TWO GENERATIONS OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN FRANCE: CREATIVE PARENTING, IDENTITY AND RECOGNITION

by Catherine Delcroix

ABSTRACT

In bringing up and educating their children, Muslim immigrant parents (coming from North Africa and living in France) are very aware of the difficulty of the task. Their children face a double bind: on the one hand, French society asks them to 'integrate', that is to enter into labour markets and melt into French ways of life. On the other hand teachers, employers, the police and media keep considering them as 'the other'. Immigrant parents show tremendous creativity in trying to help their children, boys and girls differently, to cope with this double bind.

Key words: creativity; parenting; Muslim; France

In France today there are approximately one million families who come from North Africa. Many of these are large families. Their children are born in France and they are French citizens. Their language is French, and they are raised in French schools. They feel French. But given the colonial past of France, the metropolitan French continue to consider them somehow as 'the other'. This post-colonial attitude has very damaging consequences, encouraging discrimination by some teachers, by employers, by landlords and by the police.[1]

Their parents and especially their mothers are fully aware of what their children will have to face. Mothers in particular are concerned to prepare their children to encounter the risks of discriminatory situations. I myself have been reconstructing in-depth case studies of Muslim immigrant families in France for many years. For the last twenty years I have focused in particular on how these working class families originating from the Maghreb – the mountainous rural interior of Algeria and Morocco –

educate their children to face the difficulties linked to economic instability: unemployment, chronic shortage of money, and discrimination.[2]

For studying the educational strategies of these families, I have used a methodological approach based on the reconstruction of family histories, drawn from life story interviews with several members of each family: parents, children and so on. I have repeated these case studies in many different regions and cities of France. For each case study, I chose families with similar living situations, and similar problems in terms of migration, work, resources and family life. My aim was to identify the different types of life paths and diverse profiles of these city families.

In order to have a better understanding of the experiences of families confronted by such daily uncertainties, it was essential for me to hear their own intimate accounts of their lives. But this was a difficult challenge. In effect, confronted by a typically accusatory public discourse, Muslim families had very rarely

opened their doors to researchers, whom they equated with judgemental journalists or social workers. However I explained at the start that I had not come to interrogate them, and denource them as neglectful parents. I wanted to *grasp* and then *describe* the efforts which they were making to overcome their difficulties, and similarly with those of their children who agreed to participate. This positive approach opened the door.

It seemed to me esssential in order to understand the lives of these households in depth to develop a research approach combining the ethnographic with the sociological. The ethnographic approach is based on living and staying with the families studied, joining them on outings and on holidays, observing their daily actitivies and their reflections on them. Salvador Juan points out that in contemporary western cities it is no longer possible for a researcher to share the daily life of of inhabitants for as long and with as much intensity as earlier generations of anthropologists in faraway cultures. Nevertheless a valid 'socio-anthropological' approach is possible insofar as relationships of confidentiality can be established, complemented by observation, and resumed at intervals.[3] The sociological approach seeks to identify the collective processses shared with thousands of other families which have similar experiences to those of the Nour, the family I chose to study over a period many years. The Nour are a Moroccan family with eight children, who have been living in France for over thirty years. In keeping with the spirit of my original approach – to them and to other families – I have published a portrait of their family and their struggles, a sequence of testimonies of first Madame Nour and then all the eight children, which as a *livre de poche* (cheap paperback) has had a wide circulation in France: one step towards a wider understanding of this crucial French minority.[4]

From early on in this long observation of Muslim families, I was recurrently amazed by the great creativity that their mothers show in bringing up their children.But before turning to the core of this article, let me outline some points about the historical context of Muslim immigration to France.

I believe that the present negative French perception of Islam stems especially from the colonisation of Algeria. This part of Africa, which is larger than France itself, was conquered by French troops between 1830 and 1860. In 1871, the French political regime changed drastically. Napoleon III had to resign and a republic was eventually established. In this new context, it was decided to incorporate Algeria into the territory of France, sharing the same legislation with the 'Métropole'. But the problem was whether or not full citizenship should be given to the Algerian Muslim natives: 'Les Indigènes'. There were nine million of them. Most were Arabs and Kabyles (one third of the population). There was also a small Jewish minority who had been living there for centuries. The 'Décret Crémieux' of 24 October 1871 gave full citizenship to the 37,000 Jewish Algerians, and also to European colonisers coming from Spain, Italy or Malta. But Muslim Algerians, if they wished to acquire French citizenship, had to renounce their religious faith – and few did this. So the French government condemned Algerian Muslims to a subaltern status.

