Islam as a Reaction to Exclusion: The Re-Discovery of Muslim Identity Among Arab Immigrants' Descendants in Marseille

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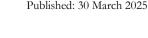
Abstract

For many "Beurs" - a slang word referring to French citizens who are descendants of Arab immigrants - (Sayad, 1994), Islam is a marker of identity (Ballard, 2018). Since they are often identified through negative stereotypes by French whites, the construction of Muslim identities might be understood as a coping mechanism against racism: Islam can provide a positive identity. In this frame, Sayad's approach could enlighten the re-discovery of Muslim identity among Arabs' descendants. In fact, despite "Beurs" are not proper immigrants, they seem to experience a double absence (Sayad, 2002). On one hand, their Frenchness is questioned by white French, on the other, they are physically absent from their grandfathers' homeland. Hence, for many of them, the myth of the return does not entail a physical movement to the ancestral countries but a re-discovery of Islam as the main feature of their personality and community.

The paper analyses some of the patterns of identity retrenchment enacted by "Beurs". We ask: How does this identity-retrenchment take form? Which actors are involved? How is it connected to the exclusion operated by the French State? The research, conducted in Marseille between 2019-2020, draws on 33 interviews with "Beurs" and key informants (heads of cultural/religious associations) and considers the analysed identity retrenchment as intertwining with the ethnic-based exclusion enacted by the French State - that imposes a hierarchical ethnic classification of the national population (Avallone, 2018) -, and as a reaction to a modern continuum of Sayad's double absence: Their trajectories are hence more understandable.

Keywords: Sayad, Double absence, identity, Islam, racism, Islamophobia.

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1. Introduction: Sayad's Double Absence and its Modern Continuum

In his studies, Sayad offered a deep understanding of the exclusion experienced by non-White foreigners in France, namely the Algerian immigrant community. In advocating an understanding of migration as a "total social fact" Sayad drew a new perspective in which the immigrant was considered exiled, doubly excluded, doubly absent. The concept of Double Absence itself, which Sayad defined as *"the condition imposed on emigrants based on two complementary data:* [...] *the exclusion of the host society* [...] *and the fracture, not only spatial, with the land of origin"* (Sayad, 2002, p. 81), may be used as a lens to study all the phenomena related to migration and, thus, also the experiences of immigrants' descendants.

Sayad, in his works, paid particular attention to the children of immigrants. In *Les enfants illégitimes* (1979), he highlights the dynamics of social and cultural reproduction, the emergence of different orders of meaning between generations, and the material and symbolic role of the country of origin in this relationship. In *Le mode de génération des générations immigrés* (1994), instead, Sayad focuses on the relationship between migrants' descendants and the White-French society, focusing on power hierarchies, and the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion. Dynamics that often entail an identity void, just as for immigrants. Hence, if the *"immigrant is atopos, without place, out of place, unclassifiable [...] at the frontier between being and non-being, not fully here nor fully there"* (Bourdieu, in Sayad, 2002), the descendants of immigrants *"occupy an even more dominated position [...]: contrary to the traditional immigrants, who could still delude themselves that they could ignore the very process of stigmatisation, they can neither abandon the game they are engaged in nor pretend that they are not interested in it at all"* (Sayad, 2002, p. 340). For instance, then, exactly as immigrants have always been suspected of betrayal and violence due to their visible otherness (Mehta, 2010; Talpin et al., 2017), their children are suspected of the same potential crimes but perpetually (Blanchard, 2016). In contemporary France, hence, being a descendant of immigrants means undergoing what Goffman defined as the "visual stigmatisation of the appearance" (Goffman, 1963; Sayad, 1979).

The stories of immigrants' descendants are similar to those of their grandparents. In both cases, they are subalterns that time does not liberate from their original status, as evidenced by the persistence of the second and third-generation categories, heirs of the immigrant category (Sayad, 1979; 1994; 2002). Just as their grandparents, immigrants' descendants undergo the ideological needs of the Nation-State, which ensures that there are only two modes of political life and existence: the natural one of white citizens, considered legitimate, and the extraordinary one of immigrants and their children, considered illegitimate (Sayad, 2002; Avallone, 2018). In Sayad's view then, even the so-called process of "naturalisation" is nothing more than a form of allegiance to the dominant

order. Indeed, to the eyes of the sociologist, such a process does not liberate them from being inferior but gives birth to incomplete citizens who will always lack something to be nationals like the others (Avallone, 2018), and will always be asked to prove their Frenchness (Silverstein, 2018). For both the immigrant and his descendants, therefore, it is not possible to forget their colonised origins and the ongoing process of depoliticization that tends to wipe out their autonomy (Molinero, 2018): it is the State to empower the political life of its subjects, and if in the case of the immigrant is absent due to his lack of citizenship (Raimondi, 2016), in the case of his descendants is deficient due to their otherness.

