

# Associations and Immigration in Catalonia (2008-2018)

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Between 2008 and 2018, a large number of foreign people arrived in Catalonia, resulting in a spectacular social transformation. These people, with very varied origins and backgrounds, make up a highly diverse profile of Catalan society and enrich it. The association fabric clearly reflects this transformation, because migrants have understood that forming associations in the Catalan tradition can help improve their visibility, achieve a particular objective for a specific community or secure subsidies from public authorities. Thus, there are many examples of associations working both to improve the life of migrants and to meet a specific need. However, sometimes these associations are somewhat endogamous and, therefore, networking is necessary for people of a migrant origin to really be able to integrate into Catalan multicultural society and extensively interact with it to cover all fields.

## Prior Considerations

There are few articles on associations and migration and those that do exist are academic and not very informative. This text seeks to provide a comparative vision of what happened in Catalonia with the incorporation of migrants into the association fabric between 2003 and 2018, a period in which there was the highest proportional arrival of foreign people into an EU country. The article does not seek to be merely descriptive but aims to analyse the causes of this phenomenon and draw conclusions. This is possible due largely to the lessons and knowledge acquired during ten years of direct interlocution with associations and people. A professional and personal experience that has changed my view of migration and has helped me understand that nothing and no one can

prevent current societies from being diverse, that all efforts to preserve uniformity are, above all, unfeasible and sterile. The richness of making contact with people from the most distant parts of the planet – regardless of why they have left their country – is an issue on which we rarely reflect. We ignore it, consciously or unconsciously, out of laziness or mistrust. Overcoming reticence and prejudices about the people we label as migrants and mechanically tend to relate with poverty and vulnerability involves some degree of awareness and effort. A fruitful effort, because knowing each other better, through mutual help – respecting each one's identity and desires –, is the only way to progress as a society. Although in the article I use terms such as “communities” and “second generations” to identify groups of people, throughout this time I have learnt that nobody

can be pigeonholed for being from one place or another, practising a given religion or being the son or daughter of migrants.

## The Migration Wave in Catalonia from 2003 to 2018

In the last decade, Catalonia has experienced a spectacular social transformation. According to the municipal census, out of the 7.5 million people living in Catalonia, 1,082,099 are foreigners with 167 nationalities, which accounts for 14.2% of the Catalan population.<sup>1</sup> Most of them come from North Africa (219,000) and Romania (103,000), followed by Italo-Argentines (63,000), Chinese (62,000) and Pakistanis (48,000). In the last few months there has been an increase of arrivals from Honduras and Venezuela due to the political and social conflicts in these countries. However, the so-called “second generations” capitalise on the new migration either because of the phenomenon of family reunification or as a result of the offspring of the migrants themselves. 78.6% of minors under fifteen with Moroccan parents were born in Catalonia, a percentage that in the case of Chinese offspring reaches 76.6%.

The profile of migrants is varied, as is the professional sector in which they work. If we focus on Pakistani migration, 75% are men who work in retail while Bolivian migration is formed by women (65%) working in care and domestic service. Chinese migration is usually called “family” because of the presence of more than one generation, and their business and employment activity is the most varied and diversified because they are prepared to work to continue local businesses adapted to the tastes

of the host country. One group on the rise is the active African female population, who, in recent years, have grown from 34.3% (2007) to 53.3%.<sup>2</sup> Despite the diversification of migrants’ work, an unsolved problem remains: unemployment among the extra-community population almost triples that of nationals.

## Analysis of Migrant Associations What Type of Organisations Are Created and Why

How migrants begin to develop their life in the host country and interact with the local population has been given different names: integration, adaptation, accommodation, and so on. Words whose aim is to respect the migrants’ culture and identity while acknowledging their effort to also share the culture and customs of the host country.

