

Liberty, Community and Religion: A Hispano-Moroccan Family in Andalusia

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In Europe, the relationship that migrants originating from the Arab Muslim world – whether first- or second-generation – maintain with Islam is both a little-explored subject and a source of confused concern. An ethnographic study of an Andalusian family conducted by Alain Cottereau and Mokhtar Marzok sheds light on the different ways in which people relate to religion, and calls into question what is often presumed to be a binary opposition between religiousness and a return to tradition on the one hand, and integration and a rejection of religion on the other.

The starting point for this paper¹ was a surprising discovery made during fieldwork: we were studying a specific social milieu by considering the economic situation of a Spanish family of Moroccan origin, and our preliminary contacts had led us to expect to meet people who were of the Islamic faith but not practising Muslims. After all, in the working-class milieus of the Rif region, in northern Morocco, from which the family originates, the Muslim religion has only a superficial presence, and those Riffians who have settled on the Spanish coast seem to have combined religious distancing with geographical distancing. And yet, against all expectations, during the first few days of the survey, the head of the family, Mohammed, revealed to us that he goes to mosque “at the weekend”, that he has started to pray at home again, and that he occasionally attends religious talks in the evening. Our observations, over a period of 11 months, together with the interviews we conducted, would enable us to gradually understand the full extent of this practice and determine its implications. By recounting this line of investigation and analysis, we hope to shed some light on what the expression “Muslim community” can mean today in Western Europe, by approaching it from within a relatively cosmopolitan working-class world.

The survey from which the following descriptions are taken did not primarily concern religious life. It resulted from an experiment in economic anthropology that sought to describe how a family, observed over a number of weeks, counted, measured and evaluated things and relationships, made calculations and decisions (economic or otherwise; no fields of relevance were defined *a priori*), and assessed situations in hindsight. This experiment resulted in the publication of a book (Cottereau and Marzok 2012), the key component of which was a field journal, kept jointly by the two researchers conducting the survey, from which the quotations below are taken. This article focuses on one particular aspect of this experiment: the significance today of the Hispano-Moroccan “community”, which is now an integral part of the Andalusian region and the Spanish nation. The survey explored what the notions of belonging and identity mean for this community, identified acquaintanceship networks, and followed transformations in progress at all relevant levels, from family relationships to forms of cosmopolitanism. This redefinition of ties required us first of all to look more closely at the life trajectories of the two members of the couple, Mohammed and Fatima, who told us more about what this “return” to religious practice signifies, in this context.

¹ A longer initial version of this text first appeared in Berger, M., Cefaï, D. and Gayet-Viaud, C. (eds.). 2011. *Du civil au politique. Ethnographies du vivre-ensemble*, Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, pp. 414–445.

Mohammed's life trajectory and his return to the mosque

Mohammed's family is bi-continental, bi-national and bi-regional, as are his close relatives. Today, his family is primarily Spanish, residing in Andalusia. Mohammed, the father of the family, who turned 50 in 2007, was born in a village in the Rif in Morocco, close to Nador – the new economic capital of Northern Morocco – and Melilla – a tiny port territory and Spanish enclave in Africa, located on a peninsula sandwiched between Morocco and the Mediterranean. In 1977, he emigrated to the Canary Islands (part of Spain), got married in 1989, and settled in mainland Spain more recently, in autumn 2006, in Fuengirola, a small town on the Costa del Sol, where he sells items for tourists on the various markets in the area. Since emigrating, he has also acquired Spanish nationality.

His wife, Fatima, 42, is from the same region as Mohammed. She joined him in the Canary Islands in 1996, seven years after they got married. Their two daughters, Amel, 14, and Amira, 12, were born in Morocco and still have Moroccan nationality, but as they have lived in Spain for 11 years, and are schooled entirely in the Spanish education system, they are in the process of obtaining Spanish citizenship, as Spain is by far their primary frame of reference. Mohammed and Fatima's two sons, Adib, 10, and Chawki, 6, were born in the Canary Islands and already have Spanish nationality. At home, the main language spoken is Spanish, along with some Riffian Berber, the only language Fatima speaks well.

