

“Women fly with their husbands”: Palestinian diaspora and gender relations

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Resumo: Neste artigo, proponho uma reflexão sobre as relações de gênero e as formas de organização da experiência imigratória contemporânea no bojo da experiência diaspórica dos palestinos. Segundo um provérbio árabe, coletado em trabalho de campo, “as mulheres voam com seus maridos”. A explicação se refere a um funcionamento peculiar da vida da família árabe que recebe as noras na unidade doméstica do marido, e, por conseguinte, essa unidade é também a do pai do marido. Foi através desse provérbio que tive acesso a um comentário nativo sobre o “ir e vir” de esposas da Palestina ou de outras cidades para residir na cidade do Chuí (RS) e de lá para outras localidades. No mundo pós-colonial, as mulheres se converteram em potentes símbolos de identidade de sociedades e nações. As mulheres islâmicas e, em especial, as palestinas se encontram dentro desse debate ideológico sobre a integridade e autenticidade cultural. Essa fala proverbial nos dá acesso a diferentes pontos de vista sobre os dispositivos culturais que presidem esses fluxos e nos exige uma reflexão sobre as relações de gênero e o modo como analisamos o protagonismo das mulheres muçulmanas.

Palavras-chave: diáspora palestina, família árabe, identidade étnica, mulheres muçulmanas.

Abstract: This article poses a reflection on gender relations and the ways the experience of contemporary Palestinian immigrants is organized. According to an Arab proverb collected during fieldwork, “women fly with their husbands”. The explanation refers to a kinship principle by which daughters-in-law come to live in the husband’s father’s domestic unit. This proverb reveals some aspects of the “coming and going” of Palestinian wives who reside or come from other localities to settle in the Brazilian city of Chui. In the post-colonial era, women were converted into powerful identity symbols. Islamic women, especially

Palestinians, are part of an ideological debate about cultural integrity and authenticity. The proverb grants us access to different viewpoints on the cultural dispositions underlying these fluxes, and prompts a reflection on gender relations and the ways the agency of Muslim women may be understood.

Keywords: Arab family, ethnic identity, Muslim women, Palestinian diaspora.

According to an Arabic proverb heard during fieldwork in the Brazilian South, “women fly with their husbands”. It points to a particular aspect of the *Arab family*, whereby daughters-in-law move in with the husbands’ domestic kin unit. In practice, each daughter’s wedding is also a ritual which means parting from the parents’ house and moving out of town. Through this proverb, I had access to a native comment on the “coming and going” of wives from Palestine and elsewhere who moved into the town of Chuí, (Rio Grande do Sul state), and vice-versa.

These displacements had already been observed during fieldwork, and not necessarily related to marriage. Not rarely did my visits to local stores interrupt, or overlap with, ongoing conversations by women who showed pictures of the places where the relatives they had gone to visit lived. The core of these conversations was not exactly the touristic experience they had had; they were, in fact, sharing information about these relatives and commenting the encounters. Men, along with their sons and daughters, would show me pictures of their pilgrimage to Mecca and to the sacred places of Islam. Quite didactically, they would explain each step in the pilgrimage ritual and the meaning of clothing and objects brought from the trip. They would show me the clothes, their pictures wearing them, the tapestry on their house walls, displaying images of the Kaaba, the hookahs exposed in the living room, and the Hamsa hanging on store walls. They (proudly) displayed, in their homes and stores, the souvenirs they had brought from their pilgrimage and familial reunions in Palestine.

The aim of this paper is to bring to surface the multi-locality within the families I interviewed, based on the meanings that proverbial speech may evoke with respect to gender relations. How can such speech be understood in terms of its context of utterance. More than depicting gender relations, the proverb requires that we consider it within the context of enunciation, in

order to make sense of the practical and affective difficulties involved in sustaining family ties despite international displacements.¹

Although the concept of diaspora is intrinsically related to the “Jewish diaspora”, other debates have also employed it, and activists of different realms have devoted to analyzing a diversity of experiences of forced migrations². Thus, a “transnational” experience may disclose not only the “effects” of such forced displacements, but also the symbolic re-elaborations revealed by identity experiences. These may be highly original or tightly related to the views on continuity and resistance that each group reformulates under new constraints.

An approximation with Palestinians’ immigration experience becomes essential in this regard. It is an experience of exile and genocide perpetrated under the rubric of “war” – a definition which, as some colleagues point out, would require at least two armies. But the effects of a war that lasted all the XX century and has not come to an end impinge, in very particular ways, **on** the lives of those families which have sought new trajectories and new places to build their homes.

The experience of immigrants of Palestine origin allows us to understand how an experience of “exile” may be re-elaborated by multiple voices. Therefore, observing and getting acquainted with the very ways in which forced displacement is collectively re-elaborated imply not only an attempt to comprehend how the return to the homeland or origins, is imagined (broadly conceived), but also getting to know the ways in which social bonds are restored by contemporary social groups. I believe that, in this case, marital arrangements and gender relations may shed light on the confluence between affective dispositions and social bonds.

It is worth remembering that literature on “Arabs” and “Muslims” always runs the risk of stumbling on an *orientalist* perspective that carelessly embraces the multiple experiences in the heterogeneous “Arab world” (nations that have lived Pan-Arabic, Pan-Islamic movements) as examples of the “Muslim world”. Such perspective either turns every Muslim

¹ I would like to thank Bela Feldman-Bianco, Carmem Rial and Cristiana Bastos, as well as the other participants in the Symposium on International Circulation and Transnationality of the Brazilian Anthropological Association, for the suggestions and questions which shaped the current version of this article.

² See in Clifford (1997) an important review of the conceptual use of the term “diaspora”. My understanding is that this author questions the rigidity with which the term has been deployed, and shows that it evokes a sense of returning to one’s (local or symbolic) origins. Historical experiences are, however, of re-diaspora and of continual transfiguration of identity experiences – while, paradoxically, promoting “faithfulness” to feelings that relate to some primordial identity.

into an Arab, as if the two terms meant the same, or treats every subject who lives or refers to the Arab culture as a Muslim.

