

King Jefe – I did not want...

By Massimo Cannarella & Roberto Alzetta

Background

King Jefe is a 23 year old young man, who was born in Ecuador and grew up in a middle class nuclear family shaped around two parents, himself and an older brother. When he was approximately 15 years old his mother developed cancer and his family decided to allow his mother to join some relatives in Italy where she would be properly treated within the Italian health system. The rest of the family were left behind and at this point King Jefe roamed about day and night with his friends, since his father was largely absent. It was at this point in his life he first came into contact with the Nation, an organisation of Latino youths. After a year King Jefe, his father and brother joined his mother in Italy, although shortly after this, his father and himself became homesick and experienced great discomfort about their life in Italy. The father, who is originally a taxi driver, could not cope with his new work in the building sector.

King Jefe felt lonely without his circle of friends in Ecuador. He completed second level education and enrolled, with very poor success, in a high school technical course. After a few months he dropped out of high school and after a year in Italy King Jefe and his father returned to Ecuador. While back in Ecuador he attempts to resume school, but fails yet again. Since all his friends have now graduated to a new grade and he has been left at the grade prior to his departure, he stops attending classes and begins performing in what he calls “street life.” He describes the street as a space shaped around a world made of different social actors who interact and perform to affirm themselves and to become visible either through positive or negative behaviours. To him it is a matter of becoming respectable and powerful in his world composed of friends, girls, enemies, street gangs.

We met King Jefe just after he was released from jail after a 1 year and half sentence for drug detention and smuggling. His criminal record is also linked to other sentences for violent crimes during his association with Latin kings and the Netas association fight some years before.



King Jefe has a tattoo of a king with two crowns on his chest and his A.K.A. on his back. He is tall and thin, although well built. He has a bright smile that at first glance inspires trust to people who meet him. Our first meeting with King took place when we started visiting the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation to carry out our research. He functioned as our guide, the one who was in charge of introducing us to the association and eventually granted us the opportunity to be welcomed by the Queen Nation. Along with other two Kings he was responsible to see what we were aiming to do and how we could function as positive contributors to their own cause.

We first met the Nation in Spain – viz. Barcelona and Madrid – and they put us in touch with the Nation in Genoa. So before being allowed to get in we were screened by King Jefe and his fellow members. We contributed towards making the Nation become visible in the local community as a street organization based on solidarity and support rather than as a violent gang as it is largely described in the media. As an exchange we asked the Nation to quit its long lasting dispute with the other relevant street organization in Genoa: the Netas. All Nation leaders and fellow members looked at us with a sense of curiosity and interest and after some time they accepted our deal.

All were keen to make a formal peace agreement with the exception of King Jefe: to him to make peace with Netas was impossible, he was well aware of how many Nation members have suffered from Netas actions especially in Ecuador. However, he accepted it in the context of a temporary

solution so that the tension in the community would have subsided and some members' trials in court would come to an end. During our conversation, King Jefe justified his position explaining that:

“Those who have become members of the Nation in Genoa never experienced what great suffering and troubles Netas have caused to the Nation in Ecuador...”

Two opposite feelings were emerging during our conversations with King Jefe: on the one hand, he was feeling proud for what he did as a member of the Nation and in name of it and for the symbolic signs represented on his body (tattoos and scratches), while at the same time, he was feeling a sense of discomfort and shame for what he experienced in his life during the second period of residence in Italy (from 17 years old up until today). Implicitly and explicitly he was thinking of jail and heroine drug addiction.

Time after time the answer became clearer, he does not regret being such an “active” member of the Nation, while he does regret becoming dependent on heroine and the personal and social consequences of this. His major concern now is to show himself how his life should be valued and lived in a positive and constructive way.

Street life



Latin King and Netas are commonly known as gangs due to the media's superficial description. Brotherton and Barrios (2004) suggest changing the term 'gang' to street organization, intended as a group constituted of young adults coming from marginalized societies who have the common goal to

award all members a sense of identity shaped on resistance, an opportunity for individual and collective empowerment, a potential voice to challenge the dominant culture, a refuge from daily experiences of ghetto life, stress and suffering, and a safe spiritual space where sacred rituals can be reproduced.

These movements, originally born some decades ago in North America among migrant Latino American communities, transmigrate to sending countries first and to new emigration destinations secondly. They are the result of a diasporic process formed around experience of marginalization, violence, jail, deportation and so forth. This is a permanent transnational collective history that transcends the local and individual dimension of migratory experience and in this perspective King Jefe accounts are exemplar.

At the time of Quevedo (his native hometown in Ecuador) himself along with four other friends were a close group. Among these there is what King Jefe calls his street master, the one who has taught him all the tricks and strategies to live and survive on the street:

“He was much older than I was and he was much more experienced, he was living the street for a long time and he trained me on how to defend myself, to be respected and how to fight: his basic teaching was not discussing but acting, and if you tell someone something to do...it is useless to frighten them, it is only important to warn and if necessary to go straight, hit first right to the end of it...if you talk do it once”

This the real street life that is different from the ones that are well dressed and with money pretending to perform as real street fighters (pointing at Netas). King Jefe’s master was the first to join the Latin King Nation and the one who better structured the Nation and his chapter in Quevedo by being in contact with the Guayaquil referents. All other groups followed soon after. What at first glance attracts King Jefe are the names, the colours, the signs and the idea of being united. They become a very active section in establishing respect for the Nation on the streets of Quevedo by fighting out the other groups, including primarily the Netas. As King Jefe explains:

“it was a period of my life when I was gaining respect, I was feeling empowered and all other people were respectful to me because I was strong and well known as a strong fighter. I was appointed as the Italian but I did not like it, I wanted to be called by my name and only the Netas used to call me that way..”

