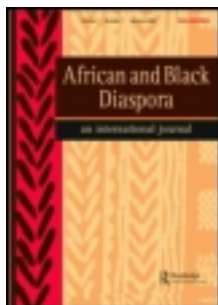


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Relationships, significations, and orientations toward a collective acting of the Afro descendants and Africans in Argentina

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Relationships, significations, and orientations toward a collective acting of the Afro descendants and Africans in Argentina

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In this work, we will analyze the collective actions of Afro descendants and Africans in Argentina regarding social movements (SMs). That is, we intend to understand the relationships, significations, and orientations toward collective action. Following Alberto Melucci's approach, we should not consider SMs as an 'empiric unit' but an 'analytical category', through which it may be possible to understand Afro-Argentine collective social action. The SMs are social constructions, and their work should be analyzed as a result, not as a starting point. We consider an SM as instituting, not as instituted, as a form of collective action oriented toward the construction of a new identity. Individuals construct their objectives, make choices, and take action according to the perception of their environments in relation to the social expectations. Therefore, we understand an SM as a network formed by a wide variety of groups and individuals scattered but interconnected, a network submerged in the daily life and from where the collective identity and the links for action are structured.

Keywords: Afro descendants; Africans; Argentina; social movement

Introduction

The purpose of this work is to carry out an analysis of the collective actions of Afro descendants and Africans in Argentina regarding social movement (SM) to understand the relationships, motivations, and intentions toward collective action. Given the density and dynamics of changes among individuals and groups with a lesser or greater degree of organization of Afro descendants and Africans, it is impossible and may be unnecessary to name them all. We believe it is enough to provide an overview or a mapping of the main nodes and their relations in order to describe and analyze the incipient and latent stages of the visibilization of the movement, according to Alberto Melucci (1989, 1994, 1999).

The use of the term Afro descendant is a new concept in Argentina, and its adoption both by the state and by those who define themselves in that way is the result of racial classification of political disputes (López 2005; Frigerio 2006).

In our case, the term refers both to Argentinean descendants of enslaved populations arriving in the colonial period and to descendants of Afro-Latin-American, Afro Caribbean, and African migrants, born in Argentina. That is to say, the category 'Argentinean Afro descendant' is composed of a heterogeneous group of people with different origins. Some of them claim their identities in relation to a particular ethnic identity, others against racism, invisibilization, and the right to difference. Sub-Saharan migrants are included in the last group.

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At the beginning of the first decade in 2000 in Argentina, mainly in Buenos Aires, the presence of new sub-Saharan African migrants (Senegalese, Cameroonian, Nigerians, Congolese, and Ghanaian, among others) increased. They began to arrive at the beginning of the 1990s and they organized themselves in migrant associations, such as The Nigerian Association of the La Plata River created in 1996 and the Association of Senegalese Residents in Argentina in 2007 (Maffia, Ottenheimer and Zubrzycki 2007). We refer to these migrations as ‘new ones’ in order to differentiate them from that formed by Cape Verdeans who came much earlier. The Cape Verdean migration to Argentina began at the end of the nineteenth century, growing significantly after the 1920s and decreasing between 1960 and 1970 (Maffia 2010).

This plurality of actors and forms of action, as we will see below, is under a construction process of a collective ‘we’. Among the several authors who have dealt with the topic of SMs, we particularly agree with Melucci on not considering them as an ‘empiric unit’ but an ‘analytical category’, through which it may be possible to understand this collective social phenomenon, in terms of action. In this sense, we will focus on a perspective leading us to analyze social units as follows: ‘this is always the result of diversified social processes that finally make possible the formation of a collective subject and the manifestation of an action’ (Melucci 1999, 43).

Thus, we consider an SM as instituting, not as instituted, as a form of collective action¹ oriented toward the constitution of a new identity. Individuals construct their objectives, make choices, and take action according to the perception of their environments in relation to social expectations.

