

# Living with difference locally, comparing transnationally: conviviality in Catalonia à la Casamance

By *Tilmann Heil*

People on the move always engage with different places and different materialities, as well as with the people whom they meet along their migration trajectory. For people who have moved from Casamance in southern Senegal to Catalonia, the north-eastern autonomous region of Spain, both transnational reference frames, and local references matter. The local social practices can be described as conviviality, understood as a minimal sociality of living with difference.

I met Keba Deme, a Jola, at his uncle's house in Catalonia, as I was explaining my research project to a group of Casamançais. Over the course of numerous meetings, he shared his migration history and his understanding of ways of living with difference. Keba had lived in Senegal, The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, and he had passed through Morocco before trying twice to get to the Canary Islands by boat. To live a transnational life means to be involved at home, with people around the globe, and in the place of current residence. In each place, Keba and many others like him had accumulated experiences of living with difference.

Ideas and concepts travel, together with and alongside the people who use them. Keba talked about relations between men and women, the various notions of brotherhood among Muslims, work attitudes, sincerity, and many more concepts through which he made sense of his social relations. The various concepts of conviviality, for example how people relate to one another despite being different, also transfer between contexts and mediate them.

Through the perspective of Senegalese living in both Catalonia and Casamance, I have focused on conviviality as the everyday process

of how people live together in mundane encounters. It points to how they translate between sustained differences and how they (re) negotiate minimal consensuses. With the continued marginalisation of minorities, a better understanding of these processes seems more urgent than ever (Heil 2013, 2014).

In today's crisis ridden Spain, in Mataró, a Catalan town of just over 120,000 inhabitants, people come from more than 100 different countries (Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya 2014). There is a concentration of people from Casamance, particularly in the peripheral neighbourhoods. Many share apartments with co-migrants, but in the streets they encounter members of previous migration streams from southern Spain, Catalans and other migrants from Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia. It is on corridors, stairs and elevators of apartment blocks, as well as on streets and squares that people cross paths. While economic, social and legal insecurity matter and restrict people in their activities, they are administratively the same as long as they register with the municipality: they are residents.<sup>1</sup>

At times, the administrative process of becoming a resident reinforces local belonging. At other times, *de facto* presence in a place mattered more than the paperwork. In both cases, specific localities are anchor points – if only temporarily – in people's lives. Residency is a concept that engages the here and now, irrespective of the past (or the future). Independent of one's legal status, it comes with *de facto* entitlements and obligations within the current context.

People from Casamance follow daily routines of living with difference in Catalonia under the heading of *convivència*, a local term related to conviviality. However, past experiences matter. Keba and others compare their everyday encounters with strangers, neighbours and friends to the social relations they had in the places they grew up in or passed through as part of their migration. Throughout this process, they (re)learn how to engage with different people. Interlocutors like Keba always connected various contexts in which they stayed or passed through in an act of continuous comparison. Everyone is aware of the fact that people sharing the same locality might nevertheless remain different. Therefore, the comparison of convivialities often concentrates on fleeting encounters. For example, Keba recalls:

*[I met] some Mancanya [from Guinea-Bissau]... Because they spoke Creole... I thought, they're my relatives... I have to greet them... I greeted them, I asked their names, I asked [and] they said they live in Cerdanyola, I said [where I live], adja, adja, I left them there. [...]*

TH: *And with the Spanish?*

KD: *There is one thing: I don't understand Spanish well. If I understood Spanish, I could do something with the Spanish. But I do not understand the language well... I am ashamed... The street allows you to meet people. Because, sometimes walking... you can say 'Ah, this dude, I always see him here'. Sometimes [you say]: 'Hola - Hola' 'Bon dia - Bon dia' - all that, it makes you acquainted... Even if I don't know you, I can tell you 'Bon dia' in the street... Since Senegal I've been used to this. [Mataró, 2010]*

Keba contextualises his need to greet in Catalonia within his life trajectory. Frequently, my interlocutors compared the values and ways of conviviality to their upbringing, the (pre)conceptions they had before coming to the West/Europe, and their experiences on the way. Variations in greeting as a way of (not) showing respect were a crucial element in this.

To foster everyday relations in any locality, most of my interlocutors were speakers of truncated multilingualism (Blommaert et al. 2005): they were able to manipulate various languages to get by in everyday life. Although Keba said he did not know Spanish well, he was able to greet in Castilian and Catalan, along with the many other languages he knew. As a crucial aspect of engaging with everyday life, this multilingualism is constitutive of the cosmopolitan self-understanding of many people from Casamance. This involved speaking first languages such as Jola and Mandinka with children born in Catalonia. These language practices show how the transnational dimension shapes local lives.

This short insight into the localised practices of people from Casamance in relation to the travelling ideas of how to live with difference has raised three points. First, people who maintain an affinity with a distant place called home do engage in many



*Another aspect of conviviality: neighbours celebrating a baptism in Ziguinchor, Senegal, 2009. ©Tilmann Heil*

ways with the localities where they live, despite maintaining their distinctiveness. Second, and importantly, a comparison is ongoing between the current and past places of residence. Third, it is not only people who travel, but also their ideas about conviviality, and about living together with difference. People who migrate combine transnational and local references, shown here through linguistic and greeting practices. These aspects have informed my analysis of conviviality as a minimal sociality of living with difference locally while comparing transnationally. □

# Endnotes

1. This approach has been variously critiqued (cf. Bruquetas-Callejo et al. (2008); Aja and Arango (2006); Solanes Corella (2006)).



# References

- Blommaert, J., Collins, J. and Slembrouck, S. (2005) 'Spaces of multilingualism'.  
*Language & Communication* 25(3):197–216.
- Heil, T. (2013) 'Cohabitation and Convivencia. Comparing Conviviality in the  
Casamance and Catalonia'. Unpublished D.Phil. Thesis, Institute of Social and  
Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford.
- Heil, T. (2014) 'Conviviality. (Re-)negotiating minimal consensus'. In: Vertovec, S. (ed.)  
*Routledge International Handbook of Diversity Studies*. Oxford: Routledge, pp. 317–24.