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Islam as a symbol of protest:
Reactions of Dutch-Moroccan
youths to the Debate on Islam

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Abstract

In the ongoing public debate on Islam in the Netherlands it is now possible to openly criticise the faith, which is associated with backwardness, women's oppression and violence. The local Dutch situation cannot be isolated from the international developments regarding Muslim migrants in Europe and Muslims in the rest of the world. I shall argue that this debate and the current policy measures sharpen the division between non-Muslims and Muslims, between 'us' and 'them', and increase the feelings of social exclusion held by Muslim youths, while making Islam more attractive as a symbol of protest. I will refer to the anthropological research I conducted in a media technology context, through two case studies: the Computer Clubhouse in Amsterdam, where youngsters learn to use computer skills, and Moroccan websites which were set up by youths as a response to prejudice against them. Islam functions as a moral frame of reference in their daily lives. By calling their religion 'backward' they feel offended and not recognised. Their transnational orientation with other Muslims encourages them to perceive Islam as an attractive religion, as a symbol of pride but also protest, stimulated by negative associations with Islam and the social exclusion of Muslims in the West.

Keywords

Islam, information technology, second generation, protest, the Netherlands.

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Introduction

'We are here to stay, so get used to it'

A contributor of Moroccan origin on the website Marokko.nl (1-31-2006)

The statement made by the late Pim Fortuyn in 2001 that 'Islam is a backward religion has since become very popular in the Netherlands. It marked the end of a leftist discourse of political correctness and the beginning of a conservative discourse of 'new realism' (Prins 2002: 242). Fortuyn's assassination by a Dutch animal rights activist in May 2002 widened the growing gap. After this murder, violent incidents against Muslims, Islamic schools and mosques have risen (LBR 2005). In the ongoing Dutch public debate on Islam it became possible to openly criticise the faith, for instance, by focussing on the lack of enlightenment and the inferior position of women (Groen and Nicolassen 2004, Bartels 2005).

One of the critics is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somalia-born refugee and a Member of Parliament for the conservative Liberal Party. She has become a public figure in a very short space of time. As a former believer she expressed her difficulty with Islam exactly at the moment anti-Islamic discourse was emerging in the media (Ghorashi 2003: 163; Moors 2005). In order to show the subordinate position of Muslim women and its relationship to Islam Hirsi Ali and the filmmaker Theo van Gogh made a short movie called 'Submission', where Koranic texts were projected on half-naked bodies of veiled, ill-treated women. Her outspoken criticism and the movie led to numerous death threats culminating in van Gogh's murder in November 2004.

The local Dutch situation has its specific characteristics but cannot be isolated from the international developments regarding Muslim migrants in Europe and Muslims in the rest of the world. The transnational character of Islam has acquired more significance in the last few years and has taken numerous forms (Grillo & Soares 2005: 11). How sensitive and precarious this is, has been shown by the overwhelming reactions throughout the Muslim world to the cartoons published by a Danish newspaper in September 2005. These kinds of events are considered as new evidence by the media, and not only in the Dutch media, that Islam is not consistent with the western tradition of freedom of speech or democracy.

However, there are some quality Dutch newspapers that seek to open up this dominant anti-Islam discourse by paying attention to the views of scholars who

have studied Muslim communities and want to explain the perception of Muslims (Kieskamp 2005a, 2005b). The general tendency is that these liberal thinkers are strongly criticised and in line with the discourse of new realism accused of political correctness. For instance, Geert Mak – a well-known Dutch author who has written several best-selling works of historical non-fiction – wrote a short essay in which he compares the current status of Muslims as scapegoats with that of the Jews during World War II (Mak 2005a: 69). Although his counterstatement has received a lot of attention in the media, the debate was more concentrated on his comparison than on the content of this essay (NRC Handelsblad, 28 February 2005).

One has to conclude that a small group with views that do not fit in the main discourse is not able to change the climate of Islamophobia - a general hatred of Islam and its civilization - or at least affect the government's policy measures. This sensitive atmosphere was reason for several scholars to characterize Dutch society as being in a state of 'moral panic', namely that citizens are desperately looking for the roots of their national identity, which must articulate what it means to be Dutch and who is included and excluded (Ghorashi 2003: 165; Mak 2005a; Van Nieuwkerk 2004; Vasta 2005). Other researchers, such as Werbner (2004: 461-2), also apply the term 'moral panic' about Islam, the sense of a threat of social order were Muslims becoming scapegoats for the crisis. A similar tendency was observed regarding Muslims in Denmark, due to the polarized debate, which left little room for being Danish with a Muslim identity (Hervik 2006: 12).

