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# Population & Societies

Version  
française

## How do immigrants name their children in France?

Baptiste Coulmont\* and Patrick Simon\*\*

Do immigrants give their children names from their country of origin or names that are similar to those given by the majority population in France? And what kinds of names do those immigrants' children give their own children a generation later? In their analysis of name data collected in France, Baptiste Coulmont and Patrick Simon find that the answers vary by immigrants' regional and cultural background.

First-name choice is a matter of parental taste, social norms, and cultural references [1]. But what comes into play in immigrants<sup>(1)</sup> and their descendants' choices for their children? For them, name choice is a cultural marker. In many studies, cultural proximity between the names immigrants and the majority population<sup>(2)</sup> give their children (or given by their descendants a generation later) is interpreted as a sign of assimilation [2]. Giving a “majority name” may also reflect a concern to spare them future difficulties in life: audit surveys have clearly shown the negative impression that North African, African, or Asian first names may have on hirers, real estate agents, and banks [3]. Adopting a “majority name” would make children's immigrant origin partially invisible and might protect them from discrimination. We analysed data from the Trajectories and Origins survey (*Trajectoires et Origines*, TeO) to see how first names are transmitted in immigrant families of various origins living in France (see Box).

### Tell me your name, and I'll tell you where you're from.

There is a long-standing rule of correspondence between a person's first name and the cultural context into which they were born. That correspondence is ensured not only by social customs but also by onomastic unification policies enforced in many countries. Up until the early 1990s, France had an administrative regulation by which parents registering a new birth were advised to select the child's name from among those “used in the various calendars”. Once that regulation was removed, first-name choice in both the majority and immigrant populations became more diverse.

The range of first names found in the majority population therefore widened after 1990, with a corresponding drop in “French” first-name use (see Box). This development can be measured first in terms of the total number of first names given. In 1986, 80 names accounted for half of births; that number had risen to 100 by 1998; and to over 200 by 2008 [7]. The end of the regulation calling on parents to choose a “calendar” first name also had the effect of integrating “exotic” first names; that is, names from outside the usual repertoire, invented or drawn from literature, film, or television series, names given in other countries or chosen as an effect of having immigrated to France

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(1) Individuals not born in France who came to France from abroad and who reside in France.

(2) Individuals with no link to immigration in two generations, i.e. who are not immigrants and whose parents did not immigrate to France.

**Box. Source and methods**

Our data source, the Trajectories and Origins survey (TeO) conducted by INED and INSEE in 2008–2009, aimed to describe and analyse the living conditions and social trajectories of individuals by social origin and their relation to immigration. In a sample of 22,000 respondents in metropolitan France questioned for the survey, the first names of all household members were collected, together with the names of offspring not living in the household. This way we were able to study given names over three generations. Immigrants themselves, born non-French abroad, are named in accordance with the norms of their societies of origin. Immigrants’ children, also termed the second generation (G2) and defined in this case as born in France to one or two immigrant parents, receive first names determined by a combination of the family’s social, cultural, and religious heritage and the social norms of their milieu. Immigrants’ grandchildren or the third generation (G3), who were not directly questioned, were identified by their second-generation parents’ choice of first name for them.

**The different methods used to classify first names**

There are several ways of linking first names to a culture. The first method assumes the existence of a list of first names for each culture; names can be culturally classified either manually or automatically (see [4] for a study of name-giving in Germany and [5] for a systematic listing of Arab and Muslim first names found in civil registers in France). The second method is to link each first name automatically to a linguistic and cultural category by way of a probabilistic classification of the linguistic referents of the syllables that compose the name. Linguistic features of first names are specific to cultural areas, a fact that justifies the cultural classification of names. This method can also be applied to last names, more stable than first names [6]. The third approach is to list first names by the frequency of their occurrence in the population group under study, regardless of their linguistic or cultural signifiers. Here an index is constructed to indicate the name’s relative degree of diffusion among people with no family history of immigration in the two generations preceding them [2].

In our study, we used the second method: automatized classification by linguistic probability. This method generated the following “cultural group” classifications:

**French:** French-sounding first names; that is, names whose components are characteristic of the French linguistic system. People with these names are not necessarily French nationals or of French origin.

**Arab-Muslim:** first names circulating in the Arab world (North Africa and the Middle East) and/or referring to Muslim tradition, including Turkish versions thereof.

**Latin:** first names given in Southern Europe (mainly Italy, Spain, and Portugal) and in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking parts of the world.

**African:** first names from all linguistic areas south of the Sahara Desert – a relatively heterogeneous category.

**Asian:** first names from all linguistic areas of Asia, mainly Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and China.

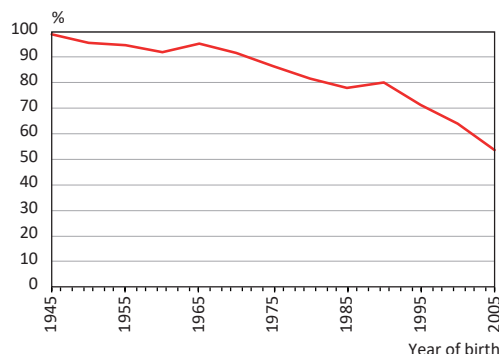
**International or English-speaking:** first names given in English-speaking areas that have spread to all other cultural areas.

