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Celtic ancestors and Muhammad's legacy: Types of narratives in a convert's construction of religiosity

PETRA BLEISCH BOUZAR

Biel/Bienne is a small, bilingual, and industrial town set between a beautiful lake and the Jura Mountains in Switzerland. Furthermore, Bienne has proportionally one of the highest Muslim populations in the country. According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, in 2000 Bienne had 3146 Muslims among its inhabitants, amounting to 6.5 per cent of the population in total, compared to 4.3 per cent in Switzerland (Bundesamt für Statistik 2003, table 3.1 and 3.4; Bovay 2004: 11). Today's estimations for Bienne go up to 10 per cent (Daum 2010).¹ As elsewhere in Switzerland, the Islamic landscape in Bienne is highly plural, with most of the diverse currents present. Furthermore, Bienne's Muslim population is composed of a variety of origins: Turkey, the Balkans, North Africa, West Africa, Switzerland, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, just to name the most common.

The Muslims in Bienne most prominent in the media are members of the Islamischer Zentralrat Schweiz (IZRS),² founded in October 2009 by Swiss converts and established in reaction to the minaret ban approved by the Swiss voters on 29 November 2009. Dressed in Arab desert style with long dyed beards for men, or the *niqāb* for women, and demanding legal recognition and other concessions, the IZRS converts quickly became, in Swiss public discourse, a symbol of the non-integrability of Islam within Swiss society (Bleisch/Leuenberger 2012: 245; Leuenberger this volume).

1 The national average rose to 4.5% for those aged 15 years and over (Bundesamt für Statistik 2012). It can be estimated at ca. 5.5% if those under 15 are included.

2 Islamic Central Council Switzerland, see their homepage: <http://izrs.ch>.

It was just a few months before the minaret ban, in the summer of 2009, that Amadea³, living in Bienne and married to a West-African Muslim, converted to Islam at the Centre Islamique de Bienne, a mosque attached to the Ahabash movement. A deeper look into this case would be worthwhile, as Amadea faced many different dominant and marginalised discourses in Switzerland during her conversion process, a time when converts tend to absorb as much information about Islam and Muslims as possible (Roald 2006: 49). As Esra Özyürek argues, in the context of a dominant Islamophobic discourse in Germany, ethnic German converts tend to strengthen the supposed distinction between *Islam* and *Culture* and “to distance themselves and Islam itself from born Muslims in Germany and the Middle East” (Özyürek 2010: 174). If this is true for the IZRS converts, Sheikh Muhammad Osman, who leads the Centre Islamique de Bienne, and whose teachings Amadea frequently follows, doesn’t share this idea at all. Therefore, studying how Amadea deals with these opposed discourses will also give us insights into her attribution of authority.

To tackle this question, an approach situated in the field of cultural psychology, cognitive anthropology, and cognitive narratology is proposed here. It is argued that narrations not only render identity constructions visible, but are constitutive for identity formation.⁴ Therefore, the analytical frame draws extensively on the concept of ‘small stories’, developed by Michael Bamberg and Alexandra Georgakopoulou in the course of their investigation of identity construction in adolescents’ conversations (Georgakopoulou 2007a: 60; 2007b; Bamberg 2007b; Bamberg/Georgakopoulou 2008), and completes the toolset they proposed with other instruments developed by cognitive narratologists. This approach will be outlined in the next section.

NARRATIVES, IDENTITY, AND CONVERSION

According to Jérôme Bruner, one of the founders of cultural psychology, narratives are seen as a “mode of thought” (Bruner 1990: 13) that allows people to understand both the intentions of other people and one’s own life. Narratives are the fundamental way through which people apprehend the world and attribute meaning to it (Bruner 1986: 17; Read/Miller 1995; Ochs/Capps 2001: 15). From

3 With the exception of the imam, Sheikh Muhammad Osman, all names of interviewees have been changed.

4 On the link between narration and identity, see Bruner 1986/1990; Somers 1994: 606; Georgakopoulou 2007a: 14; for a critical discussion, see Herman 2009: 155-159.

the perspectives of cognitive psychology and cognitive narratology, this process can be described as a complex interplay of “bottom-up” and “top-down” processes: information derived from the surrounding world (e.g. the ongoing conversation or the text one is reading) and the individual's memory (e.g. previous experiences or narrative templates) are simultaneously processed (Speer et al. 2009: 989; Martinez/Scheffel 2009: 150). A group of people who form a “community of discourse”, or an *Erzählgemeinschaft* (Dégh 1962), share and transmit “meaningful templates that carry social, cultural, and communal currency for the process of identity formation” (Bamberg 2007a: 3) in the form of plotlines, master narratives, or dominant stories (Bamberg 2007a: 2-3).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, heated discussions started in the field of narrative psychology concerning the optimal data for identity studies. On the one hand, Alexandra Georgakopoulou and Michael Bamberg, two sociolinguistic-oriented researchers simultaneously directed their attention toward the everyday conversation of young people. In their work, they both argue that the analysis of short narratives, or narrative fragments, for which Bamberg coined the term ‘small stories’⁵, not only enrich narrative studies but also bring an important contribution to the understanding of how identities are negotiated and enacted (Georgakopoulou 2007a: 60; 2007b; Bamberg 2007b; Bamberg/Georgakopoulou 2008). As Georgakopoulou puts it, the shift from biographies to ‘small stories’ as privileged data is

[...] one that does not prioritise a unified, coherent, autonomous, reflected upon and rehearsed self within a restrictive view of narrative as [...] a version of life given at a particular moment as expressing the given story as consistent and sequencing experience as lived [...]. Instead, one that allows for, and indeed sees the need for a scrutiny of fleeting, contingent fragmented and multiple selves, [...] deriving their definition through relations with others, [...] becoming on the boundaries of self and other [...] in narrative tellings in situ.