While in our presence, Mohammed reflected upon the path that led him to reorganize his life today on the Costa del Sol, in particular by setting himself new rules. During our first meeting with him, he simply told us that he had been going to mosque for a few months, and that he had found a form of social assistance there that helped him deal with his unstable situation. Later on, he told us that his family – more specifically, his wife, mother, sister and two brothers – had been putting considerable pressure on him ever since he gave up drinking the previous year. He added that drinking was a cause of marital conflict, in particular because the cost of his alcohol consumption put the family finances in serious jeopardy. Throughout the survey, our observations and questions continually elicited reflections as to why this change had occurred. In the last few days of our study, Mohammed himself told us about the period when he was addicted to alcohol. In answering a deliberately vague question – “What have been the major turning points in your life?” – he identified a loss of control over the direction his life was taking as the first such turning point:

[Tuesday 11 March 2008] “The first turning point was when I left for the Canaries. This shaped the whole of my youth. I left in 1975, at the age of 17. Over there, in the tourist industry, it was one big party. The climate's tropical, it's hot all day long. And so we were tourists all day long, too. And, like everyone else, I started drinking. It was easy living: cigarettes, alcohol, women. I would send some money back to my family, and then do what I liked with the rest. I kept telling myself, ‘Tomorrow, I'm going to get my life in order.’”

He then explained, with a certain amount of humour, how a second turning point was planned by his mother and older sister, working “in league” with one another, who thought he might settle down if he got married. But the outcome they had hoped for did not materialize right away – and so, for this reason, he does not consider his marriage to be a turning point in his life; in fact, the second turning point he mentioned occurred much later, when the rest of his family joined him in the Canary Islands, and, even then, it was only a partial turning point:

[Same day.] “So, luckily for me, I got married; my marriage saved me, but its positive effects only changed my life when my family came to join me, in 1996. My mother and older sister, Arkia, worked in league together in order to marry me off.” With a wry smile, he adds: “That's how it works: your mother and sister find you a wife so that you settle down, and that way you're no longer their problem.”

He fell back into old habits rapidly, though, cueing a second attempt to “sort himself out” and leave behind alcoholism, unemployment and the ever-worsening financial problems affecting the couple, who now had four children to look after. His use of religion is only one part of the solution

that he devised with the help of his mother, older sister and two brothers – namely to leave the Canary Islands, settle in mainland Spain in the same town as his two brothers, and set up a small business as a street vendor working at local markets. None of the members of this family “league” was particularly keen to see Mohammed return to religion, any more than Mohammed himself was: each of them clearly saw the Muslim faith as nothing more than a useful tool for leaving behind alcoholism.

Our observations showed that Mohammed regularly practised private prayer, once a day in the late afternoon during the week and twice a day at weekends if he was not working, alone in the parental bedroom, sometimes taking turns with Fatima. Mohammed would go to mosque on Fridays, as well as on Sunday mornings if he was not working. Here, “private” prayer means “individual” prayer (as opposed to “family” prayer): this is the most usual form of prayer in Islam. On Fridays, he would take his younger daughter, Amira, to mosque with him. She was keen and proud to go with him, dressed in a special outfit, but his older daughter, Amel, did not accompany them: she was not interested in attending mosque, and neither of her parents have ever encouraged her to go.

Furthermore, long conversations with Mohammed on metaphysical themes – experience, knowledge, the meaning of life – confirmed an intense line of thinking on his part, more philosophical than religious, in which the talks held at the mosque serve as ingredients rather than doctrines. They impart a conception of moral demands that chimes with common notions of what Islam as a contemporary religion is: a set of rules for how to behave that is seamlessly compatible with secular life. Divisions, compartmentalizations and potential conflicts are to be sought elsewhere. Similarly, we never saw evidence of any interference from any religious authority *per se*, either within Mohammed’s family or within his circle of friends and acquaintances. Moreover, Mohammed does not know the imam personally; he only knows the ascetic healer (*fqir*) from his former village.²

Relationships of authority do, however, exist within his family, with effects concerning religion, but their configuration does not conform to the kind of hierarchy one might expect: there is nothing that resembles the stereotype of the “patriarchy”. Furthermore, a number of observations converge on this point, revealing a certain complicity between mother and older daughter (age 14), who together ensure the father does not give in to the temptation of alcohol. To achieve this requires delicate manoeuvring, though: they must be careful not to hurt his feelings, nor must they seem to be telling him how to behave.