**Other group**

**Unclassifiable:** first names made up of syllables which, when analysed, do not link the name to any known category.

We also attributed a score to each first name based on parents’ place(s) of birth: 100 if the parents who chose the name were both born in France, 0 if no parent born in France chose the name. This score, called a distance score, measures the distance between native French persons’ choices and the choices of persons born abroad.

**Figure 1. Proportion of babies receiving a “French” first name\* by year of birth; France, majority population (%)**



B. Coulmont, P. Simon, *Population & Societies* no. 565, INED, April 2019.

Coverage: Children of the majority population.

Source: Trajectories and Origins survey, INED–INSEE, 2008–2009.

\* see Box.

or in reference to an international star of some kind (actors and actresses, athletes, politicians, etc.) (Figure 1). However, this development does not apply to all first names, or at least not to all cultural contexts or references. While 50% of majority population children born in 2008 received a first name that was not typically French (Figure 1), that diversification did not signify convergence of majority population choices with immigrants’ first names or their children’s. This is clear from the distance score, which has remained stable (at around 75 points) for the last 60 years. While the majority population selects first names from a range of cultural contexts (international, Latin, etc.), that range does not include the stock of first names given to non-European immigrants in the 1990s. For example, the majority population names their children Enzo and Clara, but not Mohammed or Farida. Immigrants often arrive in France with first names that are characteristic of the cultural area to which their country of origin belongs. Origin is therefore highly predictable: 94% of immigrants from North Africa have first names classified as Arab-Muslim; 82% of immigrants from Sahelian Africa have “African” or Arab-Muslim first names; and 92% of immigrants from Turkey have a Turkish first name. This is less the case for immigrants from Southeast Asia, only 58% of whom have an Asian-sounding first name (35% have French first names), and for immigrants from central Africa, two-thirds of whom have French first names. Our spontaneous tendency is to ascribe origins based on first names. But are conclusions reached this way factually accurate? In 82% of cases, an Arab-Muslim first name does designate a person from North Africa (either an immigrant or a member of the second generation), and in 95% of cases an “African” first name does belong to someone from sub-Saharan Africa. But

**Table. First names by Southern European or North African origin**

	Southern Europe		North Africa	
	Man's name	Woman's name	Man's name	Woman's name
Immigrants	José Antonio Manuel	Maria Marie Ana	Mohamed Ahmed Rachid	Fatima Fatiha Khadija
Immigrants' children (G2)	Jean David Alexandre	Marie Sandrine Sandra	Mohamed Karim Mehdi	Sarah Nadia Myriam
Immigrants' grandchildren (G3)	Thomas Lucas Enzo	Laura Léa Camille	Yanis Nicolas Mehdi	Sarah Inès Lina

Source: Trajectories and Origins (TeO) survey, INED-INSEE, 2008–2009.

in only 56% of cases does a Latin first name belong to someone from Southern Europe. In fact, France's majority population often chooses Latin names, though with a clear gender difference: 18% of men and 36% of women with a Latin first name belong to the majority population.

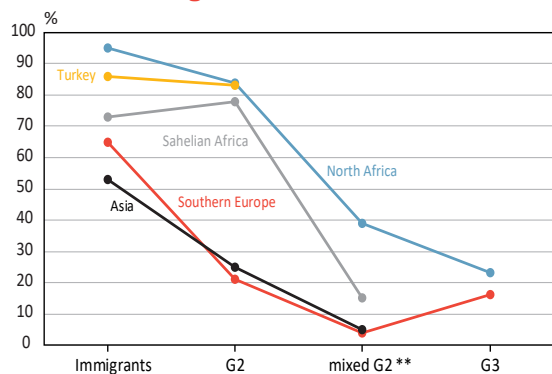
**First name as a sign of cultural change**

The first names that immigrants give their French-born children reflect their cultural heritage but also dominant norms in France, which are themselves evolving. For a girl to be named Lina, Mila, or Inès, or a boy to be named Adam, Liam, or Ethan – all top-20 first names in France in 2017 – is a sign that their parents have adopted dominant tastes. But those first names were virtually non-existent in France before 2000 and can hardly be considered “typically French”.

For reasons of TeO sample size, the only groups for which we can study transmission of first names over three “generations” are Southern Europeans and North Africans. In those two groups, the giving of “specific names” – that is, Arab-Muslim first names for people of North African origin, Latin names for people of Southern European origin (Spain, Italy, Portugal) – involves two different types of transmission logic.

