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Coming of Age in Mecca: Pilgrimage in the Life Stories of Two Young Adult Dutch Pilgrims

Marjo Buitelaar

1 Introduction¹

In this chapter I explore how the meanings that individual pilgrims attribute to their experiences during the pilgrimage to Mecca are connected to their life stories. To this end, I analyse the pilgrimage accounts of two young adult pilgrims from the Netherlands. Late adolescents and young adults are a particularly interesting age-group to focus on for an analysis along these lines.² One reason for this is that performing the pilgrimage to Mecca is a recent phenomenon for Muslims of this age-group. Moreover, emergent adulthood is a crucial life-phase for finding one's own place in society. During this phase, individuals face developmental tasks and transitions in their life that tend to have a long-lasting impact on their sense of self, their social relations, and their personal value system (cf. Kunnen 2019; Crocetti 2018; Erikson 1968). The aspirations of young adults in designing their own life and the opportunities that they are offered tend to be strongly gendered. Therefore, I will focus on how age and gender intersect in the ways the two young pilgrims whose accounts I discuss here attribute meanings to their pilgrimage experiences.

This chapter thus creates a bridge between the historical contributions in the first part of the book and the contributions that analyse contemporary hajj practices and stories from a social scientific perspective in the second part. While the historical chapters take readers along on the pilgrimage journey of one or a few individual pilgrims whose written hajj accounts are discussed, the chapters on the pilgrimage experiences of contemporary pilgrims tend to

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- 1 For their inspiring comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, I am most grateful to Willy Jansen and Simon Coleman, two brilliant anthropologists who feature prominently as role models in my own academic biography. Thank you Willy for your presence in my life story since the beginning of my studies, and Simon for entering it in the last decade of my life in academia.
 - 2 In development psychology research, adolescence usually refers to youth between 15 and 27 years old. My focus here is on youth between 20 and 30 years old, a life stage that I will refer to as emergent adulthood.

explore how various modalities of a specific theme feature in a larger body of interviews.³ In this chapter, the two approaches are combined by zooming in on the oral pilgrimage accounts of two young adult pilgrims who participated in my research project on the salience of the hajj in the personal lives of Dutch Muslims of Moroccan or Turkish parentage.

Particularly informative for the ways in which the meanings of pilgrimage are embedded in pilgrims' biographies is the question of what motivates them to embark on the pilgrimage to Mecca at a certain point in their life, or, considering the growing trend of multiple visits, at specific moments in their life. For Muslims living in Europe, whether or when to fulfil one's religious duty of performing the hajj has become a pertinent question. The present quota-system that was implemented to regulate the annual influx of pilgrims hampers the hajj ambitions of many Muslims in Muslim majority countries, but, due to covid-19, has only begun to affect those who live in European countries like the Netherlands since 2022.⁴ Also, most Muslims in Europe enjoy a standard of living that allows them to put aside money for the journey to Mecca.⁵ As a result, the number of pilgrims to Mecca from the Netherlands and other West-European countries has increased enormously over the past decade (McLoughlin 2013; also see Safar and Seurat elsewhere in this volume). Living in a cultural context where going on a holiday is virtually considered a basic need, and where families with migrant backgrounds habitually visit their country of origin, deciding where to spend one's annual leave has become a considerable moral issue for European Muslims who have not yet fulfilled their religious duty of hajj performance. Such decisions may be informed by both individual motives and peer pressure. This makes it all the more informative to learn how the decision to make the journey to Mecca relates to what pilgrims consider key events in their lives.

How Dutch pilgrims of Turkish and Moroccan descent link their pilgrimage experiences to their wider aspirations in life was one of the topics I investig-

3 Much has been written on the issue of authority, representation, and audience in approaches to the study of written and oral self-narratives that may account for this difference. See e.g., Berger Gluck and Patai (1991) and Geiger (1990).

4 The quotas for diasporic Muslim minorities in Europe and other nations like Singapore, South Africa and the U.S. correspond to their countries' total populations (Bianchi 2004, 53).

5 It must be noted that when living in a predominantly non-Muslim environment it can be a challenge to obtain an employer's permission to take leave to go on pilgrimage when the hajj season falls outside the regular holiday seasons in the Netherlands. Also, in line with Saudi hajj regulations, women under the age of 45 face the hurdle of needing a *mahram*, a male chaperone to accompany them on the journey, although it is unclear how changes in the Saudi law that allows women to travel alone will affect hajj regulations after the measures related to the COVID-19 will be fully lifted.

ated as part of the larger hajj research project which was the point of departure for this volume. In this project, a team of researchers from the University of Groningen and the University of Amsterdam studied how narrations about religiosity, social identifications, and self-identity in pilgrimage accounts reflect the ways in which the habitus of pilgrims, that is, the embodied dispositions that form a matrix for perceptions, appreciations, and actions of narrators is informed by various cultural discourses simultaneously (cf. the introduction to this volume). For my own subproject on the meaning of the pilgrimage to Mecca in the lives of Muslims of Turkish or Moroccan descent in the Netherlands, a total of 77 pilgrims were interviewed, 52 of whom were from Moroccan descent, and 25 of Turkish descent.⁶

To study the relationship between pilgrims' life stories and the meanings they attribute to the hajj, in the first part of each interview, I asked my interlocutors to sketch their 'life-line' by demarcating on a sheet of paper different phases of their lives so far and marking occasions that either positively or negatively stood out for them. The 'life-line' served as a point of entry to discuss key events, significant others, achievements, and challenges in their lives. This open, biographical part of the interview was concluded by inviting the interviewees to reflect on their religious upbringing and personal religious development. Asking for childhood recollections about people who had gone on pilgrimage to Mecca created a bridge to the second, slightly more structured part of the interview, which concentrated on the interviewee's own pilgrimage experiences, either in the form of the *'umra*, the voluntary pilgrimage to Mecca, or the hajj, the mandatory pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage to Mecca is a popular conversation topic among Muslims (cf. Al-Ajarma 2020), and most pilgrims gladly share stories about their experiences in Mecca with family and friends. As Khadija Kadrouch-Outmany and I argue elsewhere in this volume, by telling and retelling their stories pilgrims

6 All research participants were recruited through 'snowballing': initial contacts in existing personal networks, mosques, and community centres serving as starting points to approach subsequent interviewees. The majority of research participants were in their mid-thirties to late-fifties, all of whom grew up in the Netherlands. Ten Moroccan participants belong to the older generation of economic migrants that came to the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s. Most interviews with pilgrims who grew up in the Netherlands were conducted in Dutch by the author, 8 were conducted by Kadrouch-Outmany, while a research assistant conducted interviews with 10 older pilgrims of various Moroccan backgrounds in Tamazight or *dārija* (Moroccan-Arabic). In addition, two students in religious studies each conducted 10 interviews with Dutch based pilgrims for their MA research traineeship and MA thesis, about half of whom were from Turkish or Moroccan parentage (cf. Wijers 2019; de Lang 2017). All interviews were audio-taped and fully transcribed.

present themselves as moral agents. Dan McAdams' theory on narrative identity construction that informed the interview design I used is particularly apt to study such self-representations in storytelling (cf. McAdams 1993). McAdams conceives of identity as 'personal myths' or stories that people tell themselves and others to explain how they have become the person they are at the time of narration. Besides the narrators themselves—who act as main character of such stories—a small selection of significant others tend to feature as positive or negative role models in their life stories. As people's circumstances change, so do their stories about the self and about the role models that populate their stories. McAdams argues that the motor behind the 'plots' in self-narratives is finding a satisfactory balance between agency, the capacity to act upon the world, and 'communion', being embedded in meaningful relationships.⁷ Having conducted his research in mostly in white middle class American settings, McAdams conceives of agency as personal autonomy and individual achievements. He therefore focuses on the potential contradictory nature of agency and communion. As I have argued elsewhere, however, developing and maintaining meaningful personal relationships also takes much agency (Buitelaar 2016). Furthermore, not only can meaningful relationships constitute a powerful source of agency, but agency may also be experienced communally rather than referring exclusively to an individual capacity. In relation to the pilgrimage to Mecca, for example, this comes to the fore in the intensifying effect it has on experiencing the sacred for those who circumambulate the Ka'ba to be absorbed by the flow of thousands of other pilgrims who perform this rite simultaneously.⁸ Slightly adapting McAdams' approach to agency, then, I use the term here to refer to the capacity to make well-informed biographical choices in order to lead a morally 'good life'. Besides the competence to formulate and pursue life plans, in my understanding of the term, agency also includes coping strategies: one's response to challenges and threats that may jeopardize one's life plans (cf. Skinner and Edge 2002).

