In between the Netherlands and Morocco: Home and belonging of Dutch Moroccan return migrant and abandoned children in Northeast Morocco

This article was originally published in Not Just a Victim. The Child as Catalyst and Witness of Contemporary Africa. Ed. Evers, S. J.T.M., Notermans C., Ommering, E. van (Eds.), (pp. 173-195)
© 2011 Brill. All rights reserved.
Co-author are J. de Bree and E. Bartels
3.1 Introduction

In recent years the study of children has become a sub-discipline within anthropological research (cf. Meurs et al. 1999; Reis and Dedding 2004; Toren 1999). In particular, applying adult-centred theory and methodology on children is considered as problematic. Children are increasingly regarded as “people to be studied in their own right, and not just as receptacles of adult teaching” (Hardman 2001, 504). Bucholtz (2002, 529) also criticizes such developmental perspectives which portray children as “not-yet-finished human beings” in transition towards adulthood. Children, instead, should be seen as a cultural category that has its own cultural practices. Many studies now emphasize that children can be seen as active agents in constructing meanings and symbolic forms which make up their cultures (Montgomery 2005). However, there is much that remains unclear about children’s agency, such as its degree, nature and precise impact (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin 2007). To what extent do children express agency? How is agency related to age? And which methods can be used to investigate children’s agency?

In this chapter we will elaborate on children’s agency by discussing how Dutch Moroccan return migrant and abandoned children express, and reflect on, feelings of belonging and ‘home’ in Morocco. During the 1960s and 1970s, these children’s parents emigrated from Morocco to the Netherlands as labour migrants. Later on, they either brought their children from Morocco to the Netherlands at a very young age or they had children who were born in the Netherlands. Importantly, these children partly grew up in the Netherlands, which challenges adjustment to a Moroccan way of life after ‘return’ or abandonment in Morocco. For example, these children possibly do not feel understood by the local population who have never migrated to Europe. In Morocco, migration to Europe is generally perceived as one of the most preferred ideals towards an economic successful future. Leaving this place of ‘milk and honey’ for Morocco can therefore be difficult to understand. How do these children negotiate their ‘place’ in Moroccan society? In other words: How do these children express agency in this process of ‘home making’?

In exploring how the concepts of agency and home/belonging are related to one another and which research methods are appropriate in the study of children, we chose to compare children of different age categories. We focus on two main categories: Return migrant children (children who returned with their parents at the age of 12 to 14 years) and abandoned children (younger children who were abandoned by at least one of their parents). The group of abandoned children consists of three categories: children who were born in the Netherlands and then abandoned in Morocco, children who were born after their mothers were abandoned in Morocco and formerly abandoned children who have returned to the Netherlands. These different categories of children will provide a better understanding of different forms of belonging and the role of agency herein. We will first elaborate on how children are conceptualised in anthropological research, and discuss the concepts of agency and home/belonging. The remainder of this chapter includes reflections on our methodology and results of fieldwork in Morocco.¹⁸

¹⁸ This chapter is based on research by Bartels (2005) on abandoned return migrant women and their children in Morocco in 2005, on research by de Bree (2007) on return migrants in Northeast Morocco in 2007 and on research by Bartels & Storms on return migrant and abandoned children in Morocco in 2008. All three research
Who form the category of ‘children’?
A universal and single definition of ‘the child’ is hard to give. In the West, children are generally perceived as human beings under 12 to 14 years old, who shift to the category of ‘adolescents’ after that, and become ‘young adults’ after the age of 18. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines children as all human beings under the age of 18 (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin 2007, 244). However, there is much reason to assume that age is not the only distinguishing factor. The category of children seems to be flexible and can shift according to different contexts. For instance, in the Netherlands it is possible to vote at the age of 18, but sexual contact is allowed at the age of 16 (Reis & Dedding 2004, 81). In Dutch law, children thus become ‘adults’ at different ages depending on the specific situation or context.

Besides these types of contextual differences within a country, many authors state that perceptions of ‘childhood’, ‘adolescence’ and ‘adulthood’ can also strongly differ between cultures (Levine 2007; Lancy 2007; Davis 1998). For instance, in the past, adolescence as a phase of life between childhood and adulthood did not exist in North Africa. Children were expected to become adults at the age of 12 or 14 years, when they married and/or started working (Schaefer Davis 1989). However, since the 1960s, there are more possibilities to experience adolescence in Morocco. For example, children are going to school for a longer period of time; accordingly, ‘adult’ responsibilities, such as work and marriage, start at a later age. So, also currently in Morocco ‘adolescence’ has become a relevant phase of life.

