Islam, locality and trust: making Muslim spaces in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The development of an Islamic infrastructure by Muslims with a migrant background in European contexts has hardly been addressed as expressing a sign of putting down local roots, but rather as an activity that contradicts such a process. However, the various ways in which Muslim migrants have built up local Muslim spaces, both now and in the past, are ordinary modalities of locality production. This is a contentious, complex, and multifaceted dynamic. By unpacking a historical and a contemporary case, I shall address three broad questions: (1) What are the conditions for Muslim space-making? (2) What are the evolving and contested notions of space and locality that are being produced over time, and what are the religious underpinnings of this process? (3) Who are the main actors and what are the power configurations in which this process unfolds?

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 18 February 2020; Accepted 2 November 2020

KEYWORDS Muslim spaces; Islam and migration; governance of Islam; locality; trust; urban charisma

Introduction

The question of how we should define locality in a “dramatically delocalized world”, as Appadurai (1996, 178) puts it, adequately captures a major conundrum that characterizes the spatial dimensions of the presence of Muslims in Europe who have a migrant background. That migration to and settling in Europe by Muslims is first and foremost a spatial act is almost a truism. But precisely for that reason the spatial underpinnings of this process are too often taken for granted and not rigorously addressed. Mosques, as the most obvious visible signs of this process, became part of the built environment in the urban centres in these European contexts from the 1960s onward. Their number, size and architectural features were taken as an indication of the stage of this settling process. The basic point of departure in
many studies is that the institutionalization of Islam is primarily an accommodation issue, with its concomitant negotiation, planning and legal ramifications.¹

I question that perspective because it is too limited. It conceives of the institutionalization of Islam primarily as a particular mode of governance. This approach, however, ignores Muslims’ future prospects and negates the agency at work.² As Wimmer and Schiller (2002, 324) argue, studies on migration have been narrowed down to the question of how nation-states integrate migrants. In many policy reports, Islam is conceived of as a “foreign cultural trait”, i.e. as migrants’ religious baggage, and consequently initiatives to make space for Islam are generally considered not conducive to integration. Such a line of thinking has become stronger in recent years. Even though Muslims have legal rights as a religious group, in an increasing number of situations politicians are asking for additional (exceptional) measures that only concern Muslims, prompted by their double position as a religious minority and as migrants (Rath and Sunier 1994; Sunier 2018; see also Allievi 2006; Amir-Moazami 2018).

In this article, I start from the proposition that Muslim space-making among migrants is one of the most fundamental aspects of the settling of Muslims in Europe, but it is not an exceptional process.³ The various ways in which Muslims have built up local Muslim spaces, now and in the past, are modalities of the ordinary production of space (see Lefebvre 1991). It is a complex, multi-faceted dynamic that needs to be unpacked and I shall do this by answering three broad questions: (1) What are the conditions for Muslim space-making? (2) What are the evolving and contested notions of space and locality that are being produced over time, and what are the religious underpinnings of this process? (3) Who are the main actors and what are the power configurations in which this process unfolds?

While these questions are also relevant for “indigenous” Muslims in Europe, my analysis here focuses on Muslims with a migrant background. To answer them, I shall address two sets of cases. The first set deals with developments in the 1980s and 1990s in the city of Rotterdam, a city with a relatively large Muslim population compared to other Dutch cities. This was a time of rigorous urban renewal. Many neighbourhoods in the city were being demolished to make way for the construction of new houses. This urban renewal was motivated by a desire to improve residents’ living conditions, to gentrify the areas concerned and to get rid of the impoverished image of the city as a whole. It was also a time when Muslims were building up a religious infrastructure, predominantly in the areas where the urban renewal was planned. This case demonstrates how contesting notions of space-making were at the heart of the negotiations and the role played by local community leaders.
The second set of cases are three portraits of Muslim actors whose activities and strategies are examples of contemporary local space-making and the building of a local social texture. They are cases that emerged from research carried out in the 2010s. The first portrait is of a Salafi imam in the city of The Hague who put a lot of energy into overcoming inter-religious tensions in order to build local inter-communal trust; the second describes the work of the former director of a local Muslim umbrella organization in the city of Rotterdam; and the third deals with so-called “neighbourhood fathers” in poor residential areas in the city of Utrecht. My use of personal portraits as a way to present my findings and to elaborate my argument here, allows me to explore particular notions of locality that they exhibit.

A comparison between the developments in Rotterdam in the 1980s and 1990s and the three contemporary portraits shows the temporal and contextual nature of Muslim space-making and the variety of strategies and religious and social registers that are deployed in different circumstances. Before I delve into the cases, I shall first elaborate my key concept: “the production of locality” and its constituent elements.

Space, locality and Islam

The term “Muslim spaces”, which I use in the title of this article, is a generic term, denoting spatial activities of Muslims. I tend to avoid using the adjective “Islamic” as much as possible because it would create confusion about what “Islamic” means, so when I refer to making Muslim spaces, I focus on activities by Muslims. Whether or not they conceive of them as Islamic is an empirical question. The production of locality by Muslims is a particular mode of space-making.

