

## Localising transnationalism: researching political and cultural events in a context of migration

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Arbeitspapier / working paper

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Salzbrunn, M. (2007). *Localising transnationalism: researching political and cultural events in a context of migration*. (COMCAD Working Papers, 17). Bielefeld: Universität Bielefeld, Fak. für Soziologie, Centre on Migration, Citizenship and Development (COMCAD). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-413179>

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## Localising Transnationalism: Researching Political and Cultural Events in a Context of Migration

Paper presented at the conference on 'Transnationalisation and Development(s): Towards a North-South Perspective', Center for Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld, Germany, May 31 - June 01, 2007

COMCAD Arbeitspapiere - Working Papers  
No. 17, 2007

Salzbrunn, Monika: *Localising Transnationalism: Researching Political and Cultural Events in a Context of Migration*, Bielefeld: COMCAD, 2007  
(Working Papers – Center on Migration, Citizenship and Development; 17)

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## Abstract

Migration studies have extensively dealt with networks, transnational spaces and migration fields during the last 15 years. Recently, the focus has gone back to the very local rooting of these transnational spaces: Ludger Pries links geographic and sociological aspects by analysing the “spatial spanning of the social”; Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Çağlar develop a “theory of locality in migration studies”. In francophone social geography there is a similar research agenda influenced by Gildas Simon and in migration sociology there are growing interests in researching local-global embedding processes, such as Alain Tarrow’s „La mondialisation par le bas“ (globalization from below). Inspired by these approaches, I give two empirical examples for localising transnationalism: By researching political and cultural events in a context of migration, I will show how the understanding of a specific event within an urban context can help us to recognize the rooting of transnational networks. Therefore, my epistemological focus considers festive events as platforms for the negotiation of inclusion/exclusion and transformation processes within migration. Minorities and majorities are therefore seen as historically-evolved dynamic categories. This choice avoids taking an a priori-defined ethnic, religious or sociocultural category as a key issue in the processes of communitarization. The link of theoretical debates on rituals and events, on translocal social spaces and on globalization leads to innovative methodological instruments in action theory. These allow us to research festive events and their integrative impact in a migratory context. The 1st example will be the Murid parade in New York, where followers of a Sufi group get successfully integrated in the social and urban space in the United States. The 2nd example shows how origin works temporarily as a resource within festive events in Paris, which finally leads to the emergence of a we-group based on a common belonging to an urban territory.

## 1. Introduction: “Relocalising” transnational networks

Migration studies<sup>1</sup> have extensively dealt with networks, transnational spaces and migration fields during the last 15 years. Recently, the focus goes back to the very local rooting of these transnational spaces: Ludger Pries links geographic and sociological aspects by analysing the “spatial spanning of the social”; Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Çağlar develop a “theory of locality in migration studies”. In francophone social geography there is a similar research agenda influenced by Gildas Simon and in migration sociology there are growing interests in researching local-global embedding processes, such as Alain Tarrus’ „La mondialisation par le bas“ (globalization from below). Tarrus (2002:18) links the emergence of new cosmopolitanisms to the “capacity to circulate”, that means a new capacity of being here *and* there at the same time, and not being here *or* there<sup>2</sup>. The interesting point of Tarrus’ approach is the consciousness of a new identity that refers to the experience of circulation. Here is a common point with L. Pries and T. Faist approaches, which both refer to the emergence of new spaces that go beyond the addition of two experiences, and create new entities. However, another aspect of Tarrus’ reflection is problematic. He speaks of a nomad identity, assuming that these new nomads remain economically dependent exclusively of their place of origin<sup>3</sup>. This assumption can not be generalized and has to be analysed in the context of French migration studies: A certain number of research groups were influenced by public policies that had a tendency of victimization of the immigrant population. Conferring a new, nomad identity which is independent from the French State, means in this context that an autonomous empowerment of the migrants is seen by social sciences. The consciousness of an independent, self-organisation of migrants came up already 20 years in the French context and was mainly inspired by geographers from the “Migrations internationales” research group in Poitiers. Gildas Simon (1990) has very early been aware of the emergence of “migration fields”, which present common points with Pries’ and Faist’s transnational social spaces. Both approaches tend to escape from methodological nationalism and from a binary analysis between country of origin and country of residence, even though the empirical reference group is still linked to one or two Nation-States.

