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# Ambivalent Purity

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**Since the end of the 1990s Moroccan-Dutch youth increasingly identify themselves as Muslim and are categorized as such. Regardless of the way they practice their faith, reference to a "pure" Islam and to being Muslim as being one's "true" self are the most important constituting elements in their identity politics. While some scholars and politicians see young Muslims' distinguishing between religion and culture as a sign of radicalization or lack of integration, the author argues that Muslim youth's reflections on their Islam and their practices and experiences are a cultural construction grounded in a contemporary local and global context.**

In September 2001 (a few days before "9/11") a new imam was appointed in a Moroccan mosque in Gouda, a small city near Rotterdam in the west of the Netherlands.[1] Within a short period of time, imam Abdallah had gained enormous popularity among Moroccan-Dutch youth (males in particular). Although the board of the mosque and many of the first generation migrants appreciated his attracting so many young people to the mosque they were still wary about his message to these youth. This imam did not approve of women riding bikes, questioned the necessity for women to have a higher education, and he abolished several traditions in the mosque which he deemed incompatible with "true" Islam. A great controversy arose; the older generation rejected his view of the correct Islamic lifestyles as being too strict for the Netherlands whereas the young people saw that rejection to just mean that he was speaking "the truth":

> There are of course people who have problems with this (what the imam is telling, MdK), people who cannot handle the truth… They (older Moroccan-Dutch) think he is too strict for the Netherlands but it is not about the imam. You have to look at the faith. There is no Netherlands, Africa or Morocco, Islam is Islam. Period. (Rachid, 20 years)

The case of the imam is exemplary for Moroccan-Dutch Muslims for several reasons. First of all, the controversy about the imam reveals the gap between first generation Moroccan-Dutch migrants and Moroccan-Dutch youth in Gouda. The latter have since the end of the 1990s become more vocal about their quest to purify Islam of what they see as the "contamination" of Islam. For this "contamination" they blame Moroccan traditions and "bad integration," especially as pertaining to the failure in upholding Islamic rules with regard to gender relations. Secondly, imam Abdallah as part of one of the Salafi groups in the Netherlands is trying to revitalize Islam by propagating a return to the example of the Prophet Muhammad and the first generations of Muslims. Thirdly, the case also shows the involvement of Moroccan-Dutch youth with Islam. Although, like all other people, Moroccan-Dutch youth can identify themselves on the basis of numerous categories such as "Moroccan," "Dutch," gender, youth, rappers and so on, since the second half of the 1990s they have increasingly identified themselves as Muslim, and are categorized as such by outsiders despite the enormous discrepancies among them in the way they practice their faith. At the same time, notwithstanding the differences, most of the young people in my research expressed the necessity to purify Islam from (Dutch and Moroccan) culture, something that has been called the process of "deculturation" by Olivier Roy and is in public debates often equated with radicalization and a lack of integration. But what does separating culture from Islam or rejecting culture altogether actually mean?

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### Deculturation

In his well-known and important study *Globalised Islam* Roy sees the separation of culture and religion amongst Muslim youth in the West as an example of the process of deculturation: decontextualizing and deterritorializing religious practices and dismissing culture.[2] Roy argues that migration from the Muslim world to the West and the emergence of global media have created a situation where there is no religious authority for Muslims in the West, where the "pristine culture" of the parents' home country is diluted, and where Islam is no longer embedded in cultural and social relationships. Consequently, youth start to reflect about their faith and to question previously taken for granted ideas about Islam and being Muslim. Through this process Muslim youth tend to distinguish Islam from "culture" in search of a "pure" or "true" Islam.[3] Roy's ideas have been used in many of the Dutch policy reports on radicalization of Muslim youth. These reports suggest that radicalization is the consequence of the process of deculturation.[4] However, the problem with accounts such as these is that the conceptualization of culture and religion is confusing. Notions of "pristine cultures" and "deculturation" as used by Roy and others seem to be based upon an essentialist notion of culture wherein cultures are clearly identifiable and homogenous. Such pristine cultures never exist, however, where, for example, Morocco has a complex history of conflicts between Arab and Amazigh groups and between critics of the Moroccan monarchy and loyalists.

In order to have a more adequate understanding of Muslim youth's beliefs and practices, Islam can best be seen as a particular kind of cultural repertoire of beliefs, practices, and experiences that enable and limit people to navigate in, act in, and give meaning to the social realities surrounding them. People's knowledge of how to behave appropriately is formed and informed by the contexts in which they find themselves and accordingly a person's individual cultural repertoire is not always consistent and may even appear illogical.[5] A girl for example can be convinced that wearing the face-veil (*niqab*) is obligatory in Islam but only wears it at religious meetings in mosques and not at school or when she is in the presence of her parents because she does not want to offend others (in particular her parents) or because (as one girl stated:) "I'm not that strong yet." Such a statement is also an example of how the individual subject and her ideas about personal development and self-fulfilment have become central to the religiosity of youth. The quest for a "pure" Islam is a personal project filled with ideals such as self-realization and personal development or, as one boy said: "Islam is being yourself." Making choices from a cultural repertoire in terms of "pure" Islam and "being yourself" is then a way of activating and organizing their beliefs, practices, and experiences according to their ideas of a "true self" and an authentic Islam.

