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Exploring Senegalese translocal spaces. Reflections on a multi-sited research

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Introduction

This paper draws from a broader research for my DPhil at the University of Sussex (2000) which presented an ethnographic account of the interplay between a particularly good example of transnational migrants, namely the Senegalese coming from north-western regions and the capital of Senegal, and those Italians who interact a great deal with immigrants and actively participate in the construction of immigration at a local level. Before discussing some of the methodological implications of this research I would like to take into account two preliminary distinctions that I think helps to clarify the debate on the promises and pitfalls of multi-sited research.

1) A preliminary distinction I would like to propose is that between the development of multi-sited ethnography as one of the most successful experimental strategies adopted by researchers to open and enlarge the ethnographic gaze and break with the trope of community or culture as a bounded entity on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the research practice of studying migrants at both ends, sending and receiving, of the migration chain. If the first process belong to a general debate stimulated in the 80's and carried on throughout the 90's, the second methodological stance (to study migration bilocally) was becoming a must already at the end of the 70's, as Watson (1977) edited collection of what today we would call translocal ethnographies have shown. As I will reassert at the end of this paper, despite some methodological anxiety that I will share with you here, I still agree with his statement: "it is impossible to gain a true picture of immigration as a *process* without investigating the people and their families on both sides". As Sayad (1999) taught us, an immigrant is always and also an emigrant. Therefore, I argue that a multi-sited exploration of a migratory phenomenon is always worth no matter if the migrant can be labeled as a "transmigrant" or not. This lead us to my second distinction.

2) I would like to propose to avoid the conflation between the transnational approach to migration and the phenomenon of transnational migration or transnationalism. Although attempted already in the past, transnational research of migration grew rapidly through the 90's. From different theoretical standpoints, one witnessed numerous attempts to provide concepts allowing the development of a vocabulary better able to represent the complexity of contemporary migration moving beyond the mechanistic bipolar model (Rouse 1991 for a critique of this approach) or the settlers/sojourners distinction. Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc (1992) called transmigrants the people who take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns within fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. Senegalese migrants can be called transmigrants under such a definition. However, when one considers the various sociological attempts to define more categorically: 1) who is a real transnational migrant (someone who comes at least two, or five, times home; someone who actually invest at home etc.) or 2) when the concept of transnationalism can be correctly evoked (Portes et al. 1999), he or she might prefer to take into account this second distinction. Indeed, I think, even the life of a settler who remain just intermittently in touch with the place of origin and seldom manage to visit back home deserves to be understood by taking into account the sending context.

The Seneglaese in Italy as example of transnational migrants

Having said that, the case of Senegalese represents a good example of transnational migrants that would fit both Basch et al. (1994) as much as the more strict definition of Portes et a.l. (1999). Most of Senegalese migrants to Italy belong to the *Mouride* Sufi brotherhood, which was founded in the 1880's by Amadou Bamba and has its capital at Touba, the site of his revelation. Relying on relations of personal dependence added to an effective organisation this brotherhood offer a solidarity system well-adapted to precarious economic and social situations. The brotherhood's vertical and horizontal ties also provide an organisational solution able to translate into transnational networks, which are crucial in organising mobility as well as temporary settlement abroad. For many Senegalese, transnational migration means engaging in economic transactions across international boundaries, and over considerable distance, spending much of their time away from their place of origin, but returning there at fairly frequent intervals with the overall goal of creating an economic, social and spiritual life for themselves and their families in Senegal. The temporary returns of migrants play on the imagination of the people staying at home stimulating the development of a "culture of migration". The transnational dispositions of Senegalese migrants in Italy have been recorded by other scholars (Shmidt Friedberg 1994; Carter 1997), but without inducing them to a transnational research.

