that is facilitated also by relationships and connections with other Muslims.

The thesis begins with a presentation of the Islam contexts in the Netherlands and Romania, drawing a profile of the local Muslim communities, in terms of articulation, infrastructure and representative institutional structures (Chapter 2). This part also includes an overview of studies concerning the topic of women's conversion to Islam in the European context. Chapter 3 continues with the conceptual framework, developed along the three main themes approached in the study of the conversion experience of Dutch and Romanian women. It also includes some theoretical reflections arguing for the importance of relying also on an intersectional approach when investigating women's conversion in Europe, acknowledging the positioning of converted women at the intersection of different belongings – gender, religious, ethnic and national, cultural and social. Under the broader topic of inward and outward transformations, I also give a summary of the theoretical approaches and theories developed around religious conversion, and then discuss the gendered dimension of Islam conversion, reflecting further on piety and on the 'encapsulated' (Rambo 1993) nature of conversion. Next, under the overarching topic of knowledge perspectives, I consider aspects related to power, agency, and power-knowledge, while under the theme of the shared Muslim community narrative, I reflect on changes occurring in universes of discourse, on narrative reconstructions of experience, on aspects of co-producing conversion narratives, which entail assuming and circulating collective narratives concerning the Islam conversion experience, searching for community confirmation of belief. Chapter 4 focuses on methodology, introducing the research questions, and the three analytic methods applied to the collected data. In this chapter, I also present the two groups of respondents, I reflect on the procedures employed for data collection, processing, and sampling and I furnish a complete set of summaries, referring to each of the considered participant. Chapter 5 contains data analysis, divided according to three areas of narrative focus identified in the contributions of converted women – inward and outward transformations, perspectives on knowledge, and community-rooted narratives – each being split, in its turn, into the two investigated national groups.

Here I also discuss and compare the findings, while in Chapter 6 I draw conclusions and return to some of the theoretical aspects introduced and selected in Chapter 3.

I rely on two main data groups, which are the conversion accounts of 22 Muslim women converts from the Netherlands and Romania (11 for each country), gathered through a series of in-depth interviews that were conducted in the two countries. In the Netherlands, the fieldwork had a broader outreach; I carried out interviews in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Eindhoven and Tilburg, with women raised by non-practicing Christian, secular or atheistic parents. In Romania, I conducted interviews mainly among the members of the Muslim community affiliated to the local mosque in Cluj-Napoca, who were women who grew up in Christian-Orthodox, yet non-practicing families. In both cases, I applied a flexible interview schedule, complimentary with guiding and clarifying questions, and I developed also a field notes journal, with the purpose of keeping a record of factual descriptions, thoughts and impressions during fieldwork.

Starting from three guiding theoretical main directions, the research considers three main themes that define the particularities of the conversion experience as lived by Dutch and Romanian women. First, it discusses new Muslim women's perspectives on the *inward and outward transformations* they undergo in relation to their personal backgrounds, to their religious or secular, cultural, social and ethnic contexts, and to a broader Discourse – with a capital 'D', as suggested by Gee (2001) – concerning women's position in Islam, which converts may uncritically reproduce or challenge. This Discourse concerns, among other aspects, women's modesty obligations, their relationships with men, as well as the roles they assume inside their families and in a broader sense, inside society. In this framework, women's perspectives on Islamic devotion and their internal expressions are being traced, comprising, among other aspects, a newly abided by praying routine, new beliefs, values, feminine models and convictions. On the one hand, their external manifestations of religious observance through veiling and modest dress are also considered, as well as converted women's relations to men and non-Muslims, or the professional and career paths they embrace in Islam validated forms, on the other hand.

I investigate Islam conversion as a gendered experience that carries a series of features that particularize it when lived by women. Along this line, I refer to Foucault's (1975, 1984, 1993) concepts of docile bodies, disciplinary techniques and ethical subjects, as well as to Mahmood's (2005) perspectives on piety cultivation and the production of the pious subject through repeated bodily acts. I also adopt Fadil's (2011) perspective on non-veil, and consider it as a technique of the self and a form of ethical work on the self undertaken by women converts. In addition, I employ Rambo's (1993) encapsulation model, adapted into a '4 R' matrix, according to which conversion unfolds in a nexus of relationships, rituals, rhetoric and roles, regarded as catalysts of both inward and outward transformations undergone by women converts. Looking at the experience of conversion as framed by broader cultural, social and national contexts, I pay attention to evaluative stances taken on by women in what concerns their societies and belongings, as well as to their reflections on

