



Case Report

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Highland Agricultural Knowledge in Migrant Families (Argentina)



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Abstract

Migrant families are key to observe the dynamic relationship between social groups and their territories. We have analyzed different aspects of the migration process of a large group of people in Argentina that currently dwell in a lowland's peri-urban location (Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area) but whose genealogical origins are placed in Jujuy Province rural highlands (Humahuaca and Tilcara Departments). This paper presents a brief communication about our results and findings of a long-term research on agricultural practices and knowledge deployed in both geographical areas, which are united by a considerable migrant flow intensified during the last three decades. Regularities and changes in family farming type of organization and food knowledge and practices, are key to understand the cultural heritage firmly rooted in these families and the strength and sustainability of the migration process.

Keywords: Upland to lowland migration; Agricultural knowledge and practices; Knowledge transmission; Argentina

Introduction

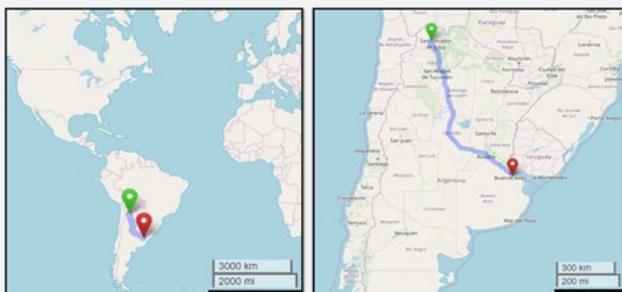


Figure 1: Migration Flow. 2.000km away from Humahuaca and Tilcara Departments (Jujuy Province) to Florencio Varela District (Buenos Aires Province). (Source: OpenStreetMap, own elaboration).

This case study presents the analysis of knowledge transmission related to agricultural practices and representations of rural migrant families in Argentina, from an anthropological approach, with emphasis in two articulated issues. On the one hand, the material aspect regarding the agricultural productive practices and, on the other hand, a symbolic aspect which informs the agricultural knowledge system. We consider the agricultural practices as the link connecting territory - identity - food [1]. In addition, it comprises particular inherited representations, beliefs, knowledge and practices that those individuals within

a specific socio-cultural group learn and share, in which certain regularities and features are established [2].

The study includes two different geographical areas (Figure 1). The first of them is in Florencio Varela District, in the Southern Metropolitan Area, in the Buenos Aires City's peri-urban border. Great amounts of migrant families from very different origins form part of the population, making it a large reception area. In this region, there is no cattle raising activities. The second one, is in Humahuaca and Tilcara Departments (Jujuy Province), in the Northern area of Quebrada de Humahuaca, a narrow mountain valley. In this Province the population in the rural area's accounts for 40% [3]. The more relevant economic activity is hortifloriculture production complemented by herding for self-supply and exchange.

The study of migrant mountain families' agricultural practices and representations presents a privileged stage to understand those strategies they displayed in the lowlands, which combine knowledge transmission and adaptability to the current location. The results of the analysis led us to understand

- a) the identity building process in migrant context through the production, elaboration and consumption of specific meals;

- b) the reproduction in lowlands of similar agricultural patterns (family farming);
- c) social health through a culturally adequate food.

To address these issues, we have been doing ethnographic fieldwork for the past ten years, carrying out different activities:

observations and participant observations of agrarian productive system : in-depth interviews to families through snowball methodology [4] : geographic information analysis. In addition, we have used other data such as national population and agricultural censuses, photographic and historic documents, among others.

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Along the last 3 decades, a profound change in food practices has taken place. It included, for lowlands and highlands, new food supply in everyday diet (fresh or industrial). This process made people slowly abandon traditional and local food practices, which has negatively affected social local health. However, both in rural and urban areas there is a strong cultural memory regarding local foods as a central element for their personal and community territorial identity [5,6], and many people recreates, for special occasions, those meals they remember having made by their mothers or grandmothers in highland homes. In Florencio Varela, highland families have abandoned quite significantly daily food practices of their home territory, incorporating new elements within the migration context. However, meals from their family territory are made by replacing ingredients and modifying the cooking base, trying to keep the seasoning base as similar as possible. Although the production of the same vegetal species (e.g. certain varieties of potatoes, maize or “ajies”) from the place of origin does not have the same characteristics in the new context (like performance, size or flavor), it is important to emphasize that migrant people continue consuming the same products from purchase, exchange or shipment through family. In this sense, consumption has an important role, giving the possibility to reproducing a particular family farming type of organization.

Thus, availability and access to raw materials are key issues that different communities have managed to overcome, especially through fairs and “ethnic” retailers (often first generations of migrant) [7] who provide the community with their own cuisine elements. Migrant families always mention their constant craving for local food (even those family members of the following generations who have never been there). The community memory of meals made of maize, potatoes or peppers is one of the substantial elements that link all those families together and strengthen the connection with their home territory.

Discussion

Given the geographical features of Florencio Varela, a fundamental aspect of highland families’ migration process is the replication of productive structures that respond to Andean patterns of family farming (type of organization, predominantly reliant on family labor, technology, cultivated species, farming techniques, among others) [8]. The characteristics of this replication enhance the possibility to produce much of those foods that remain in the community’s representation of their territory. In this sense, migrant families carry certain knowledge along and are connected to the new territory through practices and representations taken from the highlands, but with added meanings regarding their migrant trajectory. The fact that migrant families are able to obtain farming smallholdings in peri-urban lowlands, and hence the possibility of job opportunities in which they are able to use knowledge and memories from their home territory, consolidated the migrant process through family farming practices. This case study shows the importance of family farming in both an economic dimension, and in terms of cultural heritage, including notions of healthy and suitable food with strong identity ties, that keeps both territories connected.

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