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Feeling Like “Fullah”:  
The Challenges of Being a Religious Convert and  
Anthropologist

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# Feeling Like “Fullah”: The Challenges of Being a Religious Convert and Anthropologist

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## ABSTRACT

The medina of Fes has been the core of Morocco's cultural and religious identity for over a thousand years. After nearly a decade of working in the city, I returned in 2011 to begin research on young women's piety and the transmission of Islamic knowledge. Actively engaging in the religious communities of the city brought unforeseen challenges, as my own womanhood and piety were put on display. This article examines the dual role that some anthropologists can face: that of the scholar, and of the convert. Through an exploration of the position of the convert in a religious society, I was able to better develop my relationship with informants, and more accurately understand piety in 21<sup>st</sup> century Fes.

***“You are a convert. So, you are like a child, and I must teach you like a daughter.”***

**Fatima, 17, Fes Medina**

I first came to Fes to complete fieldwork as an undergraduate in 2003. Less than a year after my return to the United States I converted to Fassi Islam, which focuses on belief over performance, spirituality over dogma, and Sufism over Salafism. I was not a *muhajiba* (woman who wears the headscarf) as most converts are, and became more involved in global debates about the politics and culture of Islam than in the day to day activities of a given congregation. I returned to Fes and other places in Morocco several times since converting, and found friends and strangers alike overjoyed that I had joined them in the *ummah*, the global Islamic community.

It was not until my doctoral dissertation research on young women's piety and the transmission of Islamic knowledge began in Fes in January of 2011 that my conversion became central to my research. Almost overnight, my identity as a young Muslim woman had a strong impact on my methodology and daily experiences as a fieldworker (Tapper 1995).

In Fes (Morocco's religious, intellectual, and artistic center) I was often asked if I was Muslim. This was largely due to my comfort with the local dialect and my easy use of religious catchphrases like “*Hamd'allah*” (Thanks be to God) and “*Insha'allah*” (If God should will it). But this new project, which left me asking a multitude of questions about piety and practice, encouraged many informants to question me in return about my beliefs, my conversion, and my future as a Muslim woman. Women in particular were eager to learn my story. Would I become a *muhajiba*? Would I raise my children as Muslims? Did I face discrimination in America as a Muslim? The stories, fears, and hopes I shared with the young women I worked with brought us closer, often causing me to forget that I was not Fassi like them. In conversation, we were equals. In practice, however, my alienation quickly and intensely became apparent.

## **PERFORMING PIETY**

One central aspect of my research involved participant-observation with regard to formal religious practice in the mosque as well as informal women's rituals in the Sufi shrine of Moulay Idriss II located deep in the labyrinthine medina of Fes. As a Muslim woman, I prayed in the women's area of my host family's mosque, and joined in the prayers, songs, and rituals orchestrated primarily by women in the Sufi shrine. Almost immediately, women took a physical interest in my Muslim womanhood. Manifestations of this interest began with dictating the clothes I should wear in the shrine: a traditional *jellaba* (a North African hooded robe), a matching headscarf, and sweatpants. I was initially confused, as this wardrobe change was suggested by young women in jeans and with free-flowing hair who were sitting alongside me in the shrine. Teenage girls clad in T-shirts would grab the sleeves of my *jellaba* and pull them down to cover my wrists as I clapped along with the Sufi chants. Women would reach in while I prayed, straightening my fingers and adjusting the angles of my wrists even as I tried to engage in personal communication with God.

My greatest challenge would come as week after week, hour after hour, gaggles of girls would grab at my face and head, wrapping and rewrapping my hijab, pushing stray hairs forcefully from my face, and tightening and loosening the hijab's grip on my throat seemingly at whim. If I wore cosmetics, I was told it was *haram* (forbidden). If I did not, I was extended offers by women to be made up as a “pretty Muslim woman.” I was poked, prodded, and pulled, often with the young girls working to draw as much attention to the process as possible. I became

a doll on display.