(Georgakopoulou 2007a: 152)

From this perspective, a narrative is seen more as a talk-in-interaction and a social practice. Accordingly, narratives should always be analyzed in their interactional context (Georgakopoulou 2007a: 3-6). On the other hand has Mark Freeman de-

5 Bamberg 2004. Following Georgakopoulou, ‘small stories’ cover “a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell” (Georgakopoulou 2007b: 146).

fended the life-story analysts. He agreed that identity is produced and re-produced in specific discursive situations and that biographies perpetuate an image of identity that is much more stable than the ‘small stories’ in conversations would suggest. “But”, he argues, “we are not only the selves that issue from ‘small stories’. Whether we like it or not, we are also – at this moment in history, in the context of contemporary Western culture – big story selves” (Freeman 2007: 159).

Several points are especially worth noting. What the aforementioned authors have in common is that both perspectives are guided by the assumption that identity construction as a meaning-making process is framed in narratives – be they ‘big’ or ‘small’. The object of their disagreement is the data that should be privileged in the analysis of identity and their research agendas: while Freeman and other life story analysts study experiences as texts, Bamberg and Georgakopoulou focus on people as interactive agents (Bamberg 2007b: 168). Therefore, regarding the question of proximity to ‘real’ life, ‘small stories’ are claimed by Georgakopoulou and Bamberg to be linked to experience much closer than life stories are (Georgakopoulou 2007a: 32), emphasising the “dialogical/discursive origins of our interiors” (Bamberg 2007b: 170), while biographic analysts assume an individual who seeks coherence and authenticity as the organising forces of his/her life story.

It is argued here that since identity formation is, as Jean-Claude Kaufmann puts it, at the same time “stable et provisoire” (Kaufmann 2004: 113), it is “stable dans le sens où elle assure une cohérence à l’individu dans son histoire personnelle et dans le temps, mais elle est aussi provisoire car elle est une construction individuelle répondant aux impératifs d’une situation donnée” (Schneuwly Purdie 2009: 157). Therefore, this article attempts to provide both, a rendering of Amadea’s life story in order to detect the more stable and coherent aspects of her identity formation, and a deeper analysis of her ‘small stories’, in order to catch the dialogical/discursive aspects of her identity formation at the time of the interview.

Current research on conversion to Islam still focuses almost exclusively on biographies.⁶ This tradition has recently been challenged by a psychological-anthropological approach (Mansson McGinty 2006) and discourse analysis.⁷ To my knowledge, the concept of ‘small stories’ has not yet been applied to conversion. Thus, this chapter also proposes the use of an enlarged data corpus and new, fruitful analytical tools in this field.

6 See, for example, van Niewkerk 2006; Wohlrab-Sahr 1999; Allievi 1998; Poston 1992.

7 See Leman/Stallaert/Lechkar 2010, Leuenberger (this volume).

THE SETTING: THE CENTRE ISLAMIQUE DE BIENNE

The present study is based on fieldwork I conducted between March 2010 and June 2011 at the Centre Islamique de Bienne. This is the first time that the centre has been studied, and the data has not yet been presented. The material consists of an observation protocol and six narrative and episodic interviews.⁸ The protocol comprises several informal talks during eight evenings at the Centre, as well as the notes that I took during nine lessons, which were given by the Centre's imam, Sheikh Muhammad Osman, either to the women (six) in the women's premises or the men (three) in the main prayer room. The lessons to the men were broadcasted in the women's rooms. Amadea attended eight of the nine observed lessons. At four of the lessons, she served Sheikh Osman as a translator from German into French. The interviews with Sheikh Osman, as well as with other converts, were conducted in the Centre's premises; the one with Amadea took place at her apartment.

Because of the lack of official documents, the centre's early years have to be reconstructed through interviews and informal talks. As one convert informed me, it started in the 1980s as a small group of people around a couple of Algerian origin who "came from Lausanne". After a few years of meeting in a private house, they moved to an old building and, later on in the 1990s, to a flat near the central station of Bienne.⁹ In 2008, a new location at the *Zukunftsstrasse* was opened. It was comprised of a bigger prayer room for men, two connected small rooms for women, an office, a store, a very small space for the Sheikh's bed, and a kitchen. According to Barbara Hussein, the president of the Centre's women's association founded in 2010, 15-20 families are regular visitors. They originate from Switzerland, Somalia, Ethiopia, Algeria, Morocco, Bosnia, and Afghanistan. Religious education classes and prayers from Thursday evening to Saturday evening are provided by Sheikh Muhammad Osman, a Swiss with Lebanese ori-

8 See Flick 2000; Schütze 1983; 1987. Transcription symbols: for the transcription, the following notation system has been used: normal voice, **loud voice**, *low voice*, emphasis, exte:::nsion, - → short pause, - - → longer pause, . → fall in tone, (non-verbal expressions, such as gestures or laughter), [editorial comments]. The original language of the interview is Swiss German – all translations are mine. Numbers given in brackets refer to the line of the transcript. The interview is slightly edited, in order to increase coherence.

