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# Identifications, Cultures, and 'Groupness': Reflecting on Culture from Ethnographic Research in Argentina

Soledad Balerdi

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Article abstract

This paper reflects on the precautions to be taken into account when addressing the study, from the point of view of the social sciences, of cultures and communities. This is done through ethnographic research in a neighbourhood (barrio) of migrants from an indigenous community in the province of Chaco, in northern Argentina, who have migrated to the city of La Plata (in Buenos Aires province) and have settled on its periphery. The article starts from the idea that ethnicity comes into play, situationally, as a resource rather than as a distinct and immutable feature. Even when it is necessary to describe how notions like culture and ethnicity act in practice and what meaning they have for the actors, social researchers should not historicize them in the specific contexts in which they are brought into play.

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# Identifications, Cultures, and ‘Groupness’: Reflecting on *Culture* from Ethnographic Research in Argentina

Soledad Balerdi  
*Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina*

*Abstract:* This paper reflects on the precautions to be taken into account when addressing the study, from the point of view of the social sciences, of cultures and communities. This is done through ethnographic research in a neighbourhood (barrio) of migrants from an indigenous community in the province of Chaco, in northern Argentina, who have migrated to the city of La Plata (in Buenos Aires province) and have settled on its periphery. The article starts from the idea that ethnicity comes into play, situationally, as a resource rather than as a distinct and immutable feature. Even when it is necessary to describe how notions like culture and ethnicity act in practice and what meaning they have for the actors, social researchers should not assume them to be natural in advance. They should try to deconstruct them, comprehend them, and historicize them in the specific contexts in which they are brought into play.

*Keywords:* culture, ethnicity, indigenous community, ethnography, Argentina

*Résumé :* Cet article met en évidence les précautions et les enjeux à prendre en considération en sciences sociales lorsque l’on aborde les questions culturelles dans les communautés. Cet article met en évidence un travail de terrain de type ethnographique dans un quartier (barrio) de La Plata (province de Buenos Aires) où se trouve une forte concentration de population migrante d’autochtones en provenance de la province de Chaco, dans le nord de l’Argentine. Plutôt que d’approcher l’ethnicité dans une perspective essentialiste et d’en faire une caractéristique immuable de l’identité, cet article s’inspire d’une approche relationnelle. Plutôt que de tenter de figer le sens de notions telles « ethnicité » ou « culture », cet article met en évidence l’importance de reconstruire le sens de ces notions à partir des données contextuelles et du sens qu’elles revêtent pour les acteurs.

*Mots clé :* culture, ethnicité, communauté indigène, ethnographie, Argentine

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Soledad Balerdi has a degree in Sociology from the National University of La Plata (Argentina) and is currently completing a PhD in Social Science at the same University. She has a doctoral scholarship from the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research of Argentina (CONICET) and works at the Research Institute on Humanities and Social Sciences (IdIHCS) at the National University of La Plata). E-mail: solebalerdi@hotmail.com.

## Introduction

Angela was born in 1969 in the town of San Martín, in the province of Chaco. She was the second of seven children. Her parents came from the village of La Leonesa, a small town in the east of the province, which, along with the village of Las Palmas, makes up one urban area. This area had a sugar mill, Las Palmas, whose workforce mainly came from the population of La Leonesa and Las Palmas. From a very young age, Angela helped her father in harvesting cotton and sugar; and helped her mother with the housework and making baskets from palm leaves, which they sold at fairs in the capital city, Resistencia. In addition, she would contribute to the family finances by working in domestic service. Of all her brothers and sisters, Angela was the only one who did not complete primary school, as she only completed the first grade.

Angela migrated to La Plata in 1999. She says it was Ramón, her husband, who had the idea of moving, in the hope of finding a job. However, despite the fact that four of her brothers had also migrated to the city, she did not want to go. When they arrived at the neighbourhood where her brothers had already settled, Angela and Ramón occupied a small wooden room, and then slowly began building their house next to it, with many economic challenges. Since her arrival at La Plata, Angela has worked in worker cooperatives, babysitting, selling baskets, and in domestic service. Today, she occasionally participates in a 'fair' in the same neighbourhood, where she sells second hand clothes that she gets, along with other neighbours, by asking for help from wealthy people living downtown.