During our research it appeared to be difficult to strictly follow the definition of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child: ‘the child’ as a human being under 18. We found several examples of children whose childhood was more determined by the specific circumstances they were in than by strict age boundaries alone. In this chapter, two groups are discussed: 1) abandoned children who are younger than 14 years old, and 2) young adults, now in their twenties, who initially returned to Morocco with their parents when they were between the ages of 12 to 14, thus remembering their return migration experience as adolescents. Although the children in this last category are actually adults now in terms of age, we will refer to them as return migrant children, because the fact that they (involuntary) returned as teenagers and as children of return migrants is essential here. We argue that it was indeed this involuntary return to Morocco that impacted on their real and experienced possibilities as adults both in terms of their livelihoods and existential sense of belonging. We used life histories to research return migrant children, and the drawing method and the word association method to investigate younger abandoned children.

Do children have agency?
Ahearn (2001, 112) comes to a provisional definition of the concept of agency: ‘agency refers to the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act.’ Agency should not be understood as ‘free will’, which is totally disconnected from socio-cultural context. Such a view would deny the influence of cultural background on human intentions, beliefs and actions (Ahearn 2001, 114). In this respect, Mahmood (2001) suggests that we should not think of agency in binary
terms of resistance versus subordination. She illustrates how women in Egyptian mosque movements teach each other virtues, such as shyness, modesty and humility. From a Western perspective, it easily seems as if these women reproduce their own ‘oppression’. However, their teaching enables them to participate in public spheres which were traditionally only confined to men. Therefore, these women are not just simply showing resistance or being subordinated, but they negotiate their place in society within the boundaries of their culture.

The question now arises to what extent this negotiation power applies to children. In the debate on children and agency, it is important to see that children form a social and cultural category which is often constructed around notions of ‘innocence’. As Hall & Montgomery (2000, 13) state: ‘Whatever the reality of the lives of individual children, childhood figures in our imaginations as an idealized otherness, the purity and innocence of which is to be celebrated and protected.’ In this way, children are often portrayed as devoid of agency, in contrast to adults (Panter-Brick 2000, 11). However, there are now numerous studies which show that both young people (cf. Bucholtz 2002; Valentine et al. 1998; Wulff 1995) and small children (cf. Reis & Dedding 2004; Hardman 2001) exert agency by giving meaning to the world around them or by influencing people in a conscious way. However, the question remains how agency is related to age, and therefore we will explore how agency differs between young abandoned children and return migrant children who were elder when they came to Morocco.

Home and belonging of return migrant and abandoned children
Belonging refers to emotional attachment, about feeling at home and feeling safe (Lovell 1998; Yval-Davis et al. 2006). In case of migrants, ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ often become contested issues. In political and public discourses, first and second generation migrants are often assumed to ‘naturally’ belong to their country of origin or descent (Pedersen 2003). From this perspective, the process of migration is easily understood as temporary settlement in the host country followed by permanent settlement in the country of origin or descent. This implicates that migrants who return or are abandoned to their country of origin or descent are seen as going back ‘home’. However, this link between return migration/abandonment and ‘home’ can be questioned (Al-Rasheed in Ghorashi 2003, 188), especially in case of children who partly grew up in their parents’ host country.

Belonging is not necessarily confined to one place alone. Werbner (1999) shows that Pakistani in Britain can feel they belong to two ethnic or cultural localities simultaneously. Also Hannertz (2002, 218-219), who defines ‘home’ in contrast to what is ‘away’, states that a sense of home can be constructed in biterritorialized or multiterritorialized contexts. Feelings of home can coincide with the physical space one inhabits, but can also refer to a more symbolic conceptualisation of where one ‘belongs’, implying that feelings of belonging can be ‘dual’ or ‘multiple’ too (Salih 2003, 70).

Many studies underline that belonging to a place is created through maintaining a diverse set of socio-economic activities. According to Ter Maat (2002, 149) belonging signifies ‘a feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment with respect to work, study, family, friends and the extent of belonging to a group.’ The feeling of being accepted is an important aspect here (Flores-Bórquez 2000). However, in this chapter we will also discuss a type of belonging
which is not based on participation in socio-economic activities. Belonging to a place can be ‘imaginary’ as certain informants have never even been to the place they feel they belong to. We will now introduce the research population and discuss methodology and empirical findings.

