



**HAL**  
open science

## Negotiations on ‘culture’ in immigrant families

Jocelyne Streiff-Fénart

► **To cite this version:**

Jocelyne Streiff-Fénart. Negotiations on ‘culture’ in immigrant families. Maurice Crul, Flip Lindo, Ching Lin Pang. Culture, structure and beyond. Changing identities and social positions of immigrants and their children, Het Spinhuis Epublishers, pp.3-11, 1999. halshs-00081682

**HAL Id: halshs-00081682**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00081682v1>**

Submitted on 23 Jun 2006

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Texte publié dans : *Culture, structure and beyond. Changing identities and social positions of immigrants and their children* (ed. by Maurice Crul, Flip Lindo, Ching Lin Pang), Het Spinhuis Epublishers, Amsterdam, 1999, pp. 3-11.

## **Negotiations on 'culture' in immigrant families**

Jocelyne Streiff-Fénart

CNRS/University of Nice Sophia-Antipolis

### **Introduction**

In this article, I present ethnographic data collected during several field studies focused on relationships within North African immigrant families in France (Streiff-Fénart 1985, 1993b). At first glance, these relationships can be characterised by a clear tension between two categories of persons, namely, those belonging to the first generation, proponents of cultural standards in use in their country of origin, and those belonging to the second generation, born and educated in the host country, with reference to a completely different system of values. This tension between a traditional Muslim culture and a modern French culture is especially obvious in views of marriage and family life. For immigrants of the first generation, a proper marriage must fit within the matrimonial customs of the family line and is concluded according to traditional procedures. In contrast, most members of the second generation regard marriage as the result of an elective encounter between two individuals and as a personal matter between them. Misunderstandings between these two categories of actors are therefore generally imputed to differences of culture and to conflicts between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. I would like to develop the idea that, rather than being an obstacle to communication or a motive for conflict, this tension between tradition and modernity -- with which the first and second generation identify themselves -- is the very basis for identity negotiations that take place in daily family life.

## **Cultural difference: a common resource for mutual understanding**

In the discussion which follows between two girls whose parents originate from Tunisia, we can see how the tension between the two views on marriage, characterised as modern and traditional, is used as a means to render understandable the behaviours of both the first and second generation.

*Aïcha: 'Well concerning us it's true we're seeing, it's true we're mixing, but then some families still are rather closed in upon themselves. They say "Well look you're going to marry your cousin," because their daughter is a girl who goes home, school, home, who never knew anyone, who's never been seeing anyone. She will think "It's him I'm gonna marry, he'll be a nice guy, I've been told he is a nice guy, so I will get more freedom." To them marriage means freedom, and there's still a lot of girls like this. Not us, because... it's not our personality...'*

*Souad: 'Oh no... To marry someone I don't know... I just can't think of it.'*

*Aïcha: 'Well I mean for the parents, all they wish is that we marry a cousin. (...) Possibly they see it like this, "He's someone of the family, we know him, we know his parents," so they already know whom they will give their daughter to, because to them it's a safety, well... they more or less know, in their minds they will think, "She won't be unhappy because we know him, it's inside the family, whatever happens inside their marriage the day after, it will be a family business." Well it's sure that tomorrow I will marry a stranger. "We don't know his family," they will think, "Well right, she's gone with a stranger." Even if I've got a problem tomorrow, they won't be able to intercede because I will totally leave the family, and I will more or less get attached to another family they don't know at all...'*

*Souad: 'Right, right. To them, if we marry a stranger, that a problem can arise inside our marriage, they won't be able to intercede, and then well... they can't even intercede, they won't even intercede. Even if they could do something, they won't do it because it was us who made the choice and it was us who left, to go and live with the guy we chose.'*

The striking point in this passage is that no ideological stance is taken on the subject of marriage; the interviewees regard it as a problem they have to face personally. Public opinion in France however usually tends to idealise this topic, as can be seen, for instance, in the way the mass media deal with 'the tragedy of imposed marriages' distinguishing between patriarchal violence and individual liberties, oppression and women's rights, and so on. Here, free choice of spouse is not put forward as a claim of autonomy, but simply as something unavoidable (you cannot do otherwise) that has to be negotiated as best as possible. Thus, marriage appears as a special occasion to express one's identity, and it shows what kind of person one is, in this case, a person who 'just can't think of marrying someone she doesn't know. However, this 'unthinkable' is not assessed as a general norm, but is related to one's personal experience ('we've been seeing'). At the same time, account is taken of the very different frame of mind that others -- whether sisters or cousins -- may have, for they had a different experience ('from school to home'). There is no tension here between two types of marriage (traditional and modern), but rather between two types of behaviour (accepting a marriage arranged by the families or opting for an individual marriage). These two types of conduct are not really alternatives, in so far as each expresses a certain kind of social experience: 'seeing people', which makes an arranged marriage unthinkable, or having to remain at home which makes marriage desirable.