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Traditionally, Catalonia has been characterised as having a rich association fabric. Frequently, a group of three or more people that share an interest consider the possibility of collaborating and create an association. So much so that there are many types of non-profit organisations, groups and organisations such as the Association of Igloo Makers, the picturesque Association of Friends of the Caganer or the Associació Catalana de Fútbol Botons, a real Champions League of football played with buttons. Along with the determining cultural factors of this collective predisposition, there

1. Source: Statistical Institute of Catalonia (Idescat), 20 February 2019.

2. Produced by the Centre for Demographic Studies (CED) based on the continuous population census, with data from the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (Idescat).



Activity on Migrant Day in Barcelona (Oriol Costa).

have been many incentives. One of the most outstanding is to have a legal platform from which to collectively demand political rights and spaces of freedom, prohibited or restricted during the forty years of Franco's dictatorship. The right to demonstrate or to speak Catalan was channelled through several cultural, folkloric or sports organisations at a time when protest and explicit dissent meant a passport to underground activism.

Recent migrants have understood that forming associations in the Catalan tradition is useful for helping fellow citizens. Of course, not all migrants living in Catalonia are members of an association but I would hazard that they know about associations that can help them with multiple objectives, such as achieving citizenship or family reunification. However, the activity of the associations varies, to a large extent, depending on the origin of the people involved. The early organisations created were

endogamous and rarely grouped people other than those from the same country. The activity of those early organisations aimed to provide assistance and guidance services, such as legal advice for foreigners, access to housing or searching for work. Another common feature of the association phenomenon is the will to maintain some personal links with the corresponding country of origin. In this respect, the organisations become a place to share experiences and make homesickness more bearable. Those of a cultural, religious or gastronomic nature particularly facilitate, on the one hand, contact with customs and home country and, on the other, meeting other people with the same background. Notable among the early associations of migrants in Catalonia are those of Moroccan origin. This group was one of the first to integrate into the landscape of popular festivals of Catalan villages and towns, for instance, by setting up Moroccan tents where henna work-

shops are held and tea and traditional cakes and pastries can be enjoyed. This phase not only enables fellow citizens to meet but also to become known among the local population and, to a certain extent, interact with them. In the mid-2000s Latin American associations began to proliferate, for whom the identification with the culture of the host country is easier because of the linguistic and religious proximity. These groups frequent the local popular festivals less and tend to use open spaces on the outskirts, where large format religious and food events are often held. The associations for Asians appeared some years later, particularly Chinese immigration, which works as a large de facto organisation but finds it hard to establish an association. The sub-Saharan case, in contrast, has been one of the most structured and campaigning from the outset. Its activity is aimed more at improving their status and recognition of their rights as migrants and cooperation with their countries of origin. Along with the Amazighs, they were the first to understand the importance of learning Catalan as a tool of social ascent and recognition by the local population.

The Muslim community creates associations around religion with the aim of preserving the activity in oratories. They are spaces for prayer but also for meeting, teaching, social life and understanding your environment. Unfortunately, they are often located on ground floors, flats and garages. These places often do not meet the minimal health and safety conditions, are inappropriate for religious worship and hinder their visibility and contact with neighbours. This situation is related to the mistrust of Islamic worship and, by extension, the legal and technical obstacles that the Spanish state

puts in the way of building a mosque.<sup>3</sup> The mistrust of the local and – non-Muslim – religious authorities is often justified by the risk of the money and influence from the Gulf countries. The result can be seen in the fact that, well into the 21st century, in a city like Barcelona there is no mosque comparable to those of London or Paris. There are, in contrast, 29 oratories (500 worship centres of several religious traditions).

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The tendency among some migrants in Catalonia to emulate the local population leads to the emergence of very heterogeneous groupings, some of which often transform into associations. However, registering an association involves respecting some rules of the game; i.e., drafting and accepting standing rules that often clash with the mentality of the members. On some occasions many of them tend to reproduce organisational systems characteristic of their countries of origin. In this respect, I have been able to detect a tendency to despotism in some boards of directors or governing bodies that are not always democratic. Groups from southern Asia find it more difficult to maintain a stable social foundation. Their leaders are not very representative, either due to lack of knowledge or the rivalry between members. It is very common for one person to hold several positions.<sup>5</sup>

3. [https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/oficina-afers-religiosos/sites/default/files/recursos/memoria\\_2017\\_oar\\_acc-1.pdf\\_0.pdf](https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/oficina-afers-religiosos/sites/default/files/recursos/memoria_2017_oar_acc-1.pdf_0.pdf)

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5. By way of illustration, the holding by the same person of the post of president of the Federación de Entidades Paquistaníes, the Asociación de Amigos de Gujarat, the Federació Catalana de Criquet and the Asociación de Taxistas Paquistaníes de Catalunya.

