

# Making money, marking identities: the Moroccan wedding business in Brussels

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## Abstract

Present article deals with the weddings of the second generation Moroccan migrants in Belgium and the way they elaborate these marriages as unique ceremonial events. Triangulating qualitative and quantitative data with theoretical insights we will see how a whole economy developed in which Moroccan entrepreneurs supply for specific goods and services like the caftan, a traditional ceremonial dress for women. On the demand side the need for unifying rituals and symbols is important since the Moroccan community is inwardly torn by acculturation and individualization, leading to a growing discord between the generations and the sexes. Although traditional at first sight, the wedding rituals and the caftans are rather reinvented by a community looking for ethnic identity-markers that can help to realign all descendants. This 'translocation' of culture is therefore not just replicating the homeland but also creating new grounds to stand on.

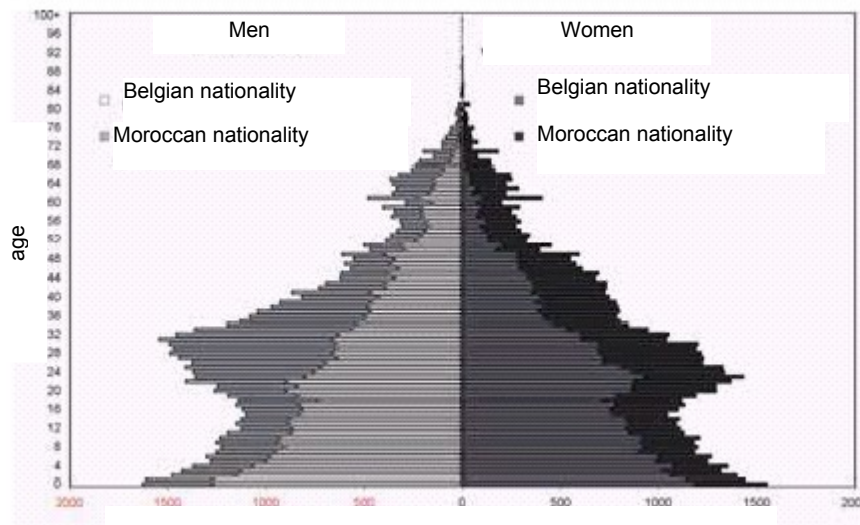
Butchers, bakers, grocery stores, retailing in clothes, household appliances, furniture and jewellery, restaurants and banquet halls, beauty parlours and hairdressers, dj's and musicians, ...: the diversity of Moroccan business in Brussels proves wide but occasionally all these enterprises link up and constitute – in a direct or indirect way – a vast wedding industry. Indeed, in Belgium Moroccan weddings became a booming business during last decade. The most emblematic feature of this commerce is the caftan, i.e. a traditional Moroccan dress worn by women on festive occasions. Making an inventory of the caftan business in Brussels we counted around 70 shops while western ceremonial dresses only have 30 outlet-stores. With 125,962 inhabitants the Moroccan community is by far the largest community from foreign origin in this city of 1 million inhabitants. Almost half of the Belgian Moroccans live in Brussels but that does not explain the profusion of caftans and the commotion provoked by the wedding.

Following article is part of a larger research project dealing with the ethnic economies of Brussels (Belgium)<sup>1</sup>. During two years time (2005-2006) we had the opportunity to observe the expanding market, making in-depth interviews with around 20 professionals dealing with matrimony – among

whom several key-figures. We attended weddings and fashion shows and had numerous informal talks with the participants. Triangulating these qualitative data with several statistical studies on the migrant communities in Belgium and a more theoretical literature, we get a surprising insight into the ongoing process of integration of the second generation.

## 1. A market in full expansion

The Moroccan population is relatively young: while only 20.7% of the native Belgians are between 18 and 34 years old, 33% of the Moroccan descendants have reached this marriageable age (Willaert & Deboosere, 2006: 33-5 + 69-70). Apart from this young bump there is a second one between the age of 55 to 70, being the former sojourners who entered Belgium from the end of the sixties onwards. So since the mid-nineties we witness a wedding-boom that is joining in matrimony members of the second generation who were born or raised on Belgian soil. They give the wedding business its vital demographic underpinning, while western stores face a demand that is dwindling away in quantitative and qualitative terms (Fedis, 2004: 10-1). The native population knows shrinking numbers of young people and they increasingly shun the traditional outfit of their intimate relationships.