In this debate the voice of Muslim youths is mainly missed, or in any case is hardly heard. How do they react? What are the effects of this debate and of policy measures on their daily situation? Do they feel included or excluded as Muslim citizens in Dutch society? I shall argue that this debate and the current policy measures sharpen the division between non-Muslims and Muslims, between 'us' and 'them', and increase the feelings of social exclusion held by Muslim youths, while making Islam more attractive as a symbol of protest, perhaps making them more susceptible to a process of radicalization. As the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk said in an interview in a Dutch newspaper: 'You must not call them stupid, but try to understand their anger' (De Volkskrant 2004). The anger is based not only on Dutch feelings of social exclusion, but is also related to the international conflicts of Muslims (Grillo and Soares 2005: 11; Ahmed 2003: 11). This transnational, global orientation of Muslims can merely be understood within the context of the

emergence of such media technology as the Internet, email and satellite television (Mandaville 2001).

In order to show the reactions of Muslim youth, I will first outline the framework I will use to interpret the current debate in terms of 'us' and 'them'. A brief overview of the social situation will be given, along with the look at exclusion of Muslims, in particular of Dutch Moroccans. The focus is on this group because in the debate attention is mostly concentrated on them, as they are currently the most contested group of migrants. They form a third of the 945,000 Muslims living in the Netherlands, which also consists of Turks and several smaller groups of migrants and refugees (Statistic Netherlands 2004). I will identify them as Muslims as well as Dutch Moroccans. Some relevant elements of Dutch integration policy will be discussed, which covers immigrant youth. In order to express the reactions of Dutch Moroccan youth, I will refer to the anthropological research I conducted in a media technology context, through two case studies: the Computer Clubhouse in Amsterdam, where youngsters learn to use computer skills, and Moroccan websites which were set up by youths as a response to prejudice against their group.¹

Us and them: the construction of the other

My starting point is that groups and individuals have different multiple identities, such as ethnicity, religion or gender, one or the other of which is stressed depending on context (Oommen 2002: 40). Identities are not just inherited, but are formed, and made, and are played out in different spaces and highlighted situationally (Werbner 2002: 266-7). For instance, this is the case with relation to Dutch Moroccan youths, who define themselves in terms of their Moroccan origin, their Islamic faith, or their Dutch citizenship. They probably feel more Dutch in Morocco and more Moroccan in the Netherlands. In addition, Moroccans as a group can be further divided, as the majority has a Berber origin, and the rest are of Arabic descent. The meanings they attach to these various characteristics are not static or contradictory, but are rather part of a dynamic process of identity formation in a specific social context. While the second generation of Moroccans was born in the Netherlands, I will refer to them as Dutch Moroccans, to show the double binding they have with both their country of residence and of origin.

However, in order to maintain one's identity, one has to sustain a boundary, although this is constantly contested and challenged. From the perspective of the

dominant society the national identity is that of the dominant mainstream, in which it is expected that other identities will be dissolved, or assimilated (Werbner 2002: 65). Those who are perceived to be disloyal and different, the 'foreigner' is created, and consequently, a division between 'us', the Dutch, and 'them' is made. As a result of this social categorisation, the 'other' is constructed, which is not necessarily negatively, it can have neutral or even positively associations, but regarding immigrants I assume it is (Oommen 2002: 111). The articulation of this process of 'otherness' is further strengthened by labelling them as inferior, less developed and as an outsider. However, one can speak of racism when the state uses their power to keep the 'other' away from jobs, politics, media and certain neighbourhoods. This last element is not yet the case in the Netherlands, but the first two elements can be already observed (Hervik 2004: 153).

Therefore, the categorization of second-generation Moroccans in public discourse as Moroccans, instead of Dutch citizens, is not as impartial as it looks at first sight. It is actually another way of confirming that they do not really belong to the nation. The same is also true for the Muslims; by their being associated with the 'other', their homogeneity is far more stressed than their heterogeneity, referring to their ethnic origins or religious interpretation. Following Van der Valk (2001: 4), discourse can be considered as a powerful mechanism is crucial in the reproduction of society and is mirrored in texts and discursive practices. Discourse does not only reflect social reality, but also constructs representations, which fit a particular ideology and influences social identities.

Since the attacks of 9/11, the murders of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh, Islam has become perceived as a threat to social cohesion and social security in Dutch society. Actually, this process of presenting Islam as an anti-Western religion was explicitly started in the 1990s with the statements of the conservative liberal leader Bolkestein² that Islam was a danger to a liberal democracy and would hinder the integration of immigrants (van der Valk 2001: 11). His speeches, interviews and book have been extensively analysed by a discourse researcher, who concludes that this political leader activated 'latent racism' by stating that 'we' are superior to 'them', associating Muslim immigrants as the 'other' with a negative-valued faith (van der Valk 2003: 198).