Opening a mosque, or a Muslim cemetery or school are obvious examples of space-making by Muslims. However, space-making and locality production by Muslims should not be confined to physical, institutional and legal signs of their presence, or as the outcome of negotiations with governments. The production of locality by Muslims can also be a spiritual act.

As a concept, I borrow the “production of locality” from Appadurai (1996). He argues that locality is not just a matter of scale; it is about producing recognizable and reliable environments and subjects. This approach comes close to what Tweed (2006) calls “inhabiting” in his encompassing theory of religion. Inhabiting is part of a more general process that he calls “dwelling”. Dwelling is a three-fold process of designing, building and inhabiting. The last process encompasses inhabiting (religious) life-worlds, physically and morally as well as mentally and experientially. The call upon Muslims by “Islamic State” around 2015 was an invitation not just to migrate to the caliphate, but also to subscribe to the discursive and spiritual boundaries of this realm and to inhabit it.
Tweed’s spatial approach provides a useful point of entry for the study of the spatial dimensions of the Muslim presence in Europe. However, I would add another important aspect of dwelling, namely its contentious and collective character. These aspects are particularly relevant in space-making among migrants. Religious dwelling should include an analytical distinction between top-down processes of order-building and bottom-up practices of creating and inhabiting life worlds. The top-down process of dwelling is about order building and design. The most obvious agents here are states, but in fact it concerns any governing body including formal Muslim organizations. Dwelling, then, is a spatial and epistemic intervention, a mode of governance. Elsewhere, I have referred to this top-down order building as “domestication” (of Islam) as a particular mode of governance with the aim of “fixing” Muslims in national territories and national legislative structures of the national state. States define religious communities (including indigenous ones) as governable domesticated categories based on an imaginary of how the nation-state is forged. Domestication becomes manifest in policy documents, public administrative bodies and political institutions (Sunier 2014; see also Mahmood 2015). In contrast, bottom-up dwelling or locality-making refers to collective activities, initiatives and alliances by city dwellers. Top-down order building and bottom-up locality-making may collide and give rise to power struggles and clashes of interest.

Locality is a fragile social condition that must be constantly reproduced and re-established. Bottom-up locality production by city dwellers implies a number of crucial conditions. A central notion in Appadurai’s approach is reliability (1996, 181). The production of locality is the production of reliable locals and the building of trust. In organization sciences, the concept of trust is often mainly addressed dealing with internal coherence and loyalties and corporate identity in organizations. In political sciences, trust is also being applied and explored to understand nation-building and the making of citizens (see Putnam 1994, 2007; Tonkiss et al. 2000; Engler 2003).

My understanding of trust, however, is closer to the way Appadurai addresses locality. The quest for trust is an answer to processes such as globalization and digitization, to the top-down epistemic and political domination by states and, in the case at hand, to the uprooting effects of migration. Geschiere (2013), in his study on witchcraft, points to the close relation between trust and intimacy and argues that trust is never an ontological certainty but an emphatically situational quality. The changing nature of communal trust is one of the crucial modalities of my analysis in the following pages, shaping the ongoing processes of establishing roots and the redefinition of belonging.

Locality could easily be understood as the counter-narrative to globalization and the digitization of all spheres of life, but this interpretation would reduce locality-production to a reactionary conservative endeavour.
Additionally, the growth of modern digital media, the digitization of all spheres of life and the emerging transnational networks among Muslims, should not be conceived of as the opposite of locality-production. On the contrary, the “local” is a site of everyday practices that links global processes with the fabric of daily human experience and the reconstitution of community. Thus, globalization and digitization have given locality-production a new and unprecedented meaning and salience.

As my cases will show, local leaders and collective actors play a decisive role in the production of locality and they must have a sufficient amount of trust and authority in order effectively to build trustful local communities. In many studies on the institutionalization of Islam, leaders are perceived only as representatives of formal organizations, or as official religious authorities such as imams. There is hardly any analysis of their persuasive qualities (or the lack thereof) and their role in the reconfiguration of local communities.

Effective urban leaders have what Hansen and Verkaaik (2009, 13) call “urban charisma”. Thus, charismatic figures:

[... ] emerge on the basis of their capacity to interpret, manage and master the opacity of the city. The specificity of the urban can neither be understood through the city’s functions nor the dynamics of its social networks. The urban is also a way of being in the world and must be understood as a dense and complex cultural repertoire of imagination, fear and desire. We propose to understand the urban and its charismatic potential through three registers: the sensory regimes of the city; the specific forms of urban knowledge and intelligibility; and the specific forms of power, connectivity and possibility which we call urban infra-power. (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009, 5–8)

