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Dutch Moroccan Websites: A Transnational Imagery?

Lenie Brouwer

In the last few years, second-generation migrants in the Netherlands have started to set up their own websites, in particular Dutch Moroccan youth. These developments have changed the old phenomenon of migration, making new communication technology a special feature of the concept of transnationalism. For migrants, the Internet is an excellent tool to ally themselves with compatriots throughout the world. This paper focuses on how the second generation of migrants uses discussion boards of websites to express their ties with their country of origin; thus websites are examples of cultural artefacts that can be seen as a virtual way of keeping alive the image of Morocco. Two websites, Maroc.nl and Maghreb.nl, show how Dutch Moroccan youth express their loyalty and belonging to Morocco. They use these websites as a source of information and imagination, therefore the sites function as a binding factor in a Dutch social context. In fact, what these particular websites keep together is not the transnational but the national network of Dutch Moroccan youths.

Keywords: Transnationalism; Websites; Moroccan Youth; The Netherlands; Marriage

Introduction

In the last few years, second-generation migrants in the Netherlands have started to set up their own websites. Youths with a Moroccan, Surinamese or Turkish background have increasingly organised themselves along ethnic lines on the Internet, exchanging information about their country of origin, providing local news concerning migrants and offering chat rooms or discussion boards. Judging by the large number of migrant boys and girls who visit these sites every day or post messages on the forums, these are very successful initiatives. Dutch Moroccan youths have been especially active on the Internet, probably because of their negative public image in the media. Websites give them the chance to be heard (Brouwer 2005: 91).

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The first Moroccan website—*Maroc.nl*—was set up five years ago. Since then, many more have been started, including the more commercial *Maghreb.nl* and the Berber website *Amazigh.nl*

These kinds of development have changed the old phenomenon of migration and have made the emergence of new communication technology a special feature of the concept of transnationalism (Faist 1999; Vertovec 1999, 2001). New communication technologies have made it easier for migrants to be actively involved in, and to sustain contacts with, their homeland. For migrants, the Internet is an excellent tool to ally themselves with compatriots throughout the world (Georgiou 2002; Miller and Slater 2000; Mitra 2000). The question, however, is how second-generation migrants use these kinds of website to express their ties with their country of origin.

I seek to answer this question by looking closely at the meaning of websites to second-generation migrants in relation to their attitude to their country of origin. Two popular sites launched by Dutch Moroccans are analysed, with particular attention paid to the content of the home page and the postings on the message board. What kind of image of their country of origin do Dutch Moroccan youths construct on their websites? Before turning to the analysis of these websites and forums, I shall first sketch both how technology can help keep transnational networks together and the role that cultural artefacts can play in this process.

Transnationalism

There have always been back and forth movements of people between countries. Recently, however, these movements have acquired such complexity that they are now regarded as an emergent social field (Portes *et al.* 1999: 217). This field consists of a growing number of persons who live a dual life: they speak two languages, have a home in two countries and maintain regular contacts across national borders. Transnational activities comprise economic, political and social initiatives. Portes *et al.* limit the concept of transnationalism to occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders (1999: 221). They exclude the occasional gifts of money sent by immigrants to relatives because, although such occasional contacts can contribute to reinforcing ties between both communities, they are neither new enough nor sufficiently distinct.

Portes *et al.* emphasise the high intensity of exchanges, the new modes of transacting and the multiplication of activities that require cross-border travel and contacts on a sustained basis (1999: 221). Although various scholars have adopted this definition, Faist seeks to conceptualise more clearly the different types of phenomenon subsumed under the heading of transnational social spaces (1999: 2). Amongst the new characteristics of transnational enterprise he mentions are the technological conditions that make communications across national borders so rapid and easy. Increasingly cheap air transport, long-distance telephone communication, e-mail and the Internet provide the technological basis for the emergence of transnationalism on a mass scale. Portes and his colleagues present the identification

of necessary conditions for the rise of this transnationalism as a topic for empirical research and as a source of new hypotheses (1999: 224). For instance, the greater the access a migrant group has to space- and time-compressing technology, the greater the frequency and scope of this sort of activity. Such a migrant group should register higher levels of transnationalism than groups with less access.

The same applies to the distance from the country of origin: the space-compressing power of modern electronics allows persons having command of these resources to engage in transnational activities without the need for face-to-face contact. The barrier of distance gradually diminishes as communities become able to substitute traditional personal contacts with new electronic means of communication. Portes *et al.* (1999) conclude that contemporary transnational networks represent a new period in the evolution of the world economy and a different set of people's responses and strategies.

