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Régine Sirota

## When the birthday invitation knocks again and again on the door – learning and construction of manners

### **Abstract**

Birthday invitations, brought home triumphantly after school throughout the year, have recently become an everyday feature in the cultural and social world of the child. Through them, we can perceive a change in the place of the child in contemporary France. Birthday ritual can be considered as a symbol of the transformation of the position of children and of changes in the modes of socialization and sociability. Within the framework of a contribution to the emergence of a sociology of childhood, this article starts an attempt to define and to identify the place of the child as a social actor in this process. Thereby, the child can be considered as a product and as a producer of the ritual.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Einladungskarten zu Geburtstagsfeiern, die während des ganzen Jahres triumphierend nach der Schule mit nach Hause gebracht werden, sind zu einem alltäglichen Charakteristikum in der kulturellen und sozialen Welt der Kinder geworden. An ihnen lässt sich ein Wandel der Stellung des Kindes in Frankreich erkennen. Geburtstagsrituale können als ein Symbol der Transformation der Stellung von Kindern und als Wandel der Art und Weise von Sozialisation und Sozialität betrachtet werden. Der Artikel versteht sich als Beitrag zur Begründung einer Soziologie der Kindheit und versucht, den Ort des Kindes als sozialen Akteur in diesem Prozess zu identifizieren und zu bestimmen, wobei Kinder als Produzenten und Produkt im Prozess der Konstruktion von Ritualen betrachtet werden.

I invite you to my birthday party next Saturday...

Salim invites you to a party to celebrate his birthday...

Come and celebrate my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday! From Thor and Odin, only Vikings admitted! But fancy dress isn't compulsory...

Hello, I invite you to my birthday. We're going to have fun and really amuse ourselves! Come dressed as an alien...

Birthday invitations, brought home triumphantly after school throughout the year, have recently become an everyday feature in the cultural and social world of the child. Through them, we can perceive a change in the place of the child in contemporary France that I would like to examine from the dual perspective of the evolution of the social object and the evolution of its scientific construction.<sup>1</sup>

Birthday ritual can be considered as a symbol of the transformation of the position of children and of changes in the modes of socialization and sociability. In fact, the birthday is the re-emergence of a traditional ritual. It may be considered as a profane ritual that displays and represents the forms of socialization of contemporary childhood and, secondly, the construction of individuality in modern times. Within the framework of a contribution to the emergence of a sociology of childhood, we shall attempt to define and identify the place of the child as a social actor in this process.

## 1. Birthday and childhood

### 1.1 The different phases in the research

This ethnographic research pursued over several years is an „in-depth“ ethnographic study, which allows me to enter into the private life<sup>2</sup> of the family and of the children themselves. The reason is because I take the dual position of a researcher and of a mother in this research. It is thanks to invitations received by my own children that I have been able to enter into private family life, where I have gathered observations, photographic or video documents, and interviews for my research.

Over the past twenty years, the ritual of the birthday has acquired three distinct forms in France: the birthday celebrated within the family, the birthday celebrated with friends, the birthday celebrated at school (see Sirota 1998a). This means that the ritual is celebrated in three agencies of socialization: in the family, with the peer group, and at school. Each of these agencies of socialization – which simultaneously communicate with the others and adopt specific forms, but which all share the celebration of individuality and membership of a social group – contribute to the socialization process.

Two figures should give an idea of the scale of this phenomenon in France: first, nine of ten children receive a present for their birthday according to surveys carried out by the French National Institute of Statistics (Herpin/Verger 1996, p. 1). And second, children during their childhood – i.e. between the ages of one and twelve – attend on average approximately one hundred birthdays celebrated with their friends and a dozen family birthdays (or more in the case of families, whose parents have divorced and remarried) without mentioning birthdays celebrated in the kindergarten or at school for the entire class, which represents approximately 125 birthdays (see Sirota 1998c). All these birthdays appreciate the strength and the importance of this ritual. An individual celebrates few contemporary rituals with such frequency and such repetition during primary socialization.

This is why I have carried out this research in several stages:

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- Firstly, I examined the creation of the ritual by focusing first of all on the enunciation, the description and the formalization of „the rules de savoir-vivre“, which determine the organization of the birthday and justify our description as a ritualised repetitive sequence. Thus, it is possible to identify a certain number of rules (see Sirota 2001), which is governed by: the invitation rule, the gift rule, the return-gift rule, the decoration rule, the cake rule and the candles rule, the pig out rule, the sweet memories rule etc.
  - Secondly, I focused on what is the stake in this ritual, which I first described as an apprenticeship of manners and its transmission (following Elias' (1973) use of the word), and as a construction of the social link through the gift mechanism around the exchange of presents and invitations. Thus, we can consider the birthday as a contemporary „childhood potlatch“, using the classical analysis of Marcel Mauss (see Sirota 1998c).
  - Thirdly, I studied the origin of the rules, which highlighted this event. Where do they come from? How are they transmitted? How are they circulated? To answer these questions, I took an extremely wide range of materials obtained from the observation of and by my obsession with the subject, and which led to the accumulation of extensive field notes. Thus, it is possible to show that the birthday is located at the centre of a „configuration“<sup>3</sup> of a series of spheres of influence, which create a sort of handbook of contemporary civility through contemporary forms such as advertising, the media (see Sirota 1999) etc.
  - Fourthly, the current research focused on the specific place of childhood in the construction of this contemporary ritual. This coincides with a theoretical examination which is not merely personal but which goes across the construction of the field of sociology of childhood.

