Becoming Sisters

Reworking Femininity and Relatedness among Muslim Converts in Buenos Aires

Tiffany Utvær Gasser

Master Thesis
Department of Social Anthropology
University of Oslo

May 2016
© Tiffany Utvær Gasser

2016

Becoming Sisters

Tiffany Utvær Gasser

http://www.duo.uio.no

Print: Mail Boxes Etc.
Abstract

This thesis is based on six months of fieldwork among converts to Islam in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It is located at the theoretical intersection of gender, kinship, and religious studies. I explore how religious conversions lead to processes that involve the reworking of identity and femininity. This multilayered point of departure enables a unique approach to conversion to Islam, and in this case, allows me to tackle the importance of the concept of sisterhood. I argue that sisterhood is a platform on which women can rework identity issues and religious piety along Islamic guidelines, which also brings forward new imaginations of kinship ties. In addition, a focus on the practices of Islam in Buenos Aires can illustrate new understandings of how the religion is appropriated in a Latin American context. At the same time, the conjunction of the local and the global highlights how Islamic practices in Argentina cannot be disassociated from global connections. An important dimension of this study is how I approach the mundane and ordinary practices of Islam. Also, by illustrating religious practices within a less explored context, namely Latin America, I wish to complicate the often rather simplified picture of Islam we are faced with these days.

These explorations begin with an investigation of what religious conversion to Islam implies. In chapter two, I look at how conversion can be theorized and how it becomes embodied by the new Muslims. New bodily practices and conceptions of the self and the body are appropriated and negotiated. In chapter three, I explore how kinship ties are reconceptualized to incorporate Islamic concepts of brother- and sisterhood, which also includes changing imaginations of marriage in light of one’s new religion. The Islamic faith, its effects, and enactments are the topic of the next chapter in which I review a matter often discussed during my fieldwork, namely the ideal of becoming a good Muslim. In the last chapter, I zoom out from the Argentine context in order to contextualize previous discussions within a global framework, and I review each of the topics from earlier chapters in light of their global presence.
Note on Transliteration

In this thesis, I follow the system outlined by the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES) with some modifications in order to transliterate Arabic words. To the best of my capacity, I apply the use of diacritics and other rules. However, I use the English plural ending in –s for simplicity’s sake.
Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the leaders of the mosques I was able to visit so often during my fieldwork. I was welcomed in a warm manner to your religious institutions, and taken with a lot of patience despite the lack of understanding for what this researched entailed. Further, I would like to thank the department of social anthropology and the European Research Council for much needed financial funding. Thank you to my parents and co-students for your support during this time, especially to Gard and Kaja for keeping me going even when I could not understand where I was headed. In addition, thank you to Emilie for asking the right questions when I needed it the most.

My sincerest gratitude goes to my supervisor, Elisabeth Schober, for her patience and constructive critique for this thesis. Your support has helped me get through the most difficult stages of this process, and you have taught me more than you know. Further, I am thankful for the rest of the Overheating research group and their valuable feedback. Unquestionably, I am deeply grateful for Sean, my fiancé’s presence in the field and constant help – you are my rock throughout time.

Most of all, I am grateful for the Muslim men, but especially women I met in Buenos Aires. It has been an honor to be part of your lives, and you have allowed me to grow so much. I hope to have given an adequate picture of who those lovely women are, and any negative portrayal is my own mistake. Shortly, shukrān hermanas.
The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) / ERC Grant Agreement n. [295843].
# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. III

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION .................................................................................................. V

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................................. VII

TABLE OF CONTENTS .............................................................................................................. IX

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................. 1

GUIDING THEMES ...................................................................................................................... 2

BUENOS AIRES, THE SUPER-DIVERSE LANDSCAPE ................................................................ 4

The Religious Scene .................................................................................................................. 5

HISTORY OF ISLAM IN BUENOS AIRES .................................................................................. 6

An Alternative History .............................................................................................................. 8

ENTRY TO THE FIELD ............................................................................................................... 8

THE MOSQUES ............................................................................................................................ 10

The Islamic Center of Buenos Aires ......................................................................................... 11

The Sufi Derga .......................................................................................................................... 13

KEY INFORMANTS ..................................................................................................................... 15

METHODOLOGY, LANGUAGES, AND MY ROLE IN THE FIELD ............................................ 16

Determining the Field .............................................................................................................. 17

A non-Muslim in the Mosques ............................................................................................... 17

The Time in Between Prayers ................................................................................................. 19

Lost in Translation .................................................................................................................. 19

Ethical Considerations ........................................................................................................... 20

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS .................................................................................................. 21

CHAPTER TWO – RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND REWORKED FEMININITIES .................. 23

APPROACHES TO RELIGIOUS CONVERSION ....................................................................... 23

A Note on Agency .................................................................................................................... 26

Religious Revivalism and Conversion ................................................................................... 26

THE ATTRACTION OF ISLAM: CONTEXT AND CRISIS OF CONVERSION .......................... 27

THE RITUAL COMMITMENT: BECOMING A MUSLIM ............................................................ 30

CONSEQUENCES: EMBODIMENT OF CONVERSION .............................................................. 31

PRACTICES OF ISLAM ................................................................................................................ 31
An Islamic Name .......................................................................................................................... 32
The Healthy Body .......................................................................................................................... 33
Fasting as Health, Fasting as an Issue .......................................................................................... 34
The Modest Body .......................................................................................................................... 35
Modesty and Argentine Society .................................................................................................... 37
Approaches to Sexuality .............................................................................................................. 38
Concluding Remarks .................................................................................................................. 39

CHAPTER THREE – IMAGINING KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE ................................................. 41
National Imaginaries in Argentina ............................................................................................... 41
Islamic Sisterhood Performed in Buenos Aires ......................................................................... 42
Becoming Sisters, Becoming Related? .......................................................................................... 44
The Changing Sociabilities of Conversion .................................................................................. 46
Gendered Spaces and the Time in Between Prayers .................................................................... 48
Discussions as Valuable Support among the Sisters ................................................................. 48
Meals and Coffee Shops .............................................................................................................. 51
The Importance of Sharing during Financial Scarcity ............................................................... 52
An Extended Understanding of Family ....................................................................................... 53
Aspirations Towards Marriage ..................................................................................................... 54
Marriage in Argentina .................................................................................................................. 55
Masculine Imaginations and a Global Perspective ...................................................................... 56
Concluding Remarks .................................................................................................................. 57

CHAPTER FOUR – THE GOOD MUSLIM ................................................................................. 59
Islamic Faith ................................................................................................................................. 59
Morality and Expectations ........................................................................................................... 63
The Set Way and the Value of Rewards ....................................................................................... 63
Differing Institutional Interpretations ............................................................................................ 65
An Individual Path ........................................................................................................................ 66
Religious Piety and Social Dynamics within the Sisterhood ....................................................... 67
“That Sister” or Another Way to Gossip ....................................................................................... 69
Ties Reconfigured ......................................................................................................................... 70
Concluding Remarks .................................................................................................................. 71

CHAPTER FIVE – A GLOBAL ISLAM ....................................................................................... 73
Different Understandings of a Global Islam ................................................................................ 74
Islam and Globalization ............................................................................................................. 76
Religious Revivalism and Islamist Movements ................................................................. 76
GLOBAL FLOWS THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL CONNECTIONS...................................... 78
THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA......................................................................................... 80
DISCERNING CORRECT PRACTICES OF ISLAM AND A PIous LIFESTYLE ....................... 82
SISTERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA DA’WA ........................................................................... 84
A GLOBAL UMMA OF SISTERS AND BROTHERS .......................................................... 85
CONCLUDING REMARKS.............................................................................................. 87

CONCLUSION: DO MUSLIM WOMEN NEED SAVING NOW? ...................................... 89

APPENDIX: COMMONLY USED ARABIC TERMS............................................................ 93

LITERATURE.................................................................................................................. 95
Chapter One – Introduction

I had not walked to the mosque since the first day I visited it. That was in late February, and the heat and humidity of the Buenos Aires summer had made the stroll unbearable compared to the short bus ride. But towards the end of April, a warm fall had settled upon the city. The forty-minute walk to the mosque through the streets of the upscale neighborhood of Palermo was pleasant. Along “Avenida Libertator,” the buildings carried the evidence of French architecture’s importance to fin-de-siècle Buenos Aires’ development, which stands in stark contrast to the Southern neighborhoods of the city. Cafés included terraces on the large sidewalks typical of the avenue. Many Porteños were enjoying a late morning coffee. On the other side of the avenue, the large park complex of “Tres de Febrero” stretched for the entire distance of my walk. Runners and dog-walkers were the most common sights, and many Porteños and tourists enjoyed sun-bathing and gathering with friends in the large green space in the middle of Buenos Aires. That day, the sun was shining and people enjoyed their summer attire before the coming winter.

Rather than going straight to the mosque, I often met with Sara, an Argentine convert in her mid-thirties, at a small café. As usual, she arrived before me and was reading the Qur’an when I saw her. We drank a coffee while discussing Islam. Sara always wore a long black dress and a headscarf. People would stare, either discreetly or shamelessly, but she rarely let it bother her. Sara always made sure we were at the mosque at least forty-five minutes before the beginning of the Friday sermon, khutba, followed by a congregational prayer, jumu’a. We walked upstairs, to the women’s separate prayer hall. More women arrived alone or accompanied by young children, and greeted their new sisters in Islam before sitting down, listening to the sermon. Young children ran around while the women, unbothered by the noise, gathered to pray together. I sat in the back, looking at the women’s elegant movements throughout the prayer, while also watching over a crawling baby headed for the staircase. When the prayer ended, a few women prayed an additional rak’a by themselves, while most came together to chat before heading to the day’s first class on Islam. The women helped the children put on their shoes and we took our time walking to class, especially if the discussion proved more entertaining than the upcoming lecture.
Guiding Themes

I position this thesis at the intersectionality between the anthropology of religion, gender, and relatedness. I am interested not only in the individual relevance of these three subfields, but in their nexus in order to illustrate how Islam is adopted, negotiated, and practiced by women in Buenos Aires. I explore if and how the decision to convert has led to a gradual renegotiation of one’s identity. The sociabilities involved in a woman’s new religious path are a central topic. I investigate how ties between women are created, and how those ties are thought of along the lines of the kinship term “sister.” Such new personal connections are especially important for the converts, as in most cases their family and friends do not respect or approve of their conversion. In other words, in my research I was guided by the following questions: When women convert, which everyday aspects of the women’s lives are changed and negotiated, on a personal, social, and religious dimension? How does conversion to Islam become embodied? In what ways are ideas of relatedness reconfigured? And how is religious piety appropriated and performed?

Earlier anthropologists, such as Edward Evans-Pritchard (1940) or Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1952) have regarded kinship as the structuring and all-encompassing dynamics that govern society. These studies have also generally viewed kinship formations as inherently connected to religious belief. The organizing function given to kinship and religion was seen as key to an understanding of how societies functioned. When it comes to kinship studies, gender has been largely absent however, and as Signe Howell and Marit Melhuus put it, kinship was a study of “relations between men, with women filling subordinated roles as mothers, sisters, daughters or wives” (Howell & Melhuus 1993:42-43).

Early anthropological writings on Islam, such as Clifford Geertz (1968), Ernest Gellner (1981), or Michael Gilsenan (1982), were all undertaken by men, portraying Islam as mostly a masculine issue (Marranci 2008:119). Written from men’s perspectives, Muslim women were not included. All the while, the oppressed and sexualized image of Muslim women has long been an object of Western curiosity (Marranci 2008:117). In this way, Islam was perceived by focusing on its gendered character and patriarchal values. The image of oppressed Muslim women was later challenged by anthropologists such as Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), who outlined strategies applied by women as a resistance to patriarchal values, or in Saba

---

1 I view identity as socially shifting, multiple, and contested (Hylland Eriksen & Schober, forthcoming)
Mahmood’s (2005) overview of Egyptian women’s active participation in Islamic piety movements. In these writings, women’s agency was put to the fore. Amélie Le Renard (2014) highlights the life of young Saudi women and which strategies they employ in such a gender segregated society, where women’s physical movement and liberty are restricted. Yet the problem has often been a lack of cross-gender research, which has been taken up by Marcia Inhorn (2012) and Nefissa Naguib (2015). This area of research highlights that gender is not about women, nor is it about men. Rather, gender is relational.

If we move away from religion for a moment in order to look at another subfield, namely gender, of anthropology, we can then return to approaches to kinship. Kinship had been central to earlier anthropological undertakings, but during the 1970s and the 1980s, the subject lost its foothold in anthropology (Howell & Melhuus 1993:39). Yet new approaches to kinship have revised the concept’s status and meaning. The anthology “Gender and Kinship” (1987) by Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako, for instance, aimed to revitalize kinship studies and break down the boundaries between kinship and gender. New understandings of kinship-making were offered, such as the process of kinning and dekinning (Howell 2003), or the concept of relatedness by Janet Carsten (1995), which I also build upon further in this thesis. From this new perspective, kinship is now deconstructed, and is seen to be in need of new theoretical and local anchoring in order to be theorized.

Melhuus and Kristi Anne Stølen view both gender and power as relative and relational concepts (Melhuus & Stølen 1996:2). Arguably, one cannot think of gender relations without also seeing them as embedded in power formations. While Melhuus and Stolen focused on a Latin American context, their discussion is equally relevant in approaches to gender in Islamic contexts. Gender and Islam, alongside gender and machismo, are contested topics that imply power relations. With all this in mind, I build this thesis on anthropological approaches to religion, gender, and relatedness. I draw upon contributions from each of the three subfields, but in particular I focus on the nexus of those, in order to shape a very specific definition of sisterhood. So far, I have placed this thesis in discussions of agency and women’s position within Islam, new understandings of kinship as a social construct, but also amidst the redefinition of older understandings of religion and kinship. In this way, I continue ongoing discussions on religion and kinship by combining approaches to Islam and gender, as well as gender and relatedness. I argue that through the concept of sisterhood, I can illustrate the importance of viewing religion together with both relatedness and gender. In order to do
so, however, it is first necessary to illustrate the complex setting within which this research is situated.

**Buenos Aires, the Super-Diverse Landscape**

Latin America is often associated with images such as violent dictatorships, extreme poverty alongside wealth, or machismo (Melhuus & Stølen 1996:6). Despite such widespread imageries, Melhuus and Stølen argue that the concepts of macho and machismo have been taken for granted and usually left unexplained, which, they argue, indicates an earlier lack of scholarly importance given to issues of masculinity and other gender constructions (1996:14-15). Even though machismo and masculinities are not the topics at hand, local gender constructions are also an important aspect of the Porteño framework with which female Muslim converts interact.

Many roads lead to Buenos Aires. I was constantly amazed by how many foreigners I would meet on a daily basis. Corina Courtis and María Pacecca (2014) argue that intra-regional migration to Buenos Aires has grown in the last decades. In particular, Bolivians, Paraguayans, and Peruvians travel to Buenos Aires (2014:26). From my observation, the city is a popular destination for Europeans and North Americans who have found work opportunities online, and have subsequently picked Buenos Aires as their new home. I also discovered that it was considered an attractive city for retirement. As such, large Western expatriate communities coexist along migration populations from poorer Latin American countries. Many West Africans have also recently traveled to Buenos Aires. They are easily recognized by Porteños by their skin color previously uncommon in the city, and are known by my informants as people who frequent a small informal prayer hall. In short, the Buenos Aires landscape is super-diverse, that is, it exemplifies the “worldwide diversification of migration channels, differentiations of legal statuses, diverging patterns of gender and age, and variance in migrants’ human capital” (Meissner & Vertovec 2015: 541).

At the same time, the country’s unstable and weak economy drives richer Argentines abroad. I discovered that wealthier families save money in US dollars in accounts abroad. The current economic situation is still marked by the aftermath of the crisis of 2001, that is, when the peso (ARS) was unpegged from the US dollar (USD) and lost two-thirds of its value (Muir 2015:310). During my fieldwork, prices on quotidian items rose monthly due to inflation. My flatmates, informants, and I often complained about how the money we had slowly covered
less and less of our daily expanses. The low official Argentine peso rate to the US dollar has led to the development of a black market to exchange money, known as the blue market (“el mercado azul”). This precarious financial situation is something I will come back to throughout my thesis. The focus on economic conditions is due to its all-encompassing impact on everyday life.

The Religious Scene

The Argentine government prides itself on the country’s religious diversity. It is difficult to delineate adequately the religious landscape of the city; religious beliefs are not included in national censuses. Imported by Spanish missionaries in the fifteenth century, Catholicism is today still the hegemonic religion in the country. Some of the Muslim converts I spoke to told me that even though it raises a conflict of religious beliefs for them, they believe that private Catholic schools offer a better education to their children than the public secular schools.

Since Pope Francis’ election in 2013, the city of Buenos Aires is promoted on the official website as “La Cuidad del Papa,” which translates as “The Pope’s City” (City of Buenos Aires n.d.). Outside the mosques, many Argentines explained to me that interest in the Catholic Church was on the rise again, after it had over the last years been losing its ground among younger generations. I observed a similar line of argument used about other religious groups. I participated in a seminar about anthropological research on religion, where I was told that Pentacolism is the fastest growing religion in Argentina. The same was said about Islam by many converts I talked to. Although it seems impossible to know for sure, these observations may point to a more general revival of religion in Argentina, which will be discussed further in chapter two.

There is a large and visible presence of Jewish communities in the city, both in some of the richest and poorest neighborhoods. They are known to be closed communities and some religious tensions are apparent in Buenos Aires. In 1994, a car-bomb exploded near the Jewish community center AMIA (“Associación Mutuela Israelita Argentina”), killing eighty-five people (AMIA n.d.). No offender was found guilty and up until today, the Israeli

---

2 Since Mauricio Macri was elected president in November 2015, he removed currency controls, which led to a devaluation of the peso and access to US dollars within the country (The Economist 2015). Many of the financial restrictions I mention in this thesis, which were important factors of everyday life during my fieldwork, have since been abolished.
government openly blames the organization Hezbollah, linking the attack to Iran. Just days before my arrival in Buenos Aires, Alberto Nisman, the prosecutor who had reopened the case, was found dead in his home. This led to outrage in the Jewish community, but it also turned into a general issue of debate in Buenos Aires. I wondered if it would spark anti-Iran feelings, and raise anti-Muslim sentiments as a consequence, but most Argentines were mostly outraged by the government’s handling of the case, which was considered to adhere to the logic of camouflage, that is, that the state covers up the brutality from which it disassociates itself (Jusionyte 2015:116). I was repeatedly told of governmental corruption, which seemed to be blamed for this incident, too.

The Muslim communities, on the other hand, are less visible. Throughout my stay, when asked what I was doing in Argentina, I told people I was here to look at Muslim communities in Buenos Aires. The common response I received was: “Are there really any Muslims here?” Few realized that Islam was a religion practiced in the city, despite its long historical presence in the area. Discussing with the mother of a convert at a Sufi order I visited a few times, I asked her how she thought Islam was perceived in Argentina. Herself a Catholic, she said people view it as foreign and unknown, which is quite ironic given the fact that there have been practicing Muslims in Argentina for over a century.

**History of Islam in Buenos Aires**

Argentina is considered to be a nation built up by immigration. This is visible in the self-identification that citizens of Buenos Aires apply to themselves – Porteños – which means “the people from the port,” who are thus distinct from local indigenous populations (Grimson & Kessler 2005:119). From 1890 to 1914, over 4 million foreigners entered Argentina, of which 2.4 million settled in the country (Solberg 1970:33). The majority of immigrants came from Italy and Spain (Solberg 1970:37). Up until the 1930s, Argentina remained open to mass immigration (Sánchez-Alonso 2013:601). There is a large academic literature on these migration patterns from Europe, and anthropological research on the topic has mainly focused on Italian immigrants and descendants (Schneider 2000). This is perhaps due to the important role attributed to “whiteness” and European descent as part of the construction of an Argentine nation (Bastia & vom Hau 2014).

All the while, many also arrived because they fled the then-Ottoman Empire, mostly people from today’s Syria and Lebanon. This other immigration pattern has recently been given...
academic attention. The main focus has often been on the historical migration from the Middle East to Latin America (Klich & Lesser 1998; Alsultany & Shohat 2013; Narbona, Pinto & Karam 2015), or to the situation in individual countries, such as Mexico (Alfaro-Velcamp 2007) or Ecuador (Almeida 1996). Those studies mention religion but do not make it their main research interest. This is also due to the lack of clarity in the religious status of individuals, especially since many immigrants Hispanicized their names and changed their religious beliefs on their way to Latin America (Jozami 1996:75). It has also been argued that only a minority of these Middle Eastern immigrants coming to Argentina were actually Muslims (Solberg 1970:40; Jozami 1996:70 n.10; Montenegro 2015:85). The first records of Muslim immigrants arriving from Syria have been dated between 1850 and 1860 (Brieger & Herszkowich 2002:157). Gladys Jozami (1996) provides the first overview of Islam in Argentina and views the religion as an integral part of Middle Eastern migration patterns (Jozami 1996: 70). From 1882 to 1925, according to disembarkation books available from the Immigration Directorate in Buenos Aires, approximately 23% of the over 80,000 immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries were Muslims, although Jozami assumes that the actual numbers were higher (Jozami 1996:74). A lack of clear denomination provided in public registers makes it impossible to clarify how many were actually Muslims. The term “turco” has been widely used to describe a person from various religious and ethnic backgrounds, which labels immigrants with documents from Ottoman authorities (Klich & Lesser 1996:4). It is a derogatory term that was rarely mentioned during my research, instead I often noticed that the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” were often used interchangeably.

Amongst those immigrants, Islamic religious identity and practices were quickly downplayed, and from the 1930s, fewer Muslims came to Argentina (Jozami 1996:76-77). Most were assimilated into Argentine society, leaving their religious beliefs behind (Jozami 1996:84; Montenegro 2105:85). By the 1960s, the Muslim communities had become almost insignificant (Jozami 1996:84). Similarly, Silvia Montenegro argues that until the 1980s, Islamic institutions struggled to maintain enough members (Montenegro 2015:90). A recent religious resurgence made Islam more visible again, which is partly due to global Islamic revivalism during that period (Jozami 1996:85). Looking at institutional Islam in Buenos Aires, Silvia Montenegro argues that reported figures on Muslims in Argentina reach from 450,000 to as high as 700,000; numbers that are most likely used by the Islamic institutions as “a strategy to bring visibility to the communities” (Montenegro 2015:86). I argue that in order to complete our understanding of the Islamic landscape of Buenos Aires, a focus on Argentine
converts is essential. This is mentioned by Jozami (1996:85) and Montenegro (2015:86), but none explore this dimension any further.

