Becoming an Anthropologist, Becoming a Convert

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Before starting fieldwork, I would listen attentively to the stories of fellow anthropologists when they returned from the field. I was looking for clues: how to behave, how to conduct research, and how to be an anthropologist. Their public tales were about the familiar and the strange, about informants’ peculiarities and pecadilloes, and about days spent struggling with boredom and repetitive tasks before that ultimate ethnographic moment which took their research on a different course. But sometimes, in private, away from the gaze of the University they would share the feelings of despair, shame, humiliation, anxiety, self-doubt, and loneliness they had experienced in the field. I gave these admissions little thought. It was not that I didn’t care, I did. I just didn’t understand how it feels to be an anthropologist.

Seeking to explore Australian women’s experiences of conversion to Islam, I joined a women’s group at a mosque in Dandenong, located in the outer south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The women met weekly to read the Qur’an and study the Hadith. After years of anthropological study, I had finally entered the field.

Fieldwork, colleagues said, would change me. This proved a rather flippant acknowledgment of such a great undertaking: the quintessential rite de passage of the discipline – ethnographic fieldwork. By ‘doing ethnography’, they told me, I too would belong to the tradition. I would become an anthropologist. Naturally, I couldn’t wait to get to the field.

A few months later, all was going well – I had established warm rapport with several informants at the mosque group, both ‘converts’ and ‘born Muslims’, and was often invited to their homes after class for za’atar and tea. On this particular day, I had been invited to a luncheon, to be held at Zainab’s house, a friend of Rasheeda’s.

Rasheeda, a convert to Islam and one of my key informants, had invited me to celebrate the start of Ramadan (the month of fasting) with a group of her friends. I was happy to be invited to the event and to be celebrating this very important time in the Islamic calendar for the first time. Rasheeda collected me from Dandenong Train Station in her car. As I climbed inside I noticed a number of containers of leftover food, the remains of other pre-Ramadan lunches. Acknowledging my interest in the unruly smorgasbord, Rasheeda suggested I help myself and I reached for some baklava as we set off.

Rasheeda had met Zainab at another mosque that she occasionally attended. ‘Born Muslim,’ Zainab had migrated to Australia from Oman with her family as a young child. When I met her she was eager to tell me her story. She explained: “While I was growing up, I took Islam for granted. It was only when I met Rasheeda that I realized how lucky I am to have been born into Islam.”

Zainab’s house was a modest, 1980s red, brick-vener home, nestled among similar houses at the end of a cul-de-sac. As was usual the front porch was littered with shoes; there were simple woven sandals, jeweled thongs, black leather boots, and luscious red satin high heels. I had to climb over the sartorial splendor to reach the door. Zainab greeted us, and she ushered us into the lounge room to be introduced to her guests. As I entered the lounge room I was immediately transported to the Middle East. Besides the soft furnishings – large embroidered floor pillows and lavishly decorated cushions – the tiled living room was bare.

Small groups of women were seated around the room. Zainab introduced me to the women – they were from Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Turkey. Each was dressed in various forms of Islamic coverings – niqab, hijab, or abayas. The fabrics, colors and decorations were diverse. The women nodded politely and returned to their conversations or their children, who were running excitedly in and out of the room.

Aisha, another convert from the mosque group, was sitting in the corner of the room. I made my way over to say hello. As we talked, Zainab and Rasheeda joined us. Zainab sat down, grabbed my hand and thrust it against her heart,
“Masha’Allah, masha’Allah, Karen, I read your article in Consider Islam,” she said. “You write beautifully, you write about our religion like you are Muslim.” Rasheeda had given Zainab a copy of the magazine. She writes for it as part of her work with Islam Australia – an online support and information group for Australian Muslims.

Rasheeda was well known for carrying magazines and information pamphlets. I rarely saw her without her large, worn brown leather briefcase, always struggling to contain the printed papers enclosed inside. She had asked me to contribute a personal story to the magazine, as a non-Muslim, about my experiences at the mosque group, and it was this article that Zainab had read. I was flattered by Zainab’s enthusiasm and praise for my writing. She had a charisma I had not encountered in other Muslims; an evangelical spirit more akin to a Christian revivalist than a moderate Muslim. I found myself drawn to her as she moved around the room attending to guests.

Lunch was a smorgasbord of foods, reflecting the diversity of contributing guests – lasagne, baklava, gozleme, lahm b’ajeen, khubz and hommous, nasi lemak, assorted curries, and cheese and vegemite sandwiches. After the meal, Zainab gathered us all together. Her dark eyes lit up as she talked fervently about Islam. Clasping her hands to her chest, she urged the women: “Get to work! Share Islam with non-Muslims! Alhamdulillah! Call Muslims who’ve been seduced by money, alcohol, fornication, and greed, back to their faith! Allahu Akbar!” She sank to her knees and, as though taking a final breath, she implored the women: “Wear hijab. And be pious examples for your children!” Transfixed, the audience listened intently, as she finally commanded for everyone to be “flag bearers of the faith.”

