Muslims ritualising death in the Netherlands
Death rites in a small town context

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For years I was part of a group of Venlo women that got together monthly to study the Qur’an and talk about life. We gathered in someone’s living room for an enjoyable evening of study, animated discussion and pleasant company. It was a colourful group in many respects: of different ages; some conservatively dressed, others dressed according to the latest fashion; headscarves in different colours and styles, while others wore no veils at all. Personalities, too, differed, as well as ethnic origins: Dutch converts and others from Turkish, Moroccan, Egyptian, Somali and Surinam backgrounds. Being Muslim was the cohesive factor that brought them together, but in the process they also learned about their differences, like when a guest was invited to speak about her work assisting in the ritual cleansing of the dead. By sharing her experience it opened up the other women to talk about the often problematic subject of death. The women discovered small differences between their traditions that triggered a discussion on ‘real Islam’, ‘correct’ performance of rites and what meaning to ascribe to them. The gatherings showed the unity of Islam, but at the same vividly illustrated the diverse perceptions of Islam and the way it is lived by various Muslims. It made everyone realise that there was less of a clear-cut tradition to fall back on than most of them expected. For many it was an eye-opening discovery that made them wonder how Venlo Muslims actually ought to practise their death rites in their particular context of people from divergent backgrounds.

1.1 Ritualising death: research problem, research context, sources

Among life cycle events death appears to have a relatively huge impact and the accompanying rites are often assigned great importance (Van Gennep, 1961, p. 146). Death often has a revelational effect, as Peter Metcalf and Richard Hun-
tington (1991, p. 25) note: ‘the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences. Life becomes transparent against the background of death, and fundamental social and cultural issues are revealed.’ Death-related behaviour is the focus of death studies or thanatology.\(^1\) Since the 1970s the academic field of thanatology has grown steadily, focusing mainly on the taboo on death and the awkwardness surrounding the subject. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, death has resurfaced as a topic of great interest in both academia and society. For a long time Western scholars did not study the actual death rites of ordinary people in their own societies (Grimes, 2000), and although in recent years there has been some research into the death rites of Muslims in the Netherlands, the impact of their divergent backgrounds is largely ignored. We focus on death ritual practice in a particular context that is influenced by migration.

Death is a confrontation and a maybe even a traumatic event to which the living must respond – and they do so elaborately with their ritual repertoire. In addition, since it is a key issue in Islam, we are very much interested in how these Islamic perceptions take shape in the ritual practice of Muslims in the particular migration context of Venlo. Garces-Foley (2006, p. ix) points out that the intersection between death and religion is a disclosing one, ‘for in the face of death humans have long expressed what we value most and what we believe to be the nature of reality and the meaning of human life’. She also points out that death is not only an opportunity for expressing beliefs and values but also an area for construing meaning and creating community, ritual and myth. Like in deathbed ritual, core values of religiosity can be observed (Nissen, 1999; Quartier, 2011).

Death rites always involve at least two ritual actors with their own distinct roles: the deceased and the survivors (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 147; Hertz, 1960). According to Islam death is a passage from this life to the hereafter. In this transition the role of the deceased is often much more active and present than one might expect. The deceased – both the corpse and the soul – plays a vivid, central role in the construction of meaning via death rites. The survivors or bereaved have to deal with the loss of a loved one or a member of their community, both by repairing the hole in the social fabric caused by death and by coping with their grief. In addition they are responsible for the rites that enable the deceased to make the crossing to the next world.

\(^1\) The word ‘thanatology’ derives from Thanatos, who personified death in Greek mythology. The field is laid out in Eric Venbrux’s inaugural lecture (2007).
In most cases Muslims in the small town of Venlo are able to practise their ritual life in their own, sometimes very small (ethnic) communities. In the case of death rites the involvement of a broader Muslim community might be needed. Particularly in a migration context death often confronts people with overwhelming doubts concerning their ability to provide the ‘correct’ ritual for their deceased loved one. In that situation they actively seek the support and participation of other Muslims. This is often a moment when diversity and differences surface relentlessly, demonstrating that Muslim communities in diaspora are rarely monolithic. At best they are a mosaic: separate pieces, each with its own peculiarities that together make up a colourful whole. Muslim death ritual in a migration context presents an excellent opportunity to study this mosaic and unravel the beliefs and values. At the same time these rites not only express people’s views, but also create a place for constructing meaning. As a result ritual practices are an indispensable primary source for the study of lived religion and death rites can be seen as vehicles of lived Islam.

1.1.1 Research problem

Islamic tradition has a body of prescribed death rites practised by Muslims worldwide. Rites accompany people in the dying process, in the period up to the funeral, during the burial and throughout the mourning and commemoration. The cleansing and shrouding of the deceased, an important ritual practice, is focal in this study. It is a key rite in the migration context, as it is almost always performed in the Netherlands regardless of where the deceased is eventually buried (the majority of first generation Muslim migrants prefer to be buried in their country of origin). Death in a strange country is a particularly intense event, as people are challenged to deal with practical problems, their needs, resources and values (Arblaster, 1998, pp. 211-217). What impact do those circumstances have on the way ritual is performed and experienced?

This study primarily focuses on particular death practices prescribed by Islam, as performed by a diversity of Muslims in the small town of Venlo in the Netherlands, a specific context very much marked by the consequences of migration. When Muslims migrate their rites are also on the move: the transfer and transformation, invention and re-invention of ritual take shape in relation to new social, economic and religious contexts (Brosius & Hüsken, 2010, p. 8). Intrinsic to the study of enacted religion is the challenge of wading through an array of voices, as culture, class, ethnicity, education, lineage and gender may all influence how Muslims enact Islamic traditions in the face of death. Islamic
legal literature provides quite detailed prescriptions for death rites and important Islamic sources like the Qur’an and Hadith\(^2\) provide an ample framework of meaning, as death and the afterlife are frequently referred to and elaborated on. These sources make a universal claim that is often labelled ‘Islamic’ and that we refer to as ‘ritual myths’. A strong focus on these myths tends to produce a narrow and somewhat oversimplified image of Islamic death ritual. By separating them from their context of practice it reduces them to abstract descriptions of rites that are desiccated, lacking trouble and life (Grimes, 2000, p. 11). When performing an apparently universal ritual order a dynamic, variegated practice unfolds, shaped by the different ethnic, social, cultural and religious backgrounds of Muslims that call Venlo their home. Muslim organisations are based on shared (or related) ethnicity or nationality, or on the various Islamic denominations, schools of law and branches. So some small groups might have a degree of organisational structure but have to share facilities like a mosque, ritual experts and a Muslim cemetery with other groups. In the case of ritual purification of a deceased body the washers might belong to a different denomination or culture, which could lead to conflict. Such conflicts can be understood as ‘diagnostic events’ (Venbrux, 1995, p. 15). These events raise issues that are of the utmost significance for the people involved but under other circumstances remain unsaid. They offer clues to what Muslims from various backgrounds consider their cardinal practices and beliefs. They also make us curious about how a variety of backgrounds will be accommodated in a common practice – how far can prescribed rules be bent?

### 1.1.2 Research context

The ritual context of this study is the Dutch town of Venlo, an agglomerate of the city of Venlo (38,811 inhabitants) and villages of Blerick (27,589), Tegelen (19,328), Belfeld (5,477), Arcen (2,490), Velden (5,127) and Lomm (1,018) situated in the south-eastern Netherlands on the German border.\(^3\) For a long time Venlo was predominantly Roman Catholic and that religion was very much alive in personal and social life.\(^4\) From the early 1970s onwards the general

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\(^2\) The Tradition; record of the words and deeds of Muhammad and other early Muslims; considered an authoritative source of revelation, second only to the Qur’an (Robson, 2012).

\(^3\) Municipal personal records database 31-12-2010 (Afdeling bedrijfsvoering, 2011, p. 43)

\(^4\) In 1947 the percentage of Roman Catholics in Venlo was 96%, in 1971 it was 91.5% and in 1989 probably around 70% (Camps 1993, p. 113). It shows the initially quite
trend of secularisation in the Netherlands greatly reduced the influence of that church and the Venlo population also became more diverse with the arrival of migrants. In the Netherlands a large percentage (73%, Forum, 2010, p. 4) of Muslims live in the so-called Randstad – a conurbation in the western part of the country consisting of the four largest cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) and the surrounding areas. In this Randstad context even the smallest Muslim communities can find a way to organise themselves. In the ritual practice in rural areas Muslims of various backgrounds need to rely on each other more often.

According to the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS – Central Statistics Bureau) in 2011 an estimated 950,000 Muslims lived in the Netherlands (Forum, 2012, p. 8). They initially arrived in various circumstances and at various dates in the latter half of the 20th century. In Venlo, like elsewhere in the Netherlands, Muslim migrants settled in roughly four stages (Shadid & Van Koningsveld, 2008, pp. 22-23). At first small groups from Indonesia and Surinam migrated in the wake of decolonisation. In the 1960s the number of Muslims grew substantially with the arrival of foreign workers from Turkey, Morocco and Tunisia. From 1974 onwards residence permits were issued to the wives and children of those workers, so families were reunited. Later, mainly in the 1990s, refugees from Muslim backgrounds fled to the Netherlands due to political instability in their home countries (Dourleijn & Dagevos, 2011). These refugees from various countries (former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Guinea and Somalia) are predominantly first generation young men and women that are placed in Venlo from refugee centres all over the Netherlands after gaining official status. Venlo also has a centre that temporarily (months, sometimes years) houses refugees during their application for asylum; some have an

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5 In its Permanent Onderzoek Leefsituatie (Permanent Survey of Living Conditions) CBS asks about religious affiliation, offering ‘Islam’ as a specific response option. The latest figures date from 2006 and were used to calculate the number of Muslims in the Netherlands: 857,000 (Herten & Otten, 2007). Based on these figures and population growth, Forum (2012, p. 8) estimates a number of 950,000 Muslims in 2011.

6 Numbers retrieved from CBS statline: herkomstgroepering (group of origin) Venlo 2011: Turkish 4,074, Moroccan 2,070. The database further differentiates between Afghanistan (302), Egypt (62), Iraq (305), Iran (174), Pakistan (53) and Somalia (174). The number of refugees and asylum seekers (living in asylum seekers’ centre, AZC) fluctuates, only those who stay longer than six months and newborn infants are registered in the municipal personal records database (GBA).
Islamic background. The migration experience of labour migrants and refugees differs greatly. With the arrival of larger Muslim communities in Venlo an Islamic infrastructure developed. In Venlo and Tegelen Turkish and Moroccan Muslims established their own prayer houses from 1977 onwards; from the late 1980s to the early 1990s larger, more multi-functional housing was found and full-time imams were appointed. Nowadays Venlo has five fully functioning mosques (two Moroccan, three Turkish). Various communities have their own religio-cultural associations, and in 1995 part of the public cemetery in Blerick was set aside for Muslim burials. In 2007 a facility for the ritual cleansing of the deceased was opened on the site of the Islamic cemetery. Today we also find second and third generation Muslims, born and raised in the Netherlands that clearly find their way into Dutch society. There is also a small number of Dutch converts to Islam. As a result of these converts and mixed marriages Muslims and non-Muslims become part of the same family and participate in death rites side by side.

The perception of Islam differs within groups and is influenced by traditions and practices in their countries of origin, by migration and by their circumstances in the Netherlands. And although the aforementioned migration movements apply to both the Netherlands as a whole and to Venlo in particular, the effect in the Randstad can be rather different from the small town context. As in Venlo, several different, very small Muslim communities depend on each other and are negotiating their position with the somewhat larger Muslim communities and their facilities – a phenomenon that, although widespread, is underexposed in current research.

Research into Islam in the Netherlands refers predominantly to Muslims of Turkish, Moroccan and sometimes Surinam (Javanese) descent, as they are large and well established communities. The actual diversity of Dutch Muslim communities is often camouflaged by this focus on numeric majorities. To gain insight into common Muslim praxis one has to take cognisance not only of the religious dimensions but also of the aforementioned social dimensions, as both

8 The number of converts to Islam is not clear, as they are not registered. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (2009, p. 38) cites a figure of 13,000 ‘autochthonous’ Muslims consisting of an unknown number of converts and the children of second generation Muslim migrants.
9 About 70% of all Muslims in the Netherlands are of Moroccan and Turkish origin (Forum, 2012, p. 8).
affect the actual practice of death ritual. The large-scale survey *Moslim in Nederland* (Muslim in the Netherlands) (Phalet & Ter Wal, 2004) does mention the actual diversity of Muslim communities, but nonetheless chooses to focus on the two largest groups: Muslims of Turkish and Moroccan origin. Regarding the lived religion of these groups the study concludes that Turkish and Moroccan Muslims in the Netherlands — also those of the second generation — still strongly identify with their religion while also influenced by the migration context. This raises the question of how this personal interpretation takes shape, and makes one curious about other, smaller groups of Muslims and their communities.

### 1.1.3 Sources

Death in Islam has been studied from various angles, but the research often provides a rather general overview of how Islam deals with death in a ritual sense. Several publications outline life cycle ritual in world religions and in Islam in particular (Sakr, 1995; Sultan, 2003; Chittick, 1992; Morgan, 2002); they meticulously depict Islamic eschatology (Smith & Haddad, 2002) and deal with the historical evolution of Islamic death rites (Halevi, 2007). These studies often appear to be stripped of any context. Descriptions of the practice of Islamic death rites in a specific context are rare, just as there is a general lack of research into the concrete death rites of ordinary people in contemporary Western society (Fabian, 2004; Grimes, 2000). Dursun Tan’s *Wandlungen des Sterbens und der Trauerrituale in der Migration* (1996) and various contributions by Gerdien Jonker (1996; 1997; 1997b) afford insight into Islamic death rites as performed by mainly Turkish Muslims in Germany. In 1998 photographer Marrie Bot published *Een laatste groet: uitvaart- en rouwrituelen in multicultureel Nederland* (A final farewell: funerary and mourning rites in multicultural Netherlands) with an informative chapter (photographs, explanatory comments and extensive background information) on death and funerary customs of a variety of Muslims in the Netherlands. A more systematic, comparative study is the work by Natal Dessing (2001) on life cycle ritual among Muslims in the Netherlands, providing detailed descriptions of the ritual death practices of Muslims of Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese descent. Her main research question — ‘how are such rituals to be transposed and adapted to the Dutch circumstances so that

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10 The recently published *Moslim in Nederland 2012* (Maliepaard & Gijsberts, 2012) does include the four largest refugee communities (originating from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia) in the research.
they retain their significance for the participants while remaining within the bounds of practicality?” – reveals a clear interest in the dynamics of ritual and ritual change. Her concept of ritual attrition – ‘which type of ritual is more likely to survive when transplanted’ – in the final chapter on continuity and change (Dessing, 2001, p. 186ff) barely touches on the subject. The book Death and religions in a changing world (2006), edited by Kathleen Garces-Foley, was an eye-opener in many respects and a clear call for more in-depth research into the intersection of death and religion in a changing world. So notwithstanding these works we can – by concentrating on death and ritual in a context of change (migration and diversity) – further explore the field. The death of a Muslim in the migration context of Venlo is approached via ritual.

1.2 Theoretical approaches, research questions and methods

This is a study of the evolution of Islamic death ritual as performed by diverse Muslims in a variety of roles in the specific migration context of Venlo, hence primarily a study of ritual dynamics. Ritual is considered a primary source for the study of religion in practice, religion on the ground or lived religion. The particular rite of cleansing and shrouding the deceased takes centre stage in this study, since it is at the heart of Islamic death ritual as practised in the Netherlands. Islamic death rites are studied via the roles of those involved – the deceased, the bereaved, the ritual performers/experts, the community/communities – and the appropriation of meaning by these participants. Through fieldwork the ritual practice and its context are explored and intensively probed so as to abstract theoretical concepts and elaborate on these. The study is intent on developing theory, in constant interaction with the unravelled ritual practices found in the field. This theorising approach leads to in-depth mapping of the field of Islamic death ritual as practised in a migration context and also contributes to further development of theoretical approaches to (death) ritual. Ritual is seen as a source of communication as well as an analytic tool.

1.2.1 Theoretical approaches: key concepts

In the course of our fieldwork three key concepts emerged: ritual practice, ritual context of migration and ritual content: meaning. These concepts are interrelated and greatly influence the approach to the research of death ritual and the methods applied. They provide a framework in which ritual practice in Venlo
can be observed, interpreted and analysed, leading us to answer the questions raised in this ritual context.

1.2.1.1 Ritual practice

From our fieldwork ritual practice emerged as a primary source for our study, so we need to expand on the concept of ritual. Defining ritual is difficult if not impossible and in this case not very useful (Bell, 1997; Grimes, 1990, p. 13). Without capturing it in a clear-cut definition, however, we can agree that it entails doing, performing actions, a particular type of behaviour. As definitions tend to be either too broad or too narrow, depending on the context, it is more helpful to explain ritual in terms of the genre and its key aspects.

Death rites form part of a specific genre of ritual generally referred to as rites of passage – rites that mark changes, shifts and transitions in the human life cycle. The French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960, pp. 189-191) found that a multiplicity of rites of passage all display the same threefold pattern: a phase of separation, followed by a phase of transition and a phase of incorporation. In *The ritual process* (1969) Victor Turner elaborates on this threefold structure, underlining the dynamic character of rites of passage. The first phase consists in rites of separation from a previous world (pre-liminal rites), signifying detachment. The second phase comprises rites performed during the transitional stage (liminal rites), when one has left one place or state but has not yet entered or joined the next. Finally there are rites of incorporation into the new world (post-liminal rites) indicating that the ritual subject has completed the passage. The rites safeguard life passages, in this case the final life cycle, both spiritually and socially. Each turning point – which is both a crisis and an opportunity – is accompanied by a set of symbolic actions which enable one to pass through a danger zone, negotiating it safely and memorably. It hinges on three pivotal notions: the human life course, the transitional phases and the experience of ritual transformation (Grimes, 2000). Labelling these ‘rites of passage’ does not fully cover the concept of ritual and we need to probe certain aspects more deeply.

Although rites are often conceived of as static, repetitive, formalistic action – and their internal structure might well be – this notion of stability is at least questionable. Even in an institutionalised, traditional religion like Islam ritual practice is dynamic, subject to both subtle and obvious changes. As there is no religious or ritual approach to death without a context, ritual actors have no option but to improvise: it is a premise of ritual (Grimes, 1995, p. 274ff). Besides,
in practice formal Islamic death rites, often perceived as strongly rule-governed, are always mixed with social custom and personal input. Contexts change, rites are transferred and they need to be ‘translated’ into the new context. They usually undergo slight of even significant changes to meet the requirements of changed circumstances. This kind of ritual re-invention goes hand in hand with ritual imagination and rites in fact survive by being reinvented and re-imagined (Grimes 2000, p. 4). It might appear strange referring to re-invention and re-imagination with reference to highly traditional and conventional rites, but by ignoring the dynamic properties of ritual one misses out on the actual ritual practice. Ritual dynamics are inherent in ritual. Rites have a life cycle of their own: they emerge, consolidate, solidify, ossify, even disperse and die, as they are also influenced by the fact that they are always embedded in a context. Rites have biographies, progressing through various highly complex stages and thus moving through different domains (Brosius & Hüsken, 2010, p. 7). As Grimes (2000, p. 12) puts it: ‘Rites are hand-me-downs, quilts that we continue to patch; whether you call it ritual creativity, invention, ritualizing, ritual making or ritual revision doesn’t matter as much as recognizing that rites change, that they are also flowing processes, not just rigid structures or momentary events.’

When it comes to further theorising on ritual dynamics it is useful to use a clear terminology. We follow Ronald Grimes’s differentiation (1990, pp. 9-10) between rite, ritual, ritualising and ritualisation. By ‘rite’ we mean specific enactments at concrete times and in concrete places that are differentiated from ordinary behaviour. These actions are widely recognised by members of a culture and are often part of some larger whole, a ritual system or ritual tradition that includes other rites as well. ‘Ritual’ refers to the umbrella concept of which a rite is a specific instance. Ritual is an idea scholars formulate. ‘Ritualising’ refers to the activity of deliberately cultivating rites. The suffix ‘-ising’ suggests a process, a quality of nascence or emergence. Finally, ‘ritualisation’ refers to activity that is not culturally framed as ritual but which someone, often an observer, interprets as if it were potentially ritual.

This section on ritual theory shows the dynamic ritual repertoire that is available to Muslims in Venlo to cope with death in their migration context. This ritual repertoire can be broken down into ritual *elements, roles, beliefs* and *narratives.*
1.2.1.2 Ritual context: migration

When studying the practice of Muslim death ritual in the Netherlands migration is a significant factor. The majority of Muslims in Venlo have a migrant background, as they (or their parents or grandparents) came to the Netherlands at some point in the latter half of the 20th century. With migration the context often drastically changes and as rites are not isolated phenomena but are performed in a particular cultural context, it is necessary to work out a detailed concept of the migrant situation. Migration involves the transfer and reinstitution of cultural patterns and social relations in a new setting (Vertovec, 2008, p. 282), so when we speak of migration we are not so much referring to the actual migration as to its outcome. This migration context is also referred to as diaspora.\textsuperscript{11} As the study of and theorising on diaspora deals in detail with the experience of dislocated or relocated populations, the concept provides interesting leads for this study. Approaches to the topic can be described in terms of underlying depictions of diaspora as a social form, as a type of consciousness and as a mode of cultural reproduction (Vertovec, 2008, p. 279). These are all useful in studying and analysing ritual in a migration context.

When people migrate from various countries and backgrounds their religious and ritual practices are also on the move, adding to the ritual dynamics. Although coming from various backgrounds they often share an original context with a strong Muslim majority who now live in a minority situation. Being a minority makes being a Muslim less self-evident. In the new context they also often encounter for the first time the diversity of practices in their own religion.\textsuperscript{12} This contrast – with the past and with others in society – makes Muslims more self-conscious (Metcalf, 1996), which is reflected in their capacity both to imagine and to enact ritual.

The context of diversity is equally new. Muslims in Venlo originate from various countries and cultural backgrounds; they arrived at various points in time and under various circumstances and they relate to their new context in different ways. To refer to them simply as ‘the Muslim community’ is to deny this diversity. It might even be considered an invention (Bechir & Saghieh, 2005) – not least by Muslims themselves, who frequently refer to a somewhat

\begin{flushright}
\footnote{11} We follow Ter Haar’s notion (1998) that migration means diaspora, without getting lost in the ongoing debate on the definition of diaspora. We take over useful concepts to understand the outcomes of migration.
\footnote{12} Here ‘new’ refers not so much to ‘recent’ as to another context.
\end{flushright}
utopian, united community of Muslims, the *Ummah*. In practice Muslim communities are marked by ethnic, national, cultural, linguistic, sectarian (various religious affiliations) and class diversity (Moghissi, Rahnema, & Goodman, 2009, p. 8). Their different migration experiences (voluntary labour migration or forced migration of refugees), the duration of the group’s history in the new context, their demographic structure and the size of the community might also contribute to the diversity.

When rites are transferred from one context to another, they (or elements of them) inevitably change, as they need to meet the requirements of the new context (Langer, Lüddecken, Radde, & Snoek, 2006). As ritual itself has a dynamics that inclines to both stability and change, the diaspora context adds a duality of continuity and change (Sökefeld, 2000, p. 23). And as rites are assessed by their practitioners — Grimes (1990, pp. 7-27) calls this ‘ritual criticism’ — they will maintain, modify or discard ritual practices, so religious and cultural reproduction takes shape.

Whereas first generation Muslim migrants might have lived long enough in their context of origin to have experienced particular ritual practices, many others (those who left at a very young age, double/subsequent migrants or second and third generation migrants) only have an imagined connection with the place of origin. The practice of Islamic death ritual has a certain claim to universality (at least for all Muslims), but at the same time they take shape in very specific contexts and therefore are also highly localised. Both universality and localisation are subjects of our study.

It might be clear that ritual is shaped by social context, but at the same time it is able to shape social realities. Ritual can be a source of change, as it opens up space for new ideas and practices instigated by both individual and social creativity.

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13 *Ummah* is a fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings. In the Qur’an it designates people to whom God has sent a prophet or people who are objects of a divine plan of salvation (Esposito, 2012).

14 Dessing’s study of life cycle rituals among Muslims in the Netherlands has a different approach. She seems to focus on the development of a totally new organisational infrastructure, as the rites of passage have lost their matter-of-course character due to loss of the support network in the migration context (Dessing, 2001, p. 43). In our view this is a way of accommodating and assuring ritual transfer and is just one aspect of ritual change.
1.2.1.3 Ritual content: meaning

In ritual we always see two key aspects converging: structure and meaning (Bell, 1997, pp. 23ff, 61ff). Each aspect has an internal and an external dimension (Quartier, 2007; 2011). Ritual structure refers to its own structure (internal) and to the structure it brings about (external). One can say that ritual in general has a stable structure manifested in an ordered ritual performance. Whether this ordered structure or sequence continues to prevail in changed circumstances and new contexts is an interesting question. The ordering effect of ritual on society and how it works out in a concrete social organisation is considered in this study. But as not all structured, recurring actions can be identified as ritual activities, rites should also have meaning apart from structure. Meaning is therefore a crucial aspect of ritual and here, too, one can distinguish between the meaning of the ritual itself (internal) and the one it refers to (external). Ritual has an internal meaning that is naturally associated with certain objects and gestures, implying recognisability. Its external meaning, on the other hand, extends beyond the concrete performance: it transcends the everyday meaning (Bell, 1997, p. 55). It makes ritual a means of communication.

In order to study ritual content – the meaning it embodies and conveys – rites should not be isolated from the specific context where they are practised. So gaining insight into the ritual meaning of Islamic death rites in a migration context is closely linked with the concept of ‘lived religion’ (Hall, 1997; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2003) that focuses on human practice. It is clear that ritual action does many things, which are naturally experienced in very different ways by the actors. The purpose of studying and analysing ritual is to try to understand the many ways in which rites are performed and experienced, and the many things that are going on when a person (group of people) participates in a certain kind of action (Nye, 2004, p. 132).

Like ritual, the term ‘religion’ is complex, in that it refers to a number of different concepts and practices. In the case of Islam it denotes a set of ideas and beliefs that Muslims, to some extent or other, subscribe to. At the same time it is a framework for their lived experiences and daily practices. Hence it is important not only to study what is prescribed – as laid down by various Islamic authorities – but also to consider the actual practice of death and dying. It is crucial to distinguish between Islam and Muslims (Campo, 2006, pp. 149-153). Islam refers to the religious principles and regulations, in our case derived from the Qur’an and Hadith. Who Muslims are is more difficult to answer, because there is no such thing as an unequivocal Muslim community. A ‘lived religion’...
approach is not so much faith-centred as focused on human practice. And it is this focus on practice that complicates it, as we have no clear-cut approach (methodologically) at our disposal. The practices of Muslims – their lived religion - in coping with death in a migration context are multi-layered and complex and demand a differentiated approach. In our case it means examining the practices, experiences and expressions of ordinary Muslims (rather than official spokespeople of Islam) in everyday life.\(^\text{15}\) Ritual is undeniably an important element of lived religion and through the study of actual ritual practices we are able to gain insight into Islam as practised by Muslims. Leor Halevi (2002, p. 5) makes the same point: ‘To study death rites and beliefs about the afterlife is in some sense to study religion at its very core.’

In Islamic tradition death rites are presented quite unequivocally with clear, unambiguous instructions. An interesting phenomenon is that the actual application of those regulations presents a very diverse picture. These dynamics between Islam and Muslims makes research into death ritual interesting but also complex. A practice of Muslim funerary behaviour and bereavement, as Juan Eduardo Campo (2006, p. 160) aptly puts it, ‘takes shape in the space between what is prescribed and what is performed, where the performed might also contradict or resist the prescribed’. The performed dimension of religion tends to be more flexible: while people are expressing their religious and cultural norms, they also adapt or contest them. A fascinating, creative dynamics unfolds, and lived Islam takes shape. Universal claims and localised practices often reveal tension between the ritual or liturgical order (Rappaport, 1999, p. 169) and actual practice. It causes confusion, as diversified praxis within a single, institutionalised religion is not always easy to comprehend. It means ‘wading through an array of voices: religious elites, funeral specialists, media experts, family members’ (Garces Foley, 2006, p. xi).

Ritual is part of a complex field of discourse, in which different social agents position themselves in relation to particular other groups, frames of meaning and status distinctions. We study the ritual actors that are participating in various roles: the deceased, the bereaved, and the ritual experts, the commu-

\(^{15}\) Individuals practice their own religious interpretations and, as in any community, there are orthodox believers, practising individuals (varying from radical Islamists to moderate adherents), non-practising sceptics, secular and lay members, and atheists (Moghissi, Rahnema, & Goodman 2009, pp. 8-9). Moslim in Nederland 2012 (Maliepaard & Gijsbers, 2012, p. 99ff) differentiates between four types of religious profiles: practising, practising in private, only food regulations, non-practising (profiling based on participation in religious practices: mosque attendance, prayers, Ramadan).
nities (Muslim and non-Muslim). Lived religion is, by definition, dealing with diversified practice. We should be more alert to emerging and (re-)invented ritual in institutionalised and traditional religions like Islam, as this kind of development is not restricted to secular or new religious movements where ritual change and creativity may be more obvious. Analogous with the idea of lived religion, we want to focus on ‘lived eschatology’ that seeks insight into the way actual Muslims deal with questions about the final destination of human beings.

1.3 Research questions and research aim

The key concepts presented in the preceding sections and their interrelationship make up the dimensions that shape the practice of death rites. In our particular Dutch context Muslim minorities ritualise in the face of death and ritual practices evolve.

1.3.1 Research questions

This leads to our primary research question:

When confronted with death, what ritual repertoires emerge among Muslims in the small town migration context of Venlo and how did these ritual repertoires emerge?

‘Repertoire’ refers to the ritual tools available to Muslims in handling death and can be broken down to ritual elements, roles, beliefs and narratives. This ritual repertoire will be studied via the participants – the deceased, the bereaved, the ritual expert and the community – in the ritual cleansing of the deceased and will be unravelled in the next four chapters of this thesis. Our three key concepts – ritual practice, ritual context: migration and ritual content: meaning – are the keystones of the research questions in each of these chapters.

- What ritual elements are significant to contemporary Muslims when ritualising death?
  What is the ritual character of the identified elements, what is the influence of the migration context and what ritual content emerges from the ‘lived religion’ practice of death rites in Venlo?
Which roles can be distinguished in the practice of the ritual cleansing and shrouding the deceased?
Which ritual roles emerge in the ritual practice, how are ritual roles shaped by the small town migration context, what motivates people to take on the role of ritual expert and how is their ritual authority recognised?

What ritual beliefs are connected to death rites?
How do death rite practices emerge from the interaction between myth and ritual, what impact does the migration context have on ritual myth and beliefs and how do these beliefs function in lived eschatology?

What is the role of narratives in the process of constructing ritual meaning of death?
How are narratives and death ritual interlinked, how do migration, context and narratives interact and what is the role of narratives in the construction of ritual meaning?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Repertoire → Concepts</th>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Narratives</th>
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<td>Ritual practice</td>
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<td>Ritual context: migration</td>
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<td>Ritual content: meaning</td>
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Figure 1. Repertoires and concepts regarding death rites

1.3.2 Research aim

The aim of this research is threefold:

- Gaining greater insight into negotiating Islamic death ritual as it occurs in the small town context of Venlo in the Netherlands.
- Acquiring theoretical insight into the ritual practice and further theorising on the subject.
1.4 Triangulation of methods and sources

The aim of this study is to explore the practice of Islamic death rites as performed by diverse Muslims in a migration context. To this end we need to gain insight into the various aspects of Muslim life and death in the Venlo context and at the same time develop a suitable theoretical framework. Triangulation is crucial when mapping the complex ritual field under consideration. Through meticulous fieldwork we set out to explore the field of death ritual as practised by Muslims from various backgrounds and the local Islamic infrastructure at their disposal, with due regard to both the ritual participants and their context.