3.2 Research population

3.2.1 Return migrant children

The return migrant children described in this section returned together with their parents. Table 3.1 shows five typical examples of this category of children. They were born in Morocco. When they were 0 to 5 years old they were brought to the Netherlands. On average, they remained in the Netherlands for ten years. When these children were 11 to 14 year old adolescents, their fathers decided to return to Morocco, because they suffered from difficulties such as unemployment, weak health and psychological problems. Most wives opposed, but faced the threat of divorce and removal of their children. Therefore, they followed their husbands. As these children were under the age of 18 at that moment, they were too young to stay in the Netherlands independently. At the time of research, these youngsters had been back in Morocco for 12 to 25 years and they were between 25 and 40 years old.

Table 3.1 Characteristics of Return Migrant Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age at Left Morocco for the Netherlands</th>
<th>Motives for leaving</th>
<th>Back to Morocco</th>
<th>Motives for returning to Morocco</th>
<th>Dutch Passport/permit of residence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hind</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Reunification</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Joined parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayat</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Reunification</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Joined parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Souad</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Reunification</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Joined parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bouchra</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Reunification</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Joined parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amine</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Reunification</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Joined parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Return had consequences for the right to Dutch citizenship. These children’s fathers made use of the Dutch ‘Remigration Act’ (Remigratiewet 2009). This arrangement facilitated return of these 45+ immigrants by providing a post-return monthly allowance. However, they also

---

19 Both groups of children cannot be considered as representative due to small sample sizes. Instead of conducting a large scale quantitative study, we investigated concepts such as belonging and agency in an in-depth way by exploring a limited number of cases, 5 return migrant and 17 abandoned children.

20 The names used in this article are fictive as to protect the anonymity of the respondents.
Chapter 3

had to give up their Dutch residence permit. As their children had a dependent residence permit, the children could not easily return to the Netherlands legally, despite the fact that they could experience difficulties in accustoming themselves to Moroccan society. The children were also likely to be affected by the ‘culture of migration’ in Morocco. Due to massive emigration to Europe, migration has generally become ‘the norm’ for many Moroccan youngsters, who perceive migration as the best strategy for having a successful future (De Haas 2003, 351). For this reason, Dutch law (section 3.92, Aliens Decree) provides two possibilities for return migrant children who feel uprooted in Moroccan society. First, a child has the right to return to the Netherlands immediately if he/she lived in the Netherlands for ten years continuously between the ages of four and nineteen. Second, if a child lived in the Netherlands for five to ten years continuously between the fourth and 19th year, Dutch court needs to be convinced that the Netherlands is the most suitable place to live before legal return can take place (Vreemdelingencirculaire 1994, 11). The administrative procedure of the second possibility can last for years.

3.2.2 Children and abandonment

Every year, mainly during summer holidays, migrant women and children are left behind in Morocco by, respectively, their husband and their father. In the case of abandonment, the father withholds their passports and residence permits whilst in Morocco and returns to the Netherlands alone. Reasons for abandonment can vary between conjugal problems between the parents, problems concerning the upbringing of the children, or parents’ fears that their children are ‘becoming too Dutch’ and forget their own cultural background and religion (Bartels 2005). Table 3.2 shows 8 of the 17 researched children.21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age at time of interview</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Motives for leaving Morocco</th>
<th>Back in Morocco</th>
<th>Motives for returning to Morocco</th>
<th>Passport</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naima</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Abandoned</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siham</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Stayed in Morocco</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a (mother was abandoned before)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karim</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Stayed in Morocco</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a (mother was abandoned before)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loubna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Stayed in Morocco</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a (mother was abandoned before)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Said</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Abandoned</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21 For the purpose of this chapter we only discuss 8 children in this chapter. These 8 are characteristic for all three categories.
Table 3.2 shows three categories of abandoned children. First, children who lived in the Netherlands (Najat, Naima, Said) and were abandoned in Morocco. Second, children who were born in Morocco after their mother was abandoned by their father who lived in the Netherlands (Siham, Karim, Loubna) and third, children who were born in the Netherlands, abandoned in Morocco and returned to the Netherlands again (Abdel, Aziza). The children of category 1 and 3 migrated to Morocco (have been abandoned) at a young age and hardly had any memories of the Netherlands. Only Najat, who migrated to the Netherlands at six and returned to Morocco at ten years old, had vivid memories and spoke Dutch. Abdel and Aziza, who returned to the Netherlands after their abandonment in Morocco, nowadays speak Dutch and attend a Dutch school.

The children in category 2 had never been to the Netherlands at all. Importantly, the table shows that residency or birth in the Netherlands did not automatically lead to a Dutch passport. Some of the children who were born in the Netherlands never had a Dutch passport (Naima, Said), whereas others who have never even been to the Netherlands have one (Siham, Loubna). This is explained by the fact that Dutch law allows parents to assign their Dutch nationality to their children whether their children are living in the Netherlands or not. For example in the case of Karim (no Dutch passport) and Loubna (Dutch passport), brother and sister. Their father wasn’t yet naturalized when Karim was born, but he was when Loubna was born.

