Constructing a Muslim self through life story telling

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I feel like a Muslim, but considering what they say about Islam on television, or how teenage Muslim girls talk about it, I realise I am a flawed Muslim… I have a Dutch translation of the Koran, but it feels odd to read the Koran in Dutch; I do not feel at home in that translation. Somehow the Dutch language is not suitable to transmit the ornate style of the Arabic text.

In this quotation Boushra, a 35 years old Dutch Muslim psychiatrist of Moroccan descent reflects on what being a Muslim means to her.\(^1\) She positions herself as a Muslim by engaging in dialogues with various collective voices in Dutch society that speak out about Islam. In this paper, I will argue that studying the construction of religious identity from a biographical perspective by using the analytical concept of the ‘dialogical self’ one can avoid essentialization and instrumentalisation of religious identity but take seriously the intrinsic value of religiosity to Muslims while placing it in a wider context.

The dialogical self

The psychologist Hubert Hermans proposes to study identity in terms of the ‘dialogical self’, which he conceives of as the temporary outcome of one’s responses to the ways in which one is addressed on the basis of one’s various positions in power relations in and between the different social and cultural fields in which one participates. Selves are dialogically constructed since (1) taking different positions one remains ‘in dialogue’ with one’s other positions and (2) significant others, either positively or negatively evaluated, cannot be dissolved from our own positions: anticipating how others respond to us in a specific position we take their perspective to look at our self.\(^2\) We are therefore always in dialogue with others and with our different selves.

Hermans emphasises the importance of ‘collective voices’ involved in these dialogues. When individuals speak, they use the words of the various groups to which they belong. These words, in turn, represent the rules, conventions and world views of those groups. The dialogical self is developed by ‘orchestrating’ the ‘voices’ within ourselves that speak from the different positions between which we shift.\(^3\)

In studying self-narratives this implies analysing how the words of our interlocutors are embedded in field-specific repertoires of practices, capital, characters and discourses that characterize

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\(^1\) Boushra is one of 25 women who participates in a longitudinal life story project that I started among daughters of Moroccan migrants in the Netherlands in 1998. The second round of interviews were conducted in 2008.

\(^2\) Hermans 2001. Also see Floya Anthias (2002) whose concept of ‘translocational positionality’ fits in very well with the idea of a dialogical self.

\(^3\) Bell & Gardiner (eds), 1998.
the various modalities of categories that (in)formed their identity. While ‘All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre […] a generation’, as the philosopher Bakthin put it\(^4\) individuals are also active co-constructors to these collective voices. They bring innovations to existing the rules and conventions as they apply them.

In my own research, I have found that analysis of how individuals in their life stories speak from different positions within the self, switch between between various collective voices and sometimes mix them as they take different positions, a productive way to study intersectionality. In particular, the concept of ‘dialogical self’ draws attention to the ways in which different collective voices may or may not conflict, and calls for contextual analysis of how one or several voices become more dominant or organising than others in self-narratives.

While Boushra considers herself a Muslim, for example, looking at herself through the eyes of others, she characterises herself as a ‘flawed’ Muslim. Apparently, the frames of reference available to her do not offer her much footing: she recognises herself neither in the image of Islam as presented in the Dutch media, nor in the way that many Muslim adolescents construct a Muslim identity.

An adequate linguistic frame of reference to help her construct a Dutch Muslim self is also lacking. Although to her koranic Arabic expresses the true voice of Islam, she cannot read Arabic. Also, having been educated in The Netherlands, Dutch is her language for self-reflection and self-expression. She therefore needs a Dutch translation to understand the Koran, but this ‘feels odd’ to her.

In common parlance Dutch does not ‘taste’ much of religion. The Netherlands is a highly secularized society. Religiosity is considered to be a private matter that people do not talk about much in public. It is therefore unlikely that Boushra will often have heard Dutch being used to express or discuss religious selves. The flavour of Arabic, on the contrary, is inherently religious to her. When asked what aspects of her Moroccan cultural heritage she finds most important to pass on to her children, she replied: ‘They should decide themselves what they do with religion, but at least I them to learn the language of Islam.’

Boushra’s reflection on her religious identity illustrates that, particularly in a multicultural setting, individuals move between different positions, each of which is connected with different ‘voices’ and cultural repertoires and each related to different power relations. Talking as a psychiatrist, for example, she speaks authoritatively and expresses no hesitations. Talking from her position as a Muslim, however, she is muted by both Muslim voices and non-Muslim voices who claim definitional power over her. Hence she describes herself as a ‘flawed’ Muslim.

