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## **Incense and Holy Bread: The Sense of Belonging through Ritual among Middle Eastern Christians in Denmark**

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**Abstract:**

This article investigates how two Middle Eastern Christian churches in Denmark are constructed as particular sensorial spaces that invite attendees to participate in and identify with specific times and spaces. As with other Christian groups, rituals of the Sunday mass constitute a highlight of the activities that confirm the congregations' faith and community, but for members of a minority faith, these rituals also serve other functions related to identification and belonging.

Inspired by a practice-oriented (Bell 1992) and phenomenological approach to place-making (Cresswell 2002) through sensory communication (Leistle 2006; Pink 2009), the article examines constructions of religious identity and belonging through ritual practices. The findings stem from fieldwork carried out in 2014-2015 and are part of a larger cross-disciplinary study of Egyptian, Iraqi and Assyrian Christians in Denmark. We argue that in various ways, the ritual forms a performative space for memory and belonging which, through bodily practices and engagement with the materialities of the church rooms, creates a memory that reconnects the practitioners with places elsewhere. More specifically, we argue that the Sunday ritual facilitates the connection with God and the eternal, a place and time with fellow believers, and a relocation to remember and re-enter a pre-migration past and 'homeland'.

**Key words:** Ritual, Middle Eastern Christians, migration, memory, Denmark

## Introduction

It is a sunny Saturday morning in May 2014, and a large group of Assyrians, members of the Mar Mari congregation, are gathered in the entrance hall of Helligåndskirken, waiting for service to begin. The door into the church hall is closed, and a middle-aged male member of the congregation explains to us that their priest is preparing the church hall for the upcoming service. More members join, warmly greeting or hugging each other, and shortly after, the priest opens the door and everybody enters the church. The priest and his three deacons have changed the altar of the modern, minimalistic Danish Lutheran church built in the 1980s to serve the rituals of the Assyrian Church of the East. For instance the altar and kneeler have been moved apart to make space for the three deacons and the holy relics, and there is now a table between the altar and the pews to separate it from the congregation. Before the transformation, light blue colours and pale beech wood dominated the church hall. Now, the pulpit and tables are covered with embroidered cloths in red and white colours, and the priest is standing on a Persian carpet behind a music stand that holds a bible and two large golden candlesticks. The priest wears a white robe with golden embroidery, and the deacons are dressed in identical colours. Behind them, we notice the home-baked host and the incense stand.

The ritual practices of the Mar Mari congregation's bi-weekly service are a mixture of keeping up tradition and adapting to a new setting. Ritual persons, objects and actions resemble the church traditions from Iraq as much as possible. For this reason, the clergy puts a lot of effort into transforming church halls into spaces suitable for specific ritual practices and cultural identifications (cf. Fortier 1999, 44ff). In Denmark, Middle Eastern congregations are relatively small and only a few have their own church buildings. The first Christian migrants from the Middle East settled in Denmark at the beginning of the 1970s, and since then denominations such as the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Ancient Assyrian Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Chaldean Catholic Church have struggled to set up congregations and get access to their own churches (Galal and Sparre 2014).

While the religious life of immigrants has been a key issue for migration research in a European context, Peter Kivisto argues that the secularism and state religion models of European countries have led to an approach where immigrant religion is addressed most of all as a challenge to these models. Islam and Muslims have often been the focus in studies of

perceived problematic encounters between immigrant religion and the European secular model (Kivisto 2014). When it comes to studies of religious rituals among immigrants, focus is also on non-Christian religions, often with a specific interest in dramatic and public rituals such as *ashura*, burial practices, circumcision, *halal* slaughtering and the use of *hijab* (cf. Fischer and 2015; Lövheim and Axner 2011; Schmidt 2007) all of which have come to illustrate the allegedly religious encounter with secular rules. Again, the dominant focus is on Islam. As argued by Cannell (2006), Christianity has been a marginalised or subordinate topic in anthropology and, added to the lack of interest from European migrant scholars, immigrants' Christianity still holds a marginal position in current research. This is even more significant when it comes to Middle Eastern Christianity. The result of this dearth is not only lack of knowledge about Christian immigrants and how, as Christians, they encounter, relocate and renegotiate their religious identity in a European Christian context; it is also lack of understanding of what may appear as conventional, routinised and familiar rituals, such as church services, and their role in reconfigurations of religious identity and institutions as a result of immigration.

In the stories told by Middle Eastern Christians about their settling in Denmark, the role of the congregation and church attendance becomes significant for 'feeling at home' in Denmark (see also Galal and Sparre 2016). The church offers the possibility to meet God, fellow Christians, and compatriots. It also offers a place for introducing the children to the religious traditions of the parents. Some of the questions this paper tries to answer are: How does the church, as a place for such encounters, come into being? What role does the relocation of Christians from the Middle East to Denmark play? And how is ritual a bridge and a barrier to enter this place? By asking these questions we want to examine how the church is created as a ritual space, and how addressing the senses invites the attendees to participate in and identify with particular times and places.

