

The role of the Mosque in the Preservation of Culture and Identity: the Case of the Moroccan Immigrants Issued from the Oriental Region

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Abstract

There are always social, economic, and emotional ties between the immigrant and his country of origin. Social institutions, such as the mosque and the school (Islamic center), play a key role in preserving these links. Based on a methodology that combines the quantitative and the qualitative, this article seeks to study Moroccan identity and culture in a constantly expanding migratory territory. It also examines the role of mosques and schools abroad in preserving identity and culture of origin. At the same time, it presents some challenges these institutions may encounter in carrying out these tasks for new generations.

Keywords: Mosque, MRE, stranger, transmission, preservation, identity, culture.

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1. Introduction

The sedentary lifestyle of the Moroccan community and the succession of generations abroad have contributed to the development of social capital linked to migration. (Finlay, 2017, pp. 785-805) However, this capital is constructed differently from one country to another, as Moroccans residing abroad (MRA) settled early in the so-called traditional countries of international migration, such as France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, and more recently in Spain and Italy. (Moroccan migration dynamics, 2024)

Among the advantages of this Moroccan social capital abroad, we mention the construction of mosques and the establishment of schools, which have played and still play a very important role in maintaining the identity and cultural ties between MRA and their homeland. (Calpe et al., 2022) They offer the Moroccan immigrant community a place and an environment to practice their culture. They are also a place for personal and collective identity blossoming. (Receiving by Giving: Examining Cross-Border Diasporic and Bi-Cultural Philanthropy, 2021, pp. 97-113)

The Moroccan international migrant (man and woman) is very complex because two major poles of attraction influence it: the host country and the country of origin. This situation is more critical for new generations, whose identity is forged through divergent and incompatible cultural interactions between home/the roots and the host society. (Mahieu, 2019)

This article examines the role of the mosque and the school as social institutions in preserving cultural and identity ties and transmitting values and norms of origin to the children of the MRA in the Oriental Region, as well as the challenges these institutions may face abroad.

We, therefore, make two assumptions:

- The mosque and the school are social institutions that contribute to the preservation of the links of MRA with their original culture.
- These institutions face challenges in maintaining cultural and identity ties.

Two major questions dictate this problem:

- How do mosques and schools (Islamic centers) intervene to preserve the MRA's cultural and identity ties with their home country?
- What are the challenges the Moroccan mosques face in preserving the cultural and identity ties of MRA abroad?

To answer the problem, we will rely on the findings obtained during the preparation of a thesis on the challenges of Moroccan international migration, in which we have developed documentary research and questionnaires destined to MRA from the Oriental Region in Europe, in addition to interviews with the presidents of two mosque associations in Spain and France. In addition, we have developed a focus group in Spain.

1. The Mosque Preserves the Culture and Identity of MRE Children Outside the Family

The only way for children of Moroccans residing abroad (MRA) to stay in contact with their culture of origin is through the family, the mosque, television channels, or visits to Morocco. (Pels & Haan, 2007, pp. 69-94) In this respect, the MRA have created Islamic associations and centers to support this community's social and religious integration and preserve its Moroccan and Islamic identity. (Bruce, 2018, pp. 159-178) In addition, these associations and centers offer religious lessons and the Arabic language to the children of MRA.

Furthermore, MRA is aware of the challenges their children face, especially regarding their relationship with their cultural roots. Therefore, they enroll them in associations or centers to receive culture classes (Table 1). (Palma & Llorent-Vaquero, 2017)

Table 1: Types of cultural courses taken by the children from the MRA contacted

Type of course	Number	%
Arabic language courses	71	39%
Course on religion	25	13,7%
Amazigh course	2	1,1%
Without answer	84	46,2%
Observation total	182	100%

Source: Questionnaire for MRA, 2016-2017

We note that 53.8% of the contacted MRA children take courses related to their culture of origin: 39% take Arabic language courses, and 13.7% take courses on a religion, based on learning the Koran and some notions on prayer, Ramadan, and daily behavior.

For example, and not exclusively, we present two associations that offer this kind of service to MRA in two European cities: the first in Igualada City in Spain and the second in Château Thierry in France.