'otherness', as suggested by Roald (2004). Similarly, I consider Jensen's (2008) view on converts as contradictory beings or liminal actors, positioned at the junction of two cultures, the subsequent changes they undergo in what concerns their self-understanding in relation to others and the mimetic processes of 'othering' in which they engage by discursive means. I analyse conversion accounts from a constructivist position, and regard women converts as the products of the particular Islamic Discourse they embrace, with aspirations and religious embodiments that result from the discursive practices to which they commit.

Second, *the acquisition, internalization and enacting of Islamic knowledge* by Dutch and Romanian converts are being discussed, tracing in their biographies epiphany moments or turning point experiences that lead to knowledge perspectives changes, influencing their decision to convert or increasing their religious commitment inside Islam. The mechanisms that stimulate the adoption and enactment of a new Islamic mindset are identified, revealing how women circulate and are circulated in their turn by Islamic knowledge, as they begin to rely on it before converting, also along their post-conversion biographies. Accordingly, I tackle Dutch and Romanian converted women's knowledge perspectives changes while considering aspects of power-knowledge articulations that result from the different approaches they take on in their Islamic knowledge pursuits.

In my analysis, I regard Islamic knowledge as actively embodied through devotional acts that encourage the cultivation of Islamic subjectivities or the (re)activation of genuine Islamic selves. In addition, I consider also Mahmood's (2005) perspective concerning habituated learning by means of practical knowledge and analyze the knowledge transformations undergone by Muslim women converts by referring to cognitive reconciliation (Mansson McGinty's 2006), according to which conversion results from the cognitive and intellectual dynamics defining the individuals' lives. This entails a mechanism of harmonizing pre-conversion and post-conversion viewpoints or symbolic universes, retroactively making the first ones coherent with the second ones. Knowledge perspectives are changed in such a manner that conversion leads to the discovery of Islam as the logical, natural and simple religion, based on a single truth – the Islamic truth and its monotheistic message. Intuited prior to religious commitment, this truth is confirmed after conversion, when personal non-Islamic backgrounds are assessed from an Islamic stance.

In addition, marginal situations of life that gain plausibility inside the joined Islamic symbolic universes are also taken into account, considering epiphany or turning point events that trigger change and knowledge perspectives shifts, making possible new types of actions and desires (Badran 2006) among converted women. Accordingly, when related to these areas of knowledge, conversion emerges as a 'fated decision' (Mansson McGinty 2006).

Third, *the articulation of conversion narratives* is analyzed as *rooted in a wider Muslim community narrative*, which imposes specific topics that have been repeatedly heard, adopted and adapted to the respondents' personal experiences. Shared themes and patterns are identified as discursively (re)produced by Dutch and Romanian converts in two distinct contexts, in which the

local communities to which respondents are affiliated influence conversion experiences and the manner these are recalled by narrative means. While I consider the conversion account as a genre, I endeavor to highlight the narrative patterns that define it, arguing that converts reinterpret their backgrounds through storytelling, drawing on key themes. These are strategically repeated when invited to reflect on their conversion (Bourque 2006), compiling a specific vocabulary that is circulated inside converts' groups, contributing to 'intersubjective sedimentation' (Berger and Luckmann 1991). Conversion narratives become 'typified social presentations' (Wolhrab-Sahr 2006), 'biographical reconstructions' (Snow and Machalek 1983, Berger and Luckmann 1991, Rambo 1999), inside which the factual reality fuses with subjective reinterpretations.

Considering these features, I argue that conversion narratives have social functions, and that they work as cognitive instruments stimulating self-understanding (Cain 1991). Moreover, I draw attention to the fact that conversion narratives socialize emotions, attitudes and identities, consolidate relationships, and sustain the formation of community membership (Ochs and Capps 2006), resulting in stereotypic articulations along specific sets of narrative patterns. In the analysis of Dutch and Romanian women's conversion accounts, I consider the following prototype-narratives or counter-narratives – explanatory and legitimating narratives, reconciling and recognition narratives, narratives of change or personal background critical narratives, conflict and difference negotiation narratives, religious quest narratives, and feminist approach narratives.

