

The Paradox of Transnational Indigenous Identities in Argentina

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That a social movement based upon ties to international organizations and populations could fail to effectively achieve its aims is paradoxical. Appeals to external governments and organizations have proven to be essential for the success of appeals by marginal populations because it provides them with access to social resources and places outside pressure upon national governments to concede to the movements' demands. Due to the emphasis the indigenous people of Argentina place upon their association with indigenous groups outside of the country's borders, it is surprising that their movements and organizations have failed to achieve the recognition and benefits that other movements throughout Latin America have attained. This paper argues that despite providing precedent for indigenous claims and encouragement of indigenous movements, the international nature of indigenous identities in Argentina has frustrated the ability of the country's indigenous people to secure recognition by both national and international actors, thereby precluding the establishment of an environment favorable to indigenous rights.

Over the past two decades, throughout Latin America, indigenous groups progressed from a position of being almost completely ignored by national and international institutions and organizations to participating in constituent assemblies, forming their own political parties, and even winning important governmental positions, most notably the election of Evo Morales to the presidency of Bolivia. Yet, native populations have the strongest correlation with impoverishment, lack of education and marginalization of any group in the region.¹ The gains made by indigenous groups in different parts of Latin America, such as securing territorial titles, rights to regional autonomy, and special assistance and consideration by the governments of their respective countries, demonstrate a greater inclusiveness and concern for marginal

¹ George Psacharopoulos and Harry Patrinos, "Executive Summary," in *Indigenous People and Poverty in Latin America: an Empirical Analysis*, eds. George Psacharopoulos and Harry Patrinos (Washington: World Bank, 1994), xvii-xix.

populations on the part of Latin American governments. Through government recognition and beneficial policy, indigenous people are able to ameliorate the poor living conditions noted by Patrinos and Psascharopolous. Despite this trend, the national and provincial governments of Argentina to date have ceded to indigenous recognition to almost none of the groups demanding such recognition.

The successes of indigenous movements throughout Latin America established a trend of state recognition of and respect for aboriginal populations, which exerts pressure upon all of the countries of the region to do the same. The accomplishments of these mobilizations throughout the region also motivate the formation of new indigenous organizations by demonstrating the possibility of attaining certain demands to native populations that have yet to do so. Additionally, communities now perceive identification as indigenous to be more socially acceptable, and thus a revival of Indian identity is now occurring. It would seem logical that by emphasizing common ancestry and choosing to associate with other successful indigenous populations in neighboring countries, the indigenous people of Argentina would be more capable of demanding recognition as an original people deserving of special consideration.

Nonetheless, by associating themselves with transnational identities, the Indians of Argentina limit their political effectiveness in multiple ways. Their focus upon regional denominations that cross present-day borders weakens their ability to establish a unified indigenous peoples movement in the country and provides detractors to these movements with arguments to counter aboriginal claims.

Definition of Terms and the Rise of the Argentine Nation

The clarification of certain terms will greatly facilitate a proper understanding of the argument of this paper. Researchers, scholars, politicians, descendents of pre-Colombian

peoples, and the general populace use the words Indian (*indio*), aboriginal, native, indigenous (*indígena*) and original people (*pueblo originario*) to refer to individuals who have descended from the people who occupied the American continents prior to the arrival of Europeans.² Different groups with different agendas associate a variety of meanings with these terms. In this paper, the use of any of the aforementioned words implies the definition of indigenous peoples as given by the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination of Minorities:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, considered themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present nondominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the base of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.³

Another definition of indigenous people necessary to understand the following examination of aboriginal social movements in Argentina is that given by the national government. The *Ley Nacional 23302 sobre Política Indígena y Apoyo a las Comunidades Aborígenes* (National Law 23302 about Indigenous Politics and the Support of Aboriginal Communities) states the following:

Se entenderá como comunidades indígenas a los conjuntos de familias que se reconozcan como tales en hecho de descender de poblaciones que habitaban el territorio nacional en la época de la conquista o colonización e indígenas o indios a los miembros de dicha comunidad. (They shall be considered indigenous communities those groups of families that recognize themselves to be descendants of the populations that inhabited the national territory during the periods of conquest or colonization and indigenous or Indians the members of said community).⁴

² These terms are derived from personal observation in the provinces of Neuquén, Rio Negro, Jujuy, Salta, and the Federal District of Buenos Aires, along with research in academic texts in the fields of anthropology, history and political science.