1.1. The Islamic Center of Igualada

Igualada is the capital of the ANOIA department, in the province of Barcelona, Spain. It is located 60 km west of Barcelona. It is built on the north bank of the ANOIA River at an altitude of 351.8 m . (Torras & Ribe, 1988, p. 33)

On January 1, 2015, the region of Catalonia was home to 1067,465 foreigners, which represents 14.1% of its population, of which Moroccans rank first with 217,955 immigrants, or 20.4% of the foreign population, followed by Romanians in second place with 99,892 immigrants, or 9.4% of the foreign population (Consell Comarcal de l'Anoia, 2015). The ANOIA department housed 9,684 immigrants on January 1, 2015, representing 8.2% of its population (Table 2). Moroccans remain in first place with 4,246 immigrants, or 43.8% of the foreign population, followed by Romanians with 1,152 immigrants, or 11.9% of the foreign population. (Consell Comarcal de l'Anoia, 2015)

Table 2: Number and percentage of Moroccans among foreigners in Catalonia, Anoia and the city of Igualada in 2015

	Total population	Foreigners	Moroccan	% of Moroccans in the mass of foreigners
Catalonia	7546 827	1067 465	217 955	20,4%
Anoia	117 809	9 684	4 246	43,8%
Igualada	38 940	4 319	1 863	43,1%

Source: Comarcal Council, informestaditic: les migracions a la comarca de Anoia 2015. Departamento de bienestar social y atención a la ciudadanía. Area of ciudadaniaiconvicencia.

According to Table 2, in 2015, Igualada hosted a very large foreign community. It reached 4,319 foreigners, which is 11.1% of its total population. Moroccans represented 1,863 immigrants, or 43.1% of the foreign population;; 992 were men, and 872 were women[4].

The Moroccans of Igualada have created an association to buy a place to transform it into a mosque. After long negotiations on the agreement and the location of the mosque, since the latter must be in a place that does not create any disagreement with the local population. Finally, the Association was able to obtain an agreement from the municipality in 2006 on the location of the purchase of the premises (Figure 1)

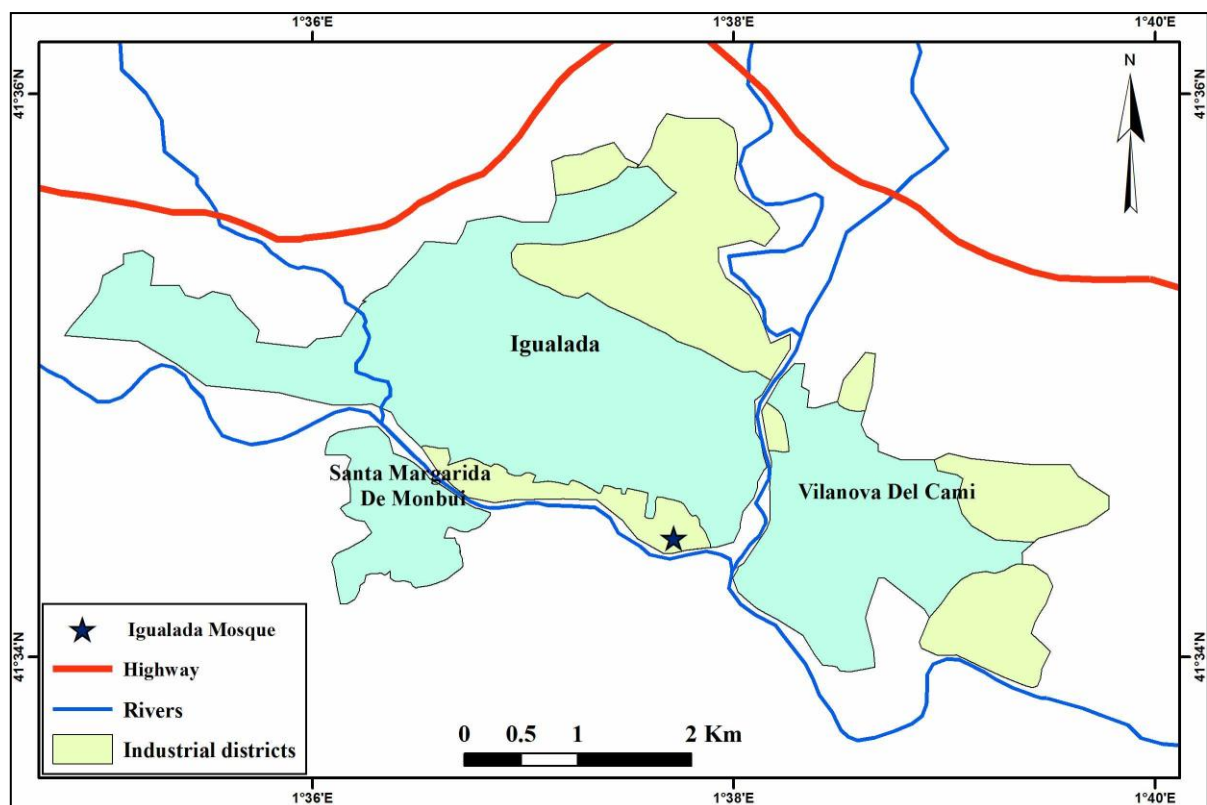


Figure 1: Layout of the mosque of Igualada

Source: Own work, (<https://www.google.com/maps/>)