Differently, this interest led me to follow some migratory paths back to Senegal and pushed me into a multi-sited fieldwork informed by 'travel encounters' (Clifford 1997) as well as by 'engaged learning' (Carithers 1992) and deeper relationships with informants with whom I spent time in Italy and Senegal. In this paper, after a presentation of my fieldwork and the various sites it comprised, I will discuss the methodological ambivalences I encountered undertaking a multi-sited ethnography and realizing the counterintuitive relevance of local contexts in mediating the scope and depth of migrants' transnational practices. If through fieldwork one appreciates the persistent relevance of context despite the deterritorialisation produced by transnational migration, which methodological strategies should adopt to temper the anxiety about "attenuating the power of fieldwork" (Marcus 1995) or about the alleged "dispersion vs. intensity" (Hannerz 1998) normally associated with the traditional single site fieldwork? At the end of the discussion I will mention to the study of translocal development as way to anchor the exploration of transnational social field to specific contexts and their institutions.

Fieldwork

By inverting the classic approach to core-periphery and local-global connections in which local contexts of the South are represented in their articulation of global flows of the North or the West, I studied rather how transnational configurations emerging from the South affected lives in local sites of the North. I particularly aimed to show how local incorporation policies relate to specific transnational modes of migration and how such a relationship affects and is affected by the experiences of people in their everyday lives (Riccio 2001). Interaction and interplay have been my key words in accessing and ethnographically sampling my informants. I, therefore, started by selecting informants from among the migrant community as well as from among institutions of the receiving country (trade unions, reception centres, training organisations) that were involved in projects which implied a constructive interaction within Italian associational structure. I also lived in Senegalese accommodation, grasping prosaic interaction and statements of Italian neighbours and looking mainly at Senegalese networking (accommodation of newcomers, reciprocal information) by focusing initially on the spatial organisation of activities and gradually interacting and discussing with them the meaning of their actions and bahaviours.

Undertaking my fieldwork, my primary focus was on the Senegalese; to observe and investigate their representations of and their experiences in both contexts. Special attention has been paid to transnational networking to examine how it affects the lives of migrants and how they relate to the influences and constraints of the receiving society at the same time. A secondary focus was the everyday work and representations of various kinds of practitioners (social workers, trade unionists, tutors in vocational training). These partially shape as well as incorporate the receiving context and have been approached from the point of view of a migrant by working with their reflexivity to draw a processual picture of the construction of two receiving contexts: Rimini and Ravenna.

Besides Senegalese accommodation, I have also carried out fieldwork through participant observation following migrants' paths in public places: at markets, along the coast, at cultural events, and within institutions such as trade unions and foreign centres. Together with the collection of information through everyday participant observation (recording of events; field notes), and with the gathering of grey material, historical and other sources in different institutions, I have conducted more than sixty long interviews with key informants among the migrant community and within the institutional settings mentioned above, selecting meaningful life and professional histories. These allow a deeper analysis of experiences, trajectories, expectations, and representations (Benmayor and Skotnes 1994). They also revealed themselves one of the best tool with which to explore traders' transnational networks and wider global socio-cultural fields in other researches (Olwig 2001). "A particular advantage of life-history material is that it has the potential to reveal dissonant voices, changing views, or the varying perspective of persons of different classes or religions" (MacGaffey Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000: 20).

Normally, I saw each interviewee at least four times before recording a long interview about their experiences. Most of the interviews were conducted in French and Italian, but some of them in Wolof with the help of an interpreter (I learned sufficient Wolof to follow some everyday dynamics but not enough to manage a full interview). I did not want to focus mainly on the ways informants constructed their argument (which, however, is far from being an unimportant issue), so interviews were not completely unstructured. I asked each interviewee (Senegalese as well as Italian) telling his or her story to follow a historical outline and I provided them with some foci: a) their view of Senegal and Senegalese at home as well as abroad; b) their view of Italians and particularly of the local receiving context. I asked them to give concrete examples if they were expressing general or abstract opinions, and, vice versa, when they were talking about concrete events I asked what they made of them.

The interviews in Senegal concerned mainly informants' expectations from and opinions of migrants and of Senegal as a sending context. These, with the help of some focus-group interviews, allowed me to collect some information on collective discourses about migration. Before conducting all these interviews in Italy and Senegal, I decided to follow a guideline according to which I told my informant all about my research. I felt that if I wanted to know about their life they had first to know who I was and what I was doing. Although interesting information is hidden sometimes and not always accessible to clear and explicit enquiry. I thought that gaining the trust of my informants was crucial to learning their stories.