Vertovec (1999: 448) considers that Portes and his colleagues have made a convincing contribution to the theory of transnationalism through their focus on the large scale of intensity and simultaneity. Vertovec defines transnationalism in a quite general manner as a 'condition in which, despite great distances, certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common . . . virtual arena of activity' (1999: 447).

Another premise Vertovec deals with is the kind of consciousness or experiences that tie people into networks marked by dual or multiple identifications. This awareness of multi-locality stimulates the desire to connect oneself with those who share the same background. Transnational ties can be held together through cultural artefacts and a shared imagination. Vertovec introduces a typical mode of consciousness—the 'new transnational imaginary'—that can be observed reshaping many forms of cultural production (1999: 451). This cultural production is especially found among second-generation transnational youths, whose identity is elaborated from more than one heritage. The global media and allied technologies are of great importance in this process.

In order to understand the ways in which technology has facilitated transnational networks, Vertovec asks what kind of transnational ties second-generation migrants maintain with their homeland and with co-ethnic members worldwide (2001: 577). Following Hine (2000: 27), who considers the Internet as a cultural artefact shaped by social processes, this question will be discussed by focusing on forums on the websites of second-generation migrants.

However, there are different ways to imagine the homeland in a transnational context. In this respect, Kaya's research (2002) on Turkish hip-hop youths in Berlin is very interesting. Hip-hop can be seen as an aspect of youth culture that enables ethnic minority youngsters to use both their own cultural capital and global transnational capital in articulating their identities. These Turkish rappers refer to their ethnicity as a strategising tool to articulate their identities in response to the nationalism and racism of the majority. Ethnicity and relations with their homeland become a source of identity politics, and therefore the texts of the songs form a counter-discourse.

They draw on authentic Turkish folk music culture as a basis for their rap songs. They tend to express themselves by means of protest music, which fits into the popular culture. Kaya perceives rap as a resistance movement, offering a shared code of communication as well as a sense of collectivism (2002: 46).

Rap bridges the gap between the Turkish diaspora community and the imagined homeland (Kaya 2002: 48). It is a specific site for creating collective identity, as well as for shaping and reflecting dominant and subordinate social and cultural relations. In the face of racism and negative pressure to assimilate, rap offers Turkish youths a positive sense of identity in constructing a counterculture. Finally, according to Kaya, rap music becomes a vehicle that allows Turkish youths to gain a better understanding of their heritage and their present identities when official channels of remembering fail to meet their needs. Kaya's research shows how second-generation migrants are able to bring together their own ethnicity and local situation in creative rap music, providing a form of counter-discourse and at the same time a source of belonging. In this article, I seek to establish whether it is possible to apply these notions about the meaning of rap music to that of websites as a vehicle of counter-discourses of collective identity for Dutch Moroccan youth.

Another example of constructing a homeland in a migrant context is related by Ruba Salih (2001) in her research on Moroccan women in Italy and Morocco. Moroccan women in Italy are involved in transnational movements and use symbolic and economic capital in the construction of their identities. Salih describes the process whereby women appropriate and negotiate symbols of modernity by attributing value to goods that flow from Italy to Morocco, and vice versa. According to Salih, what is significant is not only the flow of different goods, ideas and cultural meanings, but also the ways in which things are given new cultural meanings and the kind of relations they produce (2001: 667).

Salih focused on the conceptualisation of the home as both a physical space to inhabit and as the symbolic space of where one belongs. Women give meaning to the spaces they inhabit through the objects they take with them. For instance, homes in Italy are decorated with Moroccan and Muslim pictures or sofa covers that reflect this double tie; also the consumption of Moroccan food contributes to this sense of belonging and socialisation (Salih 2001: 667). Salih's research focused on first-generation migrants, who tend to have very strong ties with their homeland; in some cases, their life in Italy is mainly functional to their annual visit to Morocco (2001: 669).

Not only can a home be a symbolic space for creating meanings: the Internet can be, too. Hine regards the Internet as a cultural artefact, which means that it is socially shaped in a context of use and that it has different cultural meanings in different contexts (Hine 2000: 30). For instance, Miller and Slater demonstrate in their ethnographic case study of Trinidad that, thanks to the Internet (particularly email, and 'I seek you' chat boxes), family contacts that had diminished after the extensive migration have been re-established (2000: 62). Lisa Law emphasises the Internet as the site of 'new' political spaces for transnational communities in Asia, where they

question issues of human rights and working conditions of labour migrants (2003: 250). In the light of these different meanings of the use of the Internet, a question arises concerning the role of websites for second-generation Moroccan migrants in the construction of their transnational ties with their parents' country of origin.