The very influential French colonisers claimed that they needed a docile labour force (of Algerians) with subaltern status to develop the fertile lands that they had conquered during the colonial war. This, however, ran against the republican principles of 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité' for all, of whatever race or religion. The solution to this contradiction was found through basing differences in religious adherence. The new law stated that nobody in Algeria could become a full French citizen without giving up Islam. But to legitimise such discrimination against one specific religion by a French state which boasted a secular identity, a whole discourse had to be developed. It was claimed that Muslims men were barbarian, uncivilised, cruel and oppressing women.[5] Algerians still remember today very bitterly how the French Republic betrayed its ideals and closed the door to all Muslims while letting the Jews becoming French citizens. And the French collective attitude towards Muslims is still shaped by the negative images of Islam which were propagated at this time.

These stereotypes were greatly revived during the 1954-62 Algerian war of Independence. About one million Algerians and 23,000 young French soldiers were killed. With the defeat of France in 1962 about a million French colonisers, not all of them rich, left Algeria in a hurry, abandoning their properties. But the paradox is that in the three years that followed, more than a million Algerian men came to work in French factories, agriculture and building trades. They were the frontline of immigration coming from North Africa. The reason for this considerable human flow is unknown to most French people. There was a secret agreement between the French government under de Gaulle and the new revolutionary government of independent Algeria. According to this agreement, the Algerian state agreed that up to one million young men could work for French employers.

France at that time was undergoing a process of very rapid industrialisation and modernisation, which later on was called the 'French miracle'. Western European powers were competing to import low cost labour which employers wanted to keep as cheap as possible. During their first years these young men worked hard and lived in miserable slum conditions. But before long rapid economic growth allowed the development of decent housing on the periphery of cities in the form of huge housing blocks: the now famous 'banlieues'. Initially these were built to host French workers from rural backgrounds, Portuguese or Spaniards, and eventually North Africans workers also got access to this housing. Some had already brought in a young wife illegally, but after the closure of the French borders to new immigrants in 1974, the immigrants workers who were installed in France got the official right to bring their wife and children. The core of my article is about these wives as mothers and their practice of bringing up their daughters and sons in a conflictual environment. Nowadays this conflict is reinforced by the widespread interpretation of 11 September 2001 which has pushed into the public sphere the idea of a crucial clash of civilisations between Christians and Muslims.

Here I present as an example, a Moroccan Muslim family living in France whom I know especially well, as I have explained above. Morocco did not have the same history of colonisation, being only relatively briefly a colony under French rule. It was not a colony of French migrants, but for several decades in the 20th century became a French and Spanish protectorate. Nevertheless, Moroccans in France who are Arabs and Muslims experience the same discrimination as other North Africans.

THE NOUR FAMILY

In immigrant families with few or no resources, where there is no objective 'capital' to transmit, there are still non-tangible assets of moral values and love which together with the family history, can give meaning to the current situation. Communicating family history can therefore enrich the minds of young people, whilst at the same time give them an identity which is different from that associated with their rejection by schools, the labour market and by the way in which French society in general shapes its discourse on ethnic minority youth.

Not all immigrant families like the Nours are able to use personal resources, which I call *subjective resources*, because one of the common characteristics of families in difficulty is the inability of the elders to transmit their own life history to their children. This history will have been shaped by a twofold series of humiliating experiences. First, and common to everybody, irrespective of whether they were born in France or have emigrated, is the experience of having occupied the lowest posts in society. Second, and specific to immigrants, is the racism that they have experienced. In common with everyone from the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Arabs and Berbers are proud and noble peoples, who are prone to silence when it comes to admitting what they have been through. But this silence is also a collective phenomenon, and the media plays a large part in contributing to it – as they also do in ignoring the history of the French working classes when compared with the rural history of the population – which has been more comprehensively reported and seen as part of national identity.

The Nour parents, Amin and Djamila were both born in an isolated village in the north-west of Morocco. Amin, the father, is 58 and Djamila is 45, and they have the fine features of the Berber ethnic group to which they belong.[6] They spent their childhoods in very harsh conditions. Both still have problems reading and writing. Djamila lost her father when she was only 10 years old and her mother, left without a husband to provide for the family, was too poor to send her to school. Amin was just 14 when he started working full-time in the fields, soon a mature adult, although still only a teenager.

