Dealing with Diversity and Difference in Public: Traces of Casamançais Cohabitation in Catalonia?

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Introduction

In Carrer Rosselló, a pedestrian street of a neighbourhood in Mataró, Catalonia, a couple of large seats half-heartedly invited people to rest, chat, or daydream. It was one of the few permanent installations inviting social gatherings on Carrer Rosselló. Most of the time when I passed by, a couple of people would be sitting there or a smaller group would stand around and chat. On a visit in 2011 however, one of the chairs was gone. As often before, I nevertheless found Souleymane Touré, a Balanta from the Casamance, sitting on the remaining chair. It was early in the morning and the alley was still quite empty. As the sun was rising quickly, at the far end of Carrer Rosselló a hermandad\(^1\) prepared the march for the *Matinal de Saetas*, a performance of devotional flamenco songs which commonly inaugurate Holy Week. Souleymane explained that the chair had been taken away by the town authorities since a woman living in the house next to it had frequently complained about people gathering there and being noisy. When his flatmate came, they then squeezed together into the remaining chair. They continued to inhabit this space although it had caused tension. Public spaces like Carrer Rosselló were used in many ways and local residents held different opinions concerning their use. This needed to be negotiated, which in the case of Carrer Rosselló had seemingly resulted in a new consensus around maintaining the street as convivial space. Spontaneous gatherings continued to happen involving different constellations of local residents. For Souleymane this was part of the everyday and nothing spectacular.

Casamançais streets, in turn, placed hardly any limits on people gathering. *Jo, lako*\(^2\) – ‘Come, sit down!’ Leaving the yard of *Samboukunda*, the home of my first host Damé Sambou in Ziguinchor, I was often invited by acquaintances

\(^{1}\) Spanish: fraternity. Here the *Hermandad Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza*.

\(^{2}\) Jola; alternatively, people would address me in Mandinka (*naa naa, sîl*) or French. For Jola spelling I refer to Sapir’s dictionary (1993), for Mandinka to Drame’s grammar and dictionary (2003).

and friends to join one of the groups chatting and preparing tea along the street, or at a street corner during my stay in 2009/2010. Turning left from my home, the Mandinka neighbours had pulled out small benches and chairs gathering around a tiny charcoal stove on which they prepared attaaya, a strong green tea with plenty of sugar. A lot of time was spent drinking tea since three rounds were usually served. Yet people did come and go in the meantime, sharing only one or two of the rounds, and senior members or guests were included in the serving of tea even if they were not sitting with the group preparing it. This was a regular scene in the neighbourhood after lunch or dinner, and in the afternoons, often occurring in front of shops or workshops.

To the right of Samboukunda at the corner shop of a Fula (Pullo) was another regular meeting point for young men as well as young women selling fruit and vegetables. Sometimes the men prepared tea, at other times they joked with the women or chatted, commenting on the traffic on Boulevard de Lindiane, or their lives. While in front of the shop along the boulevard the men were in their twenties or thirties, further into the tiny streets of the neighbourhood a younger cohort of youths met at a shop after school to spend time, discuss, and frequently watch football on the shopkeeper’s TV. Many of these groups were mixed mirroring the diversity of the neighbourhood. In front of my house a varied group congregated. There were Fula, Mandinka and Jola, some of them Guineans, Muslims of different brotherhoods and Christians of varying denominations.

In this chapter I focus on the practices of inhabiting and temporarily appropriating public spaces and how this is negotiated. Public spaces ‘tell us a great deal about [the] most diffuse forms of social organization’ (Goffman, 1966, 4). Indeed, this is particularly salient in both Casamance and Catalonia since a wide variety of people have access to them. However, I conceptualise a space of encounter as convivial space, which is socially constructed in a process of interacting, negotiating, and translating between changing practices and norms. It does not exist a priori as a given physical space, but can be understood as a capacity, ‘an instrument and dimension of people’s sociality’ (Corsín Jiménez, 2003, 140). Convivial space emerges from the fragile process of conviviality, living with difference involving both harmonious and conflictual encounters. Furthermore, in this chapter, I focus on how convivial space

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3 On a detailed analysis of preparing attaaya among male youth in Dakar as a way of coping with unemployment and creating solidarity, see Ralph (2008, esp. 15).

4 I am aware that there are transit spaces like Dakar, other West African capitals and West African, North African and European transit spaces that have an impact on interethnic and interreligious encounters. This however is beyond the scope of this chapter.