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*Speaking of the Dead**Changing Funeral Practices among Moroccan Migrants in the Netherlands and Belgium*

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Introduction¹

When my husband died, I joined in the funeral procession [in the Netherlands]. I walked along in the cemetery as his coffin² was being carried to his grave by his brothers, friends, and father. There were a lot of men present, family members of course but also colleagues and neighbors. My sister also participated, as did several of my [male and female] best friends and my mother. My family had no difficulty with the presence of women and non-Muslims in the funeral procession. However, the imam who led the procession objected. I still see him before me, yelling at all the women and non-Muslims to leave the cemetery! For a moment there, I thought of throwing him into the grave! You just cannot deal with those kinds of people at that particular moment. There I was, in my twenties, with my newborn baby, burying my husband. I just wanted to say farewell to my husband without that imam upsetting everything. On the spot, my father politely requested the imam to leave and we proceeded without the imam.³

Muslims hold various opinions about the presence of Muslim women at burial rituals. In some cases, these attitudes can lead to distressing situations, such as the one that Najia and her family endured. Najia's father did not hesitate to intervene and ask the imam to leave, not only because the imam's behavior incited an emotionally charged quarrel in a cemetery but because the imam, as a Surinamese Hanafi, held opinions that differed from those of the bereaved family, who were Moroccan Maliki adherents. This case illustrates the topic of this chapter: How the coming together of various Islamic denominational ideas in

the Netherlands and Belgium – a phenomenon I refer to as a fusion of denominational ideas – has effected the participation of Moroccan Muslim women in funeral rituals both in their host and home countries. The phenomenon of Muslim burial rituals is little researched in general, let alone in a context of migration. As far as I know there are only two other studies in relation to the burial of Moroccan French Muslims in and outside of France.⁴ Furthermore, none of these studies includes the coming together of various denominational ideas and the effect thereof.

In order to analyze this fusion of ideas, I focused on Islamic burial rituals and the changing participation of Moroccan women in these rituals. I decided to focus on this aspect of life events, because Islamic burial rituals tell us much about how power-relations and identity are explained, embedded, second-guessed, and eventually challenged by Moroccan-Dutch Muslim women. I chose to compare the situation of Moroccan women with other Muslim women from different ethnic and denominational backgrounds. Although Moroccan women's denominational background generally forbids them to attend or participate in funeral processions, change is omnipresent. In this chapter I argue that two variables play an important role in changing Islamic burial rituals: a migration context and the diversity of Islamic communities in a host country. Interaction of these variables brought up questions about why, how, and especially, by whom burial preparations are to be performed. The consequence of the fusion of ideas the Moroccan women experienced, then, led them to confront issues of inclusion and exclusion based on gender and religious adherence.

Methodology

I conducted explorative research in the Netherlands and Belgium in order to gain insight into a phenomenon that to date has not been studied in detail, that is, changing Islamic burial rituals in the Netherlands and Belgium and the participation of Moroccan women living there. Respondents were selected using a purposive sampling technique also known as judgment sampling. This sampling method made it possible to select respondents who had experiences with Islamic burials within their circle of relatives and acquaintances in the Netherlands, Belgium, and/or in the countries of origin.

This chapter reports on the results of 35 interviews I conducted. Respondents between the ages of 20 and 45 were asked about their

experiences with Islamic burial rituals and their own ideas and opinion. The respondents all had been born in the Netherlands or Belgium or had come to these countries before the age of 12. Respondents included individuals from four Islamic religious denominations: Sunni, Shiite, Ahmadiyya, and Alevi. In order to offer some representative results, respondents were selected from within these religious communities, to tally with the number of their presence in both the Netherlands and Belgium. Often research dealing with Muslims in Europe is limited to research among the largest Muslim communities: Turks, Moroccans and Surinamese. Although this approach might be useful for policy-making, from an academic point of view, it is impossible to ignore the smaller communities, especially in a discussion of changing religious practices. Between July 2012 and January 2013, 22 Sunni, 6 Shiite, 4 Alevi and 3 Ahmadiyya respondents were interviewed. They came from various ethnic backgrounds: Moroccan (11), Turk (12), Surinamese (3), Sudanese (1), Iranian (2), Iraqi (2), Afghani (1), Pakistani (1), Indonesian (1) and one convert. Of these, 17 were female and 18 were male respondents. My focus is on the six Moroccan female respondents. In order to understand how their experiences were shaped by a fusion of denominational ideas I compare their experiences to those of the other 11 women. Of those 11, 5 had a Turkish background, and the others were Indonesian (1), Surinamese (2), Iranian (1), Sudanese (1) and Belgian (1) – this last a convert to Islam.

Data also was collected through participant observation. During the fieldwork period I attended four burials as an observer (two in the Netherlands, one in Belgium, and one in Morocco), participated in three corpse washings and shroudings (one each) in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Morocco, and attended three funeral prayers (two in the Netherlands and one in Belgium). In all cases, except one involving a Bosnian funeral, bereaved Moroccans allowed me to attend and participate.

As this multidisciplinary research was qualitative in nature, my aim was not to generalize the results to all Muslims in the Netherlands and Belgium. Rather, my primary purpose was to ensure as much variation in funeral experiences as possible. I sought to describe and explain opinions and changing practices specifically around death, dying, and burial, and more particularly, around the participation of Moroccan women and how it compares to that of other Muslim women of various ethnic and denominational backgrounds.

