

“ABORIGINAL DANCES WERE ALWAYS IN RINGS”: MUSIC AND DANCE AS A SIGN OF IDENTITY IN THE ARGENTINE CHACO

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In Argentina, aboriginal music and dance—as part of what UNESCO has called “intangible cultural heritage”—has been overlooked for a long time. During the construction of Argentina as a nation, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European-derived societies and cultures were the privileged models in our country. In that period, the national government sponsored the wave of European immigration and, at the same time, the military persecution of aboriginal peoples and their forced assimilation to “Western Christian civilization.” One of the consequences of this history, mostly in the cultural imagination of the urban middle classes, was the pervasive thought that “Argentiniens are descendants of the ships”—a popular saying referring to the ships that brought “our grandparents from Europe,” mainly from Spain and Italy.

Under the nationalistic policies of President Juan Perón’s government in the mid-twentieth century, growing attention was paid to “the popular classes,” including protection policies for some indigenous peoples. In this context, musicologist Carlos Vega (1998, 1986) began documentation of “Argentine folk music and dance,” but only a few of these forms were considered to have “aboriginal” roots. In the 1970s, ethnomusicologists Jorge Novati and Irma Ruiz began the study of different aboriginal musical expressions (Ruiz 1985a). Nevertheless, it should be noted that it was only in 1989, after long years of military dictatorships, that a democratic government recognized the ethnic and cultural pre-existence and rights of aboriginal peoples, with the Indigenous Policies Bill (National Law #23302). Probably because of this late recognition, there were very few researchers interested in aboriginal music and dance in our country. Thus, our research at the University of Buenos Aires at present intends to continue the unfinished task of documentation and analysis of both old and new aboriginal music. This article means to bring into the international view the expressions of peoples who have been subject to invisibility in a peripheral country, knowing that ethnomusicologists from many countries also face the challenge of working in similar geopolitical and academic conditions. We propose to analyse the circular song-dance, one of the dominant genres in the aboriginal rituals of the Argentine Chaco, including the role of our research in the development of these expressions.¹

The South American Gran Chaco encompasses part of the lowlands of Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, and a small region of Brazil.² It is a subtropical plain with low

1. A preliminary and shorter version of this paper was presented at the 39th World Conference of the International Council for Traditional Music.

2. The Gran Chaco is situated along the fringe of the Mato Grosso Plateau in the north, the Salado River basin in the south, the Paraná and Paraguay Rivers in the east, and the Andean foothills in the west. It consists of about 600,000 square kilometres. The name “chaco”

forests and savannah formations, with rich xerophytic flora and fauna. This land was inhabited predominantly by nomadic or semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, consisting of more than thirty socio-political units that spoke a dozen languages with dialectal variations. In Argentina, the Chaco region is today one of the most important aboriginal areas. We will focus on the circular song-dances of the Eastern Toba and Southern Movoví, belonging to the Guaycurú linguistic family.³ These aboriginal groups resisted Spanish colonization and shared important socio-cultural traits, like hunting-gathering practices, the adoption of the horse beginning in the seventeenth century, and a cosmology based on powerful beings, mostly “fathers” or “mothers” of different animal species. These beings are central to different myths of origin and the renovation of the world; they also become involved in foraging practices—guiding and granting success to hunters—as well as shamanic initiations and healing rites (Miller 1979; Wright 1997; Citro 2003). Furthermore, the Toba and Mocoví had a common social organization based on matrilineal exogamic bands that, in turn, were part of larger endogamous units or tribes (Braunstein 1983). These tribes celebrated yearly meetings that took place during the ripening of carob pods (*Prosopis alba* or *P. nigra*) and at the start of the collection of wild honey, both of which were used to make alcoholic beverages (Paucke 1943). One of their main activities was the drinking of carob or honey wine by males as a way of legitimizing leadership. Such festivities also framed the celebration of battle triumphs and initiation rites. The family links and alliances between bands were strengthened through marriage agreements and, as we will see, the performance of circular song-dances by youths promoted such bonds.

Despite these cultural similarities, the Toba and Mocoví have grown apart through their histories, especially as a result of their relations with colonial and postcolonial agents. In the Argentine Chaco, they represent, respectively, the latest and the earliest adoption of Christianity and other cultural practices from hegemonic society, such as rural capitalism, the use of identification papers, the Spanish language and education, mainstream medicine, and folk and popular music. Thus, these contrasting cases offer interesting material for highlighting the continuities and changes in a similar genre performed by different groups. We present transcriptions and analyses of two circular song-dances: *Nmi*, performed by the Toba, and *Manik*, one of the *bailes paisanos* (“peasant dances”) performed by the Mocoví.⁴ The Toba and Mocoví consider these expressions their “own old dances” because they were performed until the mid-twentieth century, when such dances were gradually abandoned in the context of the Catholic and Evangelical rituals adopted by these groups. Nevertheless, in the early twenty-first century, the

seems to derive from a Quechua word meaning “hunting ground” (Métraux 1946).

3. According to the last aboriginal census (2004), there are 47,591 Tobas in Formosa, Chaco, and Santa Fe provinces, and 12,145 Mocoví in Chaco and Santa Fe provinces. The Eastern Toba are located in eastern Formosa and the Southern Mocoví in northern Santa Fe. The Pilagá of Formosa also belong to the Guaycurú linguistic family.

4. Fieldwork among the Toba (1998–2002, 2005, 2008) was conducted in four rural settlements in eastern Formosa; among the Mocoví (2003–5) in five rural and semi-urban settlements in northern Santa Fe.

Mocoví resumed their *bailes paisanos* and, in the late twentieth century, the Tobas resumed some aesthetic features of *Nmi*. One of the most relevant distinctive features of these dances is simultaneous singing and dancing. This has led us to study them as “performance genres,” whose efficacy lies in the combination of these aesthetic languages. We propose that the structural principle that organizes these song-dances is the deep articulation between the circular and repetitive character of the choreography and the iteration through minimal variations of the musical discourse. Other key features are their cultural meanings and social uses: such dances were the traditional way for young men to woo women, with these women choosing their dancing mates and eventual sexual partners. These main traits set the circular dances apart from the folk dances performed by *criollos* or *blancos* (white people of European descent), which usually separate musical performance from dance, have other musical and choreographic structures, and are performed by couples for which the choice of partners is with the men.⁵ As we try to demonstrate, these features contributed to the establishment of circular song-dances as powerful signs of “aboriginal identity.” This is expressed in a statement that we usually heard among old Mocoví and Toba: “aboriginal dances were always in rings.” This strong identification also explains why these dances began to be resumed in the late twentieth century when the socio-political context favoured the recognition of aboriginal cultures in Argentina.

In the next section, we present our methodological approach to the analysis of this performing genre and its role as a sign of aboriginal identity, discussing the iconic and indexical potential of music and dance.