1.2 Aims of the paper and research questions

This paper aims to further actualize the Sayadian concept of Double Absence, focusing on one of the dilemmas of the franco-Algerian author about immigrant descendants: can an identity be based on a stigma?

On the one hand, Sayad wrote that the lives of immigrants' descendants *"is a matter of fighting against stigmatisation and domination [...]"*, on the other he also noted that *"all of this in most cases, only leads to reproducing, in inverse forms, the stigma one wished to combat"*, highlighting the vicious circle of stigmatisation and identity retrenchment. Nonetheless, Sayad grasped some of the under-studied facets of the identity construction process that immigrant descendants enact in reaction to their exclusion, starting from the term used to define themselves. In Sayad's words, indeed, immigrant descendants fighting against stigmatisation and domination were also *"[...] fighting for self-identity, to impose an autonomous self-definition, i.e. to define the defining principles of the social world by their own interests"* (Sayad, 2002, p. 340). Hence, to use a symbolic self-imposed autonomous definition and to avoid recurring categories as "second or third generation of immigrants", the paper refers to the studied subjects as "Beurs" - a slang word referring to French citizens descendants of Arab immigrants which will be further specified later in this paragraph.

To be more specific, the paper tries to tackle the issue related to Islam and exclusion. Into the specific, my work aims to bring into dialogue the *elghorba* ("exile" in Algerian Arabic, often used by Sayad) experienced by Beurs - hence the socio-economic exclusion and the permanent state of Othering - with the re-discovery of Islam. This process must be understood as a coping mechanism enacted by Beurs to strengthen their identity since authorities (and not only them) question their Frenchness. Islam, indeed, remains a primary cultural heritage, marking a difference between Beurs and White French. Hence, for many Beurs who grew up in France, the myth of the return - to put it in Sayadian terms - does not entail a physical movement to the countries of origins but a

re-discovery of Islam as a feature of their personality and community. In other words, since being publicly accused of not being enough French or not French at all and, at the same time, missing personal and cultural connections with their grandparents' ancestral homelands, Beurs experience a new form of Double Absence consisting of a gap between socio-economic aspirations and a permanent sense of otherness. The re-discovery of Islam may be interpreted as an identity retrenchment, as an answer to that Double Absence, and as a factor of stability. Consequently, we ask: how does this identity-retrenchment take form? Which actors are involved? And how is it connected to the exclusion operated by the French State?

However, it must be noted that in most cases, the re-discovery of Islam and therefore of being Muslim, overlaps and does not substitute the identity of French, a term that the participants often used to describe themselves. Islam must be interpreted as an addition to Beurs' identities that do not exist in isolation from their being French (Gaspard & Khosrokhavar, 1995), and not a factor in competition with nationality (Fredette, 2014; Parvez, 2017). It is widely shared among scholars, indeed, that identity retrenchment processes based on culture and religion are meant as a defence of identitarian specificities and not a substitution (Bouregba-Dichy, 1990; Fraser, 2005; Kastoryano, 1994; Tournier, 2013), in this specific case due also to the fact that Beurs' Islam is different from the one of their grandparents: is a French-native Islam (Bowen, 2004; Pingaud, 2012).

1.3 Why "Beurs"? Reasons for the terminology adopted

Concerning the terminology adopted, "Beurs" has been chosen since its meaning roots in the exclusion experienced by the children of immigrants but also in the marking of their own identity as not white French citizens, but still French citizens: Arabeu ("Arab"), the term used by White French to address the children of immigrants to highlight their ethnicity instead of their citizenship, in verlan - a slang consisting in the inversion of syllables in a word (verlan, reversed of l'anver, "the reverse") - become "Beurs" (Ara/beu → Beu/ara → Beur). Coined in the late '70ies, "Beur" quickly became a word used by the children of immigrants to refer to one another, since the use of the verlan highlighted, at the same time, their belonging to the French youths and their migratory background (Bosséno, 2013; Chabanet, 2016). Therefore, "Beurs" seemed to me the best term to avoid objectivating immigrants' descendants while highlighting their specificities.

