

Integration: a hot button issue. Contextualising Multiculturalism and Integration in Amsterdam

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Abstract

The societal transformations reflecting the increased visibility of migrants in European societies have prompted reconsideration of the theoretical concepts used to analyse and model migrant-host society relationships. Do the principles of concepts such as 'multiculturalism' and 'integration' fit the empirical examples that are meant to illustrate? The paper presents the first set of empirical results of a project designed to study questions of migrant integration by retrieving illustrative examples of experiences in this domain, drawn from Amsterdam.

Much depends upon what happens at the local level and attention to non-state dimensions of integration – such as these that take place at the city neighbourhood level – could illuminate the workings of integration in practice. The study, paying a great deal of attention to the intimate stories of women migrants from North Africa, addresses issues to do with their trajectories of adaptation in Amsterdam. The divergent experiences (and backgrounds) of these migrant women reveal the current city-policy structures and present-day cultures of the settled migrant and native populations as they unfold in practice in everyday life. Following the life experiences of migrants is perhaps one of the best ways of gaining a perspective on the integration model of the society, the processes of 'integration from below' so to speak.

Introduction

Central to the academic and political debates that invoke the notion of multiculturalism are the issues of how to live with the other and the relationship of the individual to the collective. In the present study of multiculturalism and Muslim migrant women in Amsterdam, the same issues will be examined with the view to target the idea of integration. Exploring the way multiculturalism is deployed in the framework of the relations between migrants and the receiving society, as seen in the context of this study, I will discuss how the differences of the other are negotiated with one's own system of meaning and signification.

My aim is to discuss the question of multiculturalism from the perspective of a social sphere other than the institutional, which can make vis-

ible the 'workings' of multiculturalism by looking at the existing behaviours, relations, and practices in a society. Much of the discussion on multiculturalism tends to focus on the institutional conduct towards 'outsiders', while there is a lack of regard for the significance of the ways in which different cultures achieve different dimensions of engagement within particular contexts of society. This study will look at the protocols of multiculturalism in practice, as centred on sites of daily routine and contact. Drawing on participant observation and interviews with Muslim migrant women in the city of Amsterdam regarding the various activities they engage in within the context of women migrant associations, this study seeks to address a specific question: What type of integration processes are migrant

women engaged in? And how can this be understood in the light of dilemmas of integration? The empirical question posed here thus concerns the everyday processes of integration as they unfold on the ground, with a view to subsequently provide a link between the debate on integration and the empirical world. This study suggests that following the life experiences of migrants is, perhaps, one of the best ways of gaining a perspective on the integration model of a society, on the processes of 'integration from below', so to speak.¹

From the point of view of practices of integration from below, the most striking finding concerns the varied types and non-uniform processes of integration the women are involved with, which differ noticeably from the state's official approaches to integration. This finding throws into question the view of integration advanced in institutional mechanisms of the state, one that is primarily concerned with a prescriptive technical view of the integration process, focusing on language learning and abiding by public rules and abstract principles. This integration from below in multicultural politics may lead to certain modifications in the debate on multiculturalism, and especially, on the political necessity to provide a platform for everyday issues about how to live with the other preceding the official formulation of claims. These arguments will unfold first through a discussion of the debate about integration in the Netherlands and then through an analysis of the qualitative material.

About integration

The societal transformations caused by contemporary migration have prompted a reconsideration of the theoretical concepts used to model and analyse immigrant-host society relationships. Conversely, in most western European countries, the various types of policies towards migrants, experimented with by actors and agencies in all sectors of state and society from the end of the 1980s onwards, have attracted a great deal of attention in research (Alba and Nee 1997;

Vermeulen 1997; Joppke 1999; Banton 2001). The earlier generation of scholars in the field can remember a time when older assimilationist ideas informed by post-60s views about cultural difference brought about discussions on the diversity of morals that were suddenly perceived as somehow socially damaging. It wasn't until the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s that different European countries and governments accepted that migration is indeed an unavoidable, if not necessary, condition of today's society, and that the conceptual challenge seems to lie in the question how a society of diverse cultures and interests can agree upon the terms of the debate and a public policy accepted by all.

This has culminated in yet another issue, the question of how deep these cultural differences go, which has made the idea of living together and coping with ever more cultural difference even more acute. Integration has become the preferred term used to avoid the expectation of assimilation, a term that was abandoned together with the myth of monocultural societies (Alba and Nee 1997). When linked to questions about multiculturalism, integration appears to leave room for openness to diversity and recognition of difference. Yet when one looks at policies that are being proposed by governments, sometimes it is difficult to understand where the difference between the two terms, assimilation and integration, lies (Raghuram 2007). Allegedly, integration is a two-way street that involves an opening in the receiving society as well as some effort on the part of the newcomers, and yet when one looks at the different proposals, they focus exclusively on the newcomers and the rules and norms they need to abide by in order to fit in better (Vermeulen and Penninx 2000). The term integration thus bears a similarity to the preceding terms, as it does not provide any clearer picture of the challenges of multiculturalism and instead remains very vague as to what it signifies.²

¹ This paper is drawn from my post-doctoral research supported by two separate Marie Curie Fellowship grants.

² See, for example, Favell (2003) for an analytical exploration of the history of the term integration in relation to the current debate.

