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Reserves and Mediterranean Niches in Marseille

The Meaning of Patron–Client Relations, Cultural Memories, and Innovations

Barbara Peveling

The purpose of this article is to discuss a Mediterranean microregion and the set of associated cultural reserves. The relation between space and human behaviour is the main focus of this analysis. I will analyze cultural reserves as they appear in a local community created by a Muslim–Jewish

(*convivenca*)¹ in an Arabic quarter of Marseille. The study is guided by a methodology mainly based on case studies concerning patron–client relationships. The data were obtained during my one-year field research (2006–2007) conducted in Marseille. My informants were members of the lower middle class, such as shop keepers, and those belonging to the lower working class. The informants from both groups defined themselves as religious practitioners.

1 Reserves and Niches

Idealistic and materialistic methodological approaches have been associated with the notions of “cultural reserves” and “microecology.” Here, I refer to the theory of reserves developed by Thomas Hauschild, who defined them as “immaterial, cultural potential that expands the possibility of action for human collectives” (2008: 218). Reserves – cultural, social, or religious – are always activated and mobilized through human action (cf. Gronover 2006: 205), which occurs in a specific environment. The term “microecology,” in turn, refers to the unique specificity of a local environment. Horden and Purcell noted, for example, that the fragmented Mediterranean landscape is characterized by its “micro-ness.” Therefore, the Mediterranean should be defined as a “mosaic” composed of independent microregions that complement each other (2000: 465). Braudel (1985: 9), on the other hand, suggested that, in spite of its ecological diversity, the Mediterranean as a whole forms a distinct unity because of its cultural continuity. In this article, I argue that the Arabic neighborhood of Belsunce, in the center of Marseille, constitutes such Mediterranean microecology,² a space that offers social actors, who are embedded in that context, various possibilities to revitalize the cultural reserves of their past, which at the same time confirms, on the local level, the cultural continuity and connectivity of the entire Mediterranean.

2 Marseille, Belsunce

Marseille is one of the Mediterranean cities that has never ceased to function as an intermediary between East and West (Abulafia 2006: 71). The city was founded by the Phoenicians and possesses one of the oldest ports in the region. Marseille is frequent-

1 *Convivencia* means the local interaction between different groups; see Driessen (1992).

2 Horden and Purcell (2000: 49).

ly characterized as a “cultural *carrefour*” (“meeting point”) and the place of arrival and departure.

The neighborhood of Belsunce, located in the city center, can be seen as a hub of this constant flow of people and goods. It is described as a “quarter of transition,” although it is also a “black hole” in the local political discourse. In spite of a various development projects, the social composition of the neighborhood did not change much. The first impression of a stranger who walks through the streets of Belsunce is that the area is dominated by Muslim Arabs; the neighborhood is even called *quartier arabe* (Peraldi 2001: 34). Nonetheless, the district, as an area of transition,³ has not always been Arabic. Before the Arabs entered this territory, it had been first occupied by Italian immigrants, later by Armenians, and after the Second World War by Jews from several European countries (Témime 1997). This neighborhood of transit also provides opportunities for its residents to find their place in society. Moreover, this socially marginal place serves as a stage for cultural projects of different groups, and one can also observe there, in the microscale, the basic cultural components of the Mediterranean (Horden and Purcell 2000). Belsunce can be seen as an icon for the oriental aspect of Marseille (Témime 1997: 60). How has the phenomenon of patronage and clientelism changed in the process of migration? Were the old cultural patterns of immigrants revitalized in a new way? Or did they change during the adaptation to the new social and cultural context? Did any of them even disappear after leaving the society of origin? Finally, did they enter the collective memory or did they vanish in what Paul Ricoeur (2000: 536) calls *l'oublié*?

3 “Lagmi,” a Case Study

The following misunderstanding between the researcher and an informant became an interesting starting point for a further reflection. It concerns the Tunisian concept of *lagmi*⁴ (Fieldnotes, 08. 11. 2006).