2. Beurs, the excluded children of France: otherness, categories, and socio-economic exclusion

The exclusion experienced by Beurs takes several forms and roots in their otherness, constructed by the process of categorization enacted by the State's elites through the use of the "Muslim" label - generally used for all non-white people. Despite the existence of many Beurs who may define themselves as "Muslims", most of them have a secularised background and feel stigmatised when addressed with this label, which is rich in political meanings. The use of the "Muslim" label is hyper-essentialistic and simplistic (Sinno, 2009), since it does not make differences between French Islam and that of Muslim countries and is used to make allusions to the imagined link between Islam and violence (Fredette, 2014). An important aspect of State elites in post-colonial scenarios is indeed the power to create public identities that will be judged according to the parameters of citizenship established by the same elites (Hancock, 2004). Consequently, elites also create the legal and social justifications for racial marginalisation, built on the base of the social contract between individuals and the State, hence on the dichotomies of reward-punishment for good-not-good citizens (Mills, 1997). This entire categorization procedure appears as a State's strategy for the surveillance of minorities (Foucault, 1981; Martiniello & Simon, 2005).

This whole phenomenon has been defined by French philosopher Sartre as "racist humanism" (1961), meaning that the so-called "French universalism" is nothing more than elites' desire for sameness that, in scope, implies conformity to a nationally fabricated criterion of affiliation which remains non-Muslim, and white in its very nature. This form of racism is used to shape the criteria for belonging to the national community (Hancock, 2004): every time the public discourse focuses on Muslims' cultural features it strengthens the idea that they - secularised Beurs included - are not native since not sharing the same values of the majority. In this way, the dichotomies of citizen and not citizen, native and stranger, result in the creation of inequalities. In "Postmodernity and Its Discontents", Bauman emphasises how in the globalisation era *"all societies produce strangers, but each kind of society produces its own kind of strangers, and produces them in its inimitable way"* (Bauman, 1997, p. 17). In France, strangers are produced based on blackness and religion. Hence, whole populations of not-white French are oscillating between the condition of outsiders and insiders in the construction of a post-colonial order still rooted in Nation-States (Balibar, 2010; Honig, 2001). This order developed from the colonial system and constituted determined relations similar to those of the colonial era, just as Sartre observed in his studies on the dominion relation between citizens. For instance, Beurs - assimilated to the category of "stranger" due to skin colour or religious

background (Karimi, 2020) - often end up occupying lower positions in society compared with white French, hence positions considered as "dominated" in Sartrian terms. It is no surprise, consequently, that Beurs often live and work side by side with actual foreigners, in line with those capitalists' logics - determined by race - that have projected themselves in the postcolonial era (Balibar, 2010; Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991) constructing unequal power relation systems (Peter, 2021) based on the hierarchical ethnic classification of the national population (Avallone, 2018).

Sayad himself developed his work in the shape of a lifelong investigation into how societies regard, individuate, and classify its members, and how this classification impacts the lives of immigrants and their descendants. For instance, different scholars demonstrated how skin colour and foreign origins are discriminatory features in the labour market: Beurs often cover the same position as their ancestors (Dazey, 2023; Karimi, 2020; Kepel, 2012; Sayad, 2002). In his *Double Absence*, Sayad described how the terms "immigrant" and "low-skilled worker" overlapped and quickly became similar and interchangeable in public discourses and collective imaginaries (Sayad, 2002). A social differentiation that not only is nowadays projected on the descendants of those immigrant workers but also *"refers to a whole series of factors which overall refer to national origin, according to a distinction of a fundamentally political nature"* (Sayad, 2002, p. 227). A distinction that positions non-whites at the bottom of the pyramid.

These structural inequalities of the labour market are replicated on a geographical dimension, with Beurs often living in the same working-class neighbourhoods built for their low-skilled immigrant ancestors, and going to vocational schools (Joly and Beckford, 2006; Lapeyronnie, 1992) following a colonial model of educational disengagement that alienates and isolates the children of disadvantages areas (Mehta, 2010). The continuous line between discrimination at school and in the labour market can be interpreted as a continuum of a prohibition on visible signs such as skin colour and veil (Bowen, 2004; Karimi, 2020). Valfort (2020), with her study on the impact of hijab on employability, showed the incompatibility of wearing the veil and being Muslim-like at work. On the other hand, scholars focused on school performances have shown how Beurs' rate of school dropouts is doubling the white-French rate (Brinbaum, Cebolla-Boado, 2007), while the students who manage to advance in the system are oriented towards vocational courses by their teachers (Brinbaum & Kieffer, 2009). All these practices demonstrate the intersection of Islamophobia, discrimination, and socio-economic marginalisation as a form of governmentality (Kaya, 2011) in which socio-economically and politically deprived immigrants' and their descendants are held responsible for their isolation, exclusion, unemployment, unschooling, and any kind of failure (Balibar, 2004). A discourse that

relies on the "deserving citizen" narrative, a subtler way for liberal democracies to exclude the "Other" (Mills, 1997).