Approximately 65% of Southern Europeans who arrived in France before 1980 have Latin first names (Maria, José, Antonio) (Table), names that were not often given in France at the time. And their children, the second generation, born in France, did not receive Latin names: only 16% of Southern European immigrants' children have a Latin first name (Figure 2). As for third-generation children, the distance score shows that their first names can no longer be distinguished from majority population names. Latin names such as Enzo or Laura have made a comeback since the 1990s among people of Southern European descent, but they

**Figure 2. Specific first names\* by origin and generation (%)**



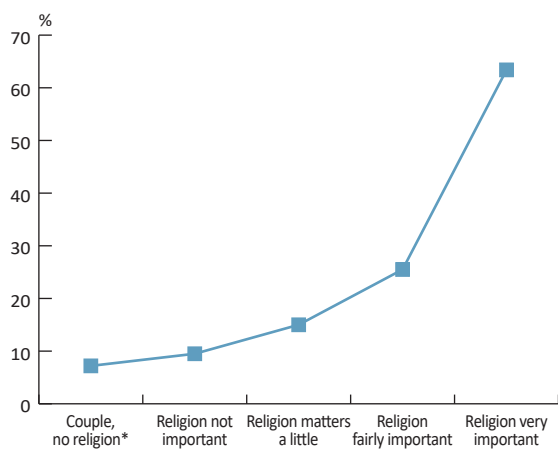
B. Coulmont, P. Simon, *Population & Societies* no. 565, INED, April 2019.  
 Source: Trajectories and Origins (TeO) survey, INED-INSEE, 2008–2009.  
 Notes: \* see Box, \*\* children born to one immigrant and one native parent.

no longer signify otherness from the majority population: assimilation is a moving target!

Immigrants from North Africa, on the other hand, arrive in France with first names (Mohamed, Fatiha) that are very distant from those of the majority population. Nearly 90% of them have Arab-Muslim names. And nearly two-thirds of French-born second-generation children also receive an Arab-Muslim first name, though the cultural context or register of that name is more ambiguous (Nadia, Myriam). However, third-generation first names for this group in 2008 were close to those that the majority population gives their children. Here again, as is the case for Southern European G3 children, we find an increasing number of first names chosen from among those now considered common in France (Inès, Sarah).

The result of the naming process over three generations for people originally from North Africa is the same as for people originally from Southern Europe, but the two groups took different paths to get there. Part of this difference is due to how close French and Latin first names are; another explanation is that mixed immigrant-native couples have a stronger tendency not to use specific first names. Regardless of origin, fewer children of mixed couples have a specific name than children whose parents are both of non-French origin (Figure 2). And while 56% of second-generation children of Southern European origin grew up in a mixed family, the corresponding figure for second-generation children of North African origin is 32%. Comparing this with the start of other groups' trajectories, we find that the behaviour of people of Turkish or Sahelian African origin fits the model followed by those of North African origin, whereas persons of Asian origin follow the same path as Southern European immigrants and their descendants. The fact that immigrants continue to arrive in France

**Figure 3. Proportion of Arab-Muslim first names among North African immigrants' grandchildren by parent's (or parents') religiosity**



B. Coulmont, P. Simon, *Population & Societies* no. 565, INED, April 2019.

Source: Trajectories and Origins (TeO) survey, INED-INSEE, 2008-2009.

\* parent reported having no religion.

from North Africa, Turkey, and sub-Saharan Africa works to prolong cultural retention because a significant proportion of the second generation are in unions with immigrants, a situation less often found among people of Southern European origin.

### Does religion influence first-name choice?

Muslims give specific first names more often than people who report having no religion or Christians, and degree of religiosity does influence choice, regardless of religion. While an average of 23% of grandchildren of North African immigrants have an Arab-Muslim name, the proportion varies by parents' religiosity (Figure 3). Whereas 7% of parents of Muslim background who report having no religion choose an Arab-Muslim first name for their child, 63% of parents with strong religious feelings (that is, who answered that "religion is very important") do so. And it is only in this last case that we find cultural retention through the third generation. Moreover, there is no similar dynamic for Christian families of North African origin because the first names that would be specific to them are the same as those used in majority population Christian families.

### Conclusion

First-name choices made by the majority population and by immigrants' descendants are not converging towards

typically "French" names but rather towards international names that everyone can identify with. However, we do find considerable transmission of first names associated with North Africa, reflected in two distinct situations: filial transmission of Arab-Muslim first names, especially in strongly religious families, but also transmission through a kind of cultural innovation, with the introduction of new first names (Yanis, Rayane, Lina) that the majority population readily perceives as North African. In other words, for France's population of North African origin, the cultural connotations of first names have not become entirely invisible: Yanis is still not seen the same way as Enzo is.

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### Abstract

The first names chosen by the majority population and by immigrants' descendants in France are not converging towards typically "French" names but rather towards international names that everyone can identify with. Many children and grandchildren of immigrants from North Africa continue to receive Arab-Muslim first names while some receive new first names (Yanis, Rayane, or Lina) that the majority population perceives as North African.

### Keywords

First names, immigrants, immigrants' descendants, France, North Africa, Africa, Southern Europe