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Prof. Dr. Nina Glick Schiller and Prof. Dr. Gudrun Lachenmann for their helpful comments on the present paper.

<sup>2</sup> Tarrus (2002:18): « Une capacité inédite *d’être d’ici, de là-bas, d’ici et de là-bas à la fois* se substitue à la vieille opposition entre *d’ici ou de là-bas* ».

<sup>3</sup> Tarrus (2002 :18) : « Ces étonnants territoires circulatoire confèrent de la sorte une identité nomade à des dizaines de milliers de migrants »... « Les nouveaux nomades, par contre, restent attachés à leur lieu d’origine et demeurent économiquement dépendants de lui seul ».

Pries (1996), while studying migration between Mexico and the United States, identified the transmigrant, a working migrant who is situated in pluri-local social spaces. Transmigrants interact in highly complex transnational networks that provide information about employment, facilitate the transfer of money to family in the home village, and offer a means of identification with the home country by network members' sharing everyday practices like preparing food and organising social gatherings according to well-established rites. The networks are structured by mutual obligations and are the result of a complex system of loyalty. The positions and identities created in this way are hybrid because they take into consideration elements of the original and host countries. These transnational social spaces are the result of new forms of delimitation and are different from geographic or national boundaries, transcending a simple coexistence of the two systems of reference (Pries 1996: 456).

### 1.1 Translocal social spaces: The importance of the local living conditions

Following L. Pries' concept of transnational social spaces and N. Glick Schiller and E. Feron's last book on long-distance transnationalists, I suggest emphasizing the importance of the specific local living conditions by adopting the notion of translocal social spaces. Even though Pries included the importance of elements of the new environment within the transnational social space, the reference to the home country seems to be the most important part in the reference system. During our fieldwork amongst Senegalese migrants in Europe and the United States of America, we observed that the *local* economic, social and cultural reference systems became more and more important within the transmigrant's identification process. Their action was only partly determined by their reference to their original nation, village or family, but more and more to their new *local* and national environment.

Hence I suggest a definition of translocal social spaces as the result of new forms of delimitation that are partly consisting in, but also reaching beyond geographic or national boundaries. These translocal spaces are leading to new sources of identification and action based on specific local and global reference systems.

## 2. The integrative impact of festive events in a migratory context

Once we agreed that it is necessary to go beyond an essentialisation of national states as the “natural” unit of analysis in global contexts, we have to make suggestions about how to move beyond that in methodology. I have developed an approach that takes festive events as a unit of analysis in a migratory context. Focusing on these events, we can observe the emergence and dynamics of group building, the development of new hybrid references and we can observe the importance of *places*, namely the very local urban environment, to these social practices.

### 2.1 First example: The Murid Parade in New York. A local and global frame of social security

In the United States, Westafrican Muslim groups have successfully promoted their specific Islamic practice by connecting it to common American discourses on minorities. The activities of a translocal Sufi tariqa (brotherhood) of Senegalese origin, the Murids, founded by Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and very active today all over the world, will be taken as an example for different integrations of religious minorities into the broader society. One of its religious leaders, Cheikh Mourtada Mbacké, kept up the ties to his pupils by visiting religious communities in Europe and overseas in the last fifteen years until his death in 2004. Another part of his activities was to work on a growing visibility of the Murids by giving conferences (at the UNESCO) and organising public demonstrations (like the Murid Parade in New York). We will show how Muslims from different *turuq* (brotherhoods) take into consideration the specific cultural and religious practices in their different countries of residence in order to become a part of the religious and political landscapes.

In the last twenty years, Senegalese migration has shifted from West African cities to France, from France to its neighbouring countries and finally towards the United States of America. Whereas the secular French state discourages religious display, especially within public space, the more community-oriented USA is far from being opposed to religious references in the public sphere. These differences explain partly the different *local* expressions and functioning of religious sufi networks in France and in the United States. I will analyse how religiously defined networks interact with other kinds of alliances, and how these worldwide existing configurations manage to create *specific local expressions* that respond to needs in social security. Studies in migration have focussed a great deal on nomadism, mobility and

transborder connections. Although these are no doubt important characteristics of the religious Sufi networks, it is necessary to stress the *very local strategies of residence*, the occupation of *public space* and *connects to local decision makers* as well as other important *networks*.