## What Really Makes Many Migrants Form an Association?

The *ad extra* motives are related, in my view, to greater access to the centres of power; in other words, to the opportunity to directly interact with the authorities. It is easier to introduce oneself as president of the Federació de Entitats Latinoamericanas de Catalunya before the mayor of a town or a political representative than as an ordinary citizen. Of course, I do not mean to question the noble motivation of the explicit purposes pursued by the association. The lobbying activity is mainly aimed at achieving such objectives, which include benefitting from institutional support in the form of financial or other kinds of assistance. Tangentially, it can be used to extol their image in their field of influence, not always with such licit purposes. However, not all migrant associations eagerly seek to rub shoulders with the public and private power. Some of them discreetly work to improve the life of both their members and those who need help. These types of associations are less in the spotlight but, in contrast, manage to achieve the necessary credibility for a broad social basis. This extensive support helps them maintain their activity over time.

The *ad intra* motives seek direct influence within the community. The leader of an association that can claim to have achieved some success or “favour” from the circles of power – agreement, support for an event or presence of some outstanding member of the authority – will have enough credibility among his or her followers to do as he or she pleases. And, by extension, to access a privileged position among the group and compete for the post with other supposed “leaders”. I have had the opportunity to witness real fratricidal struggles over a preminent place within the group. These organisations, usually represented by fake leaders, often have little or no social activity. In contrast, they are present on the institutional

agenda. There is a paradox that the public visibility of the leader of the association is often inversely proportional to his or her capacity for social action and the actual representativeness in his or her group.

## Relations with Local “Support” Organisations

When we speak of associations and migration we distinguish between associations formed by migrants and the so-called “support” social organisations. The latter work on helping vulnerable people, foreign or not, but in recent years they have been overwhelmed by the demand for services from migrants. There are different groups within them, such as the traditional organisations that are widely connected and have a broad capacity for action, for instance Càritas and the Red Cross, with a generalised presence throughout Catalonia, and others linked to neighbourhoods, such as the Secretariat d’Entitats de Sants and 9Barris Acull, in the case of the city of Barcelona.

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Also noteworthy are those created ex profeso with the mass arrival of migrants such as the Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado, Accem and SOS Racisme, which combine reporting racism and xenophobia with providing assistance. Their attitude and effort to adapt to the new situation have been immediate and exemplary. The association fabric has understood that current times require a commitment to social diversity and helping newcomers. The efforts are not fruitless. Confronting such an increase in demand – often without an increase in resources – can finally cause the collapse of the organisation. It is worth emphasising the role played by associations linked to the

Catholic and protestant churches, which in a first stage focus on assistance but finally include migrants in their management structures. The adaptation of the services often results in activities of hosting, employability, teaching Catalan and Spanish, literacy and knowledge of your environment; all of them complement the public policies of the regional government and local authorities.

Catalonia also has associations that emerged in the 1960s following the migration boom from other parts of Spain, which have great experience of hosting. This is the case of the Fundació Paco Candel, created as a tribute to the writer and journalist.

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Another example can be found in the trade unions that, far from ignoring the issue of migration and its specific demands, have seen the wisdom of including people from diverse origins in their organisational structures.

This evolution, both of organisations and trade unions, is worth examining. In contrast to business structures, the public authorities themselves or the media, in the case of local television channels – in which the social diversity that exists in the streets goes unnoticed, so that the presence of migrants is nominal and stereotyped –, social organisations go one step further. They have managed to value the abilities and talent of newcomers and have ignored the stigmas or prejudices without determining whether their work is aimed at migrants.