Such challenges to do with the recognition of differences should clearly be kept outside of the framework of 'we' and 'them' and should engage in a different logic altogether, which would also address the cultural aspects of integration in a society and not just the socio-economic ones, as is usually the case in politics. So far, we have seen integration interventions on institutional policies of the state (education, health, welfare, labour), whereas the area of culture has been less involved (Vermeulen and Penninx 2000). For example, lately more and more European states, like the Netherlands, which is considered to be a highly state-organised society, have re-introduced requirements for immigrants to learn the national language and accept the so-called national values in order to enable themselves to integrate into the mainstream national culture and potentially obtain equal access to the societal structure. However, the cultural claims of the immigrants have not been addressed in these policies as important issues to do with the workings of the multicultural state, and instead have been assigned to the private sphere of the relationship between the individual and the collective. Such arrangements expose the fact that state-centred, state-organised solutions to integration capture forms of multiculturalism that often lay on some unjust compromises at the expense of the migrant population in society (Favell 2003).

The situation of Muslim migrant women in Amsterdam and the dilemmas created in their attempts to express their cultural individuality within the public sphere is the focus of this article. Discourses of multiculturalism should all be about respect and equality as the guiding principles of human interaction. It is very difficult, however, to actually picture the specific expectations of such respect from all those concerned in the face of cultural differences. For example, in the Netherlands, some people may object to certain Muslim cultural practices, like the wearing of the hijab, while others may criticise these value judgments as operating from a position of a social norm.³ In this case it is implicit that

the idea that Muslim women should not wear their hijab at work is the standard behaviour and that those who feel differently about it simply fall outside of the social norm, which probably means that they are not seen as belonging to the society.

In a multicultural society, however, participants ideally should feel free to introduce into the dialogue their needs, principles, life-moral judgments, and conflicts, and there should be no basis for privileging national cultures over migrant ones. Both groups should be able to respectively accept a set of different values with which they have to come to terms. To paraphrase Benhabib, at any point in time in a society there are competing collective cultural narratives and symbolisations by its members, such that there cannot be a single societal culture (cf. 2002: 60). Benhabib's work, of course, falls into the more progressive integration scenarios, where intellectuals are trying to visualise how western societies are going to deal with their cultural dilemmas, achieving social cohesion under conditions of cultural diversity. Facing precisely this task, many scholars engage in theorising integration from a policy-oriented perspective, which, aligned with theoretical currents in political philosophy and liberal political theory, aspires to construct a fair society in a normative sense (Kymlicka 1995; Kymlicka and Norman 2000; Barry 2000; Bauböck 2007).

Another way of going about the same task – and the key line of thought in this study – is an approach that is interested in the practical everyday discourses that unfold within a given local context in society, the sort of (mis)understandings and meanings which develop about disputed practices in everyday social interactions. These are procedures that so far have not been properly contextualised in research. This article suggests that the societal scene at the local level is the true source of prescriptive suggestions for finding coherent democratic solutions to the integration dilemmas of a given society. However, this scene has been to a large extent

to a western bureaucratic state logic which subordinates and tames difference and, in turn, colonises the social norm.

³ On this very idea, Vron Ware and Les Back (2002), taking the example of multicultural Britain, referred

unexplored.⁴ The official public sphere of policy measures frames the guidelines within which people behave socially, yet this is not the only site of opinion and conduct formation. In fact, it is within the unofficial public sphere that one can document the dilemmas of coexistence among cultural differences and be able to span the range of integration patterns produced, under specific conditions of interaction, particular to a given local context. The need for such an 'inside' perspective persists, and will be explored further in the next section.

Processes of integration 'from below'

Whether cultural differences in a multicultural society can be made compatible, or whether this is a desirable task or not in order to achieve integration, is a contested issue. Undeniably, however, one should recognise that the sites where people come to terms with ethnic or religious difference, at first hand, are the daily, local sites of negotiation of difference (Allen and Cars 2001). The analytical approach in this article follows a line of thought that looks to the encounter between people from different cultures in daily sites (such as work, recreation, spaces of association, public spaces, etc.) within the shared spaces of the city they live in. More specifically, it looks at the issue of migrant integration by focusing on the routines of social interaction in the 'micro' everyday world of Muslim migrant women as they engage in activities within migrant associations in Amsterdam.

The article acknowledges that integration processes in a society are not uniform (Benhabib 2002) and that the outcome that can be expected very much depends on the kind of engagement that is taking place within these sites of interaction characterised as more prosaic and everyday in the sense that they concern informal parts of life experienced in common. These types

of transactions and negotiations as well as the implicit and explicit rules that are being formed therein, determine behaviour and in turn potentially could enable complex processes of social change to unfold (Allen and Cars 2001). However, examples from the empirical world of 'prosaic' interactions have been disregarded for the most part and it is argued here that this disregard has created a gap in our understanding of multiculturalism and its challenges, one that can only be filled through examining the actual everyday practice and form of integration in places understood as common public places.

This article is precisely a preliminary attempt to explore ways in which research on the question of migrant integration might be developed using this very different logic of a bottom-up perspective. My aim is not to review integration policy constructions, local policy agendas and institutionalised structures at the city level. Instead, I aim to show how the existing framing of the integration model can be seen to flesh out new, and perhaps, unexpected dynamics, the closer one looks at the behaviour and identities of migrant populations. Thus the current study seeks to address a specific question: What type of integration are migrant women engaged in? And how can this be understood in light of the current challenges of multiculturalism? The empirical question posed here concerns the opinions of women migrants on a range of issues to do with their actions, cultural behaviour, choices and emotions in relation to the so-called norms of the national population with a view to subsequently provide a link between some of the debates on integration and the empirical world. It was felt that this dimension in research, which traces a small percentage of the population in local contexts to observe their opinions about the different understandings of living together in a culturally diverse society, can possibly register the shape of cultural interaction in a local setting of multicultural relations of exchange and provide a platform for change for the formulation and justification of claims.⁵ As soon as we

⁴ Methodologically speaking, there are very few studies that look at integration processes from a bottom-up, ethnographic perspective. Most of them take a state policy-centred approach and try to measure integration with positivistic large-scale survey work or normative conceptualisations (see Favell 2003 for a detailed discussion on this).