The mosque is in an industrial district in the east of the city, in an unpopulated area. By November 12, 2016, the cost of the location and the restoration to make it suitable for prayer and other services reached €600,000. Believers' donations and monthly contributions from emigrants in the city funded the purchase and restoration.

Initially, the Association's objective was to establish a place for prayer. However, after buying the premises, it expanded its services, and the mosque became an Islamic center, which took the name of the Islamic Center of Igualada. The center offers several services, including preserving the culture of origin of the children of MRA and the Muslim population, especially by organizing Arabic language and religious courses.

In this article, we present the organizational aspects of this operation: the educational program, the timetable's levels and organization, the support and contributions, and some constraints the Association faces. These results come from the interview we conducted with the Association's executive office, which manages this Islamic center, on November 12, 2016, and from the results of the questionnaire with the MRA.

1.1.1. An educational offer that needs to be revised for migration.

The Association itself develops the program adopted in the teaching process. The President of the Association affirmed that they did not ask for pedagogical help. Instead, they have developed a program for each level. For Arabic, the program is based on textbooks used in Moroccan public schools; the same applies to Islamic education lessons (Photo 2).

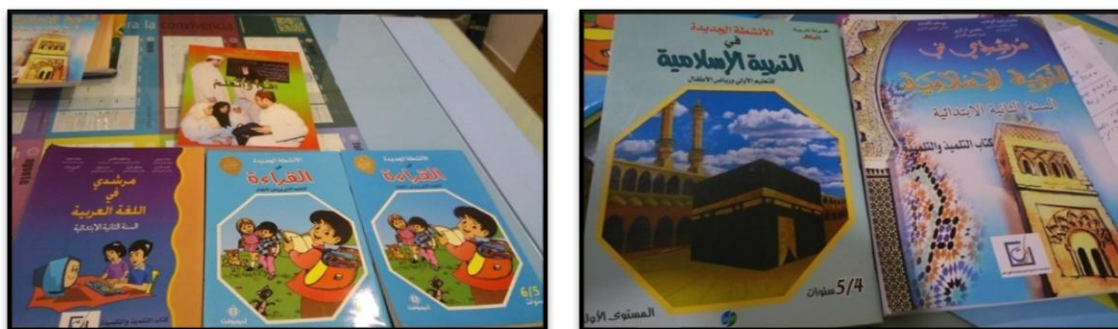


Photo 2: Textbooks of the Arabic language and Islamic education taught

Source: Personal snapshot, November 12, 2016, Igualada, Spain

Teaching methods and content delivery remain tied to teachers' efforts because the Moroccan government has not followed up on the established curriculum. Similarly, teachers still need to receive professional and pedagogical training.

Indeed, the President of the Association affirmed that "the teachers think that the program must be suitable to the environment in which the emigrant students have grown up. Therefore, the Association is currently trying to develop a program adapted to the migratory context in Spain." The desire to develop a program that suits the migratory context in Spain is an initiative that deserves the encouragement and support of those responsible for migration affairs in Morocco, since the Association is convinced that the Moroccan program is developed in another context. However, unfortunately, the students need to react appropriately to this program.

1.1.2. Schedule levels and organization

Enrollee students are divided into four levels. Each level is divided into groups, and each group is made up of 25 students:

- Level 1: has six groups
- Level 2: has three groups
- Level 3: has two groups
- Level 4: has two groups

Concerning the timetable, classes take place only on Saturdays and Sundays. Every two hours, four groups are in class. In general, there are 13 groups, meaning each student benefits from two weekly sessions.

Table 3: Students' Timetable in the Center School

10h	12h	12h	14h	14h	16h	16h	18h
Group 1		Group 5		Group 9		Group 13	
Group 2		Group 6		Group 10			
Group 3		Group 7		Group 11			
Group 4		Group 8		Group 12			

Source: Interview with the executive office of the Association, November 12, 2016, Igalada

The school also offers literacy classes for men and women. Thirty-three women receive two hours of training every Monday and Wednesday, and 10 receive two hours every Tuesday and Thursday.

