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Youth sociability, ethnicity and identity strategies An Ethnographic Study in Multicultural Schools of Brussels

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Abstract

This paper presents an identity construction analysis of youth coming from immigration in multicultural school contexts of Brussels. In order to study the schooling experience of learners in these specific contexts, we propose to study the meaning of cultural references and practices used by learners within their youthful sociability. The concept of identity strategies shows how these young people manage and choose between different cultural referents to increase their chances of integration in the "host society". If the school relations are intensively driven by cultural affirmations, we want to understand how culture is invested by learners in their mutual relations. It appears that these cultural practices and their social significations constitute meaningful basis in the structuring of their daily. These cultural systems constitute different cultural resources within the youthful sociability and give schemes of understanding capable to guide the young people in their social actions.

Keywords

Identity strategies, ethnicity, youth sociability, multicultural schools

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I propose to discuss the school institution's role in the process of social integration of young people coming from immigration. This sociological reflexion is based on the interactionist perspective, using theoretical concepts such as "ethnicity", "identity strategies". Two main points will be discussed: (1) on the self-defining plan, it refers to the negotiation of different cultural repertoires of youth coming from immigration; (2) in terms of social relations, it refers to the processes of affiliation and differentiation between the peers which works across the activation of these different cultural systems. In other words, the social organization of peer groups according to their cultural differences. Concerning the methodology, this research sets up in different schools of Brussels chosen according to their position on "the school market" according to "favourable" or disadvantageous school situations.

1. CULTURAL IDENTITY STRATEGIES

1.1 Multi-dimensional identities

Firstly, we focus on the multiplicity of cultural memberships and systems of reference to which the young people are linked in their social relations. Therefore we study the cultural dynamics at work within peer groups in analysing the place of cultural features in the constitution of these groups. To study transformations affecting identity construction of

learners, the question of identity is considered according to a multi-dimensional approach. Multi-dimensional identity tries to exceed dead ends met by previous theories to explore multiculturality. It introduces an original synthesis of a personal and peculiar identity constructed from different referents and cultural memberships (Camilleri, 1990, Cuche, 1996). The concept of identity strategy underlines the dynamic and relational character of identity and constitutes a useful conceptual tool. Avoiding an analysis of strictly rational action, the notion of identity strategy does not return in a purely calculated conception of action where human motivations would be driven only by a purely personal interest. In contrast, identity strategies allow studying the management of multiple identity cultural repertoires to spot how individuals reach a happy and pacified management in a hybrid identity (Verhoeven, 2006). Identity strategies show how these young people manage and choose between different cultural referents to increase their chances of integration in the host society. According to different identity strategies they can adopt, this study enables to understand how learners are going to involve themselves in the school project and the school work.

The sociological analysis of identity strategies was notably formalized by authors such as Camilleri (1990), Manço (1999) or Verhoeven (2002, 2006). The theoretical models of Manço and Verhoeven are particularly adapted to the school contexts under study since these authors are interested in how youth from immigration are managing this multi-dimensionality of their identity in multicultural context. The relevance of these two theoretical models consists in the introduction of a second analysis axis for the study of identity strategies. The more classical theories on integration used to formalize a model of integration articulated between two polarisations: assimilation and ethnicisation. Manço and Verhoeven improve this model by adding, next to the univocal relation to identity, a complex relation which relates to syncretic identities. But these two authors do not conceive in the same way the complexity of these identity forms. Manço (1999) concentrates on the notion of individuality, process where individuals operate a synthesis of different cultural codes in order to meet the requirements of the community of immigration as identity foundation – process called “individual differentiation” – or the requirements of the “host” society as identity foundation – “individual assimilation”. In other words, complex identity strategies subordinate the codes and values of origin to the “host” culture or subordinate the Belgian codes and values to the culture of origin. Unlike Manço, Verhoeven is interested in the way learners manage different cultural repertoires without prominence of one on the other (Verhoeven, 2006).

1.1.1 Univocal relation to identity

Regarding the psychosocial definition, “*assimilation*” is a process of total integration to the host society which undertakes by a standardization of norms and values of the dominant group to increase chances of socioeconomic adaptation. The principle considers that identity detachment to the community belonging allows a better integration to the dominant group in the host society. It is characterised by univocal relation to identity and cultural values of the host country. This kind of identity strategy is mainly observed in socially favoured school areas, encouraging ascending school careers. Inevitably, it appears in contexts where cultural differences are seen as obstacles to the succeeding of school and social processes and as a mean of better integration to strongly homogeneous school populations. Learners are willing to be treated according to colour-blind practices in order to support their legitimated membership to the host country.