Websites

The first Moroccan immigrants came to the Netherlands as guestworkers in the mid-1960s, followed by their families in the 1970s and 1980s. Two-thirds of the immigrants are of Berber origin and came from the Rif (the northern part of Morocco); the remainder came from the south or one of the big cities (Mamadouh 2001: 260). Today, the Moroccan population in the Netherlands numbers 315,820 (1.9 per cent of the country's total population), with a second generation (those born in the Netherlands) numbering some 147,324 (47 per cent) (CBS 2005).

Migrant families stay financially linked with their homeland through the remittances they send to the families they have left behind (Strijp 1997: 149). However, as noted by Portes *et al.*, this has always been done by migrants and is not very specific to a transnational group. The same applies to the houses and land most of the first-generation Moroccans own in their place of origin. Remittances to Morocco have become even more important in recent years, although the older generation gives more than the younger generation does.¹ As Salih established in her research on Moroccans in Italy, migrants in the Netherlands have Moroccan objects in their houses that reflect their ties with their homeland. Telephone contact is another important means of staying connected with their families in Morocco. Such contact has become increasingly cheap as a result of the growth of communication technology, thus making it easier to maintain contact with families in the place of origin. In addition, satellite television allows migrants to follow the news and television programmes broadcast in their homeland and to maintain continuity with their origin country (Ziyati 1999). These technologies allow rapid and sustained communication, which means one can speak of transnational groups (cf. Portes *et al.* 1999).

Besides these flows of goods and information, there are flows of people through marriages and holidays to maintain the transnational ties (Mamadouh 2001: 259). Transnational marriages (i.e. marriages between persons from two different countries) are important possibilities for social alliances with families in Morocco; in 1999, over 70 per cent of the Netherlands-based Moroccan migrants who married, married someone residing in Morocco (Hooghiemstra 2000a: 205). The physical alliance with Morocco of the youths who were born in the Netherlands is mainly determined by their regular family visits during the summer holidays. In that sense, websites are examples of cultural artefacts that can be seen as a virtual way of keeping alive the image of their country of origin. The following is a review of how Morocco is represented on the websites and the kind of information these sites provide about Morocco.

Maroc.nl

Both the *Maroc.nl* foundation and its website were officially established in April 1999 by a group of Moroccan youths who were regular users of a chat box; by December 2005 the site claimed to have almost 44,000 members or users. On the website, the organisation explains its goals, namely to increase Internet access for Moroccan organisations and to improve interaction between Moroccans, other migrants and the native Dutch. Different teams are responsible for the chat box, the discussion board and the website. The organisation is also involved in Internet projects at schools and participates in media debates.

The first page presents two photos of a typical Moroccan scene, overlain with traditional Berber symbols, which alternate every few seconds. One first sees an old man dressed in traditional Berber clothing and the silhouette of a camel, symbol of the desert, against an orange background; then a lighter photo is shown of a traditional Berber village. The latest news appears on the site every 15 minutes. The news, however, does not cater especially to issues related to Moroccans, migrants or Muslims, but focuses on national and international events.

A quick look at the information behind the links on the homepage reveals a broader orientation towards specific Moroccan topics. The links provide connections to a number of Moroccan businesses and organisations, Islamic websites, Moroccan sport sites, sites on tourism in Morocco, a marriage website, and sites from which Moroccan music can be downloaded. The access to music and sports suggests that Moroccan singers and sports stars are regarded as heroes and that the youths can associate with their success. The touristic pictures of Moroccan places and mountains present Morocco in a very positive light. These Moroccan symbols and links allow visitors to identify themselves with Morocco.

Maghreb.nl

A year after *Maroc.nl* was launched, a more commercial website was set up, *Maghreb.nl*, the ‘virtual house of Morocco in the Netherlands’. The webmasters have more advertisements on their site and compete directly with *Maroc.nl*, because their target group is the same. The organisation claims that, since March 2000, the site has had 1.5 million visitors and has around 900 members—which is fewer than *Maroc.nl* says it had by December 2005. According to the Maghreb homepage, most visitors are young Moroccans who either are studying or are active on the labour market. The site’s explicit goal is to bring together Moroccans and other persons who have an affinity with the Moroccan community in the Netherlands. The site provides information about Moroccans in the Netherlands. In this respect, it is more outspoken than *Maroc.nl*.