Process, structure, and embodied meanings in music and dance performance

Since the well known “turning point” promoted by Merriam’s study (1964), followed by Blacking (1973), Béhague (1984), and Feld (1994), among many others, there has been a growing interest in musical behaviours and performances, and their relation with social contexts and cultural meanings. In 1987, Qureshi stated that one of the problematic issues inherent in studies of musical contexts that are informed by anthropological or sociological theory was their “inability to deal satisfactorily with musical sound”: “such studies initially centered on the uses and function of music, but did not incorporate the music itself into their analytic schemes” (1987:61). More recently, in a critical view of the development of ethnomusicology, McLean (2007:138) also stated that this emphasis on context has contributed to the “conviction that ‘mere sound’ is an unimportant element of music systems,” and to the “unjustifiable erosion of confidence in transcription, analysis, and comparison.”

Taking an opposite stand, Rice criticized McLean’s statements, especially his failure “to find any value in most of what happened since 1980” (Rice 2007:168), like the “interpretive turn” that has led to question “the essential nature of music as art or as sound, to posit other aspects of its nature as symbol and behaviour, and

5. For a detailed description of Argentinean folk music and dance, see Vega (1986, 1998).

to argue for its ‘constructed reality’ rather than its ‘empirical reality’” (ibid.:169). In a similar line, other authors like Finnegan (2002) or Ingold (2000) developed holistic approaches that criticized the commonly made distinction between “music and language” or “musical and spoken communication,” since they are the product of an analytical decomposition of what once was an indivisible expressive totality.⁶ Furthermore, ethnochoreological studies also contributed to highlight links between sound, body movement, and cultural meanings (Kaepler 1978, 2003; Giurchescu 2003; Felföldi 2005).

Despite these different approaches, we still agree with Qureshi that probably one of the main challenges of our discipline is to reach a “synthesis ... between sound-oriented and context-oriented ethnomusicology” (1987:62), also including in the former body movements and choreographies. In fact, our research is the result of the collaboration between a musicology-oriented and a dance anthropology-oriented scholar.⁷

From the perspective of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (1993), music and dance can be thought of as “lived experiences” in which human bodies are the existential conditions necessary to make them possible; they cannot be reduced to static aesthetic objects isolated from their “embodiment”—the “inter-subjective ground” of all cultural experience (Csordas 1994). Nevertheless, such “lived experiences” also involve musical and choreographic codes whose structures and rules can remain relatively stable through different performances, giving each genre its identity. As Schechner (2000:13) points out, this is the “paradox” of the performance, it is a “twice behaved-behavior,” but no repetition is basically the same, for systems are in constant flow. We believe that our methodology must pay attention to these two key features of all performative arts; thus, we try to analyse music and dances as aesthetic structures and performative processes. On the one hand, music and dance are considered cultural units that can be drawn from the mainstream socio-historical process; hence, they can be registered, transcribed, analysed, and compared in their musical and choreographic internal structures. On the other hand, these units are embodied, re-signified, and transformed by performers and audiences every time they are performed; therefore, this dynamic process requires an ethnographic analysis of social practice, including consideration of the perceptions, feelings, meanings, purposes, and social relations among the performers and between them and the audience, that is, their socio-cultural context and history.

6. Finnegan (2002), inspired by approaches in communication theory, emphasizes the dynamic process of human interconnections through a variety of actions and experiences, focusing on embodied performances and human artefacts, rather than text, and on the multidimensional shared and active process of “communicating,” rather than the transferring of messages. From a “dwelling perspective” close to phenomenology, Ingold (2000) also focuses on what people do with words, sounds, and tools, contesting rationalistic models that objectivize language, music, and technology as separate domains.

7. This collaboration is also the result of our strategies to deal with the academic restrictions of our peripheral country, since there are no university degrees in ethnomusicology in Argentina.

First, we explore these expressions as relatively stable aesthetic products, identifying the musical features that distinguish the musical “dialect” of a particular performance tradition from “the common musical ‘language’ background,” in terms suitable to their properties and structure, especially in cultures without explicit music or dance theories (Qureshi 1987:67). The analysis of these musical and choreographic patterns generally leads to inferences about relational meanings at the internal levels of their structures. Second, we analyse music and dance as dynamic performances that can be changed and strategically used by performers and audiences to legitimate, reshape, or change their experiences in social life. Performance studies have demonstrated how these expressions are means to reinforce, transform, or even create feelings, cultural knowledge, meanings, and values, as well as social identities and power relations (Béhague 1984; Blacking 1985; Kapferer 1986; Seeger 1987; Frith 1987; Mendoza 1999; Reed 1998; Henry, Magowan, and Murray 2000; Taylor 2003).

The question that remains problematic is how to reach a synthesis: how the contextual dimensions are indispensable to understanding music and dance, and how the “extra-musical meanings” inherent in sounds and body movements give music and dance “the power to affect its context in turn” (Qureshi 1987:58). Some of the first perspectives to deal with this problem have been the representational models of analogies or homologies between the general structure of a society or culture and the aesthetic structures of their music and dance (Lomax 1962; Kealiinohomoku 1967; Lomax, Bartenieff, and Paulay 1968; Royce 1972; Kaepler 1978).⁸

Another approach is Qureshi’s (1987:57–58), whose model has been very useful in relating the performance context to the music in a way that permits a detailed identification of the “contextual input” into the musical sound. Understanding how musicians adapt music to the performance context requires very thorough documentation of the variations in performer-audience behaviours during each performance event, in order to identify “the contextual constraints operating ... during the performance” (ibid.:65).

Finally, in order to grasp how music and dance can affect the identity of performers and their social relations beyond the performance event, different authors have focused on the links between embodiment and emotion, and the symbolic and political dimension of these expressions. The works of Feld (1994), Turino (1999), and Qureshi (2000), among others, show the capability of musical languages to create and re-create iconic and indexical links to some key cultural practices and meanings, not as ideals or representations but as embodied experiences. We consider that this latter perspective is especially valuable to reach a synthesis between sound and movement-oriented and context-oriented approaches.

Starting from the Peircean model and its adaptation to music by Turino (1999), a sign is defined as something that stands for something else to someone in some way. Therefore, we have a three-fold model where it is possible to distinguish the sign, the object, and the *interpretant*: “the *effect* created by bringing the sign and

8. More recently, Kaepler (2003:161) calls for the examination of the entire way of life “to find systematic relationships among cultural forms and social actions and mental constructs in which they are embedded.”

objects together” in the perceiver (ibid.:222; italics in original). Here, the concept of meaning is “pragmatically simplified by defining it as the actual effect of a sign, that is, the direct feeling, physical reaction, or language-based concept inspired in the perceiver by a musical sign” (ibid.:224).⁹ Regarding the Peircean classification of sign modalities as symbol, icon, and index, Turino remarks that “symbols are *signs about* other things, whereas icons and indices are *signs of* identity (resemblance, commonality) and direct connections,” and recognizes that musical sounds and body movements that function as signs usually operate at the iconic and indexical levels (ibid.:228; italics in original). Hence, “the affective potential of signs is inversely proportional to the degree of mediation, generality, and abstraction ..., lower level signs are more likely to create emotional and energetic interpretants, whereas signs involving symbols are more likely to generate language-based responses and reasoning” (ibid.:234).