Charisma here is understood in a broader sense than the very specific extraordinary qualities of a few individuals that Weber has described (Riesebrodt 1999). Thus, “charisma in the city rests on special forms of knowledge, networks, connectedness, courage and daring that enable some individuals to assume leadership” (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009, 9). The urban knowledge to which the authors refer brings two relevant concepts to mind. The first is what Scott (1998, 311) coins as metis. Metis is slightly reminiscent of Geertz’s (1983, 168) concept of “local knowledge”, or “culture in practice”. Scott juxtaposes standardized abstract knowledge deployed by state agencies with forms of knowledge that are embedded in local experience. The ancient Greek term “metis” can be translated as practical knowledge, according to Scott, but it would be too simple to confine the implications of the term to skills, or cunning intelligence, or as referring to the actual application of rules and principles. Metis is experiential knowledge that is effective only contextually and locally (Scott 1998, 323). I consider the notion of metis or local knowledge as extremely relevant for the analysis of social processes at a local level.
In their study on religious place-making among migrants, Manuel Vasquez and Kim Knott distinguish three dimensions of migrants’ religious space-making: embodied performance, the spatial management of difference and belonging, and multiple embedding across networked spaces (2014, 326). They argue that “religion provides the resources through which people craft moral—and affectively charged—maps that not only reflect and buttress the logic of spatial regimes, but may also offer tools to challenge them, to introduce heterogeneity by building alternative utopias” (2014, 327). These insights are very relevant to understanding how religion and space-making are mutually constitutive.

The spiritual underpinnings of locality-production can best be understood as acts of spiritual home-making. By putting doctrinal obligations and principles into practice, the practitioner embarks on an experiential journey to end up in a new home, an “alternative utopia” and to turn Muslim spaces into Islamic spaces. Ultimately, this reshapes the notion of community and the senses of belonging, rootedness and home-making.

A good example here is the so-called “Polder Mosque” in Amsterdam. There have been several attempts to set up a “Dutch mosque” that would sever ties with countries of origin, break away from the ethnically divided landscape, and use Dutch as the dominant language. One of these initiatives was the “Polder Mosque”. It was a statement directed to established Islamic authorities who wanted to stick to the idea that Muslims should turn to Muslim majority countries for spiritual guidance. The founders emphasized that the initiative was an attempt to “Dutchify” Muslim spaces.

**The research**

As I have indicated, I contend that space-making among Muslims is more than a negotiation process about institutional arrangements. To substantiate this argument, I shall use the results of research projects I conducted between the beginning of the 1990s and 2017. The first case is based on ethnographic research I conducted for my PhD in the city of Rotterdam from 1989 until 1995. I frequented about half of the existing 40 mosques in various parts of the city, spoke with board members and visitors and attended meetings. I spoke with municipal servants and politicians, attended meetings with the municipality, took part in discussions and conducted a series of interviews with individual Muslims in the city. Although the original aim of the research and the theoretical approach were different and not directly related to the conceptualization of locality, a re-reading of my material has given me a new perspective on the developments and negotiations.6

The portraits of contemporary local Muslim leaders are based on the results of a research project about Islamic authority in the Netherlands, which ran from 2013 to 2018.7 One part of this research project was an
extended ethnographic case study of a number of local and national leaders with a Muslim background to understand how their authority within the community comes about and what role Islam plays in this. Between the two projects, is a time break of over two decades, which gives insights into how space-making by Muslims in the Netherlands evolved over time.

**Localizing Islam in Rotterdam**

In the early 1990s, I witnessed an intriguing discussion in a local community centre between a representative of the Rotterdam municipality and a spokesperson of a number of mosque organizations in the city. The first had just sketched the outline of the plan they were developing for the accommodation of mosques, particularly in those parts of the city where large-scale renovation and reconstruction projects were being planned. An important part of this plan was to replace the small-scale makeshift neighbourhood mosques with a big new eye-catching mosque outside the residential areas. This plan was not only motivated by a desire for the physical improvement of the neighbourhood; the municipality also wanted to “unravel the functions” of mosques. Most of the local mosques had a tea house and functioned as a local community centre for migrant workers. These characteristics were considered counter-productive to the integration of migrants with an Islamic background, so a “disentanglement of functions” was necessary (Rotterdam Municipality 1991, 39). The newly-built mosque should therefore only be used for religious activities.

The municipality intended to close down the local makeshift mosques and facilitate the building of a new big mosque outside the immediate residential area. Although many Muslim representatives were in favour of such an eye-catching mosque, they also wanted to keep the small local mosques “round the corner” for their daily practice. The spokesperson, much to the surprise of the civil servants, explained that most Muslims were not at all happy with the idea of replacing the existing small mosques with a big one outside the neighbourhood. A newly-built mosque was fine, but could in no way make up for the crucial functions of small mosques “round the corner”. According to the representative, they contributed to the establishment of local roots by Muslims and he added:

> If a Muslim who came here as migrant worker is not able to meet with similar people every now and then, how would you expect this person to become a local? If you separate all these important functions from a purely religious service as you guys tend to do, it will also take away the opportunity to blend in with the neighbourhood.  