⁵ To seek to study integration along this axis automatically sends the signal that the porousness of

look at the question from this level, it becomes apparent just how much we can learn about migrant integration and especially the domain of cultural integration, which is the one that mostly concerns us here and one of the basic elements of the integration discussion, but that has been very scantily researched.

To 'get to the bottom', then, of the issue of integration and the deeper questions surrounding it, I started by assuming a locally centred reasoning. The study suggests that issues of migrant integration are being developed in very distinct and context-specific ways, within small, specific sections of society across the state, at the city district level. We might learn a lot about integration in practice by examining the specific conditions of interaction particular to the local sites in question. Les Back, in his well-known study on race and urban youth (1996), argues that the sites for coming to terms with ethnic difference are the 'micropublics' where dialogue and 'prosaic negotiations' become compulsory. Within such sites, the question of what it takes to live with difference becomes more pronounced.⁶ In the current study of Muslim migrant women in Amsterdam, the same question will be put forward. Namely, the emphasis will fall on everyday lived experiences and local negotiations of difference, and on the micro-cultures as seen in activities taken up by these women in the context of migrant associations.

Research design and methodology

It seemed to me that a qualitative approach which draws on a combination of participant observation and interviews is better equipped to

cultures and their propensity to change in relation to other cultures is recognised. In other words, cultures are being recognised as diverging, formed in response to the life contexts in which an individual's identity is shaped – instead of being conceived in an essentialistic manner (i.e. treating cultural identities of immigrants, but also of the host society, as badges of predetermined group memberships) (cf. Baumann 1998).⁶ Les Back's ethnography of white and black youth identities in two South London neighbourhoods shows how youth race politics are shaped within the everyday local public culture, in sites such as the workplace, colleges, various centres or sports clubs, and other spaces of association (1996).

prise open for analysis ambivalent issues related to discursive practices and insights regarding the actual processes of integration as they occur on the ground. Because participant observation traditionally has been a systemic means to understand and explain cultural meaning, least bound by established institutional frameworks, I naturally looked towards a qualitative understanding of the intimate stories, background, and current experiences of women migrants (first- and second-generation) in moving from Morocco, Algeria, or Tunisia to Amsterdam. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of two years, and consisted of 35 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with migrant women, all of whom are local residents of two district areas of Amsterdam (Amsterdam East and Amsterdam West). The choice of interviewees was intended to reflect the diversity of the sample in terms of ethnic origin, citizenship, generation, cultural traditions, and educational and socio-economic status. The respondents are aged between 19 and 48, of Muslim religion, of Algerian, Tunisian or Moroccan descent; most are married with small or teenage children while the others are single, divorced or students. Some of the women of the study came to the Netherlands at the beginning of the 1970s, as dependents of their marriage partners or of their parents or with family reunification schemes after that. Others are second-generation migrants born in the Netherlands. Most have completed primary and often secondary school education, and the younger women are often employed or have had some work experience in Amsterdam. The older ones are usually unemployed. Interviews took place in both public places and/or people's own homes and were carried out in Dutch and in English, whereas care was taken not to rely too much on snowballing, but to select people from different social environments. The stories of the women reveal the current city-policy structures but most importantly the present-day cultures of migrant and native⁷ populations as they unfold in practice in everyday life.

⁷ The term 'native' used throughout the text is not meant to suggest the existence of a homogeneous native culture versus migrant cultures. Rather, it indicates the difference in the somewhat established

The study focuses on features of integration and the empirical research is roughly structured around four sets of topics: (1) Islam; (2) gender issues; (3) relations between migrants and natives; (4) life in the city. The overall empirical study extends beyond the public sphere to the private sphere and aims to gain insights into aspects of integration related to issues of religion and social life by drawing on people's own accounts about the everyday lived experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted with women attending events at migrant associations on a regular basis, on a variety of aspects about their lives in Amsterdam, their religious beliefs and practices, their hopes and dreams. The study looks at the link between the women's cultural categories of identification and the types of integration they achieve in the city. It does that by reflecting on the women's views, experiences, attitudes, social values, education, social mobility, gender relations, etc. In what follows, I will move on to present the background of the study, or else, to put it periphrastically, in the words of Favell 'what the migrants are integrating into' (2003).