7 Although related to it through the shared concept of 'agency', McAdams' theory about agency and communion should not be confused with the agency/structure debate in the social sciences, which concerns the issue to what extent social structure defines the scope and nature of the power that individuals possess to act as agents, for example to change that structure, cf. Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977).

8 Cf. the part of a sermon that Werbner (2003, 109) quotes of a Muslim scholar from the reformist Deobandi tradition, who reminded his congregation of the power of simultaneous presence of millions of pilgrims in Mecca as follows: 'When one person asks blessings alone from his God, he shall get the blessing. But if many people ask for blessing all together, they will get manifold blessings. The bigger the congregation is when they ask for blessings, the more blessings Allah will give them.'

What people consider a satisfactory balance between agency and communion can vary between different individuals, depending on their temperament, their life experiences, and on how specific modalities of agency and communion are valued for different categories of people in the cultural contexts they participate in, not in the least on the basis of their age and gender.⁹ According to McAdams, so-called ‘nuclear episodes’, that is narrations concerning key events in the life of the narrator, are particularly informative about challenges to and shifts in the balance between agency and communion.

Since it is relatively easy for Muslims in the Netherlands to go on hajj, it is particularly interesting to learn whether the motivation of my interlocutors to perform hajj at a certain moment in their lives was related to such ‘nuclear episodes’ in their life stories, and if so, how performing the pilgrimage has affected their sense of agency and of communion. Dividing the interview into a biographical part and a part focusing on the interviewee’s pilgrimage experiences worked very well in most cases; many interlocutors enjoyed looking back on their lives when filling in the life-line.¹⁰ How people sketched their life-line provided much information about the significance of their pilgrimage experience for their lives. While some did not mark the journey to Mecca on their

9 This then, is how the balance between agency and communion relates to the agency/structure debate.

10 An exception to this were interlocutors over the age of sixty, consisting of Moroccan women and men who had come to the Netherlands as (the spouse of) economic migrants. They tended to find this part of the interview difficult or appeared to feel somewhat uncomfortable about it. A possible explanation for this might be that in the Moroccan cultural context where they were raised, they were less encouraged to reflect on their personal life story than on stories relating to their family and tribal belongings. Indeed, life stories are never purely private constructions, but are informed by specific cultural conceptions and discourses about personhood (cf. Roberts 2002, 118; Widdershoven 1993, 15). Also, most of the older research participants were illiterate and felt uncomfortable drawing a life-line on paper, so that the interviewer did this for them. Another reason for the slight discomfort could be that overall, these older pilgrims were quite happy to talk about the hajj, but could not imagine why their life story might be interesting in relation to their pilgrimage experience. Their life-line stories mostly consisted of listing events like their marriage, migration, birth of children, etc. In comparison with younger interlocutors—who grew up in the Netherlands—they were more concerned with providing ‘correct’ information about the hajj, and less eager to contemplate the more personal meanings of their own experiences. At the end of the interview, for example, several female interlocutors asked the interviewer if they had answered her questions correctly. This resonates with my fieldwork experiences in Morocco between 1987 and 1991 when I conducted research concerning practices and meanings of Ramadan, the fasting month. Women would often direct me to their husbands; attending the Friday mosque sermon and the possession of ‘correct’ knowledge of religion was clearly considered the domain of men at the time (Buitelaar 1993).

life-line and only began describing it when asked in the second part of the interview, others presented their hajj or *ʿumra* journey as a crucial episode of personal transformation or development.

In what follows, I summarize the pilgrimage stories of Enes and Asmae, who both belong to the youngest age-group of interviewees between 20 and 30 years old.¹¹ I decided to select the interviews with Enes and Asmae for several reasons. First of all, both produced particularly rich pilgrimage accounts. Secondly, while their stories contain many parallels, crucial divergences can also be noted, especially in terms of their genderedness. Drawing a comparison between their hajj accounts therefore provides a glimpse of the shared challenges young adult Dutch Muslims may face in realizing their goals in life as well as shedding light on the gendered dimensions of pilgrimage practices and the meanings attributed to them.¹² After presenting Enes' and Asmae's pilgrimage stories, in a subsequent section I shall compare them by reflecting on how age and gender intersect in the ways each narrator relates their pilgrimage experiences to specific modalities of agency and communion that they strive for in their lives.

2 Enes: Ending Naughty Days¹³

Enes was one of the interviewees who began filling in his life-line by marking the year he went on pilgrimage to Mecca: 2012, three years before the interview

11 To protect the interviewees' privacy, their names and other non-essential personal details such as city of birth/residence that might expose their identity have been changed.

12 While aiming to discuss the interviews of research participants with different ethnic backgrounds also played a role in opting for Enes, who is of Turkish descent, and Asmae, who has Moroccan roots, in practice the cultural differences in their stories did not stand out enough to include them as a focal point in my analysis here. In fact, I was struck by the commonalities in their stories in this respect. The fact that both Enes and Asmae are Sunni Muslims may account for this to some extent, but does not fully explain the overlap of cultural traditions in their stories. Another explanation might be that we are presently witnessing a process of convergence between the practices and stories of Dutch pilgrims of different backgrounds. As the material produced in the interviews for this research does not allow me to draw clear conclusions in this direction, the issue would be interesting to explore in follow-up research. Also, the stories of Enes and Asmae should not be taken to represent those of larger categories of Dutch Muslims. In fact, many more Turkish Muslims are brought up in more conservative families than Enes, and having a mixed marriage, as Asmae does, is as yet rather atypical.

13 The interview with Enes was conducted and transcribed by my former student Lisa de Lang. While she quoted the interview with Enes in her MA thesis, the selection of quotes and the analysis of the interview for this chapter is mine.

took place. At the time of the interview, he was 25 years old and engaged to be married. Enes and his only sibling (a younger brother) belong to the second generation in his family that grew up in the Netherlands; his paternal grandfather migrated to the Netherlands from Turkey in the 1960s. Enes received his diploma in management studies a few months prior to the interview, and had recently been offered a job in the company where he had done an internship. He hoped that his new position would allow him to buy a house and get married in the near future. Enes did not have to be asked about his upbringing. Within the first few minutes of the interview, he described his parents as 'very liberal' Muslims who have always given him much freedom to explore:

I've always been free to do as I like. In line with our religion, my parents taught me that I am responsible for my own deeds; no imam or fellow Muslim can provide forgiveness: one has one's own responsibility towards God.