The mosque associations’ spokesperson tried to explain that a small local mosque is not only more conducive of integration than an “abstract” building
stripped of its community functions, but also makes the neighbourhood a meaningful place for Muslims.

Compared to other Dutch cities, Rotterdam is a city with a relatively large number of Muslim inhabitants from various geographic and ethnic backgrounds. The wide-reaching urban renewal plans necessitated a firm and effective line of communication between the municipality and the local population. Previous urban renewal projects partly failed because of the absence of a good and regular communication infrastructure. At the time when the urban renewal programme started in the late 1980s, the majority of the local Muslims were migrants. They were initially housed in boarding houses, so-called “guest worker houses”. With the arrival of families in the late 1970s and 1980s, they would move to normal houses in the same area. Not very surprisingly, the houses in which families settled were in bad shape and thus cheap. It was precisely these blocks that would now be demolished.

In roughly the same period and as a consequence of the settlement of migrant families, a rapid increase in Islamic accommodation took place. Among the Muslim migrants, there was a growing demand for religious accommodation. Already from the mid-1970s onwards, small makeshift neighbourhood mosques had appeared. Most of them were in ordinary houses where the living-room would function as prayer room. After some time, these mosques would develop into places were migrants would gather to drink tea and chat with fellow-migrants. Many of these mosques were not only ethnically specific, but were often also visited by people from the same district, even sub-district in the country of origin (Sunier 1996).

Toward the end of the 1980s, the number of makeshift mosques had increased more than tenfold. This mushrooming of religious accommodation, as it was called, was of course related to the growth of the Muslim population, but it was also the result of fierce competition between Islamic movements based in the countries of origin. These movements created an Islamic infrastructure that has been depicted as “Muslim enclavisation” (see Schierup 1992). An essential building block of this infrastructure was the strong emotional attachment of the migrant population to their countries of origin. In everyday matters, these Muslims’ commitment to Islam was inextricably linked with other allegiances such as family and the local village or region of origin (Sunier and Landman 2015). Religion is a broad register that links emotion, affect, and senses of belonging and binds individuals to political and cultural projects of collective actors and states (Sunier, van der Linden, and van de Bovenkamp 2016; see also Levitt 1998; Werbner 2002; Vásquez and Marquardt 2003).

The Rotterdam municipal authorities not only needed spokespersons in the Muslim communities with whom to communicate regarding the urban renewal plans, but also had concerns about the rapid increase in the number of local makeshift mosques. Therefore, by 1984, contacts with local
mosques were already intensifying. Meetings were held at regular intervals with imams, who were invited to the town hall for that purpose, were seen as more than spiritual leaders; they were presented as community leaders and their imagined function would extend far beyond their religious tasks.

In 1988, an umbrella organization for mosques in Rotterdam and the neighbouring region (Stichting Platform Islamitische Organisaties Rijnmond, SPIOR) was founded with a subsidy from the municipality. Officially, SPIOR became the representative of the majority of the mosques in the region in consultation with politicians and civil servants, but in fact it became the voice of the Muslim population in general. At a time when the majority of Muslims were first-generation migrants with a weak social position and who hardly spoke Dutch, representational organizations such as SPIOR were crucial for building up a religious infrastructure and sustainable contacts with Dutch authorities. This development was particularly relevant in the ethically and ideologically divided organizational landscape.

Despite the strategic considerations based on the increasing number of Muslims in the areas under discussion and the growth in the number of mosques, the policy change was more than a pragmatic decision; it also implied a shift in policy principles: migrants “turned into” Muslims, who should be represented by Muslim organizations. Rotterdam was the first city in the Netherlands to develop an integrated policy for the institutionalization of Islam. In so doing, they acknowledged Muslims as a specific category of the population, with specific wishes and claims.

There is no doubt that this was beneficial for Muslims in the city, but it also had a downside. The revolution in Iran in 1979, the assassination of Egypt’s President Sadat in 1981 and other dramatic developments in the Muslim world, made Islam a hot topic in the media. As a result, the religious background of migrants became a matter of public interest. The heightened awareness that a large proportion of the migrants were Muslims contributed to the “Islamisation” of Muslim migrants and their religious background was over-emphasized to explain their moods and motivations. Migrants with completely different backgrounds were subsumed into the concept of “Muslim culture” (Rath and Sunier 1994). Thus, “although the position of migrants was the result of a complex interplay of economic, social, political, and ideological factors, assumptions about the nature of Islam became a dominant explanatory factor” (Sunier 2018, 59). As a result, “Muslim” developed into a policy category (see also Allievi 2006; Spielhaus 2010; Brubaker 2013).

Toward the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, two seemingly contradicting developments became manifest in Rotterdam. On the one hand, the ethically and ideologically divided Muslim organizational landscape represented by SPIOR provided civil servants and policy-makers in the city with an effective means of communication for their urban renewal plans. As a result, organizations of Muslims became firmly entrenched in
neighbourhood politics, thereby expanding and intensifying their networks and contacts with relevant persons and institutions. Imams, spokespersons and board members of local mosques, and representatives of SPIOR became cultural brokers who acted as important intermediaries between the Muslim migrant communities and society, a role that was fostered by the policy shift on the part of the Rotterdam municipality.