The news on the first page is mainly related to Moroccan issues in the Netherlands, unlike the news provided by *Maroc.nl*. The other topics—such as business, Islam and the media—are also related to Morocco. Scrolling down the first page, one comes

across a great number of themes with hyperlinks; some are the same as on *Maroc.nl*, while others are different. Listed on the site are news issues, forum topics, advertisements, columns and a poll on the importation of marriage partners. In the middle of the site there is a photo gallery of various Moroccan events in Morocco and in the Netherlands (e.g. photos of Dutch Moroccans on holiday in Morocco and Moroccan music festivals in the Netherlands). There is also the same list of items with hyperlinks as the one carried by *Maroc.nl*; in addition, however, there is a list of personal homepages, where youths provide links to their favourite music sites or show attractive images of Morocco. On the tourism page, various pictures of Moroccan cities (e.g. Nador and Tangier) can be viewed, which stress the agreeable parts of Morocco.

Thus, both sites provide Moroccan youths with a new social space where they can share their imagination of Morocco. These sites offer information of a varied nature that can be used to construct a collective Moroccan identity. However, *Maghreb.nl* contains more hyperlinks oriented towards Morocco than the *Maroc.nl* site does, and it claims more visitors. Both websites project a rather idealistic and touristic image of their homeland, and create the possibility for visitors to identify with pictures of Moroccan cities, landscapes, singers and sportsmen. Sensitive subjects—such as politics and poverty—do not fit in with this positive image and are therefore not mentioned on the websites' homepage.

Interactivity: Discourses on Message Boards

One reason for the success of the websites is the interactive possibility for Moroccan youths to participate in virtual debates. These message boards allow them to anonymously exchange views on relevant topics. Most of the users live in the Netherlands, although Moroccan youths living in Belgium are also represented. It should be noted that the visitors use Dutch in their online discussions, although they sometimes include Moroccan expressions in their postings. Arabic is a rather difficult language to use on a computer, and most youngsters of Berber origin are probably unable to do so. This is also the case with the Berber language. The range of these forums is therefore restricted to Dutch speakers, and there is no possibility of communicating with Moroccans abroad. Thus, language limits the transnational network.

Members of these websites must register in order to participate in the discussions on the forums. Most people choose a nickname—usually a common first name (e.g. Fatima or Mohammed), although some young people identify so much with their parents' place of origin that they use it in their nickname. The Berber coastal city of Nador and the Arabic town of Tetouan in northern Morocco are good examples of this, for example 'Miss Nadoria', 'Nador46', 'Misske Tetouan' and 'Tetounia'. They also refer to the Rif by calling themselves 'Missrif' or 'Naimarif'.

I shall now deal with two discussion topics on *Maroc.nl* and *Maghreb.nl*, namely the choice of a marriage partner—because marriages with a partner from Morocco are considered crucial to sustaining the transnational network—and Morocco as a

holiday destination, because this is the physical experience that second-generation Moroccans have of their parents' country of origin. What meanings do these discussions on the websites create in the context of their connection with Morocco?

Analysing the debates on the discussion boards through discourse analysis is very fruitful, for we are dealing with the production of meanings through texts. Discourse analysis involves a perspective on language which sees this not as reflecting reality, but as constructing and organising that social reality (Tonkiss 1998: 246). This approach perceives a text as a site in which social meanings are created and reproduced.

Maroc.nl

Maroc.nl provides its members with ten forum topics on which to post messages. The most popular headings are 'Those who write, endure' and 'Girls' board'; other popular ones are, for example, 'Media', 'Islam', 'Society' and 'Bazaar'. It is mentioned in the forum that there are more than 80,000 discussion threads, comprising a total of more than a million messages (January 2005). In addition, the numerous debates demonstrate the desire among Dutch Moroccan youths for discussion, taking into account the many postings and page-views. Visitors may rate discussions by awarding them stars. An example of a five-star topic on the 'Society' forum is a survey on 'Two faiths on one pillow: the devil must sleep in between' (53 responses with 3,135 page-views in eight months). Another five-star topic is on the 'Islam' forum and concerns the role of Arabs in the debate on America's leading role in the world (113 responses and 3,378 page-views in six months). Five-star examples from the 'Girls' board' are the question: 'Are Dutch girls more attractive than Moroccan girls?' (220 responses and 7,854 page-views in ten months) and the title of a discussion: 'Not a virgin, then a whore' (136 responses and 2,448 page-views in just two months) (10 January 2005). In general, the popular topics are those that concern such sensitive matters as relationships, religion and politics. Anything related to marriage is also highly valued.