9 The founding couple moved back to Algeria and was, therefore, not available for an interview.

gins who lives in Zurich and also works in the Centre Islamique de Lausanne.¹⁰ During an interview I had with him, Sheikh Osman confirmed that he was part of the Ahabash movement.¹¹

The founder of the Ahabash movement is Sheikh Abdallah ibn Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Shaibi al-Abdari al-Harari (b. 1910 or 1920 in Harar/Ethiopia), also known later on in Lebanon by the name of al-Habashi, ‘the Ethiopian’. The founder’s origin is the reason behind the movement’s appellation (Hamzeh/Dekmejian 1996: 219).¹² In 1947 he was expelled from Ethiopia due to struggles with both the *‘ulamā’* of the Wahhabiyya¹³ and the political authorities (Kabha/Erlich 2006: 522; Erlich 2007: 81-87; Avon 2008: 3). After travelling to Medina, Jerusalem, and Damascus, Abdallah al-Harari settled in 1950 in Beirut – where he resides to this day – “and was licensed as a shaykh by al-Azhar University’s branch in Lebanon” (Hamzeh/Dekmejian 1996: 219). In his first 30 years in Beirut, al-Harari gained fame as “a thinker, an author [...], a mufti, and a preacher” (Kabha/Erlich 2006: 523). In 1983, when the previous president died, he was declared the leader of the association called *jam‘īyat al-mashārī’ al-khairīyya al-islamīyya* (Association of Islamic Charitable Projects, AICP; Kabha/Erlich 2006: 523)¹⁴. This can be considered to be the starting point of the political activities of the association and the Ahabash movement in Lebanon.

From the 1980s on, thanks to the Lebanese diaspora, al-Ahabash became a transnational movement with branches in South Asia, Western Europe, North America (Kabha/Erlich 2006: 523sq.), and Australia (Avon 2008: 8). As far as Europe is concerned, most of the associations were founded by Lebanese students (Boubekeur 2007: 29).¹⁵ Germany (Kabha/Erlich 2006: 523) or Paris

10 Informal talk with Barbara Hussein, 30 April 2010.

11 Interview with Sheikh Muhammad Osman, 12 June 2010, 1042-1060.

12 For a comprehensive discussion of the roots and meanings of the designations *al-ahbash* and *al-habasha*, see Kabha/Erlich 2006.

13 “Wahhabiyya” is subsequently used as an emic designation in the Ahabash sense for people referring to a political Islam based on the writings of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (Kabha/Erlich 2006: 520, 524).

14 However, the researchers have different interpretations of this incident. Some describe al-Harari as being supported by the former president (Kabha/Erlich 2006, 523), others speak of a “take over” (Hamzeh/Dekmejian 1996: 219) or even an infiltration, a “tactique de coucou” (Avon 2008, 3) by the Ahabash movement.

15 As far as I know, there are no critical studies about the historical development of al-Ahabash in Europe, and our knowledge is limited to their self-representation.

(Boubekeur 2007: 29) are mentioned as the European headquarters. In Switzerland, the first activities began in Lausanne at the end of the 1970s where, according to Amel Boubekeur, Lebanese students founded the still existing association called the Centre Islamique de Lausanne. However, the homepage of the association informs us that the Centre “fut fondé en 1979 sur l’initiative d’un groupe d’étudiants et de travailleurs musulmans venus de divers pays” (Centre Islamique de Lausanne [n. d.]), hiding their link to Lebanon. “In just a few years”, Boubekeur stated, “the movement became the official representative body for Muslims of that region” (Boubekeur 2007: 29). Besides Biel/Bienne and Lausanne, a third centre exists in Zurich.¹⁶

AMADEA AS AN AUTONOMOUS BELIEVER

I met Amadea in summer 2010 at the women’s rooms in the Centre Islamique de Bienne, about one year after her conversion to Islam. She is about 30 years old and has been married for several years to a West-African man. The interview took place in March 2011 at her apartment in the suburbs of Bienne and lasted about three hours. It started with the invitation to narrate her life story.

At the very beginning of her life-story narrative, Amadea states that it has always been clear to her that God exists, thereby positioning herself as a religious believer. The story of her socialisation in a Protestant family starts with her memory of saying children’s prayers with her grandmother, celebrating Easter and Christmas more as a “cultural celebration” (10) during childhood, and attending boring religious education classes in the house of the Protestant pastor. This led, as she explains, to an absence of religiosity during her adolescence. After the 9/11 attacks she felt the need to pray for all of the victims but failed to connect to God – “the lines went dead” (30sq.). Subsequent attempts to connect to God in “a Christian way” (33) failed as well.

During her adolescence, Amadea discovered a passion for the Celts and Native Americans, as well as (other) nature religions (“Naturreligionen”); she struggled and failed in following her best friend Laura in “going this way”(57) – stating that “I felt in my heart that it was not mine, that it was not your thing” (61sq.). Nevertheless, she (still) feels a spiritual and “almost blood relation” with the Celts, because the grandmother of her English grandfather was Irish. A small story narrated later on in the interview analyzed below, will strengthen this point.

16 See Martens 2007.

During her struggle with adhering, or not, to nature religion or neo-paganism as practiced by her friend Laura, she fell in love with her future (Muslim) husband. She states that she had the same opinion about Islam that the (Swiss) media transmitted to her: “Islam [is] evil, Islam [is] oppression of women, Islam [is] a no-go” (68sq.). However, for her it was also a “no-go” to be with someone without having knowledge about his religious and cultural background. Therefore, she started to read books about Islam and Africa: its history, culture and religion. Through her study, she slowly revised her prejudices and adopted the opinion that “in theory it is – it seems that the religion is ok but in practice it’s a no-go” (81sq.), pointing out that in Arab countries women have to wear the headscarf, and a lot of things are prohibited for them. At Ramadan 2007¹⁷ she had an emotionally touching experience while reading the *ayat* 30:21 in a German translation of the Qur’an. She explains in the interview that she was affected by the Qur’an’s statement that the basic idea of a relationship is love and respect: “[...] then my heart opened up and then my heart already decided that, yes, I will become Muslim one day” (95sqq.).