On the other hand, the gradual integration of this specific organizational field into the city, together with the extension and intensification of contacts, interactions and cooperation with politicians, civil servants and other municipal institutions, produced an intriguing side-effect. Within Muslim organizations, which were still firmly connected to the countries of origin, a discussion emerged about future strategies and priorities. Most of the first-generation leaders clearly prioritized a continuing orientation towards countries of origin over a stronger orientation towards the Netherlands. They were first and foremost Turkish or Moroccan, rather than Dutch, Muslims with strong ties and loyalties back home. For established leaders, these ties were also crucial for the maintenance of their dominant position in the community.

In the 1990s, an increasing number of these “first-generation” leaders were replaced by younger people who had lived most of their lives in the Netherlands. Many of these new leaders was in favour of a stronger orientation towards the Netherlands and more investment in better relations with society. They saw opportunities in the new municipal policies for a more sustainable and stable future for Islam in the city. In other cities, similar developments took place, but were less distinct. Rotterdam, no doubt, was a forerunner in those years, but the particular conjuncture of developments and policy decisions presented more favourable circumstances and opportunities than in other cities.

The 1990s were transitional in this regard. Under the influence of the involvement of a younger generation in organizations, policy agendas gradually changed towards a stronger orientation toward Dutch society (Sunier 1996), and young Muslims began to think seriously about what a “Dutch Islam” would entail. The increasing upward social mobility of Muslims, and their transformation from migrants to permanent residents in European societies, caused a growing awareness among young Muslims that they were an integrant part of society. Muslim organizations wanted to move from being organizations of “foreigners” to recognition as organizations of Dutch Muslim citizens. Whereas enclavisation was an effective strategy in the 1980s, the new generation in the 1990s argued that no fundamental contradiction existed between being a Muslim and being a Dutch citizen. According to this new generation, the strategy of the brokers in the 1980s who emphasized the role of Muslims as victims and outsiders became increasingly counter-productive in the eyes of this new generation (Sunier 2018).
Some Muslim leaders adopted a strategy of pillarisation. By referring to the Constitution they stated Muslims as members of a religious community should have the right to set up their own institutions just as Catholics, Protestants and Jews were entitled to do (Sunier 2018). The strategy of pillarisation was based on strong trans-local and corporate religious community alliances in which they thought that the existing organizational landscape should be incorporated. Some local Muslim leaders, however, considered this strategy distracted from efforts Muslims were making to become part of the local community.

Parallel to these politically informed developments, there were initiatives in the late 1990s and early 2000s to discuss and reflect upon the idea of an Islam that was no longer fuelled, informed and even controlled from the “outside”. Those in favour of a “Dutch Islam” had to struggle on two fronts: on the one hand, against established Muslim organizations with strong ties to their countries of origin, but, on the other, against Dutch dominated integration models based on the idea that religious affiliation should be completely privatized. These ideas about a “Dutch Islam”, however new and unexplored, would imply new modes of establishing local roots and new prospects and strategies for Muslim leadership. From the late 1990s onwards, intriguing initiatives would be developed. Yar (2018), for example, has analysed initiatives of a local Muslim organization in Amsterdam doing voluntary work for the neighbourhood.

**Urban charisma and local knowledge: three portraits**

The developments in the city of Rotterdam in the 1980s and 1990s sketched above constituted the groundwork for initiatives to strengthen community-building and communal resilience. These developments occurred at a time when the image of Islam was not yet particularly negative. The radically changed political and social context of the 2000s would make the emphasis on communal resilience more compelling than ever before. In order to elucidate this development, I shall present portraits of three Muslim leaders who operated in these new circumstances. I contend that leaders and spokespersons of Muslim communities, rather than being obsolete, continue to be a crucial element in the development of landscapes in the Netherlands that Muslims consider as proper Islamic. Although the portraits differ considerably from one another, all three leaders are crucial in the production of locality.

**Not being seized by fear**

In a neighbourhood (sometimes branded in the media as the “sharia triangle”) in the city of The Hague, I attended a remarkable event in 2017 in a well-known mosque founded by Salafi Muslims. A couple of months
before the event, the mosque received an anonymous letter accompanied by a toy truck. The letter was a warning that a truck would soon hit Muslims visiting the mosque. This was a reference to the Nice and Berlin attacks in 2016. Many people sent emails to the board of the mosque to express their support and sympathy, among them a well-known Amsterdam Orthodox rabbi. The imam decided to invite the rabbi to talk and exchange views. In the following weeks, they had several conversations and then decided to plan a meeting, which they called: “Let’s not to be seized by fear”.

