

Melting Pot

By Sandra Davené, Julie Leblond and Mathilde Leroy

In the last few years Finland has been confronted with an influx of Somalian immigrants. A Finnish arts university, together with eight European countries, therefore decided to initiate a project on the theme of immigration. Each country was invited to participate in a project entitled 'the other person in an immigration situation'. Picardy Jules Verne University, France, decided to use video as a means to investigate this subject. The theme of cooking appeared suitable for achieving this aim. In addition, this theme fitted well with our experience and individual expectations. In fact, the three of us all have contacts with foreigners and the topic of cooking had often been part of our discussions with them. Having been interested for a long time in this subject, meant that the development of our research project was the outcome of ongoing reflections we had already had, in the course of our personal experiences. For the last three years Sandra had been thinking about the way Asian friends she had, adapted to French eating habits. Through their cooking from their home countries, she had perceived part of their cultural identity. She had become conscious of the richness of exchange between the two cultures through cooking and had found it fascinating. As for Julie, she had always been immersed in African culture, firstly because her father transmitted to her his own love of Africa and later by her regular contacts with the Senegalese community in Amiens. Mathilde for her part, had recently had the experience of being immersed in another culture, when she took part in a European volunteer programme for eight months in Bergen, Norway. Through her discovery of Norwegian eating habits, as well as through frequent discussions about cooking with volunteers of other nationalities, she realised that cooking was a central point in enabling people to make contact with one another and in developing mutual comprehension. This experience enabled her to experience a situation very similar to that of people in an immigration situation;

To conclude, working on a project which concerns immigration, by means of a cookery project, allowed us to make an issue of questions we already had within ourselves. To be

more precise, the making of a film on cooking seems a pertinent starting place for forming a relationship with an immigrant. This could then lead to having a more profound discussion about their situation, by treating eating habits as an echo of their cultural identity.

Firstly, we wanted to get cooks of different nationalities together, so that they could create a common menu in neutral surroundings. The aim was to allow each person to communicate his original culture (ingredients, ways of doing things etc...). By this means we hoped to demonstrate the richness of the difference made concrete by the interaction of their eating habits, which are vectors of their cultural identity. The lack of time meant that we were unable to build up the relationships necessary to carry out this part of the project. Next, we wanted to address ourselves to the question of the authenticity of an eating culture: in what way do we show our eating culture when in a restaurant, and do we experience our eating culture more intimately when at home? After watching the film directed by Johan van der Keuken, *To sang Foto Studio*, we realised that photographic techniques were very important. In fact the way things are shown is as important or more important than the things themselves that are shown. These different stages led us to the setting of of a method, which was nourished by the ideas already described.

Having observed that eating transmits values way beyond the simple act of mere nourishment, we have tried to emphasise the culinary approach as a cultural heritage of the person and an indicator of the way people socialise in their country of origin. It is this which seems to be indicator of compromises made by people of immigrant origin, between their own culinary habits and those of their new country. Indeed, since cooking is a daily activity, it is the easiest way to access one culture from another. Hence the idea of getting people of different origins to meet to talk about their habits and discuss a subject they all have in common. In France, meals have a very social role, but is this the case in other countries? How do foreigners living in France see them? In what way do they adapt or not?

Our methods therefore consisted in putting people of different foreign origins in contact with one another and getting them to meet in a cookery workshop. The people chosen

were all already part of our circle of friends and acquaintances, so we had already established a relationship of trust. Terje, an Estonian, was doing a European volunteer programme for 11 months at the EEC information centre in Amiens. She is 23 years old and intends to continue her studies in political science after her service. Jules is Sengalese and works as a waiter in the Afro/West Indian bar, the Arawak, in Amiens. He plays in the group Talibé. Pedro a Chilean, is a social worker and active in local political life and local associations. Pedro and Jules are both in their forties and have lived in France for a number of years.

Firstly we thought it important to show each participant in their home environment, by showing the objects, photos and other things that surround them everyday. We hope by this means to see how they create a homely environment when they are far from their familiar surroundings. Over these intimate portraits, we intend to superimpose each person speaking off camera, about their cooking habits in their own country. Each person's personal space is thus linked by their words to the person's home culture. The separation of their voice from the image resembles that of the separation of the individual from their home country. These two elements will become synchronised when the moment comes to deal with their relationship with French cooking, when they are in their respective cooking spaces. How do they adapt? In what ways do they make compromises between cooking in their country of origin and that of their new country?

Next we wanted to create a meeting between our three participants. We decided to arrange it as part of a cookery workshop on the premises of the association *Women in Motion*. This organisation brings together women of different origins living in the North of Amiens. Its main aims are nutrition education, as well as creating an environment conducive to sharing and conviviality among people of different origins. Thus it is interesting to establish a link between our project and their objectives. By using an intermediary in the form of a mediator from the association, Terje, Jules and Pedro will be invited to enrich a basic recipe using their own know how. We hope by this means to create an exchange of views concerning each person's eating habits. The film will finish with them tasting the meal concocted together.

From the question of individual adaptation, we have developed towards the notion of the mixing of races by means of the meeting of different cultures. We therefore show that the other person is a source of enrichment.

In order to best attain our objectives, we have begun to meet with each of the people implicated in the project and to discuss with them the form and content of the film **the melting pot**. These meetings take place in international places such as an Indian restaurant or an African bar. In this way, like our three participants, we are transported into a place where the culture is foreign to us. Thus we are all on an equal footing.