Age pyramid of the population of Moroccan descent residing in Brussels (data: NIS 2001 - 1991)

Seventy caftan shops is quite something: the Moroccan supply being 10 times bigger than what the traditional western stores have in stock<sup>2</sup>. Yet the wedding ceremony implies far more than caftans: one has to rent a banquet hall, food has to be served. One can invite a catering company

or call in butchers, bakers and greengrocers willing to earn some additional income. The family might be mobilized to prepare meals oneself – now it is clear why the stores sell over-sized cooking pots. There has to be music, a photographer, one can rent a limousine and the bride has to be bathed, her hair has to be done, feet and hands tattooed with henna. A female ‘master of ceremonies’ – the ziana – should be contacted, a dowry fixed: golden jewels or furniture and household appliances. The guests will of course buy presents for the young couple and being thanked for their presence, they receive Moroccan pastry or ‘coated tablets’ as a token. Taking into account all these peripheral activities it seems that more than one third of the shops in the ‘rue de Brabant’ – the major shopping street of the ethnic economy in Brussels – is dealing in one way or another with the Moroccan wedding ceremony. Such a remarkable offer attracts of course customers and they do not only come from Brussels but from all over the country and some even from abroad. The caftan designer Bachir estimates that 30 % of his clientele resides in neighbouring countries. The man is enjoying great fame with fashion shows that take hours and show almost 100 models, attracting the attention of TV-channels as RTM (Radio Télévision du Maroc) and ‘el Maghreb’ that broadcast throughout Europe and Morocco. Fashion-shows are frequently organized, a magazine was launched and websites followed, all focusing on Moroccan marriage. To understand this booming business we will first discuss the ceremonial program of the wedding (see 2) and turn afterwards to the economic rationale of this business (see 3). Since successful markets link supply and demand, we subsequently question the side of the costumers and their need for ceremony (see 4 & 5).

## 2. The wedding protocol

Moroccan marriages are quite unique. Compared to other Arab countries, Morocco maintained its own tradition which is quite different from a western wedding. Of course some couples celebrate in an elaborate way, others do it shorter, the sequens of events may be altered but in general we find the following elements. A marriage between Moroccans implies a marriage contract that is conclude at the Moroccan consulate. According to patriarchal tradition a downry has to be fixed, stipulating the amount of money the groom has to pay for the future bride. This is a delicate operation, all the more because it conveys the unfavourable impression that she is being purchased. Nowadays one tries to disguise the transaction by buying golden juwels, furniture or household goods (Jansen, 1997; Renaerts, 1991: 73-4). A second official moment is the civil marriage registered at the Belgian town hall. For this occasion the bride wears a white bridal gown and there is the obligatory photoshoot, sometimes Belgian friends and acquaintances are invited for a reception so that the festivities for the family can preserve their Moroccan character.

A Moroccan wedding easily takes two or three days so one starts generally on Friday. On the eve of the big celebration the groom can go out with his friends while the bride stays with her family and invites friends to come over. Sometimes there is the traditional ritual bathing (possibly in a hammam) but mostly one contents oneself with the henna-ceremony in which the hands and feet of the bride are being decorated with filigree designs. The best part however is kept for the following day. Amidst finely decorated and hooting cars the groom is going to fetch his bride, if desired in a rented limousine. After a warm reception in her parental home the autocade leaves to have further photo- and videoshoots against the backdrop of typical sceneries in Brussels. In the evening the guests arrive at the banquet hall where they are welcomed with drinks and appetizers. True to tradition men and women are being segregated. Some banquet halls have the facilities to split-up the celebration, otherwise a second ceremony is given the following night. In general men keep it simple, the number of invitees rarely exceeds 20 or 30 persons. On the female side however the big celebration can count more than 2 or 300 guests and almost all wear caftans.

The men begin with the recitation of the first surah after which the celebration can start with drinks and snacks. A band of musicians or a female dj sets in and the women start dancing. It is already quite late when the long-awaited dinner is being served. The groom only appears to offer his bride some gifts. There are symbolic ones as the sugar, milk and dates representing purity and fertility. Other more substantial presents are displayed for the public on so called tefors i.e., gilded plates with a conic top. Bride and groom are being seated on sort of a throne, the so called mida's in which they are carried amidst the cheering crowd. On this occasion the man wears a western costume or a white djellaba, the princess of the day is dressed in a caftan. The peculiarity is that she will change gowns during the night, possibly wearing up to 7 different pieces. Each caftan represents a different region in Morocco, sometimes there is also a sari and a white wedding dress to conclude. Changing clothes the bride is assisted by a ziana who is responsible for the make-up, for dressing her hair and bringing in accessories like jewels, caftans, tefors and the like. Also the photographer is busy since most female invitees want a picture with the radiant bride.