2.1 Religion as a marker of identity: coping with exclusion in France

The mentioned forms of exclusion have a primary role in generating disaffection and alienation among Beurs (Fredette, 2014) which feel like undergoing an infinite process of "assimilation" (often refused) that does not cancel the socio-economic differences (Martiniello & Simon, 2005) but instore a feeling of Otherness and identity void that in the end must be filled somehow. *"All that remains for them* (the children of immigrants) *to do is to accept* [...] *the dominant definition of their identity"*, wrote Sayad (2002, p. 340), referring to the definitions attached to Beurs. However, the process of acceptance may not take the form of a resignation but of a rebellion. To put it in the words of French sociologist Lapeyronnie (1992), *"[their] identity is constructed against them by the society to which they belong, it is both imposed and forbidden to them. To claim themselves as 'Arab', as 'Muslim' or as 'Arab-Muslim' is, somehow, to claim their own condemnation, their own humiliation".* Thus, Beurs reapproaching or converting to Islam are seen as defending their cultural specificity (Bouregba-Dichy, 1990), following the logic according to which building new hybrid identities is a claim to recognition (Oriol, 1979) and a cultural struggle on personal identification (Fraser, 2005).

Islam as a reaction to exclusion then, or as a reappropriation of the category imposed. A process of identity-building more understandable if we take in mind that religion is recognized as an important cultural source of identity among the descendants of immigrants (Frisina, 2010; Kaya, 2011). Islam has become a pillar of identity not only for previously secularised Beurs but also for Beurs already practising: Brouard and Tiberj (2005) detected in a survey that 42% of Muslim respondents were giving more importance to religion after 09/11 - due to the consequent stigmatisation -, while Cainkar (2010) observed that the increased surveillance suffered (Bechrouri, 2014) by Muslims was the cause for the increase in activism and religious practices observed among the Muslim population. Both trends were repeated and observed in the context of the wave of repression that followed the Daesh attacks in 2015 (Talpin et al., 2017), showing a nexus between Islamophobic repression and the strengthening of faith. As a matter of fact, converting or rediscovering one's belief is one of the forms in which the dialectical and dialogical relation between the majority and the minority takes form (Kaya, 2011). Kastoryano (2004) shows in her works how the cultural repression enacted by the French State reinforces Islam as the locus of identity and a source of pride. For many Beurs in disadvantaged areas and difficult socio-economic conditions, Islam reduces the gap between their

aspirations and reality (Pingaud, 2012), especially after unsuccessful school pathways that end either with a drop-out or the channelling towards limited, pre-established, and racialized professions. For instance, Islam may provide the sense of community or the cultural engagement necessary for Beurs to face their social downgrading (Kastoryano, 2004). Already in the '90ies, Hervieu-Leger (1999), in her studies on studying religion and youth in French high schools, reported the idea of a "conversion protestataire" (protest conversion), meant as Beurs' choice to protest a pre-established social order. Hence, by converting to Islam or strengthening their religious beliefs, Beurs can tackle their identity void by finding personal legitimacy and community in a religious tradition instead of distant and vague republican values (Hervieu-Leger, 1999, Le Pape, 2007).

Finally, to better understand the trajectory of Beurs, it must be considered that religion is considered a marker of identity but also a cement for communities (Ballard, 2018). According to several psychologists, individuals find meaning, relevance, and satisfaction through a sense of belonging to a group, which implies the feeling of being accepted and included (Allen, 2020; Eid & Parker, 2023). In a way, like Algerian immigrants living together and developing a sense of community and solidarity to strengthen their position in an environment perceived as hostile (Sayad, 2002), Beurs may enact this strategy to cope with the exclusion suffered in French society. Already in the 80ies, immigrants' descendants referred to the solidarity of Muslim communities to overcome difficulties (Andezian, 1986). On the other hand, Islamophobia and Arabophobia help what Cohen (1997) called "victim diaspora", or the feeling of community-belonging shared by those citizens with a migratory background who suffer racism. A definition that seems suitable for Beurs facing the consequences of the political process of Othering they suffer.