Even though the migrants, notably the political and religious activists, take into consideration the cultural and political differences between their various places of residence, they follow continuous strategies across their *translocal spaces*. Special events like the Murid Parade in July or the Senegalese presidential election campaign in spring 2000 provide rich empirical data for the analysis of the complex interaction between Senegalese inside and outside their country, their *translocal networks* and their *connections to the local situation* in Paris and New York City. The latter include the different inhabitants of Harlem and the local geographical setting, the representatives of the state and the politics of immigration, as well as the Mayor and his political program. The recently opened House of Islam founded by members of the Murid Sufi order in Harlem shows how deeply the Senegalese in the US are already rooted. The annual religious event organised by the Murids is part of a larger strategy of recruiting converts who support the religious network based in Senegal, whose richest contributors reside outside West Africa. The reasons that people integrate or are in contact with these religious networks are highly complex: the notion of social security has changed according to the *local context* and the *individual situation* of the members. Whereas financial support for other members of the networks, trade relationships and spiritual help are still the most important motives for entertaining the networks, there are other motivations coming up recently: As the new President of Senegal is a member of the Murid network, the relations become more political orientated. With the growing financial impact of the Senegalese migrants, the petty traders and taxi driver who were a majority in the beginning of this migration, are now joined by very rich investors who commit themselves and their business more in their new places of residence than in their home villages. The weekly prayer at the “House of Islam”, lunch at a Senegalese restaurant in Harlem owned by members of a Sufi order, and the participation in annual political and religious events become important places of sociability which transcend the belonging to a religiously defined network and can be analyzed as the “landscapes of confluence” of different kinds of *local and global networks*.

#### *Creating social security through translocal spaces in the USA*

Since the 1990s, the USA has been a new centre of Senegalese migration, which is mostly a result of the above factors. From New York City, New York State, Connecticut and New Jer-



sey, migrants spread over the whole country, building several *regional centres* like that in Atlanta, Georgia. The *local context of migration* and the way that migrants organise themselves *within the new translocal spaces* is as important as the knowledge and customs from their original home. Therefore, we suggest including the notion of ‘translocal spaces’ in theoretical and empirical approaches to migration. Our recent empirical fieldwork amongst religious (Sufi) and political Senegalese networks in New York has shown how deeply these networks are rooted in the local social spaces. Getting connected to key persons in the religious communities in New York and getting in touch with the local administration in order to build up commercial, social, political and religious structures are important examples of local strategy for migrants that has to be taken into consideration by researchers (Salzbrunn 2004). The implementation of religious and political structures by migrants in New York requires profound local knowledge concerning law, customs, administration, etc. The existing social practices have influenced and modified the experiences of the Senegalese, and led to new hybrid practices, which take into consideration the very specific local situation in Harlem. Whereas France and Senegal are secular states, the presence of religious references in public space is much more visible in the United States. In Harlem, prayers are organised within public space, often via microphones on the street in front of churches or assembly halls. The flourishing Pentecostal or Neo-Protestant movements in particular put a strong emphasis on missionary street work. The Senegalese migrants, who have become familiar with the religious patchwork of Harlem, have adopted the use of loudspeakers to announce daily prayers in a mosque in the urban centre of West African migration, near the Malcolm Shabbaz mosque. Iconographic symbols of religious affiliation are also omnipresent in the names and decors of Harlem boutiques, as well as in the cars of Senegalese cab drivers. Stickers and paintings reproducing the only existing image of the founder of the Murid brotherhood, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba (1853-1927), and photos of the Murid’s Kahlifes who were residing at Touba, are commonly exposed in Senegalese restaurants or video shops. The use of these iconographic documents is much more common than Arabic writings and calligraphy – which can be explained by the limited knowledge of Arabic amongst the West African Muslims, in comparison to other Muslim migrants residing in the United States. The symbolic presence of Senegalese religious leaders within the public space provides a feeling of emotional security. Senegalese become a part of Harlem through their religious expression. Instead of feeling “downgraded” in a country, where religion, and especially a non-Christian religion, is less visible, Senegalese migrants in the USA become more and more upgraded – the practice of religion provides them respect in the eyes of Americans. This acceptance allows the Senegalese in return to identify more with American values. One example of this ongoing identification process is the increasing use of the English language and the decreasing use of French and the presence of American flags during religious demonstrations like