³ United Nations, "Study of the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations," (New York: UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, 1986). UN Document E/En.4/Sub.2/1986/7Add.4, Paragraph 379.

⁴ Ley Nacional 23302 sobre Política Indígena y Apoyo a las Comunidades Aborígenes, Article 2.

As shall be demonstrated in this paper, this definition of indigenous communities is manipulated according the hegemonic discourse of Argentina to deny the indigenous nature of the people demanding recognition from the state.

Indigenous groups view themselves as their own unique nation, but state institutions subsume them to the Argentine nation. In this paper, mention of transnational identification, identities and associations refers to relations between groups who live under different states, as opposed to relations between different ethnic nations. Five of the six largest aboriginal populations in Argentina, according to the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos* (National Institute of Census and Statistics), INDEC: the Mapuche, Kolla, Guarani, Toba, and Wichí, all identify with an indigenous denomination that also exists in neighboring countries, including Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay and Uruguay.⁵ The primary identity of these groups is an ethnic one that is determined by an unifying conception of common ancestry, language history and shared cultured markers and crosses the borders of these present-day states.⁶

INDEC found that approximately one and a half percent of the Argentine population is of native descent; this is a larger figure than that of both Colombia and Brazil, whose aboriginal people have achieved much greater success in appealing to their respective governments their Argentine counterparts. Although INDEC uses self-identification as the basis of its statistics, the definition of indigenous given above by Law 23.302 demands the fulfillment of other requirements. As a result, some populations recorded as aboriginal by INDEC are denied such recognition by both national and provincial states.

⁵ Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, “Primeros resultados de la ECPI: El INDEC ya contó 450.000 indígenas,” 6 September 2006. Available from http://www.indec.gov.ar/nuevaweb/cuadros/2/ecpi_generales_13_09_06.pdf

⁶ See Table 1 for countries in which certain indigenous groups can be found.

These Argentine ethnic groups typically organize at the community level to demand that the state recognize them as indigenous. The attainment of such recognition bestows upon the community judicial personage, which implies, among other things, titles to traditional land, access to earmarked funds for indigenous peoples, participation in all government action that may affect the community, and special consideration by local governments in the formulation of policy. These concessions give the community resources to aid in its subsistence and bestow more respect upon the communities by official sectors, allowing them to better maintain their native identity and culture. Many communities organize under the indigenous social movements of the country in an effort to more effectively pressure the state. Such organizations include the Organización de Naciones y Pueblos Indígenas en Argentina (Indigenous Nations and Peoples Organization in Argentina), Coordinador de Educación Intercultural, Bilingüe y Cultural (Coordinator of Cultural, Bilingual and Intercultural Education), Confederación Mapuche Neuquina (Neuquén Mapuche Confederation), Asociación Centro Mapuche (Mapuche Central Organization), Coordinadora de Organizaciones Mapuche (Coordinator of Mapuche Organizations), Asociación Indígena de la Republica Argentina (Indigenous Association of the Argentine Republic), Asociación de Comunidades del Pueblo Guaraní (Association of Communities of Guaraní People), and Centro Kolla (Kolla Center).

The government of Argentina is highly decentralized and fragmented, with a number of different offices and institutions that concern themselves with indigenous rights. To the frustration of the Indians of Argentina, they frequently must appeal to multiple institutions in their demands for state recognition in order to attain the rights and treatment which they are

demanding.⁷ It is through the *Instituto Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas* (National Institute of Indigenous Affairs), INAI, that communities elicit national recognition of their aboriginal status. Nonetheless, Indians must also appeal to other government institutions, including but not limited to the *Ministerio de Desarrollo Social* (Social Development Ministry), *Secretaría de Derechos Humanos* (Human Rights Secretary), and the *Ministerio de Trabajo Empleo, y Seguridad Social* (Work, Employment and Social Security Ministry) in order to secure indigenous rights. At the provincial level, the institutions vary between provinces, but commonly consist of the *Dirección Provincial de Tierras* (Provincial Land Directory), *Consejo Provincial de Educación* (Provincial Education Council), *Centro de Acción Social* (Social Action Center), and *Dirección Provincial de Personas Jurídicas* (Provincial Judicial Personage Directory), to name a few.