The potential of iconicity in music and dance has been studied more than indexicality (Turino 1999:228, 234). Feld (1994:150) has especially examined how musical icons work, not just as “metaphoric equivalents, but as felt iconic wholeness.” More recently, Qureshi (2000:811) has also remarked that music works as a potent icon of social practice as well as personal experience and can become “as much a political tool as it is a language of feelings.” Nevertheless, according to Turino (1999:227), music and dance can also act as indices whose power derives from the fact that “the sign-object relations are based in co-occurrences within one’s own life experiences, and thus become intimately bound as experience.” These expressions developed their own special potential for producing emotional responses and social identification, since the “indices continually take on new layers of meaning while potentially also carrying along former associations—a kind of *semantic snowballing*” (ibid.:235; italics in original).¹⁰

In common with these authors, we assume that the experience of performing/perceiving music and dance usually “means” (has “effects,” like feelings, physical reactions, and ideas) through the combination of two complementary ways: (a) linking their formal aesthetic structures to socio-cultural and personal experiences, cultural meanings, and values through iconic relations, and (b) attaching that music and that dance to the feelings and meanings embodied in previous performances through indexical relations. Thus, music and dance become a “key resource for realizing personal and collective identities” in different cultures (Turino 1999:221).

To reach a synthesis between sound and movement-oriented and contextual-oriented approaches, we propose that the way in which music and dance are changed during performances and which permeates all socio-cultural relations not only

9. This model focuses on processes and changes, because the important thing is not the “sign itself” but the “semiotic chaining”: “how sign-object relations at one stage create a distinct effect (interpretant) which becomes the sign at the next stage in the chain ... [A] sign is not a self-evident idea or entity but is the catalyst for an effect” (Turino 1999:223).

10. “Indices signify through co-occurrence with their object in real-time situations. Once such indexical relations have been established, however, actual co-presence of sign and object is no longer required; the index may still call to mind objects previously experientially attached. But when former indexically related objects are not present, or even when they are, new elements in the situation may become linked to the same sign” (Turino 1999:235).

depends on the behaviours of the performers and audience and the more general socio-cultural context, but also on the iconic and indexical powers closely related to their aesthetic structures and to the fully felt, embodied experience of their previous performances.

The performative process: The colonization and return of circular dances in Toba and Mocoví history

Comparing Mocoví and Toba relations with the main colonial and postcolonial agents—missionaries, national state policies, landowners, and the work market—we find that similar processes took place among the Toba of eastern Formosa province one century later than among the Mocoví of Santa Fe province. The Mocoví underwent early missionization by the Jesuit mission (eighteenth century), continued by the Franciscans (nineteenth century), and a more recent and weaker influence from Pentecostal Evangelism (since the late 1970s). In contrast, the Toba had a later and more reluctant incorporation into the Franciscan mission (from 1901), but an earlier and stronger influence of Pentecostal Evangelism (from the 1950s). In relation to state policies, the Mocoví suffered an early military persecution to appropriate their lands and cripple their fighting abilities (from 1824), and an early incorporation into the national army (from the mid-nineteenth century) and to elementary public education (since 1901). In the Toba case, the military advance on their lands and the creation of reservations began only in 1911, and they were incorporated into elementary education and the military draft in the mid-twentieth century. Finally, Mocoví lands have been overwhelmingly occupied by European immigrants since the mid-nineteenth century, forcing the Mocoví to become rural labour in timber mills, for harvests, and on sugar-cane plantations. In contrast, the Toba kept some of their lands, surrounded by the advance of white settlers and, since the mid-twentieth century, they have been partially and sporadically incorporated into the regional labour market. The decisive factors in this different pace of colonization seem to have been the higher economic value of the fertile southern Chaco lands and the greater distance of central Chaco from Argentina's political and economic hub, being 1100 kilometres from Buenos Aires.

Though the Eastern Toba have preserved some of their territories, foraging practices have been severely curtailed and replaced by rural labour and, in the last twenty years, by state assistance policies. They have kept their own language and religious beliefs, but have also incorporated Spanish and Pentecostal Evangelism. Since the 1960s, the religious movement of the *Evangelio*—a result of the complex interaction between pentecostal and Toba traditions and Mennonite influences—has played a fundamental role in their socio-cultural organization and ethnic identification (Cordeu and Siffredi 1971; Miller 1979; Wright 1997; Citro 2003). Nowadays, a great number of Tobas identify themselves as “Tobas Evangelios,” and their aboriginal churches are the site of the only rituals practised today.

Before the pervasive influence of the *Evangelio*, the circular song-dances called *Nmi* were performed both in the context of *niematak*, the festive gatherings of dif-



Figure 1. The *Nmi* dance in the sugar-cane plantation of San Martín del Tabacal (undated; Archivo General de la Nación, Argentina).

ferent groups, and in evening gatherings of youths, celebrating in their own communities or work places. Figure 1 is an old photo of the *Nmi* taken in a sugar mill where the Toba and other Chaco peoples went to work.

The men formed a circle with their bodies slightly bent, and held hands waist high with alternate partners. There was always in the ring at least one “captain,”¹¹ an adult man who knew a lot of song-dances received from spiritual beings in dreams, and sometimes learnt from other captains. The captain initiated each song and later joined the rest of the performers; the men stepped together with the same foot while the women stood around them and watched. Each woman then tapped a chosen young male; the men then broke up their chain to allow her to join the circle. The song-dance continued without interruption as each of the women joined in. The contact of different parts of the body (back, hip, hands, arms) expressed the female’s choice of a mate.

In figure 1, a group of *criollos*, maybe foremen, surround this aboriginal dance. Since these dances were performed at night, after the day’s labour, it appears that the setting was especially prepared for the photographer. All dancers wear the typical clothes of aboriginal rural workers and are barefoot. Nevertheless, when these dances were performed in their own places, the captains in particular wore headbands and ankle rattles, and the young dancers also added traditional ornaments to their attire to seduce women. The Toba usually said that through dance the men “tried to make women fall in love,” and after that they “went to sleep together,” implying sexual intercourse. As the elder Toba Alberto Muratalla explained:

11. The Toba use two Spanish words that we gloss here as “captain”: *capitán*, the same word as for the military rank of captain; *canchero*, an adaptation of the word used to refer to the place for dancing or playing soccer (*cancha*), but which also designates a proud person in colloquial Argentine Spanish.

“The old dance was started by men and later the women chose their boyfriends ... Women enjoyed seeing the men dance.” Both in the past as in several events nowadays, women usually take the initiative of approaching and proposing to the chosen mate. So, the men had to seduce the women by dancing, chanting, or playing musical instruments like the *nviqne* (“tin fiddle”) or *nashere* (flute) (Ruiz 1985b). The Toba usually emphasize the sexual character of these dances and, as Gastón Gordillo (2004) pointed out, this memory is often shaped by the contrast between their past performances and their current practices, especially in relation to Christian morals about sex.