Collective identity and visibilization of the Afro-descendant population

One of the key questions in our research is: When does an SM start? An answer that we consider theoretically correct is that an SM appears when a discordant or uncertain situation between preferences and expectations places the subject in a marginal situation, individually lived, with respect to collective identities and political wills that act in a certain society at a given time (Melucci 1999). Revilla Blanco (1996) states that the situation about loss of sense of an individual action results from the lack of referents for building one’s own identity in the frame of a collective identity, of not belonging. In Argentina, the existing collective identities did not allow Afro descendants to affirm themselves and to be recognized. In agreement with Frigerio (2006), Segato (2007), and Geler (2010), among others, we can point out that one of the structural conditions which Afro descendants’ actions should confront is the dominant narrative of the nation that presents the Argentinean society as white, European, modern, rational, and catholic, based on a racial classification system that routinely invisibilizes black people.

Segato suggests that the absence of plurality in Argentinean society is linked to the idea of uniformity as a requirement for citizenship based on the above assumptions. This excluded diversity, which resulted in a deliberate political agenda to eliminate any ethnic features, pressing those who are ethnically marked to distance themselves from their origins using formal and informal mechanisms of persuasion, distortion, and even genocide. With reference to Africans and their descendants, she (Segato 2007, 225) adds that ‘the disappearance of black people in Argentina was ideological, cultural and literally constructed instead of strictly demographic (...) their presence was first excluded from the official representation that the nation gave to itself’.

But despite this invisibilization in some national imaginaries,² between the 1980s and the 1990s, as a consequence of the convergence of national and international factors,³ the Afro descendants – not only in Argentina – began to be visible by different degrees and through different organizational forms, forming part, sparsely at the beginning, of fights against discrimination and racism, for cultural vindication, land demand, and access to health and education (Hoffmann 2010).

In the SM model proposed by Melucci, there are analytically two interrelated phases, that of latency and that of visibilization. The first one ‘allows experimenting directly with new cultural models, favors the social change by means of signification construction and the production of codes different from those which prevail in a society’ (Melucci 1999, 76). That is to say, ‘it is where the potential for the complaint is elaborated, where the alternative frames of signification are produced through the networks and groups that draw up alternative cultural challenges in the “factory” of the daily life’ (Rubio García 2004, 21).

On the other hand, there is the visibility phase, which is expressed in collective demonstrations and upon which the SM studies normally have been centered.

To Melucci, ‘visibility’ means ‘public demonstration’, when the small groups forming the submerged networks emerge and challenge structures of inequality.

According to this definition, the term ‘visibility’ is analytically different from the relationship visibility/invisibility with which the relationships between the Afro-descendant populations and the national imaginaries of Latin-American countries in general, and of Argentina in particular, have been conceptualized. The emergence of new groups, organizations, etc. which become ‘visible’ in the social space would not necessarily imply a visibilization stage of the SM according to Melucci. However, authors like Warren (1998) and Escobar (1999) – with whom we agree – point out that the success of an SM does not always depend on its ability to mount mass demonstrations and public protests.

In this work, we understand an SM as a network consisting of a wide variety of groups and individuals scattered but interconnected, a network submerged in the daily life and from where the collective identity and the links for the action are structured (Melucci 1999). For this case study, we assume that the movement is at a first stage of visibilization, of action – further analyzed, without being marked the massive public demonstrations.

Actors, actions, and purposes. The emergence of ‘identifiers’. Latency and visibilization phases

In the network of social relationships, we can find individuals with a high density of relationships, around whom there is a concentration of interconnections, called *identifiers* by Revilla Blanco, acting as organizational cores; we also find individuals with few connections with the network, ‘with lower degrees of identification’ (Revilla Blanco 1996, 13).

The 1980s is known, by professionals and by the actors themselves, as a node point from which a series of actions were developed, *identifiers* appeared, and a framework for interconnections began (latency phase). In Argentina, as part of the democratic process started in 1983, sociopolitical transformations occurred; socio-possibilities of a greater activism, for instance the appearance of organizations such as the Argentinean and Latin American Committee Against Apartheid (1986) founded by Enrique Nadal – Afro-Argentinean intellectual and activist who died in 2008 – and the Democratic Haitian

Committee (1987), spaces where some Afro descendants began to militate politically, were observed.

Nadal and his fight against racism would be the link between two of the *identifiers* that appeared in this phase and have been acting so far with different intensities and in different spaces. Later on, we will see how other identifiers begin to emerge in the dynamics of this SM formation.