## 1.2 The child as product and producer

Most English speaking and French authors of the field seem to concur to a point of theory formulated as an assertion or postulate: „If we consider childhood as a social construction, we cannot simply consider the child as an object, we must also consider him as an actor“.<sup>4</sup> The effect of this proposal is to create a paradigmatic break. In other words, we must revise the classical position established by Durkheim, which has long determined the dominant sociological position – in French sociology, at least – by focusing principally on the analysis of the socialization process through the analysis of institution's functioning, and exclusively virtually, i.e. the socialization structures destined to give birth to the „social being“. Attention has only gradually been focused on the role of the actors, but for a long time neglecting the pupil or child as a fully-fledged social actor. What happens when we consider the child not merely as a „future being“ but as an „actual being“? But is this not merely a shift from one romantic representation to another? David Buckingham (1999; 2000) put it in his work of media and children, the description from total incompetence to total competence. In fact, the question is not as simple as it appears. Why should the child occupy a specific position as a social

actor? Considering him as a fully-fledged social actor does not necessarily mean he is given full autonomy, outside all sociological contexts and all theoretical foundations. This is why a certain number of sociologists, including James and Prout (1990), in their definition of the new paradigm of a sociology of childhood proceed cautiously when they assert that childhood is a social construct, where the child should be considered simultaneously as both product and producer. I shall start from this theoretical position.

### 1.3 The place of the child in the construction and the shaping of a ritual

To analyse the hypothesis of a child as both product and producer, I based my approach:

- On an „interactionist“ framework, where I assume that in the birthday situation the ritual is constructed, defined and re-defined (in all the sequences forming the elaboration of the birthday, from its initial preparation to the celebration of the ritual without forgetting its transformation into a memory).
- Seeing the definition of socialization as a reciprocal process, where the „*métier d'enfant*“<sup>5</sup> and the „*métier de parent*“ are developed parallel and in interaction with one another. The parenthood is considered as a continuous socialization process here.
- On a dual hypothesis, defining the role of the birthday as a „traditional“ ritual<sup>1</sup>, which is transmitted vertically between the generations, and as a „contemporary“ ritual (see Segalen 1998) transmitted horizontally through the peer group comprised of the children or of the adults and parents.
- Where each of the social actors involved, is located at the intersection of spheres of influence of a mass-media, commercial, cultural, or school-based nature.
- In a market society providing the objects required for the organization of a contemporary childhood potlatch, because the party can be considered as a modern form of the forging of the social link through the fundamental mechanism represented by the gift.

If we consider the birthday from this dual point of view, which sees the child both as product and as producer within the framework of a ritual that develops a socializing process and the social link, then we are faced with the opposition between and in combination of certain mechanisms, which should be both highlighted and explained.

We have to consider on one hand a traditional ritual transmitted to the child as a „product“ via vertical transmission, within the framework of traditional education, based on imposition, reproducing behavioural patterns and values

and, on the other hand, the making of a contemporary ritual  
by the child as a „producer“,  
via horizontal transmission,  
within the framework of the spread and extension, of new forms of sociability,  
based on different relationships of authority,  
produced through negotiation,  
within the context of a consumer society,  
founded on social dynamics and innovative behaviour,  
that offers material modes of manufacture,  
spreading symbolic codes,  
that themselves speed up changes in civility.

I shall take a few examples from one of the first phases and initial rules of the birthday celebrated with friends: the birthday invitation.

## 2. Symbolism of the invitation card

### 2.1 Traditional code, fashion code, market code

Let us start with the rule governing the invitation: a few days ago, a card was sent to announce the organization of the birthday party and to inform the fortunate guest, that he or she is invited to attend. Within the framework of traditional civility, it could be pointed out that this highly stylised – if not formal – way of proceeding is usually reserved for the major events in the life cycle: births, marriages, and death. It is associated with a certain pomp determining the manner, in which the host presents him-/herself and the nature of the event. The written invitation forms a part of the transmission and the teaching of „good manners“, which demand respect for social decorum along with a certain improvisation within these limits because these rules, first of all, belong to tradition and customs, common practice and a social heritage; they belong to a social presentation, a theatrical setting, which – based on a „morality of trivia“ – provides a social grammar giving expression to the place and the form of the birthday ritual.

Thus, the use of this invitation card will teach the method for using the domestic script, and it will transmit from one generation to the next. Thereby, the social codes are governing the presentation of oneself. Thanks to these „domestic scripts“, an initiation to „*all the usages of written communication imposed by our private life and social existence as members of a family and a network of friends and acquaintances*“ (Albert 1993, p. 37) is introduced into the child’s socialization process. The birthday invitation both reveals and embodies in the public sphere, an event originally from private life.

These birthday invitations exist in a wide variety of forms from the commercially standardized invitations to the most sophisticated cards created at home.

„Writing also involves being familiar with the art of organizing the appropriate words on the page. ... The choice of the paper, choice of the words, the layout, style of writing, but also the art of receiving and replying, everything was governed by etiquette“ (Grassi 1995, p. 47) explain the historians of courtesy and savoir-vivre. This etiquette seems far from being lost if we consider the care and attention of some invitations.

The aim is to teach – and consequently, to learn – how to draft a message containing all the required practical details: name, address, times, etc., but also to present the forthcoming party. This is by no means self-evident, even if the epistolary style, when writing birthday invitations, seems to have acquired a stable form as clearly expressed in correspondence handbooks:

„You are familiar with the subject of the letter you are about to write, you have studied it in great detail and you know the order in which you should present your ideas. So far so good. You feel that all you have to do is to take your pen and the words will flow freely onto the page. But then, suddenly, you’re faced with a multitude of problems: what sort of paper should you use, what title should you give to the invitation, how should you address your guests, how much space should you leave under the title, and the first line... the salutation, the formal close, how should you conclude the letter... A host of important questions that merit your attention considering that, ultimately, it is in these details that lies the ceremonial of letter-writing“ (Bescherelle 1858, p. 102).