Young Tobas developed different choreographic variations of *Nmi* (Citro 2006a). The role of the captain was very important in this process, since his status and prestige depended on his dancing and singing skills, and especially on the number and variety of songs he had.¹² Agustín Chamorro, a captain whose renown reached several Toba settlements, was remembered by Antonio Muratalla as “the king of the youngsters,” “all of them followed him,” and “[he] had more than sixty songs.”

In the 1970s, as ethnomusicology studies began in Argentina, the *Nmi* was being banned by Evangelical churches as an expression of the “world’s sins and vices.” So, the first recordings by Irma Ruiz correspond to the last *Nmi* performances. Twenty years later, trying to document memories about the *Nmi*, we interviewed elders like Alberto Muratalla, over sixty years old, who performed this dance in his youth. At the beginning of our research, many refused to speak about the *Nmi* because, from the current Evangelical perspective, it was perceived as a fundamental part of the “old aboriginal culture,” associated with “sin.” The sexual connotations of these dances and particularly the consumption of alcohol and tobacco (“sins” condemned by pentecostal churches) are causes identified by the Tobas for explaining this abandonment. Despite this initial reluctance, some elders gradually began to recall more details about these dances and songs, probably as a result of our persistent curiosity. Perhaps the interest of white scholar women “from the capital” prompted them to revalue those depreciated cultural practices and also encouraged the Toba to talk about them.

In the mid-1990s, youths started to perform a circular dance called *Rueda* (“wheel”) in the churches. Some Toba link the circular design of this dance and the performers’ sexual intent to the old *Nmi*, despite important stylistic differences, such as running instead of walking steps and the absence of body contact between the sexes; furthermore, *Rueda* dances have a similar musical structure, even though they are played with guitars and incorporate lyrics in Spanish.¹³ The links between *Nmi* and *Rueda* are at present a source of debate in aboriginal churches.

Unlike the Mocoví, the Eastern Toba have not developed an aboriginal political association, partly because the articulation between the Evangelio and the local

12. A similar relation between song, power, and prestige can be appreciated in the shamans who also received their songs from spiritual beings (see Ruiz 1978–79; García 1999; Citro 2009).

13. In other works (Citro 2000, 2003) we analyse how the *Rueda* has turned into an arena of dispute through which young people try to redefine their role in rituals and everyday life.

political clientelism inhibited other modes of self organization (Citro 2003, 2009). Only in recent years have they begun to participate in political actions to protest against their “poor” living conditions and the “corruption” of some white local authorities. In this context, some young Toba auxiliary teachers began in 2006 to try to “recover” the old songs and choreographies of *Nmi*, in a struggle to legitimate these expressions in an Evangelical context that remains adverse to them. Thus, to support this interest, some members of our research group at the University of Buenos Aires offered initial training in video documentation. The results were two collaborative videos about music and dance made by these young Tobas (DiarTE et al. 2007a, 2007b).

For the Southern Mocoví the consequences of the colonization process were very different from the Toba. When a great number of Mocoví families lost their traditional foraging territories, they were forced to become migrant rural workers. This produced a scattering of aboriginal families and favoured the adoption of Western hegemonic practices. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Mocoví also started to conceal or even reject their aboriginal identity in their relations with white people, supposing that this would facilitate them being hired. In this process, Spanish gradually began to replace the Mocoví language; at present Mocoví is spoken only by some elders. Another important reason for this “tactic of concealment” was the fear passed on by their elders after the 1904 slaughter and military persecutions of the Millenarian movement of San Javier, the largest Mocoví settlement in Santa Fe province (Citro 2006b). Memories of this traumatic experience still plague them at present. Despite this concealment and the geographical dispersion of Mocoví families, the annual Santa Rosa feast, celebrated on 30 August, allowed the continuity of their social bonds. Today it is considered “the traditional Mocoví feast” and is celebrated in two villages, Colonia Dolores and Costa del Toba (Citro et al. 2006).

According to the Mocoví people, their ancestors used to have their own rituals to celebrate nature’s renovation at this time of year, but Catholic influence later “mixed it with Santa Rosa’s feast.”¹⁴ This celebration was organized by *caciques* or chieftains who gathered a number of families, either in ranches or logging camps where they lived and worked, in small territories relatively free of whites or in settlements created in the Catholic missions, such as San Javier and Colonia Dolores. Mocoví families were forced to scatter over long distances to find work and lands where they would be allowed to live. As the Mocoví elders Eufemia López and Modesto González explain, it was precisely the celebration of Santa Rosa that permitted the scattered families to gather each year, and the dances favoured courtship and marriages within the ethnic group:

They all look forward to the Santa Rosa feast, they always come. Don’t forget this place because they’re from here, always come, so far ... they meet their relatives ...

14. An eighteenth-century Jesuit source (Paucke 1943:197–98) confirms this correspondence with the date of the old rituals. The process of mixing between Catholic influences and Mocoví rituals dates back to the Jesuit and Franciscan missions (Citro et al. 2006).



Figure 2. The “Mocoví dance” in Santa Rosa de los Calchines, Santa Fe (undated, published in Alemán 1997; used with permission of Bernardo Alemán).

There’s no work here, that’s why folks have left. (interview with Eufemia López, Colonia Dolores, August 2004)

We went to the feast, to dance and maybe you got hooked, got married, and never made it back home, got hooked in the dance. (interview with Modesto González, Los Laureles, November 2004)

The festival organizer owned an image of Santa Rosa; the centrepieces of the celebration were a riders’ parade and an altar table. During the two or three nights of the festival, the musicians played different dance genres. We documented two types of circular dances or *bailes paisanos*—discontinued in the 1950s. As we will see in the next section, the song-dances named *Manik* and *Vizcacha* had choreographies imitating the movements of two important hunting preys and their musical features followed the traditional parameters documented among other Guaycurú dances. In turn, the *Cielito*, *Sarandi*, *Toncoyogo*, and *Bravo* were circular dances greatly influenced by the old *criollo* quadrilles called *Cielito*, *Pericón*, and *Media Caña*, and were played by violinists, in some cases with instruments of their own making.¹⁵ The role of the “baton leader or master” was fundamental—especially in these latter cases—because he led the dance, signalling for the changes in choreography. Changes in the order of sequences, introducing new movements or impromptu verses, may have led to the emergence of these aboriginal variations of the old quadrilles. Through these creative practices developed in their rituals, the Mocoví transformed those outdated *criollo* genres into “Mocoví dance.”

Like the previous photograph, figure 2 shows the bosses or foremen watching Mocoví dances; it was probably taken at a work place. See also how garments

15. For a description of these dances, see Citro and Cerletti (2006)

differentiate the performers: the master wears a hat and a suit similar to the white foreman's, while the rest of the dancers wear the usual attire of rural workers. Nevertheless, a shared feature of all these aboriginal dancers distinguishes them from the *criollos*: they are barefoot.

Probably as an ambivalent strategy of "colonial mimicry"—a form of difference "that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994:122)—the *bailes paisanos* were re-elaborated based on quadrilles; other aspects kept their traditional features and the clothes of the dancers somewhat imitated *criollo* fashion, while the bare feet carried on an old aboriginal practice.