I analyze the collected data as a consistent set of conversion accounts or meaningful stories concerning the conversion experience, collaboratively produced during the interview encounters and apply three narrative analytic approaches, associating each method with one of the three research questions that refer to three areas of narrative focus. First, I apply critical discourse analysis – CDA – to the discourse samples referring to internal and external undergone transformations, depicting women converts' affiliation to Islam through the changes of which they make sense in relation to their personal backgrounds. Aspects of ideological reinforcements of a broader Islamic Discourse, enacting an identity that is socially specific, and naturalized as common sense features or challenged by converts, are also identified, as CDA focuses on 'how' narratives are told, tracing aspects of argumentation, rhetoric figures, lexical style, and generally storytelling (van Dijk 1993). In this manner, it discloses how converts take on or challenge sometimes taken for granted perspectives concerning women's position in Islam. Applied to an array of discursive samples extracted from the transcripts of the narratives produced by twelve Dutch and Romanian converts during the interviews concerning their Islam conversion experiences, CDA uncovers the discursive mechanisms through which Muslim women converts make sense of the inward and outward transformations they have undergone as Muslim believers with reference to their personal backgrounds.

Second, the accounts referring to aspects of knowledge perspectives transformations undergone by converts in terms of acquisition, internalization, and enactment of Islamic knowledge are considered through biographic narrative analysis. In accordance with the analysis strategy

recommended by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), this method focuses on the chronology of the narrated events and on the occurrence of turning point experiences or epiphanies in the biographies of the considered individuals. In addition, women's agency inside the Islamic knowledge circuits of which they become active members is also assessed as situated within the power-knowledge nexus they join as devoted Muslim women, through their approaches to knowledge acquisition, internalization, and enactment. Applied to a set of ten Islam conversion accounts generated by Dutch and Romanian respondents (five from each group), biographic narrative analysis highlights the transformations undergone by women converts in terms of Islamic knowledge perspectives, considering the respondents' biographies, their influence on conversion and on the epistemological approaches they take on as Muslims. This analysis reveals that while engaged in an Islamic knowledge acquisition-internalization-enactment flux, Dutch and Romanian women converts display approaches to Islamic knowledge that are influenced by their religious or secular backgrounds, their life trajectories and their access to religious knowledge infrastructure. Women converts operate inside Islamic learning paradigms as conscious agents, but also subject themselves to external sources of agency, circulate knowledge and are circulated by it in their turn, within networks of religious piety and spiritual submission.

Third, patterned conversion accounts are traced through narrative analysis inside the overall body of conversion narratives produced by Dutch and Romanian respondents, disclosing the shared features that define conversion accounts as parts of broader collective narratives. These are regarded as collaboratively produced by converts, circulated inside the Muslim communities to which they are affiliated, consisting of either strict, devoted Muslims or of non-conventional, liberal born Muslims or converts. Consequently, conversion narrarives disclose explicitly or implicitly group sanctioned forms of belief and practice, and religious belonging conceptualizations, also in the form counter-narratives that emerge in patterned configurations. This method is applied to the conversion narratives of the 22 Dutch and Romanian respondents involved in this research, starting from the assumption that these accounts are rooted in the communities inside which converts operate. The respondents from these two communities develop narratives along model-stories, which are defined by shared topics, arguments and approaches.

The use of a mixed approach is recommended in qualitative analytic frameworks (Frost et al. 2010, Roulston 2010, Hesse-Biber 2010). Combining analysis methods, and in the particular case of the present study, using a threefold approach in analyzing the meaning making process in qualitative data, generates 'layers of interpretation' (Frost et al. 2010). Nevertheless, the study comprises a set of limitations concerning availability of information, and data access; in addition, the debate concerning women's position in Islam is briefly touched and not discussed in detail, due to the complexity of the topic. To some degree, the study is also restricted by the deficient information related to the incidence of conversion in Romania, its gendered dimension, and the dynamics defining it. In addition, the research had initially also an online outlook, analysing also Islamic topic online networks inside

which women converts are proactive, yet it was impossible to carry out a systematic analysis of this type of data in a comparative perspective for two main reasons. These were the language barrier encountered in the Dutch context, and also the necessity of considering a different and complex set of methodological aspects, also going beyond the scope and the means of the study. Consequently, an overall perspective concerning the emergence of alternative infrastructure support-platforms that facilitate the circulation and dissemination of Islamic knowledge among the members of small converts' communities like the Romanian one is still necessary for future research.