Thus, we can distinguish different types of birthday invitation cards, and different degrees of sophistication:

- *Standard invitations* bought in a shop or at a kiosk specialized in children’s birthday tea parties or, in the greeting card section of shops, invitation card sold individually, or more frequently, in packets of 5 to 10, which naturally pre-suppose a collective invitation for birthdays or a children’s tea party. The first page includes an illustration generally of a festive nature, including favourite childhood themes or more fashionable subjects, or representing the tea party and its activities. The illustration must be playful and light-hearted, and suggest that a merry time for all is in preparation. The inside includes all the necessary headings: address of the host, times, reason for the invitation, and frequently a RSVP. The host merely needs to fill out the different sections (see Invitation No. 1 Laura).
- *Homemade invitations* include the same information because this consists of a veritable social code, but the information is then presented in a less. A wide range of distinctive<sup>7</sup> strategies emerges from the aesthetic exercise, which will be shared and negotiated by parents and children in the intimacy of the home. For certain families, buying invitation cards is out of the question in the name of home economics and moral values, which implies a virtual professionalism of the mother’s role as an educator, considering these are chiefly the mothers, who assume responsibility for this training. Individualization and social code come on the stage, in an orgy of imagination and a host of forms, which emphasize the importance granted to these occasions by the families. A host of technological resources will be used, including photocopies and computers (see Invitations No. 2 and 6), in addition to

drawings, cut-outs, paper of different weight, texture and colour, from the most rudimentary to the most elaborated one (see Invitations No. 2 and 3). Highly original materials are used: balloons, record sleeves, lasagne etc.

No. 1 Standard invitation card, Laura (Author's collection)

The exceptional nature of the day and the personalization of the invitation are expressed through the codes shared or negotiated between the parents and the children related to the presentation of self, the presentation of a social identity, the representation of childhood, and the production of social events. We can decipher the stakes at play in the making of this invitation card:



No. 2 The laborious making, Théophile (Author's collection)

## 2.2 „The laborious making“

It is not so easy to animate a child for producing a set of a dozen of homemade invitations; some are more or less elaborate, or more or less successfully or badly achieved. Théophile's one (see Invitation No. 2) is a good example of the ambition and the difficulties of the process. The invitation of the party is made by himself and partly made by his mother in a mix of drawing and printing. We can imagine the social work, taking place in the domestic arena to transmit the social habits implicit to the constitution of the habitus. The drawing of a „Zombie“ has to convince the guest of the fact that they are really going to „s'éclater“, which means having fun and sharing a nice moment together (in the slang used by the kids). The theme of the birthday is science fiction. The formula is still using the two codes, the one of the peer group and the one of the parents.

## 2.3 „La petite fille modèle“ or the incorporation of good manners

Here, valorisation of the social competence of each gender is well exposed, in the perfect mastering of handicraft by the young Chloé (see Invitation No. 3). Sense of the aesthetic codes, care, grace and beauty are brought into play. „A good workman is known by his chips“ says the proverb. Chloé shows already the perfect competence in domestic scripts expected from a nice little girl, a good pupil, and a future bride and a future good housekeeper. Domestic scripts are the principal tools of the construction of the feminine relation to intimacy.

## 2.4 „In search of originality or distinction“

Vincent's mother asked a painter, friend of the family, to draw an invitation with the theme of the birthday party „Painting“ (see Invitation No. 4). Between naive paintings and professional advertisement, the original drawing will be reproduced in colour and send to each guest. The search of originality is also quite evident in Victor's invitation engraved on a „lasagne“, but the purpose is more the individualization of the child than the strategy of social distinction. Smallest of a family of four, he terribly wants to appear on his own, so the suggestion was made by his mother to signify that he was inviting for a spaghetti party.

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But if the „Sprezzatura“ is not innate in the family, the required originality can be learned by books. By example, a chain of retail shop called the „Fnac junior“ (specialized in toys and books for children) edited a practical guide for birthday parties (see Document No. 1).<sup>8</sup> The guide contains five items: invitations cards, decoration, animations, goûter (snack), and presents. The chapter of invitations cards starts with the introduction: *„The birthday of your kid is also a little bit your feast, and you want your family and your friends to be there. Your invitation cards will announce the atmosphere: be original, and surprise already your guests, by a previous first performance!“*

Seven suggestions are proposed following: a balloon card, a photo-puzzle, a bottle to the sea, a pea-shooter card, a footprint card, a glutton card, a sweet card. The making of each one is precisely explained, and illustrated. They need simple materials, and the trick of the trade is explained by getting every one able to realize the first requisite for a successful birthday party. „*Birthday of your kid, what an event! It is an important date, for him and for you, and it's a good occasion to meet the family and the friends! To help you to transform this small feast in a magical moment, we have gathered funny and simples ideas*“:

*The balloon card. Materials: a set of balloons of light colours, some indelible dark markers. Blow a balloon, and write your message on it. Wait until the ink is dried, let the air out of the balloon. Send it as it is in an envelope.*

*The photo puzzle. Materials: a set of your kid's photos, some indelible dark markers. Write on the backside of the photograph your message. Wait until the ink is dried, then cut it up in four or five pieces, which you slip into an envelope.*

All practical books about birthday parties begin with similar chapters; this handcraft „bricolage“ reflects the weight of individualization and presentation of the self in the modern realisation of the self.

## 2.5 „Expression of the culture of the peer group“

The social identity of the child is signified by the appropriate social codes, especially the age. Those codes are the result of a negotiation between parents and children. As the children grow up, they have to reflect more and more precisely the culture of the peer-group. To the symbolic, and quite a temporal codes reflecting the child's world, as toys, clowns etc., succeed more particular figures.

Pierre's invitation is a pastiche of Harry Potter (see Invitation No. 5). The invitation to the inauguration of the first French Poudlard College, the „Collège Blanchlard“, is using all the characters and the styles of the book and deals with the connivance and the complicity in a shared culture of the peer group. The fourth volume „*Harry Potter and the Goblet of fire*“ of J. K. Rowling has just been published in France, and all the ten years old boys invited by Pierre just spent all the last weeks reading and chatting about.<sup>9</sup>

The gradual emergence of codes specific to pre-adolescence signifies the child's conquest of his autonomy. So is to consider Alba's invitation made by a set of plastic CD boxes, which she bought empty, and then created the paper sleeve by her own. Here the social codes of adolescence are used to express the theme of the birthday party, to convey that it is not a children's tea party, but rather a teenage rave-up. Invitations to parties of this kind are frequently characterized by the technique of borrowing the childhood code, diverting it, and translating it into the language of the adolescent. Thereby, clearly is shown that the celebration will be organized around the theme of music or dancing. The sound-engineer in this case is the older brother. The parents' presence is unwelcome in this context although their eviction is not clear; it's the siblings or the baby-sitters, who act as a go-between, frequently. But the invitation includes the same practical indications and shows the mastery of the code while both originality and social integration are revealed in this invitation.