In selecting locations in the context of origin I followed people as well as kin and other social ties relying on contacts made in Italy.

Different sites

As I could appreciate through the research process there are many different ways of being a "transmigrant", and local contexts tend to affect the outcome. These are among the most meaningful sites of this translocal fieldwork:

Village

Since drought is a key reason for internal migration and emigration, one important sending context is that of the rural village, from where, as an informant coming from a village in the Baol told me once: ' *if someone does not emigrate, it is because he has no legs to do it'*. Many young Senegalese feel they have no other choice as the withdrawal of government involvement from the farming sector makes it very difficult to earn a living in the countryside

The postcolonial town

Kebemer is what I would call a small post-colonial town (once flourishing and now surviving, thanks to emigration) in the region of Louga (ancient Cayor), that represents a typical sending context for emigrants to Italy. Almost every household has a member who has emigrated. The investments of emigrants in new houses and shops are immediately apparent. These shops (food; spare parts; beauty products, clothes, Télécentres, bakeries) are managed by emigrants' wives or friends, who are responsible for their family's subsistence. After the groundnut crisis, local traders became the main link between emigrants and their families. Through loans of initial capital to assist emigration, local traders ensured that remittances came directly to them, and payments were then disbursed to the migrants' families and sometimes to people building their houses. Instead, a different organisational solution to transnational migration has been developed by Mourides in Touba.

The holy city

The holy city of Touba is a central pole for transnational configurations where Mourides have constructed the largest mosque in sub-Saharan Africa.. 'Touba 'commands' Mourides, wherever they may be' (Ross 1995: 233) and is a very important sending context for migration towards Italy since 70% of emigrants from Touba go there. It is a sending context, but also a receiving context of an international as well as an internal flux of people and investments. It is on its way to becoming the second city of Senegal and is a significant economic and financial centre. Touba's big market, Okass, provided and still provides many advantages for traders.

The capital city

Following desertification, drought and the consequent migration towards Dakar, in the 1960s, the Mouride community consolidates in the capital and the principal open-air market, Sandaga is controlled by Mourides. It is a major centre for informal activities like import-export and an important departure point for people heading towards Europe and the USA (Ebin 1992). Another typical sending context is the 'village artisanale' (Salem 1981). It is the centre of Laobé carvers who produce African art objects such as masks, bags and carving of all sorts, and acts as a sort of springboard for Mouride commercial migration to Europe.

Rimini: the "homogeneous" receiving context

Following people as much as the products of their investments one moves to the coast of Emilia Romagna which in the summer transforms itself into a big tourist market and becomes the favourite target of Senegalese street sellers within Italy and from Senegal. Through a comparison of the same transnational group in two different localities I have shown that as some transnational configurations stem from the organisational solutions found during internal urbanisation (Riccio 2003), so future transnational development may emerge from interactions with the specific context of migration. To summarise the comparison between these provinces it is worth drawing in a loose illustrative way on Wallman's 'homogeneous - heterogeneous' model (1986). Rimini represents the homogeneous type with an economic structure focused almost entirely on tourism and where the street selling carried out by the Senegalese is easily perceived as threatening the wealth of the community, built mainly by traders and merchants. Here Senegalese migrants are publicly portrayed as a danger from different points of view: social order, cultural image and economic achievements (Riccio 1999). To analyse this confrontational interaction I undertook fieldwork in a campsite (Camping Sole) where many Senegalese street sellers live during the summer, meanwhile conducting a discourse analysis of the local press where the issue of irregular trade is often debated. However, this difficulty partially explains why, although Rimini was one of the first communes to do something for immigrants in the region, so little has been done in immigration policies since that first attempt.