After this big celebration most couples enter their first wedding night but some postpone this till the day after. It lightens the schedule of the wedding and so the groom will arrive with his hooting company at her parental home the following day. After reception there will be a photoshoot – as already mentioned – and possibly the celebration for the men, if that did not take place the previous day. The morning after the first wedding night the bride might be visited by her family – possibly checking out the maculate conception – who invites for breakfast but most of the times it is already Monday and most families skip that part. There is no time left, all the more if the young couple wants to leave on honeymoon,.

### 3. Making profits on rituals: the economic opportunities seen from the supply side

The simple fact that we had to explain in detail the whole wedding ritual demonstrates the competitive advantages of a Moroccan entrepreneur venturing into this kind of business. His ethnic background grants him foreknowledge and possible skills to satisfy the specific demands of the families: one knows caftans and is familiar with Moroccan cuisine, one knows how to make things and where to find the ingredients or materials. Unacquainted with these traditions, native Belgian entrepreneurs stand by idle and because there is no competition Moroccan businesses can seize this unique opportunity and establish a virtual monopoly. Following the widely used typology of Waldinger & Co (1990) we can qualify this economy as an 'ethnic niche'.

Entrepreneurs, costumers, the goods and services traded: all share the same background and this niche can flourish because it is fended off from the fierce competition that rules the regular markets. So far the advantages of ethnic specialization but it also has a drawback because one addresses only one community that is limited in size and purchasing power. Recent research shows that the income of somebody from Moroccan descent is on average 742 € a month, i.e. 64,5 % of the average income of a native Belgian (Van Robaeys et.al., 2006: 8-9). Having few resources, they have to cut their coat according to their cloth but apparently the caftan is a rare exception to this general rule laid out by Engel (1895; Kochuyt, 2001). Poor people mainly buy bare essentials but marriage is a unique event and since everybody thinks it should be the happiest day of one's life, people lash out the money. During a caftan show we picked up a conversation between two young ladies that proves quite telling.

*- I wonder what the average Moroccan wants to pay for a wedding. Give me a figure, hard €.*

*- Believe it or not but my niece and her husband have spent for their wedding 12,500 €. That is a lot of money indeed but everything was included. Yet, I want to add: it is not just about the money you pay... you only marry once a lifetime and you should do it properly.*

*- Yes, you're right. It is a one time event.*

So for once poor households will spend without restraint to crown the migrant's daughter 'amira' (i.e. princess) of the day. Totalling up the expenditures an average wedding easily costs 10,000 €. This guarantees a decent ceremony, one can not be accused of avarice and at the same time one avoids extravagant costs. Traditionally it is up to the groom to pay but if the young man is not of substance his parents, the bride and the coming in-laws can step in and help to pay the bills. As long as all agree that the wedding is important, one proves to be pragmatic in financial matters as these.

In sum, as a protected niche the wedding sector can mobilize a considerable purchasing power and that – for sure – attracts a lot of businessmen who seize this rare opportunity. The booming of the market however is also linked to the fact that it enables the entrepreneurs to develop a whole division of labour. Since the ceremony asks for a sheer endless shopping list, everyone can supply for something without impeding the other. Ethnic economies often suffer from a copy-cat syndrome since the success of one entrepreneur is giving a lead to another who starts with something similar (Waldinger et al. 1990: 47 ff). Instead of beggaring thy neighbour the wedding industry however is fairly successful in elaborating a wide diversity of goods and services that are complementary to one another. The banquet hall relies on a catering company that calls in butchers and bakers; the ziana needs a caftan-shop, hair dressers, musicians and the like, ... : with in the end a vertical integration of all the requisites within one and the same community.

#### 4. The social motives of the demand side

For outsiders this whole ritual seems strange. All the more because considerable sums are spent, proving that people literally value their Moroccan heritage. In line with Weber's typology of social action, one could see in these ceremonial practices traditionalism ((1922)1964: 20-2): i.e., actions that reproduce the former times of the former home-country – something that stands in sharp contrast to the present situation of second generation Moroccans living in Belgium. Transplanting the old mores to new grounds, they seem maladapted within the host society. Yet, the traditional appearance does not mean that there has been a stand-still. Questioning the first generation, they admit that their wedding was no big deal. In a hurry they did it in Morocco or in Belgium, at home and without much ceremony or numerous invitees. Even caftans were rare in those days. Now the children start to marry however, tradition revives. '*To my surprise*' says the designer Bachir '*the young people pick up the threads and restore former customs.*' In other words: tradition is not an old time favourite but is rediscovered and recycled. '*Some of my costumers*' – another designer adds – '*wear for the first time a caftan.*' The editor of the magazine 'Afrah' (i.e. ceremony) confirms this but thinks that it is important to reconnect people to their roots: '*Unfortunately they (i.e. the second generation) do not know any longer how to marry and that is why we want to show the richness of the Moroccan heritage.*' The reference to tradition is therefore not that straight-forward as it seems. First impressions may be deceptive. Leaving it till the end (see 6), we therefore return to the initial question: why people spend so much money for a Moroccan marriage?