This short story, based on what Angela told me about her life, allows us to see a number of concrete experiences as moments, situations, and conditions of her life story: the experience of migration and settlement, the experience of a poor educational and working background, the experience of occupying a specific role within her family as a woman, the experience of social inequality, and lack of material resources. What is not immediately shown in this story? The fact that Angela is part of what many call an 'indigenous community' or 'native people'.

The aim of this paper (in the light of the first results of ethnographic research conducted in a 'Qom neighbourhood' of the city of La Plata, and based on the analysis of a set of texts) is to argue against certain tendencies that are still present in the social sciences in Argentina – tendencies that essentialize the notion of ethnic identity, reify culture, and assume the existence of communities and groups.

With this purpose, this article first presents a brief review of the history of the *Qom* population in Argentina and of the studied community, as well as of the entry into the field. Then, it outlines a theoretical review of the arguments of the main authors studying *culture*, *ethnicity*, and *identity*. Finally, this article discusses, as examples, some arguments elaborated on the basis of the fieldwork carried out: the centrality of family networks in the migration process, the use of ethnicity as a resource, and the formation of identities and sense of belonging from the differences.

Argentina, unlike other Latin American countries, has always thought of itself as a 'white' country. The hegemonic common sense about the Argentinian state and nationality since its formation has promoted the idea that the Argentinian population is entirely white, descended from Europeans. However, this imaginary has been changing in recent years, as indigenous communities have achieved greater visibility in the national public space. In this context, contributing to the field of knowledge on internal migration and ethnicity in Argentina, research in this field can support this

change in the ethnic visibility of such populations, making visible the diversity of our population. As Liliana Tamagno (2003) argues, this research can give visibility and relevance to the situation of indigenous populations in the country, and can remove the widespread idea that *Argentinity* is white, European, and not indigenous. This context presents us with a renewed challenge: to avoid reifying *indigenous* as an essentialist category of actors in research. To stress the importance of avoiding *culturalist* (Ortiz 2004) positions is, then, the aim of this article.

### **The study of the *Qom* population in La Plata: Avoiding essentialism**

The *Qom* were, until the late nineteenth century, nomad indigenous hunters and gatherers that migrated seasonally through the Chaco region. In the late nineteenth century, the consolidation of Argentina as a nation state involved two notions: on the one hand, an expansion of the agricultural frontier into indigenous territories that were taken over by wealthy landowners and *colonos* (due to the recent entry of Argentina into the capitalist world market as an exporter of primary products); and, on the other hand, the development and consolidation of an idyllic Argentinian nation associated with the 'civilized' values of white and European people, as opposed to (and excluding) the indigenous 'barbaric'. Thus, the occupation of indigenous lands by Argentine military forces between 1884 and 1912 forced the *Qom* population to settle in colonies, reductions, and reserves, and to work in lumber mills, in agriculture and animal husbandry, and in sugar mills. Finally, from the 1950s – mainly because of unemployment caused by the crisis in the cotton sector (Gordillo & Hirsch 2010; Vivaldi 2010) – many *Qom* families from the Chaco region migrated to the big cities of the centre of the country, such as Rosario, Buenos Aires, and La Plata, where they established settlements at the peripheries (Briones 2004; Gordillo 2007; Gordillo & Hirsch 2010; Maidana 2009; Vivaldi 2010; Wright 2008).

The neighbourhood in which this fieldwork was conducted can be briefly described as a peripheral settlement located in La Plata, consisting of about thirty or forty families that recognize themselves as *Qom*, and who have migrated from different locations in the province of Chaco in different years since the 1990s. My first encounter with the neighbourhood occurred through my participation in a university project in 2011. The following year, when I decided to start my research, an initial bibliographic search led me, among other things, to some studies on the subject that were based on fieldwork in *Qom* neighbourhoods in the city of La Plata. Such studies supported the thesis that their informants conserved their ethnic identity despite migration, and that they insisted on living together as a community.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to what I was beginning to know about the dynamics of networks of interactions in the neighbourhood, these ideas were quite romantic to me, and I even thought they were providing a fetishized image of 'community', an idyllic representation of the 'indigenous'. During my first approaches to the neighbourhood, a university colleague had told me it was a settlement of families from the Chaco. It was several weeks later that I discovered they were *Qom*, during a casual conversation with one of the neighbours.