That Boushra does not feel ‘at home’ in the Dutch language as a Muslim not only illustrates how our selves are informed by collective voices that we have at our disposal, but also points to the

\(^4\) Bakhtin 1981
multiplicity of religiosity. While the rational dimension of her religiosity is addressed perfectly well when reading a Dutch translation of the Koran, the sensory and emotional dimensions of her religiosity cannot easily be transmitted by the Dutch text. In her narrations, Islam has connotations with what in Dutch is referred to as ‘nestgeur’, meaning: ‘nest scent’. Nest scent refers to both early childhood memories that are difficult to put into words. Sensory and emotional experiences merge with rational considerations in the impact of nest scent. Referring to experiences during the earliest, formative stage of psychological development, such early childhood memories leave deep marks and are closely related to core identity issues.

Life story telling

Life stories contain a wealth of information about the impact of nest scent on people. Also, perhaps more than in any other genre, in life-stories people narrate about their own multiplicity and different self-experiences. Life stories therefore constitute a rich source to study dialogical self-constructions. In comparison to other interview formats, biographical interviews give people more say in what to include in their narratives and how to do so. While some of my interlocutors mentioned Islam only in passing, others present Islam as a basic frame of reference for interpreting their experiences.

Khadijja, for example, positioned herself firmly as a person of Muslim background in this very first sentence of her life story:

When I was born, since my father was already working in the Netherlands by that time, my grandfather whispered the shahada in my ear.\(^5\)

The image of the maternal grandfather whispering the shahada in the ear of his granddaughter sets the tone for narrations full with references to love, protection and warmth in the Moroccan setting where Khadijja spent the first five years of her life. This contrasts strongly with stories set in the Netherlands after reunion with her father. Those narrations are full of pain, fear and humiliation she suffered due to the harsh upbringing of her father, who maltreated his wife and daughters. From then on, Islam figures mostly negative in Khadijja’s life story. She related, for instance, how when she was about eight years old, her father frightened her with stories about hellfire:

My father didn’t like it if we touched his things, so when he caught me spinning a globe that he kept in his bedroom he warned me that as in Hell, there was fire inside it that could burn me. I asked: Hell?? ‘Yes’, he replied, ‘that’s where some of us go when we die. If you live well you’ll go to Paradise, but if you behave badly you’ll burn in Hell’. After that I had recurring nightmares about Hell. I saw fire everywhere, it was really scary.

\(^5\) The shahada is the Muslim creed ‘There is no god than God and Mohammed is his messenger’.
Khadidja also had bitter stories to tell about how her father restricted her freedom of movement as a teenager by appealing to what he presented as Islamic prescriptions. When in a later phase of the interview we discussed her ‘personal ideology’, Khadidja’s childhood stories helped me gain a fuller understanding of her ambivalent views on religion. She suspects that many people who claim to be pious Muslims are only hypocrites. Mentioning the hajj or pilgrimage of her father as an example, she states scornfully:

His highness grew a beard and went to Mecca. I guess he figured he could compensate for his sins that way. Quite unlikely if you ask me.

Khadidja herself does not much care for Islamic prescriptions, nor is she interested in reading the Qur’an or knowing its exact contents. She does not perform the salat or prayers, and while she would never eat pork, she does enjoy a glass of wine now and then. As the opening sentence of her life story indicated, however, she has not thrown out the baby with the bathwater. She cherishes being brought up as a Muslim and still identifies with Islam. Like most other interviewees, Khadidja observes the fast during ramadan:

I think it is a very good thing to express one’s solidarity with the poor by fasting. I also make donations at the end of Ramadan. When I endorse the general idea behind a practice, I support it.

This attitude characterises Khadidja’s general stance on Islam. To her, Islam shares with other religions the universal message that one should be good to others and take good care of oneself. Emphasising the general idea behind Islamic stories, rituals and symbols has enabled her to develop a personal ideology which allows her to identify with the life-style and views of non-Muslim significant others in her life while remaining true to her religious convictions.

By analysing quotations from the life stories of Boushra and Khadidja, I have hoped to illustrate that studying religiosity through life story interviews allows to follow the development of religious views and practices over the life course and document how a religious self is dialogically constructed. Quoting Khadidja illustrated the importance of parental voices addressing the child in developing religious identity, while quoting Boushra shed light on the impact of ‘collective voices’ on the construction of religious selves.