Although his mother has recently begun to observe the *ṣalāt*, during most of his life, Enes' parents seldomly engaged in religious practices. Unlike many other Turkish-Dutch children, for example, Enes was not sent to a weekend Qur'an school. As a result, until his teenage years, he knew little about Islam. His father taught him what Enes calls the Islamic 'basics' of what it means to be a good person, like not lying, stealing, or hurting others. Enes marks his teens as the phase where he began to develop a general interest in religion. Wondering 'why should Islam be the truth?', as he put it in the interview, he looked up information about Islam and Christianity on the Internet and in booklets. He taught himself how to pray and began to attend the Friday service at the local mosque every now and then.

Enes marked the year that he turned sixteen as the conclusion of a phase that he characterized as having led a 'normal' life as a disciplined and successful student. Next came what he calls his 'discovery phase': he began to drink and smoke pot, joined his friends to house parties, and engaged in what he calls 'naughty things'.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, his study results deteriorated and, after a while, so did his physical condition. Realizing that 'this is not me, I must stop,' as of 2010 he struggled to get back to 'normal' life. He joined a soccer club, thinking: 'playing soccer calms you down: you come home exhausted, so you don't have the energy to go out again.' Also, soccer training provided him with an

14 He did not elaborate on the latter other than stating that he was grateful for having managed to stay out of the hands of the police.

alibi not to join his friends if they asked him to go out. Although he felt better for a while, in the long run the soccer strategy did not work and he relapsed into 'naughtiness'.

Enes' 'naughty phase' lasted for five years. All this time, together with a friend he continued to visit the mosque occasionally. And then, in 2012, he happened to attend the Friday mosque service when an announcement was made that would change his life:

There was this announcement about an *ʿumra* trip they were organizing, and for youths under 25 it was subsidized: just 700 euros rather than 2000, so that's super cheap! I decided that I would go on the spot. The announcement was made two days after I had attended a birthday party of a friend where I had gotten very drunk. Meaning that there were *exactly* 40 days between the party and our departure to Saudi Arabia, which I remember very well as it was King's Day [italics added to indicate the emphasis, MB].¹⁵ (...) They say it takes 40 days for alcohol to leave the body (...) and I was very lucky because our flight was delayed one day, so that there were *exactly* 40 days between my last drink and our departure for the *ʿumra*.

Enes explained that the moment he heard the mosque announcement, he realized this would be his best chance to stop his bad habits:

I knew that if I'd go there, I wouldn't touch alcohol any more, no more pot or pills either. Also, I figured: once I've been to Mecca, my friends won't try to persuade me to go out again, you know, they will respect me for my religiosity. So I realized: this will save me.

As young male Muslims tend to do more often, Enes and his friend decided to go on pilgrimage together. The *ʿumra* journey that they signed up for was organized by two Turkish mosque organizations with Dutch branches: Diyanet, the Turkish state mosque organization, and *Milli Görüş*, together assembling 300 pilgrims with Turkish backgrounds from all over the Netherlands for this specific *ʿumra* journey. The information supplied by the organizers pertained predominantly to the logistics of the journey and descriptions of how the various rites should be carried out. Enes watched a DVD about the pilgrimage,

15 King's Day or '*Koningsdag*' is a Dutch national holiday with festivities in all Dutch cities and villages to celebrate the birthday of King Willem Alexander.

but otherwise he took to heart his grandfather's advice not to seek too much information on the meanings of the hajj, but to just 'let it happen':

My grandfather is the only person in our family who has been on hajj. I was still a child at the time. Besides the ring he gave me upon his return, what I remember is what he'd say when someone asked him about the hajj: 'You cannot describe it, you can only feel it.' (...) When I told him that I was going on *'umra*, he said: 'Just go. You will see what I mean when I told you that it cannot be described. Just feel it.' And so I decided to let myself be surprised.

Before Enes left for Mecca, his mother organized a barbecue party that many family members attended:

We call that *helalleşmek* in Turkish, you ask everyone: 'Forgive me if something between us has happened' and then you kiss each other. (...) Everybody gave me some money and they said things like: 'I'm so happy for you.' (...) It was a great day, my whole family was there, we had lots of fun. (...) Not any different than the parties we organize before going on holiday to Turkey, mind you, just a nice family gathering. Great fun as always.

The first stop on the *'umra* journey was Medina, where the pilgrims visited the grave of the Prophet Muhammad. For nearly all pilgrims, 'greeting' the Prophet is an intense emotional moment. Rather than elaborating on what it meant to him to visit the Prophet's grave, however, Enes stressed how impressed he had been by how modern and proper the town was:

I was like: 'Wow!' Medina is such a luxurious city, no beggars or anything. Our hotel was only a ten minutes' walk from the mosque, and the entire mosque area was super clean. The marble floor is so clean you can eat from it, that was so beautiful! (...) So I thought: the Ka'ba and Mecca can't be more beautiful than this, this must be it, this must be the peak moment.

Enes deftly plays with raising expectations in his narrative here:¹⁶ after stating that he had assumed seeing Mecca could not impress him more in the last

¹⁶ Enes may be born story teller who spontaneously used this narrative technique in the interview. However, considering the coherence and flow of his account, which resonates



FIGURE 10.1 Courtyard of the Prophet's mosque in Medina

PHOTOGRAPH: ANONYMIZED RESEARCH PARTICIPANT IN BUITELAAR'S RESEARCH

sentence of the quote above, the enormous impact his first sighting of the Ka'ba had on him during stands out all the more. Indeed, he relates how his initial encounter with the Ka'ba exceeded his wildest expectations:

That's where I fell in love [*verliefd werd* in Dutch, MB], I can't express the feelings I felt then. My friends and I have visited many places, like Spain and Denmark, and that was all great and nice too, but this ..., this was falling in love, there's no other way of putting it. (...) When I started to circle the Ka'ba, I felt it pulling me towards it like a magnet. Whenever I was near the Ka'ba during those five days we spent in Mecca, I never felt tired or sleepy. I wanted to stay close to it, so during our entire stay, I think I only

with the narrative structure of a conversion story according to which a previous, bad way of life is left behind to embrace a much better lifestyle (cf. Sandage and Moe 2013), it is likely that he has told the story more often.

slept in the hotel a few hours. For the rest, I'd sleep a bit in the courtyard of the Grand Mosque, but mostly I'd be sitting there looking around.

Enes is quite unique to use the phrase 'falling in love' to describe his emotions upon seeing the Ka'ba for the first time. Similar to its English equivalent, the Dutch '*verliefd worden*' has connotations with romantic love. As such, however, being overwhelmed by emotions and feeling a strong love for God is a recurring topic in both oral and written hajj accounts (also see the contributions by Al-Ajarma, Kateman, and Nurgat elsewhere in this volume). Most pilgrims are moved to tears by the experience, and Enes had expected the same to happen to him. Tour leaders often try to maximize emotional effects on pilgrims during their first sighting of the Ka'ba by suggesting they keep their eyes closed or heads down and let themselves be guided by someone who has been there before until standing in front of the Ka'ba. This also happened to Enes. A fellow pilgrim offered to lead the way so that Enes could keep his eyes shut until reaching the Ka'ba. To his disappointment, however, no tears started to flow:

When I got there and opened my eyes, I saw that it was so beautiful and I saw all these people crying, and I thought: 'Wow, this is pure love, how come I don't cry?' (...) I longed to cry too; it is a sign of sincere love. But no tears appeared! That is, not when we started out circling the Ka'ba. But during each round I managed to get closer to it, so the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth ... [Enes takes his time to draw seven, increasingly smaller circles with his finger on the table to illustrate the circling, MB] and then, during the seventh time round, I could actually touch the Ka'ba and I pressed my faced into the black cover. That's the moment I started crying!