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<sup>1</sup> This argument is presented in Tamagno (2003, 2005).

The situation of belonging to an ethnic community is not something that can be deduced from the physical features of its members, nor from daily practices distinct from those of other poor neighbourhoods in La Plata, nor from clothing, tools, or some particular object that is used or held. Indeed, it cannot even be inferred from everyday language because not many people in this neighbourhood can speak *Qom*, and its use is not very common (at least not in front of ‘external’ actors like us – middle-class, academic, urban people). However, the aforementioned research studies seemed to view the informants as an *obvious* part of a *specific*, isolated, and autonomous *cultural group*. These studies analyzed them, taking into consideration their own language, their memories, and their specific knowledge, but obscured the influence of the migration process, saying that, here or there, *Qom* people “conserve their identity,” as if they were independent of their contexts, as if “people would move with their culture” (Grimson 2011, p. 37, translation by author).

The goal of this article, in remembering those first studies I read at the beginning of my fieldwork, is to critique those perspectives, which are not rare indeed. I will begin with arguments of key authors in the study of *culture*, *ethnicity*, and *identity*.

### **A theoretical review on the concepts of identifications, culture(s), and groupness**

The main objective is to attempt to argue against what we can call, following Ortiz (2004), the *culturalist* position of some researchers, according to which they have tended to “reify the notion of culture” (p. 201), then to explain a heterogeneous set of practices and meanings as an obvious consequence of an idealized and essentialist vision of community identity, or what Grimson (2000) called “brotherhood.”

First, we can start with Barth’s definition, for whom “ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people” (1969, p. 10). From this basis, Barth discusses the traditional anthropological literature that

has led us to imagine each group developing its cultural and social form in relative isolation, mainly in response to local ecologic factors, through a history of adaptation by invention and selective borrowing. This history has produced a world of separate peoples, each with their culture, and each organized in a society which can legitimately be isolated for description as an island to itself. (p. 11)

Thus, ethnicity is not a substantial feature of a group, consisting of ‘objective’ elements that differentiate it from others, and, above all, it does not suppose that actors who identify with such ethnicity carry a specific autonomous and isolated culture (Barth 1969).

Moreover, according to Abu-Lughod (1991), it is possible to say that sometimes the notion of culture works as a unifying element (grouping people and practices) and therefore as a differentiating element (distinguishing those people and practices from others), and it is in this operation that it tends to ‘freeze the differences’, to make them substantial, consistent, and permanent. As the author explains, and as we shall see, recognizing this is not to deny “that the notion of having a culture, of being a culture, has become crucial to many communities” (Abu-

Lughod 2005, p. 122), but it involves the “need to rethink the notion of culture as singular, as a shared set of meanings distinct from those held by other communities” (p. 121). What matters is that this “shared set of meanings” is not unique; it is contingent, and does not assume a homogeneity among actors who share it or identify with it.

Other authors have addressed the debate on ethnicity or ethnic identity specifically from the study of migration. Glick Schiller et al. (2006) advocate for taking migration research beyond the use of the ethnic group as the unit of analysis, and beyond the hegemony of a single model of migrant incorporation. They say, “comparative studies need to more fully theorize the frequency and distribution of different pathways of migrant incorporation, including various types of nonethnic pathways” (p. 626). Along these lines, Andreas Wimmer (2009) criticizes the major paradigms of immigration research, including various branches of assimilation theory, multiculturalism, and ethnic studies, as he argues that all of them concur in taking ethnic groups as self-evident units of observation and analysis, assuming that this is the most meaningful way of dividing society into groups of individuals. They also take it for granted that each ethnic group is endowed with a specific culture, communitarian solidarity, and a shared identity. Instead of treating ethnicity as an unproblematic *explanans* – providing self-evident units of analysis and self-explanatory variables – the boundary-making paradigm proposed by Wimmer takes ethnicity as an *explanandum*, as a variable outcome of specific processes to be analytically uncovered and empirically specified.

