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Negotiations on Tradition and Modernity in the German Migration Context: a Comparison of the Life Histories of a Young Kurdish Woman and a Moroccan Woman

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1 Gender, Migration, and Tradition

Considering migration to be a gendered experience, in this article, I focus on the gender-specific processes of cultural production and tradition-building in the context of migration and pose the following questions: What happens to gendered biographies in a migration context? What role does gender play with respect to the rupture, renewal, or building of traditions in migration processes? Drawing on the basic assumption that “gender fundamentally organizes the social relations and structures,” which in turn shapes the processes of migration (cf. Curran, 2006, 199), I make use of the concept of gender defined as an accomplishment, as a performance in daily interaction practices:

When we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual, and focuses on interactional and, ultimately, institutional arenas. (West et al., 1987, 126)

Such a notion of gender relates the study of migration and gender to an analysis of gendered institutional arrangements and to the social structures and power relations which are dominant in different social settings. My broader concern is to determine what kinds of social conditions and biographical processes facilitate, hinder, or prevent the development of skills/resources relevant to gaining autonomy and to the emancipative project of a biographical self in a migration context.

How should one view the relationship between gender, tradition, and migration? Drawing on Habermas’s critical revision of the concepts of *lifeworld* and *everyday knowledge* used by Alfred Schütz, Ursula Apitzsch states that in modern societies,

tradition can only be contemplated in terms of renewal, building new traditions, or as cultural reflexivity, which would necessarily consider the interference between the lifeworlds of those born in the culture and of the migrants (Apitzsch, 1999, 10). Furthermore, she points out that reflexive reference, as a critical re-appropriation of traditions in modern societies, would also necessitate biographical work on the side of migrants. In this framework, tradition should be understood as a stock of everyday/practical knowledge and practices through which a symbolic space of lifeworld can be (re)constructed, which is in turn based on the interpretations of experiences by the preceding generations (cf. Apitzsch, 1999; Inowlocki, 2001a; Inowlocki, 2001b).

Similar to Ursula Apitzsch, in her study on the processes of reflexivity on tradition in three generations of displaced families of Jewish descent, Lena Inowlocki stresses the importance of biographical and generational work and how the transmission of traditional practices requires considerable practical knowledge. Developed by Alfred Schütz, the concept of *practical knowledge* is understood as:

‘ways of life, methods of coming to terms with the environment, efficient recipes for the use of typical means for bringing about typical ends in typical situations’, in accordance with what is accepted as relevant within a group. (Schütz, 1962; [cited in: Inowlocki, 2001a, 89])

Combining Schütz’s concept of practical knowledge with the concept of gender as an accomplished performance in daily interaction processes raises the question of what the practical knowledge of being a gendered person in a society looks like. In other words, how can the knowledge of being a gendered person in a society be understood? The concept of *gender knowledge* deals with exactly this problem:

[Gender knowledge is] knowledge ... about the differences between the sexes, the reasoning of the self-evidence and evidence [of these differences], [and] the prevailing normative ideas about the ‘correct’ gender relations and divisions of labor between women and men. (Andresen/Dölling 2005, 175; [cited in: Cavaghan, 2010])

Feminist authors also underline the importance of biographical processes in the acquisition of interpretative frameworks which constitute gender knowledge (Dölling 2005, 49; [cited in Cavaghan, 2010, 20]).

The analytical framework that I employ looks at the contestation, production, and reproduction of gender knowledge in migration processes and deals with the question of how gender knowledge is transmitted between generations (i.e., between mothers and daughters) and how the younger generation reworks this knowledge in interaction with the social and cultural institutions of the majority society. For

a proper understanding of the negotiations on gender knowledge – its continuity, contestation, and transformation – one should look at the intergenerational relations and the transmission processes of cultural and social resources. In this sense, there is still a gap in the research regarding the study of familial transmission processes and the intergenerational transmission of social and cultural resources in the German-speaking academic environment (Gerner, 2007, 228).