## 2.6 The efficacy of the „industrialized privacy“

Dimitri and Florence used the family computer to make their invitation. That is the reason why their invitations look similar (see Invitation No. 6). They used a set of possibilities, preinstalled and offered by IBM for Birthday cards. They chose their preferred drawings accordingly to their taste and the theme of their own birthday party, and reproduced them at home with the domestic printer.

No. 6 The efficacy of the „industrialized privacy“, Dimitri (Author's collection)

The production of these domestic scripts, in the intimacy of their sweet home seems to depend largely on the industrialized tool they used, and on its influence. But why do they use such a traditional form of invitation? If the vehicle is quite traditional, the content is much less so.

### 3. New Norms of Sociability

#### 3.1 „I invite you to my birthday party“

Here, the child appears no longer as a product but as a producer because in fact, the invitation card becomes a means of following and accompanying changes in the status of the child on a practical level. One common feature to all these invitations is, that the child is the master of the ceremonies, and demonstrating a reversal of the general tenets of „savoir-vivre“. The child is no longer an incapable minor for he invites in person. „*I invite you to my birthday party*“ is the basic formula, which may possibly be expressed in the third person: „*Vincent invites you*“. The use of the familiar „tu“<sup>10</sup> („*Je t'invite...*“) enounces Vincent's entire circles of sociability.

This display of an omnipotent „I“ is a symbol of the place – not only of the child but also of the individual in our society, in a transformation of the relation between „us“ and „I“. <sup>11</sup> The play between the „I“ and the „You“ shows the place of the relation by election in the constitution of the social link, in the early stage of the process of socialization. Social belongings are no more shown in that announcement; family names have disappeared, and indications of social places are non-existent.<sup>12</sup>

The explicit announcement of the birthday implies that everyone understands the code, which is „*to come (an essential point) with a present*“. The „*My*“ birthday also emphasizes the fact that the person, who invites, will be the centre of attention and the master of ceremonies. But this moment of exception is limited in time; the invitation specifies that the party will last from 3 to 6 o'clock pm, which implies that the party will come to an end at that time.

The invitation is addressed to quite a large network. Children are becoming masters of their network of sociability increasingly early because birthdays are celebrated with friends from the age of two or three. At a very young age, children are invited to the party that the parents do not know. How can you send an invitation when you know neither the surname nor the address of the guest? Anyway, the envelope, which inevitably contains the invitation, is only addressed with the first name of the guest (except when two children share the same name). As a consequence, in part of the greater numbers of women, who are going out to work, and of a change in our attitude towards education<sup>13</sup>, children in France are kept in collective structures from a very young age. These collective structures put children in contact with the others without the direct intervention of their parents. This is true, a long time before the school enrolment at six, whether in the kindergarten, day nursery or family crèches, followed by the playing school or infant school.<sup>14</sup> In these socialization areas devoted to extremely young children, birthdays are always celebrated virtually as a symbol of the individual attention paid to the child. In this way, the ritual leaves the family circle very early on where, historically, it was traditionally celebrated, to be organized in a collective structure placing the child at the heart of its peer group.



### 3.2 Negotiating the list of guests: dependence and autonomy

As a criterion of the self-fulfilment of modern childhood a successful socialization supposes being able to invite a certain number of children. This is why the children of the parents' friends or young cousins are invited to the first few birthdays before, gradually, the guest list includes the child's own social network. Then, the guest list rapidly becomes a subject of subtle negotiations. Victor, for example, invites fourteen children for his 10<sup>th</sup> birthdays. It rapidly emerges that a certain number of guests are unable to accept the invitation, and that only eight remain. „*This would be depressing*“ so a second circle of children is invited.

This family seems to think that a minimum number is necessary to ensure the festive nature of the birthday party. Then, veritable bargaining takes place between the mothers, so that the birthday parties are not held on the same days and all the children can attend or can receive all their guests, conversely. „*Don't let the idea of welcoming your son's little tribe get you down. Organize something quick and easy! First choose the date and the place for the party. It is out of the question to celebrate Julien's birthday on the same day as his best friend's. Invitations should be sent out at least one week before the appointed day*“ (This advice is given in an article about Birthday parties in *Vies de famille*, Journal of the Caisse d'allocations familiales de Paris-Ile de France, Mai 1999, p. 27). The price of missing a birthday party is paid with arguments, and it insults because the invitation and the subsequent acceptance symbolize the membership of the circle of friendship. The accomplishment of this calendar of festivities requires an effort of social coordination on the part of the adults as well as between the children themselves and between the adults and the children. After fixing the date and limiting the numbers, the task of drawing up the guest list should be developed. The work of drawing up this guest list is a symbol of the evolution of the relationship of authority within the family. Irrespective of the type of upbringing at home, the definition of the list is always presented in discussions or interviews as a negotiation with the child. If the choice of guests seems principally to concern the child himself, the parental standards may be appearing in an extremely subtle manner. To the immense surprise of a mother, who considers herself to be extremely liberal and open-minded, her daughter when questioned about her choice of guests answered: „*Anyway, you wouldn't have liked her!*“ Mothers and children generally ensure that they obtain even a number of accepted invitations to maintain the circular nature of this potlatch represented by the birthday party. The apprenticeship of the rules governing inside of the organization of this party is carried out in a wide variety of different situations both within the intimacy of family life as well as in meetings between members of the peer group, whether in the playground or at the birthday party itself.

### 3.3 A dual construction of the norms of sociability

„*There were thirty of us for my daughter's second birthday. We invited about ten couples from among our friends, which came to twenty adults, and with the chil-*

*dren, that made about a dozen little kids who were rushing all over the place. It was really sweet, but exhausting.*“ In fact, the party is a meeting of the parents’ age group, which forms together a collective norm. The invitation to the children’s birthday party provides an opportunity to bring together the circle of friends in this new identity as parents. This is a situation, in which parenthood will evolve no longer simply by traditional transmission within a family, but by contamination within the parents’ group of friends. The norms of two peer groups will combine in this situation: that of the parents and that of the children, both to develop this new form of sociability governed by its specific codes. Gradually, the codes of the ritual will chiefly change in relation to the children’s peer group, moving from the children’s tea party, entirely organized by the parents, and gradually controlled by the children themselves to the rave-up. Then the evening reception will dispense with card-based invitations, which mark the increasingly powerful influence of the peer group in the socialization of the child. The invitation card will disappear, and the telephone will take its place as the go-between in the organization of independent forms of sociability, increasingly. This will follow to other formalisms based on endless considerations and whole series of discussions to determine the appropriate form of the friend’s birthday party.