Marriage Partners

In Moroccan culture, marriage is traditionally a family matter that unites two families; it cannot be an individual decision taken by a son or daughter, unlike in Western societies (Brouwer 1997). Although Moroccan girls have a formal right to refuse to enter into an arranged marriage, they are not supposed to suggest a partner. Most parents consider a marriage with a member of the family as the ideal arrangement, as the families are known to both partners, which means that the marriage will have the greatest chance of success. In the migration context, transnational marriages have become even more significant for migrant communities, since such marriages continue the transnational ties with the homeland. In addition, it is now the only way to legally enter the Netherlands from Morocco, as the borders have been closed to new migration streams (Hooghiemstra 2003: 166).

However, for the last ten years the government has been trying to restrict this flow by tightening the rules, increasing the formal income requirements to above the social minimum, and raising the minimum age at which a person may marry a person living abroad (Hooghiemstra 2003: 77). Because of the big difference in income and labour possibilities between the Netherlands and Morocco, families are occasionally pressured by their relatives in Morocco to let them participate in their supposed wealth through an arranged marriage with a nephew or niece. These requests are difficult for Moroccan families in the Netherlands to refuse. Dutch policy makers fear not only that the newcomers would be unemployed, but also that a new flow would hamper the process of integrating the existing communities, especially in the case of migrants with a low level of education (Hooghiemstra 2000b: 209). These various interests and expectations of the families involved have meant that transnational marriages have become quite a sensitive topic, with not much room for young people to negotiate. The debates on the message boards give second-generation Dutch Moroccans the opportunity to express their view anonymously on this challenging topic and to exchange personal experiences and strategies (*Maroc.nl* 2001).

On the 'Girls' board, the discussion on the topic 'With whom do you want to marry?' seems to be very popular: it has been given five stars and has been running for more than two years (the first message was posted on 26 April 2002; on 11 January 2005 the discussion was still going on). The number of page-views (over 20,000) also illustrates the attractiveness of the topic.

Along with the discussion, the website published the results of a survey in which 1,359 persons participated: 64 per cent said that they would prefer a Moroccan partner from the Netherlands, 10 per cent stated that they would prefer a partner from Morocco, 20 per cent had no preference and 6 per cent filled in 'other' (11 January 2005). Although this survey cannot be regarded as representative, since it was based on a selective sample, it does indicate a certain tendency that is in contrast with the current daily practice of a majority of second-generation Dutch Moroccans—namely, they still marry a partner from Morocco, as mentioned above. A closer look at the 280 postings on this topic reveals more about the reasons behind the respondents' preferences.

First, the dominant discourse in the public debate on marriages with a preference for a partner in Morocco is hardly reflected in the contributions to the digital forum. Most of the participants say that they would not trust a partner from Morocco, as they fear that the partner would want to marry them for the residence permit and not for reasons of love. Many believe that there are no males in Morocco who would marry for love, and that therefore one would always doubt the motives of a partner from Morocco. An 18-year-old Moroccan girl summarised this feeling about grooms from Morocco: 'You never know what they want from you. Do they really love you—or do they only want a residence permit?' (4 June 2002). In Morocco, the Netherlands is called the 'land of milk and honey', although it is assumed that a good Muslim will never marry someone just to get a residence permit. The visitors have also their doubts about Dutch Moroccan boys who want to marry a young virgin in Morocco.

The same applies to Dutch Moroccan girls with a bad reputation who try to find a groom in Morocco, in the expectation that any man will marry them in order to get to the Netherlands.

Because of this negative attitude, if a youngster is planning to marry a partner from Morocco, he or she feels the need to explain the situation. One girl wrote:

I was always the first one who shouted most loudly that I want to marry someone from the Netherlands. But what do you think happened? Yes: I still had ten days to go before I was to return to the Netherlands—and what happened? I met a boy who was really perfect, and with whom I will marry. What is your answer? Fate [*mekteb*]. You can say what you want, but finally you just don't know (30 June 2002).