2 Biographical Migration Research: Different Approaches

The following section discusses under which biographical processes and social conditions migration becomes either a resource for achieving gender autonomy or an obstacle.

Theoretical approaches to migration assume a gap of modernization between the country of origin and the destination country, which constructs the destination country as “modern” and the country of origin as “backward” (Apitzsch, 2006, 256; cf. Morokvasic, 2007, 72). In these approaches, the picture of the traditional patriarchal structure of a migrant family is contrasted with the picture of the urban modern family (cf. Baros, 2009, 138), particularly with a focus on the Islamic migrant family. These analyses draw on the assumption of a gap between modern life and Islamic tradition (cf. Apitzsch, 2006, 250). The difference between the social environment (norms, values, and cultural codes) of the majority society and the (supposedly patriarchal) values of the migrant family is also conceptualized as two conflicting forms of socialization (cf. Riegel, 2007, 247). Such simplistic, binary perceptions are radically questioned, for instance, by Ursula Apitzsch, who poses the question: “What is modern about the destination country?” (Apitzsch, 2006, 256).

The biographical analytical approaches on migration stress not only the processes of social suffering and discrimination which might be faced in the destination country, but also the processes of creative transformation on the side of migrant subjects. In the migration context, the migrants may build on their already existing biographical resources and emotional skills, or they might develop new ones through interacting with the opportunities and structures which are available to them in the majority society. Thus, migratory processes mostly involve an act of balancing between individual autonomy and social constraints, between processes of acting as a social agent and processes of suffering due to the constraints put on individuals by social structures (cf. Kontos, 1999, 232; Gerner, 2007, 228; Lutz, 1999). Scholars looking at the reversal and transformation of gender order in migration contexts put emphasis on the importance of investigating “identities, practices, and positions” (Lutz, 2010,

1658), insisting on the necessity of seeing migrants as “actors rather than as objects or targets of the change” (Morokvasic, 2007, 71).

The analysis of gender-specific cultural production and tradition-building focuses on daily practices (cf. Kaya 2007, 207) and the related praxis of constructing norms, gender, identity, roles, values, and the processes of symbolic production. Along these lines, tradition entails practical knowledge which is transmitted between the generations. Thus, studies which examine the production and transformation of gender knowledge in the migration context must take intergenerational processes in general into account (cf. Mahler, et al. 2006, 33), particularly the mother-daughter relations (Kaya, 2007; Inowlocki, 2001a; Inowlocki, 2001b).

Mothers are not only seen as the main carriers of culture, knowledge, and emotion, but also as the mediators of norms and values within the family (Kaya, 2007, 209). As I will show below, the *migration project*, which includes the motivations, goals, and conditions which lead mothers to migrate, together with their experiences in the migration context, plays an important role in the formation of daughters’ gender knowledge and in the construction of their life projects, as well as their way of life.

3 Biographical Case Studies

Comparison of two different life projects by the daughters of Muslim migrant families

In the following, I will present a comparative study of the two life histories¹ of a young Moroccan woman and a Kurdish woman,² with a particular focus on their own interpretations of their migration experiences with regard to how they think of tradition and modernity and with regard to how they draw on these in the constitution and employment of different biographical action schemes.³

1 To differentiate between the terms *life story* and *life history*: the former refers to the autobiographical narrative told by the person and the latter refers to the interpretative reconstruction of the life story by the researcher. This differentiation is also related to the differentiation made between the *narrated life story* and the *experienced life history* (see Rosenthal, 2004).

2 The two interviews cited in this article were conducted within the framework of the research project “Family Orientations and Gender Differences in Intergenerational Transnational Migration Processes” in 2011 at the Goethe-University Frankfurt in Germany. The project was directed by Prof. Dr. Ursula Apatzsch (Goethe-University, Frankfurt am Main) and financed by the Ministry of Science and Arts of Hessen (HMWK). Within the framework of the project, I have conducted 18 biographical interviews with migrant women of Turkish, Kurdish, and Moroccan origins who belong to the first, second, and third generations.