But these social experiences, together with the fact of being 'a certain kind of person' (what they call personality, namely, to like to go out, to go clubbing, to see and mix with people, on one side, or to be 'closed in upon oneself' or 'always with mum and dad' on the other side), do not make these choices irreversible. People can shift from one to the other as did Aïcha's sister who, after a failed attempt at marriage arranged by the family, started at age thirty to join her younger sister in going out, in the hope that she might find someone 'to be seeing'.

The distance of the interviewees to family norms regarding marriage (that is, endogamy inside the family) does not prevent them from restoring the meaning of their parent's attitudes in conversations with the researcher. Instead of resorting to the cliché of "the respect of tradition", they try to bring to light the reasoning ('they see', 'they know', 'they will think', 'to them') of their parents' point of view -- that this type of marriage is the best possible one, not only for the preservation of parental interests and values, but also in keeping with the perception they have of the happiness of their daughter. Thus, the perceptions of everyone are

made understandable by linking them to different rationalities implying different moral convictions. The fact that people refer to one or the other of these rationalities, means to them different responsibilities. Individual choice, outside the family, goes counter to the very logic of matrimonial exchange, with all the implications that go with it in terms of allocation of constraints, of rights and of moral responsibility, as is underlined by the juxtaposition of 'they can't intercede' and 'it was us who made the choice'.

Consequently, distance to the norm is formulated as being one of the possible points of view among a range of points of view one can take into account. The whole point is then, to negotiate at best the compromises that will make it possible to reconcile the seemingly opposing points of view.

### **Cultural arrangements**

The case presented below provides an example of cultural negotiations within the family, in which the ability of the actors to make use of different levels of interpretation allows the negotiation of compromises satisfying to all. The marriage concerned in this account is what is commonly called an 'arranged' marriage. The suitor, a cousin of the young girl, was proposed to her by her mother after an informal agreement with the mother of the man. At the time of the story, as told by the older brother of the girl, the two families had already met several times, and an organised meeting between the two youths caused hopes to rise.

*I am officially in charge of this task. I am to be sitting at the table, to talk with the husband-to-be, to welcome him and always be present. We're about the same age... we know each other, we'll meet then and again at a party, we'll talk about this and that, we know each other (...). My parents are considered as belonging to the generation before, so they are not supposed to understand what's happening in France, they are not supposed to... accept easily what's happening here, so they'd better, they'd rather withdraw. [---] My parents went to Tunisia and his parents as well, so I was in charge [---] here during the holidays, and I managed to play this role so that they could meet (...). I tried not to betray my parents while being also, well I'm from France, so it was*

*done following rather tolerant practices, not like 'I'm staying here, sitting in the middle and I'm gonna wait to hear what they say.' I tried, I couldn't find my bearings, it was very hard for me, so I had to do comings and goings. For me, in order not to betray my parents, the main task of the role I had to play was to avoid any sexual intercourse between the two partners. On this side, I couldn't do any other way. It was then up to me to manage my comings and goings, the... watching of the couple, because this also is part of what I was doing, right, it's obvious. I withdrew little by little and let's say that during the last months of the summer, I left them alone for the whole evening, I even left them alone at my parents' for the whole night without being there myself, I was master of the situation. It comes from trust, you know, well I spelt it out to the lad, and then to my sister, and then there was trust.'*

In this story, the involvement of the narrator in the betrothal of his sister can only be understood if it is linked with the obligations traditionally attached to the role of the older brother. These obligations entail a particular and personal concern for the reputation of the sister and the protection of her virginity. But what he is asked to do is not to assume a traditional role, as a model of pre-established conduct, but to deal, as he says, with the 'comings and goings' between two models of marriage, for he possesses the keys to both, contrary to his parents.

The problem he has to deal with is that of permitting at the same time, two rival interpretations of the role of 'suitor' each of them embracing socially legitimised principles of gender relations: one prescribes avoidance between engaged persons before marriage, while the other can be summed up by the very term of 'seeing'.

