

Summary

Water and the Bowl - Social Thought and Actions of Leaders and Volunteers of a Turkish Mosque Organization in Amsterdam

Muslim citizens currently account for more than five percent of the Dutch population. This population group – which mainly has a non-Western origin – has become an integral part of Dutch society over the past decades, through a process of interaction with the surrounding society. In large and medium-sized cities, mosque organizations were founded to provide for religious needs. Gradually, mosques have gained new functions, namely social ones.

Community building is an essential part of the Muslim faith. The call to gather, to form a group and to look out for each other is not only part of theological teaching in the Islamic tradition, but is also anchored in rituals and institutions including mosques. From the Muslim point of view, community building is the embodiment of a part of the religious conviction. However, group formation on religious grounds is interpreted differently by the outside world than by the members of the group itself. From the point of view of the outside world, this community formation displays characteristics of the formation of parallel societies. Here the Dutch integration politics is at odds with the community-building activity of, for example, Turkish mosque organizations. Secondly, several legitimate motivations for action exist, not just one. People have different ways to legitimize their actions and walk different paths that connect them to their living environment, with their neighbourhood, city, and society. Mosque communities therefore have their own ways in which they determine and legitimize their place in society. However,

we do not know exactly what these ways are, how mosque communities work on positioning themselves in society, how they interact with the world around them, and how they interpret the social meaning of mosque organizations for their own participants and for the surrounding society.

This study investigates the meaning of participation for volunteers in a Turkish mosque organization in a disadvantaged area of Amsterdam. The research question is: **What causes the leaders and volunteers of the Turkish mosque organization “*Milli Görüş Amsterdam-West*” to be socially active – both inside and outside their mosque organization?**

Chapter one focuses on the research topic, the motivation for the research and the purpose of the research. Various studies about Islamic organizations are available in the Netherlands. The research results are contradictory however. There are researchers who find that there is a positive relationship between participation in an Islamic faith-based organization and the social cohesion of society, and researchers who critically question such positive outcomes. In Dutch society, the dominant migration debate strongly emphasizes the misadaptedness of the individual migrant (CBS 2012). The perceptions about different groups of migrants – such as Turks – that circulate in society, are coined by researchers as negative and problematic narratives, which bear witness of stagnation, underdevelopment and failures in the integration process. From the perspective of the dominant integration debate, the integration of Turkish migrants has failed. The Turkish Islamic organizations are being held responsible for what is seen as the isolation of Turkish-Dutch citizens from society and the emergence of a parallel society. Due to past research, we know that mosques and related organizations and networks, in addition to their main tasks such as

providing religious services and accompanying 'rites of passage', also devote themselves to organizing various social activities. How Turkish mosques and related organizations enhance the participation, trust development and reciprocity of their members and participants has not been taken into account in previous conducted studies of the Turkish community; the answer still remains unknown. Nor it is known how volunteers give meaning to their social efforts and their way of '*being in the world*'. The present study focuses on the narratives, perspectives, value orientation and attitudes of leaders and key persons in the mosque organization "*Milli Görüş Amsterdam-West*" (further abbreviated as MGAW).

Chapter two describes the methodology of this study. Starting point of the research is the perspective of volunteers occupying leadership positions in MGAW (further called "leaders" in this summary). I am interested in the meaning that these leaders in the MGAW assign to their social efforts. Therefore, I opted for an ethnographical study, in which interviews and participatory observations form the important data collection techniques. In order to conduct the field research, I chose to do a case study on the mosque organisation MGAW for two particular reasons. First of all, this study had to elaborate on previous studies and related projects performed in Amsterdam-West, in which I participated during the period 2004-2012. Previous studies concerned: poverty research in Bos and Lommer, food aid in Amsterdam-West, interreligious dialogue in Bos and Lommer (BLIB), enhancement of expertise training and conferences relating to volunteer work in Bos and Lommer. The second reason was the socially active character of the Milli Görüş movement, a Turkish Islamic movement the MGAW is affiliated with. Besides religious-spiritual activities, the MGAW, as a mosque organization, initiates a variety of other forms of social care, as well as community development initiatives and social-cultural

work. The research is qualitative in nature: data were constructed in interviews and through observations of four sub-organisations of the MGAW. I focused on certain participants in the mosque organization, namely the volunteers who had been intensively active in the MGAW for a certain period. Research took a total of five years. After a thorough literature review, the data were collected over a three-year period using the techniques of participatory observation, interviewing and document analysis at the level of the individuals and at the level of networks pertaining to this mosque organization.