Fatima’s trajectory: the limited horizon of a “life controlled”

The degree to which the two spouses got along, or otherwise, was another of this study’s surprises: based on our initial contact, we expected to find a united family, and yet from the outset discovered a more problematic context, with a wife who would have liked a different life from the one life dealt her, and who has not truly resigned herself to her situation. Fatima talks about this, quite openly, the day after our first meetings:

[Monday 9 May 2007. Mokhtar is alone with Fatima. Before conducting this survey, he had not seen Fatima – his cousin – since attending her wedding as a child.]

“I listen to her story while seated at a small kitchen table; Fatima is standing up, and has to turn her back to me in order to wash some fish. From the way she turns her head and repeatedly turns to face me while talking about the last 18 years since her wedding, I surmise that the subjects in question bring back painful memories that she does not manage to hide:

² The term *fqir*, or “holy healer”, designates the central person in a religious institution common among Maghrebi Berbers. An approximate equivalent, the “marabout”, is better known in Europe.

‘You understand, things haven’t been easy all these years,’ she says, becoming animated. ‘You can’t imagine it! Everyone has their problems in life! Well, look at mine! You know what happened, right?’

‘Well... I only know what your mother-in-law saw fit to tell me.’

‘When I was finally able to move to the Canaries with my daughters to be with him, that’s when the problems started. He was drinking, he was partying, he was gambling... and that wasn’t the half of it; he had every vice going. We talked and argued constantly about how we were going to get by financially. Sometimes he would disappear and we would only see him three days later, penniless. Then, a few years ago, he went to Málaga, and left us on our own, me and the children. He didn’t send us a single cent. My two brothers helped me out, though, and then I found a job as a cook that paid 800 euros [per month]. I was doing OK, I was getting by, but then he called me and told me to come to Málaga with the children, so that the family could be together. He said that he’d changed. But I didn’t want to: I was on my own, I was managing to get by on my own and I was thinking about getting a divorce. My female friends told me not to go down the divorce route: I would end up on my own, far away from my family; when all is said and done, they kept telling me, it would be better if I went to Málaga, as I couldn’t let my children grow up without their father. So I went over there, and after a week I found myself caught up in the same mess again. If only you knew how much I regretted that move! I kept thinking to myself: who could possibly have thought it was a good idea to go over there?! I was just getting back on my feet, I was taking back control of my life. Today, it’s two months since he started going to mosque. And it’s only now – now that he’s in poor health – that the money situation has brought him back to his senses to some extent. And even now, as you can see for yourself, he leaves at five in the morning, and some days he’ll bring some money back home, and others none. By the grace of God! (*Inshallah!*)’”

Today, these regrets about the trajectory she could have had, when she was “taking back control of [her] life”, is now nothing more than a backdrop, albeit one that influences her projections on to her daughters. When asked about the kind of future she wants for them, she makes it clear that she would like them, in their future lives as Spanish citizens, to take and keep control of things; and that, in order to achieve this, they should start by earning a salary of their own that gives them independence, and the freedom to choose a husband.

Religion as therapy for alcoholism: the polar opposite of a religious conversion

In this context, the fact that Mohammed has “started going to mosque” is put into perspective when Fatima tells us that “the money situation has brought him back to his senses”. This is the polar opposite of a narrative suggesting a religious conversion: it is clearly not religion that has made him see sense, and the information about him attending mosque is pronounced with a hint of sceptical irony. Reading between the lines: his situation as a small businessman in difficulty has made him see sense, and religion helps him resist the temptation to drink.