In other words, based on the examination of ritual practices of church services in two Middle Eastern congregations in Denmark – St Mary and St Markus Coptic Orthodox Church west of Copenhagen, and Mar Mari Assyrian Church of the East congregation in Aarhus – we argue that, in various ways, the ritual forms a performative space for memory and belonging which, through bodily practices and engagement with the materialities of the church rooms, creates a memory that reconnects the practitioner with places elsewhere. At the same time, some community members, in particular across generations, contest the church services as

rituals, and the question is then how this contestation influences the reconfigurations of religious and transnational belonging among Christians with a Middle Eastern background.

The article is based on findings from fieldwork in Denmark carried out in 2014-2015 as part of the collaborative international and cross-disciplinary research project ‘Defining and Identifying Middle Eastern Christians in Europe’ (DIMECCE).<sup>1</sup> The project explores identity formation among Middle Eastern Christians in Europe. In this article, we draw on participant observation among Coptic Orthodox and Assyrian Christians in Copenhagen and Aarhus and on qualitative individual and focus group interviews with them.<sup>2</sup>

The article proceeds by presenting our theoretical framework, followed by a short introduction to the Middle Eastern churches and communities in Denmark. Based on the analysis, we next argue that the Middle Eastern churches are constructed as particular sensorial spaces that can be analysed as, firstly, a place for the encounter with God, or spirituality; secondly, a place for the encounter with fellow believers; and thirdly, a place for the encounter with the ‘homeland’.<sup>3</sup>

### **The study of Christian immigrants and Sunday rituals**

In his book *Religion and Immigration* Peter Kivisto argues that studies of religion and immigration generally have the overall objective of examining how immigration may lead to reconfigurations of religious identity and institutions, or as he phrases it: how ‘being an immigrant means being prepared to be transformed’ (Kivisto 2014, 38). This article falls within this overall interest. However, more specifically we want to add to this discussion by looking at sensorial practices and church rituals as place-making. Hence, we subscribe to a phenomenological approach in our attempt to take seriously the ritual experience and not reduce it to a derived aspect of or secondary phenomenon to ethnic belonging, which seems to be the case in many studies of immigrant religion (Kivisto 2014; Ruane and Todd 2010).

Another tendency is to use studies of rituals to explain dynamics of social relations and structures (Durkheim 1965; Geertz 1973). While we do not ignore its social side, we equally do not want to ignore the inherent material, bodily and sensorial elements of the ritual as an aspect of the religious experience. Therefore, we suggest exploring the ritual practices from a practice-oriented (Bell 1992) and phenomenological approach as place-making (Cresswell 2002) through sensory communication (Leistle 2006; Pink 2009).

Inspired by Catherine Bell (1992), we understand ritual practice as a way of acting that ‘specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important and

powerful' compared to other activities or ways of acting within a particular cultural context (90). Through spatial and temporal practices ritualisation creates a space or an environment organised through specific schemes of order, and subjects gain access and contribute to the production of this space mainly through bodily and practical engagement (cf. Bell 1992). Yet, whereas Bell's overall interest is in how ritualised action is a strategy for the negotiation of power relations in a society, our focus is on participants' subjective experiences of the ritual spaces through their bodies and senses, and how the church as a place comes into being through such experiences.

Based on Merleau-Ponty's work on the sentient body, Bernard Leistle suggests exploring the ritual as sensory communication: 'It is by *doing* things, by handling objects, by performing standardised movements and gestures that ritual creates cultural meaning' (2006, 49). Rituals appeal to bodies and senses, and the participants of rituals become part of an atmosphere in which they both celebrate themselves as the creator of their own scene (the ritual) and, through repetition, remember the essential and where they come from, their cultural and religious home (49). It is the sensorial embodiment that makes the cultural meaning real to people involved - 'participants, performers and onlookers alike' - and thus to study the ritual we have to study how cultural meaning becomes embodied and sensorially experienced by participants (49-50). Leistle points at each of the senses as particular modes of communication between self and world (59). Senses like smell, taste and sound each in their own way penetrate the participant and may potentially 'dissolve the spatial, temporal and object-related structures' (62).

Through sensory communication, rituals have the potential to evoke experiences of collective memory and identification among their participants. Institutions such as churches keep the collective memory of a community alive by reproducing and interpreting texts, pictures, celebrations, and monuments. To make the ritual space appear stable, the church incorporates new experiences of the social body or community into the representations of the holy texts and thus collective memory (Halbwach [1952] 1992, 119). Furthermore, localities are constructed as holy – e.g. places where Jesus is believed to have been – and they function as places for reviving and reconstructing memory (199-200). In the orthodox churches, the holy shrines of saints and martyrs for example serve this function (Galal 2012). Such localities are in their materiality left behind in the countries of origin and this forces the congregations to create new places that nurture the collective memory. Thus with

immigration, new experiences such as changed localities, new social positions and new languages all impinge on the communities. The adaptation of the material forms of the Assyrian service to Danish localities is an excellent example of keeping while reinterpreting the rituals. While the material forms ensure the sensorial experiences that connect the Christian past with the present, the sensorial practices at the same time invite an incorporation of new memories related to the migrant experience (cf. Fortier 1999). In this process, past and present merge in a common ritual time and remembrance, and the ritual appears as a unique opportunity for participants to become part of a particular social community (Kristensen 2007, 68-70), to ‘re-member’ it (Fortier 1999). For this reason, the establishment of their own churches and ritual spaces becomes critical for ethno-religious communities like the Assyrian and the Coptic orthodox, who want to transmit Christianity and its traditions to younger generations in an immigration context.

