

Islamic education of Muslim children at home and in the mosque

Stella van de Wetering

Islamic education and socialization in Muslim families

Muslim families differ of course as all families do. And all different families have their own specific way in raising and educating their children. There are differences in migrant families, who only recently have arrived in the Netherlands and families of second and third generation Muslims. Families differ also concerning their social economic status, the level of education of the parents and their country of origin. But also the religious attitude of the parents and the family can make a difference.

One can for example divide on the one hand between *traditional families*, who follow mostly the pattern of the country of origin. In those families the culture of the country of origin is predominant. Yet those traditional families can differ a lot in their measure of religiosity. Some are quite religious or even orthodox and keep up to religious practices in their culture and some are not. On the other hand there are the modern westernized families, who are to a certain level integrated in the society of the country of migration i.e. the Netherlands. Also those modern families can be very religious or not religious at all or secular.

The question we would like to answer is however: what religious attitudes and rituals do children growing up in an average Muslim family experience.

One can for example think of food-prescriptions. In most Muslim families it is important to eat and serve only halal food. This means that meat will be bought from an Islamic butcher i.e. meat from animals slaughtered in the Islamic way. Pork will not be on the menu at all. Also the consumption of alcoholic drinks is very rare in most Muslim families.

In more strict families also food-additives containing alcohol in chocolate or pudding or spurs from meat that is not halal like gelatin in ice cream or candy and coagulum in cheese will be avoided.

When children are still small they will be used to the food patterns and meals at home and they will not ask questions about it. But when they start consuming food outside their homes, they will get instructions on what food they are allowed to eat

and what food they are not. Some parents try to explain to the children why they should avoid certain food and others will restrict to telling them that it is not allowed in Islam.

When my son was 5 years old I tried to explain to him why he could not eat pork. I told him that God has forbidden it to us, because pigs tend to like to crawl in the mud and therefore it is not healthy to eat. Later on when he grew up he told me that in that time he saw a classmate with bacon on his bread and was astonished, because he associated it with mud and dirt.

When children grow older they will be asked more frequently why they have to obey certain prescriptions. So they are in need of logical answers to explain. The answer that it is a religious prescription can however also be logical and acceptable.

Other prescriptions have to do with cleanliness and hygiene in an Islamic way. Islam is not only a belief and conviction, but it is also a culture and way of life. Cleanliness is very important in Islam. It concerns the ritual of prayer. One should perform the ablution or ritual washing, wear clean clothes and pray on a clean floor or prayer rug *sajjāda*. That is why in Muslim homes, shoes will be left at the door so that dirt from outside will not be walked into the apartment or the house. Also washing the genitals after visiting the toilet is important as well as washing the hands. A dog is considered a dirty animal at least his mouth and his but. Therefore it is unusual to keep dogs inside the house and most Muslim will avoid contact with dogs also outside the house.

This means that children encounter at home other cultural and social rules and codes than they encounter in the "outside world", while some cultural prescriptions are sanctioned by religious rules. This can throw hindrances for them to act and participate fully in the wider society. When children for example visit non Muslim friends or neighbors at their house it can give problems, when they have a dog as a pet or when not halal food is offered to them. The ideal way of getting those hindrances out of the way is that the parents of the children have good relations with their non Muslim neighbors and other parents of the school so they can communicate effectively to give their children the opportunity to live and participate with non Muslims in the neighborhood. (Wetering & Bakker, 1998, p. 147-148)

Another important ritual children in Muslim families often experience at home is the ritual of prayer. Many Muslims keep on to their duty to perform the ritual prayer five times a day. The prayers should be performed on strict times according to the position of the sun. The first prayer (*fajr*) can be performed two hours before sunrise, the second after the sun has passed its summit (*zuhr*) until the shadow of an object is as large/ long as the object itself. After that the noon prayer (*ʿasr*) can be performed until about half an hour before sunset. A few minutes after sunset the sunset prayer (*maghrib*) is performed and the last prayer (*ʿishāʾ*) is about 1.45 hour after sunset when it is all dark. Children see their parents pray and from their early childhood get acquainted with it. Of course most parents also explain to their children how and why they pray.

To learn more about prayer and the Qurʾan verses and chapters (*suraʾs*) recited in prayer many parents send their children to the mosque, because they find it difficult to teach their children themselves. The imam or the teacher at the mosque can explain best and can show the children how to read and recite the Qurʾan verses in Arabic.

Also an important ritual is of course fasting during the month of Ramadan. Even Muslims who will not fulfill the duty of the daily prayer, will very often keep up to the duty of fasting in *Ramadan*. This means that adults and children from about the age of puberty in the month of Ramadan have to refrain from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual intercourse during the day from dawn (*fajr*) until sunset. Especially in Northern Europe the space of fasting differs considerably in summer (in Amsterdam a maximum of about 19 hours of fasting a day) and winter (in Amsterdam a minimum of about 10 hours of fasting a day).