*An Alternative History*

In the wake of the twenty-fifth of May (an Argentine national holiday), the weekly local Buenos Aires television program “El Cálamo y su Mensaje” was aired. It discusses Arab and Islamic matters. That particular Sunday was mostly dedicated to the national celebrations. Among other things, the *gauchos* were being discussed. Professor Ricardo Elía, who is affiliated with the Argentine Islamic Center, was invited to the program that morning. He argued against the common assumption that Islam entered Argentina amidst the big immigration wave from Syria and Lebanon, and claimed that Islam made its way to Latin America much earlier than that. Rather, he argued, the first Muslims in Argentina were Moriscos coming from ports of southern Andalucía, who were expelled or forced to convert in the early seventeenth century. Therefore, many gauchos were in fact Muslims. This version of history is also supported by the Saudi mosque. As this episode indicates, the Muslim community has taken an active part in trying to re-tell the history of Islam in Argentina and to inscribe it into Argentine history at a much earlier point than what is usually assumed. Hernán Taboada (2004) argues that this historical version of Islam in Latin America is acknowledged, but has received little academic research so far.

*Entry to the Field*

As I am sure many anthropologists in training can relate to, my research changed considerably from what I had written in my initial project proposal in March 2014. I had previously lived in Cairo during the fall of 2012, and about one year in Khartoum the next academic year. In both countries, and in Oslo, I had spent time learning Arabic. After living in Egypt and Sudan, I felt ready to return to the region, but this time, I wanted to go to Tunisia. I wanted to look at gender relations in a post-2011 context. Tunisia offered the perfect location.

---

3 Argentina’s Independence or Day of Revolution against Spain in 1810. The ninth of July represents the country’s proper independence day, but this celebration is equally important.

4 This translates as “the reed pen and its message”.

5 In a discussion of the gauchos’ significance in identity politics in Argentina, it has been argued that around World War I the gaucho was used by nationalists as a symbol against immigration (Archetti 1999:35; Solberg 1970:154).
It was at the forefront of the events that have become known as “the Arab Spring,” but the political situation had since become much more stable than in most other countries in the region. Moreover, French is a commonly spoken language; so in addition to basic skills in Arabic, my mother-tongue could become a practical tool. But as the fall settled in Oslo in 2014, the insecurity in the Middle East grew. The Islamic State, which at the time of my application was barely an issue ever mentioned, was now making it to all front pages of newspapers in Europe. Gradually, I worried more about traveling to Tunisia. After valuable advice from my advisor Elisabeth Schober, I decided to change my research location to a new region. Many discussions with my partner later, I discovered for the first time that Islam was a small, but actual phenomenon in Latin America. I was quickly intrigued by the topic, and I decided to go to Buenos Aires.

Prior to my departure, I found no scholarly texts on the subject nor any clear numbers on Muslims in Argentina. But based on news stories and short articles, I discovered that Islam was in fact practiced in many places in Latin America. More is known about Islam in Brazil, with studies looking at the diaspora from Palestine (Jardim 2000), or studies on descendants of earlier Middle Eastern migration (Karam 2007; Pinto 2010). Jozami (1996) and Montenegro (2015) provide short overviews of Islam in Argentina. As for me, I was not sure what to expect. With this scant information in mind, I arrived to Buenos Aires in the beginning of February 2015, at the height of summer. Initially, I thought that I would primarily meet families who had been practicing Muslims for generations, adapting their practices to Argentine society. I also expected to meet newly arrived Syrians who were escaping war. I did meet people corresponding to those expectations, but for the most part, the people I got to know better were of a completely different background. I met many people from other Latin American countries, who had moved to Buenos Aires and converted to Islam, but most of my informants were actually Argentine converts. They were your average Porteños who shared the local mate drink6 with friends and had grown up going to church.

Indeed, this thesis largely focuses on the ordinary, everyday, and non-sensational aspects of Islam. Ever since 9/11, Islam has become sensationalized in the West and has since then been easily linked to terrorist attacks. In 2002, Abu-Lughod wrote that “(…) there was a consistent

---

6 Mate is a typical Argentine drink made from the Yerba Mate plant. It is commonly drunk with a metallic straw and shared among friends rather than as an individual beverage.
resort to the cultural, as if knowing something about women and Islam or the meaning of religious ritual would help one understand the tragic attack on New York’s World Trade Center and the U.S. Pentagon” (2002:784). The frenzy around Islam and the issue of gender, which also played a role in my withdrawing from the initial research plans, is something I disassociate myself from. I do not wish to add fuel to the fire to the debates we see in Europe today around the issues of Islam and gender. Rather, by switching to a less explored geographical context of Islam, I wish to highlight its everyday practices and effects, and show that issues of gender and Islam can also be approached without hyperbole and fears.

The Mosques
Looking at identity questions among Muslim communities in Buenos Aires, I decided to take my point of departure in religious institutions. There are three official mosques in the city that I had found presented online prior to my arrival. Two of them are Sunni mosques, while the last one is Shi’i. I later realized how these institutions have significantly different characteristics, and I did not have any preference concerning where to go. During my research, I also discovered four unofficial prayer halls, musallas, which are all situated within Sunni Islam. The institutions described above are:

- The Argentine Islamic Assembly,
- The Islamic Center of Buenos Aires,
- The Islamic Association of Argentina,
- Three Sufi orders, and
- A small musalla with no official name.

I visited four of the seven institutions mentioned above. From there, I eventually delimited my field to two places, that is, the Islamic Center of Buenos Aires and one of the Sufi orders, a decision I took due to multiple reasons. First of all, I spent most of my time with the women within these religious institutions. Despite gathering there on a regular basis, none of my informants went to a mosque every day. In general, in all the Sufi institutions, people gathered on Thursday evenings. At the other Islamic institutions, the Muslim communities would gather on Friday. In Islam, men are required to attend the congregational prayer, jumu’a (Esposito 1998:90). Women are allowed to join too, and in Buenos Aires, the Friday gatherings were a valuable event for most of the women. Consequently, Friday became the most important day of my week and the occasion during which I was able to spend the most time with my informants.
In addition, with its large amount of resources, the Islamic Center offered many activities throughout the week, which gave me the opportunity to see my informants at least two or three times a week. It was also the first Islamic institution I visited, and after having explained my research to its staff, I was warmly welcomed to join them. At first, I was surprised by this; I had expected that a mosque which is sponsored by the Saudi government (something I return to shortly) would have stricter practices and regulations concerning non-Muslims. Eventually, I realized many thought I would convert, not because they thought it was my intention, but because I would discover it as my intention. Finally, there was an issue of location to consider: Buenos Aires is spread out across an immense geographical area, and travel could take up to two hours one-way in order to get to some locations. In addition, many activities took place during the evenings, which made traveling home by public transport less available and less secure. This was especially relevant for the month of Ramadan, when I stayed around almost every evening until late at night. I lived in the upper-class neighborhood of Palermo, in the north of the city, close to both mosques.

To conclude, these two spaces turned out to be the most relevant for this research. Running on different schedules, it was easy to combine visits between both, and having two sites opened my eyes to the nuances in the ways Islam is practiced, but also to different ways of embracing one’s religious conversion. For clarity’s sake, throughout my thesis I will refer to the Islamic Cultural Center as the Saudi mosque, and to the Order as the Sufi derga.

*The Islamic Center of Buenos Aires*

The Islamic Center of Buenos Aires is a center funded by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that opened in 2000. It includes a mosque, conference rooms, and a library. There is also a primary school as well as a massive garden. The center hosts the family of the director, the imam, and more Saudi staff. It is currently the largest mosque in Latin America, as people mentioned to me with an element of pride. The 3.5 hectares in the chic Palermo neighborhood, where the center is located, were donated by the then Argentine president Carlos Menem in 1995 (Clarín 2000), who incidentally is a son of Syrian migrants, but who had converted to Catholicism to become president. With this large space available, they were
able to build the center with the mosque facing Mecca. Those spatial possibilities illustrate the center’s resources, as all other mosques were built within existing streets rather than receiving open spaces. Therefore, the direction of Mecca did not always coincide with the pre-existing layouts of the built environments at other mosques.

The first day I attended the mosque was during one of the monthly Saturday seminars for new Muslims. I had spent the whole day there, and as I was just beginning to speak Spanish, I was exhausted from the constant flow of information and lack of food. When we walked out from the classroom, two long tables had been set up on opposite sides of the hall. I sat down with the women and we were served a delicious meal. I ate it all without thinking about its cost. I thought this had been a special occasion, but as I returned the next day, I realized we were served dinner again. Throughout the year, meals are served twice every Friday and once on Sundays before or after the classes. During special events, such as the seminar for new Muslims or the end of Ramadan celebration, ʿĪd al-Fitr, food was also provided for all participants. A chef is employed fulltime, and all meals are provided free of charge throughout the year. During the month of Ramadan, people would also gather at the mosque to break the fast. First, directly at sunset, they were given water and dates before the prayer. After that, a big feast was served every single night during the whole month, serving around two hundred men and women.

Being sponsored by the Saudi government, this mosque is extremely wealthy. Much of the mosque’s effort is spent on spreading information about Islam. As most people would gather at the mosque on Fridays for the jumuʿa, two one-hour classes were held every Friday as well as an hour every Sunday night. During my time frequenting the mosque, the center began offering daily Qur’an recitation classes, as well as calligraphy classes every Saturday night. The latter was frequented by an equal number of non-Muslims and Muslims. I observed that this was the only time within the Saudi mosque that non-Muslims and Muslims would interact. The course was cancelled after a few times though, as the teacher became sick. Arabic classes with two levels were taught on a four-month basis. This course was the only one that required payment, while all other services were free of charge. On a monthly basis, the mosque organized a youth day to promote Islam, a family day, and a seminar for new Muslims. The center also gave out free books and information pamphlets. Those combined

---

7 All Islamic prayers have to be performed facing Mecca.
doctrinal arguments with practical advice for everyday concerns (Mahmood 2005:80). There was also a library within the center as there were many resources devoted to the spread of Islam. All other Islamic institutions I visited used and handed out books and pamphlets produced by the Saudi mosque.

The Sufi Derga

Commonly, Sufism is known as the mystical branch of Islam. Despite the shortcomings of such a brief description (Ernst 1997: xvii), I cannot attempt to give Sufism the full overview it deserves. A particular aspect of Sufism is the importance placed on meditation practice, *dhikr*, which takes shape as a recitation (1997:92). Sufism is divided into many orders that are “spiritual techniques” passed on through a community rather than closed entities (1997:122). Those orders grew in the eleventh century to fill the social and religious gaps of the Arab Empire of the Caliphate (1997:125). During the twelfth and thirteenth century, orders became organized as groups with specific teachings, linked back to a famous figure considered to be its founder, whose religious authority is passed to a successor (1997:127-128). At the Sufi derga, a wall was filled with pictures of the main leading shaykh\(^8\) of the order living in Istanbul.

Their religious space was often referred to me as their derga. The derga was far more modest and smaller than its Saudi counterpart. Located on the second and third floors of a house above a small shop, it was almost invisible from the streets. Apart from a small sign on the door, it was practically impossible to know of its presence. Divided into two levels, the first one was established as a prayer hall. On the second floor, there was a small kitchen as well as a large open room with couches along one side. Every Thursday evening, people would gather for the sunset prayer, *salat al-magrib*, and stay for a few hours. Usually we shared a dinner, which was organized by members of the derga – two people per dinner on a rotating basis – and paid for through the expected donations of the members attending. Men and women ate separately. After the common dinner, they would then perform the *dhikr*. *Dhikr* stands for “recollection” in Arabic, which is in reference to God and his commands (Ernst 1997:92). *Dhikr* is practiced by all Muslims through repeating Allah’s names or expressions with reference to Allah. In Sufism, members gather together and perform it in a ritualized manner.

---

\(^8\) The term shaykh is here applied to refer to an Islamic leader. In the case of Sufism, a shaykh is also considered a spiritual master (Geoffroy 2012).
Due to a lack of space to create the gender segregation required in Islam properly, the atmosphere of the derga was less formal that the one I encountered at the Saudi mosque, and I was thus able to get to know men here as well.\(^9\) Men and women prayed and ate in the same room, though on different sides of it. Again, this was due to the spatial restrictions rather than a wish to mix men and women. Still, this set-up offered a less strict environment and opportunities to discuss with men as well women. Estebán and Rafael were two young men I met there. Both had converted and were well read in mythology, history, and religion. They were spiritual and curious young men, who were eager to talk to me. Rafael was married to a non-Muslim, which was common among the male converts frequenting the Sufi derga. The non-Muslim partner was always welcomed to join, as I was too. One Ramadan evening after meeting at the derga, I walked towards the bus with Esteban and Noor, an Argentine convert who had chosen to take an Islamic name.\(^10\) Noor offered to go and have a coffee rather than go straight home. The three of us went to a café and they explained many aspects of the order and Islam in general. Estebán is highly knowledgeable and told me that Sufism is a tough path within Islam. There is a strict hierarchical social order with clear statuses to be followed by all members. Accordingly, the shaykh decides what is correct for one or not. This is not directly practiced in their derga in Argentina, but Estebán explained that in Turkey, if one’s shaykh does not want you to do something, such as leaving for a holiday, you are expected to cancel your plans. The relation between a Sufi master and his disciple, and obeying the master are highly important in Sufism (Ernst 1997:124). Estebán traveled to Turkey and converted there.

In a corner of the room on the second floor, there was a computer. I mention this, as the computer was an important tool to communicate with their shaykh. The current leading shaykh for the Sufi derga is an Argentine man living in the United States (US). As such, every Thursday evening, the members of the derga set up a Skype appointment with him. The discussion usually began with some personal and warm questions to people the shaykh could see, followed by a class on Islam. Sufism follows a strict hierarchical order and another man acts as the shaykh in the leader’s absence. Here, a man by the name of Santiago took on this

\(^9\) Despite this insightful possibility, I spent much more time with the women here, too.

\(^10\) Upon conversion, many would choose an Islamic name in order to fit into their new identity. I discuss this further in chapter two.
role. Santiago is a young man who dedicates himself to a strict pious lifestyle. He is also a convert, but he has traveled to Istanbul many times.

**Key Informants**

On Thursday evenings, I left my apartment early in order to get to the Sufi derga. Yet, every time, most of the members had already arrived before me. Walking up the stairs, one enters the prayer hall. Mariam and Nesrin were usually already seated in the back and they always got up to greet me with two kisses on the cheek. Mariam was soft-spoken and often joked kindly with others. Nesrin was older and had some administrative responsibilities at the derga. The men present welcomed me as well, and I often stood discussing with Rafael or Estebán. Julia was usually on the floor above, helping in the kitchen or watching over children. She was the wife of Santiago, the order’s on-location leading shaykh. Noor often arrived a bit late, sneaking in discreetly to head straight to the bathroom to fix her headscarf. Arriving to the Sufi derga was also a long journey for Anna and her daughter Leila. They lived just outside the city of Buenos Aires and had to catch a long bus ride in the middle of rush hour to get there. Leila was an incredibly sweet teenager who was close to her mother Anna. They were inseparable.

When visiting the Saudi mosque midday on a Friday, I usually arrived with Sara. As mentioned earlier, Sara was a convert in her mid-thirties. She was a pious Muslim and claimed ancestry to Syria. Helen and Valentina usually arrived early as well. They were also in their thirties, both divorced and with children. Helen had remarried to an Argentine convert. Fatima, Rashida, and Flor were among the elder women frequenting the Saudi mosque. Fatima and Rashida usually sat together talking or individually reading the Qur’an. Flor stayed in the mosque’s garden with her husband and arrived a bit late, the expected behavior from newlyweds. Gabriela and Rana also came with their husbands. The latter had recently moved to Buenos Aires from Egypt, and she always left right after the congregational prayer. Gabriela was young and had converted after meeting her Syrian husband. They had lived in another province for a longer period, so she had just recently begun frequenting the Saudi mosque. I eventually discovered that Camila and Hala sat in the back of the main prayer hall, closer to their husbands. ¹¹ Camila had an imposing character, which gave her a

¹¹ As long as they stayed in the back, women were allowed in the main prayer hall.
certain aura of authority. Hala was her good friend, and they never seemed to sit more than a few chairs apart. Other women arrived later, as they could not take Friday afternoon off work, such as Martina or Naima. Maria arrived at about three in the afternoon, usually with her youngest child. Maria had a calm personality and most women felt comfortable confiding in her. Samaa joined after spending the afternoon caring for her mother. I got to know about thirty young women all together. Apart from three women, all of them were either Argentine or Latina converts. Arguably, this was also due to my choice of locations.

Methodology, Languages, and my Role in the Field
This research is based on fieldwork undertaken from February to August 2015 in Buenos Aires. I planned my stay around the holy month of Ramadan, which in 2015, occurred from June eighteenth to July seventeenth. Prior to departure, I had plans to complete a structured research, with interviews and recorded talks. I also wished to use film as a research medium. As I gained more access to a world so different from my own, I decided to put such tools aside and follow the women. That is, I did not complete any formal interviews, but preferred a “deep hanging out” approach as coined by Geertz (1998). Therefore, despite not being completely able to grasp the full meaning of participant observation prior to my research, my understanding of it eventually grew. I discovered how fieldwork is “a process of physical labor, bodily interaction, sensory learning” (Okely 2012:107). Spending much time in the mosques had both positive and negative impacts. Many women showed gratitude that I spent so much time with them, rather than discarding them after a short while. On the other side, towards the end of my fieldwork, some women at the Saudi mosque became frustrated that I still had not converted. In their eyes, I had learned enough to understand that it was the right path for me, and by not converting, I lessened the respect I showed to Islam.

With a focus on such a gender-segregated religion, my access within the religious institutions was mostly restricted to the women’s worlds. I was allowed to join the women in their side of the mosque or in their individual prayer room, and I ate my meals with them. But as I mentioned earlier, gender is relational, and I cannot look at women without including men. I highlight throughout this thesis how gender is a set of relations between men and women. Here, the women navigated between machismo and ideals of Islamic masculinities on a daily basis. In addition, all classes on Islam that I attended were taught in mixed settings. On these occasions, I often saw what men wondered and asked about. Overall, except in certain
specific contexts, I discovered and learned mostly from spending time with the women and their children.

Finally, it is worth noting that a lot of time was geared towards writing out my fieldnotes, which as Judith Okely puts it, turns into a “double work shift” after spending time with informants (Okely 2012:78). I also used the opportunity to understand as much as possible of everyday life in Buenos Aires. If the religious institutions became my field, I had to understand the broader context, here meaning the urban environment of Buenos Aires. I spent a considerable amount of time outside the two religious institutions, either with my informants or alone.

*Determining the Field*

As mentioned above, I chose two religious institutions, the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga, as the main stages to my fieldwork. I alternated between those two locations. However, even though I commuted between multiple sites, this is not a multi-sited ethnography as offered by George Marcus (1995). Montenegro argues that Islam in Argentina is “diverse and fragmented” due to contrasting practices offered by the different Islamic institutions (Montenegro 2015:88). I argue that, rather, the combination of two institutions offer the possibility to view the nuances of a religion as it expresses itself in the Argentine context. I here find Mahmood’s (2001) approach relevant. When looking at different understandings of Islam in Cairo, Mahmood argues that conventional behavior varies not only across different historical contexts, but also within the same “cultural milieu” (2001:834). The two institutional frames of the Sufi derga and the Saudi mosque follow different paths within Islam. Yet, I would argue that both the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga are positioned under the broader structure of Islam in Argentina, within the same contextual frame, and in Mahmood’s words, the same cultural milieu. Therefore, the two institutions represent a common field with some diverging practices rather than two distinct entities, and flows in between the different institutions are not uncommon.

*A non-Muslim in the Mosques*

Prior to my departure to the field, I had considered the fact that conducting research in an Islamic setting as a non-Muslim could set certain limits to my access. I presented my faith as it is, namely born a Christian, but with some uncertainties. I had not anticipated to meet as
many converts to Islam, which proved to create completely different social dynamics than I had anticipated. Most women perceived me as what they used to be prior to becoming Muslim, that is, spiritually lost. In this way, I became a subject that needed to be fixed and an object on their agenda: Many insisted on showing me the path to Islam. The efforts to convert me were kindhearted, yet it felt tiring at times to be confronted with this issue as often as I was. I was unable to give a good answer as to why I would not convert, which is probably why most continued their religious daʿwa. I felt like this issue gradually got “in the way” of my research. Only after a while did I realize the importance of those uncomfortable situations. Through their individual ways of trying to convince, I discovered what each woman saw as a valid reason to convert to Islam. By taking a step back from the situation, I also discovered how far I let the women stretch my patience. But in the same way, as anthropologists, we push the boundaries of our informants by involving ourselves in their life as fully as we do. This tension is worth highlighting, as it became a part of my daily life during fieldwork. The religious proselytism described here was more present at the Saudi mosque. At the Sufi derga, all were aware that I was not Muslim, but no one ever tried to convince me of converting to Islam. I realized that it was assumed that I would focus on my research rather than my own spiritual quest. Nesrin, a woman central to the everyday running of the Sufi derga, told me of an Argentine anthropology student who had previously spent time with them and written about Muslim communities in the city. I discovered that we operated from opposite points of departure: He was an Argentine Muslim man who was already frequenting the mosques in the city. I, on the other hand, arrived as a non-Muslim foreigner.

Some women were initially surprised by my research interests, and why those were not translated into personal interests. My credibility came from having previously lived in several Islamic countries and having spent two years learning Arabic. Based on this, all women saw my research interests as genuine and thought me capable of appreciating Islam rather than judging their ways. The women were especially surprised that I had come all the way from Norway to look at Islam in Buenos Aires, out of all the places in the world. At the same time, it gave them a sense of importance.

Finally, despite having a partner, I was considered single, in opposition to married. I will therefore use the idea of “single” in its emic sense, namely as non-married. Marriage proved to be an important aspect of the women’s discussions. Some married women whose husbands were also frequenting the same institution were usually more private and would often gather
together, or meet their husbands during the time in between prayers. Although there was no clear-cut separation between married or single women, I observed some level of groups forming based on the women’s marital status in both locations.

*The Time in Between Prayers*

A few months after returning from the field, during a cold winter afternoon in Oslo, I sat thinking about the temporal dimension of my fieldwork. As mentioned earlier, both the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga offered many activities. The two religious institutions were easy to combine for me as a researcher, as they had their main attendance on different days. At the Saudi mosque, where I most often spent my Fridays, the *jumuʿa* began around 13:00. After that, we had two classes on Islam, lunch and dinner, and the last three daily obligatory prayers spread throughout the day. At the Sufi derga, the structure was similar, yet involved a shorter time span. I realized that, despite these activities having taught me a lot and showing me what was at stake for most converts, the time in between formal activities proved to be the most relevant. The waiting until the next prayer or class either at the institutions or right outside was when women discussed what they did not want to discuss with their families, who were often non-Muslim, or during the classes mixed with men. In my notion of “the time in between prayers,” I include all free time spent within the mosque or at nearby cafés, as well as the shared meals. I will use this conception of time throughout my thesis.

