

Analysis of Objects in Migratory Process of Identity Building in Transnational Migration Contexts

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Abstract

This paper proposes a methodological challenge in an attempt to provide new ways of looking at transnational phenomena, convinced of the need to seek new types of multi-sited research, interested in following and reconstruct the movement of people, objects and cultures. The article problematizes the real feasibility and the academic benefits of a research focused on the analysis and monitoring of objects used in rites and ceremonies in transnational migration contexts, promoting a new way of understanding the migration context that break the classical dichotomy destination/origin or community of origin/community of migrants abroad. Then I propose a new concept, the migratory between-space, with the intent to enrich the context of migration and to not let into oblivion one of the essential elements in the study of transnational migration, represented by the trip and the perception that migrants have about.

Key Words: transnationalism; multi-sited ethnography; migration; methodology.

Introduction

This paper aims to problematize the feasibility and the academic benefits of a research focused on the analysis and monitoring of objects used in rites and ceremonies in transnational migration contexts. In my case the attention is centered in the trajectories that those objects draw between their place of origin, the province of Cochabamba in Bolivia, and his transnational context, represented by the bolivian community resident in Villa El Libertador, a neighborhood in the city of Córdoba (Argentina) with a high percentage of bolivian migrant. In this paper I also analyze the connections created from the transnational movement of this objects.

My interest in this sector of research came from some methodological questions that served as catalyst for the preparation of this paper. Considering the international situation, characterized by an increasing number of societies that expand their own borderline outside their country of origin, spontaneously arise a question: in studies of international migration and transnational contexts can we feel satisfied with an analysis focused on the nation of origin and on the destination one, omitting the connection and the migration trajectory that unified these two contexts? And also: the objects suffer some change of meaning during these migrations movements?

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Trying to find an answer to these questions I developed this paper, with the purpose of showing the movements of these objects between three spaces, represented by the origin place, the migration trajectory and the place of destination, without forgetting the consequent change of meaning that the objects suffer in this movement. I was also interested in show the pros and cons of a research based in this methodology and problematize its real feasibility.

Historical, Geographical and Social Contexts of the Research

The Argentine nation has a long and complex migration history, characterized by a constant flow of migrants from other continents and nations. From 1960 the Argentine government began to enact highly restrictive migration policies, collaborating in this way to build the perception that the migrant from neighboring country are dangerous. The opinion of the government officials, with the support of some media, played an important role in creating an image of the migrant characterized from his illegality, coming to be perceived as socially undesirable. This position was supported by xenophobic speeches characterized by ethnic-racial contempt for all those that did not reflect the desired image as the European national.

«The fact that the phenotypes of these immigrants may be associated with a possible indigenous membership and that were born in countries less favorably positioned in the international ranking (Silva 2007), contributed so that his being foreigner is not tolerated and its incorporation process into the collective of national identification is difficult or even impossible» (Pizarro, 2011: 2).

In December 2003 came into force the national law n. 25871, which marked a discursive change in the treatment of the issue.

«The sanction of this new law requires the recognitions to the migrants of their rights to vote and a full integration in the society of destiny, but even if you make changes in the text of the law, there are some mechanisms generating exclusion which may continue operating even when the human rights of immigrants are legally recognizes: on one hand, racism and cultural fundamentalism mentioned by Caggiano (2008) and the other the existence of unequal social relations between the inhabitant of a country and foreign-immigrants that make possible the survival of the capitalist economy mechanism» (Pizarro, 2011: 2).

The majority of Bolivian migrants suffer various forms of economic, social, political and cultural exclusion. How show us Pizarro (2007), the characteristics of Bolivian migrants in Argentina and its main destinies changed over the years. In general terms, until the 1970, the few Bolivians that came in big cities like Buenos Aires, Cordoba and La Plata, came from middle and upper class residing in urban areas of Bolivia. Some of them were political exiles, others migrates with the aim to study at university. The majority of those who decided to settle in Argentina, gained a relatively good socio-economic position (Pizarro, 2011).

In the first half of 20th century, the Bolivian migration in Argentina consisted mostly of men with low-skilled work, coming from rural areas, attracted to the neighboring Argentine provinces by the supply/offer of labor in plantations of sugar cane, cotton and tobacco. This represents a temporary migration due to the fluctuant demand of labor in agriculture.

Around 1950, due to mechanization and to the introduction of new technologies for the agricultural work on the north-east region, further to the relative lack of importance of some crops in the regional economy and the industrialization of the urban centers because of the increasing globalization of consumption, the Bolivian migration let the old destinations in favor of new destinations and also new works. This produced a shift of the Bolivian migration to the south, in the metropolitan area of the city of Buenos Aires, as well as in the province

of Mendoza, where they began to work in horticultural crop and in the harvest (Pizarro, 2011).