3. Methodological approach and sampled population

For the very nature of the topic, I decided to opt for a qualitative methodology based on in-depth face-to-face semi-structured biographical interviews administered to the subjects of the sampled population.

> Indeed, the interview is generally recognized as the best tool to observe and analyse social processes with a certain kind of privacy (Della Porta, 2007). Most of Islam's dimensions in France are in fact easier to study through tools able to reach the deepness of the social experience in which individuals participate (Pingaud, 2012). That is because of the stigmatised status of Islam in France, which makes its room in the public space limited to a negative aura (Aksoy & Sreepada, 2021). Furthermore, in-depth face-to-face interviews are

particularly relevant for gathering data on the sense-construction process of the participant (Della Porta, 2007), hence for shedding light on the minorities' view of the social world (Thompson, 1978). On the other hand, the choice to cover with particular attention the life trajectories of the interviewees (bi-ographical interviews) is given by the need to highlight the intersectionality of their situations: in this way, it is easier to shred lights on the barriers imposed by the State and the economic sovra-structure (Kaya, 2011). Sayad widely used the biographical approach to valorise the life trajectories of migrants and their descendants (Avallone, 2018). In *"Double Absence"* (2002), for instance, Sayad used the biographical interview approach to bring up immigrants' descendants' voices about integration, France, and Frenchness. Additionally, the biographical approach does not entail an extractivist approach but is a product of the trustful relationship between the researcher and the participant (Avallone, 2018) that, eventually, brings a knowledge and self-knowledge that reveal both parts intimate dimensions (Perez, 2009).

Concerning the participants, it is important to specify the strategy that led my sampling process: after a period of attendance at demonstrations and anti-racist events, I proceeded with a snowballing approach through the gatekeepers with whom I managed to bond, in addition to some contacts I gathered thanks to the help of cultural and religious associations. I hence managed to sample a population made up of thirty Beurs and three gatekeepers (the head of a Franco-Algerian association, a young police officer descendant of immigrants, and a White-French teacher who worked in a degraded suburb).

4. Stories of struggles: "If I'm not French but I'm not a foreigner, who am I?"

During the interviews, I noticed a high degree of consciousness concerning the processes the participants underwent due to their migratory background, especially in the case of Islamophobic attacks and Muslims' representation in media. Concerning the Islamophobic attacks, all of the interviewees noticed an increase of such episodes in the aftermath of Daesh's terrorist attacks: *"Islam is France's public enemy right now, it has always been…but since 2015 it worsened"*, said Dorsaf, 27 years-old police officer, followed by Aziz, 64 years-old head of CADSA Marseille, a socio-cultural association dealing with Algerian legacy in France: *"I don't think that French people are genuinely racist, I think is the media's and politics' fault: every day there is much news about Muslims, veils, mosques and terrorism and so on [...] in all of this is politicians gaining* (he explicitly referred several times to Marine Le Pen*): they earn votes out of fear"*. He then continued: *"France, has always had a problem with Islamophobia, but politics and newspaper exacerbate it: since a few years,*

every man with a beard is a terrorist and every woman with a veil is oppressed by her husband… we are all terrorists for them". On the same line, Mohammed (fictional name), a 21 years-old Sociology student, noticed how *"at every news concerning Islam and Muslims newspapers publish some picture of men with long beards or women with hijabs…often not even from France* [...] *all of this enforce the idea that Muslims are barbaric and not French…but guess what: we are!".*

This latter point - well described by the highly educated participant - was a focal point of the interviews, since dealing with categorization at the base of Beurs' exclusion. Mehdi, 18 years old living in a peripheral neighbourhood and just recently reconverted to Islam, explained that *"It is very easy for us* (Beurs) *to look suspicious or being suspected* [...] *many of us can tell one or two stories…if we walk to the city centre and police see us you can be sure they are going to search us…in-depth* [...]*"*. As a matter of fact, the same participant told me that time when *"I was held all night long at the police station of the Canabiere* (street in central Marseille) *because someone robbed and stabbed a tourist on the same road* [...]*you know how many people walk by night between Noailles and the Canabiere* (laugh*)? And you know to whom the police went? Who was suspected of the crime? Yes, me, the 'Arab'* (he used specifically this term) [...] *all of that happened to me like three years ago, I was fifteen!".* Ahmed - 26 years-old man who embraced Islam in 2014 at the end of a difficult period (for personal reasons) - better explained the political environment after Daesh's terrorist attacks: *"after the attack at the Stade de France* (November 2015) *it was difficult for Muslims…not only for the shock of the violence….like every French we were shocked by that…but also because we were left alone and we felt endangered: I wear qamis* (traditional clothing used in some communities) *and that makes me visibly Muslim…you can't understand how people suspiciously stare at me* [...] *people told me about verbal aggressions suffered…one of us had been asked to 'leave Franc'* (while saying it, he shook his head several times in disappointment) *while walking with his wife in the street, just because she wears a hijab".*