Our basic approach for this study proceeds from the empirical field situation, focusing on the actors and actions presented. Throughout the fieldwork the gathered material was critically examined and the key concepts – ritual practice, ritual context and ritual content – were derived from it and refined to serve as analytical concepts. These emerging concepts, the relations between them and continuous interaction with the field led step by step to theory building. They were basic concepts for further theorising.16 It is not so much a linear as a circular process, as these concepts are subject to ‘theoretical sampling’: when important elements are discovered in the material, new cases are researched to sharpen, confirm or rectify them. In this way theories can be both tested and developed.

The initial data were collected through extensive fieldwork in Venlo in the period 2009-2012, consisting of interviews and (participant) observation. Through semi-structured personal interviews and informal personal communications with ordinary Muslim men and women we were able to unearth the issues and topics regarding death and dying that are very much alive among the people in the various communities. The informal personal communications were very useful in unravelling ‘lived religion’, as people tend to be more spontaneous in their behaviour and less focused on socially acceptable answers.

In selecting respondents – ordinary Muslims in Venlo – diversity was the criterion: men and women of different ages (generations), of various ethnicultural (Turkish, Moroccan, Somali, West-African, Afghan, Iraqi, Kurdish, Indonesian, Iranian, Surinam, Dutch and Bosnian) and social backgrounds

16 I conducted 36 semi-structured interviews that were recorded and transcribed (some respondents preferred not to be recorded). In field notes I report over 50 informal personal communications with respondents and informants. For the sake of confidentiality all names of people mentioned in this study have been changed.
(mixed families, converts), with different migration experiences (voluntary and forced migration) and various Islamic affiliations (Sunni, Shia, Alevi, Suleimanji and Mouridiyya). We also interviewed people playing key roles in various communities, who proved to be rich sources of information and were consulted regularly. They were active in their own ethnic and religious communities or social groups (youths, refugees, women) and professions (spiritual and health care, funeral organisations, social workers). They were also helpful in proposing and introducing respondents for the interviews and tipping me off about events in their communities. The interviews provided the ritual narratives – accounts of personal experience of ritual and appropriations of the repertoire – that form the basis of this study.

Taking part in a women’s Qur’an group opened my eyes to the variety of Muslims in Venlo. A first step in identifying Muslims in Venlo was to search databases that provide demographic information (CBS Statline) to gain some insight into the variety and number of Muslims living here. Although exact numbers are not available, as ‘Muslim’ is not a search category, one can search the databases on nationality or country of birth (or of parents) for predominantly Muslim countries. This provided some idea of what groups (their size and demographic development over the years) are actually living in Venlo. The Islamic and Muslim infrastructure could be partly traced by searching telephone directories and databases that list mosques, cultural and religious organisations. Venlo is also my hometown where I was born and raised and where I returned after ten years of living elsewhere. I participated in a local women’s Qur’an group that made me mindful of the diversity within the Muslim communities in Venlo and how people handle those differences. And as my parents were actively involved in coaching refugees and other migrants, I simply got to know a lot of different Muslims in town. This personal network proved very helpful when I started my fieldwork, as it was easy to establish a first contact with certain communities and families.

Observations were conducted to witness and sometimes participate in death rites. I watched funerals from a distance with other female participants, said the funeral prayer in the mosque and attended several mourning gatherings. I had a rare opportunity to participate in the ritual cleansing of a deceased person some years ago. To explore the Venlo context I made many home visits, went to celebrations of various groups, visited mosques, cultural and religious organisations, women and youth groups. Both weddings and funerals provided a context in which Muslims in Venlo live. The observations and interviews
centred on ritual action – the practice of people, not what Islam prescribes. We were looking for the practices of Muslims without labelling it Islamic ritual beforehand, as the prescribed ritual is often only part of what Muslims actually practise. So the idea was not so much to give a detailed overview of how certain rites are performed in all the different communities as to determine how plurality as such influences the ritual practice in the small town migration context. In preparing both the interviews and the observations I used the observation model provided by Ronald Grimes (1995; 2003), a leading scholar in ritual studies. It proved very useful in unravelling complex ritual practices and putting them into context.

1.5 Overview

Following this introductory chapter, subsequent chapters will deal with the ritual repertoires found among Muslims in Venlo when confronted with death. The ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased is the key ritual in this study. In each chapter we elaborate on how particular ritual repertoires emerge and develop in this small town context in the Netherlands. Chapter 2 examines the ritual elements which permit the mapping of ritual practice; chapter 3 is on the ritual roles that emerge; chapter 4 concerns ritual beliefs; and chapter 5 focuses on ritual narratives. In each chapter the three key concepts of this study – ritual practice, ritual context and ritual meaning – are used as keystones of our research questions. Chapter 6 collates the conclusions drawn from chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5. It also offers suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER 2

RITUAL ELEMENTS

MAPPING THE RITUAL CLEANSING AND SHROUDING OF THE DECEASED

Death in a strange country presents a particularly intense context that challenges people to deal with practical problems, their needs, resources and values. Although Muslims have a rich, carefully specified ritual repertoire at their disposal where death and dying are concerned, in a new context these repertoires are often changed or reinvented to meet the altered needs. It is these reinvented ritual repertoires used by Muslims to handle death in their new surroundings that we trace in this study in order to answer our main research question:

*what ritual repertoires emerge among Muslims in the small town migration context of Venlo?*

Ritual elements, roles, beliefs and narratives are all part of this repertoire, which is the ritual range available to people. In this chapter we map the field of Islamic death ritual by concentrating on ritual elements, which will lead us, step by step, to answering the question: *what ritual elements are significant to contemporary Muslims when ritualising death?*

By identifying and mapping the ritual elements we provide an overview of ritual practice in this particular small town migration context. Thus we learn how it constitutes the religious experience – a process of constructing meaning – of Muslims in Venlo. The main focus is the rite of cleansing and shrouding the deceased. The choice is dictated by practical reasons, as this rite is almost always performed in Venlo regardless of where the body is eventually buried. The cleansing is a rich and dynamic ritual in an interesting context: a small town migration setting that is often overlooked in research.¹

¹ Parts of this chapter were published in *Jaarboek voor liturgieonderzoek/Yearbook for liturgical and ritual studies* (Venhorst, Venbrux & Quartier, 2011).
2.1 Ritual elements: creating an interpretive framework

Mapping ritual elements entails identifying what can be seen as the essential building block of ritual cleansing and shrouding. Breaking the rite down into observable elements makes it possible to transcribe and interpret complex ritual practices – both on the level of ritual practice and theoretically.

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

Figure 2. Elements of ritual

These ritual elements will be encapsulated in a ‘thick description’ as proposed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in The interpretation of cultures (1973, pp. 5-6, 9-10). Thick descriptions are first interpretations that proceed from the participants’ social world and refer to their construction of meaning and reality. The elements make up workable units that can function as axes of comparison and make it possible to link developments and changes in different contexts. They also afford insight into the way ritual elements are interrelated and structured. Mapping these elements serves as an introduction to the lived practice of death ritual in Venlo – introducing particular ritual practices and those involved in them – and as an interpretive framework for studying death ritual in a particular context. Both are important pillars in answering the research question. This approach to ritual elements is advocated by Ronald Grimes (1982; 2003; 2006) in numerous publications and it provides a useful framework for both observation and interpretation of ritual as it conveys its multidimensional character, already evident in the various roots of ritual: human bodies, the environment, cultural and religious traditions, social processes (Grimes, 1982, p. 2).
Even though we are exploring individual components, they should not be seen as isolated but as closely interrelated and in constant interaction with the context. The ritual elements we distinguish are studied in detail with reference to the key concepts identified in the chapter 1: ritual, context of migration and lived religion.

2.1.1 Applying the key concepts
The key concepts identified in chapter 1 enable us to deepen our observations and interpretations, as they prompt continuous questioning of the gathered material.

2.1.1.1 Ritual practice
The concept of ritual practice highlights the dynamics of ritual – a dynamics inherent in ritual but also a result of the participants’ biographies and their context. It leads us to examine the qualities of identified ritual elements and the ritual practice they constitute in the small town context of Venlo. Mapping and studying these ritual elements enable us to unravel this complex ritual dynamics.

What is the ritual character of the identified ritual elements?

2.1.1.2 Ritual context: migration
The migration context is marked by change, which affects ritual practice. Just as migrants are on the move, so are their ritual repertoires. For a better understanding of how Islamic death ritual takes shape in the specific context of Venlo the concept of ritual transfer (Langer et al., 2006) is important. As rites are not isolated phenomena but are performed in specific cultural contexts, the transfer of ritual (elements) from one context to another can be expected to entail change. Studying the interaction between ritual (elements) and context sheds light on the particularities of ritual funerary practice in a migration setting.

What is the influence of the migration context?

2.1.1.3 Ritual content: meaning
The concept of ritual meaning makes us look for emerging ritual and ritual reinvention. We focus on the actual performance of Islamic death rites by various Muslims in Venlo by zooming in on particular ritual elements to gain insight into their lived religion: the flexible ritual practice derived from clear, unam-
biguous guidelines and prescriptions in Islamic law and tradition. Ritual actors (a variety of Muslims) in a particular context (Venlo) create a diverse practice in regard to both ritual structure and ritual meaning.

What ritual content emerges from the ‘lived religion’ practice of death rites in Venlo?

2.2 Mapping ritual elements

We focus on the ritual purification of the deceased, both rites and ritualising enactments, which are studied within a larger body of interconnected funerary rites. Rites do not exist in the abstract but are enacted in particular forms and contexts. The ritual elements presented here were studied in the specific context of Venlo.

2.2.1 Actions

The treatment of the dead is an important subject in Islamic legal works, presented either as part of the chapter on prayer or in a subsection about funeral prayer. On the basis of these sources we discern a ‘ritual/liturgical order’ (Rappaport, 1999, p.169) for the cleansing and shrouding of the deceased. The purification rite is part of a larger body of Islamic funerary rites and is generally understood to proceed as follows. After death the mouth of the deceased is closed and clothes are removed, whereupon the corpse is completely covered with a sheet. Every effort should be made to prepare the body for burial quickly. For the ritual cleansing the body is placed on a raised surface and washed by a Muslim who knows the procedure. In principle, a male corpse is to be washed only by men and a female one only by women. However, a woman is allowed to wash her husband and it is permissible for a young child to be washed by an adult of the opposite sex. Before undertaking the washing, the washers perform the wudu (minor ablution) on themselves and audibly or mentally express the niyya (intention). During the washing the corpse is kept covered from navel to

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2 Many studies of Islamic (death) ritual provide a more or less detailed description of the ritual cleansing of the deceased (e.g. Bot, 1998; Campo, 2003; Dessing, 2001; Jonker, 1997; Sakr, 1995; Smith, 1998; Sultan, 2003). The description of ritual actions given here accords with these sources and includes accounts by ritual experts in Venlo. In addition I draw on observation and participation in a ritual cleansing in 2006.

3 Sometimes the ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased is referred to in Arabic as ghusl al-mayyit and takfin. These terms were not used by our respondents.
knees at all times. The *ghusl* (major ablution) starts with a first rinse to remove any impurities, followed by washing the genitals and anus. Then the belly is pressed gently to empty the intestines. It is recommended to perform the *wudu* that usually starts with pronouncing the name of God, the most gracious and merciful (*basmallah*), followed by washing the hands, rinsing the mouth and nose, washing the face, washing the forearms up to the elbows, rubbing the head with a damp hand, washing the feet up to the ankles, and rubbing the spaces between the toes; then water is rubbed into the hair roots and poured over the entire body. Each washing starts on the right side from the front to the back and from head to feet, followed by the left side. The body is washed an odd number of times—say, three or, if necessary, five or seven times. The water is perfumed with camphor or other aromatics. After purification the body is dried and shrouded, using one or more pieces of clean cloth. When shrouding the body the corpse is wrapped in plain white cloth. The distinctive features of the person are obscured and only the outline is visible: the corpse assumes a more or less anonymous shape. As the ritual cleansing is not open to the public, it offers a suitably private moment and space for the bereaved to pay their last respects. Particularly for women and children—who, due to gender and age restrictions, are often not permitted to attend the burial—it is the last opportunity to say their goodbyes: the last time the actual body is available for ritualising and ritualisation. The hours immediately before or after the corpse is washed and shrouded are commonly used by the bereaved to say their last goodbyes. This is often done in ritualised ways by those present during this usually most private section of all death rites. A widow explains:

> Relatives and friends gathered at the funeral parlour to pay their last respects. The children, his brothers and sisters and I said our last goodbyes by pouring water over the sheet that covered the body. We each poured three small bowls of water, starting at his head, moving to his feet. Then they removed the sheet from his face and the children kissed him for the last time. After this the imam from a local Moroccan mosque came with two men to perform the proper washing and shrouding while we waited outside. (Personal interview Habo, 6 December 2010)

Another example of ritualising enactments by the bereaved was cited by Rianne—a Dutch convert to Islam, married to a Syrian man—who lost her baby girl shortly after birth:
We lost her... My husband was on the phone to his relatives in Syria all the time, about what to do and how to proceed. I very much needed to share my grief with my parents and to involve them in the funeral – but we were all a bit hesitant about how to do all this, as they are not Muslims... Eventually they participated in the ritual cleansing and they were able to say their last goodbyes in their own way. (Personal interview Rianne, July 2010)

The actions described above are not part of the prescribed ritual order but are improvised to suit the particular circumstances and context and they have the potential to become part of the ritual order or develop alongside it.

At the morgue the body is placed in an open coffin or on a special bier to bring it to the place of the funeral prayer (salat al-janaza) that is always performed in the presence of the corpse. If the burial takes place in Venlo, the body is taken to the general graveyard, Blerickse Bergen, which has a part reserved for Muslim plots. As this is not within walking distance, the traditional walking procession with the deceased to the place of burial is limited to the distance from the entrance of the cemetery to the grave. Participation of women at this stage is usually considered wrong or even forbidden, which applies very much in Venlo, although in mixed families/marriages women often do join in in one way or another. Participants should remain quiet, as audible expression of grief is considered wrong. In the grave the body is turned on its right side, facing Mecca. Each participant throws three handfuls of soil into the grave, where after the grave is filled.

The ritual cleansing is a very bodily event, entailing both the presence of the corpse and the physical involvement of the washers performing the rite. The main actions of the rites are performed on the physical body and involve skin to skin contact as the corpse needs to be rubbed, pressed and turned over. Although the purification is of a ritual nature (Douglas, 1966, pp. 29ff.) and not primarily aimed at hygiene, the extensive touching and rubbing serve a cleansing purpose as well. In performing the rite the purity of both the deceased and those who perform the ritual cleansing is at issue. Cleansing by washing the body with water is, of course, a common, everyday practice. But performing these actions in the framework of Islamic purification elevates it. The daily wudu is the most common purification rite and a prominent feature of everyday

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4 As the vast majority of first generation Muslim migrants are still repatriated to the country of origin, the number of burials in Venlo is quite small.
5 With minor modifications of the ritual in the case of different schools of law, as presented in Al-Azeri’s Al-Fiqh ‘Ala al-Madhāhib al-Arba‘ah (cited in Dessing, 2001, pp. 144-146).
Islamic life (Kevin Reinhart, 1990). Although most Muslims are familiar with these purification rites, in this case they are not performed on oneself but on a deceased person (a loved one or a fellow Muslim), and because of its hands-on character, it is not an easy task to perform. There is direct confrontation with the naked corpse, which can be a harsh confrontation with death.

These concise guidelines are drawn from *fiqh* literature and present the core actions of the death rites. They appear to be stripped of all contextual, hands-on information, which means they are applicable in any context but at the same time a layperson has difficulty following them in concrete practice. It is also obvious that different contexts influence the ritual. The difference between the context of origin and the current context does not really affect the (basic) actions. In the new context various Muslims introduce actions in addition to the strict ritual order, of which the foregoing cases of Rianne and Habo are just two examples. These additional, non-prescribed actions become part of Islamic funerary ritual in Venlo and are products of the new location and circumstances.

### 2.2.2 Actors

Different roles can be distinguished in the performance of death ritual, each with its own distinct actions and position. The deceased plays a central role, as the ritual is perceived to facilitate the transition of the dead from this world to the next. During the ritual cleansing deceased persons are treated as if they are still sentient and aware of what goes on around them. That is why the washing has to be performed with care and respect. There have to be enough people to gently turn the corpse so as not to leave the deceased face down, and lukewarm water is used for the cleansing. The deceased should not be disturbed by unrestrained expressions of grief and less pleasant acts (like pressing the belly to empty the intestines) are accompanied by whispered apologies.

The bereaved do their best to fulfil the (assumed) final wishes of their departed loved one; these often concern the place of burial. For most Muslims the loss of a loved one in their present context is a novel experience and they are unfamiliar with how to make all the arrangements. Not knowing what to do makes people insecure. Another complicating factor is that the next of kin are not always living close by and their much needed involvement in the funerary rites may be difficult to arrange. As not all the bereaved involved might share the same religious tradition and affiliation, the funerary rites have to be adapted, for instance in the case of this mixed couple:
On the sudden loss of their child the parents started to make arrangements for a Muslim funeral. This was difficult to deal with for the Catholic grandparents, the parents of the child’s mother, who converted to Islam years ago. In consultation with a local imam the child was taken to a [Catholic] church for a memorial service where relatives and classmates were able to say their last goodbyes. After the service the child was taken to a facility where the imam and some helpers performed the ritual washing. After the funeral prayer on the premises of the mosque, the child was buried in the Muslim cemetery. (Personal interview with imam A, 20 January 2011)

Migration also raises new questions like where the body is to be buried and how to make preparatory arrangements to meet these wishes, for example drawing up a will and setting aside some money for funeral insurance. Sometimes repatriation is not an option because of the safety situation in the country of origin.

The bereaved often have a specific frame of reference, arising from personal experiences of death or the lack of it. The next of kin don’t always feel comfortable with participation in the final washing of their loved one, even though the ritual order reserves a prominent role for them. This can also apply in most contexts of origin, but because of the Muslim majority finding a washer is hardly ever a problem. In both the original and the present context the vast majority of the bereaved don’t actively participate in the ritual washing of a deceased loved one, even when they are the most appropriate candidates to do so. This makes ritual experts indispensable.

The imam (of either the local Moroccan or Turkish mosque) is often considered best qualified to perform the ritual purification in the prescribed way. But as all imams are men, they are not allowed to perform the ritual on a deceased woman. That is why local mosque organisations have recently started to support the training of female volunteers. For decades older women and widows performed the washings, but of late some younger women have joined in. These ritual experts almost always take the lead, sometimes assisted by relatives of the deceased. They are connected with either a Turkish or a Moroccan mosque and are called in whenever their services are needed. So in practice they actively deal with different Muslim communities. In smaller Muslim communities ritual experts are far less visible, as they are not traceable through mosque organisations; they are either known in the community or are traced when needed. And since these communities are quite small, their experts often live elsewhere (sometimes not even in the Netherlands), making it harder to secure their services.
According to Islamic sources the Muslim community is expected to play a leading role in the performance of death rites. But we have noted that there is no such thing as an unequivocally Muslim community that all Muslims, regardless of their (ethnic) background, can fall back on. Muslims of Turkish and Moroccan communities, being the oldest and best established communities in town, can rely on their own customised religious infrastructure consisting of mosques and imams. Other small groups and individuals have to find ways to deal ritual-ly with this lack of a community.

In chapter 3 we elaborate in detail on the motivation and authority of these ritual experts.

2.2.3 Sources

When asked, respondents typically cite the Qur’an and Hadith as the main sources on death rites. But although the Qur’an contains a lot of information on human death and its (religious) meaning, there is nothing concrete about funeral rites. The Hadith does contain some ritual information, but it is by no means easy to distil a concrete praxis from it. Of all Islamic sources fiqh literature probably provides the most concrete guidelines. Fiqh literature is often not readily accessible and is rarely consulted directly by ordinary Muslims, as it is written in Arabic and even when translated is full of legal jargon. Regulations are often translated into pamphlets, teaching material, sermons and narratives that circulate in local communities as a source of knowledge.

In Venlo the imam of the local mosques is often seen as the authority to turn to for knowledge, assistance and the performance of death rites, even when he is from a different (ethnic, national, cultural and religious) background or the locals have never met him in person. Often there is a preference for either a Moroccan or a Turkish imam, depending on the language one speaks or the culture.

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6 Halevi (2007, chapter 2) sketches Muhammad’s death and funeral rites, including the ritual cleansing and shrouding as described by Ibn Ishaq (d.767) in the oldest extant biography. Another frequently cited hadith reports how Muhammad instructed the woman who performed the ritual cleansing of his deceased daughter (Halevi 2007, p. 71).

7 Halevi (2007, p. 6) explains: “Collections of sacred law in the genres of Hadith, or Oral Tradition, and Fiqh, or Jurisprudence, generally include a chapter or book entitled ‘The Book on Funerary Practice’. These chapters or books differ from each other in content, focus, and style…Thus most of these books include a section on burial attire in which they relate a story about the shrouds of Muhammad. The story varies from book to book … What also tends to vary – sometimes slightly, sometimes significantly – are the conclusions drawn on the basis of an anecdote.”
one relates to most closely. The imams in the Venlo mosques were all educated in either Turkey or Morocco and their knowledge of the Dutch language is often limited. Their role as key religious and ritual authorities is also new or to them.

Other religious or ritual experts – with a less formal role – are also consulted. They are often recommended by others and their advice is sought by phone, on internet or through intermediaries. These specialists frequently move between different contexts and provide information on specific cultural and ethnic traditions. Relatives living in either the original or the new context advise on particular family traditions. Local mosques organise courses and meetings to educate Muslims in death rites.

Other groups (women, young people or certain religious affiliations) also meet to discuss the topic. These meetings are considered a source of basic Islamic knowledge. The mosque organisations predominantly teach in either Turkish or Moroccan Arabic, hence they only reach members of their own community. A lot of young people consult the internet (for online videos and documentaries) to get a first impression of Islamic regulations concerning death.

I would go to an Imam if I was in need of information about what to do. It is what I did when my nephew died. But when I look at my children, they are a different generation. My son, who is 18, is really interested in things concerning Islam; he searches the internet for information. And many times he comes to me with the information he finds and then we talk about it. (Personal interview with Khadija, 25 September 2010)

In the original context sources appear to be more entrenched in the immediate daily environment, knowledge is drawn from people in the community, from relatives and neighbours or from designated ritual experts. This idea is very much alive among Muslim migrants, as Mo explains:

Where we are from you are surrounded by Muslims. You really grow up like a Muslim. So when someone dies everybody knows what to do. You can simply ask a neighbour. That is so different here. Nobody knows anything. (Personal interview with Mo, 26 November 2010)

This somewhat nostalgic, idealised image of the context of origin is often seen as contrasting sharply with the present context.
In Islamic education death plays an important role and Muslims generally are very much aware of concepts concerning life, death and afterlife. Natural death is seen as a fact of human life and is part of the order of things. In interviews, conversations and meetings people spoke at length about religious aspects of death, afterlife and Islamic eschatology. Putting these (often fragmented) stories together, a fairly accurate overview of Islamic viewpoints based on Hadith and the Qur’an unfolds, for instance in studies like *The Islamic understanding of death and resurrection* (Smith & Haddad, 2002).  

At death an angel is believed to bear away the soul of a person, which is later returned once the deceased is in the grave. In this way the deceased is able to assist in the funeral ceremony and the mourning process. Once in the grave the dead person is visited by two more angels who will interrogate him and search for proof of his faith. Other angels are reported to register the deceased’s good and bad deeds, which will be revealed on the day of judgment. An unbeliever will not be able to answer the angels’ questions and will be punished, while the believer is rewarded (by widening the grave or opening a window to heaven). Then starts a waiting period until the day of judgment, when the dead will be resurrected from their graves and gathered for the final judgment. True believers will meet and stand before God for their final reward.

These widespread beliefs about the afterlife greatly influence Muslims’ attitudes towards death ritual. On the basis of these teachings choices are made, as this Senegalese Muslim – member of a Sufi order – explains:

I am a Mouride, a follower of the teachings of Sheikh Amadou Bamba. We Mourides want to be buried in the holy city of Touba [central Senegal], where Bamba is also buried. On the day of resurrection we will be close to him, so our path to paradise will be open. So wherever I spend my life, my grave has to be in Touba, even if my Dutch wife and children do not agree. I would prefer them to be buried in Touba also, but it is up to them. (Personal interview with Mbaye, 3 August 2010)

Islamic eschatology and the idea that an intact body is needed on the day of resurrection make the rather widespread custom of cremation in the Netherlands

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8 The beliefs presented here accord with views fount in most studies of the subject (Campo, 2003; Chittick, 1992; Sakr, 1995; Smith & Haddad, 2002; Tottoli 2012). They are also reflected in Islamic textbooks used in the courses offered by mosque organisations like *Basisboek Islam* (Siregar, 2002). These beliefs were frequently cited by our respondents, albeit in fragmentary fashion.
hard to digest for most Muslims. The flames of the crematorium are also often associated with the flames of hell. To most Muslims cremation is a horror scenario, as this West African Muslim explains:

My first experience with death in Venlo was when a Dutch friend died. He had cancer and I was invited to the house after he passed away. He was laid on a bier in the living room and I was a bit shocked, because I am not used to this. I found it quite bizarre that people were sitting there, talking and drinking coffee next to my friend’s body. The next day there was a service in church; I also spoke some words to express my friendship with him. That was nice. And then I was invited to the cemetery, or at least I thought I was. Something happened I wasn’t prepared for… We ended up at the crematorium. Although I didn’t see the actual fire, I was deeply shocked and couldn’t sleep for weeks! How can you do this to a person you love? I don’t understand the Dutch people! This experience made me think about my own funeral, as I am all alone here in Venlo … What will happen to me? I really don’t want to be cremated. So I made arrangements with funeral insurance that, in case of death, my body will be repatriated to Guinea and my relatives will take care of everything. Even the washing and the shrouding I want to be done there by people I trust. (Personal interview with Amadou, 22 November 2010)

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

I married a Dutch man 15 years ago and moved from Java to Venlo. My two youngest children from a previous marriage came with me, two others stayed in Indonesia. That makes me part of two countries now and makes it complicated when I die. Although I am very much aware of the Islamic objections to cremation, I see the division of my ashes among my children as my only option. They have to take care of me after I die. But they should not keep my ashes in their house; they have to bury me so I can return to the earth like Islam prescribes. Allah will understand that I am in two countries and that is why I have to take these quite drastic measures. What choice do I have? (Personal interview Shukri, 24 November 2010)

Young men and women who present themselves as pious, living according to the tradition of the prophet are very articulate about the role of death and the afterlife as a guideline for their daily lives, as Mo explains:

I live with the concept of death every day, because only then I am able to live. I live with the certainty that the angel of death visits my house four times a day to see if it is my time. This way I make the most of my life, because when
I am dead there is nothing left to do. Life is your chance to be a good Muslim and to live according to the teachings of the prophet – peace be upon him. This is also why I am part of a group of volunteers who perform the ritual washing of the deceased; it is our religious duty and we will be rewarded in the afterlife. (Personal interview with Mo, 26 November 2010)

Death rites are part of the so called *fard kifaya*, the collective duties of Muslims. It makes the Muslim community responsible for ensuring that each Muslim gets a proper funeral. From time to time money is collected to provide for the repatriation or funeral arrangements of a fellow Muslim. It encourages them to participate in death ritual, also when the deceased is not a relative or friend. Participation also brings what is called *ajr* ('plus' points) that are offset against their ‘negative’ points when judged by God after death (Nieuwkerk, 2005; Schacht, 2012). Although merit can be gained through participation in death rites, there is also a widespread fear of death. People from a refugee background often have traumatic experiences of death, which exacerbate that fear. Others have no experience of death at all as they live far from their extended family or in an urban setting where death is largely confined to hospitals. When considering participating in a ritual, people wonder if they can control themselves and not disturb the deceased with their emotions of grief. For this reason some people stated that they could only participate in the washing of a stranger, not of someone they are close to. Others feel they could only participate if they are very close to the deceased. Women specifically mention the washing of a child or their mother. Those who have actually participated in the ritual bathing of a deceased loved one value it as a comforting experience. How these mixed emotions intertwine is explained by Fatima:

“I am afraid of death, that is why I find it difficult to participate in the final cleansing of the deceased,” she explains. But just minutes later she tells how she, together with her sister, did participate in the cleansing of her one-year-old nephew. She considers the washing of a dead baby something else, something that did not scare her at all as “he was like a sleeping little angel”. She passionately insists that Islam views little children as pure and sure of an afterlife in paradise and therefore the ritual cleansing of a child is not a necessity. “But,” she concluded, “for us it was a beautiful and comforting thing to do.” (Personal interview with Fatima, 17 December 2010)

Attitudes, beliefs and emotions about death and the ritual washing might not differ fundamentally from those in the context of origin, but the present context causes exceptional situations that make the ritual practice less self-evident. This
forces people to reinvent and adapt their ritual practice to the new context to suit their new circumstances.

Chapter 4 on Muslims’ views on life and death is devoted to the ritual beliefs cursorily described here.

2.2.5 Place

According to the *fiqh* basically any screened off area is suitable to perform the ritual purification of the deceased as long as the body is oriented towards Mecca during the washing, as it is during the funerary prayer. In practice the washing is far easier to perform in a place that has a special table with a drain, warm water and sprinklers.

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

The choice of a final resting place appears to be a topic of on-going debate among Muslim migrants, with arguments for and against burial in the local context of Venlo, where since 1995 a part of the general cemetery of Blerickse Bergen is reserved exclusively for Muslims. A walk around the site shows that the largest Muslim communities – those of Turkish and Moroccan origin – hardly ever bury their dead here. Almost without exception they are buried in their country of origin. Other migrants, too, decide against burial in Venlo or the Netherlands. Their choice is explained in different ways. Some claim that they just want to return to the land of their forefathers (simply going home or actually returning to the physical ground of their ancestors) or return to a place where relatives can take care of their grave and pray for them on a regular basis. Some find it important to be buried among other Muslims rather than be surrounded by a non-Muslim majority. The assurance that their grave will not be emptied after some time is another reason to choose a final resting place in an Islamic country. And sometimes it has just become a (family or community)
People’s ideas on their context of origin and the present context greatly influence their decision on where to be buried. Two women with similar backgrounds focus on different aspects and come to different conclusions, as the following examples show:

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

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

For Nadia being buried in Morocco was self-evident for a long time. When her father died 30 years ago he returned to his homeland, as it was his clear and final wish. But as her oldest children are starting their own families, Nadia thinks being buried in Venlo is the next logical step. She wants her children to visit her grave regularly to pray for her, something she could hardly ever do for her father. (Personal interviews with Dilek, 20 January 2011 & Nadia, 17 December 2010)

Dutch converts often have different considerations as they have no context of origin to fall back on, as in this case of the young convert Marco:

With the day of judgment in mind, Marco instructed his non-Muslim mother to have him buried in an Islamic country when he dies. Although he has no personal ties with any Islamic country, his request is mainly motivated by the fact that eternal rest in the grave is not (yet) guaranteed in the Netherlands. His best friend Muhammad, who fled from Somalia as a child, doesn’t share Marco’s opinion. For him Islam clearly teaches that one should be buried where one dies, following the example of the prophet Mohammed. (Telephone interview with Marco, 30 December 2010)

Even though the actual burial is not the main focus of this research, the choice of a final resting place also affects the ritual washing. In preparation for burial
in the country of origin the ritual washing generally takes place in the Netherlands, where the bereaved can pay their last respects before the deceased is placed in a specially sealed coffin. Insurance often only pays the expenses of repatriating the body and tickets for one or two chaperones. So other relatives are left behind and are unable to attend the funeral. The funerary rites are split between places and people. Sometimes it may happen that on arrival in the country of burial relatives arrange for the deceased to be washed again. Repatriation takes time, which conflicts with Islamic prescriptions of an immediate funeral in the place where one dies. For some Muslims in Venlo (refugees in particular) a funeral in their home country is not even an option. So the Muslim part of the cemetery does not provide a standard image of Muslims actually living in Venlo.