Ravenna: the "heterogeneous" receiving context

Ravenna offers a more plural economic structure (industry, agriculture, tourism, and trade) able to be more resilient when facing socio-economic changes. Here, what Grillo (1985) would call an 'institutional complex' of linked organisations began to develop in response (reception, information, and accommodation) to the arrival of immigrants and projects able to stimulate entrepreneurship in accordance with the Senegalese own strategy are beginning to be conceived. Indeed, there is a recent phenomenon which has spread during the last few years, that often takes the form of micro-projects conceived in the receiving country to be implemented in the sending one. The institutionalisation of these transnational projects seems more likely in Ravenna than Rimini.

Comparisons

The field connecting these sites is not a collection of separated units but they are linked by social actors' relations and practices. Following them, I have connected these different localities and the different methodological experiences through continuous cross-checking and comparison: a comparison in space embedded in the continuous connections between actions and thoughts emerging from the different sites of the fieldwork; a comparison between two neighbouring provinces and of their policies towards migrants; a comparison between life and professional histories (similarities and differences).

Discussion

Multivocality

This path helped me to shape a multivocal representation of the studied transnational community and this constitutes the first important opportunity of multisided research. As Marcus already suggested long time ago, activities and identities are "constructed by multiple agents in varying contexts, or places, and ethnography must be strategically conceived to represent this sort of multiplicity, and to specify both intended and unintended consequences in the network of complex connections within a system of places" (Marcus 1989, 25). Following the devaluation of CFA in 1994, emigration from Senegal has affected every category of people, not only the Mouride street peddlers who have been the object of much research. To the internal 'survival' migration engendered by drought and desertification, one may add the international economic emigration of the urban elite hit by the financial crisis. There exist different stages, different forms of organisation, different backgrounds of class, urban or rural culture, different sending contexts affecting the way a migrant interpret his or her life within a translocal formation. I wrote my work trying to stress this multiplicity of trajectories and a multivocal representation of Senegalese transnational spaces. The multivocality I tried to convey in my broader work helps in writing against 'cultural fundamentalism' (Stolke 1995) and in providing a disaggregated image of the transnational 'community' (Riccio 2001). One of my main objectives was to document the variety of perspectives toward the migration process and to this end the multi-sited path I undertook was particularly effective. Another aspect that was facilitated by a multi-sited strategy was the understanding of transnationalism as constant networking within transnational spaces, as opposed to reified transnational networks. I recognise that transnational migration encompasses differing practices rather than being an homogeneous system. Co-nationals tend to overcome religious and ethnic differences in a foreign country and some of them, although relying on communitary networks, also try to shape other networks in the receiving context. They then expand their networks in the context of origin to enlarge the potential market of import-export activities, for instance. Translocal research makes even more explicit the processual and constructive nature of ethnography as much as of informants' life.

Multi-sited ethnography as a virtuous spiral

Paul Stoller (2003), in his last monograph stresses how his previous works in Niger and his fluency in Songay facilitated his access to West African migrants in New York. From this methodological point of view, multi-sited ethnography is designed and constructed as a virtuous spiral. Indeed, each stage benefit from that before. For instance, after my first mission in Senegal I came back very enriched by that experience and the direct knowledge of the sending contexts facilitated enormously the access to new informants and new contexts in Italy. Moreover, even the selection of sites is the product of a gradual and cumulative process as new insights develop and new acquaintances are made. These reflections should prevent us to underrate the psychological difficulties underlying multi-sited research: following biographies as much as networks and practices, one never stop accessing new contexts. I have the feeling that too often we do not stress enough how translocal ethnographic research demands human skills as well as the ability to adapt and to deal with the practicalities of frequent movement. These features seem forgotten when scholars debate about multi-site ethnography as stemming from practical and instrumental reasons (Hannerz 2003; Parkin 2000).

Partialities

On the other hand, holistic ambitions should be left aside. It is difficult to have an "ethnographic grasp of the entire 'fields'". Through translocal research one focuses to some aspects (trade, transational families, detrrritorialisation of religion, etc.) and not on others.