In our sample, abandoned children were generally much younger than return migrant children, which can be explained as follows. For migrants, Dutch policy prescribes a period of five years residency in the Netherlands before Dutch nationality can be obtained. The mothers of abandoned children who came to the Netherlands to join their spouse who already lived in the Netherlands (through family reunion), initially obtained a dependent residency permit for three years. If these women (and their children) stay less than three years in the Netherlands, they cannot return to the Netherlands legally after abandonment. In our sample, most abandonment took place before these three years ended, when these women were pregnant or had young children. This explains why children tended to be young at the point of abandonment to Morocco.

---

22 After the father of Abdel and Aziza abandoned them and their mother in 2003, the children spent four years in Morocco. Since 2007 they have been back in the Netherlands.

23 See footnote 22.
3.3 Methodology

**Life histories**
The oral life history research method was particularly relevant for investigating post-return ‘belonging’ of returning adolescents. Compared to abandoned children, they were relatively older at the point of return, spent a longer period in the Netherlands and generally had been back in Morocco for a longer time. They were thus more conscious of their lives in the Netherlands. Their memories were an influence on how they constructed their current sense of belonging in Morocco.

Life histories or narratives should not be understood as presentations of truth or facts, as the accuracy of a person’s memory cannot be taken for granted (Pratt & Loizos 1992). Life histories are constructions of the past; certain events are emphasized and others are omitted. According to Riessman (2001, 701), life histories have a ‘performative function’. As the act of telling stories always takes place in social contexts, life histories potentially become representations of ‘the preferred self’, or how the person sees him or herself and wishes to present this image to his or her audience, rather than an accurate representation of the past. An edited representation of the past arises, which functions as giving meaning to the present (Henning et al. 2004).

Life histories are all about the positioning of individuals in relation to the audience, other people and themselves (Riessman 2001). They can position themselves as victims or as active agents controlling the past circumstances they were in. The way other people are perceived is also an important aspect of positioning the self, as ‘narratives (...) are clustered around some hegemonic constructions of boundaries between “self” and “other” and between “us” and “them” ’ (Yval-Davis et al. 2006, 2). Life histories can thus provide information about the characteristics of people perceived as belonging to the same group and people defined as ‘others’.

Life histories with return migrant children were conducted in their homes and held in Dutch. The conversation generally started off with open questions on past experiences related to life in the Netherlands and return to Morocco, so that respondents could raise the topics that were most important to them. Additionally, some questions were asked about past behaviour, such as form and frequency of economic and socio-cultural participation in Dutch society. Although such ‘memories’ were most probably coloured, they still provided valuable insights on how return migrant children gave meaning to their current sense of belonging.

**Drawing elicitation method and word association elicitation method**
This section discusses the research methods that were used for the younger abandoned children. In comparison to adults, children ask for an altered research approach. Although children are increasingly considered as active participants and culture makers, child focused research methods are still in their infancy in anthropological methodology. Quantitative data gathering such as questionnaire surveys with children is difficult (Young & Barett 2000, 142). However, qualitative data gathering methods such as semi-structured interviews are also difficult. Children’s verbal expression is often not developed enough for answering questions in an interview setting (Clark-Ibáñez 2004, 1512). On the other hand, participant observation...
is a research method that goes beyond age categories, but is only partly suitable for researching belonging, as this topic requires verbal expression to some extent.

During our research, we tried to develop two research methods in order to communicate with children in a child-friendly way: The drawing elicitation method (DEM) and the word association elicitation method (WAEM). DEM was derived from the photo elicitation method (PEM). PEM is a qualitative methodological approach; photographs are used as an interview technique (Clark-Ibáñez 2004, 1507). Informants are given a photo camera and an assignment to take photographs of a certain topic. After that, the contents of the pictures are discussed. The photographs serve as ‘a medium of communication between researcher and participant’ (Clark-Ibáñez 2004, 1512).

However, for this particular research we needed to know children’s sense of belonging with regard to both the Netherlands and Morocco. As taking photos of the Netherlands was not possible, we chose to work with drawings instead. Another advantage of children’s drawings is that these present what children know. Children tend to draw what they know and not what they see, as adults do (Willats 2005). We handed a piece of paper to the children with the assignment to make a drawing of Morocco and the Netherlands. After finishing, we discussed the drawing together with the child and often the mother. In this way, drawings are a medium for elicitation of thoughts and a means to discuss in children’s terms what they think and imagine.