Regarding the number of registered students at the different levels at the Islamic Center of Igalada, Figure 2 shows the evolution of the number of students between 2012 and 2016.

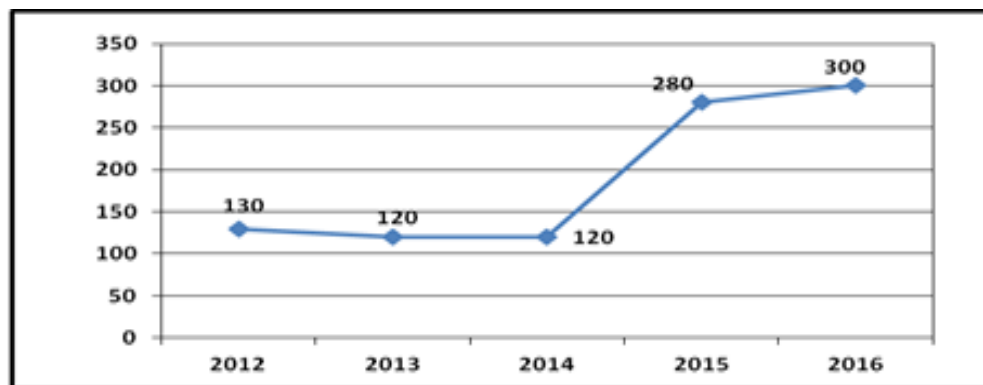


Figure 2: Evolution of the number of beneficiaries of language and religion courses offered by the Islamic Center of Igalada

Source: Interview with the executive office of the Association, November 12, 2016, Igalada

Figure 2 clearly shows that the number of pupils increased from 2012 to 2016, reaching 300 pupils. This suggests we are ahead of many students, given that the number of Moroccans in this city is 1863 emigrants. In addition, the President affirmed that there are registrants of other nationalities: 6 Algerians, 2 Tunisians, 22 sub-Saharanans, 2 Libyans, and a Spaniard.



Photo 3: Arabic language session at the Islamic Center in Igualada
Source: Personal snapshot, November 12, 2016, Igualada, Spain

Photo 3 shows one of the four classrooms in the center. The number of students is quite large, and the classroom walls are still being restored. The President of the Association confirmed that the number of students registered at the center school differs from the total number of children in Igualada. This is because some parents want their children to skip Arabic lessons. The Igualada area is made up of two other small towns (Figure 1, P: 4). These are the Vilanova Del Cami town which is located on the east side of Igualada city, and which has a small mosque, in addition to Santa Margarida de Monbuitown which is located in the south, and which has a prayer room. The distance between these three cities is a few hundred meters.

There are 65 Moroccan students at the Vilanova Del Cami mosque, they take Arabic language and religion classes, and at Santa Margarida de Monbui, there are 25 students. This means that the Igualada area offers classes to 390 students in two mosques and a prayer room.

The number seems important and requires immediate intervention from the Moroccan Government. The number is also alarming regarding the problems faced by the Moroccan and North African communities abroad, namely crime and terrorism. (Preventing religiously inspired violent radicalization among Moroccan youth, n.d.)

1.1.3. Material and educational needs

The interview with the Association's office, which manages the center, revealed that it faces several challenges, notably the urgent need for textbooks and equipment such as tables, as the number of beneficiaries has grown significantly. The Association meets only 45% of needs. A very urgent challenge is the need for more space; since the current space is insufficient, "we sometimes use the prayer room for teaching."

Another constraint is the low financial contribution from parents because they are not interested in the challenges the Association faces. The financial contribution of the parents of beneficiaries is limited to 60 euros per year for each child. However, only 50% of parents pay this amount. There is a lack of commitment and seriousness; the President of the Association had said that "we sent invitations to 300 parents of