At the beginning of 2009, she started to be concerned with theories about the end of the world in 2012, which made her pretty nervous. She explained in the interview that she was convinced that she must absolutely become Muslim before December 2012, “[...] just to be sure” (145). The pronouncing of the *shahāda* took place during the first week of Ramadan in 2009 in the Centre Islamique de Bienne. Unlike other conversion narratives collected during research, the narration of this event is rich with details (dialogue, feelings, people involved), and includes many references to time and place, indicating a personal experience that made a deep impression. At the beginning of Ramadan, Amadea tells us, she had decided to do a “real Ramadan” and requested that her husband teach her how to pray. Her husband explained that an imam would be the right person to do this, and he promised that he would arrange a meeting in the mosque, which happened a week later. At the meeting, Sheikh Osman explained the basics of Islam to Amadea and asked her if she wanted to convert. Amadea narrates that she was very surprised by this question, but finally agreed. The same night she also got Islamically married to her husband and started to get to know the other members of the women’s group. She got particularly close to Lubna, a girl in her early twenties, born in Switzerland of Lebanese origin. It was Lubna who “adopted [me], she said you are now my sister” (253), and who took care of her religious education by teaching her the basic rituals, such as prayer or ritual ablution. At the same time, Amadea started to follow the teach-

17 This is the first moment in her life story narration where she refers to a specific time.

ings of Sheikh Osman, and read Kristiane Backer's (2009) conversion story, who became, as Amadea argues later on in the interview, her model, "because she wants to live a European – Islam [...] – that is my opinion as well" (337sq.).

While the vast majority of her family and friends, as she tells us, reacted in a negative way to her conversion, her husband's friends – all African Muslims – were delighted. Amadea insists in the interview that her husband never urged her to become Muslim, and would only respond to questions about Islam but never speak about religion of his own accord. In a lengthy section of the interview, she narrates her decreasing interest in hanging out with her friends in bars and discos. Her neo-pagan friend Laura was the only exception among her friends; after a long process, she was able to accept Amadea's conversion.

Analyzing Amadea's live-story narrative, we get the following general plotline of her religious biography: Amadea was born as a believer; experienced a Christian childhood, which felt wrong; searched unsuccessfully for a connection to God; was attracted to neo-paganism; met her future Muslim husband; and finally converted to Islam after a long period of struggle and doubts. This plot corresponds with a lot of other conversion-to-Islam narratives where the encounter with a (male or female) Muslim is one of the most common triggering factors (Roald 2004: 99).¹⁸ As noted above, Amadea narrated her personal experience of her pronouncement of the *shahāda* in a quite long and intense 'small story'. If we read this 'small story', as Jerome Bruner proposes, as the breach of an implicit canonical script (Bruner 1990: 11), we may sketch the following 'canonical' plotline: a Swiss (or European) woman gets in touch with Islam, mainly through an acquaintance with a Muslim man; then informs herself and reflects (a lot); then, when she is ready, she decides to convert, choosing the place and witnesses.¹⁹ The breach in Amadea's narrative occurs during the last event of the 'canonical script': she was ready to learn prayer, but not to convert, and she didn't control the time, place and witnesses of her conversion. In this sense, the 'small story' implicitly affirms the general aim of conversion-to-Islam narratives in representing the convert as a reflected, rational and self-determined believer,

18 See also Allievi 2006: 122-123. Amadea's story further confirms Roald's observations that crises are not part of the 'canonical' conversion narrative to Islam as a cause for conversion (Roald 2004: 94sq.).

19 See, for example, Kristiane Backer 2009, Amadea's favourite biography of a convert; for the recurrent motive of conversion to Islam as a 'rational choice', see also Poston 1992: 171; Wohlrab-Sahr 1999: 159.

thereby contradicting the general public discourse of fanatic Muslim subjects.²⁰ Following Beckford, conversion narratives always include elements of the religion's ideological rationale (Beckford 1978). Amadea's statement at the very beginning of her life story narration that she has always been a believer integrates and reaffirms the concept of *fitra* as the idea of believing in a one and only God as the natural religion of humankind (Roald 2004: 87).

NARRATING INNER CONFLICTS IN 'SMALL STORIES'

Most of the conversion narratives I collected during my fieldwork include an account of a period of struggle over whether or not the women will become Muslim. Amadea rendered this period of being torn between paganism and Islam in the following 'inner-conflict' 'small story':

[that happened] in October during Ramadan [...] in 2007 and then I read the Qur'an in German, the translation of the Reclam Edition – I read *sūra* 30 verse 21 – and it has to do with – that God created men and women out of one substance [Wesen], and that he created them to be together, and that (High German) love and respect be among them (continuing in Swiss German) just this – [explanation about love and respect] then my heart opened up and then my heart already decided that yes one day I will become Muslim. My head **didn't agree** with that yet [...], during two months [I had] really, (High German) an emotional roller-coaster [Sturm der Gefühle], (continuing in Swiss German) – yes – (fast) you're nuts [geht es eigentlich noch] do you want to become Muslim are you sure – (normal) yes I want to – ok, but have you given a thought here and there and afterwards, it has been a discussion if I want more in the nature religious sense – (hesitating) ye::::s – or better Islam – or maybe one can merge this somehow – *no I can't ok, all right*, and then I tried afterwards – to make my choice in one direction – and – [...] afterwards I realized that the Celtic, the nature religions, attract me strongly, but that it isn't my thing. – And that I feel attracted to Islam, and simply my rationale [meine Ratio] still having a problem with that, it is not ok – ok then, we will just have a look now [wir luegen jetzt mal] afterwards, to start with, I decided for the moment for the direction Islam. (85-112)

20 See van Nieuwkerk 2006: 102. For the public discourse on Muslims in Switzerland, see, for example, Clavier 2009; Behloul 2009; for the media discourse in Switzerland see, for example, Koch 2011.