In 1969, when he was 26, Amin decided to leave his village to find work in France. Like many other young men he was seeking a better way of life. He soon found work as a mason working on construction sites, yet he was not settled permanently in France and every summer he used to return to his village in Morocco. It was during one of these visits, in 1973, that he met Djamila. Amin was by now nearly 30 and anxious to find a wife and start a family. Following local traditions, he approached Djamila's mother to ask for her hand in marriage. Djamila's mother consulted with her brothers and a decision was quickly reached: Djamila, who was only 17, would be married to Amin that very summer. Her mother and brother left her no choice and she clearly did not want to get married to someone she didn't know. The couple were married that summer and Djamila followed her husband to France shortly afterwards. After a while living in temporary accommodation, the couple were allocated a flat on a council estate the following year. More than thirty years later, they are still there. They have eight children: six boys and two girls aged from 6 to 25 years old when I first met them.

FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT

Like many other parents from ethnic minorities, the Nours came to France to improve their economic situation and did not know at the time whether they would settle permanently. But the birth of their children has transformed their situation and attitudes. As the sociologist Louis-André Vallet remarks:

> The initial reasons for leaving one's country are short-term and linked to the prospect of a better social status when returning home. But these reasons are transformed into a project with broader horizons – ensuring that their children are fully integrated into the host country's society…. Education therefore becomes the lever to success for these families and their children. For the second generation, training and higher education are seen as the key to having a high social status and professional occupation. Despite having few social and cultural resources, schools become the central concern for these families.[7]

Amin and Djamila have always had one thought uppermost in their minds – that their children must not fail at school and end up being socially and economically excluded. Ethnic minority parents generally focus their energies on the French school system, developing strategies to ensure that their children get a good education. But how do parents with little or no education themselves manage to convince their own children that education is important? The answer is in the time they spend discussing their own childhood and their own life experiences with their children. It is only by becoming aware of the hardships their parents endured that the next generation begins to understand why they have to devote time and energy to their own studies. This process starts when the children are very young and goes on until their teenage years.

The key element of this transmission from generation to generation is through the telling of family histories. As Robert Neuburger puts it, 'Passing down successfully amounts to passing down the ability to pass down'.[8] Family history, as told by parents to children, is a tool, conveying both information about the past and traditions, but also about the need for changes. And the power of these stories, as Toshiaki Kozakaï remarks, rests not on biological parenthood, but on bonding through the sharing of childhood years.[9]

The Nour parents grew up in an environment where traditionally three generations of a family lived together and where the concept of childhood, as understood in the late twentieth-century European context, did not exist. From a very early age Berber children have responsibilities on a par with adults, something which is necessary for the subsistence of the whole group. Manual work to bring in money was, and still is, a must. Childhood is very short. However, as we shall see, the responsibilities of Berber girls and boys, and women and men, are different.

Djamila was born in 1956 and her father died when she was ten. She was the eldest child and had two sisters and an 'adopted' brother, actually a cousin being brought up by her mother. When she reached an age to go to primary school, her mother could not afford to send her. They were at the time living in the home of an uncle who sent his own children to school. Djamila describes her memories of this time as follows:

> I would have loved to have gone to school but my mother didn't have the means to send me. When my father died, I asked her, 'Please can I go to school Mum… ' but she said, 'The school is a long way from us and who is going to take and collect you?' Every morning I saw my uncle's sons and daughters going to school with their satchels. I would have loved to have gone with them. Sometimes I scribbled with a bit of coal in a writing book or wrote in the ground with a stick.

Djamila repeats this story to her children nearly every day. She always stresses the importance of school. She feels her lack of qualifications has been a major handicap in her life and she still wishes that she could have some form of basic education. Djamila's insistence that learning is the key to success has clearly rubbed off on her children. Leïla, the eldest daughter, currently at university, has a vivid impression of her mother's childhood:

> When my parents were young, such a thing as childhood didn't exist at all. My mum was weaving carpets when she was only six. I know that the carpets she used to make were very beautiful. But that wasn't the only thing she did. She used to collect buckets of water from the well and bake bread. When she was ten she was already working in the fields, planting and tending the crops.

The Nour children understand the strength and courage their mother needed; they recognise the hardship she endured and they do not regard it simply as bad luck. They know that their mother had to grow up very fast and that she learned to confront life's problems at an

early age.

Not all of Djamila's stories of her childhood describe difficulties. There were happy moments too and she had many friends. In fact, one of the striking features of Djamila's narrative is how the good and the bad coexist, as in the simple play activities which she recalls with fondness: 'I used to play with knucklebones nearly all the time, and I used to skip a lot. Before he died, my father used to tell me really beautiful stories which set my imagination running wild… When I look back on my childhood, I can see that I was very happy'.