Therefore, to understand practices and situations exclusively through their relation to a particular belonging or origin implies that there is a being-from-one-place (having a culture) that perpetuates in time and beyond contexts. It means to assume that *Qom* people do what they do because they are *Qom*. However, what is *being Qom*? When approaching the study of actors who identify themselves as ‘indigenous peoples’, and live and act accordingly, it is common for many researchers to start from an idea of community or ethnic identity *a priori*, rather than seeking to ethnographically understand the meaning(s) it has for the actors. Taking this ‘identity’ for granted means that, ultimately, it is being considered as *unique*, and the *same one* for all the people being recognized as part of the ‘community’.

Instead, trying to restore the multiple and heterogeneous senses of identification processes involves taking a less essentialist position – although, of course, without restricting the analysis to a “cliché constructivism” (Briones 2007). It involves saying, as Hall (1996) argues, that “though not without its determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it, identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency” (p. 2). Above all – and against collectivist or community idealizations – Hall suggests that identities “emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of identical, naturally-constituted unity” (p. 4).

In this context, starting from the notion of identity as an articulation, one must question the idea that around a specific identification there is a specific and constant community, a certain group. On the contrary, we must also understand ‘groupness’ as a *contingency*. Brubaker (2002) criticizes the tendency he recognizes in many contemporary discourses, what he calls *groupism*, that is, to presuppose the notion of *group* in the study of ethnicity, race, and national belonging and the “tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations and races as substantial entities to which interests and



agency can be attributed” (p. 164). While it is true that the actors themselves often represent ethnic conflicts in *groupist* terms, the analyst, as Brubaker says, should not “uncritically adopt categories of ethnopolitical practice as our categories of social analysis” (p. 166).

### **Some empirical examples: The centrality of family networks in the migration process and the use of ethnicity as a resource**

Contrary to these perspectives, my first ethnographic approaches allowed me to see, in articulation with new bibliographic searches, something different. Instead of a sense of community or community living, one of the structural dimensions of everyday experience and social relations in the neighbourhood (a dimension that in many cases has functioned as determinant of migratory movement and settlement process) is family ties. Alongside stories of my interviewees about the influence of brothers or sisters, cousins, and husbands on the migration process (both on the decision or imposition of migrating, as well as on the choice of destination for the migration, on employment opportunities at the place of destination, etc.), I found some research that – away from an idealistic or romantic point of view – saw the possibilities and constraints of “parentage networks” (Maidana 2009) as one of the main structuring factors of migration and living together.

We can take Ramón’s trajectory as an example. Ramón, Angela’s husband, lived in Chaco with her and their two children, and in the early 1990s, he was fired from his job. One day he received two bus tickets from one of his sisters. She lived in La Plata and wanted him to visit, arguing that he could find a job in the city. Ramón received the tickets without prior notice, on the same day of departure. Angela did not want to go: it was unexpected, and as her family lived far away from them, she had no way of notifying them about the journey. Instead, Ramón took one of his sisters with him. He did not know where La Plata was, much less the location of the bus station, or his sister’s address. He arrived in the city with nothing, and during the first three months, he lived in his sister’s house and worked as a construction worker with his brother-in-law. Then, he managed to get a payment in advance, and was able to return to Chaco to bring his family with him. He went back to Chaco without previous notice, and with the intention of returning to La Plata with Angela and their two children the following day, since he had to go back to work. Angela initially disagreed, but finally, resigned, she accepted.

Thus, as in the case of Ramón, who received a bus ticket to travel to La Plata sent by his sister who was living there; as in the case of Angela, who had to leave her home against her will following a decision of her husband; and as in the cases of the majority of the inhabitants of this neighbourhood, multiple parentage and filiation networks (Maidana 2009) are the reasons that largely motivate migratory movements and certain processes of location, and not an idealistic desire of living in community.