At that time his mother was informed by some friends about King Jefe’s new lifestyle in Quevedo and she decides to come back to Ecuador to tackle the situation. When she becomes aware that her son is a Latin King Nation member she does not forbid him to be part of it, but her strategy is to better

understand what the Nation is so that she can better understand what it really means to be part of the Nation and what are the values that inspire their action. But when the fighting between street organizations rise dramatically she decides to return to Italy and bring King Jefe along with her:

“ she kept coming to see me every night with the signs of fights and troubles...she was telling me that they were going to kill me at some point and so I bring you away from here...”

Genoa drug and jail

Arriving for the second time in Italy he does not even attempt to enrol in school, he has had enough and now he is 17 years old, an age when, he explains, you should do something in your life. He starts work in a cleaning services company that provides cleaning outside Genoa. According to King Jefe it is a very good job where he works from very early morning up until midday and he has plenty of time to see his friends in the afternoon, though it can also be a very lonely job since you work alone at strange hours. This the period when he joins – and he co-founds – the Nation section in Genoa that at the time was just a small group lead by a man who has never been a King but only an attaché in Ecuador. As King Jefe explains they were not organized, he joined some meetings without mentioning that he had been a member of the Nation in Ecuador and he noticed the lack of proper performing according to the code. Then when others became aware of his experience they just asked him to take the proper step to transform this group of persons into a Nation section. Along with a friend they got in touch with their former “Inca” in Ecuador and got the permission to establish a section in Genoa. He then got in contact with Kid in Milan and together with him he visited all people who were part of this early group in Genoa and from that point onwards the group started to act and perform as a real Nation section.

We then meet King Jefe and Kid after a couple of years after these events. They are our first contacts within the Nation and our gateways into the association. Suddenly King Jefe disappears and we were not able to have any information about what happened to him. Some months later we are informed that he was arrested by police in a kind of media frenzy to assuage public opinion on security concerns. The arrest was circulated on national TV news and programs: King Jefe was identified by police as the leader of Latin Kings in Genoa and was charged as responsible for street fights against Netas gangs.

Since then we met him rarely only on occasion of certain Ecuadorian feasts and events. Since he was arrested he is no longer an active member of the Nation has started to regularly make use of heavy

drugs. According to him, this was the reason why he distanced himself from the Nation as he did not want the Nation to be seen as the locus of drug dealers and consumers.



The way Latinos use heroine is a peculiar one, they do not inject it but rather they started to sniff the vapours rising from it boiling in some sterile water. It is a kind of less invasive abuse that allows users to divide a normal quantity into smaller doses. However the dependency effect is the same and in a short time the need of more quantity to get the same effects is there. This is what in the local language is called a “coffee”.

King Jefe explains to us how he started to make use of drugs occasionally at a disco club and how since then he has collapsed into a vicious circle of dependency. He reminds us how he is no longer part of the Nation since his new girlfriend does not want him to be involved in it. It was a hard time and the solitude made him more resilient to the temptation of something that is forbidden, the consumption of drugs:

“one night in a club I have been offered it and I took it...you know in Ecuador we do not have heroine but rather marijuana and cocaine... so I did not know what would be the consequences...I did like it and I started to use it in the weekends and then during the week and then every day and every moment I became eager to have it that how it happened...”

King Jefe was again arrested for drug dealing and he experienced his worst period in jail, especially due to his condition as drug abuser. He reminds us of how going “cold turkey” was painful on a daily basis.

Since then King Jefe has entered jail several more times and each time it has helped him reduce his dependency, until he gets released from jail and then he resumes abusing drugs. Now he claims he has changed and has not touched heroine for a year although he has been offered several times. He feels clearer now and does not want to depend on something anymore.



In our first interview King Jefe summed up his life in a few words stating that his experience being part of a gang was the most relevant and instructing part of his life. Everything else he did was wrong; leaving school, losing his job and not seeking a new one as well as abusing drugs. For him Italy has been never been perceived as a home, to be and to live, it was only the place where he was forced to live due to his family decisions and circumstances. King Jefe personal account has a sense of *j'accuse* to the socio-cultural, economic and juridical constraints in which his life experience in Italy has been.

Of course he has a sense of self responsibility and he does not avoid blaming himself, but he is also conscious that in the darkest moment of his life he has been left alone. What he stresses is that, he has had no chance of receiving any support from either the state or community to resolve concerns.

Commented Notes

King Jefe is a highly representative case in the way that it provides us an understanding of the reality in Italy. Production and reproduction of inclusion and exclusion mechanisms are highly de-regulated: in other words, there are no clear selective processes. We do not know for sure if with any form of support King Jefe might have had a better life and broader opportunities for integrating into Italian society. But we know that the Italian system is lacking in many ways in this respect. On the one hand, the institutional and policy making efforts are weak and on the other hand, resources that are made

available to sustain any form of intervention are even less efficient. Given this panorama, it is very hard to enforce a positive framework for any kind of national, local and community level form of integration policies and so young adults of immigrant origin are left to perform according to their own will, capacities, effort and strength. Simply speaking if you want to succeed and integrate at some point in Italy you have to count basically only on your own and your own network to exploit material and non-material capital and resources available: you cannot expect to be positively supported beyond the limits of your own capacities. King Jefe, as a young adult of immigrant origin, has been exposed to this situation with dramatic consequences and, more importantly, his migration took place against his will.