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# Danish Muslims Catalysts of National Identity?

TINA GUDRUN JENSEN

New Muslim converts represent new configurations of national and religious identity.<sup>1</sup> They can be seen as border crossers and cultural mediators between Muslim and non-Muslim identities. This, in turn, gives rise to an important question: to what extent can these converts be perceived as figures with the potential to transform official identity models, and as carriers of new forms of national identity? Answers to this question are explored through a focus provided by what Gerd Baumann calls “grammars of identity,” models for identity-making based on patterns of relations between “us” and “them.”<sup>2</sup>

In Denmark, the notion of equality in the sense of “sameness” is vital for an understanding of the ways the relationship between “us” and “them” is addressed in the public debate. Implicit in the notion of “sameness” is agreement and consensus, indicating uneasiness with what is “different”; a reluctance to acknowledge “difference”; and a tendency to suppress disagreement.<sup>3</sup> In the public debate on immigrants of Muslim background, two grammars of identity appear to be prevalent. First, an Orientalizing grammar indicating distance and opposition, which is found in the public discourse that provides a framework of polarization between “Danish values” and “Islam,” and, thus, between

“us Danes” and “them Muslims.” The second prevalent grammar is that of “encompassment,” or hierarchical subsumption, a concept which is related to the idea of assimilation: “They” (the immigrants) should become like us in order to be perceived as “real” Danes.

The dominant discourse partly expresses the idea of Danish culture as permeated by Lutheran-Protestantism, which explains why it is perceived as “un-Danish” to be Muslim, and, at the same time, partly the idea that it is “un-Danish” to exhibit your religiosity in public. But despite the apparent reluctance to exhibit personal religious convictions,

the Evangelical-Lutheran church is forming the Danish national church and as such is supported by the state. The irony consists in the fact that while secularism is used in the debate against Islam, this takes place in a context in which there are strong ties between state and church.

## Positions on “Danishness” and “Muslimness”

During the last four decades, between 2,100 and 2,800 Danes have converted to Islam. The majority of Danish converts grew up in urban milieus and is young (between the ages of twenty and thirty), but otherwise they make out a heterogeneous group, cutting across different social backgrounds, age groups, and genders.

Mediated by the prevalent grammars of identity in the relationship between a Danish “us” and a Muslim “them,” ethnic Danes who convert to Islam are generally seen as having become “the other” (the immi-

**In the Danish public debate a familiar pattern of polarization has emerged. Danes who become Muslim by conversion need to respond to prevalent identity grammars that contrast Danish and Muslim identities. In carving a space as Danish Muslims, converts create new and hybrid identities that favour openness and equality in the public domain. Yet although these new Muslims embody the potential to transform identity models, the controversial nature of conversion means that their societal impact remains uncertain.**

grant), a national traitor, or simply a contradictory person. Converts partly incorporate this polarization between being “Danish” and “Muslim,” but they also challenge it by presenting themselves as “Danish Muslim.” First and foremost, this polarization is present in conversion narratives, and in converts’ displays of religiosity. In narrating their conversion, converts speak about how they are suddenly perceived as too “different” to be Danish by their non-Muslim family. The family’s common stere-

otypical conjecture about the incompatibility between Muslim identity and Danish identity, or Muslim identity as “not Danish,” has a clear effect on the way that converts perceive themselves as having become “different.” This is expressed in the general tendency to refer to the group as “us Muslims” in opposition to “the Danes.” Furthermore, converts who formulate their conversion as a “rupture,” speak of Danish culture and society as something they exclude themselves from by designating themselves as “immigrants” (*indvandre*). Others, however, emphasize a sense of continuity with their Danish identity, pointing out that they do not identify with the culture of immigrants just because they have become Muslim. Yet, “rupture” and “continuity” do not represent fixed choices, but positions, that converts tend to waver between during their conversion processes. This wavering first and foremost mirrors different degrees of acting on and submitting to the external categorization of them as “Muslim,” which includes an incompatibility between Danish and Muslim identities.

In converts’ verbal and ritual expressions, the polarized and discriminatory construction of a Danish “self” and a Muslim “other” is often questioned. This indicates a potential to reinterpret and negotiate identities, which reflects a subversion of stereotypic and discriminatory constructions.<sup>4</sup>

## Transformation of national identity?

Converts to Islam are often described as “mediators,” “bridge-builders,” and “cultural translators” between the majority and the minority society.<sup>5</sup> Roald has thus maintained that converts in Scandinavia play an important part in the representation of Islam and Muslims in the media, and in the organization of unions. Converts have thus been relegated a certain agency due to their symbolic capital in the form of language and education. Thomas Gerholm has furthermore pointed to the difficulty of being a cultural mediator, especially in relation to the problem of neutrality implied in this role, of being “in the middle,” translating between two dimensions.

In my own findings, I have seen converts in the role of “mediators” at different levels in Danish public life. At one level, converts volunteer at the local authorities as interpreters between immigrant clients and social workers, by which they tend to play an important part in the translation of cultures and social practices related to being a Danish citizen. This, however, takes place at a highly informal level. Converts have less success in the political field. Indeed, the Danish public perceives those converts who appear in the political debate as somewhat bizarre human beings. Converts are in most cases excluded from the political field as Muslims generally are. Simultaneously, some representatives in the Muslim field criticize them for attempting to participate in the political process at all.