For a long time, the mosque had been dominated by an imam who regularly issued controversial statements on many topics, and especially family morals and responsibilities, the position of women, and homosexuality, and he urged Muslims to interact with non-Muslims as little as possible. These were issues that would usually stir up trouble and generate substantial media attention, so he was frequently invited to appear on late-night shows because his performance would guarantee animated debates. Public figures such as this imam are products of the mediatized and polarized political atmosphere that emerged in recent decades.

A couple of years prior to the 2017 event, the mosque made a rather fundamental change under new leadership and in changing local circumstances. The mosque still belongs to the broader category of “Salafī” but, contrary to the negative image of Salafism that would generally characterize them, they have issued very strong statements against violence and radicalization and prioritized good relationships with the local police, politicians, law courts, and with other religious communities in the neighbourhood. The new imam distanced himself from his predecessor and built up a strong relationship with young people in the neighbourhood and beyond. He had authority and was a respected and well-known resident in the neighbourhood.

The meeting at the mosque was attended by representatives of the municipality, the police, political parties, local welfare organizations, various religious communities and neighbourhood residents. In a joint statement, the imam and the rabbi said that, rather than competing over which community was the more victimized, they should take care of each other. They decided to plan a joint visit to schools, both in the neighbourhood of the mosque and in the Amsterdam neighbourhood where the rabbi was active, to present their views and to teach young children not to hate each other. The message was: stop competing over victimhood, and start teaching your own community to look at their own role.

Both religious leaders were well aware of the non-committal character these kinds of statements often have, but this particular case was different because they both made explicit use of their religious authority and their respected position in the local communities to reach out to different populations. They did so not by playing down religious differences or tensions and controversies, but instead by calling on their own communities to go...
beyond victimhood and to see what needed to be done to improve the quality of living together. A very important strategy they used was to work “below the radar” as much as possible. So instead of seeking media attention for their initiative, they did their work silently, without the gaze of journalists and politicians, only to make it public afterwards. The effectivity and strength of the initiative lay in its very local character. Both religious leaders know the local neighbourhood; they have extensive personal network and they know how to use that. They have “metis”, the local knowledge and experience that is necessary in these kinds of initiatives. Additionally, the way they positioned themselves is crucial here. Rather than downplaying animosities and religious controversies, they took them seriously by arguing that it was not religious differences as such that were the source of animosity but the distorted depictions and the lack of knowledge of religious traditions that could easily be exploited.

**Building bridges**

In September 2019 a meeting was organized in the city of Rotterdam on the occasion of the departure of the director of SPIOR, the regional umbrella organization mentioned in the first case. The departing director was a Dutch convert to Islam, born and raised in Rotterdam. She had worked in the organization for over seventeen years, of which seven as the director and the principal figurehead. During the farewell-reception, she was praised for her capacity to connect people and build bridges. While this may sound like the common praise in any farewell speech, the description in her case precisely matched her modus operandi during her years in SPIOR.

During her time with SPIOR, she transformed the organization from a representative board of local mosque organizations and a mouthpiece for the municipal authorities into an agenda-setting platform that engages with the thorny and controversial issues that dominate the discussion about the position of Islam and Muslims in the city. Thus, issues such as forced religious marriages, radicalization, domestic violence, poverty, healthcare, the position of elderly Muslims, homophobia, growing intolerance and discrimination have been addressed in past years. In many instances, SPIOR has managed to go beyond the scope of “limited” Muslim interests and include other religious communities. In the case of forced religious marriages, a covenant was formulated with a great number of religious organizations to show that religious affiliation was not the source but the solution to forced marriage.

The director of SPIOR positioned herself explicitly as a city-dweller who happened to be a Muslim and not vice versa. She called on the political parties that continue to problematize the Muslim presence to face the undeniable reality that Muslims have become an integral part of the urban
community. So, instead of emphasizing legal rights, a strategy that may have been effective in earlier decades, under her leadership SPIOR embarked on a strategy that took this new reality as its point of departure. Muslims do not need to claim space in the city since their presence in the urban landscape is a fact. However, they have an important responsibility to contribute to a shared social environment and the common good. So, precisely as in the previous case the challenge is to go beyond victimhood and equal rights discourse. Additionally, the strength of her position and her good reputation among municipal servants, and among Muslim communities, was based on her thorough knowledges of the city. Her performative qualities and the explicit deployment of her embodiment of a Dutch Muslim convert, together with her thorough knowledge of the city, made her a very effective director of SPIOR.