Following the establishment of independence, in the mid nineteenth-century the political elite of Buenos Aires accepted the ideas espoused by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento that in order for Argentina to prosper, the “barbarous” elements of the interior, specifically the indigenous people, needed to be overcome by the “shining light of civilization.” As opposed to immediate domination by Europeans, as occurred throughout much of Latin America, the indigenous people of the territory that would become Argentina not only retained their independence but also frequently maintained a position of supremacy in relation to the invaders. Although Sarmiento’s principle suggestion was a populating of the interior of the country with Europeans, his doctrine served as the basis for the Conquest of the Desert, the military domination and genocide of much of the indigenous population of Argentine territory

⁷ Individual communities seeking recognition as aboriginal by the state frame and reframe the presentation of their community in an effort to gain the bestowal of judicial personage. The process is complex and unique for each community. An in depth analysis of one case is provided by the thesis of Laura Inés Ramos, *Robo de tierras y estrategias de recuperación : el caso de la comunidad mapuche Kom Kiñé Mú*, presented in 2001 to the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO).

in 1879.⁸ While these military campaigns did vastly diminish indigenous numbers, they did not completely exterminate the Indians as the official Argentine history affirms.⁹

Analysts of nationalist phenomena, including Joseph Rothschild, Eric Hobsbawm, and Ernest Gellner, argue that it is in the nature of a state to seek to homogenize its population in order to legitimize its existence by presenting itself as the true representative of a uniform nation.¹⁰ Accordingly, Argentine history presents the dissolution of the country's indigenous population as a central element in the formation of its nation of European descendants. Argentine leaders chose to emphasize European roots, as opposed to the nation-building of neighboring countries, which chose a mestizo representation for their nations.¹¹ In this process, national discourses espoused the benefits of European descent and imparted a pejorative connotation to traits associated with nativity to the Americas.¹² Whether or not it was true, Argentine history, as presented in such documents as the national constitution and school textbooks, was painted as one void of aboriginal presence following the establishment of the white Argentine nation through the Conquest of the Desert.¹³ Despite the general trends of political gains by indigenous movements throughout Latin America, the context created by the nation-building process of Argentina places movements in this country at a disadvantage because, beyond denying the existence of Argentina Indians, it denies the very possibility of indigenous influences native to Argentine soil.

⁸ Jonathan C. Brown, *A Brief History of Argentina* (Austin: Facts on File, 2003), 137.

⁹ Gastón Gordillo and Silvia Hirsch, "Indigenous Struggles and Contested Identities in Argentina: Histories of Invisibilization and Reemergence," *The Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (2003): 10.

¹⁰ Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1991), 2. Ernest Gellner, *Naciones y nacionalismo* (Madrid: Alianza Universidad, 1988). Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹¹ Gordillo, 4.

¹² A la Europa debemos todo lo bueno que poseemos, incluso nuestra raza, mucho mejor y mas noble que las indígenas..." Nineteenth century Argentine political scientist and diplomat Juan Bautista Alberdi, as cited in Víctor Ramos, *Racismo y discriminación en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Catálogos, 1999), 31.

¹³ Gordillo, 5.

Fragmentation in Indigenous Movements

The expansive territory of Argentina spans a variety of climates. In the North are tropical forests while the South is known for its glaciers. The western border is formed by the Andes mountain range while the eastern border is defined by the Atlantic Ocean. This variety of climates led to the formation of a heterogeneity of native cultures, with few, if any, common traits.