On this point, at least, Fatima’s and Mohammed’s respective narratives corroborate each other: both imply a relative compartmentalization of different aspects of his life. Religion plays a limited role: financial woes do not call for religious salvation, or for a reversal of the hierarchy between God and money; at most, one might hope for an increase in *baraka*³ – something that Mohammed’s mother requested of the *fqir* in his home village. The improvement in Mohammed and Fatima’s economic situation is above all the result of rational calculations combined with moral checks and controls on Mohammed’s behaviour. Ultimately, from Fatima’s point of view – a standpoint shared by her daughter Amel – and indeed also from Mohammed’s point of view, prayer and mosque attendance are first and foremost therapeutic tools for combating alcohol addiction. Readers of Max Weber will here be surprised to find, in Fatima’s analysis, two characteristics of the Calvinist ethic, in an advanced phase of secularization: methodical ethics and rational calculation. Those familiar with the history of Great Britain and Scandinavia may also see an analogy with the convergence of

³ *Baraka*: blessing or divine protection; good luck.

religion, the temperance movement and working-class sociability in the history of the industrialization of these countries in the 19th century.⁴

The expansion of women's liberties and the emancipation of female honour

Fatima's condescending discourse concerning the irresponsibility and poor behaviour of her husband forms part of a common register used among married women to evaluate their husbands, as highlighted some 40 years ago in research conducted in North Africa.⁵ Lawrence Rosen, for example, noted that men feared the power that women, too, possessed, and which they could use to transform their husband's life into a living hell. This was observed in particular in the case of urban marriages: faced with husbands who sought to confine their new wives to a life indoors, urban networks of female family members and friends would mobilize their forces and take action, supporting requests for divorces or threatening to provoke scandals, for instance.

A generation later, female networks continue to function as opposition forces. However, changes in the way these networks are integrated into society has changed their *raison d'être*. The power resources of women in their first marriages, in the form of groups of mutual acquaintances, are no longer indirect: they no longer work by mobilizing allies from male family lines – especially as these women, often with no room for manoeuvre, cannot count on former family support networks, which are typically too far away and inaccessible after migrating to join their husbands working abroad. This is the case for Fatima, and for everyone in her network of new female friends, without exception. Going to live with one's expatriated husband shortly after marriage is something that shakes up the whole matrimonial system of migrants, compared to previous generations, or even compared to the initial phases in the lives of the oldest women in the current network, when wives stayed in their home country after marriage and brought the first few children into the world, under the watchful eye of their mothers-in-law.

This major change in women's lives is accompanied by access to new freedoms: two important levers for these are travel (daily journeys undertaken in groups of two or three female friends in order to go to markets, something they were generally not allowed to do in the Rif, as the *souks* were the preserve of men, both as buyers and sellers) and female sociability at the park (around 15 such women meet in the evening and form a veritable "wives' union"). These new freedoms symbolize a more radical change: the integration for each of these women of a right to happiness, of which they themselves are the primary judge. It is implied in their visions of the world that it is a given that underlies their life projects and criteria for success. All the female viewpoints encountered and recorded in the field journal consider this dimension to be something that has now been definitively acquired, presumed to be a given – something that is expected and no longer explicitly requested. Even in the arguments presented by Mohammed's mother, who stayed in Morocco but has followed from afar the ways in which her children have changed in Andalusia, criteria relating to independent free choice have become obvious points of reference in her judgements.

She vehemently criticized recent religious incursions that seek to redefine the role of women as a subordinate social position, and indeed could not find words harsh enough to disavow the rise of the Islamic veil – completely unknown in the rural society of the Rif – that symbolizes this redefinition, always expressing the same views about women who submit to this demand: "It is not their choice, they are not free." Similarly, the opinions of Mohammed's sister and two stepsisters, like those of their mother, were unanimous on the issue of marriage and being able to choose one's spouse: it represents a major step forward and a liberation. Marriage is no longer seen as a transcendent entity

⁴ We owe the identification of this link – between the Muslim faith as a remedy for alcoholism and a means of acquiring respectability, on the one hand, and analogous European traditions, on the other – to Stéphane Baciocchi. The definitive reference in this domain remains Thompson 1963.

⁵ Vinogradov, unpublished typescript, *Man's World, Woman's Place: The Politics of Sex in North Africa*, cited by Lawrence Rosen (1984, p. 39), in which men are described as "worthless" and "childish".

whose purpose is to produce future generations, but as an agreement that takes account of the personal life plans of both spouses. In this context, the respectability of individuals and families has a new framework: there are no longer common “assets” of honour to be maintained; instead, respectability is determined by the potential for arrangements between honourable and reliable people. The obvious legitimacy of female life plans leads to a legitimacy of personal judgements regarding honour and credibility: the respect and honour of women is no longer in the hands of male relatives; it is women’s own responsibility, and one of which they shall be the judge, first and foremost.