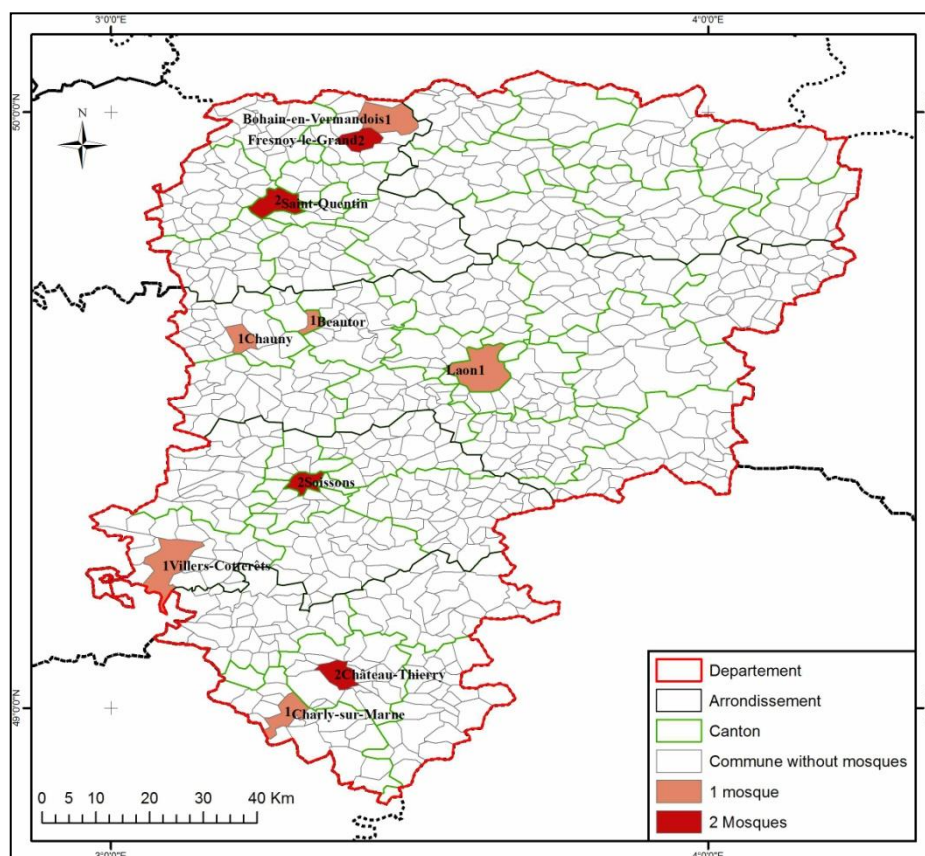
students, and only 30 attended. There is no helping hand from them", which poses a great financial challenge.

There are only four female teachers; they are volunteers who receive a 300 euros stipend per month in return for 12 hours of work each week on Saturday and Sunday. These volunteers have only the baccalaureate level and no pedagogical training. The Association cannot offer the necessary means to finance this entire operation due to a lack of financial resources.

1.2. The Association of Château Thierry

Château Thierry is a French city part of the Department of Aisne in Picardy. It is located 100 km northeast of Paris in the North of France. The Moroccan diaspora in Aisne dates back to Moroccan soldiers who fought alongside French troops during the First World War.

According to the 2015 census, Aisne had 538,659 inhabitants; of these, 11,021 were foreign, and 4,059 were Moroccan¹. We should necessarily mention that the Aisne has 14 mosques (map 2).



Map 2: Municipalities with mosques in the Department of Aisne

Source: <http://www.trouvetamosquee.fr/category/mosques-de-france/> (updated on 11-07-14)

The legal population of the Aisne department, which is part of the Picardy region, reached 536,136 inhabitants in 2016. As map 3 shows, 14 mosques are located on this territory in 8 municipalities. Some urban communes such as Saint Quentin, Soissons and Château Thierry own 2 mosques.

¹ General Census in France of 2015 (the number of foreigners consists of immigrants with documents of permanent residence).

In Château Thierry, an association was created in 1992 under "The Cultural Association of Moroccans" (L'association culturelle des marocains) to buy suitable land to build a mosque.

A meeting with the President of the Association revealed information on the Association's role in preserving Moroccan culture and identity. Indeed, the President confirmed that the number of students registered has evolved as follows:

Tableau 4 : Le nombre d'élèves marocains inscrits à « L'association culturelle des marocains » à Château Thierry

Year	2015	2016	2017
Number	54	42	32

Source: Interview with the President of the Association on August 21, 2017

The President said that because the number of registered members is small, the Association has set a simple schedule that gives the children more free time. In 2017, 32 Moroccan students registered, 11 from the Oriental Region and 12 from other Moroccan regions. The remaining registrants (09) have other immigrant nationalities.