Framing the study

Big cities in the Netherlands, like Amsterdam, have large migrant populations. People of migrant cultural backgrounds inhabit poor inner-city neighbourhoods that are relatively segregated – white Dutch residents are not significantly present in numbers in such neighbourhoods (Kloosterman et al. 1998). These areas provide interesting sites to analyse how inter-cultural relations work. The Dutch official political discourse defines the absence of relationships between inner-city natives and migrants as a problem of social cohesion. In the same official terminology and in everyday speech, migrant populations are defined by their collective identities (i.e. descent and cultural background) as ethnic groups, and, on the whole, they are labelled as 'allochtone-

cultural (and otherwise) order of things before and after the arrival of migrants in the city. I do not use the term national population as many of the migrants of the study also have Dutch citizenship and thus would also count as such.

ous'⁸; yet, these are people who, as is often the case, share a common Dutch citizenship with the 'autochthonous' (the indigenous population). The nuance of the term 'allochtoneous' vis-à-vis the objective of creating conditions of equal rights and participation, non-discriminatory membership, and belonging for people of a migrant background in a multicultural society, as Dutch society aspires to be, is quite noticeable. The whole issue in general terms revolves around the fact that the religious and cultural background of certain migrant groups within inner-city mixed neighbourhoods has led to doubts, according to recent public discourse, about the groups' 'assimilability'.

Schiffauer, in his analysis of civic society as it has developed in western Europe, argues that it is based on the idea that the collective public interest outweighs the particular individual one (Schiffauer 1998:1). By virtue of its form, civic society, he goes on to suggest, is subjecting the 'outsider' within it to various impositions and perhaps exclusions. The outsider, depending on the specific relation between the individual and the collective in a particular political culture, undergoes integration and perhaps discrimination (Schiffauer 1998). But how would Schiffauer's sketch of western European civil society back in the 1990s fit the Dutch case and experience of today? In Dutch political culture, the principle of the collective (the nation) was designed in recent history as comprising cultural particularisms, with a policy aimed at giving equal rights to individuals of different cultural groups (pillarisation)⁹,

⁸ Naming without using inaccurate terminology when it comes to such sensitive and politically loaded issues can be daunting. The Dutch refer to the newer non-colonial migrant groups, such as the Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians, as 'allochtoneous'. It is a Greek origin word which literally means 'people of a different place'. However, most of them no longer fit the description. The first waves of migration originating from these countries took place throughout the 1960s. Many of their children were never migrants in the strict sense. They were born in the Netherlands and grew up there. Doesn't that gives them 'roots' in the Netherlands?

⁹ The term has been used to describe cases in which different cultural communities were allowed to operate their own distinctive institutions in society. These

a system where different faith groups were kept autonomous and distinct provided that there could be interdependence at the level of the nation-state (Vermeulen and Penninx 2000).¹⁰ However, in later years, with the flow of migration increasing and the number of cultural groups in society multiplying, it became clear that the whole system required re-examination. Pillarisation could not possibly operate for so many different groups in society, it would be too complex. Moreover, the continued distance between different cultures/ethnic groups in society made contact between the national population and the migrants difficult (Vermeulen and Penninx 2000).

Since 1998, efforts have been made to change the political framework for migrant integration. It was taken for granted that the government had a great responsibility in promoting the integration of immigrants. The central government defined the parameters of the integration policy by means of financial support, rules and laws such as the Newcomer Integration Act (WIN 1998),¹¹ but the main responsibility for implementing the integration policy fell to the level of city government, the municipalities (d'Haenens 2009). Notably, from 1990 to 1999 the administrative decentralisation of Amsterdam was completed, resulting in the division of the city into 16 separate districts, which implied a quasi-autonomous formulation and implemen-

side-by-side pillars, where everything was separate but equal, were presumed collectively to hold up a united state. Pillarisation was instituted between 1917 and 1970. Though the policy no longer exists, it has left its mark on social institutions until today.

¹⁰ This particular arrangement of the relationship of the individual to the collective had been efficient as evidenced by the positive assessment of the state organisation in Dutch popular culture at that time (Rath et al. 1997). After the disintegration of the system from the 1960s onwards, it was thought that reliance on state efficient operation may have been a factor that brought about weak interaction while maintaining socio-cultural distance between different ethnic groups.

¹¹ The Dutch newcomer integration policy (WIN 1998) was developed during the 1990s as an answer to the continued influx of considerable numbers of immigrants. WIN established the rights and obligations of newly arrived adult immigrants in the Netherlands concerning settlement and/or integration programmes.

tation of immigrant policies at the district level. Many policy fields and tasks (education, health, welfare, etc.) were transferred to the responsibility of the local city and district level of government and among them decrees were passed to encourage, via subsidisation, the initiatives of cultural or faith groups to collectively seek support for representation, and some sort of government subsidy was provided to activities of the so-called 'umbrella associations'¹² (Wolff 1999). These associations did not explicitly serve just one ethnic community, but many simultaneously, and acted increasingly as something of integrationist institutions, with their task apparently being to promote 'social cohesion' (At Home in Europe project, 2010). These policies encouraged the integration of 'allochtone' into Dutch society by making it explicit that the target was not separate migrant communities, but individuals who were considered to be at a disadvantage (physical and/or socio-economic) to integrate in society (Entzinger and Scheffer 2012).

Within these associations migrants come together as a kind of community of special interests to do with social, political, religious and/or cultural aspects of the migrant population.¹³ The acquisition of basic knowledge of the Dutch language and society was encouraged within the associations, as this was thought to be essential for the promotion of integration (cf. *Report on Urban policy and the Integration of Ethnic Minor-*

¹² During the 1980s, as part of the increasing policy of strict separation between religion and state, the formation of migrant associations was initially established by the state as a way to look into religious facilities for 'ethnic minorities', since it was no longer possible for migrant associations to get government subsidies for religious purposes.