These cultural differences cause a lack of identification among indigenous groups in Argentina. They associate themselves with citizens of neighboring countries who share such cultural markers as common ancestry, way of life, and historical interaction rather than with other Indians who live under the same government.¹⁴ Throughout the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the Mapuches of Argentina and Chile strengthened their ties and fomented greater interaction between the two communities. The Kolla and Guarani of Argentina have always maintained strong relations with their distant and not-so-distant relatives in Bolivia, Peru and Paraguay. The differences among these distinct groups in Argentina are so pervasive that the Argentine anthropologist Morita Carrasco asserts that it is doubtful that a single organization could form of national indigenous leadership to represent the interests of the aboriginal population of the country.¹⁵

While the decision to associate with regional identities that cross borders based upon the belief of a shared ethnicity is rational, the failure to establish a national movement is not as probable as Carrasco argues. Although cultural markers such as shared language and religion are the most salient identifiers for ethnic groups, even where these characteristics have fallen

¹⁴ Silvia Maria Hirsch, "Bilingualism, Pan-Indianism and Politics in Northern Argentina: The Guarani's Struggle for Identity and Recognition," *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (2003): 85.

¹⁵ Morita Carrasco, *Los derechos de los pueblos indígenas en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Internacional Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2000), 21.

into disuse but retain a symbolic weight, shared experience under the domination of a particular state or government also serves to unite populations and individuals in the creation of a national group.¹⁶ Multiple Latin American countries, most noticeably Ecuador with the formation of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) in 1986, demonstrate this phenomena, in which Indians moved beyond differences of religion, language, and even prior ethnic association, to create a pan-indigenous movement within a country based not upon traditional cultural markers but instead a shared history of domination and marginalization.¹⁷

Nonetheless, the indigenous groups of Argentina never mobilized beyond their transnational regional identities to form a united national movement. The belief that essential ethnic differences separate the aboriginal groups of Argentina further augments the disunity that exists between these populations because it encourages them to organize independently of one another. Each denomination focuses upon their particular issues and demands, preventing the establishment of a common indigenous platform that could unite the culturally distinct groups. A representative of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples and Nations in Argentina (*Organización de Naciones y Pueblos Indígenas en Argentina*) stated that while her organization does attempt to combine separate claims of indigenous groups in different regions of the country, these groups do not associate with one another and have difficulty working together because they frame both their demands and identity in such diverse manners.¹⁸

By framing their claims separately, the indigenous communities and organizations hinder their appeal to institutions at the national level. For each individual native identity, the

¹⁶ Rothschild.

¹⁷ Donna Lee Van Cott, *From Movements to Parties in Latin America: The Evolution of Ethnic Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). 99.

¹⁸ Representative of Organización de Naciones y Pueblos Indígenas en Argentina, personal interview, Federal Capital of Argentina, 15 December 2005.

member numbers in Argentina are too small and their demands are too specific to their region to motivate national officials to take note. This forces them to present their claims to provincial governments in order to achieve recognition as indigenous and the bestowal of territorial and cultural rights. The nature of these appeals is detrimental to aboriginal movements because local and regional actors are more likely than national actors to deny territorial rights and special consideration due to the limitations that these concessions place upon the formulation of local policy and the redirection of local funds to aid Indian populations.¹⁹ Officials can more easily deny indigenous claims when a variety of organizations with different platforms use diverse tactics to attain their aims. As Donna Lee Van Cott notes in her examination of ethnic political movements in Latin America, a key factor in the creation of a regime favorable to indigenous rights is the existence of a united and organizationally mature ethnic movement capable of mobilizing at the national level.²⁰ The formation of such a movement is precisely what the regional, transnational ethnic identities present in Argentina prevent by encouraging the aboriginal populations of the country to note and emphasize their differences with other ethnic groups.

By associating themselves with regional transnational identities, the indigenous peoples of Argentina have debilitated their capacity to unite to form a unified national indigenous peoples movement capable of successfully demanding recognition and consideration by official sectors. As opposed to appealing to actors at the national level, these people interact with provincial and local officials, who are more likely to deny their claims because they face direct consequences from granting recognition to indigenous peoples. The strong regional identification that supersedes national borders not only creates a disunity between the

¹⁹ Van Cott: 199.

²⁰ Ibid., 200.

indigenous movements of Argentina, but also provides national and international actors with arguments that counter the claims and demands made by these communities and organizations.

Presentation of Indigenous Elements are Foreign to the Argentine Nation

Besides fragmenting the indigenous movements of the country, the transnational nature of Indian identities in Argentina undermines the establishment of a regime favorable to indigenous rights by providing the grounds for the argument that aboriginal elements present in Argentina are not native to its territory. National imaginings fix these elements as foreign, using transnational identifications as evidence that all things indigenous come from outside the Argentine nation.