#### 4.1. Conspicuous consumption

Weddings are about glamour, on this high day of consumption the guests get a demonstration of what the engaged families have to offer. In his *'Theory of the Leisure Class'* Veblen ((1899)1965) describes how the nouveaux riches in the USA of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had the tendency to show off their prosperity by conspicuous consumption. *'In order to be reputable it must be wasteful'*, Veblen states and parties are indeed instrumental in this respect ((1899)1965: 96 + 75). In a way the same applies for Moroccan migrants. For sure, according to western standards they are poor but compared to the misery the first sojourners left behind in the home-country, things appeared (Missaoui, 1995). This upward mobility urges them to give some visibility to their newly acquired position, all the more because the traditional criteria for one's status – place of origin and family reputation – lost their relevance in the host society. In other words: the glamour of the wedding ceremony is becoming the new status-indicator for migrant families (Renaerts, 1991: 61; Werbner, 2005: 751). Among other things it explains why the financial burden that tradition lays upon the groom, is now being shared by both parents and children. Because it is all about prestige people also introduce new rituals: the limousine, the wedding photographs being replaced by a whole coverage on video, travel agencies sell the idea of a honeymoon, etc. Another addition is the coated tablet with almond or chocolate given to the female guests as a token. In Morocco this practice is only common among the upper-classes, in Belgium it became a craze. During an interview with a shop-keeper selling such sweets and the finely decorated boxes that go with it, a future bride and her mother address the man showing him the box they got at the wedding of an acquaintance. They are looking for something fancier. To measure prestige one has to compare and outdo the appearances of the other. *'They are mad'* the shop-keeper says afterwards but cashing in he clearly benefits from this extravagance. The entire wedding business is indeed thriving on this new status competition.

#### 4.2. Breaking up is never easy

Pomp and circumstance are surely important but it is also a matter of timing. Marriage proves to be a turning point in life: children leave the house, distance themselves from the parents and start a family on their own – according to their own views. If there was a social umbilical cord it would be cut at this very moment. Such a caesura asks for a suture that bridges the growing distance between the generations and gives them a new continuity. Through rituals the individuals try to reframe within the larger unity of the extended family and the cultural community they belong to. One needs therefore – as Van Gennep named it – a rite of passage: *'For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in*

*a different way.*' (Van Gennep, (1909)1977: 189-90). To assure that people do not get lost during the transition these 'rites of passage' stress stability by bringing in real or alleged traditions, they restore former customs and folkways: not to conserve but to use them in such a way that changes can take place without breaking up the whole. Tradition therefore prevents time from unravelling social ties. Such is quite a universal phenomenon: the white wedding gown withstands with success the present detraditionalization of the western dress-code (Top, 2000: 93). Notwithstanding the pervasive effects of secularization, religious rituals as baptism, holy matrimony and funerals remain relatively popular (Dobbelaere, 1988: 48-52; Pickering, 1974). Being universal this need for continuity is all the more prevalent among migrant families because here the genealogical question coincides with a cultural one (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006: 53-63 + 191-208; Werbner, 2005). Migration is about distancing oneself from the extended family, the home-country, one's language, culture and all the things that go with it. In the country of immigration the first generation did not always find the proper setting to restore everything and to pass it over to their children. Inevitably things will be lost. In reaction to this threat literature discerns two possible responses (see among others: Abramson, 1980; Berry & Sam, 1997; Gordon, 1964; Portes, 1995; Warner & Srole, 1945). Or the migrant community clings to its traditions and rejects the values, norms and customs of the new environment: one retreats as a distinct cultural entity. Yet, on the other side of the spectrum, we find an acculturation where the migrant is discarding his heritage and sucked into the cultural mainstream of the host society. Here we have an assimilation process where the minority gradually adopts the dominant culture of the new environment.

## 5. Conserving or changing: some data

Surely, we are opposing stereotypes resulting in a simplified picture made of black and white but it helps to evoke the field of force in which migrant communities are trapped and look for possible ways out.