## Participation and Politicisation of Migrant Associations

The issue of the mass arrival of migrants in Catalonia has also not gone unnoticed by policy-makers and social agents, as shown by the creation of consultative and participatory bodies. The most important are:

- The Taula de Ciutadania i Immigració, a consultative body created by the Government of Catalonia to give a voice to migrant associations but that works more as a top-down endorser of the policies of the time than as a body of actual participation. A policy initiative endorsed by the Taula will always have more “legitimacy” than if it is undertaken without the involvement of its members.
- The Consell Municipal d’Immigració at Barcelona City Council, created in 1997 based on sixteen associations and with a solid structure based on working groups and a vice-presidency held by a representative of the association sector.

One of the aims that have been made explicit in the recent electoral campaigns by most parties is the participation of migrants in the host society. Seeking out sympathisers and adepts – or votes, as if it were the municipal elections, in which not only those holding Spanish nationality can vote – became a real obsession of some political parties, particularly between 2008 and 2014.

In our country, political parties see migration as an opportunity to widen the supporter and voter base.<sup>6</sup> Although it is true that the discourse favours inclusion and interaction with the host society, in the moment of truth

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6. For instance, some pro-independence parties such as Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) find in the minorities persecuted in their countries of origin and living in Catalonia the opportunity to increase the number of adepts to their cause. Among the members of this party are leaders and members of the Casa Amaziga or of Catalunya Casamance, who quickly sympathise with the thinking of ERC.



Mujeres Pa'lante Association Poster.

politicisation reaches ridiculous extremes. Creating foundations ad hoc linked to parties, whose objective is to incorporate leaders of diverse origins for mainly aesthetic reasons, is a good example. These types of organisations pursue the complicity of migrants by fostering, in most cases, clientilism and building loyalty to the party based on the prospect of favours or promises concerning the distribution of posts in the case of an electoral victory. This approach often results in the displacement of the social integration project as the backbone of involvement of its members and the fragmentation into spaces, depending on the provenance of the members (the Afro, Asian or Latin space) headed by like-minded people,<sup>7</sup> in a clear intention of controlling and politicising the activity of the organisation. “Participation” is another resource for gaining adepts and potential vot-

ers. The mass mobilisation of people of diverse origin in the campaign rallies is often used as an electoral lure in exchange for compensations for the associations aligned with the positions of power. Direct surrender of premises or assumption of maintenance expenses formally take the form of subsidies and other activities to promote culture but can cause reasonable doubts about the discretionary nature of how they are granted and their justification.<sup>8</sup>

However, the leaders of the associations know how to read beyond the interest of the policy-makers. If the aim is to teach Catalan, the association can become a school of this language, which will enable it to maintain the premises in operation thanks to the public help received. This is the case of the Associació de Treballadors Pakistanesos de Catalunya, whose premises are used by the Consorci de Normalit-

7. This is the case, for example, of the model of the defunct foundation *Nous Catalans*, linked to *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (CDC), the party that governed Catalonia for over twenty years.

8. The events to attract the vote of the Pakistani group by the socialist party during the Barcelona municipal elections proliferate through associations that feel close to it such as *Camí de la Pau* or the *Associació Cultural Educativa i Social Operativa de Dones Pakistaneses* (ACESOP) even on the day of the elections. The help offered by the socialist group is also aimed at associations such as the *Federación de Bolivianos de Cataluña*, *Fedelatina* or the *Asociación de Rumanos en Cataluña* (ASOROM) while the *Partido Popular* (PP) guides its alliances towards Venezuelan and Bolivians in associations such as the *Federación de Asociaciones Americanas en Cataluña* (Fasamcat) or the *Centro Boliviano*, which act as counterpower to socialists and nationalists.

zació Lingüística de Catalunya<sup>9</sup> to teach Catalan for free. This venue is frequented every day by dozens of Pakistanis in search of a skill that they know will help them to prove their rooting in the country. Although this is the main motivation that takes them to the venue, the association is a meeting point for many of the Pakistani group in the emblematic neighbourhood of El Raval in Barcelona. The association thus becomes an informal information rather than training centre.