Near the end of the 1980s, Afro descendants' activism regarding cultural activities began in the city of Buenos Aires, thanks to the separate but simultaneous efforts of Afro-Uruguayan, Afro-Brazilian, and Afro-Cuban migrants. Among them, we mention the Afro-Cultural Group, founded in 1988 by two Afro-Uruguayan brothers known as the Bonga brothers – who are currently engaged in the Afro Cultural Movement, a nonformal organization.

Even though we partly agree with Frigerio and Lamborghini's (2009) view in the sense that massiveness and the degree of organization of all these initiatives are characterized as either by militants or by professionals, in the model of analysis we chose, SMs include not only the 'formal' organizations but also the network of 'informal' relationships that connect individuals and key groups to a wide area of participants.

We should underline that the over characterization/identification as militant can be understood as a particular tactic of 'exaggeration' (Chebel 1998) in the strategy of complex identities, resulting from diverse identity strategies whose roles have a purpose, conscious, and voluntary, where the capital of collective signs is renewed in function of an objective. Chebel (1998) calls 'exaggeration tactics' as those which have the purpose of not only showing the differences or inequalities but also highlighting them, showing them as the bases for 'widening' political vindications.

Who are these individuals with high density of relationships?

Consider Gomes born in Buenos Aires province, an Afro-Argentinean, daughter of a Cape Verdean immigrant and Cape Verdean descendant, who has studied literature at the university level and was the president of Cape Verdean Association of Dock Sud (Avellaneda County, Buenos Aires province) between 1993 and 1995. Nowadays she is filling this same position again.

Lucía Molina, born in Santa Fe city (Santa Fe province), is also Afro-Argentinean and even though she does not know who her ancestors were, she recognizes herself as descendant of slaves brought to the country many generations ago. She has studied at tertiary level. Together with her husband, Mario Lopez, she founded the House of Indo-Afro American Culture in the city of Santa Fe in 1988. Since the beginning of her activism, Lucía has been in contact with transnational networks: in 1989 with Afro World (organization of Uruguayan Afro descendants created in that same year), and in 1990, she participated in a meeting of black entities of the South Cone in Montevideo (Uruguay), when she met Miriam. Both, together with Enrique Nadal, began to 'plan joint actions for fighting against racism'.

In 1991, they organized the first local encounter in Santa Fe province, the First Workshop of Black Culture, where Miriam and Enrique participated, among others.

In 1992, Lucía formed part of the Network of Afro Latin American and Caribbean Women. In 1993, The Second Workshop of Black Culture was held in Santa Fe, and in 1994 the House of Indo Afro American Culture joined the Continental Network of Afro American Organizations born in Uruguay as part of the initiative of the Afro World

movement. By the mid-1990s, when coming back from a trip to the USA, Miriam was contacted by two consultants of a regional multilateral organization, the Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (BID), who invited her to collaborate in visiting the different black communities and organizations of Argentina as part of the Program of Poverty Relief in Minority Communities of Latin America. Miriam introduced the BID consultants to María Magdalena 'Pocha' Lamadrid, who is recognized as another *identifier*. Pocha is Afro-Argentinean, descendant of enslaved Africans; she does not have a secondary or university degree, and has had a difficult and hard life. In her own words: 'I learnt on the street what you can learn in books' (Maffia and Lechini 2009, 162).

Because of the contact established with the BID, Miriam and Pocha traveled to Washington in 1996 to participate in the Forum about Poverty and Minorities in Latin America and Caribbean, where the declaration that developed the formation of the Afro America 21st Network was signed.

From the attainment of social and cultural resources that this contact with the network offered, mainly the training on project production and management, Pocha created the Foundation Africa Vive (Africa Alive) in April 1997, which received financial support from the Kellogg's Foundation for three years.

As Melucci points out, temporary factors (for instance, political opportunities, the presence of coordinator agents, the integration degree, or the environment crisis) certainly contribute to the emergence of collective phenomena. But, he also states that 'we have to take into account that these factors could not work without the actor's capacity to perceive them and integrate them in a system of interaction and negotiation of orientations, regarding the aims, means and field of his action' (Melucci 1999, 15).

Africa Vive is the first organization that catered to Afro-Argentineans in Buenos Aires province in the twentieth century, outside the traditional immigrant associations like those Cape Verdeans who founded in Ensenada and Dock Sud (Buenos Aires) in 1927 and 1932, respectively.