This presentation of the 'other' is also reflected in the critical way Dutch natives perceive Muslims and their lifestyle. According to a national survey, held in 1998, half of the respondents consider that Western and Muslim ways of life are

irreconcilable and 89% believe that Muslim men oppress women. Since then, such negative opinions have become even stronger (SCP 2005: 197). But also qualitative analysis of the thinking of 'ordinary Dutch people' shows how the presence of Muslim immigrants is a reason to worry, as they can form a threat to the stability of society. The overall opinion is that if immigrants do not adapt to Dutch laws and rules, it can undermine stability and the unity of the nation (Verkuyten 2004: 67-71). What is remarkable is that Dutch people, together with Germans, seem to be more negative towards Muslims than natives from France, Great Britain and America (SCP 2005: 197).

This existing antagonism, the construction of the 'other' as different and inferior, was easily evoked and capitalised upon by the populist Pim Fortuyn and his political party in 2000. After his death other political parties took over the discourse on the failure of the integration of immigrants (Penninx 2005: 11). In fact an appropriate climate was created for the integration policy measures to restrict further immigration. A hardening of the public debate took place. It became possible to openly state that immigrants had not put enough effort into finding work or learning the language, with the assumption that if they had done more, they would have become more integrated. The focus was in particular on Muslims, as their religion formed an obstacle to integration (van Nieuwkerk 2004: 233).

The measures that are considered to hinder further immigration, especially from Morocco and Turkey, mainly take the form of transnational marriages. For instance, bureaucratic rules have made it more difficult to marry a partner from the homeland by imposing higher income demands, increasing the age of marriage from 18 to 21 year and requiring would-be immigrants to learn some Dutch before coming to the Netherlands. This policy affects the majority of Moroccan and Turkish youths, as around 60% of this group marry a partner from their homeland. This policy has been effective because it has already decreased the numbers of transnational marriages (SCP 2005). Another important factor is that of double nationality, which the government regards as a dilemma for full integration into society. Although Moroccans are one of the groups of citizens who are not allowed to distance themselves from their nationality, this is contested repeatedly (Elsevier 2004).

This construction of the 'other' presupposes the existence of a strong, positive, collective self identity, which according to some critics the Dutch do not have (Van Rossum 2005). The arrival of Islam in Europe came at the same time

that European integration weakened national identities, which stimulated its countries to reflect more on their own national identity (Roy 2005: 7; Hervik 2004). Besides, if you ask immigrants to integrate, you have to be clear about a common national culture. Processes of globalisation, flexibilisation of labour markets, and individualization have become dominant forces – forces that people cannot influence or control. Citizens therefore have something to lose, which makes them fearful. In this climate of 'fear' and 'moral panic', national identity is questioned, what is it to be 'Dutch', what is the relationship of Dutch history with Protestantism, mercantilism, and tolerance? How much space is left for immigrants if Dutch national identity is defined by this specific history? These kinds of issues are now widely discussed in the media (e.g. Bolkestein 2003; Hilhorst 2004). It seems that national identity is being rather strictly articulated, without the recognition that people can have more than one identity, i.e. multiple identities, which can be flexible and dynamic, depending on the social context.

Social exclusion

In order to understand the reactions and anger of Dutch Moroccan youths, one needs to have some general background information on the social position of this group in the Netherlands and on Dutch integration policy. The number of the group (315,000) is quite small, but they are unevenly distributed and live mainly in the big cities in the western part of the country, in quite segregated, poor neighbourhoods (SCP 2003: 32).

Unemployment among Dutch Moroccans has risen in recent years and is higher than the figure for Dutch people, namely 27% compared with 9% (Dagevos 2006). Migrant youths have higher unemployment rates than native Dutch youths, but the Dutch Moroccans have the highest unemployment rate compared with other migrants. Even if one evaluates this percentage with differences regarding education level, knowledge of Dutch language and age, the unemployment rate for Dutch Moroccans is still higher than for native Dutch. This difference can be caused by inefficient search behaviour, but also by discrimination, however, this has not been systematically studied (SCP 2003: 219). Besides, in the public debate is this also not a theme of much awareness (LBR 2005). This lack of recognition of discrimination in the labour market can be regarded as an example of not

questioning the contribution of national institutions in the high rates of unemployment of migrants.