2.2.6 Time

Islamic regulations strive to bury the deceased as soon as possible after death, an urgency that is clearly felt by the bereaved. Prompt burial is one of the first things mentioned when asking about Islamic death practices. Interment within 24 hours is possible since the new Dutch Corpse Disposal Act (Herziene Wet op de Lijkbezorging) passed in 1991, but one still has to get permission from the local authorities.

If insured, an insurance representative will assist in making all the necessary arrangements and as they are quite experienced in that field, they are usually able to speed up the process considerably. But there is no guarantee that the burial will take place within 24 hours, as a death after office hours or on a public holiday might slow things down. Repatriation of a body to another country entails a lot of paperwork and travelling time and also delays the funeral. People believe a speedy burial is needed to prevent the body from decomposing so the deceased can appear before Allah intact. The anticipated peaceful state the deceased will enjoy once in her grave is another reason for speeding things up. On the other hand one finds that when it comes to deciding on the place of burial (see 2.2.5) people are willing to compromise on the time it takes.

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

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9 As witnessed by Dilek when attending a funeral in Turkey. (Personal interview 20 January 2011)
My husband died on Thursday evening and we tried our very best to make all the arrangements for a funeral on Friday. We Somalis are such a small community in Venlo, so it was good we could bring the body to the mosque on Friday afternoon. This way all the regular visitors could pray the special funeral prayer with us. It reassured us. A substantial number of people praying for a good passover is good for the deceased. (Personal interview with Habo, 6 December 2010)

Especially in very small communities the attendance of other Muslims – in this case provided by the Friday prayer service in the mosque – is considered important for a successful ritual performance.

2.2.7 Objects

According to the ritual order there are no special or sacred objects needed to perform the ritual bathing, just clean water that is available at the facilities. Practical requirements like gloves and towels, small bowls to pour the water or a sprinkler make it easier. Additives to the water like camphor, *sidr* leaves, flowers or soap are not explicitly prescribed but are often part of cultural traditions. These traditions appear to be so strong that people go to great lengths to get the ‘right’ additives to ensure that their funerary duties and customs are properly observed. Additives from the original context become a vital ingredient for the ritual in the present context. Alternatives that are readily available and perfectly suitable according to Islamic regulations are often not sought after.

The plain white cloth used for shrouding (4 metres, cut into three to five pieces) is either bought by the bereaved or provided by the volunteer washers. Some people buy the cloth when on pilgrimage to Mecca (or have someone bring it for them) for the purpose of shrouding them after death. Even though the fabric varies, simplicity is preferred.

2.2.8 Languages, sounds

Opinions differ on whether recitation of Qur’anic texts is part of the cleansing rite or not, but many people assume they are. There is no text available and most respondents said they were worried about getting the recitations right as they are generally not conversant with classical Arabic.

Muslims in Venlo who don’t speak Turkish often find the use of that language problematic. Even if they have never actually visited a Turkish mosque, they are under the impression that there Turkish is mixed into ritual
performances. It is a widespread and very persistent assumption. Arabic is seen as the only proper ritual language and that is why some minorities prefer a Moroccan mosque/imam to a Turkish one, as the lingua franca is Arabic.

In general voices are lowered during the ritual washing and any emotions that might surface are repressed. Most of the rite is performed in attentive silence and in the preparation phase silence is said to be crucial. People participating in the washing often talk to the deceased in their mother tongue. Dutch doesn’t play a role in the ritual, but is increasingly the language of instruction.

### 2.2.9 Senses
Respondents often refer to (the idea of) the scent of death, considered a bad thing or sign when it surfaces. To avoid or mask unpleasant odours incense is burnt during the washing. The burning of incense is common in African and Asian cultures, a custom migrants take with them.

Some respondents explicitly referred to the prophet Mohammed who could be recognised by the sweet smell of roses. Because of this oral tradition, rosewater is often used to perfume the water for the final ritual washing; it might also be applied to the parts of the body that touch the ground during prayer or to the shroud. It is considered important that the deceased should appear before God clean and sweet smelling.

One imam was very outspoken about the burning of incense and stated that regular soap will do the job. Another imam emphasised moderate use of any fragrance. They both recommended adding camphor (kāfūr) to the water for the final washing, as this substance is readily obtainable in the Netherlands and the fact that it is mentioned in the Qur’an seems to add to its suitability (personal interview Imam A, 20 January 2011 and personal conversation with Imam C, 28 November 2010).

### 2.2.10 Comments and criticism
Muslims from different backgrounds living in the migration context of Venlo are confronted with different ideas and practices. This often occurs in discussions about what is ‘real Islam’, commonly regarded as Islam stripped of cultural influences. The largest, best established and best equipped Muslims groups in Venlo are those from Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds. They are able to preserve and develop their own ritual clusters and present them as ‘real Islam’ or ‘correct ritual’ to their own communities and at the same time differentiate themselves from other communities. But within those communities, too, we find
that young people – the second and third generation – are actively (re)defining their religious identity that differs from that of their parents (De Koning, 2008; Entzinger & Dourleijn, 2008). This generation gap is also apparent in ritual criticism, a process of ritual revision and reinvention, and has an impact on the death ritual repertoire.

Death brings separate Muslim communities together, as in the case of the funeral prayer for a deceased Somali man during the Friday prayer gathering in a Moroccan mosque. Because of this shared experience they begin to see each other as fellow Muslims who actually share the same faith and ritual.

The role of close relatives in the ritual washing of the dead is a sensitive issue, as most people acknowledge that they have a role in the ritual but are too afraid or insecure to participate. One of the imams actively strives to change this by motivating relatives to fulfil their responsibilities. His policy is to participate in a supportive rather than a leading role in the ritual cleansing of the deceased. This enables relatives to perform the washing themselves, with the help of a ritual expert.

2.2.11 Mapping ritual elements: summary

The ten ritual elements guided us through the ritual practice and yield the outline summarised below. The findings concerning each ritual component are briefly listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>Ritual purification of the deceased is part of a larger body of interconnected funerary rites. Basic actions stay the same but the parties present, the location and circumstances change in the new context and additional actions are improvised to meet the needs of the bereaved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>The deceased plays a central role, the bereaved struggle with their own roles to do the right thing by the deceased and themselves with due regard to feasibility. New roles emerge. Ritual experts (washers) are indispensable as most people don’t know the procedure. An actual Muslim community is not self-evident in the new context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>Qur’an and Hadith are frequently mentioned sources. Although <em>fiqh</em> literature offers the most tangible guidelines, it is often inaccessible to lay people. Imams become a primary source in the new context. Additional information is provided by courses, meetings and the internet. In local narratives all these sources converge and become an important source in the Venlo context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes, Beliefs, Emotions</td>
<td>Muslims in Venlo are very much aware of death, the afterlife and Islamic eschatology, which affect attitudes towards ritual practice. The awareness of <em>fard kifaya</em> can reinforce a Muslim community. The current context creates exceptional situations that make the ritual practice less predictable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places</td>
<td>The washing can be performed in any screened off area and may be a very private ritual. The actual place of burial has a direct impact on the way the ritual cleansing is performed and perceived. It might cause funerary rites to be split between people and places.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>The bereaved feel pressurised to conduct the funeral within 24 hours of death, which is not easily arranged in the present context. Repatriation of the body also obstructs prompt burial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects</td>
<td>The washing requires mainly practical items that are readily available. But people appear to go to great lengths to get additional material (incense, leaves, shrouds) from their original context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages, sounds</td>
<td>The primary ritual language is Arabic – a language not many have mastered. That and the unavailability of clear texts make people feel insecure about participating. Dutch is only used as language of instruction (outside the ritual performance).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senses</td>
<td>The scent of death is feared and counteracted by burning incense or adding rose water or other perfumes to the water. Camphor is recommended in the current context: it is easy to obtain and is also mentioned in the Qur’an.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments, criticism</td>
<td>The diversity of Muslims, their different origins and their migration to a new context trigger debate about what is ‘real Islam’ or ‘correct ritual.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3. Elements of death rites*
2.3 Conclusion

Mapping the ritual elements of the purification of the deceased and connected death rites clarifies the practices of the performers of the ritual repertoire – the various Muslims living in the Dutch town of Venlo – by zooming in on the ritual elements and how they are (re)shaped in the current context of Venlo.

After analysing the actual practice using the separate ritual elements as stepping stones, we now take a step back so as to look at the glue that seems to hold all these findings together: a ritual process of ‘reinvention’, closely linked with our three key concepts – ritual practice, the ritual context of migration and ritual content (meaning).

2.3.1 Ritual practice

*What is the character of the ritual elements we have identified?*

The description of the building blocks of ritual – the elements – enabled us to provide a substantiated picture of the actual ritual practice. The ritual practice presented through these elements displays the dynamics inherent in all ritual. It also clarifies how rites as hand-me-downs take shape in a particular context and affords insight into the reinvention of death ritual to make it fit the particular context. It shows us how Muslims ritualise in the face of death.

What emerges is a twofold picture. We conclude that Muslims in Venlo have a rich ritual repertoire at their disposal, provided and prescribed by Islamic sources. At the same time there is manifest transformation of this repertoire to fit the new context.

2.3.2 Ritual context: migration

*What is the influence of the migration context on the ritual elements?*

Islamic funerary tradition has taken shape over time and space – from the early days of an emerging Islam in the Arabian peninsula to our modern world where Islam is found in all corners of the world. As a result of migration Muslims are on the move and so is their ritual repertoire. Muslims in Venlo find themselves in a contrast position, as they are now a religious minority and even their own Muslim ‘community’ is marked by diversity. This makes being a Muslim in the migration context less matter of course than in their context of origin. That at least is a common view among Muslims in Venlo: there is a strong tendency to romanticise and idealise the context of origin.
This process of re-imagination manifests itself in vivid narratives that circulate in Muslim communities and play an important role in constructing meaning. We shall dwell on this in chapter 5.

Again we see a twofold development. Migration and the new context make it necessary to review the ritual repertoire and reinvent and adapt its elements to the current context. On the other hand it is a selective process in which certain elements are chosen rather than others. For example, in case of repatriation of the corpse prompt burial no longer seems to be a priority. The same applies to the primary role of relatives as washers in the ritual cleansing of the deceased: in the migration context the function has been taken over almost completely by ritual experts.

2.3.3 Ritual content: meaning

What ritual content emerges from the ‘lived religion’ practice of death rites in Venlo?

The dimension of lived religion concerns the way religion is experienced in the practice of death rites in a particular context. We see that Muslims are keenly aware of images of death provided by Islamic sources. This colours their perception of death, often reinforced by the contrast situation they find themselves in. Although standard ritual prescriptions are available, actual ritual practice is far from uniform. Nonetheless the diverse practices are generally labelled ‘Islamic’ by participants.

Once again there is a duality. It appears that all Muslims in this context actually have is ‘lived religion’. The common practice, in all its variations and adaptations, is primary. Interestingly, this seems to go hand in hand with lively debates on ‘correct ritual’ and ‘real Islam’, being Islam free from cultural influences.
RITUAL ROLES

MOTIVATION AND AUTHORITY OF RITUAL EXPERTS IN A MIGRATION CONTEXT

In chapter 2 we examined the common ritual practice of cleansing and shrouding the deceased, using ritual elements as stepping stones. In the process we came across various ritual actors: those who perform the most prominent or most significant ritual actions (Grimes, 2003, p. 10). The actors assume a particular role or ‘ritual identity’, as Grimes (1995, p. 27) calls it. In Venlo the Islamic ritual of cleansing the deceased is mainly performed by what can best be described as ritual experts. In defining the ritual repertoire of Muslims in the face of death we focus on these experts and the way their roles are shaped in this small town migration context: which roles can be identified in the practice of the ritual of cleansing and shrouding the deceased?

We shall clarify exactly who participates in the ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased, and in what way.¹

3.1 Ritual identity: reinventing the role of the ritual washer

A first differentiation is between two parties participating in and playing active roles in funeral rites: the deceased and the survivors (Van Gennep, 1960, p.147). The principal ritual actions are performed by the ‘washers’; those who perform the actual, hands-on ritual cleansing of the deceased. The procedure is laid down in Islamic legal sources. Fiqh literature explicitly assigns the role of washers to the closest relatives of the deceased. Actual practice shows that these clear instructions do not guarantee a problem-free exercise. Particularly in a migration context – by definition a context of change – the role of the washer is daunting. The bereaved, we found, have difficulty participating as they are un-

¹ A version of this chapter will be published in Mortality (Venhorst, Quartier, Nissen, & Venbrux, forthcoming 2013).
certain about the procedure and often feel inadequate. The regulations might be clear and fixed, but ritual practice in this context is not. The migration context certainly makes it harder to observe the death rites prescribed by Islamic sources or to perform them in the way that is customary in the context of origin. For the bereaved (both the next of kin and the Muslim community) in particular it is hard to live up to the important role that is reserved for them in Islamic death ritual. In the diaspora close relatives might be completely unavailable, few and far between or simply incapable of performing the death rites. Muslims in Venlo are a minority of hybrid origins, a mosaic of bigger and smaller pieces, each with its own features. So support and participation by what is conveniently called ‘the Muslim community’ cannot be taken for granted. In this context we see the emergence of a new role, that of the ritual expert (Quartier, 2010), who meets the specific needs of Muslims in the diaspora and can take the lead in the ritual purification of the deceased.²

The changing context of Muslims in Venlo challenges them to adapt their ritual repertoire to the circumstances. To ensure the practice of their death rites a process of reinvention is negotiated and we see the role of the ritual expert developing. Ritual experts provide help and guidance in this dynamic, complex situation that challenges all the interrelated parties involved. The deceased, the bereaved, the Muslim community/communities, ritual experts and secular authorities all have to be attuned to each other and to the specific context. Not only do the ritual actors have to deal with new and unfamiliar situations, but the ritual itself is subject to change as it moves from the original to the new context (Campo, 2006; Venhorst, Venbrux, & Quartier, 2011). Dutch converts generally lack this migration background and although their number is small, their praxis is interesting.

Although detailed descriptions of the core ritual actions are available, they are stripped of all contextual information so they are applicable in any situation and context. At the same time this means that a layperson finds them difficult to perform without guidance. The ritual involves extensive touching of the deceased, as the whole body needs to be systematically washed at least three times and the intestines have to be emptied by pressing the belly. This has to be done with great caution, as it is widely believed that the deceased is still sentient at this time (Jonker, 1997, p. 53; Smith & Haddad, 2002, p. 37). Washers should

² The term ‘ritual expert’ is chosen as it is a role that is still under construction. Both religious and ritual specialists (like Imams) are involved as are volunteers without any formal training.
not display their grief or be overwhelmed by emotion, as it will disturb the deceased in this already difficult phase before the burial. The bereaved often fear that they will not be able to control their emotions. All this makes them very aware of the risk of ritual failure (Hüsken, 2007). So although the fiqh clearly appoints the next of kin as the most suitable ritual actors, most of them consider this to be overruled by the requirement – also prescribed – that the washer should be ‘a Muslim that knows how to proceed’. The need for ritual experts is apparent in these circumstances. They are expected to be competent to deal with all these facets and are widely used in a migration context. But what motivates someone to become a ritual expert? And how does the role become authorised by others? Both motivation and authority are important markers of the role of the ritual experts – the washers.

3.1.1 Applying the key concepts

Although the employment of ritual experts in the migration context is common nowadays, they are fairly low profile. The world of Islamic ritual experts in a migration context still has to be discovered and examined. Their motivation and authority need to be studied on a personal level as well as in relation to the people and communities around them – the social level. Besides, motivation and authority deriving from a transpersonal, religious level should not be overlooked (Quartier, 2011b).

In order to gain insight into the ritual expert’s motivation and authority we once again apply our key theoretical concepts. Having focused on the ritual elements in the previous chapter, we now look at the ritual roles in the cleansing and shrouding of the deceased.

3.1.1.1 Ritual practice

Ritual practice shows that of all funerary rites the ritual cleansing of the deceased is probably the most daunting, as it is hands-on and requires direct physical contact with the deceased. Ritual knowledge, skills and experience are considered essential for correct performance of the ritual – qualifications few relatives possess so they are not able or willing to perform the rite, making ritual experts indispensable. In practice the latter take over as primary actors in the ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased. How does this affect the washer’s role? And what does it mean for the other participants, the bereaved and the Muslim community? How can these roles be unravelled and defined?

What roles emerge in the ritual practice and how can they be defined?
3.1.1.2 Ritual context: migration

The ritual context of migration is a new social context for those involved in Islamic death rites. Being migrants, many of them are no longer actively involved in and frequently confronted with death in their midst. We see a privatisation of death in the new context: generations no longer live under the same roof and most deaths occur in hospital. In addition the paucity of relatives and absence of a like-minded Muslim community complicate the performance of death rites and exacerbate the anxiety. Being in a minority position causes insecurity about how to gain the necessary knowledge and confidence to participate in such a hands-on death rite. The emergence of ritual experts certainly solves some of these problems, but what about their motivation and authority? How does the migration context define the role of these primary actors?

How are ritual roles shaped by the small town migration context?

3.1.1.3 Ritual context: meaning

The concept of ritual content – meaning – enables us to determine how participants experience the roles they play in the ritual cleansing of the deceased. What motivates experts to take the role of ritual washer and serve fellow Muslims they often don’t personally know? And as the role of the ritual expert is not prescribed and sanctioned by Islamic sources, it raises the issue of how roles in this context are authorised by others. To come to grips with these questions we take a closer look at the ritual expert’s motivation and authority. First we look from the perspective of the experts themselves: what motivates them to become involved in the performance of death rites? Then we shift to the perception of others and their acceptance of these people as ritual experts. For the sake of a complete picture both motivation and authority are studied from three interrelated angles: personal, interpersonal and transpersonal.

What motivates people to take the role of ritual expert and how is their ritual authority recognised?

3.2 Ritual experts at work

The involvement of ritual experts in the ritual cleansing of the deceased has become widespread. Muslims in Venlo refer to these experts in general, using descriptive Dutch terms like ‘de mensen die de doden wassen’ [‘people who wash
After death, either at home or in hospital, the experts are called in to perform the ritual washing. In Venlo this usually happens at the general morgue, which is seen as the best equipped facility. The morgue provides the prescribed screened off area and convenient tables and ablution facilities. Ritual experts often work in teams, with a clear division of roles. The senior team member (in age or experience) takes the lead to ensure a smooth performance. This person also keeps a close eye on the others’ mental ability to handle the situation. About three people are needed to perform the washing respectfully, as the body should be turned and treated gently. The team consists either exclusively of experts or of an expert guiding participating relatives of the deceased.

These experts that actually lead the performance of the ritual are a select group, and they are the main focus of this chapter. But we should at least mention the much larger number of people and organisations that function as ritual experts in a counselling capacity (Quartier 2010), providing information on Islamic death rites. Information is provided through various media (e.g. narratives, conversations, courses, books, websites and audio-visual material) and people (e.g. Islamic scholars, family members and peers), and is absorbed during one’s life course. They are a primary source of basic ritual knowledge and shape what is perceived as ‘correct ritual performance’ – often culminating in the choice of a specific ritual presider.

The most visible, most frequently employed experts are the imams of the local mosques; they are active both as ritual presiders and as ritual councilors. These are so-called professional imams (Shadid & Van Koningsveld, 2008, p. 62), paid either by the local mosque organisation or by the Turkish government (Diyanet). These imams are generally recruited in the country of origin, highlighting the identity (‘Turkish’, ‘Moroccan’ and specific religious affiliation) of the local mosque and indicating the community they primarily serve. To

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3 The common Dutch expressions lijkwas/lrijkwasler ['corpse-washing/corpse-washer'] and afleggen/aflegger ['laying out'/‘layer-out’] with reference to the preparation of a body for burial were not used by our Muslim respondents. In some texts the word ‘bewassen’ appears to refer to washing the dead.

4 Interestingly, in 2007 a state-of-the-art Islamic washing facility (funded by various Islamic organisations and the municipality) was opened near the cemetery in Venlo-Blerick. So far it has been used only sporadically. In interviews and conversations people say that the general morgue is a more neutral place that allows greater privacy.

5 *Diyanet* is the Presidency of Religious Affairs of the Turkish republic that provides the majority of imams for Turkish mosques in the Netherlands.
these communities they are most readily accessible, but other Muslims also refer to imams as the persons to turn to for ritual guidance, as the mosque and its representatives are the most visible Islamic institutions in the migration context. Whether people actually do so in practice does not necessarily follow. An imam in the Dutch town of Venlo relates his experiences:

Before being sent to Venlo some years ago, he was an imam in Turkey where he worked under very different circumstances: ‘In Turkey my main responsibility was to preside at the daily prayers in the mosque – one of many mosques in a predominantly Islamic environment. Here leading the prayers was just a small part of my duties. In Venlo I am educator, psychologist and a friend for the Turkish Muslim community; we are a minority position.’ In Turkey he was hardly ever involved in the performance of death rites, whereas in Venlo he is almost always called in when a member of the community dies. ‘Most people have insurance that is offered through our mosque organisation. It ensures them an Islamic funeral and repatriation to Turkey. In this way mosques and their imams become involved in the diaspora’ He has presided at many ritual cleansings of deceased males or was asked to provide detailed ritual knowledge. ‘This is not something an imam normally does. I don’t mind doing it, but at the same time I think it is very valuable for family members to perform the washing themselves and it is also what Islamic regulations prescribe. But I also see people struggling with their uncertainties and their fears. I encourage them to assist me, but I have volunteers I can call on who will help me with the ritual when family members are not available or not able to help.’ He emphasises that this is not the right way and he sees it as an important task to make young people aware of their duties towards deceased relatives. (Personal interview Imam A, 20 January 2011)

For imams in the Netherlands the performance of death rites has become a standard part of their professional responsibilities. In their role as ritual presiders individual imams can’t fully serve their community. To perform the ritual cleansing properly and respectfully a single person is not sufficient, and because of strict gender regulations a deceased woman can only be washed by women. Initially individuals took it upon themselves to organise and perform the washing of women within their own (Turkish and Moroccan) communities. Only recently some (mosque) organisations have started training predominantly young women for this task. How they will be deployed eventually is not clear yet. Not being professionals, their motivation and their authority differ. Samira has been involved in the ritual cleansing of Muslim women for over a decade now:

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6 More on roles of Muslim women in transnational death rites can be found in the work of Gerdien Jonker (1997, 1997b), Katy Gardner (2002) and Gardner & Grillo (2002).
I got involved in the ritual cleansing of the deceased by chance. When the three-month-old child of one of my friends died she asked me to help her do the washing—and although it was sad, it was also a very impressive and beautiful experience. Later I was closely involved in taking care of a young teenage girl who was very sick, she had a brain tumour. When she eventually died it seemed natural to participate in the ritual cleansing. For me and the others involved it was a closure that helped us cope with her untimely death. Samira explains that on both occasions she met Farida, an elderly Moroccan woman who had been leading the washing of deceased women in Venlo for years. Farida’s expertise is usually called in by the local Moroccan mosque organisation. ‘She guided us through the procedures of the ritual. Once she called me when someone died and they didn’t have enough people to perform the ritual cleansing. Now I am a more or less regular member of a group of women that perform the washing of the deceased.’ Although Samira herself is not originally from Morocco and never visits the Moroccan mosques, she is an active member of this group. They have been involved in numerous washings of women from various backgrounds. ‘For me being involved is an act of love for people and for God. It is the last thing you can do for somebody on this earth… This idea helps me through it, because I still find it hard to deal with a dead person. You have to be very nice and gentle with them, as it is also hard on the deceased. But I learned to do it over the years. God was very gentle with me, as washing the baby and the 14-year-old girl were my initial experiences and they were beautiful experiences, not scary at all. God guided me step by step, so now I can also do more difficult washings of older people or people that are disfigured by a long illness.’ (Personal interview Samira, 9 June 2011)

Cultural, ethnic, religious and social background greatly influences the way death is perceived and how one should (ritually) deal with it; it also determines one’s expectations. The pressure to do the right thing often features in the crisis situation of the death of a loved one. Especially in a migration context, with its diverse Muslim communities, ‘correct performance’ can be a relative notion. This is most strongly felt among the smaller Muslim communities that are often relatively new to Venlo and sometimes consist of only a few people. They are not as well equipped as the larger Turkish and Moroccan communities. Being mainly refugees from countries like former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Guinea, their migration experience is very different from that of labour migrants. Because of this they make up small and very diverse groups with an overrepresentation of young men, single people and broken or incomplete families. For these small communities ritual experts with a similar background are hard to come by in Venlo, so in the event of a death the bereaved
have to turn to experts from the larger communities or find a suitable expert elsewhere in the Netherlands or in Europe. Finding a suitable expert is not easy because of the time pressure exerted by Islamic regulations that demand prompt burial. And although Muslims of various backgrounds refer to local imams as people to turn to for ritual guidance and assistance, there are also objections (founded or unfounded). The following case illustrates typical considerations that small communities have to deal with:

A Somali woman died. Just a few years before she had left the unstable situation in her home country and fled to the Netherlands. There she got ill and it was discovered that she was suffering from cancer and had only a few months to live. As the woman had no relatives with her, the Dutch social worker approached the small local Somali community for help. Three young Somali women who grew up in the Netherlands took it upon themselves to see this woman through the final stage of her life. They took care of her and comforted her. The social worker urged the young women to discuss her final wishes so proper funeral arrangements could be made. ‘This was hard, as we are not used to discussing this kind of things in our culture,’ one of the women explained, ‘we don’t talk about death.’ They had some vague ideas about the proper Islamic rites that have to be performed but had never actually participated in them before. The dying woman expressed a wish that they should take care of the ritual cleansing after her death. ‘We agreed, but we were in no way prepared. We spent quite some time organising certain traditional aromas that are used in Somalia for this washing of the dead. That was what we had when she actually died.’ After dying in hospital the body was taken to the general morgue for the ritual cleansing. ‘We had never done something like this before. We found a lot of information on-line. Yes, we googled and downloaded a detailed step-by-step manual with pictures and thought we could do it like this … I didn’t think of going to a local mosque for information or help as they are Turkish or Moroccan mosques.’ Guided by their printed manual the young women tried to perform the washing but immediately encountered problems. Although the manual provided clear guidelines on what to do, they were somewhat general. Practical details like how much water, what temperature, how to pour the water on the body were not described. Also handling a dead body proved to be very difficult and emotional. ‘So we decided not to continue, we were afraid we couldn’t do it the right way. After a frantic search we found a specialist, a Somali woman in Brussels who came over immediately. She took care of the rites and we assisted her…. It was only much later that I found out there are also female washers in Venlo that could have easily helped us, but somehow we were intent on having a Somali doing it.’ (Personal interview Imani, 25 September 2010)
In these small communities it appears that in the case of a female deceased the bereaved tend to be much more cautious in their choice of a ritual expert. In the case of a deceased male they feel less hesitant to call in a local imam (Moroccan or Turkish) to perform the washing and it is not uncommon to negotiate a suitable ritual practice with him.

To complete the picture of diversity in the Muslim community of Venlo today I should mention the growing number of second and third generation Muslims, born and raised in the Netherlands. Although by and large they still relate to the original context of their (grand)parents, they are also very much part of Dutch society – something that will have an impact on their perceptions and wishes concerning death and death ritual. And although the number of Dutch converts to Islam is quite small, when they (or their close relatives) die things can be complicated, as they are part of families that comprise both Muslims and non-Muslims who have their own views of what is an appropriate death ritual. The same applies to mixed marriages. These various backgrounds can influence the practice of death rites and the employment of ritual experts.

On a national level there have been several initiatives to serve these groups by offering a more general Islamic alternative that is not directly connected with a particular ethnic or cultural background. Recently we have seen the rise of Islamic undertakers (commercial businesses, predominantly in the Randstad) and (non-profit) organisations like Stichting Islamitisch Begrafeniswezen (Islamic Burial Society), whose focus on Islamic death ritual and burial in the Netherlands is evident on their website:

The Islamic Burial Society (IBS) was born of the needs of Muslims in the Netherlands concerning Islamic burial customs. The IBS’s main objective is to ensure eternal rest for the dear departed/deceased. In addition the IBS is currently negotiating with local authorities to establish one or more dedicated Islamic burial sites in the Netherlands. The IBS has also set itself the goals of promoting the transfer of knowledge concerning Islamic burial traditions and customs, promoting jurisprudence regarding Islamic burial laws and founding a body of Islamic undertakers.7

These organisations provide information adapted to the Dutch context as well as ritual experts recommended through websites and word-of-mouth advertising.

3.3 Becoming a ritual expert: motivation and authority

Although death is part of life and Islamic sources elaborate on the topic of death and the afterlife, Muslims’ actual participation in death rites is less common. Dealing with the abstract notion of death is different from actually handling the dead body of a loved one. The earliest Muslim communities in Venlo have an aging first generation, which means that in the years to come they will have to deal with death in their midst more frequently. This raises new questions and challenges for these Turkish and Moroccan communities. Other Muslim communities are relatively young and death occurs only now and then, taking people by surprise and leaving them to react on the spur of the moment. For most Muslims now living in a Western context death is no longer a natural part of daily life; generations no longer share the same house and most deaths take place in hospitals. This lack of visibility and unfamiliarity with death adds to people’s fear, which doesn’t make dealing with it any easier. So it is legitimate to research the motivation of people who actually get involved in the ritual washing of deceased fellow Muslims that they often don’t even know personally. What motivates them to become ritual experts? As the role of the ritual expert is often not formally sanctioned, we focus on their so called ‘performance agency’ (Krüger, Nijhawan & Stavrianopoulou, 2005, p. 22). What makes others accept them as ritual experts?

A comprehensive picture of ritual experts’ motivation and authority requires study on three levels: personal, interpersonal and transpersonal. On a personal level we study their personal background: their cultural and ethnic heritage, their traditions, their life experiences, convictions and beliefs, and the knowledge and skills acquired in life. The interpersonal level is social and includes the way ritual experts relate to the others involved; their relationship with the deceased, the bereaved, the community/communities and other ritual experts. The transpersonal level refers to what we could call a religious (in a broad sense) dimension: the ritual expert’s relationship with God and Islam, local Islamic institutions, religious traditions, regulations and beliefs. The discussion of each of the three levels is preceded by a vignette.

