Imam in Nederland : opvattingen over zijn religieuze rol in de samenleving

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Summary

Imam in the Netherlands
Views about his religious role in society

In public debate and academic discussions about Islam in Western
society, reference is often made to the role of the imam in process-
es of acculturation of Muslims. Throughout these debates, we
come across the important question of how imams transmit Islam-
ic norms and values to Muslims living in a secular, non-Islamic so-
ciety. This descriptive-exploratory research considers this ques-
tion specifically looking at the role of the imam in the local mosque
in the Netherlands.

Reference to the role of the imam is made in the context of the
Dutch integration debate. In this respect, his potential role in inte-
gration processes of Muslims in the Netherlands is often high-
lighted. At the same time, his presumed current role is often criti-
cised.

On the other hand, the imam features in discussions about the role
of traditional religious authorities in the migratory setting. The
question is asked how individualised, young believers in the
Netherlands connect to the normativity of the Islamic tradition.
Young practising Muslims claim an individual responsibility for
their religious duties. At the same time they express a need for reli-
gious leaders who can authoritatively explain their multiple alle-
giances to both the Islamic tradition and Dutch society.
    Who has the position, the knowledge and the charisma neces-
sary to authoritatively make the connection to normative Islam?

What is the role of the imam in the local mosque in this transitionary phase?

To shed light on this complex set of issues, the following key questions have been formulated:

What role does the imam play in the mosque community according to circulating opinions in the Dutch public debate on imams? How do the imam and practising Muslim believers regard the role of the imam in the mosque community? What are the main similarities and differences between these role conceptions?

In these key questions, three perspectives are discernible.
The first is the external perspective of the views circulating in the public debate on imams between 1993 and 2004.

The second perspective is the internal perspective of the mosque community and its imam. This has been brought into focus empirically by describing and exploring his role, authority and influence in two mosque-communities and one Islamic student association. The internal perspective has been further divided into the perspective of the imam – who finds himself in a field of tension between expectations from the majority society on the one hand and expectations of the believers on the other hand – and the perspective of a group of practising, mostly young and highly educated Muslims who grew up in the Netherlands.

The selected mosques actively participate in the public debate on Islam and integration. All forty-eight respondents are practising, believing Muslims, both men and women, from different generations and from Turkish, Moroccan and Dutch background.

The indicative findings from the internal perspective have been compared with the external views. The outcomes of this comparison are used to clarify the ongoing public 'imam-debate'.

The *first chapter* starts with a summary of Dutch research on imams. From this the relevance of the key question is derived. A discussion follows of recent sociological research on religious individualisation processes of young European Muslims and

their need to (re-)connect to the Islamic tradition, symbolically represented by the *umma*, and recorded in Koran and Sunna. These sociological studies point at an absence, decline and fragmentation of traditional religious authorities in the European Diaspora.

To be able to operationalise and analyse the question, the concepts role, authority and influence are elaborated upon. In the final part of the first chapter, the chosen methodological approach is discussed.

Chapter 2 discusses the first of the key questions: *What role does the imam play in the mosque community according to circulating opinions in the Dutch public debate on imams?*
From the analysis of public debate, it appears that the imam is often considered to be the central influential leader of Muslim communities. He is supposed to have a progressive responsibility in the integration process of Muslims in the Netherlands. However, it is often presumed that the majority of the imams in Dutch mosques play a regressive role in the integration process.

This paradox in the debate can be grasped by distinguishing between the 'current imam' and the 'ideal imam'. The 'current imam' is often discussed in terms of shortcomings. The 'ideal imam' is trained in the Netherlands, speaks Dutch and is able to counsel young people in the Dutch context. Apart from having knowledge of Dutch language and customs, the 'ideal imam' orientates himself towards the core values of Dutch society. This is seen as a precondition for his stimulating role in the integration process.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the aspirations of the Dutch government. The government attempts to instrumentalise the imam in the integration process by using three tools. These instruments are a Dutch imam training program, compulsory citizenship courses for imams and the immigration policy regarding imams.

The third part of chapter 2 analyses these external role-expectations against the background of shifting notions of secularism and citizenship. The chapter shows how four incidents around particular imams can be regarded as symbolic events which have func-

tioned as catalysts in the discussion on Dutch national identity and the place of religion in the public sphere.