… most multi-site studies really also have built-in assumptions about segmented lives, where some aspect (work, ethnicity or something else) is most central to the line of inquiry, and other aspects are less so. The ethnographer may be interested in the embeddedness of a particular line of belief or activity in a wider set of circumstances, but this hardly amounts to some holistic ambition (Hannerz 2003: 209)

There are various gaps in my research. Some methodological weaknesses are represented by the 'androcentric' stance of this work. Migration is generally a gendered phenomenon (Salih 2003), but the configurations I explored through my fieldwork were particularly male. Senegalese migration into Italy is mainly a single male migration (94%). Moreover, besides a few exceptional cases, the environment of immigration policies also manifested a strong male bias - most of my Italian informants were men. However, multi-sited fieldwork helped me to understand how the lives of certain people span through different contexts and the importance of living within transnational social fields for them. I was interested in what Hastrup and Olwig call 'nodal points in the diffuse networks of global and local relations that constitute the context of life of many people today'. Nevertheless, they argue themselves, 'such nodal points are grounded in cultural constructions associated with particular localities' (Hastrup and Olwig 1997, 12).

The relevance of context despite deterritorialisation

Indeed, an aspect that revealed itself to be important to my understanding of Senegalese transnational migration in Italy is that the local context impacts on the scope and depth of migrants' transnational practices. Therefore I argued against the assumption that the development of transnational social fields necessarily implies an erasure of the importance of local context in affecting migrants social life (Riccio 2002). Now, the risk of a complex multi-sited ethnography, it is argued, lies in weakening the deep and intense analysis of a locality provided by traditional fieldwork. This research strategy, although having relied on bounded and static views of culture as a natural whole in the past, used to give and still gives an in-depth knowledge of social relations and local historical legacies. What I am intimating is that 'trying to present both place and system in multiple perspective' (Marcus 1989: 19) is a difficult job and one must be careful not to throw the baby with the bath water. I argue in favor of opening the ethnographic gaze to transnational connections without loosing context. Local context is not a natural given neither (Appadurai 1996). It is rather an evolving and contested product of performances, practices, narratives and power relationships stratified through time (cf Coleman an Crang 2002). Indeed, it is migrants and non-migrants themselves through their talk and their activities that prevented me from underrating the localized form of many transnational practices. Although it would be a mistake to dismiss the transnational effects on the local, fieldwork of Senegalese migrants' configurations also revealed the 'contextualisation of the transnational' and implied the revitalisation of context in my ethnographic enquiry. Despite culture being unbounded and constantly changing rather than a natural 'whole' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), it remains vital to recognise the heuristic value of constructs which allow an understanding of the multistranded connections between categories of life and their relations to local historical contexts which survive processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

Coda: translocal development as an ethnographic lens

Ideally the student of transnational migration should be working simultaneously on three fronts: with the institutions of the receiving society, among migrants themselves, and in the sending society (Grillo 1985). Therefore, it is important to combine a transnational approach with the need to bridge a divide in the studies of migration which have tended to consider either the characteristics of an immigrant community or the characteristics of the society incorporating it. With this aim, one may focus on the potentials of 'translocal development' (glossing the term *coopération décentralisée*) involving migrants who embarked on micro-development projects conceived in Europe and aimed at their country of origin (Grillo and Riccio 2004).

During the 1980s, translocal development saw a major expansion in France: various forms of migrants' associations began to initiate development projects with the involvement of a variety of local institutions and actors 'here' (regional and municipal authorities, NGOs, and associations, with funding from the state, or the EU), and counterparts (local authorities, NGOs, village associations etc) 'there', in the South, becoming in this way 'development actors'. Also in Italy some local authorities had become involved in translocal development projects, and attempts to work through immigrants and their associations are developing. Although, one should be cautious towards a celebratory as much as pessimistic views towards this phenomenon, a methodological opportunity needs to be recognized: by involving so many social actors, this field of research represents a laboratory for the study of such a complex and ambivalent social process, as is transnational migration. Indeed, the study of migrants' translocal development represents a methodological solution to focus on the interaction between the institutions of the receiving contexts, migrants' transnational practices and the economic and socio-cultural transformations of the sending context. It might represent a way to anchor transnational research to the local contexts and their institutions and to work sideways with informants negotiating the meaning given to the transnational as much as to the local.

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