Yet, like any collective practice, church rituals are multivocal (cf. Pedersen og Rytter forthcoming), e.g. they are potentially experienced and practiced differently depending on e.g. age, gender, generation, and status. Of particular significance are intergenerational relations and negotiations. In the context of migration, “generations are not only generated in different times”; each generation is also formed by their unique experiences of “living in, and being formed by, different local settings and societies” (Rytter 2013, 6). While both older and younger generations are influenced by and to some extent adjust their ritual practices to the socio-cultural context of Danish society (cf. Pedersen 2011), there are in many cases differences in how and to what extent parent and children generations sense these rituals, including the potential relocation to countries of origin. Due to a combination of their youthfulness and their limited experiences with church rituals and the wider societies in Egypt or Iraq, many younger members born and/or raised in Denmark seem to “come into contact anew” (Mannheim 1964, 293) and start reformulating the religious and cultural traditions of their parents’ generation through the lens of their contemporary experiences of growing up in Denmark, and in doing so, some – but not all – create their “own hierarchy of values and ideals” (Wohl 1979, 217) when it comes to the meaning for the church rituals.

Looking through the conversations with the interviewees, the Sunday visit stands out as particularly important, followed by the seasonal festivals, Easter in particular. Historian Alexis McCrossen writes how Sunday in the nineteenth century was a predominant marker of time and setting for memory among European and American sea-travellers (McCrossen



2005). Her distinction between different times and places has inspired us to look for how time(s) and place(s) are practiced in different ways during the ritual of the weekly church service. McCrossen identifies Sunday as providing ‘three measures of time’: firstly, the distance between the temporal and the eternal; secondly, the difference between work and rest; and thirdly, as a setting of memory (2005, 36). Hence, the weekly church service helps the participants to structure their weekly as well as their eternal lives. Inspired by McCrossen, we suggest not only exploring the different times, but also how Sunday becomes a meaningful place through the church rituals. Here we understand place-making as a social construction that comes into being in the process of ascribing meaning to a space (cf. Cresswell 2002, 26), in this case through ritual practices.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the Sunday service provides a place for the sacred, and thus the eternal; a place away from the busy life in Denmark; and a place for remembering the country of origin. Whereas the Sunday church service has been studied as a place for commemoration of fallen soldiers, world wars, victims of catastrophes etc., we argue that the sensorial aspects of the Sunday rituals not only invite remembrance of the past, but of being in different times and spaces – or realities – at one and the same time.

How then to access such embodied and sensorial experiences and places of the participants? Sarah Pink argues, in her development of a sensory ethnography, for different ways of accessing cultural meaning through the senses. She advocates examining the experiencing, knowing and emplaced body, where engagement with others is studied as multisensorial and embodied (Pink 2009, 25). The ethnographer can approach the cultural meaning of the ritual through her own bodily engagement. But she can also approach it through interviews with attention to the sensory categories used by interviewees or their invitation of the ethnographer to sense together by passing on objects to ‘touch and hold, to look at, smell and listen to, or invite them to sense physical spaces’ (86). Yet before exploring how Middle Eastern churches are constructed and experienced as particular sensorial spaces, a brief introduction into Middle Eastern Christians and their establishment in Denmark is required.

### **Middle Eastern Christians and their establishment in Denmark**

In Denmark, the majority of Middle Eastern Christians have their origin in Iraq. Approximately 3,500 Christians are of Iraqi origin, while 500-600 have origin in Egypt.<sup>5</sup> The first Christian refugees from Iraq arrived in Denmark in 1984 together with other Iraqi refugees, and due to the last decades’ continuous wars and conflicts, the number has been

steadily rising. In contrast, Christians from Egypt came with Muslim compatriots in very small numbers to Denmark as part of a larger movement of work migration to Europe in the late 1960s and 1970s and as a response to the welcoming but regulating Danish labour migration policy from 1967 to 1980.

While almost all Christians from Egypt are Coptic Orthodox, Christians of Iraqi origin belong to several denominations including the Assyrian Church of the East, the Ancient Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. Among these, some identify as Assyrians, mainly those belonging to the Assyrian Church of the East or the Ancient Church of the East. While contextualising our analysis in the broader field and data on Middle Eastern Christians and their churches in Denmark, this article focuses mainly on two Middle Eastern churches in Denmark, namely St Mary and St Markus Coptic Orthodox Church outside Copenhagen and the Mar Mari congregation of the Assyrian Church of the East in Aarhus. They represent at the same time two different forms of national belongings, since the Coptic Orthodox Church identifies strongly with the Egyptian nation-state, while the Assyrian Church of the East identifies with a lost nation (Assyria) rather than the nation-state Iraq (O'Mahony 2010; Healey 2010).

For the Orthodox Copts from Egypt, worship began in the 1970s with occasional services held by visiting priests from Sweden or Egypt in the Bethlehem Church in Copenhagen during Easter and Christmas. Throughout the 1980s, services became more regular, and the congregation moved to its own premises in the southern part of Copenhagen. In 1996, the congregation bought its current church building in Taastrup, about 15 kilometres west of Copenhagen, and named it St. Maria and St. Markus Church. Several priests have served the congregation since then, all of them appointed by the Patriarchy in Egypt, including their current priest who has served the congregation since 2012.

