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Title: Africans and Afro descendants in Argentina. The study of multiple relationships from an anthropological perspective.

Marta M. Maffia (CONICET/UNLP)

migraciones@uolsinectis.com.ar

mmaffia@museo.fcnym.unlp.edu.ar

Introduction

This paper is part of a broader research on migrations of minority groups in Argentina, a topic I have approached since 1979 from an anthropological perspective, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

First, we will refer to Cape Verdeans, the only group of immigrants from Sub Saharan Africa arriving in Argentina at the beginning of Twentieth Century. We will deal with issues like hybridization of identities in relation to the process called “Argentinization” as a result of State policies whose aim was the assimilation of immigrants. Also we will analyze, among other issues, the modalities existing in the articulation of practices within the associations where a continuous process of co-construction of ethnical and identity boundaries plays an important role in the interaction with the widest social group, not only the one in Argentina but also regarding the worldwide socio-political context.

Second, regarding the so-called “new African immigrants” (Senegalese, Nigerian, Cameroones, among others), who began arriving in the country around the beginning of the 1990s and taking into account that we are in the first stage of this research, we will describe a brief characterization of some of their associative forms and of their relationship with native Cape Verdeans and Afro Argentineans.

In both cases, we will focus on how they are organizing themselves in connection to a series of proposals and demands of their right recognition and visibleness to the Argentinean society.

In reference to Cape Verdeans migration, the documentary sources are practically non-existent, that is why we had to rely almost exclusively on oral sources and carry out a population census¹ during the first stage of the research (Maffia,2008).Intense fieldwork in Argentina was complemented by stays in Cape Verde and Portugal in order to compare and research bibliographic and documentary reference .

Also, the documents referring to this new group of immigrants and the literature resulting from research work are very scarce (Traoré, 2006; Maffia et al 2007; Agnelli et al.2008; Zubrzycki et al.2008). We have resorted to various kinds of sources, on one hand, statistics provided by official organizations such as the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INDEC), the Committee of Eligibility for Refugees (CEPARE), ACNUR and National Migration Office. On the other, to oral sources, *corpus* obtained through interviews carried out with authorities, diplomats, members of immigrant associations and with representatives of local institutions that help and advise refugees and with immigrants of diverse contexts. We also carried out “participant observation” in public places where Senegalese immigrants, in particular, work and in meetings either organized by them or where they participate.

Cape Verdean Migration to Argentina

Our informers talk about the first Cape Verdean arrivals towards the end of the nineteenth century, linked to the whale hunting in the Southern Seas. Then, in the first decade of the twentieth century, they arrived as members of board crews, or as stowaways.

This migration gained relevance particularly from the 1920s, at the same time one of the worst famines devastated Cape Verde (Carreira 1977). Most of them emigrated in small groups or individually from Sao Vicente, Santo Antao and Sao Nicolau islands and, to a lesser extent, from Fogo and Brava islands.

Approximately between 1927 and 1933, we could trace a new flow that continued until the late 1930s; despite the great difficulties Argentina was going through.

There was a third flow immediately after the Second World War, more precisely in 1946 [between 1940 and 1946 there were other two large famines in the islands]. Nearly all the leaders of Cape Verdean communities in Argentina belong to this generation [or to their children’s]

Around the 1960s, the immigration flow decreased in intensity. In those years the migration flow of Cape Verdeans to some countries of Europe increased.

Considering Cape Verde’s insular condition, linked to the sea or to a *water* environment - and recognized by the Cape Verdean themselves as part of their *idiosyncrasy* and as an important reference in the construction of their identity, they chose to settle down mainly in Ensenada, the neighborhoods of Dock Sud, La Boca and the city of Avellaneda.²

Like other immigrants in Argentina, as those of Italian or Portuguese origin, the Cape Verdeans chose to settle down in La Plata River bank or in maritime zones, like Mar del Plata and Punta Alta, because of the proximity to their jobs, on board merchant navy ships or the National Navy, and to the factories, industries and shipyards settled in the zone.³

There were two Cape Verdean associations in Argentina, one founded in Ensenada in 1927 and the other in Dock Sud in 1932. We should not forget that these institutions were founded in the middle of an economic crisis, with high unemployment rates all over the world including Argentina, so the main needs they tried to satisfy were employment, housing, medical and burial services and, in second place, general recreational and cultural activities.