The second type of univocal relation to identity, “*complying differentiation*”, is developed by Manço (1999). Complying differentiation strategies pass by an idealised and utopian appeal to principles from the community of belonging. This may create an identity withdrawal or prevent from real insertion in the host society. This cultural shelter produces some ethnocentric attitudes such as *ethnicisation* or *essentialisation* which correspond to identity strategies commonly seen in disadvantaged school situations. In fact, the cultural characteristics of origin are lived as necessary foundations of identity, “community anchorages work as a self-defining support”. In that way, the cultural referents of origin work as true permanent identity foundation and cannot occur without self-identity crisis (Verhoeven, 2006).

1.1.2 Complex relation to identity

“*Reflexive hybridization*” corresponds to a safe and good management of several repertoires where the individual chooses efficient cultural features or having a meaning in order to adopt them according to the social requirements of the host society. It is an autonomous identity step where the individual is considered as an actor of his own identity construction. This identity synthesis results from a selection, from a reflexive capacity and from a subjective appropriation of different identity cultural referents (Verhoeven, 2006). Following Manço, “*individual assimilation*” and “*individual differentiation*” constitute two variants of reflexive and hybrid strategies developed by Verhoeven. These two notions shade the relation established between cultural repertoires from origin and from the host country:

- *Individual assimilation strategies* consist in the enrichment of practices and codes from the host country by ethnic features. These strategies are therefore a complex management of different cultural referents that articulates the assimilation requirements of the host country with the values and codes from origin in order to conserve the “ontological” family culture.
- *Individual differentiation strategies* consist in interpreting cultural matrix of origin across the cultural codes and referents of the host country. As a result, youth get involved in actions supporting ontological conservation while trying hard to meet pragmatic assimilation requirements to the host country. They have to develop capacities to juggle with different cultural identity repertoires in accordance with different contexts of interaction. Hybridization defines itself as an “ad hoc” and reflexive use of languages and cultural registers. This identity-socially ascending strategy characterises individuals who show relevant use of cultural referents in given situations. The choice to refer to certain cultural repertoires will depend on contexts where they can affirm suchlike very good and judiciousness cultural qualities.

Finally, Verhoeven (2006) shows that in disadvantaged school situations, the mismanagement of different cultural repertoires can lead to forms of “*anomic hybridization*”. These identity strategies are seen in disadvantaged school situations where the integration of youth coming from immigration is not happening. These individuals undertake “fragilisation” of their cultural identities and, as a result, don’t appreciate the different contexts of application of their cultural referents. The management of different cultural codes is therefore imperfect and deficient as this non-reflexive hybridization of repertoires is often accompanied by a non-efficient judgment of relevant use of different cultural codes, leading to the ethnicisation of social relations.

1.2 Community inscription and subjective appropriation of cultural referents

According to our analyses, youth identity construction works according to a double dynamic which articulates at the same time a self-defining dimension – subjective appropriation of cultural repertoires – and a collective self-defining dimension more linked to the community of membership. From different indicators – ethnic affinity, perpetuation of some cultural features from origin, affiliation to the host society – our analyses could highlight a general tendency of students who express a complex identity construction. In reality, two tendencies take shape. The first tendency characterises young people who describe themselves principally from the values of origin and for whom the Belgian nationality is accepted but not promoted. The second tendency appears as a much more hybrid identity construction where the double membership to the country of origin and to the host country is taken into account and promoted. However these two systems of cultural references will be differently invested: a much more emotional relation links these learners to their referents of origin while the membership to the host society is lived on a more rational and pragmatic point of view.