A group of approximately 100 Assyrians founded the Mar Mari congregation of the Assyrian Church of the East in 1985. Today, the congregation consists of around 350 active members. Their priest, an Assyrian refugee who came to Denmark from Iraq in the early 1980s, serves as an unsalaried priest and as rural dean of the church in Denmark. Until he was ordained in 1996, services were held by a visiting priest from Sweden who came to Aarhus two to three times annually. Throughout the years, more and more Assyrians have moved to Aarhus from other parts of Denmark. In 2017 the congregation inaugurated their own church in one of the north-western suburbs of Aarhus. Until then, the Mar Mari congregation was

dependent on church facilities of different Danish churches in the Aarhus area, most recently Helligåndskirken, a Danish Lutheran church in the western part of Aarhus, which provided facilities for services, meetings and social gatherings. Whereas the Danish churches happily borrow their premises to immigrant congregations, the Danish state does not provide any financial support. Therefore, the establishment of own churches depends on a high level of financial and communal commitment.

While the Coptic Orthodox and the Assyrians have different histories of and experiences with establishing their own congregations in Denmark, creating a suitable ritual space for their members has been and still is of great significance for both congregations. Focusing on three aspects of the Sunday ritual – connecting with God, connecting with the community, and connecting with the ‘homeland’ – it is this significance of the ritual space we explore below.

### **Church rituals as sensory experiences**

Participating in the service of the Assyrian Church is a feast for all the senses, with its profusion of colours, smells, tastes, sounds and touches. The same is true of the Sunday service of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Taastrup. The building used to be a Catholic church, and a lot of effort and money has been put into changing its interior and decorations. The altar was moved from the west to the east end, and the whole interior was replaced with specially made and imported Egyptian furniture, including doors, pews and iconostases made out of wood and decorated in the same style as Coptic churches in Egypt. Like in other orthodox churches, the altar, or sanctuary, is fully shielded from the congregation by the iconostasis decorated with carvings and icons, and its entrances are covered with white cloths decorated with icons. Large icons painted in strong colours and gold decorate the inside walls, and opposite the altar there is a stand to light candles matching the rest of the interior and with a large icon of the Virgin Mary and the Jesus child.

Once everyone has found a place on one of the not very comfortable pews, the service starts its three-hour flow of readings, prayers and chanting in Arabic and Coptic. Having to stand during a huge part of the service, the body literally feels the length while the singing and chanting accompanied by triangles and cymbals strengthen the bodily feeling of exhaustion mixed with elevation. Not surprisingly, the highlight is the sacrament of the communion. This is followed shortly after by the priest going around the church blessing the congregation by sprinkling holy water on them. After the service is formally finished, the

priest shares out bread to everyone who queues to receive his greetings and a piece of the bread (*al-qurbaan*).<sup>6</sup> Receiving the holy water and *al-qurbaan* means receiving a share of God's blessings (*baraka*). Not only the believers and children present strive to get their share, as described by Nora Stene Preston in her account of the ritual in a Coptic church in London (Preston 2004, 199); also, one of the ethnographers noticed during her visit that she, after many years of attending Coptic churches in Egypt as part of research, had embodied the same aspiration; she wanted her share before leaving. As argued by Bell, ritual practice 'acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts itself' (Bell 1992, 100).

A key aspect of these embodied and sensorial elements is the spiritual role they play in letting church attendants connect with the sacred and thus with the eternal. In general, this is not understood symbolically, but literally, as argued by the priest of the Assyrian Church of the East when talking about the communion: 'There has to be supper and wine. And the wine is considered as Jesus' blood, and the supper is Jesus' body – I mean literally, because you believe that it is changed due to the Holy Spirit.' Rather than talking about God, the Middle Eastern Christians seem to talk about sensations and perceptions when they are explaining the meaning of the rituals. Ritual becomes, as Leistle argues, a pre-objective experiential atmosphere in which the 'participants are "scaling" or "tuning" on a level of experience implied by the sensory structures' and thus constituting the actual meaning (Leistle 2006, 49). The sensorial practices, such as music, become ways of constituting and inhabiting the ritual (50) and thus the connection to something godly or sacred. In addition, the ecclesiastical Coptic music is spiritual and considered the language of the soul to praise God. Not following 'musical notes nor dedicated rhythm, it translates the pulses of the spirit', as argued on a website about Coptic Cairo.<sup>7</sup> Knowing the songs therefore also gives you an entry point to the church, says Michael, a Coptic man in his 40s who came to Denmark when he was in his early 20s:

Already when I was 14, I don't know how you say it in Danish, I was a deacon and I loved these Coptic songs. Thus, I know pretty many of them, and this is maybe why I am known in these Coptic churches – only because I know these difficult songs.

The communion and the Coptic music exemplify the role of the ritual connecting the congregation with the time of Jesus and the early church (cf. Halbwach ([1952] 1992, 90-91).

According to Michael, the bodily experience is even more manifest when it comes to the holy feasts:

I mean, the ritual that affects me the most is the week before Easter, because it succeeds in moving me spiritually, being inside the event, and the meaning to me, where I can shut off from the physical world and live in this momentum. This ritual plays an important role, because the tone during these ceremonies ... is such a little more sad tone. There are relatively many significant words, quite a few, and a lot of texts are read. The church is in black, and then one also spends more time there, and this actually means that one get into another state than the state you live in.