### 5.1. The risk of fragmentation

To get an idea of how these tensions work out in Belgium we bring in the large surveys conducted by Lesthaeghe & Co in the mid-nineties (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1995; Lesthaeghe, 2000). Moroccan and Turkish migrants living in Flanders and Brussels were questioned on gender relations and the data allow us to set aside the two generations. The following table compares second generation women born in Belgium all between 17 and 25 years old, and the first generation of mothers between the age of 40 and 50 who form the initial migrants. Looking at

their schooling, nuptiality and partner choice, the female code of conduct and gender relations we see clear differences between the generations. Times are changing indeed, provoking a rapid acculturation of practices which leads to differing options about the value of tradition and faith.

		2nd generation	1 <sup>st</sup> generation
Mean duration of formal schooling (in years)	Moro	13	2
	Turk	12	3
Percentage of women + 18 married before age 18	Moro	7	41
	Turk	13	42
Percentage of ever-married women knowing their husband for less than 2 months before marriage	Moro	19	49
	Turk	18	31
Percentage of ever-married women with marriage arranged without prior consent/consultation	Moro	4	17
	Turk	5	28
Percentage of ever-married women with marriage initially decided by partners themselves	Moro	57	13
	Turk	50	11
Percentage women agreeing with statement that wearing a headscarf is not necessary when outside	Moro	85	39
	Turk	76	23
Percentage women agreeing with statement that women need not always obey their husbands	Moro	85	43
	Turk	42	10
Percentage women thinking that 'good manners' and 'obedience' are important in the education of daughters	Moro	20	63
	Turk	35	64
Percentage women preferring adaptation to modern times over relevance of religious and traditional views	Moro	49	26
	Turk	41	22

Source: 'Family Formation and Values Pattern'-surveys conducted in the 1992-93 period among the female population aged 17-49 with Turkish or Moroccan nationality resident in Flanders and Brussels (Lesthaeghe, 2000: 29-35).

The generational shift within the Moroccan community is all the more apparent when we compare with the Turkish responses that score 10 to 30% higher when it comes to conserving traditions. The same observations apply more or less for men: Moroccans are more open towards the host society than Turks and the second generation is more outspoken than the first but that does not mean that the second generation Moroccan men are in line with their female counterparts. The former have for instance negative attitudes towards a larger participation of women in public life (Lesthaeghe, Surkyn & Van Craenem, 2000: 212)<sup>3</sup>. In the end these are clear figures but they give us a blurred image of how migrants try to settle in their new environment. Summarizing the findings Lesthaeghe concludes : *'the picture of the closely knit communities would be more applicable to the Turkish case, but not to the Moroccan one. (...) Moroccans show considerably less normative consensus than Turks and they are incorporating core individualistic values as well. (...) For Moroccans the modernizing effect of the host society is probably larger than among the Turks, but again it affects the second generation women more than men. Community cohesion, and its correlate of less gender or generation related tensions, are markedly stronger for Turks than Moroccans. The latter community shows increasing signs of fragmentation ...'* (2000: 26-7 + 41).

## 5.2. Importing the missing link

Evaluating these figures in the light of the previously mentioned field of force – sticking to one’s tradition or assimilating into the host society – the Turkish community presents itself as a relatively closed entity, centred around a moral consensus that is aversive towards external influences – something that is also reported in France (Tribalat, 1995) and Germany (Nauck et al., 1997). This remarkable cohesion however can only be understood if one takes into account that approximately 70 % of the partners are imported from the home-country. Since they correspond much better to the cultural ideal of the first generation (Janssens, 1997; Lesthaeghe, 2000: 32), one can reanimate old values and norms and counter the assimilation process. By importing suitable brides and grooms one assures not only genealogical continuity but also cultural stability for the community at large. The Moroccan community is not that secluded: we find less import partners and the generational differences previously discussed, prevail.

Distribution of potential importers by partner type, sex, and migrant group				
Type of partner	Turks		Moroccans	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Western European	7,0 %	3,8 %	19,9 %	9,9 %
Migrantgroup	18,3 %	27,5 %	23,0 %	33,3 %
Imported	74,7 %	68,7 %	57,1 %	56,8 %

Source: Lievens, 1999: 723 (based on Belgian census, 1991).

Acculturation and individualization deeply influence the second generation and even threaten to alienate parents and children. Here migration is not opposing groups – as in the Turkish case – but it penetrates the community itself and distorts its genealogical and cultural cohesion. Within the Moroccan community there is no moral consensus left: neither between the generations nor between the sexes. There are indeed no indications that the young men and women find each other on a new moral ground allowing more individuality within gender relations. So some of the second generation decide after all to import the partner, others marry within the migrant community, some opt for a native Belgian consort. In sum: within the field of force evoked earlier we get shifts that swing back and forth, showing that the traditional patriarchal family is no longer a structure uniting the generations and the sexes. On the contrary, it leads to fragmentation.