Recently, a new Association of Cape Verdean descendants has been created in Mar del Plata city.

Identity and invisibility in natives and descendants

Ethnic identity can feed from different signs, accumulate many or retain only one of them, but it is clear that the characteristics of a group's distinctive label can become an object of transformation, substitution or reinterpretation.⁴

As a summary, we can state that unlike some Cape Verdean groups in other countries such as the United States and Portugal⁵, in Argentina they did not form closed groups. Natives speak Spanish perfectly well, they have not taught the *creole* to their children, who, at best, can understand it, but do not speak it; they do not eat Cape Verdean food regularly, just in some celebrations; they do not maintain traditional practices linked to the vital cycle; they interact with Cape Verdeans and non Cape Verdeans, most of them are married outside the group and the descendants know little or nothing about their parents' place of origin, although this last situation has recently been [partially] reverting as shown below.

Just when the census was carried out we faced the following situation: a numerous group of Cape Verdeans lives surrounded by non Cape Verdean neighbors and do not want to maintain any contact with their compatriots, breaking their belonging bonds and directing their relationships mostly towards mixed groups, that is to say, groups from diverse origins [mainly Spanish, Italian, and their descendants].

Different reasons, not always explicit, were determined through the interviews. On the one hand, there were those whose memory of their place of origin was so traumatic that they preferred to eliminate any

element that triggered it. Others denied their African, black, Cape Verdean origin calling themselves Portuguese, to the point that they refused to be censured for not considering themselves Cape Verdeans. And finally, those who, having acquired a better social condition, did not want any contact with those of lower social position.

From the census and the further survey carried out in 1998, we could detect that more than 50 percent of the population under study had moved from Ensenada to La Plata [the capital of Buenos Aires province] and from La Boca and Dock Sud towards the Federal Capital and other locations in Great Buenos Aires. The reasons were: the desire to improve their socioeconomic situation and giving their children a better education.

Although some Cape Verdeans belonging to the old generation of immigrants continue living in the ethnic neighborhood, their children and grandchildren born in Argentina, particularly adolescents, deny traditional Cape Verdean values and they *Argentinize* themselves, this leading, in many cases, to intergenerational conflicts and deep mixed feelings regarding their ethnic identifications.

And this *Argentinization* [not only of descendants but also of Cape Verdeans themselves] has to do with many issues. One of them is the *imperative* of the Argentinean state to *nationalize* and *civilize* immigrants [and their children], essentially through education and compulsory military service, that is to say, policies with the objective of assimilating immigrants. Other institutions such as the Church adhered too.

The process that led to the group's invisibility and to a "first generation without memory" (Woortmann 2000) is evident.

At this point, we can conceptualize invisibility as a strategy born partly from the historical experiences processed in Cape Verde, linked to African and black denial. We should bear in mind that "in Cape Verde, the struggle for making the traits of an African heritage *invisible* became particular relevant in the so called Barlovento islands⁶ (...) considered free zones of *African ethos* ..." (Fernández 2002: 90)

To this fact, it can be added the socio historical experiences in the new context such as in Argentina where the presence of blacks has been denied in practice and discourse (Frigerio 2000, Picotti 2001), as expressed by B. Leite "it is not that the black person is not seen, but he is seen as non existent, a mechanism that is revealed as one of the principal ways in which racism is manifested" (Boaventura

Leite 1996: 41). “However, in Argentina the most everlasting of all prejudices is that derived from skin color.” (Devoto 2003: 430).

The old Cape Verdeans built an image of themselves [as Portuguese] distant from the other Africans, following the model developed by many generations in Cape Verde

These contrasting identities like European - Portuguese -White vs. African - Cape Verdean - black work using the image and words proposed by Cardoso de Oliveira as *ideological condensers*, storing the energy of the ethnical and social class contradictions given at the interethnic system and class structure (Cardoso de Oliveira 1992:120).