the Murid parade. The rooting of the Murids in the USA can be seen as a sign for emotional and spiritual security, although it is not the guarantee for economic and administrative security. It increases the hope of achieving the latter, and shows that Senegalese, Murid and American identity does not exclude each other, but can be parts of an individual identification process, accompanied by the elaboration of various aspects of social security. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Suzanne Blanc-Szanton (1992) say that non-acceptance in the established society favors identification among immigrants with transnational and home country communities. The higher identification of migrants with America than with France is not only linked to colonial history, but also to the higher degree of emotional security and symbolic presence within the public space. A brief history of the Murid community in New York shows how the Senegalese Muslims became established thanks to their capacity to *integrate the local political, social, economic and religious frame of reference*.

#### *The Regular Visits of Shaykh Mourtada Mbacke to New York*

At the end of the 1990s, the annual visit of the Murid Cheikh Mourtada Mbacke has become an important event that lasts for more than two weeks. The Senegalese and American press, as well as radio stations, regularly report the news. Video producers film the whole event in order to commercialise the tapes through retailers in the US, Europe and Senegal.

On his arrival at JFK Airport, a crowd of hundreds of Talibe wearing large Boubous welcomes Sheikh Mourtada Mbacke at each visit with Khassaides. Serigne Mbacké Ndiaye and Adja Aram Adji, President of the female Daira Sokhna Diarra, direct the organisation of the visit. El Haj Mohammad Balozzi, the first African-American convert, is the first person to salute Shaykh Mourtada on American soil. He follows the rules of 'soudjod', having one knee on the ground and kissing the Shaykh's hand. Then he conducts the Shaykh towards a huge white limousine, where the Shaykh, accompanied by the Talibe's Khassaides, leaves the airport with an escort of the Port Authority of New York Police. The important engagement of the police who accompany the event is shown as a sign of prestige rather than a threat in the eyes of the participants. Whereas events organised by Muslim minorities in European countries are sometimes accompanied by large numbers of policemen to prevent conflict and subversive acts in the crowd, the engagement of the American police in this specific religious event is rather seen as a matter of honouring officially the arrival of a religious authority who needs protection and respect. Before the acquisition of the House of Islam in Harlem, the Shaykh resided during his stay in prestigious luxury hotels. At his arrival at Pennsylvania Hotel in 1999, a huge crowd, comprising a lot of women and children, again saluted him.

Tens of banderols, mostly in English but also in Arabic, proudly celebrate 'blackness' as an important quality, or cite 'Allah the Creator of the Universe'. Children wear T-shirts especially printed for this event, some show Senegalese and American flags. Several messages are appeals seeking for converts: 'You young people. Get the achievement of peace and justice as your ultimate goal while starving for knowledge and enlightenment'. In 2001, the ambassador of Senegal and his son have welcomed Shaykh Mourtada at the Salon d'honneur at JFK Airport. This manifestation of official honour was reported in the bi-monthly francophone Muride magazine distributed around the different migration platforms. The fact of getting Senegalese and American official proclamations or symbolic honours is part of the strategy of occupying public space, and is not seen as contradicting the secular constitution of Senegal.