This process includes the suburbs of the city of Córdoba, which was converted into a center of industrial development.

According to what we learn from Pizarro (2011), the most recent flow in the city of Córdoba

«comes in most cases from rural peasant-indigenous areas of the provinces of Cochabamba, Potosí and Tarija. These migrants are articulated in a subsidiary position in the labor market, doing hard and sacrificed works, being also subject to various discriminatory mechanisms by those who consider themselves Native and, in some occasion, also by their compatriots coming from different regions and social classes» (Pizarro, 2011: 4-5).

Bolivian migrants in the city of Córdoba work in horticultural production, manufacture of bricks, construction, commerce and to a lesser percentage in the service sector.

The allocation of Bolivian migrants around the installations of work activities contributed to the gradual creation of some isolated residential areas which are considered as immigrant neighborhoods. These neighborhoods such as *Villa El Libertador*, *Villa Esquiú*, *Bajo Pueyrredon* and *Nuestro Hogar 3*, tend to concentrate in urban peripheral areas of the city of Córdoba. It is in these both geographically and socially peripheral spaces that reside the majority of Bolivians poorest immigrants, those who suffer daily experiences of discrimination and exclusion in various areas of socialization: in the street, in schools, in the workplace and in their contact with the various state agents (Pizarro, 2011).

A broad sector of Bolivian immigrants in the city of Córdoba daily experiences different conditions of oppression due to the ethnic-national, social class, gender and nationality difference. This generated a form of suffering in migrants, both physical and psychological, which is interpreted by the migrant themselves in various forms.

In some cases, the living conditions and the ethnic-national segregation that legitimate relations of oppression are naturalized and justified through the internalization of the perception of bodies as if they were different, which is internalized with a certain ethnic pride (Pizarro, 2011).

In other cases, immigrants are trying to reduce the differences by researching an incorporation in the hegemonic society, being the access to the school system the preferred form through which seek to ensure the integration and the resulting social and economic mobility for their children and for themselves too (Perez, 2009). Also *«Bolivian migrants develop some practices with the intention of showing a self-made identity and break free the identity that destiny society assigns them»* (Pizarro, 2011:5).

Participation in recreational and religious activities organized by and for Bolivians, in which also participates Argentines and people from other nationality, represent one of the most used means for the creation and presentation of what they themselves consider “their identity”.

I agree with Pizarro (2011) in considering these “areas” as builders of transnational social spaces, where it stands against discrimination, constructing and presenting Bolivian identity and showing the existence of others Latin American identities marking its indigenous descent, even when the Argentines prefer to emphasize their European tradition.

As stated Igaki *«the main screen factor sustenance of the Bolivian community of Villa El Libertador (n.d.a.) is its transnational feature that possibility the human, material and symbolic circulation, necessary for a continuous recreation of the*

performance of “bolivianity” outside from their country of origin» (2012:6). So, these religious ceremony, ritual and civic fests form part of the traditional cultural baggage that the Bolivian migrants use in the city of Córdoba as identity reinvention matrix, beside serving as response to racist practices.

One of the essential elements that constitutes these practices is represented by objects of ritual use, like llama fetuses, religious statues and carnival costumes. These elements play a fundamental role in the identity and cultural reinvention of Bolivian immigrant residing in the city of Córdoba.

The sacredness with which these objects are thought and used, is due to their precedence from the country of origin of migrants. In fact, many of these goods could easily be produced in Argentina, but the Bolivian migrants consider essential travel to the place of production of these objects, in their homeland, to buy them and bring them to Argentina, often in defiance of custom controls and risking the confiscation of the objects.

The objects therefore have a connective character between the society of origin and destiny, represented by the transnational context. Using the words of Boruchoff, the objects *«serve as a way so that a dispersed population is constituted as a community (...) to create a single social context»* (1999: 453).

This fact leads us directly to understand the reasons of the academic interest in objects, in my case of ritual use, in transnational migration context.

Development Mode of the Research

In the current global processes it is necessary to build ethnographic researches that take into account the transnational realities. Technological development has made simpler the cultural interconnection, which has given rise to a new way of looking at the different socio-cultural phenomena, among which there are the migration processes.