In Argentina⁷ they tried to become part, at least nominally, of the Portuguese segment of the population, but in fact few of them were accepted in their social environment, in general they coincided with the *elite* group whose relatives had good relationships with the colonizers in Cape Verde.

Before Independence, in Argentina, Cape Verdeans interacted with Portuguese who identified them as pertaining to the colony of Cape Verde in Africa and called them Cape Verdeans. In that relationship Cape Verdeans defined themselves as Cape Verdeans.

However, they recognize themselves and are recognized as Portuguese when interacting with other Europeans such as Italians, English, Spanish, among others.

Though, it is also clear that the Portuguese Consulate did not accept them as first class Portuguese.

Most Argentineans did not recognize them (not even today) either as Portuguese or as Argentinean: “There are no black people in Argentina” and were even less recognized as Cape Verdeans, they are “from Brazil”, “Central America”, “Cape Verde?” Where is that? Southern Africa? Ethnic labels and stereotypes activated and turned relevant in face-to-face social interactions.⁸

In terms of what Greenfield (1976)⁹ calls “adaptive strategies”, we could label them: *Cape Verdean Portuguese* and *Cape Verdean Argentinean*, strategies that, in those first days, finally resulted in the group’s invisibility, with the conscious or unconscious objective of achieving their insertion and social reproduction with the least possible conflict, although with scarce social mobility. We shall remember that most of them arrived clandestinely staying [for a while] aside the social structure without an effective presence, they were mainly invisible for the state. On the other hand, there has been a marked negative political participation [so far] of the Associations, especially that participation that

could be linked to ideologies considered [by specific groups] to be *subversive* to social order and that could lead them to be negatively visible for the state and the rest of the society.

Today, some members of the community [mostly young people of second and third generation] start recognizing themselves as Argentineans of African descent, rethinking invisibility in terms of discrimination and of political struggle, in an effort to achieve vindication together with other minorities.

The visibleness process of the Cape Verdean community settled in Argentina.

As before mentioned, during this decade the new generations started to take different positions regarding their identity¹⁰ and to communicate them through the media, especially a sector “of Cape Verdean activists linked to Afro-Argentinean organizations and their intellectuals, who maintain links with *black* movements in America and politically regard themselves as *black Cape Verdeans born in Argentina* considering their culture as Cape Verdean with African influence” (Correa 2000:90-91). This would identify at least one small segment of the group with another Diaspora, the *African*, where phenomena of affirmation, denial, conflict and ambivalence take place inside the heart of the community.

As expressed by Kim Butler (2001), the Diaspora construct is an alternative collective identity that solves negotiations of social power.

Many of the activists are women, some of them have acquired their *militant capital*,¹¹ from long term friendships and family ties with Cape Verdean activists and from *school competitions* that enabled or encouraged this behavior.

One of those women was Miriam Gómes, literature professor, former president of the Cape Verdean Union of Dock Sud between 1993 and 1995 and present vice-president. She critically points out, that “Cape Verdean community in Argentina has not integrated with the rest of the Afro-Argentinean community, remaining as a separate group. As a black minority the former has suffered the same conditioning factors as the latter” (Gómes 2001: 408) .But only in 2000, we observed a more outstanding and sustained participation of the Cape Verdean community always represented by the same person, along with other African communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. This began due to preliminary meetings of the III World Conference against racism that took place in Durban, South Africa, in September 2001.

Nowadays, the group, as part of the post Durban agenda, is planning along with the National Institute of Statistics and Census and an international funding organization, the incorporation of a question in the Argentine National Census in order to get a more accurately qualitative and quantitative vision of the natives and Afro descendants in Argentina. Due to the difficulties arising from the elaboration and implementation of such question, a pilot test was agreed for this first stage [to be held in April 2005] in various zones of the Republic, which would consist of questions and a series of issues that would enable to evaluate its efficacy.¹²

Although these manifestations have been present during many years in Argentina, it is in the 1990s when these initiatives increased both at group and individual levels.¹³

In that same decade, the Afro topic was included in agendas of international organizations and multilateral agencies encouraging the formation of black organizations in Latin America.

