

# Re-imagining Islamic Death Rituals in a Small Town Context in the Netherlands

## Ritual Transfer and Ritual Fantasy

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Every month a group of Muslim women gets together to study the *Quran* and talk about life. It is a colorful group of people in many aspects; they are of different ages, some dress conservatively while others dress according to the latest fashion and headscarves are worn in different colors and styles, while others are not veiled at all. Their personalities differ and they are from various ethnic origins: Dutch converts and others with Turkish, Moroccan, Egyptian, Somali and Surinam backgrounds. A guest was invited to speak about her work assisting in the ritual cleansing of the dead. Sharing her experiences opened up the other women to talk about the difficult subject of death. The women discovered small differences in their traditions that actually heated up the discussion on what is 'real Islam' and what should be considered superstitious notions. The realization that they had no clear-cut tradition to fall back on brought confusion.<sup>1</sup>

Islamic death rituals are quite thoroughly described and studies give in-depth insights in Islamic eschatology, the evolvement of Islamic death rites over time or in death rites as part of life cycle rituals among Muslims in the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> But often the focus is very much on Islam, its rules and regulations. I want to focus on Muslims and their dynamic and diverse ritual praxis in a specific (migration) context.

Over the past decades Muslims from different countries and at different points in time migrated to the Netherlands. People, their religions, their practices and traditions are brought into close proximity to another. And although Muslims share the same religion, their backgrounds often vary tremendously. By studying their beliefs and customs surrounding death, a window is opened to deep held values and to the basic assumptions of their worldviews.

As death in a strange country provides a particularly intense context, people are challenged to deal with practical problems, their needs, resources and values.<sup>3</sup> The concept of ritual transfer provides insights in the way rituals are revised and adapted and how ritual creativity is inevitable in the process of 'trans-

<sup>1</sup> Observations, November 18, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> L. HALEVI: *Muhammad's grave. Death rites and the making of Islamic society* (New York 2007); J. SMITH & Y. HADDAD: *The Islamic understanding of death and resurrection* (New York 2002); N.M. DESSING: *Rituals of birth, circumcision, marriage and death among Muslims in the Netherlands* (Leuven 2001).

<sup>3</sup> S. ARBLASTER: 'Doing as death demands: encountering crisis in the context of migration', in *Journal of beliefs & values: studies in religion & education* 19/2 (1998) 211-217.

lation' from one context into another. Active re-imagination appears to play an important role in reshaping death rites.

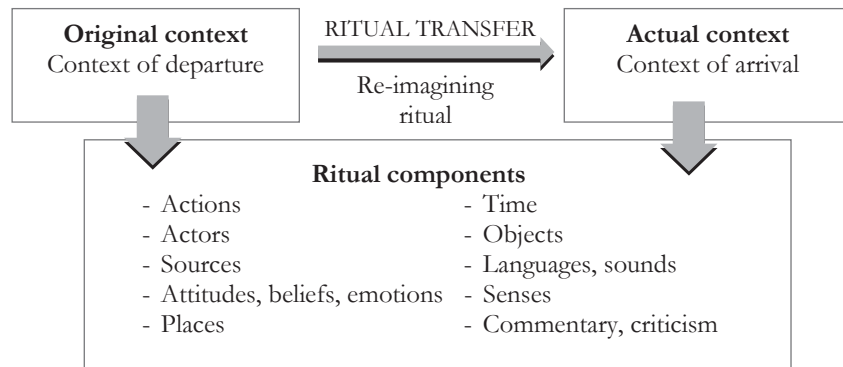
This study is part of an ongoing research on Islamic death rituals in the Netherlands, set in the small town context of Venlo.<sup>4</sup> In this specific context several different, very small Muslim communities are depending on each other and are negotiating their position towards the somewhat larger Muslim communities and their facilities. A context that, although widespread, is underexposed in current research.

Data are gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews and (participant) observations. Interviews involved 23 Muslims (10 men and 13 women of various backgrounds and 2 imams in the age between 17 and 72, living in Venlo. The focus was on peoples' attitude towards ritual as they were not all personally involved in the ritual cleansing of the deceased.

## 1. Ritual Transfer

For gaining a better understanding of how Islamic death rituals take shape in the specific context of Venlo, the concept of ritual transfer is an important one.<sup>5</sup> As rituals are not isolated phenomena but performed within a specific cultural context, the move of ritual (elements) from one context to another can be expected to provoke ritual change.

We can speak of ritual transfer when **actors transfer a ritual from one context to another context**.



<sup>4</sup> A conglomeration of the town Venlo (65.453 inhabitants), Tegelen (19.337), Belfeld (5.449), Arcen, Velden and Lomm (8.681) situated in the south of the Netherlands, directly at the border with Germany.

<sup>5</sup> R. LANGER, D. LÜDDECKENS, K. RADDE, J.A.M. SNOEK: 'Ritualtransfer', in *Journal of ritual studies* 20/1 (2006) 1-20. I borrow their basic idea of ritual transfer but adapted the interpretation of the elements of ritual and context.