I'm introduced to two men from Tunisia in the *halla* butchery. Both of them are working in the bakery next door, one of them is the shop owner. Since I'm currently researching the meaning and the application of the concept of *lagmi*, I'm using this occasion to ask both men about it. They answer that “he” comes from Tunisia but

has lived in France for a long time. I don't understand, I've been asking about the palm extract! Mahmud,⁵ the assistant of the butcher, clarifies the misunderstanding by stating that the men are talking about a restaurant's owner. In Belsunce, the original meaning of this word has already left the frame of its old context and acquired the meaning of a “restaurant owner.” Still, I want to know more about the palm extract. The baker explains that it would be a sin to drink the juice after it's fermentation into alcohol, which happens generally in a couple of hours. In Tunisia, this juice is made of the heart of the date palm that is taken out and pressed to obtain a sweet juice, which cannot be preserved and which is not produced in Europe. While they are leaving, the two bakers mention that they provide the “Jew,” the owner the restaurant, with bread for his sandwiches.

Lagmi is, therefore, a word that has a specific cultural history. The date juice is extracted in Tunisia and cannot be preserved for a long time. In France, the term acquired a new meaning. In Belsunce, the term is simultaneously referring to a person and a restaurant. In this way, the concept reflects its current cultural and economic context that brings together patrons, workers, and clients. All those elements form a network of local relationships in Belsunce that has a number of nodal points. The first of these points is the restaurant “Lagmi” and its owner. The second one is the Tunisian bakery, which provides the kosher restaurant with bread. Some other nodal points are the groups of local Jewish business owners and their employees, who from time to time eat in their kosher restaurants to reinforce the relations with their Jewish patrons.

The “Lagmi,” along with three other local restaurants, is very popular, in particular among Jewish residents, although it is not under the religious control of the Beth Din – an institution that supervises if Jewish dietary prescriptions are observed. At the time of my research, the owner of “Lagmi” considered the membership in Beth Din as too expensive (Fieldnotes, 20.08.2006). Interestingly, the restaurant is also popular among local Muslims. “Lagmi” can thus be viewed as a “cultural reserve” which activates local social networks.

Furthermore, one can, in Belsunce, observe an organization of space according to ethnic origins and religious affiliation. Jewish wholesalers of Algerian origins are living in the upper part of the “Rue national.” On the other hand, in the “Rue longue des Capucins” one finds Muslims, mainly Ibadites from the south of Algeria, who are selling drapery and teapots. The same can be said about the dis-

3 Anna Seghers (2005) described the unique characteristics of this quarter in the novel “Transit.”

4 *Lagmi*: palm sap or palm wine.

5 All names are pseudonyms.

tribution of professions and occupations: the Jews of Djerba dominate in gold transactions, Tunisian Jews – who before their migration worked in the same sector – are now having the upper hand in the business of costume jewellery, although many other Tunisian Jews also make their living by selling clothes at retail. Algerian and Moroccan Jews, in turn, work mainly as wholesalers. A similar specialization can be observed in the local Muslim community: butchers, in general, come from Algeria, bakers are Tunisians, and many Moroccans are owners of grocery stores.

In a way, Belsunce also offers a perfect micro-ecological structure for newcomers who are seeking for integration into the local society and for social actors who want to practice their religion in a modern society. It is a matter of particular interest for religious Jews, for instance, to remain in that neighborhood, despite their successful integration into the French society.⁶ Moreover, the local clientele allows the Jewish merchants to follow flexible opening hours, adjusted to their religious timetable and calendar; they can, for instance, close on Sabbath (Saturday) and open instead on Sundays. In another quarter, more adapted to the mainstream society, the Jewish merchants are supposed to open their businesses on Saturdays.

4 Patron–Client Relations

Patronage and clientelism point to a vertical social relation, particularly in informal economic systems. Their basic mechanism consists of protection and financial input provided by the patron in return for services on the part of clients. This is an asymmetrical relationship that creates the situation of structural dependency from the patron (Haller 2005: 185). Jack Davis (1977) interprets patron–client relations mainly as an instrument of control of resources within the group. This relation rests on the prestige of a local patron, which in turn forms part of the Mediterranean honor and shame complex. In the past the patron–client relations structured community life of Jews and Muslims in the Maghreb as well: the Jews were obligated to enter into business relations with a Muslim patron, and in return, he protected them and their property.