The problem of segregation in urban neighbourhoods is reflected in the segregation of the education system, especially at the primary and secondary level (ibid: 91). Although the situation is improving, the figures are worrying: over 50% attend lower level vocational schools and 16% of Dutch Moroccan pupils leave school without a diploma and become drop-outs. The figure for Dutch pupils is 5.5% (ibid: 133). Another problem is the shortage of apprenticeships, which are essential ways to finish secondary vocational schooling, which affects in particular the youth of different ethnic groups (Algemeen Dagblad 2004).

Another point of note regarding Dutch Moroccan youths, and particularly boys, is the high rate of criminality – such as, violence, robbery and theft – and their misbehaviour in public places and urban neighbourhoods (SCP 2005: 150). Together with Antillean boys of 18 to 24 years they form big groups of repeat-offenders (ibid: 151). The anti-social behaviour of Dutch Moroccan boys in particular in various multi ethnic quarters, such as Amsterdam, has received a lot of media coverage. According to the mayor of Amsterdam the media interest in one of these incidents was comparable with the queen's son's wedding. 'The nuance is lost', he commented (Kreling and Weeda 2006). However, it is striking that native Dutch boys between 12 to 17 years are more likely to be officially reprimanded for disturbing the peace than all the non-western immigrants put together (SCP 2005: 150). However, this comparison is never made in the public media.

To sum up, the social position of Dutch Moroccan youths is quite complicated. Although there is some progress in levels of education and in the labour market, most of them have to deal with stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, which receives little attention in the media and in policy (de Fey and Grubben 2004). It could be said that in terms of social exclusion Dutch Moroccan youths are at risk because of their low socio-economic status, disadvantaged position in the labour market, low education level and their residence in segregated neighbourhoods (Jehoel-Gijsberts 2003).

Two case studies

The Amsterdam Computer Clubhouse

In 2002 and 2003, I did fieldwork at the Amsterdam Computer Clubhouse, which is located in Amsterdam-West. Here, 42% of the inhabitants are of foreign origin; most are Moroccan, Turkish or Surinamese. This quarter has had a bad reputation since 1998, when a group of Dutch Moroccan boys rioted and got into a fight with a policeman. The affair made the national news (Zwaap 1998; Van Veen 1999). A special committee wrote a report on the problems in the neighbourhood and produced 56 recommendations for improvement. However, after three years, one of the members of this committee declared that nothing structurally happened; school drop-outs and criminality are still a problem (Schenk 2002).

There have been occasional confrontations with the police; sometimes the situation becomes quite tense, and just a single incident may lead to strong reactions and emotions. One of these incidents was caused by a police officer who shot dead a young Moroccan man during an argument in 2003, because he felt threatened by the knife the man had. The ensuing riots and a major demonstration in the neighbourhood provoked a lot of unrest among Dutch Moroccan youths. Since then, more problems with Dutch Moroccan youngsters hanging around and disturbing the peace have been mentioned in other neighbourhoods in the city, and also in the rest of the country (Kreling and Weeda 2006).

The Amsterdam Computer Clubhouse can be seen as one of the strategies by the local council to provide migrant youths with access to information and communication technology in order to give them a better chance in the labour market and combat social exclusion. However, another of the council's reasons is to keep the youths off the street. The Clubhouse has almost 200 male and female members, with a core group comprising 40-50 youths aged between 10 and 18. The members are assisted in their work on the computers by 20 volunteer mentors from different ethnic backgrounds and of different ages and educational levels, and by three staff members (Brouwer 2004).

During my research, I focused on the way the youths learned various computer skills. According to the youth workers, the boys and girls who visit the Clubhouse have low self-esteem. 'If you give them a compliment', they say, 'you realize that they are not used to it: they don't take it seriously. It seems as though they don't believe you, and they immediately make a joke about it. They never get

compliments at school or at home'. However, I also noticed that most of the jokes the visitors made were not as innocent as I had thought. They frequently referred in their own jokes to public debates about stereotypes of Moroccans as criminals or drug dealers, they challenged prejudices against Islam and they sometimes made positive comments about the 9/11 attacks. I wondered how I should interpret this kind of behaviour. Why did they make jokes about such sensitive issues?

After the filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam, I began to see things from a different perspective. The murderer – a 26-year-old man of Moroccan origin – had been raised in Amsterdam-West, the neighbourhood where the Computer Clubhouse is located. He was born in Amsterdam, is well educated and speaks Dutch fluently. When I heard more about his background, I began to see some similarities between him and the Clubhouse visitors. I am not referring to his adoption of a very orthodox version of Islam, or to his act of murder, but to his protest against the 'crusade' against Islam and Muslims, his transnational identification with the struggle of other Muslims in the world, and his use of the Internet to obtain information about Islam and to communicate with other Muslims in his transnational network (Chorus & Olgun 2004: 37). In fact, it looks like he could belong to the same category of young Dutch Moroccans I met at the Clubhouse. What are the grounds for their anger? Is it their social exclusion and not feeling accepted as Muslims in society?