The episode in which she read the *sūra* led to her subsequent narration about a split between her heart which opened up and decided that it wanted to be Muslim and her mind which didn't agree and started to argue with her heart. Amadea attributes independent agencies to both of them, identifying the 'me' with her heart while her mind, her rationality, addresses the heart as 'you'. At a specific moment, her mind asks the crucial question about whether it would be possible to merge paganism and Islam. It gets and accepts the (very soft-spoken) answer that it's not possible – and the author of the answer remains unidentifiable. Subsequently, Amadea/her heart decided that she was more attracted to Islam, while her mind ("*meine Ratio*") still had a problem with that. In the evaluation part²¹ of this 'small story', Amadea reunites her 'heart' and her 'mind' (while the heart understands the mind's reservations) in a 'we' and decides as the 'I' that one day she will convert.

Later on in the interview, two other 'inner-conflict-stories' occur. They are embedded in an argumentative part where Amadea talked about her involvement with Pierre Vogel:

[...] somehow I also have been very enthusiastic about Pierre Vogel, and then – Laura already started to worry about (laugh) me and then later on my rational mind has again – and then – so – so (clearing her throat) hmhm – hello – ah have you seen how people behave, how they isolate themselves – that everything that doesn't fit in their value-system is just basically wrong, do you really want to end up like them. Then I had to say – *hmm no not really*. This was then, in fact, I can always, [when] an idealistical ideal takes hold in my head, I can count on my mind getting in touch with [me] at least after three months saying ye::s. Did you calm down? Yes. It's ok. (1077-1088)

As in the 'inner-conflict' 'small story' mentioned above, she renders her involvement with Vogel's interpretation of Islam in an inner dialogue attributing independent agency to both, the 'me' and the 'mind'. While the 'me' gets enthusiastic about Vogel, her nature-religious friend Laura starts to get worried. On the level of the narrative structure, Amadea first supersedes Laura with her 'mind' and then merges her 'mind' and Laura as her vigilant and critical counterpart. After a long argumentative part in which she emphasises and argues her rejection of Vogel's interpretations of 'true Islam', which are judged by her as intolerant, she concludes

21 The structure of 'small stories' usually consists of a plotline and an evaluation (Georgakopoulou 2007a: 92). Plot is defined here as the motivated composition of events (Martinez/Scheffel 2009: 109; Fludemik 2008: 40).

with a metaphorical ‘small story’, comparing her initial enthusiasm with Vogel’s ideas with swimming in a river. At a specific moment, facing the danger of a waterfall or a floodgate, her mind becomes active and saves her (1109-1114).

In all of the three ‘small stories’, Amadea creates an inner dialogue as a narrative technique through the split of her heart and her mind to give access to her inner thoughts and struggles. In the first of the three mentioned ‘small stories’, her heart convinces her mind to convert to Islam (while rejecting paganism), thereby legitimating this choice through emotion (Bleisch Bouzar 2012: 292). The priority she gives to her heart can be explained in two ways. One possible explanation is to see this as the inclusion of a Sufi-oriented conversion narrative pattern. Another possibility is to read this as a reaction to “the public”, which is often puzzled that people choose, as Jawad puts it, “Islam against all the odds” (Jawad 2006: 156). As holding a rational argumentation in favor of Islam is costly, time-consuming, and probably unsuccessful, the emotional legitimation can hardly be put into question. However, the mind has to be convinced in order to make a decision. In the other two ‘small stories’, it is her mind that saves her heart from choosing the “wrong” interpretation of Islam, starting to think, to read, and, thereby, creating coherence. The priority Amadea attributes to her mind is in line with the self-representation she gave in her life story account. In these ‘small stories’, the choice of the “right” interpretation of Islam is thematised, thereby, her mind is choosing the more accepted one in the eyes of the society. The narrative technique of inner dialogue (splitting herself into a heart and a mind) allows her to explain her navigation between the different discourses and to make her choices understandable to the interviewer.

NARRATING BOUNDARIES IN ‘SMALL STORIES’

Christianity and Neo-Paganism

As we have seen in Amadea’s *small story* about her choosing between Neo-Paganism and Islam, she agreed with an unknown author that the two cannot be combined. However, in a long part in which Amadea discussed evolution, she came back to her family background, proposing the following ‘hypothetic-general-law-story’:

Why do I now have such a penchant for Celts and Indians? As a child, I always wanted to migrate to Canada – why [...] and afterwards I considered it as follow[:]
ye:::s – well some people explain it with reincarnation, because in a previous life you have been an Indian, that’s why you want to go back. I considered – because –

the body of the child emerges out of the parts of [its] mother and father. – And what if a part of the soul – from the parents – because for me it is always that the child has a new soul – I rather believe that God, that every soul - simply exists once – **but** – maybe a part of the parent's souls or of previous ancestors merges into the child's soul and that this, [...] as for example, longing for Canada, maybe I had an ancestor 200 years ago who absolutely wanted to go there because – in Ireland there was a famine, because I have Irish people in my family. (958-972)

The plotline here is embedded in an explication and can be traced as follows: an Irish ancestor lived in Ireland 200 years ago during the famine and may have longed for Canada. This desire became enclosed somehow in his soul. Then he/she had a child and a part of his/her soul (still containing the longing for Canada) somehow merged with the soul of his/her child and so on until this (same?) part of the soul merged with her own soul when she was created. God is introduced in the narrative as a character, but it remains unclear what part he takes or action he performs. It is interesting to note that unlike other 'small stories', this story is narrated anachronistically.²² One may take this as an example of an ongoing emplotment. The story's structure is created while narrating, rather than reproduced. Through this she merges the Islamic representation of an undividable unique soul with a specific template of reincarnation – presumably the concept of 'hereditary memory' (*Erberinnerungen*²³). The story in itself – even if presented as hypothetical – functions as an attempt to explain and solve her puzzling question (why she has this longing for Canada), which canonical Islamic view cannot solve.