The dominant national discourse of Argentina today holds that aboriginal elements completely disappeared from the country by the rise of Peron to power. With his first government, Peron granted citizenship rights to those Indians that still lacked them, and many of these people received identification papers certifying their Argentine citizenship for the first time ever. While this act did demonstrate that the Conquest of the Desert did not fully cleanse Argentina of its indigenous population, it also firmly established the foreign nature of aboriginality. Parliament considered the granting of citizenship to these people to be justified because they had “Argentinized” and abandoned their traditional lifestyles sufficiently to truly be incorporated within the national community.²¹ Thus, the act of granting citizenship secured the belief that the Argentine nation was free of native elements, which in turn causes them to be stigmatized as foreign.

Despite the popular belief, espoused by politicians and historians, that the country is white and European, indigenous people and elements are evident in Argentina in the present day. Communities of descendents of original peoples in the provinces of Salta, Jujuy, Formosa,

²¹ Gordillo, 13-14.

Corrientes, Neuquén, Rio Negro and Chubut maintain at least some pre-Colombian traditions in practices. In order to reconcile this discrepancy, the national imagining relies upon the argument that all things aboriginal are alien to the Argentine nation. The national narrative explains the presence of Indians and their cultural practices by depicting the recent penetration of indigenous groups and cultures into Argentina and thus designating them foreign elements.²² This line of reasoning is historically established in the Argentine nation; the elite of Buenos Aires used it to justify their military campaigns to pacify and eliminate the Indians occupying what they considered Argentine territory.

The Argentine presentation of the natives who occupied the Pampas region demonstrates the depiction of indigenous elements as foreign to Argentina. The political elite at the time, through a series of statements issued to the general populace in the mid-nineteenth century, portrayed a process whereby a particular indigenous people of Chile, the Araucanians, invaded what the inhabitants of Buenos Aires considered Argentine territory. According to the elite of the Argentine capital, the Indians of the Pampas and Patagonia were either descendents of these “Chilean Indians” or were indigenous people who had lost their original identity through a process of forced assimilation by the Araucanians. Thus, the extermination of the Indians in the Conquest of the Desert was not considered genocide of people native to the area, but an elimination of foreign invaders that was necessary to establish the Argentine nation.²³

Immigration into Argentina following the establishment of the nation also aids in locating indigenous people outside of the Argentine state. Since independence, Argentina has experienced an influx of immigrants from neighboring countries, due to both the relatively low

²² Axel Lazzari and Diana Lenton, “*Araucanization and Nation, or How to Inscribe Foreign Indians Upon the Pampas during the Last Century,*” in *Contemporary Perspective of the Native Peoples of Pampa, Patagonia, and Tierra del Fuego*, ed. Claudia Briones and Jose Luis Lanata (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 2002), 34.

²³ Ibid.

population density of Argentina and the relatively high-performing Argentine economy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Specifically, multiple immigrations by aboriginal populations into Argentine territory are presented in the Ethnographic Museum of Buenos Aires, most notably an immigration of Mapuches (or Araucanians) into Argentina following the push by the Chilean government to “pacify” the indigenous occupants of Chilean Patagonia.²⁴ Additionally, large numbers of Guarani and Kolla entered Argentine territory throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to political conflict and economic pressures.²⁵ Detractors use these immigrations to demonstrate that the indigenous people currently in Argentina are not of Argentine origin, but instead foreign immigrants.

Certain communities, families and individuals within the indigenous population openly admit that their descendents entered Argentina from other regions, including Chilean Mapuche, Bolivian Kolla, and Paraguayan Guarani.²⁶ These people tend to intermix with those individuals who claim nativity to Argentine soil, which complicates the issue of granting recognition as an original people of Argentine territory and provides government officials and institutions with grounds for the denial of indigenous rights. For example, the provincial governments of Chubut, Neuquén and Salta have used such justification throughout the past decade to deny communities land titles and judicial personage. By identifying Indians as foreigners, they become associated with land other than that now ruled by Argentina, and this refutes the validity of their claims to special consideration in Argentine territory.²⁷ Besides confronting charges that they are not native to Argentina, aboriginal populations within the country also

²⁴ Museo Etnográfico, 4 August 2005.