Fatima’s words quoted above – “I was taking back control of my life” – clearly indicate this change of frame of reference, even though it is expressed, in this case, as a regret. For her daughters, she dreams of emancipation through personal economic independence, which she was unable to maintain herself. This criterion for the exercise of freedom is not trivial. Indeed, the old justifications for the subordination of women deemed that the female nature was incapable of self-control. Whether by design or otherwise, the words used by Fatima constitute a frontal attack on this viewpoint. Men are fragile and can easily end up adopting an infantile irresponsibility with regard to their families: this is the collective view of their wives, contradicting male stereotypes of women’s natures. And it is this view that leads them to the belief that religion is more useful for men than women – a form of reasoning completely unheard of in Catholic circles.

Fatima tells us she says her five daily prayers at home, in accordance with the asceticism befitting a good Muslim woman who knows her place, but does not see why she should go to mosque. On the other hand, she appreciates the therapy for alcohol addiction that the Muslim religion provides her husband, as a means of “taking back control” of his life as a father and head of the household, alongside the financial control imposed by his responsibilities as a self-employed worker.

Being a “Spanish Muslim”

On the scale of the Hispano-Moroccan milieu on the Costa del Sol, it is possible to say that, in certain respects, male and female networks are responsible for performing the transition from community to society, in accordance with Weber’s terms – a transition that was already under way in Moroccan society: transforming relationships of belonging into relationships of voluntary agreement. These changes have taken place no more than a generation or two later than in the West, even though the youngest generations in Morocco would see the before and after situations as two very different worlds.

The idea of community needs to be defined more precisely. The expression “sense of belonging”, in particular, means nothing in itself: it covers identifications that can and do vary as soon as one takes into consideration circumstances that coherently guide and determine a person’s integration into a new context. This is a case where out of the mouths of babes – more specifically, in a collective interview recorded in our field journal – comes truth:

[Interview in Spanish, conducted by Alain and Mokhtar, with the four children, who were invited to tea in exchange for this contribution to the study. We remind readers that the two girls, Amel, 14, and Amira, 12, were born in Morocco and are legally of Moroccan nationality; they have Spanish residence permits, and are aware they are in the process of obtaining Spanish nationality. Their two younger brothers, Adib, 10, and Chawki, 6, were born in the Canary Islands and have Spanish nationality. Mokhtar asks the questions.]

“How do you feel, in terms of your identity? Amira, what does ‘identity’ mean? [Pause.] It sort of relates to... whether you feel Spanish, right?”

Amira’s reply, after a long period of reflection, accompanied by different facial expressions, as if she were visualizing different answers and wordings, was: “Yes, Spanish Muslim.”

Mokhtar: “What does ‘Spanish Muslim’ mean?”

Amel replies (for both herself and her sister): “We’re from here, but we’re Muslims.”

Amira concurs. Adib adds his two cents; he is in full agreement with his big sisters: “The difference is that we speak Riffian and don’t eat pork.”

Amel, in order to dispel any remaining ambiguity, adds: “But I don’t feel Moroccan.”

And yet things aren’t quite as simple as that. A further correction, in order to avoid any possible misinterpretation, is provided, this time by Amira, and once again approved by Amel: “This one time, there was a girl at school who said racist things about Moroccans, in the middle of class. At home time, with some Moroccan friends from school, we all went and grabbed her by the hair!”

Adib: “It’s happened to me too: with friends, I’ve corrected people who’ve said nasty things about Moroccans!”

And thus concludes their answer to “What does ‘identity’ mean?”: it means nothing, out of context, just like “a sense of belonging”. Indeed, the children’s various replies tell us what the real question should be: “What are the different components of your identity, and in what circumstances?” Different circumstances call for different responses, not in a bid to obscure a difficult identity but rather to adapt one’s heritage to the relational world that we must all construct.