In the first part of this chapter I provide a background to the study through demographic statistics on Muslim communities in the Netherlands and Belgium that highlight their diversity. I then discuss Islamic burial preparations as *rites de passage* and apply theories developed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner⁵ to shed light on the ambiguous “betwixt and between” nature of the liminal phase in the transition from life to death. Literature on women and rites of passage is abundant, but this chapter opens the door to theorization in the field of women and funeral rituals. I argue that the liminal phase during which burial preparations occur can be characterized by vulnerability, conflicting opinions, and time pressures, owing in part to the Islamic prescription for burial within 24 hours after death. In the next section I examine the four elements of burial rituals: the washing, the shrouding, the funeral prayer, and the funeral procession. How these rituals are to be performed, by whom and where is discussed in detail in the various jurisprudence (*fiqh*) manuals. I pay special attention to the issue of gender, Moroccan women’s participation in burial rituals, and the fusion of denominational ideas, illustrated by excerpts from interviews I conducted. Finally, I conclude with observations about how trends in burial rituals in the Netherlands and Belgium have reverberated back to Morocco.

Diversity among Muslims in the Netherlands and Belgium

Islam and its adherents cover a wide spectrum of normative beliefs and cultural backgrounds. In studying the fusion of different Islamic denominational beliefs and corresponding changes in the burial rituals of Muslims in the Netherlands and Belgium, and the resulting “fusion of denominational ideas,” some insight into this diversity is useful. In addition, it is helpful to understand the migration context for Moroccans living in the Netherlands and Belgium.

Large-scale settlement of Moroccan and Turkish Muslims in the Netherlands and Belgium began in the 1960s, when they were recruited as guest workers (*gastarbeiders*). Today, Muslims living in the Netherlands and Belgium vary in regard to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, adherence to different Islamic denominations, schools of law, and understandings of various modern Islamic ideas. Moroccan and Turkish ethnic groups represent about 80 percent of the Muslim population of these countries, with the other 20 percent

from various countries and regions, including Surinam, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, South Asia, the Balkans, and Africa south of the Sahara. To these can be added small groups of native Dutch and Belgian converts to Islam.⁶

In 2011, the estimated number of Muslims in the Netherlands varied between 857,000 and 950,000 out of a total population of 16 million inhabitants and in the same year an estimated 410,000–628,000 Muslims lived in Belgium out of a population of 11 million.⁷ The geographical distribution of the Muslim population in the Netherlands and Belgium is quite uneven. In the Netherlands, a great majority of the Muslims live in the western part of the country, with large concentrations in the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht.⁸ In Belgium more than 40 percent of Muslims live in the Brussels-Capital Region⁹ and account for 17 percent of the region's population, resulting in the fact that Brussels today has one of the largest Muslim populations in the Western world.¹⁰

An estimated 85 percent of Muslims worldwide follow the Sunni branch of Islam, and this is also the case in the Netherlands and Belgium.¹¹ In addition to Sunni Muslims, adherents of Shiite, Alevi, and Ahmadiyya Muslim denominations also are found in both countries. Shiite Muslims form a significant part of the Iranian and Iraqi communities, Alevi Muslims are a significant part of the Turkish community, and Ahmadiyya Muslims are a prominent part of the Surinamese and Pakistani communities.

Muslims also follow the teachings and opinions of various schools of law (*madhhab*). A school of Islamic Law is a school of thought within *fiqh*, (Islamic jurisprudence). In Sunni Islam the four major schools are Maliki, Hanafi, Hanbali, and Shafi'i, while in Shiite Islam the major school is the Ja'fari.¹² Sunni law schools differ in their treatment of what is known as subsidiary matters (*furu'*), which extend to a large variety of topics, including burial practices and regulations. The *madhhab* to which one belongs is principally determined by the country or community to which one belongs. Moreover, many prominent scholars of contemporary Sunni Islam, such as Yusuf al Qaradawi, head of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, reject *madhhabism* in principle and prefer a return to an original doctrine of Islam that can be shared by all Muslims. Their position predominates in many of the scholarly opinions (fatwas) issued within what is known as Jurisprudence for Minorities (*fiqh al-'aqalliyat*).

Islamic Burial Rituals as *Rites de Passage*

Because Islamic burial rituals are neither eternally nor universally fixed in their form and content, it is difficult to define them with precision. For the purposes of this research, then, I considered burial preparations to be rituals within the specific genre of life events known as *rites de passage*. Using this approach, I examined Islamic burial preparations performed in the “liminal phase” of dying. In analyzing the practice of Islamic burial preparations in this liminal phase, I focused especially on inclusion and exclusion based on gender and religious denomination. In this way, I was able to touch on the issue of how normative conditions surrounding burial practices in Morocco were subject to change.

Rites de passage are life-cycle rituals that mark changes of place, state, social position and age during a person’s life. The French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep identified a tripartite form inherent in all *rites de passage*: the phase of separation, the phase of transition, and the phase of incorporation.¹³ The separation phase emphasizes detachment of the subject from “either an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a “state”), or from both.”¹⁴ In the transition phase that follows, the characteristics of the subject (in this case, the individual undergoing the burial ritual) are ambiguous, as he or she belongs neither here nor there. Finally, in the third phase, the subject is incorporated into her or his new state.

Islamic burial preparations can be considered rituals performed in the phase of transition with the purpose of guiding the deceased through the transition from one world to the other. Those involved in performing the rituals are expected to be aware of the deceased’s state of uncertainty and the need for a rapid and correct effectuation of the burial preparations. This imperative is consistent with the work of Victor Turner,¹⁵ which builds on van Gennep’s threefold structure by emphasizing the dynamic nature of *rites de passage*. Turner characterized the second phase, that of transition, as a phase in which people are “betwixt and between.” Turner called this a “liminal” or period in which the subject does not have a status, making it highly desirable to keep this phase as short as possible. Thus, this liminal phase is of great importance in the burial practices of Muslims.