*Lost in Translation*

I spent five weeks taking Spanish classes in the beginning of my stay. Being fluent in French accelerated the learning process and I was quickly able to understand most of what was being said. There are always some nuances that will be lost when hearing a new language, and in some classes due to, for instance, an unknown topic or a mumbling man, I found myself lost in some explications of suras of the Qurʾan. Some of the women were fluent in French or English, and they were always eager to discuss issues in those languages with me. Those two languages were important and as I later discovered, greatly appropriated and used on social media by my female informants.

Arabic also turned out to be a significant language during my fieldwork. It is considered the only pure language of Islam, and as we were told in a class in the Saudi mosque, when looking at a copy of the Qurʾan in English, it is not a translation of the Qurʾan, but rather a
translation of the meaning of the Qur’an, as its true translation is impossible. The language of the holy book cannot be translated in a perfect manner. Therefore, both religious institutions constantly promoted the need and imperative to learn Arabic in order to fully understand Islam, and both offered Arabic courses. The prayers cannot be translated, one has to learn the Arabic version, only phonetically if need be. At the Saudi mosque, the classes on Islam were given by a shaykh. However, due to a constant restructuring of the center, there was no shaykh present during most of my fieldwork. So instead, the center’s director often took on other responsibilities such as leading the classes. He was from Saudi Arabia and did not speak any Spanish. He was therefore always accompanied by an Argentine staff member who translated. I was sometimes surprised by the length of the Arabic sentences compared to the Spanish translation, and every now and then, I managed to pick up words in Arabic that were not translated into Spanish. The general point was obviously not left aside, but I wondered how many elements were being omitted. In between prayers, a woman once told me that so much disappears in the process of translation. She mentioned the classes on Islam and told me to picture just how much was lost in the translation from Arabic to Spanish.

Ethical Considerations

The Islamic scene in Buenos Aires is today still rather modest in size. Therefore, I have given the different religious institutions new names. I also anonymize every individual I met to the best of my capacity. In some cases, I suspect that anonymization is not enough. In those situations, I use the concept of sister as a tool to further disguise my informants in the discussion. I also became close friends with some of the women. Therefore, some material acquired in discussions with them was confided to me as a friend. As the boundary between researcher and friend became blurred, I have decided to exclude information that was given to me in such a confidential manner.

As mentioned above, most women at the Saudi mosque assumed that I would eventually convert to Islam myself. I realized that some took it for granted that I had already done so after spending so much time at the mosque. I often had to remind the women gently that I had actually not converted. Finally, I am aware of the ethical implications of my own positioning. Islam is today often portrayed in the western media as a threat to the world. Especially when looking at gender relations, Muslim women are considered as objects of oppression (Abu-Lughod 2002). Arriving as a non-Muslim white woman, however, I was not there to tell the
women to unveil. Despite not being interested in converting to Islam myself, I regard Islam and Muslims with deep respect.

**Structure of the Thesis**

In order to illustrate the daily life of converts to Islam in Buenos Aires, I explore the diverse dimensions which I discovered to be relevant to the women with whom I spent my time. As mentioned in this chapter, the 2001 financial crisis impacted much of the women’s everyday life. Therefore, I keep the crisis as a thread that runs throughout this thesis to demonstrate the financial situation and its impacts. In the next chapter, I begin with the religious conversion itself. I shortly explain the ambitions behind and the social context of a conversion. I illustrate the ways of ritual conversion, before looking at how Islam becomes embodied and practiced by the women. I point to issues that proved to become an important part of the women’s lives, namely a reconfiguration of the body. In order to do so, my informants often emphasized their new understanding of health and of modesty. I then move from the individual women to the communities of women in chapter three. I argue that Islam provides a new arena to reconfigure sociabilities. On the one hand, women negotiate sociabilities around the Islamic ideal of sisterhood, and on the other, Islam also provides the basis for forging marriages. I will illustrate these topics in light of Carsten’s (1995) concept of relatedness. In chapter four, I look at religious piety and the women’s aspirations to become good Muslims while exploring how new concepts of morality were adopted. New practices are seen in light of the two different approaches of the Saudi mosque and the Sufi order. In this chapter, the nuances between ideals and practices become visible among the women. Finally, in the last chapter, I reflect on all these topics – religious conversion, relatedness, and religious piety – by exploring Islam as a global force.
Chapter Two – Religious Conversion and Reworked Femininities

This chapter consists of a two-part discussion around religious conversion and its effects on the women’s lives. In the first section, I begin by exploring religious conversion. There is no Arabic word for conversion, but rather, the understanding of conversion revolves around the idea of submitting oneself to God (Jawad 2006:154). At both the Sufi derga and the Saudi mosque, the act of converting was explained in the Spanish phrase “embrasar el Islam”, meaning “to embrace Islam.” In order to make sense of the complexity of conversion, I use the conversion model offered by Lewis C. Rambo (1993). His model offers quite a bit of flexibility, and I will return to the different stages Rambo describes throughout the chapter. I also build on earlier research on gender and conversion to Islam. Focusing on women’s conversion to Islam has over the last months shown me how tense the topic is. Gender and Islam are two highly contested concepts, especially when viewed together (Jansen 2006: ix). Ten years after Willy Jansen pointed this out, there is still a lot of controversy around the terms, yet I argue that by looking at a new contextual framework, Argentina, the situation may present itself rather differently. After broadly defining conversion and approaches to it, I will explore different dimensions of the conversion.

In the second part of the chapter, religious conversion provides an entry point to look at how Islam becomes embodied and practiced by women in Buenos Aires. Karin van Nieuwkerk argues that religious conversion becomes embodied by the individual by incorporating new bodily practices, such as praying, fasting and new dietary habits (2006a:4). In this way, conversion can be operated as an entry point to explore identity reworkings. The individual body is central in this process. In order to understand this involvement, I want to look at the manners in which the body is conceived. That is, I want to look at the types of bodies the women actively discuss and debate. I argue that the women reworked their own body through new feminine ideals of a modest body and a healthy body to fit what Le Renard calls a “model of Islamic femininity,” namely, femininity in accordance to Islam (2014:29).

Approaches to Religious Conversion

How can conversion with all its layers be investigated? It can be useful to approach it as a “complex social phenomenon” rather than a personal spiritual process (Jansen 2006: ix). In order to shed light on the conversion itself, I here use Rambo’s conversion model (1993), in which he orders conversion as a process consisting of seven different stages that a convert
goes through, namely: Context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. Each conversion takes place within a dynamic context (1993:20). First, the individual experiences some sort of crisis. There are different types of crises, which can vary in severity, but have to be explored within the broader conversion process, rather than as individual events (1993:46). Then, one embarks on a quest, which is the process of meaning-making (1993:56). The next stage, namely encounter, implies a meeting with a religious advocate (1993:66). Rambo further argues that after encountering a religious group, the interaction with the community usually increases (1993:102). Committing to the new religion is, he argues, a turning point in the conversion process, which is often performed as a public ritual (1993:124). Finally, the convert faces a variety of complex consequences as a result of conversion (1993:142). Rambo’s model is offered as a means to order data rather than as a universal set of criteria, in which the stages are “interactive and cumulative elements,” and thus leaves room for manoeuver (1993:17). Rather than being a strict linear model, it offers room to move between the seven stages. Therefore, the conversion process can greatly vary among individuals. Rambo’s model has been criticized for its broad, multi-disciplinary, and all-including ambition (Machalek 1994:193; Blanchard 1994:738; Lofland 1994:100) and was criticized for the failure to include the convert’s gender and age (Gooren 2007:345), which are all discernible constraints. At the same time, as I will show, it is also problematic to delimitate the different stages. Yet I also view the openness of Rambo’s model as an advantage in order to explore and structure the conversions. This model is good to think with if one wants to make sense of the conversion, and the stages offered break down the conversion into a tangible process. At the same time, I do not argue that all conversions fit into one model. One cannot expect to find a prototype convert, as all converts come from a heterogeneous group of people (van Nieuwkerk 2006a:3).

Anthropological research on conversion to Islam has been given attention in an American context, with a focus on conversion among African-American communities (Rouse 2004). Studies have also illustrated conversions to Islam in the Solomon Islands (McDougall 2009), Spain (Rogozen-Soltar 2012), Britain (Köse 1994), or Germany (Özyürek 2015). In 1993, Rambo argued that there was still little research available on women’s experiences of conversion (1993:174). This topic has been given more attention over time. Conversion to Islam and gender has been written about mostly in a Western context. McGinty (2006) analyzes narratives of conversion among Swedish and American women. In 2006, the edited volume “Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West” by van Nieuwkerk
Van Nieuwkerk argues that there are two main approaches to gender and conversion to Islam (2006a:10). The first approach attends to conversion and the building of new identities, while the second considers discourses and narratives produced within the Muslim communities (2006a:10). Both approaches are valuable in order to study conversion, especially to explore the embodiment of new social and religious practices (2006a:11). Although I do not focus on the creation of conversion narratives here, aspects of both approaches are applied. I explore the women’s identity reworking processes, which I prefer to the idea of creating a new identity as offered by van Nieuwkerk (2006a:10). At the same time, I highlight Islamic discourses that shape how new practices are embodied.

In line with earlier studies on conversion, I define it as a process, rather than an event (Rambo 1993; McGinty 2006; van Nieuwkerk 2006a; Bourque 2006). Instead of viewing conversion mainly as an act or a ritual, a processual approach toward conversion opens up space for a broader understanding of its significances and the individual trajectories of the converts. This approach also is in line with the women’s own perceptions of their conversion and their conversion narratives. Finally, before turning to the attraction of Islam for the converts, some dimensions can be highlighted. Any attempts to theorize conversions based only on the sociocultural and political context, and without reference to the convert’s actual religious interests, can result in a reductionist picture (Rambo 1993:10; Rogozen-Soltar 2012:613). Such a point of view was echoed by Helen, a woman frequenting the Saudi mosque who had previously studied anthropology herself. In Helen’s view, social sciences failed to capture and appreciate the individual religious experience and belief. In respect for the individual experience of Helen and all other converts, I place the convert’s agency centrally. The notions of power and history are worth mentioning here, as it is fundamental to place the conversions within their specific historical contexts (Rambo 1993:11-12; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991). In addition, it is also fruitful to view the power relations between the particular religions (Jansen
2006: x). What other elements are central in a study of conversion? I here want to highlight some dimensions further, namely the concepts of agency and religious revivalism.

_A Note on Agency_

Before going any further, I want to pause on the concept of agency. Abu-Lughod argues that much literature on Muslim women has been focused on disproving women’s passivity (Abu-Lughod 1989:291). As women are often portrayed as passive victims of Islam, voluntary female conversions to the religion might come as a surprise. Therefore, I argue that the concept of agency is a relevant concern to this research. Studies of gender and Islam can put women’s agency in line with resistance, such as Abu-Lughod’s (1986) study of Bedouin women in Egypt. The edited volume on women’s conversion to Islam in the West I rely on here also places attention on the individual agency of the converts. That is, the women’s decision to convert and their ways of further diffusing Islamic knowledge becomes the research’s main topic (Jansen 2006: xi). In a similar way, I place women’s agency at the heart of this research. I follow Sherry Ortner’s (2006) approach to the concept, who shows how in the context of early nineteenth century German tales, agency or a lack thereof was asserted through the notions of activity and passivity (Ortner 2006:140). In line with Abu-Lughod, a connection between women’s practices and passivity is established. In order to define agency, Ortner divides it into two forms, namely the agency of power, where there is dominance and resistance, and the agency of culturally established projects, with a focus on intentions and aspirations (2006:144). She argues that breaking the concept apart is useful in order to explore how the two elements articulate with each other again (2006:153). As power relations are intertwined, I focus on agency as a cultural project, namely the women’s desires to convert to Islam. The relevance of a discussion of agency seen in light of modesty among Muslim women is equally important. Therefore, I will return to the concept in the second part of this chapter.

_Religious Revivalism and Conversion_

The secularization thesis, namely that a diminished importance of religion and a growing secularization would grow alongside modernity, has been refuted (Bowen 1998:3; Hylland Eriksen 2007:133). The current importance of religion paints quite another picture. Shortly, to

---

12 This is a position Abu-Lughod herself later criticized (1990).
assume a disenchantment of the world, to borrow the Marxian term, was quite premature. The recent spread of Islam is due to various Islamic movements, which I will discuss further in chapter five. For now, it is worth noting that religious conversion does not happen in a vacuum, but rather it is simultaneously shaped by various factors, be they political, economic, or social, occurring on local, national, or global levels. That is, Islamic revivalist movements, which are often considered to be a reaction against modernity, can rather be seen as an expression of it (Lapidus 1997:444). Various global movements of Islamic revivalism are at play in the context of Buenos Aires. Both the Sufi derga and the Saudi mosque are incorporated into broader Islamic movements, which create and form ideas of religious piety that I discuss further in chapter four. I argue that the effect of such revivalist movements are important dimensions to be considered in the women’s conversions to Islam, and how Islam becomes embodied by them. These movements will be explored in chapter five.

**The Attraction of Islam: Context and Crisis of Conversion**

I here return to Rambo’s model. The first two stages he describes are “context” and “crisis.” As I mentioned earlier, the model is not linear, and there is room to navigate between the stages. Therefore, I begin by exploring the stage of crisis. It is described by Rambo as a catalyst for change and includes different types of crises, such as near-death experiences, illness, or a search for something more important in everyday life (Rambo 1993:48-55). Yet a single crisis should not be seen individually though, but in light of cumulative events and processes (1993:46). In the next stage, Rambo divides context into a macro- and micro framework (1993:21). In my own research, the macrocontext consisted, among other things, of a recent economic crisis affecting Argentina. Most women came from a middle to lower social class and, with the unstable financial situation in the country, economic uncertainty affected the women’s intimate lives significantly. The microcontext, on the other hand, refers to an individual’s more immediate setting, which shapes one’s identity and a feeling of belonging (1993:22).

---

13 He later added another subdivision of the context, namely the mesocontext, which refers to which mediates between the two other types (Rambo & Farhadian 1999:24-25).

14 As I did not meet the women prior to them visiting one of the mosques, I have no observations of their life prior to Islam. Therefore, I have less information about the individual microcontexts of each woman, which shaped their search for another religion.
When in Buenos Aires, I discovered that religious affiliation is not included in the national censuses, and there is therefore a lack of reliable data on the amount of Muslims in Argentina. In a study of institutional Islam in Buenos Aires, Montenegro argues that numbers range from 450,000 to 700,000 according to the different Islamic institutions, shaykhs, and Muslims she met (Montenegro 2015:86). Also, as people convert, some leave their newfound religion after a while. Such changing opinions and religious practices complicate the possibility to define a convert (Allievi 2006:144). Earlier research indicates that the ratio of female converts to Islam is much higher than men’s, which is mostly due to conversion of women who have married Muslim men (Jawad 2006:153; Bourque 2006:237; Özyürek 2015:1). This was also the common assumption when non-Muslims heard about my own research,15 but the majority of the women I met were actually single or divorced.

At this point, the most burning question concerning conversions in the context I studied is: Why do women convert to Islam? Why are women drawn to Islam, when they so often are portrayed as victims of it?16 There are various theorizations regarding the reasons for women to convert to Islam. I here want to highlight some of these attempts. Two basic reasons are suggested by Allievi (2006) and Bourque (2006), namely marriage and the intellectual appeal of Islam, or as Stefano Allievi has coined it, “relational and rational conversion.” Haifaa Jawad further complicates this; she keeps marriage as one option, but dismantles other motivations behind conversion into two main reasons: The simple religious message provided by Islam and the moral structure the religion entails (Jawad 2006:156-157). Others emphasize the fact that Islam provides everyday structure and moral boundaries (Haddad 2006:35; Wohlrab-Sahr 2006:80; Simmons 2006:182). Yvonne Haddad (2006) nuances the different reasons discussed so far. Rather than viewing marriage as the central relation for conversion, she views a meeting with a Muslim as equally important (Haddad 2006:27). Haddad also addresses the need for boundaries such as a need for clear gender roles, or the desire to restructure everyday life in face of Western moral corrosion (Haddad 2006:33-35). Further, in line with others, she emphasizes the importance given to community and family bonds in

15 The common assumption here is in reference to informal discussions while in Argentina or after coming back from fieldwork.
16 The victimization of Muslim women is well illustrated by Abu-Lughod (2002), as well as by Hirschkind & Mahmood (2002).
Islam (Haddad 2006:32; Wohlrab-Sahr 2006:80; Simmons 2006:182). In short, a variety of individual choices and conditions can lead to a religious conversion.

In sum, it is difficult to theorize the reasoning behind a conversion. As these examples show, many factors are intertwined in a woman’s decision. The reasons presented above also show how intertwined the two stages of crisis and content are. An intellectual appeal to Islam, which in Rambo’s terminology consists of a crisis (as a search for more meaning in life) shows how attention to the context can be directly relevant, for example because of Western moral corrosion, or indirectly, because of the need for social mobility within a community. Many of the considerations mentioned so far are equally relevant in Buenos Aires. Many women expressed dissatisfaction with Catholicism, and told me that they needed another religious path to provide support they did not encounter at church. Also, some distanced themselves from what they considered a problematic approach to monotheism expressed in the Trinity and the heightened status of Jesus in Catholicism (Jawad 2006:157). A minority of the women I met had converted after marrying a Muslim man, although for some, an initial meeting with a Muslim opened the process of discovering Islam. Many had on some level gone through some sort of life changing experience prior to their conversion. Most had previously been married and gone through a divorce. Others had endured illness. The women never saw those situations as the underlying reason for their conversion. Still, I would argue that traumatic or difficult experiences have opened new spaces for the women to reconsider how they are living their lives. As I mentioned, the Argentine macrocontext was among other things shaped by economic instability after the 2001 crisis. Most women frequenting the Saudi mosque were of lower social classes and economic instability affected them on a daily basis. I argue that the broader financial crisis is an important underlying factor. Again, this highlights how intricately connected the context and crisis stages are: personal crises can also be affected by the broader financial crisis (the macrocontext).

The bases for a conversion are thus many, and as Rambo puts it: “Affiliating with a group and subscribing to a philosophy may offer nurture, guidance, a focus for loyalty, and a framework for action” (1993:2). When discussing the appeal of Islam, the notion implies a singular Islam (van Nieuwkerk 2006a:7). I have already mentioned the variety of motivations of converts earlier, and thus, with the differences among them, it becomes constraining to view Islam as having one appeal for all. Van Nieuwkerk argues that rather, it is exactly the religion’s broad range of options – religious, ideological, or its orthopraxy – that attracts so many converts.
(2006a:7). So the reasons for conversion are variable, individual, and at times difficult to grasp. To return to my question of why women convert, there is not one clear answer. Rather, various reasonings and strategies illustrate the women’s agency.

The Ritual Commitment: Becoming a Muslim

The commitment ritual itself is an easy process; one has to declare the shahāda, the testimony of faith to Allah only and accept Mohammed as his messenger. Throughout my time in Buenos Aires, I witnessed the conversion process many times. Sometimes, the convert is asked why he or she is converting and how they had discovered Islam. The responses vary from walking past this mosque, or reading about Islam during one’s studies. The converts are seldom accompanied by a spouse or family member. To begin with, the director or shaykh present pronounces the shahāda word for word, with the person converting repeating after him, attempting to pronounce correctly in Arabic. Miguel, a dedicated mosque staff who is himself a convert, explains its signification. Every time, after the person converts, or in their words, embraces Islam, the women or men present are told to welcome their new sister or brother, as men and women refer to themselves and other Muslims in these terms. The women are then expected to walk up to their new sister, give her a hug, and congratulate her on finding the right way (as the men were expected to do with a new brother). Sometimes, the newly converted starts crying of relief, while others have a more nonchalant attitude. The conversion ritual was performed in this manner every time I witnessed it. Its procedure is rather simple and straightforward. All conversions I witnessed were at the Saudi mosque. I was not present during any conversions at the Sufi derga. Instead, two visiting men from another Argentine province who were already practicing Muslims (also converts) joined the order while I was there. They were given a small white hat that all men at the Sufi derga were wearing. It is often recognized that Sufism provides the most common entry point to Islam for converts (Allievi 2006:123; Haddad 2006:37; Jawad 2006:159). In Buenos Aires, on the other hand, the situation as I experienced it was quite different. I argue that the Saudi mosque’s prominence and visibility often made it an easy first meeting point with Islam for Porteños.

During my fieldwork, I noticed that there was a lack of a female authority figure both within the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga. When it comes to a woman embracing Islam, Miguel

17 One is also expected to be able to make the decision to convert individually and shall not be forced into it.
tells the other sisters that they are responsible to teach her everything feminine. The first time I heard that, I was surprised and wondered how this would actually work; most women frequenting the mosque had converted recently as well. Few of them are prepared to teach another woman what they themselves are still learning. This process, however, I discovered, proved to create affinities among the women and by discovering their path together, the sisters often became closer. This is something I discuss at length in chapter three.

Consequences: Embodiment of Conversion

In this second part of the chapter, I take the ritual of women’s religious conversion commitment as my point of departure. This is not to devalue the meanings and situations I described above before the ritual. Rather, I argue that the ritual provides an interesting starting point to observe Rambo’s stage of consequences. From that instant onwards, one is considered a Muslim and part of a new community. Rambo defines three types of consequences: sociocultural and historical, psychological, and theological consequences (1993:142). Although all three forms are relevant, I here interpret the concept of consequences in a different manner. I focus on the embodiment of Islam and bodily consequences of the religious conversion. As shown so far, the ritual of conversion itself is an easy procedure, but it also opens a long and challenging process: reshaping one’s identity. I want to stress the individual body in light of Islam. How is the body negotiated and on what terms? What new practices are embodied? I argue that the body becomes a crucial site to rework one’s feminine identity.

Practices of Islam

Religious devotion through practice was constantly highlighted by the women and in classes as fundamental in order to comprehend fully and appreciate Islam. Identity reworkings are shaped by new practices of the body (Bourque 2006:242). As I mentioned in the introduction, embodying the practices that concern praying, fasting and new dietary habits are central dimensions of a woman’s conversion (van Nieuwkerk 2006a:4). Such practices, as well as new clothing and ways of acting around men, which are linked to Islam play an important role in the everyday life of becoming a Muslim (Bourque 2006:240).