How do patron–client relations function on the local level of Belsunce, however? Nine out of ten of my Jewish informants in Belsunce, many of them Muslims, were regularly visiting the restaurant

“Lagmi” at lunchtime, which points to the owner’s broad network of customers and clients (Fieldnotes, 01. 12. 2006).

The first time I heard about “Lagmi” was at the jewellery shop of a Jewish merchant, Maurice (all names are pseudonyms), from Djerba. During our interview, he ordered by telephone a sandwich which was delivered shortly after by a Muslim employee of “Lagmi.” Maurice did not sell merchandise in his shop any more, as this part has been taken over by his sons in a new shop located on the main street of Belsunce, the “Cours Belsunce.” The old salesroom was transformed into an office in which Maurice received his clients. In that office, I first met Fatima, a Muslim widow from Algeria, who has been a client of Maurice for a long time. Maurice has brokered jobs for her and her children. She greeted Maurice respectfully “El Hadsch” and kissed his hand (Fieldnotes, 01. 12. 2006). During the conversation, Fatima repeated several times that she would stop by “Lagmi” after her visit. In doing this, she intended to strengthen her relationship with the Jewish patron. During my interview with her, Fatima even stated that “the store of Maurice is like the house of God,” by which she meant that all good things that she received from Maurice were also God’s work. Furthermore, Muslim male clients frequently create fictive kin relations with their Jewish patrons in order to consolidate the patron–client networks. They were often stating that Jews and Muslims are “cousins” or even “brothers.” Interestingly, Maurice and other Jewish informants never contradicted these statements. Maurice, for his part, did not recognize such fictive relationships with his Muslim clients or even with other Jewish merchants. Nonetheless, many of my Jewish interviewees often mentioned the peaceful relationships between Jews and Muslims in their communities of origin in North Africa.

The patron–client relationship is an instance of a broader gift–exchange complex; consequently, no one expects any direct and immediate compensation. Maurice told me about an Algerian Muslim client, who had deposited a plastic bag in his store for some month. After some time, when Maurice began to wonder if the man would ever return to collect the bag, the man suddenly appeared. He told Maurice that the bag contained a large sum of money, and that he had more confidence in Maurice than in any Muslim in the neighborhood. Some month later, Maurice had to travel to Oran because of a health problem, about which he wanted to consult a local healer. He told the Algerian client about his project and the man asked him when he would be arriving in Oran. From the time when Maurice has left the

⁶ The possession of property and financial success are regarded as signs of a successful integration.

passport control in Oran until his departure back to Marseille, the Algerian client was helping him. Although Maurice had grown up in the traditional Djerban society, which protected itself against foreign influence for a long time, he still possessed the essential cultural skills necessary for entering into good relationships with Muslims on day-to-day basis. Another Jewish merchant from Belsunce was Pierre who, like Maurice, was also frequently patronizing “Lagmi.” Pierre came from Algeria to France in 1961. He is one of the wholesale business owners from the “Rue national.” Together with his wife and two sons, he manages two draper’s stores. He also employs two Muslims from Algeria. Pierre was introduced to me by Mahmud, the assistant of the Algerian butcher and the same person who had introduced me to the aforementioned Tunisian baker.

During my fieldwork, I had could observe several conflicts between Pierre and his Muslim clients. Sometimes they were quarrelling about payment, at another time about political opinions. One day, for instance, Pierre and Mahmud, independently from each other, told me about their dispute concerning Sarkozy and his election campaign. Pierre supported Sarkozy and Mahmud was against him. Furthermore, Pierre believed that Mahmud was afraid that Sarkozy would expel him from the country. Mahmud, for his part, was convinced that Pierre was worried about losing his hard-earned fortune if Sarkozy would not win. All in all the argument centered around property and wealth. Property was also a frequent reason of conflict between Pierre and other Muslim and non-Muslim clients. One day, for instance, one of Pierre’s employees was missing at work, and Pierre told me that the man had fractured his leg. Some hours later, however, I met the man at the butcher’s shop. When I interrogated about the problem, Mahmud explained to me that the man had asked Pierre for a pay increase, and because the two did not come to any agreement, the man stopped working for Pierre. Mahmud was upset with Pierre and called him “stingy.” On the other hand, Maurice maintained good relations with his clients and was generally regarded as generous and compassionate; he was treated with high respect, while Pierre was rather feared and mistrusted. It is also worth noting that Pierre’s staff mostly remained at the back or in the basement of the shop. I observed, however, that in stores with good relations between employers and employees, the workers were present in at the front part of the store.