**Neighbourhood fathers**

In early 2017, the mayor of the city of Utrecht invited a number of so-called “neighbourhood fathers” to the town hall to thank them for their role in keeping at bay the annual disturbances and havoc created by youngsters (many of them of Turkish and Moroccan origin) on New Year’s Eve. Neighbourhood fathers are elderly men, mostly of Moroccan background, who are well-known figures in neighbourhoods that are branded as disadvantaged with a complex combination of social problems and a relatively high proportion of inhabitants with a migrant background. These men observe, talk with people and address young people when they behave badly. The invitation by the municipality was a token of gratitude but it was also an acknowledgment of the important function of neighbourhood fathers. These men apply a certain level of social control that is only effective at the neighbourhood level where they are familiar members of the local community. It is a role that has existed for quite some time, but urban authorities have only recently started to acknowledge the crucial part they play. In some cities, these low-profile local initiatives have been incorporated into “urban projects”, sometimes with a small budget, because they were regarded as contributing to social cohesion. The neighbourhood father project Al-Wasl in the city of The Hague:

works on improving the quality of life and safety in Laak [a poor neighbourhood in the city] and on communication with and between neighbourhood residents. The project has a bridging function between parents and young people and motivates young people to work on a good future perspective.10

Some neighbourhood fathers would make use of their respect and authority as senior members of their ethnic community – an extension of the domestic parental role vis-à-vis youngsters who make trouble in the neighbourhood.
Others would emphasize the importance of ethical behaviour not by referring to abstract Islamic normativity, but by developing a moral imperative to be a responsible Muslim vis-à-vis the rest of society and to develop an ethical frame of reference in everyday situations and encounters with the entire local community (see also Lambek 2010).

Government budget cuts and the increasing deployment of neighbourhood police in situations outside the neighbourhood have seriously diminished the standing of the police as an integrated part of the local public space. Neighbourhood fathers, whether or not they are incorporated and recognized by municipalities, have specific knowledge that is not accessible to the police and other monitoring institutions. The relative autonomy of neighbourhood fathers is recognized as a useful addition to the official monitoring role of the authorities. It is acknowledged as a contemporary form of social control that has been lost as a result of the individualization of social relations. But the relative autonomy of these neighbourhood fathers has sometimes also created disputes about the question of who is ultimately in charge. A project in the city of Amsterdam in 2017, in which the municipality sought cooperation with local figures to identify radicalization among youngsters, failed because the parties involved disagreed as to who was in charge of the project.

These three portraits not only demonstrate the importance of personal skills and reputation, the particular type of knowledge that is required and the essential communication capabilities; they are also examples of modern locality production and community building, be it in different settings and circumstances. Compared with the enclavisation strategy of religious brokers in the 1980s, they have given the notion of “Muslim space” a fundamentally new meaning.

Comparison and conclusion

In this article, I have analysed Muslim space-making by re-reading research data collected in the early 1990s and the mid-2000s with the aim of understanding what the production of locality by Muslims entails and how it has developed over time. I argue that the production of locality by Muslims is a particular mode of the making of Muslim spaces that emerged in the course of time. Many of these activities imply more than only creating infrastructure; they have an explicit significance for Muslims as forms of spiritual home-making. Locality is a dynamic and contested category. The “local” is not just an administrative level, or a matter of scale; it is a site of everyday practices, alliances and imaginaries. Locality-production refers to how people inhabit created life-worlds and how they live by these imagined geographies. The production of locality is contested because it is an arena in which different parties have a stake in the basic question of how locality is made
and remade and who makes the decisions. As I have argued, the production of locality unfolds against a background of tension between top-down order-building and bottom-up activities and initiatives. Trust is a central principle that runs through all the cases I have addressed. The production of locality and is intricately intertwined with trust. However, what trust entails and who is entrusted are matters that clearly transform over time.

By assessing locality-production in a temporal frame, we gain insight into how different conditions across time produce different imaginations about Muslim spaces. I have explored political and historical contexts in different periods by addressing three broad questions: (1) What are the conditions for Muslim space-making? (2) What are the evolving and contested notions of space and locality that are being produced over time, and what are the religious underpinnings of this process? (3) Who are the main actors and what are the power configurations in which this process unfolds?

With regard to the conditions for Muslim space-making, a number of conclusions can be drawn. In the 1980s, the majority of Muslims were recently arrived migrants with a strong orientation toward their countries of origin, who were busy building up a religious infrastructure. Governments considered Muslim organizations primarily as a specific type of migrant organization. The discursive process of the “Islamisation of migrants” that emerged in the course of the 1980s had a considerable effect on the possibilities Muslims had to build up this infrastructure. The situation in the 1990s was a different because the emerging young generation of Muslims became increasingly active in Muslim organizations and thought seriously about their position and future in the country beyond their migrant status. The circumstances in Rotterdam in the late 1980s and early 1990s constituted a historical political conjuncture of a variety of factors that gave a very important impetus to the transformation of Muslim space-making primarily as a form of enclavisation.

The portraits of contemporary Muslim leaders recount the activities of three local Muslim actors in completely different circumstances and time frames from the first case. The majority of Muslims in the Netherlands today are born and raised in the country, and many of them are in a better socio-economic position than their parents and grandparents. They regard themselves as an integral part of Dutch society and demand equal rights. On the other hand, the political significance of the post-9/11 securitization of Muslims constitutes a serious challenge for contemporary leaders. Current social and political urban conditions require an unprecedented and highly demanding form of connectedness with various dimensions of the urban environment.