During the hajj, when millions of pilgrims have gathered in Mecca to perform the *ṭawāf* at the same time, it takes much determination and elbowing to get to the Ka'ba and touch it. Many of my interlocutors commented critically on the selfishness of pilgrims they had seen push others out of the way. In their view, this goes against the spirit of the hajj, which, besides worshipping God, is also about celebrating unity and solidarity among all Muslims. The chance to touch the Ka'ba without having to take recourse to drastic measures is much greater during the *ʿumra*, not only because there are fewer pilgrims then, but also because *ʿumra* pilgrims tend to spend several days if not weeks in Mecca and are able to do the *ṭawāf* numerous times. This was also the case for Enes, who was even lucky enough to be able to kiss *al-ḥajar al-aswad*, the Black Stone set into the eastern corner of the Ka'ba:

One of the most special moments I experienced was at the Black Stone. The Prophet kissed it, which means that everyone wants to kiss it too. I myself managed to kiss it, and when I did, I saw something there that made me realize 'Wow!' ... I guess what I saw then has made the biggest impression on me of all I've seen in Mecca.

[Interviewer]: What was it you saw?

One isn't supposed to tell ...

Note again the trope in Enes' storytelling of the ineffability of certain experiences. Enes was quite happy, however, to repeat several times how much it had moved him to touch what to Muslims is God's house on earth and to be able to spend ample time in its proximity. Wanting to share that feeling with his loved ones at home, he saw to it that some of the souvenirs he bought for his friends and relatives, like himself, had been in direct contact with the Ka'ba:

I did not feel like shopping much, but there are lots of shops right outside the Grand Mosque so that's where I went a few times to buy some stuff. I filled one rucksack with souvenirs for family members and close friends that I rubbed against the Ka'ba so that I when I'd give them something I could say: 'This has been in touch with the Ka'ba.' I also rubbed some strings of prayer beads against the black cover, as well as some prayer mats. I like the idea that saying your prayers on that mat you can visualize its having been in contact with the Ka'ba.

When asked if rubbing his souvenirs against the black cover of the Ka'ba was a way to transmit God's *baraka*, blessings, Enes laughed a bit before stating that 'No, no, no; it's just a nice idea.'¹⁷ Interestingly, while denying the power of the Ka'ba to transmit *baraka*, shortly afterwards he did refer to Zamzam water as having extraordinary properties. Like virtually all pilgrims, besides souvenirs he also brought home a five-liter-bottle of Zamzam water:

Unfortunately, I put it in my suitcase and then the lid burst, so that by the time I got home, there was only about one liter left. Never mind, I was able to give everyone who came to the house to welcome me home a small cup to drink. (...) Zamzam water is very special, you know: it digests com-

17 Cf. Bursi 2022 who discusses different historical views on whether touching the Ka'ba is laudable or should be avoided.

pletely in your intestines, so that you don't produce urine. You can drink as much as you like, but you don't have to go to the toilet.

[Interviewer]: What makes Zamzam water so special?

Oh, I don't know exactly, it's got something to do with Safa and Marwa, it welled up from under Ismael's foot.

Telling about Zamzam water reminded Enes of how pilgrims sitting in the courtyard of the Grand Mosque shared drinks and food with complete strangers:

There is so much positivity there. It shows on everybody's faces; everybody is merry. It is just so awesome that you're given the opportunity to be there, you realize that is something that you all share, so people greet each other, shake hands, rub perfume oil on your hands, it's all pure love: 'Here you are, brother, sister,' 'Have a piece of cake,' that kind of thing, you know. (...) You're all there with the same goal; 'I want to make a fresh start.' That makes you feel like you're being born again. I really felt like: 'Wow, this is it, grab your chance.' It's very difficult to describe, actually, just like my granddad had predicted.

Enes then took his smartphone out of his pocket to show the interviewer some photographs. Almost echoing his grandfather, he stated that while they do give an impression, they cannot possibly convey what it feels like when you are actually there:

It's like watching a soccer match on television. That can be cool, but only when you're actually there in the stadium, that's where you really feel the atmosphere.

After his return home, having experienced God's love and the emotional power of collective worshipping inspired Enes to become a more active member in the local Turkish mosque in the town where he lives. Shortly before the interview he had even joined the mosque board, and he now applies the management skills that he acquired during his studies to the benefit of the local Muslim community. Having reiterated several times throughout the interview the love he felt in Mecca, as he summed up his pilgrimage experience towards the end of the interview Enes mentioned his love one more time:

This [Mecca, MB] is the place where I fell in love, and it has been my salvation, really. I did not have great expectations; it was more like an excuse

to turn away from my previous life. But I really fell in love, I could feel it in my whole heart. (...) The way I was pulled towards the Ka'ba, that was really magical.

[Interviewer]: Do you feel as if it has changed you in any way?

I think what changed is that I have become more balanced. As in: no more doing my prayers one day and then skip them the next. In terms of my expectations for the future: those haven't really changed. I still want to settle down into married life and raise a family. The standard story, so to speak. But my self-image has changed in the sense of having found a calm. (...) I've grown up, become more mature, more focused on my future. So, going on *'umra* has helped me climb that wall and step into a new chapter.

3 Asmae: Mapping One's Own Path in Life

Asmae was 30 years old and had been married for a year when we met in July 2019, three weeks before she and her husband would go on hajj. We met for a second interview five months after the couple's return. Like one of her two older sisters and two younger brothers, Asmae was born in Amsterdam to a Moroccan family that had come to the Netherlands in the early 1980s. Her oldest brother and sister were born before the family's migration. Asmae's husband is of Pakistani parentage and, like herself, was born in the Netherlands. I conducted the biographical part of the interview during our first appointment. Asmae began to draw her life-line by demarcating her educational trajectory from elementary school to university. Subsequently, she added marks for her discovery of a Sufi approach to Islam through the Muslim student association she joined during her studies, and her marriage in 2018. Only later in the interview she mentioned having been on *'umra* three times. Realizing my specific research interest in the pilgrimage to Mecca when mentioning one of those trips, she went back to the sheet of paper with her life-line to add marks for each of these journeys.

Two girls who were Asmae's close childhood companions are still her best friends. Making an exception for these friendships, Asmae describes the years before she went to university to study pedagogical sciences as a life-phase when she felt lonely and unhappy within her family:

There are quite some years between my sisters and me, and my younger brothers more or less kept me at a distance because I was a girl. So in hindsight, I was the odd one out in my family. I could not go to my parents if

I needed advice—they wouldn't know how to help me anyhow—but I wasn't close enough to my older siblings to turn to them.

Looking back, Asmae realizes that her parents could not help her because of their poor education and rural Moroccan background. They felt insecure in the Netherlands and held on strongly to the Moroccan culture they had grown up with, particularly in how they raised their children. Until recently, Asmae had a tense relationship with her mother because of what she characterizes her mother's 'traditional Moroccan views' on gender roles:

Boys and girls were treated very differently in my family. (...) In my parents' view, men should have freedom. They belong to the outside world, so to speak, whereas we [women, MB] belong to the inside world. My sisters and I were supposed to do lots of domestic chores, but my brothers were exempted and free to do as they liked. At the same time, like them, we went to school and had to do homework. So we always had more tasks. My mum insisted we should learn how to cook. To her, that's how you invest in a good marriage.