This study focuses on the Islamic death **ritual** of purification of the deceased as it is performed by Muslims in Venlo. The choice for this particular ritual is based on the fact that this ritual is almost always performed in the Netherlands, even when the deceased is buried elsewhere – as the majority still is. The ritual washing of the dead is part of prescribed funerary rites that are considered *fard kifaya* (collective duties) for all Muslims.

The **actors** are a variety of Muslims in Venlo. They share the same religion but differ in their backgrounds; they originate from various countries and regions; they have different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and their migration experience might vary, as might their religious affiliations and socio-economic situation. They all have their own personal biography. And it is this variety of Muslims that are the carriers of the funerary rites.

There is an **original context**, often seen as the point of departure, in a literal as well as a figurative sense. For migrants it is the home country and culture they physically left at a certain point in time. For others it is the context one feels strongly connected with; this might be the home of their parents or ancestors. The **actual context** (the context of arrival) is the context they are living in now. Here a new context is configured in which this variety of Muslims has to relate to each other and to others (non-Muslims). This **transfer** of ritual (elements) is a ‘translation’ from one context into another, provoking changes that might be obvious or more subtle.

### 1.1. Ritual components

Studying the transfer of specific Islamic death rituals (the ritual cleansing of the dead in particular) means getting insight in how the rituals are impacted by this transfer from one context to another. Breaking the ritual down into observable elements makes it possible to transcribe and analyze complex ritual practices. Ronald Grimes provides a very practicable framework of elements of ritual that also conveys the multidimensional character of it.<sup>6</sup> The ten components of ritual presented here can function as axes of comparison and make it possible to track developments and changes that take place between the different contexts.

It is important to recognize that rites change as rites are not givens; ‘they are hand-me-downs’, as Grimes puts it: ‘whether we call this activity ritual creativity, ritual invention, ritualizing, ritual making, or ritual revision does not matter as much as recognizing that rites change’.<sup>7</sup>

The list of ritual components does not represent all facets of ritual but is fine-tuned to studying a certain set of rituals, performed in a certain context.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> R.L. GRIMES: ‘Ritual and performance’, in G. LADERMAN & L. LEÓN (eds.): *Encyclopedia of religion and American cultures* 2 (Santa Barbara 2003) 515-528; R.L. GRIMES: *Rite out of place. Ritual, media, and the arts* (Oxford 2006) 109.

<sup>7</sup> GRIMES: *Rite out of place* 12.

<sup>8</sup> GRIMES: *Rite out of place* 109.

Components of ritual
Actors, roles, figures
Actions
Sources
Attitudes, beliefs, emotions
Places
Time
Objects
Languages, sounds
Senses
Commentary, criticism

Even though we are exploring the separate components, they should not be seen as isolated elements but strongly interconnected and in constant connection with the original and actual context.

## 1.2. Context overview: Muslims in Venlo

In the Netherlands live an estimated 857.000 Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Muslim migrants settled in roughly four stages.<sup>10</sup> At first there were small groups from Indonesia and Surinam that migrated due to the decolonization process. In the 1960s the number of Muslims grew substantially with the arrival of foreign workers from Turkey, Morocco and Tunisia. From 1974 on, residence permits have been issued for the wives and children of those workers, so families are reunited. Later, mainly in the 1990s, refugees with Muslim backgrounds came to the Netherlands due to political instability in their home countries. Muslims from all those phases of migration are present in the Venlo-context.

Muslims of Turkish origin (over 4000 persons) and Moroccan origin (around 3000 persons) form the largest and best established Muslim communities in Venlo. Nowadays these communities consist of men and women of different generations.

Refugees from countries like former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Guinée and Somalia came some decades later. They make up a rather diverse Muslim community with people from various cultural backgrounds, predominantly first generation young men and women that are placed in Venlo from refugee centers all over the Netherlands. Their migration experience is rather different than that of the labor migrants. They all share the fact that they mostly originate from a context with a strong Muslim majority and now live in a minority position. A position that comes with insecurities as a Somali respondent explains: 'Where we are from you are surrounded by Muslims. You really grow up like a Muslim. So when someone dies, everybody knows what to do. You

<sup>9</sup> M. VAN HERTEN & F. OTTEN: 'Naar een nieuwe schatting van het aantal islamieten in Nederland', in *Bevolkingstrends* 55/3 (2007) 48-53.

<sup>10</sup> W. SHADID & S. VAN KONINGSVELD: *Islam in Nederland en België* (2008 Leuven) 22-23.

can simply ask the neighbor. That is so different here. Nobody knows anything'.<sup>11</sup>

Today there is also a second and third generation of Muslims, born and raised in the Netherlands that clearly find their way into Dutch society. There are families that hold Muslims as well as non-Muslims and people of various cultural backgrounds due to marriage or conversion. Over the years an Islamic infrastructure has been developed in Venlo, consisting of four mosques (two Turkish, two Moroccan), a number of cultural-religious associations and Islamic parcels at the cemetery since 1995.