It is noteworthy that he explains his experiences in sensorial language. He refers to the tone and the feelings rather than the message (cf. Pink 2009). Furthermore, he points at the meaning of another way of measuring time, and how the rituals and ceremonies help him to cope with the stress of secular or mundane life by realising that 'life is not only that. It is more than that.' He continues explaining how the church as a place is transformed during the celebration, where by the hour you follow in the footsteps of Jesus into Jerusalem while reading and singing. 'It is very, very beautiful,' he stresses, and continues, 'I believe that if you go on YouTube and write the word "*fesh*" [Easter], yes then you will probably find something there. You will get a feeling of it.' In other words, he reveals that to get an understanding of what is going on 'you have to feel it'. Since we were sitting at his workplace, he didn't have any tools at hand to trigger our senses. Thus, a YouTube clip was our entrance into the ritual and the sensorial experience of elevation into another time and place.

A similar sensorial encouragement was given upon a visit to an Assyrian family. When talking about the church service, the father of the family suggested that we should smell the incense used in the church. He went out in the kitchen, prepared the incense, and brought it back in the living room to let us smell the smoke. According to Leistle, smelling produces a sense of closeness as 'something impending announces its coming' (2006, 60). Or, in a broader meaning, as Hsu argues: '[r]itual arouses the senses and has a peculiar quality that awakens alertness' (2008, 439). One could argue that the rituals of the Sunday service call the congregants to be alert for another place and time than ordinary mundane life. It invites them to get closer to a 'virtual' reality (Leistle 2006, 54) – in this case God, the sacred, eternal life – and to Christianity. Thus, the church and its sensorial materialities create the stage for

performing belonging to God and the Christian community, a performance that extends the presence in time as well as in space.

While telling the story of enjoying the atmosphere of the church, the music and silence, as a way to another place that put his busy and stressful life in perspective, Michael also admits that he visits the church less and less often due to his busy life. YouTube or meditation at home becomes his alternative way of keeping the spiritual aspects alive. Likewise, while the communion is important in the Coptic Church, it happens regularly that some people arrive just before communion, skipping the first two hours of the three-hour service, cutting off parts of the ritual. Particularly some of the younger community members negotiated the value of the church rituals as it was practiced by their parents and other first generation immigrants. For many younger members, born and/or raised in Denmark, the rituals at times represented a cultural tradition rather than a Christian faith; something that kept them at distance from God rather than connecting them. This leads us to explore the church service as not only a place for spiritual life, but also as a meaningful space for social or community life.

### **Time out of time with other Middle Eastern Christians**

Apart from facilitating the connection with God and approaching the eternal through rituals such as taking communion and kissing the holy icons, the community churches offer space and time to connect and socialise with other Middle Eastern Christians. A ritual towards the end of each service in both churches directs participants' attention toward each other. Holding their palms together, they kiss the tips of their fingers and then turn towards the people sitting near them, one by one greeting them while touching their hands. In this ritual act, the congregation shares the blessings they have just received from the priest. Hereby they turn their attention away from the encounter with the priest and the spiritual and towards each other, preparing themselves sensorially for the socialising at the communal meal. Both the Assyrian Church of the East in Hasle and the Coptic Orthodox Church in Taastrup have communal meals just after the service or prayers. These meals are referred to as breakfasts, because the congregation is expected to fast prior to taking communion. Families take turns in cooking different Middle Eastern dishes, always prepared in accordance with the rules of fasting.<sup>8</sup> Many of our interviewees emphasised the importance of this social aspect of church attendance. One of them was Hanna, an Assyrian woman in her 50s:

It means a lot to us. As I told you, church, Christianity and family are connected through love, because you share love with others when you meet with them in

church. The church is the only place where all Assyrians can meet. We attend service, and when it ends, we go to have communal breakfast. It is cosy [*hyggeligt*]. It is nice to be with each other, exchange news and information.

In comparison to the rather ceremonious atmosphere during the actual service or prayers, communal meals, despite the ritual setting, are more relaxed and homely, associated with family-like relations of mutual care and love and an atmosphere of cosiness and togetherness. Attendees sit close together in small groups, talk and listen, laugh, and occasionally touch each other's hands or shoulders. An Assyrian woman in her 40s living alone explained to us that attending these events made her 'very happy'. Another woman, Coptic Orthodox Anna in her 30s, noted 'we become more intimate when we eat together'.