The culminating point of the annual visit is the Murid parade, a march through the streets of Harlem that ends with several discourses held in Wolof, Arabic and English at a corner of Central Park. The videotape that documents the Murid parade 1999 shows interviews with several participants during the march. The common point of most of the discourses is the celebration of 'African' unity, the wish to bring together 'Africans born in America and Africans born in Senegal'. One of the main messages is the invitation for a reinvention of Africanness addressed to the African-American population. Clear allusions are made to the Black Muslim movement and Afrocentric philosophy: 'We want to thank Shaykh Mourtada for coming here to spread Islam amongst the African-American community'. Several speakers assimilate African unity to conversion to Islam. 'We would like to thank Shaykh Mourtada for his dedication, his hard work, his support for the last ten years to the Murid Islamic community here in America. Insh'Allah, next year, the Murid Islamic community will be continuing to propagate Islam, propagating and letting the world know that the Senegalese, that the African-American community have come together to do something great. That something has been prophesied by Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, one day we will come together and be one.' After the discourses, several Senegalese and African-Americans are demonstrating their unity by emphatic accolades. The women, who were mostly at the end of the parade, are also interviewed, expressing in Wolof or French their great satisfaction at participating in this event. A large place is always reserved for female participation in religious or political events in Senegal. During official meetings with religious or political authorities, women are systematically represented and participate in the debate. The participation of the female Dahira Mame Diarra in the 2001 Murid parade and the community's activities in general are reported in the 'Mouride' magazine as 'immense oeuvre'. 'Behind every great man, a great woman is hidden', says the article as a summary of the situation in New York.

*Criss-crossing alliances in Harlem*

Another part of their strategy to become well rooted in the public space in Harlem is the translation of their values into a language understood by Americans in order to promote their activities. The most important issues amongst these values are economic and moral practices. The ideology of very hard work and the ideal of a certain form of piety are welcomed by a section of American society<sup>4</sup>. In the context of an open battle by state officials against drugs and alcohol, the promotion of an ascetic lifestyle by the Murids is considered as a helpful initiative. American researchers who are specialists on Muridism also express their fascination by the expression of these values. In their own discourse, Murids declare they have reconstructed large parts of Harlem, fought crime and stopped the disintegration of the area. Economic, emotional and administrative security grow thanks to these changes. Negative prejudices against African-Americans include their supposed negative attitude towards work and loss of moral values. I have also collected several negative testimonies of African-Americans against Africans. These include the feeling that their new employers in recently opened shops and restaurants exploit African-Americans, or that the Africans show no solidarity but a hostile attitude towards the former inhabitants of Harlem. Almost every person I interviewed from both groups gave a concrete example of negative experiences with the other group. The apparent unity, which is declared during the Murid parade, seems to be in contrast with everyday social relations. Considering the attraction for African-Americans of Muridism, the economic dynamics of the Senegalese traders are cited as one of the personal reasons. In general, conversion is the result of a search for spirituality and authenticity.

Even though the average Afro-American Muslim might not have the historical intellectual roots of the various Black Muslim movements in mind – and the knowledge gap between leaders and followers of a social or religious movement is a general phenomenon -, it is important to underline that the leaders of the major Afro-American nationalistic Muslim movements have managed to connect afrocentric and Muslim ideologies: Pauline Guedj (2003) points out that the Ahmadyyah Movement, the Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam have drawn inspiration from the theory of an Afro-Asian Islam and an Afro-Asian origin of the black race. This idea provides these movements also with a negative referent for their thought. Karen Isaksen Leonard (2004) points out the inherent paradoxes of these ideologies. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam 'both as-

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<sup>4</sup> See the article 'In Harlem, a Link to Senegal', by Susan Sachs, New York Times, July 28, 2003; the article 'Feature: A different kind of Islam in NYC', by Natalia Antelava, United Press International, July 30, 2002, and Linda Beck's contribution 'An American's View of Mouridism and the Mourides of New York' on the website of the Murid Islamic Community of America, [www.micasite.org](http://www.micasite.org).

served “Asiatic” racial identities, explicitly rejecting slave, Negro, and/or African identities in many ways’. The emerging category of ‘Asiatic Black’ can be interpreted as a response to the racialisation of identity politics in general in the United States. Nevertheless, the complexity and variety of the contemporary identity discourse of the Murids shows us how dynamic these discourses and references are. The reference to ‘African personality and culture’ in the Mayor of New York’s proclamation of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba Day connects African roots and Sufism, which makes it possible for Afro American Muslims who currently research their African roots to identify themselves with this spiritual leader. But I want to underline how fragile these intellectual identification processes are, because those of the everyday-life struggles that are based on religion, ethnicity, origins, etc., have an important impact on community life and individual practices in the United States. The discourses of social or religious movements are not representative for the relationships between individuals and/or groups.