The main constitutive basis of Africa Vive is the family, which we could call a wide extended family in anthropological terms, within which there are connections related to cultural practices that include food, music, dance, cognitive schemes, and regulations constituting the dynamics of a collective identity shown for a long time only inside the family, or in places like the Shimmy Club, which, according to Otero Correa (2000, 34), was the meeting and unity place of 'recognition of blacks by blacks', the 'big family' until the mid-1970s. Presented as a family-oriented environment, 'Shimmy was a private environment though extended (...) This semi-secret and exclusive place is remembered as a ritualized space where the "black people of African descent" recognized themselves (...) where they could feel and act the continuity and the community, as a differentiated group' (Otero Correa 2000, 35).

Since 2000, the local leaders have had a more intense and sustained participation, establishing relationships with members of other black communities of Latin America and the Caribbean, due to the preliminary meetings for the Third Worldwide Conference Against Racism that would be held in 2001 in Durban, South Africa.

We should not forget that at the end of the 1990s, the use of the Internet became popular, enabling access to information and to the construction of transnational networks and contacts, not only among activists and organizations, but also enabled the connection with financing sources, universities and professionals, and the organization of joint activities.

Among these activities, we can mention the development of the Afro Argentinean Coordinating Committee (October 2000) supporting the conference; the trip to Santiago

de Chile, a pre-Durban meeting, where the category Afro descendant was proposed; and the meeting in Paraguay also in preparation for the World Conference, in order to re-affirm the Afro Latin American and Caribbean Alliance created in San Jose de Costa Rica in September 2000. In September 2001, the conference was held in South Africa and Lucía attended it, thanks to the network of Afro organizations economically supported by the United Nations; Miriam and one of Pocha's nephews (representing Africa Vive) traveled through the Afro World, supported by Fundación Ideas de Chile, together with other Afro Argentineans.

As part of the post-Durban actions, that is to say the commitment that the official delegation of Argentina had with the NGOs attending the meeting, it included the possibility of adding ad hoc questions for the Afro population follow-up in the next National Census of Population of Argentina. In the context of the human rights policy developed by Nestor Kirchner and continued by Cristina Kirchner since 2003 and as part of the mentioned post-Durban actions, in 2003 and 2004, the World Bank, implementing a similar policy in other countries of Latin America, summoned the Afro and African organizations to meetings together with the National Institution of Statistics and Census (INDEC). But these negotiations among international agencies, state officials, and Afro activists about the addition of a question in the census were not free of conflicts that – metaphorically – like in the movement of plates resulting in an earthquake gave rise to fractures, ruptures, and rearrangements. A similar situation but of much higher intensity took place when the National Census of Population was carried out in October 2010, in which the question was effectively included.⁴

In 2005, a pilot test was conducted regarding the question that would be applied in the census, activity in which Miriam and Lucía were significantly involved and appointed by their background as 'native' advisers of the process. The test yielded a result of 3.8 percent of individuals self-identified as Afro descendants.

In 2006, within the National Institute Against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism (INADI), there were two institutional instances which incorporated Afro descendants, and as Lamborghini and Frigerio (2010) point out, the black activists obtained, for the first time, a (small) place within a national governmental organization. These spaces are the Advisor Council of the Civil Association and the Forum of Afro descendants of the Civil Association (Otteneheimer 2009).

Another national governmental space is the Commission for Afro descendants and Africans of the Consultant Council of the Argentinean Chancellery, a place occupied since 2008 by another *identifier*: the Afro Uruguayan Carlos Alvarez, a former member of the African Association and its Diaspora.⁵

The African Association and its Diaspora was officially founded in 2004, though the *Benkadi* magazine – issued between 1999 and 2000 – is considered to have been writing about the Afro community and the African Diaspora in Argentina – as a 'non-institutionalized beginning'. It is constituted among others, by Afro-Uruguayans, Afro-Peruvians, and Africans with residence in Argentina for years, and its general aim is to develop strategies in order to facilitate the participation of Afro descendants and Africans in every aspect of the political, economic, social, scientific and cultural life, and the economic progress and development of Argentina.⁶

They publicly state that the problem is 'class struggle' and they ally with other organizations of popular movements such as the Center of Popular Movements, but they are also members of the Argentinean Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexual and

Transsexual people, of the Youth Association of the Americas, and of the National Council of Afro Organizations (further referred to).