3 For the concept of biographical action scheme employed in the analysis of biographical narrations, see Schütze 2007.

Alena:

Alena is the daughter of a Kurdish-Alevite migrant family and belongs to the second generation. At the time of the interview, she is 25 years old and lives with her family and two brothers together in a house.

Alena's early childhood and school life is characterized through painful ruptures and separations from the family, which is also typical for children of migrant families in her generation. At a very early age, she migrates illegally to Germany with her family and stays at an immigration detention center. After the denial of the family's asylum application, they are deported back to Turkey, where the mother leaves the children with their grandparents in a village in Eastern Anatolia. Through a sham marriage with a German man, the mother succeeds in migrating to Germany successfully on her second attempt. After some time, the family is reunited in Germany.

Since her mother works long hours and stays away from home, Alena undertakes the role of the mother, doing the housework, cooking, and cleaning, and looks after her younger brother. The way she talks about her role of supporting her mother suggests that she finds a sense of pride, competence, and power in this duty.

Alena's school life in Germany is characterized by frequent changes from one school to another. She does not learn German properly and, in her words, after a while, she gives up the hope that she would ever be competent in the German language. After visiting different secondary schools, she changes to a vocational school and learns home economics. Today she works as a home economist in the food service kitchen of a youth hostel, where she has difficult working conditions and has a constant feeling of insecurity because of her short-term job contract, and she wishes to find a job with a long-term contract.

During the interview, Alena states that her life from childhood until now was sort of a permanent struggle: she wants to "be finally free and achieve something for herself" (P. 32, L. [1026-1029]). That means different things in different contexts. Sometimes it means being free from the obligations of a job at a workplace and creating her own job. At other times it means being free from the gender-specific obligations and norms of behavior imposed on her during the visits to her grandparents' village in Turkey. During the holidays, accompanied by her mother, it means the freedom to party, drink alcohol without limits, and flirt with the young men. Back in Germany, it means also being independent from the social pressure exercised by circles of relatives, by her parents, and by her fiancé's parents, and also by her neighbors. During the interview, she shares the information that she therefore plans to move away from the city to a village in Germany, taking another surname for her and for her future husband (P. 42, L. [1366-1375]).

During the interview, through appealing to the well-known story of Heidi⁴ – who was living with her grandfather in a village in the mountains of Switzerland very happily until she was displaced and had to come to Frankfurt am Main, where she faces considerable difficulties adjusting to the city life and gets ill in the end – Alena shares with me an interpretational frame as to how she sees and understands her migration experience. She uses the *metaphor of Heidi* to make her migration story intelligible to the reader. The interesting part is how she reinterprets the story: Her interpretation of Heidi's story fulfills different functions in different narrative contexts. At times she uses the *Heidi metaphor* to excuse her poor achievement (in terms of grades) at schools, her feeling of not really fitting into the social settings in Germany, which relates to her not coming to terms with different aspects, rules, norms, intuitions, and rhythms of “modern life”: After an incidence of violence in the secondary school yard, she justifies her behavior: “I come from a village, what I should do? I was born like this; I must continue living in that way” (P. 18, L. [572-573]).

At other times, in the context of comparing village people and their life prospects, world views, and expectations with her experiences, with the stock of knowledge and vision which she had acquired in Germany, the Heidi metaphor was used to enact a sense of supremacy and being experienced vis-à-vis village inhabitants. In her narrative, Alena reproduces the tension between modern and traditional life through her contrast between the city life in Germany and village life in Turkey. At the same time, this interpretation scheme is most ambivalent, since city life, despite all the advantages mentioned by her, might mean (as explained in her own words) a life full of insecurities for an adult, as in the case of her short-term job contract, disputes with colleagues, or the really difficult working conditions at her work place – as depicted in detail in her narrative. In contrast, the village life in her childhood meant an absence of surveillance, rules, regulations, and responsibilities, as well as an unlimited sphere of action and freedom, which was described in her narrative in the style of a pastoral idyll with a feeling of longing for the past beauty of village life and the happy-go-lucky times of childhood. But despite this idealistic and romantic depiction of the village life of her childhood years, Alena, in her narrative, sounds proud, considering herself more knowledgeable than the inhabitants back in her parents' village.