## 2. The ritual purification of the deceased as practiced by Muslims in Venlo

Our focus is on the ritual purification of the deceased – a cluster of rites and ritualizations – which is studied within a larger body of interconnected funerary rites. As rites do not exist in the abstract but in particular forms in specific contexts, the ritual components were studied in the specific context of Venlo. The presented descriptions are the result of in-depth interviews with various Muslims and (participant) observations in Venlo in the period 2009-2011.

### 2.1. Actions

The treatment of the dead is an important subject in Islamic legal works, either presented as part of the chapter on prayer or in a subsection about funeral prayer. Based on these sources, a 'ritual/liturgical order' of the purification of the deceased can be laid out.<sup>12</sup> The purification ritual is part of a larger body of Islamic funerary rites and is generally understood to proceed as follows: after death occurs the mouth of the deceased is closed and clothes are removed after which the corpse is completely covered with a sheet. Every effort should be made to quickly prepare the body for burial. For the ritual cleansing the body is placed on an elevated surface and washed by a Muslim that knows how to proceed. In principle, a corpse of a man is to be washed only by men and that of a woman only by women. However, a woman is allowed to wash her husband and it is permissible for a young child to be washed by an adult of the opposite sex. Before undertaking the washing, the washers perform the *wudu* (small washing) on themselves and audibly or mentally express the *niyya* (intention). During the washing the corpse is at all times covered from navel to knees. The *ghusl* (full washing of the body) starts with a first rinse to remove any impurities followed by washing the genitals and anus. Then the belly is softly pressed to

<sup>11</sup> Personal interview with Mo, November 26, 2010. The names of respondents are changed for privacy reasons.

<sup>12</sup> R. RAPPAPORT: *Ritual and religion in the making of humanity* (Cambridge 1999) 169.

empty the intestines. It is recommended to perform the *wudu* – consisting of washing the hands and arms up the elbows, feet, face, neck and ears, and rinsing the nose and mouth with water – as one does in preparing for the daily prayers. Each washing starts with the right side from the front to the back and from head to feet, followed by the left side. The body is washed an odd number of times, so three or, if necessary, five or seven times. The water is perfumed with camphor or other aromatics. After purification the body is dried and shrouded, using one or more pieces of white clean cloth. Followed by the *salat al-janaʿza* (funeral prayer), that is always performed in the presence of the corpse. From here men carry the body to the gravesite; it is considered wrongful or it is even forbidden for women to join the procession. All participants should remain quiet, as audible display of grief is considered wrongful. In the grave the body should be turned on its right side, facing Mecca. Those present each throw three handfuls of dirt into the grave, where after the grave is filled.<sup>13</sup>

These rather concise guidelines are drawn from *fiqh* literature and present the core actions of the death rituals. They appear to be stripped from any contextual and hands-on information which makes them easy to perform in any given context, but at the same time for a layperson it is rather hard to put them into concrete action. It is also obvious that different contexts very much shape the ritual.

Cleansing by washing the body with water is of course a very common, day-to-day kind of action. Performing these actions within the framework of Islamic purification rites has elevated it above their daily meaning. The washing of the deceased has a clear link with the sober and plain purification rites that take such a prominent role in the daily performance of Islam.

The difference between the original context and the actual context does not so much concern a change in (basic) actions. In the new context various Muslims develop other actions in addition to the strict ritual order; these actions (not prescribed by Islam) become part of funerary rituals and are evoked by the new location and circumstances.

## 2.2. Actors

Different roles can be distinguished in the ritual and each role goes with its own distinct actions and position.

The deceased takes a central role as the rituals are perceived to facilitate the transition of the dead from this world to the next. During the ritual cleansing the deceased are treated like they are still sentient and aware of what goes on around them. That is why the washing has to be performed with care and respect: enough people to gently turn the corpse, not to leave the deceased face-down and the use of lukewarm water for cleansing. The deceased should not be

<sup>13</sup> With small alterations in the ritual where different schools of law are concerned as presented in Al-Azeri's *Al-Fiqh 'Ala al-Madhab al-Arba'ah*, cited in DESSING: *Rituals of birth* 144-146.

disturbed with unrestrained expressions of grief and less pleasant acts (like pressing the belly to empty the intestines) are accompanied with whispered apologies.

The bereaved do their best to fulfill (assumed) final wishes of their departed loved one. Final wishes often concern the place of burial. For most Muslims the loss of a loved one in this actual context is new and they are unfamiliar with how to make all the arrangements in this new context. Not knowing what to do can make people insecure. Another complicating factor of migration is that the next of kin are not always living close by and their much needed involvement in the funerary rites is not always easy to realize. Not all bereaved involved might share the same religious traditions and the funerary rites have to be adapted like in the case of this mixed couple:

On the sudden loss of their child, the parents started to make arrangements for a Muslim funeral. Something that fell hard on the catholic grandparents, the parents of the child's mother that converted to Islam years ago. In consultation with a local imam, the child was taken to a church for a memorial service where relatives and classmates were able to say their last goodbyes. After the service the child was brought to a facility where the imam and some helpers performed the ritual washing. After the funeral prayer at the premises of the mosque, the child was buried at the Muslim cemetery.<sup>14</sup>

With migration also new questions rise like where to be buried and how to make preparatory arrangements to meet these wishes, drawing up a will, setting aside some money or to take out a funeral insurance. Sometimes repatriation is not an option due to the safety situation in the country of origin.