Both, some Cape Verdean descendants and other Afro Argentinean descendants of slaves during colonial time construct a founding myth whose axes are slavery and Diaspora. Clifford (1999) states that even though the diasporic conscience begins with rootlessness and loss, it is also positively produced through the identification with worldwide historical forces of cultural-political nature. These forces, at the same time, act for keeping the community with the preservation and selective recovery of traditions adapting them and producing versions which give rise to new, hybrid situations, often antagonistic. The continuity with the past is always established by creative processes as it is shown by Hobsbawm and Ranger in reference to “the invention of traditions”.

The myth is transformed into ideology through that struggle represented by ancestors who acquired legendary features such as Amilcar Cabral, the leader of Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau liberation.

This identity and political positioning is registered and reinforced in wider transnational movements which fight for recognition and redistribution (Fraser, 1995), and after Durban (2001) they are expressed through facts and based on recommendations arising from these movements like the inclusion of the term “Afro descendants” in every document which deals with cultural diversity, visibleness of “Afro” contributions to the corresponding countries as regards education and politics and the inclusion of Afro descendants in National Censuses.

Besides, the processes of visibleness and valorization evidenced the discrimination that Afro descendants have been undergoing, leading them to a situation of lack of ownership and which has to be made up for symbolically and economically.

It is worth highlighting that as a result of the strategies developed by the Afro descendant activists, in local and global context, the different collectivities of the group have been strengthened. Probably, because it is a valorization process of the African thing and of different cultures, rendering at the same time a historic depth.

New African immigrants.

In Argentina, at the beginning of the 1990s the presence of these new immigrants coming from Senegal, Mauritania, Liberia, Sierra Leona, Nigeria, Mali, Ghana, , Guinea Cameroon, among other countries, began to be noticed, not only in Buenos Aires Capital City but also in some cities of the Buenos Aires province like in La Plata, Mar del Plata, Villa Gesell. This presence is increasingly more notorious.

The arrival of these immigrants would seem to approach the trends identified in studies on African immigration such as that of Adepoju (2004) where he points out that the emigrants are going to non conventional destinations where there are no previous linguistic, cultural or colonial bonds, partly due to the deepening of economic instability of Western Africa between 1980-1990 and to restrictive policies of European countries; we suppose that this trend will increase due to the recent regulations of the European Union, especially to the regulation for returning, agreement signed by twenty-seven country members and approved by the European Parliament on 18th June, 2008.

Formal and informal Clusters among Africans.

Some Africans that arrived in the country these years began to gather informally, among them the Malians, Ghanaians and currently Cameroon's immigrants. Other groups formalized their organizations, such as the Nigerian Association in La Plata River, the Association of Senegalese residents and the African Union of Southern Cone.

The African Union of Southern Cone is a civil association created in 1999 from the initiative of a group of Africans of several nationalities, (Senegalese, Congolese, Cameroonese) who decided to face the needs about the integration of the new immigrants and the difficulties, according to them, resulting from the ignorance about the African continent in Argentina. Its president points out that even though at that time there were organizations -such as The House of Africa- which tried to solve the problems of the new African immigrants, they do not have the enough knowledge to achieve so.

The Union is an organization of continental nature opened to all Africans, though the presence of Sub Saharan Africans, such as Senegalese, Congolese, Cameroonese and Ghanians, is outstanding among its members. Such association gives them the legal frame, as since 2002 has legal status, even though some of them, like people from Senegal, are under formalization process. The Association does not receive grants or financial help from any embassy, the financing is through the collaboration of its members, mainly from the president who pays the rent of the head office and contributed with computers with access to the internet.