Fasting in families is often experienced as a special time with a high spiritual connotation. Also the meals shared together in the month of *Ramadan* are special and a kind of festivity. Most Muslims share the meal at the end of the fasting day at sunset (*iftār*) and in the middle of the night or early morning before dawn (*suhūr*) with their family. After the *iftār* many Muslims will visit the mosque to participate in the extra Ramadan prayer (*tarāwīh*) and many children will join their parents.

This month also gives Muslims the feeling that they should do their best to be better persons and try to live up to the expectations of their faith. One can compare it with the spiritual feelings many Christians get at Christmas.

Small children don't have to fast because it is too heavy a burden for them, just like people who are ill, on journey or find themselves in difficult circumstances. Yet the children experience during the month of Ramadan that something special is going on and are eager to take part in it and are generally also stimulated to do so. They might try to fast for one day or more even if they are not yet obliged to fast and then they will also be awakened before dawn to eat together with the family, which feels special for them of course.

The main celebrations in Muslim families are at the end of Ramadan (*ʿIdu 'l-Fitr*) or at the end of the pilgrimage (*Hajj*) in Mecca, the Feast of Immolation (*ʿIdu 'l-Adhā*) in remembrance of the sacrifice of Abraham (*Ibrahim*), when every family will buy their own sheep or goat to be slaughtered. The meat of the sacrificed animal will be shared with the family, the guests visiting for the holiday and can also be shared with the neighbors and the poor.

At religious celebrations parents will mostly buy new clothes and presents for their children. Many children will also pay a visit to relatives with or without their parents and will collect money and sweets.

Besides the above mentioned two main celebrations of the Muslims there are also minor celebrations like the birthday of the prophet (*Mawlid an-Nabī*) or *ʿAshūra* on the tenth day of the first Muslim month *Muharram* i.e. 10 days after the Islamic New Year.

Some of those celebrations are controversial (because the prophet Muhammad is not reported to have celebrated at those occasions) but also with certain ethnic groups and various denominations very popular.

ʿAshūra for example has a quite different meaning in *Shi'a* families because on that day they remember the martyrdom of the grandson of the prophet Imam *Huss-ein* on the battlefield at *Karbala*. It is also the day of mourning processions and gatherings in the *Shi'a* communities.

For children of course those celebrations at home will have a huge impact on them, especially when they get gifts and presents and there is extra attention for them. On the other hand those celebrations do not correspond with the celebrations in the non Muslim environment and schools like Santa Claus (*Sinterklaas*), Christmas, Easter, birthday parties etc.

Traditionally Muslim families did not celebrate birthdays, but many have taken this tradition from the Western environment into their homes and even if they haven't they generally allow the children to celebrate their birthday at school and give them candy or cake to distribute to their classmates and teachers.

From an ethical and social viewpoint relations between family members and relatives are very important in Islam. Many pay a weekly visit on Saturday or Sunday to parents, grand parents, uncles and aunts. In this way many Muslim children experience an important social life with nephews and nieces.

In the relation with relatives and family members good behavior and respect are very important. In most families thus a warm social surrounding is offered, in which relative care for each other, keep in touch and are acquainted with each others difficulties and situations.

In the social surrounding of the children the mother tongue also provide them with numerous religious Islamic expressions with a strong spiritual and ethical connotation like: *as-salâmu alaykum* (peace be upon you), *al-hamdu li 'llâh* (may God be praised), *bismillah* (in the name of God), *in sha' Allâh* (so God wishes), *Allâh yahfaz* (may God prevent), *'a'ûdhu bi 'llâh* (I take my refuge to God) and in case of the dead of a person: *Innâ li 'llâh wa innâ 'ilayhi râjî'ûn* (we are of God and to him we will return) etc. etc. The Islamic culture is therefore not a secular culture at all.

In families where Dutch has become the main language of conversation we see either a terrible loss of Islamic ways of expression or we see that Arabic expressions are incorporated into the Dutch language spoken at home. The problem is that the Dutch modern language as it is used in many secularized Dutch homes lacks those kinds of religious expressions and children therefore are not able to communicate those expressions and all kinds of religious language to non Muslims, because they don't know the exact words or translation in Dutch. Especially children who have never attended religious education in Dutch schools are not able to express their religious feelings in that language. This is quite complicated for them in a situation, in which as we have mentioned above the non Muslim surrounding will ask them questions on certain behavior or social codes common in the Muslim community.

Therefore it is important for Muslim children to get acquainted with a religious vocabulary in Dutch so they can express their religious feelings and explain their religious habits. Especially in a multi religious and multi cultural society in which there are so many misunderstandings.