The bereaved often have a specific frame of reference, formed by personal experiences with death. The actual lack of experience with it makes that the next of kin don't always feel at ease to participate in the final washing of their loved one, even though the ritual order has a prominent role reserved from them. This can also be the case in most contexts of origin, but because of the Muslim majority it is hardly ever a problem to find a washer. In the original as well as in the actual context the vast majority of the bereaved don't actively participate in the ritual washing of a deceased loved one, even when they are the most appropriate candidates to do so. This makes ritual specialists indispensable.

The imam (of either a Moroccan or a Turkish mosque) is often considered best equipped to perform the ritual purification the way it is prescribed. But as all imams are men, they are not qualified to perform the ritual on a deceased woman. That is why recently local mosque organizations started to support the training of female volunteers. For decades it were older women and widows that performed the washings, more recently also some younger women have joined in. These ritual specialists almost always have to take the lead and some-

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with an imam, January 20, 2011.



times they are assisted by relatives of the deceased. These specialists, connected to either a Turkish or a Moroccan mosque, perform the ritual wherever their services are needed. So they actively deal with different Muslim communities.

Ritual specialists in the other often smaller Muslim communities are far less visible as they are not traceable through mosque organizations; they are either known within the community or searched for when needed.

According to Islamic sources the Muslim community is also expected to take a leading role in the performance of death rituals. But there is not such a thing as a single Muslim community in Venlo that all Muslims, regardless of their (ethnic) background, can fall back on. Muslims of Turkish and Moroccan communities, being the oldest and best established communities in town, can rely on their own customized religious infrastructure consisting of mosques and imams. Other small groups and individuals have to deal with a lack of community.

### 2.3. Sources

When asked, the *Quran* and *hadith* are typically mentioned as the main source regarding death rituals. But although the *Quran* holds much information on human death and its (religious) meaning, there is nothing concrete on funeral rites. The *hadith* do contain information on rituals, but it is far from easy to distillate a concrete praxis from them. Of all Islamic sources *fiqh* literature probably provides the most tangible guidelines (see 2.1), but as they are not very accessible, they are hardly ever directly consulted by common Muslims. Regulations are often translated into pamphlets, teaching material, sermons and narratives that circulate in the local communities as a source of knowledge. In the actual context of Venlo the imams of the local mosques are often referred to as an authority to turn to for knowledge, assistance and the performance of death rituals. Also when the imam is of a different (ethnic, national, cultural and religious) background or they have never met him in person. Often there is a preference for either a Moroccan or a Turkish imam, depending on the language one speaks or the culture one feels most related to. The imams in the Venlo mosques are all educated in either Turkey or Morocco and their knowledge of the Dutch language is often limited. Their role as a central religious and ritual authority is also new to them, as one imam explains:

Before I came to Venlo, I was an imam in Turkey in a city of 70.000 Muslim inhabitants. I worked at one of the fifty mosques. There were two more people employed, so my main task was to lead in the daily prayers. Here in Venlo, it is just me in this one [Turkish] mosque and there is so much work to do! I lead in the five daily prayers, I am a mufti, I am a teacher and a psychologist.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Personal interview with an imam, January 20, 2011.



Also other religious or ritual specialists are consulted. They are often referred to by others and their advice is sought by phone, internet or through intermediaries. These specialists frequently move between different contexts and provide information on specific cultural and ethnic traditions. Courses and meetings are organized at the local mosques, for groups (women, young people or certain religious affiliations) and among friends or family. They are also considered a source of basic Islamic knowledge. The Mosque organizations predominantly teach in either Turkish or Moroccan Arabic therewith only reaching people within their own community. A lot of young people refer to internet (for online video's and documentaries) as a source to get a first impression of Islamic regulation concerning death, like in the case of Imani:

A woman in our community was dying, and we were asked to take care of her final wishes. We are so young; we have no experience with death and all the rituals we have to do for her. Maybe it sounds strange, but as we have no Somali specialist in this region we started on Google.... But it was hard for us to understand what the right information was. Information on Somali Islamic death rituals was rather concise. But at least we had some idea after seeing the videos and reading some articles.<sup>16</sup>

In the original context sources appear to be more embedded in the direct and daily environment, knowledge is drawn from people in their community, from relatives and neighbors or from designated ritual specialists.