Here we see that the girl needs two concepts to justify her choice: 'love' and 'fate'. Others also used these terms. In spite of the common image of arranged marriages—namely that love will develop during the marriage—the visitors prefer to talk more in terms of love as the basis for a happy marriage. Most of them start their contribution by saying: 'If I could choose my own groom, I would choose someone I really love, whatever his background'. In the case of true love, some of those posting a reaction even say that having the same ethnicity or religion as their partner is not that relevant to them. As a 17-year-old girl notes: 'Nobody else can decide who you should love. If I had a partner who is not Moroccan and I loved him very much, then I'd choose him. After all, it's your future—not your parents'. Most participants agree with this challenge to the dominant influence of parents on partner choice, but they do not agree that the background of the groom does not matter. A large number of the responses underline the importance of both partners having the same religion and the same Moroccan ethnicity, otherwise they foresee problems with communication: 'A girl from Morocco has undergone a totally different socialisation process than a Moroccan girl in the Netherlands has' (23 June 2002). Most of those posting a reaction reflect this attitude and prefer a Moroccan partner from the Netherlands. However, the frequent use of 'fate' shows that the visitors realise that this matter cannot be entirely dictated by their parents or by themselves, as nobody knows what will happen in the future. One boy wrote that:

Fate will lead us to the right person. Leave fate to Allah and don't initiate relationships by yourself, as we all know this is not allowed. And if we don't obey him, why should he make our life easier? (26 August 2002).

In terms of the continuation of the ethnic community, one can conclude that there is hardly any reason for concern, as most of the second-generation Moroccans on this forum still prefer to marry a partner who is from their own group and has the same religion. However, in terms of sustaining the transnational ties with Morocco, according to the second generation who visited this website, transnational marriages seem to be a contentious theme, especially if we compare this outcome with the current practice of getting a marriage partner from Morocco. In these lively debates,

young Dutch Moroccans create a new space in which to express their views on this important phase in their lives.

Morocco as a Holiday Destination

Another way for second-generation Moroccans to express their connection with Morocco is to talk about the country as a holiday destination. This leads to a totally different and less contested picture. What kind of image of Morocco do the visitors construct in their debates? Typing 'Morocco' into the search engine of the website's forum results in 3,035 threads of postings, which is a large number to read. If we only focus on the highly valued debates (five stars), the selection is easier. For example, the response to 'Choose your favourite holiday city in Morocco' illustrates very well how Dutch Moroccans perceive their parents' country of origin. Within two weeks, 353 members had polled, 70 messages had been posted and 1,228 page-views had been registered (31 March 2003). This topic stimulated boys and girls to write very enthusiastically about their holidays and the way they feel connected with Morocco. Half of those posting a message chose Casablanca as the most wonderful city; however, also places in the north—such as Nador, Berkane and Oujda—are very popular. The messages celebrate the pleasant scenery, the beautiful mountains and the blue sea. Some contributors use rather poetic terms when writing about their place of birth; for instance, a girl wrote about Berkane: 'Her taste is as sweet as her oranges, her face has an orange colour. This city stays in my heart' (14 March 2003). One boy felt the need to post a message about Nador because he is 'touched by the image' that is projected onto his eye: 'Despite everything, I stayed loyal to her and Nador, I love you ...' (14 March 2003).

In another five-star debate called 'Powerful stories', some submitted pictures of their city, which they had downloaded from a special Berber website (1 April 2003). One girl responded: 'I love Nador so much that I can't wait till the summer holiday to return to it' (27 March 2003). Besides the nice Moroccan landscape and cities, they praise the hospitality of Moroccans and express their pride in the Berbers' history. One Berber girl cites 'the hospitality, the rich Berber history where rebels fight for liberty for the *Imazighen* on the Dhar Oubarran mountain. Situated in the very beautiful blue sea full with fish, sung by the Riffan singers.' (14 March 2003). In a poll on 'What do you like most about Morocco?' the possibility 'holidays in Morocco and sitting on the roof and telling each other stories' is highly valued; the same applies to Moroccan feasts (30 November 2004). Others add how nice it is to meet your family again and to see how people support each other.

There are only a few criticisms of Moroccan cities. For instance, one girl says that she used to live in Nador, which in her opinion is 'nothing'. Another remarks that Nador is pleasant for a week, but that she prefers big cities like Tangier or Fez (26 March 2003). Concerning the living conditions in Morocco, there is more space for critical notes. One member writes that 'It's just a pity that there's no tap water and there are no good roads' (14 March 2003). Some also use the forum to recount their

bad experiences as a tourist—such as having to pay more in restaurants, on terraces or for taxis—but there are not many responses to these complaints.

Although most of the second-generation youths are only acquainted with Morocco from their holiday visits, when reading the postings one has to conclude that these visitors also perceive their parents' country as their homeland. The dominant discourse is to idealise the country, with only a few points of criticism. By talking anonymously about their parents' place of origin, Dutch Moroccan youths actively express what their loyalty to Morocco means. Talking about their personal experiences of Morocco as a holiday destination is therefore a valuable way to sustain transnational ties with this country and to keep the image alive.