Secondly, we used the word association elicitation method. We asked the children to tell us what first popped in their head when we said a certain word. To become accustomed to the game, we first tried words such as couscous, kitchen and TV. Later on, we presented words such as the Netherlands, Morocco, mother and father. Their answers often elicited more information and gave insight into their perspectives of the situation they, their siblings, and mother were in.

The methods mentioned above supplemented more mainstream methodological approaches such as life histories and participant observation. Additionally, it was crucial to collect life histories from the mothers. These served as a context to talk with the children and to elicit their view. The use of various methods enhanced the validity of the research material concerning children who were often not fully verbally capable to express themselves. At the same time these methods gave children a chance of free expression.

3.4 Empirical results

3.4.1 Return migrant children

This section will describe the experiences of return migrant children. They grew up in the Netherlands, returned to Morocco as adolescents and are now adults. They experienced many post-return problems in economic and socio-cultural participation in Morocco, as the story of Hayat (25 years old) showed:
Hayat was three years old when she went together with her mother and younger brother to the Netherlands. Her father had already been living there for twenty years. She went to a Catholic primary school. After one year of secondary school her father decided to return together with his family. He had been unemployed and was suffering from psychological problems. Upon return, they lived for more than a year with family and then started to live in their own house in Oujda. Hayat did not realize what was happening. She thought she was just on holiday in Morocco. She could not continue her school in Morocco due to language barriers and remained at home. Her life made her feel very depressed and she had many fights with her father about his decision to return. At the age of twenty a Dutch Moroccan asked her to marry and she agreed. She moved back to the Netherlands. She was treated badly and told her father she needed to come back to Morocco. Back in Morocco she became depressed. She tried to look for work without success. She has been back in Morocco for ten years now and wishes to return to the Netherlands. Since 2 years she has been involved in the legal procedure to obtain access to the Netherlands again.

All return migrant children discussed in this chapter grew up in Dutch society, which made them internalize a Dutch way of life. They all attended Dutch schools and spoke Dutch fluently. Interestingly, all, except for one, were unable to understand or speak Moroccan (Arabic Deriya) or Berber (Tamazigh). They knew little about Islamic or Moroccan practices, as Amine illustrated: ‘I had never even heard of Mohammed, only about Jesus. I was just like a Dutch person!’ They had been on holiday to Morocco only once or twice in ten years’ time. All these children almost exclusively lived in Dutch contexts, which made their fathers’ decision to return to Morocco a shocking turning point in their lives.

Upon return, all five of them were confronted with a different way of life. This caused many difficulties, which were different for the two genders. Three girls were not able to continue school. They blamed this on language barriers, but gender hierarchies also played a role. Except for Bouchra who studied English literature at University, the other girls were not stimulated to go to school. Most girls remained indoors, which strongly contrasted to their lives in the Netherlands. This negatively affected their self-worth and well-being, as illustrated by Hayat:

I felt like I was nothing, like I was no human being. This is how you start feeling when you do nothing. I know that I am intelligent, but I cannot prove it. If you start doing something, you start feeling like you are something, like you are alive. I felt more dead than alive. At some point I was thinking it would be better to be dead, because then I could finally stop doing nothing.

Although Bouchra went to school, she was negatively affected by gender expectations too. Freedom of movement and being outdoors can be limited for girls and women in some parts of Morocco, as Bouchra complained:

As a woman, you cannot even do groceries without people staring at you. You cannot do anything without hearing comments.

As a boy, Amine did have the possibility to go to school, but he initially suffered from language barriers and had problems with teachers who beat pupils. As a result, he never obtained his certificate. Although boys and girls thus experienced different difficulties, they all had to deal with a post-return context in which their ‘Dutch’ way of life did not fit. Furthermore, work was difficult to find due to high unemployment rates, lack of certificates and contacts. Scarcity of work opportunities was even the most important reason for wishing to return to the Netherlands, as Souad expressed:
If I was in the Netherlands now, I would be able to work. I just want to work and make money, so I can take care of my children by myself. I do not want my husband to earn all the money. Here in Morocco even if people have a certificate they still do not find work.

These returnees were not suffering from a lack of income. Financially, return migrant children were much better off than abandoned children. However, their ideas and norms about being able to work and being financially independent made them wish to return to the Netherlands.