#### 2.4. Attitudes, beliefs, emotions

In Islamic education death plays an important role and Muslims are in general very much aware of concepts concerning life, death and afterlife. Natural death is seen as a fact of human mortality and is part of the order of things. In interviews, conversations and meetings people often elaborately spoke about religious aspects of death, afterlife and Islamic eschatology. Putting these (often fragmented) stories together, a quite accurate overview of Islamic viewpoints based on *hadith* and *Quran* unfolds. With death an angel is believed to bear away the soul of a person, a soul that is later returned when the deceased is in the grave. In this way the deceased is able to assist at the funeral ceremonies and the mourning process. Once in the grave the dead person is visited by two more angels that will interrogate him and search for proof on his faith. Other angels are reported to register the deceased's good and bad deeds which will become evident at the Day of Judgment. The unbeliever will not be able to answer the angels' questions and therefore will be punished, while the believer is rewarded (by a widening grave or a window opening towards heaven). A waiting period will start until the Day of Judgment, the day the dead will be resurrected from their graves and will be gathered for the final judgment. True

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview with Imani, September 25, 2010.

believers will meet and stand before God for their final reward.<sup>17</sup> These widespread beliefs on afterlife very much influence the attitudes of Muslims towards death rituals. Choices are made, based on these teachings like this Senegalese Muslim in Venlo explains:

I am a Mouride, a follower of the teachings of Sheikh Amadou Bamba. We Mourides want to be buried at the holy city of Touba (Central Senegal), where Bamba is also buried. At the day of resurrection we will be close to him, so our path to Paradise will be open. So where ever I spend my life, my grave has to be in Touba, even if my Dutch wife and children would not agree. I would prefer them to be buried in Touba also, but it is up to them.<sup>18</sup>

Islamic eschatology and the idea that an intact body is needed at the day of resurrection make the rather widespread custom of cremation in the Netherlands for most Muslims hard to digest. The flames of the crematorium are also often associated with the flames of Hell. A West-African Muslim explains:

My first experience with death in Venlo was when a Dutch friend died. He had cancer and I was invited to the house after he passed away. He was laid on a bier in the living room and I was a bit shocked, because I am not used to this. I found it quite bizarre that people were sitting there, talking and drinking coffee next to my friend's body. The next day there was a service in church; I also spoke some words to express my friendship with him. That was nice. And then I was invited to the cemetery, or at least I thought I was. Something happened I wasn't prepared for... We ended up at the crematorium. Although I didn't see the actual fire, I was deeply shocked and couldn't sleep for weeks! How can you do this to a person you love? I don't understand the Dutch people! This experience made me think about my own funeral, as I am all alone here in Venlo ... What will happen to me? I really don't want to be cremated. So I made arrangements with funeral insurance that, in case of death, my body will be repatriated to Guinée and my relatives will take care of everything. Even the washing and the shrouding I want to be done there by people I trust.<sup>19</sup>

In almost every interview or conversation, the issue of cremation automatically came up, always filling people with dread. With the remarkable exception of Shukri from Indonesia:

I married a Dutch man 15 years ago and moved from Java to Venlo. My two youngest children from a previous marriage came with me, two others stayed in Indonesia. That makes me part of two countries now and makes it complicated

<sup>17</sup> As it is also presented in Islamic textbooks used at the courses provided by the mosque organizations: S.S. SIREGAR: *Basisboek Islam* (Den Haag 2002) and R. TOTOLI: 'Afterlife', in G. KRÄMER, D. MATRINGE, J. NAWAS & E. ROWSON (eds.): *Encyclopaedia of Islam three* (Leiden 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Personal interview with Mbaye, August 3, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Personal interview with Amadou, November 22, 2010.

when I die. Although I am very much aware of the Islamic objections to cremation, I see the partition of my ashes among my children as my only option. They have to take care of me after I die. But they should not keep my ashes in their house; they have to bury me so I can return to the earth like Islam prescribes. Allah will understand that I am in two countries and that is why I have to take these quite drastic measures. What choice do I have?<sup>20</sup>

Young men and women that present themselves as religious, living according to the tradition of the Prophet, are very articulate about the role of death and afterlife as a guideline in their daily lives, as Mo explains:

I live with the concept of death every day, because only then I am able to live. I live with the certainty that the Angel of Death visits my house four times a day to see if it is my time. This way I make the most of my life, because when I am dead there is nothing left to do. Life is your chance to be a good Muslim and to live according to the teachings of the Prophet.<sup>21</sup>

Death rituals are part of the so called *fard kifaya*, the collective duties of Muslims. It makes the Muslim community responsible for each Muslim getting a proper funeral. Like from time to time money is collected to provide means for the repatriation or funeral arrangements for a fellow Muslim. It encourages them to participate in death rituals, also when the deceased is not a relative or friend. Participation also brings what is called *ajr* ('plus' points) that are compared to their 'negative' points when judged by God after death.

Although by participating in death rituals merit can be gained, there is also a widespread fear of death. People from a refugee background often have traumatic experiences with death, add to that fear. Others have no experience with death at all as they are living far from their extended family or in an urban setting where death mainly appears in hospitals. When considering participating in a ritual, people wonder if they can keep it together and not disturb the deceased with their emotions of grief. For this reason some people stated that they would only be able to participate in the washing of a stranger rather than that of someone they feel close to. Others feel they could only participate being very close to the deceased. Women explicitly mention the washing of a child or their mother. Those who have actually participated in the ritual bathing of a deceased loved one, value it as a comforting experience.

Attitudes, beliefs and emotions about death and the ritual washing in general don't differ so much from the original context but the actual context causes exceptional situations that make the ritual practice less self-evident. So people are forced to reinvent and adapt their rituals in this new context.