Most of the learners referred themselves both to their Belgian nationality and their belonging to the country of origin. It is as if the self-definition was based on a double identity level, simultaneous or organised into a hierarchy, among which one is generally fixed: the Belgian nationality. For example, a question frequently asked to the researcher, « And you? Are you Belgian-Belgian or ...? », reveals the double dynamic of their identity construction. Nevertheless, this general similarity underlies a broad variety in the way they articulate their Belgian nationality and their membership to the country of origin. The first identity logic underlines the hybrid character of their identity construction. This hybridity does not manifest itself with the same intensity but it remains strongly present in what people say about themselves. This self-defining interbreeding will be translated in reflexive hybridity strategies as much as the learner does a selection in his multiple inheritances. The second logic, even if he admits the duality of his membership, testifies a reference and a more fundamental identification to the country of origin.

1.2.1 Reflexive and hybrid strategies

Identity strategies expressed by learners referred at the same time to their Belgian nationality and to their country of origin. They present their identity as a sum of several cultures (“It is a bit of a mixture of everything”, “I have a mixed culture”) which is the product of their live in the country of origin, the migration – mainly Belgium- and cultural aspects or their sociability as youth. These identity strategies correspond to reflexive hybridization of identity registers. As Verhoeven (2006) points it out, the youth introduce a plural picture of themselves, and, in combining different inheritances, they put forward “their own way to build identity”.

These learners speak about their self-defining hybridity straightaway, as though their culture was the product of different socialisations which helped to build them progressively. However, discourses about the place of culture from origin and from host country are not completely the same: the culture of origin is considered as an asset that needs to be preserved – a source of pride – while the reference to a Belgian or even a European identity is considered as a result of their daily life in the host country. Also, the fact to have lived their adolescence in Belgium, or else the practices and habits they adopted according to a European way of life, give sense to their affiliation to a Belgium or Europe.

- Claiming the belonging to the host society

In relation to this complex relation to identity, the hybridity does not happen in the same ways according to their cultural repertoires: some will support mostly their identification to the country of origin, others will affiliate themselves more especially to their Belgian or even European living, others will play on both sides by pointing up the beneficial or essential side which both repertoires contain. Nevertheless, we must underline the affirmation of a significant and visible membership to the host country even if these learners were born in their respective country of origin. (“I’m rather Belgian than African”, “I can’t see in what I’m not Belgian!”, “At home it is my small corner of Antwerp”). This claiming of a belonging to the host country is always compensated by the belonging to the family culture, to traditions or even to their native language. This affiliation to Belgium is considered in a pragmatic point of view. This tugging is expressed in terms of physical and emotional distance with the country of origin. Invoked reasons remain strongly similar: they arrived when they were young in the host country, the difficulty in practicing a little learnt and little lived culture, the way of living or the fact that they do not want to return to the country of origin. It seems as if the early leaving from the country of origin explained their affiliation to Belgium and their integration in the Belgian society. This departure explains and legitimises fact that these young people do not know big thing of their country of origin. Like the values or traditions which were transmitted to them were learned through their family or community but on the Belgian territory.

- Saving several cultural features from origin

To reduce this tension, it seems that these young people grant importance to their cultural practices from the country of origin to protect them from any emotional and social detachment. Very often, the importance of the native language – often the mother tongue – is central and seen as an asset (“It serves when you don’t want to be understood”), but also maintain as a filiation to the origin as several students use it with their peers, with their family or even with the community. These learners often speak about their culture of origin to the first person of the plural, in other words “us” could refer to the family or to the close cultural community which is related to the collective dimension of their identity.

1.2.2 Individual differentiation strategies

Other students invest more fundamentally their culture of origin while admitting their relation to the host society and to the Belgian culture due to their integration in the educational system and because they lived a relatively important period of their life here in Belgium. This emotional demonstration of ontological conservation transforms this reflexive hybridity into an individual differentiation since the culture of origin is put forwards. The rational and neutral connection to Belgium points out that these young people adopt practices which could meet requirements of “pragmatic assimilation” in the host country (Manço, 1999). It is rather interesting to see that these students claim that they know the history of Belgium to justify their nationality. However, it seems as if these learners were trying to modify the influence of Belgium on their identity by stressing the fact that their culture of origin remains predominating. (“I’m more tied to my family than to my friends”). Customs, traditions or some other activities connected to the culture of origin are therefore promoted and put into practice. Sometimes they say they are even worried about losing their “cultural characteristics”.