Although these return migrants tended to describe themselves as victims of constraining circumstances, they also possessed agency to refuse the options that came on their path. They were not willing to do every kind of work. Amine worked one week for his cousin’s illegal taxi company. He did not want to continue because he thought he did not earn enough. Hayat did a course to become a hairdresser, but she never intended to do the work. The salary would be very low and she would have to work in authoritarian circumstances. She only did the course to be able to leave the house during the day. Thus, also their views of ‘normal’ working conditions were in conflict with post-return reality.

Within the socio-cultural domain, these returnees showed agency by expressing great anger towards the person who decided to return, predominantly the father. Hayat had many fights with her father; she blamed him for taking away both her life in the Netherlands and her future. She usually isolated herself from her family, e.g. by watching German television in her own room, as the German language resembled Dutch. This showed how return can worsen family relations within the household, and how return migrant children actively contributed to that.

Besides problematic family relations, these return migrants also had difficulties in dealing with people who were their own age. Except for Souad, they all did not want to marry in Morocco for this reason, as Amine explained:

If I stay here in Morocco, I will never marry. I cannot marry a girl from the Rif mountains. I do not think they have a normal life. They only stay at home since the day they were born, they do not know anything about the world, they never went to school. Moroccan girls only think about marriage and children. They think they have no future without a husband. They are very different, I cannot talk to them.

All five return migrant children tended to perceive non-migrants as ‘others’, sometimes in very negative terms. Hayat did not get along with Moroccan girls and described them as ‘jealous’ and ‘unreliable’. Return migrant children also tended to describe non-migrants as more ‘backward’, as the quote of Amine illustrated. This was also the case for Hind, who explained how she found other youngsters ‘incredibly strange’, that she ‘could not deal with those people’ and that she ‘was just like a foreigner there’. Hayat and Hind were very limited in their social life, as they only had one close friend. Amine was better off; he had the chance to go to school and establish friendships there. He did not feel treated as much as an outsider as Hind and Hayat did. This was also the case for Souad, who knew all people in her neighbourhood. However, she considered none of them as friends, even after 25 years of return. Bouchra also kept a distance towards her fellow students as she felt different from them.

As a result of all these post-return problems, these return migrant children preferred to return to the Netherlands. They strongly identified themselves with the country they grew up in.
up in, which is expressed by the importance they attached to the Dutch language. They had learnt to speak Moroccan and/or Berber dialects, but they still considered Dutch as their mother tongue. They all identified themselves as Dutch instead of Moroccan. Language played an important role in this, as Hayat showed:

My nationality is Moroccan, but in my heart I feel like a Dutch person. I am different. I try to live like a Dutch person here, I also took my habits with me from the Netherlands. I still think in Dutch. If I have to translate a recipe, I always translate it in Dutch. My mobile phone is also still programmed in Dutch. Because the Dutch language is in my blood. If I make a wish for myself, I always wish in Dutch. But if I have to speak up: Always in Moroccan.

This quote of Hayat demonstrated her agency, as she actively held on to the Dutch language, even after ten years of return. She also followed some Dutch language classes; not to learn anything (as Dutch was her mother tongue) but only to hear the language. In contrast, she never developed much interest in learning French, the second language in Morocco. Instead, she taught herself German from television channels, because German served as a substitute to Dutch channels which she could not receive on her satellite. All this showed how Hayat resisted integration in Moroccan society by actively holding on to the Dutch language.

### 3.4.2 Abandoned children

The case of Naima (12) and Siham (6) illustrated the circumstances of abandonment. Both sisters lived with her mother Mounia in the outskirts of a large city in Morocco.

Mounia married at the age of 21 with a Moroccan man who lived in the Netherlands. A year later, Mounia migrated to the Netherlands where she started to live with her in-laws. During this period Naima was born. After five years, Mounia’s husband took her and Naima to Morocco, under the pretences that they could stay in his house there while he sought after a house in the Netherlands. During this time, he commuted between Morocco and the Netherlands. Siham was born in 2005. Mounia started questioning whether her husband would take Naima to the Netherlands in order to go to school – as he had promised. However, a letter arrived from court in which he applied for divorce. After the divorce the police evicted Mounia and her two daughters from the house. At the point of the interview she lived in her parental house with her daughters, mother and sister. Mounia applied for alimentation in court. ‘It is no use, every time my husband is ordered to come to court; he leaves for the Netherlands. He pays nothing, I’m tired, I’ve had it’, said Mounia, who started working as a housekeeper. Siham had never seen her father. Mounia and her daughters wanted to return to the Netherlands. After her divorce she started informing about return to the Netherlands. Mounia visited the SSR24 once; went to the Dutch Embassy in Rabat several times; bid for return more than once, but wrongly submitted the application. Thus, the request was never granted.