His position of older brother especially inclines him to play this role of 'cultural broker' between tradition and modernity: his status inside the traditional kinship system designates him as a potential substitute for the parents in the task of protecting his sister's virginity, while his knowledge of modern norms in love relationships, of which his parents are deprived, enables him to distinguish the limit between what can be accepted and what is forbidden.

The difficulty of his task is to appreciate how far he can go in furthering the romance ('so that they could meet') while vouching for the preservation of his sister's virginity. To manage this task, he is not only to 'understand what is happening in France', as he says, but also to be able to 'accept it easily', that is, to be able to witness without shame intimate moments between the

two engaged persons (from which the parents are disqualified). He also has to maintain the prohibition on sexual relations as a constraint of the situation, though it is not part of his own standards ('on this side, I couldn't do any other way').

In order to 'be master of the situation', as he says himself, the narrator has to display great skill in interpreting a role he is inventing at the same time. He can reach this goal by transposing the task traditionally allotted to the older brother, that he himself defined as 'watching' over, into a contractual relationship between different parties, based on mutual trust. This kind of cultural arrangement can only work when all the actors (himself, his parents and the fiancés) cooperate so as to avoid exposing a contradiction between two views of marriage and of gender relations that are totally conflicting -- that of the 'traditional' and that of the 'modern'.

### **Tradition and modernity: ideal-typical tension and its practical use**

As we saw in the examples above, the possibility of negotiating a recasting of family roles depends on the preliminary acknowledgement of a cultural discrepancy between parents and children which is accepted by all those concerned.

The contrast between tradition and modernity is routinely used by family members to evaluate their behaviour and that of others, to expound their disagreements and justify their own point of view. For instance: 'We did not wish to have a *traditional* marriage, we rather had a *modern* one'; 'My parents are very respectful of *tradition*; but, we prefer to behave like French do;' 'I received a *modern* ring, not like the jewels they make over there', and so on.

It is no use underlining with a scholarly comment the ideal-typical opposition, offered by the actors spontaneously to the observer as an explanation for their behaviour. We should rather examine how this division of the social world between traditional and modern, or between what is done over there, and what is done here, becomes manifest in interactions between the generations.

First and foremost, we notice that this principle of division is shared by the two generations. Thus, they are at least united in a common view on their own division. Everyone agrees that parents are supposed to be traditional and the youth, modern. Any non-acceptance of this view is usually noted and commented upon: 'She is a genuine homeland girl'; 'As for her, it is

different, her parents are more modern'.

Secondly, we observe that, though readily admitted, and often referred to in conversations, this opposition between tradition and modernity is not always strictly and automatically relevant to behaviour or actions identified as such; rather, it serves as a possible interpretation, always at hand, but applied differently according to circumstances and actors.

For instance, two models of marriage can be differentiated out of this ideal-typical opposition: the Arabic as performed in the original society, and the modern marriage, 'as the French do'.

Traditional marriage is characterised by a certain number of features (lack of individual choice of spouse, payment of a dowry, rite of purification in the hammam, recitation of the *fatiha*, ritual deflowering of the bride, partition of men and women and absence of alcohol during the feast) that all actors more or less agree are characteristic of traditional Arabic marriage. But very few are able to agree on which precise marriage belongs to the modern or traditional type. This is not only because most marriages concluded in France combine traditional and modern aspects, but because the aspects chosen to characterise a marriage as modern or traditional, will be selected according to the features that one wishes to make predominant.

When an immigrant says: 'We had the traditional marriage', it does not mean that all the parts characteristic of the traditional matrimonial rite have been respected, but rather that among all the elements of the wedding, some can be used to confirm tradition, **underplaying** those aspects (the free choice of spouse, the honeymoon) which enable the newly-married to consider themselves as a modern couple, married in the European way.

The same applies to the choice of a spouse. Here again, whatever opinion they may hold on the question, all actors agree on calling a marriage traditional when the choice of spouse is arranged by the families, while defining a marriage as modern when spouses freely choose each other.

This dichotomy is also used by sociologists studying the transformation of family structure during the immigration process. As indicational tools for analysing the process of acculturation and assimilation of immigrants in the host society, these ideal types are problematical. The question whether children from immigrant families freely choose their spouse or if the spouse is chosen by the families, is in fact too polarised and therefore impossible to answer. In reality, it is not how the problem is actually posed.

Of course, one can, on the one hand, identify cases of marriage in which individual submissiveness to parental authority has clearly been imposed by both physical and



psychological constraints; on the other hand, one can identify cases in which the formation of the matrimonial tie depends only on the subject's individual will and not in the least on family constraints; this is particularly the case in mixed marriages.