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discussions and reciprocal prejudices on one's own and others' "culture." People perform mock relationships by addressing each other in raw and seemingly offensive, but also playful, tones of voice, which exemplify a parody and a simultaneous subversion of racial meanings. At the same time, there is a latent Orientalized desire in these interactions, in which "the Arab" becomes an object of imitation.<sup>7</sup> These new Danish Muslims hint at the mixed relations that develop where people of so-called different ethnic backgrounds hang out with each other. In the urban spaces of Denmark—in the streets, super markets, and social housing estates, as well as, in places dominated by immigrants of Muslim background such as mosques and sport centres where Eid celebrations take place—young Danes of different ethnic backgrounds "pop up" together. To the outside spectator, they are an image of dis-socialization of the objective reality. But they are also an image of coequality, sharing time and space. They constitute alternative public spaces, or liminal spaces, in which transformation of meaning, negotiation, and creation of identity takes place. By constituting alternative and liminal spaces they make connection between issues, which in the public debate are constructed as having no relation to each other (e.g. being "Danish" and "Muslim"). In contrast to the official public sphere as authoritative and representative, these public spaces make out "fun spaces,"<sup>8</sup> autonomous social spaces that incite a privileged form of knowledge or cultural practice that break down boundaries and challenge fixed definitions of collective identities and subjectivities.

In the interactions among so-called "new Muslims," we witness new communities, life-styles, and fractures that contradict the prevalent grammar of identity based on distance, separation, and exclusion. Whereas the grammars of identity put into play in the Danish everyday discourse on the relationship between "us" and "them" veer between "Orientalization" (through the discourse of polarization) and "encompassment" (through the discourse of assimilation), the alternative spaces indicate a grammar of "segmentation." In the latter instance, the discourse involves fission yet equality and neutralization of conflict. Here, the notion of otherness is still present, though as a matter of context. In this respect, the grammars in relation to a Danish model of identity seem to be changing. The question remains: at which level does this pertain to? If converts can be perceived as figures with the

potential to transform official identity models, and as carriers of new forms of national identity, it is perhaps not so much vis-a-vis their identity as sole "cultural mediators." In fact, converts seem to have more success in forming new Muslim organizations and thus new Muslim identities, than in influencing the authoritative and representative public spheres. Conversely, second-generation immigrants' success in performing a mediating role relies heavily on the fact that they have acquired a certain capital, in the form of language and education, this is vital for succeeding in Danish society. This also shows the limits of hybridity: whereas "they" are allowed to mix with "us" on our premises, "we" should not mix with them. In this way, "Encompassment" through assimilation persists. While "hybridity" indicates a potential to overthrow cultural truths, the challenge is to point out whether it transcends ephemeral creativity. When considering the question of transformation of identities and the power of social agency, it is vital to distinguish between spaces and spheres that are private and public, as well as the various meanings of the "public" according to interests, ability, and power.

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**Prayers at  
the Town  
Hall Square,  
Copenhagen,  
1 February 2006**

This leads, however, to another subtle identity implied in the role of being a mediator: The trickster as an ambiguous figure, sometimes good, sometimes bad, a dangerous being—but also a figure of transformation. The conversion to a minority religion has often been perceived as a means of cultural critique, a revolt against the national community, and thus "a dissent that unsettles the boundaries by which selfhood, citizenship, nationhood, and community are defined, exposing these as permeable borders."<sup>6</sup> It is a factor that not only represents a tendency to erase racial identity, but also to nullify the community that breeds this racial identity. This perspective, then, indicates another role often associated with the mediator—the role of creating new and hybrid identities.

### Convergence and hybridity

The last decade has witnessed an appearance of new Muslim organizations. The founders and participants are primarily second-generation immigrants of different ethnic backgrounds, and converts to Islam. What they share is their conscious choice for Islam, in the sense of conversion and religious awakening respectively. Both groups can be seen as representing a break with their respective families' biographies and religiosities, and in the case of born (-again) Muslims, from a national/traditional Islam to a Danish and global Islam. Furthermore, they all share the same age group: young, between 20 and 30 years of age, and either students or academics. In other words, they are the elite of the new Danish Muslims, representing new identities in relation to being both "Danish" and "Muslim." These new organizations arrange study classes on Islam, debate evenings, and in various ways try to forge an impact on the public debate. This phenomenon can be seen especially amongst the so-called second-generation immigrants who act as commentators to current debates (e.g., the cartoon-affair), thereby performing a role of mediation in which they strive for the art of being "in-the middle," often with more success than converts. This, however, also stands as an ironic example that there are limits to where "hybridity" works; when "they" converge to "our" domain, it is perceived as successful integration; whereas in the opposite case, it is seen as problematic.

The everyday-interactions between Danes of different ethnic backgrounds that take place at these new organizations are often rife with

### Notes

1. Fieldwork was conducted in 2004 and 2005 as part of a postdoctoral research project on "Conversion to Islam in Denmark," financed by the Danish Research Council for Culture and Communication.
2. Gerd Baumann, "Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach," in *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*, ed. Gerd Baumann and André Gingrich (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).
3. Anne Knudsen, *Her går det godt, send flere penge*, (København: Gyldendal, 1996).
4. Les Back, *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture* (London: UCL press, 1996).
5. Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Tomas Gerholm, "Three European Intellectuals as Converts to Islam: Cultural Mediators or Social Critics?" in *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*, ed. Gerholm and Lithman (London: Mansell, 1990), 263–77.
6. Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 16.
7. Omar Shah, "Muslimsk ungdom, tradition og modernitet," in *Islam, Kristendom og det moderne*, ed. Rasmussen and Larsen (København: Tiderne Skifter, 2004), 25–56.
8. Pnina Werbner, "Fun Spaces: On Identity and Social Empowerment among British Pakistanis," *Theory, Culture and Society* 13, no. 4 (1996): 53–79.