Among women, hijab played an important role in the episodes suffered. Safa (fictional name), 19 years old and unemployed, talked about *"the hysteria of France towards hijab"*, sharing an episode she witnessed: *"I was walking with my friends when at some point I heard someone raising his voice…I turned and a woman wearing a hijab and holding the hand of a little girl was being denied her entrance to a public office…there was this man, this security guard who was telling the lady to uncover her head if she wanted to enter the building…for security reasons he said but that make no sense since that lady had only her head covered while the face was visible…it was not for security reason, it was just Islamophobia".* What I found interesting in Safa's story, at that time *"not practising Muslim"*, was her final opinion on the woman affected by the episode: *"[...] the most impressive thing was the differences in the behaviour between the security guard and the woman…he was raising his voice and being intimidating* (she puffed out his chest and frowned) *but you know what? She said nothing! She did nothing! She seemed not*

afraid but proud…after a while, she just walked away with her child, proudly, like nothing happened, despite all the people staring at her [...] *she was a badass woman, that was cool, I admired that and loved her strength".* Later, she told me she does not wear a head-scarf because of "*the racism".* However, the admiration for the racialized woman is a phenomenon well analysed by many scholars, among which Croucher (2008), who described the pride of hijabi women when authorities try to regulate or forbid the use of headscarves - implying consequences on personal and professional levels. Fatma, 20 years-old unemployed girl preparing for her university admission exam, explained to me: *"[...] all of this* (the hijab matter) *is incredible: it is already difficult due to the politics, and journalists, and the racists, but also here* (home) *it is problematic* [...] *I and my mother started to discuss it a few months ago when I failed again my university admission exam and started talking at home about finding a job at least a part-time one* [...] *I'm a practising Muslim and I think it's time for me to be more serious about it and hijab* [...] *my mother is not happy about it: every time I come up with it at home she says that it would make impossible for me to find a job* [...] *she'd always say 'people are racist', people would judge you, you'll end up like your aunt"* (middle-aged unemployed woman, living as a housewife due to her hijab, according to Fatma). In the end, Fatma revealed: *"I think she may be right, so I'm taking time to think about it…you know…if you hijab everything is harder…but there are many Muslim women who hijab and manage to find a job, it is also about faith: God will reward me".*

Concerning the experiences of young Beurs in school, I decided to share some extracts from the interview with Veronica, a White-French teacher who worked in a high school in a peripheral neighbourhood and seemed biased towards her Beurs pupils. *"Every time something happens at school, every time there is some problem they always are involved",* at some point Veronica said with an exasperated tone while we were talking about her teacher experience, therefore adding further details: *"[...] they* (Beurs) *are so disrespectful towards teachers…if you pass in front of a group of them, they make noises, they insult you, that's not admissible* [...] *every time there is something illegal going on guess what? It's them* (Beurs) *again and again and again…you smell marijuana? It's them…a phone or a wallet disappeared? Be sure it is them! Is there a fistfight in the school? It's always them, acting like a pack, provoking someone and then jumping on him in ten or fifteen if there is a reaction".* Veronica seemed emotionally involved while talking, hence I asked her to go deeper: *"It happened to me once to assist to the beat up of a student by some of them* (Beurs*): it was in the bathroom in lesson time, I walked there randomly* [...] *I heard some weird noises* [...] *I went to the bathroom and saw three Arabs* (she used this specific term) *beating the hell out of a pupil, lying on the ground trying to cover his face and head".* Veronica also told me that, despite the investigation inside the school, they were not able to understand the reason behind such behaviour, nor from the violent pupils, nor the victim, since all of them changed versions many times. However, Veronica explained to me that after everything ended with *"a long suspension"* the reaction of the pupils was

"burning my car in the school looting park (actually police were not able to gain evidence of that, but she was sure about it)*"*. Throughout the entire interview, Veronica mentioned how her position and ideas towards her Beurs pupils were shared by most of her colleagues, while kept calling them "Arabs", implying their foreignness. For instance, when I was talking about their stigmatisation and marginalisation she shook her head in disappointment adding: *"The State already provides them with shares in both public offices, housing, schooling, and social insurance…they don't work much but get a lot…well, it seems to me they had even more than French people* (Franco-French) [...] *despite that they keep complaining about their situation and their poorness* [...] *they are just smart"*.

As mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph, Beurs perceive how their Frenchness is always questioned by some media and part of the French population. Perception confirmed in Veronica's interview, full of references to an assumed differentiation between White-French and Beurs, slightly defined as foreigners. Among women participants, the idea of being penalised for hijabing was generally shared, just as all the participants confirmed feeling alienated, and sometimes confused by the idea of not being considered French just for their appearance. How Karim, 25 years-old unemployed man, said in his interview: *"If I'm not French but I'm not a foreigner…what am I?"*.

4.1 Stories of struggles: "Islam is not only a religion: it is a community! A family!"

After talking about Islamophobia, the interviews moved to the process of identity-retrenchment that was enacted through a rapprochement to Islam, hence the assumption that Beurs, as racialized people whose Frenchness is often questioned, find in a religious revival the way to fill the gap on the identity level. An example is Ahmed, 26 years-old man, who *"found God at the end of a period of crisis"* in which he *"even thought of suicide"*. Born in Malpassé - a peripheral degraded area of Marseille -, Ahmed told me about *"dealing drugs and using them quite frequently"* after losing his job in a Footlocker's warehouse under the accusation of stealing, something that he denied: *"They never proved that! they threatened me to suit me but they did not…Why? Because they had no proofs…because I did nothing"*. After the event, Ahmed fell into a deep crisis, due to the disappointment of his parents: *"[...] here* (Malpassé) *is not easy. When I dropped out of school and started working my parents were not happy but they got it, I needed independence [...] What do you think they felt like when I told them my story…I saw the disappointment in their eyes because they knew it's not easy to find a job without a diploma [...] yes, I was using drugs, hashish as everyone in here and I was also dealing with that…nothing big but I needed to earn money you know [...] after couple of years like that I seriously thought about suicide, about you know,*

ending everything just jumping out of the window but I did not have the guts to do so…not even that…I felt totally useless". An amelioration came in Ahmed life in *"an unexpected way"*: a new imam in the neighbourhood. *"Here the prayer room is in front of a parking lot, a place where we used to chill* (him and his friends) […] *he* (the new imam) *came often to talk with us, he was young and gentle, we did not like him at the beginning, we taught it was like the previous one, a boring snitch, but instead he was very nice* […] *once he came at the parking lot and asked to help him with the children of the school since the teacher called sick that day…no one step up so I did it, I like children I grown up with three younger siblings* […] *after that* (helping with the children) *he approached me and we start talking about my previous experiences with kids* […] *it was nice to hear him congratulating with me for the work I made with those kids, I was feeling useless in those days* […] *he asked me to do it more often and I accepted […], after some weeks he asked me why I never went to his prayers and I explained my position about God* […] *he invited me to the mosque, just for trying and I found a different environment…I have different feelings, you know? I learned something* […] *look at me now!* (he smiled, showing me his qamis, as a symbol of his belonging to the community)*"*. When making a comparison between whom he was before converting to Islam and who he was at the time of the interviews, Ahmed explained that *"everything changed: I have nothing to do with drugs* […] *I feel better now, I like my life, I also managed to find a job thanks to a brother in the mosque* (he works in a halal supermarket) […] *I'm not hanging out with the wrong people anymore, I have a wife and I have an important role within the community* (alluding at his role with children)*"*. Ahmed's story is a story about religiosity after a long period of sufferance started with the loss of his professional position and the consequent feeling of alienation. However, it is not the only one. Amir, 33 years-old delivery man, told me that he always considered himself *"a Muslim"* at least *"culturally"* but he found religiosity *"in prison, where I was serving a two-year sentence for stealing a car when I was 23 and I was one of those crazy fuckers you hear about* (laughs loudly)*"*. Amir's story is another story of *"community you know? That's why I started to go to the prayer room in prison…because I felt alone. When you find yourself in prison at that age the world falls on you* […] *the worst thing when I was sentenced was the cry of my mother…all my family was destroyed and I felt so guilty…guilty and scared because I knew it was going be harsh* […] *when you are a young thug you always think that you will never get caught and you almost like the idea of going to prison…but when you get sentenced…everything changes"*. In his story, Amir referred many times to the alienation he was suffering inside the prison: *"*[…] *every day was the same of the previous one, there were not many things to do* […] *that was no place for me* […] *I felt alone, desperate* […] *I think that was God bringing me to prison because only in prison I would have found God* (smiles) […] *when you are alone you look for someone to help you out, someone to talk with, and the people from the mosque were there for me, they were there exactly for that* […] *to be honest…I'm kind of ashamed to say that…but I was going to the mosque because I needed something to do, somewhere to stay but then I got all the meaning of that, of the belief, the community, God is also about that* […]