Transnational studies, with the intention of analyzing a social reality which transgresses geographical, political and cultural boundaries, impose us the need to seek new types of multisited researches that propose to follow and reconstruct movement of people, objects and cultures. This strategy of research can result in a journey of an anthropologist that passes physically from stages of migration (Viazzo and Sacchi, 2003).

«The contribution of multilocal ethnography is to discover original road of connections and associations through which the traditional ethnographic interest for the action, for the symbols and for the daily practices can continue to be expressed with a different spatial configuration» (Marcus, 2001: 113).

With the movement of people, goods and information across two or more nations, social relations, cultural forms and identities are not built in one social context, but in the connection between various places (Hirai, 2002). In the multilocal ethnography that I propose, the interest for daily life persists, with the difference that in transnational contexts we are faced with a multisited daily life.

I believe that a research that has as its central focus on following and analyzing the objects, that are moved by transnational migration processes and draws a representative map of migratory trajectories and transnational ties, can't be separated from the analysis of its multilocal context represented by place of origin, the destiny and from the migratory between-space.

It is the same fact to follow the objects that shape our research context. The purpose of visiting multiple locations is to follow the relationship that unites various places (Wilding, 2007). What I propose in this article is to analyze the object in question in three different contexts:

- Place of origin, paying attention to the meaning and traditional uses of the objects in questions.
- Place of destination, focusing on meanings and uses of objects in a transnational context. In this context is likely that the object suffers a change of significance, being adapted to local context and to the needs of the local community.
- Migratory between-space, represents the physical and virtual space present between the place of origin and destiny.
- Talking about the physical character of this migration context, a research mode can be made from following items with the intention of monitoring their “migration”. In this complex task we are in close contact with the migrants who regularly travel with the aim of bring the objects and goods indispensable to the social and cultural life of the community in the place of destiny. A research focused in this monitoring have a strong ethical charge, because the researcher will be witness of the difficulties and abuses that migrants must endure in order to bring these goods at the place of destination. Finding a way to represent these difficulties will be the duty of the anthropologist, also represent the abuse and the physical and psychological violence to be categorized as illegal only because they brought with them objects indispensable to the ritual life of their communities in the country of destination (as the llama fetuses, coca leaves, kopál, etc.).

In his research, the anthropologist will be witness of the harsh reality experienced by migrants, also he will assist to the system of corruption that many times represents the only way to move goods across the border Argentina-Bolivia, thus attempting to avoid the state laws, the custom controls and the seizure of the goods transported.

In this regard an important issue is the mode of representation of these types of research. It will be enough just an ethnography or should we think about other modes of representation?

I think it's time to create hybrids way of representations capable of showing to an audience the complex reality of the trajectories and transnational ties, accompanying, for example, an ethnographic text with a short documentary, with the aim to return the life and dynamism to the anthropological work and to the object of study. In addition to showing the reality experienced by migrants, which is not too often represented with the proper importance.

- The other space that makes up the notion of migratory between-space is of a virtual-perceptual character. A knowledge of culture and social interactions does not always require a face to face contact in order to have meaning and impact in the daily lives of people. One of the great opportunities for ethnographic studies is to show how people perceive and construct their own connections with other people living in other nations (Wilding, 2007).

Thinking about the migratory between-space as a virtual space, would be interesting in order to analyze it as the place where the change of meaning of the object happens. Wanting to use a well know concept to anthropology, the migratory between-space could be thought as a liminal space/stage (Van Gennep, 1985) where the object suffers a mutation of meaning that enables people, in the place of destination, to use these objects for his own uses and needs, adapting to the new socio-cultural context.

Many of these objects imported from the place of origin, serve to legitimize the ritualistic ceremonies performed in transnational migration context. Therefore, one of the uses that ritual objects in transnational migration context have, it is to be protagonists and many times vehicles of reinvention and self-construction of

identity. I agree with Pizarro (2011), when she says that (in the case of Bolivian immigrants in some Argentine cities) these practices constitute transnational social spaces where the immigrants resist discrimination, giving new meaning to ethnic and class difference set by the society of destination. Answering in this way to the cultural labels created by the society of destination with the intention to showing them culturally and biologically different from an imagined “us”.

These cultural practices are developed and used with the aim to articulate and reinforce an other kind of Bolivian identity, what they themselves recognize as “being Bolivian”. In this way they build their notions of where they live and the homeland they have left. The homeland continues to be one of the most powerful unifying symbols used by dispersed populations, even used by the state policy with the aim to create a feeling of nationalism among migrants (Gupta and Ferguson, 2008), and traditional objects of ritual use are one of the main vehicles of these symbols.