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Another battlefield on which migrant associations compete for centre stage is the so-called “Fiestas Patrias”, cultural festivals organised by Latin American associations that commemorate the independence of their respective countries from the Spanish crown. This type of event, held in open spaces and that can bring together up to 30,000 people, does not go unnoticed by mayors, regional presidents, deputies, the consular corps and all types of political representatives, who exploit it to launch their own agenda. In many cases, the protocol established by the associations gives a voice to those who have financially participated or are members of the party with which the associations holding the event align. However, sometimes many of the leaders who belong to a given association with political aims do not feel fully at ease. One of the reasons is that the postulates of the Catalan parties do not always coincide with those of the parties of origin.

Paradoxically, some parties that advocate Spanishness in Latin America reject it in Catalonia and defend independence, which creates confusion and sometimes perplexity among their members. While the migrant festivals go almost unnoticed in many EU countries, in Catalonia they are a real electoral target. Conservative parties are displaced due to their inability to orient their discourse to migrants, to the extent that they change completely depending on whether the audience is local or not, which ends up disconcerting both their followers and others.<sup>10</sup>

Not only politicians see migration as an opportunity to grow. Employers’ associations and trade unions also attentively follow the evolution of the associations that develop new retail activities and business models – cyber cafes providing telephone services, *halal* butcher’s, hair salons with competitive prices and long opening times or shops open twenty-four hours a day run by Chinese, Pakistani, Bengali... The now defunct Confederació del Comerç de Catalunya designed strategies such as “Oberts al català” [Open to Catalan] to foster the social use of the language in *halal* butcher’s or cybercafés; “El comerç t’acull” [Retail welcomes you], a programme to foster the employability of migrants; or “Estirem la manta” [Lifting the cover], a campaign to raise awareness about the reality of selling in the street, known as “top manta”. The sudden emergence of Pakistanis driving taxis in Barcelona led to the creation of the Asociación de Taxistas Pakistaníes, who speak English and have vehicles operating at all times, which causes some resistance from local taxi drivers, although many end up subcontracting them. It is a grey issue, with possible job exploitation, which needs to be

9. <https://www.cpnl.cat/acolliment-linguistic/novetats-acolliment-linguistic/>

10. The same politician who, during an electoral campaign rally in the town of Palafrugell in the province of Girona, argued that “the number of *mohameds* attending had begun to be worrying,” some hours later photographed himself with Muslim leaders investigated by the police during the Festival of the Sacrifice.

addressed carefully. Similarly, the proliferation of Chinese hair salons that include activities of another nature (known with the euphemism “happy ending”) led to the creation in 2010 of the Asociación Artesana China de Salones de Belleza de Cataluña, which seeks to put an end to certain undercover practices and make their job respectable.

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A phenomenon characteristic of Catalonia is the role of the big trade unions, which create sub-units to deal with the status of foreigners (the Centre d'Informació per a Treballadors Estrangers, of Comisiones Obreras, and the Asociación d'Ajuda Mútua d'Immigrants a Catalunya, of the Unión General de los Trabajadores) which end up being managed by migrants. Based on this relationship, associations demanding dignified conditions are founded. We find an example in home helpers who, after many years of working without regular hours or a contract, have managed to involve the authorities to adapt the legislation, so that cases of job exploitation can be reported. Notable in this respect is the association Las libélulas, founded in 2016 and mostly formed by Bolivian women, who create a platform to report the exploitation they suffer. Also noteworthy is the association Mujeres Pa'lante, which defines itself as a group of women from many countries who have created a space to “meet, recognise, look after and support each other, and find a common path to achieve a better and fairer world for all.” These associations are a great help so that their female fellow citizens become aware of their situation,

not only in terms of work but also in relation to machismo that, as they acknowledge, is widespread in their communities.