The restrictions Asmae experienced and her parents' expectation that she marry a Moroccan man are the main topics in her stories about her teen years. Thanks to the mediation of one of her sisters, she was allowed to go to university, which marked the beginning of a happier phase in her life. She joined a Muslim student association that introduced her to a very different kind of Islam than what she views as the 'culturally inflected religiosity' of her poorly educated parents. The student association invited highly learned speakers like the British convert Abdul Hakim Murad, a neo-traditionalist Islamic scholar with Sufi inclinations (cf. Sedgwick 2020). It is particularly the Sufi approach that speaks to Asmae: its emphasis on the love of and for God; of having what Asmae calls 'a short line' between oneself and God, that is, a close, personal relationship of trust.¹⁸ As an example she mentioned the opportunity to go on hajj: 'I see that as a personal gift that God grants me. It is as though He says: "There you are, my girl, it's yours" you know. He's doing me favour.' The conception of God that she developed as a university student differs much from how her parents raised her:

18 Asmae used the term '*liefde*' here, that is, love in a more general sense than the '*verlieftheid*', or having fallen in love, which Enes spoke about. See a similar emphasis on the love of God in Pnina Werbner's extensive quotation of a Sufi Muslim who shared his Sufi interpretations of the pilgrimage to Mecca with her (Werbner 2003, 105).

The God I grew up with was always condemning and punishing; good or bad, right or wrong, He was judging all the time. But I definitely got rid of that image.

What also appealed to Asmae was the relaxed socializing between male and female members within the student association, many of whom were of Pakistani parentage. She found that Pakistani males 'act normal' around women, unlike Moroccan men who, in her experience, are brought up to believe that they are princes and superior to women. It is through the religious networks she participated in during her studies that Asmae met her husband. Since her parents had rejected several previous suitors of non-Moroccan parentage who had asked for the hand of one of their daughters, she was convinced that they would forbid her to marry the Pakistani-Dutch friend she had fallen in love with. Indeed, after she stated her wish to marry him, a long, conflictual period ensued. Eventually, however, her parents consented to the marriage.

In her narrations about the student association and how her participation in it marked a major turning point in her life, Asmae mentioned in passing that she had had a most wonderful time when she went on *'umra* with some lecturers and a group of friends from the student association. She stated that this visit to Mecca was quite different from the time she had been there with her brother and sister-in-law shortly after having begun her studies, even though her first visit had been very special precisely because it was her first time in Mecca. It was only then that she realized that she had not yet marked her *'umra* trips on her life-line and hastened to remedy the omission. In response to my subsequent question what had motivated her first visit to Mecca, Asmae 'avowed' that the decision had been taken light-heartedly; she had simply wanted to go on a vacation. Once in Mecca she had realized that it was a very 'different holiday' than other travel destinations:

Obviously, my parents would not allow their daughters to travel unaccompanied, so whenever one of my brothers would go on holiday, I'd ask if I could join him. Usually they'd go with other guys, meaning that joining them wasn't an option, but this time, my oldest brother had just gotten married and he wanted to visit Mecca with his wife. So my sister and I asked if we could join them, and it was no problem. Actually, it was, of course, his duty to take along two sisters who need a *mahram* when they want to go to Mecca [laughs, MB]. But anyway, he didn't mind, and my sister-in-law actually liked the idea; considering that so much is gender-segregated there [in Saudi Arabia, MB], she liked having female company.

So that's how it started, but once I was there I thought: 'Wow, I never want to go on a different holiday [than Mecca, MB].'

[Interviewer]: Can you remember what made you think that?

First of all, it's how you feel when you're there: the only thing that occupies your mind is worshipping God, concentrating on your faith, there is nothing else to distract you. (...) Being in *iḥrām* strips you from all irrelevant things in life. It's like a home coming. (...) And then, of course, what makes it different from any other trip abroad is its historical significance: if you realize that Ibrāhīm built the Ka'ba—well, actually the history goes all the way back to Adam, peace be upon him. (...) All those prophets and *aṣ-ṣaḥāba*, the companions of the Prophet Muhammad that are buried there. They died as *shahid*, martyrs, but they are still alive in their graves. So, you feel that kind of spirit all around you there. I had made sure to read a lot about the history of those places, and having that knowledge when you see them makes it very special.

Like Enes and many other pilgrims, the first time Asmae entered the courtyard of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, she refrained from looking up until she was standing in front of the Ka'ba:

I was nervous and preoccupied with deciding which *du'ā* (supplication) I'd do first when I'd get there. Because the first wish you pray for will be fulfilled instantly. So it didn't sink in immediately. But I do remember being very impressed standing there, thinking: here's that building that I know so well from television, and now I am here myself. That was very surreal. I remember finding it slightly smaller than I had imagined, but, to be honest, I can't recall if that was the first time or maybe during my second *'umra*. What I do clearly remember is thinking: 'Here is where my journey begins.' Both literally: my *'umra*, but also my journey into Islam.

The second time Asmae visited Mecca was quite different. Being there with friends from her student association added greatly to the joy of the experience. This time her youngest brother joined her as a *maḥram*:

Rather than my asking 'Can I join you', this time it was 'Would you like to come along?' I have more power over my younger brother [laughs, MB], but that wasn't the point really: I explained how important it was to me to go there with this group of friends and that I needed him to accompany me as a *maḥram*. He understood and was happy to come along.

What also differed from Asmae's first *'umra* was that their tour leader informed them about the deeper layers of meaning in the hajj rites, for example about the angels that circle the *bayt al-ma'mūr*, God's House in heaven directly above the Ka'ba, at the same time as pilgrims circumambulate the latter. This added to a multi-layered sense of unity that Asmae experienced:

I was very conscious of the fact that we were there as pilgrims from many different nationalities, all saying supplication prayers, everybody worshipping God. That sense of unity meant a lot to me. As did the connection to God, and with the hereafter, because of those angels circling the *bayt al-ma'mūr*. (...) When you are there, it is all so much within reach, as though ... as though your life on earth no longer matters, as though you live in the hereafter.

Tears flowed down Asmae's cheeks as she was telling me this. When asked what touched her so deeply, she explained feeling a kind of 'homesickness': a strong longing for Mecca and the wish to get back in touch with that feeling of connectedness she experienced there:

It's like: I belong to God, and He sent me to earth to learn how to grapple with life and to think of Him. But I'm not that good at it, I struggle. So then He brings me back—either on *'umra* or on hajj—to give me a boost. To stimulate me, or to bring me calm, peace of mind.

Asmae's yearning for Mecca explains why she has been on *'umra* three times already—the third time in the company of yet another brother and sister-in-law. During the interview prior to her hajj journey, I asked her why for her upcoming visit to Mecca she and her husband had decided to perform the hajj. Considering her strong longing for Mecca, her answer surprised me:

Once it is an option, it becomes a duty. We have the money: 'check'. I have a *mahrām*, that's another 'check'. (...) We discussed it when we got married: shall we go on a honeymoon or on hajj? We decided it makes more sense to get the hajj out of the way before buying a house or spending money on holidaying. So: duty first, and after that we can start enjoying ourselves. Mind you, going on hajj is also very enjoyable, of course. But we thought we'd do it before getting a mortgage.¹⁹ It's as down to earth as that, I'm afraid.

19 Because of Dutch tax regulations, it is not only complex, but also very expensive to get an

Indeed, when I met Asmae for the second interview five months after her return from the hajj, she and her husband had recently returned from a holiday in Malaysia:

When we just came back from the hajj, we said: 'Great, that's done, now we can go on holiday and do whatever we like.' But looking back ... I mean, Malaysia is nice and beautiful and all that, but it is nothing compared to an experience like the hajj, which gives me such a wonderful feeling, much better than going on a vacation. So I guess I would like to go again, either for the hajj or the *'umra*.