As explored in the previous section, the sensorial elements of church rituals facilitate the individual experience of getting closer to God and the sacred. Yet in order to understand the multilayered role of the sensorial in church rituals more fully, it is necessary to include the sensorial experiences generated *between* people. Some social spaces are sensorially richer than others, because 'we sensorialise our world, especially through engaging in intense social activities' (Chau 2008, 490). Particular rituals and performances make up forms of such condensed sociality, and as such, provide insight into kinds of sociality which are otherwise less explicit (Sjørølev 2007; see also Pedersen 2014). In the ritual spaces of the Assyrian and Coptic Orthodox churches, community members' mutual relations are maintained and strengthened through engaging in ritualised intimate social encounters, such as sitting side by side singing the hymns during service, touching each other in greetings across the pews, and engaging in what appear to be meaningful conversations while eating the same home-made, familiar Middle Eastern dishes together. As revealed in other studies of immigrants (Naguib 2011; Min 1992; Pink 2009), the bodily activity of eating together plays a particularly important role in facilitating social bonding. Because 'taste memories form part of all of our biographies' (Pink 2009, 74), eating together is a way of sharing the tastes and smells of the foods in which memories are embedded. Further, as noted by Leistle (2006), tasting and smelling bring external substances into the body immediately with their sensorial connection to the sphere of nourishment and respiration: 'When we smell or taste something, it has already intruded into us' (59). Furthermore, speaking and listening to colloquial Arabic or Assyrian language<sup>9</sup>, the mother tongues of older generations of Coptic Orthodox and Assyrians respectively, adds a further familiar sonic layer to this social sensory experience.

Due to practices of ritualization (cf. Bell 1992) such as prior fasting and special diets, the communal meal, like the Sunday service, is seen and experienced as different from – even in contrast to – everyday activities such as eating a regular meal. Furthermore some, like Amira, a 60-year-old Coptic woman, view the Sunday service as the place against which she measures and adjusts her moral conduct in everyday life: ‘I think that when you are attached to the church, then you always know what you are doing in life, the bad things or the good things. It is like having a living conscience to consider whether you make mistakes or do something good.’ Consequently, it can be argued that the weekly or biweekly services in the community churches are also social breaks from the daily routine, a time out of time (McCrossen 2005), due to the order of the everyday being temporarily suspended (Sjørøsløv 2007, 19; cf. Turner 1969). Furthermore, especially from the perspective of some older congregants, church rituals are also small breaks from their everyday life as first generation immigrants, with its constant challenges of cultural and language barriers. Both the service and the communal meal are gatherings centred on ritual practices of praying, praising and eating, in which participants are allowed to fully engage with their common heritage and some of what they share as a community. For this reason, Sundays can be seen as a time to ‘purify the family, which ha[s] been corrupted after spending the week in the world of the market’ (McCrossen 2005, 31) and among a majority population characterised by secularism.

Many older Middle Eastern Christians in Denmark are concerned that younger Copts or Assyrians raised in Denmark are becoming ‘too Danish’ in the sense of forgetting or neglecting their Eastern Christian faith and traditions. During the sermon, priests often speak directly to the parents, telling them that they have to be more observant when it comes to their children; they ‘have to take them to church in order for them to grow up in Christian surroundings and learn about Christian values’. For many among the older generations, it was important that young Assyrians or Coptic Orthodox youths met regularly because they shared something that was too valuable to be lost. Some, among these Hanna, added the Aramaic language and certain cultural traditions like Assyrian folkdance, as part of this unique ‘luggage from the homeland’: ‘Although we live in Denmark, we have some cultural values which we have to preserve.’ While some among the younger generations highly appreciate the older generations’ efforts to keep and pass on the *Assyrian* or *Coptic* Christian traditions, others, like Leah, criticise especially the priests for not adjusting their education to the challenges of growing up in Denmark: ‘...I like the traditions, and I also know many of the



psalms by heart. [...] but I don't think that my expectations are always met, for example when it comes to education. They should contribute more to the education of the youth.'

Parents' efforts to transmit ritual practices across generations, apart from reproducing cultural or religious traditions, are also attempts to include their children in a specific social and moral community in a local context (Pedersen 2011, 118). As such, it could be argued that from the perspective of the parents and priests, services and communal lunches are seen as a way to purify the congregation, in particular its younger members, through strengthening their social relations and sense of belonging to the community, the church and the family in Denmark. During their early years in Denmark, Assyrians in particular had other places and occasions than the Sunday ritual to meet and to socialise their children into the traditions. With time, these have become fewer, and presently it seems that the community church is the primary place for the encounter with fellow believers. However, if the ritual space of the church is in practice the only opportunity for Assyrians and Copts to relocate in time and space, how does this affect their sense of belonging as Middle Eastern Christians in Denmark? In order to answer this question, we need to explore how participants are invited to experience 'homeland' belonging and remembering in the ritual space of the churches.

### **Homeland remembering and (be)longing**

Above, we focused first on the individual spiritual aspect and next on the social aspect of how the church is created as a ritual space, looking at how each invites the attendees to experience through their senses both a connection to the sacred, the eternal, and to a here-and-now time with other Middle Eastern Christians. However, the church ritual implies a third relocation in time and space, this one to the countries and churches left behind. Younan, an Assyrian man from Iraq in his 50s, puts it this way:

I started [attending service] because I really missed my homeland. The only place to gather is in the church with the language and all, and service is here. I miss my homeland. So if you want religion, the church or whatever, or if you miss your homeland, then come to church. It is the best place to gather the community – not only for service but also to drink coffee and eat cookies after service. It is a feeling of love to those things.

As such, a third aspect of belonging concerns the presence of the 'homeland' in the ritual.

In both the Coptic Orthodox church in Taastrup and prior to every service in the congregation of the Assyrian Church of the East in Aarhus, a lot of effort is put into creating a ritual space similar to the churches left behind in Egypt and Iraq. Priests and their helpers strive to make the experience of the church rooms and rituals in Denmark as close as possible to how they themselves experienced them in Iraq or Egypt. In the Assyrian congregation, this transformation has to be carried out prior to every service, while the Coptic Church in Taastrup was completely transformed in the early 2000s.