I further explore the performance of the five daily prayers, salat. This performative act was embodied and practiced by all Muslims of the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga. But for some
women, prayers were difficult to integrate into everyday working life, and they did not know how to proceed without the guidance of an imam. In chapter four, I give an outline of the detailed attention given to the prayer in both religious institutions, but here I explore its effect on the body. The prayer is a complicated bodily process of a “fixed body of formulas” (Ernst 1997:86). There is no room for innovation, as only one way is sunna, that is, the way the prophet Mohammed did. It is constituted by recitation of parts of the Qur’an in Arabic and involves a series of different body positions. Between postures, one goes back into a sitting position on folded legs, which over time becomes painful. At the Sufi derga, Santiago taught us that discipline was required to become a good Muslim, which was needed to be able to sit over longer time in such a position. The prayer can be adapted to less painful positions for those in need though, for example by the use of chairs or pillows. Sara from the Saudi mosque and I suffer from the same back pains, and I know how painful it is for her to stand over longer periods of time. She is therefore allowed to sit instead. But she never did, preferring to show her devotion by standing through the pains. The amount of prayer is intensified during the holy month of Ramadan. After breaking the fast, supplicatory prayers, tarāwīh, were performed, lasting between an hour and ninety minutes. Some women would pick up a chair halfway through to relieve the pain. But continuing without any modification was seen as religious piety and beneficial. It is also worth mentioning that there are diverging gendered effects of conversion. Men are usually not easily recognizable as converts (Özyürek 2015:58). They can wear a beard or change their clothing, but it is a practice that gives rewards, rather than one that is expected (Allievi 2006:131).

An Islamic Name

After embracing Islam, the convert is considered born again from all sins. Becoming a new person could, if one chooses to, be accompanied by taking on an Islamic name, which marked a new beginning as a Muslim (van Nieuwkerk 2006a:4; Bourque 2006:239). The practice is not sunna, therefore not expected of converts to fulfill, and many abandon it after a while (Allievi 2006:125). Some converts decide not to take on an Islamic name to begin with, in order to avoid discrimination (Jawad 2006:155). Esra Özyürek shows how German converts proudly keep a German name as they wish not to be affiliated with communities of

18 The tarāwīh prayer are additional prayers performed throughout the month of Ramadan.
immigrants (2015:6). In Buenos Aires, I observed a fluid approach to this practice. Some chose to take on an Islamic name, while others did not, but also, many sisters alternated between their initial name and a chosen name upon conversion.

The Healthy Body

The other embodied practices van Nieuwkerk outlines, fasting and new dietary habits (2006a:4), are closely linked to what I describe as ideals of the healthy body. The dietary practices women embodied are related to the Islamic understanding of purity and impurity. Eating clean, halal, food is required by all Muslims. I often discussed food restrictions with Julia, the wife of current Sufi shaykh Santiago. Both follow a strict halal diet, despite the limitations this brings.

The practice I focus on here is the fast, ṣawm. Fasting is the most important practice of Ramadan, which is to be performed between sunrise and sunset. That is, Muslims are required to restrain from drinking, eating, and smoking during daylight hours. This practice impacts the body quite severely and some found it difficult to follow through. Many found the lack of water difficult to deal with and found themselves without energy to complete a day’s work. Many benefits were attributed to the fast, however. Every informant I talked to, except those with diseases such as diabetes or who were of older age, engaged in the fast. Two women at the Saudi mosque were pregnant during the fasting period and both followed it rigorously, despite the option not to fast. Health issues were often discussed in the period leading up to and during Ramadan. A personal condition made the issue of health quite present throughout my research. Having been diagnosed with celiac disease a few years ago, I stay away from gluten-containing food, typically bread, pasta, or cake. This was often misunderstood as a fear of gaining weight, but proved to open many discussions during shared meals about dieting and food habits both at the Sufi derga and the Saudi mosque. I discovered that the Qur’an provided an undisputed source of knowledge to the women. As I arrived at the Saudi mosque for the breaking of the fast one evening in the early month of Ramadan, Helen and Naima were walking towards the exit. Naima was covering her mouth with her scarf. She had a cold sore on her mouth and the side of her face was hurting. Helen went with her to look for honey. I asked if honey helped with mouth ulcers and Naima answered that there is a sura about the bees, indicating that honey is curative. Helen added that she drinks a glass of warm milk with honey every morning to avoid getting sick. The all-encompassing curative potential of honey was mentioned many times to me.

33
Health was perceived on different levels and was not limited to the physical body, but could also refer to a spiritual state. At the Saudi mosque, religious piety and devotion is seen as essential for a healthy lifestyle. At the Sufi derga, bodily discipline is central. Once during an evening class, Santiago discussed the importance of self-control. He argued that it is not a question of doing whatever one wants whenever she or he wants it; in order to follow a religious path, one has to be punctual, and there is a need for spiritual discipline. It is important to pray all prayers, wake up and go to bed early, and not to lose time on the Internet or watching TV. One should begin the morning by reading the Qur’an and meditate. Then, one has to go to work, spend time with the family, and pray. Similar to what I had heard at the Saudi mosque, he mentioned the importance of cleanliness and how it also constitutes a kind of spiritual work. He concluded with: “We [Muslims] have to search excellence in everything. We are not mediocre.” Looking at an American setting, Nancy Scheper-Hugues & Margaret Lock have looked at health as increasingly becoming an achievement rather than an attribute (1987:25). That is, one’s health is equal to the work put into it. In the context I studied, the ideal of a healthy body draws on a similar approach. The healthy body is in some way expected to be strictly disciplined, and one is to follow a routinized lifestyle to achieve this kind of excellence.

Fasting as Health, Fasting as an Issue

The practice of fasting has strong effects on the body. Despite the days being relatively short, the fast required a lot of energy. Amal struggled to find the energy to work without being able to eat and drink. Both at the Sufi derga and the Saudi mosque, all women who had a job kept going to work. Most hid from their colleagues that they were fasting and would come up with excuses for not joining during common breaks at the workplace. I argue that fasting can also shed light on some problematic issues. At the Saudi mosque, the issue of eating disorders was a factor for two sisters. One had been struggling with anorexia for years, while the other still suffered from bulimia. A clinical report from Turkey argues that Ramadan is a “cultural trigger” which can increase the possibility of eating disorders among teenagers (Akgül, Derman & Kanbur:2014). In the case of the two Argentine women, Ramadan cannot be understood as a cultural trigger, as the disorder existed prior to their conversion and contact with Islam. One evening during Ramadan, the sister struggling with bulimia explained that by fasting, she felt the urge to make herself sick again. However, I here see the fast as provoking embodied memories. Despite Ramadan not being a cultural trigger, the practice of fasting
evokes previous bodily practices that are difficult to relinquish.

**The Modest Body**

During my fieldwork, ideas of modesty and correct behavior were fundamental among converts to Islam at the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga. The female body is often constructed as a religious boundary (van Nieuwkerk 2006a:1), which has to be protected. Modesty of the female Muslim body is almost always situated in a discourse around clothing and linked to the hijab (Abu-Lughod 2002:785). In essence, the modest body should not be made more attractive than it is, but rather actively conceals beauty. The Qur’anic verse “And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts) and not to show off their adornment” (24.31) illustrates how the women are responsible for the purity of the relations between the sexes (Mahmood 2005:110). At the same time, understandings of modesty were interpreted differently among the women. It is thus worth mentioning here that interpretations of modesty and by extension the hijab are results of the women’s decision. Whether the hijab is used outside the Islamic spaces or not varies, but its appropriation is a result of women’s agency.

A conversion to Islam meant for many a reworking of modesty and what exactly clothes are meant to do. The hijab becomes the medium used to create and express modesty, which implies an inherent connection between a norm, modesty, and its shape, the hijab (Mahmood 2005:23.). Today, the use of hijab is often negatively portrayed in the media. There is much controversy around its use and it has become a symbol of oppression, both of women and of individual choice (Allievi 2006:120). Over the course of the six months that I spent in the city, I came across less than ten women covering their hair in the streets of Buenos Aires. It is not a common sight and for many converts, this sets certain limitations. None of the women from the Sufi derga wear the hijab outside Islamic spaces. Among the women frequenting the Saudi mosque, some also took it off outside the mosque, while others used it in public space. Some used it on a daily basis, while for others, it was more context specific. In this sense, the hijab is not only about one’s personal belief. Rather, it becomes a public attestation of an

---

19 The term hijab is the Arabic term for covering, but it has become used to refer to a specific style to wear a scarf. Between the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga, the women showed a variety of styles which are lost in the encompassing term hijab. Another option, the concept of a veil, is also commonly used, but it has more semantic implications that imply an idea of covering up (Allievi 2006:120).
Islamic faith (Bourque 2006:247; Haddad 2006:36). This type of declaration usually evoked reactions among Porteños. The converted sisters told me that it is usually Argentine women who comment on their veiling rather than men, who rather flirt or ask if they were not warm wearing the hijab. But many had experienced uncomfortable situations during which women would react negatively to the headscarf. The hijab challenges common approaches to modesty and thus immodesty among women in Argentina. When the Muslim converts altered their perception of a modest body, they viewed uncovered bodies as indecently exposed. In this way, non-Muslim women can feel criticized in their own conceptualization of modesty.20

Since 2011, women have been allowed to wear a veil on their national ID card in Argentina. Then Minister of Interior, Florencio Randazzo, promoted it as an effort to strengthen the freedom and culture of citizens (Infobae 2011). María made it a point to get her picture redone before the upcoming local elections. The hijab is a visual marker of the women’s religiosity, but for many it was also restricting in their daily lives. At the Saudi mosque, the topic led to a heated discussion during a lunch break after Ramadan in which the women present agreed that there is a need to unite for their rights. I asked about the ID-document law, but I was told that it was more of a superficial act and that the new law did not bring forward any actual change. The women viewed the 2011 law as nice façade, while the actual impact remains limited.

Access to Islamic clothing was restricted due to the economic situation and lack of organized communities.21 In an attempt to maintain the reserve of foreign currencies, the government introduced some limitations to online purchases from abroad (BBC 2014). As such, the cost of import taxes was too high and the bureaucracy involved in getting one package usually meant spending about half a day at the post office. Just as with goods available in the country, what was ordered from abroad was subject to high costs and difficulties. This was an issue for all online purchases. Therefore, the women applied different economic strategies to attain their ideals of modesty.

20 This final observation is based upon my own speculations, as I was not able to interview the women who had reacted negatively to the hijab.
21 By Muslim communities, I here refer to social spaces outside the mosques. Many women told me that there was a lack of stores, restaurants, and public spaces where they could “be Muslim” outside the religious institutions.
I met up with Sara on a Monday morning in the neighborhood of Belgrano, in the northern part of Buenos Aires. She lives outside the city limits, but often takes the bus into the city. That day, she had first gone to another neighborhood before meeting me. In both areas, she had gone to fabric stores. When we met, she had bought black fabric with a subtle pattern. With it, she later sewed a long black dress. But Sara was not the only one to sew her own outfits. María had learned to sew her own clothes long before she converted. When she was still married, she and her husband would occasionally struggle economically. She had then learned to sew clothes for her family in order to save money. Many more sisters sewed their own dresses, and some saw economic potential in this skill and began sewing dresses and selling them to other women frequenting the mosques. Others resold various clothing items they owned.

*Modesty and Argentine Society*

The modest body is inevitably linked to gender relations as spelled out in Islam. However, the converts’ approaches to modesty also need to be read within the broader Argentine society. I was often told of Argentine women’s indecent clothing and careless behavior by the converts. In contrast to this, the modest body and the need to protect it was highly important to them. María and Helen were worried about what kind of society their children were growing up in. They both have the social media passwords of their preadolescents and watch their actions online closely. During the course of my fieldwork, there were some femicides that received extensive media coverage. A 2009 law was enforced to protect women against domestic violence, but according to the local NGO “La Casa del Encuentro,” there have been 2094 femicides between 2008 and 2015 (Majdalani 2016). Despite legal protection, the situation has not improved. In May 2015, the body of fourteen-year-old Chiara Paez was found buried in the garden of her boyfriend’s home (La Nación 2015). This situation led to #niunamenos (“not one less” [my translation]), a campaign against femicide in the country, with large protests held in early June 2015.

The women at the Saudi mosque often lamented the lack of religiosity in Argentine society. When discussing the topic, they often blamed women’s clothing style and their supposedly careless behavior. The converts tended to back a “biologically determinist approach to femininity and masculinity,” as Saba Abbas put it (2015:153). This implies a natural and uncontrollable way of being for men, which also often entailed a “blame the victim” – i.e. the
women – chain of thought. Over the course of six months, I often witnessed talks among the
women about physical alterations to one’s appearance and what is allowed or forbidden in
Islam. Putting on nail polish, for instance, was seen as an act of seduction. Once, a woman’s
nine-year-old daughter was putting on nail polish at the Saudi mosque. It was a Friday and we
had just eaten lunch. Her mother was not paying any attention to her, as she was telling me a
story. When she did notice, she took the nail polish away from her, telling her it was neither
the time nor the place for it. Another woman present that day joined the conversation and
explained to the child that girls her age should not use nail polish at all, because when they
do, older men get attracted and do horrible things to them. She mentioned that many girls had
been disappearing lately, and she argued that they had all been wearing nail polish.

Approaches to Sexuality
As the women adhered to new ideals of modesty, I observed that the room to discuss issues
outside of straight marital sexuality was rather restricted. The only time sexuality and sexual
preferences were discussed during a class was at the Saudi mosque. The topic was approached
in a conservative manner: homosexuality and adultery are sinful. We were shown different
sins and homosexuality was matched with adultery as an obscenity. In line with the Saudi
mosque’s teachings, I observed that some women agreed with such a conservative approach
to sexuality. I once discussed homosexuality with a sister. She used both the Bible and the
Qur’an for her argument; homosexuality is not compatible with religion. Another time, I was
walking back home with Sara after an evening at the mosque. We were accompanied by two
visiting women, who were both Syrian and currently living in Dubai. As we were walking
down the street, a blond woman with a short black skirt and high heels walked past us, and
Sara turned around in shock to talk to us. I assumed she was about to comment the woman’s
outfit, but then she told us:
   - ‘Did you see? Did you see? It was a man wearing women’s clothes!’
   - ‘Yeah, it’s normal. I see it more and more’, answered the young Syrian woman in a
     very unsurprised manner.
   - ‘In Dubai?’ I asked.
   - ‘No, on the Internet.’
   - ‘What? Internet?’ Sara asked confusedly and did not know what else to say.
We kept walking in silence. The two Syrian women were also strict, practicing Muslims, just
like Sara. The younger one had lived many years in Saudi Arabia and despite being eight
months pregnant, she insisted on following the fast. But in her reaction to the transwoman,
she was more open-minded than Sara, who configured sexuality in heteronormative terms only, despite living in a LGBT friendly society. Both Sara and the Syrian woman followed the same line of Islam that came with conservative gendered expectations, but their reactions to the transwoman, and thus what being a woman implies, showed some room for maneuvering. I argue that, for the newly converted Muslims, the body became a central tool for the shaping of their Islamic identity, which is perhaps why Sara felt the need to draw such strict boundaries. For Sara, as a convert, the importance of maintaining those boundaries was an integral part of her reworked identity, comparing to the Syrian woman who had grown up being a Muslim.

Concluding Remarks
In this chapter, I have explored the women’s conversion to Islam. I outlined various approaches to the topic and illustrated the importance of an Argentine framework within this discussion. Ultimately, the phenomenon is complex and fluid, and as Rambo says, “the effects of conversion are not always direct, radical, or total” (1993:150). In the second part, I have explored the women’s identity reworkings through an embodiment of Islam and of new practices. I have focused on the individual bodies based on what was considered essential for the converts. Further I will illustrate a reorganizing of social life. In the next chapter, I will look at changing sociabilities, or to borrow Rambo’s terminology, interactions with other members of the new religious group. That is, I move from changing conceptions of the self to changing understandings of their social world and an extended use of kinship terms.

---

22 In 2010, Argentina became the first country in Latin America to legalize gay marriage.
Chapter Three – Imagining Kinship and Marriage

This chapter focuses both on imaginations of kinship as well as imaginations of marriage. This two-part discussion is grounded in the Islamic concepts of sisterhood and brotherhood. Upon conversion, both men and women are welcomed as brothers and sisters to a new religious community. The Spanish terms “hermano” and “hermana” were commonly used among Muslims in Buenos Aires. During my fieldwork, I found these concepts to play an important role in the women’s self-perceptions, sociabilities, and aspirations for the future.

In the first part, I investigate what becoming a sister in Islam implies in an Argentine context. What role does it take in the women’s lives? The sisterhood encompasses the sociabilities women encountered among each other at the mosques, for coming to the mosque is to visit a religious space, but it also has a social component. It is those sociabilities that I explore in this chapter. To do this, I use ideas from Le Renard (2014) as well as the concept of “relatedness” as offered by Carsten (1995). Understanding the sisterhood is relevant when looking both at the Sufi derga and at the Saudi mosque, with many similarities and some discrepancies in its meanings. I explore how the sisterhood provides the women with a sense of belonging through their religious conversion and thus, the reworking of their identity. In the second part of this chapter, I argue that sisterhood and brotherhood also provide the platform for imagining marriage. Marriage was often a topic of conversation among the women. As many were either divorced or still single, the thought of finding a Muslim man to marry was often on their mind. I argue that the Islamic communities become the platform to search for a partner. What the right partner entails varies among the women, especially between young and older women. In order to contextualize a discussion of imagining kinship and marriage, I will begin this chapter by looking at the Argentine framework. I explore how similar terms of relatedness have been applied in ideas of Argentine nationalism.

National imaginaries in Argentina

Argentine national imagination, to borrow Benedict Anderson ([1983]1991)’s concept, is often conceived in gendered terms of masculine ideals, incorporating the concept of brotherhood. After World War I, nationalists used the gaucho as a tool to create a national imaginary, and Argentine intellectuals quickly appropriated it as a symbol of national identity (Solberg 1970:154-156). Nationalism in gendered terms is thus often appropriating masculine images, such as the Argentine cowboy, but also with sports. For example, soccer has become
a male platform to engage with nationalism (Archetti 1999:15). Yet, in addition to masculine forms of comradery, feminine representations are equally essential to an understanding of Argentine nationalism. As men are portrayed as the protectors of Argentina, the country itself is often conceived as a woman. I discovered that on famous mausoleums of the well-known Recoleta cemetery, Argentina is a tall, beautiful woman, protected by male soldiers. 

Representations of the nation are often gendered, which creates a complex and intricate picture of the nation. Yet such gendered national imaginations can be understood in more mundane situations as well. Elena Shever (2013) looks at the reworking of kinship relations in an oil town in the Neuquén province in Patagonia, Argentina. She argues that depictions of the Argentine nation have often incorporated kinship terms, either as brotherhoods or nuclear families (2013:95). By using Howell’s (2006) concepts of “kinning” and “dekinning”, Shever argues that the oil workers she studied, when moving to the end of the earth (as the region is commonly called) against the family’s wish, had to create new kin relations with other workers (2013:97). Shever gives the example of Fernando, who by marrying the daughter of a high-ranking worker within the state-run oil company was fully incorporated into the company’s family (ibid.). Regardless of the different contexts, Muslim communities of Buenos Aires versus a Patagonian oil town, I argue that the processes of creating and reimagining kinship ties are similar in both cases. Anderson underlines the notion of imagination, because knowing and interacting with all fellow members within the broader community is impossible, yet “the minds of each lives the image of communion” (Anderson 1991:6). The imagined community configured along kinship terms in Islam is similar; no Muslim will possibly know all fellow Muslims in the world. Yet, the idea of a global community, umma, is central to the configuration of Islam in Buenos Aires, something I return to in chapter five.

**Islamic Sisterhood Performed in Buenos Aires**

If we leap from Argentine national imaginations to Islamic understandings, we can see how brotherhood and kinship terms remain important tools. In the Qur’an, it is cited that “the believers are nothing else than brothers” (49:10). All Muslims are considered to form a brotherhood and sisterhood. This feeling of belonging somewhere is important for the women in order to stay on an Islamic path (Bourque 2006:243). The concepts of brother- and

---

23 Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) provides a sophisticated account of the gendered dimensions of nationhood.
sisterhood have been appropriated in various ways. The model of a brotherhood has been applied by the social movement of the Muslim Brotherhood to promote pan-Islamism. In an Islamic developmental discourse, the term of sisterhood is usually used to fight for women’s rights, such as the civic society organization “Sisters in Islam.” But rather than using a large-scale approach to the concept, I here focus on the everyday aspects of sisterhood, namely the sociabilities among Muslim women.

I argue that becoming sisters in Islam altered the platform for social life and, for some, it meant an instant intimacy with women one would not know otherwise. A sense of closeness was created through the sisterhood. I mentioned in chapter two that there was a lack of female authority figures both at the Sufi derga and the Saudi mosque. Therefore, the sisterhood was constituted of a relatively egalitarian group of women of all ages and backgrounds. Most of them had recently converted, and the sisterhood provided an avenue to discover their religiosity and to negotiate identity issues together. I was amazed by how easily they interacted with each other, and the confidence some found in being part of the social group. Despite being well-integrated among the women, I never became a sister per se. I was often told that I was behaving in the correct way; I was wearing the headscarf, I greeted people correctly, and came more often than most to the mosque. But as a non-Muslim, there were some limitations to joining certain sociabilities of the sisterhood. Before the prayer, they would perform the purification process of wudūʿ. One has to wash different body parts, including the head, and thus the women had to take off their hijab. Sara categorically refused to take her scarf off in front of me; as a non-Muslim I was not allowed to see her hair. It could have been that she was the only one thinking that way, or maybe most thought the same. Therefore, I avoided the bathroom before the prayer. Fatima, one of the oldest women frequenting the Saudi mosque, and one of the few who had been coming since its opening, once told me that I was equally as much her sister as all the other women in the mosque. For her, we were all daughters and sons of the same God. But in essence, my lack of belief separated me from the women; until I converted, I could not properly be part of this sisterhood.

I here expand on Le Renard’s (2014) approach to young women in Saudi Arabia. She conceptualizes the idea of a “society of young women.” Le Renard defines this specific use of the society concept as: “(…) an entity broader than an intersocial group, but more interconnected than a sociodemographic category. It signifies sociabilities and identifications
that emerge within shared spaces, bringing together women who do not know one another, offering them new possibilities as to why they can meet and talk” (2014:86). This definition addresses multilayered factors. The society is larger than regular social groupings, but also more intimate than a body of people gathered by shared sociocultural factors. Two dimensions are relevant here. First, the fact that regardless of demographic backgrounds, women meet and hang out with one another. Also, the emphasis on shared space is important, as the two mosques (and surroundings) provided the women with arenas in which they could meet. Le Renard’s multiple dimensions of the concept of society are thus relevant and valuable for my discussion. Instead of simply applying Le Renard’s concept of society, however, I engage with the notion of the sisterhood as an analytical tool. This conceptual decision is based on several reasons. First, it is the most emic term I encountered, as most women valued finding sisters and referred to each other as such. Secondly, the term sisterhood encompasses and advances a kin-based value that is not necessarily implied when looking at the social group as Le Renard offers, a society. Instead of discarding Le Renard’s society of young women, I shall further build on it.