### 3.4 The multiplication of invitation cards

Following the trajectory of these invitations and the network<sup>15</sup> they describe makes it possible to sketch the outline of one of the forms of spread of the birthday ritual through the community of the child’s peers and the network of the sociability of childhood. As a vector of a social code, it discharges into a new normativity because from invitation to invitation the ritual reoccurs either among all the members of the potlatch, or with the same child during the entire potlatch cycle (see Sirota 1998c). Whenever the invitation knocks again and again on the same door, it reinforces the weight of the ritual. And whenever it flies to other homes, it introduces a new form of sociability to which parents and children will have to respond, to reproduce (in part) and to spread in turn. ... This is how the ritual spreads horizontally by contamination following the flight of these small insignificant invitations. As means of forging a social relation, they help to build up a community through this act of writing, which gains in importance, perhaps thanks to its regularity.

## 4. The making of social link

### 4.1 Integration or exclusion

Being invited or not invited to a birthday party seems to symbolize personal fulfillment and social integration. We can read in a work of popular psychology, the introduction is devoted to the *Unruly Child*: „*Having an aggressive child is no easy matter: at school, the teacher, supervisors or headmaster regularly complain about his attitude. Outside the school, the parents of his friends find him quarrelsome and, in a word, ‚persona non grata‘ at the birthday parties he turns into a powder keg*“ (Efrergan/Etienne 1999, p. 157). Indeed, the only explicit prohibition, verbalized by the mothers, concerns these excessively unruly „*enfants terribles*“, whose energies, so the mothers' fear, they will be unable to channel or contain: „*no sooner had he come in than he jumped through the window to go and play in the garden.*“ In contrast, a mother explained with considerable emotion, that the irrefutable argument was what the son's teacher had noticed, „*that he was invited to all the birthday parties organized by the children in his class*“. This argument influenced the decision of the teaching staff of the committee in charge of deciding whether to keep her disabled son at the local school (which is by no means in France automatic, and it requires the deliberation of a committee and the agreement of the teachers). This criterion is effective from the point of view of both the parents and the children, who wield the invitation like a fearsome weapon among their friends during the recreation: „*I won't invite you to my birthday, nah!*“ because, as they put it themselves: „*If she isn't invited, she'll think she isn't my friend any more.*“ Inclusion in the circle of friends has to be reasserted year after year.

Thus, the arrival of these little invitation cards – distributed during the recreation or placed above the coat rack – clearly signifies the integration for the chosen few, under exclusion from the social circle for the rest. The stakes are so high for children that they do not give in so easily to the „reasonable“ arguments of their parents, when they try to restrict the number of guests – frequently to about one dozen.

For his birthday, Hadrien's mother only allowed him to invite ten children, when her son wanted to invite the entire class, virtually. The whole afternoon children came that she didn't know, she welcomed them but was surprised. As the afternoon passed along, her worry grew up as she began to understand that the entire class had been invited, in fact. On the strength of those ramshackle invitations, rapidly patched together by her son, which explained why the guests were arriving at different times because the invitation frequently omitted both the full address and the time of the party.

As the years have gone by, the problems haven't become smaller because, as the autonomy of the children increases with their age, the negotiations are difficult not only with their parents, but also with their friends. Then, one of the major problems of teenage parties emerges: „*la squatt*“, or „*l'incruste*“, gate-crashers or guests who overstay their welcome – a problem, which frequently

coincides with conflicts based on differences in social classes between those, who have the material possibility to celebrate their birthdays and those who do not, or are not invited. This social practice among young people – which consists in inviting oneself to a party and in invading as a group when they have not been invited – is frequent and a major source of concern for it leads to a large number of incidents because account for it must be given to the entire peer group.

## 4.2 Exclusion or „Tapez l’incruste!“

Mathilde is in her third year at secondary school. She has organized a party to celebrate her birthday for which she has invited about twenty friends. A number of girls – the „caïds“, „big shots“ in the class and school playground – have not been invited. Getting their revenge, the girls have created counterfeit invitations and have circulated them throughout the school widely, and more particularly among their own group, which represents the „cailleras“<sup>16</sup> or riffraff of the school:

*On Saturday, November 23  
Mathilde is organizing a party from 5 o'clock pm until dawn.  
16, rue Vandrezanne.  
Be sure to come. Everybody welcome!  
Password: „Gouwire“, from ANIESKA BATORSKA.  
LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING YOU!!!!*

The doorbell rang the entire evening. The parents get wind of what is going on, don't find the situation particularly funny, and are far away from appreciating the ambiguity of this double-sided invitation. They don't give in, however, but call on the services of the baby-sitter, a student of architecture who dresses in fashionable casual clothes to act as an efficient and flexible doorkeeper because everyone is worried of verbal – if not physical – confrontation. She arrives with her boyfriend Hakim, a muscular young man, and her younger brother to stay the evening and to make sure she is able to cope with the situation.

The social codes of politeness, appropriated to avoid direct confrontation, could expose to be ineffective. The filtrating process seems to be a tickler situation because the false guests think they really had been invited. To refuse them the entry, it is necessary to explain clearly, who belongs to the invited circle of people and who does not. The work of social selection carried out by the invitation card – via this partly visible, and partly invisible mechanism – is designed to express and to find acceptance for integration and exclusion by allowing everyone to save their face (as Goffman used the expression). This completely is laid bare through this parody of an invitation, and it is applied with terrible social brutality. The response imagined by the uninvited “hot shots” expressly intended to disrupt the party, to reply to a perceived attack, and to uncover what the initial invitation was supposed to conceal. The rules of hospitality were broken in order to point out the limits and to enforce the respect of each other's territory.