1.2.3 From differentiated identities towards ethnicisation

Although these students are characterised by hybrid identities moderated by a strong inscription in the culture of origin, their identity construction remains rather similar to the differentiated identity strategy. These young people affiliate themselves predominantly to their culture of origin. It seems as if their identity strategies were developing in an almost essentialist dimension mostly related to their culture of origin. This phenomenon describes a process of differentiation close to ethnicisation – but tempered by a complex relation to identity – as the inscription in the country of origin is “totalising” (Verhoeven, 2006). These learners pretend that you should not “disclaim”, or not either “forget” or “lose” your culture (“It’s my culture, you shouldn’t lose your origins!”). It seems as if they were considering their culture of origin as “a cultural spinal column” because of the migratory situation. The contact with other cultures – including the host society with its more secularized – is lived as a threat for their “identity cultural integrity” (“I have some girl friends who are more Belgians than Pakistanis! And me not, I prefer my culture”, “In Belgium, they are very much familiar with their parents you see. It is not the respect you give to your parents”).

We must insist on the fact that learners absolutely do not show identity withdrawal on the culture of origin. They admit however their double identity partly due to their life in Belgium that they cannot deny (Verhoeven, 2006). For example the impact of the youthful culture on their identity allows contrasting this self-presentation based on the culture of origin. Besides, some of these students do not foresee coming back in their country of origin and show a clear preference for Belgium. The links maintained with the culture of origin are therefore ambiguous. In several cases, the relationship to Belgium is considered in an instrumental conception like the fact to have identity documents which determine access to a better quality life. But, when the self-definition is entirely seen across the culture of origin prism (“I’m more Moroccan you know! In everything you see!”), these obvious identity signs are related to the “ethnicisation” process. They do not recognise any affiliation with Belgium and the identity card has only an administrative value. Again, this univocal self-definition is put in tension with their “Belgian experience” and the perspective of non return in the country of origin (“Now we’re used to here you know?”). Besides, the fact they do not know well the main codes and values from the country of origin conducts this ethnicisation process towards an anomic identity.

In conclusion, the identification and differentiation processes endorsed by learners show that, even in relegated school contexts, they do not take refuge necessarily on a cultural withdrawal. On the contrary, these people are characterised by a complex relation to identity as they can manage together different identity repertoires.

2. THE ETHNIC NATURE OF YOUTHFUL SOCIABILITY INSIDE SCHOOL

We offer an analysis in ethnic terms to study the school reality of our modern societies to show why ethnic markers represent practical categories of perception, of explanation and judgement inside multicultural schools. It is a question of highlighting the indicators of this process as the school is progressively lead to transform the social and school relations into ethnic relations. Actually, this progressive ethnicisation of school relations is intrinsic to our societies of immigration and represents a break with the ancient universalist model of integration. We can see it in the revival of identity cultural affirmations and more particularly in social disadvantaged schools. The paradigm of ethnicity is used in order to understand the reasons why place is more and more granted to individual cultural differences. “Ethnic topic

is obvious in the school context under the joint effect of a society model in transformation and because of the school massification, to promote cultural diversity and to assure equal chances between people" (Perrotin, 2000).

Ethnicity as a concept proves to be particularly relevant to analyse social relations between learners from different cultures. According to Barth's definition (1969), the interactional approach of ethnicity allows to concentrate on two perspectives of analysis: ethnicity can be analysed according to a substantial and relational approach. It is meant to be both tributary of the constructivist and relational approaches since ethnicity is built in between social relations and since cultural contents are manipulated to maintain or to (re)-build ethnic borders.

Besides, ethnicity has been, wrongly, generally considered as a social tag. Many researches contributed to reinforce this ethno-conception by exploring arbitrarily the ethnic question in marginal situations where this concept takes inevitably an alienating connotation – ethnicity is seen as a reaction to the stigma and not as a process. Referring to notable empirical works as Lepoutre, Payet, Perrotin, Verhoeven but also theoreticians such as Barth, Jenkins, Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart, we suggest that the mobilisation of these ethnic labels can be observed in various school contexts (Verhoeven, 2006). In Belgium, the French-speaking school model is partly drawn from the French universalist model of integration. The school massification and the transformation of a society model have practical involvements on the progressive emergence of the ethnic issue inside school. Generally, in these multicultural school contexts, we can witness the affirmation and increasing exhibition of individual cultural features. Affirmation or claiming of various cultural features refers to a need of individual recognition. A problematic of inclusion is drawn through the mobilisation of different ethnic labels by learners.