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview with Shukri, November 24, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Personal interview with Mo, November 26, 2010.

## 2.5. Place

According to the *fiqh* basically any screened off area is suitable to perform the ritual purification of the deceased as long as during the washing – as during the funeral prayer and the burial – the body is oriented towards Mecca. Practically the washing is far easier to perform at a place with a special table with a drain, warm water and sprinklers.

Venlo does have some what we might call specific Islamic places to perform the ritual bath. They are located on the premises of a mosque or near the Islamic cemetery and are exclusively used by Muslims. A new washing room (funded by Islamic organizations and the municipality) was opened in November 2007. The complex is run by a group of Muslims that is considered (too) strict by others and therefore some are reluctant to use it. People often use the well-equipped general morgue, situated at the site of the local hospital. This morgue has a more neutral status and relatives feel freer to proceed the way they want. The ritual purification of the deceased is quite a private matter and the last place where women and children can be present and involved, as in most cases they are not allowed to participate.

The choice for a final resting-place appears to be an ongoing debate among Muslim migrants with clinching arguments for and against burial in the actual context of Venlo where since 1995 a part of the general cemetery Blerickse Bergen is exclusively reserved for Muslims. Walking around the site clearly shows that the largest Muslim communities, those of Turkish and Moroccan origin, hardly ever bury their deceased here. They are almost without exception buried in their country of origin. Also other migrants decide (or consider) against a burial in Venlo or the Netherlands. Their choice is explained in different ways. Some claim that they just want to return to the land of their forefathers (simply going home or actually returning to the physical ground of their ancestors) or returning to a place where relatives can take care of their grave and can pray for them on a regular basis. Some find it important to be buried among other Muslims, rather than to be surrounded by a non-Muslim majority. The assurance that their grave will not be emptied after some time is another reason to choose a final resting-place in an Islamic country. And sometimes it has just become a (family or community) tradition to do so. While the expenses for repatriation are high, the cost of the grave is low compared to prices in the Netherlands.

Ideas one has on the context of origin and the actual context are very much influencing the decision of where to be buried. Two women with similar backgrounds focus on different aspects and come to different choices as the next examples show:

Dilek (Turkish) and Nadia (Moroccan) both came to Venlo as little children, over 35 years ago. Together with their mothers and siblings, they joined their fathers who were already working here. Both women feel at home in Venlo, are working and raising families.

When she dies Dilek passionately wishes to return to her home village in Central Anatolia. She knows exactly where she wants to be buried (next to her mother and grandmother) and on several occasions she has pointed out this place to her husband and her children. For Dilek it is a peaceful place not only because of the nature that surrounds it, but also for who her neighbors will be. During the waiting period in the grave, it are these neighbors that keep you company. And when you know they are good people (good Muslims) the time in their grave will be quiet and peaceful and Dilek hopes to share in this.

For Nadia being buried in Morocco was self-evident for a long time. When her father died 30 years ago, he returned to his homeland as it was his clear and final wish. But as her oldest children are starting their own families, Nadia thinks being buried in Venlo is the next logical step. She wants her children to visit her grave regularly to pray for her, something she could hardly ever do for her father.<sup>22</sup>

Remarkable were the considerations of the young Dutch convert Marco:

With the Day of Judgment in mind, Marco instructed his non-Muslim mother to have him buried in an Islamic country when he dies. Although he has no personal ties with any Islamic country, his request is mainly motivated by the fact that eternal grave rest in the Netherlands is not guaranteed (yet). His best friend Muhammad, who as a child fled from Somalia, doesn't share Marco's opinion. For him it is clear that Islam teaches one should be buried where one dies, following the example of the Prophet Mohammed.<sup>23</sup>

Even though the burial is not the main focus of my research, the choice for a final resting-place also impacts the ritual washing. In preparation for burial in the country of origin the ritual washing generally takes place in the Netherlands, where the bereaved can pay their last respects before the deceased is placed in a specially sealed coffin. Insurances often only pay the expenses of the repatriation of the body and tickets for one or two chaperones. So, other relatives are left behind and they are not able to attend the funeral. The funerary rituals are split up and become divided between places and people. Sometimes it can happen that on arrival in the country of burial, relatives arrange for the deceased to be washed again.<sup>24</sup> Repatriation takes time and causes conflict with Islamic prescriptions of an immediate funeral at the place one dies. For some Muslims in Venlo (refugees in particular) a funeral in their home country is not even an option.

## 2.6. Time

Islamic regulations strive to bury the deceased as soon as possible after death, an urgency that is clearly felt by the bereaved. A prompt burial is one of the

<sup>22</sup> Personal interviews with Dilek, January 20, 2011 & Nadia, December 17, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Telephone interview with Marco, December 30, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> As witnessed by Dilek, attending a funeral in Turkey. Personal interview January 20, 2011.

first things mentioned when asking about Islamic death practices. Interment within 24 hours is possible since the new Dutch Corpse Disposal Act (*herziene Wet op de lijkbezorging*) passed in 1991, but one still has to get permission from the local authorities to do so. If insured, an insurance representative will assist in making all the necessary arrangements and as they are quite experienced in that field, they are often able to speed up the process considerably. But there is no guarantee the burial can take place within 24 hours, as dying after office hours or on a public holiday might slow things down. The repatriation of a body to another country takes a lot of paperwork and travel time and will also delay the funeral.