3.3.1 Motivation

As already indicated the motivation of the ritual expert is studied on three levels personal, interpersonal and transpersonal.
3.3.1.1 Personal

“When I started working in a nursing home many years ago I was for the first time confronted with a dead patient. It was a very old woman whom we had nursed for a long time and I thought I would be horrified to see her dead – let alone touch her. But as it was our task to lay her out before the relatives came, there was no way to avoid it. When I saw her I was struck by her peaceful appearance. This experience made me think about death and dying a lot and it motivated me to do a course at our local mosque to be trained in the Islamic ritual of washing the deceased.’ (Personal interview Dilara, 27 January 2011)

Dilara describes her becoming a ritual expert as a conscious choice to undergo ritual training after personal experiences of death in her work. Many others get involved in the ritual practice more gradually and, as they often describe it, ‘by chance’. Experience of and confrontation with death in one’s intimate circle can be a major factor: death is no longer distant, unknown and frightening. Sometimes people were active ritual experts even in their country of origin (or their relatives were) and they continue in the new context. For professional imams, too, death rites are an obvious part of their work in the migration context. Through these personal experiences people acquire ritual skills and knowledge and are able to perform the ritual cleansing of a deceased person. Personal experience of the actual absence of a suitable ritual expert when a relative dies can motivate someone to come forward as an expert for the community.

Thus a wide range of personal experiences motivate people to participate in the performance of death ritual and continue to become a ritual expert in this area. Similar experiences also lead to rather different considerations, like whether one is capable of performing the ritual cleansing (only) on people you know and have a bond with or (only) on people you don’t know.

3.3.1.2 Interpersonal

‘I converted to Islam and it is still a bit confusing to which community I belong. My Muslim friends are from various backgrounds and my close relatives are all non-Muslim... This made me think a lot and in my regular talks with an imam of the nearby mosque volunteering for the performance of the ritual cleansing of the deceased came up. It is a very important ritual for the deceased and for the Muslim community. Participating in something so important and the fact that they trust me to do this make me feel part of the Muslim community more than anything else!’ (Personal conversation Marco, 7 January 2011).
Motivation to participate in the ritual cleansing of the dead often derives from other people. Actual participation moreover puts you in direct contact with others, as one always relates to the other participants: the deceased, the bereaved and the (Muslim) community/communities, and other ritual experts. A personal connection with a sick or deceased person or their relatives can be the initial motivation to get involved. Many are also motivated to be meaningful for their community and find ritual support of the deceased a good opportunity for that. Some communities offer a formal structure (training course or an apprenticeship) that a candidate can enrol for.

Participation in the performance of death rites is considered a respected thing to do and secures or strengthens one’s position in a Muslim community. This can be important for individual Muslims who have no (or just a very small) community to fall back on. Sometimes it is not so much a conscious decision but simply a call from a ritual expert one knows who is short of a pair of hands and thinks you might be suitable to participate in the ritual. The general idea is that if one is asked, one cannot refuse.

3.3.1.3 Transpersonal

‘Death makes you very conscious of your life, to live it like you should, like the Qur’an teaches you... That is why I am not afraid of death. When I realised this I became active in the mosque organisation to start training women to perform the ritual cleansing of the deceased. It is your duty as a Muslim... you will be rewarded …it has already strengthened my beliefs and my relationship with God.’ (Personal conversation Sahar, 26 November 2010)

Sahar describes herself as a pious Muslim who lives according to the tradition of the prophet. She is very articulate about the role of death and the afterlife as guidelines for her daily life. Various aspects of religion motivate people to become involved in the performance of death rites. The *fiqh* (cited in Dessing 2001, p.145) authorises close relatives of the same sex as the deceased to perform the ritual purification and adds that it should be a Muslim who knows how to proceed. First there is a more general message presented by Islamic sources on the importance of people’s awareness of death. The Qur’an vividly and frequently refers to death and the afterlife, and to eschatological representations and expectations. All rites concerning death and dying are seen as *fard kifaya* – collective duties for all Muslims, making the Muslim community responsible for ensuring that every Muslim gets a proper funeral. It encourages them to participate in death ritual, even when the deceased is not a relative or friend. Partic-
ipation also brings what is called ajr (‘plus’ points) that are weighed against their ‘negative’ points when God judges them after death. Participation in death rites in particular is connected with immense immaterial rewards, hence acceptance of financial payment is seen as makruh (reprehensible).8 Based on this same principle ritual experts explain their motivation in personal terms: they participate to serve and be directly connected with God by taking care of God’s creatures in their hour of need.

3.3.2 Authority
Also the authority of the ritual expert is studied on the indicated three levels: personal, interpersonal and transpersonal.

3.3.2.1 Personal
‘I didn’t know what to do exactly. I heard you need to wash the person and you need to recite from the Qur’an. It is not simply washing… It needs to be done by someone who is experienced, who has studied this. Like the imam, for example, he knows exactly what verses to recite and how the washing should proceed… It needs to be someone who knows exactly what to do.’ (Personal interview Ammar, 13 December 2010)

The personal background of a ritual expert is seen as important: not only their abilities but also their ethnic background and the community they belong to are seen as indicators of their authority. Another interesting fact is that most people don’t personally know the ritual experts who will perform the washing of their deceased loved one, but they are nevertheless perceived as people of irreproachable conduct that have the required ritual knowledge and skills – the ability to perform the ritual correctly. Their personal virtue and ritual skills are generally just assumed on the recommendation of others (mainly trusted members of the community). The experts are considered ritual guides who will ensure correct ritual performance on behalf of the bereaved that hire them.

3.3.2.2 Interpersonal
‘When I die I want to return to my home country, to my family. They will take care of me and will bury me there; also the washing and shrouding I want

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8 It refers to one of the five legal values in Islamic law (fard or wajib, obligatory; mustahabb or mandub, preferred; halal, permissible; and haram, prohibited). Makruh acts are not legally forbidden but are discouraged in that Muslims are advised to avoid them, as continued and persistent commission of such acts will lead to sin (Esposito, 2012).
to be done by people I trust… I was never part of a mosque community in Venlo as they are quite different from what I am used to. And with the Dutch authorities you always have to worry, as they might cremate you. So I made arrangements – insurance and a will – that will guarantee my repatriation when I die.’ (Personal interview Amadou, 22 November 2010)

Trust and authority are clearly a two-way street and depend heavily on how the expert is perceived by others. For the experts it can be necessary to be or become part of a community, which then provides them with authority that may be limited to this specific community. Amadou’s case shows, that the living (the future deceased) can make their preference known. But more often it is up to the bereaved to arrange a suitable ritual expert to perform the ritual cleansing. For the bereaved ritual experts fulfil an important role in facilitating a smooth transition of their deceased loved one from this world to the next. Preferably ritual experts are part of the community they are serving, sharing the same background and values. That is difficult to achieve for small Muslim communities, as they often have no appropriate experts at their disposal. A creative solution such small communities come up with is to choose an imam or female washers (from one of the larger communities) to perform the ‘formal washing’, in which the bereaved do not participate but who ensure that ‘what has to be done’ is done properly. This is preceded or followed by an ‘informal’ ritual performed by the bereaved only; it reflects their personal or cultural interpretation of the ritual cleansing and includes their final goodbyes.

3.3.2.3 Transpersonal

‘If someone dies you can always turn to one of the local mosques. Even if they don’t speak your language they know how to perform all rites and they have to help you – they are Muslims, aren’t they? They will do it according to the rules of the Islam. If you can’t go to the mosque for this, where else should you go?’ (Personal conversation Ismael, 6 September 2011)

The role of the ritual expert takes shape in actual practice as it is not explicitly defined in the fiqh. Islamic legal sources clearly state that close relatives of the same sex as the deceased should perform the washing, but the fiqh also specifies that the washing should be done by a Muslim who knows how to proceed. This point is widely recognised and leads people to conclude that the employment of experts is not prohibited. The widespread fear of ritual failure and the consequences that it could have for the deceased’s salvation greatly increase the demand for ritual experts. Although Islam has no central authority, in the migra-
tion context of Western Europe we see an important role in the dissemination of Islamic (ritual) knowledge through local mosques and their imams (Van Bruinesse, 2010). They not merely lead the congregation in prayer but also take on many pastoral duties and play a leading role in education on and performance of Islamic rites of passage from birth to death (Boender, 2007). In the local setting of Venlo mosques are the most visible Muslim institution and the imam officiating in this mosque the most prominent Muslim authority.

### 3.3.3 Motivation and authority: summary

Although the practice in Venlo shows that ritual experts are widely employed in the ritual purification of the deceased, they are nonetheless fairly low profile. Who they are, what motivates them and what their performance agency is based on is a complex puzzle. To study Muslim ritual experts and their practice in Venlo a multi-layered approach was indispensable. Diverse factors surfaced that afforded insight into the various configurations that make up each individual expert’s motivation and authority. Here is a short overview of our findings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal</strong></td>
<td>• Found in (assumed) personal qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Recommendation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Often a result of various personal experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal</strong></td>
<td>• Trust is a two-way street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared background (recognisable) provides authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Service to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Being part of a community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transpersonal</strong></td>
<td>• Mosque (organisation) most visible religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>authority in migration context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Religious duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reward in the hereafter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Serving God through serving people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4. Levels of motivation and authority*
3.4 Conclusion

Unravelling ritual experts’ motivation and authority on a personal, interpersonal and transpersonal level gives us a clear picture of experts involved in ritual cleansing in Venlo. For greater insight into the concomitant ritual roles we need to connect our findings with our key concepts: ritual practice, migration context and lived religion. The role of the washer and the way the rite is performed and takes shape in the actual context offer an insightful view of ritual roles in general.

3.4.1 Ritual practice

*What roles emerge in the ritual practice of death rites and how can they be defined?*

Ritual cleansing of the deceased involves various actors. When we focus on the actors performing the most prominent ritual actions we observe a leading role for the so-called washers. The washer’s role is prescribed in Islamic legal sources and is assigned to close relatives of the deceased. Changing and practical circumstances mean that the role of relatives as designated washers is strongly challenged and reinvented. Actual practice in Venlo shows that the relatives hardly ever take the leading role of the washer; they leave it to a ritual expert. Thus a new role emerges, but that of relatives, often confined to the minor role of bystanders or audience, needs re-evaluation and reinvention.

Most ritual experts don’t know the deceased (well), which makes their relation to the deceased rather different from that of the bereaved. The experts’ distance from the deceased seems to make it easier to perform this hands-on rite, but it also is also a matter of concern for the next of kin, who have to leave their loved one in the hands of ‘strangers’.

Although the ritual experts are the main actors, the deceased’s relatives are the initiators of the rite, as they decide who to ‘hire’ to perform the cleansing and when and where it will take place. As a rule the relatives also pay for the facilities. The ritual experts, although leading the performance of the ritual actions, play a supportive role. We observed very few relatives participating actively. Some did, with the guidance of an expert, but most relatives actually waited outside the room where the washing took place, entering it only after the shrouding to say their last goodbyes.
3.4.2 Migration context

How are ritual roles shaped by the small town migration context?

The involvement of ritual experts is not peculiar to the migration context, as in many Muslim countries – particularly in cities – specialist washers are available. But the small town migration context has its own dynamics and peculiarities. When confronted with death one is forced to deal with the concrete context where one is living at the time. As the ritual cleansing of the deceased is almost always performed in Venlo, in contrast to the actual burial that might take place in the country of origin.

Muslims are forced to operate in the local circumstances. The minority position of Muslims in Venlo makes that the performance of death rites problematic and people are very conscious that they might not be adequately equipped to participate in the ritual cleansing. It raises the question of who actually is adequately equipped. The anxiety is exacerbated by diversity in the Muslim community; it makes people even more aware of what they perceive as ‘correct’ ritual.

Although imams already operate as religious and ritual specialists, their emergence as experts in death ritual is specific to the migration context. And as one person is not sufficient to perform the ritual cleansing and gender regulations disqualify him when the deceased is female, other ritual experts are indispensable. This has led to the emergence of ‘volunteer’ ritual experts. In this particular context it is helpful to distinguish between ‘professional’ experts (imams) and ‘volunteers’, as both their motivation and their authority are subject to a different dynamics.

3.4.3 Ritual content: meaning

What motivates people to take on the role of ritual expert and how is their ritual authority recognised?

Becoming a ritual expert and the definition of their role are very much a product of lived religion, which is the best perspective for studying the expert’s motivation and authority. Imams perform death rites as part of their professional duties and their position as professional, diaspora imams almost automatically ensures their authority. The motivation of volunteers derives from a wide range of personal experiences that are a strong push factor. In actually becoming a ritual expert other people (often already functioning as ritual experts) play a decisive role – they are a pull factor. The religious or transpersonal motivation accords with the personal motivation and provides the expert with a framework of
meaning. Where the authority or ritual agency of the experts is concerned it is always based on recognition by others. Even at the personal level – the personal qualities and skills of an expert – it is very much defined by others. Often others who are already active and recognised experts or trusted members of the community recommend them and vouch for them. This two-way street also means that becoming a ritual expert on the recommendation of others almost automatically makes you a respected member of the community. It is often not clear why a person is granted authority, as it is very much the personal choice of an already active ritual expert.

Mosque organisations and imams delegate ritual agency to volunteers, as they are often the contacts through which the experts for the ritual cleansing operate. Interestingly, the ritual and religious view of the specific mosque is not necessarily in line with the personal and transpersonal motivation of the ritual experts employed. New – in the small town context of Venlo – are courses organised by mosque organisations to train prospective experts in the ritual cleansing. These courses clearly disseminate the views and tradition of the organisation and focus on the needs of the primary community they serve. This could add a new professional dimension to their ritual authority, but it might also alienate these experts from other Muslim communities. If it will actually lead to a new category of professional ritual experts (alongside the imams) and the consequences this will have for their approachability are not yet clear.
CHAPTER 4

RITUAL BELIEFS
LIVED ESCHATOLOGY
MUSLIM VIEWS OF LIFE AND DEATH

Eschatology (beliefs concerning the last things – the beliefs, we associate with death rites) has strong roots in Islamic primary sources. The afterlife is a major theme in the Qur’an; it frequently speaks about death, the end of the world and resurrection, as does the Hadith. Belief in the day of judgment and resurrection is explicitly mentioned as one of the five articles of the Islamic faith.¹ We dealt briefly with these beliefs when we enumerated the ritual building blocks in chapter 2 (§2.2.2). In this chapter we consider the question: what ritual beliefs are connected with death rites?

The Islamic eschatological narrative has been studied thoroughly over the years. A good example is The Islamic understanding of death and resurrection (Smith & Haddad, 2002), which provides an in-depth analysis of the eschatological myth and its development over centuries. Underexposed in this theological understanding of the end of time and the hereafter is the way these eschatological perceptions are actually lived and ritually enacted by Muslims. We take a close look at the eschatological meta-narrative as an organising principle for thinking and action (Cortazzi, 1994, p. 157) and locate ‘lived eschatology’ in the ritual process.²

4.1 Introducing lived eschatology

In our search for the ritual repertoires of Muslims in a migration context we now turn to Muslim views of life and death. These views or religious perspectives that look beyond the realities of everyday life are what Clifford Geertz

¹ Aqidah: Islamic creed or articles of faith. The Qur’anic formulation includes belief in God, angels, prophets, scriptures and the day of judgment (Esposito, 2012).
² An earlier version of this chapter is to be published in Changing European death ways (Venbrux & Quartier, 2013 forthcoming)
(1973, pp. 111-112) calls belief. A myth like the eschatological myth can impose order and dispose people to experience that order in the world around them; it is made tangible in ritual (Bell, 2003, p. 83).

This takes us into a rather complex field where Muslim beliefs, Islamic myth and death ritual converge. Disentangling this field entails exploring the interactions between thought and practice, ritual actions and interpretations, and ritual structure and meaning. Unavoidably we shall touch on the longstanding debate on the relation between myth and ritual.\footnote{Overviews of this debate are provided by Bell (2002) and Segal (2006).} We shall not delve into the matter too deeply, but we can’t completely ignore the question. The point is to fully acknowledge that myth and ritual are related, even inextricably so.

To answer the main question in this chapter – *what ritual beliefs are connected with death rites?* – we should not separate thought and action. Hence we study the eschatological myth from the angle of its meaning and place in the ritual structure. This offers an interesting slant on that myth, which differs from the common, more theological approach that tends to separate the two aspects. Separation of thought and practice is not really useful, as fieldwork shows that the two are closely intertwined. A thought can only be understood in terms of the practice that embodies it (Bell, 2002).

4.1.1 Applying the key concepts

By analogy with the idea of lived religion we want to focus on ‘lived eschatology’ as reflected in the practices, experiences and expressions of ordinary Muslims in everyday life. Lived eschatology affords insight into the way Muslims deal with questions about the final destination of human beings and how this is ritually enacted. In this chapter our key concepts – ritual practice, migration context and ritual meaning – provide a framework to study ritual beliefs and practice connected with the eschatological myth. To this end we need a framework for studying the ritual structure of death rites (ritual process as practised), in conjunction with ritual meaning (external meaning).

4.1.1.1 Ritual practice

In studying concrete death rites we take a closer look at how myth and rite interact. But before moving to the practice we need a theoretical framework to help us interpret the concrete rites. Death rites are typical life cycle rituals or so-called rites of passage: ritual marking changes, shifts and transitions in the
human life cycle. The French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1961, pp. 189-191) concluded that rites of passage display a typical pattern in a multiplicity of forms. He discerns three phases: separation, transition and incorporation. In *The ritual process*, Victor Turner (1969) elaborates on this threefold structure, underlining the dynamic character of rites of passage. The first phase comprises rites of separation from a previous world — preliminal rites, signifying detachment. The second phase are rites executed during the transitional stage — liminal rites, in which one has left one place or state but has not yet entered or joined the next. Finally there are rites of incorporation into the new world — post-liminal rites indicating that the ritual subject has completed the passage (Turner 1969, pp. 80-81). The same structure applies to Islamic death rites, in which three phases can be distinguished: (1) before the funeral, (2) at the grave, and (3) at the end of time.

Analyses of death rites tend to focus on the bereaved and their rites of passage. From this perspective the separation phase is concerned with dying, the transformation phase with the funeral and the integration phase with mourning (Sörries, 2005). This approach manifestly assigns a central position to the bereaved, who are making a transition from life with the deceased to a life without their loved one — death rites as mourning rites. This focus on the bereaved bypasses Islamic eschatology and the corresponding ritual. The basic eschatological narrative centres on the deceased, a focal point also recognised by the bereaved. The bereaved actively participate in the performance of death ritual, but these rites primarily support the deceased in their final transition. At the same time the bereaved are reminded that they are the future deceased. Both personal and collective eschatological impressions and concrete death rites function as coping mechanisms in anticipation of death and the great unknown. Most Islamic death rites are designated *fard kifaya* — collective duties — that makes taking care of the dead a responsibility of the Muslim community.4 These *fard kifaya* are thought to earn *ajr* — ‘plus points’ gained by doing good deeds that are offset against negative points at the final judgment (Schacht, 2012). This implies interaction between the deceased and the bereaved, so death ritual is always two-way.

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4 This means that as long as the deceased is taken care of others need not be involved, but if a fellow Muslim is not taken care of the whole community is responsible.
The interaction is directed to repose of the soul of the deceased, as well as future salvation of the bereaved. Where and how this interaction takes place also depend on the actual relationship between the bereaved and deceased. The bereaved can be next of kin, close friends, casual acquaintances or fellow Muslims within the same community. The type of relationship also influences the way the bereaved (can) participate in death rites. Studying the practice of death ritual gives us insight into the enactment of the eschatological myth in concrete rites and how the personal and collective levels interrelate in the process. The interaction between deceased and bereaved is also explored. A practice approach to ritual (Bell, 1992) provides a framework for the study of concrete death rites. This approach not only takes into account what people do and how they do it, but also what the rites do. Rites as vehicles of lived eschatology are not regarded merely as communicators of meanings and values, but also as a set of activities that constructs particular types of meanings and values in specific ways. How do death rite practices emerge from interactions between myth and ritual?

4.1.1.2 Ritual context: migration

This study focuses on lived Islamic eschatology in a migration context. In this context it is not clear how the meaning ascribed to the ritual by participants relates to the meaning found in Islamic sources. The meaning might change; it might be lost or acquire a different emphasis when the practice changes in a particular context (Bell, 1992). Our goal is to determine how changes in ritual enactment of Islamic eschatology affect the way Muslims live and perceive it. To grasp these changes in meaning we need to determine how the eschatological narrative relates to its ritual enactment and the participants.

Eschatological narratives and enactments take place and shape in, and interact with, a particular context – in this case a migration context in the Netherlands where a variety of Muslims live together. They share the same religion but their backgrounds differ, for they originate from various countries and regions, have different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and their own personal biographies. Their migration experience might vary, as might their religious affiliation. These are the Muslims who perform funerary rites. What they have in common is that most of them originate from a context with a Muslim majority, whereas in the Netherlands they have become part of a (religious) minority. What impact does the migration context have on the ritual myth and beliefs?
4.1.1.3 Ritual content: meaning

Our focus is the transition the deceased has to make from the world of the living, through an in-between stage (the so-called ‘life in the grave’) to the final judgment at the end of time. This final destination is a collective image closely intertwined with the destination envisaged for each individual Muslim. It is useful to distinguish between the two levels: a personal eschatology, directed to what awaits each human individual after death, and a collective eschatology that deals with the end of time in general (Quartier, 2009). Collective eschatology is expounded in Islamic sources and takes the form of an eschatological myth. It is set in a time frame that can be qualified as mythical time. It is a collective timespan that starts with the birth of humankind: creation from nothing by God. At the end of time the signs of the hour herald the end of the world. The complete destruction of the world and everything in it signifies a death that leads to the resurrection or rebirth of all humankind. It is followed by the final judgment, and culminates in an eternity (akhirah) of either heaven or hell. For every Muslim there is also a personal eschatology with an individual timespan, which is temporal and should be understood as clock time. A person is born. At death she leaves the temporal world (dunya) and slides into barzakh, perceived as the time between individual death and resurrection, a period that in popular imagination is seen as life in the grave. With the destruction of the temporal world at the end of time, followed by the resurrection, personal and collective eschatology blend, as participation in these events is envisaged as a collective experience.

The final destination of the deceased is a collective image, meaning that personal and collective eschatology need to be interwoven. This interaction between personal and collective eschatology happens in ritual. Eschatology comes to life in the ritual enactment of the transition of the deceased, which can be understood as a rite of passage with a connective structure (Assmann, 1992) that unifies personal and collective eschatology.

The deceased occupy a prominent position in Islamic eschatology, as their salvation or final destination in the afterlife is at stake. The bereaved have a crucial role of supporting the deceased, as well as their own position as future deceased. In the ritual enactment of eschatology they are the key actors, whose roles interact in lived eschatology.

How are these beliefs enacted in lived eschatology?
4.2 The grand eschatological narrative

To understand the field of shared meaning we have to trace the eschatological myth, the grand narrative that deals with the origin and destination of human life. Islam, like all religious traditions, seeks to turn the mere sequence of moments and events into a significant past, present and future. Thus it has created a sacred history that knits these moments of life into a continuous narrative with a beginning, middle and end (Fenn, 2003). Islamic eschatology, as expounded in the Qur’an and Hadith and elaborated on by generations of scholars and teachers, has developed into a grand narrative. This eschatological myth, derived from various sources, is generally understood as kind of official doctrine that proceeds as follows.\(^5\)

At death life leaves the body through the nose. God (or angels on his behalf) removes the soul of the deceased – a dreadful event, accompanied by feelings of desolation and loneliness. The dying person suffers a terrible, burning thirst, ingeniously exploited by Shaytan (Satan) by offering cold water, taking advantage of the vulnerability of dying persons. It is seen as an attempt to get them to give up their faith. Although the soul is taken from the body, it is believed that it will stay close by or that at least some aspect of the human person will survive until the day of resurrection (Qur’an 39:42). So life may continue in some form either in the grave or in another state, but is commonly referred to as life in the grave.

There is no agreement on what happens next, but a dominant idea is interrogation in the grave by two angels. They order the deceased to sit up and answer questions on faith, God and the prophet. If one gives the right answers, one might be taken up to God or a window will open through which one can glimpse the beauties of heaven. For those the remaining time in the grave will pass quickly and agreeably. The unfortunates whose answers were incorrect will endure terrible torments. Their time in the grave will pass extremely slowly and painfully. So the outcome of this preliminary judgment determines conditions while waiting for the day of resurrection and the final judgment. Life in the grave comes to an end with what is called the signs of the hour, frightening events that will culminate in the complete destruction of the earth and all that live on it (Qur’an 55:26-27). At the sound of the trumpet the resurrection will

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\(^5\) This generic eschatological myth is recounted in various works on the subject (e.g. Campo, 2003; Chittick, 1992; Sakr, 1995; Smith & Haddad, 2002; Tottoli, 2012) and is also commonly recited by ritual experts (imams in particular) in Venlo.
take place and all people will be gathered. Each person will be offered his or her book — a written record of good and bad deeds accumulated during life on earth. Good deeds are carried by an angel on the right shoulder, bad deeds by an angel on the left shoulder. For the final judgment these deeds are balanced, often depicted by an actual pair of scales. If the angel of the last day places the book in your right hand, you are allowed to enter heaven and enjoy its bliss. An offer to the left hand means hell, the torments of fire. Another image that is often cited is that of a final crossing of the bridge over the fires of hell: a bridge ‘bristling with hooks and thorns and narrower than a hair and sharper than a sword’, which believers cross in the wink of an eye and from which the sinful fall into the fires of hell (Monnot, 2012). Graphic images of the pleasures of heaven (garden, paradise, Eden) and the torments of hell (Gehenna, fire) are shared by Muslims, backed up by extensive Qur’anic references. Even though the events at the end of time and at the fountains of paradise and the fire are often vividly depicted, for Muslims this final phase remains the great unknown, also described as ‘the unseen’.

The eschatological myth underlines that God, the creator and originator of all things, is the sole authority over the beginning, duration and end of all things. Human life has a beginning and an end — a lifespan that Muslims believe to be a fixed term. *Ajal* means that the outcome of human life lies in God’s hands and so comes to an end at an appointed time (Abrahamov, 2012). At the same time it teaches Muslims that their actions during their life on earth determine their destination after death.

This particular narrative doesn’t adhere too closely to the generic Islamic eschatological myth presented by Smith and Haddad (2003). Although a more or less coherent eschatological myth is presented here, in practice it is much more fragmented. Individual Muslims tend to focus on certain elements of the narrative. They elaborate on these elements, drawing on personal experiences and family or cultural traditions. How these different accents work out in practice will become clear in the ritual enactment of the grand narrative.

### 4.3 Enacted eschatology

The foregoing eschatological myth is ritually enacted by Muslims and takes shape in particular death rites, a ritual practice described in chapter 2. The ritual enactment of the Islamic eschatological myth takes the form of several inter-
connected rites. These death rites are numerous and although it might be interesting to map (through its ritual elements) each of them individually at a later stage, here we focus on the ritual process as a whole. This means that we first look at the level of ritual structure and the place of lived eschatology in it. Islamic death rites are clustered in three phases – the typical pattern of rites of passage distinguished by Arnold van Gennep (1960): before the funeral (rites of separation), at the grave (rites of transition) and finally at the end of time (rites of reintegration/post-liminal rites).6

4.3.1 Before the funeral

The rites in this phase mark separation from earthly life on the level of both personal and collective eschatology, enacted in concrete rites:
- Dying rites
- Washing and shrouding of the deceased
- Funeral prayer

4.3.1.1 Dying rites

It is not always foreseeable when, where and in what circumstances someone will die. As the death of a Muslim in the Netherlands can easily happen in a ‘non-Muslim environment’ like a hospital or a road accident, it does not follow that bystanders are able to act (ritually) according to Islamic prescriptions. Even born and bred Muslims might not immediately know what rites should be performed. For advice or instruction on how to proceed ritually an imam or other ritual expert is called in. When it is clear that someone is about to die – in a more controlled environment, at home or in hospital – the right surroundings can be arranged and the proper ritual actors called in.

Dying with your face turned to the qibla (the axis directed to the Ka’ba in Mecca, also the direction of prayer) is considered a good thing. This can be achieved by turning the dying person on her right side or, if lying on her back, propping up the head slightly and turning the bed; in both cases the person faces Mecca. An effort is made to die with the words of the shahada (the Islamic profession of faith: La ilaaha illal lah –‘there is no God but God’) on your lips or in your

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6 Our overview of death rites, ritualised practices and ritualisings is based on common Venlo practice. The sketches of the various rites derive from (often fragmented) descriptions obtained from our fieldwork: interviews, conversations and observations. To supplement the ritual sketches we made use of existing studies that describe these practices or parts of them (Bot, 1998; Campo, 2003; Dessing, 2001; Jonker, 1997; Sakr, 1995; Smith, 1998; Smith & Haddad, 2002; Sultan, 2003; Van Bommel, 1989, 2006).
heart if speech is no longer possible. Doing so eases the pain of dying and might open the doors to paradise. Those present at the deathbed can soothe the dying person by also whispering the shahada or by reciting from the Qur'an. In particular sura Yasin (Qur'an 36), known as the ‘heart of the Qur’an’, is believed to ease the pain of dying and possibly diminish punishment in the hereafter. This sura emphasises the divine source of the Qur’an and it warns of the fate of men who are stubborn and make fun of God’s revelations. It reminds of the punishment that befell earlier generations, and of God’s power. The end of the sura forcefully insists on the reality of the resurrection (Abdel Haleem, 2004). Sura Yasin is quite long and not easy to recite for a layperson and as most Muslims in the Netherlands are not fluent in (classical) Arabic, they are probably not capable of reciting it themselves. Instead of reciting, some people dissolve Qur’anic texts in water that is then drunk by the dying person. In this way the baraka (blessing) of the specific text is imbibed. The much shorter suras 113 and 114, known as the ‘verses of refuge’, serve as duas (supplicatory prayers) at the deathbed. They are invoked against evil in general (Abdel Aleem 2012):

‘In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. Say [Prophet], ‘I seek refuge with the Lord of daybreak against the harm in what He has created, the harm in the night when darkness gathers, the harm in witches when they blow on knots, the harm in the envier when he envies’ (Qur’an 113).’

‘In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. Say, ‘I seek refuge with the Lord of people, the Controller of people, the God of people, against the harm of the slinking whisperer – who whispers into the hearts of people – whether they be jinn or people’ (Qur’an 114).

At the actual moment of death the eyes and mouth of the deceased are closed. All clothes are removed, or one may wait until the ritual cleansing. The arms are gently stretched along the sides and the legs are kept straight; finally the body is covered with a sheet or a piece of cloth. Qur’an verses can be recited while doing this. Loud weeping by the bereaved is believed to be very disturbing for the deceased, whose soul is taken by now but who is still aware of what goes on around him. For the same reason the deceased is not left alone or left in the dark. Most dying rites are performed by close relatives in a very private setting; sometimes a ritual specialist is involved to recite more extensive Qur’anic texts.

7 All suras cited are taken from the English Qur’an translation by Abdel Haleem (2004). The original Arabic text, phonetic transcriptions and several English translations are easily accessible online, for example on http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/htq/index.htm.
The next of kin are also responsible for paying all debts the deceased might have, a necessary step for the deceased to deal with the judgments that await her. In this stage the bereaved greatly fear the bad influence Shaytan might have on the deceased, an influence that will diminish once the person is buried. This underscores the need for quick interment.

The process of dying is perceived as a test of one’s personal faith, a battle with demons, and those present at the deathbed are trying to ward off that attack through the performance of rites. Although the suffering involved with dying is feared, it is also perceived as necessary, as it cleanses the soul and tests one’s faith in God. The end of the personal lifespan is on a collective level, believed to be determined by God. Dying puts an end to the possibility of doing good deeds that will pay off in the afterlife.

