

THE STREET CHILDREN'S POINT OF VIEW ON DAILY FOOD PRACTICES:

FROM COPING STRATEGY TO PEERS TRANSMISSION

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Abstract – My paper aims to question the notion of transmission between children, considering what street children do, say and eat daily in La Paz, Bolivia. I will first show how street children elaborate alimentary rules, e.g. food supply, preparation, consumption and commensality, as a coping strategy. Secondly, I will focus on the central contribution of food in transmission processes between children, especially in the reinforcement of what street children call themselves their « organized gang » (*pandilla* in Spanish). Through this example, I will then show that street children actively participate – also they do not mention it explicitly – to a transmission process which could be interpreted as a particular form of heritage, both in its tangible and intangible dimensions (know-how and identities). The more general problem of anthropological research on transmission between children will be finally evoked and defended.

Key Words – Children, Food, Coping Strategy, Transmission, Heritage, Bolivia

My paper aims to question the notion of transmission of identity between peers, considering what street children eat daily in La Paz, Bolivia. I will first show how street children elaborate alimentary rules food supply, preparation, consumption and commensality, as a coping strategy. Secondly, I will focus on the central contribution of food in transmission processes between peers, especially in the reinforcement of what street children call themselves their *pandilla* or « organized gang » in Spanish. Through this example, I will show how street children actively participate to a particular form of transmission, both in its intangible and tangible dimensions, such as know-how and identities.

My analyses are based on observations conducted in La Paz, between 2002 and 2003, within a *pandilla* of peers aged from 8 to 16 years. I will first briefly discuss the analytical category of « street children » before talking about their daily food.

The social universe of street children is entirely oriented towards the *pandillas* they belong to. Their spatial universe is oriented towards the places *pandillas* occupy in order to sleep, to take drugs and drink, to work, to steal... and to eat. This whole universe includes bridges, river banks, parks, cemeteries, market places and dumps.

The new members of a *pandilla* are introduced and referred to as « friends ». When relations last long, the term « friends » is replaced by the term « brothers ». Peers refer and speak then of a « family » to name their *pandilla*. Peers also refer to a « brotherhood » (*hermandad* in Spanish), a term which stresses the constructed and organized dimension of the *pandilla*.

The reference to an individual who would originally have created the *pandilla* does not emerge from discourses. But the brothers recognize they always have a leader. The leader of *Solitarios*, the *pandilla* I worked with, is identified as the « head of the family » or as a « father » by those he calls himself his « children ». However,

in as much as his status depends on its feats, a father can become a brother again at any time. He is not a father for life, but a temporary father. In the *pandillas*, descent is fleeting: only sibling is lasting.

The size of the *pandillas* is highly variable. They include 20 to 100 children. Boys, who form a majority, speak to the girls of the *pandilla* using the term « brothers ». In doing so, they tend to « crush » any gender differentiation (Razy), a crush that does not aim at « masculinizing » girls, but rather to merge sexes into an identity or a new gender subsumed by the street children status.

When children fight, solidarities emerge and disappear according to a mutual aid system and subordination principle among *pandillas*. There are « elder » and « young » *pandillas*. Elder *pandillas* are rather involved in theft and drug activities. Young *pandillas*, such as *Solitarios*, are rather involved in survival. Indeed, these activities are not so exclusive in daily life. At last, elder *pandillas* rescue young *pandillas*. This generally causes collective drug and drink taking, but also collective food consumption.

These features clearly demonstrate the way transmission of identity is constantly shaped and reshaped within the *pandilla*, and by all peers.

Let's move on now to the question of eating in the street, a question that raises one of the concrete side of street peers transmission.

The most frequent way of daily eating consists in organizing a *callu*. This term refers both to collecting money and to the meal prepared thanks to this money.

The meal is composed of mixed onions, tomatoes and sardines. It is always eaten with a 15 centimeters long French baguette. Each commensal gets half of it, always with a crust. The crust helps to push food and to fully empty the plate.

In the *callu*, collecting money and preparing the meal means exactly the same. Thus, organizing a *callu* neither refers to a job nor a theft. Other terms are used for these activities. For the brothers, the *callu* is a full subsistence activity.

When 5 to 15 children of the same *pandilla* have got enough money, they form a commensality group. Within this group, everyone pays the same amount of money to buy the different ingredients. Then, peers cook their favorite meal and eat it all together. The brothers who could not pay can sometimes be invited. Uncertain cycles of loans, advances, gifts and counter gifts are then established.

But the abundance of the *callu* is not strictly proportional to the amount of money collected during the day. It also depends on what is left once brothers have bought their drug and alcohol for the previous night. As a matter of fact, peers usually prepare and eat the *callu* when they wake up after their tough and short night. The will of eating also largely depends on their psychological and physiological condition.

For those children who have spent the whole money they hardly got during the day in drug and drink, eating is a real challenge. They have no other way than relying on their brothers' generosity.

As you may have noticed, the *callu* requires some kind of organization. The objective is to supply food, to prepare a meal and to find a place to eat. It means that the *callu* reflects, reproduces and reinforces the mutual aid and the subordination relations that already exists between peers. Besides its nourishing function, it contributes to maintain the quasi family ties which unite them together. The social configuration that is expressed in the *callu* fit in the so-called « chosen kinship », which is both elective and selective. When a *callu* takes place, a kind of « nourishing kinship » (Jeudy-Ballini 1998) or « nourishing environment » (Suremain 2000, 2007) is implemented. More or less expended, more or less coed, it is always fleeting.

Finally, does food child transmission exist? In an anthropological perspective, the issue of discussing street food as a form of transmission between peers is not speculative at all. First of all, the type of transmission that is implemented through

the *callu* is clearly horizontal and not vertical. It is a transmission between siblings and not a transmission from ascendant to descendant.

Secondly, the *callu* also implies material and immaterial dimensions, namely ingredients and a particular form of social organization. The *callu* denotes a culinary preparation, easily recognizable, that does not change, and that is stemming from a know-how specific to a particular social group. Moreover, there are identity and alterity in the *callu*. The *callu* is THE meal of street children. Those who eat the *callu* are recognizable and they distance themselves from those who don't eat it; and those who don't care about street children ignore the existence of the *callu*. In brief, the *callu* is not consumed by other social groups than street children, even if its content slightly varies between *pandillas*.

Let's go straight to conclude.

The *callu* plunges us into the most sordid margins of society: the one of peers deprived of descent and connected together by a temporary sibling partly built on illegal activities; on the other hand, the *callu* is the perfect counter-example of a culinary preparation a society would give to show and to taste to the Others to represent itself.

From the extreme example of the street children' *callu*, we should discuss the following questions: How food transmission between peers is elaborated and characterized? What is it made of? How does it change? How does it spread among peers? To what extent is it different from adult transmission? In what is it able to modelling adult transmission?

As to me, such are the main questions that should direct an anthropology of transmission between peers, be transmission related to food or not.

Thank you for your attention.