The result of an explorative and qualitative research project, this study is based predominately on anthropological fieldwork conducted in Tiel (the Netherlands) from 1991-1993, and subsequent visits. At the beginning of the 1990s, Tiel had some 33,000 inhabitants, of whom 1,000 were of Moroccan origin. In the summers of 1992 and 1993, I made two field trips to Morocco, specially to the Rif, the mountainous, predominantly Berber-speaking region in North Morocco from where the majority of Moroccan immigrants in Tiel originated.

The main goal of my research was to describe and analyse the ways in which, since their arrival in Tiel, Moroccan immigrants have practised their religion. The construction and maintenance of particular religious, and ethnic boundaries, between Moroccan immigrants and others (especially Turkish migrants and the Dutch), and among Moroccan immigrants themselves, was examined. The problems encountered during fieldwork induced an extensive reflection on the anthropological research conducted among Moroccan and other minority groups in Dutch society. Using the method of participant observation, I discussed both my own investigations and the research of other anthropologists among Moroccan immigrants, so that my dissertation forms part of the recent tendency in anthropology to reflect on the course of anthropological fieldwork, relations with informants, and the production of ethnographic texts.

My field research was generally tough-going, as full participation was hard to achieve. Relations of trust, which many researchers consider crucial yielding reliable, valid results, were difficult to maintain with Moroccan immigrants. Family life and the religious beliefs and practices of women, for example, were virtually inaccessible to me. Unfortunately having visited the Moroccan mosque for about a year, a conflict about my presence meant I was no longer permitted to attend religious services. I had to seek out other opportunities to gather data.

In short, my participant observation was hampered by severe restrictions, which I also apply to other anthropologists who have conducted research among Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands. They too, have found it difficult conduct intensive participant observation, particularly in the private sphere. Yet I would argue that participant observation offers several advantages. It may uncover what would otherwise remain hidden data. It enables researchers to check their informants’ accounts of their actual actions. Most importantly, the method accesses the local context in which accounts are provided and within which they must be understood.

The crux of this article is the foundation of activities in the various mosques in Tiel, particularly the Moroccan ones. This process was reified and strengthened in 1988, when the Moroccans moved to another building and founded a new mosque, leaving the other building to the Turkish migrants.

The most important function of this new Moroccan mosque (the Hassani mosque) was religious. It offered a place for the daily obligatory prayers, and for other kinds of assemblies. In the evening, during Ramadan, for instance, approximately one hundred men came to say tawaddah prayers. Gatherings with a more socio-religious character were also held in the Hassani mosque (for the birth of a child or the circumcision of a boy). On such occasions prayers were recited and food served.

Each evening, except during Ramadan, the imam gave an informal religious lesson (dars) to the men present in the mosque. The lessons were well attended by the Moroccan community. The discussion about errors made, and by the expression ‘Allah al-hamidah’, which was a shortened and therefore incorrect form of Salāt al-‘isrā’i’ilah (May God listen to him who praises Him).

In spite of the open, and informal sphere during the religious lessons in the Hassani mosque, only a small minority of the Moroccan population actually fulfilled their religious duties there regularly. Partly, women were more absent. A significant minority of the mosque members were a small group of fifteen to forty (or more). Younger men appeared less frequently, and the number of men who came for the prayers was smaller than research elsewhere in the Netherlands would have led us to believe.

In a tacit attempt to examine the social organization of Moroccan immigrants, I investigated the complications concerning the purchase of the Hassani mosque building from 1988-1993. Before that it had been municipal property. I argued that the mosque constituted a political arena in which the men competed for status. Positions within the Moroccan community was a great signification and it was obvious that the mosque was a larger public. Even then, the number of men who came for the prayers was smaller than research elsewhere in the Netherlands would have led us to believe.

In spite of the open, and informal sphere during the religious lessons in the Hassani mosque, only a small minority of the Moroccan population actually fulfilled their religious duties there regularly. Partly, women were more absent. A significant minority of the mosque members were a small group of fifteen to forty (or more). Younger men appeared less frequently, and the number of men who came for the prayers was smaller than research elsewhere in the Netherlands would have led us to believe.

The relevance of Moroccan migrants’ relations with family members and other country-men in Morocco drew my attention when I was in Morocco. The relationships between migrants and non-migrants were fairly ambivalent. Migrants longed to pass their holidays in their home countries, but were discouraged because many people, kinsmen and strangers alike, tried to cream off their (usually small) fortunes obtained in Europe. Moroccan migrants were conscious of the relative wealth of Moroccan migrants and very eager to migrate themselves, yet disapproved of many migrants’ inclination to display their wealth. Both categories competed for status, thereby demonstrating the great impact of migration on the position of individuals in the social hierarchy of the community of origin. In this respect, my anthropological fieldwork in Tiel emphasized the importance of including research in the migrants’ country and it underlined the necessity of taking into account affairs which cross national frontiers and transcend national interests and government policies...