People believe a speedy burial is needed to prevent the body from disintegrating, so the deceased can appear before Allah intact. The anticipated peaceful state the deceased will be in in his grave is another reason to speed things up.

Friday is a holy day and therefore the day that most mosques are full for the special Friday prayer. And although one is not supposed to wait for a full mosque to have a funeral prayer, people are content when it does turn out this way:

My husband died on Thursday evening and we tried our very best to make all the arrangements for a funeral on Friday. We Somalis are such a small community in Venlo, so it was good we could bring the body to the mosque on Friday afternoon. This way all the regular visitors could pray the special funeral prayer with us. It reassured us. A substantial number of people praying for a good pass over is good for the deceased.<sup>25</sup>

Especially for those very small communities or individuals the attendance of other Muslims is considered important for a successful ritual performance.

## 2.7. Objects

According to the ritual order there are no special or sacred objects needed to perform the ritual bathing, just clean water that is available at the facilities. Practical gear like gloves and towels, small bowls to pour the water or a sprinkler make it easier. The additions to the water like camphor, *sidr* leaves, flowers or soap are not explicitly prescribed but are often part of cultural traditions. Traditions that appear to be so strong, that people go to great lengths to get the 'right' additions to the water to ensure that their funerary duties and customs are properly preserved. Materials from the original context become a vital ingredient for the ritual in the actual context. Alternative additions, that are widely available and very much suitable according to Islamic regulations, are often not sought after.

The plain white cloth used for shrouding (4 meters, cut up in 3 to 5 pieces) is either bought by the bereaved or provided by the volunteers that perform the washing. Some people buy the cloth during their pilgrimage to Mecca (or have

<sup>25</sup> Personal interview with Khadra, December 6, 2010.

someone bring it for them) with the purpose of being used for their shrouding after death. Even there are variations in material, simplicity is preferred.

### 2.8. Languages, sounds

There is no script available for the recitations (of Quranic verses or other) during the washing of the deceased. Most respondents not so much worry about not getting the actions right, but they fear not being able to recite the right words and phrases as they are not very familiar with the classic Arabic language.

Those Muslim that don't speak Turkish often find the use of that language problematic. Even when they never actually visited a Turkish mosque, they are very much under the impression that Turkish is mixed into the ritual performance (a very persistent narrative). Arabic is seen as the only proper ritual language. That is why some minorities prefer the Moroccan mosque/imam over a Turkish one as they speak Arabic.

In general the voice is softened during the ritual washing, as are emotions that might surface. People participating in the washing often speak to the deceased in their mother tongue. Dutch doesn't play a role in the ritual, but becomes more and more a language of instruction.

### 2.9. Senses

Respondents often refer to (the idea of) the scent of death. To avoid unpleasant odors or to mask it, incense is burned during the washing. The burning of incense is rather common in several cultures in Africa and Asia, a custom that migrants take with them.

Some respondents referred to the Prophet Mohammed who could be recognized by the sweet smell of roses. Because of this oral tradition, rosewater is often used to perfume the water of the final ritual washing.

For the deceased it is considered important to appear clean and nicely smelling before God. One imam was clearly against the burning of any incense and stated that soap will do the job while the other imam emphasized a moderate use of any fragrance. They both recommended the adding of camphor (*kaḥḥūr*) to the water for the final washing. It is easily obtained in the Netherlands and the fact that the substance is mentioned in the *Quran* seems to add to its suitability.

### 2.10. Commentary, criticism

Muslims of different backgrounds live together in this new context and one is confronted with different ideas and practices. This is often related to a discussion about what is 'real Islam', as an Islam stripped of cultural influences. The oldest Muslim groups in Venlo of Moroccan and Turkish background also are



the best established and best equipped groups. They are able to preserve and develop their own rituals and present them as ‘real Islam’ for their community.

Death can also bring separate Muslim communities together; as in the case of the performance of the funeral prayer for a deceased Somali man during the Friday prayer gathering at a Moroccan mosque. Due to this shared experience they began to see each other as fellow Muslims that actually share the same faith and rituals.

The role of close relatives in the ritual washing of the dead is a sensitive issue, as most people acknowledge their role in the ritual but at the same time are too afraid or too insecure to participate. This is something that one of the imams actively wants to change as he motivates relatives to bear their responsibilities. His policy is to provide a supporting role and not a leading one in the ritual cleansing of a deceased.