All the Dutch Moroccan members of the Amsterdam Computer Clubhouse are Muslim, and they attach meaning to their religion in various ways. During Ramadan, I visited the Clubhouse and was surprised to see how seriously these young boys and girls took their fasting – although the atmosphere was sometimes quite agitated, because several of the boys were very hungry but did not want to admit it. However, during an interview with one of the junior mentors after Ramadan, I suggested stopping so that he could eat or drink something. 'No, it's no problem for me,' he said. 'We don't need to stop talking.' At another meeting, a boy wanted to light a cigarette directly after the end of the fast, until he realized that according to Islamic rules, he had to eat first. They say they feel guilty when they do something wrong.

The girls express their Islamic identity by wearing a headscarf, which has become a very important religious symbol and identity marker for Muslim girls in Dutch society. In the dominant discourse of the Islam debate, a headscarf is generally seen as a form of female oppression: the assumption is that girls have to

wear it and lack any freedom of choice. 'They never ask *us* why we wear a headscarf,' one Dutch Moroccan girl remarked, 'why all this attention for the Islamic headscarf and not for the Jewish cap or the Catholic cross?' Since the 9/11 attacks, girls with headscarves have increasingly had bad experiences in the public domain, and people on the street react to them aggressively. Anti-discrimination offices have recorded a rise in the number of complaints related to religion, especially those concerning the wearing of a headscarf (LBR 2004).

Several times I saw young boys surfing the Internet looking for a Muslim site; for instance, one boy who found a nice one copied the Ka'baa of Mecca as a screensaver complete with the Arabic singing. The singing attracted other boys, who then wanted to have the website on their computer's desktop. During teatime, one of the boys started to tell me about the Islamic feast of sacrifice, which he was to celebrate with his family. He invited me and a staff member to join the feast, because hospitality is part of Islam: 'As a Muslim, you must invite other people.' He continued, stressing that they would slaughter a sheep and eat the whole thing, even the eyes and brain. As he was saying that, he started laughing and looking for a reaction: would we be disgusted? How shall I interpret this story? In one way he shows how proud he is of his faith, but at the same time he challenged us by emphasizing the boundary between him as a Muslim and we as non-Muslims. He anyway made us easier to us not to accept the invitation.

Islam functions as a moral frame of reference in many occasions. As one boy explained to me, 'it's not possible to shout "fuck the Dutch!" and to steal and lie, and then start to pray and say that they are a Muslim.' He is convinced that real Muslims do not steal or lie. I heard this belief in Islam as a beautiful and peaceful religion many times. For instance, one Dutch Moroccan female student said: 'Why are Dutch people so afraid of Islam? Islam doesn't approve of violence.' When referring to the 9/11 attacks, she said that 'a terrorist cannot be a Muslim'. That is her firm conviction. The anthropologist Akbar Ahmed calls this one of the greatest paradoxes of the 21st century that Islam perceives itself as a religion of peace and tolerance, while it is currently associated with violence and murder (Ahmed 2003: 7-9). In his view it has to do with using the Quran selectively by Muslims and non-Muslims, for instance, the 9/11 events had nothing to do with Islamic theology. The clash between Islam and Western civilization is the solution, but dialogue and understanding Islam.

The music room at the Computer Clubhouse is very popular among the members, especially among the boys. The attraction is the possibility to tape your own music on a computer, make a beat, sing a song and copy it to a CD. After one 17-year-old Dutch Moroccan boy made his own rap song, many others followed him. Two boys won a rap contest and were invited to perform at multicultural festivals and protest meetings; one of them even appeared on television. He told me that:

I want to become a professional rapper. So I practice almost every day at the music studio at the Computer Clubhouse. When I sit down at the table to make a song, the sentences come automatically. It's easy. But to perform on television, you need guts. I'm proud of myself. I'm a Mokro of Lelylaan. I've had one bad experience with the police: I had to stay in prison for a few days, even though I was innocent. I made a song about this to express my anger. I cannot stand injustice.

After the incident with the police and the death of a Moroccan man in Amsterdam-West, he and a friend wrote a rap song about this event to express their anger. 'Why did the policeman shoot him? He only had a small knife.' During a big protest meeting in that neighbourhood, he was asked to sing his song, whereby he verbalized the anger of more Moroccans. The black youth worker of the Computer Clubhouse discussed with them the content of their songs and tried to stimulate some criticism among these boys. Several times he told them that they should not jump to conclusions and always believe that it is the fault of the police. He also stressed that he wants them to realize that they have to work twice as hard as Dutch natives, because he believes that they will never be accepted as Dutch, which he knows from his own experience.