Chapter three provides a picture of the mosque and its environment, based on impressions obtained from neighbourhood walks and participatory observations during my fieldwork. The MGAW is located in the neighbourhood called the "*Kolenkitbuurt*" (the "coal-scuttle neighbourhood") and has about a thousand members and more than fifteen hundred visitors a week. The "*Kolenkitbuurt*" is the most multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Bos and Lommer, one of the suburbs of Amsterdam-West. Due to social, economic and educational problems, Bos and Lommer was included in the list of the forty most disadvantaged districts of the Netherlands by the Dutch national government in 2007. About 8.500 members of the Turkish community in Amsterdam-West, a district with a total of 135.000 inhabitants, are familiar with the MGAW. The MGAW consists of four sub-organizations: the *Mevlana* mosque, the women association "*Hilal-Basak*" ("Crescent and Corn Plant"), the youth-centre MGT and the girl division "*Katre-i Hilal*" ("Shining Crescent"). Every sub-organisation of this grassroots organization has a board composed of twelve members who are the same time volunteers in the MGAW. In addition, the *Mevlana* mosque functions as a neighbourhood mosque for non-Turkish Muslims in the district, especially for local residents of Moroccan origin.

Chapter four provides a picture of leaders and other volunteers in the MGAW who were interviewed. Their world is seen through their eyes. Based on the interview material, portraits of leaders and other volunteers were made. The majority of the volunteers have been active members of the MGAW for more than a decade. We read in the portraits that these leaders and other volunteers are active inside and outside their mosque organization. The activities of the volunteers are results of the interviewees' interpretative framework: they experience the forceful social reality in Amsterdam-West, and have a religion-based view of society in which a close community and neighbourhood life play a central role. The interviewees act to that imaginary community where that kind of life becomes their partial reality. Each of them sees a close relationship between their participation in the MGAW and their religious beliefs.

In chapter five the data are presented, followed by a presentation of the results of the data analysis. The instrument with which the data were analysed, is also described. Study of the activities both inside and outside of the MGAW participation area, of the motivations and reasons of leaders and other volunteers to organize activities, and of the meaning given to participation provided insight. The leaders and volunteers who were interviewed gave a certain meaning to their work for/at MGAW. They think they would feel useless if they would not volunteer. The conviction of believers that there might be an afterlife and that all people will be held accountable for what they did on earth, can be seen as one of the inspiration sources for their social efforts. Allah is a god who holds them accountable for all their actions, here or in the afterlife. Their god encourages them to be meaningful to others. In their subjective theology not only the vertical line between them and God is of importance, but also the horizontal line, the line between

people. The sincerity of the indifferent, selfish man is heavily doubted.

The motives of the interviewed volunteers for doing social efforts can be divided into theological and social motives. Theological motives focus on accountability in the afterlife (*hesap*), on the reward for good works (*sevap*) and on the satisfaction of God (*fi sabilillah/Allah rizasi* = pro deo). These motives are recurring arguments in the stories told by these respondents about why they commit themselves socially. These religious concepts function for the respondents of the MGAW as a source of strength and give them energy for, and during their social commitment. In addition to spiritual motives, there are also social motives. One of the findings concerns social awareness as one of the main incentives for the altruistic behaviour of these volunteers. It is important for them to mean something to society. Volunteer work in and out of the mosque gives them satisfaction. They are very driven, with heart for their volunteer work; they are idealistic and have a strong sense of duty. The interviewed volunteers consider volunteering at the mosque as an asset and also as their duty. In addition, they experience it as a source of pleasure and happiness. Although the volunteering costs them a lot of time and money, the respondents see serving their fellow men as a sign of virtue. In the way the leaders and other volunteers perform their work, we encounter features of the so-called *theory of presence*. These leaders are 'present' in a practically oriented way in their community, in the midst of their target audience. They are open to, and make time for participants in the mosque activities.