The mosques could play a role on their part, but unfortunately in most mosques religious education is offered in the mother tongue of the children or in Arabic, although religious education in Dutch is expanding as will be explained below.

Islamic Education In the Mosque

The mosques in the Netherlands are almost without exception divided on an ethnic base. One will find Turkish, Moroccan, Surinam/Hindustan and Pakistan mosques. Beside this ethnic division, there is also a division based on political and religious mainstreams within the ethnic groups. Within the Turkish community for example the mosques are divided in three mainstreams: the mosques of the Diyanet, following the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Milli Görüş following the Justice and Development Party of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Sulaymanlis following the Islamic educational system of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan (1888-1956). (Amirdihi, 2010)

The Surinam community is divided in Sunni and Ahmadi Muslims each of those groups of course having their own mosques. The small Arab *Sunni* communities mostly share the mosques of the Moroccans. And the *Shi'a* communities of course also have their own mosques.

As to the ethnical division of the mosques this also has a very practical reason i.e. the language. Most visitors of the mosques are still the first generation of Muslims and they generally do not master the Dutch language very well just like the *imams* who are mostly recruited from the country of origin.

Because of this situation the curricula of Islamic education in the mosques differ a lot as to what the parents are used to in their home countries.

For example in the Moroccan mosques the mastering of the Arabic language plays a very important role. Arabic is not only the language in which the Quran is read and recited but it is also the language in which Islam in the Arabic countries is usually transmitted. Furthermore for the Moroccans it is also their national lan-

guage although most Moroccans in the Netherlands speak Thamazight as their mother tongue and their children' mastering of even the spoken Moroccan dialect is poor. Besides the pupils in the Moroccan mosques learn to recite the Quran by heart beginning from *Sûratu 'l-Fâtiha* (the first *Sûra* of the Quran) and thereupon *Sûratu 'n-Nâs* (the last *Sûra* of the Quran)⁽¹⁾, *al-Falaq* and *al-'Ikhlâs* and so on. The ultimate goal is that the pupil will learn the whole Quran by heart and become Hâfiz, but only very few pupils will reach that level. Along with the Arabic language teaching they will also learn the main Islamic rules as to the rituals, the confession of faith (*Shahâda*), the ablution (*Wudû'*) and the prayers etc. as well as the doctrines of faith (*Aqîda*). The teachers will learn them also the stories of the prophets, the main Islamic ethics and give them information about the main celebrations. All this teaching is usually in Arabic (Stichting de Meeuw, 2004, 7-13).

In the Turkish mosques pupils will also start learning how to read the Arabic alphabet to know how to read and recite the Quran, but they will not be taught Arabic as a language. Religious transmission in general takes place in Turkish (Pels, 2006, p. 107-142). Pupils learn about the rituals of the ablution (*Abdes*) and the prayers (*Namaz*). How the ablution and the prayers are performed and what Arabic texts one should learn by heart to perform the daily prayers. The teachers also will give them information about also the rules concerning the five pillars: the confession of faith (*Shahâda*), the prayers, fasting, obligatory alms (*Zakat*) and the pilgrimage (*Hajj*) as well as just like in the Moroccan mosques stories of the prophets, the main Islamic ethics and the main celebrations.

In most Surinam mosques the lessons take place in Dutch just as is the habit in Surinam. They learn the Arabic alphabet to be able to read and recite the Quran. They also learn Quran verses and chapters (*sura's*) in Arabic by heart, just like the Arabic texts they need to perform the ritual prayers. Furthermore they are made acquainted with the rituals and rules of Islam, the five pillars and good Islamic behavior and ethics.

Apart from the Surinam mosques and some mosques that concentrate more on the youth like the Tawheed mosque in Amsterdam, religious education in the mosques is rarely in Dutch. Yet more and more voices plead for Islamic education in Dutch, because the pupils mastering of Arabic and Turkish might be very poor.

Main goals of Islamic education in the mosques are as we have mentioned above:

- Learn how to read and recite the Quran.
- Learn how to read out Arabic.
- Learn how to perform the main religious rituals concerning the five pillars.
- Get information about Islam as a faith and way of life.
- Learn about Islamic etiquettes and ethics.

In the modern curricula another goal is added. As to the Dutch environment it is considered important that the pupils learn that respect and decency towards others, whatever religion or ethnicity they might have, is Islamic and important social behavior.

The problem we observe here is how to teach children to be respectful to persons of another religion, life view or culture while in the same time they learn that the faith and behavior of those is reprehensible or *harām*. Like denying the existence of God or drinking alcoholic drinks or get drunk. But this is of course a pedagogical challenge in many faiths, religions and life views.