In order to help the integration of immigrants, the association offers its head office as a meeting point where they give advising services. On the other hand, with the aim of promoting a better information about African culture as well as possibilities of economic investment in the continent, they give conferences to businessmen, mainly held by the president and activities, such as the African week, event which began to be developed since 2004 once a year. Recently, the association participates of the so-called African Diaspora, constituted by Africans and African descendants.

The Nigerian Association in the La Plata River, not of continental type but of national type, was founded in February 1996 and was created thanks to the initiative of a group of Nigerians who were in the country at that time gathering informally in houses of some of them since 1995. The “formalization” of these meetings consisted of writing a constitution and giving a name to the organization.

Among the goals established in the constitution it is mentioned: to contribute to the welfare of the members, to promote the peaceful coexistence among its members and neighbors, to encourage the unity and understanding in the diversity and to develop cultural relationships between Nigerians and the inhabitants of the La Plata River region. The association was opened formally in 1997 and it has been working so far in a private house due to the lack of an own place for the head office. In 2002 the proceedings for its legal status began.

In addition to meetings among members, the association celebrates some dates, especially with public events, when academicians, ambassadors, members of other communities and public in general are invited, for instance, the Day of Nigerian Democracy (29th May) and the day of Independence of Nigeria (1st October).

Regarding Senegalese immigrants in Argentina there are two groups: one constituted by immigrants from the North of Senegal, mainly from Diourbel region, of Wolof ethnical origin and members of the

mourides brotherhood, grouped in a structure called *dahira* (term meaning “weekly meeting). The other formed by those from the southern region of Ziguinchor province gathering individuals of Diola ethnical group but not associated to any specific brotherhood (Traore 2006).

The Association of Senegalese Residents was created by mid 2007, still waiting for the definite resolution regarding its legal status. The creation of this structure as civil association has as main objective to legitimize the presence of Senegalese and obtaining a formal recognition from Argentinean authorities. One of the main issues that the Association deals with is due to the lack of a Senegalese embassy or consulate in Argentina, as well as the lack of Argentinean diplomatic representation in Senegal.

As well as joining these entities whose members are only Africans, some joined other mixed associations, that is to say, formed also by Afro descendants such as Africa Association and its Diaspora and the Federation of Organizations of Afro descendants and Africans in Argentina (FOAARA).

Some of these African and Afro descendant organizations began to act in the planning and organization of the event “Week of Africa”, held for the first time in this way in May 2007. Its main purpose was “to broadcast interdisciplinary African culture and histories and their different expressions in America, from the organization of an extended tribute of the Day of Africa”.

They also participated jointly in the meetings held during July of the same year, in the month of the Afro Argentinean Culture, where the First Argentinean Congress of Afro Descendants and the Regional Seminar of Ethnic Groups, Gender and Sexual Diversity were included. There, Afro descendants of several countries, Africans, members of other organizations of civil society and government representatives participated. In other words, the African immigrants in Argentina have begun to establish bonds with multiple actors, especially with Afro Argentineans, who influence in processes of building collective identities.

However, these views regarding Afro descendants are not unanimous among African associations; this first stage of constituting a field of joint sociability appears to be conflictive.

We will set an example through one of these events: the fore mentioned “African Week in 2007”. One of its main objectives was to encourage a greater communication and interactivity among the various organizations, institutions and other associations devoted to Afro topics. However, here there was a clear evidence of disputes arising from unsolved conflicts in the inside of the “Afro”¹ collective.

During the organizing meetings, some of them observed by our team, different aspects were discussed such as the members integrating the Organizing Commission (CO) of the event and whether the Week should be established and led by Africans or Afro descendants or by both at the same time. Even though they had agreed that the event would be called “Africa and its Diaspora”, name referring to a wide range of participants either Africans or Afro descendants, the discussion was about the members of the OC. The conflict showed different concepts about how to present the event to the Argentinean society who was not Afro. That meant that the OC was another form of presenting Africans to non Africans and the fact of discussing if it had to be made up by only Africans, Africans and Afro descendants implied that the expression “Africa and its Diaspora” involved conflict.