To analyse sociability between students, it is necessary to take into account the school context as well as the student's school career. Often the type of friendship or the self-representations about their sociability reflect the identity strategies adopted by these learners. In accordance with the previous paragraph, the students' representations concerning their sociability follow the same logic as the one concerning the identity strategies of integration. There is a propensity of learners from disadvantaged schools that uses ethnic categories to describe their relations with other peers. They justify suchlike forms of "ethnic solidarities" by essentialist speeches on their identity (Verhoeven, 2002). In the contrary, students from favourable schools justify their sociability without taking into account ethnic categories, which means that these friendships are culturally independent or rather, that "elective" affinities depend on personalities, tastes or shared leisure activities.

- The youthful sociability in disadvantaged school contexts

In this first situation, it seems as if the ethnic categories were practical categories to explain and read the social relations inside school. These labels give expressly an account of affinity or tensions that take shape between students (Verhoeven, 2002). Many learners justify their group by the fact that they share similar hobbies, cultural practices or common living. This kind of speech stresses then the natural obviousness of an inter-communication between persons coming from the same ethnic group. For Verhoeven (2002), these speeches are characterised by their "essentialist" character where these "ethnic solidarities" are culturally legitimised because of common cultural referents shared within the peer group. In return, the group reinforces ethnic identities since it is close to the family environment.

This emotional commitment in the culture of origin is also observable in the way the young people construct their best friendship relations. "The best friends" are often described as being learners coming from the same country of origin, who lived a part of their childhood "in their country" like them. In that way, it seems that the community anchoring, not often seen at first glance, discloses in the building of deeper or more sincere best friendship relations with youth coming from the same cultural origin, which develops very often outside the school surrounding wall. The question of ethnic affinity is more dependent on the emotional relation which differentiates normal mates to the "true" friends. Everything takes place as though this common living, being born in the country of origin, was decisive in the emergence of this ethnic affinity, even if their network of sociability is culturally less determined. The justification of these best friendship relations is explained by the natural obviousness of each other's better understanding due to shared cultural origins (Verhoeven, 2002). Across the ethnic borders, the nature of relations is quite other between the peer groups since these relations are lived as controversial or rival. Tensions emerged from the interaction between different cultural memberships since the leaners perceive these contacts as dangers to lose or be unfaithful to their culture. This phenomenon is often conjugated with anomic or essentialist identity strategies which could lead to extreme forms of community withdrawal.

- The youthful sociability in favourable school contexts

This second situation relates to favoured school contexts where the sociability between peers doesn't develop in different cliques. Independently of the ethnic colour, learners explain how much they construct best friendship relations in a transverse way to the ethnic groups, according to affinity and personalities, offering them opened and rewarding intercultural relations (Verhoeven, 2002). This spontaneous opening to different cultures or discovery of other's differences is envisaged both for the students and for the school as source of enrichment and as a relational quality. Cultural diversity is taken into account to be promoted, to put the multiculturality in benefit for a better common future. Therefore, we must question the nature of identity strategies since peer groups are less justified by ethnic categories. If learners adopt attitude that shows "superficial effacement" of any ethnic distinctive identities, it seems as if elective affinity will be not defined from ethnic labels. Youth coming from different cultures and characterised by successful school careers will be able to adapt different cultural repertoires according to given contexts. For them, ethnic categories don't represent relevant resources for integration and these will be replaced with others more meaningful categories related to their environment.

2.1 The mobilisation of ethnic labels by the learners

Different authors (Lepoutre, 1999, Perrotin, 2000) have suggested that a shared school experience of multiculturality favour the use and the symbolic meaning of ethnic labels. These ones begin to be obvious in the school daily live and are increasingly used as tools to read and act inside multicultural schools. As a result, ethnic labels become natural categories of identification attesting the obvious physical visibility of differences between learners (Perrotin, 2000). The ethnic dimension of school experience would condition a "happy co-habitation" inside school. If this ethnic visibility is part of the school life, undoubtedly, it develops through differentiation between individualities and between groups. This differentiation process is simultaneous to a mutual ethnic recognition which seems to go without saying. Learners display practical ethnic knowledge which works out according to different ethnic categorisations.