**Becoming Sisters, Becoming Related?**

Through the sisterhood, the women find emotional, financial, and religious support among sisters from different backgrounds than themselves. As the term sister implies, there are some connotations that imply a kin-based network. I want to nuance the concept of society as offered by Le Renard in light of Carson’s concept of relatedness. Carsten defines relatedness as a way to understand local practices of kinship, which are not pre-determined categories (1995:224; 2000:1). She furthers dismisses the analytical opposition between the social and the biological which is the foundation of earlier anthropological studies of kinship (2000:4). As such, there is no valid a priori definition of kinship. I argue that the analytical concept of relatedness is relevant in a discussion of the sisterhood in Islam. In this case, Islam becomes a platform to re-imagine kin-based relations.

Upon conversion, a woman is automatically welcomed to the sisterhood. But the relationships she enters into require establishing closeness and care. It is a constantly changing process and different methods are applied in order to cultivate these sociabilities. Barbara Bodenhorn illustrates how among the Iñupiat in Alaska, the concept of kinship is a constant reconstruction process, which requires hard work (2000:143). Carsten argues that this dimension, the hard work to maintain and create relations, is often overlooked by
anthropologists (Carsten 2000:26). So after embracing Islam, a sister was instantly welcomed into the sisterhood, but in order to preserve that bond, the women have to invest in each other’s lives. As one finds emotional, financial, and religious support among her sisters, she is expected to give equally much. Throughout the chapter, I will show different ways in which the women work to maintain their relation with new sisters.

There are some limitations to the concept of relatedness. Carsten herself points to Ladislav Holy’s critique, who has concerns over the broad extent of the analytical category, which runs the risk of “becoming analytically vacuous” (Holy 1996:168 cited in Carsten 2000:5). But for this study, the openness of the concept enables a reconfiguration of kinship understandings in light of the women’s own definitions drawn from their experiences with Islam. It is also important to note that the women were obviously aware that their brothers and sisters in Islam were not like natal bonds. This was especially visible in the lack of closeness between men and women. But it is the connection between genealogical links and the real family that is interesting here. As ideas of relatedness challenge the status of biology, what is considered “real” is equally disputed (Bodenhorn 2000:142). This is further exemplified by Kath Weston, on whom Bodenhorn builds her work. The taken-for-granted understanding of family is linked to concepts such as “straight,” “biological,” or “blood” (Weston [1991]1997:3). This is an understanding of the family that was also commonly used in Buenos Aires amongst my informants. Weston (1997) offers the notion of “chosen family” among gay and lesbian communities in the US as an alternative definition of family. The possibility to choose one’s family is relevant here. In the same manner, Muslim converts are able to recreate bonds of relatedness with other individuals they identify more with. They choose their new brothers and sisters based on shared belief. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that the notion of choosing can be used in discourses attacking Muslims. In Özyürek’s study of German converts to Islam, she argues that Islamophobia is closely related to contemporary homophobia, as in both cases the individual is being blamed for choosing a specific lifestyle, either as a gay or lesbian, or a Muslim convert, and is attacked for their decision (2015:12). This constitutes the opposite of being able to choose one’s family. Regardless, I argue that a chosen family, or imaginations of new kinship bonds, was vital for most converts I encountered.

This processual understanding of kinship allows for a comparative approach to different ways of being or becoming related (Carsten 2000:5). Diverse and changing fundaments become
central in the process of relatedness, such as money, guns, and paper among the Nuer in South Sudan (Hutchinson 2000), feeding and sharing substances among the Malays in Pulau Langkawi (Carsten 1995), or in this case, religious belief among Muslim converts in Buenos Aires. By applying the concept of relatedness in this context, the significance of what the sisterhood represents is accentuated. Women who, without Islam, would probably never have encountered each other formed fond bonds. I argue that this relatedness was central to their “Muslim-ness,” and thus self-understanding. For the converts, finding sisters was highly relevant, especially when considering how their social networks were reconfigured due to their conversion.

The Changing Sociabilities of Conversion

It is important to view the sisterhood in light of the women’s previous sociabilities. To use Rambo’s terminology, I here come back to the microcontexts in which the women found themselves prior to embracing Islam. An important dimension of the microcontext I did not discuss in chapter two is one aspect of the changing sociabilities of the women: their families and friends. For most women, their social world was turned upside-down when embracing Islam. This can be highlighted by an example. One evening, a shy woman came to the class at the Saudi mosque and sat in the last row. I had seen her once before, upstairs in the women’s prayer hall. She had sat behind the women praying, looking timid. That day, she had come to the mosque in order to convert. At the end of class, she told us that she was in the process of getting a divorce. As she was talking, her voice broke and tears started rolling down her cheeks. She wanted to embrace Islam, but she also needed people around her to respect that choice. Miguel explained that most people in that room experienced resistance from their family, but that if she wanted to find peace and tranquility, her religious quest had to be about something bigger and more important than just her family’s opinion.

This situation sheds light on how, for many converts, social life was affected when becoming Muslim. The conversion described above exemplifies one of the biggest issues most of the women at the Saudi mosque faced, namely the reaction and usual lack of support from their family and friends. It is a struggle most converted women go through, which has been described by others as well (Haddad 2006:31; Bourque 2006:239; Jawad 2006: 156). One way or another, all converts lost affinities outside the mosque. This issue was talked about during class and was often discussed amongst the women. The social stigma attached to their conversions made it difficult to discuss the problems linked to this new identity. I was told of
being spat at by a close family member, parents cutting all contact, and attempts to convince them to return back to the right path, namely Catholicism in this case. Also, upon conversion, the women adhered to new practices, while discarding previous social and cultural practices, such as celebrations and contact with the opposite sex (van Nieuwkerk 2006a:4). For example, the women could not attend occasions such as birthday parties, funerals, or Christmas celebrations. The family of some women reacted strongly to this. During Ramadan, Sofia was expected to go to the funeral of an aunt who had passed away. She reluctantly went, in order to avoid further conflicts with her family. Most women did not have a network of social support within which their new Islamic identity could be openly practiced outside of the mosques. At the same time, these problems opened up for new sociabilities with other converts. Consequently, I argue that the sisterhood took on a significant role for many. To them, the mosque is not only a religious space, but a space to reconfigure understandings of kinship.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned the two young men visiting the Sufi derga. Both had come alone. One was already married to a non-Muslim. Upon joining the order, Santiago asked him if his wife knew about him joining a Sufi order. He responded that she was indeed aware of it. Santiago was satisfied with that and explained to all of us the importance of the family’s support. In his eyes, it was important that a Muslim’s family respected and supported the conversion. For example, his mother often joined on Thursday evenings, despite not being a Muslim herself. The words of Santiago show a different mindset from the one described above at the Saudi mosque, as seen in Miguel’s response. During my fieldwork, I observed that the friends’ and families’ acceptance of the conversion seemed to be more of a priority for Santiago, but also less of an issue for the converts than at the Saudi mosque. The Sufi derga was frequented by a much smaller group of people, who consequently got to know each other much better. Santiago always came with his wife Julia. His brother and wife were also converts, and he had a leading position at the Sufi derga. Most were already married. Anna, a divorced woman in her fifties, often came with her youngest daughter Leila, who had also converted to Islam. Non-Muslim spouses joined for dinner when they had the chance. The social dynamics at the derga were characterized by a familial feeling, both among actual family members, but also in all social interactions amongst members attending.

---

24 Not all women follow those new restrictions, especially those with younger children.
Gendered Spaces and the Time in Between Prayers

How can a concept such as sisterhood be investigated? In order to delimit the concept, its spatial and temporal dimensions are worth highlighting. Islam is a religion that imposes the segregation of men and women. Outside marital and natal relations, interaction between men and women is restricted. In the prayer hall, women are expected to stand behind the men for reasons of modesty in the prostration position during the prayer, or ideally, in a separate space (Esposito 1998:90). At the Saudi mosque, men were encouraged to frequent the mosque more often than women. The Friday sermon is obligatory for men, yet voluntary for women. However, converted women challenge the idea of the mosque as a masculine space and join in order to meet fellow converts (Özyürek 2015:43). In Buenos Aires, many women joined the Saudi mosque on Fridays or the Sufi order on Thursdays. At the Saudi mosque, the women’s prayer hall was a balcony separate from the main hall, located on the second floor, that became an important site for the sisterhood. The main spaces are in this case limited to the mosques, as well as the surrounding cafés which the women frequent together. The Saudi mosque’s garden and outdoor space also became important social arenas. The size of the Sufi derga was smaller, and the prayer hall was shared among men and women, but the back of the prayer hall, and the table for shared meals were central arenas for the sisters to gather. In addition, the sisterhood can be explored along a temporal dimension that I have called the time in between prayers. As I explained in the introduction chapter, the time in between prayers consists of all the free time between classes and prayers, as well as the time before arriving and after leaving the mosque. I also include the meals and coffee breaks shared among the women in this notion.

A mosque provides the converts with a platform to learn and a new community (Woodlock 2010:265). Therefore, especially for converts, the mosque becomes an important platform to embody Islam and spend time with their sisters. All women made it a high priority to come to the Saudi mosque or the Sufi derga as often as possible.

Discussions as Valuable Support among the Sisters

As mentioned earlier, there was a lack of female authority figures within the religious institutions. The sisterhood provided a relatively egalitarian space for discussing issues. This feminine space also offered the chance for women to ask their sisters what one did not want to ask a more authoritative official figure, namely a man. Most often, women were interested and asked each other what was allowed or not, as well as what one should do in order to
behave in a correct Islamic fashion. The discussions touched upon all subjects and matters, from sex to makeup, to friendships and work places. Small-talk with fellow sisters is a way to learn about Islam, but also how to talk about the religion (Bourque 2006:243). But again, with some exceptions, most women frequenting both the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga had only been Muslims for a couple of years at most, so it sometimes proved difficult to give or receive good guidance. Straightforward questions about whether something is permitted or not were not necessarily always met with a clear solution. When they could not find a proper answer, this sisterhood at least served as a space for discussion. I argue that in the process of reworking identity that the women negotiated, discussions with their sisters became a central arena. I will use two vignettes from the Saudi mosque in order to exemplify different discussions and their effects.

One summer day, the time in between prayers was rather long. The five daily prayers are set in accordance to the sun’s position. Therefore, during the summer, the prayers are further apart from each other than during the winter. That Friday, I joined Sara, Maria, and her friend Valentina for a coffee outside the mosque. Valentina, a young mother of five, told us that breastfeeding her fourth son had left her with some sort of deformation on the side of her breast. She said that for women, sexual pleasure is connected to the breast, and that ever since breastfeeding, she lost all of it. Thus she was considering surgery to fix her breast. Sara told Valentina that she could not do it, as plastic surgery is forbidden in Islam. Valentina disagreed; she perceived it as a remedy to her wellbeing rather than an aesthetic decision. However, Sara categorically disagreed and left Valentina no room to explain. The two women defined the surgery and its premises on different terms. Sara told Valentina that she should still ask the director before doing it, but this was not a topic Valentina wanted to discuss with him. A week after this episode, Valentina, five other women, and I went to eat ice cream at the same coffee shop. All the women had converted within the last two years. They talked for quite a while about what was allowed or not when it comes to aesthetic issues. They also discussed plastic surgery, and Valentina saw the opportunity to bring up the breast surgery again, which she was still considering. Compared to the previous week’s response from Sara, the women were all positive and agreed that Valentina should be able to do it. Valentina found the answer provided by Sara unsatisfactory and thus felt the need to discuss it further with other sisters. In this situation, I believe that despite sounding convinced by her own decision, Valentina needed the support from her sisters in order to feel like she acted as a good Muslim. When navigating their new religious identity, the women found support among
their sisters. At the same time, I argue that this empirical example also demonstrates how the social arena impacts and shapes the women’s practices. The sisterhood provides room to elaborate on one’s identity, but it also sets a structural constraint on what is deemed acceptable.

Sometimes, a question could trigger a clear answer, but with some room for interpretation remaining. Within the relatively egalitarian structure of the sisterhood, I observed that the opinion of Miguel’s wife, Camila, was more valued than others’ among the women. Miguel was a local staff at the Saudi mosque, and both he and Camila had been frequenting the mosque for several years. Many would often ask Camila for advice and trusted her opinion. As I was leaving the Saudi mosque one evening, Camila called me over. She wanted to make sure I had everything I needed in Buenos Aires. We were interrupted by Amal and Martina, who wanted me to join them for a coffee. Amal used the opportunity to ask Camila about the use of art in therapy and whether it was permitted. Camila told her that there was no categorical answer and used yoga as an example. She argued that yoga as a form of relaxation is possible, but when does one know if it was moving from relaxation to, in her words, “a search for mantra or whatever they do?” Camila also brought up psychology as a similar example, and said it would be a good thing to ask in class. She said that if one comes with a problem to an Islamic leader, there will always be one solution: The Qur’an. A therapist, on the other hand, is not an equally solid source; as a human being, a therapist will interpret the situation from his or her point of view. Camila continued that with Islam, it is simple, “it’s not like all this philosophy.” Camila made it clear that some activities are not necessarily forbidden, but what they mean for a person is what matters. Camila was unable to provide Amal with a clear-cut answer. This example shows the ambiguities the women face as a newly converted Muslim. I argue that this “in-between-ness” of how to practice Islam correctly makes the discussion among sisters even more valuable.

25 This is an interesting comparative approach in Camila’s perception of a shaykh versus a therapist. In her view, the Qur’an is not individually interpreted and can be read in one correct manner. On the other hand, a therapist is human with his or her flaws, but also with an economic gain behind their help.
Meals and Coffee Shops

“Food is always about more than simply what fills the stomach.” (Rouse & Hoskins 2004:246)

Some evenings, we were tired and ate in silence. But most often, discussions would take shape around the dinner table. The sociabilities around meals and coffee breaks also provided the women with a space to discuss their thoughts and worries. It also enabled a space to discover their new religious path, and discussions around how much it would affect their individual life. Carolyn Rouse & Janet Hoskins (2004) discuss the importance of cooking and sharing food among Afro-American converts to Islam in Los Angeles. They describe the entanglements of Afro-American history and Islam by looking at food habits. Through food and cooking, women exercise their agency (2004:228). The authors argue that by reappropriating soul food, the women reappropriated the African slave history (2004:239). In short, food sharing and cooking provide the women with the means to exert agency. In the context of Buenos Aires, I want to show how, in similar ways, the sharing of food and cooking were actively used by women to appropriate a Muslim identity.

Every Thursday night, I shared my dinner with the women at the Sufi derga. Every Friday, I ate both lunch and dinner with the women at the Saudi mosque, as well as my Sunday evening dinners. In both religious institutions, the tables were separated for men and women. Over the course of six months, I shared numerous meals with most sisters, especially during the daily meals served for Ramadan. As shown earlier, during the Fridays at the Saudi mosque, I often followed women to the mosque’s garden or to a nearby coffee shop in between prayers. One particular coffee shop by a small shopping center facing the Saudi mosque became a regular spot. I often accompanied the women, either in small or large groups for coffee or ice cream.

At the Sufi derga, the shaykh’s wife Julia and her sister-in-law often started discussions during the Thursday meals about baking. Most sisters were interested and joined in. Julia, in particular, always had many ideas for halal substitutes in order to cook Argentine dishes, but she also adopted Turkish culinary habits. The meals there were prepared by the converts themselves on a rotating basis. Each Thursday, a man and a woman were paired up in order to cook for the rest. At the women’s table this consistently led to complimenting the cook and asking about the recipe. Furthermore, each woman had to balance the skill of cooking halal food, which was not easy Buenos Aires. At the Saudi mosque, the dynamics around meals and

51
sharing food were rather distinct from the dynamics of the Sufi derga. At the Saudi mosque, most of the meals shared by the sisters were not cooked by the women, but their cooking skills became apparent in other ways. Camila and Hala usually sat outside in between prayers. Some tables and chairs were set up in the shadow of the mosque’s walls. Hala often brought some *mate* and biscuits or other sweets along that she had baked at home. Hala appropriated the mosque through bringing food with her (Le Renard 2014:89). Camila and Hala consequently attracted more women to sit with them, and Hala shared her baked goods with all. By showing generosity and a clear understanding of dietary restrictions, Hala expanded her social network and showed a good understanding of her faith (Rouse & Hoskins 2004:228). Hala was proud of her cooking, and she often showed me pictures on her phone of new meals she had prepared. She was especially happy when she managed to mix typical Argentine flavors with Levantine cuisine, and of big meals she prepared for national and Islamic holidays.

Rouse & Hoskins show the changing food taboos linked to religious practice in a historical and contextual perspective, and how those have over time shifted towards religious orthodoxy (2004:242). In the context of Buenos Aires, both at the Sufi derga and at the Saudi mosque, ideas of purity linked to Islam, halal, lay the basis for dietary restrictions. Although this was approached in vastly different manners depending on the individual woman (as I will discuss in chapter four), within those common meals and coffees rules of what is halal were strictly followed.

*The Importance of Sharing during Financial Scarcity*

Partaking in meals also had an economic dimension. This discussion is more relevant to the Saudi mosque where, compared to the Sufi derga, more women of lower social classes were frequent visitors. At the Sufi derga, each member attending the meal was expected to pay a contribution for the food. At the Saudi mosque, on the other hand, all meals were free of charge. Many women relied on the free meals offered by the Saudi mosque. After a conference prior to Ramadan, Helen, Camila, Hala, a few more sisters, and I stayed at the Saudi mosque. One of them was Natasha. Natasha was an older, divorced woman with three children. She was living with her youngest son who often joined us at the mosque. That evening, Hala told me that Natasha never eats meat due to its expensive price. Natasha sat next to us, unbothered by Hala’s discussing of her personal life and explained that she relied on the mosque to be able to eat meat at all. Financial scarcity was also evident in other cases.
One sister always brought a large Tupperware box with her and stored all the dinner’s leftovers to bring home. Her behavior led to some conflicts and gossip, which will be discussed further in chapter four.

The free meals are part of a broader financial support structure given by the Saudi mosque that I will explain in chapter five. The help that women could receive from attending the mosque was also supplied by additional informal support given by the sisters. One Friday after class, I saw Rashida slide a banknote into a sister’s hand as she whispered something in her ear. Another evening, some women were discussing what their options were to help an older woman with her own financial issues. Despite all coming from lower social classes, the women helped each other in the ways they could. As such, the sisterhood contributed with financial help during periods of scarcity. All women were impacted by the economic crisis to some extent, and the sisterhood provided a form of security.

**An Extended Understanding of Family**

In the Sufi derga, alongside “brother” and “sister,” there was another kinship term added to the community, namely “baba,” which in Arabic, signifies “dad.” The shaykh who is nominally leading the derga is also an Argentine convert, but he is currently living in the US. Despite physical distance, his presence is still important within the derga, and the members skype with him weekly during their Thursday gathering. The first time I was there, I was surprised by the closeness of the shaykh to the people compared to the behavior between attendees and the director or shaykh at the Saudi mosque. The Sufi shaykh opened the Skype session by greeting us all, then by asking a man how his wife was doing and told him to greet her. He then saw one of the men without a hat, and exclaimed that someone ought to give him one. During the conversation, the shaykh was referred to as “baba” by everyone. His authority can be interpreted as consisting of a patriarchal structure, which reinforced his role as the head of the derga. In her account from an oil company, Shever shows that patriarchal values and paternalism have been applied in the development of the Argentine oil industry (2013:86). I argue that a similar thing is clearly unfolding within the Sufi derga. Family values were established on a patriarchal basis that are both reflected in Argentine society and the structure of Sufism. Noor once told me that she would skype with the shaykh alone once a

---

26 A small white hat is given to the men who join the Sufi order.
week and ask him for his guidance. She often told me how important the derga was for her, and having lost some family members, she saw them as her true family now. In case of a problem or celebration, Noor always reached out to the Sufi derga.

The sisterhood offers sociabilities that use kinship terms and imaginaries. The same can be said of how women view the men of the brotherhood. But as seen in the use of space, social relations between the genders are restricted. Carsten shows how models of marriage can be constructed on the idealization of the relation between an older brother and his younger sister (1995:226). Carsten worked with Malays on the island of Longkawi, who are also practicing Muslims (1995:227). While Islamic practices vary within local contexts, I argue that such ideals of the sister- and brotherhood are apparent here as well. Yet the ideal relationship was imagined slightly differently here. At the Saudi mosque, many women who married a convert from the same mosque were older, which reproduced the relation between the prophet Mohammed and his first wife Khadija. This relation was interpreted as the ideal commitment. Aspirations to marry within the Islamic community varied largely though, especially between the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga, but also between younger and older women.

Aspirations towards Marriage
Islam also became a new territory in which to find a spouse. What were the women’s intentions when it comes to marriage? Most converts were single. Many had married young, right after high school, and most already had between two and five children from a previous relationship, and had divorced since. Therefore, the intention behind marriage was not necessarily to form a family. Instead, they were looking for the right partner to share their new religious path. Consequently, I argue that imaginations of marriage became central to the reshaping of a Muslim identity. But how the topic of finding the right man was approached and imagined varied vastly among the women. Flor was in her mid-fourties and a strong advocate in trying to convince me to convert. Flor had just become married when we met the first time and was radiant. Her husband also frequented the Saudi mosque, and the couple had met there. Flor could barely stop smiling and loved the chance to talk about him. Some women listened in awe, others thought her to be naïve. One Friday during our lunch break, Flor was telling me and a few others about her new life with him. She had moved into his home, and since she came from a more restricted economic situation than her husband, Flor was thrilled to adopt her new lifestyle. After the morning prayer, salat al-fajr, her husband would usually go back to sleep for a few hours and Flor would do whatever domestic task was
needed. She proudly told us about waking up at sunset to do his laundry and similar tasks.

Some responses to her stories were slightly more cynical, however:

- ‘Have you fixed the civil marriage yet?’ asked Rashida.
- ‘No, not yet’, responded Flor. ‘He has to finalize his divorce first.’
- ‘Without a civil marriage, you risk ending up with nothing. You can’t trust a man’, she warned her.
- ‘Anyways, I don’t care about material goods or the money.’
- ‘You might not care, but it certainly helps’, responded a third woman.

How to find the ideal man was a difficult question. I often discussed this with the women at the Saudi mosque, and in general, the standard answer I was given was that one could contact the center’s director who would find someone suitable. María found this procedure reasonable. She had not used it for herself, but she told me that if a shaykh found a good Muslim, their love for god would unite her and her future spouse. On the other hand, Amal once told me: “Do you really think he (referring to the director) could find someone suitable? He doesn’t even know me. I would never do it.” Unofficially, there was another way to meet a Muslim man that did not involve any institutional guidance. Quite a few women put their sisters in contact with men they knew, mostly through social media. This pattern was more commonly practiced and preferred by the women.