Me: You said that you moved, like Heidi, from village to the city.

Alena: Yes, like Heidi moved from the village to city. Had I not done that, I would not know that much.

4 The world famous novel of Heidi, a classic book in children's literature by the Swiss author Johanna Sypri, tells the story of a little orphan girl who grows up in the care of her grandfather, having a happy childhood in the Swiss Alps until she is brought to the city of Frankfurt am Main as a companion to an older handicapped girl. After the happy times she spent in the Swiss Alps, Heidi cannot adapt to the city life and misses the mountains and her life there, along with her grandfather, and she gets seriously ill. Only after she returns to the mountains does Heidi's health recover.

Me: Know about what?

Alena: Like Heidi came from the village to the city. If I had not done that, I would have been like the others in the village, not very informed about things. I would have been like my grandmother and grandfather; I would have had old-fashioned thoughts even today. But when you come to the city, you learn so much. There are good things and there are bad things. I should decide on my own what I want. If I [make] well-thought-out decisions, then things will work out well. But things can get worse at any time. There is no guarantee. If I hung out with bad friends, then it would of course get worse for me. If I had not learnt a vocation, if I had another job, or were unemployed like my friend... no idea, so many [bad] things can happen.⁵ (P. 49, L. [1608-1618])

Samira:

Samira is a young woman of Berber origin and belongs to the second generation. She joined her family in Germany at the age of six. When the interview took place, she was 26 years old and attending a university of applied sciences. Samira's mother wears a headscarf (hijab); she is a housewife and she only speaks elementary German.

Narration on her educational and school life is a central aspect of Samira's biographical narrative. In contrast to Alena's, her biography represents a rather successful story of social mobility through education – albeit with some periodic crises, ruptures, and new orientations. Due to her excellent academic achievement in secondary school (*Realschule*), she can attend a high school (*Gymnasium*). The changeover from the social world of secondary school, dominated by the children of migrants and their ethnic-religious positioning, to the high school, dominated by German youth and their diverse subcultures, thus marks the beginning of a biographical self-transformation process for Samira, which will be interpreted as “the change in worldview” by her (P. 3, L. [89-93]). The discovery that the prejudices and ready-made opinions of her own ethnic community and peer group towards the German youth in particular and the culture of the majority society in general do not hold true at all triggers a process of biographical reorientation and reinterpretation for Samira in which all the prejudices and established patterns of thinking and gendered norms will be put into question by her.

The process of empowering, which means becoming autonomous and able to claim herself as an independent young female subject with her own schedule and sphere of activities in daily life, goes hand in hand with her critical attitude on the migrants' “ethnic” way of life. Accordingly, she criticizes not only the traditional practices

5 The interviews were conducted in German and the passages quoted here have been translated by the author into English.

and ways of life, which she sees as specific to the Moroccan ethnic community and other ethnic minorities, but, moreover, she defends herself against the established traditional gender norms as to how a young Moroccan woman should live: “That’s doing a vocational study after school, getting married around the mid 20s, and giving birth to children” (P. 3, L. [104-110]).