In Islamic practice, helping the deceased through the perilous journey from life to afterlife involves at least four important obligatory

elements prior to burial: the washing, the shrouding, the funeral prayer, and the funeral procession. In Van Gennep's terms, the actual burial occurs in the final phase of incorporation. As long as a person lies unburied, he or she is considered to be "betwixt and between." Herein lies the principal reason why Muslims emphasize the correct and rapid effectuation of burial preparations and of the actual burial itself. From a religious perspective, the soul will not rest until the body is buried and enters into its next phase; that of incorporation. Thus, the longer the period between death and burial lasts, the more heavily the burden of the deceased lies on the bereaved. Accordingly, burial preparations usually are performed carefully and within a very short period of time (mostly within 24 hours after death) in order to shorten the precarious liminal period. Certainly, because this phase typically involves the mourning of a loved one it also is marked by an explosion of emotions, conflicting expectations, and various opinions about how the rituals should be performed.

Outside their context of *rites de passage*, burial preparations can also be viewed as an activity that expresses a strong sense of belonging to a specific denomination. Certain people are allowed to perform burial rituals, and others are not. Participation is predicated not only on knowledge and expertise, but also on religious background and gender. For this reason issues of identity come to the forefront during the performance of burial preparations. Further, individuals are included and excluded from these rituals based on various decisions that must be made within a very short period of time. Thus, the "liminal period," also is a time when the identity of the bereaved is underscored, particularly in regard to belonging or not belonging to a preferred gender or Islamic denomination. Again, issues related to being betwixt and between come to the fore – not for the deceased, but in the assessment of those who are or are not allowed to attend or perform the burial preparations.

Changing Burial Rituals in the Netherlands and Belgium

Analysis of the interviews and participant observation revealed that the processes of inclusion and exclusion in Islamic burial rituals were subject to change. In seeking to understand how to explain these changes, I looked to the social and legal settings of the host country as well as the influence of the different Islamic regulations and beliefs

held by Muslims of various denominations in the Netherlands and Belgium. In order to illustrate this fusion of denominational ideas, I focused on the washing and shrouding of the corpse, the funeral prayer, and then the funeral procession and on the viewpoints of Islamic scholars from various schools of law. Overall, the findings suggest that in the context of immigration to the Netherlands and Belgium, changes in the participation of Moroccan women in Islamic burial rituals may be attributable less to the influence of the larger non-Muslim community than of adherents to other denominations and schools within Islam.

Washing the corpse (ghusl al-mayyit). In various manuals of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the washing of the corpse is described in detail, and there is some variation between the different Islamic denominations and the *maddhabs*. Just as in the other aspects of burial preparations, the washing of the corpse is considered to be a communal obligation (*fard kifaya*).

The washing is to be performed by a Muslim who knows the procedure. Although the *fiqh* calls upon immediate family members to perform the ritual, in practice the washing is often done by volunteers from a “washing group” from the local mosque. The washers can either be men or women, though as a rule, deceased men are washed by men and deceased women are washed by women. An exception to this rule is when an individual washes his or her spouse.¹⁶

Halima, a Moroccan respondent living in Belgium, told me how her father forbade her from attending the washing of her deceased baby boy, who had died only three weeks after birth due to heart problems:

No, I was not allowed to participate according to my father. Although I knew that in the case of babies, gender is not an issue. I took Salmane with me before he was washed. My father wanted me to go home after Salmane died, but I refused. I insisted that I had to stay with my child.

When I asked Halima about her father making this decision for her she emphasized that she regretted not arguing with him, especially since both her husband and the Maliki regulations did not prohibit her from being present at the washing. At that time though, she agreed to follow her father’s wishes and was relieved that her husband could wash their son under the supervision of trained washers. She recounted how the hospital nurses sought to help her with her grief:

While Salmane was taken away to be washed the nurses in the hospital really helped me and they made me a little box with some of Salmane's belongings. His hospital bracelet, a lock of his hair, and the report they had been filling in since he came in to the IC.

Lukewarm water is used during the washing and the washers must handle the deceased very carefully, as if she or he still were alive. It is a general belief that the deceased is still aware of what is going on around him or her and is able to feel the washing as it is performed.¹⁷

This story was reflected in a 2012 washing in Belgium in which I participated. When I arrived at the mosque in Antwerp to interview Majda, a Moroccan woman who was part of a professional washers group, she informed me that a woman was coming in shortly to be washed. She asked me if I would assist. When I asked Majda what I needed to do, she explained that I mainly would assist her and the other two women who would participate in the washing and that they would talk me through the process. After performing my ablutions (*wudu'*) along with Majda and the other women, we went into the washing room of the mosque and waited for the coroner to bring in the deceased woman.