At the Sufi derga, the group of members was much smaller, and its familial feel discussed above was noticeable. Most women were already married to other local converts. In this way, marriage was rarely a topic of discussion. One sister did bring up her wish to meet a man with me, but she rarely shared this during meals with all other sisters attending.

Marriage in Argentina

Statistics show that fewer Porteños are getting married. In 2013, 11,642 couples got married in Buenos Aires, about half as many as in 1990, when 22,000 couples did. The drop in marriages is even higher in religious marriages, with a 61% decrease from 1990 to 2011, that is from 155,000 couples to approximately 60,000. Those changes could be due to several reasons, such as higher proportion of women to men, or the financial situation (Goñi 2015).

Despite a decline in matrimonial union in Argentine society, marriage was central to the women’s Islamic faith, especially the Islamic performed ceremony. This was something most
desired. But the Islamic rite itself is not recognized by the Argentine state. Despite the possibility to choose a religious ceremony, marriage has for a long time been a secular institution in Argentina. All religious performed ceremonies have to be coupled with a civil ceremony. A secularization of the law was implemented in 1888 with changes in the civil code (Ruchansky 2010). Therefore, all authorized religious institutions in Argentina have to receive a civil marriage document in order to allow a religious ceremony. This was also the case with the Saudi mosque, where Muslims are required to show a record of a civil marriage in order to perform it according to Islamic law. Some, as Flor, do not see the urgency to get a civil ceremony to legally tie themselves to their husbands. Others were of course warier and found her way of acting ridiculous. But as her husband was legally still married to another woman, how was it then possible for Flor to marry him according to Islamic law, considering the fact that the Saudi mosque now follows the Argentine legal system? I learned that Flor had gone to a smaller unofficial muṣalla. This place is known within the community for its quick marriages, particularly between Argentine women and African men. But this ceremony had no legal depth and the marriage is thus not recognized by the state. I was told stories of women who married men and were left overnight. Financial or child support became more difficult to request from their ex-husband in those cases, as they could leave without any trace.

Masculine Imaginations and a Global Perspective
Other women dreamed of marriage in a more global fashion. Again, this discussion is especially relevant with a focus on the Saudi mosque, as most women frequenting the Sufi derga were already married to a fellow Sufi. As mentioned earlier, a man being Muslim was an imperative to the women I spoke to. Some wished for a man from an Islamic country, ideally an Arab, and found most of the men frequenting the mosque, who were other Argentine converts, unattractive and not in their interests. Many younger women maintained a romanticized idea of a Muslim husband and with it, a dream to move away from Argentina. This was based either on a wish to practice their religion without it interfering with everyday life in an Islamic country, or to move somewhere with more opportunities than available in Argentina. A sister once asked me for advice, on how sisters I had met in Egypt met potential husbands. Women with children usually preferred a man to be able to move to Argentina

27 This was a rather new practice adopted by the Saudi mosque, as a couple I met had been married there in early 2014 without a civil marriage prior.
instead. Some sisters also discussed the possibility of becoming the second wife as a potential solution. This orientalist dream of the future was mostly limited to younger converts, that is, up to forty years of age.

Older women, on the other hand, envisioned marriage, or re-marrying, on different terms. Rashida often tried to explain to younger women how their wish to move away was misguided. In her opinion, staying close to one’s family was more important. Victoria, who in the discussion of Flor’s marriage earlier had been skeptical to her attitude, was a divorcée. She had been offered to become the second wife of a Muslim man abroad, but she had denied the proposal categorically. In a way, Victoria, Rashida, and other women above forty had their lives established in Buenos Aires and were not interested in moving away. At the same time, I mentioned earlier that the ideal marriage at the Saudi mosque was often imagined to resemble the relation between the prophet Mohammed and his first wife Khadija, who was older than him. In this manner, I argue that the women of this group were potentially considered more attractive than younger women such as Sara, Samaa, or Maria. However, despite some variations on how marriage was imagined, I maintain that most converts desired to meet a Muslim man with whom they could share their life. In order to reach this dream, the sisterhood provided the space in which to visualize this future through discussion, but also the option to meet someone as a woman could potentially set up her fellow sisters with Muslim men she knew.

Concluding Remarks
I have continued to explore some consequences of a woman’s conversion to Islam in Buenos Aires. In this chapter, I underlined the sociabilites of women. Those changed considerably, as most lacked the support of family and friends in their conversion. Yet I argued throughout the chapter that Islam provided the women with new conceptualizations of the kinship terms brother and sister, which were appropriated and applied by all. In this way, older ideas of relatedness were challenged and expanded to include an Islamic understanding of the concept. For the women, the sisterhood plays a central role in their everyday life of becoming Muslim. I have shown how the sisterhood is an essential platform to rework one’s Muslim-ness and how the new sisters provide a woman with emotional, financial, and religious support. In addition, the sisterhood is a channel to find something that most desire, namely marriage. Imaginations of marriage are discussed and conceptualized among the sisters, but also connections are established with Muslim men through the sisterhood. Such imaginations were
thought of along different lines, and I have shown its importance and variety among younger
and older women, but also between the two religious institutions. To conclude, the women
enter a religious space, but also a platform to negotiate ideas of relatedness.
Chapter Four – The Good Muslim

It was an early Friday afternoon at the Saudi mosque during late summer and we had just had our first class of the day. At the end the director opened up time for questions regarding the class’ subject, and a man stood up. But rather than addressing the director, the man was more interested in making a comment to the women attending. He proceeded by explaining that his wife had been present to the Friday sermon, khatba, last week and the women had not been welcoming to her. Looking over the women’s side of the room, he loudly told us: “If the sisters have a problem with my wife, they have a problem with me!” He repeated this angrily twice, targeting the women and their behavior. His reaction led more to laughter than anything else and provided a topic of conversation during lunch following the class.

This story can serve as a starting point in order to explore religious piety and its practices. Why had this situation become such an issue? In this chapter, I explore an Islamic ideal many women discussed and explained to me as essential, namely to become a good Muslim. I look at aspects of Islamic faith, albeit without giving a comprehensive overview of Islam. Rather, I want to tackle some concepts that were relevant, and how those were taught at the Sufi derga and the Saudi mosque. I also explore how religious piety became incorporated in the women’s way of thinking of morality. I demonstrate how conventional behavior can vary within the same cultural milieu (Mahmood 2001); that is, different institutional approaches, as well as individual interpretations, need to be considered. In the second part of this chapter, I investigate how religious piety was practiced within the sisterhood by looking at processes of social inclusion and exclusion.

Islamic Faith

In Arabic, the term Islam signifies “to submit, to resign oneself” which in the religious context refers to a total submission to God (Murata & Chittick, 1996:3). Faith (īmān) in Allah was the essential starting position taught during my fieldwork. In its full meaning, īmān refers to faith in Allah, the angels, the holy books, the prophets and messengers of God, the final judgement day, and in predestination. Islam is a monotheistic religion, and Mohammed is God’s last prophet (but he cannot be worshipped). In this section, I want to mention some
aspects of what an Islamic faith involves. Despite many theological debates and disagreements in Islam, there is a common ground: As Andrew Rippin points out, the Qur’an is “the primary source and reference point” of Islam (1990:24). As I show in this chapter, it often served as a basis for classes offered by the religious institutions I studied. Another important textual source is the hadith, the account of the Prophet Mohammed’s actions, sayings, and opinions (Robson 2012). Consequently, much information on Islamic practice is found in the hadith, where the sunna (the exemplary practice) of Prophet Muhammed is used as a guide to act accordingly (Murata & Chittick 1996:29).

The five pillars of Islam are considered to be the structure and foundation of a Muslim’s life. We were taught at the Saudi mosque that the pillars of Islam could be compared to the foundations of a house, and without them, the house would collapse. As Sachiko Murata & William Chittick mention, “(…) the implication is that everything else depends upon them [the pillars] (1996:8).” The five pillars are: the declaration of faith (shahāda), the prayer (salat), alms-giving to the poor (zakat), fasting (sawn), and the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj). In chapter two, I explained how the conversion ritual revolves around the pronunciation of the shahāda in Arabic and how the salat and sawn become embodied. In the next chapter, I will illustrate some possibilities available to travel to Mecca. Performing hajj was a lifegoal for many. Yet, it is an expensive trip many cannot afford, especially with the high costs of flights outside Argentina due to governmental restrictions. Zakat is expected of Muslims, especially during the month of Ramadan, as people are to help the less fortunate. In Argentina, zakat is paid by Muslims through donations (either in the form of money or food) to the mosques, which are then redistributed to the less fortunate.

Both the Sufi derga and the Saudi mosque were considered to follow a strict path within Islam, but models of strictness were constructed differently. Both religious institutions offered free classes on Islam to their members. As mostly converts frequented the Sufi derga and the Saudi mosque, such classes proved to be a valued resource, and most took advantage of this

---

28 I discuss some dimensions, while knowing that many likewise important aspects are left out. The emphasis I have chosen here follows what was discussed mostly during my fieldwork.

29 In 2013, a law regulating taxes on foreign currency was adapted to the economic situation, leading to an increased 15% tax on tickets for travel out of Argentina (Infobae 2013).
Religious piety was approached by looking at the fundaments of Islam. Attention was devoted to the religious texts, but also to the correct behavior expected of a Muslim. Both institutions set teachings as a priority, but the actual practices and performances of Islam were valued above all. All the training they provide is deemed unnecessary as long as one does not do what is required. Converts were encouraged to become good Muslims, and thus good people. Yet I argue that despite this common ground, the same principles and topics were approached in slightly different manners. Here, I illustrate how religious ideals and piety can be reached through different means.

At the Saudi mosque, due to the absence of a shaykh working there full-time, the classes were given either by the center’s director or a shaykh visiting for shorter periods. Therefore, there was a lack of continuity in the structure of the teachings. A lot of attention was directed towards specific suras of the Qur’an, and towards explaining their significance and support in specific situations. The classes covered many Islamic topics, but here, I focus on monotheism and the prayer. Islam being a monotheistic religion was often a topic brought up in class. The main focus was thus to not venerate anyone but God. In the Argentine Catholic context, this referred to the Trinity and the heightened status of Jesus in Catholicism. This also took shape in discussions of sins. We were told that shirk is the biggest sin a Muslim can commit. Shirk refers to the association of God with other divinities, and it can also be translated as polytheism (Gimaret 2012). The ritual of the prayer was also given extensive pedagogical attention. This detailed consideration is similar to Mahmood’s description of Islamic revival movements in Cairo (2005:123). At the Saudi mosque, great attention was dedicated to the performance itself and the condition surrounding it, i.e. the nine conditions and fourteen pillars of the prayer correctly. The nine conditions refer to correct physical and mental states of being in order to perform the prayer. The fourteen pillars cover a detailed outline of the individual movements of the prayer, in order to perform it as the prophet Mohammed himself had prayed, sunna. Other topics were covered, but I emphasize monotheism and the prayer as

---

30 In both locations, a core of regulars joined the classes, with others attending as often as they managed. The classes were formally open to the public, and every now and then, especially at the Saudi mosque, Muslim travelers or Porteños curious to learn about Islam joined for the class.

31 Jesus is also an important figure in Islam, but he is considered a prophet of God without any divine properties.
those were the topics that generated the most interest in class.\textsuperscript{32} At the end of each class, about ten to fifteen minutes were set aside for questions. I was constantly amazed by the detailed enquiries into these two topics. The general concern was about the practices of Islam and their correct performance, down to the most detailed level. For example, many questions revolved around when things should or should not be done. Becoming a good Muslim was thus thought of as a process of learning that would allow one to do what is considered correct Islamic practice.

At the Sufi derga, the class was taught within the contexts of the Thursday gatherings. After the dinner and before the \textit{dhikr} ritual, we all sat down and listened either to the US-based shaykh via Skype or to Santiago, the local head of the derga. The classes were interrupted during the month of Ramadan, and thus I was able to attend fewer classes there than at the Saudi mosque. But Santiago would often bring up specific topics towards the end of dinner, and most people would stop talking in order to listen to his guidance. The message told during those talks or in classes revolved around the questions of how to lead a good life and act according to moral standards. This also implied the importance of monotheism and the practice of the prayers as discussed in the Saudi mosque, but what was emphasized was slightly nuanced. Sufi ethics are tied to purity and understood as a “purification of the hearts,” requiring strict discipline in meditative practice (Ernst 1997:23). As I discussed in chapter two, Santiago dedicated one class to the question of how to lead a structured life. This was also evident in many aspects of day-to-day life. We were taught the importance of learning “the science of Islam” (Santiago’s formulation) through learning and internalizing, then practicing repeatedly. His focus was often on the discipline the Sufi path requires, and the need to reflect upon the meaning of our acts. Another time, we had a Skype class with the shaykh abroad prior to Ramadan. He explained the opportunity Ramadan provided to remember that we can afford food and to help those who cannot. Stories were often used to explain the good behavior that was expected of the converts.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{32} Just as with the topics covered, the concerns of the participants varied greatly, and it would thus be a mistake to assume that they only cared about those two points. I highlight them here, as they show an interesting dynamic and contrast to the Sufi derga.}
Morality and Expectations

The five pillars and new understandings of faith made an impact on how women conceived morality, which became embedded in Islam. After conversion, new moral premises were determined in order to be able to distinguish right from wrong and act accordingly. Sara often repeated to me that Muslims are not perfect, yet Islam is. This argument revolves around the fact that whatever wrongdoings are done by Muslims is due to their human imperfection, because Islam itself is flawless. The religious structure is considered a set framework with no room for manipulation, but underneath it, there is room to navigate and become a better person. No human can act perfectly, but can be forgiven by God (with some exceptions). This approach was also something that was taught in classes. With this in mind, religious piety and new understandings of morality were conceptualized. Women often talked about taking a patient, processual approach in order to learn about the religion’s complexity more efficiently. This step-by-step approach to conversion is common in incorporating practices of Islam – food habits, use of hijab – over time (Bourque 2006:238). The Qur’an became the ultimate source for knowledge, but also for advice. However, I argue that a moral frame grounded in Islamic faith was understood and acted upon in different manners.

The Set Way and the Value of Rewards

There are two dimensions of Islamic faith that I discuss further, namely the final judgment day and predestination. Islamic belief is grounded in the idea of predestination. One’s final day and material wealth has already been decided, and no changes can be made to this. Compared to the religion left behind, Catholicism, this changes a person’s frame of reference. I once had an interesting conversation on what predestination meant with Saif, who had grown up in Sweden with a Swedish mother and a Pakistani father, and was thus not a convert. Growing up a Muslim, he did not care so much about his faith up until recently, when he started paying more attention to Islam. He frequented the Saudi mosque, and his wife invited me to meet them at the small café they own in a residential Buenos Aires neighborhood. Now that he embraces his faith fully, Saif told me that he sees the possibilities offered by Islam. In his opinion, his future was set, regardless of his actions. As he grew up amidst the stability offered by Swedish society, he told me laughingly, he would never have left and poured all his savings into a business in Latin America, without having this exact frame of mind. He continued by saying that, especially given the current economic situation, he probably never would have done so, if Islam had not provided him with this security that lies in the idea of predestination. For him, the focus on rules and on correct behavior as
promoted by the Saudi mosque is wrong. Faith was thus appropriated in different manners by different believers, and what people saw as fundamental varied accordingly.

When predestination was mentioned among the women, it was often in light of their conversion. Most saw how throughout life, they had been going through stages guiding them towards the right path – Islam. Khadija who joined the Saudi mosque after I began frequenting it, told me one night that she used to do belly dancing. In Argentina, belly dance is referred to as Arabic dance (“danzas arabes”) and is a popular dance genre among women. Looking back, Khadija saw it as a move towards Arabic culture, which opened the way to discovering Islam. My study of Muslim women in Buenos Aires after having lived in Islamic countries was also read and explained in this way; I was, in their eyes, coming a step closer to the right path. Women did not necessarily discuss predestination all that often, but it was rather seen as an explanatory device to understand and make sense of their conversion.

Yet, predestination does not imply that actions have no repercussions. Not every action is determined in advance, but will be decided upon on the final judgement day. The concept of rewards is here important. Rewards are given for good deeds and correct behavior, and women approached this concept in an almost calculating manner. The day of judgement can shift one’s frame of reference completely (Bourque 2006:239). Yet, as most converts in Buenos Aires were originally members of the Catholic church, this was something most already believed in. The topic was often talked about in a very calm manner. Women told me that the crises in the world, such as the rapidly changing climate or raging wars were all signs that the end was near. The time of the final judgment day is known only by God, which will lead to the death of humanity followed by the judging of people and their resurrection (Rippin 1990:20). I once asked Gabriela and her Syrian husband Anas what the constant references to rewards signified. Anas explained to me that when the final day arrives, one’s actions would be weighted in order to determine whether one should go to heaven or hell, and therefore, many focus on achieving as many good actions and deeds as possible. The idea of rewards was thus fundamental for the motives of people’s actions. I was often struck by how decisions and actions were shaped by the idea of rewards: I argue that it provided a framework for how to lead a pious life, but also a preparation for the future, which encompasses life after the one on earth. As shown in chapter two, many performed the prayer standing when they had the opportunity to sit. This was done with an idea of how many rewards one would gain from the
prayer. In a similar manner, many women were afraid to give wrong information on the practice of Islam, as making misstatements could lead one to lose rewards.

Differing Institutional Interpretations

Islamic faith and the moral structure it entails are grounded in the same Islamic concepts I have discussed so far, but there were diverging institutional emphases between the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga. This is visible in approaches to knowledge. Expanding the knowledge of Islam was the reason for the teachings offered. Seen as fundamental, Muslims were encouraged to read the holy texts mentioned earlier. Both institutions emphasized the need to learn Arabic in order to get a better understanding of Islam. At the Saudi mosque, the idea that “Islam is simplicity” was used almost as a slogan. According to my observations, this idea was used as a means to promote progress and as the solution to personal problems people faced. Also, we were often told that one who knows (i.e. has the knowledge) is better than the person who does not, but knowing the difficulties of the language, the staff advised its members to learn the suras phonetically and listen to Qur’an recitations in order to absorb and embody the knowledge. At the Sufi derga, the emphasis on internalization was equally central, but here the focus was additionally on repetition, which is also a key aspect of the dhikr ceremony. But beyond internalizing knowledge, we were taught by Santiago that it is important to know why things are said or done, as plainly remembering them is not enough. A deeper understanding was required, which could be reached through discipline. Santiago often explained that the derga’s members had chosen a difficult path.

Here, two emphases become more visible. At the Saudi mosque, perfection in one’s practice was central. Each individual was required to work towards the goal of perfection, in the performance of the salat, the reciting of the Qur’an, and ways of acting. At the Sufi derga, rather than aiming for perfection as such, discipline in everyday life was stressed in order to become a better Muslim. I argue that by focusing on perfection, the final goal is more important than the attention given to the process of one’s individual development. In contrast, the process itself is more central in the ideal of discipline. Within the same socio-cultural context, these Islamic concepts are fundamental, yet some nuances and frictions arise on how Islam is taught and thus perceived. Here, two religious institutions in Buenos Aires accentuate

33 The concept of knowledge is my translation of the Spanish word “conocimiento” which was used to refer to Islamic knowledge in both religious institutions.
different aspects of the same religious teachings. Yet, despite some diverging pedagogical surroundings, the cultural milieu is essentially the same.

*An Individual Path*

Diverging institutional approaches evidently led to various personal understandings. But those were not only shaped by the mosques. I argue here that the converted women appropriate an Islamic faith in various ways. Despite the learning sources available and the support provided by the sisterhood, reality reveals an intricate picture. One evening, I was walking with María towards her bus stop after a Saturday at the Saudi mosque. She told me:

> “You know, things are not so easy. You can’t live a complete Islamic life here, because you would have to cut yourself away from society, and that is not what Islam is about either. What is important for you is not necessarily important for someone else, and the limits one sets will vary. It’s hard, because you have to find your own way and that takes time. Also, you have to balance it with a culture that is so different. After embracing Islam, you have to create your own path in between Islam and Argentine culture. That’s a difficult and individual path.”

And indeed, all women created their own path. Most dealt with a family who did not provide any support in their conversion. Despite the help of the sisterhood, as María told me, each woman has to find out what is essential for her on her own and what changes she is willing to make. Therefore, the women each created individual approaches and practices when it came to the idea of being a good Muslim. This can be highlighted with the examples of Naima, Sara, and Julia.

Naima is a divorced mother of three young children, and one of the frequent visitors of the Saudi mosque. Her approach to leading a good life according to Islamic standards is by focusing on going to the mosque as much as possible in order to be close to God. In between prayers, she often reads in the Spanish translation of the meaning of the Qur’an and works with learning suras phonetically. For the last ten nights of Ramadan, she spent every night

34 By a complete Islamic life, María referred to including all Islamic practices and living according to Islamic law (shari’a).
awake at the mosque praying and reading the Qur’an, getting only a few hours of sleep before going back to work during daytime. Naima once explained to me that she did not wear the hijab outside the mosque, as she worked in a secular public school. For Sara on the other hand, wearing the hijab was mandatory. She was looking for a job and wanted to find work that, in her view, is compatible with Islam. Those different approaches to the hijab are obviously also affected by Naima and Sara’s respective financial circumstances. Sara follows a pious lifestyle, but one of the greatest difficulties she encounters is eating halal food. Pork gelatin is used as a thickener in a variety of food items, such as yogurts, and the lack of clear labeling restricts access to halal food.³⁵ She also finds it difficult to buy meat, as there are only two halal butcheries in Buenos Aires. She told me that she often tried to follow a strict halal diet, but found it too difficult. Both Sara and Naima frequent the Saudi mosque, follow the same teachings, and yet individual perceptions arose. Julia, the wife of the Sufi derga’s shaykh Santiago, never wears a hijab outside the derga, unless she is traveling to Turkey or other Islamic countries. However, she only ate what was considered halal. When I asked about difficulties she encountered, she told me that she would buy meat in a kosher store,³⁶ and simply be vigilant when grocery shopping, always reading the list of ingredients. Here, we can see how Naima, Sara, and Julia all had created an individual path within the same contextual framework. All aspired to become good Muslims, but this was practiced in diverging ways.

Religious Piety and Social Dynamics within the Sisterhood
In this second part, I explore how Islamic values are embodied and practiced by the women. In order to do so, I investigate aspects of the sisterhood in accordance with understandings of a reworked morality framework and religious piety. As discussed in chapter three, the sisterhood provides the women with a new community, which proved to be of great support. Highlighting social dynamics can illustrate how women act and decide to follow religious piety. I analyze the functions of the sisterhood to show some aspects that are not initially noticeable. I complicate the social dynamics within the sisterhood, or as I was told:

³⁵ Often, the list of ingredients containing gelatin did not mention its origin, therefore making it unclear whether it was pork-based or not.