### 5.3. Linking the fragments

Inarticulate tensions can cause a rift between people, especially at a critical moment like marriage. Parents hardly recognize their lost sons and obstinate daughters when they leave home to start a life on their own. At the other side the youngsters of the second generation are not sure who they are, what they stand for and where they come from. Migration and the processes of acculturation and detraditionalization that go with it, threaten the genealogical linkage and cultural identity of those concerned. It is at this crucial point that marriage is transformed into a huge 'rite of passage', a ceremonial event bringing together men and women from different generations around some Moroccan archetypes that give them a sense of belonging and so a proper ethnic identity (Eicher, 1995). In this way the wedding ceremony is no longer a strange and traditionalistic ritual but a meaningful event that connects to the experience of migration and acculturation. It is a 'translocation' of culture – as Werbner (2005) coined it – that helps to sink roots in a new country. The logic that brings all this together is one of compensation: where tradition is no longer structuring the family unit and the relations between the generations and the sexes, this loss is made up for by symbolically referring to matrimonial folkways and mores. This dialectic bind is surely ambiguous but if we compare with the Turkish community, it is clear that their marriages are not calling in elaborate rituals and emblematic symbols. There is no booming wedding industry as on the Moroccan side. Since Turkish migrants have in general a moral ground to stand on and to maintain their community in the host country, they can temper the need for conspicuous signs evoking genealogical and cultural continuity. The traditional family structure is still holding things together. Anyhow, because figures and comparisons can not tell everything we now turn to some in-depth interviews with Belgian Moroccans working in the wedding business.

Let us start with an organizer of caftan shows. *'The first generation had the idea to return to Morocco so they lived all the time in a vacuum. No changes were allowed and of course this fossilization is unbearable for their children who have no intentions to go back. Change is needed, you know, we have to move on and that is why I'm dealing with caftans. It reminds the young people that they have a heritage where they can be proud of, that they have roots. Without roots a tree is just a stupid sign-post standing in the ground, with roots a tree can grow, make branches and leaves. So tradition is a force that bears live and can help the second generation to find its place among the other communities in Belgium. And for sure, western and oriental elements can blend, one shouldn't be sectarian. But things will not change when one ignores one's cultural background.'* A female designer confirms this by saying: *'One shouldn't preserve tradition but extend it. Knowing your origins, you can deal with it more easily and follow your own way. It is not because the bride wears a caftan that her marriage is arranged by the parents. Recognizing tradition gives her more individual freedom which allows her to choose her own*

*partner, to marry at a later age, to postpone children and to go out working if she wants to.'*

Although atypical in several respects the life history of this designer illustrates the inner strains of the Moroccan community. As the eldest of 9 children she helped a lot in the parental household and disliking this kind of work, it motivated her to study hard at school. Finally she graduated from university and started working in the private sector. Although the parents could not understand her ambitions, they were proud of this bright daughter; till she fell in love with ... a native Belgian. She was cast out of the family, their reputation was ruined within the migrant community. Anyway, the black sheep got children and after some years she decides to do something else in life: she started a caftan shop. As she gradually finds a clientele her relationship with the Moroccan community and her family improved and nowadays the veiled nieces help her out when there are fashion-shows. For sure, her story is not representative for the community at large but it illustrates the tensions within and the way they can be mastered by bringing in symbols and rituals that assemble and grant a sense of belonging. The power of it all is ambivalence: because symbols and rituals are polysemic in nature, their meanings are in the eyes of the beholder. Everybody sees what he wants to perceive. The elder sense that they have transmitted something, that not everything is lost but on the contrary that their children can marry in a more decent way than they have done. For the younger generation the caftan is fashionable and it connects them with their roots: by recognizing tradition they can branch out and do things that deviate from the original ideal without breaking up with their parents. The guests can gaze and see how the new and old ones position themselves within the status hierarchy of the Moroccan community in Belgium – as preconceived by the inviting families. And since signs are open to interpretation the wandering sociologist might read all this as an attempt to regain cohesion within a community torn by acculturation.