It is worthwhile to note here that unlike her attempts to merge the pagan ideas with Islam, her demarcation of Christianity is very strong, as the following 'small story' shows:

Ok I generally struggled with Christianity, I couldn't set up a connection – in fact me and Christianity, an appropriate image is if you want to put a cat into a bathtub

22 See Martinez/Scheffel 2009: 33-34.

23 The German writer Carl Friedrich Wilhelm Jordan (1819-1904), who used *Erberinnerungen* to describe the idea that we have "eingeborene Empfindungen" (Jordan 1886: 195), innate perceptions that have been transmitted from generation to generation (see Martini 1981: 387). Later on, the *völkisch* esoteric movement used *Erberinnerung* as a method to enter into contact with the hidden world of the pagan Germanic ancestors (Wiedemann 2007: 140-141). Nowadays, it is reported that, at least in neo-pagan groups, the concept regained popularity, although it remains contested (Gründer 2010: 26).

full of water, that is the same inborn reaction pattern. – I would have wanted to – but as soon as I tried it is like to [push] a cat into a bathtub. – (she pushes her palms forward) away. – **go away stop it** (fast voice) let it be. (34-40)

It is interesting to note that the boundary of the Christian faith is not drawn by the rejection of the Trinity as in many other cases,²⁴ but through the employment of a kind of instinctive and genuine reaction by means of a metaphorical ‘small story’. The rejection of Christian faith is not only narrated, but properly enacted with vivid gestures and voice. The same metaphorical story is used when she informs me about her best friend Laura rejecting all monotheistic and patriarchal religions.²⁵

In both ‘small stories’, Amadea doesn’t make use of rational arguments to draw boundaries, but rather advocates in the “cat” story an innate ‘decision-maker’ that preserves the *fitra* and is coded against Christianity. However, in another part of the interview she positions herself as an open-minded and tolerant person who accepts all religions, in order to dissociate herself from, as she states, the many Muslims who despise Christians, Jews, and the even worse pagan people (353sq.).

Arab Islam and Wahhabi converts

In a long explanation following the life story narration, Amadea advocated her preference of a “good African” and a “good European Islam” over a “bad Arab Islam”. In her eyes, Arabs are narrow-minded, blinkered and hostile to critical thinking, whereas Africans are likeable and open-minded. Contrary to their Arab sisters, African women are allowed to move about freely, to trade and to entertain informal relationships with men. Amadea takes the IZRS converts with their beards and dress codes as a proof for the Arabs aim to impose their culture on all Muslims. However, taking a closer look at the ‘small stories’ that occurred during the whole interview, her rejection of “Arab Islam” must be nuanced. She rejects the “Saudi Arabian” and, as noted above, the “Pierre Vogel” interpretations of Islam – thereby following her Lebanese teacher, Sheikh Osman. These stories will be analyzed in this section. In the next section, we will take a closer look at her ambivalence when dealing with Sheikh Osman’s ‘Arabicity’.

In a passage where Amadea talked about the importance of the Centre to her religious life, she illustrated her approval of the way gender separation is practiced in the Centre with the following ‘hypothetical general law’ story:

24 See, for example, Roald 2004: 103sqq.

25 Laura, by the way, remained her preferred interlocutor at least until the interview took place.

I must say that I'm not a supporter of gender separation, and in my view it is a disaster when boys and girls are separated at an early age and then do not meet each other until the bridal night, as, for example, in Saudi Arabia – that is a shock, that is an absolute disaster – then it is expected as well – then you are, for the first time in your life, you have been kept away from men during your whole life, then you are locked up with one of them, and then it is expected of him that he has sex with you because the virginity has to be proven, and this is an absolute disaster, this is – this is extremely traumatic, and I'm not a supporter of gender separation at all. (657-667)

Her evaluation in this 'small story' is given at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of it: that gender separation as practiced in Saudi Arabia is a disaster. In a hypothetical story, she constructs the following plotline: you have been separated from men your whole life – then you are together with one of them for the first time, and locked up with him in a room – and then it is expected that he has sex with you. Therein, she pictures two characters, a man and a woman who are strangers. By using the second person singular, "you", she invites the interviewer to identify with the woman. Thus, Amadea, as the teller, seeks to enhance the listener's empathy. If we read this narration as the breach of an implicit canonical script (Bruner 1990: 11), one may sketch the following "European" plotline: a man and a woman meet, get to know each other, then they fall in love with each other, and then they have sex together. The breach of this canonical script is twofold: first, the "Arab" story omits the initial events and jumps to the abrupt sexual intercourse, and second, the sexual relationship is not the outcome of a common decision but a unilateral action undertaken by the man on the woman. According to this story line, "it" is expected that the man does sex to the woman. "It" functions here as a blank (*Leerstelle*²⁶) to be filled in by the listener (maybe with "tradition" or "their families"); the man and woman are portrayed as having been conditioned by "it", and the woman is more passive than the man. While in Amadea's statement, she advocates relaxed relationships between men and women, in the 'small story' she creates a situation of potential sexual violence. She directly addresses the listener and claims his or her empathy. As the listener unavoidably imagines the scene (being locked up with a stranger who is expected to have sex with you), experientiality is created, conferring plausibility to her initial statement that gender separation "is a disaster".

Besides Pierre Vogel, it is Nicolas Blancho "and his gang" (633sq.) who are the incarnation of her "Swiss convert but living as an Arab" counterpart.

26 In narratology, *Leerstellen* or "Unbestimmtheitsstellen" (Iser 1984: 284) are blanks or vague passages that have to be completed or filled in by the reader.