At the conclusion of her speech, Zainab urged each of us to share a little about ourselves with the others. When it was my turn, she asked if I would be keen to convert. Explaining that Ramadan is the perfect time to convert, she presented me with a conversion ‘goodie bag’ that contained a brown silk headscarf, a CD of the Qur’an, and numerous pamphlets about Islam.

As I accepted her gift, expectant faces gazed back at me. I blushed deeply.

The promise of my conversion coupled with Zainab’s enthusiasm for her religion seemed to be rubbing off on the other women. I thanked her shyly, muttering that I would try to fast throughout Ramadan. She seemed happy with my response, and asserted that I would choose Islam when I was ready. Conversation resumed, and my looming conversion was put aside.

Waiting to board the train from Dandenong to the city that evening, I reflected on Zainab’s enthusiasm to convert me. It was not the first time I had encountered proselytizing in the field. One woman had attempted, very carefully, to groom me to become her second wife. She had spent time with me in her home, introducing me to her husband, and giving me recordings, pamphlets, and books on Islam. Another, upon learning that my mother was Catholic and unwell, implored me to convert so that I could show her the true path and save her from Jahannam (hellfire).

There was, however, something about the experience at the luncheon that made me particularly uncomfortable. I had previously navigated the complexities of insider-outsider roles successfully. I always stated my research intentions, and I chose not to veil so that I would be ‘visible’ as a researcher to those who encountered me casually during fieldwork. I wasn’t sure why Zainab’s attempts to convert me were so disconcerting. Perhaps I enjoyed having access to these women’s intimate lifeworlds without having to ‘go native’, so to speak. Perhaps it was because Zainab had publicly drawn attention to, and confronted me with, my outsider status.

Indeed, I had been lulled into feeling as though I was part of the
mosque group. I behaved as if I were a Muslim woman. I paid attention to what food I ate, how I ate it, how I washed my hands, how I slept, and I was even trying to give up alcohol and fast during Ramadan. But Zainab’s public declaration had innocently drawn attention to my outsider status and, for this reason, I felt ashamed, humiliated, and marginalized. I felt like a fraud, an impostor. I really wanted to belong – to be Muslim. I wanted to be an insider.

As the train made its way to the city I opened the conversation bag and read leaflets about Islam. A young man, in his late twenties, with sandy-blond, curly hair, wearing a tracksuit, and carrying a gym bag, boarded the train and sat opposite me. After a while he leaned forward and asked: “What are you reading?” I explained that it was a pamphlet about the basic teachings of Islam. “Are you Muslim?” he asked. “No!” I replied, “just interested.” He pulled out a small booklet from his gym bag and handed it to me. It was simply titled, The Sabbath. He encouraged me to read it, and, at his insistence, I put down the leaflet and began to flick through his booklet.

As I scanned pages of The Sabbath, my companion explained its relevance. He said that his religion was a better ‘fit’ with Australian society, if I was interested in joining a religious community, I should consider coming to his group’s meetings on Sunday mornings. As he scribbled details of the meeting place onto a scrap of paper, I asked which religion he followed. Ignoring my question, he replied: “Islam is not good for women. If you convert to Islam you will be oppressed, it is not the way for a woman like you to live.” There was no time for further discussion. The train reached the city, I stood up to leave, and thanked the young man for the information. He bid me farewell and declared: “God will help you choose the right path.”

Alighting from the train, I felt dazed, light-headed, and confused.

Did I look like a woman in need of a moral compass?

Could Zainab and the man on the train ‘see’ my past transgressions or my moral failings? Was I a lost soul crying out for redemption from evil? I felt panicked.

Moving through the city, my mind in a fog, heart heavy, I reviewed my own history. Guided by the moral frameworks I had internalized during fieldwork, I assessed my life according to Islam’s core principles. Arriving home, I was agitated. I tried to write of my experiences through the day. I looked out the window at the dark, night sky. It seemed to be closing in on me. I felt suffocated, squeezed, started to cry, loudly, and then sob. My partner tried to comfort me. I ranted: “I don’t know who I am. I don’t know what to believe. Should I believe in God? What will happen to me if I don’t? I think I believe in Islam. I think I want to be Muslim. My life has no meaning. These women have such meaningful lives. Our life feels meaningless.”

And on I went, continuing into the early hours of the morning. My partner sat calmly, listening to my manic discussions of the nihilism of our secular, atheist existence and of the fear I held of not being a believer. I went over and over every perceived transgression, every sin I had committed in my lifetime. I explained in exquisite detail, the growing divide I was experiencing between those in my closest social circle and myself.