This group of affiliations shows how in this association, in particular, and in the Afro Movement in Argentina, in general, there could be a convergence of issues, as Melucci points out, – exclusion of social categories and groups, the right to citizenship, and access to resources – and conflicts in contemporary societies linked to definitions of identity.

In 2007, the Afro Argentinean Misibamba Community Association of Buenos Aires was created, formed by Argentinean Afro descendants, some of whom had participated in the beginnings of Africa Vive. Among their several goals, they intended to organize around making visible the Afro-Argentinean community in the national and international levels, to promote the vital development of the Afro-Argentinean culture of the ‘colonial stem’ within the communities of Argentinean Afro descendants and to fight against all forms of discrimination, intolerance, racism, and xenophobia.

In a document published on the association web page, the anthropologist Pablo Cirio, a non-Afro-descendant member of the board of directors and active spokesperson of the association, pointed out that, as a result of the internal workshops for dealing with issues such as black history and identity in the country, the name ‘Afro Argentinean of colonial stem’ was born. In this way, ‘being black from Argentina, not black in Argentina’ was emphasized. Based on this self-ascription/identification, the members often refuse to participate in events about black culture in Argentina ‘as if it were a visiting culture (like that of the Afro Uruguayan migrants) or basically passing through (like that of the current African immigrants)’. According to Cirio (2010):

Far from trying to fragment an apparent unity –Afros –, which did not even exist in Africa, the Argentinean community descendant of enslaved Africans differs from the rest of the local Afro collective in its history, culture, course and aims, in the belief that if they do not work first in a local Project, it would be impossible to fight for global vindications, such as the eradication of discrimination and racism, concerning the Afro collective.

Also in 2007, using another identity strategy, Afro-Argentineans, Afro descendants, and Africans together organized, with heated disputes, the cultural event called ‘The African Week’, which since 2004 had been organized only by Africans (Senegalese, Cameroonianians, and Congolese) grouped in the Union of Africans in the South Cone. The activity Week of Africa was sponsored by the Embassy of South Africa, through the political adviser Victor Rambaud, who was interested in supporting the activities for the Afro visibilization in Argentina in relation to their incorporation in the Sixth Region: Africans in the Diaspora. The general objective of the Week was to spread the African culture and history and their different expressions in America. One of the specific objectives was to generate better communication and interactivity among the different organizations, institutions, or agencies involved in the Afro issues.

In the first organizational meetings, representatives of different organizations participated: among them Sociedad de Socorros Mutuos Cape Verdean Union; África Vive Organization; Indo Afro American Culture House; Civil Union Association of the Africans in the South Cone; Civil Association Civil África and its Diaspora; Nigerian Association in River La Plata; and Senegalese Residents in Argentina (an informal organization so far). In these meetings, some disputes and unresolved conflicts appeared within this collective by those who intended to identify as ‘African Diaspora’; that is why some of the organizations and individuals ceased participating. After the event in May 2007, the group that continued,

after several discussions, decided to form an entity called Movement of the African Diaspora of Argentina (DIAFAR) and began the legal status proceedings, choosing the board of directors from which Miriam Gomes became the president.

One of the members is a young Afro-Argentinean, Federico Pita, a university student and whose father's family is related to Enrique Nadal. He was increasingly more present in the operations of the organization, contacting other groups and individuals outside the movement. He was becoming another *identifier*, and in 2009, he succeeded Miriam in the presidency of the Movement of the Diaspora (nowadays known as DIAFAR). The discontent resulting from this change in the leadership led Miriam and the representatives of the Union of Africans in the South Cone and the Association of Senegalese Residents in Argentina to leave the movement.

Miriam focused her activity on a project financed since 2008 by the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation for the Development (AECID) called Support to the Afro-Argentinean population and its organizations that she leads.

All the disputes and conflicts within the organizations and among different leaders and groups, such as the mentioned organization of the event Week of Africa and the disputes within the Diaspora Movement, or the confrontation with and between the INDEC and INADI (state organisms) and some groups of activists about the 2010 census highlight, as Melucci (1999) points out, that the collective action had to face several demanding requirements; it was never a simple expression of the pursued goal, but was built through the actors' available resources and, according to the possibilities and obstacles, was created from a certain environment. Goals (the sense that the action has for the actor), means (the possibilities and limits of the action), and environment (the field where the action takes place) permanently give rise to unease; the goals do not fit the means or vice versa; the means are quite consistent with the action field; the environment is poor or rich in important resources, etc.