Blanco, president of the aforementioned IZRS, frequents the nearby 'Arab speaking' Al-Rahman mosque described by other members of the Centre Islamique de Bienne as extremist.²⁷ In order to illustrate their standpoint, Amadea narrates a secondhand about her friend Lubna visiting the mosque for the purpose of a paper Lubna had to write for school:

For example, behind the Islamic Centre there is the Al-Rahman mosque. Nicolas Blanco and his gang are hanging around, because – once Lubna had – visited different mosques for a task and she had also been there – and she always wore a headscarf but she put on colorful clothes and also European clothes and not Arab clothes, simply longer at the back [...] – then she had a sweater on and a long spaghetti strap dress reaching down to the knees or in the middle of the upper legs, simply nothing slinky, simply European clothes that can be combined [...] – yes she is dressed up normally with local clothes – that conform to the prescriptions but they are not too saucy - - but what she wore wasn't welcomed at all, so they [...] frowned at her. (633-649)

The plotline is cut in two and, in between, Amadea provides an extended and detailed description omitted in the citation of the clothes that – one assumes – Lubna was wearing that day. In summation, the clothes are labelled as European but respecting Islamic prescriptions. Amadea does not dress in as sophisticated a way as Lubna, who has, as I observed in the Centre, a very artful and thoughtful way of styling herself. Amadea dresses most often in jeans, a men's hemp shirt, and a simple headscarf. Amadea interprets the reaction of the mosque's visitors as a critique of the non-Arab, European dress style. As this 'small story' is embedded in a paragraph about the Centre itself, it serves as a background against which the Centre is portrayed as tolerant. However, the Center's imam, Sheikh Osman, whose teaching Amadea follows frequently, is an Arab as well. One may wonder how she deals with his "Arabicity".

Sheikh Osman's "Arabicity"

In her rejection of the "bad Arab Islam" as personified by Nicolas Blanco and Pierre Vogel, Amadea follows the Centre's imam, Sheikh Osman. In short, in his teachings, Sheikh Osman perpetuates the Ahbash's initial opposition towards the Wahhabiyya (Kabha/Erlich 2006: 522; Erlich 2007: 81-87).²⁸ He also upholds

27 Field protocol Centre Islamique de Bienne 1.

28 Interview with Sheikh Osman, 12 June 2010, 1097-1103; 1125sq.

Sheikh 'Abdallah al-Harari's main messages (brought from Ethiopia to Lebanon) of peaceful Islamic-Christian coexistence,²⁹ which he transformed into amicable Islamic-Swiss cohabitation. Furthermore, Sheikh Osman's lessons aim to protect the Islamic community from terrorism and extremism.³⁰ However, a very strong boundary is drawn between believers and unbelievers.³¹

Amadea attends as many of his lessons as possible and describes him as a very friendly and open person, a good teacher with a great capacity to explain things (280-284). Moreover, whenever she manages to arrive sufficiently early in the Centre, she discusses the lesson with Sheikh Osman, in order to prepare for the (simultaneous) translation into French. However, as she explains, her (African) husband recommended that she ought to respect Sheikh Osman, but not always listen to him, because – she says imitating her husband's voice – “he is an Arab, you know” (892). She renders one of Sheikh Osman's lessons in a very long and detailed narrative, which, unfortunately, can only be partially presented here:

[...] that was before Mawlid, before the – ah the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, because it is also prohibited by the Wahhabis. - The sheikh explained it to us ye:::s, because that is nothing bad, because what is bad in remembering our Prophet and – praying prayers together and singing religious songs together, what could be bad about it, there is nothing bad about it because we don't do anything – nothing that impinges on the religion. - And then we came to [*darauf gekommen*] the issue of normal birthdays and the sheikh said, normal birthdays never [niet]. Afterwards I asked him – why not – he simply said because it is – not – the tradition of celebrating birthdays doesn't come out of Islam. So he has a little bit like the attitude that – everything that doesn't come out of Islam, and this is true for a lot of people, – that doesn't originate in Islam isn't good. And here we are back to what we discussed previously [in the interview] – culture – to put your culture on someone else. Who is coming from a completely different culture. [...] – And then afterwards I said to her [Rahe], I said that I simply translated the sheikh's words one-to-one and afterwards when the lesson was over I said please come here [*du komm schnell*]. - Then I said – I am here – the sheikh asked me to translate - - and then I do this here and I translate

29 Kabha/Erlich 2006: 523; field protocol Centre Islamique de Bienne 2.

30 Interview with Sheikh Osman, 12 June 2010, 467-505; field protocol Centre Islamique de Bienne 2. Already in Lebanon during Lebanon's civil war, the Ahabash movement positioned itself “as a non-militant alternative to the Islamists, [...] call[ing] for religious moderation, political civility, and peace” (Hamzeh/Dekmejian 1996: 224).

31 Field protocol Centre Islamique de Bienne 2.

his words exactly how he said them – and now I give you my opinion [...] I said, what is bad in celebrating birthdays? If you invite people to eat cake together and they offer you something that is not – a **glorification of your personality** [...] - [Lubna] would tell you now – yes, when you are celebrating your birthday but not on the same day that you have your birthday, you know like this – *but this is then again so - - that is – it's pointless*, that is then just so, so behind the back, sort of a handycraft-mentality [*das ist dann nachher nur so wieder so ein hinten durü irgend öppis Bastelmentalität*], for me that is not ok, that is silly. For me it's silly (laughing) – said shortly it's silly [*kurz gesagt ich finde das jetzt doof*]. (1529-1574)