The controlled and limited access I was granted to the studied communities as a non-Muslim researcher is also to be considered, as well as the fact that I conducted fieldwork in a monolithic manner in Romania. Differently from the Netherlands, where I could approach respondents from different cities and communities, an aspect reflected in the higher diversity of Dutch respondents' profiles in terms of their cultural and social backgrounds, in Romania I focused on a single community. The respondents' group was concentrated in Cluj-Napoca, excepting for the eleventh participant, who was the member of a Shia community based in Bucharest. Other aspects to be considered refer to data collection, handling and processing; interviews with Romanian converts unfolded in Romanian, while those with Dutch women converts were carried out in English – a non-native language for both the interviewer and the interviewees. In addition, Romanian interviews were translated into English, which raises aspects related to the 'situatedness' of the researcher (Blommaert 2000: 20). This 'can be seen in terms of the metapragmatic practices s/he engages in: the study of transcription and translation as culturally and institutionally situated practices of discourse representation' (Ibidem). Nevertheless, as stressed by Elbaz-Luwisch (1997), since the study works on a relatively small-scale data sample, the narrative approach does not seek for generalizations in the typical sense, nor does it promise direct practical benefits, while still arguing for the authenticity and the potential of a research carried out through such means. Accordingly, taking into account these limitations, I treat conversion accounts as subjective reconstructions of the respondents' experiences, jointly produced during the interview encounters, and analyze them in detail, through a mix of narrative methods that cover aspects of both content and form.

As revealed by the first type of analysis – CDA – some of the Dutch converts dismiss the dominant culture in which they were socialized prior to their conversion to Islam and reject the Dutch culture of freedom as unnecessary and irrelevant. Refusing to make concessions with the aim of adapting to the dominantly non-Muslim setting, Dutch respondents also recall experiences of harassment to which they were exposed because of their otherness, articulated and externally identified by non-Muslims due to their visibly Islamic appearance. Nevertheless, some participants from Netherlands remain unsure whether those negative reactions were also prompted by the visibility of their Dutch belonging, which sharply contrasts their deliberate affiliation to Islam. In addition, some of them discursively articulate their entry in Islam as a biographical reparation or adjustment and accordingly make sense of the transformations they underwent as Muslim women in opposition

with their original contexts. Among Dutch respondents, discourses of conflict and opposition are articulated on multiple levels: against the dominant non-Muslim society, against personal backgrounds, against non-supportive born Muslims and even against other Dutch converts. In this last case, Dutch participants also embrace versatile positions, placing themselves as Muslim women in a context that can prompt multiple levels of prejudice because of their intersectional belongings, resulting from their original secular or non-religious affiliations, their Dutch nationality and culture, now overlapping with Islam and sometimes with their social statuses of single mothers or divorced women. Sometimes they plead for making concessions and for adjusting to the dominant Dutch contexts and accordingly deconstruct those Islamic Ideological Discursive Formations that encourage strict forms of religious observance, while disregarding the surrounding non-Islamic dominant context. Moreover, they delimitate themselves from other converts, whom they regard as inflexible in their practice of Islam. Dutch women converts may also refuse to wear the veil, dismissing it as a non-issue, while non-covering emerges from their discourses as a form of ethical work on their own selves, through which they counteract those IDFs that encourage Muslim women's covering. Implicitly or explicitly identifying themselves as liberal or spiritual Muslims, these Dutch respondents do not fit tightly encapsulated matrices, inside which they ought to engage in relationships and to perform rituals, to take on roles and embrace a specific religiously imprinted rhetoric. Accordingly, they dismiss pre-given roles and challenge those Discourses that encourage women to operate mainly inside their households, arguing instead for the importance of their work outsides their homes and for their potential of becoming assets for society.

In their turn, some of the Romanian respondents reproduce Islamic IDFs that discourage any form of compromise aimed at adjusting to the expectations of non-Muslims and implicitly of the dominant Christian society in Romania. In some cases, Romanian converts rely on male authoritarian voices and reproduce them in their Discourses concerning women's modesty obligations. Consequently, they suggest that covering is compulsory for all women, no matter their religion, and endow the Islamic veil with a social order and safety preservation function. When they embrace a strict approach to Islamic religious practice and particularly to additional forms of modesty by adorning the full veil, they also take on a critical stance against the Muslim community that makes concessions in order to be accepted by non-Muslims, sometimes with the cost of reducing the intensity of daily religious observance.