Although the making of Muslim spaces, now and in the past, displays a continuity of forms and stakes, changing conditions also produce changing notions of space and of the local over time. In the late 1970s and early
1980s, Muslim residents in urban neighbourhoods did not consider themselves to be part of the local community. The making of Muslim spaces was primarily the building up of religious accommodations and institutions. These institutions functioned almost as sanctuaries in an alien environment. This is why the term “nostalgia mosque” was occasionally used in the media to denote their function. Trust in these circumstances was predicated on strong personal networks with countries of origin.

The negotiations in the city of Rotterdam in the 1980s and 1990s about accommodation and religious infrastructure made clear that Muslim spokespeople already had well thought-through ideas about the importance of the “mosque round the corner” for Muslims in the process of putting down local roots. As the three contemporary portraits show, the struggle for what locality entails revolves around questions of how to assess the local situation, how to support the establishment of local roots, what kinds of knowledge are crucial and productive, and not least who “owns” the neighbourhood. Locality today is about the creation of a specific local social texture in which functional boundaries overlap and interact. We also see that radically changed circumstances in the 2000s have made locality an even more charged and contested issue than ever before. The portraits also show how the making of Muslim spaces developed from a process of building up institutional and legal arrangements in the 1980s to a process of spiritual home-making in which Islam contributes rather than demands.

My analysis, set out elsewhere, of discussions in Turkish mosques about the theological implications of inviting non-Muslims to the iftar is a good example of this process (Sunier 2017). The chairman of a local mosque in Rotterdam in the early 1990s took the initiative of opening up the iftar at the end of the month Ramdan and making it a public event. He proposed inviting a limited number of people to attend the ritual and the subsequent meal at the mosque. The motive behind this initiative was to create more understanding about Muslim rituals and norms, but also to emphasize that the mosque and Muslims in general were an integral and cooperative part of the neighbourhood. In those years, a considerable number of Muslims were against the plan and a compromise was made, but within a decade the “public iftar” became a common practice in many mosques.

As for the main actors and their strategies over time, we can observe a clear shift from enclavisation applied by the religious brokers in the 1980s to the strategy applied by the new generation of leaders in the 1990s to dismiss the image of Muslims as immigrants and outsiders and to foster Islam as one of the country’s religions, with rights and duties equal to others’. In both cases, leaders were firmly attached to the organizational structure set up by Islamic movements for Muslims with a migrant background. These organizations were well established and dominated contacts with the government in those years. Their dominant position would pose a
challenge to those who wanted to trigger discussion and pursue new ideas. Although these leaders were effective and powerful as brokers in those years and under those circumstances, they did not have urban charisma as described by Hansen and Verkaaik (2009).

For present-day Muslim leaders, the biggest challenge is posed by the deterioration in the climate for Muslims and the increasing complexity of the urban landscape in general. Political and social polarization implies that effective strategies and approaches are no longer a matter of having the right social networks and connections with urban institutions; what is required are specific sensitivity and knowledge about the urban myriad of activities and situations. The concepts of “metis”, “local knowledge” and “urban charisma” that I have invoked, capture precisely the qualities of many contemporary Muslim leaders. They articulate, translate and indeed bridge various sensorial forms of engagement with the divine with the question of how different modalities of space-making, and indeed community-building, must unfold.

Notes

1. See, e.g. Rath et al. (2001), Fetzer and Soper (2005), Maussen (2006), Rosenow-Williams (2012).

2. Barbara Metcalf’s edited volume Making Muslim Space (1996) is one of the few studies that very explicitly focus on space-making among Muslims and that go beyond this limited “governance of accommodation” perspective. See also Beekers and Tamimi Arab (2016), Becker (2019).

3. I prefer the term “space” to the often-used term “place”. Place too much suggests only physical environment, while space broadens out the field to activities and phenomena that are equally relevant.

4. The articles brought together by Metcalf (1996) provide good examples of this process. See also Landman (1992).

5. Amer (2018), in his study on Minhajul Quran activities in the Netherlands and the UK, applies the concept of *ahlak* to point to the ways in which Muslims create a moral environment without building boundaries between them and the rest of society, but instead by exploring ways to live as practising Muslims and as citizens. Noor (2018) shows how pious Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium create spaces of Islamic knowledge production by consistently taking issue with the daily encounters with the social, political and cultural environment in which they live. Both authors argue that this quest is more than a pragmatic attempt to create possibilities of living according to Islamic principles; it is a spiritual endeavour of home-making.

6. For more information about my research, see Sunier (1996).

7. The project called “Making Islam Work in the Netherlands” was financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO). The cases will be discussed in greater length in a book I am currently writing.

8. From my research notes. See also Sunier (1996).
9. At the time of my research in Rotterdam, there were approximately 65,000 inhabitants with an Islamic background and some 40 mosques (Sunier 1996, 84–85).
10. https://haagsevaders.nl/projecten/de-buurtvaders/ (accessed October 2020).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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