For several reasons, performing the hajj felt very different to Asmae than her previous *'umra* journeys:

First of all, some parts are really tough, you suffer [*'het is afzien'* in Dutch, MB]. Also, because it is an obligation it carries more weight. My husband and I had this ongoing conversation: Why would God ask this of us? What is the purpose of it all? Furthermore, doing the pilgrimage together with my husband obviously made it very different from my *'umra* experiences.

What stands out most for Asmae are the 'life-lessons' that performing the hajj together with her husband taught her. She has written them in bullet points in the notebook on her smartphone so that she can look at them whenever she feels she needs their support. The first lesson concerned the realization that she should let go of being such a perfectionist; it is okay to do her *ibādāt*, the acts of worship, in a more relaxed and 'one step at a time' manner. This she learned from conversations with her husband in Medina, where their group stayed the first days of their package tour. Initially, Asmae was inclined to spend as much time as possible to say *du'ā* or supplication prayers in the courtyard of the Grand Mosque where the Prophet Muhammad is buried. Her husband, however, told her to take it easy; just the *ṣalāt*, the obligatory five daily prayers and some additional *du'ā* prayers would do according to him. For the rest, he told her, it was alright to enjoy themselves:

We decided to first and foremost enjoy ourselves in Medina, and make sure that we'd be fit for the hajj later on. We'd go to the mosque for the

Islamic mortgage in the Netherlands, that is, one that does not include paying rent, which is forbidden according to Islamic law.

ṣalāt but didn't do not much else. (...) We didn't join the excursions or anything. We just indulged in the luxury of the hotel. (...) We had, after all, deliberately opted for a five-star package tour with a room to ourselves rather than having to share with others. So we savoured every moment of being together. Not surprisingly, of course, being newlyweds.

When the actual hajj ritual in Mecca started, the couple similarly tried to stay together as much as possible. Asmae abhorred the gender-segregated tents in Minā. Being surrounded by noise and dirt, she could hardly sleep. Therefore, on the day of the first *ramy* or pelting rite at the *jamarāt*, the pillars representing the devil, she and her husband decided to carry out the rite early, so that they would have some time together back in the tent camp when the group would leave for the pelting:

That tent is so very small, I really don't want to be in it when the group is there, I get very claustrophobic. So we thought we'd stay behind and have a tent to ourselves and chill for a bit. That's not allowed, of course, but we did it anyhow [laughs, MB], and since we hadn't slept well the previous night, we fell asleep. (...) But then we overslept and missed the bus that would take the group to Muzdalifa. The tour guide later told us that he had kept phoning us, but apparently we had put our phones on silent. So the bus had left. When we woke and found that the whole tent camp was almost deserted I panicked: how on earth were we going to get there? But my husband saw some groups that were still waiting for their bus and were allowed to join one of them. (...) When we finally found our group in Muzdalifa the tour guide was furious! Some people sniggered but others looked annoyed.

Asmae interpreted the fact that all ended well as a sign that God had not disapproved of what the couple had done. She also felt encouraged by the independent stance her husband had taken to confront the group and make his own plans:

I realized how well we communicate ... and how easily other people can disturb that. (...) I must admit that I often felt guilty towards the group. (...) I mean, we operated mostly independently whereas they were all busy sharing food and taking care of each other. But sorry: I did not choose you; I don't feel like bonding with you, I prefer operating independently from others.

While, like Enes, Asmae was captured by the visualization of the *umma* in Mecca, the above quotation indicates that it is particularly the idea of the community of Muslims in the abstract that speaks to her. She is happy that—contrary to the Netherlands—in Mecca she does not stand out. Simply being among other Muslims instils her with a sense of belonging. In practice, however, she finds that having to engage with fellow pilgrims often hampers her own decision making and her freedom of movement. Extrapolating her courage to not succumb to the social pressure of the group of fellow pilgrims she travelled with, she decided then and there that she is entitled to follow her own path and make her own choices in life:

The hajj triggered that: I realized I was growing into myself. I didn't feel at home among Moroccans, I didn't feel at home in my family, and I did not feel at home among my colleagues at work. But I do feel very much at home with my husband. (...) And if there is one place where I do feel I belong, it's in Islam; I belong to God.

Once more, tears welled up in Asmae's eyes when she narrated this 'life-lesson' that the hajj had taught her. As it turned out, despite the empowering realization that she is entitled to follow her own path, and despite feeling nurtured by the fact that her sense of belonging as a Muslim matters more to her than her belonging to an ethnic group or a specific family, it has been very difficult for her to face the complexities of everyday life since her return to Netherlands:

I have been feeling very down since we came back. I guess it is the contrast between feeling very much at home there, and not feeling at home here. Not having to worry about anything else than doing the rites, in comparison with everything you have to do here. Since our return home, it somehow bothers me all the more that I feel the odd one out at work, for example.

[Interviewer]: What makes you feel the odd one out?

... Why is it fine for my colleague to say 'I'm having a break for a fag', whereas I can't say: 'I'm having a break for my prayers'? Small details like that show that I still hide myself ... I so much want to come out, but somehow I just don't dare. (...) But if there is one thing that I learned from the hajj, it is that it's alright how I am. So I will go for it, even if it means going against the mainstream. (...) Being Muslim is such a primal feeling.

Asmae feeling very much 'at home' during the hajj and homesick after her return to the Netherlands should not be mistaken as meaning that she would

actually like to live in Mecca. Like most interviewees, she is very critical of the Saudi regime and in general does not like the ways foreigners and women are treated in Saudi Arabia. Rather, the pilgrimage to Mecca symbolizes and reinforces her sense of belonging to Islam. At the same time, she is struggling how to reconcile this sense of communion with fellow Muslims with her wish to act as an individual who makes her own decisions rather than adapting to the expectations and demands of others.

The open, biographical interview design that was used in this research allowed narrators to select the stories and highlight elements of their pilgrimage experiences that they themselves deemed important.²⁰ As a consequence of the open interview format, the topics different interviewees address can vary significantly. A recurring theme in Asmae's stories, for example, is how she relates her pilgrimage experiences to her various senses of belonging and not-belonging. While Enes also addressed his sense of belonging to the *umma* or community of Muslims, unlike Asmae's stories, his narrations do not contain any references to a potential tension he experienced between acting as an individual on the one hand and as a member of the *umma* on the other hand. I would argue that one factor contributing to this difference in Enes' and Asmae's stories concerns the gendered dimensions of their experiences. In the next section I will reflect on how age and gender intersect in the ways Enes and Asmae

20 The open, biographical approach is frequently used, particularly in feminist research, with the aim to 'give voice' to subaltern groups in society. Besides the unfortunate word choice—the subaltern have voices, it is a platform they need—the ideal of letting interlocutors speak for themselves can obviously not be fully realized; as Dan Goodley et al. (2004, 167) argue, by compiling story fragments 'researchers are always pulling strings'. The ideal to let research participants speak for themselves would require presenting the near integral transcript of our interlocutors' stories, as, for example, Ozlem Ezer (2019) does in her impressive example of collaborative storytelling in her book *Syrian Women Refugees* in which she presents the personal accounts of Syrian refugees. While for the purpose of this chapter Enes and Asmae were invited to tell the stories they themselves found important, eventually it was I who selected episodes from the interview transcripts that, in my view, represent best how each of them narrated their pilgrimage experiences and attributed meaning to them. Another reason why 'giving voice' can at best only be partial is that storytelling is always dialogical; the stories that interviewees share are attuned to the research topic they agreed to be interviewed about. Also, in this particular research project, many interviewees were motivated to participate to contribute to sketching a different picture of Islam than the often-negative representations found in public discourse (also see Al-Ajarma and Buitelaar 2021). Indeed, storytelling is a process in which narrator and audience are engaged in an ongoing negotiation of meanings. In this sense, the pilgrims who participated in the research are not the sole author of their stories; their hajj accounts are necessarily co-authored and multi-voiced (Buitelaar 2021; cf. Zock 2013).

interpret their pilgrimage experiences in relation to the kinds of agency and communion they strive for in their wider lives.