In this sense, classes take place only on Sundays, and students are divided into two groups: beginners from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., and intermediate students from 12 p.m. to 2 p.m. The curriculum includes Arabic and Islamic education. The Association has just one volunteer teacher.

The President mentioned certain constraints that hinder preserving the immigrant children's language and culture of origin. First, parents of beneficiaries show little commitment and involvement. Even the financial contribution for each pupil is at most 10 euros per month. There is also a need for more financial aid and a shortage of volunteer teachers. Students face constraints like attendance and difficulty putting in as much effort as in French schools.

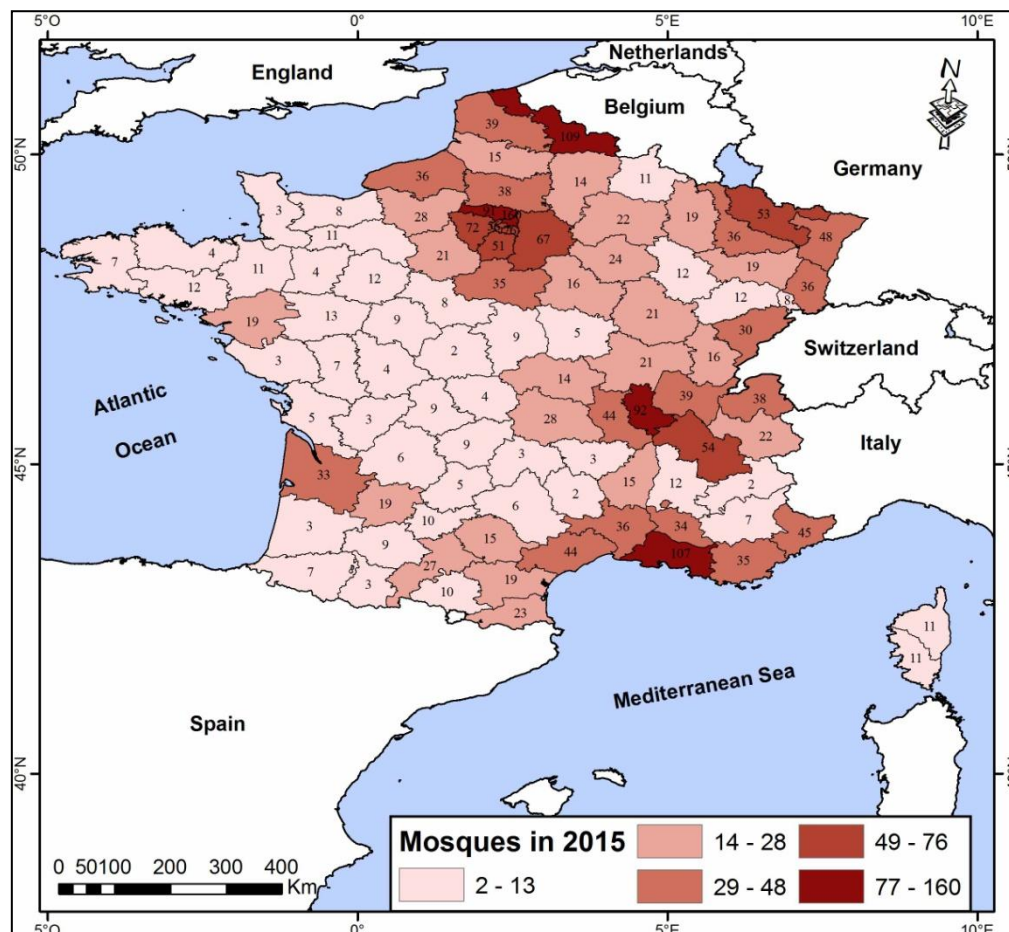
The President of the Association confirmed that Morocco's support is limited to sending an imam during Ramadan. However, aid is needed for language education and cultural preservation.

1.3. The mosque: a place of social construction and for the preservation of the collective identity

The mosque plays an important role in maintaining the relationship between the immigrant and his identity. Gathering for prayer preserves the community's collective characteristics. Even if the Muslim emigrants are not all practicing their religion, the mosque remains an institution of great spiritual and identity importance. (Pérez, 2023, pp. 78-103)

The exact number of mosques in the host countries of Moroccans is not identified. For example, neither the National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) nor the French Council for Muslim Worship (CFCM) have exact figures in France.

Generally, French territory had only 100 mosques in 1970, most of which were in hostels for immigrant workers. However, a new census in March 2016 showed more than 2400 mosques and prayer rooms.