Silva (2008), Hildred Geertz (1979) and Goody (1995) have, at different moments, warned of the traps involved in totalizing the “Oriental” or Islamic world, even in debates on the “Arab family” and dispositions evinced by anthropological studies on kinship. Lessons on family and kinship found in such studies only point to the complexity of the debate in terms of requirements such as “genealogical principles” or “generation and gender loyalties”. These are not exclusive to the “Arab world”, but they do enhance our understanding of the participation and loyalties in an extended kin network shaping the subjects’ decision-making. Anthropology has always excelled in the debate on “models” of kinship, highlighting the research subjects’ own interests when dealing with kinship, rather than perpetuating an attitude of verifying such models, or refining them by means of field research.

Studies on kinship and peoples of “Arab origin” abound, but many are vague when it comes to defining the “Arab family”. Similarly, they refer to a vast area in Northern Africa which has been historically conquered. However, this imprecision when defining the “Arab family” does not preclude its presence as a “value” in the discourses of interlocutors in the field.

Regarding the Palestinians, I have always avoided the thought that what I found in the field could in any way represent the contemporary “Muslim world”. Cautioned by interviewees themselves, I learned about the multiple ways of relating to religiosity, and that neither the label “Arab” nor the generic rubric “Muslim” would grant me access to these immigrants’ full identity and generational experiences. Accordingly, in this study, gender and kinship are not means for unveiling the “Muslim world”, but possible ways of approaching, in this particular case, the identitary and affective experiences of the immigrants and their children, as they resort to tradition and group continuity.

A diaspora scene among others

My field research was carried out among immigrants of Arab origin, who refer to themselves as Palestinians and live in the southernmost region of Brazil, on its border with Uruguay. Between April 1996 and 1997, I carried out field work in Chui, and interviewed immigrants’ children living in other cities in Southern Brazil in the following years.³ I observed and interviewed them in their stores, which serve also as their homes. All too often, their stores

³ On this, see Jardim (2001, 2007). This article follows up from reflections presented in a recent publication, and takes forward my analysis of gender relations in this research universe.

are closed for long periods, or the families spend seasons out of town; therefore, although I return to the city at regular intervals, not always do I meet the same persons.

The interlocutors I met in the Brazilian South refer to their arrival in the country as an evasion, triggered by the creation of the State of Israel. This yields to narratives on the impossibility to work and support their families, hence the decision to migrate in search for safe places to work and live. Migrating implied facing a few possible trajectories. One of them was to be destitute of their one's state of origin, the condition of *refugee*. At that time, entering the realm of humanitarian help, that is, assuming a refugee status (at the time, one could not be relocated but only return, which meant to renounce the status of refugee) had the immediate cost of being prevented from circulating freely from one country to another.⁴ They preferred, they said, to enter Brazil with permanent visas, granted at the moment of departure. This situation eventually changed in the case of late immigrants.

On the other hand, my interlocutors' experiences show that the documents obtained in order to leave Palestine were either Israeli (which prevented access to the labor market in Arab countries) or, at best, Jordanian. More recently, some of their children were able to get a Palestinian passport as a result of some amnesties granted to illegal foreigners living within Palestinian territory.

Given this limited set of choices, it is difficult to estimate the actual number of Palestinian immigrants. Bureaucratic precision is of no help, even in those cases where regularization occurred in Brazil. For instance, behind the regularization of a Jordanian in Brazil might be the story of an evading Palestinian family which went to Jordan and then sent their son to America. Later on, by means of family contacts and proxy marriages, the family paid for the travel costs of this son's wife – who could have come, for instance, from Kuwait (fleeing the 1991 war).⁵ This reveals the connectivity of work careers in the Middle East, and draws us

⁴ Torpey (2003) calls attention to the invention of the passport as a historical process which reveals aspects of control of the circulation of people by reducing their permanence time and scope of territorial movement. These modes of control, increasingly intensified and internationalized, suggest a naturalization of the “right” to come and go. In my view, they provide elements to reflect on the sophistication of the state's control mechanisms over the circulation of people, of a safe-conduct document as guarantor of the subject's moral value, in the framework of a passport. In the Palestine case, this is most dramatic, because immigration has to be made viable in spite of the absence of a passport or of an internationally recognized nation-state. This means to sidestep the absence of a nation-state guarantor which would secure a site of return for the subject intending to migrate.

⁵ “Family webs” and migration trajectories are nonlinear, both in relation to the route travelled up to Chuí and to the various nationalities obtained by the family members along the diaspora. At times, it seems like Chuí, a city

even closer to the singularity of the Palestinians' recent experience, which informants and experts on Palestinian immigration refer to as a *diaspora*.⁶

Originally, my research comprised the observation of ten families, defined according to their own criteria: that is, three or more household units per family. As fieldwork research proceeded, I found a shared reference to the fact that the oldest immigrants came from the city of Ramallah and its outskirts. This indicated common origins in rural villages. Thus, during fieldwork, mutual recognition by means of the "same town" became relevant. But the women who came to Chuí in order to get married were not identified by shared hometowns, but as co-residents in Palestinian towns inhabited by their relatives. This showed a network of relatives that had migrated from Palestinian territories (and within them) to other Arab countries (such as Kuwait and Egypt), or even to cities in Germany, England and the U.S., or to Latin-American cities like Quito or Buenos Aires.

This coming and going of families has been recently updated by key informants: the club's immigrants' representative, the city's Arab teacher, school teachers' comments on their students, and a return to the homes of immigrants that I had interviewed during my original research (in the late 1990's). Some of these have been contacted by means of the social networking website *Orkut*, others by e-mail. I have lost contact with some of them due to their constant moving among different towns.

Considering a longer historical context, my oldest interlocutors may be situated as part of the post-war migration wave, spurred by the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. As for the youngest, such evasion had already resulted, at some moment in family life, in their "return" to Palestine as Brazilian foreigners.