There are individual people who have succeeded partly thanks to affirmative action programs, but there are also indicators for a continuous discrimination based on race: the high percentage of Afro-Americans who are incarcerated or the extremely low percentage of mixed couples in the U.S. (in comparison to France) show the real impact of a constructed and/or perceived racial difference. It may be too early to draw general conclusions on the relationship between Afro-Americans and recent immigrated Africans, so that I limit my own analysis on the specific case of Senegalese migrants in New York. As we have seen that the analysis of the specific local situation is extremely important for the comprehension of a translocal network, an extension of the analysis to the situation in Atlanta (where Martin Luther King’s non-violent movement has its roots, and where African American politicians have promoted racial identity as a ground for legitimacy) or in California would need further intensive fieldwork.

The local Murid network in Harlem is an actor for social transformation. The real estate within that area has considerably changed since the arrival of the first Senegalese migrants in the 1980ies. Thanks to the visibility of religious practices within public space, the Senegalese Muslims, and particularly the members of the Murid brotherhood, earn emotional and spiritual security, accompanied by administrative and economic security provided by the State and by the borough of Manhattan. The authorities trust the new migrants because of their Muslim ethics that is expressed in almost weberian terms during their lobbying campaign and public events like the annual Murid parade.

As well as Pentecostalism, which ‘has become a transnational phenomenon that, in its modern form, is locally expressed through a highly accelerated circulation of goods, ideas and people’ (van Dijk 2002: 178), Muridism has spread around the multi-sited migration network

and evolved. On the one hand, the local expression of Muridism changes according to the specific context and influences the religious network as a whole. On the other hand, the local expression of Muridism as an event contributes to the restructuring of a local territory including social, economic and political practices. We have shown how the Murids managed to use the local administrative rules (like the access to public space for religious communities) and the specific symbols of belonging to the American citizenship (through the Proclamation of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba day, etc.) in order to become a part of Harlem. Even if concrete everyday relations with African-American citizens are a source of serious conflicts, the Murids used the common colour of skin in order to create a link and to lobby for particular rights and recognition. The demonstration of religious ethics like piety and hard work can easily be understood by American Protestant thinking and helped Murids to obtain recognition from public opinion and beyond. This strategy is directly connected to the specific local context and the result of hybridisation of religious, political and social practices related to a multi-sited translocal space. The specific local expressions of this translocal network are the result of a fine knowledge of this context. They do not erase the general uncivic structure of this translocal movement: e.g. the important financial flows go beyond national boundaries or controls of international public organisation. Murids do not seek systematically for a visible place in public space, but in case of New York, this visibility and the construction of a peaceful, tolerant, event 'workoholic' image of the Murids was helpful in the negotiation process with the Mayor. So the occupation of public space is not an aim in itself, it could also be considered as an instrument of the efficient local rooting of an uncivic translocal network.

In Muridism, the individual relationship between Talibe and Marabout has always been the basis of a wider network of solidarity. Migration has led to a deterritorialisation of this relationship, reinforced only during visits of the Talibe in Senegal or by displaced spiritual links in favour of Cheikh Mourtada, who went to see the Senegalese around the world until his death august 7<sup>th</sup> 2004. So far, migration, a source of emotional insecurity, has reinforced the translocal religious network that provides stable spiritual and emotional solidarity. However, the economically successful American Senegalese invest a growing amount of their benefits in the United States and only a small but efficient part of their gains in Senegal. Will the following generation keep up the translocal solidarity network or will moral obligations shift from Senegal towards an inner-American network, or even disappear within the individualized society? In any case, we have seen that the Senegalese residing in the United States do not exclusively refer to the national or religious network, but are connected to a multitude of frames of reference that are concentrated in the political and religious events that I have observed. For the actors, nationality is only one of different existing resources.

## 2.2 Second example: Belonging to an urban territory and getting rooted in France

By researching networks based on nationality in the context of political and religious struggles, I realized to which extent these networks go beyond the geographic origins of their members. The connection to other networks present in the locality, allow these networks to get rooted in an urban context. The Senegalese case shows that the network in itself has cross-cutting ties and is far from being homogenous. The specific locality and its political, social, economic context determine the evolution of the network linked to this locality.