In this 'small story' of personal experience, Amadea introduces four figures: (1) Sheikh Osman teaching the lesson; (2) herself translating the lesson to the women among them; (3) Rahel, a convert living in her neighborhood; and (4) Lubna, who is introduced as a virtual interlocutor, but it is not clear whether she was present at this specific lesson. Concerning the celebration of *mawlid*, all actors seem to agree that it is permitted – thereby drawing a boundary to the Wahhabiyya. Concerning the celebration of one's own birthday, Amadea renders three different opinions: Sheikh Osman seems to be opposed, arguing that it is not an Islamic tradition and therefore bad; Amadea herself doesn't see it as a problem at all as long as the person is not venerated; Lubna is said to hold that one should just not celebrate one's birthday on the day of the birthday. Amadea transmits all three of the opinions to Rahel – the Sheikh's view as the translation during the lesson – and Lubna's and her own after the lesson in a more intimate talk with Rahel. As noted elsewhere, translators in these kinds of settings are more than simple transmitters of knowledge, but more like 'adjusters' of the knowledge to the cultural context, becoming authoritative figures on their own (see Bleisch Bouzar 2012; Kuppinger 2012).

Amadea narrates her opposition to the Sheikh at two moments. First, she responds to the Sheikh's lesson during the lesson with "why not", implying that she doesn't agree, but seemingly, she doesn't argue with him in front of the other women. As I observed in the lessons I attended, Amadea is one of the most critical of Sheikh Osman's students, often seeking further explanation and confronting him with other interpretations. In return, she is the woman Sheikh Osman addresses most during the lessons when he asks questions to check if the women had understood his teachings. Therefore, we can describe their relationship as privileged. Second, Amadea opposes the Sheikh by transmitting her own point of view to Rahel. Here, again, she doesn't confront him openly or put his authority fundamentally into question, but presents herself as a critical seeker of a sound interpretation of Islam, which can be integrated into Swiss society.

One further point should be mentioned here. In the omitted part of the above 'small story', Amadea argued against Sheikh Osman's imposition of Arab culture (by not allowing the celebration of one's own birthday). She stated that we do not know if the *ahādīth*, which are not of divine origin but were transmitted by people, are authentic or not. After the interview, she told me that one evening, while chatting online in a forum that has nothing to do with religion, she talked to an Alevi girl in a discussion about *ahādīth*. This girl recommended a website that deals critically with this issue.³² Since then, Amadea has had serious doubts about all *ahādīth*. In her critiques of Nicolas Blancho, as well as different rulings from the Sheikh, she casts doubts on the authenticity of *ahādīth* as a discursive strategy to reject "Arab Islam".

CONCLUSION

In this article, I tried to show how a particular convert deals with different discourses she faces and that an approach within narrative theory using the concept of 'small stories' is particularly fruitful.

As we have seen, Amadea, in her life story narration, distances herself from nature religion stating that she clearly chose Islam. However, the detailed analysis of a 'small story' reveals that she integrates nature religious ideas creating an original conceptualisation of the soul. Moreover, Amadea presents herself in her life-story narration as an autonomous and reflective believer, rejecting, yet at the same time affirming the existence of the public stereotype of oppressed Muslim women. Thus, the analysis of her 'small stories' shows that she is, or has been, at that time searching for an interpretation of Islam that is in line with the public discourses – thereby rejecting the "bad Arab Wahhabiyya". She found the solution in both a "European" and an "African" Islam. It is interesting to note that she doesn't make any differentiation between them. Similar to Roald's and Özyürek's observations (Roald 2004: 114; Özyürek 2010: 174),³³ Amadea, at one point in the interview, evokes a strong gap between "culture" and "religion", while reducing religion to the basic obligations of prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage, allowing her to implement "Islam" in every "culture". However, her husband's "African Islam" is never questioned, and nowhere in the interview does she distance herself from her Muslim-

32 See <http://islam.alrahman.de> (accessed 4 July 2012).

33 For the prominence of the "culture-religion" distinction in European-Muslim discourses, see also Jouili/Amir-Moazami 2006, Peter 2006.

born husband's interpretation of Islam. On the contrary, as shown above, "African Islam" is presented as valuable as "European Islam".

As Amadea faces many discourses about Islam and Muslims in Switzerland, this analysis gives us insights into her authority attribution processes. We may describe the ensemble of authority figures and other instances as a kind of network (Bleisch Bouzar 2010), whereby authority figures can function as experts (Sheikh Osman, Lubna) and role models (Lubna, Christiane Backer) (Bleisch Bouzar 2012), depending on Amadea's purpose. Her relationship with Sheikh Osman can be described as ambivalent. On the one hand, she needs his expertise and religious knowledge. On the other hand, she is very critical regarding the supposed "cultural" aspects in his teachings. However, she never contests him openly.³⁴ Laura's role is particularly interesting in this setting. Although Laura is neither an expert in Islam nor a role model in living as a convert in Switzerland, she can be depicted as a role model in living, if not as a feminist, then at least as a religious woman aware of 'women's issues', and maybe also as a follower of a minority religious tradition in an increasingly secular society.

If we interpret Amadea's life story narrative as a means for her to construct a coherent story of herself, Laura gains another function. As she is the only friend left from her time before her conversion, Laura, along with Amadea's hereditary Celtic part of her soul and the concept of *fitra*, ensures a self which didn't suddenly change her (religious) identity one day to another, but has always believed and is, in a way, faithful to herself. In this way, Amadea constructs continuity and coherence in her life story narrative as. This is in line with the function Mark Freeman attributes to life-story narratives (Freeman 2007: 159). However, at the same time, as we have seen in the analysis of the small stories, she enacts struggles, difficult decisions, and breaches of canonical scripts, which not only allows us to discern how she is navigating between the different religious or Islamic discourses but also to perceive the impact of the public discourse on her identity formation.

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34 This ambivalence was first described by Jouili/Amir-Moazami 2006: 619sq., 638.

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