The “Spanish mosque”, or “Muslim congregation”

Both parents, worried by the fact that their children will soon be teenagers, are counting heavily on the support of the mosque as a means of keeping them on the straight and narrow. They have signed them up for Arabic lessons and Koran class. But this is not about a return to traditions. When talking about the future of his four children, Mohammed explained to us that they had become “multicultural” (*multiculturales*, a term used in Spanish), which meant that he would have less and less authority over them. He therefore hoped that the mosque would help resolve this situation. He felt it was obvious that their future lay irrevocably in Spain and that, as a result, they, the parents, would probably return to Morocco on their own to retire, if they didn’t have the financial means to keep living in Spain.

The idea of “mosque” used here is also different in terms of what it signifies. More specifically, it means “Spanish mosque”, another concept that is somewhat rooted in the future. To explain this notion, we have proposed the term “Muslim congregation” (a term frequently encountered in the US and Canada, along with “Islamic congregation”, but which is more difficult to translate and express in our original work in French, where the word *paroisse* means both “ecclesiastical parish”, i.e. an administrative and territorial division used by an organized religion, and “congregation”, i.e. the community associated with a given parish).

The unremarkable nature of the expression in the US reflects the perception there of Muslim immigrants as simply the arrival of an additional religion, as has occurred with each of the many successive wave of immigrants who have come in search of greener pastures, ever since the arrival of the first Protestants. The detailed anthropological survey by Walbridge confirms this perception, which was destabilized, but not completely uprooted, by the 9/11 attacks (1993).⁶

⁶ Walbridge spent four years, from 1987 to 1991, in a Lebanese Shiite Muslim neighbourhood in Dearborn, an inner suburb of Detroit, where she lived with her husband and children, who attended the local schools, after conducting fieldwork in a village in Lebanon. See also Sweet 1974 and Aswad 1974.

Assertions of religiousness, specific to migratory contexts

Assertions of religiousness are linked to situations where individuals are suddenly immersed in a world in which they are “foreigners” or “strangers”. Often, life trajectories show that migrants of all religious traditions begin to practise their faith even if they were not religious in their home country. They find mutual aid and support among a new immigrant milieu, where the older generations interact with new arrivals, whom they welcome and initiate into a new form of inclusion in the American context.

Religion becomes a matter of personal choice, simultaneously “privatized” and a means of social integration, based on a wide variety of religious justifications. Accordingly, the mention of sharia law, outside fundamentalist minorities, when placed in the social-life contexts of the individuals in question, above all defines rules for moral behaviour: being a good Muslim – honest, reliable and supportive.

Inclusion in a non-Muslim country transforms inherited religious belonging into conscious adherence from the outset. The history of American minorities confirms a reinforcement of this style of proactive local congregation with lay populations that play a much more active role, the development of institutions promoting social solidarity and education, and efforts to ensure the intellectual training of senior congregation members and subsequently encourage them to take on roles more closely linked to the organization of religious and social activities or roles as counsellors, confidants and mediators for other members of the congregation. The universalist idea of a “community of believers” (*ummah*) is effective in gradually attenuating divisions that may have existed in their countries or regions of origin. However, typically, they only result in new practical links on the scale of a solidarity-based attachment to a congregation.

The Hispano-Moroccan milieu as an intermediate public sphere

It is from this perspective that the expression used by the children – “Spanish Muslim” – begins fully to make sense. By combining a nationality-based term and a religious term, a compromise of identity is avoided. Rather, these two terms summarize two qualities of the space that they inhabit, for both the present and the future: the perimeter of the first continues to expand with each new Spanish citizen, while the second has a more restricted perimeter, limited to those encountered who are deemed to be trustworthy and dependable. All the configurations evoked above converge on a dual connection: a relatively reliable milieu, based on a certain familiarity and guarantees of morality, provides the resources necessary to integrate into the anonymous milieu of adoption. In this situation, one’s status as a former Riffian is not brought to the fore when it comes to establishing a shared sense of belonging, theoretically leading to an obligation of solidarity between compatriots. It forms a space for new encounters and meetings, where new networks are built up around reliable people – and where the Muslim faith forms part of the criteria used to judge reliability. Instead of community-based belonging, what we have here is therefore an intermediate public sphere, oriented towards emancipation and freedom, that acts as a base from which to embrace Spanish life, the Spanish economy, and Spanish citizenship.

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