The creation of Israel is a fundamental landmark in the history of the Palestinian exile. It is linked to processes of de-colonization and to a transition from British domination to a new partition of the Middle East amongst foreign national powers. As Rashid Khalidi (2003) has shown, the episode most often evoked to account for the term "Palestinian" refers to their

on the border between Brazil and Uruguay, is less a final destination than a point of passage (or resting place) for new displacements. The estimate voiced by residents is that the city might have as many as 200 immigrants of Palestinian origin. There is, however, no register distinguishing between immigrants and their children born in Brazil. As viewed by both Brazilian residents and by the interviewees themselves, they managed their differentiated "origin" (either paternal or maternal) as their own self-definition of "Palestinians".

⁶ The experience of families in diaspora and how it traverses family relations has been analyzed by Feldman-Bianco (1999).

expulsion from their homeland, and to various conflicts and loss of control over their territories to Israel.⁷

The experience of Palestinian immigrants in Brazil unveils connections with yet other conflicts: the Six Days War in 1967, the 1987 Intifada, a decade marked by civil war and loss of citizenship rights (even in Israel or Jordan). These often intermingle with the historical impossibility of acknowledging a Palestinian state.

The armed conflicts and closed borders during the past three decades help account for the continuous “coming and going” of relatives which at times directs migration beyond Arab countries, at times limits (returning) family visits due to the difficulties encountered when trying to re-enter their territories of origin.

Constraints to the international circulation of Palestinians

The immigrants’ transnational experiences help us make sense of the singular experience of Palestinians in diaspora. The Palestinian diaspora sheds light on the new itineraries and ways of re-creating possibilities of citizenship “between” nation-states. How do they enable and maintain such circulation? How do they nourish the vitality of their notions of collective identity based on the evocation of a common origin? These questions demand from analysts a closer look at gender relations, at the “marriage market”, and at the knowledge amassed by immigrants on their trans-national relations.

Among the constraints to the circulation of Palestinians, which may either facilitate or hamper the displacement of kin, are passports and the problems faced by some of them to pass

7 Khalidi (2003) brings important considerations on Palestinian identity and its re-configurations resulting from diplomatic moves and the continuous homelandlessness suffered by the Palestinians. It should be noted that the category of “refugee” deployed by international bodies does not encompass all choices made by the potential victims of the occupation wars waged by Israel within Palestinian territory during this and the past century. The option for Jordanian passports, for instance, does not imply an immediate renouncement of the Palestinian citizenship, and even the choice of remaining in Palestinian territory may result, later on, in appealing to the category of refugee made possible by international aid. In other words, as Morris (1987) has shown, data quantified by international organizations that make use of categories deployed by international human rights are also political in that they are inexact and aim at magnifying the problems afflicting war-torn territories. My understanding is that the categories used should not reduce the subjects’ identity experience, which is broader and denser than national affiliations. I call attention to this “adding up” of nationalities as part of the identity trajectory of Palestinians during diaspora, and I disagree with the search for some unicity of the Palestinians’ identity experience carried out especially by means of national registers. Such registers are the ones that are possible, but are not necessarily the most desirable ones.

through customs, even with Brazilian citizenship but with an Arab name and last name. These obstacles demand a special kind of calculation because they bring about new concerns with the international free flow of people, and, in the case of Palestinians' children, new barriers to the re-encounter between relatives and their "countrymen".

The study of Palestinians shows an accumulation of experiences with transiting among different national legal systems. Many legal provisions pertaining to access to visas and modalities (such as family reunion) are shared, established by bi-lateral or international agreements. But in practice, they are implemented by flesh-and-blood people, by real agents working at particular borders and nation-states who follow unique bureaucratic pathways.

As Coutin (2003) noted, the legal status granted by one or more nation-states may facilitate the organization of transnational immigration. As I observed among Palestinian immigrants and their children, obtaining documents in the receiving societies is precisely what broadens the possibilities of international transit.⁸ Indeed, some subjects and families are able to travel around and enjoy relative freedom of movement internationally – something which would not have been possible had they been immediately classified as the "poor immigrant", the "problematic immigrant", or the "illegal immigrant". As some of the interviewees have acknowledged, however, this does not apply to everyone, and it is to be negotiated with the Customs Service.

After all, an Arab name and phenotype are always more salient than one's passport's color and origin. We know that classifications associated with immigrants are powerful and constrain their freedom of movement as well as their potential new destinations. Moreover, classifications are directly connected with phenotypic appearances, with an (Arab) name in documents, and with the moral accusations that pervade the world market of documents and border bureaucracies.⁹

Palestinians seem to avoid second-class citizenship statuses, the fragility of provisional papers, and attributed images of *dispossessed* which would make them vulnerable vis-à-vis the nationals or limit their movement among different places.

Migrating is never an easy task. This fact underscores the power shown by some social agents to manipulate unfavorable codes and to direct reunions, but especially male and female

⁸ Coutin (2003) discussed the oath of allegiance to the U.S. flag taken by various groups from Central America in the United States. The path to naturalization is considered a quick way to escape classificatory ambiguities and social disadvantage experienced by immigrants in the new society.

⁹ Heyman (1995, 2007) approaches negotiations on the Mexico-U.S. border, focusing on customs officials and the way they interact with illegal immigrants.

investment in immigration as well as the ways international transit is handled. Therefore, a look at what goes on within families, especially in terms of gender relations, might contribute to an understanding of the “web of affects” that makes possible and commands the deployment of legal opportunities for reuniting the family.

The *scattered* family, a “shared experience”

A family “scattered” in different countries is something quite common among Palestinian immigrants and their children. It is important to recall that it has been only sixty years since the state of Israel’s inception. The continuous occupations and territorial redefinitions that followed the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories have produced a “coming and going” of people that often takes the form of migrations to new destinations and new nations. This sometimes unfolds into periods, however brief, of reencounter between relatives in Palestinian territory.