In my second example, I wanted to take even more distance to any predefined notion of belonging to religion or origin. I took an event as entry to a local, geographically defined space, in order to understand how groups emerge or evolve in a migratory context.

The epistemological focus of this new research project considers festive events as platforms for the negotiation of inclusion/exclusion and transformation processes. Minorities and majorities are hereby seen as historically-evolved dynamic categories. This choice avoids taking an apriori-defined ethnic, religious or sociocultural category as key issue for processes of communitarization. Hence, the project questions how events create, reinforce and change transforming feelings of *Communitas*. The link of theoretical debates on rituals and events, on translocal social spaces and on globalization leads to innovative methodological instruments in action theory, that allows us to research festive events and their integrative impact in a migratory context. Following a *histoire croisée*, qualitative methods are applied to a multi-sited field in France and Germany, and empirical research is backed up by historical sources.

Richard Grathoff has applied a phenomenological perspective in his study on neighbours and the interactive creation of space, by focusing on events. Inspired by this sociology of neighbourhood (Grathoff 1994:52) and Alois Hahn's approach of the construction of the stranger (1994:140), I am interested on the production of the imagined other on the stage that is given by the event within the urban environment. Social sciences have produced a huge amount of studies focusing on festive events like carnivals (Abner Cohen, Bakhtin, Bausinger, N. Z. Davis, M. Ouzouf) and on rituals of transgression (Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, Max Gluckman and the Manchester school, Don Handelman, Klaus-Peter Köpping, Ursula Rao, etc.). The performative, dynamic approaches of the festive situation with a high potential of transformation are precious sources of inspiration for the project.

Instead of taking migrants as an a priori defined group based on religion or ethnic origin, I focus on the group building process within this social and geographic space. As far as my observation permits so far, I can assume that the carnival creates a new geographical identity that overcomes ethnic differences rather than reinforcing them. Renouncing on choosing a special migrant's group a priori, which means going beyond methodological nationalism, opens the observer's perspective to new actor's groups that are created thanks to the reinvented ritual. My objective is to open an alternative approach on migration studies that allows understanding the emergence of new, inclusive groups within an urban environment.

In the Parisian district of Sainte Marthe, I have seen the presence of local political struggles that are concentrated within the festive situation. Festive events are instrumentalised by the actors as a mean of resistance against urban restructuration projects and lead to a new, geographically defined, we-group that includes people from various horizons.

In Sainte Marthe, which is part of the better-known quarter called Belleville<sup>5</sup>, the center of interest is the celebration of cultural diversity by including the largest possible number of inhabitants from various horizons. The population includes working migrants from North Africa and former Yugoslavia who arrived in the 1960s, painters and musicians who have occupied workshops deserted by artisans, and an increasing middle class population attracted by the diversity and the village character of the architecture – a tendency which will lead to a growing gentrification. During the festive events organized on the place Sainte Marthe, participants are called to disguise themselves and paint their faces in order to change identity, but are also asked to bring elements of their own cultural background on to the stage, especially music. The events are organized by the association “Les 4 horizons”. Their founder and president is a French woman of Algerian origin, whose motivation is to provide alternative occupations for the inhabitants of the quarter, especially the youth, to create links between different people, and to create a meeting point for the Algerian women who suffer from isolation. She also wants to prevent the quarter from destruction, because real estate promoters who would like to rebuild the whole quarter threaten the fragile buildings. *Les 4 horizons* organized an active resistance movement by creating cultural events like outdoor balls, public couscous banquets and carnivals, which have made Sainte Marthe more and more popular. The new left wing mayor has become aware of the cultural value and the historical heritage of the quarter, which is a former worker's residence city created by utopian industrialists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The organization of festive events like the carnival has been central for the growing identity of the inhabitants of the quarter. In 2001, the small picturesque central place

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<sup>5</sup> See P. Simon (2000) for an analysis of the Jewish-Tunisian culture at Belleville.