³⁶ In both Islam and Judaism, meat is slaughtered in the name of God, thus making it possible for the religious groups to buy from each other.
“If you put ten men in a room for a month and you open the door after that time, they will be fine. If you put ten women in a room and open the door after just five days, they will all be dead – they all killed each other.”

Fatima, an older woman frequenting the Saudi mosque who could not care less about the women’s chatter, told me this one evening, and we laughed warmly together. She mentioned the dynamics between the younger women and said that all they wanted was to figure a woman out, know if she was married or had children, before deciding to care or not. She continued by telling me that she does not come to the mosque to socialize with other women, but rather to be with Allah. And indeed, in between prayers, rather than discussing with a group of sisters, she would most likely be sitting in a corner, reading in the Qur’an. Some, as Fatima, distanced themselves from the sociabilities of the sisterhood. Fatima had been coming to the Saudi mosque since its opening, and was friendly to all the women, but she kept some distance to the group dynamics. But for most, especially the younger women, social isolation and exclusion were upsetting and hurtful, especially since they considered the sisterhood a safe space to investigate and act upon their new identity. No women wanted to be socially isolated (except in cases like Fatima) and behavior leading to the exclusion of some was considered morally wrong. And yet, it is still a phenomenon that was part of the everyday dynamics at the Saudi mosque.

Social dynamics led to affinities and smaller group formations, which is not unique to this specific context. I quickly understood who was close to whom and which sister a woman would go to for laughs or when seeking advice. This was a valid point for both places. However, I focus specifically on the Saudi mosque here. There were many more women frequenting this institution – between ten and thirty on average, in opposition to an average of four at the Sufi derga – which complicated the social dynamics. At the Sufi derga, the atmosphere was more intimate and discussions involving all sisters usually went with ease. With many more women being at the Saudi mosque, tensions between the sisters became visible. I argue that some discrepancies arose between ideals women said they followed and what actually happened. This is not to say that they did not strive to become better Muslims, but rather to give a more nuanced picture of the pious Muslim women in Buenos Aires.
“That sister” or Another Way to Gossip

In Argentina, gossip is known as “chisme.” The anthropologist Patricia Fasano (2006) looked at sociality among urban poorer women through the practice of “chisme.” Her researched was based in Paraná, a city northwest of Bueno Aires. Looking at what positions are defended and renegotiated, and what is at stake when gossiping, Fasano refers to the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1993) and the Brazilian anthropologist Claudia Fonseca (2000) to show how gossiping is a resource available to all in order to realize their social status and acquire social capital (Fasano 2006:30). But rather than limiting “chisme” as an aspect of social life, Fasano argues that “chisme” makes social life (2006:31). Similarly, gossiping played an important factor in the women’s daily activities at the mosque. I explore the ties gossip creates, that is, how sociality is strengthened, as well as the problems it causes.

As the sisterhood divided into smaller groups, some of the women had the feeling of being left out. On a regular Sunday evening, a young woman was there to convert. She had brought her two sons along with her, and the young boys were unable to concentrate during the hour-long class and the prayer. She tried to keep them calm, but soon, the women started rolling their eyes and making some comments about the boys’ agitated behavior, despite this not being uncommon conduct for the kids accompanying their mother. After her conversion and being welcomed to the sisterhood, the women already seemed tired of her, and none made an effort to talk to her. Compared to other conversions I had witnessed, this woman – who never returned to the Saudi mosque during the time of my fieldwork – was directly excluded. No woman mentioned her presence in this incident’s aftermath, yet I was puzzled by what had happened. The woman was Argentine and her two boys were black. I believe that the perception of their dark skin was shaped by underlying racial prejudices, which was also visible in the way the small unofficial ḥusalla is perceived. As I showed earlier, it is known for being frequented by “Africans” and for its easy marriage ceremonies. This racial prejudice was reinforced by the much-discussed reputation of “Africans” as needing only papers, then divorcing the woman, leaving her with no legal protection.

Social dynamics such as those mentioned above could become gateways for gossip and the spreading of rumors. Two sisters who initially got along very well abruptly stopped spending time with each other. They had had a heated argument and left it with many disagreements. In the weeks that followed, the sisters talked and rumors were spread, until one of them could not take it anymore: she decided to stop frequenting the Saudi mosque. In this way, she lost
her sisterhood as she had known it, and had to go to another mosque in order to recreate a new community. I was told after my departure that she was frequenting another mosque, which shows that there is a flow between the institutions. This is the worst impact gossip could have on a sister as I witnessed it. But talking behind other people’s back was not uncommon.

Here, despite gossip itself never being a topic brought up in class by the shaykhs or the director, it was considered bad behavior according to the ideals of how to treat brothers and sisters. The women, on the other hand, were very aware of gossip and made it a point that they personally did not engage in it. Yet, the term sister could be applied for more malignant use. In that way, one never directly said anything negative about another woman, but rather, the sister term implied it. For example, both during Ramadan and the rest of the year, we were more often than not served large quantities of food for dinner – more than what would be consumed. One sister consistently brought a large box to bring leftovers home. This in itself was not problematic, but many women reacted when she started taking the food while others were still eating. I once offered that she might have economic difficulties, but most answered that many others do too, yet they do not take all the food. Towards the end of meals, the woman in question would pull out a box from her bag, and gather the serving plates. Almost all women made comments about “that sister” or gave other women a look of annoyance. During Ramadan, some women complained about her behavior to the center’s staff, but they themselves were not bothered by her actions and were more annoyed by being pulled into the women’s disputes.

Ties Reconfigured

Finally, I wondered: When confronted with gossip, how did women rationalize this act? During Ramadan, existing and new tensions arose. The women frequented the mosque on a daily basis, and many were tired from the fast and less sleep. Many women stayed late at night and, when sitting in small groups, gossip about other sisters flourished. At one point, Sofia asked whether talking about other women behind their backs was acceptable. Camila, who I have mentioned earlier, had to some extent a higher status among the women due to her knowledge. She was sitting with us, and answered without further explanation that of course not, it is not permitted in Islam. I was taken aback by her understanding of the situation,

37 During one of the last ten nights of Ramadan, angels ascend, making this night more important than a thousand months (Plessner 2012).
which highlights how most women felt about themselves: They did not gossip. I argue that in
the process of developing a pious and moral self, the dynamics within the sisterhood lead to
subtle processes of social exclusion, but also, simultaneously, ties among sisters were
reinforced.

Therefore, gossip can be seen from a different perspective. So far, I have shown its effect on
women when it comes to issues of social exclusion, but it also generates social inclusion.
Going back to the argument of Fonseca (2000), I want to look at gossip as a resource and
what its positive functions are. While some are excluded, the ties between the women are also
renegotiated. Through gossip, imagined ties are reinforced and the sisterhood becomes an
even more important platform for the women. As shown in the vignette presented at the
beginning of the chapter, the man yelled at the women for their lack of proper behavior
towards his wife. His reaction, and that of the sisters can be explained along the lines of
religious piety. In his view, the women were not showing proper Islamic behavior towards
their sister by not including her. On the other hand, the women saw it as a complete
misreading of what had happened. In their perspective, his temper was showing a lack of
proper behavior and control. The effect of his reaction led to laughter and remained a topic of
gossip for the day, and none of the sisters worried about the man’s wife. Yet, in a sense, the
bonds of sisterhood were enhanced, but not in a way he had intended. Rather than leading to
his wife’s inclusion, the ties forged between the sisters present at that event were reinforced.
Faced with an external threat or inconvenience, the sisterhood plays a central role, and the
intimacy of the relations between the women increases. In this way, gossip becomes a way of
making and negotiating relationships.

**Concluding Remarks**

In the first part of the chapter, I have outlined some basic principles of Islam based on topics
that were most often brought up during my research. Further, I explain how those ideas are
conceived and incorporated into a personal morality frame, as well as how those are taught to
Muslims in Buenos Aires with some nuances in the approaches adapted by either the Sufi
derga or the Saudi mosque. In the second part, I viewed approaches to religious piety in line
with the sisterhood in order to highlight other aspects of this new conceptualization of
relatedness. I explored how despite the sisterhood’s strong influence, each woman has to
reformulate religious piety according to her own day-to-day experiences. Finally, I discussed
the use and moral ambiguities around gossip and what its functions are. In one way, women
are excluded from the sisterhood, but at the same time, it implies that other ties are negotiated and made stronger.
Chapter Five – A Global Islam

One evening, after spending time at the Saudi mosque, I was walking with Amal towards her bus when she recounted a conversation she had previously had with a sister. Confused, I asked her which sister she was talking about. To this she responded: “You don’t know her. It’s not a sister at the mosque, but a sister I met online.”

Amal’s answer sheds light on an important aspect of my research. The institutionalization and practices of Islam in Buenos Aires are not secluded from other forms of Islam worldwide. During my research, I was amazed to discover how much informal contact is being kept between Muslims throughout the world. At the same time, both the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga have institutional connections to larger mosques, respectively in Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Thus the networks of Islam spread globally. This religious globalization is intensified by the fact that many Muslims throughout the world actively use the Internet as a space to negotiate their religious identity. In the case presented here, how do Porteño converts identify with the global aspects of Islam?

In this two-part chapter, I begin by exploring the notion of a global Islam. This concept is somehow both unclear and all-encompassing, therefore further elaboration and clarification is essential. It is also necessary to place religious conversion to Islam within a broader historical context of Islamic revival movements worldwide. In such a way, I can then position both the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga within their global institutional connections. How is Islam as it is taught and practiced in Buenos Aires also shaped and affected by global flows? I address international networks pertaining to the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga and show how such institutional connections are relevant in local understandings and preachings of Islam. In the second part of the chapter, I expand on the topics of earlier chapters, namely religious conversion and its embodiment, new conceptions of relatedness, and religious piety. I do so in order to reconsider each of these topics viewed from a global perspective. I begin where I left off, namely with an emphasis on the religion itself. Further, I return to my initial topics, namely the conversion and its impacts on the body. Internet and social media play an important role in this discussion. That is, they become tools in the process of becoming a Muslim. Finally, I show how the concepts of sister- and brotherhood were not only restricted to the actual mosques. Rather, imaginaries of kinship and marriage are often widened to encompass a global dimension. In sum, in this final chapter, I discuss aspects of a global
Islam through all the subject matters I have discussed so far, which allows me to contextualize the Porteño converts and their practices of Islam in Buenos Aires within a broader discussion on Islam. First, however, I shall look more closely at the idea of a global Islam.

**Different Understandings of a Global Islam**

One evening, Samaa, Helen, Amal, and I were talking in the garden of the Saudi mosque. Amal mentioned that the Argentine Islamic Assembly was organizing a concert, and she told Helen and Samaa that she found it difficult to give up music after her conversion. According to the teachings at the Saudi mosque, music is a work of the devil, *shayṭān*, and is therefore forbidden (*ḥarām*) so attending a concert at another Islamic institution was out of question, too. Helen told Amal to just let it go and forget about it. Samaa, on the other hand, became irritated at the thought. She told us that she did not like the Argentine Islamic Assembly for promoting a local variant of Argentine Islam. Samaa insisted that there are no local appropriations of Islam, there is only one pure global Islam.

This story highlights an important element: That is, what do we talk about when we talk about a global Islam? The interpretation offered by Samaa offers one point of view, which refers to the doctrinal practices and teachings of Islam. From this angle, a global Islam is understood theologically as the one way to practice Islam and thus be a Muslim. I will also illustrate how Samaa’s approach is in line with the message of the Saudi mosque. Local forms of Islam are in this case cast in opposition to global Islam. Movements of Islamic revivalism often oppose a “folklorization of worship” within Islam (Mahmood 2005:48).

The other understanding of a global Islam that I want to illustrate here entails a more practical and analytical value. The scope has grown from national to a larger global range (Appadurai 1996:22). At the same time, I argue that a slight opposition to the West is somehow implied in this understanding as well. I want to illustrate this with two examples. First, many people seem to be make an almost immediate association of global Islam with religious fundamentalism and terrorism. Especially Wahhabi Islam, which will be discussed further in this chapter, has in the Western media become known as a sponsor of global terrorism. Such connections certainly exist. Some Wahhabi Muslims view jihad, often translated as “holy
war” as their calling in life, but most do not, and certainly none of my informants did.\textsuperscript{38} Therefore, here I accentuate another less commonly discussed dimension of global Islam, namely its mundane implications. Second, I am fascinated by how often the controversy unleashed by the publication of the novel “The Satanic Verses” is used as an example in descriptions of globalization in scholarly publications (Appadurai 1996; Hylland Eriksen 2007; Beyer 1994). In 1989, a fatwa was issued by the Iranian government to Muslims around the world to kill the author Salman Rushdie, as the content of his book was seen as blasphemous and insulting to Islam. The controversy’s quick unfolding and response on a global scale illuminate aspects of a globalized world and the position of religion in it (Beyer 1994:1). However, as Said argues, the political context of western writings on Islam should also be recognized and made explicit (Said [1981]1997: ivii). Similar incidents to the Rushdie affair have taken place recently. The cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed published in a Danish newspaper led to massive protests of Muslims throughout the world. Such events, together with the attacks in Paris, respectively on January fifteenth and November thirteenth 2015, as well as in Brussel on the twenty-second of March 2016; or large numbers of Syrian refugees portrayed as a crisis for Europe, all reinforce contemporary fears of Islam amongst many non-Muslims. Within this understanding, Islam is often portrayed in opposition to the West.

In short, these two approaches to global Islam represent both an imaginary conceptualization and a practical approach to a global Islam. In the first perspective, global Islam is in its emic sense understood as an imagination of a global community. I base this approach on how the term was discussed among some of my informants. Yet, this theological understanding entails some restrictions and does not take the various forms of Islam into consideration (Ernst 1997:212). On the other hand, global Islam as an analytical tool is an approach to investigate the religion in contemporary times, especially in order to explore its local-global implications as I do here. However, there is some discrepancy between the Western application of the term “Islam” and the variety of lifeworlds as practiced within the religion (Said 1997: i). Both approaches – the emic and scholarly one – suggest that there is “one” Islam. Aware of the difficulties that come with the term, I retain the conceptual tool of a global Islam in order to

\textsuperscript{38} Aaron Hughes argues that the “holy war” is often considered a partial translation of the term. Jihad signifies “striving” in Arabic and can be understood in a nonmilitant way, highlighting the need to live a moral life, defending Islam, but also striving against injustice (2013:215-217).
discuss the religion’s global unfoldings and mundane practices. My use of the term draws upon both approaches: Its practical value is useful in order to explore local and global connections. At the same time, the imaginary sense sheds light on an important aspect of the converts’ navigation of Islam in Buenos Aires.

Islam and Globalization

Islam is a growing religion on an international scale. Demographic projections about Islam forecast that the global Muslim population is to increase by 35% between 2010 and 2030, that is, growing from 1.6 to 2.2 billion. This growth is grounded in higher fertility rates and improved health and economic conditions in many Muslim countries. Interestingly enough, religious conversion was not mentioned as a factor in those projections made by the Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center 2011).

How is religion factored into studies of globalization? Peter Beyer (2006) and Patrick Eisenlohr (2012) outline two different approaches that are commonly applied. Beyer argues that religion has mostly been taken as a dimension of culture in scholarly writings on globalization (Beyer 2006:120). This can be exemplified with Arjun Appadurai’s argument, namely that long before we discussed the concept of globalization, religions of conversion, including Islam, have been an important factor in global cultural interplays (Appadurai 1996:27). On the other hand, Eisenlohr argues that religion has rather been considered as an “epiphenomenon (…) of the spread of neoliberal capitalism” (Eisenlohr 2012:7). In both understandings, the approaches depicted view religion as an aspect of a global phenomenon, rather than a topic of its own.39

Religious Revivalism and Islamist Movements

As I showed in chapter two, the “secularization thesis” that rationalization would replace religion has proved to be misguiding (Bowen 1998:3; Hylland Eriksen 2007:133). If anything can be said at all, the importance of religion actually seems to be growing. David Commins traces contemporary Islamic revival movements of the late nineteenth century in Islam back to three religious revivalist movements, namely the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, the Muslim

39 Csordas (2009) and other anthropologists since seek to reposition religion as a central domain of globalization (Eisenlohr 2012:8).
Brothers of Egypt, and South Asian movements, which cooperated against the expansion of western cultural forms (2006:145). Islamic revivalism is today often seen as fundamentalism. Fundamentalists call for a return to basic premises, that is, the Qur’an and sunna, by getting rid of cultural and traditional practices which are not explicitly advocated by the Qur’an or sunna, and replacing them with “renewed commitment to Islam” (Lapidus 1997:445). Further, Lapidus argues that two strategies are employed to spread the message of Islam: either a bottom-up educational and community approach, or political violence (1997:447). The latter has had much more impact on Islam’s reputation in the Western media. The focus on the first approach, on education and the building of a community, is more central to my thesis, however. These movements originated in Islamic countries, but have ever since spread globally. Revivalist movements cannot be understood as separate from modernity (Lapidus 1997). The existence of the Saudi mosque in Buenos Aires and its spread of Islam in Argentina can be placed within this framework. But what about the Sufi derga? Due to widespread media representations, Islam is today essentially tied to Islamic fundamentalism, an understanding which does not represent the religion’s global particularities (Ernst 1997:212). Despite this, Sufism is often the first meeting point with Islam for many converts (Allievi 2006:123; Haddad 2006:37; Jawad 2006:159), as some branches of Sufism can also conform with some aspects of New Age spirituality (Ernst 1997:199). Its global spread and attraction makes Sufism an important dimension of a global Islam.

Islamic revivalist movements have spread globally, but other religious segments have also enjoyed similar growth. As I mentioned in the introduction, the idea of religious revivalism was often mentioned to me during my fieldwork in Buenos Aires, coming from various religious groups. Pentecostal missions are growing in countries such as Brazil, the Philippines, and Ghana; New Age religions are popular in the West, and are also growing in India recently (Hylland Eriksen 2007:133). In short, religion’s role in today’s world has far from diminished. Rather, new global connections have emerged, both on an individual and an institutional level. Further on in this chapter, I look into how these connections are established, operationalized, and challenged.
Global Flows through Institutional Connections

During my fieldwork, I discovered different types of global flows⁴⁰ between the Middle East and Latin America. In this section, I illustrate how Islam is institutionally organized in Buenos Aires. Both the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga have connections to broader Islamic institutions in either Saudi Arabia or in Turkey. These networks are not necessarily direct links, and often pass through other regions of the world. I showed in the introduction that the leading shaykh of the Sufi derga is currently living in the US. Therefore, the members relied on the Internet for all communication with him. Further, the derga is part of a larger order, with a head derga in Istanbul. The Saudi mosque is, as its name indicates, operated directly by Saudi staff. The two religious institutions are thus small components of global networks made up of mosques which are all connected back to a main institution.

Saudi Arabia’s economy is largely based on the export of oil, and the country’s geo-political importance could easily have remained minimal without this resource (Beyer 2006:170). Yet the country has been sponsoring mosques and Islamic organizations worldwide with the goal of expanding the Saudi-Wahhabi understanding of Islam (Beyer 2006:171). In Saudi Arabia the growth of the Wahhabi movement was intertwined with the establishment of the ruling al-Saud family. In short, Wahhabism is an Islamic revivalist movement that can be traced back to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s teachings. As mentioned above regarding fundamentalist movements in general, Wahhabism is a call to return to a pure monotheism, worshipping God only, and a revival of the right Islamic faith and practice (Commins 2006: vi).⁴¹ The al-Saud launched an Islamic foreign policy during the 1960s and 1970s in order to spread this particular message of Islam through religious institutions abroad (Commins 2006:4).

The Saudi mosque is a product of this Saudi Islamic foreign policy, and much of the Saudi mosque’s efforts are spent on spreading information about Islam. There were direct connections to the mosque’s sponsor country through various channels. As mentioned in the

---

⁴⁰ The concept of global flow, which was introduced by Appadurai, is commonly used in anthropological discussions of globalization, but its meaning and the baggage it carries with it often remains unclear (Rockefeller 2011). Despite the concept’s unclear usage, I find it relevant here to discuss the different types of movements described further in the section.

⁴¹ Wahhabism is often considered a negative term, and fundamentalists consider themselves as “Salafists,” the first companions of the prophet (Hugues 2013:235). Despite this, I here keep the term Wahhabism.
introduction, the Saudi mosque was an extremely wealthy institution. Most activities were organized free of charge, which provided much day-to-day support for many women. Further, many donations were made by the Saudi mosque. I discussed in chapter two how desired modest clothing was not easily available in Argentina. The Saudi mosque often contributed with clothing brought from Saudi Arabia, especially during celebration times, such as Ramadan and the ‘Īd feasts. During festive periods, the women wore their nicest outfits. I asked Samaa and Naima where they had found the long colorful dresses they had been wearing for the breaking of the fast on a few evenings; both responded that it had been a gift from the mosque. Also during the month of Ramadan, I met an elderly woman. She had moved from Iraq to Argentina and was one of the few born Muslims I met during my fieldwork. She did not frequent the mosque outside the fast, but she enjoyed the festive atmosphere of Ramadan and the breaking of the fast with her sisters. One evening, as I was sitting next to her, she told me that every year the Saudi mosque sends four families to perform the pilgrimage, hajj, in Mecca. I was surprised by this generous offer, but she dismissed it, telling me that she would never receive this from them; it was a privilege reserved for the friends of the director. In addition, another opportunity was offered to converted Muslims. Through the Saudi mosque, converts were able to travel to Saudi Arabia in order to enhance their knowledge of Islam. When I arrived to Buenos Aires, I met a young man who was waiting for his visa approval. This offer though was restricted to men only and therefore none of the sisters ever benefited from this opportunity. All Argentine staff working at the Saudi mosque had themselves spent some time in training abroad. With few exceptions, the Saudi mosque does not generate any income. In sum, the totality of its resources rely on financial flows from Saudi Arabia.

The image of Sufism, on the other hand, is relatively different than Wahhabi-Saudi Islam, and is usually imagined to present less of a global threat than Wahhabism. As mentioned, Sufism is often a gateway to Islam for many converts, as its spiritual dimensions attract many Westerners. Many members of the derga had traveled to Turkey to visit the order’s main derga. Although most wanted to visit the mother institution of their Sufi order, Saudi Arabia was an optimal travel destination here as well, for one important reason: to perform hajj. Mariam was an important figure at the Sufi derga. She and other members had travelled in a group to perform the pilgrimage some years ago, and she told me that she and her husband were saving up to go back in two years. But with the costs of traveling being rather expensive for most, another kind of transnational movement was often prioritized: As mentioned in the
introduction, the relation between the Sufi shaykh and his student is a highly important hierarchical relation. For example, Santiago was subordinate to the shaykh in the US mentioned earlier, but while the shaykh was gone, Santiago was in charge. A few days prior to my leaving of Buenos Aires in August 2015, I spent one last Thursday at the Sufi derga. Santiago told us about a course for shaykhs organized by the Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo. He encouraged the members to provide assistance or donate money so that he could participate, as all would benefit from this learning. Financial support was advocated as the right thing to do for all the members.