My fieldwork in the city of Chuí from the late 1990’s to the year 2000 unveiled a series of negotiations within families which pointed to another, less well-known facet. The kinship map I drew based on data provided by my interlocutors revealed cousins, uncles and aunts in different Latin American countries and/or Palestinian towns. Such map was made up of many known cousins or cousins with whom they had recently had a chance to relate, not all of them living in the city of Chuí or in Brazil.

This “absent presence” drew my interest. Why are such absent subjects so important throughout their lives? A young male described his affinity with a female cousin who lived in Peru; he spoke of her as a person with whom he had great – according to him, *almost telepathic* – affinities. Others showed significant familiarity with cousins or uncles and aunts they had met only for a short time during recent trips. In these and other instances, absent relatives began to pop up in the kinship map. These relations were marked by great intimacy nourished in brief periods of acquaintance during family reunions made possible by trips and invitations to live temporarily abroad, or in the event of a wedding. Such trips could be extended to other countries and to visits to other relatives in the Northern hemisphere.

This “back and forth” of relatives no doubt took different forms for men and women, but revealed significant generational complicity among the young, even if under the care and gaze of uncles and aunts.

These multi-local family experiences are largely propitiated by efforts to revitalize kin relations during such trips. Part of this investment – or, the common outcome of such trips – was compounded by possibilities of finding spouses precisely by attending weddings. Such

celebrations are the site par excellence of encounters and amplification of the marriage market. Participating in a wedding means being on display, having the chance to meet other young people.

According to my interlocutors, there is no dating among Muslims. In practice, this often takes the form of “secret dating”, which demands, again, significant generational complicity (and a great deal of risk-taking). Intermediation is a mother’s and married women’s task; as they talk, these women let one another know about the interests of the unmarried younger men and women of their families, in an attempt to weave marriage possibilities for them. Thus, besides the complicity and generational interest in relating to cousins, attention should also be paid to these leading characters – the mothers and aunts who are entrusted with the task of finding appropriate spouses.

This helps us understand how the “flights” of women are made possible by the family web. As I have suggested in Jardim (2001), although discourse on immigration is part of male authority, in the field I noticed intense exchanges of information, pictures and possibilities of reunion waved by the women, in their roles as mothers looking for spouses for their children or aunts who participate in such “matchmaking networks” by planning new trips and displacements of relatives. The sons who lack an “Arab mother” (immigrant, Muslim) delegate this task to the father’s sister.

On a daily basis, it is the women (mothers and aunts) who are concerned with configuring possible fates for their children. Very pragmatically, it is the women who sustain the exchange of letters and pictures within the network of neighbors in Chuí and among their relatives. They announce births, university graduations, talk about the “fruit” of unions, and, potentially, gauge the other families’ moral qualities by means of mundane details, during engagement parties and weddings of other families of immigrants living in Palestine or in other Latin American countries. Photographs, letters and fax messages are this network of immigrant women’s indispensable means of communication.

In studies about Arab immigrants in America, it is often hard to distinguish a “pioneer”.¹⁰ Behind the story of an immigrant from an Arab country there is a flow of other migrations that preceded his. For the most part, these were migrations “plotted” by kin or neighbors in their home village. Women play a part in organizing the trip. I believe they do not (just) arrive after the fact; they assemble the conditions for the travels of their sons and daughters. In these

¹⁰ Truzzi (2007) analyses immigration as part of immigration systems, and provides a review on studies of Syrian-Lebanese immigration in Brazil.

marriages, what would seem like a separation from the original family might be regarded as a new connection, a new family configuration in the new destination, an encounter.

The more recent experience of Palestinian diaspora suggests that travelling may take on new meanings when one assumes these women's point of view. Mothers and aunts are the ones who organize and operate a communication circuit connecting relatives. They are recognized as marriage dealers among the young, including those who live in distant towns and nations. In the villages, this takes place on a regular basis, since single people do not speak directly with each other. Gender relations, however, cannot be reduced to marital ones.

Communication is indirect; it is mediated by multiple intermediaries who wish to "put them on their way". They are therefore mediators of the unmarried's communication and reciprocal interests. Standing between relatives, they contrive the possibilities of marriage among the young. In doing this, they end up weaving new itineraries and displacements between countries and localities on behalf of the women to be married.

An exemplary story

Recent events in Samir's family put in perspective this international transit as a constitutive part of these immigrants' family experience, as well as the constraints that make possible and redirect the international transit of Palestinians across Latin America.

In 2006, Samir was entrusted by prayer room members with the responsibility of inviting the men to Friday prayers using the sound system placed outside the club. He is an engineering graduate, and, although he does not regard himself as fully qualified to be called *cherk*, he took on such task as part of his obligations and concerns with the local Muslim community.

During fieldwork in the 1990's, Samir was always in town, and eventually left Chuí in order to attend engineering school in Palestine, where he met his current wife. Now married and father of a young son, Samir took on a share of his father's commercial activities. All his sisters were able to go to school and live in Palestine.

His older sisters are currently married and living in Palestine. Samir, on the other hand, brought his wife to live in Chuí. They live in a comfortable apartment above his father's store. As with other merchants, the stores' upper floor might include one or more homes for the family members, who are then able to live together but "independently".

Samir's wife, Fátima, speaks Arabic and English, but this does not seem to pose a problem given the significant number of Arabic-speaking people in town. She was trained as an English teacher and currently teaches Arabic to immigrants' daughters in the office space next to her apartment. I had a chance to meet Fátima once, and have met her briefly in other

occasions. She was born in a town close to Nablus, where she met Samir. According to her, their families knew each other and their aunts did all the mediation so they could meet. In order to come to Brazil, she obtained a permanent visa as a Brazilian.

Samir spoke about the conditions for his return to Palestine in order to meet his mother and sisters, who live there. For this Brazilian-born son of immigrants, this is a calculation that includes numerous variables. He told me that during the period when he went to school in Palestine and lived with his mother and sisters, unlike them, he could enter and exit the Tel-Aviv airport because he only has a Brazilian passport. He had already been questioned by Israeli customs officers regarding his possession of another passport besides the Brazilian. The lack of a Palestinian passport allowed him a shorter route than that of other relatives: to get to his town through Israel rather than Jordan.