4 Enes' and Asmae's Stories Compared

A first point to note when comparing the pilgrimage accounts of Enes and Asmae, is the wider social context in which they are embedded; their familiarity with holiday trips, and their having been able to visit Mecca when the occasion arose, illustrate that both research participants belong to a generation of modern middle class citizens with consumerist lifestyles and desires. Asmae has visited Mecca four times already, while Enes expects to go back for the hajj in the near future. Although older Muslims in the Netherlands also engage in repetitive pilgrimage, as was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, multiple hajj performance differs significantly from patterns that can be discerned in Muslim majority countries like Morocco and Turkey, where the pilgrimage to Mecca very much continues to be a 'once-in-a-lifetime journey' that remains beyond the reach of many Muslims. Also, for most people from Muslim majority countries who are able to realize their wish to visit Mecca, it often takes a life time of saving money to do so, meaning that the pilgrimage tends to be postponed until old age (cf. Al-Ajarma 2020). For this reason, the honorific title of al-Ḥājj(i) or al-Ḥājjā that is used to address people who have conducted the pilgrimage, have connotations with old age and are therefore avoided by and not used for young pilgrims like Enes and Asmae.²¹ When young pilgrims are addressed by the title, it is often done flippantly.

The new trend among Muslims in the West to visit Mecca in emergent adulthood and to perform repetitive pilgrimage comes with shifts in the meanings of the pilgrimage and new ways of narrativizing the experience. For elderly Muslims, going on hajj is an important step in taking leave of life on earth and preparing to meet one's Creator. Undertaking the journey is motivated first and foremost by the wish to settle one's debts with God and beg forgiveness for one's sins before dying (cf. Buitelaar 2020; Haq and Jackson 2009; McLoughlin 2009, 138; also see Buitelaar and Kadrouch-Outmany, and Safar and Seurat elsewhere in this volume). The *helalleşmek* party that Enes' parents organized for their son echoes the notion of preparing to take leave of one's earthly life. Rather than emphasizing the dimensions of seeking forgiveness and bidding farewell

21 Strictly speaking, the honorific title al-Ḥājj or al-Ḥājjā only applies to a person who has conducted the hajj. In practice, however, in many Muslim communities any pilgrim who has been to Mecca tends to be addressed by the title.

from one's dear ones that characterized such farewell ceremonies in the past, however, for Enes the party was 'just a nice family gathering' similar to the ones his family organizes before going on holiday to Turkey.

While Enes and Asmae both mention the mandatory nature of the hajj, the main argument in this chapter is that instead of viewing pilgrimage as a fitting conclusion of one's life trajectory, for many young pilgrims like Enes and Asmae visiting Mecca serves the purpose of preparing them for adult life first and foremost. Indeed, the two pilgrimage accounts discussed here are very much coming of age stories. Enes and Asmae explicitly interpret their pilgrimage experience in terms of overcoming previous biographical hindrances and repositioning themselves as active agents in their social networks and in Dutch society more widely.

In particular, in line with the main developmental tasks that characterize emergent adulthood, their accounts illustrate a reconsideration of agency and communion and a focus on activities that aim to shift the balance between the two. Feeling he had not handled the freedom his parents had allowed him in his teenage years well, in terms of agency Enes is seeking to find more discipline in his life, so that he can start his own career. In terms of communion, besides wishing to start a family, what stands out in his account is how his experience of being 'reborn' by performing the *'umra* is mediated through his mimetic relationship with his grandfather. Being the only member of the family who has performed the hajj, Enes' paternal grandfather features prominently in his account. Enes has developed a strong identification with his grandfather on the basis of their shared pilgrimage experience. Furthermore, the communion with fellow pilgrims Enes experienced in Mecca motivated him to become more active in the local mosque community in his Dutch hometown. In his position as member of the mosque board, he is able to apply and develop his professional management skills. His new engagement with Islam that resulted from his pilgrimage thus involves both agency and communion.

Asmae is likewise seeking a new balance between agency and communion. In terms of agency, she interprets her pilgrimage experiences as a crucial step in her journey toward a more liberal Islam that allows her to make her own choices and distance herself from the demands and restrictive environment of her family. In terms of communion, she moves away in the stories about her subsequent pilgrimage journeys from her family towards her friends and eventually her husband. Similar to what can be observed in Enes' stories, different modalities of agency and communion intertwine and mutually reinforce each other in her narrations; as her relationships with significant others in her life change, Asmae's sense of agency increases. Interestingly, her sense of empowerment is very much linked to the relationship with her husband; she relies heav-

ily on his orchestration and interpretation of the couple's hajj performance. This comes to the fore, for example, in the frequent use of the plural 'we' that appears in the narrations about her fourth pilgrimage journey. By telling her that she can take a more relaxed stance, it is her husband who provides legitimacy to the liberal Islamic approach that speaks to Asmae.

Besides interpreting their pilgrimage experiences in terms of equipping them for adult life, what also transpires in Enes' and Asmae's stories is a view on the pilgrimage to Mecca as something to be enjoyed rather than purely an act of atonement or obedience in preparation to death. In this respect, Asmae is most explicit in presenting the pilgrimage as a 'present' given to her by God, which she understands both as a spiritual 'boost' and a time-out from the complexities of everyday life.

For my analysis here, two points in the narrations of Enes and Asmae stand out in particular. First of all, conceiving of their pilgrimage experiences as a sign that God approves of them and intervenes to help them reinforces their future-oriented views on the significance of the pilgrimage in their earthly lives. Both Enes and Asmae discuss their experiences predominantly in terms of self-realization and personal growth. Enes summarizes the significance of the *'umra* for him in terms of 'step into a new chapter', cleansing the soul and body and seeking forgiveness from God for his previous 'naughty life'. The pilgrimage experience offered him a 'calm' that enabled him to settle down. Asmae describes her pilgrimage experiences as 'growing into myself' and discovering what she really wants for her life.

Secondly, in keeping with an emphasis on personal growth, both Enes and Asmae speak of God in terms of a loving and nurturing power. For Enes, this is more or less in line with how he was raised. His parents taught him to approach Islam as a guideline to learn how to be a 'good' person, similar to alternative sources that non-Muslims may draw from. Also, rather than threatening him with a relentless God as a way to control him, his parents allowed their son to experiment with different lifestyles and emphasized his responsibility for his own deeds. Asmae's parents, to the contrary, presented their daughter with the image of a punishing God. The Muslim student association that she joined in her university years, however, allowed her to develop a more personal relationship with God. Subsequently, her husband taught her that it is okay to be ritually relaxed. Eventually, being introduced to a new perspective that emphasizes one's personal relationship with God, Asmae's hajj experience marked the culmination of her religious journey into her realization that 'it's alright how I am'.