The small trade unions, which work in sectors, linked to demands for dignified housing, holding down rents or fighting against evictions, have naturally embraced migrants.

Another example of an organisation that fights for dignified labour conditions is the cooperative Diomcoop, managed by fifteen people of sub-Saharan origin who sell in the street without permission (popularly known as “top manta”), which works on inclusion of vulnerable migrants both socially and in the labour market.

## **Evolution and Current Situation, Successes and Lessons Learnt**

Of course, the aforementioned circumstances will have an effect on the success or failure of the association. Some of them have been victims of politicisation, have remained in the phase of “cultural festival” (henna and cakes and pastries) or have merely lived on the margin of social reality. Others, in contrast, have evolved by developing activities to help their groups with employability programmes, language training, literacy, knowledge of and interaction with the environment, involvement in the successful schooling of their children, promotion of their own or adopted trading activity, and so on. Another determining factor is how the association manages its finances. The payment of fees by members is quite unusual, and therefore economic resources often come from the public aid through calls for subsidies by the administrations for social integration projects. In this case, the association will have to adapt or transform its activity in keeping with the conditions of these calls.

If we briefly review the number of migrant associations that began in the early 2000s, we

see that 90% are no longer operational. The reason is simple. Those that have survived have joined the network of third sector organisations. They do not only offer services to their members but have depoliticised and many of them have developed self-funding. In general, they remain active because they have been able to reinvent themselves in times of crisis and maintain sufficiently solid social support. The main factors that contribute to this stability are the availability of transparent structures in the management of the organisation, the commitment to accountability, the democratic election of their representatives and facilitating participation of its members in decision-making.

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The good news is that many of the current organisations have understood the importance of coordinated networking for social inclusion and citizenship, avoiding parallel structures. Some examples are the case of the Coordinadora per la Mentoria Social, which brings together diverse associations committed to this as a formula for improving social integration; the Associació Comissió de Formació, which produces material in the fields of literacy, intercultural mediation and education and job guidance; the association Mujeres Pa'lante, which created a cooperative ten years after its creation for the care of dependent people or those who need home help; and the Associació de Dones Marroquines, which offers a learning space to Moroccan mothers with the aim of fighting against the illiteracy of this group through local cookery and literature classes.

I could go on, but the million dollar question (based on observing how the different groups

evolve) is whether the continued existence of associations formed by migrants is meaningful. Personally, I think that they are necessary and that the administrations should continue to promote their creation and establish partnerships to efficiently design activities, in keeping with social progress. However, allow me to introduce some nuances. I imagine, for instance, the potential of an association of children of migrants or youths from diverse origins: boys and girls who arrived at a very early age or were born here, people who have multiple national identities and are multilingual and have acted as a bridge between two or more cultures, interpreting and linking the culture of origin of their parents with that of the country where they have grown up. Such an association, in itself, projects an image of plurality and maximum tolerance of individual options. At a time of political drift towards totalitarianism, theocentrism and standardisation we need models for the richness provided by living in a diverse society and interaction in this multicultural reality.

Perhaps the question is not so much whether the existence of migrant associations is still meaningful, and to what extent, but how to articulate their presence within the association movement, free of labels based on origin. In Catalonia there are the so-called Consells, cross-cutting organisations focused on diverse aspects of social life. At the time of writing this article, I have been unable to find anyone of migrant origin in the Consell de la Gent Gran, the Consell Esportiu, the Consell de la Joventut de Barcelona, the Consell Nacional de la Joventut de Catalunya (CNJC) – a platform that brings together around one hundred youth organisations in Catalonia and local youth councils – or the Consell Escolar de Catalunya, to cite a few. The challenge is for these associations to reflect Catalan social diversity. The normalisation of the presence of these people of migrant origin in diverse environments, particularly those that make them more visible, would be a

complementary initiative in the right direction. Seeing these people in the media, introducing more general subjects or expressing their views on issues across the board helps break down stereotypes and facilitates their inclusion and full participation.

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