Despite her considerable success in educational and social life, Samira’s empowerment process is not smooth and not without difficulties. She is accused of being “too Germanized” by her Moroccan friends (P. 3, L. [94-100] & P. 30, L. [1199]). Male relatives criticize her way of life because she does not conform to the traditional gender norms and roles attributed to men and women. She also struggles with the stereotypes and prejudices towards Muslim migrant women, which are dominant in the majority culture in Germany. Standing at the intersection of different discourses and inclusion/exclusion axes, Samira develops multiple positions and belongings. But she feels obliged to legitimize and defend her multiple belongings as she faces the different prejudices exercised on her by varying social groups. This necessitates considerable argumentation and discursive work, which is also reflected in her biographical narrative. In this process, she gets the support of her mother and her family as Alena does. Like Alena, she has solidarity with her mother, a solidarity based on a sort of exchange of services, like helping the mother in the migration context and enjoying in return the support of her mother back in the village in Morocco should her “unconventional” behaviors annoy the village inhabitants. But, unlike Alena, she has resources and discursive tools available to her due to her upward mobility in German educational life.

4 Two Different Modes of Negotiation on Modern and Traditional Life Practices

Samira and Alena:

Samira and Alena both want to break away from the traditional circles: they both want to get rid of restrictive gender norms, cultural codes, and established ways of thinking as to what constitutes a proper life for a migrant woman. They both struggle against the constraints put on them by neighbors, family, members of their ethnic community, peer-group, and relatives, and also by the hegemonic norms of the majority society. Still, the tools and means they implement to attain and expand their autonomous sphere of action differ greatly. To attain her autonomy and to allow herself more room for maneuvering, Samira makes use of the opportunities and structures available to her in the German educational system while relying on financial, emotional,

and social support from her family and mother at the same time. In contrast, Alena wants to establish a family of her own in the hope of having an independent life under another surname far from the social pressure exercised by family, relatives, neighbors, and by the members of the Kurdish community.

Samira's and Alena's biographical narratives represent two different modes of negotiation on modern and traditional gender norms and ways of life. Samira, in her self-representation as a modern-looking, young German artist who is involved in the graffiti and arts scene and, at the same time, as a young Muslim woman with a Moroccan family, manages to combine different components of what are seen as modern and traditional cultural practices. Through a reflexive reference to different social worlds, she seems to be able to combine identification and discursive practices in her narrative, which are usually considered to be conflicting identities and practices: modern and Muslim, daughter of a Moroccan migrant family and educated, and German and Moroccan. Whereas Alena moves back and forth between places, between what she conceives as traditional and modern forms of life: back in the village, she feels superior to her grandparents' traditional ways of the life. Regarding the chances and opportunities of young women her age living in the village, she feels that she has more options. In Germany, however, she turns her position around and excuses herself for simply coming from a village, which in her eyes constitutes a valid justification for her not fitting well into the social settings and conditions in the German context. Her solution to the tensions and conflicting situations which she has to face in different social environments is assuming a new surname, which she sees a chance to start with a new life.

The modernity/tradition paradigm employed in migration studies draws on the assumption that moving from the traditional environment to the modern one, migrant women have the opportunity to become liberated even if they work in precarious and poorly paid jobs in the receiving country (Morokvasic, 2007, 73). Intergenerational biographical migration research draws a more complex picture than a move away from the traditional structures to the emancipative ones in the migration context. Alena's and Samira's cases show that not only tradition and modernity acquire new meanings in the migration context, but also that the migrants might employ different strategies simultaneously, which may be perceived as contradicting one another (cf. Morokvasic, 2007, 82). As in the case of Alena, the wish to get married, have a child, and stay at home, which might be considered as a traditional gendered strategy, could be perceived in the migration context as a chance by young (unskilled) women to extricate themselves from burdensome working conditions and precarious job situations and become free to do something for themselves. In contrast, Samira chooses a strategy that is considered to be a modern one: upward social mobility through education and work.

Nevertheless, she still defines her religious identity with reference to Islam, although Islamic gender norms are considered to be highly patriarchal and traditional and not compatible with the values of majority society. In this sense, I think the biographical reconstructions of Alena's and Samira's cases clearly demonstrate the necessity for contextualized research focusing on microlevel actors and the biographical processes of meaning production. Moreover, their cases suggest that caution should be exercised towards approaches which build their analyses on the simplistic binary understanding of modern versus traditional ways.