### THE PROS AND CONS OF CONVERSION

Before my story becomes entrenched in the frustration and anxiety this position as convert created, I should note that there are some definite advantages to being a Muslim while studying piety in Fes. Because Morocco is an Islamic country practicing Maliki law, and because of laws passed during its years as France's colonial protectorate, only Muslims are allowed to enter religious buildings in Morocco, especially mosques and Sufi shrines. Non-Islamic anthropologists and other scholars seeking to study Moroccan Islam must do so from afar, outside of the community—at least until years of close ties allow the national laws to be gently ignored for the sake of an “almost-Muslim” friend (Combs-Schilling 1989; Eickelman 1985). While it would be possible to talk to young women about Islam outside of the religious buildings, many rituals and communal moments would be unavailable, leaving the ethnographer with little participation, merely observation. Instead, I was able to pray with my host family and friends during Friday services, sing and dance at Sufi ceremonies to heal women with mental illnesses, and find myself the center of groups of self-policing young women in the shrine of Moulay Idriss II.

But what I did not expect was to become an instrument through which Moroccan girls would express their own piety. Not only were the young women I worked with trying to help me become more pious, but they were also showing to those around them that piety was an important matter to them; a public demonstration that they knew how piety was “supposed” to manifest itself. In essence, the women were showing each other that they were good Muslim women by making me a better Muslim woman. Like mothers who gain status by the proper actions of their daughters, these teenage girls were aware that the captive audience of older Muslim women was pleased by their attempts to improve me. I would be put on show at the shrine, and once the girls had fixed my outfit they asked me to walk around with them to meet other women in the room. Even older women saw my performance as a marker of status. I would be given prominent seating with well-respected women during ceremonies and greeted reverently just as they were, even as my hosts declared, “This is my American daughter. She is a Muslim. Look at how Moroccan she is!”

For each fieldwork situation, the idiosyncrasies of research create unique challenges for which our graduate training does not and cannot prepare us. For me, the continuous physical contact coupled with seemingly endless personal criticism of my religiosity became stressful. Each time I entered the shrine or mosque, a new horde of young women would descend upon me, often contradicting the well-intended advice I had received only days before. I began to question my legitimacy as a Muslim and even my self-worth as a woman. I stopped eating breakfast, as the panic attacks I experienced on the walk down to the shrine made me nauseous. My host mother and aunt expressed concern at my noticeable weight-loss. When my adviser noted my lack of communication over email, I made light of the situation and implored him not to mention my struggles to departmental peers. I developed weekly migraines and found myself unable to sleep at night. As I struggled to delve deeper into my informants' notions of piety, I felt under siege by their desire to shape my own piety into their image.

### FEELING LIKE FULLAH

The result of the constant attention was the sensation of being a doll. When preparing for *Mawlid* (the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad), my outfits were chosen by

others and I was dressed by others. When posing in pictures, other women would do my make-up. In the shrine, I would sit still as girls surrounded me, a swarm of eager, sticky hands pulling at the shoulders of my *jellaba*, re-draping and re-pinning my hijab, and adjusting the ankles of my baggy pants. In each case, the commentary was lovingly condescending: “Look at how pretty I make you!”

Produced by a Syrian company, Fullah is a doll designed to teach young Muslim girls “proper” Islamic values. She wears a hijab, has a diverse wardrobe, and is packaged with accessories and coloring books that depict her as a positive role model for young Muslim girls. The irony, of course, is that the Fullah doll is simply a repackaged Barbie: a dark-haired version with the same mobility, literally produced in the same molds in the same factories in China (Bado-Fralick and Norris 2010:57-67). The face is the same, as are the epically unrealistic proportions and the pale, unblemished skin.

I became, in many ways, a Fullah: a white American import dressed up like a Muslim, pretending to be something others wanted her to be, lacking a concrete sense of identity. Just as Fullah is a tool for showing piety to others and teaching proper Islamic values, I became a means by which young women could show others around them that they too knew what a good Muslim woman should do. I would sit patiently as girls, still too young to wear the hijab themselves, would tie mine tightly, turn to their mothers and other older relatives, and literally say, “Look, she is a good Muslim now!” At times, girls would show off to each other, sitting in a circle around me, tying my hijab in different styles and debating which was the most fashionable. I was made beautiful, both physically and religiously, while my young friends gained social approval and status within their social groups.