Maghreb.nl

This website provides six forum topics, four fewer than *Maroc.nl*. Although *Maghreb.nl* claimed to have more users than *Maroc.nl*, this was not supported by the number of participants: the *Maghreb.nl* forum had fewer posted messages (6,792), fewer discussions threads and far fewer members than that of *Maroc.nl* (21 January 2005). As *Maghreb.nl* does not have such a large web archive as *Maroc.nl*, it provides neither the number of threads and page-views, nor the ranking system for highly valued discussions. According to the reported number of postings, the most popular theme is 'News of the Day' (1,129 postings), followed by 'Moroccan youths in the Netherlands' (2,723) and 'Islam in Dutch society' (2,182). The other issues are 'The position of women' (1,664), 'Who wants to return to Morocco?' (683) and 'Where are you from?' (715) (21 January 2005). With respect to transnational marriages and ties with Morocco, I have studied the forum topics regarding the position of women and visits to Morocco more carefully.

Marriage

In the *Maroc.nl* forum, highlighted above, members expressed their doubts about the intentions of marriage partners from Morocco. On *Maghreb.nl* this topic is not really an issue; insofar as it is discussed, participants used the forum to articulate personal experiences. One girl wrote about her brother's divorce: 'On the day his wife received her residence permit, she asked for a divorce' (29 March 2003). Another girl criticised the young married couples she met in Morocco:

I thought: you don't know what marriage means. Why do they neglect themselves after their marriage? Why do women become fat and ugly? Why does the husband look like a homeless person? It's the duty of men and women to take care of themselves.

She then praised the men from Oujda: they are 'wonderful', relaxed and have the right mentality.

I spoke with some girls who had married a boy from Oujda; I only heard positive stories. . . . Do you know what I like most? If a man from Oujda or Berkane loves a Dutch Moroccan girl, they really intend to marry her, and they don't do sneaky things during their relationship (29 March 2003).

Another member also said how important it is to be 'honest' when one meets someone, and she criticised boys who pretend to be nice and promise to give their wife 'freedom', but who then change after marriage and show their 'real character' (29 March 2003). Furthermore, the content of the discussion was mainly about the problem of mixed marriages with a Dutch partner and what to do. They exchanged experiences of how to deal with the Moroccan family, who they expect will be against it. Just as on the forum of *Maroc.nl*, the topic of love in marriage was highly discussed and mostly emphasised. 'True love will survive everything' is the dominant discourse, although a few warnings are posted. For instance: 'Remember that love is temporary; choose a person with your own religion' (6 December 2003).

To summarise, one can say that marriage is a greatly contested issue and visitors like to talk about it in this new digital space, but in terms of sustaining the transnational ties with Morocco, it does not seem that crucial. Just like the visitors to *Maroc.nl*, the members of *Magreb.nl* seem to prefer a Dutch Moroccan partner to one from their country of origin. The visitors to *Maghreb.nl* also appear to be more likely to have a Dutch partner. In that context, they emphasise the significance of making your own choice and hardly mention the role of fate.

Morocco as a Holiday Destination

In several discussions, explicit reference is made to the posters' relationship with Morocco—for instance, to their holiday experiences or to the question of a possible return to Morocco. In the discussion about holiday experiences in Morocco, members say how beautiful some of the places are and how these are kept in the member's soul. One boy described how he visited the village of his father in northern Morocco, after eight years of absence: 'I fell totally in love.' He wanted to return the following year to film it, so that he could see it any time he wants. 'Unfortunately, it won't be the same as in reality'. The village houses were so 'cute', and for the first time in his life he saw the primary school his father used to attend. He wrote how much he has seen there, 'in particular when you're an adult, you see these things differently'. He discovered pleasant things, but also things that frightened him, for instance 'children living in a cemetery, that broke my heart.' These practices make him realise 'how lucky' he is to live in the Netherlands (27 March 2003).

Although second-generation Moroccans living in the Netherlands feel that they belong to Morocco, they do have ambivalent sentiments. They start to look at their country of origin through different eyes. They feel excluded in the Netherlands by 'all the bad things that are said about Moroccans in the Netherlands'. However, they also appreciated the possibilities Moroccans have in the Netherlands, for instance, in

education. One girl described how hard it must be to live in Morocco for someone who was raised in the Netherlands:

I could stay in Morocco for as long as eight weeks, but only for a holiday. Life must be very difficult there if you're accustomed to Holland. When I'm in Morocco, I feel at home because I'm in my motherland. However, people treat you like a foreigner. That happens in the Netherlands as well. You're therefore a stranger in both countries (30 October 2001).