Chapter five describes how leaders and other volunteers in the MGAW view, interpret and legitimize their participation. Chapter six focuses on that topic as well, but from a theoretical perspective. The voluntary participation and the meaning assigned to social

commitment are reflected upon by using theoretical concepts elaborated for the study of volunteer work in faith-based organizations. The interviews provided me with insight into motives of leaders and other volunteers that relate to *bonding* and *bridging*, two major theoretical concepts from theory on social capital. Listening to the stories of these active volunteers in the MGAW, there is no reason to suspect that the MGAW would not fulfil a meaningful role in the bonding and bridging of the social capital of these individuals, as is the case with various other faith-based organizations discussed in national and international studies.

In the concluding and reflective chapter, chapter seven, it is shown that the motives for respondents to participate in the mosque are, first of all, religious in nature. The religious upbringing and belief system of the respondents appear to function as a drive for their activities as members of committees and as volunteers within and outside the Islamic faith community. This kind of self-organization on behalf of migrants empowers migrants in their relation with the outside community and opposes alienation. Nevertheless, their engagement with the surrounding society arises in its own way, in a way that is not recognized within the dominant integration debate. The commitment on behalf of migrants to the surrounding society – in this particular case, leaders in the MGAW – comes into being in a way and takes on a form that is, so far, not recognized and acknowledged in that debate. Here lies the core of the controversy. My research shows that *bonding*, the creating of a web of internal networks, is important to initiate relationships outside the mosque (*bridging*). The mosque organization is, first of all, the channel through which the social commitment of this particular group takes shape. It is a place where people find inspiration, experience community and gain citizenship skills. Although leaders in the MGAW sometimes find little reason to occupy themselves with people

outside of their own community, this does not lead to isolation and disconnection from society – contrary to what the current integration discourse presupposes. The internal cohesion does not lead to ‘an opting out of society’, but to an external orientation towards a socially vulnerable target group, in their neighbourhood, in the midst of Amsterdam city. The mosque society adapts itself to the environment in which it is located and responds to the needs that occur in that area. The water adapts itself to the shape of the bowl. The findings of my field research do not validate the concerns that exist about the rising of a parallel society on behalf of the Turkish community, and the alleged negative role of the Turkish mosque organizations. Secondly, the participation in MGAW establishes networks of trust and reciprocity. Within those networks, volunteers occupying leadership positions are able to develop empathy for others who sometimes live in difficult circumstances, and to provide support to them on the basis of that empathy. They develop their own presence-approach as practical wisdom. Thirdly, Islamic social thinking provides a framework for the legitimization of their participation. Islamic social thinking gives coherence to the achievements that enable participation, makes it meaningful, confers validity on it and feeds the selfless attitude of the volunteers. Fourthly, we notice the socializing meaning of the MGAW. As a mosque organization, the MGAW provides links between two forms of socialization. On the one hand, socialization in the mosque community with its own Islamic social thinking, which is a familiar reference framework. On the other hand, the socialization in the neighbourhood and in the city. The first form of socialization turns out to be the stepping stone to the second. In this way, participation in the MGAW fulfils a citizenship-building function. Participation at MGAW offers the opportunity to develop basic social skills such as learning to hold meetings, listening to others, asking questions,

constructing arguments, and learning to negotiate and compromise. Fifth, there are two movements that counteract the vulnerability of the participants in the mosque activities. On the one hand, the movement of empowerment which enables the participants to discover their own strength, with the Islamic tradition and Turkish culture as sources of inspiration. On the other hand, there is an effort to eliminate social, economic and educational deficiencies in the target group. The leaders in the MGAW who were interviewed give shape to the mosque society of MGAW and, through their attention and the time they selflessly make available, build a resilient existence within its social network. Sixth, the mosque organization, in the perception of interviewees, serves as a complementary facility for welfare, care, education and leisure activities in Amsterdam-West.

In summary and in final conclusion, the process of 'getting connected' to what flows as a tradition through MGAW ensures that leaders and participants in the mosque activities (of the different target groups) undergo a balanced development – striking a personal balance between the secular world outside and their religious world within, between care and hope, between the new and unknown and the old familiar, between (trans)national relationships and intimate neighborhood-level relationships, between "thin" and "thick" trust. This search for equilibrium in existence helps them not to fall out of society and hence out of the time in which they live.