In Between the Netherlands and Morocco: ‘Home’ and Belonging of Dutch Moroccan Return Migrant and Abandoned Children in Northeast Morocco

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Introduction

In recent years the study of children has become a sub-discipline within anthropological research (cf. Meurs et al. 1999; Reis and Dedding 2004; Toren 1999). In particular, applying adult-centred theory and methodology on children is considered as problematic. Children are increasingly regarded as “people to be studied in their own right, and not just as receptacles of adult teaching” (Hardman 2001, 504). Bucholtz (2002, 529) also criticizes such developmental perspectives which portray children as “not-yet-finished human beings” in transition towards adulthood. Children, instead, should be seen as a cultural category that has its own cultural practices. Many studies now emphasize that
children can be seen as active agents in constructing meanings and symbolic forms which make up their cultures (Montgomery 2005). However, there is much that remains unclear about children’s agency, such as its degree, nature and precise impact (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin 2007). To what extent do children express agency? How is agency related to age? And which methods can be used to investigate children’s agency?

In this chapter we will elaborate on children’s agency by discussing how Dutch Moroccan return migrant and abandoned children express, and reflect on, feelings of belonging and ‘home’ in Morocco. During the 1960s and 1970s, these children’s parents emigrated from Morocco to the Netherlands as labour migrants. Later on, they either brought their children from Morocco to the Netherlands at a very young age or they had children who were born in the Netherlands. Importantly, these children partly grew up in the Netherlands, which challenges adjustment to a Moroccan way of life after ‘return’ or abandonment in Morocco. For example, these children possibly do not feel understood by the local population who have never migrated to Europe. In Morocco, migration to Europe is generally perceived as one of the most preferred ideals towards an economic successful future. Leaving this place of ‘milk and honey’ for Morocco can therefore be difficult to understand. How do these children negotiate their ‘place’ in Moroccan society? In other words: How do these children express agency in this process of ‘home making’?

In exploring how the concepts of agency and home/belonging are related to one another and which research methods are appropriate in the study of children, we chose to compare children of different age categories. We focus on two main categories: return migrant children (children who returned with their parents at the age of 12 to 14 years) and abandoned children (younger children who were abandoned by at least one of their parents). The group of abandoned children consists of three categories: children who were born in the Netherlands and then abandoned in Morocco, children who were born after their mothers were abandoned in Morocco and formerly abandoned children who have returned to the Netherlands. These different categories of children will provide a better understanding of different forms of belonging and the role of agency herein. We will first elaborate on how children are conceptualised in anthropological research, and discuss the concepts of agency and home/