at some point I decided to convert and become a real Muslim". What is relevant in Amir's story is the rupture between his life before prison and his life after the conversion inside the penitentiary facility. After serving his sentence, Amir kept participating in the community: *"Once outside I kept working on myself and on my community [...] the conversion changed my life and I'll never forget that...that's why I'm doing many things for the community, for my brothers and sisters* (mentioning his volunteering work in the neighbourhood and in the prison where he served)*".*

Most of the participants had stories similar to those of Amed and Amir: alienation and sufferance filled by the insertion first into the community of Muslims, then into the labour market, and finally into the national society. However, it is worth spending some words on a very interesting and unusual interview I had and that had to be interrupted under the request of the participant - Daliya (fictional name) - since she was feeling *"uncomfortable"*. Despite that, in the minutes she conceded to me, she shared some of her thoughts, which I consider an extreme example of identity retrenchment, openly in contrast with Frenchness, something she wanted to *"abandon"*. The participant was a 32-year-old woman, wife, and mother of two, who told me she grew up with a religious background despite *"not practising nor believing if not for tradition...because I was used to it, I was grown like that"*. She felt the need to reapproach her *"correct path* (Islam)*"* some years before our encounter, due to *"bigger causes"*. After the military coup in Egypt (2013), which overthrew the Government (close to the Muslim Brotherhood) led by Mohamed Morsi, Daliya - French with Egyptian origins and relatives still in Cairo - felt *"depressed for a very long time"*. She *"could not believe that was happening in Egypt...at home"*. She explained how at some point she started to feel it as *"a call from God itself, because my Muslim brothers and sisters were getting killed for their beliefs [...]"*. Daliya told me that she *"started feeling better the closer she got to God [...] practising with more rectitude, frequently going to the mosque, and helping the community"*, she started to hijab and sent the older of her sons to the Quranic school every Friday. With the worsening of the crisis in the Middle Eastern countries - she often mentioned Syria and Palestina - and the involvement of France, she developed a feeling of *"distrust and disgust towards French people* (she did not define herself as a French) *[...] all of a sudden I realised how hypocrites our previous friends were, how judgy, and ignorant and racist French people were [...] These are the people who wanted to decide what's better for me, for my children, what is freedom [...] These are the people who are afraid of Muslims but are not afraid in front of the sufferings of Muslims in Philistine, Suriya, in places where their country is involved [...] but they don't care...it's just Muslims dying, they consider us animals"*. After mentioning some Islamophobic attack she suffered due to her headscarf, she explained me that she was thinking with her husband to *"leave France for good and go living in a real Muslim country where our children could have a real education [...] somewhere to live in the name of God"*, mentioning Turkey and Saudi Arabia as possible destinations. At my request to go deeper into some

matters, she refused or kept saying the things she already told me. At some point, she asked to stop the interview. Despite many attempts, I had never been able to reach her out again.

5. Conclusions

Despite the research being limited to the city of Marseille and a relatively small population of participants, the results show some interesting outcomes. First, Sayad's Double Absence has been proven a valid tool to analyse the identity void developed by children of immigrants (and their consequent reaction) in a situation of socio-economic exclusion. With such an approach it seems indeed natural and spontaneous to highlight the identity-retrenchment enacted. Hence I would define recommendable to refine it and further elaborate it.

The idea of Islam as a reaction to exclusion, therefore as the core of this identity-retrenchment, is confirmed by the importance given to the Muslim community by the participants: exactly as Putnam noticed (2000), religion is a bonding capital for the individual approaching a community, while questioning the Muslims' presence in Europe may be one of the factors which lead either to the radicalization of identity - like in the case of Daliya - or to radical identitarian changes - like in the other cases (Kaya, 2011). As a matter of fact, participants showed a high degree of consciousness about their situation, just as Veronica's example (the teacher) explains the suspect on the Muslims' depiction as part of the national White population.

Finally, the paper highlighted the role of organisations and associations (in this case religious) in providing a community and an identity to the participants. The role of such entities must be investigated in the future.

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