When we first met Rachida we were struck by the paradox of a veiled woman working in the western wedding business. As a young girl she explains, she did everything to hide her Moroccan origin and so she started off a career in Belgian fashion houses to arrive at a certain moment in life where she faced the question who she really was. Religion proved to be an answer in her case and by putting content before form she was looking down on the caftan-business as a fancy fair of outward appearances. A year after this first encounter however she participated in a caftan show herself, showing models that were clearly of oriental inspiration. Being questioned about this change, she replies: *'It is no disgrace to be Moroccan, or is it?'* The caftan helped her to redefine her origins in a valorising way, inverting the negative stereotypes she was afraid of in former days. Having discussed the supply side of the wedding dealers and the demand of the involved families we should turn now to the ceremony as such: the ritual protocol and its so called historical authenticity.

## 6. In search of tradition

All respondents invoked tradition but where this leads us in a strictly historical sense? To check out we consult two sources: the most recent one comes from Renaerts (1991) who reports on matrimonial practices in Belgium and Morocco during the seventies and eighties. The ethnographic fieldwork of Westermarck (1914) on the other hand dates from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – assuring us that we will learn more about the traditions as they were in former times.

### 6.1. The ceremony

Westermarck is quite encyclopaedic when he deals with marriage ceremonies in Morocco. The regional diversity he records is vast with striking contrasts between the Arab cities like Fez or Tanger on the one hand and the Berber tribes of the Rif, the Atlas and the South on the other. What remains however is a road map where the bride a) departs from her family, b) crosses over and c) is integrated within the family of the groom. Each step being marked by specific ceremonies orchestrated by the families, the bride and groom only take up their respective roles without necessarily knowing each other. The rituals are very elaborate: in the case of Fez for instance the arrival of the bride triggers off a whole set of festivities that take a week. The segregation of the sexes is strict and most of the time the families do not mix.

As Renaerts (1991) shows things changed profoundly in the meantime: since the sixties the freedom of choice of the partners became prevalent leaving to the parents the role of consenting to the relationship. Arranged marriages are getting rare and that also holds for the emigrant communities (Lesthaeghe, 2000: 30). Bonds are established between individuals, seeing love as a precondition for marriage instead as a lucky side-effect. Romance is creeping in and so a man and a woman meet, look into each other eyes and see that tradition and things like the dowry are rather embarrassing. In the *Afrah*-magazine there are comics about the misfortunes of arranged marriages. The wedding ceremony is simplified, mainly skipping the preparations of the groom and the long aftermath. Some Berbers still maintain their particular variations but in general regional diversity flattens out. In Morocco among some higher classes both sexes celebrate together and adopt western elements in their dress-code. The whole wedding now takes two or three days only but in Renaerts' report we still recognize the three steps of the previously mentioned roadmap.

The earlier description of Moroccan weddings in Brussels shows that the process of detraditionalization carries on in the country of immigration. The departure of the bride from her parental home and the entrance in the new house are no longer publicly celebrated events, the major festivity takes place in a external banquet hall – inevitably blurring the road map that

structured the traditional wedding. The segregation of the sexes is maintained but western influences step in: photoshoots, a honeymoon in stead of forty days of confinement for the bride, etc. Comparing the different protocols identified by Westermarck, Renaerts and ourselves, one realizes that the Moroccan wedding is far less traditional than it appears to be at first sight. Indeed, it is quite different from a western marriage but that does not mean that the ceremony remains indifferent to the influences of modernisation, individualization and commodification. Metaphorically one names it traditional but literally it is impossible to understand it as such.

## 6.2. The caftan

And what about the caftan show, epitome of the contemporary Moroccan wedding? Reading Westermarck proves disappointing because a century ago there was no such thing. The only precedent found brings us to Fez where the bride shows seven different dresses on the sixth day after the actual marriage and these were not necessarily caftans (Westermarck, 1914: 277). It is astonishing to see how the rich diversity of ceremonies depicted by Westermarck has been lost over time while a marginal event in Fez is now being celebrated by all Moroccans as something emblematic. All the more because the majority of Moroccans living in Belgium are of Berber origin: coming from rural areas as the Rif they have few social or cultural affinities with an Arab city like Fez.

This lack of historical continuity can only be understood if one brings in a process of embourgeoisement whereby inferior positions adopt the customs and mores of the higher strata in an attempt to upgrade their poor status (Elias, (1939)1982: 260-7; Veblen, 1899). According to this well-known mechanism the rural areas follow the lead of the urban practices – especially those of Fez being the cultural capital of the country and guardian of its Moorish history. Although a majority, the marginalized Berbers copied the matrimonial ceremonies of the urban Arabs: resulting in a trickle down of the caftan during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Renaerts, 1991: 62)<sup>4</sup>. This is true for Morocco in general and also holds for a country of immigration as Belgium where nowadays the second generation is connecting with this so called national tradition. What started off as embourgeoisement transforms here in the context of migration into a search of identity. From foreign descent one stresses the oriental and traditional character, being prudent with the western and modern influences that are more easily adopted in Morocco itself. This concern for authenticity however does not preclude that the wedding ceremony and the family structure it installs, are very malleable and have profoundly altered during the past decades. One can not stop all these sweeping changes but to preserve continuity a historically improper piece of cloth as the caftan is being used as a banner to mark one's identity. In a similar study on the Japanese wedding enterprise Goldstein-Gidoni rightfully remarks: '*... young Japanese do not care about historical truth but are interested instead in the 'forms' – indeed forms of culture – which bolster*