By the mid-twentieth century, holding dances like the *chamamé*, played on guitar and accordion, and accompanied by singers, became the main courtship backdrop among youths, replacing the circular song-dances that had traditionally served this purpose. The *chamamé*—a dance with a ternary rhythm descendant from the polka family—has been particularly favoured by the *criollos* of the region, especially migrant workers from Corrientes province in festivities celebrated in timber mills. The early integration of the Mocoví to the rural labour market was the main cause for the incorporation of the *chamamé*. Thus, until the mid-twentieth century, Mocoví adults and elders still performed the circular song-dances they had practised in their youth, but youngsters preferred to dance the *criollo chamamé*. At that time, an important difference between Toba and Mocoví circular dances was that in the latter, adults and elders began to replace the young, hence, the social aims of these dances also changed: from the promotion of courting among the young, evidenced in the Toba case, to the preservation of a collective identity by the elders in the new Catholic rituals in the Mocoví case. So, in the *bailes paisanos* that we could document, men and women were in alternate positions, but there were no movements to indicate a female choice of partner like in the *Nmi*. Besides, as can be seen in figure 2, there is no close contact between performers—they only hold hands while performing different circular figures, or even dance apart, like in the imitative dances of *Manik* and *Vizcacha*.

Finally, in the late twentieth century, adults and elders still danced the *chamamé* they had practised in their youth, but the young began to dance the *Cumbia*, a widespread popular genre. In sum, throughout the history of the Mocoví, music and dance has been a means to express generational differences between the youth and elders, and also a more or less visible identification with *criollo* or Mocoví cultural signs.

An important change in Southern Mocoví history occurred in the late 1980s. In the context of national recognition of aboriginal rights, the Mocoví began a political mobilization that led to the creation of the Organization of Santa Fe Aboriginal Communities (OCASTAFE). This indigenous group—supported by a non-governmental organization linked to the Catholic Church—has organized Mocoví political actions to recover their lands and has also promoted a process of public identification of the Mocoví as "aboriginal people" (Citro 2006b). In 2003, our team of researchers began anthropological, ethnomusicological, and linguistic research in collaboration with OCASTAFE members and more than a hundred Mocoví consultants. The consultants were very interested in "recovering" their



Figure 3. *Paisano* dance in the Santa Rosa celebration. Colonia Dolores, Santa Fe, August 2007 (photo: Darío Soich, with permission).

history, so they received our project with enthusiasm. Nevertheless, compared with the Toba case, the choreographic and musical data about the circular dances was less complete. This was mostly because Mocoví elders only had general memories as they had only watched such performances in their childhood or adolescence, actually taking part in only a very few cases. Furthermore, there were no previous recording or research activities about Mocoví music and dance. We agreed on the publication of two books based on aboriginal narratives, one concerning language, history, and culture (Gualdieri et al. 2006), and the other the Santa Rosa feast (Citro et al. 2006). After our fieldwork and the publication of these collaborative books, Alfredo Salteño, one of our elderly consultants, began to teach a combination of the old choreographies to some youngsters and adults of Colonia Dolores, one of the oldest and largest Mocoví settlements. In the Santa Rosa celebration of 2007, these Mocoví began to perform a new version of the *bailes paisanos* again, under Alfredo's lead.

In figure 3, notice that the garments of the contemporary dancers have some resemblance to the clothes worn by the performers in figure 2. Such clothing is today considered to be out of fashion. Figure 2 was the cover design for our book (Citro et al. 2006) and it probably inspired their dancing costumes. Nevertheless, this “aboriginal mimicry” also “is almost the same, but not quite,” since there are some subtle but important differences: the dancers of old were barefoot and the contemporary ones wear espadrilles; the old dancing master imitated the clothes of his boss, but now wears the same garments as the rest of the performers; and, the youth and elders are mixed. Thus, the differences between dancing masters and performers, elders and youth, are blurred, and controversial aboriginal indicators like bare feet—usually an indexical sign of poverty from the *criollo* point of view—have been abandoned.

In conclusion, among the Toba and Mocoví, the circular dances faded away in popularity for a time but now are returning, despite significant changes, particularly in the Toba case. Socio-political contexts, but also our “research performance,” surely favoured these processes of revaluation and the return of such old expressions. Like Schechner, we consider that different activities can be studied “as performances,” as long as they are at least a “twice behaved-behavior.” Since our research involves the experience of fieldwork with the recurrence of interviews, participating observations, “observing participations”—for instance trying to learn dance steps or the playing of instruments—and video workshops, these repeated behaviours, together with the production and distribution of collaborative publications and videos, seemed to promote the reflection and legitimation of these practices. However, beyond these contextual constraints, the musical and choreographic structure of these dances also has an important role in this “return,” because some aesthetic features are perceived as closely related to some of the key elements of aboriginal identity.

The aesthetic structure of circular song-dances: A form that folds back onto itself

Three main musical forms are shared among Guaycurú peoples: collective song-dances, linked to the circular dances of youths, and others to female initiation rituals; individual songs played with the marrow rattle, related to shamanism and drinking rituals; and the playing of musical instruments like the tin fiddle and flute (associated with states of love and courtship), and the water drum and rattle stick (linked to the preparations for different rituals) (Ruiz 1978–79, 1985b; Roig 1998; García 1999; Ruiz and Citro 2002; Citro 2003, 2006a, 2008). These forms are recognized from the aboriginal point of view and people emphasize the differences between the genres, according to their performance contexts and purposes. For instance, they usually remember the “songs for healing,” “for success in the hunt,” “for the fermentation of carob pods,” “the song of drinkers,” “dances for finding a girlfriend,” and so on.

Throughout the colonization process, and especially during the Catholic and Evangelical conversions, many of these genres were abandoned or changed. Numerous new genres began to be performed and new musical instruments began to be played—mainly those from the folk music played on guitars, drums, and violins, and from popular music like *Cumbia*, played on electronic keyboards (Citro and Cerletti 2006; Citro 2005). Hence, people usually distinguish the “old aboriginal music” from the “new.” The old expressions are characterized by binary rhythms and three-pitch melodies equivalent to major or minor triads with intervals of fifths, thirds, and unisons, and the high ranges are less distinct due to the use of recitations and glissandos. Furthermore, as the Toba and Mocoví usually say, these are “songs without lyrics,” referring to the lack of lyrics or to the repeated iteration of the same word or short phrase.

In order to analyse the features that distinguish circular song-dances, we transcribed and analysed the existing corpus of twelve Guaycurú song-dances, recorded by Irma Ruiz in 1972 and during our fieldwork since the late 1990s. We use a transcription model based on Ruwet's "paradigmatic analysis" (1990), which best represents the properties and structures of this genre as it bases segmentation on repetition.¹⁶ To study melodic profile we follow La Rue's typology (1970), especially when he analyses "the small dimension," suitable for these types of music.