Doing ‘fieldwork at home’, I moved often between emotional fields: between outsider and insider, between fieldworker and friend, between Islam and ‘the West.’ Increasingly, I developed empathy with the political and emotional lifeworlds of those among whom I did field work. I often felt anger as my other friends reiterated stereotypes, labeling Muslims ‘terrorists,’ ‘misogynists,’ ‘oppressed.’ I felt morally compelled to challenge these misinformed notions. I needed to defend the people with whom I did research and now felt a real affiliation. They were not two-dimensional characters in a cheap newspaper polemic. They were real people, with families, jobs, emotions, and personal politics. I was increasingly ostracized by former friends who could not understand my new loyalties. As I engaged more deeply with my fieldsite, what had previously been familiar became stranger.

It was this strangeness, this loss of familiarity, this experience of being an outsider in my own lifeworld, that disabled me that evening. I was no longer assured of myself. I was betwixt and between worlds. In my hurry to get to the field, I had not anticipated how I would feel as an anthropologist. Rarely had I read an account of the emotional life of the fieldworker, of how fieldwork experiences may change an anthropologist’s sense of self and identity. These were the conversations usually divulged behind closed doors, in private. As anthropologists, we study the emotional life of other people. We even give thought to ways in which our presence may reshape their lives. But what of the emotional life of the anthropologist herself? I knew so little about the dark places that confront anthropologists in the field. Anthropologists, I had thought, always seemed so in control.

I had not anticipated how much fieldwork would challenge my understanding of myself or of how I related to others around me. I had not anticipated how the discomfort and difficulty I experienced in the field would alter my relationships with those among whom I did research, and would open new understandings between us.

For months I existed in this liminal state, unsure how to proceed, until
one afternoon I shared my anxieties with Imogen. She is a convert from the mosque group and we met regularly for coffee. An intellectual and community worker, she loves talking, and has a self-deprecating sense of humor. She was about to commence a PhD and invited me to coffee to discuss fieldwork methodology. I remember shifting awkwardly in my seat, unsure whether to reveal details of my own crisis. But in the end I did. And as I told of that day, and of the anxieties and fear it induced, Imogen listened attentively, nodding quietly in silence. When I finished, she reached out and touched my hand. “I think I understand,” she said simply.

Imogen went on to describe her experience of converting. She spoke of her earnest search through the ‘isms’ – postmodernism, feminism, Marxism – for a remedy to her own existential crisis. Upon finding Islam, she felt hopeful, confident that she had found her ‘truth.’ But as she began to transform her life, every relationship she had – with her family, her friends, and with herself – changed. Her life was thrown into chaos.

Not anticipating the chaos, or the reactions from her friends and family, she had been surprised when friends had questioned her about her mental health. Some assumed she had suffered a mental breakdown and that converting to Islam was her chosen solution. But it was not the case, for Imogen did not convert because of a crisis, but instead was thrown into a crisis after she converted.

By opening up to Imogen, and disclosing the difficulties I was having, I unwittingly developed a new empathy with, and understanding of, the experiences of women who converted to Islam. I came to recognise their liminality – their own betwixt and between position. Often, they had lost touch with their families, by distancing themselves from traditional celebrations such as Christmas or birthdays. They refrained from eating foods such as pork, or from drinking alcohol. Some removed photographs of family and friends from the walls of their houses for fear that they would be viewed as worshipping ‘false idols.’ Others stopped hugging male friends as new gender roles were explored and, for some, friendships with openly gay friends became strained or hostile. Yet others stopped listening to, and playing, music, or they stopped dancing or physical pursuits such as yoga, out of concern that these activities were haram (forbidden).

At the same time, however, many converts still felt like outsiders in their new communities. This sense of being outside Islam, of not being a ‘real’ Muslim, but only a convert, meant that some women felt a need to ‘prove themselves.’ Some chose to interpret the Qur’an and the Hadith literally, and adopted strict and rigid guidelines for behavior. As they lived the experience of conversion, some women described feelings of ‘schizophrenia,’ of living between two worlds and of constantly negotiating shifting ground. Becoming Muslim, they were neither insider nor outsider.

Through much of the time I did fieldwork, like so many of the converts I met, I occupied a liminal space. I was neither an insider nor an outsider of either Islam or anthropology. As I opened myself up to this space, to life as an anthropologist, I simultaneously opened myself up to the experiences of women converts. Increasingly, I learned to empathize with, and understand, the deep, complex, and confusing emotional lives that were unfolding for these women during their conversion. Acknowledging and exploring my own emotions in the field enabled deeper anthropological insights into their experiences. And this enabled me – finally – to become an anthropologist.

About the author:
Karen Turner is a doctoral candidate in the anthropology program at the University of Melbourne. Her doctoral research explores the cultural and gendered dimensions of religious conversion with women who converted to Islam.