*their sense of cultural identity.*' (2000; also Eicher, 1995; Conzen & Gerber, 1992; Nagel, 1994: 162-5). Following Hobsbawm (1983) one can recognize in the caftan an 'invented tradition' or a constructed heritage that helps the contemporary migrants to reconnect. The 'translocation' of culture is indeed about relatedness (Werbner, 2005). As an identity-marker it symbolically tries to secure the genealogical and cultural continuity of a migrant community that is making the passage from their left home land to the new grounds of the European continent. Traditional in appearance however it is symptomatic for the transition the community is going through: *'We should expect it (i.e. the invention of tradition) to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed (...) Older forms of community and authority structure, and consequently the traditions associated with them, were unadaptable and became rapidly unviable (...) 'new' traditions simply resulted from the inability to use or adapt old ones.'* (Hobsbawm, 1983: 4-5). As we argued before the Moroccan migrant community is confronted with an old patriarchal family structure no longer capable of linking up the generations and the sexes. Migration accelerated the fragmentation of the traditional authority structures, leaving a void that has to be stuffed with 'new' traditions that can still give some cohesion to a fragmenting community that is eager to find a valorising identity within a host society that does not necessarily appreciate difference.

### 6.3. Bumpy outcomes

In line with Durkheim (1912) one could call the caftan a 'totem', i.e. a symbolic representation of the collective enabling all those involved to celebrate the regained unity. A less esoteric interpretation can be found in the work of Gans (1979; 1992) when he recapitulates the evolution of several migrant communities in the USA. Opposing the idea that ethnicity witnesses a comeback since the sixties, he stresses the fact that acculturation and assimilation to the new environment are unavoidable – especially for the later generations. This process however does not follow a straight line but can steer up a nostalgia whereby the descendants of the former migrants go back to their origins and reintroduce holidays, rites of passage, ethnic cuisines and other visible identity-markers. These revivals lead to bumps in the straight line envisaged by assimilation theory but most of the time these references to the culture of origin remain symbolic. Migrants' descendants 'reinvent' their origins and that helps to define who they are and where they come from but it does not imply that all of them are still close with their ethnic group or culture; it does not mean that the traditional authority structures still control their lives. On the contrary, *'what appears to be a revival is probably the emergence of a new form of acculturation and assimilation'* (1979: 11). Since one can easily lose one's footing during these transitions, one is however looking for symbols to hold on to and by 'translocating' symbolic ethnicities, changes can take place without tearing apart the genealogical and cultural cocoons people need if they

want to emerge in a new environment. Therefore Gans concludes: '*... both acculturation and invention theories are accurate, for immigrants and their descendants will be moving away from the Old Country culture but concurrently inventing the bumps in bumpy line theory*' (1992: 50).

## Conclusion

Although western modernity has a profound impact on the Moroccan migrant community in Belgium, the assimilation they experience is not that straight forward. Sensing that the social cohesion is crumbling and that its moral consensus is about to collapse, this migrant community is looking for and reinventing ethnic markers that give a clear image of the culture of origin that is gradually fading away. Where this 'translocation' of culture will lead to remains to be seen but in the meantime the search of identity opens up economic markets enabling Moroccan businessmen to further commodify the rituals their compatriot descendants need to assemble the bits and pieces their fragmented lives are made of.

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<sup>2</sup> The average caftan-shop in Brussels stands for 1.799 Moroccan residents while a shop in western ceremonial dresses relies on average on 17.414 native customers.

<sup>3</sup> 'Migration History and Social Mobility'-survey of the 1994-96 period among Moroccan and Turkish men aged 18 + in the whole of Belgium.

<sup>4</sup> The same happened in the West. In 1734 Anne of Hanover was the first to marry in a white gown, setting a dress-code within the English court that was largely adopted by the continental dynasties afterwards. At the end of the 18th century the bourgeoisie stepped in and in the course of the 19th century a general democratisation of the white gown followed (Monsarrat, 1973).