### **WEARING THE HAT AND THE HIJAB**

Ultimately, it was the efforts of my significant other, my fellow graduate students back in Boston, and another American convert in Fes that allowed me to free myself from the alienation and self-doubt that so many of us experience in the field but so few of us are willing to talk about. My significant other reminded me of the liminal nature of the convert: I was held to higher standards of performance and appearance because I was the manifestation of idealized and hopeful piety. But as a non-Moroccan, a convert, and a “child” of the religion, I was never judged for not meeting those standards—except in my own mind. I had already brought my informants satisfaction by becoming their sister in Islam (Ahmed 2010:305), and their continuous attempts to improve me were more about their internal questions of piety than my own failings. My fellow graduate students revealed to me their own difficulties, and suggested ways to detach myself and turn my struggles into a lens through which I could focus my observations on the ways that Muslim women self-policed and conceptualized piety. But it was not until I met another American convert, a non-hijab-wearing mid-Westerner visiting her Moroccan husband's family here in Fes, that I realized that my experience was not unique. She too had been pulled and prodded while the female community watched with smiles and pride.

These experiences also taught me a valuable lesson about the nature of ethnographic fieldwork. My ability to speak the local dialect, coupled with the fact that I have conducted fieldwork in Fes several times since 2003, allowed me to become a part of the larger medina community as well as a member of certain families and associational networks. At times, this led me to forget that I was not actually local, an experience with which many seasoned anthropologists also struggle. My informants, however, did not experience this confusion. To them, I was always a beloved guest. As I worked each day to become more deeply immersed, I

chided myself for errors in dress or behavior that, to my informants, were simple realities of the fact that I was not actually Moroccan. My new Fassi female friends found my errors endearing, and easily forgave them. I, the self-critical perfectionist, was far less willing.

It is often said that as anthropologists we wear two hats. One is the hat of the participant, who lives with her informants, shares their joys and sorrows, eats at their weddings and laughs at their jokes. The other is that of the scholar, who takes copious field notes, changes names to preserve anonymity, and applies complex theories to explain the idiosyncrasies of the beautiful and tragic moments she has shared. Yet we only articulate these two positions while writing grant proposals and submissions to internal review boards; when it comes to the heart and the mind, graduate researchers and even veteran anthropologists may have trouble separating the scholar and the participant. This is perhaps one of the hardest lessons to teach, as each fieldwork situation is different. And it is likely one of the most painful lessons to learn, whether because of physical dangers in the field, political realities of our informants' lives, or in my case, the emotional challenges of properly performing the faith that shapes every aspect of this life and the next. Understanding this dichotomy required that I realize I was both held to a higher local and religious standard but also never expected to meet that standard: I was an adult and a Muslim, but I was also a foreigner and a convert, and therefore a child. Until I discovered this, I was unable to find the inner peace I needed to overcome the challenges of my field situation and successfully investigate the nature of piety in Fes. Now I understand that sometimes I must take off my anthropologist's hat and allow all the young Fatimas of Fes to tie my hijab for me if I want my research to explore the reality of religiosity in Fes.

As my first season of dissertation fieldwork comes to a close, the approaching summer heat has led many young and fashionable ladies of Fes to abandon their hijabs and modest clothing (Stratton 2008). Many young women are heading to the parks and gardens to socialize, rather than to the shrine. It is, after all, far easier to attract the attention of potential husbands under the afternoon sun than under the gaze of pious mothers and grandmothers. Standards for "Fullah" have not changed, however, and the heat has only made my moments of primping more physically challenging. But those moments simultaneously enable my exploration of piety, status, and the gap between true belief and socially-prescribed performance in a way that a non-convert would not experience. My methodology, even the focus of my project, dramatically changed because of my identity as a convert. The question of whether I have become more pious or simply more alienated has yet to be answered.

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