The actions related to the sensitization of the Afro-descendant population regarding the 2010 census, carried out both by DIAFAR and Africa and its Diaspora in connection with INDEC, and those carried out by Miriam and Lucía in parallel through the INADI, are the starting point of what we consider an incipient phase of visibilization of the movement. Among the initiatives, we mention the repeated appearance in the national communication media and the contact with individuals and Afro collectives of the interior of the country. As a result of the interactions, negotiations, and joint actions, in November 2010, DIAFAR and the African Association and its Diaspora formed the National Council of Afro Organizations of Argentina (CONAFRO), with an agreement signed between the two Afro organisms and the Consultant Council of the Argentinean Chancellery. 'CONAFRO will be the instrument for promoting and ensuring that the laws are upheld in the Afro descendant community. The council includes the Afro issue in the State agenda' pointed out by Balthazart Ackhast, president of Africa and its Diaspora. Federico Pita, DIAFAR president, considered:

This work revitalized the Afro issue. The next step is that the community begins its political organization and that is why this advice is given. Regarding this, the greatest objective is to organize in March next year – year of the Afro descent for the United Nations (2011) – a massive national congress where international referents of the Afro descendant activism attend.⁷

The political mobilization has not been promoted by all of the groups but by some of them, such as Africa and its Diaspora from the beginning and now from CONAFRO. The

latter produces a differential space from which to promote positive policies toward Afro descendants and Africans regarding the consolidation of the relation with the state.

Summing up

We have analyzed the Afro Movement in Argentina in its latency stage, in construction of interconnections in submerged networks, and in its incipient visibilization, though this is not in terms of protest and public demonstrations. The feelings of exclusion and resistance have been present since the arrival of the first slaves in America, but it is in a particular sociopolitical situation – the last decades of the twentieth century – that the actors began to organize on the basis of perceiving and integrating these feelings in a system of interaction and negotiation of the orientations, regarding the goals, means, and environment of their action.

We have described the course of some of the so-called *identifiers*, the shared experiences of exclusion in the national imaginary, and the construction of diverse identifications (Afro descendants, Afro-Argentineans of the colonial stem, and African Diaspora) that at times they coalesce in a collective ‘we’, relatively stable.

We highlighted the peculiarity of that ‘we’ in Argentina since it includes the descendants of enslaved populations, Afro-Latin-American and Caribbean migrants, Cape Verdeans and their descendants, and the new sub-Saharan African migrants. In addition, we have also observed the internal differentiation of the groups involved in levels of organization, social, educational, economic capitals, and in the implemented goals, demands, and strategies. Groups and individuals whose collective actions are mainly structured around a series of purposes or plural goals: the fight against racism and discrimination, for visibilization and the right to the difference. Goals that are carried out through different media, such as conferences, talks, congresses, meetings, commemorations, artistic festivals, complaints to public organisms, publications in newspapers and magazines, bulletin edition, blogs, and web pages, among others, have made explicit the possibilities and limits of the action of individuals and groups. We have identified and analyzed different actions regarding the proposed objectives and which at times have not been convergent with particular organizational cultures and available resources. The multiple actions produced situations that gave rise to unease and conflict characteristics of the dynamics of an SM under construction.

Notes

1. Taking into account that not all collective actions can become an SM.
2. This invisibility – pointed out by several professionals – regarding Afro descendants is not exclusive of Argentina; also this is the image developed in Uruguay (Ferreira 2003) and in México (Lara 2010).
3. The 1990s strengthened the hegemony of the capitalist market worldwide, the victory of democracies as political system, and the establishment of neoliberal policies as globalization ideology; context that triggered a series of sociopolitical transformations activating the emergence of new social conflicts and designing new scenarios for the acting of social movements (Espitia Caicedo 2006).
4. The question was: Are you or another person in this house Afro descendant or has ancestors of Afro-descendant or African origin (father, mother, grandparents/great grandparents? The census results are still being processed.
5. And currently member of the group Xangó.
6. <http://africaysudiaspora.wordpress.com/about/>. Consulted on 28 February 2011.

7. <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/sociedad/subnotas/3-50463-2010-11-24.html#arriba>. Consulted on 12 March 2011.

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