In addition, these first steps in the field encouraged me to argue against the essentialism with which ethnicity is sometimes understood. I saw that the constructions of *nosotros chaqueños* (we as people from Chaco), *nosotros comunidad* (we as a community), and *nosotros Qom* (we as *Qom* people) had something in common. They were made by those who see themselves as leaders, the referents of the neighbourhood; those who have contact with different politicians; those who are delegates to the meetings of the National Institute of Indigenous Affairs (INAI); those who have traditionally mobilized the community actions that have been carried out, and so forth.

Once again, new bibliographic readings (Briones 2004; Briones & Ramos 2010; Gordillo 2007; Gordillo & Hirsch 2010) gave me the framework to understand that in a context in which the indigenous issue has gained greater public visibility, and in which the Argentinian state has elaborated – or, rather, resignified – categories to describe these social sectors with which it is now seeking to interact (Balerdi 2013), the actors in the neighbourhood who believe they have the ‘duty’ of building bridges between their families and neighbours, and the new State resources, develop discursive forms that appeal to a communal ethnic identity. Such discursive forms allow them to position themselves as legitimate players in the political arena, as subjects of particular rights, as the ‘original populations’.

This construction of a specific ethnicity should not be thought of as unidirectional, as an ‘effect’ of a State action, as coming ‘down from the top’. On the contrary, the State enables ethnic identity to function as a legitimate mechanism for obtaining resources (material, political, social resources). In addition, the actors themselves demand and mobilize this possibility. As Hall (1996) states, the identity functions as an ‘articulation’ between a (discursive and practical) invitation to the subject to take a particular subject position, on one hand, and an identification of the subject with such a position, on the other. We could say it is an *articulation*, a ‘bridge’ between a certain *hetero-* and *self-* identification.

Thus, ethnic identity is no longer understood as essence, and becomes a resource that is contextually and situationally activated, at the margins, by the differences (Barth 1969). It is not something that *is*, but something that comes into play, not a trait that defines a group *per se*, but an element that articulates a contingent *groupness* (Brubaker 2002).

### **Another empirical example:**

#### **The formation of identities and senses of belonging on the border**

The ethnographic work done so far leads me to conclude that the influence of “parentage networks” (Maidana 2009) on migratory movements implies that *Chaco origin* and *ethnic belonging* function as devices of production of a specific and differentiated territoriality. The four or five blocks that form the *Qom* settlement are next to the homes of a community of Paraguayans living in the neighbourhood under very similar housing, infrastructure, and socio-economic conditions to those of *Qom* families.

In fact, one could say that an outside observer would find almost no differences between the two spaces and easily would confuse what for its inhabitants are clearly separate and distinct neighbourhoods. Thus, while the inhabitants of both settlements share a “‘common experience’ linked to inhabiting the periphery” (Segura 2011, p. 86), in parallel, during the fieldwork, I recorded appreciations, opinions, and recurring actions by different actors of the neighbourhood intended to differentiate themselves from their Paraguayan neighbours.

It is then not fundamentally within the same ‘community’ but at the *limit* of community where certain senses of belonging are configured. If, following Barth’s definition of an ethnic group, the focus is the fact that ethnicity operates as a category of ascription and identification, and that ethnicity is a “form of social organization” (1969, p. 13), it is possible to affirm that the cultural differences that presuppose ethnic categories are not ‘objective’ differences, but depend on cultural traits that “the actors themselves regard as significant” (p. 13) to differentiate themselves. To Barth,



contact with others functions as a mechanism that reinforces identification and self-ascription to the group itself: “the persistence of ethnic groups in contact implies not only criteria and signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows the persistence of cultural differences” (p. 16). In the same vein, Hall (1996) holds that identification “entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of ‘frontier-effects’” (p. 3).