We asked Mounia why she wanted to return to the Netherlands. ‘My future is gone, I want my children to go to school and have a better future. It is my responsibility’, Mounia answered. Her chances of returning are minimal. Too much time had passed since her return. However, Siham, who never went to the Netherlands, had the passport to go overseas. Naima, who was the eldest and was born in the Netherlands, did not obtain a

---

24 SSR (The Foundation to Support Return migrants) is located in Berkane. Dutch Moroccan returnees are assisted in their contacts with Dutch government and social security institutions. Assisting youngsters and abandoned women and children wishing to return to the Netherlands, is one of their aims.
Dutch passport. Their father was not yet naturalized when Naima was born, but when Siham was born he was.

After abandonment, children and their mothers were mainly confronted with economic problems. Often, the father refused to pay alimony. At the same time these children were confronted with a broken family, because abandonment often led to divorce. As a consequence, these children often formed a front with their mother against their father. Because of such problems all children considered the Netherlands as the country they belonged to and wanted to live in, although they also had warm feelings towards Morocco, mainly because their relatives were living there.

The drawing elicitation method provided us with information on feelings of belonging of these children. For example, we asked eight year old Aziza, who returned to the Netherlands in 2007 and living in a shelter, to draw two pictures: One about Morocco and one about the Netherlands. She drew a house, a sun and birds flying in the sky on the ‘Moroccan’ picture, and a sea and a sun on the ‘Dutch’ picture. ‘To whom does the house belong?’ we asked her. ‘To my mother,’ Aziza answered. ‘And why did you draw a house in Morocco and a sea in the Netherlands?’ Aziza responded, staring at her drawing: ‘I don’t know. It should be the other way around.’ ‘Why?’ We asked. ‘The house should be in the Netherlands and the sea in Morocco.’ ‘Why is that?’ ‘Because I want a house in the Netherlands,’ she continued, ‘I want a room of my own, with a computer and television. My friend’s house is very beautiful. She has a big TV and computer in her room, and little hearts painted on the walls.’ This story, which was elicited while discussing Aziza’s drawing, showed that Aziza felt she belonged to the Netherlands.

The word association game also provided us with some interesting insights. We asked Naima what first came to her mind when she heard the word ‘the Netherlands’. She answered:

> There is much in Holland. Morocco is not fun. In the Netherlands there is work, schooling and rights. Here (in Morocco) you are not valued as an individual (...) There are no rights in Morocco.

The words chosen by Naima seemed very mature and appeared to stem directly from her mother, who used similar words to express her feelings. It was clear that the mothers transmit feelings of non-belonging in Morocco and longing for the Netherlands. The children internalized and expressed this discourse. These children developed ‘imaginary belonging’ which resulted from intergenerational transmission of identity (Moen et al. 1997; Schönpflug 2001; Nauck 2001).

Respondents mainly wished to migrate to the Netherlands because of economic constraints in Morocco, such as limited possibilities with regard to schooling, lack of work, and ‘getting your rights’. Low financial resources could constrain children to go to school in Morocco. However, mothers mainly emphasized the low standard education in Morocco. Even with having successfully completed education, chances of work are very limited due to high unemployment rates in Morocco. Contrary to return migrant children, language barriers and adaptation to Moroccan life did not form problems. Because abandoned children were young, they could better accustom themselves to Morocco, especially because they had no other reference. ‘Having rights in the Netherlands’ was mentioned repeatedly. The mothers felt their rights were violated in Morocco, and injustice was done to them through abandonment. The mothers’ drive to provide their children with a better future was
remarkable. They were determined to return to the Netherlands and give their children a good education and financial resources.

In relation to the intergenerational transmission of identity, post-return problems were mainly communicated by mothers. While some children copied their mother’s words, others did not communicate explicitly about home and belonging. It was difficult to describe the agency of these children, especially the young ones. They often expressed anger towards their father for abandoning them, but the consequences were not fully understood. As explained above, their feelings of belonging could possibly develop in favour of the Netherlands. Children who obtained a Dutch passport could possibly migrate to the Netherlands at the age of eighteen. Although ‘home’ could be in Morocco, as they spent most of their life there, they could also feel they belong to the Netherlands. On the question, ‘you have two passports, which one is you?’ Najat (18) answered: ‘The Dutch one, because I want to go back. In the Netherlands you can study, do everything, it is not like here. You can find work easier, it is not like here.’ On the question, ‘if you had good education and work in Morocco, would you stay here?’ Najat replied: ‘Maybe, not really. I want to go back to the Netherlands, despite of everything here. I want to see the Netherlands.’ Najat thus expressed agency, also at a younger age:

Najat had good memories of her primary school period. Her memories of living with her father and her stepmother were unfortunately not good. They had molested her severely. One day Najat went to the police who brought her to Child protection. Eventually the police sent her home with her father. Back home, her father brought her to South Morocco while her mother lived in the North. After many months Najat’s father took her to her mother. Najat never had any contact with her father again.