Before beginning the washing, I remember all the washers quietly apologized to the deceased woman for the trouble we had moving her from the coffin onto the washing table. They emphasized that the deceased is in a vulnerable state after the process of dying, and if a washing is to be performed easily there must be enough people present to turn the deceased gently from one side to the other. Under no circumstances, they explained, should the deceased be turned face down.¹⁸

Of the six Moroccan women I interviewed for this study, none was present at the washing and shrouding of their deceased. Ilhame and Mouna shared their stories of the deaths of their fathers. Ilhame's father died in the Netherlands and was buried in Morocco. Mouna's father died while on vacation in Morocco. Mouna and her siblings traveled from the Netherlands to Morocco as soon as they received the news of their father's heart attack. Wisaal shared with me the story of traveling to Morocco with other relatives after the death of her older brother, who died while working in Belgium and was transported to Morocco for burial. Najia shared her story about the death of her husband, who died in the Netherlands in a car accident and also was buried in the Netherlands. Nora shared the story of the death of her

mother, who died in the Netherlands after being sick and was transported for burial to Morocco, where Nora and her relatives then traveled. Finally, Halima related the story of the death of her baby boy, who died only a few weeks after birth due to heart problems and was buried in Belgium.

The first three testimonies about the deaths of two fathers and a brother reflected the Islamic prohibition against women participating in the washing and shrouding of their fathers and brothers. The respondents explained that they were at peace with this regulation and understood the idea behind it, which had to do with the concept of *'awra* (the intimate parts of the body).¹⁹ Mouna added:

The men really kept me, my sisters, and my mother out of the whole thing. We were told not to interfere. But I said that my mother was allowed to wash her husband! I knew this because I had read about it and also heard about widows who had been allowed to wash their husbands.

Mouna understood that Islamic regulations allow for exceptions to the rule that men are washed by men and women by women in the case of spouses and infants. Najia explained that, in her case, she was mentally unable to attend to her deceased husband as she was so distressed by his loss and had to take care of her newborn baby. Nora, as we discussed earlier, did not participate in the washing of her mother because of her need to care for her children and the condolence visitors. Her sisters and her father, however, did attend and participate in the washing. Halima was aware that according to the Islamic regulations, she was allowed to wash her baby boy, but as she explained, she “lost the battle with my father. He allowed me to either attend the funeral prayer or nothing at all. So I chose for the first option.”

The situation of these six Moroccan women diverges from those other eleven women I interviewed. These were mostly allowed to attend the washing (unless there was a gender restriction) and most of them did so.

Takfin: Shrouding of the corpse. The requisite shroud (*kafan*) consists of at least one cloth that covers the entire body.²⁰ However, various denominations and *madhabib* have different preferences for the number of cloths and the *kafan*.

Regardless of the nuances, the shrouding procedure typically proceeds as follows: The garments are laid down one on top of the other, the largest garment at the bottom. The deceased is then placed on top

of the garments to be enshrouded. Before shrouding, a piece of cloth with some fragrance is placed between the buttocks to prevent any impurities seeping out onto the *kafan*.²¹

Islamic *fiqh* prescribes that the *kafan* be purchased with the deceased's own money.²² In practice, however, a mosque organization or the funeral director usually provides it. During one washing and shrouding I attended in Belgium, the *kafan* was made on the spot from a large roll of fabric. Measuring the height and width of the deceased woman, we cut the five pieces of her *kafan*. I held the large roll of fabric while one of the other women measured the *kafan* with her hands.

The respondents indicated that their last chance to see the deceased and say their goodbyes occurred after the shrouding ritual, and in some cases before the washing and shrouding. Halima, the mother of the deceased baby boy recounted:

After the washing had taken place, I took Salmane alone with me again. We spent maybe an hour together. I kept kissing him and praying for him. I still remember how he looked, so beautifully wrapped in his white *kafan*. I said my goodbyes to him, and told him how much I love him.

Mouna's testimony about her father's death and funeral in Morocco:

After the washing my father was to be transported to the cemetery. My uncles had put him in the ambulance that was going to bring him to the cemetery. We didn't get the time nor space to say goodbye and I knew that this was our very last moment with him. He was so close and yet so far. It was so frustrating, also because my younger brother was allowed to do everything, and we were forbidden everything. Eventually after I argued, pleaded, and screamed at my uncles, my mother, my sisters, and me were allowed into the ambulance to say our farewells. It was bittersweet. I said goodbye in my own way, touched his corpse and then I insisted that we would drive with them to the cemetery. My uncles were furious, but I just stayed in the ambulance.

These testimonies correspond with a study by Venhorst²³ on the ritualization of death among Muslims in the Netherlands. Since both cleaning and shrouding are not public, the hours before or after the washing and shrouding provide a suitable private moment and space for bereaved to pay their last respects. As Venhorst noted, "Particularly for women and children – who, due to gender and age restrictions, are often not permitted to attend the burial – it is the last opportunity to say their goodbyes."²⁴ Halima took both moments as

an opportunity to say farewell. She explained to me how she took her baby son with her both before and after he was washed and shrouded:

It was hard to say goodbye to Salmane. I didn't want to forget the feeling of holding him. I knew that after he was washed and shrouded, I would never hold him again, because he was going to be buried. So I took my time to say goodbye. We were alone, just him and me, and I tried to say goodbye. But it was hard.²⁵

Funeral prayer (salat al-janaza). After the corpse is washed and shrouded, the last ritual to be performed before the actual burial takes place is the funeral prayer. According to *fiqh*, praying for the deceased is considered to be a collective obligation for Muslims. The guidelines are the same as for the obligatory daily prayers. Participants should be in a state of ritual purity – meaning that they have performed ablutions (*wudu'*) – and they should cover their *'awra* and stand facing in the direction of the *qibla*.²⁶

Since the funeral prayer typically is held after a daily prayer, anyone present at the mosque can join in. My analysis of relevant texts did not yield statements concerning the desirability or undesirability of women and children attending a funeral prayer. Consequently, this practice differs from case to case. All the funeral prayers I attended in the Netherlands, Morocco, and Belgium, I was in the mosque for the daily prayer when the imam announced that we should not leave after the prayer because there would be a funeral prayer. In each of these cases women and children were participating, albeit in the separate women's section of the mosque.