Just as the text of the counterfeit invitation contradicts the code governing birthday invitations, it is clear, that parties organized for children at that age never go on until dawn. The dawn symbolizes the transition to adolescence, the attainment of the „grown-up“ status. The end of the party is just like the list of guests the subject of the major negotiations within the family. If the first party is sometimes organized to coincide with the children's teatime, the party lasts up to the later evening from five to nine, and then from seven to eleven, when the child becomes older.

Here once again, the children stay behind the labelling of the ages of life, accelerating the transition to social indicators belonging, until then, more to adolescence than to childhood. The conquest of and the transition to the life of a 'nighthawk' reflect the transition to adult life and independence, and the end of supervision. Similarly, the „everybody welcome“ pours scorn on the limit of numbers imposed by the parents. Usually there are no passwords; the invitation itself is the being of the „open sesame“, which emphasizes the closeness of the circle. In fact, the password is the surname of the young girl organizing the party; it is a question of the affiliation to the „grand“ family. The instigators seem to derive the considerable amusement by the final line of the invitation, related to the ambiguity of „Looking forward to seeing you“. The signature is not imaginary. „Agnieska Batorska“ really exists. Her name was used unknown to her, and was chosen because it sounded non-French. Written in the third person and type-written on a scrap of white paper, the crime operates in the form of an anonymous letter, using the entire peer group to gain revenge for a case of social exclusion.

### 4.3 Integration: Aïcha

The stake represented by exclusion from or integration in a child's peer group can become a vector of integration for an entire family group by initiating and fostering factors of acculturation. Thus, the example of Aïcha's invitations<sup>17</sup> shows how the arrival of the child in the social circle of the birthday ritual through the cultural apprenticeship is provided. The social relations create, maintain and allow the social integration of a North-African immigrant family.

Birthdays are celebrated in Morocco rarely, except of the lavish festivities arranged by the highly Europeanized elites. Her classmates invites Aïcha, the young daughter of an immigrant family from Morocco, whose father is a factory worker and mother a housewife. *„We didn't do it at home. I didn't know what it was until then. I was a little unsociable! Nobody explained, and it was hard coming here from the country. I wonder how I managed. I knew that it was when girls were invited to their friends' homes or to the neighbours'. I thought it was friendly. The first time was with Thérésa. She asked me if the little ones could come to her place, for her daughter's birthday. She said I could come too. I didn't know what it was, but I was pleased because she had invited me to her house with my children.“*

Aïcha's mother gradually has learned to accept invitations more easily while accompanying her children because she would never allow her children to go

alone, at the beginning. Thus, at each birthday, the mother met the parents, they introduced one another, and they talked and she was acquainted with them. But she realized quickly, that she had to return the invitation all, especially as her children demanded „*their birthday party*“. Because the fact of attending a potlatch implies certain reciprocity, irrespective of its cultural context, should it be French or Moroccan. „*I celebrated their birthdays to allow the children to be the same as the others. It's natural. They also wanted to invite their little friends and be given presents.*“ The question was how to go about it. Clothing, gifts, food etc. everything was a problem financially, materially or culturally. What cake? What clothes? What guests? Over the year, we would learn how to make a big cake, which is required for celebrating a birthday, but unknown to Moroccan cooking. „*Before the day chosen for the party, I asked Thérèse to tell me how she made la tarte aux pommes' I thought were so good when she invited us. So when the day of the birthday came, I tried but it came out too hard! Before that, I didn't know how to do anything. You can read (recipes) if you don't know. I can't.*“ The success of it would become the analyser of the mothers social and cultural integration because her famous pie would become over the years, and thanks to the compliments of the children in the family and their guests, increasingly tender and tasty.

„*We always overdid it a bit to encourage her*“ recalled Aïcha. Then, over the years, a new whole family ritual has come into being. „*Early in the morning, we would get busy preparing the cakes. We'd open the cookery books and read the recipes to our mother who, that way, learnt how to do them because she used to say change, and that way I learn how to prepare French food. I know how to do Moroccan dishes but you have to...*“. At the end of the birthday, when the parents came to fetch their children, Aïcha's mother always invited the parents to take the traditional mint tea, served with another tarte aux pommes, which she kept back for them especially. Here they could talk about the children, their education and the school. Cultural specification and the adoption of new forms of sociability are brought together in this example through the mediation of the child, opening the way for social integration. The respect of the codification of social rituals – the apple pie or the mint tea – enables each protagonist to make the first step towards the other. The continual and parallel construction of the „*métier d'enfant*“ and the „*métier de parent*“ provides each other with mutual support of the construction of a social link, which is difficult to manage. In this example, the child was the engine and the go-between in the introduction of new cultural practices.

#### 4.4 The composition of a family reunion, the gathering of the blended family

This social integration, in which the child plays a pivotal role in the birthday ritual, is not only found in terms of the acculturation of an immigrant population. Symbolic of the rapid change of behaviour, an advertisement – published by the mutual insurance company for employees of the French education system

(MAIF, the largest mutual insurance company in France) “The MAIF protects your tribe” – presents a child aged about twelve in the process of opening his birthday presents in the company of his family. Who are the guests at this family birthday? Eight people and a dog are present. There are the father and the mother of the child, his maternal grandparents, and his three half-brothers and sisters and one of the parents partners. Labels attached to each individual explained his or her relationship with the rest of the family because „*at the MAIF, the family begins where people live together. It's unimportant that the family to be insured is traditional or modern.*“ In the centre of the picture it is the child, who represents the opportunity for this family reunion, gathered to celebrate this birthday ritual. The presents, the cake and the candles make the birthday ritual abundantly. Adopting something of a nativity scene from the Renaissance, the gaze and smiles of all the characters converge upon the child. This representation of childhood through the idealized world of advertising refers simultaneously to the transformation of the family group – although this situation only concerns 14% of children – and to the change in the child’s place within that family group. Depicted by demographers, the child becomes the only fixed point in the family’s space because it is the child, who makes the family, and who gives a unity regardless of the ups and downs of marital life, maintaining through new forms of parenthood the link of filiations. Childhood is currently defined as a crossing through successive sequences, whose elements may change in line with fluctuations in the parent’s marital life.