During my first interview with Pierre he told me that the relations between Jews and Muslims were good in the Algerian past, but they deteriorated at

present, in France. “The Muslims want to rule the world,” he told me in a low voice. This trend did not exist in the time of his adolescence spent in Algeria. As for Jews, Pierre drew a sharp distinction between the time in Algeria, until the 1960s, and the time after the mass exodus to France. In his view, the immigration of Jews and Muslims from North Africa to Europe was the origin of the conflict between both groups, simply because the Muslims resent the Jews’ economic success. In this new, post-emigration context, those who formerly lived harmoniously together now compete for property and prestige in Western society. Similarly, the interviewed Muslims pointed to the issue of property as the main source of conflict between Jews and Muslims. The French sociologist, Michel Wieviorka (2005: 146), conducted a more detailed study of that structural imbalance between Muslims and Jews in France.

When comparing Maurice and Pierre in their roles as patrons, one can observe two different attitudes. While Maurice still drew on the cultural codes of his Algerian Jewish-Muslim society, Pierre seemed to adopt a new set of values. Thus, Maurice spoke mostly Arabic with his clients, whereas Pierre did so only on a few occasions. The difference between these two social actors, I argue, resulted from different histories of their socialization: while Maurice came from the traditional Djerban community, Pierre belonged to the colonial, French-influenced, Algerian society, a society that viewed itself as threatened by the war of independence and then by the post-war displacement. Maurice, as well as his ten children, possessed certain cultural codes that prompted them to enter the same fields in the new social space in France as they once occupied in Djerba – for instance, gold trading. This cultural heritage allowed them to have the same economic and social success in dealings with Muslim clients as had their ancestors in Algeria.

One cannot of course foretell how long this configuration of relationships between Jews and Arabs in Marseille will last. In my opinion, the persistence of this kind of Jewish-Muslim relationships depends on the existence of the cultural niches, such as the quarter of Belsunce, or “la Gouda” in Paris for that matter. The social and cultural *mélange* in Belsunce and the transitional character of the quarter enabled the social actors to build relationships that beyond the issues of the current Jewish-Arabic conflict. Today, however, more and more exclusive Jewish schools are being founded, which however erects a sort of “invisible wall” between both communities. While hardly anybody of my informants has gone to a Jewish school, now most of their children are students in such establishments, primarily

if their parents are religious-minded. Furthermore, a school director told me about growing tensions between Jewish students and those with Muslim immigration background.

5 Cultural Memories and Cultural Innovations: A Conclusion

As we have seen, in the neighborhood of Belunce the former social roles have been inverted: the Jews, who frequently were economically depended from Muslim patrons before their emigration to France, themselves became patrons for Muslim employees in the new, post-emigration reality in France. Still, a patron–clients relationship can only be developed in the context of a common cultural heritage and discourse, and these can be found in the collective memory of both communities, and activated as a cultural reserve in an analogous social and natural environment. The neighborhood of Belsunce functions as such niche that offers social actors a possibility to activate and revitalize their cultural patterns, although with certain innovations. This amalgam of memories and innovations is reflected in the meaning of the word *lagmi*, which has acquired a new meaning in the cultural niche of Belsunce, where old relations, going back to the pre-migration past, appear in new forms, redefined. The neighborhood is a hub of transition and exchange in which goods, money, and memories are circulating among members of different groups and among individuals, and where Jewish and Muslim agents use their collective memories to reinvent their relationships.

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Ancient Hindu Scriptures Show the Ways to Mitigate Global Warming through Responsible Action

Govindasamy Agoramoorthy and Minna J. Hsu¹

In today's world, we do not pass a day without reading or hearing the words "climate change." In December 2009, politicians and policymakers converged in Copenhagen, at the global climate change conference, to find ways to ease the crisis. Whatever comes out of it may not change much of what occurs in day-to-day lives of people – be it the scarcity of water in their backyard wells or vanishing birds in their gardens. They may still go unnoticed.

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