These rappers are eager to participate in Dutch society; they want to finish school and be accepted as a Dutch citizen. This is expressed in their remarks that Dutch is their first language and that they do not know much about their country of origin, only what they learn while on holiday there. At the same time, they want to show their affinity with their Moroccan origin, by saying that they are proud to be Moroccan: 'I love my parents and respect them.' After their parents, they refer to their religion and God as important sources of inspiration.

While most of the boys opt for a combination of Dutch and Moroccan identity, one rapper considers himself as Dutch: 'I was born here and raised here, and I speak better Dutch than Arabic.' However, it is his experience that when he gets on a bus and takes a seat near an old lady, she keeps her bag away from him. He said that: 'I think then to myself, stay calm, say nothing, because the old lady will

always be right.’ These kinds of daily incidents are frequently shared with other Dutch Moroccan boys (Kammerman 2006). He has started to rap about these experiences, although he also writes about meaningless violence. Referring to the Iraq conflict and the Palestinian conflict, he stated that: ‘Small children are being killed in the war, or sometimes they’re forced to fight. In fact, it’s about all the wars.’ These rappers are able to verbalize some of the anger of their mates in rap songs and to reach a wider audience. Similarly, they also refer to international conflicts of Muslims word wide, expressing their transnational orientation and identification.

These Amsterdam rappers actually represent the more general phenomenon of an international hip hop youth culture, in which youngsters condemn their racist experiences in their protest songs (De Koning 2005). For instance, Silverstein and Tetreault (2005: 1) wrote that if people had listened to a specific rap song ten years ago, in which the police aggression was contested, they would not have been surprised by the urban violence in France in 2005. However, a Dutch Moroccan rap group discovered that, despite the discourse of new realism, not everybody can say what they think. They expressed their frustrations about Hirs Ali’s statements on Islam in a rap which was spread over the Internet, but they ultimately had to stand trial. The public prosecutor declared that they had crossed the limits of freedom of speech with their threats and accusations, and imposed a 150 work hours penalty and two weeks in prison (de Volkskrant 2005).

Moroccan websites

The Computer Clubhouse website was developed by a young man of Dutch Moroccan origin who set up his own enterprise in the new media sector, and is the owner of Marokko.nl – one of the Moroccan websites. Four years ago he started the site with some friends because of the bad image of Moroccans in Dutch society and their lack of a voice in public debate. ‘Too much has been written about Moroccans in the media, whilst too few Moroccans have consulted directly.’ He developed the website in order to fulfil this gap in communication. The site immediately became a success; in fact, the visitors took it over by their active participation in discussion boards. However, he is still not satisfied with the representation of Muslims and their international struggle, in the Dutch media. He and his friends have therefore added a news page to the website: ‘We base our sources on news offices, such as Al Jazeera. We trust these sources more than Dutch ones.’ In Denmark, as Hervik

(2006: 4) pointed out, this is this for some Muslim youth a reason to stop watching Danish television or reading Danish newspapers.

He is assisted in his work on the website by two young mentors, who have been active at the Clubhouse from the beginning. One of these boys - who is partly of Egyptian origin and partly Dutch – is also very critical of the way Islam is represented in the media. The boy told me about the media that:

They are busy in a wrong way. Do you know the expression, 'The elephant is still in the room?' The problem's still there. The stories are made bigger than they are in reality. Dutch people don't know anything about Islam; it depends on how you put your religion into practice. Fundamentalists who follow the principles of Islam are not bad.

To illustrate this, he told me about the time his father, who is a well-known imam, came to the Clubhouse; the female coordinator wanted to shake hands with him, but his father was not allowed to do so because of his religion. Another Dutch Moroccan boy laughed at this. 'I would find it very difficult to do this.' The son of the imam first sought to explain his father's behaviour. He said: 'People see it as an insult, but that's not the case. In Egypt we say, it starts with a glance, a smile, a word, a date, a hand and problems'. This is indeed a small incident, but in another social context, the Dutch minister of Integration had this same experience. At a meeting with fifty imams, conferencing on Dutch norms and values, one imam from Syria refused to give the minister a hand as a Muslim. The minister, who was "not amused", responded with the words that "I am equal to you; in that case we have enough to talk about" (NOVA 2004). This incident received a great deal of media coverage. Although the minister received some criticism and some Muslims tried to explain the attitude, the incident still confirmed the general opinion that this imam, and thus Islam, does not respect women (Elsevier, 23 November 2004).