The *chapters 3, 4* and *5* present ethnographic descriptions of a Turkish mosque and a Moroccan mosque, and a Muslim students' association respectively. These empirical, qualitative descriptions are used to discuss the second key question: *How do the imam and practising Muslim believers regard the role of the imam in the mosque community?*

Chapter 3 provides an inside view of a Turkish mosque in Amsterdam, which is the central mosque of Milli Görüş North-Netherlands. After a sketch of the structure and organisation of this mosque, a description is presented of the role of the two imams and the *mufti* in ritual and ceremony, in religious education, and in their direct and indirect communication with believers. On the basis of interviews with the imams and the mufti, as well as eleven recorded and translated sermons, important elements of the message of these imams to the mosque visitors are shown.

This is followed by a discussion of the reception of their moral admonitions and social advice by the believers. In this Turkish mosque, the imams seem to have gained confidence and respect of the active mosque visitors, as a result of the way they reach out to believers of various generations and backgrounds.

The final part of this chapter deals with the socio-religious activities and religious authority of women. Female socio-religious leaders appear to play a very important role for women. Their role often remains out of sight in the public debate on the role, authority and influence of the imam.

Chapter 4 has a similarly structured observation of a Moroccan mosque in The Hague. This newly built mosque offers a large number of socio-religious activities. The imam is the central figure in this mosque. He pro-actively reaches out towards believers of various backgrounds and uses different strategies to communicate with them. He wants to counsel believers by departing from the Islamic jurisprudence, stressing the flexibility of interpretations

classical *fiqh* offers to modern believers in Europe. Besides his own argumentations presented in interviews, observations from his monthly 'question and answer sessions' are presented to illustrate this conclusion. At the same time, the imam can often only re-actively respond to the questions which are posed to him by (young) believers. It becomes clear that they try to formulate an answer to their questions individually. In this search, they consult media sources (like internet, translated books, (satellite) television and audiocassettes), their peers, and their own youth organisations within the mosque.

This is further elaborated on in *chapter 5*. This chapter focuses on highly educated young Moroccan and Turkish female and male students, who are member of the Muslim Students' Association Iqra at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. This interethnic Muslim Students' Association forms a place where they can publicly and independently discuss questions of religious leadership and the role the imam plays in their multiple cultural ties. They select the speakers at the lectures autonomously.

The insights gained from the perspective of these students allow an analysis of the role of the imam outside the direct formality of the mosque. The drivers of change within the mosque community develop their transitional discourses between tradition and modernity also outside the walls of the mosque building. The student association appears to be an important platform to discuss how to be Muslim and Dutch citizen.

According to the respondents, the imam continues to play an indispensable role in the mosque- and prayer-bound ritual. His institutional position as leader of the congregational (Friday-) prayer forms an integral part in the continuation of the Muslim tradition in the non-Islamic society. However, the students emphasise that the degree of influence the imam can possibly have depends on his knowledge and the content of his message. They object to an indiscriminate influence of the imam on their individual moral opinions and societal actions. His personal 'charisma' and his ability to be empathetic and sympathetic about the daily circumstances of young people then become important elements for establishing his authority. If the imam is capable of providing these young peo-

ple with clues of how to connect to the Islamic tradition without obstructing their options in the society they live in, he can reach the portrayed group of young Dutch practising Muslims. Then the mosque forms one of the places in which this group can develop their religious and civil ties.

The imam appears to be only one out of various authoritative voices who can guide them in this process. Parents, peers, internet forums, television-*shaykhs*, lecturers and 'self-made-preachers' also play a considerable role. In the end, it depends on the believer if and to what extent he or she lets the advice of the imam influence his or her opinions and actions.

On the basis of the indications arising from these three case studies, the *final chapter* enters into a comparison of the external expectations and the internal expectations on the role of the imam. This answers the third key question: *What are the main similarities and differences in these role conceptions*?

A comparison between the external and the internal perspectives shows three role tensions.

First, the supposition, derived from the external perspective, that the imam is the central, influential leader of the mosque community who can actively reach and influence a considerable group of Muslims via his institutional position, can be modified on the basis of the empirical findings. His influence should not be overestimated.

Secondly, where the focus of the external perspective is on his (potential) role in societal integration of the believers, the imams themselves have as their first mission the maintenance and reinforcement of the religious ties of the believers.

And thirdly, we notice that there is a shared concern about the ability of the imam to communicate with young Dutch Muslims. Language obstructions and knowledge of the Dutch societal context can seriously hinder open communication. However, a 'charismatic', 'ideal' imam who can pro-actively reach out to the young, will be only one out of a differentiated group of religious leaders. Amongst other leaders, women will increasingly be visible as religious executives.

The chapter ends with the summary that in future construc-
tions of religious authority, the imam will continue to play a reli-
gious role in his position as prayer leader, preacher and religious
teacher in the mosque community.