4.3.1.2 Purification and shrouding of the deceased

The deceased is taken from the place of death to a suitable facility for the performance of the ritual purification and shrouding. Although any screened off area will do, better equipped places like funeral parlours are preferred. The ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased are specifically mentioned as a fard kifaya and are explicitly prescribed in the fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). Although the fiqh calls on direct family members to perform the ritual, it is commonly done by ritual experts – volunteers that can be contacted through local mosque organisations. Relatives are present in the room or waiting close by but in general do not take part in the ritual cleansing of their loved one. This rite is very much hands-on and many are afraid of touching a dead person or fear that they are not able to perform the ritual correctly. They fear they will not know how to proceed or will be overwhelmed by emotion and unable to behave calmly. At the washing place the body is laid on a raised surface and stripped of clothes (if that wasn’t done already). The corpse should at all times stay covered with a piece of cloth from navel to knees.

In principle the corpse of a man is washed only by men and that of a woman only by women. However, a woman is allowed to wash her husband and it is permissible for a young child to be washed by an adult of the opposite sex. It is prescribed that close relatives should perform the washing and shrouding, but this hardly ever happens, as it is considered very important that the deceased should be washed by a Muslim who knows how to proceed. In the Netherlands the majority of cleansings are performed by ritual experts. Before the cleansing starts the washers perform their ablutions so as to be in a state of ritual purity.
themselves and they express – audibly or mentally – the niyya (intention) to perform the ritual act.

First the corpse is thoroughly cleansed of all impurities, using soap and lukewarm water. The ghusl (full washing of the body) starts with the genitals and anus, then the belly is pressed softly to empty the intestines. It is recommended to perform the wudu (ablution), consisting of washing the hands and arms up the elbows, feet, face, neck and ears, and rinsing the nose and mouth with water as Muslims do when preparing for their daily prayers. The body is washed an odd number of times – at least three, if necessary five or seven times. Each washing starts with the right side from the front to the back and from head to feet, followed by the left side. The water for ablution might be mixed with perfume, herbs, rose water, lotus or camphor. After the bathing the body is dried and often some kind of perfume (like camphor) is put on the places that touch the floor while praying: top of the feet, knees, hand palms, nose and forehead.

The washers are very careful to treat the deceased as if still alive, as it is widely believed that they are still sentient and aware of what is going on around them. That is why lukewarm water is used and all actions are executed respectfully. There should be enough washers so the deceased can be turned gently and should not be turned face down. The deceased should not be disturbed by unrestrained expressions of grief, and less pleasant acts (like pressing the belly to empty the intestines) are accompanied by whispered apologies. In the performance of these rites, the emphasis is very much on the wellbeing of the deceased, who is believed to be in a very vulnerable state. Then the body is shrouded, using one or more pieces of clean, plain white cloth. As a rule the shroud of a male consists of three pieces and that of a female of five. The final sheet covers the entire body and is tied with cotton strips at the head, waist and feet. This plain white shroud makes all equal in death. After the washing and shrouding are done the washers ritually cleanse themselves.

The ritual purification has a very private character, as the bereaved are gathered in a closed off area and they monitor who is attending. For women and children it is often the last opportunity to say their final goodbyes. The moment and place are also open for additional ritualising practices to accompany these last private moments with the deceased.

4.3.1.3 The funeral prayer

The next fard kifaya is the funeral prayer for the deceased, often said in the courtyard of a local mosque. Sometimes the prayer is said inside a mosque, at a
funeral parlour or at the graveyard. The deceased has to be present and the bier or casket with the corpse is placed in front of the men gathered for the prayer. As a rule women do not take part in this ritual. Like for a regular prayer, the attendants have performed the ablution and face the qibla, but the funeral prayer is said standing, without prostration.

The prayer starts with inner expression of the intention (niyya) to pray the janaza and is generally followed by four takbirs (the utterance Allahu akbar, ‘God is the greatest’); it ends with the taslim (the formula Salam alaykum wa rahmatullah, ‘Peace be upon you and the mercy of God’). Only the takbirs and the taslim are spoken aloud by the person leading the prayer; the rest is recited silently.8 After the first takbir a silent opening prayer is prayed, such as the opening chapter of the Qur’an, Al-Fatiha (Qur’an 1).9

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy! Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, Master of the Day of Judgment. It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help. Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray.10

The second takbir is followed by an attestation of faith like the so-called Ibrahim prayer:

O God, bestow Your favour on Muhammad and on the family of Muhammad as You have bestowed Your favour on Ibrahim and on the family of Ibrahim, You are Praiseworthy, Most Glorious. O God, bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad as You have blessed Ibrahim and the family of Ibrahim. You are Praiseworthy, Most Glorious.

After the third takbir a supplication for the deceased is directed to God, like this well-known dua:

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8 This makes it difficult to form a clear picture of how the prayer is actually said. It was explained to me by one of the local imams (Personal interview Imam A, 20 January 2011).

9 Depending on whether the funeral prayer is seen as a kind of salat (Fatiha is required) or a dua – in this case dua al-istiftah – is recited: ‘Glory be to you, O Allah, and all praises are due unto You, and blessed is Your name and high is Your majesty and none is worthy of worship but you.’

10 The opening sura of the Qur’an is seen as a précis of the Qur’anic message. It is very important in Islamic worship, being an obligatory part of the daily prayer repeated several times during the day.
O Lord! Forgive those of us that are alive and those of us that are dead; those of us that are present and those of us who are absent; those of us who are young and those of us who are adults; our males and our females. O Lord! Whomsoever You keep alive let him live as a follower of Islam and whomsoever You cause to die, let him die a believer.11

Then a fourth takbir is recited, followed by a brief pause and a final taslim: "Peace and blessings of God be unto you." It is spoken with the head turned to the right, with an option to repeat it with the head turned to the left. This concludes the prescribed prayers. In Turkish mosques – Muslims of Turkish descent make up a large proportion of the Dutch Muslim population – an additional rite is performed where fellow believers explicitly grant the deceased absolution.12

Before leaving the mosque the attendants offer their condolences to the bereaved males and pay their last respects to the deceased by passing by the bier or coffin. The funeral prayer is a public ritual that offers the local Muslim community an opportunity to participate: the deceased is granted absolution and the community can earn ajr. After this ritual the body is transported to the place of burial. The vast majority of first generation Muslim migrants in the Netherlands still opt for burial in the country of origin, even though Islamic regulations prescribe burial at the place where one actually dies. The repatriation of the deceased disrupts the usual order, place and time pattern and requires adaptation of the ritual practice, as we saw in chapter 2.

4.3.2 At the grave

Entering this phase entails crossing a threshold (limen) that Islamic eschatological narratives often refer to as barzakh (‘barrier’, Qur’an 23:99-100), representing an unbridgeable barrier between the deceased and the realm of the living. The term ‘barzakh’ is also used to indicate the time between individual death and resurrection: the so-called ‘life in the grave’ starts with the burial of the body.13 Both personal and collective eschatology are enacted in concrete ritual:

11 Collections of duas are available to believers through mosque organisations, pamphlets and on the internet, for example on http://www.duas.org/death.htm.
12 Referred to as helal etmek or tezkiye etmek by Dessing (2001, p.157).
13 References to barzakh are minimal in the Qur’an and although the Hadith provides more information, it has become common knowledge mainly through popular imagery (Lange, 2012). The rich barzakh imagery that evolved from the early centuries onwards is a “genuine Islamic product, a rare phenomenon on the eschatological market” (Eklund, 1941, p.82)
4.3.2.1 Funeral rites

The final *fard kifaya* concerns the burial of a fellow Muslim. When interment takes place in the Netherlands the deceased is commonly buried in the Islamic graveyard – often a special part of the public cemetery. From the place where the *Salat al Janaza* was performed the corpse is taken to the cemetery by car, as distances are too great to be covered on foot. The bier is then carried from the car to the grave, the carriers switching every few steps as it is widely believed that *ajr* can be earned from this practice.

The construction of the grave is important, as it has to facilitate the eschatological events to come. It is dug in such a way that the deceased can be laid facing the *qibla* and room is available for the angels to do their preliminary questioning. Hence the sides of Muslim graves are often supported by wooden scaffolding so that the body will not be directly covered with soil. Since the passing of the Dutch Corpse Disposal Act in 1991 the use of a coffin is no longer mandatory, but a coffin is also seen as convenient for transporting the body.14

When a coffin is used for moving the body from one place to another the shrouded body is often taken out for the actual burial and the coffin is placed upside down on the wooden scaffolding to create a kind of roofed house.15 This enables the deceased to sit up for the preliminary interrogation. Three men (preferably close relatives) place the corpse in the grave and turn it to the right facing Mecca. A piece of cloth might be spread over the grave when lowering the body of a woman. While doing so *sura* Taha (Qur’an 20:55) is recited: ‘from the earth We created you, into it We shall return you, and from it We shall raise you a second time’. In the grave the right cheek of the deceased is positioned to touch the soil and the ties at both ends of the *kafan* are Unfasted. Everybody present throws three handfuls of earth into the grave while also reciting *sura* Taha, whereupon some men fill the grave. Sometimes the *Fatiha* (Qur’an 1) is prayed by all just before and after the burial, and *sura* Yasin (Qur’an 36) is recited once more. Immediately after the interment *talqin*

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14 For repatriation a special coffin is still mandatory; this leaves the problem of whether to dispose with or without a coffin to the bereaved in the country of origin.
15 Or the open coffin is placed in the grave and the coffin lid is placed on some stats to create the same effect.
(lecturing and learning by heart) is performed to prepare the deceased for the preliminary judgment that is about to take place in the grave. It can be done by a family member, but more commonly the imam sits down at the head of the grave and addresses the deceased directly by name to ‘teach’ (prompt) him or her about God’s role in life and death, life in the grave and the articles of faith that the deceased has to present in the interrogation by the angels. An imam is involved, even though this practice is considered a new invention with no roots in primary sources. The talqin can take place after everyone has left but often happens in the presence of the bereaved, as it is believed to be a lesson not only for the deceased but also for those still alive. The first night after the burial close relatives often add some duas to their regular prayers at home for the pardon and peace of the departed soul.

Burial rites are considered to be very public, open to all members of the (adult male) Muslim community, an opportunity for even relative strangers to earn ajr for their hereafter.

4.3.2.2 Mourning rites

The fiqh allows grieving for a period of three days, the only period that the bereaved take centre stage. During this mourning period, starting after the funeral, friends and neighbours prepare food – mourning meals – for the bereaved family and encourage them to eat.

The time my husband died was very hectic, there were so many things to do and to organise, you go on and on… There is no time to think about yourself and what you are feeling. When I got home after the funeral, I found all my friends there… they cooked and they were there to take care of me. It brought tears to my eyes, it was heart-warming… (Personal conversation Samira, 9 June 2011)

Although Islamic sources limit mourning to these three days and the majority of Islamic scholars reject memorial gatherings as they don’t want grief to be revived, they are very common. The bereaved gather after the burial and mourning gatherings are often held on the first three days, on the 7th and 40th day after the death of their loved one (sometimes also after a hundred days and on the first anniversary).

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16 Only the mourning period of the widow (idda) is set at four months and ten days, the legally prescribed waiting period during which a woman may not remarry after being widowed or divorced (Qur’an 2:234).
Figure 5. The entrance of the general cemetery ‘Blerickse Bergen’. Through this gate the body is carried to the Muslim parcels.

Figure 6. The plaque at the entrance
These gatherings are organised at home and commonly consist in reading the Qur’an (the whole Qur’an or certain verses) and preparing and serving of mourning meals.

After my father’s death we prepared a lot of meals, we even had some sheep killed, as a sacrifice… and we bought Fanta. We brought all of this to the Moroccan mosque my father always used to go to – they will give it to the people there. It is what we are used to doing in our own country. I don’t know if they were used to it in this mosque, but it is something we had to do. (Personal interview Ammar, 13 December 2010)

During the first three days the focus is on the bereaved and their loss and provide an opportunity for the bereaved and the community to interact. Offering condolences, comfort and sympathy is seen as a good deed. During these first days there is also a practice of loud expressions of grief (like wailing, lamentations, chest beating, tearing hair or clothes – mainly practised by women), something strongly condemned by Islamic scholars. These expressions of grief occur at a distance from the deceased so they will not be disturbed by it.

After the period of condolences, the focus shifts back to the deceased: mourning gathering turns into memorial gathering. The practice of sadaqa (Weir, 2012) – donating voluntary alms in name of the deceased – is common. Some families have meals and bottled soft drinks brought to the local mosque to be distributed to the community and close relatives take over certain duties of the deceased, like the zakat (charity, donating to a good cause – one of the five pillars of Islam), debts are paid, the Qur’an is recited, food is distributed, even a hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) may be undertaken in the deceased’s name. The departed loved one is remembered in the niyya that is expressed inwardly before performing any of these rites.

4.3.2.3 Grave visits

Whereas mourning gatherings are collective, grave visits tend to be more personal. Visiting the grave of a loved one is seen as important for both the deceased and the bereaved. Perceived as the physical or symbolic place where ‘life in the grave’ happens, it is a tangible place where contact with the deceased is sought. When visiting the grave, the deceased is greeted. One can pray (duas) at the grave to seek forgiveness for the deceased, thereby earning merit. It makes the people left behind very aware of what is awaiting them and that they should use their time on earth wisely. It is also widely believed that the
deceased can mediate for the living, as they have more direct access to God now. So personal problems of the living are brought to the grave, and when the grave is too far other solutions are found.

The graves of my deceased relatives are not in Venlo, they are far away in our village in Turkey. I know where they are and I can be in contact with them. You can pray to God to give a message to your departed loved one. It is really a strong connection that I feel. I do this almost every Thursday evening – that is the best day for it. When I read from the Qur’an I say out loud the names of those who are no longer here… I am one hundred per cent sure that my messages will be given to them by God. I think they are waiting for my prayers on Thursday… (Personal interview Dilek, 20 January 2012)

A remarkable example of ritual creativity was proposed by Shukri. She actually opts for cremation in order to suit her changed circumstances and give her children the opportunity to visit her grave:17

I married a Dutch man 15 years ago and moved from Java to Venlo. My two youngest children from a previous marriage came with me, two others stayed in Indonesia. That makes me part of two countries now and makes it complicated when I die. Although I am very much aware of the Islamic objections to cremation, I see the division of my ashes among my children as my only option. They have to take care of me after I die. But they should not keep my ashes in their house; they have to bury me so I can return to the earth like Islam prescribes. Allah will understand that I am in two countries and that is why I have to take these quite drastic measures. What choice do I have? (Personal interview Shukri, 24 November 2010)

The major holidays (especially Fridays, Ramadan, 27th or last day of Ramadan) and death anniversaries are considered particularly suitable days for grave visits. Although Islamic scholars write a lot about the prohibition to erect any structure on the grave or decorate it, this creed is widely ignored: material traces of grave visits are visible (plants, flowers, pictures, etc.) and headstones are placed on the grave.

4.3.3 At the end of time

In this final phase both personal and collective eschatology will come to completion with the transition from dunya to akhira. It is also the phase that features prominently in the Arabic terminology referring to Islamic eschatology: kiyama

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17 This exceptional example was also cited in chapter 2 (§2.2.4).
Figure 7. Muslim graves at the Islamic burial site in Venlo-Blerick. There are in total approximately 40 graves.

Figure 8. Muslim children’s graves at the Islamic Burial site ‘Blerickse Bergen’
raising oneself’, ‘rising’, ‘resurrection’) or al-maad (‘the return’) (Gardet 2012). The Islamic eschatological myth promises a rebirth at the end of time that will enable all deceased to live eternally in either heaven or hell. With the complete destruction of the world at the end of time life in the grave and on earth comes to an end and a final transition from the temporal to the eternal is made collectively. The resurrection of all humankind leads up to God’s final judgment of each individual, based on their deeds during their life on earth. But although participation in these events is vividly described and often ardently anticipated, the final phase is very much a virtual one.

Rites, being concrete, temporal acts, are not applicable in eternity, which is mythical time. One could speak of an ‘eschatological reserve’, a final completion that is foreseen and expected but cannot be fully experienced (yet) – it is reserved for the future in which both personal and collective eschatology will be completed. The fact that the completing event is future or virtual doesn’t mean it can be brushed off, as happens when mourning is considered to be the final phase of the rite of passage (Sörries, 2005). Even though not lived on earth, the events at the end of time are a vivid part of lived eschatology.

4.3.4 Enacted eschatology: a summary

In the phase before the funeral we see that at death the person’s active, physical life comes to an end; and with it the possibility of earning merit for the hereafter. But the body is still present in dunya, earthly time. The focus is very much on the deceased (or dying person), who is believed to be in a vulnerable state and under constant ‘attack’ by evil influences, against which she has hardly any defence. It is up to the bereaved to protect the deceased and engage in ritual enactment, for which the eschatological myth provides a framework on both a collective and a personal level. It is up to the bereaved and the wider Muslim community to bring the personal lifespan of the deceased to a good close by making the first transition as safe and as pleasant as possible through the performance of specific rites. Close relatives take the lead in the performance of dying rites and the ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased, as they take place in a private setting.

The funeral prayer is a public event open to all who are able to attend at the mosque, making the body available to the broader (male) community.

18 It comes close to the concept of eschatological reserve in Christian theology, but the way it works out in Islamic lived eschatology is rather different.
The funeral – the actual burial of the deceased – marks the transition to a new phase at the grave. Funeral ritual entails intense interaction between bereaved and deceased and, being public events, (male) relatives as well as the wider Muslim community is involved. Ritual enactment is directed to the body. It is the last time the deceased is visibly present in dunya, as the burial initiates the slide into the in-between state of barzakh. Whereas the funeral is a peak of ritual support of the deceased by the Muslim community, once in the grave he has to deal with the preliminary judgment on his own. At this point the focus shifts to the next of kin for a mourning period of three days, during which the community takes care of them.

At the end of time there will no longer be deceased and bereaved and the events that await all will be experienced collectively: the personal level dissolves into the collective.

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Figure 9. Dimensions of eschatology in death ritual
4.4. Conclusion

We have constructed a framework for our analysis of enacted eschatology, in which myth and ritual meet. To answer our research questions we once again turn to our key concepts.

4.4.1 Ritual practice

*How do death rite practices emerge from interactions between myth and ritual?*

To understand the ritual practice of enacted eschatology we first looked at the organising principle of the meta-narrative (myth). This organising principle underlies death ritual as a whole, in which the separate death rites can be placed. Hence the practice of concrete death ritual is described and further interpreted, using the threefold structure of rites of passage as a steppingstone.

Ritual practice is very much moulded by the interaction between the bereaved and the deceased, occurring in a framework of personal and collective eschatology. Bereaved and deceased take various roles and positions towards each other and the significance and intensity of their interaction varies. The rites of separation – the phase before the funeral – are clearly prescribed in *fiqh* literature. For the rites of transition – at the grave – there are just a few guidelines, in particular from the moment the deceased is buried. The rites of reintegration are preliminary rites that are not prescribed at all. But here we see myth at work, as collective perceptions of *barzakh* shape the interaction between bereaved and deceased, who are still available for ritual action. As primary Islamic sources provide hardly any information on the period between personal death and resurrection, this gap is filled by popular imagination mainly in the form of narratives, resulting in additional, semi-public mourning rites (gatherings at death anniversaries) and more private ones, like grave visits that entail personal interaction between close relatives and the deceased.

It is commonly believed that the deceased in the grave gain insight into the *unseen* – God and eternal afterlife – and can therefore function as intermediaries between the living and God. During this period of life in the grave we find not only that rites are performed for the deceased to ameliorate their fate, but the deceased remain available for ritual action to serve the bereaved either in their present state or as future deceased. Although the final incorporation is purely virtual, life in the grave is perceived as giving the deceased a (fairly extensive) glimpse of what awaits them.
4.4.2 Ritual context: migration

What impact does the migration context have on the ritual myth and beliefs?

In most academic studies the Islamic eschatological myth is expounded as a complete, coherent and self-contained unit. Although on the whole Muslims in Venlo are familiar with this eschatological myth, their knowledge appears to be much more fragmented. Certain aspects, certain stories are singled out and elaborated on extensively in popular narratives. These vivid narratives circulate in various Muslim communities in Venlo and are strongly influenced by the migration context. As noted before, in the case of death the migration context is a somewhat insecure setting; being a religious minority, the diversity of the Muslim community or simply unfamiliarity with death in the new context makes it difficult to adequately deal with the situation. It is this challenging context that colours the detailed stories highlighting certain aspects of the eschatological myth. The stories – they can be reassuring or frightening – reveal various attitudes towards death. The fragmentation of the eschatological myth as represented in the lived eschatology of Muslims in a particular context (migration context of Venlo) has obvious implications for both the ritual order and the frame of reference it creates. As Rappaport (1999, p.135) puts it: ‘In contrast to myths, rituals even when they seem to be no more than detailed re-enactments of myths always stipulate a relation between performers and that which they perform. Such rituals communicate more than their myths. They communicate the indexical message of the participants’ acceptance of those myths as well.’

It has become clear that in this particular migration context, along with the meta-narrative, popular narratives play an important role. Hence we need to research this popular eschatological imagery and the way it takes shape in popular narratives in Venlo carefully. Chapter 5 – ‘Ritual narratives. Re-imagining death rites in a small town context’ – is devoted to that.

4.4.3 Ritual content: meaning

How do these beliefs function in lived eschatology?

In terms of Van Gennep’s structure it is clear that in this world we have an ‘incomplete’ rite of passage, as the final phase of reincorporation – at the end of time – is purely virtual. At the same time it is much anticipated by Muslims as a phase of completion, strongly advocated by the Islamic myth and enacted in ritual. The Islamic myth presents a powerful collective image of the final eschatological fulfilment that result in a practice where the deceased takes centre stage,
with rites of passage that focus on their final crossing over. At the same time various bereaved (always in a certain relation to the deceased) are the ones who initiate and perform these rites.

The eschatological expectations conveyed by the Islamic myth make the bereaved strive for a prompt burial to relieve the deceased. Ritual enactment in this phase is strictly regulated, as it is driven by the collective perception of an ‘eschatological reserve’ that is expected and foreseen but not experienced (yet). In the migration context the focus on the deceased is still obvious in this first phase, but the ritual enactments are not always in keeping with the meaning the eschatological myth provides. In practice the requirement of a prompt burial often turns out to be secondary to personal wishes, like the wish of the vast majority of first generation migrants to be buried in their country of origin. This clearly stands in the way of prompt burial, as repatriation takes time. The burial of the deceased initiates a fairly undefined waiting period that has to be bridged. It entails a strong sense of uncertainty, as no one knows when the end of time will come. Islamic primary sources don’t expand on the period of barzakh. This lacuna has given rise to a rich popular imagery, resulting in less regulated ritual practice.

In contrast with the phase before the funeral that is completed within hours (a few days at most) of death, ritual enactments at the grave stretch over a long period of time. They can take a lifetime or even longer, with new generations still visiting graves of their ancestors. In this phase – and our fieldwork highlights it – the bereaved are more ready to break regulations, particularly in the practice of extended mourning rites and grave visits. In these cases we see that the eschatological myth is adapted to accord with the ritualising enactments performed by the bereaved. People create additional narratives, for example to explain why it is better for the repose of the deceased’s soul to be buried in their country of origin. Either one emphasises some aspects more than others, or one simply ignores certain aspects of the eschatological myth. The fragmentation of the eschatological myth discussed in 4.4.2 is also apparent here. Lived eschatology largely takes shape in this ‘in-between’ phase (at the grave), where there is room for a more personal beliefs and images of life after death and where meanings can be adapted to the context, resulting in more personalised ritual enactment conveying more personalised meanings.
In search of the ritual repertoires available to Muslims faced with death in a migration context we encountered ritual elements, ritual actors and their roles, and ritual myths and the beliefs associated with death rites. In this chapter we expand the ritual repertoire by focusing on narratives: what is the role of narratives in constructing the meaning of death ritual?

In chapter 4 we concentrated on the content and ritual use of narrative on a meta-level. We showed how both lived and ritually enacted eschatology defines the ritual process and structure. We also noted that in the process of constructing ritual meaning the eschatological myth has become very fragmented and personal and popular narratives are invoked to cope with the challenges of the small town migration context.

In this chapter we leave the meta-perspective of the grand narrative, take a step back and look at the glue that apparently holds all these findings together: a process of (re-)imagination reflected in and instigated by popular narratives.¹

5.1 Introducing a world of narratives

In this chapter we explore popular narratives relating to death ritual, micro level stories of ordinary Muslims in the Venlo context. It is a vibrant body of popular narratives, much more fluid than the eschatological myth, which is often perceived as unchanging. We are referring to narrative in the sense of storytelling: people’s own accounts of their lives and experiences. Note that these personal, individual stories are always linked to the collective or community; they accord

¹ Like Roof (1993) we focus on the actual stories and themes rather than submerging ourselves in semiotics, hermeneutics or deconstruction – however intriguing these might be. Our approach is reflective and interpretive, more in the verstehen tradition, as Roof puts it.
with broader social narratives (Lawler, 2002, p. 251). And as they have implications for major interpretive questions, they are more than just illustrations (Roof, 1993, p. 297). These are highly interactive stories that both depict and shape the context in which they occur. In addition people act (ritually) on the basis of these narratives, hence they shape ritual practice. The narratives are part of constructing ritual meaning, a process of re-imagining directly linked with ritual creativity (Grimes, 2000). Thus studying these stories affords necessary insight into the ritual dynamics of death rites. It is an approach Ronald Grimes passionately advocates for studying ritual – as it is ‘entanglement with narrative’ (Grimes, 2007, 14) – and of which his book Deeply into the bone (2000) is a fine example.

We are not only interested in the content of narratives – what the story is about – but also in their function and purpose. In the case of content we look at the ideas, attitudes and fantasies (regarding death and death rites) expressed by Muslims in Venlo: how do they perceive death and the practice of death rites in both their context of origin and their present context – and how do these contexts interact? Through narratives people paint a picture of the world they live in: they portray themselves, others and their views of the world. Hence these stories are an important tool for making sense of experiences and provide a collective understanding of how things (should) work (Riessman, 2008, p. 193). It is also worth noting that stories are told not so much to illustrate as to affirm who we are and what gives identity, purpose and meaning to our existence (Roof, 1993, p. 198).

Narratives are social products of people in a specific context. They take us into worlds of meaning or, as Geertz (1973, p. 5) puts it, into ‘webs of significance’. So stories are motivated by a search for meaning and a drive for coherence: they bring things together, sharpen the focus and help people see things differently (Roof, 1993, p.299). This points to another function of narratives: that of transmitting information. We saw in previous chapters that information on death rites is desperately needed, as Muslims in Venlo operate in the often challenging circumstances of a small town migration context. Narratives build a body of local knowledge that is not in the first place based on factual information. These stories don’t primarily transmit facts; they are produced by people in a specific context and convey the teller’s version of events, experiences and emotions. Storytellers and their stories are closely interwoven, hence these stories are able to persuade or induce scepticism. They have the ability to awaken emotions and trigger responses, they are able to mobilise people (whether in-
A final significant quality of narrative, important for our research, is the way it links past and present (Lawler, 2002, p. 248). It has a way of synthesising two different dimensions of time (Lawler, 2002, p. 245). In narratives we see how the past is remembered, revised and edited to fit the present context.

The continuous interaction between personal narratives and their context means that they can’t be reduced to mere personal experiences. Stories both reflect and shape the social context they interact with and they also evoke a response from an ‘audience’. Thus narratives have unique potential to reveal how Muslim communities in Venlo ritually deal with their deceased. This makes them an interesting subject of study, as they reveal nuances and subtle shades of meaning (Roof, 1993, p. 301).

5.1.1 Applying the key concepts

By applying the key concepts of our research we want to gain insight into the role of narratives in the practice of Muslim death ritual in the small town context of Venlo. How do these narratives interact with ritual structure and meaning?

5.1.1.1 Ritual practice

That ritual practice is not simply regulated by Islamic rules and regulations has become clear from the previous chapters. Narratives – both their content and function – play a part in ritual practice. The ritual practice is presented through narratives and at the same time it is evaluated. This shows the ability of stories to interact with death rite practices. In and through these narratives ritual (re-)imagination takes place. But how does the interaction take place? How can we deepen our insight into this complex process?

How are narratives and death ritual interlinked?

5.1.1.2 Ritual context: migration

Death ritual takes shape in a certain context, in our case the migration context of small town Venlo. We have designated it a context of change that challenges individual Muslims and various Muslim communities in the way they deal with death and the performance of death rites. In Venlo most Muslims refer to a context of origin that is often seen as the point of departure, both literally and figuratively. For migrants it is their home country and the culture they physically left at a certain point in time. For others it is the context they feel strongly con-
nected with – possibly the home of their parents or ancestors. The present context (the context of arrival) is where they are living now. Here a new context is configured in which these diverse Muslims have to relate to each other and to non-Muslims.

How do migration, context and narratives interact?

5.1.1.3 Ritual content: meaning

Muslims in Venlo express their social and religious experiences of death and death rites in narratives. These narratives (story fragments, elements of the meta-narrative, stories and counter-stories) are woven into a meaningful pattern. Popular narratives circulate in the various communities, some for a short time (e.g. in reaction to recent events) while others persist for years. They become a way of presenting and transferring the ‘knowledge’ that is typical of lived religion in that it represents experiences, events and ideas of ordinary Muslims in a particular context. It is a vivid part of the ritual process of constructing meaning. Narratives are interpretive devices through which people portray themselves and their views to themselves and to others. Apart from constructing meaning, these stories are also used to mobilise others and can bring about transformation.

What is the role of narratives in the construction of ritual meaning?