Menezes Bastos (2007) recently pointed out that "variation" through "repetition" and other procedures, is the main process for composing musical pieces among the aboriginal peoples of the South American lowlands. In our case, we find that the structural principle that characterizes Guaycurú song-dances as a performative genre is the deeper articulation between repetitions with slight variations in musical discourse, primarily due to the loss of motifs, and the collective repetition of the same movement in a circular formation in the choreographic discourse. In addition to the shared musical parameters mentioned above (binary rhythm, three-pitch melodies, and lack of lyrics), we also identified six other specific features related to this structural principle. Analysing each feature, we tried to follow Qureshi's (1987:65) suggestion to capture "the vantage point of the performer[s]" who convert the musical and choreographic structures into a process of sound and movement performance "on the basis of their apprehension of all the factors relevant to the performance context." Nevertheless, all the existing recordings of these old song-dances unfortunately correspond exclusively to non-ritual performances, that is, they were recoded in the context of anthropological interviews or were performances prepared for the interviewer. In such cases the consultants remembered the songs and sometimes a few body movements and choreographic patterns. Thus, the variations of the music according to the original contexts of performance can only be reconstructed in a very general way; and as a complementary perspective, we had to pay special attention to variations in the context of our "research performance."

The six features and their performative constraints as identified in these circular song-dances are the following:

1) Sequences of continuous performance made up of several brief song-dances (1–2 minutes each), without interruption by silence or the lack of movement.

Organization in sequences of chants (or instrumental or vocal-instrumental pieces) is another key feature of musical repertoires in the South American lowlands (Menezes Bastos 2007). In this case, the knowledge of different song-dances gives "prestige" to the captain, legitimating his role. Thus, the length of the sequences probably varies according to the prestige of each captain.

16. In this model we can appreciate that musical motifs are placed in vertical and horizontal columns in order to make a clear-cut distinction between similarities and differences. Ruwet applies this analytic system to medieval monophonic music. However, it has also been used by ethnomusicologists, since in both cases music is mostly based in oral tradition (cf. Cámara de Landa 2004:161)

2) *Minimum differentiation in performative roles: the captain initiates the song, followed by the rest of the performers, and all sing the same melody together and repeat a similar movement.*

Aside from the beginning of the song by the captain—indicating his leadership¹⁷—and the entrance of the women in the Toba *Nmi*—an expression of gender relations—there are no differential body movements or melodic lines. Nevertheless, some dancers are remembered for their personal styles, generally linked to subtle variations in their way of doing the same step, such as in movements of the neck or waist (Citro 2006a). These variations probably were an effective way of catching the attention of the women, since the dance was the main way for men to be chosen by women.

3) *Continuous and steady pulse in the accent: a binary rhythm in relation to the right and left steps that beat the rhythm, reinforced by the use of a lower centre of gravity in the movements.*

4) *Strong articulation in the text, music, and body movement: the link between music and lyrics is strictly syllabic; the texts are very brief, only a few words repeated over and over, together with the rhythmic-melodic motif and the dance step to which they are attached.*

Being a collective dance, in most cases without instruments, these features are the main ways to maintain coordination of the dancers' movements. However, dancers sometimes lost the rhythm and had to pay some token penalty, such as leaving the dance (Citro et al. 2006; Citro 2006a).

5) *Fixed relation between pitch and intensity: the higher the pitch, the greater the intensity; as pitch decreases, so does intensity; this is how every phrase and song-dance concludes.*

6) *Alternation between static cells characterized by the use of unisons, for beginnings and endings, and wave-like melodic movement with a predominance of thirds.*

Since there are no silences between musical phrases, or even between one song and the next, the pitch-intensity relation, sometimes combined with the unison, becomes a structural feature to distinguish phrases and songs, and is not only an expressive device. Similarly, at the choreographic level, there are no indications for beginning and ending or to stop moving. Thus, variations in muscle tone and the energy of the beginning and ending steps could have been expressive features that also played a structural role in the choreography. In the old recordings, the unisons of transition tend to grow faster before the start of the undulating movement. They probably operate as a way to match the rhythm, and when it was reached, they

17. In Lomax's approach, this parameter corresponds to the Amerindian model: the leader starts the song and then merges with the chorus joining in unison, with mild tonal fusion, but accurate rhythmic accord (1962:247). According to Lomax, this performative structure is correlative with decentralized systems of leadership, as in the Toba and Mocoví cases. It should be noted that for the South American lowlands, Menezes Bastos (2007) presents a nucleus-periphery model of structure with different variations, but the application of this model to the Guaycurú song-dances requires further analysis.

Figure 4. A Toba *Nmi*: *baile sapo* (toad dance)

initiate the rest of the song. So the length of the unisons probably depends on each performance event.

In order to show some of these characteristics of circular song-dances, we present the transcription and analysis of a version of the Toba *Nmi* and the Mocoví *baile paisano* named *Manik*, recorded during our fieldwork in Formosa and Santa Fe, respectively. Through these examples we also try to demonstrate how a specific context—our “performance research”—can modify some features.

The *Nmi* song was performed by an elder Toba man, Alberto Muratalla, during an anthropological interview at his home in 2001. The transcription only shows the initial melody, repeated five times with slight variations (figure 4). Of these five, the last repetition is the shortest, confirming the reduction of motifs at the conclusion. One can appreciate the frequency of repetition as well as the fixed association of pitch and intensity. On both the macroformal (the melody beginning again) and the microformal levels, the variations in each phrase are caused mainly by the loss of motifs.¹⁸ Also very noticeable is the iteration of the diminuendo in each of the repetitions and phrases. The diminuendo, from being an expressive device becomes a structural feature, as it remains unchanged in all cases, acting like a

18. We consider a motif to be the shortest intelligible and self-existent melodic or rhythmic figure. At the micro level, we can appreciate that the initial A is absent from the second staff and that the first E crotchets disappear on the third and fourth staves. On the fifth staff only unisons on A remain, which then finally lose their initial crotchets.

terminating principle. On a macrolevel, this gradual articulation of the diminuendo helps identify, though inconclusively, the beginning and end of each song-dance, blurring the limits between each piece and creating a sort of continuity. The lyrics have no particular meaning; they are rather a way to enhance the music.

The anacrustic beginning is reinforced by the combination of two other stress modalities: the tonic accent of the ascending fifth and the increased length of the agogic accent. The reinforcement is produced because the tonic accent is a larger melodic movement. There is then the descent by a fifth (in other songs, there are descents by thirds), followed by unisons. Nevertheless, in the song-dances performed in 1972 recorded by Irma Ruiz, we do not find such an anacrusis, but there is a predominant presence of unisons for beginnings and endings. The main difference between these research performances is that in 1972 a group of young men performed these dances for the anthropologist, while in 2001 an old man alone performed them. Thus, in the traditional collective performance, unisons were the way to match the rhythm. In contrast, the anacrusis seems to be linked to this special context of a dance performed alone, since the musical accent, accompanied by a firm step down, was used to initiate each song-dance.