These boundaries (both symbolic and material) are not unbridgeable. The inhabitants of the neighbourhood ‘trespass’ them every day (mainly for work). As well, different middle-class actors, inhabitants of the central areas of the city (members of political parties, government officials, students of the university, researchers), constantly ‘enter’ the neighbourhood. As Segura (2006) argues, “the border exists and shapes social life, which is structured, and depends largely on the mobilization of (few) resources and on the development of various strategies to cross the border in order to access goods and services which are scarce or absent in the neighbourhood (work, health, education, recreation). Goods and services necessary for the reproduction of the conditions of life” (p. 6, translation by the author).

Recognizing this flow, this back and forth, does not assume that actors of both social spaces experience equal conditions from, or because of, making these paths. Quite the contrary, as Cosacov & Perelman (2011) hold, “to place *interactions* against *fragments* [allows us] to show that these relationships exist and are unequal” (p. 317, translation by the author).

### **Brief final reflection**

The critical revision of the state and intellectual attempts to build a homogeneous society in Argentina meant eliminating or invisibilizing the indigenous population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and demonstrates the historicity of the processes of visibility and invisibility of the various social groups in national identity formation. It allows us to historicize the “regimes of ethnic visibility,” enabling analysis of the influence acquired by the indigenous presence in public space and in the social and political organization of the nation today (Grimson 2003, p. 145). Thus, and according to some authors (Gordillo & Hirsch 2010), we can argue that in the last decade, due in large part to the struggles of indigenous peoples, Argentina’s state policies on indigenous matters have become more equal with regard to the rights of indigenous peoples. It is possible to affirm the existence of a change in the regime of ethnic visibility in Argentina, where the demands of indigenous people and migrants have attained greater visibility and impact in the public arena. This is due, on one hand, to the increased struggles and demands of these populations, and on the other hand, to a change in the logic of the Argentinian state, which is now seeking to engage with those sectors that were previously invisibilized.

In this context, the aforementioned research shows that while state recognition of citizenship and rights for these populations has ‘forced’ them to be formalized (through the creation of institutions or organizations recognized by the State, for example) in order to demand as ‘indigenous people’ or *pueblos milenarios* (ancient peoples) with specific rights, and while this has served as a state control device of these populations, at the same time it has also meant an increase in their relative power, creating the possibility of leveraging the visibility that their demands have gained within state channels to put forward other demands.

In this sense, ethnographically mapping indigenous populations in the country<sup>2</sup> becomes relevant not only to raise awareness of ethnic diversity in Argentina, but also to contribute to the development of migratory and indigenous public policies in the context of the country's social and economic development. This, as was argued in the introduction, confronts us with the renewed analytical challenge of avoiding essentializing cultures, identities, and groups in research. To account for the importance of this challenge was the central aim of this article.

Angela's narrative about her life story, embodied in the story mentioned in the introduction to this article, enables us to question analytical approaches that assume constituted and determinant identities, and constant and culturally distinct groups *a priori*. On the contrary, her life story allows us to see that a particular ethnic identification is always partial and situational, and that while in a given context the practices and meanings of these actors can articulate around 'being *Qom*', at another time, or simultaneously, they can articulate around being a worker, or Pentecostal, or from Chaco, or women or men. To avoid essentialism and *a priori* assumptions, it is important that researchers ethnographically rebuild relational frames, connections, and flows, not forgetting the analysis of operative inequalities, but always seeking to restore the positivity of their practices, using the dialogues derived from the perspective of the actors.

A *culturalist* approach 'invisibilizes' the relationships among actors and the fact that such relationships are always unequal. Accounting for the situatedness, the partiality, and the contingency of ethnic identities and groups allows us to envisage the contexts and interaction frameworks in which they occur. Therefore, it allows us to account for power relations and operative inequalities.

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<sup>2</sup> Mapping indigenous populations in Argentina avoids focusing only on 'cultural' dimensions, such as language, religion, rituals, typical food, etc. – elements that define the 'features' of 'groups', and at the same time fixes or reifies them (Abu-Lughod 1991). Instead, it incorporates an analysis of the living conditions of these populations, which diversifies their life trajectories (family situations, labour trajectories, academic or educational background, housing conditions, etc.).

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