Map 3: Number of mosques and places of worship in France in 2015 by department

Source: <http://www.trouvetamosquee.fr/category/mosquees-de-france/> (updated on 11-07-14)

We can conclude from Map 3 that mosques are concentrated in the South-East, East, and North. Some departments host a fairly large number. In Seine-Saint-Denis (93 department) in the north of Paris, there are 160 mosques. In Marseilles, the number reaches 107 and 109 in the North department. In 2016, France housed almost 2,437 mosques.

The socialization of the new generations is one of the social roles of the mosque, among other roles; it generally happens unofficially, which sometimes poses problems in controlling this kind of learning, especially the messages transmitted to young children. (Calpe et al., 2022)

2. School: a social institution that preserves the culture and identity of the children of MRAs.

2.1. The intervention of the Moroccan state

Teaching the Arabic Language and Moroccan Culture (ELACM) is an action carried out by the Moroccan State that aims to preserve the links of the Moroccan community residing abroad with the language and culture of their home country.

To consolidate the attachment of the children of MRAs to their culture of origin, Morocco has adopted a program that consists of teaching them the Arabic language and Moroccan culture in several host

countries, including three intergovernmental agreements that have been signed related to teaching the Arabic language in public schools in each of the host countries, especially France, Spain, and Belgium¹.

According to the Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans residing abroad, "FH2MRA" took charge of education for the children of MRAs during the 1990-1991 school year. The geographical distribution of Moroccan language and culture teachers spans several countries, namely France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland, Austria, Canada, Great Britain, and the United States of America. However, 78% of teachers are concentrated in France and Belgium.

Table 5: Number of Moroccan teachers and beneficiaries abroad

Years	Teachers	Beneficiaries	Years	Teachers	Beneficiaries
1990-1991	411	34 482	2001-2002	453	59 975
1991-1992	464	36 557	2002-2003	456	58949
1992-1993	466	39 127	2003-2004	452	54 283
1993-1994	484	42 394	2004-2005	515	56 623
1994-1995	482	41 471	2005-2006	541	56 748
1995-1996	464	40 649	2006-2007	541	60 064
1996-1997	453	40 572	2007-2008	516	63 105
1997-1998	453	39 435	2008-2009	499	63 000
1998-1999	432	53 686	2009-2010	525	60 000
1999-2000	434	53 416	2010-2011	518	62 000
2000-2001	420	53 196	2011-2012	576	75 387

Source: Teaching of the Arabic Language and Moroccan Culture in Figures.<http://www.fh2mre.ma>.

Regarding the geographical distribution of Moroccan teachers abroad, most are concentrated in France (Table 6).

Table 6: Geographical distribution of teachers abroad between 1990/1991 and 2012/2013

Countries	%
France	60,1
Belgium	17,43
Spain	10,22
Italy	4,22
Germany	3,8
Holland	1,4
Britain	1,2
Other countries	0,81

Source: Teaching of the Arabic Language and Moroccan Culture in Figures.<http://www.fh2mre.ma>

We note that 60.1% of Moroccan language and culture teachers abroad are concentrated in France, followed by Belgium, with 17.43%. In 2018, 188 teachers passed an exam to join the body of Moroccan language and culture teachers abroad. These teachers were distributed across the host countries as follows: 146 in France, 26 in Spain, and 16 in Belgium².

¹ Institutional education.<http://www.marocainsdumonde.gov.ma>

² "انتقاء 188 أستاذًا لتدريس اللغة العربية والثقافة المغربية لأبناء الجالية المغربية المقيمة بأوروبا" <https://www.ccme.org.ma/ar/revue-de-> presse-ar/53947, الاثنين، 14 مايو 2018

2.2. The school, a gateway to the collective identity in the host countries

The school is a space where collective national identity is forged. It is an official tool for transmitting the values and principles of citizenship. It is one of the main institutions of construction and social integration. (Wolhuter et al., 2020)

We know that more than 20% of MRAs were born on the territory of a host country, and it is also well known that the Moroccan migratory field is very wide: it concerns more than 100 hosting countries. (Talent Abroad: A Review of Moroccan Emigrants, n.d.) Indeed, the children of Moroccan international emigrants will learn different values in their host countries' schools, subsequently producing different Moroccan immigrant identities. (The politics of Arabic language education: Moroccan immigrant children's language socialization into ethnic and religious identities, 2010, pp. 171-196) We often hear notions such as Moroccans from Spain, France, Canada, and other parts of the world. These designations have a primarily geographical connotation. In addition, identity identification is divided between the country of origin and the host country.