Djamila's innocence ended when she learned about her future marriage with Amin. She was only eighteen and very pretty. She is still very attractive. But Amin, the man who wanted to marry her, was thirty two. There was even worse to come: Djamila found out that Amin had divorced after a marriage that had lasted ten years. He had repudiated his first wife because she couldn't have children. Djamila's destiny as a wife and mother was suddenly clear to her, with devastating effect:

> When I first met Amin, he had already divorced his first wife. Obviously, he didn't have any children and he was looking for a wife. I thought to myself, 'What did he do to his first wife? He left her. Well, he's going to do the same with me'. So I ran away from home for two weeks and told my mother, 'I'm not coming back home until you say no to this marriage'. She started to cry and told me that 'If you don't come back, your brother will kill you'. Then other members of the family got involved and told me 'You cannot spend all your life unmarried. You're eighteen and it's about time that you got married. In any case, if it's not with this man, God will find you another the same way. We know that you feel strongly that he has already divorced one woman, but you must put that behind you'.

In Berber tradition the family, along with friends and neighbours, provides a strong social network. Although this form of solidarity can protect individuals in an affectionate environment, it will only do so as long as rules are respected. When implicit codes of behaviour between parents and children are broken, sanctions result from the wider social network. Moreover, the consequences are much more important for girls than for boys, because girls alone symbolise the honour of the family group and its wider relationships in the community. Each individual act therefore implicates the wider social group.

Djamila's strong personality is a recurrent feature emerging from her childhood narratives. She really wanted to control her destiny. However, in the end she made up with her family and was married to Amin. But today, Djamila is adamant that her own children should be allowed to choose freely their own husband or wife, and that their choice should not be restricted by national or religious considerations. Djamila gives her daughters this message: 'You will marry the person who you love, and I will not be the one to choose your husband or wife'. Her eldest son, Rachid, recently married a young Algerian girl from an Arab rather than a Berber background. Such a union is considered by members of the Nour's social network to be 'a mixed marriage', not always approved. However Djamila fully supported her son's decision.

The issue of arranged marriages is frequently discussed within the family. Djamila is steadfast on this matter – it should be up to the individual to decide. Her husband and children know exactly where she stands and have been won over by her persuasive arguments, even though they know that Djamila's personal ideal is still marriage within their own cultural tradition, even if this means outside the Berber community itself. Leïla, for example, remarks that: 'I've talked about marriage with my parents. I know that deep down they would like me to marry an Arab with a good social position who treats me well. But if this doesn't happen, they would respect my decision. The only exception is that if my future husband was not Muslim, then they would want him to convert'.

But not all the Nour children have the same opinion on the issue of marrying a non-Muslim. Farid, although still young, is very clear:

> If I had a daughter, I wouldn't consider it shameful if she married a Frenchman who was not a Muslim, although of course not any old person. I really couldn't care less what other people would think. It's the future that counts the most for me. I would let my daughter choose for herself because most of all I would like her to be happy. After all, it's not my life.

In contrast, others in the family do not share Farid's liberal views and give more emphasis to the views of the local community. Even if they feel traditional values may be outdated, their own values are revealed by what they say. Fatiha, the youngest girl, claims that:

> If you are against mixed marriages, then you are seen to be racist. But a marriage between a Frenchman and an Arab is not a good

thing, because the two people are from different religions and God does not want this to happen. Perhaps it is written in the Koran. Everyone can have friends of different religions, but marriage is difficult because everybody has different food habits.

Djamila reacted strongly against her arranged marriage, which took place in the most traditional Islamic conditions. One consequence of her reaction to her own experience is the way in which she tries to bring up her daughters by giving them a different perspective. Djamila also believes strongly that a good education will help them to make up their own minds and to develop their own opinions. She hopes that they will become successful professionals and earn good money.

Djamila's attitude has already had a positive effect on her daughters, who consider their future to be full of possibilities. But with her sons things are more complicated. Whereas the girls stand to gain in autonomy, the boys stand to lose a resource that previous generations of men, including their own father, took for granted: the power of men over women. The patriarchal model, even though outdated in most of contemporary society in modern Western countries, remains potent in the minds of second generation young men from Muslim backgrounds. At the same time, it should be remembered that the issue of changing gender roles in modern society is one that *all* men are facing, irrespective of cultural background.