¹³ Until the 1980s the Dutch regime of integration of foreigners conformed rather to a logic of institutional recognition of minorities. When an ethnic group attained the status of an official minority, then the claims of such groups to housing, education, employment and other forms of social support could be met. Such official minority groups then acquired the rights to establish their own cultural, religious, and educational organisations and associations. Consequently, in stark contrast to the situation before the 1980s, policies for the provision of autonomy for separate ethnic minorities were now held back through less subsidisation.

ities in the Netherlands, 2001; Entzinger and Scheffer 2012). But there has been an unforeseeable side-effect: The emphasis on the individual disadvantage in order to promote integration, instead of on an affirmation of cultural heterogeneity, was read by many as clear evidence that cultural difference was not regarded as a source of strength in society, but as a source of weakness.

Migrant women's terms of integration

The empirical work focuses on the discourses and attitudes of the Muslim women themselves about their actual migrant experiences of integration in their city. The empirical findings are briefly summarised under a list of themes. Each theme/heading is suggestive of the issues that were raised in more detail in the course of the study.

Multicultural issues and Islam

The women of this study are Muslim women of different national origins and occasionally women of double nationality (i.e. Dutch-Tunisian, Dutch-Algerian, etc.). They regularly participated in a number of migrant associations in which they designed several activities. The activities pioneered therein depended to a considerable extent, as discovered in the study, on the particular interests of the members. For example, in one association, the women built up several powerful initiatives of a multicultural nature, which defy the often assumed, broadly reiterated themes in the media about Muslim women's 'social isolation', or the 'insufficiency of Muslim women's social insertion' (i.e. *NRC-Handelsblad*, August 2002; van der Meer and Ham 2011). More specifically, the activities began as initiatives to support women who face personal problems (divorce, domestic violence, etc.), but with time the projects of this migrant association became more spectacular. The women moved on to establish an art atelier where they spend a good deal of their time making art, selling their products at fair prices, and experiencing success as artists and entrepreneurs.

Jasmine,¹⁴ the Algerian-Dutch coordinator of a migrant association, spoke about the function of the centre in helping women to integrate into Dutch society. According to her, the city policy of social cohesion has set 'too high standards of expectations to achieve integration'. She believes that 'integration has to begin from the very basics of the mainstream cultural adaptation because this is what the women need.' She describes how, according to the district policy, the local cultural centres for women are there to promote computer lessons, sporting activities, and so on, whereas, according to her, 'other more serious problems need to be tackled with priority', since in the neighbourhood where the centre is located, 'there are women who are facing unemployment, social isolation, etc.' She imagines her job as one to provide 'a kind of bridge' between different cultural values, and one to help 'balance' the membership of migrants and natives in society.

In many ways, then, these migrant associations offer new channels for participation to migrant women and new forms of non-traditional and unconventional cultural activity. As far as their practice is concerned, the migrant women associations represent interests and act as negotiating partners between their 'clients' and the local government by operating on two levels: On the one hand, they offer a certain number of social services (listening centres, nursery schools, training, medical assistance), sometimes in cooperation with local councils; and on the other, they are also engaged in various activities to promote Muslim women's rights within a cultural rights framework ideology.

Each association has its own coordinator who speaks for the migrant 'clients', representing their

¹⁴ A consideration of the ethical implications of fieldwork and representation should underpin any research project, even more so regarding such a sensitive issue which furthermore involves interviews. Interviewing creates ethical dilemmas as the issues covered may enter the personal domain of the informants. It is good practice to ensure anonymity in the written text, so I have 'protected' my informants from exposure they were not prepared for by mixing and matching their names and profiles.

interests in various local bodies. There is no fostering of individual migrant direct access to state institutions. In this way, migrant associations can act as a filter between competing migrant and state interests, managing needs and providing support and advice. Each migrant association is a member of the local Forum (*Stichting*) of each city district, on which they depend for organisational and financial support, information, and advice, and which acts as their 'employer'.

The role of the coordinators vis-à-vis the operation of the women migrant associations is, as can be expected, a complex one. On the one hand, they promote the Muslim women associations' *raison d'être* by campaigning for fund-raising and, on the other hand, they align themselves with ideologies that put high demands of linguistic and cultural assimilation on Muslim women. While, in the context of these associations, Muslim migrant women are officially encouraged to rely mostly on their gender as a diacritical characteristic of identity and less on their culture or religion, to obtain resources and channels for participation and representation of their interests in society, they still feel free and perhaps emotionally compelled to express their culture and their religion in various activities. For example, they often organise lessons to teach second-generation Muslim girls and keen Dutch women how to cook Moroccan style, the meaning of Ramadan, or even how 'to resist (the so-called) Dutch cultural extremities' (the following section will discuss this in more detail), that is, discussions about taboos in different cultures, appropriate cultural conduct, and cultural confrontations among the youth. One such example was a lecture by a Surinamese imam, on the occasion of Ramadan, to a big group of Muslim girls from different ethnic backgrounds who wished to understand the meaning of Ramadan and religious practices during the days of fast and festivity. This kind of cultural activity is not meant as an act of distinct ethnic affirmation. To the contrary, what appears to be happening is a propensity to a homogenisation of cultural practices across different Muslim cultures that bring Muslims together, emphasising religious affiliation at the expense of ethnic divisions. Hadisha, a

32-year-old mother of two boys, makes this point clear: 'I don't want to organise my life around my race or my sex, but around my religion, yes.'