It is important to emphasize the role of religion in the reinvention of identity. The same fact to organize and participate in traditional religious ceremony in transnational context give people a sense of being part of a local community and produces between them the feeling of “being Bolivians” (Hirai, 2002).

Thinking about a mode of analysis of this space, based on modification of the meaning of objects, I consider essential a comparative study in origin and destiny of the same object, with the intention to understand its traditional uses in the context of origin and method of use in the place of destiny. As Marcus says *«in research projects based on multisited ethnography develops the comparative dimension as a function of the plane of movements and uncovering fractured between places, while mapping the object of study and requires a proposal to logical relations, translations and associations between these places»* (2001: 115). In this way it will be interesting to see how they change the meanings of objects and also from whom those change comes.

This kind of study can show us the social needs in transnational migration context and help us to understand how people respond to these new needs through ancient rituals.

As an example of mutation of meaning in Bolivian objects of ritual use, in the transnational migration context of the city of Córdoba, we can analyze the statuettes of the Virgin of Urkupiña. Through the field work I have done between the city of Quillacollo in the province of Cochabamba and the city of Córdoba, in Argentina, I could see the significance of mutations in the possession and use of images of the Virgin of Urkupiña. In the place of origin, represented by the city of Quillacollo, almost all families have his own statue of the virgin, which daily venerate and also on August 15th of each year celebrate its anniversary with ritual ceremonies that consist in visiting the shrine built on the site where the Virgin appeared for the first time and also buy clothes and jewelry to dress the statue during the new year.

Using data gathered in field work and literature on the topic (Giorgis, 2004) I suppose that in the city of Córdoba these objects are characterized by a mutation of meaning, where the statues are no longer a common good of the faithful, but they become objects of power legitimators, owned only by families with a recognized role and social status in the local community.

Recently it has been possible to observe what it could be described as a “democratization” of the ceremony of the Virgin of Urkupiña in the city of Córdoba, characterized by an increasing of virgins (statues) who annually participate in the festivities organized in the district Villa El Libertador. Another explanation for this phenomenon could be the increasing number of families of Bolivian migrants who reach a high social economic status, necessary to actively participate in the ceremony.

Analyze these objects and rituals in which they are used, through the concept of *performance* (complex sequence of symbol acts) developed by Turner (1986), would help us to understand the major classifications, categories and contradictions of cultural processes. The performing act of a ritual and the objects it contains, not only shows us a reality, but also creates it. Then through the objects and their change of meaning we can see the intention of that community to build their identity, leaving out anything that is not desired.

In other words, the different meanings attributed to the objects used in ritual in transnational context are an element by which we can read the ratings, the categories and the contradictions present in that area. A careful analysis of these factors would help us to understand the social hierarchy of the Bolivian community in question and to identify the cultural and social areas where and through which it is built this hierarchy, that in the case of the Bolivian community of Villa El Libertador (Argentina) are made by public ceremonies, civic and religious ones.

Another object characterized by the change of meaning is the dress that every year the faithfuls buy to the Virgin. In the place of origin, there are many shops that deal with sewing clothes with patterns and colors that represent those of the Virgin of Urkupiña kept in the main church of the city of Quillacollo. In the city of Córdoba these clothes are used not only to dress the virgin, but they assume a legitimizing character of the same religious ceremony and give prestige to those who buy them and offering to the Virgin, for the simple fact that they were imported from the city of Quillacollo (Bolivia). The clothes could be produced in Córdoba, which would generate a new economic entry for the same migrants and could help them to save the costs of travel to Cochabamba, but despite this it was decided to keep buying the clothes for the Virgin in Bolivia, as if in this way the dress would get a certain sacredness inherent to it and to its place of origin. I think this serves as a legitimizing element of the Virgin of Urkupiña's ceremony abroad, in my case in the transnational context of the city of Córdoba.

In the last eve of the ceremony (2011), the owner of one of the statues of the Virgin, socially recognized as the one who began the celebration of the Virgin of Urkupiña in Córdoba, answered to my question about the origin of the dress of his virgin in this way “*this year my daughter sewed the dress, because we had a death in the family, my older daughter died, therefore it was not possible to travel to Cochabamba*”. These words made me think that the lady was apologizing for something, precisely to not following the legitimizing tradition represented by the purchase of the dress in the place of origin.

This brings us to one of the most important aspects of the migratory between-space represented by its legitimating force. As can be seen in many ritual ceremony in the area of Córdoba (Virgin of Urkupiña, Virgin of Copacabana, Bolivian carnival, etc.) the mere fact of getting the necessary items to these celebrations directly from the place of origin, means that the whole ritual obtains legitimacy. As if this object lead with himself the power of tradition and centuries of Bolivian history, embodies the soul of the celebrations in question.