Furthermore, negotiations on traditional and modern gender norms by the children of migrants should be investigated in the framework of intergenerational relations,⁶ especially in the continuum of the mother-daughter interpretation of the migration experience. Both Samira and Alena enjoy the support of their mothers, but in very different forms. Compared to Alena's mother, who works and earns her money by doing cleaning jobs and who fought for considerable autonomy and decision-making power in the family against her husband, Samira's mother fits the image of the powerless traditional migrant woman rather well (wearing a headscarf, being a housewife, and having very limited knowledge of German). But exactly for this reason, Samira can afford to pursue an educational career, being free from care and reproductive duties within the private sphere. Alena, meanwhile, despite the powerful position of the mother within the family and despite the extensive support she gets from her, had to replace her mother since childhood as the only daughter among three children, assuming the responsibility for her younger brother, cooking, washing, and cleaning for the family. Even her paid job today as a home economist at a food service kitchen can be seen as an extension of her duties from the family sphere to the public sphere.

In the broadest sense, compared to their mothers, daughters are found to produce a different "gender knowledge," and accompanying visions of what kind of life is worth living. They have the possibility of combining the knowledge of being a woman that is transmitted by their mothers with the alternative identification models and life projects which are available to them in the transnational migration context. Nevertheless, the young women, in their struggle for autonomy and empowerment in a migration context, face many tensions and conflicts in different social settings such as work life, educational life, family life, as well as in the public sphere as demonstrated in the cases reconstructed above. Thus, to understand the mechanisms of reshaping and redefining the gender order in the migration context, we need to look beyond the macrolevel conditions to the individual life contexts and microprocesses, such as biographical

6 Researchers like Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar, for example, insist on the necessity of considering gendered and generational hierarchies in the analysis of migration processes. See Mahler et al., 2006, 33.

and gendered negotiations on modernity and tradition, intergenerational processes of knowledge, and the tradition-building and empowerment strategies of mothers and daughters specific to each biography. Still, these young women might not only become cultural innovators through the combination of different gender knowledge and the knowledge of different social worlds acquired in multicultural contexts in transnational social space, but may also contest and modify the established notions of tradition, modernity, religion, national culture, and identity.

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Odnosi med tradicijo in modernostjo v nemškem migracijskem kontekstu: primerjava biografij mlade Kurdinje in Maročanke

Ključne besede: vednost o spolu, biografske migracijske študije, odnos mati : hči, integracijska transmisija, mlade muslimanske priseljenke

Migracijske študije pogosto domnevajo, da so ciljne države »moderne«, države izvora pa »tradicionalne«. To pride do izraza predvsem v primeru islamskih priseljenkih družin, kjer se tako teoretsko izhodišče postavlja zaradi patriarhalnosti in tradicionalnih odnosov v družini. Taka dihotomija v pojmovanju modernega in tradicionalnega še dodatno spodbuja tako stereotipe kot esencialistične in homogenizirajoče diskurze o muslimanskih ženskah, ki so predstavljene kot pasivne žrtve svoje religije, zatirane zaradi patriarhalnih odnosov v svojih Skupnostih. Pričujoča razprava na temelju biografskih pripovedi mlade Maročanke in Kurdinje stereotipe in prevladujoče diskurze postavlja pod vprašaj; namesto njih predlaga preučevanje mikroprocesov in biografskih interpretacij spolno zaznamovanih priseljenkih izkušenj. Prav tako poudarja pomen preiskovanja integracijskih transmisij ter razmerij med materami in hčerami, skupaj z raznolikimi strategijami opolnomočenja. Tako bi lažje razumeli spolno zaznamovana razmerja med tradicionalnimi in modernimi kulturnimi praksami in načini življenja v transnacionalnem migracijskem kontekstu.