

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL NETWORKS

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In December 2016, with a Research Tutorial Award (RTA) from the Center for African Studies, three students accompanied me to Senegal for a field research exercise. I have done research on circular migration to France, Central Africa and the US from the Senegal River Valley for years. Therefore, I used the opportunity of the RTA to introduce UF undergraduate students to my field site and to teach them hands on about basics of an ethnographic research. The short research course was devoted to the study of a hometown Association named Thilogne Association Développement (TAD) and the homecoming of its members after sojourns in Europe, America, and Central Africa in search of employment, income and opportunity.

The goal of the program was to introduce the three students to a community and to initiate them to some basic ethnographic research techniques. They learned how to practice participant observation, take field notes, conduct interviews and document cultural performances through photography and videography. They also learned how to use social media, and smartphone applications as research tools to capture migrants' transnational social networks. The Ultimate research goal was to use the data collected during the forum and the cultural festival to make sense of the changing modalities of

transnational communications between migrants scattered around the world and their home community due to the use of the internet and smartphone applications.

The forum in Dakar December 9-10. The students and I participated in the forum organized by TAD in Dakar on December 9 and 10 where all the sections of TAD (Dakar, France, Italy, USA, and Gabon) were represented. On December 9, the discussions of forum revolved around the evaluation of the 40 years of existence of TAD and its major realizations and challenges. On December 10, the discussions focused on the way forward with the identification of major projects. The following project received the support of all participants: Thilogne a green town (Thilogne ville verte), the creation of a foundation that would help booster income generating activities. The forum also talked about the identification of government programs that can be used to better prepare the youth for employment, the creation of a network of "les cadres de Thilogne" (the brains of Thilogne) to harness ideas and resources for local development.

The cultural Festival in Thilogne December 16-18.

After Dakar, the students travelled with returning migrants to Thilogne, a small town in the Senegal River Valley, 750Km away from Dakar. The students immersed themselves in this Haalpulaar community for a week. The cultural festival started on December 16 with the official opening by the governor of the region. The mayor of Thilogne and a representative of TAD world took the stage praising the migrants' participation in funding community projects (in health, education, clean water, and the environment). The speeches were followed by performance of the Thiayde, a slow-paced procession of young girls wearing colorful traditional outfits, traditional hairstyles, and fake golden jewelry singing and clapping their hands. The interviews conducted by the undergraduate students and I, at the end of the Festival, revealed

the history of this cultural practice. The interviews also addressed how this particular cultural performance became the highlight of the festival despite the fact that it is not any more part of what young girls do during the Muslim holidays as it used to be the case until the early 1980s.

The two events, the forum and the Festival, were streamed live in the Salndu Fouta Whatsapp group allowing migrants in Europe, America, and Central Africa from Thilogne to follow instantaneously what was going on. Pictures and video feeds of the two events were shared in social media, on Facebook, skype, Snap Chat by participants and their friends across continents. Our small research show how local events are made global using the new technologies of communication. At the same time, it shows also how the local events such as the forum and the cultural festival are prepared and organized at a global level by migrants who live in countries separated by long distances but who can also use effectively the virtual spaces offered by skype or Whatsapp to coordinate their activities.

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