Playing on different cultural classifications according to ethnic categories does not follow the same logic of attribution. The levels of abstraction are variable according to cultural origins. Student would speak about “noirs” – in French – or either about “blacks” – more seldom “African” – to underline their difference from African learners’ skin colour, while they would use precisely “Moroccan” to indicate the young people from North Africa. On the contrary this categorisation process seems less easy for learners coming from Eastern Europe countries where some confusion persists since they speak at the same time about “Polish”, “Russian” or “Romanians”. Others have much more individual nicknames but which also rely on cultural origins, for example “Paki” for Pakistan or countries around Central Asia. Besides, these ethnic labels of attribution depend also on the representativeness of cultural groups present within the school. In a school context where the students’ heterogeneity would turn out to be source of complexity, these classification processes are, in the contrary, aimed to simplify the multicultural interactions. They constitute easy manageable and identifiable practical resources. Due to their central place in the school sociability, it is used upon an ironic or playful tone between learners who joke about this multiculturality as a playground. However, these labels do not carry out neutral meanings since the learners use mostly these registers through cultural differentiation processes. They also use them to justify inter-ethnic conflicts or problems of misunderstanding between cultures.

2.2 Sense and role of cultural practices for the learners

As we mentioned, cultural practices also take place in the construction of inter-ethnic relations between ethnic groups. Not in the sense of a hybrid culture but in a direction which enable to establish social relations across different group’s borders through typical cultural practices – as food practices or native languages. If, in such multicultural contexts, learners are interested to share about their cultural differences, it is not due to a humanist ideology preaching the opening to the “otherness”, it is rather a result from a real and nervous curiosity in other words, as well interested as distrustful which are typical types of social relations taking shape in the daily. It is a process of “acting” acculturation where exchanges between learners are made both on the sharing and rivalry ways, both in alliances and conflicts (Lepoutre, 1997).

Substantial ethnic indicators such as dress behaviours emphasize these processes of categorisation and ethnic classification. Indeed, when we questioned the students about the existence of specific looks or typical dress habits in the school, they systematically used ethnic attribution labels to describe looks they could identify. This question revealed not only the existence of ethnic categories but also social differentiation processes at work between peer groups. For example, dress practices constitute a very significant part of the substantial dimension of ethnicity. Other cultural repertoires sustain these ethnic processes of differentiation; beyond the national or community cultural repertoires, learners also create and appropriate themselves more specific youthful referents which would occur among ethnic social relations.

CONCLUSION

In Brussels school contexts, widely influenced by the French universalist integration model, the double effect of the school mass phenomenon and the transformation of a society model, shows that the ethnic issue is more and more relevant to understand the relations inside multicultural schools (Perrotin, 2000). If our research field is situated in an unprivileged

school environment and concerns a strongly diversified school population, it seems that the ethnic issue do not concern only the poor or popular schools.

Generally speaking, learners are characterised by complex identity strategies since they manage several different identity repertoires. As a result, the youth coming from immigration, in a broad process of social integration, necessarily modify and select subjective relevant cultural referents to build their identity. The diversity and complexity of these identity processes – even concerning the most “univocal” identity figures – came to reinforce this intuition. However, the reputation and the social environment of the school – relegation status and disadvantageous position on the “school market” - are factors which must be taken into account in the analysis. The influence of these two factors can be observed in the way the learners build their identity strategies.

Besides, it comes out from our analyses that the ethnic categories are meaningful in school life. This phenomenon draws several consequences away in terms of logic of action. First of all, the students are willing to display their cultural membership which takes form through ethnic borders and work according to differentiation processes. But we could also notice ways of regrouping that depend on the constitution of classrooms. As a result, peer groups do not correspond automatically to the logic of ethnic borders peculiar to the relational approach of ethnicity. In other words, even if the students permanently handle these ethnic labels in their relations, there are not necessarily culturally differentiated friendship networks inside school.

The research points out that the cultural practices observed inside the youthful sociability is influenced at the same time by the young mass culture and by the culture of origin. Independently of the identity strategies, this culture of appearance is common to all the students. Therefore, cultural practices do not necessarily determine the differentiation processes between groups. Ethnic regroupings emerge from cultural affirmation of learners who adopt by conformity a certain culture of appearance. Even if it refers to a broad ethnic origin, the culture of appearance does not come true necessarily in corresponding cultural practices. This one is rather the result of a mix between popular culture and the culture of origin.

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