Romanian converts also associate the negative reactions against covering coming from the dominant society with the negative Western influences exerted on the local culture, which are criticized also by some of the Dutch converts. Moreover, Romanian respondents reflect critically on their biographies and identify a series of Islamic cues inside these, which they interpret as signals they have been considering before entering Islam, although they claim they never recognized these as Islamic. For instance, they explain they have been questioning the concept of the Trinity as Christian believers, and further interpret their reluctance as a proof that they have been anticipating Islamic

monotheism. In addition, reading these from an Islamic stance, they contest their previous Christian religious practices or minimize them as lacking substance, contrasting them by discursive means with the rituals to which they committed in Islam.

Thus, similarly with Dutch respondents, Romanian participants articulate discourses of conflict and opposition at different levels. They contest the non-Muslims society, associating it with the morally spoiled West. In addition, they become critical of their personal backgrounds and implicitly of their previous religious belongings, also contesting the approaches to religious observance of other Muslims, whose pious practices are dismissed as lessened because of the compromises they make in order to be tolerated by non-Muslims. Differently from the Dutch context, when criticising other Muslims, Romanian converts reject them precisely because of making concessions in order to be accepted by the dominant society, and discard their flexible approach to religious practice. The respondents from the two considered national groups consider the inward and outward transformations they underwent through conversion both from similar and opposing stances. On the one hand, both Dutch and Romanian respondents contrast these changes with the features of the dominant non-Muslim contexts they live in. On the other hand, Dutch and Romanian converts also embrace distinct outlooks in what concerns the accuracy of religious observance in non-Muslim settings. Accordingly, Dutch converts dismiss inflexible approaches to religious practice, which are in turn defended by Romanian participant. These are aspects that become visible at a discursive level when considering the conversion accounts of the interviewed women.

Once they enter Islam, some of the Dutch converts whose contributions are discussed through biographic narrative analysis appear to be taking on the task of disseminating positive knowledge about Islam among non-Muslims – family and friends – with whom they share their backgrounds and who are non-religious in most of the cases. In addition, as a knowledge acquisition technique, Dutch women converts may consciously search for negative knowledge concerning Islam, striving afterwards to deconstruct anti-Islamic arguments, strengthening in this manner their knowledge basis as Muslim believers. Such a process may also be regarded as fulfilling a mimetic function, since its outcome is anticipated by the subjects; this function may pertain at uncovering positive arguments that support Islam and women's decision to embrace it and consequently to defend themselves when challenged about it by their previous peers, by family members and by members of the broader society.

While some Dutch converts, who are devoted Muslim believers, are articulate about their alertness and critical mindset in what regards knowledge acquisition and its enactment, other converts, who make efforts to increase their piety, try to minimize their critical approach to religious knowledge, in order to be able cultivate their Muslim subjectivity. In some cases, such a challenging stance is related to the woman's professional identity, which also influences her involvement in Islamic knowledge circuits, her general approach to Islamic knowledge, the manner in which she operates changes on her subjectivity and spirituality, and how she 'trains' herself as a Muslim

believer. Some of the Dutch respondents enact critical perspectives, reject strict forms of Islamic knowledge enactment, and recommend, for instance, the consideration of the historical context in which the Quran was revealed. Sometimes, such stances taken against rigid manifestations of religious knowledge are directed against improperly applied forms of calling to Islam or *dawa* in the Netherlands and also against the exclusive focus on conversion rather than on simple religious practice or on the articulation of Islamic models. They conclude that these examples should be visible to non-Muslims as well, as they ought to undermine anti-Islamic stereotypes instead of consolidating them through strict and inflexible Islamic knowledge embodiments. In addition, as they exert their agency while consolidating their pious Muslim selves, Dutch converts also display flexibility when acquiring knowledge, internalizing and enacting it, relying on both subjective and mystical knowledge sources (e.g.: dreams), and also on rational, methodically attained knowledge. Most of the Dutch respondents have secular upbringings and consequently needed to undergo a sustained religious socialization process in Islam. They activate their agency while discerning between the accessed knowledge sources, sometimes restarting the Islamic knowledge acquisition process after initially relying on scarce, narrow or traditionally biased information. In other cases, when converts already have a practicing religious background, this is used as a fundament for their future evolution as believers in Islam. Assessing their biographies from an Islamic epistemological stance, they often endow their Islam conversion with a function of personal history adjustment or reparation.