Next there is a transcription of the *Manik* song-dance performed by an elder Mocoví man, Modesto Gonzalez, during an anthropological interview at his home in 2004 (figure 5). Modesto used to be a dance master of the *bailes paisanos* and a *chamamé* musician; at present, he is one of the few Mocoví shamans. The *manik* or Greater Rhea (*Rhea americana*) is an important prey hunted by the Mocoví and is also a powerful being. In the choreography, the performers move in a ring, and the arm movements of the dancers imitate the wing movements of the rhea escaping the hunters. According to some sources, a chieftain called José created this song-dance, based on observation of the characteristic movements of this bird. The *manik* rhea also plays a central role in the Mocoví myth of the origin of the Milky Way: stars are the tracks left by the powerful Father of all *manik* during a series of episodes where hunters chased him to protect the humans he meant to devour. The dark areas of the Milky Way represent the figure of this *manik*.¹⁹

This song-dance is organized in three long phrases with an expressive diminuendo at the close of the first two, while the third closes with a declamatory exclamation in the last cadence, a type of ending characteristic of Guaycurú shamanic chants.²⁰ In view of the fact that this performer is a shaman, his performance of the *Manik* song-dance seems to combine musical traits of these different genres. This song also presents a high degree of repetition as a constructive principle. The brief lyrics refer to the *manik* rhea and to Chieftain José, remembered as the creator of this song. The lyrics are reiterated—one or two words at most per phrase—maintaining a strictly syllabic text-music relation. Each phrase iterates a rhythmic cell with little or no change of melody, in keeping with the textual iteration.

19. The imitative character of some Mocoví and Toba dances has never been documented before, although it is very frequent in the dances of hunter-gatherer groups (Citro 2003). The origin of these dances is often attributed to hunters' observations and the study of the physical characteristics, movements, and habits of each animal.

20. This is a form of declamatory speech-like singing as a closing.

The song concludes with the repetition of the word *lkalla*, on unisons on the penultimate variation and then in recitation with a glissando to the last note. The use of intervals structured on thirds and unisons results a three-pitch melody interrupted only by the declamatory voice at the conclusion.

Beyond the particularities of each song-dance and their variations through different performances, we can appreciate the structural aesthetic principle that organizes Guaycurú song-dances: the deeper articulation between the circular and repetitive character of the choreography and the iteration through minimal variations of the musical discourse. This principle reinforces the identity of a form that folds back onto itself. The repetition does not pursue the thematic goal of reaffirming an idea (as is the case of repetition in tonal music), but it evokes the image of the circle in the continuous use of rhythmic and melodic cells and choreographic units.

Towards the synthesis: Circular dances as sign of aboriginal identity

Guaycurú circular song-dances are a performing genre with similar aesthetic structures, but they have also developed different stylistic variations, cultural meanings, and social uses from group to group. We have seen how performative contexts produced variations in the sounds and movements, now we will try to demonstrate how these expressions also affect performers' lives, even beyond each performance event.

We believe that Toba and Mocoví circular song-dances became a sign of aboriginal identity through the iconic links promoted by their similar aesthetic structure, reinforced by successive performances. The articulation between the circular and repetitive character of the choreography and the iteration through minimal variations of the musical discourse is an aesthetic principle that evokes meanings of "community" and "permanence": the experience of belonging to a common group that persists through time. These "meanings" not only imply symbolic ideas in the interpretants, but also result in a fully felt embodied experience.

Dancing in rings, with the simultaneous repetition of the same movements and similar musical units, usually promotes fraternity and closeness. So these aesthetic forms could have induced the experience Turner (1982:45–48) calls "spontaneous *communitas*": "an unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals" that becomes "totally absorbed into a single, synchronized, fluid event." According to Turner (1974:54), this experience, opposed to social structural relationships, has a direct, egalitarian, and undifferentiated character, a predominance of emotion, play, and creativity. In "the mode of spontaneous *communitas*," people "feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved" (Turner 1982:48). In the Toba *Nmi*, feelings of camaraderie were especially related to the group of young men that organized the night meetings and "followed" their captains all together. Only gender relations set the performers apart, evident in their different roles at the beginning of the choreography. In the Mocoví case, when these dances were incorporated into Catholic rituals, these gender relations were blurred and similar roles and a wider community feeling were promoted.

The *bailes paisanos* are usually wistfully remembered by the Mocoví as a “shared community experience,” a practice where all were able to participate: “no one was slighted,” “there were no problems,” “everything was fine,” and “it seemed that everyone was at ease.” Although *paisano* dances were practised mostly by elders in the mid-twentieth century, seeing their elders’ circular dance has rekindled in the young a feeling of belonging to Mocoví culture. Thus, when these youngsters became elders in the early twenty-first century and the social context favoured the recovery of aboriginal expressions, they also began to practise these old dances. Promoting the perception of fleeting feelings of *communitas*, these dances have become an iconic sign of a Mocoví community with a shared history.

As for “permanence,” the aesthetic principle that organizes these musical and choreographic structures implies the experience of the cycle: a form that folds back onto itself with slight changes. This aesthetic principle is iconically linked to a cyclic concept of time as one of the key Guaycurú cosmological notions that permeates the cycles of nature, the social world, and their cosmogony. These song-dances were repeated every year, especially during spring and summer. These are times for the renovation of nature and also of the social bonds among kin groups. Moreover, several Guaycurú cosmogony myths describe how the world is reborn after successive destructions, thereby originating different species. As Cordeu (1969) points out, Guaycurú myths combine a substratum of the typical cosmogony of Amazonian hunter-gatherers with influences of the Andean cyclic concepts of time. Thus, in an iconic way these song-dances seem to evoke these cycles of closer relationships among humans, nature, and powerful non-human beings. Note that the iconic relation to forms of animals and non-humans appears in the choreographic movements and lyrics of some Toba and Mocoví dances and also in some of the musical parameters of shamanic songs.

In conclusion, these Toba and Mocoví circular song-dances address certain aspects of their cosmological world, as well as their experience of *communitas*, but these metaphorical meanings operate as “feelingfully synonymous” in an experience of “felt iconic wholeness” (Feld 1994:132, 150). Note that the different musical and choreographic parameters may be “meaningfully combined to produce a macrolevel sign, although the significance of certain components may be foregrounded in the musical context” (Turino 1999:237). In the Toba and Mocoví view, the circle is the musical and choreographic parameter foregrounded as sign of aboriginal identity. In this way, they were also able to differentiate their own aesthetic forms from other *criollo* folk genres, characterized by couple dances and other musical and temporal structures.

Iconic links can be reinforced, combined, or even confronted with other indexical links developed at each new performance. Therefore, new ideas, emotions, and social uses can be attached to this genre, according to the performers’ intentions, ritual contexts, and socio-political constrictions. The circular song-dances have promoted different indexical links, becoming a legitimate sign of a unified and idealized aboriginal identity among the Mocoví, and a controversial and disputed sign among the Toba.