The child's social construction in French schools is based on the values and principles of the Republic, e.g., secularism and gender equality. However, these values sometimes contradict the principles and values transmitted by the family. This contradiction between school and family creates a cultural imbalance in the child. Incompatibility here forges a so-called hybrid identity. (Lizotte, 2020, p. 102121)

2.3. Culture and identity of MRAs in a multicultural society

Daily life in the host countries requires migrants to come into contact with several cultures. This includes not only host-society cultures but also other immigrants' cultures. These cultures interact in the street, at school, at work, in administration, etc. Each immigrant community exercises and preserves as much of its originality as possible. This means that the host society is a mixture of cultures. (Finlay, 2017, pp. 785-805) Indeed, "a multicultural society is one in which each cultural group retains and affirms its identity and traditions while sharing and respecting the common values of the country." (Van Eeckhout, 2007, pp. 27, 24).

For example, in 2015, France had 6,106,695 immigrants and 49 different nationalities, meaning many immigrant nationalities are part of French society. MRAs are obliged, like all other immigrants in France, to familiarize themselves with and be part of this multicultural and melting pot society. Multiculturalism becomes more visible in the suburbs and neighborhoods where HLMs live.

The Moroccan community residing abroad still preserves its culture and identity, especially during certain events. We can see this preservation in dress, customs, and habits: the feast of sacrifice, Ramadan, weddings, baptisms, and circumcision. These are occasions when Moroccan and Muslim customs emerge, even though the practices and celebrations often take place in private¹. (Ready, 2024)

Beyond the private ceremonies linked to their culture of origin, migrants in host countries are part of society. They normally benefit from the same holidays as national holidays. Over time, migrants become familiar with the host society's culture, and it becomes part of their lives, especially for new generations. (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 2017, pp. 697-717)

¹ Focus group 2016

2.4. Cultural ghettos: a complex challenge to overcome.

A participant in a focus group carried out in Spain used the concept of "cultural ghettos", which in our opinion, reflects well the major challenge of preserving the culture of origin in the host countries, which has produced notions such as the generation known as "Beur children" or hybrid identity, because "this situation will create children with a hybrid culture, it is not that of the country of origin nor the host society (Berkouchi, 2003, p. 16). In this sense, M.H BERKOUCHI mentioned, "As for the younger generations, they find themselves in many cases embedded in culturally troubled areas."¹

The participant also affirmed that "Moroccans live in cultural ghettos. We live among the Spaniards, but we know their festivals at all, neither national nor religious. The situation is very complicated for our children because they live in absolute conflict. For example, children learn sex education at school, which is unacceptable in the family. Some words appear normal at school, but at home, they are unacceptable, which creates a cultural division in the child"². Another participant affirmed, "At school, children learn to respect differences – the relationship between man and woman, homosexuals... – on the other hand, this kind of discourse is unacceptable in the family."³

All the participants agreed that "the most difficult integration is the cultural integration, because as Muslims and Arabs, it is difficult for us to appropriate Spanish culture, and vice versa, they also cannot appropriate ours. Therefore, integration throughout Europe must be based on multiculturalism". This reflects that the emigrants, especially North Africans and Muslims with their culture, live in isolation, even if they are visible in the host society.

3. Conclusion

The mosque and school are two institutions that seek to facilitate the integration of MRAs and their children into the host society and the Moroccan immigrant community. (Eguren, 2018, pp. 514-531) To accomplish this societal mission, some mosques have become Islamic centers that combine prayer with other tasks such as education and the celebration of ceremonies. (Islamic Centers | Dawat-e-Islami Europe, n.d.) The educational operation achieves two objectives: the first is learning the language and culture of origin, and the second is creating an endogenous place for sharing, contact, and practice of the culture of origin. (Finlay, 2017, pp. 785-805)

However, we have seen that different cultures live side by side in host societies, such as French society. The children of Moroccan international emigrants learn different values in schools in their host countries, which can shape their culture of origin and produce different Moroccan immigrant identities.

Finally, we can say that the preservation of Moroccan culture and identity abroad is a rather delicate and very complex affair, which requires the intervention of different parts: the migrant, the family, the mosque, the school, and the country of origin on one hand, and the host country and its people on the other hand. (Mahieu, 2019)

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¹ Focus group 2016

² Focus group 2016

³ Focus group 2016

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