²⁵ Hirsch, 86.

²⁶ Affirmed in personal interview, Luis Morales and Olga Hueneyhuen. Hirsh.

²⁷ Laura Kropff, “Activismo mapuche en Argentina: trayectoria histórica y nuevas propuestas,” in *Pueblos indígenas, estado y democracia*, ed. Pablo Dávalos (Buenos Aires: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 2005), 107-108.

face claims that they are not truly indigenous at all, and thus, they do not deserve any rights or treatment different from that received by the general populace.

Acculturation and the Manipulation of Indigenous Identity

Indigenous movements throughout Latin America achieved many gains in the past two decades, and these successes clearly influence the Argentine movements. Indian leaders frequently speak of Evo Morales, CONAIE, and other successful organizations and individuals as representative of that to which they aspire.²⁸ The influence of movements in other countries is particularly present in those communities who interact and identify with these foreign groups through their common assertion of pertaining to a particular indigenous denomination. The Argentine members of these groups mirror the organization strategies and claims made by members across borders in order to improve their own communities and use the ethnic categories established in other countries to enable a more effective negotiation on their behalf.²⁹

Both government officials and organizations use comparisons between Argentine Indians and their foreign counterparts to strengthen counterarguments to indigenous demands. While some communities maintained distinct aboriginal identities, the majority of the native people of Argentina acculturated much more than Indians in neighboring countries. As a result, official actors refute their indigenous status by comparing them to the “real” Indians in foreign territory. Critics focus on the use of the Spanish language, the use of mass-produced Western

²⁸ Affirmed in personal interviews with Lorenzo Epulef, Martin Purran, Bernardo Lenarz, Clarisa Monetenegro, and Raul Capitan.

²⁹ Hirsch.

clothing, and the lack of traditional kinship relationships to deny the indigenous identity of many groups in Argentina.³⁰

Two exemplary cases are those of the Guarani in the Northwest of the country and the Mapuche of Patagonia. In her examination of the creation of a Pan-Guarani identity, Hirsch notes that the Guarani of Bolivia maintained cultural markers such as language and dress, while, in general, these markers disappeared in Argentina.³¹ In the case of the Mapuche, the members of this group in Chilean territory maintained Mapuche religion, customs and the language much more than their counterparts in Argentina, to the point that the two communities had few characteristics in common.³² Both national and provincial state institutions dismiss the claims of aboriginality by Argentine indigenous groups by stressing their lack of the traditional cultural markers present in their foreign affiliates.

Appeals to land titles and special political consideration suffer from this inability to secure state recognition that would denominate communities as indigenous and grant them judicial personage. As Laurie Occhipinti notes in her examination of land claims made by the Kolla and Wichí groups, if these people were simply poor campesinos, their assertions would have no grounds.³³ By demonstrating their “Indianness,” people are able to attain resources and assistance from both government institutions and international NGOs. This situation mirrors that observed by Beth Conklin in her examination of Amazonian Indians and their sentiment of obligation to present a certain image to Western audiences in order to validate their indigenous nature; these groups lack political and economic power and must use their cultural difference,

³⁰ Laurie Occhipinti, “Claiming a Place: Land and Identity in Two Communities in Northwestern Argentina” *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (2003): 159.

³¹ Hirsch.

³² Claudia Briones, “Re-membering the Dis-membered: A Drama about the Mapuche and Anthropological Cultural Production in Three Scenes (4th Edition),” *The Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (2003).

³³ Occhipinti, 160.

whether real or imagined, in order to generate some form of political capital for themselves.³⁴ The ability to demonstrate an aboriginality in accordance with Western perceptions of what that nature entails becomes essential in processes of arguing for indigenous rights.

Nestór Fuentes, the director of the Provincial Land Directory (*Dirección Provincial de Tierras*), located in the city of Zapala in the province of Neuquén, demonstrated the view held by government actors concerning indigenous claims. Using his experience with the Mapuche communities of Neuquén to generalize for the entire country, Fuentes stated that the people demanding indigenous recognition believe that they deserve more rights than other citizens, even to the point of violation of the rights of other citizens. Additionally, Fuentes remarked that the people who have yet to be granted recognition by the state are not indigenous because they do not exhibit cultural characteristics of Indians that demonstrate their difference from dominant society and instead are simply individuals attempting to take advantage of indigenous recognition in order to gain access to land and special rights.³⁵ The skepticism of official sectors in relation to native claims is not surprising; aboriginal identity is highly politicized and indigenous movements use these ethnic categories to gain leverage in their relations with the national and provincial governments.³⁶ This makes the recognition of Indian populations a contentious issue.