The Nour sons, like so many other boys and young men, feel ill at ease in this new world. Djamila knows this only too well. When she asks them to help with daily tasks around the home, she knows that she is sending a concealed and positive message. She is transforming previous cultural codes on the sexual division of labour. At the same time, Djamila also upholds the central principles of Islam. These subtle changes are brought about in the everyday activities in the household. The dualism of traditional and modern beliefs can be seen in the way that Djamila speaks to her children and more generally in the way that she brings them up. Writing on the importance of this process, Smaïn Laacher states that:

> There is a myth that the ethnic minority family is static and that each member is stuck in an identity rooted in tradition from which they cannot escape and far away from the autonomy that one supposes they wish to acquire. Nothing could be further than the truth. Both parents and children construct their identities independent of immutable tradition.[10]

Djamila's self-identity is constructed by her reflections on childhood, her marriage to Amin, the upbringing of her children in a different country and, more recently, Amin's taking of a second wife back in Morocco. Clearly she has had the strength to put a lot behind her. Djamila is not just a passive observer of her life events. She has overcome difficult situations and invented new ways of bringing up her family. At the same time, she and her husband want their children to remain Muslim and she has never encouraged them to leave or change their religion. Djamila's persistence on this matter has paid off, because even though the eldest daughter, as we shall see, is interested in other religions, she has not abandoned her Muslim identity.

A change in other attitudes does not in itself warrant abandoning an entire religious background – why should it? If they were to give up their religion, they would be abandoning one of the main resources available to give meaning to their lives. In situations where it is difficult to create a respected social identity, individuals with a strong religious background are comforted and strengthened by their beliefs. The Nour children have grown up on a large, sprawling housing estate in an area of high social deprivation. They have the additional stigma of being 'Maghrébin' (a French term for North African, often derogatory) or having Maghrébin roots. As Jacqueline Costa-Lascoux notes:

> …every single piece of research on racism, such as those surveys conducted annually by the CSQ [a media watch-dog] for the National Consultation Committee of Human Rights, clearly shows that on the scale of discrimination, Arabs or 'Maghrébins' score high, whether this racism consists of words, acts or attitudes.[11]

The Nours are aware that French society looks suspiciously at their boys, while it sees Muslim girls as possible victims of male Muslim oppression from which they should be helped to free themselves. Mothers such as Djamila know about this double standard and try to prevent sons' resentment against their sisters and against French society.[12] For example, Leïla has been studying English and Italian at school. Her good results are a contrast with those of her brothers. This could create an explosive situation. The brothers could have become jealous and reacted, as in some other families, by asserting control over their sister in the name of family honour. But Djamila had anticipated this risk. She had

made Leïla understand that success at school was not everything, and that she should help her brothers in their relationships with various bureaucracies or in looking for qualifications or for work. Leïla does indeed phone potential employers for her brothers:

> Once an employer asked me, 'Miss, why are you speaking for your brother ?' I told him, 'A feminine voice, even with an Arab accent, is less likely to frighten you, sir. You will be more willing to listen to me, and I've got an interviews which were refused to my brothers.' He did give Saïd an inter-view, and he took him on as a plumber.

At the same time Djamila succeeded in getting the brothers to accept that they should take their share in the household tasks, includ-ing taking over Leïla's roles when she was taking an exam.

The Nours do not see such changes as an abandonment of their Muslim background. Like many other young women, the girls have become 'Muslim Westerners'. As they redefine their own identities, so too the boys have the challenge of building their own. Djamila and her daughters are aware of the limits to change. They do not want to disturb family harmony, so any changes have to be slowly negotiated. But with each step, they are building a femi-nine identity that is very different to the one that Djamila knew when she was growing up.

Djamila Issolah's research into young women from a North African shows how the social construction of their identity is charac-terised by a double process: the internalisation of the family, cultural and religious norms of their parents and the acquisition of the norms prevalent within French society.[13] These young women occupy a new and privileged place

within the family, and their attitudes and behaviour are forces for change.

The Nour daughters are typical of this process. They have adopted new social roles which would not have been possible under traditional conditions, where strong norms on sex and family hierarchy dominate behaviour. For example, Leïla, the eldest daughter, helps with routine administrative tasks that concern the family, as well as contributing financially to the running of the household. She also helps out with bringing up the younger children, following their school progress whilst at the same time pursuing her career in law at univer-sity. The combination of these roles would previously have been considered suitable only for the eldest son.

Thus Djamila gives her children the oppor-tunity to link tradition and modernity. She rejects the suggestion that tradition and moder-nity are opposing forces, and that her children's objections to her parental views are radical and represent some form of generational conflict peculiar to children from immigrant families. A notable example is her creative parenting in both encouraging her daughter's school success and balancing this with an obligation to help her less successful brothers, and so to hold the sibling group together in the new social context. Thus we need to be cautious in interpreting single strands of change. Family relationships are continuously shifting, and invariably complex. Nevertheless, we can fairly conclude that among immigrant families like the Nour one aim dominates, and underlies the creativity of their parenting: the hope of giving their chil-dren the inner subjective resources they need to overcome the handicap they have from their national and class background, so that, remain-ing in France, they can fully exercise their status as citizens.

NOTES
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