As I have discussed more elaborately elsewhere, the conception of God as a loving entity and an interpretation of the pilgrimage to Mecca in terms of

its contribution to self-realization can be discerned more generally among the children of Muslim migrants who grew up in the Netherlands (Buitelaar 2020; Beekers 2015, 145). This stance strongly resonates with a modern conception of personhood in terms of an 'authentic self'. The idea of an 'authentic self' implies an understanding of life according to which each individual should realize their own way of life through self-exploration and self-expression rather than 'surrendering to conformity with a model imposed from the outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority' (Taylor 2002, 83).²²

Looking through the lens of modern subjectivity in terms of an 'authentic self', the pilgrimage accounts of Enes and Asmae appear to have much in common. The stories of both research participants illustrate how the polysemous Islamic tradition intertwines with other globalized social imaginaries to construct modern Muslim personhood (cf. Jung 2016). Although his grandfather features prominently as a role model in his pilgrimage stories, Enes reiterated that he had found his way to God independently. By underscoring his personal agency and the voluntary character of his religious development, he emphasized his personal motivation to conduct the pilgrimage and his strong commitment to worshipping God. Similarly, a notion of free choice underlies Asmae's view that rather than having to conform with the model of Islam imposed on her by her parents, she is entitled to follow her own path and become the kind of Muslim she wants to be. In this sense, both Enes's and Asmae's stances are in line with modern conceptions of Muslim subjectivity according to which 'submitting to God', as the literal translation of the word Islam indicates, is considered to be more authentic and sincere if it is done voluntarily (Jouili 2015, 37; Fadil 2008; Mahmood 2005).

At the same time, resonating with a general conception among Muslims that pilgrims are 'called by God' (cf. Al-Ajarma 2020), both Enes and Asmae interpret having been able to visit Mecca as a direct sign or intervention by God. Enes interpreted the fact that he happened to be present in the mosque when the call for a next *umra* trip was announced as a sign that God was helping him to get back on the straight path. Likewise, Asmae conceives of each visit to Mecca as an opportunity granted to her by God with a purpose. Likewise, she presents the fact that she and her husband managed to catch a lift to Muzdalifa after disregarding the rule of gender-segregation and falling asleep

22 Although the discourse of the 'authentic self' suggests a liberation from conventional social constraints, it also dovetails with the demands of today's global neoliberal political economy by carrying with it the normative imperative to take full responsibility for one's own life and wellbeing.

together in a tent in Minā as a sign from God that he did not disapprove of their behaviour and that it is alright to go their own way rather than adapt to the group.

Asmae's narrations about operating independently from fellow pilgrims not only points to how her interpretations of the pilgrimage experience are informed by her desire for specific modalities of agency and communion related to her specific phase in life, but also sheds light on the import of gender in her experiences. Her stories diverge significantly from Enes' account in terms of references to gendered dimensions of the pilgrimage. The presence of fellow pilgrims in Enes' and Asmae's narratives is a case in point. While Asmae's account contain several references to her fellow travellers, they are conspicuously absent in Enes' stories; he only mentions chance encounters with pilgrims from other countries that he very much enjoyed. I would argue that Enes' feeling free to do and go as he pleases, such as spending most of his time near the Ka'ba rather than returning to the hotel to sleep, points to the genderedness of his experiences. As a male pilgrim he does not need a *maḥram* as Asmae did on her pilgrimage trips. Also, as I describe in my contribution with Khadija Kadrouch-Outmany elsewhere in this volume, several women who participated in my research reported that female women are expected to adapt to their fellow pilgrims in the group far more than male pilgrims are.

Indeed, when looking through the lens of gender, in certain respects Asmae's narrative is the mirror image of Enes' pilgrimage account. The red thread that runs through Asmae's stories concerns the empowering effect the hajj has on her efforts to liberate herself from social conventions, more specifically to break free from a restrictive parental milieu characterized by gender discrimination. By contrast, Enes felt empowered by the pilgrimage in the sense of its helping him to develop the willpower to withstand the enticement of an excess of freedom and to adopt a more disciplined life. Although he did not address gender in his stories—or perhaps precisely because he did not problematize it—his account is equally gendered as Asmae's. He volunteered the information about his liberal upbringing early in the interview, and mentioned it again several times as the interview progressed. Considering that his father is not principled about abstaining from alcohol and that his mother has only recently started to perform the *ṣalāt*, it is likely that, indeed, the freedom Enes enjoyed as he grew up is due to the more liberal religious style of his parents. Since Enes's only sibling is also male, it would be difficult for him to answer the question to what extent his gender played a role in the freedom of movement and space for exploration that his parents allowed him. What can be established is that not relating their freedom of movement to gender occurred more generally

among male interviewees.²³ The majority of female interlocutors, to the contrary, addressed gender restrictions frequently, both in the stories about their upbringing and in stories about their pilgrimage experiences, such as the need to be accompanied by a *mahram* (also see Al-Ajarma 2021; Thimm 2021; Buitelaar and Kadrouch-Outmany elsewhere in this volume).

I would argue that Enes' struggle to curb his freedom, and Asmae's fight to expand hers, not only shaped how each interpreted their pilgrimage experience, but also informed their religious trajectories more widely. The contrasting motives that characterize their accounts can be linked, for example, to the emphasis on sensing the divine in Enes' pilgrimage stories and the focus on life lessons in Asmae's narrations. Although both Enes and Asmae longed to be touched by the pilgrimage and much appreciated its overall spiritual ambience, Asmae was more strongly oriented towards the historical and deeper meanings of the pilgrimage rites and sites than Enes. Similarly, she also reflected much on the life lessons they had in store for her. This is directly related to her search for a spiritual home where she can feel more truly herself than in what she experiences as the restrictive religious atmosphere in her parental home and an exclusivist environment at work.

In comparison to Asmae, Enes clearly represents a less reflexive religious style. Following the advice of his grandfather, he had deliberately not looked up much information about the pilgrimage to Mecca beforehand but focused on letting himself be overwhelmed by the experience. The significance of the ritual for him pertained predominantly to its potential to provide him a transformational experience that would help him make a new start. As I read his pilgrimage account, contrary to Asmae, he was not in search for religious knowledge, let alone for new, liberating interpretations of the pilgrimage ritual. For him what counted first and foremost was the powerful effect of the *'umra* and the sojourn in Mecca on his body and mind. He hoped that experiencing this power might fortify him and help him adopt a more disciplined life style.

To conclude, reading the pilgrimage accounts of Enes and Asmae through the lenses of age and gender sheds light on both commonalities and differences. The comparison of their stories indicate that the commonalities relate mostly to their positions as modern, middle class Dutch Muslims in emergent adulthood, while the differences pertain to their gendered experiences both in their daily lives in the Netherlands and during the pilgrimage to Mecca. Moreover,

23 Male interviewees often did mention restrictions in their freedom of movement during childhood by having had to attend mosque lessons at times that their non-Muslim friends were free to play or do sports.

by zooming in on the life stories of Enes and Asmae, I hope to have demonstrated that embedding pilgrimage accounts within the wider context of the narrators' biographies enhances our understanding of how the significance of the pilgrimage to Mecca to individual pilgrims relates to life-cycle transitions and their relationships at home.²⁴ While the more thematic approach that this chapter shares with the chapters to follow provides insights in how their specific positionality informs the ways contemporary pilgrims appropriate their Islamic heritage to make it meaningful in their daily lifeworlds, the 'travel biography' approach that this chapter shares with the discussion of historical accounts in the preceding chapters draws attention to how what pilgrims identify as key events in their personal lives also contributes to the experience and meanings of the pilgrimage to Mecca.

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24 cf. Hillary Kaell (2014, 13) who demonstrates in a most convincing way how the American Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land she studied are motivated by 'the belief that flying far away will help them meet the responsibilities and deepen the identities they inhabit at home.'

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