In 2006, Samir and Fátima's son was little more than one year old. Samir told me that the boy could be registered in his wife's papers as the son of a Palestinian. In their next trip to visit Samir's mother, Samir will have to take the same route as his wife and son. This means they should get to Palestine through Jordan and follow by land up to the border because, as a Palestinian, Fátima cannot land at the Tel-Aviv airport. Even though Samir's son is Brazilian, Samir said he would accompany him and the wife in this longer route in their next trips to Palestine. He noted that, even though Fátima has Brazilian citizenship, she is also registered in the airport as a Palestinian citizen, which will prevent her from arriving at the Tel-Aviv airport and force her to arrive through Jordan. If they do register the child in the wife's Palestinian passport, as Samir wishes, he hopes that his son will be able to live in Palestine. In that hypothetical period of residence, in order to accompany his wife, Samir would have to enter Palestine as a Brazilian tourist (since he does not have his father's Palestinian citizenship). But to stay would mean to become an illegal alien and to have to wait for an amnesty (of his illegal status). This is, however, something he considers quite unlikely.

Such projection may be far more complex than I have described. It should be noted that it had been a few years (in 2000) since I first heard the proverb "women fly with their husbands" from Samir's father. At the time, I knew something about Samir's sisters, and that they had been married and lived in Palestine. Today, it is easier for me to understand Mr. Jamal's (Samir's father) pride when introducing me to his daughter-in-law and praising her ability to speak both English and Portuguese. At the time, his reference to the proverb could not relate to his daughter-in-law (who came later), but only to his other five daughters who are in Palestine together with their Palestinian husbands. Today, it was the daughter-in-law who

came from Palestine, further reasserting the proverb's truth.¹¹ After all, she also flew with her husband.

In this contemporary example, there is a calculation regarding the potential illegal status Samir could face in Palestine, as well as doubts concerning his return. On the other hand, the story confirms Jamal's "point of view" and provides elements to reflect on Fátima's "flight". It was Mr. Jamal who told me that Fátima had been his daughter's English student. And, as Fátima herself has confirmed, it was through the mothers and aunts that she and her husband met. In other words, such "flight" has been enabled by various coincidences and other kinds of agencies beyond paternal authority, patrilocality, or the actualization of some matrimonial rule.

Today, as Samir explains, Fátima's students have increased from five (in 2006) to thirty, all of them girls. As both spouses noted, she could not teach men (that is, those over ten years old). During separate interviews, they have both explained that ten-year-olds are undergoing significant changes and start to look at women differently. It is also at that moment that one should begin wearing the veil when these children are present.

As they told me, it was the students' mothers (residents of Chuí) who asked Fátima to teach them Arabic. These girls argued that they knew of others who had gone to Palestine and faced adaptation problems at school because they could not speak Arabic very well. They would lag behind in classes, or join cohorts that did not match their own age. Arabic classes, they suggested, could open up new windows of opportunity. They were being prepared to leave Chuí and reenter Palestinian life.

I have met her Arabic students in the state school. The way they traced their Arab origin, or their Arab "half" of the family, was not very elaborated. They would mention first names and draw a map of kinship with a strong bias toward paternal and maternal ties, as well as their brothers'. As in other moments during fieldwork, eventual visits by cousins and their parents to Chuí were part of the learning process about the girls' Palestinian origin which situated them in such maps.

When I met this "group of girls" I quickly realized they had shared routines. They would walk around the town together, left the stores where they worked as clerks at the same time, and attend the same Arabic class. These girls are not related to each other. For Arabic classes, for instance, they would leave work and drop by each others' stores in order to pick up their friends and walk together to Fátima's place.

¹¹ During my first period of fieldwork in 1996, immigrants had a hard time finding a female Arab teacher for

Various regular elements of such female (and generational) solidarity had also been indicated by Fátima. This was something that surprised me, especially with respect to her postpartum experience. I used to see her as a “newcomer” with a limited social circle. But she told me about all the solidarity she was welcomed with in Chuí. All women who were wives of immigrants went to visit and welcome her when she first arrived in town. She told me that when her son was born, her mother-in-law came from Palestine just to be with her. When asked about the kind of support she had during postpartum, she told me about the huge solidarity of Chuí women. They would come to her house, make coffee for the guests – Fátima said with a smile that she did no more than take care of her own newborn.

As in other moments during fieldwork, generational and gender solidarity appeared as significant part of their lives. Therefore, it is not possible to understand negotiations within the family and the proverb itself only from the perspective of marital life and the impositions of one generation on the others. The intense solidarity and daily relations among women (and men) should be recognized. Here we find the proverb’s particular density. While it tells of a common outcome and reiterates patrilocality, it also indicates other points of view on the experience of displacement and the ways these run along gendered lines.

Neither should “female solidarity” be regarded as something purely “structural” in family relations. It sheds light on debates between the colonial feminist perspective and the feminist view on Muslim women that has been proposed by authors such as Leila Ahmed (1992) and Lila Abu-Lughod (2002b).

Different points of view on matrimonial exchange

The saying that “women fly with their husbands” evokes some of the elements that configure migration, and reveals elements of gender relations. This is a space of affects which exposes its practical and affective costs, and prompts us to approach the proverb from the perspective of fieldwork experiences pertaining to gender relations and immigration, as well as to revisit orientalist views on Muslim women.¹²

As shown by Abu-Lughod (2002a), studies drawing on a new colonialist feminism promote a need to “save” Muslim women; among its colonial obsessions is the veil as a sign of male domination. Abu-Lughod’s orientalist critique suggests that studies on this kind of

their young daughters.

¹² Dayan-Herzbrun (1995) mentions the singularity of Palestinian women as symbols of national resistance within the Arab world. Part of the political rhetoric discussed by this author draws on the most evident signs evoked by these women to differentiate themselves from other Muslim women.

phenomena (and she refers more directly to Afghanistan) should regard debates on the female world within the society in question as products of distinct histories and desires which are differently structured. This is not about some blind “respect” for the other’s logics, but an acknowledgement that debates on equality and its symbolic meanings are themselves the product of particular histories.