The interview data indicates that funeral prayers that took place in the Netherlands and Belgium were performed mainly in the mosque or outside in a square near the mosque (57 percent), or at a funeral parlor (20 percent) or the cemetery (23 percent). The attendance of women at funeral prayers is the subject of an ongoing discussion among Muslims who have migrated to Europe, and the Netherlands and Belgium are no exception.²⁷ Half of the Moroccan women I interviewed (Najia, Ilhame, and Halima) participated in the funeral prayer even though they did not attend the washing and shrouding. On the other hand, the relatives of two of the women, Mouna and Wisaal, forbade them from attending the funeral prayer. Nora was absent during the funeral prayer because she had to care for her children and the visitors who came to console her.

Shiite, Alevi, and Ahmadiyya respondents considered attendance of women at the funeral prayers and the actual burial as normal. Thus, prohibitions against the attendance of women at funerals seemed to be most vigorous among Sunni Muslims. Some female Moroccan respondents saw this exclusion as being unfounded, however. Mouna shared the story of the funeral prayer for her father which took place in Morocco:

I thought it was ridiculous that I was not allowed to attend the funeral prayer! Islam does not forbid women to attend the funeral prayer. I know that because I personally know a widow who participated in her husband's funeral prayer. She is an Iraqi from the Shia. But that doesn't matter, she is also Muslim. She wears *hijab* and goes to the mosque. So then why can she attend and not me? When my sister, brother, and I arrived in Morocco, my father had already passed away. The next day was his burial and a funeral prayer was held. I was not allowed to attend or to participate. I was so angry. According to my brother, the mosque was full of people. People who never knew him, and I, his daughter, was forbidden to be there! I was also sorry that my mother didn't help me to confront my uncles, she was so distressed by her loss.

By contrast, Ilhame, a Moroccan living in the Netherlands, spoke of her surprise at seeing how normal it was for Surinamese Ahmadiyya Muslim women to participate in the funeral rituals of their deceased:

I think it's such a traditional thing for Moroccans in the Netherlands, to exclude women from attending and participating in funeral rituals! It has nothing to do with religion, or with halal and haram. For example, I live close to an Ahmadiyya mosque. I actually go there quite often because I'm friends with several women in this community. Whenever someone dies in their community, a lot of people come together in the mosque, men, women, and even children, to participate in the funeral prayer. I remember once an aunt of one of my friends had passed away. The deceased woman was the imam's wife. After the prayer, they took the coffin in the hearse and drove to the cemetery. Everyone, including women and children, got into their cars and joined the deceased at the cemetery. I saw them! Later I spoke to my friend and she said, everyone present at the cemetery also participated in the funeral prayer. Maybe it has to do more with cultural traditions than with religion that Moroccan women are so absent during funeral rituals. Personally, I do not participate in those stupid halal and haram (allowed and forbidden) discussions. You just have to think for yourself as a Muslim what makes sense for you, and what doesn't. I totally understand that as his

daughter, I'm not allowed to see my father's naked body, and therefore I cannot participate in the washing and shrouding. But I am certainly allowed to join the funeral procession and the actual burial!

Ilhame's assertion illustrates how Moroccan women in the Netherlands and Belgium come to learn of different Muslim customs and try to incorporate these into their own beliefs. Hence the fusion of denominational ideas mentioned previously in this chapter. Whether or not they actually participated in the funeral prayer, Mouna and Ilhame clearly changed their views on the participation of women due to their exposure to other denominational practices in the context of migration.

Another respondent, Halima, was allowed to attend the funeral prayer for her baby son after she reached a compromise with her father. As noted earlier, he had strictly forbidden her from attending the washing, shrouding and burial. When it came to the funeral prayer, she agreed on a compromise with him. She would not make a fuss about the washing and shrouding and in return, would be allowed to attend the funeral prayer. She explained:

I really pleaded with my father to be there at the funeral prayer. He thought I was making a fool of him in front of other people. I demanded that if I were not allowed to participate in the funeral at the cemetery, I would go along to the *salat al janaza* and see with my own eyes how the coffin would be taken from the mosque into the car. I went to the mosque with a friend of mine. I saw my child leave the mosque in his coffin.

Participation of Moroccan Women in Funeral Processions and Burials

Like visiting the sick, accompanying the funeral prayer and burial (*janaza*) of a deceased person is seen as an obligation that Muslims owe their fellow Muslims.²⁸ Yet, while some elements of the etiquette for the funeral procession are widely accepted, others may be frowned upon. For example, there is a range of scholarly opinions about who may join in the procession. Concerning attendance and participation of women, scholars from the various schools of law (*maddhabib*) vary greatly. Where Hanbalites and Shafi'ites hold the opinion that it is undesirable (*makruh*) in some situations, Hanafites are convinced that the presence of women at the funeral procession is undesirable under *all* circumstances.²⁹

Further, among the Malikites, participation in the funeral procession is open to old women as well as any young woman who is appropriately covered and whose presence will not lead to any temptation.³⁰ Thus, in the Maliki school (to which Moroccans generally adhere), women are not strictly forbidden from attending funeral processions, suggesting a more open-minded approach than some other schools of law.