Referring to integration issues, according to one of the boys of the Computer Clubhouse:

'Integration must come from two sides. I can see both sides as I know them both. I feel comfortable in both cultures. Although to the Dutch I'll always be of foreign descent, to those of foreign descent, I'll always be Dutch.'

These kinds of views can be observed in debates on the website of Marokko.nl, which provides seven general discussion boards on, among other topical issues, Islam, and marriage and relationships. These public digital forums can be read by everyone who has access to the Internet, but in order to post a message one must be a member and register with an email account. More than 99,000 people have already done this, and not only Dutch Moroccans, but also Dutch people and other

youths from diverse ethnic backgrounds (March 3, 2006; Brouwer and Wijma 2006). In particular, after the murder of Theo van Gogh the number of contributions on the discussion boards doubled (Oegema in Thie 2005). As a Dutch Moroccan girl explained to me: "I was so angry, I was eager to express my opinion."

The busiest discussion board on the website is the forum of 'Moroccan youth and topical issues', consisting of more than 26,000 subjects, raised by 750,000 participants. Discussions on Islamic topics or current political conflicts in Palestine or Iraq have the most contributions and page views. For instance, the results of a survey among Dutch people, who became more anxious about Islam following the conflict arising from the publication of the Danish cartoons, had 5500 page views and 625 responses in two weeks (3 March 2006). However, these online topical debates are almost as polarized as the public debates in the media, if we take into account the abusive language and the many jokes that the different contributors use. Because of the anonymity of the online debates, it is easy to participate, and therefore, moderators monitor the development of these often heated discussions and ban contributors who discriminate or threaten others.

There are currently roughly more than thirty Moroccan websites, but Marokko.nl is one of the most popular and biggest sites. The transnational orientation of the second-generation Dutch Moroccans becomes particularly apparent in their specific interest in other Muslims around the world. Through satellite television and the Internet they are more informed about the struggles of Muslims worldwide, with which they feel emotionally connected. One of the Dutch Moroccans I spoke with, said that she

'...identifies absolutely with the struggle of Palestinians. I feel powerless, I can do nothing. Palestinians are treated inhumanely by the Israeli government. The Jews have experienced the same treatment, but now they act in the same way towards the Palestinians.'

She then mentioned other international Muslim conflicts that are also discussed on the websites, such as Kashmir, Chechnya, and the Moluccans. "As a Muslim", she said, "I don't differentiate between ethnicities. You form a community with all the Muslims worldwide; it doesn't matter where you come from". This ideology of solidarity, 'the idea of *ummah*, the global Islamic "imagined" community, is strongly shared by other Muslims, especially when they are involved in a conflict with a Western country (Grillo and Soares 2005: 11; Werbner 2004: 467). These kinds of events lead to an increased sense of transnational community, which in the words

of Grillo and Soares (ibid), forms a 'transnational Muslim public sphere', including Europe as well as the Muslim world.

Although the debates on the forum of Dutch Moroccan websites stimulate internal communication between Dutch Moroccans, and sometimes with Dutch people, in terms of a wider contribution to the public debate they are not able to counter the anti-Islam discourse - rather the contrary. As the site owner stated:

Journalists only quote the extreme views of Dutch Moroccan youths from the forum page. This again confirms the negative stereotype of this group. It is said that 'Every religion has extreme forms or rotten apples'. For instance, they should have a look at Jewish sites.

Although the phenomenon of websites draws more and more attention in the media, as the site owner indicated, this is principally to stress the dangers of it and to quote the radical views that are now and then expressed (Labovic 2005; Schouten 2005: 7). The murderer of Theo van Gogh was an active contributor to one of the Moroccan websites and as a consequence the National Secret Service keeps a regular watch on the content of the discussions (Van Ringelestijn 2005). Therefore, merely focussing on the negative part of this phenomenon is one-sided, and overlooks the potential of this means of giving excluded youths a voice to express their (counter) views, and to communicate with each other, and also to the exchange of views with Dutch people (see also Wheeler 2002).

Conclusion: Islam symbol for protest

The dominant tone in public debate, at a national as well as an international level, expresses what could be called Islamophobia, a phenomenon which seems to be growing (Ahmed 2003: 8). The 9/11 attacks in America, and the international conflicts with Muslim countries, as well as local Dutch events, have contributed to this climate and to the moral panic that followed. Islam is associated with backwardness, women's oppression and violence, and people were able to express this more openly in this new discourse of 'new realism', referring to freedom of speech. Since then, the gap between non-Muslims and Muslims, between 'us' and 'them', has become more outspoken. By associating Islam and Muslim immigrants with these negative values, a specific 'other' has been constructed. In this context policy measures have been taken in order to restrict further emigration and stimulate integration. The Netherlands is not unique in this kind of representation of

Muslims in the media. This can be noticed too in other European countries, such as Denmark or France (Hervik 2004; Van der Valk 2003: 202).