Lila Abu-Lughod (2002b) evokes the work of Leila Ahmed (1992) to argue that it is not reasonable to believe that debates on female emancipation and education are a separate topic from feminist debates and perspectives by Muslim women’s movements in their own countries. She reminds us that the question of women stirs today’s ideological struggles, especially because it includes expectations that women represent authenticity and act as symbols of resistance to foreign influence. Women end up rising as powerful national symbols, and are contested as a sign of continuity and faithfulness to national traditions.

Abu-Lughod (2002b) explores the example of numerous controversies involving emancipated and educated young women in Egypt during the 1980’s. At that moment, there was a return to wearing the veil. For this author, this was a moment when educated young women wore it as a sign of distinction among relatives, in order to show that the veil would not put at risk their own respectability. At the time, notions of female emancipation were put aside and cast as equivalent to “Western corruption”. Although in these debates modernizing notions often appeared linked to a condemnation of marriage “forced” upon by the parents, bridges were made to other debates and ideals – among these, that modern marriages should be based on the values and ideals of romantic love and free choice.

These authors, therefore, show that debates on the value of modern marriage are not impervious to the contemporary experiences of women and men in Arab countries. They draw attention to a debate that exceeds the space of affect and reach soap operas and popular women’s magazines, and which competes with religious views and reenacts new conceptions that are complementary to religious debates.

As Abu-Lughod (2002b) goes on to argue, it is as if religious obligation was making room for a debate on the imperative that modern couples share common values. Among the latter are partnership and complementarity, grounded on a notion (particularly common among women from Chuí) that it is the role of women to “harmonize” family and marital relations.¹³ There

¹³ In Jardim (2001) and Jardim and Peters (2005), the wedding ritual is ethnographically described as the “weaving” of various elements: the bride’s white veil and dress, the bride’s conversion ritual, the henna ritual and solidarity among married women are aspects of a same ritual that encompasses all these “pieces” and glosses of tradition. Social experience reveals tradition as relived by the group, and reasserted as part of a vast *Arab repertoire*. Accounts by brides and couples reference and value the ideal of romantic love. See Peters (2006).

are lessons to be learned from these debates. A key one refers to the need to broaden our understanding of the “reach” of “marriage”; an over-emphasis on “affects” could blind us to a broader view on moral values.

Among works adopting this critical perspective, I single out Mervat Hatem’s (2002) analysis of poet A’isha Taymur’s biography, which is an invitation to de-center “dominant male narratives”.¹⁴ A poet celebrated as part of Egypt’s nineteenth century literary avant-garde, Taymur is often regarded as the product of a liberal, modern family. She is identified with the modernization of Egypt, and therefore as an agent of change. Contrastively, Hatem’s (2002) take on her entry into the lettered world displaces biographical interpretations centered on the figure of the father (who supported her participation in the literary world) versus the mother, who would represent tradition (the world of domestic skills) and disincentive to the letters. According to this author, such interpretations end up overestimating male power and granting a secondary role to solidarity among women (including the poet’s daughter) in A’isha’s success.

Mervat Hatem’s (2002) arguments reassert the need to displace the point of view toward other subjects, in order to enhance our understanding of gender relations beyond daughter-father or husband-wife relations. Most commonly, interpretations on the agency of Muslim women refer to the constraints attributed to submission to an “other”, and to the logics behind structural schemes of male domination. The proverb that lends a title to this paper seems to suggest a similar emphasis. Hatem’s re-reading of A’isha’s biographies suggests analyses of other points of view on the gender experience, beyond the male-female relation crystallized in marital or parent-child relations.

Is it possible to make salient women’s leading role in immigration routes based on this proverbial saying? After all, at first sight the role of women appears to be subsumed or, at best, “complementary” to what is proposed by their husbands.

I thus take the proverb as an explanatory “clue” for how the kin group has maintained itself during the diaspora, and as a comment on the persistence of migration and “its” common experiences. This, of course, does not mean that this saying exhausts everything there is to be said about gender relations, and much less about marital relations and expectations between the sexes.

¹⁴ In this regard, see interview with François Héritier (Sztutman; Nascimento, 2004) on Bourdieu’s reading of male domination.

My suggestion is that “situations” and contexts should be taken into account; these provide access to a broader and more diversified web of gender relations.¹⁵ It is about dispositions, present at various scales, which concur to an understanding of the proverb (or of its actualization) and of the very possibility of keeping the kin group in motion.

During fieldwork, I took matrimonial arrangements not exactly as a comment on female submission, but as something thought of by women (mothers and daughters) as part of a delicate debate on emancipatory possibilities – at times valuing the daughter’s own emancipation, at times taking marriage as part of a path of female success which would also encompass education and academic training.

In general, what I observed among mothers and in conversations between women was a high value placed on women stemming from the cultural capital achieved by the bride and her family. They would show jewelry gifted to the bride expressing the importance she would assume in the new kin (the groom’s family). These material elements seemed to further highlight the bride’s academic status by showcasing her moral virtues, also described as skills or “qualification”.

Gender relations are a matter of point of view; better said, they are a matter of where from one looks at matrimonial negotiations. If it is from the female group, from what goes on between the bride’s mother and friends, interpretations on the evaluation and outcome of such negotiations may differ significantly.

Flanquart (1999) and Belhadj (2000) discuss the high schooling of Algerian female immigrants in France. What could be seen as an avenue toward emancipation might be in fact experienced as a challenge and as a tension between family and personal projects. This avenue may mean an “option” for celibacy – which, in other contexts, may be a risky calculation. As Belhadj (2000) has argued, investments in educational achievement are not incompatible with values cherished by the family. However, her assessment is that matrimonial choices end up restricting the path to higher education. This author shows that the younger sisters are the ones who end up reaping the benefits from the high schooling of some women. These women are able to enjoy these achievements (i.e., to have their voice heard within the family) and the new ways of configuring family life negotiated between parents and their older sisters.