Then, the birthday ritual becomes one of the rituals for the gathering of these new family units, as celebrated in the form of the photo album, frequently, and as imitated by this advertisement presented as a snapshot of ordinary family life. The family circle is convened to celebrate the birthday either by acutally celebrating the birthday as depicted in this portrait of contemporary morals, or via the traditional birthday greetings expressed by letter or by phone. All the different relatives, who take the trouble to wish a child a happy birthday, are also expressing behalf the child the social link between them and, conversely, as this event is repeated over the time, the child learns who his relatives are, and thus the family circle is drawn:

*„Paris, October 20, 1999*

*Dear Tom,*

*I'm sorry I'm so late in sending you a little money so you can buy yourself a little something for your birthday. All the same, I'd like to wish you all the best. I send you all my love and kisses (now you've got over your shyness, you even let yourself be kissed by me!).*

*Wishing you every happiness in life,*

*All my love,*

*Auntie Jeanne.“*

*„Paris, 28 June 1998*

*Margot,*

*Just like all these little rabbits, we also wish you a very happy birthday and send you all our love. Auntie Sonia, Daniel, Janine.“*

Faced with the divisions and reunions of an „uncertain“ family<sup>18</sup>, rituals are created or re-created in order to assert and reassert the family link. They empha-

size this elective ideal and characterize the „relational“ family (Cicchelli-Pugeault 1998; Singly 1996). This is one of the forms of the contemporary family, in which the child is no longer merely the product but also, and paradoxically, becomes one of the producers.

## 5. Acceleration of social time, the material and symbolic „live“ production of a social code

This ritual between children, implying the involvement of the parents in its organization, has not escaped the attention of people with a professional interest in childhood. It is becoming an attractive social object in a commercial and mediated society, constantly on the outlook for social changes and new trends. As such, it could become the basis for scenarios, involving children in so-called „real“ situations, taking the form of advertisements, games, tests, and books. Thus, this test – innocent in appearance – taken by young trainee gym teachers, who work with 3<sup>rd</sup> – year secondary students, is based on the situation to create a sociogram:

*„You can invite ten classmates to your birthday party. Who will you not invite?  
Who do you think will invite you to their birthday party?  
Who do you think will not invite you?“*

The mere existence of this questionnaire contributes to the social confirmation of this practice and emphasizes its importance in the development of friendships. Would a child dare to confront his teacher, saying that there was a social practice unfamiliar to him? Thus, the ritual starts to develop from the common situation upon a norm. The position of the child is reversed, from being the producer of a social norm to become produced by that same social norm in a sort of social instantaneity, because the time is extremely short separating the two phenomena. There exists an overlapping of the two space-times, an extension of the ritual by word of mouth, by direct contamination, and by its translation in the media that can take on a wide variety of different forms.

### 5.1 Translation in the media and the normalization of contemporary civility

In *Astrapi*, a children’s magazine with a circulation of approximately 180,000 copies distributed by a leading newspaper group, specialized in educational publications for children, we can find the sketch titled „The Birthday Tea-Party“ in the section „Pik and Pic“, where the well-behaved child Pik is opposed to a little devil, Pic, in a sort of humorous contemporary lesson in morality. The starting point is the reception of the invitation card. One of the characters shows it to



his mother, and calls to accept the invitation and to thank the friend for inviting him, immediately. He thinks about buying a present, and plans this outing with his mother in the family's agenda. On the day of the party, he offers the present, which the host seems to like and takes part good-humouredly in the games organized during the party. He thanks his friend and his mother and leaves bathed in the well-wishing smile of his hosts. In contrast, Pic forgets to tell his mother, rushes out of the house, doesn't have enough time to buy a present, arrives late, refuses to take part in the games, spits out the food, and finally leaves under the exasperated gaze of the mother, who never wants to invite him again. The moral of the story is that if you want to be invited again and again, you have to adhere to the rules of civility in the process of construction, which is by no means an easy exercise since they deserve to be explained.

Then, the child seems to be produced by the mirror of his own behaviour. Constantly, our mediatized societies are on the outlook for something new: A scoop or something sensational, which transforms everyday life into the new scenario of its fiction. Not only the media do broadcast messages to the featureless masses and to isolated individuals, they are also areas for the projection of society and its individuals.<sup>19</sup> In this mirror, parents and children seek to find points of references in terms of their behaviour as friends or lovers. This explains the success of certain television series and those collections of books illustrating the evolution of manners, which focuses on situations of greatest conflict experienced by contemporary children from the most banal to the most exceptional, such as: „Lily won't go to bed“, „Max was caught out for cheating“ or „Zoë's parents are getting divorced.“

The stakes of the situation are clearly described in this new children's literature: „Yesterday, in the classroom, Simon put an envelop on my table just before he seated. I was not the only one, who received one, four envelops got off his pocket. The fellows, who did not received some, looked at us with envy. By example, Julie my neighbour, as I love teasing her, I waited a moment before opening the envelop. Every one knew that Simon's birthday was coming; he was speaking about it for a week. At each playtime, he was explaining that his parents were going to organize a super fiesta with surprises, cakes and everything. I was invited. And Julie wasn't. At Julies Birthday, I haven't been invited. The day started quite well“ (Stéphane Daniel/Sophie Kniffe: *J'adore les anniversaires*. Rageot Editeur, Paris 2000, p. 70).

## 5.2 Merchandising and internationalisation

This is all the more true as the commercial mechanisms, possibly less respectful of childhood practices, will invest in the change of behaviour in order to constitute the foundation for purchasing habits, and to build their marketing strategy with the potential represented by one of their favourite target: the child. We are familiar with its influence in the prescriptive behaviour of the consumer.

As the invitation cards have become a veritable commercial object, they are displayed in every newsstand offering items, which are necessary for celebrating

birthdays. Some of them are partly repeating and some of them are partly offering variations of successive fashions, keeping pace with the themes of each new Walt Disney release. Following the example of the birthday invitations circulated worldwide by chains of fast-food restaurants, the standardization of norms goes hand in hand with their internationalisation (see document No. 2).