The opportunistic depiction of those groups demanding recognition as aboriginal led to the creation of the term *indios truchos* (fake Indians). This is an essentialist definition of aboriginality created by Western society that defines indigenous identity as a demonstration of accepted cultural markers, without which an individual cannot be considered a member of an

³⁴ Beth Conklin, "Body Paint, Feathers and VCRs: Aesthetics and Authenticity in Amazonian Activism," *American Ethnologist* 24, no. 4 (1997): 713.

³⁵ Nestór Fuentes, Director of Dirección Provincial de Tierras, personal interview, Zapala in Neuquén, 9 January 2006.

³⁶ Hirsch, 93.

original people.³⁷ Use of such definitions to undermine indigenous claims is not exclusive to Argentina. Native people throughout the world feel pressured to conform to Western interpretations of aboriginal identities in order to attract resources; Conklin demonstrates this particularly well when she explains that Indians of the Amazon use “traditional” dress and customs less out of a desire to affirm their culture but instead to satisfy Western interpretations of aboriginality in order to guarantee special rights for their constituents.³⁸

While the term *indios truchos* is used pejoratively to refer to people claiming indigenous identity with little or no cultural markers that demonstrate their difference from Western society, the term is also used to refer to populations that have constructed markers of indigenous identity, such as language and religious and cultural practices, in the past few decades. The revaluation of indigenous identity and acceptance of cultural difference that has occurred in Latin America recently lead to processes of cultural affirmation and reconstruction. The Indians of Argentina have made many efforts, especially in the last decade, to revitalize indigenous identities and customs.

Unfortunately, much traditional knowledge of customs is lost in time; the environment in which many elders of modern day aboriginal communities were raised strongly encouraged their assimilation and acculturation. A Mapuche elder of the Lof Wiritray community explained this trend by describing how she lost much of the traditional Mapuche culture because her parents pushed her to acculturate so that she might be able to escape the dire poverty in which her community lived at the time.³⁹ Briones corroborates this explanation in her examination of cultural reconstruction in Mapuche communities, in which she notes incidents where elders are less capable of speaking in the traditional language than younger

³⁷ Conklin, 713-714.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Mapuche elder of Lof Wiritray, personal interview, Lof Wiritray in Neuquén, 18 January 2006.

leaders. Briones later demonstrates that the older generations lost many traditional markers of cultural difference that the younger generations are now attempting to revitalize, such as knowledge of traditional Mapuche festivals and celebrations.⁴⁰

Since elders are not sufficient sources for much of the cultural reconstruction occurring in Argentina among indigenous groups, younger generations look to foreign counterparts of their ethnic identities who have maintained cultural traditions to provide guidance. Hirsch confirms this when she states that the influence of Bolivian Guarani brought about the establishment of language programs that were “fundamental to the creation of a new Guarani identity.”⁴¹ The same can be said for the Mapuches. In order to establish a stronger transnational bond, the Mapuches of Argentina emphasize some symbols common in Chile whose historical pertinence to their ancestors is doubtful.⁴²

Those who contend the validity of indigenous movements designate the reconstruction of aboriginal identity as an effort to create a cultural difference where one does not exist. Thus, by locating elements of lost cultural difference in movements of neighboring countries, the Indians of Argentina provide their detractors with an argument that weakens their authenticity. This line of reasoning maintains that the people claiming indigenous identity are attempting to ride the coattails of successes of other movements, to the point that populations in Argentina appropriate foreign cultural markers. Institutions of the provincial and national governments locate such recreation, or creation, depending upon the observer, of indigenous markers in the

⁴⁰ Briones (2003).

⁴¹ Hirsch, 89.