Between these two extremes, however, most marriages are concluded on the basis of compromise which allows love and family interest to pair with each other, while allowing each party to believe that it is one or the other ideal which makes a happy pair. Sometimes love appears as a rationalisation of a choice based on completely different criteria; much more frequently than believed, young girls claim to have married their cousin out of love, or even out of love at first sight. Sometimes, families have to endure the amorous choice of the young; now and then, they even think that they made the choice themselves. The role of the mother is fundamental here as she is very often the one to bring about an understanding between the traditional idea of marriage and the modern aspirations of the young. She organises for instance, without the knowledge of the father, romantic encounters between the two intended, or she recommends a candidate as if she had found him herself, whereas in fact the marriage has already been decided on by the couple themselves.

Even the dowry, one of the features along with deflowering most often alluded to as synonymous with tradition, is open to a manipulation of meaning. It is, at the same time, the very example of an apparently complete cultural tension between the two generations. For the parents, fathers as well as mothers, givers as well as receivers, the dowry brought by the family of the bridegroom represents the price of the union; it means that this is an alliance based on price. It is the sign that the groups who are joining are persons who do things as they should be done. Whereas the father considers the value of his daughter on the matrimonial market as proof of the honour of his lineage, the daughter generally sees only the infamy of having been sold as a piece of cattle. As for boys, they simply regard the dowry as an indirect way to get money and as payment for a kind of right of access to the girl. When one collects the opinions of two generations on this question, it is striking that one is dealing with two different worlds -- one in which people refer to the dowry in terms of a symbolic exchange economy, and the other in which the dowry is referred to in the terms of a merchant economy; that is where girls are bought and sold. There is a complete cultural contradiction here: for the first group, not to give or to receive a dowry is a breach of honour; for the other group, to pay or to be paid a dowry is to show venality or contempt of a human person.

But the interesting point is to see how this contradiction in viewpoints is resolved in practice.

In most cases, it does not imply a confrontation between parents and children any more than it requires that the one gives up his or her own convictions in favour of the other. The contradiction is neither confronted nor cleared up, it is turned around by stratagems which permit each party to feel that things have been done as they should. Family delegations who meet before the marriage always discuss the question of the dowry, acknowledging its importance as a basic element of marriage. But in practice, negotiations are generally concluded, according to a scenario set beforehand by informal intermediaries, with an agreement whereby the family of the bride allocates the sum of money received to cover the furnishing expenses of the newly married couple. So, instead of saying: 'I have been sold', the girl can say: 'My parents offered us the bedroom.' Everyone can accept this and conclude, on the basis of their views, that there has or has not been a dowry, that one acted according to tradition or modern ideals.

Depending on circumstances and actors, the same choice or the same behaviour will appear to conform with Muslim traditions or with modern ideals, the essential point being, not that the rules or standards which one upholds are applied literally, but to make it possible to invoke these standards in order to confirm one's identity. Far from leading to intergenerational confrontation or to a dialogue between deaf parties, the cultural difference between parents and children is managed under the guise of an organised misunderstanding, which leaves space open for compromise and negotiation between the two generations.

It should be underlined that this proficient managing of cultural ideal-types is of a completely different nature than that within the context of fundamentalist ideologies. Contrary to religious or cultural essentialist views which regard identity as a fetish and promote worship of authenticity, members of immigrant families maintain via their own culture an oblique relation with each other in which traditions are all the more useful if they are not followed to the letter and if they make it possible to remain oneself while being different.

## **References**

Poutignat, Ph., Streiff-Fénart, J. : "Théories de l'ethnicité", Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1995.

Streiff-Fénart, J. :

1985 "Le mariage, un moment de vérité de l'immigration familiale maghrébine", *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, vol.1, n° 2, déc. 1985, pp. 129-141.

1989 *Les couples franco-maghrébins en France*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

1990 "La nomination de l'enfant dans les familles franco-maghrébines", *Sociétés Contemporaines*, n°4, déc. 1990, pp.5-18.

1993a 'The making of family identities among Franco-Algerian couples', in: A. Hargreaves & M.J. Heffernan (eds), *French and Algerian identities from colonial times to the present. A century of interaction*, pp. 225-237. London, The Edwin Mellen Press.

1993b "Les immigrés et le marché matrimonial", In : (sous la dir. de J. Barou et Le Hu K.) : *L'immigration entre loi et vie quotidienne*, Paris, L'Harmattan (coll. Minorités et Sociétés), 1993, pp. 89-105.