Another area in which we can focus the analysis is represented by what Bolivians that live in their homeland (the non-migrants) think about this “migration of objects” and their uses abroad. The analysis could focus on the loss, reinvention, reinterpretation and fetishization of those objects, always paying attention to the change of meaning which are submitted.

Contributions and Problems of the Research

In any methodological proposal it is necessary to stop and think about its credibility in both academic and practical level. Wanting to analyze the pros and cons of a research based on a methodology of this type – research that could be called multisited – I think it is appropriate to consider some aspects of the object of

study in question:

- The transnational context where the object is located is characterized by three spaces: origin, migratory between-space and destination.
- The context and how the object it is used in the traditional and transnational area.
- The legitimizing and generator of connections character of the ritual objects.

Agreeing with Pizarro «*It is necessary that the ethnographer accept the challenge of anthropology to experience and live the possible worlds of our interlocutors*» (2007: 3). In the case of migration the anthropologist has the duty to live the various worlds of the migrants, one of which is represented by the same trajectory that migrants, more or less regularly, cross with the intention of bringing goods essentials to the social life of the communities of migrants to the place of destination.

One of the contributions of this multisited research based on analysis of objects in the three migration context (origin, between-space and destination), would be to show the experiences of these migrants that provides to their communities these items. I believe that analyzing the journey itself, doing participant observation which involves traveling with the migrants that at more or less regular intervals traveling to their countries of origin, could show us a “face of the coin” that has not yet been studied sufficiently.

The importance of links between place of origin and destination is taken into account in many studies based on the transnational character of contemporary migrations. But I think it is necessary a research focusing on what I call migratory between-space. Anthropologists know the importance of the place from where to look, to know and to analyze the object of study. So I do not think it's a risk to say that this type of research would help to form a new way to observe and understand the traditional objects used in transnational contexts, opening new paths in the field of transnational migration studies.

Therefore a research of this type applied to the Bolivian transnational reality of the city of Córdoba could show us all that migrants face to carry to their country all the objects in question, could be useful to understand the legitimizing character (of power and social status) of the objects, also show us their symbolic power in the religious ceremonies and consequently their role in the identity reinvention, perceiving the power inherent in unspoken words contained in religious ceremony that seem to shout “*we are Bolivians, we have a millenary culture and identity and our clothes and carnival dances shows it; we are Bolivians and these statues and religious objects brought from Bolivia for this ceremony symbolize our strong devotion as Christians?*”.

Even this methodology, as all the other ones, in addition to have various convenient factors, present some problems. A difficulty in developing this type of research is that the anthropologist, changing various places, must constantly renegotiate their identity from place to place (Marcus, 2011).

The main difficulty that complicate the use of this type of methodology is the high confidence that is required with our interlocutors, such as asking them to follow and monitor them during their travel where, in addition to going through strong and personal moments, such as the reunion with his family in their hometown, we will also assist to actions defined as illegal and punishable in the destination country, such as to pass through the custom goods prohibited by Argentine government, but necessary to the social life of the Bolivian migrant community of the city of Córdoba.

As Ribeiro says «*There is a no hegemonic economic globalization formed by popular markets and trade flows that are driven by common people. Their activities are considered illegal, contraband, but are the state elites who have the monopoly of the definition and regulation of legality/illegality*» (2007: 5). Certain objects that cross

different social contexts and different countries can move from legality to illegality and vice versa. One example are the coca leaves and the llama fetuses that are considered traditional items of daily and also ritual use in Bolivia, but classified as dangerous and illegal in Argentina.

Therefore we require a high level of confidence between the researcher and the interlocutor in order to develop this type of research. The researcher will share with migrants anguish and suffering, happiness and emotions, but he is a favorite subject because he has a freedom that other social agents don't have, being everywhere and nowhere. The researcher has the possibility to pass from the space of migrants to that of the institutions, and vice versa, and this gives to the viewer the privilege of a point of view and a conceptual distance that the actors themselves do not have (Dominguez and Saslavski, 1998).

Concluding Remarks

This article aims to introduce new ways of looking at transnational phenomena through an innovative methodological proposal. Scholars and researchers in the academic field of transnational studies will easily understand the possible innovation of this type of methodology. We know that it is always difficult to “navigate unexplored seas”, but I believe that scholars of transnationalism have the duty to continue to explore new methods of analysis and new ways to discover the object of study, essential if we want to continue to expand the knowledge of this social area.

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