How the concrete practice of the ritual washing of the dead takes shape in a new context is summarized in the following overview where the findings concerning each ritual component are shortly presented:

Components	Findings
Actions	Ritual purification of the deceased is part of a larger body of interconnected funerary rites. Basic actions stay the same but who is present, the location and circumstances change in the new context and additional actions develop.
Actors	The deceased play a central role, the bereaved struggle with their own role to do right by the deceased, themselves and what is practically possible. Ritual specialists (washers) are indispensable as most people don’t know how to proceed. An actual Muslim community is not self-evident in the new context.
Sources	<i>Quran</i> and <i>hadith</i> are frequently mentioned sources. Although <i>fiqh</i> literature provides the most tangible guidelines, they remain inaccessible to laymen, so imams become a primary source in the new context. Additional information is provided by courses, meetings and the internet.
Attitudes, Beliefs, Emotions	Muslims in Venlo are very much aware of death, afterlife and Islamic eschatology which affect attitudes towards the ritual practice. The awareness of <i>fard kifaya</i> can enforce a Muslim community. The actual context causes exceptional situations that make the ritual practice less self-evident.
Places	The washing can be performed in any screened off area and can function as a very private ritual. The actual place of burial has a direct impact on the way the ritual cleansing is performed and perceived. It might cause the funerary rites to be split up and divided between people and places.

Time	Bereaved feel pressured to pursue a funeral within 24 hours, something that is not easily facilitated in the actual context. Repatriation of the body also stands in the way of a quick burial.
Objects	The washing requires mostly practical gear that is widely available. But people appear to go to great lengths to get additional material (incenses, leaves, shrouds) from their original context.
Languages, sounds	The primary ritual language is Arabic – a language not many have mastered. Due to that and the fact there no clear scripts available makes people insecure to participate. Dutch is only used as language of instruction (outside the ritual performance)
Senses	The scent of death is feared and counteracted by burning incense or with the addition of rose water or other perfumes to the water. Camphor is recommended in the actual context, it is easy to obtain and also mentioned in the <i>Quran</i> .
Commentary, Criticism	The diversity of Muslims, their different origins and their migration to a new context, gets the discussion going on what is ‘real Islam’: the Islam of the original context or an Islam stripped of cultural influences.

### 3. Further exploring ritual transfer: (re)imagining death rituals

By studying the transfer of the Islamic ritual of purification of the deceased and interconnected death rituals, insights are gained in the lives and motivations of the carriers of those rituals: Muslims living in the Dutch town of Venlo. The transferred death rites are in this actual context performed by a rather heterogeneous group of Muslims whose members still very much refer to their original contexts.

The process of ritual transfer was mapped by zooming in on the several ritual components and how they were (re)shaped in the concrete context of Venlo. Now I want to take a step back, zoom out, and take a look at the glue that apparently ties all these findings together: a process of (re)imagination that proceeds the presented ritual changes and at the same time illustrates how these changes are instigated.

#### 3.1. Re-imagining: fantasy expressed in narratives

Confronted with death in a new context, people are often forced to improvise because of the very different context. But they also lean on experiences, memories and (family) traditions they know from their home countries. In this way for most Muslims in Venlo (death) rituals are very much connected to their

context of origin. People are (re)imagining how the ritual was performed or even stronger: how the ritual should be performed in the original context and how to translate this to their actual context. This strong form of (re)imagination is referred to as 'fantasy' by Ronald Grimes: 'the fantasy of a ritual, more than the memory of it, often determines practice'.<sup>26</sup> Grimes defines this particular way of imagining as self-preoccupied and projective and that leads to reinvention of ritual.<sup>27</sup> This process of (re)imagining/fantasy concerns both contexts and how people relate to them and is expressed in an extensive body of narratives.

It is through these vivid narratives Muslims in Venlo express their ideas, attitudes and fantasies towards the two contexts. The same time these narratives very much influence how these Muslims think about death in the actual context and the rituals involved. Within different communities (ethnic groups, social groups, families but also internet forums and refugee centers) these stories originate and circulate. The narratives contain stories about personal experiences, religious regulations (like eternal grave rest), the Dutch ritual practice of death rituals (especially cremation), Dutch government regulations and how other Muslim communities in the new context practice Islam and Islamic ritual. These narratives very much influence the perception people have of their original context – the place they left often years ago or where they never even lived – that they are still referring to.

Through these narratives the original context is often romanticized and presented as an ideal world where in case of a death one can go to any neighbor and he or she will know how to proceed. This is often in contrast to the narratives that refer to the actual context which are very much shaped by the fact that here Muslims are a minority. This position makes it in some cases impossible to perform the ritual washing and shrouding according to a set tradition (religion, culture, family). The two contexts are in this way presented as opposites: an ideal and glorified original context and a problematized actual context. Muslims in Venlo are dealing with this tension through a genuine pursuit for clear guidelines to perform the ritual (or have it performed) in the right way. They consult or hire imams or other specialists, they attend courses, read books and internet sites that do provide clear and fixed guidelines and then borrow their authority to proceed. One would expect rituals to become more uniform, like it is already very much the case for Islamic burials in Venlo, that are very public and in which Muslim men of various backgrounds participate. But due to the private character of the ritual washing of the deceased, this phase of the funerary rites becomes a kind of refuge of ritual creativity.

<sup>26</sup> R.L. GRIMES: *Deeply into the bone. Re-inventing rites of passage* (Berkeley 2000) 111.

<sup>27</sup> GRIMES: *Deeply into the bone* 111.

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