Both religious institutions play an influential role in the Islamic landscape of Buenos Aires. In Buenos Aires, but also worldwide, the role of such Islamic organizations is central to the perpetuation of a global Islam (Beyer 2006:181). Beyer nuances this understanding further by arguing that Islam is institutionally well organized, but that as a global “religious system,” Islam is not globally structured (ibid.). This is perhaps not surprising, as the idea of one Islam is itself problematic. However, a study of global religion will also have to take local contexts into account. That is, even the idea of a global Islam needs to be situated.

In addition, religious institutions are contained in contemporary social, financial, and political power structures (Meyer 2006:6). The notion of power is relevant here, and I build on Wolf’s (1990) delimitations of four power forms. The religious institutions’ capability of spreading their idea of Islam depended on the larger networks they were imbedded in. That is, their fields of practices were delimited by structural power (Wolf 1990:587). The spread of Wahhabi Islam is a clear example of the force of structural power. Yet, I argue that new media channels complicate the issue of power in spreading Islam. Individuals exert agency and contest existing structures by what Wolf conceives as the second type of power, namely the individual power that emerges in interaction with one another (1990:586).

The Importance of Media

So far in this chapter, I have discussed the idea of a global Islam and its various uses and implications, and I contextualized the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga within the discussion. In the second part of this chapter, I keep this global lens to look at the topics brought up in

42 Wolf divides power into this four forms: an individual attribute, relational power, tactical or organizational power, and finally, structural power (1990:586).
previous chapters, namely religious piety, religious conversion and its embodiment, and new understandings of relatedness. In order to do so, I begin by coming back to the idea of power. I mentioned above that means of communication may contest preconceived notions of power. The power referred to here is the structural kind granted to the religious institutions and their capacity to spread Islam, as can be seen in how the Saudi mosque distributed so many free books that promoted their ideas of religious practices. Yet, I argue that through the Internet, Muslims around the world are capable of spreading the message of Islam and their own interpretation of it, without passing through Islamic institutions.

Appadurai (1996), in his approach to modernity, highlighted two main components, namely media and migration. I have mentioned in the introduction the importance of migration in the construction of Argentina, as well as Islam in Argentina. I also discussed how Islamic marriage patterns are taking shape, involving different sorts of migration routes to and from Argentina. I do not intend to view those concepts as entities operating individually. Rather, they are intertwined components, which together shape what Appadurai calls “the work of imagination” (1996:3). In previous sections, I have briefly approached migration, but for now, I shall mostly illustrate the implications of the use of media.

Early writings on the use of Internet have focused on virtual spaces as set apart from “real” life (Miller & Slater 2000:4). Miller and Slater (2000) argue against such a distinction between the real and the virtual, and shows how the use of the Internet is an important component in the enacting of Trinidadian identity. Online activities lead to new “dynamics of positioning,” where individuals become global actors and the national boundaries porous (2000:18-19). Despite the obvious differences in ethnographic contexts, I similarly argue that mundane online practices are relevant in a study of Islam in Buenos Aires. The consumption and use of media is a platform to enact one’s agency (Appadurai 1996:7). It is this media appropriation and individual agency which I focus on here.

It is not new to suggest that media play an important role in religion. Anderson shows that the importance of the Reformation was reinforced by the use of printed media (1991:39). Birgit Meyer argues that the incorporation of media is inherently part of religion (Meyer 2006:13). Having herself looked at the connections between Pentecostalism and the use of video in Ghana (2004), Meyer emphasizes the importance of the “the visual orientation” of media plays for religion (Meyer 2006:18). Paying attention to the visual does highlight some
important tensions arising between religious iconism and the importance of visual representations in new media channels (Meyer 2006:18). Yet here I discuss other uses of media that do not concern the visual as much.

When it comes to Islam, there are several anthropological studies on the meaning of media and religious practices, which have focused on sermon audio recordings in Egypt (Hirschkind 2001) and in Mali (Schulz 2006), as well as of the use of videocassettes and DVDs among Murid Sufists in Senegal and abroad (Buggenhagen 2010). Through media, Muslims are able to access doctrinal information which they previously could not (Mahmood 2005:79). The importance of the Internet is acknowledged (Buggenhagen 2010:82), yet few look further into its uses. Jon W. Anderson ([1999]2003) highlights the role of the Internet in the Muslim world and how it opened arenas for new independent interpreters of Islam to create public spaces where Islam’s authority is then negotiated. In this way, information becomes widely disseminated and not limited to the powers of an interpretative elite, ‘ulama’, leading to a growth in circulation and anonymity (Anderson 2003:46). At the same time, Anderson argues that this new crowd of online interpreters is restricted to a group of transnational bourgeois professionals (Anderson 2003:53). In this way, the hierarchical status of the spread of information is not fully flattened. However, as these writings are from 1999, I will add nuance to these points in response to the changes which have occurred in the digital world since the turn of the millennium. Another approach that Anderson does not touch upon is to see how the Internet provides a platform to write out narratives of conversion among Muslim converts (van Nieuwkerk 2006b). Here, I explore how the Internet was appropriated for religious da’wa, Islamic knowledge, and for the search of a global community.

**Discerning Correct Practices of Islam and a Pious Lifestyle**

Outside the mosques, access to material on Islam was restricted in Buenos Aires. This is due to several reasons mentioned earlier. As I explained in chapter two, access to online purchases was still restricted in 2015. Also, the lack of female authority within the mosques often made it uncomfortable for women to discuss their issues, as they would have to approach a male figure. Therefore, they would often discuss their questions among the sisters. But what if the sisterhood could not provide any help? The sisters actively employed online resources to

---

43 Aniconism, which is an opposition to icons and symbolic representations, was indeed an important issue presented to me by the converts in Buenos Aires, and could have been discussed here in the use of online videos.
acquire knowledge and complete their practices of Islam. Online discussions often concerned the question of how to conform Islamic requirements and live a pious Islamic life in a non-Islamic society (Anderson 2003:48). Many supplemented the knowledge they received from the mosques with readings and discussions with other Muslims online. During classes at the Saudi mosque, the women were often warned not to use online sources uncritically. Despite this, almost all women actively appropriated the Internet for the shaping of their pious self. I was shown and sent countless YouTube videos throughout my fieldwork. 44

Members of the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga use online videos as sources of knowledge in order to embody a correct practice of Islam. After the first prayer of the day, salat al-fajr, Sara usually eats breakfast watching YouTube videos. She follows the teaching of American shaykhs, and used the information provided online in order to supplement her understanding of how to be a good Muslim. She understands English perfectly and lamented many times the lack of good information on Islam available in Spanish. The use of online sources can also be highlighted by looking at the next situation: One Ramadan night at the Sufi derga, men and women were sitting in the same room. In between prayers, we were sitting in small groups, talking or reading. I was looking at the Qur’an with Noor. Two or three men were discussing the dhikr ritual and its performance, which led to a search of videos on the order’s main computer. The videos caught everybody’s attention. We spent some time watching different dhikr videos from around the world. All present members were looking at the symbiotic synchronization of the groups’ movements and its effect in the different videos. All agreed that they could improve their own performances. The members carefully watched the videos and discussed what was needed in order for them to learn how to embody their own practices properly.

The Internet offers room for new interpreters who shape opinions on how Islam should be practiced (Anderson 2003). Yet the sisters used the Internet and social media not only to learn, but also to share information about Islam and correct practices with other people, Muslim or not. Naima once showed me a video that she, Valentina, Camila, and some other women had been talking about. It was three American Muslim men showing what behavior is inappropriate inside a mosque. Naima and Camila discussed the need of similar information

44 This was also due to the fact that women were afraid of giving me wrong information about Islam, and preferred to redirect me to other sources.
in Spanish, targeting women, and discussed the possibility of making a similar video themselves. Almost all converts I met actively used Facebook to share information about correct Islamic practice.

**Sisters and Social Media Da’wa**

Naima had previously been married. She had been a practicing Catholic, though her husband was never religious. Naima explained that after getting divorced, she felt lost in religious tumults. She would beg God for mercy, as she was only able to praise Him, and not Jesus. One day, a man contacted her on Facebook. He asked her about her religion and beliefs. Naima told him she was a Christian, but that she only worshipped God. The man, who was a Muslim, told her that this was basically what Islam was about. In this fashion, Naima discovered Islam, and converted not long after, in January 2014, at the Saudi mosque.

Naima’s discovery of Islam was due to another Muslim’s *da’wa*. *Da’wa* refers to the preaching of Islam to non-Muslims. Mahmood argues that the women’s piety movement in Egypt should be understood as institutionalization of new *da’wa* practices (Mahmood 2005:57). Similarly, I argue that the efforts of the Saudi mosque to spread Islam can be placed within these attempts. Yet here I focus on individual endeavors to bring knowledge of Islam to non-Muslims, which with the help of the Internet and social media, has expanded greatly. Muslims in Pakistan or Egypt are today able to spread the message of Islam to non-Muslims around the world. As the example with Naima shows, Muslims contact people through social media and open a discussion concerning one’s religious belief. Such small talk with Muslims on social media seemed to be the norm among single women especially, here meaning mainly the women frequenting the Saudi mosque. As I slowly discovered, many women were in constant contact with the global brotherhood or sisterhood through social media.

There is little information available on the topic of online *da’wa*. There are of course methodological complications on how to approach the subject. Most conversations happen within the private spheres of communication. I cannot say how widespread the phenomenon is, yet I was surprised by its scope amongst my informants. I discovered that Facebook was an important platform for them to meet fellow Muslims across the world. After becoming friends with most of my informants on this social media platform, I myself have been contacted by many young Muslim men from across the world.
A Global *Umma* of Sisters and Brothers

Finally, I elaborate further the discussion on imaginations of sisterhood and marriage from chapter three. The local mosques and Muslim communities in Buenos Aires are important, but online means are central to the reshaping of relationships and sociabilities (Le Renard 2014:103). Both at the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga, converts were encouraged to think of fellow Muslims across the world as part of their brother- and sisterhood. Constructions of relatedness are thus expanded to a global scope. As told in the story at the beginning of the chapter, Amal referred to another Muslim she had met online to discuss practices of Islam as her sister. To highlight this broadened understanding, I find it useful to apply the Islamic concept of *umma*. The *umma* refers to the Muslim community sharing the same values and ideals (Mahmood 1996:12). Its all-encompassment is highlighted in the Qur’an: "Truly, this, your Ummah, is one religion, and I am your Lord, therefore worship Me" (21:92). Yet the concept is also problematic. As with the notion of global Islam, the same problems arise with the idea of a global *umma*. It could be beneficial to think of many Islams with different dogmatic practices and approaches rather than the global inclusion of all Muslims into a single *umma* (Hughes 2013:97). Though for this discussion, I see the global *umma* as a useful conceptual tool. I base myself on the experiences of my informants, and in their eyes, they joined such a global Islamic community. Most envisioned Muslims as a worldwide *umma*. Therefore, I include women from the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga in this broader community.

Imaginations concerning marriage are especially relevant here. As discussed in chapter three, the young women frequenting the Saudi mosque often romanticized Arab Muslim men as the ideal husband. The possibility to meet someone was enhanced by the use of online meeting websites and social media, such as Facebook. Many women have Muslim friends from the Middle East and North Africa, but also from other regions, such as South East Asia, Europe, or West Africa. Through the Internet, Muslim men and women can interact freely (Le Renard 2014:103). I argue that single women went through the most effort to maintain contact with the global community. As many women met men through social media, most hoped this could potentially lead to marriage (Le Renard 2014:71). But for some women, such encounters proved to be disappointing and lead nowhere. During my fieldwork, I did not come across any
woman who had met her husband online. One of the sisters, on the other hand, was during my fieldwork indeed meeting with a young man she had met online. In contrast to other women’s preferences, however, he was a non-Muslim Porteño. Seeing a non-Muslim was quite stigmatized, as most converted sisters viewed having a partner who shared their faith as an imperative. She kept this from her fellow sisters, preferring to wait a little longer prior to telling anyone. Yet most women were not interested in this option. In chapter three, I discussed how the sisterhood provided a network to meet men. This was a common practice, and many converts met Muslim men in this manner. In this way, a connection was initially established through an actual sister. From there, Facebook became an important tool to enhance existing relations.

Mariana had met a man in this manner. She began frequenting the Saudi mosque during the month of Ramadan. Mariana had recently converted and was quickly welcomed as a sister. In the mosque, I found her often talking on her phone or sending pictures. In a skeptical tone, Valentina once mentioned that she was always skyping an African living in Saudi Arabia who wanted to marry her. Valentina warned Mariana about meeting someone online; the reality could be completely different. But Mariana was in love and did not see it as a problem. One Friday after Ramadan, a few of us were slow to go to class after the prayer. We sat in the prayer hall talking, and Flor told us eagerly that Mariana was engaged. Mariana’s fiancé is originally from Benin. When I asked how she had met him, she told me that a sister (not from the Saudi mosque) had introduced him to her and they had begun talking over Skype. She had already met his entire family and they were planning for her to travel there to get married. Since I left Buenos Aires, I have followed the women’s posts on social media. In December 2015, I saw that Mariana’s fiancé travelled to Buenos Aires and that they have been married in the small unofficial musalla.

A final aspect of this global umma I want to highlight is that, since I returned, I have been following how the women have been using their social media channels. Some of the women, especially the single converts, have been posting texts regarding Islam in both French and English, despite the fact that they do not speak those languages. I was intrigued by this practice that I never witnessed in person; in comparison to the women fluent in those

---

45 For the sister’s privacy, I intentionally do not mention whether she frequents the Saudi mosque or the Sufi derga.
languages, they only used these languages on the Internet. But online, the single converts devoted great attention to communicating in French and English. But why those two languages? With English and French, I believe the women were able to communicate with a significantly larger amount of Muslims worldwide than by communicating in Spanish. This communication skill broadened the community one could discuss issues with and simultaneously increased a woman’s chances to meet a potential good Muslim to become her husband.

**Concluding Remarks**

In this final analytical chapter, I zoomed out in order to view Islam in light of globalization. Notions of a global Islam are often applied both in research and practice, yet its multiple meanings can be conflicting. I have outlined different approaches and, for lack of a better term, I retain the use of the concept. I then zoomed in and addressed the actual flows between the two religious institutions and a “home-nation,” namely Turkey and Saudi Arabia. This highlights how the institutional religious practices in Buenos Aires are shaped by broader global networks. Those networks further frame how the two mosques spread information on Islam. I have highlighted the power dimension involved in this setting, yet I argue that power relations are often contested by individuals. Through the use and appropriation of media, and in this case, the Internet and social media, Muslims around the world exert agency. They especially contest traditional Islamic interpretative elites and become part of a new public of agents who interpret Islam (Anderson 2003). This appropriation of media is relevant in order to view the main topics of this thesis in light of a global Islam. Therefore, I have returned to religious piety, conversion, and extended understandings of relatedness to shed light on how those practices in Buenos Aires are shaped by global flows and an online dimension of Islamic practice.
Conclusion: Do Muslim Women Need Saving Now?

The title above plays on the well-known question asked by Abu-Lughod (2002, 2013) regarding Western perceptions of Muslim women amidst a global war on terror, and the gendered arguments used in the discourse. Women’s position in Islam is more often than not portrayed as that of the oppressed victims. This can be even more evident for women converting to Islam: They chose this lifestyle, and men are thought usually to represent an underlying reason for this decision (Jawad 2006:153; Bourque 2006:237; Özyürek 2015:1). In short, gender and Islam are highly contested topics, and their entanglement is all the more pronounced these days amidst rising fears. At the same time, the global spread of Islam is perceived as a threat to the West. Due to the recent terrorist attacks in Europe and refugees fleeing Syria, most European countries have seen growth in anti-Muslim sentiments, and rising fear fueled by these events. The intense media focus given to Islamic fundamentalist as representing Islam leads to an unbalanced picture of the various practices of Islam that can be found throughout the world (Ernst 1997:212). But again, a connection between Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism is taken for granted.

In line with others (Abu-Lughod 1986; Le Renard 2014), I provide a focus on women in Islam by looking at the mundane aspects of their lives: I explored everyday practices and strategies. For this research, two factors have been highly relevant. First, I have discussed its contextual framework, Argentina. Some aspects affecting Argentine society, such as the long-term effects of the 2001 crisis, were introduced in order to return to them throughout the thesis. Second, the fact that most of my informants were converts to Islam rather than born-Muslims provided this research with particular social dynamics. I explored the specifics of conversions to Islam, which the women chose to perform, in chapter two. Conversion is a gradual process, which begins long before the actual ritual. I outlined approaches to conversion and discussed the ritual conversion itself, and what it implies for the women. In the second part of that chapter, I explored the embodiment of Islam and the centrality of embodied understandings in becoming Muslims. The everyday practice of the religion, as well as new conceptualizations of the body, are discussed, in order to illustrate how conversions led to a negotiation and reworking of feminine understandings of identity based on Islam.
Furthermore, new imaginations of kinship were conceived through the Islamic concepts of brother- and sisterhood. Based on newer anthropological approaches to kinship, I used Carsten’s (1995) concept of relatedness to discuss the sisterhood and its role for the women in chapter three. As most converts’ older social networks did not approve of their conversion to Islam, the sisterhood filled a gap and played an important social function. At the same time, the sisterhood is not about sisters only, but involves men too. I showed how marriage was often an important topic, and imaginations of kinship were extended to one’s desires to (re)marry. Islam provided a new platform to inquire about marital relations, and the sisterhood often played an important role in the search for a Muslim husband.

Yet the conversion to Islam did not only shape new relations, but also new understandings of faith and of morality. In chapter four, I explored a much discussed wish I encountered amongst my informants, namely to become a good Muslim. Religious piety was set high on the agenda in new understandings of their self-perception. Their moral framework and understandings of life were reversed and reshaped according to Islamic premises. Yet I argued that this discussion is all the more significant when viewed in light of the sisterhood. Here, actions and social dynamics were interpreted in light of a new moral structure.

In the beginning of this conclusion, I mentioned how Islam and gender are contested topics that I attend to here. I have showed throughout the text what I argued for in the introduction, namely that gender is relational. Ideas about men were present through the reconceptualization of modesty (chapter two) or in different Islamic masculinity ideals (chapter three). Relations between men and women became visible during gender-mixed classes at the Saudi mosque or at the Sufi derga, where the lack of space described in the introduction prevented the construction of a gender-segregated space. In chapter four, I began by describing a specific event of a man yelling at the sisters during a class at the Saudi mosque for not including his wife. This story highlights not only that different conceptualizations about acting like and being a good Muslim can collide, but also how gender is at the center of these ideas.

Throughout this thesis, I made it a priority to highlight aspects I discovered to be important from the perspective of the female converts themselves. I also placed this study of Islam, or rather, Islamic practices, within two contextual frameworks. To begin with, this discussion has been grounded in the local context of Buenos Aires. I spent my time between two Islamic
institutions that I have referred to as the Saudi mosque and the Sufi derga throughout this thesis. The combination of both has allowed me to look into nuances of how Islam is performed and practiced among Porteños. This geographical delimitation was put in contrast to a much more far-reaching conceptual delimitation discussed in chapter five. That is, I investigated the idea of a global Islam and how it becomes appropriated by different actors. Even though the term is used differently and has certain limitations, I decided to retain and apply the term myself. My conceptualization of a global Islam was done by returning to the topics of the previous chapters, namely religious conversion and its embodiment, sisterhood and marriage, and finally morality and religious piety. In this way, I have demonstrated how local Argentine practices of Islam amongst recent female converts are part of and shaped by global connections. In sum, the thesis highlights the tensions between the local and the global within an Argentine context. By focusing on a Latin American setting, I shed light on the topics of Islam, relatedness, and gender. I wish Abu-Lughod’s question would be considered meaningless today, yet its importance seems instead to be rising.
# Appendix: Commonly Used Arabic Terms

*Daʿwa* – Call upon all Muslims to spread the message of Islam  
*Dhikr* – Act of remembrance of God  
Fatwa – Legal opinion within Islamic law  
Hadith – Sayings and doings of the prophet Mohammed  
Hajj – Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca  
Halal – Pure/permitted  
*ḥarām* – Impure/banned  
Hijab – action of covering, used to describe the veil used by women to cover their hair  
ʿĪd – The two celebrations after the fasting of Ramadan  
Imam – Man leading the ritual prayer  
*Īmān* – Islamic faith  
Jihad – Strive for a moral life and defense of Islam  
*Jumuʿa* – Congregational prayer  
*Khuṭba* – Friday sermon  
Mecca – Holy city in Saudi Arabia  
*Muṣalla* – Prayer hall which cannot be considered a mosque  
*Rakʿa* – Unit of the ritual prayer  
Ramadan –Month of the fast in the Islamic calendar  
Salafi – Fundamentalist understanding of Islam  
Salat – Islamic ritual prayer  
*Salat al-fajr* – First of the obligatory Islamic ritual prayer, before sunset  
*Salat al-maghrib* – Fourth of the obligatory Islamic prayer, after sunset  
*Sawm* – The fast  
*Shahāda* – Declaration of Islamic faith  
Shariʿa – The canonical law of Islam  
Shaykh – Islamic leader  
Shiʿi – Islamic denomination  
Sunna – correct; as the prophet Mohammed did  
Sunni – Islamic denomination  
Sura – Chapter of the Qur’an  
ʿUlamaʿ – Islamic religious scholars  
*Umma* – Islamic community of believers
Wahhabism – Branch of Islam developed in Saudi Arabia

\textit{Wuḍū́} – Purification process before the ritual prayer or handling the Qur’an

Zakat – Alms-giving
Literature


AMIA. N.d. “Atentado a la AMIA – 18 de Julio 1994”.


http://www.brillonline.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/shaykh-SIM_6890?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.cluster.Encyclopaedia+of+Islam&s.q=shaykh


http://lacasadelencuentroblog.blogspot.no/2016/03/informe-de-investigacion-de-femicidios.html (Accessed May 15th 2016).


Narbona, Maria del Mar Logroño; Pinto, Paulo G. & Karam, John Tofik (eds.). 2015. Crescent over Another Horizon: Islam in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA. Austin: University of Texas Press.


The Economist. 2015, December 17th. “Argentina lifts control on the peso.”