In other words, in order to understand gender relations it is paramount to keep in mind generational solidarities and their differential distribution among women – that is, the various

¹⁵ Dayan-Herzbrun (1995) presents a debate on images of women and Palestinian nationalism. My interlocutors

points of view on this negotiation of “fates”. Accordingly, what happens with Muslim women in one research context will not necessarily be reproduced in another. This seems evident, but in general, the way literature is deployed ends up bringing together different research contexts and demanding some kind of artificial correlation. This does not mean one cannot learn something about female experiences of generational and gender solidarity. What I am drawing attention to is an over-emphasis on the singleness of the experience of “Muslim women”, and, in some cases, arguments for the diversity of singular “cases” as “variations of a same”.

In the Brazilian South, travels could mean an abrupt interruption of education, since to ascertain the compatibility of educational systems, validate degrees, or pursue education locally might mean to enter yet another space of validation of papers. What is at stake here is not only individual desires, but the ability to carry on education and to show that family and individual projects are compatible. In this sense, it is not about some a priori incompatibility between marriage and education, but about assessing how to make them compatible and sorting out the difficulties identified in trial-and-errors that appear along the way. As with marriage, family negotiations about investment in school life toward higher education were one of the “critical points”. Such investment revealed the family’s ability to afford to keep all its children “in school”.

In Chuí, I met girls who took investment in education – something valued by their family – as an “excuse” to delay their entry in the matrimonial “display window”. That could mean to postpone their attendance to weddings in the region. Subhi’s oldest daughter Halila, for instance, was being pushed by her brothers to attend a wedding for which the family had been invited. Her “excuse” not to attend relied on the priority given to her enrollment in medical school in a neighboring town (Rio Grande), where her parents had already sent one of her brothers to study geography.

In fact, jocosity among siblings helps explain common jokes about the “negotiations” taking place during weddings, where boys and girls stand in opposite sides. Halila’s brothers remark that in her absence, they would be excluded from part of the fun, in special jocosity among young men from their generation. Without a sister, they would be in a disadvantageous position in relation to their cousins and other guests in the cycle of jocosity involving the “negotiations” and exchange of “promises” that make such events so interesting. Halila, however, puts off her involvement by deploying an important fact in family life: her preparation for medical school’s entrance exams.

This sheds light on the ways wills are handled and imposed in this family game made up of numerous voices. In other occasions, I have noticed efforts by some girls to convince their female friends that a trip to Palestine could be as much interesting as her candidacy for the city council. These friends noted the scarcity of “good candidates” in the known matrimonial market or in the same “age group” as the bride since, for them, her friend was waiting too long to get married.

Other situations suggest that the family is cautious not to thwart the professional and individual investment made by their children. These concerns emerged from other experiences of conflict within the family, or from “good examples” mentioned by kinsfolk. Therefore, in the context I observed, certain decisions, marriages, participations in the matrimonial market, paths of education and professionalization become references “among immigrants” which provide exemplary experiences for other children of immigrants:

[The parents] always say so. There is also that sort of prejudice... of course, all of us are made of flesh-and-blood, but Arabs have that prejudice that an Arab woman cannot marry a Brazilian man. A Brazilian man cannot marry an Arab woman. But there it happens a lot. But in my family, my father taught us since we were little that... well, we had it within us that... how would I put it? I have never dated a Brazilian man. Sami was the first one. But within me, whether I wanted it or not, there was always that: it will be with an Arab, it will be with an Arab, do you understand? I have never nourished the perspective of dating a Brazilian. And ever since we were small, that's how we were raised (Manira).

These situations and contexts invite us to speak of cultural “dispositions”, and not exactly of a Muslim culture and even of some coherence between what is experienced in Chuí and what women know in Palestine, or between what one knows and what one is able to say of “Muslim women”.

In Jardim (2001), I have shown that in the context I observed two kinds of solidarity seemed to compete and traverse family decisions. Generational solidarity (between cousins) reasserted the voices of the unmarried vis-à-vis the older generation's authority in the debate on their own destinies. On the other hand, solidarity between “aunts and uncles” (which, from another perspective, is also a kind of solidarity between cousins revitalized in a same, previous generation) showed sympathy with the nephews and nieces' complaints, for instance by hosting them temporarily in their towns. Although schematic and almost “structural”, this

account helps understand the “forces” that organize negotiations and tensions within the family. These two kinds of solidarity overlap with male and female groups, who are the interlocutors par excellence of relations between kin groups. They are the ones who mediate decisions, including the displacement of relatives among localities.

The moment one enters the circuit of celebrations or is interpolated by matrimonial choices is not only the expression of a script defining desired marriage models. It brings to surface the difficulties experienced by the unmarried (in this case, siblings) in imposing their own will over the numerous demands placed on them by relatives (parents or uncles and aunts). Also at stake are the parents’ concerns with the fate of their children, in special the daughters’ sexual purity. Thus, from the children’s point of view, the desire to meet and reencounter their cousins who, after marriage, have moved far away to Peru, Chile, Venezuela or Palestine may be actualized by visits during weddings and engagement parties. In this sense, this circuit is cherished as a desired and special moment.

When some immigrants talk about marrying their children, they plan marriages as a way to bridge the distance between cousins. Some of these desires are expressed jokingly by parents as children that have been *promised*. Such jocosity turns into flukes that are made real by their children.

In Chuí, I had a chance to witness a space of tension within the family due to problems with accomplishing “Arab” weddings. This may take the form of “buck passing” between siblings regarding who should get married first, and thus satisfy the relatives’ will. This has the potential of hampering generational solidarity, particularly among siblings. It is here that cousins emerge as allies within the family, reinforcing or supporting the participation and joking relations in wedding celebrations.¹⁶ Apparently, the boys are not so reluctant to take part in this circuit, but it is not uncommon to find sons of immigrants who have never attended such events and have sought to distance themselves from this matrimonial market.