5.2 Popular narratives in Venlo

Our field research in Venlo – interviews, conversations and observations – involved a wide variety of Muslims. Within the various communities we found that certain narratives concerning death rites kept recurring. Our research data yielded many stories about how and where death rites are (or should be) practised. There are two main themes: (fear of) cremation and (the quest for) a place of burial – themes to be elaborated on in this chapter. When confronted with death people turn their personal experiences into stories. They show us how these events raise questions and issues. The narratives that evolve present worldviews of Muslims in Venlo and how they deal with the dominant culture in their particular context. Many personal stories dwell on the theme of cremation, which is seen as typically Dutch:
A few years ago one of our fellow countrymen died unexpectedly. He was a young guy and no one expected him to die! And as he has no relatives in this country it was very difficult for us, his friends here in Venlo, to decide what we should do. We were very, very worried when it became clear that someone from the municipality was in charge…. They have no clue how we deal with our deceased loved ones! They have no clue at all! We were so worried that they would cremate him. That is what they do! I heard it is cheaper to cremate than to bury a dead person – so the choice is easy for them. If it is cheaper, the Dutch will do it… And of course there is not much space in this country, you are so many! And probably it is necessary to burn your deceased otherwise there will be too many corpses in the cemeteries. In Islam it is forbidden to cremate a body …. I find it so harsh… You know, my relatives are not here, so I worry about what will happen if I die. Will they cremate me? I have to make arrangements that this will not happen! (Personal interview Boubacar, 11 February 2011)

The other main theme is eternal graves that are not common in the Netherlands. Narratives on this topic often contain horrible details of the way graves are emptied after some time:

Can I ask you something? You are Dutch and you might know about it… I hear so many stories about the way the Dutch handle their deceased. Is it true that they empty the graves after some time? I heard they empty the graves with a shovel and then all bodies are dumped in one place…. Or do they burn them? It is like a horror movie! If it is like this, it would be very difficult for me to be buried here in Venlo when I die… In Morocco this would never happen! Impossible! So it might be safer to be buried there… (Personal interview Soraya, 23 November 2011)

Some narratives deal with the question of where you want to be buried in a single phrase:

Let me be short on this: when I get buried I prefer ezan [Islamic call for prayer] to church bells. (Personal conversation Ebru, 24 April 2010)

Financial considerations were often mentioned to explain the choice (or wish) to be repatriated after death:

I checked what it would cost to be buried in the Netherlands, and I was shocked by the prices… Not so much the price for the funeral but how much it costs to be buried in Dutch soil! You only pay for ten years or so and then your relatives have to renew the grave rights, and pay again! I know that it al-
so costs a lot of money to transport my corpse to Morocco but the grave is for free... (Personal conversation Hassan, 8 December 2010)

We have funeral insurance through our mosque [Diyanet]. They arrange for us to be buried in Turkey when we die, all costs are covered... For this we pay something like 50 euros each year, for me and my wife and for the children that still live at home. I think it is a good deal... (Personal conversation Ismael, 18 February 2011)

The foregoing narratives reflect a kind of mistrust of their present context in Venlo and they oppose ritual practice in the Netherlands. There are also narratives that deal mainly with the glorious context of origin:

Of course I want to return to Turkey when I die... or maybe not so much to Turkey in general, but to my village. I love that place! I have such good memories of my childhood there. It is surrounded by beautiful mountains and stunning views and all my relatives are buried there... It is my personal choice. (Personal conversation Gulsen, 21 February 2011)

The narratives in circulation are evaluated (Labov, 1972) by the receivers and may lead to counter-narratives that oppose these stories in some way. For example, there are narratives told by Muslims who don’t have a choice in where to be buried due to the situation in their home countries:

I respect the rules the prophet Mohammed has given me, they are a guideline in my life. When I die I want to be buried in that place – like our religion prescribes, like the prophet was buried where he died. I have visited the Muslim cemetery in Blerick, it is not a bad place at all! The views from the new Maas Boulevard [a new shopping centre in Venlo on the river Maas; Blerick is situated on the other bank] are splendid! No, I am just joking a bit. Being buried in Venlo will be fine... (Personal interview Mo, 26 November 2010)

My brother died and was buried here in Venlo... and I can tell you, I was very content with the help we received from our funeral insurance. They really did a good job! First I was a bit worried because Nationale Nederlanden is a real Dutch company and we had an Islamic funeral, but it worked out fine. They made all the arrangements, only the religious things we organised ourselves. They even paid for the food we served to all the people staying in our house on the days after the funeral. Now I tell all my Muslim friends about it ... to take out insurance in the Netherlands, it is so much easier... (Personal interview Ahmad, 13 December 2010)
These narratives are numerous and they seem to crop up over and over again. Of course, the stories are not repeated verbatim; they are adapted and altered in accordance with personal experience and the circumstances of the context they interact with. Although they originate from personal experiences, conveying personal thoughts, the narratives are recognised by others living in similar circumstances. We also see how narratives interact and are often triggered by incidents reported in various media. They challenge people to react and express an opinion about it, resulting in storytelling.

5.3 Narrative themes on death rites in various media

On these themes respondents frequently referred to what they heard or read in national news media (papers and television), books and the internet. These media both represent and instigate personal and popular narratives. That is why one needs to investigate narratives concerning cremation and place of burial in various media.

Clearly the media do more than communicate information. Through the media people share (often personal) experiences. This sharing makes personal stories ‘common knowledge’ (Hjarvard, 2006, p.10); at the same time they interact with other personal narratives, creating popular narratives that circulate in Muslim communities. They become persistent stories that are told and retold, over and over again. The following sections present some concrete examples of these interacting popular and media narratives.

5.3.1 News media

Some news items are directly connected with the practice of Muslim death rites in the Netherlands. From time to time (national) news media pick up on cases that they see as newsworthy, which trigger debates in the various Muslim communities in Venlo. During our research people frequently referred to items that were in the news in recent years.

In 2007 the intended cremation of a 34-year-old policewoman Habiba Yaakoubi (Rotterdam region) of Moroccan descent was a hot item in the news-

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2 The book Religie in de krant (‘Religion in the newspaper’ – Wiegers & Beck, 2005) shows how newspaper clippings make interesting research material. It deals with questions like to whom and how the presented cases are explained.
papers for some time. A court order – applied for by the mother of the deceased – put a stop to the cremation ceremony that was already being arranged. Habiba’s non-Muslim partner stated it was her last wish to be cremated, a wish that was also documented. Her relatives successfully contested the authenticity of that document in court and eventually, after three months, Habiba’s body was buried in the Islamic part of the cemetery in Rotterdam. The narrative about this event includes discussions about the role of the relatives. Habiba’s mixed relationship with a Dutch non-Muslim and her personal wishes were ignored.

Every now and then there are news stories in which the absence of relatives creates a dilemma. Thus there was a Muslim in Eindhoven whose funeral was taken care of by the municipality and a non-Muslim neighbour, who opted for cremation. National newspaper Trouw (Hakkenes, 2012) picked up on this case in a short interview with Ibrahim Wijbenga, chairman of IBW (Stichting Islamitisch Begrafeniswezen) on how to prevent this from happening again. Wijbenga and his foundation actively raise awareness of the reason why cremation is not an option in Islam and calls on Muslims to make their final wishes known (e.g. through a codicil). Wijbenga himself is a Muslim of mixed descent – his mother is Moroccan and his father Dutch – and is strongly motivated by his personal experiences. Other narratives originate from the strained political situation in the Netherlands. Political parties like the PVV (the far-right ‘Freedom Party’) and its leader Geert Wilders openly express anti-Islamic viewpoints. In 2007 the PVV caused a stir about the appointment of two state secretaries, Ahmed Aboutaleb and Nebahat Albayrak. Their loyalty was questioned because of their dual nationalities (Dutch and Moroccan/Turkish). Aboutaleb countered this attack on his integrity by stating that when he dies “he entrusts his body to Dutch soil” (Etty, 2007; RTVNH, 2007). Being buried in the Netherlands became a statement of full integration of Muslim migrants with Dutch society, which was repeated in various news media. A few years later a Dutch-Moroccan Muslim, Ahmed Marcouch – a public figure, role model and member of parliament – spread the same message (Marcouch, 2010; AT5, 2010).

More substantial was the contribution of Nadia Zerouali in the TV programme De halve maan, (‘The crescent moon’, NTR, 2012), a weekly, opinion forming news show with a sharp eye for developments in the Muslim communi-

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The programme showed Nadia’s family — her parents (first generation migrants from Morocco) and siblings, all living in the small town of Winterswijk — discussing where they want to be buried when they die. All facets were covered: the mother’s wish to be buried with her family in Morocco, the father’s wish to die in Mecca or to be buried where he dies (probably in Winterswijk), the need of the children to be able to visit their parents’ graves and to be buried in Dutch soil in an Islamic way. In the studio Nadia explains that some years ago when her husband unexpectedly died, his relatives automatically assumed that he would be repatriated to Morocco. Nadia resisted and, in keeping with her late husband’s wishes, opted for interment in the Netherlands. As Winterswijk had no Islamic cemetery, he was buried in Lelystad (150 km away). Because of this personal experience she wants to raise awareness of this issue in Muslim communities, breaking the taboo on talking about death.

5.3.2 Books

For some years now more and more ‘Islamic’ books — mainly translations of existing Arabic texts — have been available in the Dutch language. They are available via specialised Islamic internet bookshops and sometimes (a small selection) at local mosques. In regard to death and dying there is a variety of books on topics like the afterlife, life in the grave and the practice of Islamic death rites. Many books provide guidelines for ‘correct ritual practice’ or, as the preface to *Begrafenissen: voorschriften en vermaningen* ['Funerals, prescriptions and admonitions'] (Al Djibaaly n.d.) puts it:

This work is a humble answer to the idea that we have a great responsibility to help generate books for a Dutch speaking readership — books that clarify Islam and present it purely and simply, adhering meticulously to the way it was understood and executed by its first righteous pioneers: the selef.

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4 The program’s website: http://dehalvemaan.ntr.nl
6 With titles like: *De dood, het graf en wat erna gebeurt* (‘Death, the grave and what happens afterwards’, As Soejoethie, 2005), *Het graf, bestraffing en genietering* (‘The grave, punishment and enjoyment’, Al-Wassaabie, 2010), *Begrafenissen, voorschriften en vermaningen* (‘Funerals, prescriptions and admonitions’, Al Djibaaly, n.d.) and *De dag der opstanding* (‘The day of resurrection’, Al-Asjqar, 2008).
The blurbs generally provide clear descriptions of what can be expected of the book, like the one on the cover of *Begrafenisrituelen in de islam* [‘Funeral rites in Islam’] (Brahmi, 2007):

> How many Muslims die in the pretended and general indifference of their ‘brothers’ in faith? How many of them died while the religious community denied them their God-given rights? How many of them were cremated and cast into oblivion, unattended and without prayers? The intention of this book is to fill this horrendous gap.7

Or this fragment on the back of *Het graf, morgen is het jouw beurt* [‘The grave, tomorrow it is your turn’] (Ya’qûb, 2010):

> My brothers and sisters in Islam, my loved ones. Hold a moment. Meditate! Think about your next stage. No one will escape Allah the almighty. Let’s feel the fear of the tortures of the grave. What will happen? You will be in the grave all alone. The address of the grave, the pressure of the grave, the questioning of the angels, the opening of the door to paradise or hell, the causes of agony: how can one protect oneself against the torments of the grave?

These books mainly contain quotations from the Qur’an, collections of *ahadith* and *fiqh* literature complete with explanations, lessons to be learnt and practical guidelines. They often explicitly warn against ‘innovations’, additional practices that don’t correspond with Islamic sources. Although many of them attempt to provide guidelines for localised contexts (Muslim minorities in the West), it is striking how they all present a highly uniform, static picture of Islam. The books are bought and read mainly by young people in search of answers to their questions. Quotations from these books are often used in peer group discussions.

### 5.3.3 Internet

The World Wide Web offers an abundance of information on Islamic death rites. This information is not always easy to assess, as the sources are not al-
ways clear and the information is diffuse. For young Muslims in Venlo the internet is a source of reference and a place (various internet forums, cyber imams) where questions can be asked freely: where and how to be buried, whether a Muslim can attend the funeral of a non-Muslim and how to ensure an Islamic funeral when your relatives are not Muslims (as is the case with converts), how to live your religion in this day and age and in this particular context. In his research into the religious identity of young Moroccan-Dutch Muslims, Martijn de Koning (2008) finds that youngsters resort to the internet in search of answers to their questions as they often feel that they cannot turn to their parents for these. Different perceptions and interpretations of religion and religious practices seem to create a generation gap, making the parents unsuitable conversation partners. De Koning also points out that the online and offline worlds of exchanging ideas and knowledge are highly interactive: ‘they influence, complete and change each other’ (De Koning, 2008, p.307). The internet is also a great source of books and news items – including those that don’t make it to national TV or newspapers – and of instructive videos on various death rites.

The *Stichting Islamitisch Begrafeniswezen* (IBW) runs a highly informative website, providing clear information on Islamic death rites – all in line with their mission to provide Muslims in the Netherlands with a proper Islamic burial (place).8 They explicitly focus on the establishment Islamic graveyards that contain perpetual graves only, a message they keep repeating (on the site and in various media through their spokesperson Ibrahim Wijbenga) and that is non-negotiable.9 In this way they contribute greatly to the popular narrative on this theme.10

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8 The IBW website: http://www.stichtingibw.nl/
9 This episode in the television programme InFocus (NMO, 2010) contains a discussion on Islamic funerals between Dr Umar Ryad, Islamic scholar at the University of Leiden, and Ibrahim Wijbenga (IBW). Interestingly, they disagree on the idea of perpetual graves as an absolute requirement in Islam. Wijbenga’s consistent message can be traced in all his media appearances (like van Veen & Pietersen, 2007; van Hoof, 2008; van der Heijden, 2011; van Es, 2012; van den Hoven & van Hunsel, 2012).
10 The internet has become an important source of information and an arena for discussion, in particular for young Muslims. The significance of these developments and its actual effect on Muslim death ritual in the Netherlands is an interesting lead for further research.
5.4 Between two contexts: a process of re-imagination

As described in the previous section, popular narratives have made the themes of cremation and burial ‘common knowledge’ (Hjarvard, 2006, p. 10) in Muslim communities in Venlo. It is a type of knowledge that is still fluid, as there is still lively interaction that both presents and moulds their views on the context they live in right now. Although these popular narratives centre on cremation and burial, they offer a much broader view that transcends these topics. In their narratives Muslims in Venlo evolve their perception of the context they are living in. This migration context challenges them to deal with death and it is also the context in which they actually perform their death rites. Personal and popular narratives define the real-life context and show that this context is closely connected with the context of origin. This affects the way they (ritually) act. Narratives instigate, represent and mould a process of re-imagination that warrants a closer look.

Where we come from you are surrounded by Muslims, you really grow up like a Muslim, so when someone dies everybody knows what to do. You can simply ask the neighbours. That is so different here, nobody knows anything.
(Personal interview Mo, 26 November 2010)

We have referred to Amadou’s shock on finding himself at the cremation ceremony of a Dutch friend (chapter 2, §2.2.4). But even less confrontational experiences at ‘Dutch funerals’ make Muslims think about their own death rites, in relation to either their context of origin or the current context of Venlo:

I’ve been to several funerals here in Venlo, you hear from colleagues or their relatives… And some things were really beautiful, like the way the Dutch can express their emotions in words. It is so much more dignified than the unrestrained emotional crying and shouting that I am used to. I know Islam is against this kind of extreme emotional expression of grief, but people do it anyway – they can learn from the Dutch in this regard… But then there is this music! Bang! That I can’t get used to, with loud music like this you have no respect for the deceased… (Personal interview Dilek, 20 January 2010)

My husband is from here [Venlo], he is a Catholic … so I did go to Catholic funerals here with him. What really surprises me is that you don’t see the person getting buried! You leave the cemetery and the coffin is still standing there… How can you be sure that your loved one is actually buried there? It is
It is such narratives that make people rediscover and re-imagine death ritual that might lead to a re-invention of death rites that accord with the given circumstances.

5.4.1 Re-imagining death rites

When confronted with death in a new context people often have to improvise because of the very different context. But they also rely on experiences, memories and (family) traditions they know from their home countries. Thus for most Muslims in Venlo (death) ritual is closely connected with their context of origin. People re-imagine how the ritual was performed or, even more compellingly, how it should be performed in the original context and how to translate this to their new context. This powerful form of re-imagination is what Ronald Grimes (2000, p. 111) calls fantasy: “the fantasy of a ritual, more than the memory of it, often determines practice.” Grimes defines this particular way of imagining as self-preoccupied and projective, leading to reinvention of ritual. This process of re-imagining/fantasy involves both the context of origin and the present context, and the way people relate to them is expressed in an extensive body of narratives.

Narratives originate, circulate and are adapted in different communities (ethnic groups, social groups, families; also internet forums and refugee centres). There are stories about personal experiences, religious regulations (like eternal grave rest), the Dutch ritual practice of death rites (especially cremation), Dutch government regulations and how other Muslim communities in the new context practise Islam and Islamic ritual. They not only interact with the current context but also influence Muslims’ perception of their original context. The narratives link past and present, creating a ‘remembered past’ to fit the present – it constitutes past experience and at the same time makes sense of it (Lawler, 2002, p. 248).

We see that the original context is often romanticised and presented as an ideal world where in the event of a death one can go to any neighbour, who will know how to proceed. This often contrasts with narratives about the present context, which are strongly influence by the fact that here Muslims are a minority – and one has to be wary of cremation! In some cases this disoriented,
marginalised position makes it impossible to perform the ritual washing and shrouding according to a fixed tradition (religion, culture, family), necessitating re-imagination, improvisation and re-invention of (parts of) the ritual practice.

5.5 Conclusion

To determine the role of narratives in the construction of meaning we studied personal and popular narratives. These narratives guided us through the process of re-imagining that afforded insight into the ritual dynamics of a migration context. In answering our research questions we again turn to our key concepts.

5.5.1 Ritual practice

How do narratives impact on ritual practice?

Through narratives Muslims interact with that context in order to construct meaning and bring order to their lives. Thus narratives define both the present context and the context of origin, expressing ideas, attitudes and fantasies. Ritual practice in Venlo takes shape between those two contexts that are presented as opposites: an ideal, glorified original context and a problematic present context. Muslims in Venlo deal with this tension by genuinely seeking clear guidelines on how to perform death rites (or have them performed) ‘correctly’. They consult or hire imams or other specialists, they attend courses, read books and visit internet sites that offer clear, fixed guidelines and proceed on their authority. They don’t (often simply can’t) just take over a ritual repertoire from the context of origin: it won’t fit their present circumstances and usually they have no knowledge or experience of the ritual practice. So through narratives death rites are re-imagined and reinvented to suit the present context. In this re-imaging process people draw on experiences that might vary greatly among the Muslims communities in Venlo: originating from different countries and regions, having different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and their own personal biography. Besides, people’s migration experience might vary, as might their religious affiliation. These nuances can be traced in people’s narratives and counter-narratives and they affect ritual practice. In particular public death rites (like burials) are reshaped by popular narratives and seem to become fairly uniform, whereas more private rites (like the ritual cleansing of the deceased and grave visits) become refuges for ritual creativity that reflect greater diversity.
5.5.2 Migration context

*How do migration, context and narratives interact?*

Muslim migrants in Venlo find themselves in a context where they experience disorientation and marginality, which becomes more evident in the face of death. Dying in this particular context raises unavoidable issues and questions. The confrontation with Dutch society and the way people handle death and death rites in Venlo, personal experiences of death and death rites are slotted into stories that both reflect and shape the context they are living in. The context of origin is an unmistakable part of the current context and in narratives that past and the present are brought together, trying to make sense of experiences in both contexts. These narratives show that death rites are shaped ‘between’ contexts.

5.5.3 Ritual content: meaning

*What is the role of narratives in the construction of ritual meaning?*

Narratives define both the present context and the context of origin, and they do not necessarily do it in a factual way. They weave worlds of meaning, ‘webs of significance’, in which death rites are performed. Via the themes of cremation and burial we can see how Muslims in Venlo try to make sense of their experiences and turn them into a collective understanding. We see fragments of the meta-narrative (eschatological myth) crop up, which interact with the context and become part of popular narratives; they become part of a miscellany of subjects that are thrown together in order to make sense of it all. In the weaving of meaningful patterns we also see ritual construction of meaning. Narratives make us perceive how lived religion takes shape and how ritual meaning is ascribed.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

MUSLIMS RITUALISING DEATH IN THE NETHERLANDS, NEGOTIATING DEATH RITES IN A SMALL TOWN CONTEXT

Throughout this study we have been exploring various ritual repertoires used by Muslims dealing with death in a migration context. Spotlighting the pivotal rite of washing and shrouding the deceased, we were able to unravel and interpret the practice of death rites in a small town context in the Netherlands. The previous five chapters showed how Muslims negotiate and appropriate their ritual repertoires in the migration situation. Each chapter focused on how a specific ritual repertoire is practised and shaped to fit the context.

6.1 Research questions and outline of conclusion

In this final chapter we collate the identified repertoires in an overview. It will enable us to answer our research questions:

*When confronted with death, what ritual repertoires emerge among Muslims in the small town migration context of Venlo and how did these ritual repertoires evolve?*

- What elements of death ritual are significant to contemporary Muslims?
- Which roles can be distinguished in the practice of the ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased?
- What ritual beliefs are connected with death rites?
- What is the role of narratives in the ritual process of constructing meaning?

Our key concepts – ritual practice, ritual context, ritual content (see 1.2) were vital in unravelling these ritual repertoires. They will obviously feature in this
concluding chapter. In previous chapters we saw how ritual repertoires and key concepts are interlinked and were able to refine our insight into both the repertoires and the concepts.

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*Figure 10. Recapitulating repertoires and concepts relating to death rites*

The key concepts are discussed in section 6.2 on the situation in which Muslims negotiate and appropriate death ritual in a particular context. Section 6.3 describes the emergence and development of these repertoires by answering the sub-questions before moving on to the main research question. This achieves our first research aim: understanding the negotiation of Islamic death ritual in the small town context of Venlo. In section 6.4 we streamline the theoretical insight gained, followed by the practical insight acquired in this study. Although the role of care professionals (health, social and spiritual) was not an explicit research subject, they unavoidably entered into it. Some practical guidelines for appropriate professional care for Muslims in the face of death are presented in appendix II.
6.2 Negotiating ritual in the face of death: ritual practice, context and content

Islamic sources – like the fiqh, also the local imam – provide practical guidelines and prescriptions of how to act (ritually) when a relative or a fellow Muslim dies. Other sources like the Qur’an and the Hadith, and narratives derived from them, give the bereaved and future deceased a mental image of how to approach death and dying. These Islamic sources are universally oriented and apply to all Muslims everywhere, but when practised in a specific context the general regulations crystallise in highly diversified practices: ‘orthodox’ regulations don’t necessarily lead to orthopraxis. The common practice of Islamic death rites appears to be a heteropraxis, since the regulations are always implemented socially.

Because ritual tends to be seen as static, its dynamics is often overlooked or disregarded. The term ‘Islamic rites’ is taken to mean traditional rites, reinforcing the idea that rites are not created or invented. But there is no such thing as an everlasting, fixed rite. Rites are not created out of nothing and ritual dynamics is a fact. Even in long-standing ritual traditions there is great scope for both ritual creativity and ritual loss (Grimes, 2000, p. 57-58). Studying the ritual of cleansing and shrouding the deceased in a migration context is a study of the rite in a context of change. Muslims in Venlo are shaping and negotiating their ritual repertoire in the context of the small town where they live. The Islamic guidelines are generic in that they are meant to apply in any given context. This means that there is plenty of room for translation into particular contexts.

We call our research context a migration context because the vast majority of Muslims in Venlo have a migration background, having arrived in the Netherlands during the latter half of the 20th century and subsequently. There are also Muslims in Venlo who have no personal migration background, having been born and raised in the Netherlands. These include converts and second and third generation migrants. But for them, too, migration in many respects informs the context. To understand this we have to define migration more precisely. Although migration refers primarily to dislocation and relocation of people – that is, physical movement from one country to another – it is not so much the actual migration but its outcomes that determine our context. It is not just people who relocate; their cultural practices and social networks are also transferred and need to be re-established. Diaspora is very much a social phenomenon, a
type of consciousness and a mode of cultural reproduction (Vertovec, 2008) It is a significant part of the process of re-evaluating, re-imagining and reinventing ritual repertoires in the new context. Thus migration or diaspora is an intrinsic part of the local context and should not be perceived as a foreign import. The Muslims whose ritual repertoires we studied are definitely part of the Dutch small town context where they practise their rites.

The ‘Muslim community’ in Venlo is very diverse and it would be more accurate to speak of Muslim communities in the plural. Muslims in Venlo originate from different countries and they (their parents or grandparents) arrived at different points in time in varying circumstances. They have different ways of relating to both the context of arrival and the context of origin. The context of origin is not simply the country the migrant left behind; it is also a concept, a construct that is by no means fixed. The context of origin is a fluid idea arising from migration experiences and the context the person is living in now. It is between those two contexts that ritual repertoires take shape. Ethnic or national background is often considered a primary marker, particularly when referring to the large communities of Turkish and Moroccan Muslims. But there are other markers, like cultural, linguistic, sectarian and class attributes. There are also the disparate migration experiences of labour migrants and refugees that affect the way people perceive their original and current context. The number of people in a community and the time that they have been in Venlo also influence the demographic structure. It means that some Muslim communities comprise several generations with a balanced composition of men, women and children, whereas others consist of few people and have an unbalanced composition, such as a surplus of single young men or women. Although they come from diverse backgrounds, a common denominator is that they usually originate from a context with a strong Muslim majority and are now a minority. Being a minority, being surrounded by ‘others’ makes their Muslim identity less self-evident.

Muslims of Turkish and Moroccan descent are the largest, most established and best equipped Muslim communities in Venlo. They were the first communities that have settled in Venlo since the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their numbers are considerable and they are demographically well balanced, comprising men, women and children of various generations. Both communities have their own mosques (organisations) that offer religious, ritual and social back-up. These mosque organisations also mediate between the context of origin (that they still identify and are identified with) and the present context. People turn to them, their volunteers and imams for ritual guidance and the
imam is often considered the most qualified ritual presider. So Turkish and Moroccan Muslims in Venlo are well equipped, are often part of a larger social network of relatives and acquaintances and have a Muslim community with a similar background to fall back on when somebody dies. Many of them also have access to funeral insurance tailored to their specific (migrant) situation, offering an affordable and trouble-free repatriation to, and funeral in, the country of origin. It is in these circumstances that they negotiate their ritual repertoires and practice. We have said that Muslims’ ideas about their context of origin and the current context are fluid, meaning that they are perceived differently depending on circumstances, resulting in different ritual repertoires. Most of the facilities available to the larger Turkish and Moroccan communities are not there for other, smaller Muslim communities or individuals handling the death of a loved one. They generally don’t have an institution or ritual expert to turn to, and for many refugees burial in the country of origin is out of the question. This makes the process of negotiating their ritual death practice even more complex and stressful.

To perform the ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased and prepare them for burial one also has to deal with various Dutch authorities like hospital staff, municipal officials, social workers and undertakers. The small communities – minorities within the Muslim minority – also depend on the larger Muslim communities for certain facilities. They might need an imam or volunteers to help them with or preside over the cleansing and shrouding rites, or they might want the funeral prayer to be performed in a mosque. These are occasions when Muslims are actively confronted – often for the first time – with diversity and various practices within their own religion. This contrast with the context of origin and with others in society makes Muslims more self-conscious (Metcalf, 1996). The migration context is marked by diversity.

The migration context is much more than just a backdrop to Islamic death ritual. We can’t separate ritual from the context in which it is enacted – it is the key to the re-evaluation, re-imagining and reinvention of ritual repertoires. Ritual context interacts with ritual practice and ritual content, our other key concepts. That clarifies the ritual dynamics. In using and developing our key concepts we were constantly aware of the two fundamental aspects that converge in ritual: structure and meaning (Bell, 1997, pp. 23ff, 61ff). Examining both ritual structure and ritual meaning makes it possible to distinguish between ritual practice and content and at the same time discover their coherence, in that all aspects are interrelated. In studying ritual practice we differentiate be-
between an internal structure (the one ritual has) and an external structure (the one it brings about).

The internal structure of the ritual purification of the deceased is basically laid down in the Islamic fiqh. Different law schools, cultural and family traditions introduce minor modifications to ritual, but one can still discern a solid structure that is perceived as the ideal ritual order. It is this perceived ritual order that is often challenged by contextual circumstances. Particularly in a migration context the ritual order needs to be revised, as the actors are insecure and fear ritual failure as a result of insufficient knowledge and lack of practical experience. This results in additional ritualising actions and enactments that fit the actual circumstances. On a more abstract level we recognise the structure of rites of passage. These are rites marking transitions in the human life course and proceed through three phases: separation from the community, transition into a formative time and space (liminality), and reincorporation into the community. The unfolding of the ritual process underlines the dynamic and formative character of the liminal stage. The (external) structure that is or seeks to be brought about is an ordering one. It defines how the ritual actors – bereaved, deceased, fellow Muslims (community members) and others – relate to each other. Their roles are revised and reinvented to suit the particular circumstances of the migration context. Relationships between the ritual actors are restructured and this redefinition is a dynamic process, varying from case to case, as it is not a matter of course.

Ritual not only possess and effect structure: they also have meaning, the ritual content. Here we again distinguish between internal meaning (the meaning ritual has) and external meaning (something that transcends the actual performance). What we see is how the ritual practice in the specific (migration) context is perceived by participants. The internal meaning is one that the participants discover in ritual, and should therefore be recognisable. It is not always self-evident in a context of change. The meaning ritual conveys has clear roots in Islamic sources that specify the beliefs ritual actors draw on. That meaning needs to be negotiated in the context of change, depending on the parties involved. Although Islamic sources clearly colour these perceptions, they don’t result in an unambiguous, universal web of significance. Meaningful patterns are certainly influenced by the beliefs presented in Islamic meta-narratives, but are modified in popular narratives that attune the perceptions to the given context. In the case of ritualising actions the referential link with an ‘Islamic’ belief system is not always obvious, as they are not (yet) explicitly defined in this
tradition. Hence their meaning lies in their performance and unfolds in the ritual action itself (Grimes, 1992, p.36; Mitchell, 1999, p. 49). Both ritual structure and meaning are revised in the in the migration context of Venlo. It provides a setting in which ritual dynamics takes place, that is, a framework for negotiation.

6.3 Emerging Muslim ritual repertoires: elements, roles, beliefs and narratives

The key concepts provide a framework for negotiation and appropriation of death ritual in this particular Dutch context. For the emergence and development of ritual repertoires in this context we return to our research questions. What elements of death ritual are significant to contemporary Muslims?

The defined ritual elements (actions, actors, sources, attitudes, places, time, objects, language and sound, senses, commentary and criticism) enable us to map the ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased in a fairly detailed overview of this ritual practice in a particular context. At the same time they provide an interpretive framework that deepens our research. They enable us to unravel complex, multi-layered practices without losing sight of the whole, as the elements remain closely interconnected. This approach enables us to go beyond the often isolated and generic descriptions of rites and their ritual order that tend to focus on specific aspects like actions, actors and (written) sources.

Studying the ritual elements opens up a broader field, in which the various death rites are interconnected, and opens our eyes not only to the particular rites of cleansing and shrouding the deceased but also to ritualising procedures accompanying the established rites. Repatriation of the corpse or the fact that relatives are geographically dispersed separates the bereaved in place and time, breaking up the ritual process. Study of the individual elements also shows that in some circumstances typical of the migration context different elements are emphasised. Muslims in Venlo consciously choose to highlight certain aspects to fit their situation. As the ritual cleansing and shrouding are performed in private, it is often the last time women and children can be with the deceased and say their final goodbyes. These are often highly ritualised and go beyond the prescribed Islamic death ritual. This is another example of the discrepancy between what is prescribed and what is performed.
Although people refer to a rich ritual repertoire available in Islamic sources, they seldom draw on these sources directly. In fact they rely more on lived religion, a heterodox common ritual practice that evolves between the context of origin and the present context. In many cases lived religion predominates and becomes the principal source of ritual action. It is interspersed with ritual re-imagining and reinvention to make rites fit the context they are practised in. Interestingly, this coincides with lively discussion of what is correct ritual according to ‘real’ Islam.

As the ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased is almost always performed in Venlo, unlike the actual burial that might be in the country of origin, Muslims are forced to deal with local circumstances.

Which roles can be distinguished in the practice of the ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased?

When it comes to roles in the practice of washing and shrouding the deceased, Islamic sources assign prominent roles to the deceased and the bereaved relatives. But in practice the most active role, that of the washer, is performed by a so-called ritual expert. This is an emerging role, performed by a very small number of people. Relatives rarely act as ritual presiders; they might be involved as assistants or merely as an audience.

Again there is a discrepancy between what is prescribed and common practice. Whereas Islamic sources clearly state that the deceased’s closest relatives are the designated washers, in the reality of the migration context this hardly ever happens. There are various reasons for this development, some of them peculiar to the migration context or at least intensified by it. In some cases there are simply no (close) relatives available: they might live in other countries and be unable to come (in time) to perform the washing and shrouding in the hours after someone’s death. In cases of mixed marriages or conversion there might be no suitable relatives available to perform the washing, as they are non-Muslims and being a Muslim is a precondition for participation. But most bereaved consider themselves unqualified to perform the rite. Cleansing and shrouding a deceased is a very hands-on rite, which means one has to physically handle the corpse of a loved one and most people are fearful of that. At the same time it requires knowledge and practical skills to perform these rites adequately and respectfully, which many Muslims in the migration context lack as they are not (frequently) confronted with death and death rites. This adds to fear of ritual failure.
In Venlo the washing and shrouding of a male body is generally presided over by a local imam from one of the Moroccan or Turkish mosques. These imams perform the rite as part of their professional duties and are assisted by regular volunteers or by relatives of the deceased. In the case of female corpses things tend to be more complicated, since there is no ‘professional’ body of washers to turn to. At present female washers in Venlo have no formal status or training. They volunteered for the task at a certain point in time, often out of necessity, or they got into it by chance. Although not officially associated with a specific mosque (organisation), they generally can be contacted via these.