Nevertheless, while some of the Moroccan women in this study had been present at the funeral procession of their loved one, the majority had not. Though they offered different reasons for their absence, the primary one was that their relatives or the imam forbade their participation. In the following, I discuss these various situations separately in order to elucidate the respondents' different considerations in agreeing or disagreeing with the prohibition.

Halima, who was not allowed by her father to attend the washing, shrouding and funeral of her baby son, made a deal with her father to get him to go along with her presence at the funeral prayer in the mosque. For Halima, it was of utmost importance to see her child, in his coffin, leave the mosque to be buried. By the time she started the negotiations with her father, she was aware that her religious denomination permitted her to be present at all the rituals, since gender was not an issue with an infant. Therefore, though she could have emphasized her religious right, she chose to select the one ritual that was most important to her, namely the funeral prayer. Halima explained, "It's such a special moment. All those people come to pray for the deceased. I wanted to see that and share the communal power of prayer with my fellow Muslims."

Halima told me that the experience of her child's death made her aware of her responsibility and position within Islam. Previously, she would take her father's word for truth. Unlike Halima, who gained a broader sense of her position and understanding of Islam *after* the funeral rituals for her son, for Mouna the moment of awareness came when she insisted on her presence and participation *prior* to the funeral rituals. As noted earlier, Mouna, after arguing with her uncles, refused to leave the car carrying her father's body to the cemetery.

While Halima argued and negotiated with her father in Belgium, where her son was born, Mouna's struggles occurred in Morocco. She had developed her ideas about the presence of women at funeral rituals in the Netherlands, in part because of her interaction with Muslims

from different denominations and ethnic backgrounds. She took this altered sense of religious practices around funeral rites back to her country of origin. This dynamic is significant in that it serves as an indicator of larger religious and social changes taking place among Moroccan Muslims in the Netherlands and Belgium as well as Morocco. Mouna told me that she and her sister were the only women present at her father's funeral.

My sister and I attended the funeral from a distance. We were not allowed to join and carry my father to his grave, although my brother was allowed to perform this special act. I really regret that we were forbidden. It is said that people who carry the deceased to his grave earn *hasanat* (good deeds). Aren't women aloud to earn *hasanat* through this act? My Islamic right to fully participate was denied by my uncles, not by Islam.

Mouna's anger at her uncles and Moroccan funeral practices were evident when I spoke with her. She recounted her experience with great bitterness. This is in contrast to Nora and Wisaal, neither of whom attended the funeral procession. Neither Wisaal nor Nora argued about their role in the funeral rituals. They both spoke about the trust they had in the people that did attend and performed the rituals for the deceased. The same was true for Ilhame, although she emphasized that she did not agree with what she called "Moroccan panic" when it comes to women attending and participating in funeral rituals. Ilhame explained:

I was not allowed to join in the procession or in the funeral according to my male relatives in Morocco. I felt sorry, but didn't make a problem of it. I went up to our roof terrace and saw how the group of men carried my father's coffin to his grave. It felt as if I was there, with them. I found my own way of participating, and no one could deny me this right from my own roof terrace. If my father had been buried in the Netherlands, I would definitely have joined in the funeral procession and funeral. I feel more at ease in the Netherlands and know my way around. Because we were in Morocco, I didn't feel comfortable breaking traditions and the way people obviously do things. I trust that the imam who joined in the procession knew what he was doing, I just don't agree with how he manages women at funerals. He acted so panicked when I asked if I could join.

Ilhame found her own way of attending her father's procession and funeral. Najia's husband died and was buried in the Netherlands, in a cemetery located in a city different from the one where Najia and her

family lived. Because they did not know anyone there, her father contacted an imam in that city via the cemetery manager. This imam had a different view about the attendance of Najia and other women at the funeral procession and at the funeral:

My family is very open-minded. I grew up in a non-Muslim environment, so we as a family are used to having non-Muslims for dinner and joining them and inviting them in weddings, baby showers, and funerals. We are also a very religious family, we pray, we fast, we do everything. But we were not expecting the imam to behave the way he did. My father was very disappointed in him, and he never ever visited that mosque again.

When confronted with the imam's attitude, Najia's father responded by taking over the ceremony. At this personal and painful moment, Najia's father had to ask the imam to leave, and the family proceeded without him. Nevertheless, Najia recounted a beautiful ceremony:

Once the imam left, it was so much better. My father said some prayers at the grave, and then he and my husband's brothers, friends, and father each threw three hands full of soil into the grave. Then I did the same, and my sisters, my mother, and all the others followed. We buried him together. We all lost someone that day. We all had and have the right to say our farewells in our own way.

Although the Maliki school to which Najia and her family belonged is more liberal on the issue of the attendance of women and widely followed in Morocco, it is certainly not common for Moroccan women to attend funerals.

Opinions about the attendance of women can lead to distressing situations such as the one that Najia had to endure, as cited above and at the beginning of this chapter. Without much hesitation, the respondent's father decided to intervene and ask the imam to leave, prompted not only by the emotionally charged situation resulting in a quarrel in a cemetery, but also by the fact that the imam's opinions differed significantly from those held by the bereaved family. The imam was a Surinamese Hanafi, whereas the bereaved were Moroccan Maliki adherents. As discussed earlier, scholars differ in their opinion on the permissibility of the attendance of women at funeral rituals.

Both in theory and practice Moroccan Sunni Muslims seem to be less accepting of the participation of women in funeral rituals than Shiite,

Alevi and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Instances of changes are evident in the experiences of several of the Moroccan Sunni female respondents who had accompanied a funeral procession and even the funeral itself. They emphasized that although imams or male relatives made clear that they were unwelcome, they decided to attend anyway.