⁴² Briones (2003).

realm of the “unbearable politicization” of identity that goes beyond what governments consider to be a fair claim.⁴³

While transnational identity ties provide native groups in Argentina with frameworks for the revitalization of cultural markers lost through their domination by and assimilation into hegemonic society, this process of cultural reconstruction also serves to undermine their political demands. Local, national and international institutions defame the reconstruction of indigenous identities in Argentina based upon identities in other countries as an imitation of successful Indians by non-Indians in an effort to replicate their demands and gain access to resources and rights that would otherwise be unavailable. Official actors deny the authenticity of new demonstrations of cultural distinction as constructed identity markers created by indios truchos to take advantage of the presently favorable environment for indigenous rights and claims.

Conclusion

Although identification with Indian denominations that cross present-day borders does benefit aboriginal peoples in Argentina to a certain extent, the overall effect of this transnational identification is detrimental to the claims and demands of indigenous communities and organizations. Hegemonic society has strongly marginalized the native populations of Argentina, and this marginalization diminished the presence of aboriginal cultural markers and identification with original peoples. Nonetheless, the general trend of revaluation of indigenous elements throughout Latin America, along with the establishment of special consideration and rights for original peoples that this revaluation causes, motivates

⁴³ Claudia Briones, “‘*We Are Neither an Ethnic Group Nor a Minority, but a Pueblo-Nación Originario.*’ The Cultural Politics of Organizations with Mapuche Philosophy and Leadership,” in *Contemporary Perspective of the Native Peoples of Pampa, Patagonia, and Tierra del Fuego*, ed. Claudia Briones and Jose Luis Lanata (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 2002), 102.

renewed identification with indigenous groups. This encouragement of Indian organization and mobilization is particularly strong between indigenous denominations that identify with a common ethnic group but live under different states.

To the detriment of indigenous movements in Argentina, their identification with transnational identities undermines their ability to achieve their aims. Association with identities that span borders leads to an emphasis of regional connections and failure to ally with other aboriginal denominations living within Argentina. This prevents the establishment of a unified national indigenous movement that would be more capable to achieving Indian demands than the regional movements that currently exist.

The national discourse of Argentina denies the existence of in original peoples native to Argentine territory; transnational aboriginal identities provide grounds for this discourse, which is then used to counter the claims made by descendents of native peoples. The national imagining of Argentina presents the identification with indigenous communities in other countries by the groups in Argentina as evidence that these people did not originate in Argentina but instead immigrated to the area, and thus, they are not native to Argentine territory. Government officials and institutions also compare the people demanding recognition as indigenous in Argentina to indigenous people in neighboring movements to undermine the cultural authenticity of the Argentine movements. Argentine Indians often lack traditional cultural markers that officials identify with aboriginality, or these movements recently “reconstructed” these elements. Once again hegemonic society argues that the revitalization of indigenous characteristics is simply a ploy to take advantage of an environment favorable to Indian rights by copying the aboriginal identity of foreign movements.

Indigenous people are severely marginalized in Argentina. Recognition as indigenous would aid the amelioration of this marginalization by returning some traditional resources to these people and encouraging their cultural difference, as opposed to the promotion of assimilation into dominant society, as has been Argentine government policy since the state was formed. The possibility of recognition does exist; laws and constitutional amendments exist that emulate the positive indigenous policies of other Latin American states. The experiences of Indian communities in Argentina are not uniform; provincial and national governments have granted some communities recognition as indigenous and bestowed territorial rights. Nonetheless, these policies are rarely enforced, and as a result, most aboriginal communities endure unfavorable living conditions and disregard by the governments under which they live

By identifying the elements that frustrate the success of indigenous demands, these movements will hopefully be able to move beyond their current situation and more effectively meet their aims. While I have demonstrated the negative consequences that transnational identities affect upon indigenous peoples movements in Argentina, it is not the sole cause of their poor performance. Further analysis is necessary to gain a greater understanding of what other causes undermine the establishment of a regime favorable to aboriginal rights, from which the conditions necessary for the formation of a successful indigenous peoples movement can be ascertained.

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Tables

Table 1: Indigenous Groups Present in Particular Countries

	Mapuche	Guarani	Kolla	Wichí	Toba
Argentina	√	√	√	√	√
Bolivia		√	√	√	
Chile	√		√		
Paraguay		√		√	√
Peru			√		
Uruguay					√