Therefore, in parallel and/or in spite of an apparent official stance promoting integration in the host society in terms of the state tools and agencies for this purpose, there is also another dimension of integration that takes place within the migrant associations of the study. Their members specialise in folkloric art inspired by the cultural traditions of their different countries of origin and strategically use their common religion as a form of cultural identification to promote their chances of assessing funds by the state.¹⁵

Interestingly enough, despite the state's official central design and its expectations of the function of migrant associations, namely that they will focus on integration by making cultural and religious differences non-relevant and thus suppress them, these women migrant associations engage in activities that draw upon cultural traditions in an attempt to refer to a religious community in the new setting. In many ways, the women clients of many different associations organise themselves around a shared Muslim identity: They accommodate special places for prayer or organise Arabic and Koranic courses, and they play a significant role in educating young Muslim women by providing a venue for regular discussions about sensitive issues to do with everyday life dilemmas and/or conflicts that arise between expectations of proper religious conduct and individual lifestyle preferences, etc. It was a significant finding of the study therefore that a broad range of activities was deemed important: activities tackling social isolation or unemployment, non-traditional and unconventional cultural activities as well as more culture/religion-specific activities.

Matters of cultural confrontation

Another theme I stumbled across during the study which also refers to the activities the women develop in the sites of the migrant asso-

¹⁵ A claim to the local government for extra funding is sometimes more likely to be positively reviewed if the applicant is a multi-ethnic migrant association.

ciations, assumes an equally important role. In a civic culture, such as the Dutch, where the separation of the private and the public is rated highly as a condition for social participation, someone who was brought up or socialised in a different culture, like many of the participants of the study, where religion, culture, rituals and sociability are more strongly pronounced, is expected to have some difficulties fitting in. Muslim migrants to the country identify with a religion that tends to keep the public and the private sphere well connected in some ways. This is at odds with the socialisation expectations placed on the individual in Dutch society, where secularism draws distinctive boundaries between the public and religious spheres.

The women often spoke about a strong feeling of self-consciousness, a sense of cultural difference – difference from the past (the country of origin) and difference from the present (the surrounding society) – and a sense of belonging somewhere in between. This is one of the reasons why the women of the study felt the need to meet up in the cultural centre of the migrant associations to talk about Islam and to set up discussion groups and organise lectures about cultural adaptation and the continuity of culture and traditions.

Religious identification seems to serve important social and cultural functions. For the vast majority of the women interviewed, 'being a Muslim woman' appears to be one vital element that conditions how they live their lives. For each of them, being a Muslim woman represents a set of values, religious obligations, and a destiny. It also signifies a particular world-view marked by attachment to family and high regard for ethical conduct and offering (hospitality and/or charity). Whether these traits are actually common to all the women is debatable and in many ways irrelevant. But what is relevant is that these women understand these traits as making it possible for them to be a closed, imagined community of 'sisters'.

Yet, most of the women interviewees who are born in the Netherlands, while considering religion personally important, also feel that some aspects of it intersect with their social life and

need, to a large extent, to be 'modernised'. These women believe in an interpretation of the Koran free from political ideology, which, they reckon, would allow for respect of their need to feel free to pursue their interests, beyond the sphere of the home and the family. Quite a few young girls reject their parents' conformity to traditions and religiosity while they, for themselves, embrace a distinction between 'religion' and 'culture'. Jasmine, for instance, a 23-year-old student in a technical school, explained that the relationship with Muslim religion should not in any way be an obligation, and instead should remain a private matter for each individual. Similarly, Nazha, a 21-year-old university student, spoke of her need not to 'always carry your own religious beliefs in your head' and to integrate into society by taking an interest in the local-city affairs which are of a non-Muslim character.

According to Nazha, and to other second-generation women migrants, symbols of religious diversity do not need to be attached to personal appearance with bodily signifiers, such as the head scarf. It seems then that, at least among second-generation migrants, social interaction among (migrant and host) cultures, over the years, has encouraged a cultural dialogue and the cultural integration of these women. Regardless of generation, age or migration history, though, it is interesting to note a common thread running through the ideas of the women I spoke to, concerning the wearing of the *hijab*. For them it represents a private act of faith/consciousness and is not a statement of religious fundamentalism or an indication of women's subordinate status to that of men or any other kind of oppression. In this regard, the women often spoke of the *hijab* and the relevant misconceptions, as they called them, about the position of women in Muslim cultures as seen in the Dutch media and general public opinion.¹⁶ It is this diversity of opinion

¹⁶ The head scarf affair – the Dutch version – remains a highly politicised, controversial subject of heated recurrent debates. The sweep of the debate, in others as well as in this country, ranges from the head scarf's meaning as a form of empowerment for the woman choosing to wear it, to a means of seclusion and containment imposed by others.

that continues to make the *hijab* the subject of debate in women's meetings.

Social interaction does not lead to changes in preferences in all cases, and in spite of a widespread discourse on respect and tolerance in the Netherlands, the acceptance of other different lifestyles still remains quite difficult. Interesting topics arise in interaction, as will be shown, when there is an awareness of an unresolved cultural boundary. Parts of the study examine the cultural discontinuities experienced by some of the participants. Naturally, when these migrants came to the Netherlands, they carried with them their cultural traditions, i.e. the celebration of national and religious holidays, marriage customs, child rearing practices, family divisions of labour practices, etc. Women migrants were thought to bring with them cultural and religious visibility in the receiving society, more than men ever did. Such cultural practices may still persist to a certain extent in the new environment.