This dispute also showed the discrepancies about the objective of celebrating this Week. That is to say, whether the political aspects of the Diaspora, involving the struggle against discrimination and racism as well as socio-economic demands of slave descendants, had to be present or just the cultural and artistic goals had to be taken into account.

Another dimension of the dispute was the title of the organizers, that is to say, whether they were participating as members and representatives of associations or as individuals without connection to any institution. Other questionings arouse from the tension among FOAARA members and other groups which were not part of this association.

Finally, even though the Week was held, some groups, among them Nigerian Association and African Association and its Diaspora, stopped participating in the organization.

We will need a longer and more intensive field work to deal with the heterogeneous and complex situation within each organization, the relationship among them and other groups of the civil society and state institutions, the changes that are taking place, the definition and /or construction of ethnical boundaries between the new African immigrants and the Afro Argentineans, the different forms of building identity, the Diaspora notion they have, taking into account theoretical concepts such as diasporic citizen, transnationalism, multi located identities, among others.

Notes

¹ Statistical data on the Cape Verdean population do not appear either in the Memories of the National Migration Directory or in the census due to the fact that, firstly, they entered [those who did it legally] as Portuguese and secondly, because a great number [hard to determine] entered clandestinely. There had not been investigations on that

group either until we began our research, therefore during the beginnings of our work in 1979, we had no choice but to try and cense at least one part of the population, with the assistance of the by then Honorary Consul Joaquim dos Santos and members of the collectivity. By that time the population was of approximately four thousand native Cape Verdeans and descendants. About results of the census, see Lahitte, H.; Maffia, M. (1981).

² Cities located on La Plata riverbank. We also find them in Mar del Plata, Punta Alta, Campana, Rosario, Puerto Madryn, cities with marine or fluvial ports but in smaller numbers

³ A similar situation is observed in the United States, particularly in New England where most of them worked in maritime activities (Greenfield 1976)

⁴ “The *differentiating traits* were formed in the course of a common history that the collective memory never stopped transmitting, in a selective way; interpreting and transforming certain facts and legendary characters, through the social belief, in significant symbols of ethnic identity.” (Lapierre, W. 1997: 13)

⁵ See Greenfield and França referenced in literature.

⁶ The majority of Cape Verdeans living in Argentina belong to these islands.

⁷ According to Sydney Greenfield similar group behavior was observed in the United States as well.

⁸ Today, the few natives still alive generally define themselves as Cape Verdeans and most descendants invoke their Argentinean, Argentinean-Cape Verdean quality and a minority defines itself as Cape Verdean-African, African-Cape Verdean, though these definitions are not unanimous, redefining their memberships according to the context and subjects of the interaction.

⁹ Greenfield (1976) states that Cape Verdeans in the United States adopted four main strategies to achieve a better-suited insertion in the chosen society. One of them is what he calls “Cape Verdean-Portuguese”, secondly, “Cape Verdean-Black”; thirdly, “Cape Verdean-African” and, fourthly, “Cape Verdean-American”.

¹⁰ Some of them could travel to the islands during events such as the Immigrants Week organized by the government in the islands.

¹¹ A provisional expression coined by Matonti, F and Poupeau F. (2004) but of great analytical usefulness, “capital born out of authority recognized by the group and in this sense *unstable*: incorporated under the form of techniques, dispositions to act, intervene, or simply obey, it covers a set of techniques and mobilizing knowledge during collective actions, interparty or intraparty struggles but also exportable, convertible into other universes, and therefore, susceptible of enabling certain *reconversions*” [...] “The acquired militant capital and the conquered position constitute an opportunity of recognition for individuals who are classless due to a phase shift between the aspirations linked to prolonged schooling and the reality of the social and professional occupied position.”

¹² For this topic see Laura López’s paper (2006).

¹³ According to Greenfield (1990), starting from the 1970s there is a valorization of the ethnical cultural heritage in the United States sparked by the civil rights movements, “today many Cape Verdeans located in Avellaneda are rescuing their creole language, their culture and traditions, what was unacceptable until recently.”

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