Romanian respondents have previous religious belongings, though sometimes this entails only a minimal religious knowledge and practice base, which they value or discard from different positions as Muslim believers. Accordingly, previously non-practicing Christian Orthodox believers retroactively attain information about their past religion and dismiss it as absent from their current life contexts, opposing it to the Islamic knowledge they enacted on a daily basis as Muslims – for instance, in the form of the five mandatory prayers. In their turn, participants who initially underwent a neo-Protestant conversion before their Muslim becoming, exert criticism against their non-practicing background as Christians from a double stance, both neo-Protestant and Islamic. They evoke predicaments resulted from the lack of advice in Christian Orthodoxy and from the overlooked moral norms or identify in their spiritual background and in the religious knowledge they had been abiding by the foundation of their future Islamic becoming. In addition, Romanian women converts acknowledge sometimes the effort of abandoning Christianity and particularly their belief in the Trinity, to which they urged themselves to renounce. Nevertheless, when not discharged, already present and abided by religious knowledge are associated with Islam by the new Muslim woman, and transformed into meaningful proofs that support one's conversion to Islam.

Romanian converts also rely on intuited knowledge, on dreams or mystical experiences, and on answered prayers, which operate as epiphany moments on their biographies and stimulate the launching of religious pursuits inside Islam, and of religious epistemological readjustments. Fuelled by biographic crises, these turning point experiences are situated at the limit of reality, derived from

Islamic key dreams or events that are interpreted as leading to Islam and inserted into the individual's new plausibility structure. This type of knowledge makes Islam conversion a fated decision or a predestination. In addition, discovering Islam means uncovering already present beliefs and convictions, and bringing a previously marginal universe of discourse to the centre of the converted woman's existence. Therefore, when reflecting on their personal life stories, converts harmonize pre-conversion and post-conversion perspectives, and acknowledge taking the step further to Islam as a logical and natural move. Thus, conversion is presented as a biographic adjustment also by Romanian new Muslims. Moreover, Romanian converts also commit to gathering information on Islam through a systematic search, sometimes after initially challenging it. Accordingly, they carry out a mimetic process of Islam rationale deconstruction, starting their Islamic knowledge gathering with the initial purpose of contesting this religion, an enterprise whose Islam favourable outcome is nevertheless anticipated. In addition, Romanian converts also commit to calling their non-Muslim families to Islam, trying to pass on religious knowledge and to present as positive the transformations they submit themselves to through conversion. Similarly with Dutch participants, they may highlight the minimal impact of their conversion to Islam on their capacity of adjusting to non-Muslim contexts. On the other hand, they may also accuse themselves of not being able to confront their Christian families with their choice of entering Islam and practicing it, and for accepting compromises in order to avoid open disputes with non-Muslims (for instance, by postponing or minimizing veiling).

After gathering Islamic knowledge, both Dutch and Romanian converts internalize it through different forms of reconciliation, matching past non-Muslim beliefs and practices with their current Islamic standpoints, sometimes realizing they have been intuitively Muslims. As revealed by their biographies, new Muslim women employ various Islamic learning strategies, which sometimes fulfil only a formal role, as they are initially designed to deconstruct Islam, an attempt which emerges as deliberately failed, with the purpose of legitimising their conversion to Islam and their current religious knowledge embodiments inside power-knowledge paradigms.