Markus, one of the founding members of the Coptic Orthodox congregation in Denmark, described to us how he and others spent years fundraising, planning and carrying out this extensive renovation and decoration of the interior in the church in Taastrup. In order to create a true Coptic Orthodox Church room, wood and other materials were shipped from Egypt to Denmark, and Egyptian painters and architects were employed to carry out the work. Through things like furnishing and decorations, Markus and other central members of the congregation sought to reproduce as closely as possible the ritual space of the churches in Egypt. It was pivotal to him that when entering the church ‘it had to be *felt* that [...] it is an orthodox church – Coptic Orthodox by the shape of the icons’. From the street the church is hardly visible, and from the outside the rather small and discreet white wooden church does not give newcomers the impression that this is a Middle Eastern orthodox church. Yet there is a strong contrast between the inside and the outside. During fieldwork, we attended several services there, and when we entered the church from the street, we immediately experienced a feeling of being back in Egypt, where both of us have backgrounds of long-term stays and fieldwork. Thus, through a sensory bombardment of sounds, smells and sights, such an engagement with the rituals and the materialities of the church space has the power to awaken a sensorial experience of attending a Coptic Orthodox church in Egypt, even for an ethnographer who might access the cultural meaning of the ritual through her own bodily engagement (cf. Pink 2009, 86).

This sensory relocation from Denmark to either Egypt or Iraq is for many community members, in particularly the parent generation of whom most are first generation immigrants, dependent upon loss of and longing for a past and a ‘homeland’. The relocation is a setting of memory, as reflected in the above statement by Younan as well as by Coptic Michael, who describes the congregation in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Denmark as ‘a community for the memories’. Remembering, however, is more than individually recalling church life and

attendance in Iraq or Egypt. Like all commemorative ceremonies, ritual practices in the church offer a remembrance, which is both a social and bodily experience insofar as church rituals build upon habit and bodily automatisms (Connerton 2008, 5). What is more, in a migration context the familiar sensorial impressions and bodily practices have the potential of bringing the ‘homeland’ into the community churches through the materialities of the spaces – its relics, icons, colours, smells and sounds – and consequently participating in the rituals is potentially like *being* in the homeland. In terms of place-making, being in the ritual is like being in two realities, one of which is the migrant church in Denmark and the other, home in Egypt or Iraq. The church does not only remind members of a past home, but materialises this home through the senses (cf. Kristensen 2007). This form of relocation is best conceptualised by Ghassan Hage’s idea of the ‘lenticular multi-ontological world’ as a condition for living in diaspora. In this understanding, people experience being in two realities simultaneously. Inspired by the lenticular printing method, which makes it possible to show a set of alternate images that may appear to transform into each other, Hage further employs the notion of a lenticular reality, or way of living, to conceptualise this amalgamation of two realities, here experienced by Coptic and Assyrian Christians in the migrant churches.<sup>10</sup>

For the Assyrian and Coptic Orthodox congregants, the process of remembering as a way of bringing the homeland into the ritual space draws on both positive and negative experiences, memories which ‘add substance to the immediate, lived experience of the present’ in the church (Fortier 1999, 46). On the one hand, in many accounts of the pre-migration past, the community church is described as the place to practice faith as well as the place to feel the unity and togetherness with other Copts or Assyrians, as described in the previous section. Through participation in church rituals – performing the routinised bodily acts, listening to chanting in Aramaic or Coptic, and smelling the incense – participants are invited to re-experience being part of a Coptic or Assyrian community in their homeland. On the other hand, bringing in the homeland also implies re-entering pre-migration experiences of discrimination due to being a religious minority. Hanna recalls how her mother talked her and her siblings into attending service every Sunday by emphasising that the church was the only place for Assyrians to learn to read and write in the Assyrian/Aramaic language.<sup>11</sup> Fadi, a Coptic Orthodox man in his late 30s, remembers his experience of belonging to a minority in Egypt:

Living as a minority not having its full rights, so church it's not only a place where you are, like connected to, but it is a place where you feel you are accepted and you are free to do what you want.

Thus, in both Iraq and Egypt the church provided a kind of safe haven, a place in which Christians could safely practice their religion and traditions, and where they were not subject to discrimination from the majority population. However, the personal history of one of the priests provides a narrative of the fragility of this haven, since the church in Iraq where he once served was attacked and burned to the ground.

Compared to Iraq and Egypt, the Assyrian and the Coptic churches in Denmark offer a space for living as a minority, a position which is at the same time similar to and different from that of the Coptic Orthodox church in Egypt and the Eastern churches in Iraq. Unlike in Egypt or Iraq, Coptic Orthodox and Assyrians in Denmark have equal civil status and rights as citizens. Yet, a cultural value of 'sameness' as the quintessence of Danish identity and society comes with the claim of equality (cf. Jöncke 2011; Sjørlev 2011). Consequently, many Middle Eastern Christians feel 'different', even marginalised, because ritually their church practice is different from the Lutheran protestant, but also because many Danes do not identify strongly as Christians. Thus, they have to restrain themselves when it comes to displays of their version of Christianity in order to become recognised as 'real Danes' (Rytter 2010). Furthermore, many among the Danish majority population encounter Christians of Middle Eastern background as Muslims. Due to physical appearance, accent and/or name, most of whom we talked to have experienced this misrecognition and racialisation as Muslim - and with this prejudices and negative discrimination. In other words, they experience marginalisation and minorisation due to being made invisible as Christians and visible as Middle Eastern Muslims (Sparre 2016). It seems, however, that the ritual space in community churches is less a place of refuge from being misrecognised and/or minorised in Danish society than it is a place for the sacred/eternal, a place for being with other Middle Eastern Christians, and a place for remembering the country of origin. Similar to the significance of St. Peter's Church in London for Italian migrants and their descendants, the Middle Eastern migrant churches in Denmark are 'place[s] of collective memory, in which elements of the past are cobbled together to mould a communal body of belonging. It is a place where