In these debates on the *Maghreb.nl* forum, the users highlight the negative sides of life in Morocco more than the users of the *Maroc.nl* forum do. One girl talks extensively about the bad quality of the roads and the dangerous traffic in northern Morocco, and about the lack of electricity and piped water. For instance, the biggest shopping mall in Berkane has no running water. According to her: 'Instead of drinking from the tap, you'd be better off committing suicide' (21 March 2003). Others followed up with notes about the bad health situation or 'the corruption, which is also called "coffee"' (21 March 2003).

In short, the postings indicate that the feelings of belonging to the land of origin are still prevalent among the Dutch Moroccans who visit the *Maghreb.nl* website, although they certainly do not idealise the living conditions in Morocco. Consequently, it makes the users even more conscious of their connection with their country of residence and the possibilities they have there. The fact that they can articulate their critical views anonymously definitely stimulates this tendency.

Conclusion

The concept of transnationalism is closely related to the emergence of new technologies and communication methods that facilitate migrants' ties with their country of origin. Migrants who are part of a transnational network are apt to use the new media to maintain contacts with their homeland, which has given migration another image. This is especially the case with the first-generation migrants, who still have strong financial and social ties with their homeland. However, this is not automatically the case for those of the second generation, who have a different relationship with their parents' place of origin. So far, not much is known about the attitude of second-generation migrants to the land of their parents.

Websites and message boards are useful for establishing the attitudes of the second generation towards their country of ancestral origin. These sites show that young people do not maintain strong physical ties with the homeland of their parents, but seek to imagine Morocco on the Internet. They articulate their Moroccan collective identity by feeding their interest in Morocco through music, sport, Islam and tourist information. These websites allow them to demonstrate their loyalty and belonging to the country of origin through a virtual community in a Dutch context.

Dutch Moroccan youths primarily use these websites as a source of information and imagination. As Georgiou (2002) suggests, these sites are the new social

platforms for second-generation youths to find out who they are and which aspects of their culture they consider important. The sites therefore function as a binding ethnic factor in a Dutch social context. Vertovec emphasises that we need to understand the ways in which technology has combined with transnational networks, particularly in the case of second-generation migrants. He supposes that the second generation seeks to maintain transnational ties through cultural artefacts and a shared imagination, which can be called the 'new transnational imaginary' (Vertovec 1999: 451). Websites can be seen as examples of such cultural artefacts.

On the message boards, the members debate any topic, including their views on and experiences with their land of origin. The content of these debates is much more diverse and critical than the texts which present Morocco on the first page of the sites. The forum discussions can be partially compared with the Turkish rap songs described by Kaya: like a rap song, a forum discussion can function as a specific site for the creation of collective identity (Kaya 2000: 50). By stressing common Moroccan symbols, the debates nourish and propagate the participants' collective identity as Moroccan. According to Kaya, a rap song can be perceived as a form of counter-discourse to challenge racism in society. In this particular case, the forum discussions about Morocco function as an artefact to express, anonymously, ambivalent experiences with both countries, more than as a counter-discourse. The debates reveal the complex relations the second generation have with their country of origin.

Following Salih's symbolic conceptualisation of a home as a physical place in which to give new meanings to new objects, Dutch Moroccan youths construct their websites in order to virtually imagine their relation with Morocco. Salih shows the importance of the meaning of artefacts for migrants; the rise and popularity of Moroccan websites can be viewed as a shared imagination through Moroccan artefacts. Reading Moroccan topics and discussing the kinds of problem young Dutch Moroccans face in Dutch society strengthen their common feeling of having a Moroccan background. By using the Dutch language, they restrict their linkage to other Dutch speakers. They are therefore more embedded in the local Dutch Moroccan community than in a transnational link with Morocco or with other Moroccans abroad. In that sense, they are less part of a transnational network than they would be were they to practice their Moroccan language.

These types of website can therefore be understood as a symbolic space that is part of the Dutch Moroccan community and which expresses their collective identity. In fact, what these websites keep together is not the transnational but the national network of Dutch Moroccan youths.

Note

- [1] Dutch Moroccans sent 236 million euros and 55 million objects back to their country of origin, representing about one fifth of their income. More than half of the migrants aged

35 or more built a house in their home country. In 2002, remittances sent by migrants amounted to 6.4 per cent of Morocco's GNP (De Haas 2005: 62).

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