At a very young age (10 years old) Najat stood up for herself and tried to escape the abusive situation she was in. This shows that children can have agency at a young age. Possibly, agency develops at a younger age when children are in pressured situations. The case of Najat was a very extreme one; she had no one but the police to turn to. Generally, abandoned children were supported by their mothers, who did everything to provide them with a secure future.

### 3.5 Conclusion

This chapter argued that Dutch Moroccan children in Morocco did not exclusively construct feelings of home in the physical place they inhabited. However, some remarkable variations existed between the different children discussed in this chapter. Firstly, children who returned as young adolescents with their parents tended to claim mono-belonging to the Netherlands. They grew up in this country. Particularly through school, they internalized a Dutch way of life, which made the confrontation with the Moroccan way of life an overwhelming one. Participation in Moroccan society was a very important factor here, as those who had more possibilities to participate seemed to entertain feelings of belonging towards both the Netherlands and Morocco. However, all felt uprooted in Morocco to some extent and wished to return to the Netherlands.
This chapter also discussed different types of (younger) abandoned children, who were more likely to claim dual belonging. They grew up in Morocco, but they also expressed feelings of belonging towards the Netherlands. Interestingly, some children showed imaginary belonging, such as the ones who had never been to the Netherlands, as they were born in Morocco after their mothers were abandoned. These feelings of belonging were mainly transferred from mother to child. Imaginary belonging or not, all children longed for the Netherlands. This was mainly explained in terms of good education and better chances of work later on. These children also mentioned ‘having rights’ in the Netherlands. This was explained by the fact that they, and/or their mothers, had to deal with feelings of force and injustice by being abandoned in Morocco.

The different constructions of belonging revealed children’s agency, which is largely affected by age at the point of return. Elder return migration children expressed agency most strongly, as they tended to refuse participation and belonging to Moroccan society. However, these expressions of agency were not isolated from local Moroccan discourse, or the ‘culture of migration’. In Morocco, migration to Europe is generally considered as the ideal way to achieve a successful future. Within this context, return migrant children had to negotiate their own position in society. This was done by refusing to accept both the fact that they returned and participation in Moroccan society. Blaming their fathers and being negative about living conditions and life in Morocco in general, exempted them from responsibility and from being ‘losers’. Being not at home in Morocco was a way of negotiating a symbol of ‘otherness’, of dealing with feelings of force, injustice and stigma as a ‘loser’, which was a consequence of being relocated from one country to another and of giving up a future and life in the Netherlands.

For younger abandoned children, agency played a different role in the process of constructing post-return belonging. Intergenerational transmission was an important factor here. Abandoned children predominantly wished to return to the Netherlands because their mothers told them to. Apparently, younger children’s agency mainly consisted of reproducing perceptions of their mother, whose views were not isolated from the ‘culture of migration’ either. In this sense, it was arguable that younger children expressed free will to a lesser extent than the elder ones. However, this might change at a later age. When the children grow older, they may internalize their mother’s wish to return to the Netherlands and express it as their ‘own’ free will as a consequence of intergenerational transmission and growing up in a ‘culture of migration’.

The three methods described in this chapter, life histories, the drawing elicitation method and word association elicitation method, seemed to be relevant tools for researching different age categories in this chapter. Life histories provided the meanings returnees attached to the past, to themselves and others. This was an act of agency in itself. The drawing elicitation and word association elicitation methods seemed to be suitable in case of younger children. In this way children had a chance to express themselves while they were simultaneously included as an active research group rather than passive actors. It would be interesting to conduct longitudinal research on younger children. This could clarify the query in what way their sense of belonging and agency will develop over the years. For example, drawing elicitation and word association elicitation could be used when they are young, whereas life histories could be conducted when they are older. This would provide a better
understanding of the links between age and children’s agency in the context of return migration and abandonment.

References

Bartels, E. (2005), *Onderzoeksnotitie over migrantenvrouwen en kinderen die gedwongen zijn achtergelaten in landen van herkomst*. Voorstudie voor Adviescommissie van Vreemdelingenzaken, Den Haag. (*Research report concerning migrant women and children who have been left behind in their country of origin, a pre advice for the Advisory Committee for Foreign Affairs of the Ministry of Justice in the Netherlands*).