individual lives, present and past, are called upon to inhabit the present space, to “member” it’ (Fortier 1999, 59).

This call to member the ritual space is, however, experienced differently internally in the congregations. As described above, many young members expressed pride in the church rituals and recognition of the importance of them, including the hymns in Aramaic or Coptic. However, several also called for more focus on the challenges of present lives of Middle Eastern Christians in Denmark, rather than constantly relating the rituals to the countries of origin by reproducing a ritual space as similar as possible to the one in countries many of these young people have never visited. Another way of understanding such responses is that young Copts or Assyrians who have lived all their lives in Denmark do not experience the same sense of belonging to a ‘homeland’ through the church rituals. The ritual performance of the Egyptian or Iraqi ‘homeland’ does not foster any sensorial memory; in other words, unlike their parents, many of the young Copts and Assyrians do not live in a lenticular reality.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have explored how rather unnoticed ritual practices like weekly church services play an important role in the reconfigurations of religious identity and belonging among members of Middle Eastern churches in Denmark. Through these ritual practices, the church as a place offers sensorial experiences that in different ways relocate participants in time and space. First of all, the sight is nurtured by the interior of the church and clothes of the clergy; the sense of hearing by the chanting, music, and psalms; the taste by the wine and bread; the smell by the incense; and the sense of touch by the holy water. With the help of all the senses the believer relocates to another time and place and connects with the sacred and eternal. Secondly, the service and in particular the communal meal offers time to connect and socialise with other Middle Eastern Christians *as well as* time away from the challenges of both the ascribed and achieved identities of everyday life as immigrants. Thirdly, the church and its rituals become a time and space for remembering and re-entering a pre-migration past in Egypt or Iraq, including how it was to be a minority and how the church was a safe haven. As such, participants simultaneously experience a belonging to God, fellow migrants and a more or less imagined (ethno)religious community in their country of origin. And temporally, their experiences of a presence, ‘a time out of time’ with fellow community members in the church offer a sensorial bridge both to re-membering (Fortier 1999) their collective past and to aspiring for eternal life and salvation.

The efforts made to create such connections between the past of the church, the presence of the congregation, and the future of the community are mainly communicated and given meaning by the members in a sensorial language and practice. Rather than talking about God, it is about experiencing the sacred, the social body and the lenticular reality. Not talking much about God makes it possible to connect emotionally to all three times and places within the same ritual practice. Thus, the Sunday service as ritual place-making is inclusive, embracing participants who may have different purposes for attending. This inclusiveness may, however, also become a challenge to the churches, when members and in particular younger generations instead of subscribing to the convergence of ethnic and faith identities, uncouple these to create their own forms of religious times and places.

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/dimecce/>.

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on data from 26 individual qualitative interviews and five focus group interviews, of which two included some Chaldeans.

<sup>3</sup> We use the term 'homeland' to stress the feeling of belonging to the country of origin without ignoring that immigrants and their descendants may at the same time also have feelings for – in this case – Denmark as a homeland. To stress the relativity of the term, we use the inverted commas. Another reason for using the term is that the interviewees make use of it to connote their relationship with their country of origin.

<sup>4</sup> See also our elaboration of the meaning of religious place-making in a recently published article (Galal et al. 2016).

<sup>5</sup> In general, all figures concerning Middle Eastern Christians in Denmark are uncertain. They are based on estimates by the congregations themselves as well as by Danish ecumenical actors as there are no official statistics available.

<sup>6</sup> For the communion, only one loaf of bread is sanctified, while the rest is shared with the entire congregation after the service has finished (Preston 2004, 199).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.coptic-cairo.com/culture/music/music.html> (last accessed 30 August 2015).

<sup>8</sup> During the ecclesiastical year the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East have several periods of fasting from animal products.

<sup>9</sup> Assyrian is a term used by community members for the dialects of Neo-Aramaic which they speak.

<sup>10</sup> We were presented with these concepts and ideas in the paper 'The Diasporic Condition' given by Ghassan Hage at the conference 'Middle Eastern Christians in Diaspora: Past and Present, Continuity and Change' at University of St Andrews, Scotland, 26<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> May 2015.

<sup>11</sup> In Iraq before 2003, minority languages like Assyrian Neo-Aramaic could only be practiced and taught in churches and private homes. While these languages are now recognised in the Iraqi constitution as regional languages, recent attacks on Christians and other religious minorities bear witness to the practical reality that in certain areas languages other than Arabic can only safely be practiced in secrecy.

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