The way ritual experts interpret and carry out their role is largely determined by their own motivations and the authority they are granted. Becoming a ritual expert and the definition of the role happen mainly in lived religion. Recently some mosque organisations have proposed more formal training for female washers, who will be able to volunteer for ritual cleansing of the deceased. Although quite a few (mainly young) women have shown interest, the actual training has not been finalised. The smaller Muslim communities (non-Turkish/non-Moroccan) are often not organised in this respect and as most members are quite young, they are not much concerned with death. They tend to take on the task when it arises – and when it does this often leads to stressful and difficult situations.

What ritual beliefs are connected to death rites?
To determine what ritual beliefs are connected with death rites one has to study the Islamic eschatological myth and the way it is enacted. It is also a rich source of ritual meaning. The eschatological myth has strong roots in (primary) Islamic sources and deals with the origin and destination of human life. This meta-narrative is a close-knit, coherent whole that developed over centuries and covers all aspects of people’s destination after death. These ‘religious perspectives’ that transcend the realities of everyday life are what Geertz (1973, pp.111-112) calls beliefs. They are not mere passive ideas in people’s minds but an organising principle that imposes order and disposes people to experience that order in the world around them. Ritual makes it tangible (Bell, 2003, p.83). So as not to separate thought from practice we prefer to refer to these beliefs connected with death rites as lived eschatology – an eschatology ritually enacted by Muslims.

The body of death rites comprises rites of passage, marking changes, shifts and transitions in the human life cycle. Their typical threefold structure is
apparent in the body of death rites and classifying death rites in the three ritual phases clarifies both the internal and the external ritual structure. The phase before the funeral consists of clearly prescribed rites of separation. The next phase, at the grave, consists in transitional rites, for which few guidelines are available. The rites of reintegration anticipated at the end of time are not prescribed at all and are can be described as preliminary or virtual rites. The eschatological myth operates mainly in these lacunae. It fills the gaps with collective perceptions. The final phase is anticipated by Muslims as a phase of completion.

The Islamic myth presents a powerful collective image of the final eschatological fulfilment, resulting in a practice where the deceased’s final transition takes centre stage. As primary Islamic sources provide hardly any information on the period between personal death and resurrection, the gap is filled in by popular imagination. This results in additional ritualising acts that develop alongside formal Islamic death rites. They include mourning rites\(^1\) with a semi-public character (gatherings at death anniversaries) and grave visits that are more private in nature. *Barzakh* – the time between death on earth and the day of resurrection at the end of time – takes shape in lived eschatology and these beliefs largely determine the interaction between the bereaved and the deceased. A firm belief has developed that the deceased remains available for ritual action. It is often considered a two-way process, as the ritual practice not only benefits the deceased and their fate, but they can also serve as intercessors to improve either the current state of the bereaved or their state as future deceased.

In spite of its static character the eschatological myth is adapted to the ritualising actions of the bereaved – fixed scripts are unavailable or are used flexibly. Such adaptations are subtle and consist of additional narratives or the omission or highlighting of certain aspects of the eschatological myth. These fragments of the meta-narrative interact with the context and become part of popular narratives, a miscellany of subjects thrown together in order to make sense of it all. These additional narratives explain, for example, whether it is better for the repose of the deceased’s soul to be buried in his country of origin rather than in Venlo or elsewhere in the Netherlands. The ‘horrors’ of repatriation – being transported in a lead casket in the freight section of a plane, and the often considerable delay of the interment – are conveniently ignored.

\(^1\) As they are often not formal Islamic rites prescribed in primary Islamic sources, they could be called ritualising enactments. But over time they have developed into rites and are widely practised among Muslims.
The fragmentation of the eschatological myth both represents and shapes the particular circumstances of the migration context. Lived eschatology takes shape in this ‘in-between’ phase at the grave. Here there is room for more personal beliefs and images of life after death. Meanings can be adapted to the context, resulting in more personalised ritual enactment conveying more personalised meanings.

*What is the role of narratives in the ritual process of constructing meaning?*

The Islamic eschatological myth is surrounded by numerous popular narratives. Whereas a meta-narrative tends to be generic and static, these popular narratives are much more contextual and fluid. These supplementary narratives – shared in social engagements and through various media – deal with current, pressing topics encountered by people in a given context and reflect their own account of their lives and experiences. They are social, highly active narratives linked to communities, which in their turn are both represented and shaped by the stories.

The narratives are a key to people’s experiences and provide a collective conception of how things (should) work. In our context we see that narratives have the unique ability to link past and present, context of origin and current context. The context of origin and its ritual death practices are remembered and revised; death rites are re-imagined and reinvented to fit the new context. In this way narratives define both the current context and the context of origin, and between the two ideas, attitudes and fantasies are expressed and shaped. The contexts are often presented as opposites: an ideal, glorified context of origin and a problematic present context. In defining both the current context and the context of origin narratives are not necessarily factual. They are vehicles of information and are perceived and applied as important sources of knowledge by Muslims in Venlo.

They also reflect their diversity, being based on people’s individual experiences that are as varied as their backgrounds. The diversity in people’s narratives and counter-narratives affects their ritual practice. Particularly public death rites like the burial are reshaped by popular narratives and tend to become quite uniform. More private rites, like the ritual cleansing of the deceased and grave visits, become refuges of ritual creativity that reflect the diversity of Muslims in Venlo. Narratives show how lived religion takes shape and how ritual meaning is ascribed.
When confronted with death, what ritual repertoires emerge among Muslims in the small town migration context of Venlo and how did these ritual repertoires evolve?

Our ritual repertoires (elements, roles, beliefs and narratives) emerged and developed in the small town context of Venlo. They are products of vibrant, multi-layered negotiation processes, in which rites and ritualising enactments interact with ritual actors and their (changing) contexts. Studying the ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased in a small town migration context affords insight into the dynamics and creativity of ritual. The ritual practice is dynamic, comprising both subtle and more obvious changes always embedded in a specific context. Rites have biographies, progressing through various highly complex stages and different domains (Brosius & Hüsken, 2010, p. 7). And although rites are often no longer perceived as static, repetitive, formalised actions, their dynamics is widely overlooked in the study of an institutionalised, traditional religion like Islam. This is something we have to avoid in order to discover the emerging ritual repertoires.

6.4 Perspectives for further theoretical reflection

Death in a migration context is challenging in many respects, as Muslim migrants in Venlo face unfamiliar circumstances. Often the next of kin lack experience and knowledge of actual death rites they are expected to perform. This causes insecurity – everyone being in transition – and contributes to profound fear of ritual failure among the bereaved. It not only affects the actual migrants but also rubs off on their children (second and third generation), members of mixed families (Muslim and non-Muslim) and Dutch converts to Islam. They all have to deal with the realities of a migration context. Smaller communities or individual Muslims – a minority within a minority – have to rely on larger, more established Turkish and Moroccan communities and their facilities. This often means that in these already difficult circumstances Muslims are confronted with diversity within their own communities. This context that can be described as liminal appears to be a fertile breeding ground that triggers ritual creativity on the one hand and makes people receptive on the other. This study opens up some interesting perspectives on ritual theory. Two topics surfaced regularly and offer tempting prospects for further theorising.
The first is ritual negotiation that focuses on the ritual actors, their competencies and the way they influence ritual practice. The second is emerging ritual that reveals the flexibility of ritual.

6.4.1 Negotiating ritual

In this study we considered how Muslims negotiate their role in death rites performed in a particular migration context. It is an insecure situation in which the designated washers — the closest relatives of the deceased — don’t see themselves as qualified to perform the ritual cleansing and shrouding of the deceased. And although Islamic law is quite clear on who should participate and how, the regulations are often debated and bent in a given context. Such ritual negotiation appears to be a key to the development of our defined ritual repertoires. We saw how people are often caught up in processes of interaction, in which their ritual roles are debated and constituted. Because of ignorance and fear of ritual failure many bereaved relatives are unable to participate in an active, presiding role. Who should play that leading role and ensure smooth ritual practice? Through motivation and authority others are able to negotiate the role of primary ritual actors. Ritual agency is both granted and claimed. At least, that is the position at present, as this negotiation appears to be on-going and still in process.

Hüsken and Neubert (2012, p.2) consider engagement in negotiation a hallmark of ritual. They define negotiations as processes of interaction in which different positions are debated and/or acted out. Negotiation is associated with disagreement, interaction, reinterpretation and discussion. It also means that the parties have to (re)define their mutual relations and their relation to the context they are living in. It mercilessly exposes critical issues. Although negotiation stems from disagreement, its aim is some form of agreement (Hüsken & Neubert 2012, p. 3), in our study referred to as ‘correct’ ritual performance. But does this automatically lead to uniformity? What about the diversity of Muslims and Muslim communities even in a small town context in the Netherlands? Is agreement not contextual and purely temporary? Is it not a dynamic context that will continue to generate a chain of interactions, re-interpretations and discussions? Isn’t it a cycle, an on-going process?

Further reflection on ritual negotiation will deepen insight into the complexity of ritual creativity and the roles of ritual actors that we identified in this study. A focus on ritual negotiation will highlight key issues and what exactly is at stake, probably via vivid narratives that people can act on in either
agreement or disagreement. They trigger activity and critical thinking, create reflexivity and awareness of one’s own and others’ positions (Hüsken & Neubert, 2012, p.4). The concept of ritual negotiation is interesting when it comes to lived religion and the discrepancy between ritual prescriptions (as provided by Islamic sources) and the actual ritual practice in a particular context: research into ritual negotiation over longer periods of time; who is involved and how changes happen and take shape in ritual re-imagining and ritual reinvention. Here Hüsken and Neubert’s recent study produced interesting findings that are worth looking into.

6.4.2 Emerging ritual

While negotiation clarifies the process of ritual re-invention, emerging ritual highlights ritualising enactments. Both concepts clearly contradict the idea of ritual as a stable entity.

When ritual is designated ‘Islamic’ the term usually refers to an ‘established’ or ‘traditional’ ritual system, in which rites are clustered and prescribed. In practice formal Islamic death rites, usually perceived as strictly prescribed, are always mixed with social custom and personal input. Contexts change and rites are transferred and are ‘translated’ into the new context, where they usually undergo subtle or even significant changes to meet the requirements of changed circumstances. We showed how ritual re-invention goes hand in hand with ritual imagination (Grimes 2000, 4) also in the case of highly traditional and conventional Islamic death rites. We cannot ignore the dynamic properties of ritual, since that would mean overlooking actual ritual practice. In the wake of formal death rites we see ritual creativity. The bereaved cultivate, revise and reinvent their ritual repertoires: they are ‘ritualising’. They are deliberately cultivating rites, a process of birth or emergence (Grimes, 1990, p.10). This urges us to look beyond the prescribed formal rites and look for what else is going on. The ritual cleansing and shrouding rites in particular were supplemented with other ritualising acts, which the bereaved added to the existing rites. The ritual cleansing of the deceased allows for that.

Regardless of where the deceased is buried afterwards, the rites of cleansing and shrouding generally take place in Venlo. It is a suitable moment for final goodbyes, particularly for those who will not be able to attend the subsequent rites (funeral prayer and burial), either because they are not allowed to participate (on account of gender and age restrictions or because they are not Muslims), or are not able to do so because only a limited number of people can
accompany the body to the country of origin for the burial. We observed various ritualising trends in the performance of these rites; partly their private character facilitates these. They are performed in a special place and are generally attended only by an invited few. And although close physical contact with the corpse deters the bereaved from actively participating in the cleansing and shrouding rites, they do want to pay their last respects. The migration context intensifies this wish, as the ritual order will be disrupted by the repatriation of the body, or the general situation is unfamiliar and the bereaved feel insecure. These ritualising acts can be seen as critical and creative responses “to radically altered social configurations” (Grimes, 1992, p.21).

These ritualising actions also shed light on the conditions that give rise to ritual. What or who exactly is the subject – the actor – of ritualising is a complex question. There are many animating factors, including the various ritual actors, the context of origin and the present context, ritual beliefs and narratives. The ritual actors in ritualising enactment can be identified according to two models of ritual creativity: the ritual plumber and the ritual diviner (Grimes, 2000, p.12), each typifying a certain approach. The ritual plumber model seeks to fix what is broken or dysfunctional. It is a practical approach without lofty expectations, associated with inventiveness rather than creativity. The ritual ‘diviner’ works indirectly and much more cautiously: you wait, contemplate, stay attuned and see what emerges.

When sustained and developed ritualising initiatives could become rites, but we should be aware of their ‘fragile first presence’ (Grimes, 2010, p. 51). It affords insight into a sophisticated spectrum of death ritual, the way it emerges and works out in changing circumstances. So what elements, roles, beliefs and narratives emerge, and in which circumstances? How do they relate to what Nathan Mitchell (1999, pp. 16-37) calls orthodox consensus, which ensures that rites are performed as prescribed even in a changed context? For further research we suggest more comparative studies, where emerging death rites are studied in various contexts (urban and small town) and among various Muslim groups.
Figure 11. Venlo, The Netherlands
Figure 12. Venlo, an agglomerate of Venlo, Blerick, Tegelen, Belfeld, Arcen, Velden and Lomm.
APPENDIX II

PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE
GUIDELINES FOR PROFESSIONALS

With the growing number of Muslims in the Netherlands and the aging population of first generation labour migrants the number of Muslims dying in Dutch hospitals has also risen. For staff and spiritual caregivers working in these hospitals it is not always easy to obtain usable information on Islamic death ritual and the regulations concerning dying and death. One of our research aims was to arrive at practical guidelines that would be helpful for professional (health, social and spiritual) caregivers. By sharing our perspectives we hope to provide tangible guidelines for more tailor-made care for Muslims in cases of death. They concern the field of education, communication with clients and information for professionals.

Although some introductions to Islam are available, they tend to be generic in their focus on the five pillars and Islamic law. Ritual practice and context are often just touched upon. The result is a somewhat narrow, oversimplified image that does not take into account the diverse backgrounds and migration experiences of Muslims. A more helpful approach would focus not only on the prescriptions by various Islamic authorities, but also on the practicalities of death and dying. To this end it is crucial to distinguish between Islam and Muslims (Campo, 2006, p. 149-153). Islam refers to religious principles and regulations, in this case derived from the Qur'an and the Hadith (tradition). Who the Muslims are is far less easy to answer, because there is no such thing as an unequivocal Muslim community, although references are often made to a united Muslim community, not least by Muslims themselves. Lived Islam shows that this religion with its supposedly clear and uniform rules results in diversified practice by a variety of Muslims in a variety of contexts. One also has to take into account the impact of a small town context on ritual practice. Especially the small Islamic communities are heavily dependent on others (both Muslim and non-Muslim) and their practice is greatly affected by it.

Publications and views on the well-organised Muslim majorities of Turkish and Moroccan background should not narrow our view. There seems to be a widespread idea that “Muslims do everything themselves” (Wojtkowiak &
Wiegers, 2008; Van Bommel, 2006). Certainly specific (prescribed and traditional) Islamic rites need to be performed by Muslim ritual experts. But (non-Muslim) professionals can be involved in other areas by being available as broadly oriented partners. They can play a mediatory and facilitating role by supporting Muslims who have no clear-cut community to fall back on.

A more detailed guide for professionals was published in *Omega. Journal of Death and Dying* (Venhorst, 2012). The article is presented in the following section.

### Islamic death rituals in a small town context in the Netherlands: explorations of a common praxis for professionals

Professionals in hospitals work in a dynamic context as they are dealing with a colourful variety of religious beliefs and practices. Nurses, doctors, social workers, and spiritual caregivers are constantly challenged to be aware of social changes and to convert their findings into suitable care for their patients. As Dutch care institutions are legally obliged to provide spiritual care for their patients, specially appointed spiritual caregivers are available at all facilities (Quartier, 2010). It is also these professionals that fulfil an important role in taking care of the needs of dying persons and their loved ones. Even though there are some professionals with an Islamic background, most of the time Muslim patients have to rely on professionals with a different background.

This article focuses on Islamic death rituals in the Netherlands, in particular on the ritual purification of the deceased. Muslims will always perform this specific rite in the Netherlands regardless of where the deceased will be buried (in the Netherlands or the country of origin). It aims to develop an eye for Muslim diversity, so professionals in the field can be better equipped to assist Muslims in cases of death. I will do so by providing examples from the actual practice and by raising questions.

**Methode**

The presented vignettes are drawn on qualitative research data from interviews and (participant) observations. They will draw attention to the different contexts that shape the religious and ritual practice of a variety of Muslims in the Netherlands. That is also why this research is located outside a metropolitan context, in the municipality of Venlo. A conglomeration of the towns of Venlo (65.453 in-
habitants), Tegelen (19,337), Belfeld (5,449), Arcen, Velden, and Lomm (8,681) are situated in the South of the Netherlands directly at the border with Germany. In this small town context the actual practice takes its own shape because different, very small Muslim communities are depending on each other and are negotiating their position toward the somewhat larger Muslim communities and their facilities. This context, although widespread, is underexposed in current research.

By presenting cases from this research on specific Islamic death rituals, this article wants to contribute to a higher level of perceptibility. By offering insights into actual practices, it aims to offer tangible leads for a more tailor-made care for Muslim patients and their relatives. The questions and viewpoints raised here are not unique to the Dutch context, so they might be helpful to professionals in hospitals everywhere.

**Religion in practice**

Islamic tradition seems to present death rituals in a quite univocal way; clear and unambiguous instructions where death is concerned. An interesting given is that the performance of those rules actually presents a very diverse practice. This discrepancy between the ritual order (Rappaport, 1999, p. 169) and the actual practice is often confusing. The divers praxis within a single, institutionalized religion is not always easy to comprehend.

The number of Muslims in the Netherlands has increased significantly in the past decades and with this the number of Muslims dying in Dutch hospitals has also risen. For staff and spiritual caregivers working in these hospitals it is not always easy to get usable information on Islamic rituals and the regulations concerning dying and death. A lot of the available literature on the subject seems to stress Islam as a religion of uniform rules and regulations. Introductions to Islam are often built around the central five pillars and Islamic law. The ritual practice concerning death and dying are often just touched upon. This creates a somewhat narrow and over-simplified image. An image that does not take into account the different backgrounds and migration contexts of Muslims. Generalization like “Muslims do everything themselves” (van Bommel, 2006, Wojtkowiak & Wiegers, 2008) can make professionals hesitant to step in as was illustrated by Sadaf’s story (personal interview, January 8, 2010).

Her father unexpectedly died in the hospital in Venlo after a short illness. A tough experience for her, her mother, and her sister who were overwhelmed
by the death of their loved one. Soon, grief mixed with strong emotions of panic about what to do. The women were generally aware of what should be done in case of the death of a Muslim; the ritual bathing of the deceased, the shrouding, and the burial but in Afghanistan the arrangements would mainly be made by men. The family was just starting to build their life in Venlo where they were relocated after a long asylum procedure. They were not yet part of a local Muslim community and had never been in contact with any of the local mosques. The hospital staff and the spiritual caregivers kept their distance because they were on the assumption that Muslims do everything themselves.

And eventually this is what happened here: relatives elsewhere in the Netherlands were able to organize their community to make all the appropriate religious and practical arrangements for the last journey of the deceased.

A more usable perception will become available when one not only focuses on what is prescribed—as laid down by various Islamic authorities—but also takes the actual practice of death and dying under consideration. So it is crucial to distinguish between Islam and Muslims. Islam refers to the religious principles and regulations—in the case derived from the Quran and the hadith (the tradition). Who the Muslims are is far less easy to answer because there is not such a thing as an unequivocal Muslim community. Although referrals are often made to a united Muslim community, not in the last place by Muslims themselves. Lived Islam shows that the religion of supposedly clear and uniform rules creates a diverse practice, lived by a variety of Muslims in a variety of contexts. The dynamics between Islam and Muslims makes research on death rituals interesting but at the same time complex. For those working with Muslims in the situation of bereavement it is necessary to come to grips with this complexity.

There is always a degree of tension between what is prescribed and what people, in different contexts, perform. A clash between formalized rules and the actual praxis is not unusual. Islamic regulations are laid down in legal texts and are established by religious authorities. The imperative character of what is prescribed finds a pendant in the actual practice. A practice of Muslim funerary and bereavement, as Juan Eduardo Campo (2006, p.160) so well puts it: “. . . takes shape in the space between what is prescribed and what is performed, where the performed might also contradict or resist the prescribed.” The performed dimension of religion tends to be more flexible, while people express their religious and cultural norms they also adapt or contest them. A fascinating, creative dynamic unfolds and lived Islam takes its shape.
Diversity: Muslims in the Netherlands, Muslims in Venlo

In the Netherlands live an estimated 857,000 Muslims (van Herten & Otten, 2007). Muslim migrants settled in this country in roughly four stages (Shadid & van Koningsveld, 2008, pp. 22-23), each stage with its own typical features. At first there were small groups from Indonesia and Surinam that came to the Netherlands as part of the decolonization process. In the 1960s, the number of Muslims grew substantially with the arrival of foreign workers from Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia. From 1974 on, residence permits have been issued for the wives and children of those workers, so families are reunited. Later, mainly in the 1990s, refugees with Muslim backgrounds came to the Netherlands due to political instability in their home countries. Muslims from all those phases of migration are present in the Venlo-context. The Islamic infrastructure consists of four mosques (two Turkish, two Moroccan), a number of cultural-religious associations, and, since 1995, an Islamic cemetery. While most initiatives are taken by the larger, most established groups, there is an increasing number of activities in which other Muslims are also involved. In Venlo, I came across a very diverse group of Muslim women that gather monthly.

The women get together in a living room to study the Quran together and discuss various subjects that concern being a Muslim. It is a colorful group of people in many aspects; they are of different ages and some dress conservatively while others dress according to the latest fashion. Head-scarves are worn in different colors and styles, while others are not veiled at all. Their personalities differ and they are from various ethnic origins, some are Dutch converts or they have Turkish, Moroccan, Egyptian, Somali, and Surinam backgrounds.

Today the group invited a guest who works at a local mosque as a volunteer that assists in the ritual cleansing of the dead. She shared her experiences and it opened up the other women to talk about the difficult subject of death. In general they agreed on how to proceed on the rituals that should be performed but it was small differences that heated up the discussion. A passionate discussion unfolded about what is “real Islam” and what should be considered superstitious notions. But it was the realization that none of the women present had a clear-cut tradition to fall back on that brought confusion. (C. Venhorst, observations, November 18, 2007)

The diversity of Muslims that is a given, is often masked by the focus on numerical majorities. Research on Islam in the Netherlands refers predominantly to Muslims of Turkish, Moroccan, and sometimes Surinam (Javanese) descent.
as they are the largest and well-established communities. Hardly any attention is paid to the rather recent arrival of refugees, students, economic immigrants, and those joining their relatives for family reunification from countries like former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, and other parts of Africa. They make up a rather diverse Muslim community with people from various cultural backgrounds and from specific contexts like that of refugees. Today there is also a second and third generation of Muslims, born and raised in the Netherlands, that clearly find their way into Dutch society. There is a small number of Dutch converts and due to mixed marriages, Muslims and non-Muslims become part of the same family. To develop an eye for the common praxis among Muslims, it is important not only to be aware of the religious dimensions but also of these social dimensions as both impact the actual practice of death ritual.

The large-scale survey research Moslim in Nederland (Muslim in the Netherlands) (Phalet & ter Wal, 2004) does actually speak about very diverse Muslim communities in the Netherlands but at the same time chooses to focus on the two largest groups: Muslims of Turkish and Moroccan origin that make up about 73% of all Muslims living in the Netherlands (Forum, 2010, p. 4). On the lived religion of these groups can be concluded that the Turkish and Moroccan Muslims in the Netherlands—also those of the second generation, born here—still strongly identify with their religion. In the mean time they are also influenced by secularization. Their religious praxis is clearly less orthodox than the praxis of their elders and they consider religion a personal subject (Phalet & ter Wal, 2004). This raises the question of how this personal interpretation takes form. It also arouses curiosity about the other, smaller groups of Muslims and their communities. The perception of Islam differs within groups and is influenced by traditions and practices of their countries of origin and also by migration. The social, religious, economic, and political circumstances in the Netherlands are also of influence. What is the impact of those circumstances on the way rituals are being performed and experienced?

**Ritual order: ritual purification of the deceased**

The ritual purification of the deceased must be performed by a Muslim who knows how to proceed. In principle, a corpse of a man is to be washed only by men and that of a woman only by women. However, a woman is allowed to wash her husband. It is permissible for a child to be washed by an adult of the opposite sex. The ritual washing of the deceased is according to Islamic law is generally understood to proceed as follows. First, any impurities should be
removed from the corpse. It is recommended to perform the *wudu*, consisting of washing the hands and arms up the elbows, feet, face, neck, and ears, and rinsing the nose and mouth with water, before performing the *ghusl*, the full washing of the body. The entire body must be washed an odd number of times, three or, if necessary, five or seven (Dessing, 2001, pp. 145-147). The water for ablution might be mixed with perfume, herbs, rose water, lotus, or camphor. After the final washing, the body is dried and cotton plugs are placed in the body openings (Bot, 1998, p. 136). Next is the shrouding of the body in simple white cloth—three for a man, five for a woman—that symbolizes the equality of all before God (Shadid & van Koningsveld, 2008, pp. 167-168). All is to be done with great care, as it is widely believed the deceased is still sentient at this time (Jonker, 1997, p. 53; Smith & Haddad, 2002, p. 37). The ritual washing enables the deceased to meet God in a state of purity. That is why, in most cases, Islamic law treats the ritual purification of the deceased and shrouding as a part of the chapter on prayer (*salat*) as it clearly bears comparison with the washing that is performed in preparation for the daily salat. The *fiqh*—Islamic jurisprudence based on the *sharia*—often describes in great detail who should do the washing and how to proceed, with small alterations in the ritual where different schools of law are concerned.

In the Dutch context the ritual is in most cases performed at a funeral parlour, in the hospital, or on the premises of a mosque. The washing is supposed to be performed by Islamic family members but more experienced volunteers from a local mosque are often involved. The ritual cleansing and shrouding of the dead is one of the collective duties (*fard kifaya*) of the Muslim community. The available literature on the subject is often oriented toward the structure of the ritual with detailed descriptions of what to do. There is a strong focus on the physical aspects while the matter of spiritual meaning of the rite for the deceased, the bereaved, and others involved is hardly raised. The next vignettes show that the bereaved find (ritual) ways to say their last goodbyes. A Somali family (Habo, personal interview, December 6, 2010) adds to the formal cleansing ritual so all, regardless of gender, age, and knowledge, are able to say their last goodbyes.

The young widow tells her husband unexpectedly died earlier this year. It was a big shock for her and their two boys and girls. It was the first time they lost someone so close to them. A general Dutch funeral insurance took care of all the financial and practical arrangement but the family had to take care of the Islamic rituals. Relatives and friends gathered at the funeral parlor to pay their
last respects. The children and the widow said their last goodbyes by pouring water over the sheet that covered the body. They each poured three small bowls of water, starting at his head moving to his feet. Then they moved the sheet from his face and the children kissed him for the last time. “After this the imam from a local Moroccan mosque came with two men to perform the proper washing and shrouding while we waited outside” the widow stated. After that they took him in the casket to the Mosque for the final prayers. In the afternoon he was buried at the Islamic cemetery, where only the men and the boys participated.

Fatima (personal interview, December 17, 2010) explains how the intimacy of the ritual washing of a deceased baby brought comfort to the grieving mother and aunt.

“I am afraid of death, that is why I find it difficult to participate in the final cleansing of the deceased” a Moroccan woman explains. But just minutes later she tells she did participate in the ritual when her one year old nephew died. She considers the washing of a dead baby as something else, something that did not scare her at all as “he was like a sleeping little angel.” She passionately states that Islam views little children to be pure and sure of an afterlife in Paradise and therefore the ritual cleansing of a child not as a necessity. “But,” she concluded, “for us it was a beautiful and comforting thing to do.”

These stories give some insight how the actual praxis takes shape.

Common praxis: a variety of Muslims, a variety of contexts

In performing the ritual order, a dynamic and diverse practice unfolds that is shaped by the different ethnic, social, cultural, and religious backgrounds of Muslims that call Venlo their home. Rituals are on the move and the transfer and transformation, invention, and re-invention of rituals takes shape in relation to new social, economic, and religious contexts (Brosius & Hüskan, 2010).

The highest percentage (73%) of Muslims in the Netherlands, are living in strongly urbanized areas. For the most part, they live in cities like Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag en Utrecht. In these cities, even smaller Muslim communities find a way to organize themselves. In more rural areas, a variety of Muslims depend on each other and they partake in the performance of religious rites. There are also variations that can be contributed to a variety of Islamic denominations, schools of law, and branches represented in the Netherlands: Sunnites, Shiites, Sufis, Alevites, and Ahmadiyya among others. Many small groups have their own organizational structure but some facilities (like a
mosque, skilled washers, and cemetery) have to be shared with other groups. In case of the ritual purification of a deceased, the washers might belong to a different denomination or culture, which could lead to conflict. Such conflicts can be understood as “diagnostic events” (Venbrux, 1995, p. 15). With these events surfaces what is of the utmost significance for the people involved but under other circumstances remains unsaid. They lead us to what Muslims from various backgrounds consider to be their most important practices and beliefs. This raises the question: how far the prescribed rules of the ritual purification can be bended and who or what is the determinant factor for this?

In the Dutch context the rituals of various Islamic migrant groups are being reshaped, finds Nathal Dessing (2001, p. 141) in her comprehensive study of lifecycle rituals among Muslims in the Netherlands. She sees an increasing professionalization and institutionalization of Islamic death rituals and because of this an increasing uniformity. This will particularly be the case for Muslims with a Turkish and Moroccan background as they are the most numerous and well-established communities. They are very well organized and run their own mosque-associations. But what about smaller Muslim communities that practice their own particular traditions?

There is a strict and clear ritual order laid down in Islamic law. It provides instructions for how to proceed the purification of the deceased. These rules are also used to instruct volunteers at the local mosque or through internet based courses (IBW, n.d.; Islamway, n.d.). As all imams are able to perform the ritual cleansing of the deceased, there is often a need to instruct women in the ritual because the male imam is not allowed to wash a woman’s corpse. At one of the Turkish mosques, for decades it was the same two women that were called to perform the ritual. With the aging of the women, a need grows to educate new ritual specialists. Now every year a course is organized to instruct five young women in performing the ritual.

Although in these courses a quite strict ritual order is laid down, there appears to be certain flexibility. Probably because of the private character of the ritual, especially compared to the more public funeral rites. The washing is performed in a closed area and often only attended by close family and friends. The participation of, for instance, non-Muslims, women, and children is easier to incorporate as the next example shows.