As shown by narrative analysis, the respondents interviewed in the Netherlands articulate explanatory and legitimating narratives through which they combat negative social representations of Islam, and resist categorizations that are externally imposed on them as Muslim women. Sometimes, they defy the positions of other Muslims – converts included – by shaping counter-narratives through which they dismiss their strict forms of religious practice and their refusal to adapt to the non-Islamic dominant context. Having been religious only in their early childhood years, Dutch converts match their previous beliefs with their current convictions and experiences within reconciling narratives. In this manner, they trace proofs in their biographies that sustain their conversion to Islam as a necessary and natural step and also make reference to the miracles attested in the Quran, which they evaluate as intriguing arguments, fuelling their interest in Islam. Dutch women also develop narratives of change, which depict conversion as a form of biographical reparation, addressing personal backgrounds defined by promiscuity, drug use or involvement in criminal activities. Conflict and difference

narratives touch a double layer among respondents from the Netherlands, referring to conflicts experienced in relation with Muslims and other converts, when expressing their different personal understanding of Islam and religious practice, and with the wider society, when they are treated as 'others', not having their Dutch belonging acknowledged because of their affiliation to Islam. Respondents from the Netherlands also shape religious quest narratives, which are emotionally laden accounts describing the moments of formalizing their commitment to Islam, which occur spontaneously in public contexts and are underpinned by different motivations. In addition, when not conforming dominant Islamic norms, Dutch participants also embrace feminist approach narratives, through which they support their alternative and personal interpretations of religious practice. Through these patterned narratives, Dutch respondents also dismiss patriarchal voices, defend flexible embodiments of religion and express their interest in being involved in mixed Muslim women's groups, also acknowledging the importance of sisterhood and diversity in Islam.

Defined by a higher degree of homogeneity in what concerns their Islamic group affiliation, since they are generally active inside converted women's groups, Romanian respondents defend women's obligation to cover themselves in explanatory and legitimating narratives, also resorting to Christian arguments, through which they argue for the universal character of the veiling obligation. They also articulate narratives that refer to the scientific miracles prophesized in the Quran that they systematically compare with the Bible, inside which they trace challenging aspects. In this manner, they are able to diminish the substance of their previous religious practice as Christian believers in reconciling and recognition accounts, which they shape from their current status of Muslim converts. Common features of the Romanian narratives of change and personal background criticism refer to the gained inner peace, their calm and happiness, and also to the newly internalized Islamic values and principles, rejecting past biographies as lived outside religion, having been non-practicing Christians. Romanian converts also develop narratives of religious quest, referring to the systematic religious investigations carried out prior to their conversion to Islam, disappointed by their previous religions, at the end of which they concluded they were predestined to discover and embrace Islam. In addition, not exposed to feminist approaches to Islam, Romanian participants sometimes borrow elements from the feminist rhetoric, arguing for the legitimacy of veiling as a reaction to patriarchal pressures for body display, also decrying the social lack of respect and tolerance for the diversity they embody as Muslim converts.

Although shaped, heard, rehearsed, internalized and assumed in distinct groups, which are differently articulated in the two discussed countries, Dutch and Romanian women's accounts reveal the similar narrative means through which they make sense of their conversion to Islam. By employing common tropes, they strategically situate this experience inside their biographies, adopting similar critical stances against the dominantly non-religious and non-Islamic backgrounds in which they live. Their accounts emerge as community narratives, being rooted in the women's belonging groups and accordingly differing along key lines, such as attitudes and perceptions of veiling and

religious practice or feminist interpretation of these topics. On the one hand Dutch respondents are exposed both to secular feminist discourses, in the wider context in the Netherlands, and to feminist Islamic discourses, in their religious micro-groups, and are likely to embrace more flexible approaches to Islam, as revealed by their patterned narratives. On the other hand, Romanian converts reveal a less versatile outlook, reproducing mimetic feminist approaches, which are underpinned by the patriarchal male voices they sometimes rely on and which they reproduce also in standardized accounts.

Looking at women's Islam conversion in these the Netherlands and Romania, the research approaches a phenomenon that tends to be associated mainly with Western European or with contexts that are marked by the presence of Arab origin migrants. Yet, by considering this topic also in Romania, the thesis has the potential of opening the way to the investigation of Islamic group dynamics in countries with small or emerging Muslim communities. Islamic groups in Romania are likely to expand also under the influence of its evolution as a European country, its university educational offer for international students, the articulation and the dynamic of its labor market and the investment opportunities attracting Arab entrepreneurs. Future research is still necessary in what concerns the Islamic organisational map in Romania and the overall framework facilitating conversion in this country – religious infrastructure, online Islamic resources, virtual networks and platforms and the dynamics defining them – also considering a Western European country as a comparison unit, in order to be able to assess the influence and action of different types of Islam in new or emerging Islamic contexts and the dynamics that conversion.

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