Since the recent ethnic vindication process among the Mocoví, these dances have begun to be remembered and sometimes idealized as a fundamental communal experience that plays a key role in Mocoví cultural heritage. In this context, the memory of these dances, certainly also encouraged by our anthropological research and publications, became a political tool for legitimizing their cultural identity. As Alfredo Salteño clearly points out:

Because if we say we are the aborigines' descendants, we must have something at hand to prove our point. And that's why you see me here hugging my guitar, because I want to remember something of the music of our ancestors ... What is called *paisano* dance ... is something that touches our hearts deeply, all the way to our soul ... That's why I want to play these notes of the dance we once used to listen to from our elders. (Alfredo Salteño, interview, Colonia Dolores, August 2004)

Three years later, Alfredo not only played his guitar in front of the anthropologist's video camera, but also began to teach *bailes paisanos* to the youths of his village and all performed these dances together during the Santa Rosa feast. Thus, feelings and meanings embodied in previous performances are attached to these dances, increasing their emotional power as a "real" index of aboriginal identity.²¹ During their lives, Alfredo's generation developed contradictory feelings and ideas about this identity, from the old experience of "fear" transmitted by their parents, to the "embarrassment" in their youth, and finally to the present "pride" of "being Mocoví aborigines." These dances are directly connected to all these meanings, because "they are [indexical] signs of ... lives, not signs about them" (Turino 1999:236; italics in original). Nevertheless, as the indices are highly context-dependent, their effects can be guided by controlling the contexts of reception (Turino 1999). So, in the present context, the *bailes paisanos* seem to index an idealized and unified Mocoví community in order to legitimate and empower the performers' ethnic identity. For this reason, the gender, age, and even the dancing master and the performers' roles tend to be blurred in order to imagine and live the transient experience of ideal community. As Turner states, in these cases, cultural performances represent "the eye by which culture sees itself and a drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting 'designs for living'" (1987:24). Although the colonization processes are plagued with contradictions, rituals usually provide "an appropriate medium through which the values and structures of a contradictory world may be addressed and manipulated" (Comaroff 1985:196).

In contrast, among the Toba, the contradictory meanings and values linked to the *Nmi* have continued to persist, probably because the Evangelical context is also contradictory and there are no political movements of ethnic vindication. On the one hand, these dances are whimsical reminders of the gatherings of youths

21. As Turino (1999:229) observes: "Indices are experienced as 'real' because they are rooted, often redundantly, in one's own life experience and, as memory, become the actual mortar of ... personal or communal life ... they have special potential for creating direct emotional effects because they are often unreflexively apprehended as 'real' or 'true' parts of the experiences signified."

and are recognized as a central issue of “old aboriginal culture.” On the other, the dances are criticized, mainly for their sexual connotations, and condemned by Evangelical morals, and sometimes even for their aesthetic features. Old people usually contrast such expressions with *criollo* folk music. Dances such as the *Nmi* are disparaged because they had no lyrics, no accompanying musical instruments, and no musical variations, unlike *criollo* folk music. In the past, the Tobas’ white neighbours derisively called their performances “toad dances” because, they said, “the aborigines sang at night like toads.” Thus, these comments certainly favoured disparaging aesthetic evaluations.

The persistence of such contradictory meanings and feelings is clear in the case of the *Rueda*. Through this dance, young Toba resumed a circular pattern that operates as an iconic sign of the *Nmi*. Thus, the *Rueda* also carries all the indexical meanings of that old dance, especially the sexual intentions. In contrast, other parameters, such as the music played by guitar and the lyrics in Spanish, function as iconic signs of *criollo* folk music. In recent years, these contrasting signs have promoted differing opinions about the *Rueda* among Toba congregations. For some people it is a legitimate form of Evangelical “praise” that encourages the participation of the youth in churches. In contrast, other people frown upon the *Rueda* due to its links with the old circular dances, saying that the young try to seduce the women dancing at night, as in the *Nmi*. Furthermore, some people believe that young performers try to obtain “shamanic power,” because their clothes, headbands, and girdled chests are similar to those of elderly shamans. As Turino (1999:237) states, different parameters can “function as discrete signs that compliment, chafe, or contradict the other signs sounding at the same time—contributing to the power of a particular meaning, to new insights, or to emotional tension, respectively.” Such is the case for the *Rueda*, whose differential meanings have become a dynamic field of dispute and tension through which the performers and audiences try to reinforce or transform these gender and age relations.

Concluding remarks

We have analysed Toba and Mocoví circular song-dances and their socio-cultural contexts, confronting the approaches focused on music and dance as both aesthetic structures and performative processes. We have explored the capabilities of these expressions to represent—as a relatively stable aesthetic product—and also to produce and reshape—as a dynamic performance—certain aspects of social life, encompassing cultural meanings, knowledge, and embodied feelings. Our approach considers these expressions as performances that embody musical and danced structures characterized by iconic and indexical powers which transcend their present performances. Therefore, we show how these dances have turned into a key resource to conceal or enhance the performers’ identities as “aborigines.”

Collective circular dances that imply principles of repetition have been particularly suitable to represent and promote shared socio-cultural identities around the world, especially in small communities like those of the the Toba and Mocoví.

Like a wheel, these dances are cultural forms that always fold back, since a way to reach a *communitas* experience is required. Probably for this reason, the *Nmi* and the *bailes paisanos* are alive in the memories of the Toba and Mocoví, and have returned to their rituals.

Nowadays, collective circular dances are not only performed among traditional ethnic groups. Lately, a multicultural dance practice called “circular dances” began to spread among groups of urban performers.²² In Buenos Aires, such circular dances began to be performed in the late 1990s, mainly among the middle classes in relation to the alternative practices of the New Age movement. In order to reach a *communitas* experience and “spiritual” or “sacred” states, these training courses combine elements from many cultures, especially Greek, Israeli, Hindu, Celtic, Muslim, and different European folk circular dances. Maybe some day, when aboriginal expressions become better known in our country, they will also incorporate the *Nmi* or the *Manik* into their repertoires and “Argentiniens” will consider themselves descendants not only “from the ships,” but also “from this land.”

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22. This practice began in the 1970s in Germany with the work of the dancer and choreographer Bernhard Wosien. It is practised today in Germany, the USA, United Kingdom, Spain, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, and other countries.

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Abstract in Spanish

“Las danzas aborígenes siempre fueron en ronda”:
Música y danza como signo de identidad en el Chaco argentino

En este artículo analizamos los cantos-danzas circulares, uno de los géneros performativos dominantes en los rituales aborígenes del Chaco argentino, focalizando en la comparación entre los Tobas y Mocovíes. Examinaremos las estructuras estéticas y los procesos performativos de estas expresiones, incluyendo el rol de nuestra investigación. A partir de la discusión sobre el potencial icónico e indexical de la música y la danza, mostraremos cómo estas expresiones evocan algunos aspectos de su mundo cosmológico y de su experiencia de comunidades, y cómo se han convertido en un signo legitimante de una unificada e idealizada “identidad aborígen,” en el caso Mocoví, y en un controvertido y disputado signo identitario, en el caso Toba.