Upon arrival, the migrants in question assessed Dutch society and its political and social values as 'overly liberal' (i.e. weak family ties, dress code, gender relations, etc.). Inevitably, barriers were built between them and the Dutch natives. It became evident that the women of the study with strong ties to Islam may resent, to this day, some 'Dutch values' across a number of issues, particularly those that relate to the family, religion and education. Those attitudes are frequently based not on much direct knowledge, but rather on the generalisations and stereotypes that have accumulated over the years in the absence of social contact with Dutch mainstream society. Even among second-generation migrants there are women that claim that there is a lack of understanding between migrant and native cultural values. For example, when pondering the issue of 'values', some women express stereotypical views about 'Dutch women's' perceived 'moral extravagance and excessive behaviour'. Aisja, a 38-year-old travel agent, suggests that Dutch women 'take manners into extreme', which is 'ill-mannered' according to her, as evidenced by too revealing dressing habits, explicit social manners towards the opposite sex, single motherhood, etc.

Another such example of persisting cultural barriers is expressed in personal relationships. Social contacts with Muslim people acquire a special significance for the participants of the study and they are assigned a great deal of importance. In this regard, Khadisha (a Dutch Muslim mother) shares the cultural confusion of her daughter, Zohra, (a Dutch-Moroccan Muslim girl in her late teens), when it comes to her social life choices: 'She wishes to meet up and go out with boys her age but she would keep a distance from Moroccan boys – the group which actually would be her optimal preference for a future husband/partner – because "with them any relationship would have to be in serious terms".'

Then again, there are other cultural values and practices that have, in fact, been adapted to the new circumstances in the context of the dominant culture. Some participants of the study, for example, adopted the Christmas holiday traditions of exchanging gifts and tree decoration, while similarly, during Ramadan they plan around local workday requirements; all very different experiences, indeed, from the ones lived back in the country of origin. What remains a significant finding is the fact that after many years of living in the Netherlands and subsequent cultural adaptations, religion still seems to serve as an important resource for these women.

Kinds of contact: natives and migrants in the city

Another part of the study examines how the hosting society always positions these migrant women according to their own ways of understanding it. Stereotypical talk is also to be found here: 'We are seen by the Dutch as the "other" and we are treated with suspicion, our manners appear strange, traditional and oppressing to women', says Fatima, a 34-year-old mother of two who works part-time at a restaurant. Stereotypes, misperceptions, discrimination, negative attitudes and behaviours come easier when people have little knowledge of one another. Seemingly, to this day, migrants and natives do not know how to cross the divide. Despite programs of integration, non-migrant Dutch residents and the participants of the study do not get to know one another very much, it seems. For the

first-generation migrants, language difficulties head the list of reasons why they do not spend more time together. Yet, the women of the study claimed that even if they spoke fluent Dutch, the cultural barriers would still remain.¹⁷ According to Amina, a 19-year-old Tunisian girl, 'Since the start [referring to the first arrivals of migrants to the country] Muslim migrants [meaning Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians] became a problem to be managed.' The majority of women find this discomfiting, but they attempt nevertheless to rationalise it by reasoning as follows: 'Once the country had settled into a set of policies regarding the migrants from the colonies, it was the time of the new migrants/guest workers arriving from the South... Then again new policies had to be arranged for the migrants, which was unsettling for the Dutch...' (Leila, 35, a Moroccan divorced mother of two boys). They do not fail to mention, though, that, in their own opinion, the adjustments were the hardest for the immigrants who arrived in the host country, where almost everything was foreign; starting with the weather, to the food, to people's customs and behaviour, to the organisation of time and leisure, etc.

Against the background of a popular debate structured in this way, it becomes less surprising why 'culture' is a notion that has been gradually silenced in Dutch society: In popular culture,

¹⁷ In recent years, at the level of public debate, there has been endless discussion with regards to relations among natives, migrants and their descendants, as well as the political and socio-cultural impacts of migration. Issues put forward in the media can be summed up as follows: Whether integration can succeed or not, key instances of confrontation between natives and migrants in neighbourhoods where the 'ethnic' percentage is strongest, low education and rising crime among migrants, and the problems 'allochtonous' cultures pose for Dutch norms and values, and so on. Such reports in the press incite open public discussion over these issues, while concerns about integration have come to occupy a central place in the way in which migration sentiments and discontent are being expressed (or rationalised) in the popular mood. Notably, there is a growing political conservative spectrum that seeks to reduce the numbers of migrants and asylum seekers and promotes a rhetoric of exclusion as a solution for the ills that migration causes to the public (Raymunt 2011; Kern 2011; van der Meer and Ham 2011).

people have grown uncomfortable to manage in public the talk of identity about 'categories' such as ethnicity, 'race', and religion. Of course, this is merely a popular understanding of culture which, however, matters as a loose indicator of certain values or opinions available in society that play a role in shaping peoples' lives and relations between migrants and natives, in particular.