One of the most interesting underlying reasons for this change in participation can be traced to a fusion of denominational ideas. Through meeting and interaction with other Muslims in the migration contexts of the Netherlands and Belgium, the Moroccan women I interviewed came to know other Islamic customs related to the attendance of women in funeral rituals. Especially Mouna and Ilhame, but also Najia, referred to the different approaches of various Islamic denominations and how they embraced some of these rulings within the scope of their own Maliki views. Ilhame summarized this most succinctly:

The prohibition of women at funerals and processions has nothing to do with *halal* or *haram*, or with Islam. It's just tradition and culture. I don't want to follow tradition and culture in that way, I want to know what Islam says about our attendance in general. In that regard, if other Muslim women from other denominations are allowed to participate, then why shouldn't I? They are Muslims, and so am I. So yes, sometimes I just like other customs better than what I was told from within the Moroccan community. So I follow what suits me, whether it's Shiite, Hanafi, Shafii, or Ahmadiyya regulations.

Conclusions

This study reveals that some Moroccan women with a migration background are becoming more aware of their rights in Islam with regard to their participation in Muslim burial rituals. This awareness may have been catalyzed by a personal experience of exclusion at a particularly painful moment in their life. The Moroccan women in this study referred to friends and acquaintances from different ethnic backgrounds and Islamic denominations. "If they are Muslim and are allowed to participate, then why shouldn't I?" The women carried their changed ideas back to their country of origin.

It is important to mention that all the families discussed in this chapter hail from rural Morocco where traditions are more closely observed. Changed attitudes of those who migrated to Europe are

especially noteworthy because they were not introduced top-down by the Moroccan government or through civil society associations in urban Rabat and Casablanca. Daughters of migrants from rural villages and towns held on to their new understandings upon their return to the country of their parents' origins.

The Moroccan women described in this chapter reflected deeply about their roles in funeral rituals. They took in the legal and social contexts of their host countries. Equally influential was their contact with the Islamic customs from denominations other than their own. The women skillfully fused these various influences and evaluated them against their own backgrounds, resulting in an altered understanding. Since no one is exempt from witnessing death and being confronted with the in- or exclusion in funeral rituals, these rituals serve as a significant indicator of larger religious and social changes taking place within Moroccan communities. One of the most important outcomes is the fact that young women of Moroccan origin in Europe dare to challenge the authority of male elders and family members. In a context of migration to non-Muslim countries, it is not the funeral rituals of non-Muslims and the participation of women therein, but the funeral rituals of fellow Muslims from other minority denominations (Shiites, Ahmadiyya and Alevites) that the Moroccan women looked to. They derived strength for defending their new convictions based on their understanding that they were claiming their religious rights. This new awareness not only changed funeral rituals in the host country but also in the country of origin. Though this study is based on a small sample, it nonetheless documents an important cultural and social shift and offers starting points for further exploration of changing senses of women's agency.

Endnotes

- 1 This chapter is based partly on chapter 3 of my 2014 PhD dissertation: "Islamic burials in the Netherlands and Belgium. Legal, religious and social aspects."
- 2 As a rule, Muslims are not to be buried in a coffin but in shrouds unless there is a necessity to do so. All women referred to in this chapter had participated in a funeral which involved burial with coffin. In the case of Najia, her husband had a car accident and the body was very damaged so they decided to bury in a coffin. Halima did not know of the possibility of burying without a coffin and Belgian law is still vague on this issue.

The cases of the other four women in this chapter involved repatriation in which the body is transported in a coffin which is sealed and cannot be opened.

- 3 Interview with Najia. January 2013.
- 4 Aggoun, A. (2006). *Les musulmans face a la mort en France*. Vuibert: Espace éthique; Chaib, Y. (2000). *L'émigré et la mort*. Aix en Provence: Edisud. There are some studies done on Turkish, Bengali and Surinamese burial rituals, but the latter fall outside the scope of this chapter.
- 5 Turner, V. (2002). "Liminality and communitas." *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*. M. Lambek (ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 359.
- 6 De Koning, M. (2011). "The Netherlands." *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*. J. Nielsen et al. (eds.). Boston: Brill, pp. 401–402; Fadil, N. (2011). "Belgium." *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*. J. Nielsen et al. (eds.). Boston: Brill, p. 70; FORUM Verkenning (2012). "Moslims in Nederland." Utrecht: FORUM Instituut voor Multiculturele Vraagstukken, p. 8; Sengers, E. and T. Sunier (eds.). (2010). *Religious Newcomers and the Nation State: Political Culture and Organized Religion in France and the Netherlands*, p. 115.
- 7 De Koning, "The Netherlands," p. 401; Fadil, "Belgium," p. 69; Berger, M. (2012a). "Nederland en zijn Islam. Een kijkje in de spiegel." *Kerk en Buitenwereld. Opstellen over de kerk in de samenleving voor Marius van Leeuwen*. K. Holtzapffel, J. Magliano-Tromp, and M. Tolsma (eds.). Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Meinema, pp. 15–31; FORUM Verkenning, "Moslims in Nederland," pp. 6–8; Hertogen, J. (2008). "In België wonen 628.751 moslims" [In Belgium there are 628,751 Muslims]. *DeWereldMorgen*, pp. 1–4.
- 8 Berger, M. (2012b). "The Netherlands." *Oxford Handbook of European Islam*. J. Cesari (ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, p. 2.
- 9 Fadil, "Belgium," p. 71.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Shadid, W. and S. Van Koningsveld (2008). "Islam in Nederland en België." *Religieuze institutionalisering in twee landen met een gemeenschappelijke voorgeschiedenis*. Sunni Muslims accept the legitimacy of the first four successors of Muhammad. See Esposito, J.L. (2003). *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 306. Whereas Shiite Muslims believe that Muhammad's religious and political authority was passed on to his descendants. See Esposito, *The Oxford*, p. 292. Alevis is a term which is used to cover a number of heterogeneous socio-religious communities in Turkey and the Balkans, who in the twentieth century began to share a common trans-regional Alevi identity called Alevism. See Dressler, M. (2013).