When studying Arabic at University, Dutch student Rianne lived for some time in Damascus. Here she meets the Syrian man that would later become her husband. Back in the Netherlands they have their first child, a baby-girl
that sadly dies shortly after birth. The husband finds comfort in a strict implementation of Islamic rules. But because he finds himself in a predominantly non-Muslim context, he is constantly on the phone with his relatives in Syria to ask for their guidance. Rianne converted to Islam before her marriage and lives her daily life quite strictly according to what you could call an Islamic routine. With the loss of the baby she feels a strong need to include her non-Muslim parents in the final goodbye of their grandchild. An experienced washer from a local Moroccan mosque suggests to include her parents in the ritual purification, for an intimate last farewell. The washer takes the lead and guides Rianne and her parents through the ritual. The next-day funeral is a much more public event dominated by men and not very open to women or non-Muslims. (Rianne, personal interview, July 2010)

The closed area of a funeral parlour, more than the same space at a mosque, also makes it possible to perform divergent (personal or cultural) rites.

Conclusions: explorations for professionals

People from different backgrounds bring their rituals to new contexts where they are adapted to new circumstances. Even when Muslims claim a clear ritual order that is applicable under almost all circumstances, the ritual practice shows to be far more diverse and flexible. Where the transfer of rituals is concerned we have to be aware of the context the ritual was taken from as well as the new context where the ritual takes shape again. There is not such a thing as a single Muslim community. Small communities like, for example, the Somalis, and larger groups like Moroccans and Turks in Venlo share the same faith but the differences are also quite obvious. They have different countries of origin and have their own Islamic traditions; the communities differ in size, in demographic composition, migration motives, and level of integration in Dutch society—even within the same community. Social aspects influence the religious dimension in general and death rituals in particular.

Transformations take place in changing contexts and are influenced by secularization. All these elements are of influence on the construction, performance, and perception of Islamic rituals in the Netherlands. It is important to gain an improved understanding of the actual practice and not just to cling to orthodox and uniform rules and regulations that are so often presented. Also, take into account the consequences of a small town context for very small Islamic communities as the transfer of rituals and knowledge in dealing with bereavement is affected by migration and has often more rigorous consequences in a small town context. The examples provide insights in this diversity and with
this a more apt perception of Muslim communities. It is very helpful to map the diverse Muslim communities and their social circumstances in your area and don’t let well-established majorities narrow your view. It can help professionals to improve their involvement with Muslim patients. By being available as more broadly-oriented partners, spiritual caregivers, and other professionals in hospitals can more often fulfil a mediating or facilitating role in support of their Muslim patients where needed. Exercising restraint might be appropriate where Muslims “that do everything themselves” are concerned but for others it would prove very helpful when their needs are more actively explored.
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Jarenlang bezocht ik een moslim vrouwen groep in Venlo.¹ Elke maand kwamen we bijeen om de koran te bestuderen en te praten over het leven en wat ons bezig hield. We kwamen samen in een woonkamer voor een aangename avond vol geanimeerde discussies en leuk gezelschap. Het was in veel opzichten een kleurrijk gezelschap: vrouwen van verschillende leeftijden, sommigen behoudend gekleed terwijl anderen de laatste mode volgden, hoofddoeken in verschillende kleuren en stijlen terwijl anderen geen hoofddoek droegen. Verschillende persoonlijkheden en verschillende achtergronden: Nederlandse bekeerlingen en anderen met wortels in onder andere Turkije, Marokko, Egypte, Somaliland en Suriname. Allemaal zijn ze moslim; dit gegeven bracht hen hier samen maar gaandeweg leerden ze ook over de onderlinge verschillen. Zoals die keer dat er een gast was uitgenodigd om te spreken over haar vrijwilligerswerk als lijkwas ser. Zij deelde haar ervaringen met ons wat leidde tot een levendige discussie over het vaak moeilijk bespreekbare onderwerp ‘dood’. De vrouwen ontdekten kleine verschillen in de manier waarop zij en hun gemeenschappen omgaan met de dood, wat leidde tot een gesprek over ‘echte islam’, de ‘correcte’ rituele uitvoering en de betekenis die aan de verschillende elementen moest worden toe gekend. Deze huiskamer bijeenkomsten lieten in het klein zien dat er zowel eenheid als verbondenheid is in islam, maar ze illustreren ook de verschillen in interpretatie en de manier waarop islam wordt geleefd. Het maakte voor de deelnemsters ook duidelijk dat zij niet vanzelfsprekend kunnen terugvallen op een heldere en eenduidige traditie. Dat was een eyeopener. Hoe kunnen moslims in Venlo – deze specifieke klein stedelijke omgeving met een zeer diverse moslimgemeenschap - hun riten rond de dood praktiseren?

¹ De gemeente Venlo bestaat uit de stad Venlo (38.811 inwoners) en de dorpen Blerick (27.589), Tegelen (19.328), Belfeld (5.477), Arcen (2.490), Velden (5.127) en Lomm (1.018) en is gelegen in zuidoost Nederland, direct aan de Duitse grens.
Dood in een migratiecontext is in vele opzichten een uitdaging. Omdat mensen in de huidige context nog maar zelden heel direct met de dood geconfronteerd worden – generaties wonen niet langer onder één dak en steeds meer mensen overlijden in het ziekenhuis - zien we ook dat moslims in Venlo niet erg bekend zijn met de situatie. En ook al zien we dat nabestaanden zich er veelal van bewust zijn dat zij een rol te vervullen hebben in rituelen rond de dood van een dierbare, ontberen zij echter kennis en ervaring. Dit maakt mensen onzeker en draagt bij aan een diepgewortelde angst voor ritueel falen.

Van alle gebeurtenissen in de levenscyclus, lijken gebeurtenissen rond de dood de meeste impact te genereren en de bijbehorende rituelen worden dan ook als heel belangrijk gezien (van Gennep, 1961, p. 146). De dood is een confrontatie en soms zelfs een traumatische ervaring waar de nabestaanden op moeten reageren; wat zij doen middels een uitvoerig ritueel repertoire. Rituelen rond de dood hebben ook een onthullend effect (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991, p. 25): ze geven niet alleen vorm aan (religieuze) beliefs en waarden, maar bieden ook een mogelijkheid om betekenis te construeren en gemeenschap, ritueel en mythes te creëren (Garces Foley, 2006, p.ix).

In de meeste gevallen kunnen moslims in het kleine Venlo hun rituele leven vorm geven binnen hun eigen, soms heel kleine, (etnische) gemeenschap. Maar in het geval van rituelen rond de dood kan de betrokkenheid van de brede moslimgemeenschap noodzakelijk zijn om te kunnen komen tot een ‘correcte’ uitvoering van de riten voor hun dierbare overledene. Het zijn ook de momenten dat de diversiteit binnen de moslimgemeenschap heel duidelijk wordt.

In Nederland wonen naar schatting van het CBS (2011) zo’n 950.000 moslims, die zich in ruwweg vier fasen in Nederland hebben gevestigd (Köningsveld & Shadid 2008, 22-23). Aanvankelijk zijn het kleine groepen moslims uit Indonesië en Suriname die naar Nederland komen in het kader van de dekolonisatie. Het aantal moslims groeit sterk met de komst van arbeidsmigranten uit voornamelijk Turkije en Marokko vanaf de jaren 1960. Vanaf 1974 worden nauwelijks nog arbeidsvergunningen afgegeven en zijn het voornamelijk de vrouwen en kinderen van deze arbeidsmigranten die zich in Nederland vestigen. Tot op heden vormen zij en hun nazaten de grootste groep. Later, met name in de jaren negentig, zijn het moslims uit landen als voormalig Joegoslavië, Irak, Iran, Afghanistan en Somalië die onder druk van politieke omstandigheden hun toevlucht tot Nederland zoeken. Met de komst van de grotere groepen Turkse en Marokkaanse moslims in Venlo, ontwikkelde zich ook een islamitische infrastructuur die vandaag de dag bestaat uit 5 moskeeën, cultureel-religieuze
verenigingen en sinds 1995 is een deel van de algemene begraafplaats gereserveerd voor islamitische graven.

Naast nieuwkomers is er ook sprake van een tweede en derde generatie moslims, geboren en getogen in Nederland, die volop deel uitmaken van de samenleving. Er worden huwelijken gesloten die islamitische en niet-islamitische partners en families met elkaar verbinden. Tevens is er een kleine groep autochtone bekeerlingen. In onderzoeken lijkt de diversiteit van de Nederlandse moslimgemeenschap, met zowel religieuze als sociale dimensies, verhult te worden door een nogal eenzijdige aandacht voor de getalsmatig grootste groep. De islambeleving van diverse moslims in Nederland wordt onder andere bepaald door tradities in de herkomstlanden maar zijn ook door migratie beïnvloed. De omstandigheden (sociaal, religieus, economisch en politiek) in Nederland zijn ook van invloed. Wat betekent het concreet voor de manier waarop rituelen worden uitgevoerd en beleefd?

Dit is een studie naar veranderende rituelen rond de dood zoals die door diverse moslims – van uiteenlopende achtergronden - uitgevoerd worden en zoals we die aantreffen in de specifieke migratie context van Venlo. Centraal staat de rite van de lijkwassing en het wikkelen van de overledene in de lijkwade zoals gepraktiseerd in Nederland. Het is een belangrijk ritueel in het geheel van islamitische dodenriten omdat ongeacht waar (in Nederland of land van herkomst) de overledene wordt begraven, deze rite in Nederland plaatsheeft. Door middel van intensief veldwerk in Venlo, bestaande uit diepte-interviews, gesprekken en (participantere) observaties, wordt de rituele praxis rond de dood en zijn context uitgewerkt. Een raamwerk voor observaties, interpretaties en analyses van deze praxis wordt gevormd door drie theoretische concepten: rituele praxis, rituele context, rituele content.

**Rituele praxis**

Het definiëren van ritueel is moeilijk en misschien zelfs onmogelijk, maar het is bovenal niet zinvol daar definities vaak te breed of juist te beperkt zijn. Het is daarom zinvolle rituelen te bespreken in termen van genre en elementen. Dodenriten behoren tot een specifieke genre dat gewoonlijk wordt aangeduid als *rites de passage* – riten die veranderingen, verschuivingen en overgangen in de menselijke levenscyclus markeren (van Gennep, 1960). Dergelijke riten volgen een vast patroon. De eerste fase bevat riten van separatie, die de scheiding van een bepaalde status markeren en wordt gevolgd door een fase van transitie – de liminale fase waarin men de vorige status achter zich heeft gelaten maar nog
Niet is overgegaan naar de nieuwe status. Het geheel wordt afgesloten met de fase van re-integratie, waarin riten een terugkeer – in een nieuwe status – naar de wereld bewerkstelligen. Maar met het labelen van doden riten als rite de passage zijn we er nog niet.

Hoewel riten vaak worden gezien als statische, zich herhalende en formalistische handelingen, mogen we het dynamische karakter van ritueel ook niet over het hoofd zien. Ook al gaat het hier om dodenriten die vrij gedetailleerd worden voorgeschreven door een geïnstitutionaliseerde, traditionele religie als de islam. Er is geen rituele of religieuze benadering van de dood mogelijk zonder de context, waardoor rituele actoren geen andere keuze hebben dan te improviseren. De praxis van formele islamitische dodenriten gaat altijd gepaard met sociale gebruiken en persoonlijke input die context gebonden is. En contexten veranderen, riten verhuizen van de ene context naar de andere en dienen te worden ‘vertaald’ om aan de eisen van die nieuwe context tegemoet te komen – rituele verandering is onvermijdelijk. Rituelen worden opnieuw uitgevonden en worden opnieuw overdacht – het is hun enige kans op overleving. Zo is er een dynamisch ritueel repertoire beschikbaar voor Moslims in Venlo waarmee zij de dood tegemoet kunnen treden.

Rituele context: migratie


Moslims in Venlo zijn afkomstig uit verschillende landen en culturen, zijn op verschillende momenten en onder verschillende omstandigheden naar Nederland gekomen en hun migratie ervaringen kunnen enorm verschillen. Wat zij echter gemeen hebben is dat zij veelal uit een context afkomstig zijn met een sterke moslim meerderheid en nu in Venlo leven in een minderheidspositie. Een
positie die het moslim-zijn minder vanzelfsprekend maakt. Het is ook een con-
text waarin moslims veelal voor het eerst worden geconfronteerd met een diver-
se praxis binnen hun eigen religie. Door te spreken over ‘de moslim gemeen-
schap’ – als een homogeest geheel - verliest men de diversiteit uit het oog.
Het mag duidelijk zijn dat riten gevormd worden door de sociale con-
text, maar tegelijkertijd vormen riten ook de sociale realiteit. Ritueel kan ook
een bron voor verandering zijn, het biedt ruimte voor nieuwe ideeën en praktij-
ken die worden geïnitieerd door zowel individuele als sociale creativiteit.

Ritual content: meaning
Om de rituele content – de betekenis die het heeft en wil overbrengen - te kun-
en onderzoeken moeten we riten niet los zien van de context waarin ze worden
gepraktiseerd. Om inzicht te krijgen in de rituele betekenis van islamitische
rituelen rond de dood in een migratiecontext sluiten we aan bij het concept van
‘geleefde religie’ (Hall, 1997; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2003). Net als ritueel is ook
religie een complexe term die verwijst naar verschillende concepten en gebrui-
ken. In het geval van islam verwijst het naar een geheel van ideeën en geloofs-
voorstellingen waarmee moslims zich, in mindere of meerdere mate, verbinden.
Het biedt ook een kader waarin we geleefde ervaringen en dagelijkse gebruiken
kunnen plaatsen en interpreteren. Daarom is het van groot belang niet enkel te
bestuderen wat door islamitische autoriteiten wordt voorgeschreven, maar ook
de werkelijke praxis rond sterven en dood onder de loep te nemen. Het is be-
langrijk onderscheid te maken tussen islam en moslims (Campo, 2006, 149-
153). Zo zien we dat in islamitische bronnen rituelen rond de dood veelal een-
duidig en met duidelijke richtlijnen worden gepresenteerd. Interessant is dat de
toepassing van dergelijke richtlijnen per definitie leidt tot een zeer diverse prak-
tijk. En het is deze dynamiek tussen islam en moslims, tussen voorschrift en
praktijk, die dit onderzoek interessant maar ook complex maakt. Wij onder-
zochten in de eerste plaats de praktijken, ervaringen en uitdrukkingen van gewo-
ne moslims in het dagelijkse leven. Zo verwerven we inzicht in de islam zoals
die door moslims in een specifieke context wordt geleefd en beleefd.

Deze studie wil antwoord geven op de volgende centrale onderzoeksvraag zoals
geformuleerd in het eerste hoofdstuk:

Welke rituele repertoires zien we opkomen bij moslims in de kleinstedelijke
context van Venlo, wanneer zij geconfronteerd worden met de dood, en hoe
krijgen deze repertoires vorm?
Repertoire verwijst hier naar de rituele middelen die moslims voor handen hebben in de confrontatie met de dood. Wij onderscheiden de volgende repertoires: rituele elementen, rituele rollen, rituele geloofsvoorstellingen (beliefs), en rituele narratieven. Deze rituele repertoires worden elk uitgewerkt in een eigen hoofdstuk aan de hand van de hierboven beschreven theoretische sleutelconcepten: rituele praxis, rituele context en rituele content. Deze concepten en de manier waarop ze onderling verbonden zijn bepalen de dimensies die vormgeven aan de praktijk van dodenriten zoals ze door moslims in Venlo worden geleefd. In de hoofdstukken worden antwoorden geformuleerd op de volgende subvragen:

- Welke rituele elementen zijn van belang voor hedendaagse moslims in het ritualiseren van de dood?
- Welke rollen kunnen we onderscheiden in de praktijk van de rituele lijkwas-sing?
- Welke rituele geloofsvoorstellingen zijn verbonden met riten rond de dood?
- Wat is de rol van narratieven in het proces van rituele betekenisverlening rond de dood?

Het tweede hoofdstuk richt zich op de rituele elementen die de bouwstenen vormen van de rituele lijkwas-sing en draait om de vraag: *welke rituele elementen zijn van belang voor hedendaagse moslims in het ritualiseren van de dood?* Aan de hand van tien rituele elementen kunnen we de wassing van de doden in kaart brengen. Behalve inzoomen op de afzonderlijke elementen kunnen we ook hun onderlinge verbondenheid bestuderen waardoor een uitgelezen beeld ontstaat van de werkelijke praxis. De basis handelingen van de verschillende lijkwas-singen lopen over het algemeen niet heel veel uiteen. Er zijn verschillen die samenhangen met wie er op welk moment kan participeren. We zien de opkomst van toegevoegde handelingen, die niet zijn voorgeschreven maar die tegemoet komen aan de behoeften van de nabestaanden in deze specifieke context. Wat betreft de betrokken actoren zien we een zeer centrale rol weggelegd voor de overledene, de riten zijn sterk gericht op zijn of haar welzijn. We zien in de nieuwe context rollen ontstaan die het welzijn van de overledene moeten waarborgen. Daar nabestaanden zelden in staat zijn de riten zelf uit te voeren en men niet terug kan vallen op een vanzelfsprekende moslimgemeenschap is de
inzet van rituele experts onmisbaar geworden voor een goed verloop. Koran en hadith worden door de respondenten algemeen genoemd als *bronnen* voor rituelen rond de dood, terwijl juist de *fiqh* literatuur (islamitische jurisprudentie) de meest werkbare richtlijnen bevat. Maar de *fiqh* is door haar taal(gebruik) vaak moeilijk toegankelijk voor leken. Hierdoor krijgen de lokale imams (verbonden aan een van de moskeeën in Venlo) een belangrijke rol en vormen zij een primaire bron. Informatie over de riten kan ook worden verkregen in cursussen en informatiebijeenkomsten en onder jongeren is het internet een populaire bron.

In lokale narratieve worden al deze bronnen gebundeld genoemde bronnen en worden een belangrijke informatiestroom in de Venlose context. Waar het gaat om *houdingen, geloofsvoorstellingen en emoties* zien we dat moslims zich veelal zeer bewust zijn van de dood, het leven na de dood en van de islamitische eschatologie. Het principe van *fard kifaya* (collectieve plicht om in dit geval bij te dragen aan het gepast verzorgen van een overleden moslim) versterkt het idee van een gezamenlijke moslimgemeenschap die echter niet altijd beschikbaar is.

Dit maakt de rituele praxis minder vanzelfsprekend en maakt mensen onzeker. De wassing van een overledene kan volgens de regelgeving in elke afgeschermd ruimte plaats hebben. Waar de overledene uiteindelijk wordt begraven, in Nederland of het land van herkomst, is ook van invloed op de wassing en hoe deze wordt ervaren. Bij begrafenis in het land van herkomst zien we dat het ritueel wordt opgesplitst – het raakt gefragmenteerd - tussen verschillende plaatsten waarbij steeds andere mensen zijn betrokken. De nabestaanden voelen veelal een tijdssdruk om de overledene zo snel mogelijk te begraven, iets wat niet altijd eenvoudig te regelen is. Met name repatriatie van het lichaam staat een snelle ter aarde bestelling in de weg. De *objecten* die nodig zijn voor de wassing, de basisuitrusting, zijn algemeen voorhanden en zijn voornamelijk praktisch van aard: handschoenen, zeep, handdoeken, witte katoen voor de lijkwade. Nabestaanden doen soms erg veel moeite om aanvullende materialen – veelal uit de context van herkomst - zoals wierook, speciale toevoegingen aan het water (bladeren, geurstoffen), en specifieke lijkwades te krijgen. De primaire rituele *taal* is het Arabisch, een taal die vele moslims echter niet of slechts beperkt machtig zijn. Dat en de onbekendheid met de gepaste teksten maakt dat mensen twijfelen over hun participatie aan de rituele wassing van de overledene. Het Nederlands wordt steeds vaker gebruikt als taal van instructie – buiten de rituele performance. Waar het gaat om *zintuigelijke waarnemingen* wordt vaak verwezen naar geur, zoals de zo gevreesde geur van de dood die bedwongen wordt door het branden van wierook of het toevoegen van rozenwater of andere parfums.
aan het waswater. Commentaar en kritiek worden aangewakkerd door het besef van diversiteit onder moslims maar ook door hun migratie naar een nieuwe context. Concluderend kunnen we zien dat moslims, in hun omgang met de dood, kunnen putten uit een omvangrijk (voorgeschreven) islamitisch repertoire. Tegelijkertijd zien we een transformatie van dit repertoire omdat zij herzien en opnieuw uitgevonden moet worden om te passen in de nieuwe context. Dit aanpassen gaat gepaard met een duidelijke selectie waarbij bepaalde elementen belangrijker geacht worden dan anderen. In de Venlose context zien we dat moslims in Venlo allereerst de geleefde religie als uitgangspunt nemen; het is de dagelijkse praxis in al zijn variaties en aanpassingen die eenvoudigweg als de gangbare praxis wordt gezien. Merkwaardig genoeg gaat dit samen met een levendig debat over het ‘correcte rituele handelen’ en ‘echte islam’.

In het derde hoofdstuk staan de rituele rollen centraal zoals die door overledene, nabestaanden, rituele experts en gemeenschappen in Venlo worden vervuld: welke rollen kunnen we onderscheiden in de praktijk van de rituele lijkwassing? Islamitische bronnen zien de belangrijkste rituele rollen weggelegd voor de overledene en zijn of haar directe nabestaanden. In Venlo wordt de meest actieve rol, die van de lijkwater, over het algemeen uitgevoerd door een ritueel expert. Dit is een opkomende rol die slechts door een select groepje mensen wordt vervuld. Familieleden nemen zelden de leiding in de wassing; zij assisteren of zijn als toeschouwers aanwezig. We zien hier wederom een verschil tussen voorschrift en de gangbare praxis: waar de bronnen aangeven dat directe familieleden de aangewezen wassers zijn, zien we dit in de migratiecontext nauwelijks gebeuren. Hiervoor zijn verschillende oorzaken aan te wijzen waarvan er een aantal te wijten aan de migratie context of hierdoor op zijn minst worden versterkt. Zo zijn er in een aantal gevallen geen directe familieleden voor handen; ze leven elders en zijn niet in staat (tijdig) hun rol in de lijkwassing op zich te nemen. In het geval van gemengde huwelijken of bekering tot de islam is (een deel van) de familie niet-moslim en daarmee ongeschikt om de wassing te doen aangezien moslim zijn een eerste voorwaarde is. Maar de meeste nabestaanden zien zichzelf niet als geschikt om aan de wassing deel te nemen. De lijkwassing is een zeer fysieke rite, waarbij men de overledene veelvuldig aanraakt, iets wat voor veel nabestaanden moeilijk of angstaaargend is. Het adequaat en respectvol uitvoeren van de rite vraagt ook bepaalde kennis en praktische vaardigheden die maar weinigen beheersen. Dit alles leidt tot een diepgewortelde angst ritueel te falen.
In Venlo worden overladen mannen meestal gewassen door een imam van een van de Marokkaanse of Turkse moskeeën. Deze imams voeren de riten uit als onderdeel van hun professionele taken en zij worden daarin bijgestaan door vrijwilligers. Wanneer het gaat om een overleden vrouw (die gewassen dient te worden door een vrouw) is het gecompliceerder, aangezien er geen voor de hand liggende vrouwelijke professionals zijn. De vrouwen die op dit moment betrokken zijn bij de lijkwassingen in Venlo hebben geen formele status of training. Zij zijn vaak toevallig of uit noodzaak (een tekort aan mensen) bij de wassing betrokken geraakt. Ook al zijn ze niet formeel bij een moskee betrokken, ze kunnen veelal wel via deze organisatie gecontacteerd worden. Hoe deze rituele experts hun eigen rol zien en de manier waarop ze uitvoering geven aan die rol, wordt voornamelijk bepaald door hun eigen motivatie en de autoriteit die anderen hen toekennen. Recentelijk hebben enkele moskee organisaties het plan opgevat vrouwen op te gaan leiden tot rituele lijkwassers om zo meer vrouwen beschikbaar te hebben voor de taak. En hoewel nogal wat (voornamelijk jonge) vrouwen hebben aangegeven geïnteresseerd te zijn in de cursus, is het nog niet tot een opleiding gekomen.

De kleinere (niet-Turkse/Marokkaanse) moslim gemeenschappen zijn in dit opzicht nauwelijks georganiseerd. Daar mensen in deze gemeenschappen relatief jong zijn, is men vaak niet bezig met de dood en reageert men pas op het moment dat er zich iets voordoet – iets wat vaak leidt tot stressvolle en moeilijke situaties. Met de veranderende rollen, veranderen ook de relaties van de betrokkenen ten opzichte van elkaar. Zo is het gangbaar dat een overledene door een ‘vreemde’ wordt gewassen en de nabestaanden geen rol meer vervullen in de rituele wassing.

Zowel de ritueel experts als de nabestaanden moeten zo hun relatie met de overledene (opnieuw) vormgeven. Nabestaanden moeten bijvoorbeeld een ander moment of een andere vorm van afscheid kiezen. Specifiek voor vrouwen en kinderen is de beslotten setting van de dodenwassing veelal het laatste moment waarop ze persoonlijk afscheid kunnen nemen van hun dierbare. Door het openbare karakter van de begrafenis (met bijbehorende sociale controle) worden veelal strikte genderregels gehanteerd en zijn zij enkel toegankelijk voor mannen.

Het vierde hoofdstuk richt zich op de rituele geloofsvoorstelling en hoe deze vorm krijgen in de ‘geleefde eschatologie’. We antwoorden op de vraag: welke rituele geloofsvoorstellingen zijn verbonden met rituelen rond de dood?
Om te bepalen welke geloofsvoorstellingen verbonden zijn met rituelen rond de dood is het nodig ons te verdiepen de islamitische eschatologische mythe. Deze meta-narratief heeft zich gedurende eeuwen ontwikkeld tot een fijnmazig en coherend geheel dat alle aspecten van bestemming van de mens na zijn dood bestrijkt en is sterk verankerd in (primaire) islamitische bronnen. Het gaat niet om passieve ideeën die enkel in de hoofden van mensen leven maar een mythe heeft ook een organiserend en ordenend karakter dat ten grondslag ligt aan het geheel van rituelen rond de dood. Het zijn concrete riten die deze orde tastbaar maken. In de geleefde eschatologie zien we de verbinding tussen deze geloofsvoorstellingen en de concrete dodenriten die vorm krijgen in de interactie tussen de overledenen en nabestaanden.

We gebruiken de structuur van de rite de passage als kapstok. De fase voor de begrafenis zien we dat met de dood het persoonlijke, actieve en fysieke leven tot een einde komt; en daarmee de mogelijkheid om credits voor het hiernamaals op te bouwen. Het lichaam is in deze fase nog wel beschikbaar. De focus is zeer sterk op de overledene gericht, die op dit moment bijzonder kwetsbaar is. De nabestaanden dienen hun dierbare te beschermen door middel van riten. Het is aan hen (en aan de moslim gemeenschap) deze fase voor de overledene tot een veilig einde te brengen. De begrafenis markeert de overgang naar de volgende fase, bij het graf. De rituelen richten zich aanvankelijk sterk op het lichaam van de overledene omdat dit voor het laatst zichtbaar is. Eenmaal begraven bevindt de overledene zich in barzakh (de periode tussen iemands dood en zijn wederopstanding op de Dag des Oordeels) en moet hij zich alleen zien te redden bij de eerste beoordelingen in het graf. Waar primaire islamitische bronnen nauwelijks informatie geven over de periode tussen de persoonlijke dood en de wederopstanding wordt de leegte gevuld met populaire voorstellingen. Geleefde eschatologie krijgt met name vorm in deze fase. Er is ruimte voor meer persoonlijke geloofsvoorstellingen over het leven na de dood en betekenis kunnen worden aangepast aan de context, wat resulteert in meer persoonlijke rituele handelingen die meer persoonlijke betekenis overbrengen. We zien een sterk geloof dat de overledene vanuit zijn graf beschikbaar blijft voor rituele handelingen. Aanvullende ritualiseringen (rond rouw en grafbezoek) krijgen vorm naast de formele riten. Zo zien we dat de tamelijk statische eschatologische mythe wordt aangepast, met name door een selectief gebruik ervan. De mythe raakt gefragmenteerd en wordt aangevuld met populaire narratieven die aan de behoeften van moslims in een specifieke context tegemoet komen. Zo zien we verhalen ontstaan over waarom het beter is voor de zielenrust van de
overledene om in het land van herkomst begraven te worden (en niet in Venlo) maar worden tegelijkertijd de verschrikkingen die de overledene moet doorstaan door de repatriatie – de reis in het ijskoude laadruim van een vliegtuig- achterwege gelaten.

Het vijfde hoofdstuk gaat specifiek in op de populaire narratieven en zoekt antwoord op de vraag: wat is de rol van narratieven in het proces van betekenisverlening rond de dood?

Waar de meta-narratief veelal generiek en statisch is, zijn populaire narratieven duidelijk meer context gebonden en vloeibaar. Deze aanvullende verhalen – die gedeeltelijk worden in de sociale omgang en middels verschillende media – hebben veelal betrekking op actuele en urgente onderwerpen waar mensen tegenaan lopen in een bepaalde context. Sterven in een ‘vreemde’ context werpt prangende vragen op en stelt hen voor praktische uitdagingen. Het is ook een confrontatie met de Nederlandse maatschappij en de manier waarop grote groepen daarin met de dood omgaan. Narratieven tonen en vormen de perspectieven van moslims op deze zaken. Het zijn daarmee zeer sociale en bijzonder interactieve narratieven die een sleutel zijn tot de ervaringen van mensen en voorzien in een collectieve perceptie van hoe dingen (zouden moeten) werken. Deze narratieven weven een web van betekenissen waarin dodenriten worden ingebed.

De verhalen bezitten tevens de unieke gave het verleden en het heden met elkaar te verbinden. Herinneringen aan de oorspronkelijke context en aan de lokale praxis rond de dood worden opgehaald en herzien, riten rond de dood worden opnieuw overdacht en opnieuw uitgevonden om ze passend te maken voor de nieuwe context. Op deze manier definiëren de narratieven zowel de huidige context alsook de oorspronkelijke context, en tussen deze twee voorstellingen krijgen ideeën en houdingen ten opzichte van dodenriten vorm. Beide contexten worden vaak als tegenstellingen neergezet: een prachtige en ideale context van herkomst tegenover een problematische huidige context. Het is in dit spanningsveld dat moslims op zoek gaan naar richtsnoeren voor de praxis van hun dodenriten. Narratieven kunnen worden gezien als belangrijke aanjagers omdat in de verhalen rituelen rond de dood worden overdacht en opnieuw worden uitgevonden. Ze worden gezien als belangrijke bronnen van kennis en informatie door en voor moslims. Ook al is die informatie niet altijd feitelijk en bijna altijd gekleurd. De verhalen reflecteren daarmee wel de diversiteit van de moslim gemeenschappen. De diversiteit in narratieven en counter-narratieven is van invloed op de rituele praxis. We zien dat met name publieke riten – veel-
vuldig onderwerp van narratieve - zoals de begrafenis een meer uniform karakter krijgen (ook onder druk van die narratieve). Meer private riten, zoals de rituele lijkwassing en grafbezoek, worden steeds meer een toevluchtsoord voor rituele creativiteit.

Ten slotte vat het zesde hoofdstuk nogmaals samen hoe de rituele repertoires (elementen, rollen, geloofsoorvallingen en narratieven) opkomen en zich ontwikkelen in de kleinstedelijke omgeving van Venlo. Ze zijn het resultaat van een levendig, gelaagd onderhandelingsproces waarin riten en ritualiserende handelingen een wisselwerking aangaan met de rituele actoren en de (veranderende) contexten. Het bestuderen van de rituele wassing en het wikkelen in lijkwaades van de doden geeft inzichten in de dynamiek en creativiteit van ritueel. Een dynamiek die vaak over het hoofd wordt gezien, zeker in een geïnstitutionaliseerde religie als de islam.
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