These remarks aim at bringing to light the various meanings behind the proverb. The proverb corroborates a particular “outcome” of marriages as if they stemmed from one structural (and male) principle. Moreover, it is not simply about an imposition of the will of an older generation over a younger one. In particular, the ethnography has elicited new elements that bring forth the ability of women (mothers and aunts) to organize the circulation of brides.

¹⁶ To understand the flows of alliances and rivalries within the family as “solidarities” seen as potential is a suggestion I take from the work of Fonseca (2000). Jardim (2001) and Peters (2006) describe the weddings’ dynamics, where young men dance in groups and separately from the young women. This difference does not express distance and separation between male and female; the celebrations’ bodily *performances* manifest the solidarity among cousins according to generation and gender solidarities.

My suggestion is that, to understand this research setting, it is necessary to broaden the scope in order to contemplate other points of view at play in gender relations. In particular, I would like to emphasize an overlap between generation and gender solidarity in gender relations. This brings to the foreground other “points of view” on family negotiations which influence the outcome of marriages and potentially keep kinsfolk circulating between countries.

As suggested by Sayad (1977), rupture is the truth of immigration.¹⁷ In this sense, Palestinian immigrants operate the reverse movement: their effort is to reconnect, not necessarily with their homeland, but with a wide repertoire of cultural references and family relations. It is hard to tell whether this is unique to Palestinians or if it is common to first-generation immigrants. For the Palestinians, the new home is not reduced to the production of permanence, but of a field of possibilities and a promising future.

As was seen, it is necessary to obtain papers, local documents that situate them within a nation-state, and to amass the cultural capital required in order to live in another country and speak another language. To “return” has meant above all to plan reunions, and their trajectories reflect a bet and a risk which should be permanently reevaluated.

Obstacles that complicate such displacements include the distinctiveness of an Arab name on an international document, as well as double citizenship; at times it enables, at times it reasserts, their “foreign” status within the new societies.

It is vital to lay out some of the Palestinian immigration’s singularities. What would these be? In particular, we should reflect on what happens with such international traffic when borders are not so porous, when it is not possible to negotiate with a Brazilian (or other) passport when the Arab family name is more salient than the documentation itself and complicates the travel. Another specificity is the fact that, even in the presence of individual papers, family life in passports is not univocal – whether because brothers have passports from the various places they lived at different moments in family life, or because not all children have the same nationality of the parents or among themselves.

As I have shown in Jardim (2001), women organize a broad matrimonial circuit which has animated the movement and circulation of relatives, as well as enhanced the possibilities of “coming and going”. They have nourished this travel circuit, which we regard as trans-national but which they identify as an inherent trait of “scattered families”. They act in accord with a know model of gender attributions regarded as male and female.

¹⁷ Sayad (1977) discusses how immigration and rupture are lived as generational experiences (focusing on the immigrants’ insertion in the new society) and as an experience shared by collectivities.

Palestinian immigration has therefore proceeded in the form of “scattered” families. This has allowed them to reconnect and plan new encounters among relatives according to well-known scenarios in their family experiences (of diaspora). In other words, they tend to turn rupture into continuity – that is what is encapsulated in the adage “women fly with their husbands”.

Of course, this native phrase calls for various debates – including psychoanalytic – about the terms used. After all, women *fly* when married, and this is about fates and desires that intermingle with the achievement of an adult *status*.

I believe the saying provides one comment on this disposition involved in matrimonial exchange, in order to think how the Palestinian diaspora is configured through marriage. On the other hand, it reveals a denser field of gender relations which cannot be reduced to a superficial rendition of a comment on marital life.

I suggest that the situations approached here prompt a reflection on the role we ascribe to authority, complicity, and unforeseen events in family life. Family dynamics should be looked at more broadly than as a mere structural “adjustment” of gender relations or their reduction to marital relations.

Following Lila Abu-Lughod (2002b) and Hatem (2002), I have suggested that we think of different points of view on gender relations and the tensions between them. This would mean to regard kin solidarities and rivalries as instances which delineate family experiences and create new possibilities. It is according to those situations and contexts that Muslim women organize their action.

It is thus important to take into account the system of cultural dispositions that enable the displacements of subjects. It includes, firstly, interest young people show in broadening the network of known relatives from their own generation. This allows them to meet others who share this “scattered family”, and to acknowledge similarities such as, for instance, paternal and maternal authority in decisions regarding their emotional and professional lives. Generational solidarity enables the young to meet other young relatives, and recognize their own family experience in others’.

Secondly, the proverb obfuscates the role of women such as mothers and aunts in how such “flights” are organized. The saying is proverbial, and reveals a native comment which encapsulates a variety of situations where relatives come and go.¹⁸

¹⁸ Lask (2000) stresses concerns by Brazilian immigrants of Japanese origin living in Japan regarding their mastery over the language and educational qualifications in both codes, Japanese and Portuguese. The intromission and preoccupations by the older generation with relation to the younger are also noted.

Thirdly, these dispositions are treated at times as shared experience, at times as successful examples of immigrant family life. They are, therefore, affective dispositions which cannot be reduced to “marital life” and which take into account constraints on the international circulation of relatives. It is always worth recalling that to have an Arab name on a passport, even if it is Brazilian, is a well-known constraint. Nonetheless, immigrants keep naming their children based on a pool of first names that resonates with a recognizably Arab repertoire. This reveals an investment in distinctiveness, and at the same time an evocation of family origins as something to be made present and as a reproduction of criteria that reduce the disparity between the subjects’ perceptions of the world and their possible fates.

As shown by students of the economic drives that turn immigrating into a “family way” of solving crises in the home country, immigration is not exactly the outcome of free choice. In the case of the Palestinian diaspora, immigration has become crystallized in its networks as a possible fate, both for economic and political reasons and due to efforts by families, especially women, to reconnect and re-signify the experience of travelling. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that these negotiations are performed and thought of by the various subjects involved from the perspectives they assume on gender relations.

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