- “Alevis.” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THREE. K. Fleet et al. (eds.). Available at http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/2048/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_0167 (accessed January 17, 2017). The Ahmadiyya is a controversial messianic movement founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in Qadian (India) in 1889. See Esposito, *The Oxford*, pp. 11–12.
- 12 These schools of law came into existence during the ninth and tenth century. Different scholars applied different methods of interpretation when explaining the Qur’an and *hadith* (traditions of the Prophet Mohammed). The Hanafi school was established by Imam Abu Hanifa (700–767 CE) in Kuffa, Iraq. It is the first and largest school. The Hanafi school is prevalent in central Asia, Afghanistan, South Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Second is the Maliki school, founded by Imam Malik Ibn Anas (710–795 CE) in Medina, Saudi Arabia. The Maliki school spread over North and West Africa. Third is the Shafi’i school, founded by Imam Muhammad al-Shafi’i (767–820 CE) in Medina. The Shafi’i school prevails in central and north Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Indonesia and Malaysia. Finally, the Hanbali school was founded by Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780–855 CE) in Baghdad, Iraq. In both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates the teachings of the Hanbali school represent the main source of legislation.
- 13 Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 14 Turner, “Liminality and communitas,” p. 359.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 This exception is derived from prophetic traditions such as the following: “Aisha reported that when the Prophet returned from a funeral at al-Baqee, she was suffering from a headache and said, ‘Oh my head.’ The Prophet replied, ‘No, it is I who is in pain from whatever hurts you. If you were to die before me, I would wash you, shroud you, pray for you and bury you.’” Philips, A.A.B. (2005). *Funeral Rites in Islam*. 2nd edition. Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, p. 33.
- 17 A well-known *hadith* on this matter: “By God, O washer, take off my clothes gently, for I have just escaped the torture of the Angel of Death (...) By God, O washer, do not make the water too warm or too cold because my body has endured much pain when the *rub* left her (...) By God, O washer, do not hold me too tight for my body has suffered much when the *rub* left her (...) By God, O washer, do not tighten the *kafan* around my head so that I can see the faces of my family and my children and my relatives.” (1872). *Kitab Ahwul al-Qiyama*. Edited and translated by Monitz Wolff. Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, p. 26.
- 18 See also Al Jaziri, *Islamic Jurisprudence*, p. 680.

- 19 'awra is the area from the navel to the knees in the case of a man, and the whole body of a woman with exception of the hands and face. Ibid, p. 672; A. Sabiq (1991). *Fiqh us-Sunnah. Funerals and Dhikr*. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, p. 29.
- 20 Al Jaziri, *Islamic Jurisprudence*, p. 684; Sabiq, *Fiqh us-Sunnah*, p. 31; M. Muhammed Ali (2005). *De religie van de Islam. Een uitgebreide verhandeling van de bronnen, beginselen, wetten en voorschriften van de Islam*. Den Haag: Ulamon, p. 354.
- 21 Al Jaziri, *Islamic Jurisprudence*, p. 687.
- 22 Ibid, p. 634.
- 23 Venhorst, C. (2013). *Muslims Ritualizing Death in the Netherlands. Death Rites in a Small Town Context*. University of Nijmegen.
- 24 Ibid., p. 35.
- 25 In the Netherlands burial in a shroud is allowed. In Belgium it is not although it is expected that these rules will be amended. See (July 2012). "Voorstel van ordonnantie tot wijziging van de wet van 1971 op de begraafplaatsen en de lijkbezorging om de plaatsing van het stoffelijk overschot in een ander lijkomhulsel dan een doodskest toe te staan" [Proposal of ordinance to amend the law of 1971 regarding cemeteries and corpse disposal, allowing the placement of the remains of the body in a different body wrapping than in a coffin]. Brussel Hoofdstedelijk Parlement.
- 26 Sabiq, *Fiqh us-Sunnah*, p. 38. Only Shiite scholars state that ritual purity of the participants is not a condition for the validity of the prayer. See Sistani, *Al fiqh li l-mughtaribîn*, Dialogue 5.
- 27 Dessing, N. (2001). *Rituals of Birth, Circumcision, Marriage, and Death among Muslims in the Netherlands*. Leuven: Peeters, pp. 156–157.
- 28 Muhammed Ali, *De religie van de Islam*, p. 354; Al Baghdadi 2005, 192.
- 29 Al Jaziri, *Islamic Jurisprudence According to the Four Sunni Schools*, p. 713; Sabiq, *Fiqh us-Sunnah*, p. 59
- 30 Sabiq, *Fiqh us-Sunnah*, p. 59. Based on the sample that I studied for this chapter, we can see that a significant part of the women challenged the dominant discourse with regard to religious authority. It seems to be a trend which is not limited to burial practices. In my current fieldwork in Mecca during the Hajj I found that women there also challenged the dominant male discourse with regard to religious regulation within their own group of pilgrims.