Integration into the city's life

For integration to work, it needs to actively go beyond stereotyped images that the mainstream public opinion creates about the different cultures in a city. For instance, the stereotypes for 'Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians' that are often employed uncontested in media coverage is an issue for the women of the study. They discuss the need for these generalised ideas to be challenged by a detailed, clear understanding of the people and their culture. Many of the negative stereotypes about Muslim migrants play on the idea of their 'non-assimilability' into the public social life related to negative discourses about their commitment to sacred religious practices, norms of behaviour, dress etc.¹⁸

The study reveals that these ideas do not represent the reality and diversity in the forms of integration these women achieve in the city. Most of the participants developed and expressed strong identification with the city itself. Interestingly, the city, according to them, is not an integrated place. For them, it is divided into significant, meaning-bearing places. For example, Radja, a 33-year-old shop assistant, explained that she was born in *Mercato plein* (a city district), where she currently works, her children were born, and where she anticipates and hopes to spend her entire life. Karima, a woman in her 40s working as a cook, makes a similar point when she says that her neighbourhood is called 'little Morocco' by its residents because of the high percentage of residents of Moroccan origin, the many eth-

¹⁸ See, for example, newspaper articles about Wilders' party's anti-immigration line with slogans such as 'Henk and Ingrid are paying for Ali and Fatima', which hinge on the supposed failure of these communities to integrate (*De telegraaf*, April 2010).

nic cultural centres, the ethnic store fronts and products, and the number of children of migrant origin in the local primary school. She participates in the area of her district as a resident, a consumer and a service user. Socially and culturally she is satisfied with her networks. Her social world revolves around people of many nationalities and she feels that she is involved, in many local ways, in public city life, but not in the sense prescribed by 'the dominant official ideas of what migrants should do in order to integrate'.

Many of the women of the study live in municipally owned houses in neighbourhoods where a high percentage of the residents is of migrant origin. Patterns of sociability are affected by this, such as schooling. Ramu, a 27-year-old cashier, describes how she thoroughly investigated the issue of to which school she would send her children. She intended to find a school with a large proportion of migrant pupils, but not one stereotyped as a 'black school'.¹⁹ She explained that, in popular terms, the schools identified as 'black' are the ones where the majority of pupils is of Maghrebi origin. 'Surinamese kids go to white schools', she adds. Most of the participants of the study expressed a preference for multicultural schools for the education of their children and preferably schools with high or moderate academic records, but not exclusively Muslim schools.

Evidently, the study found that there is a constant reflection and self-consciousness in matters of religion and culture amongst these women, and the social meanings of categories are detected and negotiated within the safe spaces of the migrant associations. Another important finding is the strong connection felt by the women towards their city and the increased

contact with other groups outside their own ethnic circles, not so much, however, with their native Dutch counterparts.

Conclusion

This article attempted to contextualise migrant integration processes by looking for references in the social reality of Muslim migrant women's everyday choices, actions, and practices within Dutch society. Contextualising is important as we need to humanise and intensify qualitatively what we know about the central themes to do with the sphere of migrant integration in today's societies. This article also tried to show the processes of integration from below with initiatives by Muslim migrant women in the context of migrant associations, designed and implemented to mobilise resources other than the official policies imposed 'from above', based on agendas of the migrant women themselves to satisfy their needs and represent their interests.

When it comes to the question of who sets the terms of integration in this case, the present study does not purport to give any definite answers. We can only describe the trajectories of the women of the study in relation to their integration dilemmas and try to draw some conclusions. However, drawing on the modalities of integration from below in this case, the empirical findings suggest that what happened to these migrant women is more a kind of structural integration in the city's life rather than integration in the mainstream cultural behaviour. In the bottom-up version of integration explored in this paper, it would have been somewhat odd if the success of migrant women's integration were measured entirely in terms of the norms of integration set by the state they live in. The destiny of full integration under these state norms, however, may not be the norm for these particular migrant women. A rather different picture may be emerging. In these less formal conditions, the imperative of integration according to state norms starts to lessen and another integration scenario is offered to these women. If they find the integration offered by the state unappealing, or if they find themselves in negative socio-economic conditions, the women will prove resilient

¹⁹ There is a prevalent divide into the so-called 'white' and 'black' schools in the Netherlands, linked to racial, educational as well as economic factors. This is an issue of concern in the public debate because, firstly, on average children in 'black' schools are performing below par, and secondly because it is feared that the lack of contact between native Dutch and migrant children will lead to strained relations between the high-income Dutch native groups (white) and low-level income migrant groups (black) in the long run (Karsten 1994).

enough to follow an integration path to encompass their self-organised informal activities in the city. The crucial issue of their cultural integration is still a hot button issue for all parties concerned. One is left with a certain scepticism towards how the issues of cultural difference and recognition are dealt with in official policies, as far as the integration of Muslim women migrants of the study is concerned. But aside from the official integration policies there is, now, another operative sphere of differentiated practices of integration, in particular local settings of society, that need to be addressed in the overall integration debate to make it theoretically clearer and politically satisfactory. This new project of integration from below promises some hope but still raises questions on the recognition of cultural difference, not mere acknowledgement of its existence, but respect for its expression.

I shall close by noting that what appeared to be the starting premise of this paper will also be its conclusion: Observing the actual way that these Muslim migrant women try to integrate

in the city where they live, is seen here as contributing to the understanding of the integration debate in its actual, applied – not abstract – terms. The success of the integration process in the host society is confirmed by the behaviour of migrants in it, who are acting as orthodox political actors, pursuing their interests, and adapting the tools and opportunities of the polity to their own ends (Favell 1998). The apparent disregard in official integration politics of these everyday, perhaps prosaic, politics of migrants themselves left a gap in adequately grasping multiculturalism and its dilemmas. These politics, when examined, point rightly to the complexities and difficulties involved in living together with the other by revealing the actual practices of integration in certain parts and contexts of society, and they may provide new insights to conceptualise the puzzling integration questions. In practice, integration is marked by considerable variation, as in the case explored here. Recognising this variation can be an ideal vehicle for designing a more nuanced and liberal path of integration policies.

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