Thus, the birthday invitation has become the basis of a veritable industrial strategy, which has been described in the media, in fact.<sup>20</sup> Leading American manufacturers have assigned anthropologists to identify „true behaviour“ in order to help them to design products corresponding with the family's needs. „I always act as if I were in an unknown tribe, with a culture I know nothing about. I don't think twice about asking people why they open that door rather than this one. They look at me in surprise, but then they always say something interesting. We share in the lives of the families, we monitor them, we talk to them, we go to church with them.“<sup>21</sup> Commissioned by Canon to find a use for colour printers at home, the anthropologist observes that children spend a lot of time trying to write and draw coloured messages. She advised Canon, therefore, to launch „Creative“, a colour printer designed to print birthday invitations and decorated letters, leading to an international advertising campaign whose slogan in France was „*Tu vas pleurer, si l'imprimante ne marche pas*“ (You're going to cry if the printer doesn't work). The outcome was an immense commercial success. Now, every PC includes a kit for creating a birthday invitation, which underpins the practice of birthday parties celebrated with friends. This is because companies such as Intel or Xerox all have teams of psychologists and anthropologists: „*Intel has set up a team of anthropologists and psychologists within its Oregon research laboratory where 500 specialists work. We were recruited four years ago when Pentium processors and PC's really became consumer products*“ (explains John Sherry in the same article). Children will push their parents to buy the colour printer that one of their friends already owns. Whence the multitude of these invitations made on computers is a factor which – in turn – takes the social use of this new item at home: the family computer. All the more, so as children don't be slow in learning how to use this new technology, and they frequently represent in the family one of the vectors for the taming and domestication of information technology. Frequently, the parents are proud to say that the invitation was entirely made by the child himself.

As the target of a consumer society owing to his ability to adapt to new technologies, the child is one of the instruments of his own autonomy and of his own alienation. It is difficult to determine who is producer of the social and cultural world of the child. All the more, so as this acceleration of social time does make itself the subject of the media's interests, which stand as a mirror to the speed of the change in our society, and contribute to its acceleration through the construction of fashion effects, which act like magnifying mirrors.

This depiction of contemporary behaviour is built like a game of mirrors, in which everyone can see the reflection of his own behaviour, offering a privileged space to the child.

Document 2: Merchandising and internationalisation (Everyday 1998, AM-SCAN, The Party People International Catalogue)

## Notes

- 1 This paper is a reappraisal of two conferences: „Childhood and childhood rituals in France“, „*Kindheit in Europa – Lebenslagen im Vergleich*“, Childhood in Europe – positions of life in comparison, International Conference of the Franckesche Stiftungen and Institute of Education, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Germany, 26th –28th October 2000. „O legas da crianca na construa de un rite contemporaneo, o aniversario“ *Congresso Internacional Os Mundos Sociais e Culturais da Infância*, Instituto de Estudos da Criança da Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal, Janvier 2000.
- 2 Understood in the way in which historians such as M. Perrot or P. Ariès use this term in *l’Histoire de la Vie privée* (1987).
- 3 In the sense used by Norbert Elias (1981).
- 4 An observation, which clearly emerges from the following international reviews of the question: Montandon (1998), Sirota (1998b), Corsaro (1997), Sarmento (2000), Qvortrup (2001) and James/Prout (1990).
- 5 As French-speaking sociologists define and use this expression (see Sirota 1998b). It is very hard to translate this expression in English. The closest expression would be „the profession of being a child“.
- 6 We are using the word „traditional“ in its etymological sense derived from the Latin „*traditio*“ from „*tradere*“, which means „to transmit, remit“ and, in the Christian tradition, the orally transmitted Christian truths (Cusenier 1995).
- 7 In the sense used by P. Bourdieu (1979).
- 8 See *L’anniversaire des tout-petits*, Guide pratique, Fnac junior, 1999.
- 9 At that date, 66 millions volumes of the three first books of this serials have been sold in the world (Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s stone, Harry Potter and the Chamber of secrets, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban). The serial has been translated in fifty languages. In France, where the success of the serial was slow, Gallimard the French editor had already sold 1 250 000 books before the edition of the fourth were published (*Livre hebdo*, 10 nov 2000). The fourth book contains 636 pages, which those children not only had read, but also knows nearly by heart.
- 10 In French, to address someone with the second form of singular „Tu“ is only used in a context of familiar relationship, which is very contradictory with the formal situation of a written invitation. It is an oral style of discourse, allowed to children.
- 11 Reflecting the famous chapter of Elias, Irène Théry (1998) points out the same tenancy („Il n’y a pas de je sans nous“).
- 12 The same phenomena are appearing now in birth-notices, and notification of death (see Ringet 1992; Mery 2001).
- 13 This shows J .C. Chamborédon very clearly as soon as 1973, about the use of *L’école maternelle* in his article.
- 14 At the age of three nearly all the children are actually at school in France.
- 15 In the same way the team of R. Chartier (1991) analysed the correspondences during the XIXème siècle.
- 16 It’s a French slang (*verlan*, the slang adopted by the young people from the suburban housing situated near large cities, based on the inversion of the syllables of a word). „Cailleras“ is derived from „*racaille*“ or *riffraff*, used to describe certain groups of pupils, frequently of working class origin, frequently opposed to the school system and who adopt an insolent attitude towards the teachers and exhibit a certain „look“ by wearing fashionable designer clothing.
- 17 The quotations are translated from Arabic and taken from a dissertation for a BA degree in Educational Science, University of Paris V: „A North-African family in France: the analysis of a process of socialization, and integration, of a mother through the birthdays of her children“, by Zahra Mabrouk, 1996.

- 18 To borrow the expression coined by Louis Roussel (1989).  
 19 As certain sociologists working on media have excellently pointed out with respect to TV series such as „*Hélène et les garçons*“ (see Pasquier 1999).  
 20 See e.g. *Le Nouvel Observateur*, supplement to issue n° 1827, November 1999.  
 21 Susan Squires, President of the American Association for the Practice of Anthropology, quoted in *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

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