### Purifying Islam

People do not make choices from a cultural repertoire in a social and cultural vacuum. During the last decade both native Dutch as well as Moroccan-Dutch youth have interpreted perceived differences between them in religious terms. According to Moroccan-Dutch youth the native Dutch usually categorize them negatively; Islam is portrayed as suspicious, related to terrorism, intolerance, and the oppression of women. This leads to a confusing situation; the search for a Muslim identity means, in relation to native Dutch people, an attempt to transcend the perceived dichotomy between "Moroccan" and "Dutch". Thus, one boy's statement: "When I'm a Muslim, it doesn't matter whether I'm Moroccan or Dutch." At the same time it also means trying to maintain a certain distance towards Dutch society and their parents. Their views on girls' behaviour and dress are particularly important for preserving a distinction between them and Dutch society. "They (the girls, MdK) let themselves be influenced too much by western things. People call that integration, but I do not call that integration." In the process of negotiating identities girls occupy a central position because they are, much more than boys, frequently scrutinized by other Dutch Moroccans and native Dutch people who focus on their behaviour and attire. With regard to other Muslims and native Dutch people, girls also use

the discourse of true Islam to define themselves and Islam. They criticize the stereotypes (such as the oppressed Muslim woman) that native Dutch entertain about them and challenge the gender inequality they sometimes experience in their relations with other Muslims. This was clear in Gouda where most women did not publicly express their views in the conflict with the imam but some of them accused the imam of "being ignorant and mixing up Moroccan traditions with Islam" while at the same time they remained critical about the Islamic traditions of their parents. Instead of creating an Islam without culture, they are making choices from a particular repertoire that is closely related to their cultural context and moreover relies on common cultural forms such as language (in this case Dutch and sometimes English).

### Connecting individual experiences

The choices Muslim youth make are by definition products of a cultural environment and the way these processes evolve is dependent upon the changes in societies.[6] The idea of a purified Islam makes their faith stand out as a positive or even superior benchmark in an environment they experience as filled with crises: the high crime rates among Moroccan-Dutch youth, the attacks against Islam by Dutch politicians, the injustice that Muslims, according to them, face worldwide, and so on. The questions young people have about Islam and how to be a "good Muslim" are derived from their daily life; the issues they deal with have to do with contemporary political circumstances. They ask questions on the Internet in which they compare themselves to native Dutch youth (for example whether having a boyfriend or girlfriend is allowed in Islam or is it permissible to marry a non-Muslim); they study texts about the position of women in Islam and their relationship to non-Muslims; gather information about the conflicts in the Middle East (especially in Iraq, the Palestinian areas, and also Afghanistan); and attend meetings about "how to be a Muslim in Dutch society?".[7] In the process of finding answers to their questions, Muslim youth turn to alternative authoritative persons whom they think do not dilute the message of Islam; they range from the Egyptian Amr Khaled, Tariq Ramadan, Abdullah Faisal to Gouda's imam Abdallah. By asking these questions and turning to new authorities youth connect their own individual experiences to global themes and authorities. Thus, instead of a loss of religious authority there is emergence of new authorities and hierarchies sometimes resulting in conflicts between their rival group followers.

PHOTO BY WALTER HERFST, 2008

**The Nour Mosque in Gouda**

### Practicing Islam

The concept of deculturation seems to reflect the praxis of Moroccan-Dutch youth proclaiming their construction of Muslim identities as an ongoing purification of their cultural repertoires which stresses the sharp distinction between them and Dutch society and between them and their parents. But instead of creating their own individualized Islam, Moroccan-Dutch have to find recognition and acceptance for their ideas with others. This makes the way they practice Islam much less straightforward and rigid than is suggested in their accounts of a "pure" Islam or in the aforementioned conflict with imam Abdallah. For example, during one meeting the girls asked the imam if they were required to wear a headscarf. The answer was a clear "yes, it is obligatory." Although this confirmed the opinion of the girls, they still faced a problem because the school in question forbids headscarves. After a short discussion the imam again stated the norm clearly but also validated the girls' practice of removing the headscarf when they were in school as something that did not violate the norm. This was important for them, because they felt guilty every time they removed the headscarf and every time they put it back on. The concept of deculturation overestimates the agency of youth who seem to be able to create their own Islam regardless of the context. The construction of a "pure" Islam in which according to the girls and the imam a headscarf is obligatory takes place within different relationships such as with the schools and the parents and the girls have to manage all of the loyalties that come with it. Paradoxically their quest for a "pure" Islam in daily practice is neither an expression of breaking up with Dutch society nor with their parents, but rather of an ongoing process of negotiation and making compromises as a means to carefully balance all their loyalties.

This sought after "pure" Islam is actually a hybrid cultural construction based upon and emerging within specific historical and cultural contexts and relationships. Instead of an indication of crisis of pristine cultures, lack of integration, or signs of radicalization, it denotes customary processes during which the new generation tries to re-define and re-organize different cultural repertoires in response to the challenges of their lifeworld. Because of the inevitable changes that come with this re-interpretation, many older people often experience these developments with regret and nostalgia. Sometimes this may lead to conflicts over the question of who interprets Islam the right way and who represents "the truth," such as in the case with this imam.

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**Notes**

1. This article is based upon my Ph.D. thesis. An English summary can be found on http://religionresearch.org/martijn.
2. O. Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst, 2004), 258.
3. Ibid., pages 151 and 272.
4. See also "A Clash of Cultures or a Debate on Europe's Values?" *ISIM Review*, no. 15 (2005): 6–7.
5. André Droogers, "The power dimensions of the Christian community: An anthropological model," *Religion* 33, no. 3 (2003): 263–280.
6. M. Adams, "The reflexive self and culture: a critique," *British Journal of Sociology*, 54, no. 2 (2003): 221–238.
7. De Koning, "Identity in Transition. Connecting online and offline Internet practices of Moroccan-Dutch Muslim Youth," ISET Working Paper Series 9.