that had been abandoned by the inhabitants because of a certain number of small crimes was symbolically inaugurated: it was officially named “Place Sainte Marthe”. Thus the square, which was saved from destruction thanks to these carnivals and banquets, was “re-gained” by the inhabitants. It still symbolizes the link between the different habitants of the quarter and incarnates their common geographical identity. The act of putting plates with the name “Place Sainte Marthe” on different house facades of the square was similar to the consecration of a political victory. In this quarter, feasts named “carnival” have been celebrated in three different forms: first, as a summer carnival organized by a theatre company and supported by the city. Local artists from the rue Sainte Marthe and the President of *Les 4 horizons* animated the event by helping the children to create masks and costumes. Second, several inhabitants of the quarter participated in a new type of summer carnival organized for the first time in 2003 with reference to the London Notting Hill carnival and named “Barbès Tour”<sup>6</sup>. 2003 was the official year of Algeria in France, so the President of *Les 4 horizons* and her neighbors referred to this by wearing Berber costumes behind a banner on with “Algeria my love” written in Arabic. In 2004, the “Barbès Tour” took place in Barbès and Sainte Marthe, where a concert with different musical styles was organized on a permanent stage. The third explicit reference to carnival concerns the Catholic calendar: Tuesday before the beginning of the Lent period, which is the carnival *mardi gras*, *Les 4 horizons* offers crêpes to the children of Sainte Marthe and prepares a Tajine, a Moroccan dish, in a local restaurant run by an association. They refer to “la Chandeleur”, a Catholic feast day which takes place on February 2<sup>nd</sup> (*fešta candelarum*), but which is today associated as being a pretext for eating crêpes together. Therefore the reference to the carnival period (*mardi gras*), the Catholic feast day of *candelarum* and the preparation of seasonal French dishes, to which a North-African dinner menu is added, is another example of cultural *bricolage* in the sense meant by Lévi-Strauss. The most recent hybrid creation of *Les 4 horizons* was the celebration of Halloween and the beginning of Ramadan in 2004, which happened to take place during the same period, on the same day at the association’s restaurant.

One of the results of our study of Sainte Marthe that is interesting for our debate on methodology is the following:

**The local political identity that is expressed during the festive event leads to the emergence of a we-group, not the other way around. The geographic element is a**

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<sup>6</sup> “Barbès” is the name of a popular quarter in the Northern Paris, approx. two kilometres from Sainte Marthe. It is one of the quarters where migrants from Subsaharian Africa, but also from North Africa, are implemented.

**more important element that creates a feeling of belonging to one group than elements that refer to the cultural or religious elements linked to the region of origin.**

If I had focused on the Algerian origin as a common point of the population in that district, my findings could have confirmed an ethnic or transnational network: there are indeed connections between the President of Les 4 horizons, her nephew in Great Britain and her uncles in Algeria. But this family network is not sufficient for a description of this local migratory space. The connections to other residents in and around Paris are much more important for the economic, social and political situation of this person. Abner Cohen (1993) and Fredrik Barth (1969) have already emphasized the fact that cultures do not exist in themselves, but only in a specific context. Completing her reflections on culture which is always „sited and negotiated“, Pnina Werbner (1997a: 16) reminds us that the actors' identities are “partial, multiple and fractured by cross-cutting alliances” (Werbner 1997b: 265). Therefore, the transformation of cultural practices is due to the context of space and time. These cultural practices and alliances can best be analysed in a local context with its specific political, social and economic living conditions. The combination of a diachronic and a synchronic perspective shall avoid taking one urban context as a representative example for the social group that emerges or that the researcher has defined a priori.

**Focusing on localities rather than on a priori defined groups based on national, ethnic or religious criteria allows us to go beyond methodological nationalism and to follow the actor's social practice, which goes also beyond national frameworks.** In their latest article, Glick Schiller and Çağlar give the examples for a renewal of migration studies. Other authors have also claimed for more attention to be paid to the “synergy between the global processes that are restructuring cities and the incorporative processes linking migration to localities” (Rath and Kloostermann, cited by Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Çağlar, 2006: 15). Concerning multi-sited fieldwork on one predefined group of migrants, one could add that a systematic comparison of localities also becomes indispensable. I suggest that a focus on events can avoid taking an a priori-defined ethnic, religious or sociocultural category as a key issue in the processes of communitarization. This epistemological perspective can open up our research setting towards some surprising criss-crossing alliances within an urban space that go beyond predefined categories.

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