Some mosques also see it as important that pupils learn to develop an assertive attitude about their own Islamic faith and culture in an environment that is seen as islamophobe. Pupils should learn to defend their own religion and identity.

In a research of the Verwey-Jonker Instituut as to the pedagogical approach in the Turkish Milli Görüş Aya Sofya mosque, the coordinator of Islamic education and a teacher in the same mosque stress that educational activities in the mosque should learn children to answer questions on jihad, the headscarf, homosexuality etc...

In the conclusion of the same research report the following items are mentioned as starting points for pedagogic innovation:

In short the Aya Sofya mosque concentrates in her activities on transmitting knowledge of Islam and the religious, social and moral education of the pupils. The didactical approach shows a combination of transmitting knowledge and dialogical learning. In the first place the goal is to achieve that the pupils feel part of the own religious community. A further goal is to achieve a good connection of the pupils with the Dutch society. But the view in this perspective is very much defensive:

knowledge of Islam is the tool of the child to defend him self in a surrounding that is ignorant of Islam or even islamophobe.

In the same time pupils are impregnated with the fact that respect and decency are very important values. (Pels et al., 2006, p. 185)

The same research is done in two other Moroccan mosques in Rotterdam. From the research it seems that this type of bridging is also generally used in the Moroccan mosques that were subject of the research.

Furthermore it is mentioned in the research that the climate in the lessons was overall friendly to the pupils. This as a response to the very strict climate that is known from education in the mosques in Turkey and Morocco and also in Turkish and Moroccan mosques in the Netherlands in the 70's, 80's and 90's of the 20th century. It shows that the mosques in the Netherlands probably have become more aware of the importance of a child friendly and effective pedagogical climate in Islamic education.

Yet as we have stated above educational material is almost without exception in Arabic or Turkish and this is also the language used to communicate with the pupils. For this reason the lessons do not refer to the Dutch context at all. It depends on the teacher whether he will bring it into the discussions with the pupils or not.

The research also concludes that in the three mosques that were subject of the research the didactical approach is following the IRE model of teaching i.e. the Initiate - Response - Evaluation - model: The teacher poses a question; the pupils respond and the teacher evaluates the answers. This kind of approach is a one direction communication between the teacher and the pupils. Although the researchers also found that in the Turkish mosque the communication was more open and there was more opportunity for especially the older pupils to suggest topics or items to be discussed in the lesson and to bring in their own questions (Pels et al., 2006, p. 92-93).

Yet as we have stated above while describing Islamic education at home we see that the educational situation and environment of Muslim children and youth is quite complex. Therefore the demands as to the Islamic education in the mosque are considerable.

As Tariq Ramadan has said in his book *Western Muslims and the Future*:

As is stated also by Tauhidl (2001) and Khan et al. (2005) traditional Islamic education does not succeed in learning the Muslim youth to master the critical skills they need to resist the difficult moral and social dilemma's they are confronted with (Tariq Ramadan, op. cit. Pels et al., 2006, p. 16).

Conclusion

At the one hand we have stated above that religious education in Muslim families in the Netherlands varies considerably as tot the ethnic background, the educational level of the parents and the level of integration in the Dutch society.

At the other hand however we see that the culture in almost all Muslim families differs from the culture of the surrounding Christian and secular society, because the Islam is not only a philosophical religious system, but also a way of life with daily rituals, religious prescriptions and own celebrations. This is why Muslim children from the early youth will be confronted with questions and need guidance of adult Muslims (parents and teachers) to answer those questions in a reasonable way for them and for others in their surroundings.

Islamic education in the mosque seems through the decennia to have been improved in a pedagogical sense. Teachers are less strict and have a friendly attitude to the children and the lessons and materials are more attractive, although most materials are still in Arabic or Turkish. The means that the context of the Dutch society is not reflected in the materials. It depends on the initiative of individual teachers weather they discuss the daily life situation of the children in classroom. The communication of the teachers with their pupils is still very much a one way communication.

The complex situation of Muslim children and youth however is very exigent as to Islamic education in the mosque. It is also important for the children that Islamic education should be in Dutch so they will learn to discuss about their religion with others in the Dutch society and explain it to them.

We noticed that Islamic education in Dutch is usual in Surinam mosques in the Netherlands as well as in Surinam and in some Moroccan mosques that concentrate more on the youth.

The future will show whether Islamic education at home and in the mosque will be able to overcome the huge challenges in transmitting Islam as a religion in the indigenous Dutch society to Muslim children and youth who often feel lost and not understood not by significant others in the Dutch society and not by the own family and teachers in the Muslim community (Alaoui, 2009, p. 37).

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(1) This presentation is partly based on research and literature on the topic and partly on own research for many years and own experiences as a mother in a Muslim Dutch-Moroccan family in the Netherlands.