The negative image of Islam in public discourse, as might be imagined, is not shared by Dutch Moroccan youths themselves. Islam has a totally different meaning for them. As some of them say, they are proud to be a Muslim, it functions as a moral frame of reference in their daily lives. By calling their religion 'backward' they feel offended and not recognised, which can lead to different forms of protest as means of coping with these accusations (Waardenburg 1984: 28). As Waardenburg noticed, Islam has had, since its foundation, a 'marked reform and protest character' (ibid: 22). This appeal to Islam to express protest can take different forms, which for the group themselves can symbolise a true religious feeling or right moral action. It is also worth noting that Islam can actually play an ideological role, where there may be no other (religious) reasons involved (ibid: 23).

Although the youngsters of the Clubhouse perceive their religion as a very significant part of their identity, they do not feel the need to express this by frequent visits to the mosque, or by becoming part of an Islamic movement. However, for a small group of Muslim youths, for instance the murderer of Theo van Gogh, the lack of recognition was one of the breeding grounds for a growing interest in radical Islamism. Schiffauer explains how central this concept is in understanding the attraction of these particular groups for Muslim youths, as they can find recognition, which they lack in mainstream society, without losing contact with their community (1999: 10).

As second-generation Dutch Moroccans have multiple identities, depending on the social context, one of these may be highlighted. For instance, when they look for an apprenticeship, if they are a pupil, or try to find a job, when they finish school, some of them encounter difficulties and discrimination in the labour market. Or girls who wear a headscarf may come across similar problems, discovering that their Muslim identity cannot be combined with their Dutchness. They realize that they do not have the same possibilities or rights as Dutch youths, even though they were born in the Netherlands. These kinds of experience make it very hard for them to identify with the country, as Schiffauer also points out in relation to the Muslim youths in Germany (1999: 10).

Another form of protest or reaction to social exclusion can be aggression (Schiffauer 1999: 10). From this perspective we can look at anti-social behaviour differently when considering small groups of Dutch Moroccan boys in the

neighbourhoods of big cities, which increase the level of prejudice. The urban disturbances which occur can also be interpreted as a means of protest for marginalised youths. Some comparisons have already been made with the French riots, even though the situation there is very different from that in the Netherlands. For example, the poor quality of housing and the lack of public transport to the city make these quarters more isolated than the Dutch suburbs. The same is true for the French political system of *laïcité*, which formally means that all inhabitants are primarily considered as French citizens. The riots were spontaneous, and not organised by certain groups. For instance, Islamic associations did not manage to organise the anger of the second generation (Silverstein and Tetrault 2005: 11). Although youth unemployment, school failure, police harassment and discrimination are higher in France than in the Netherlands, the outcome of social exclusion and lack of recognition can be seen as similar (Silverstein and Tetrault 2005: 4).

Although their experience with social exclusion can lead to a form of passive victimisation, as is often observed, the opposite also happens, as some of them really become actively engaged. Through the availability of information communication technology, they are able to make their own rap songs or launch websites, which give them a voice. Making your own rap music is very popular among Dutch Moroccan youths, as well as among other youngsters of different ethnic backgrounds, and it provides them with the opportunity to articulate their own experiences and opinions in song.

Criticizing the way Muslims are represented in the media is another reason for young Dutch Moroccans to launch a website. These websites create a new space for those who are marginalised in the public debate, and give them a chance to define counter views. On the discussion boards of these sites very lively debates are conducted about a great variety of topics, mainly initiated by Dutch Moroccans, but sometimes by Dutch, or youths of other ethnic backgrounds. Regarding the intensity of the discussions on topical issues public discourse has been almost reproduced, but with the crucial difference that Dutch Moroccans participate actively in these discussions.

When we look at the themes the visitors are interested in, these highlight great interest in all kinds of issues referring to Islam, and in the conflicts of other Muslims worldwide. Dutch Moroccans seem to identify themselves with Muslims, if we take into account the many page views and contributions to these topics on the forums. The local division between 'us', the Dutch, and 'them', the Muslims as the

'other', reflect the unequal power relationship between the West and East on a global scale. This transnational orientation of Dutch Moroccan youths stimulate them more and more to perceive Islam as an attractive religion, as a symbol of pride but also protest, stimulated by negative associations with Islam and the social exclusion of Muslims in the West.

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Notes

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² Bolkestein, as a senior European commissioner, expressed these same views on Islam in his opposition against Turkey's membership to EU fourteen years later, in 2005.

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