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# 86 Ethnoastronomy in the Multicultural Context of the Agricultural Colonies in Northern Santa Fe Province, Argentina

Armando Mudrik



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**Abstract**

In this paper, we present a study about cultural astronomy among European colonists and their Argentinean descendants, in the context of a complex interaction between *criollos*, aboriginals and European colonists from different origins and religions, who settled in the northern area of the Argentinean province of Santa Fe, which is part of the southern Gran Chaco. These colonists arrived among waves of immigration occurring in Argentina in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Through ethnographic field research among these immigrants and their descendants, we carried out a survey of their astronomical representations and practices, and the connections of these with their social life and farming tasks. Through this we gained an insight as to how the astronomical ideas of immigrants, *criollos* and aboriginal groups influenced each other, generating a variety of new relations with the celestial realm.

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## Introduction

This paper represents a small part of a wider study about cultural astronomy among *criollos* and the various European immigrant groups who settled in the Argentinean Chaco. This study is within the larger framework of an enterprise being carried out by many researchers to thoroughly investigate cultural astronomy in the Chaco region, to build a more complete context for understanding how the astronomy of specific *chaqueños* aboriginal groups relates to the astronomical ideas of immigrants and *criollos* settled in this region (see ▶ Chap. 85, "Chaqueña Astronomy").

Our investigation involved ethnographic field research in the rural area of Santurce, an agricultural colony founded in 1887, now a village with about 120 inhabitants; and in the town of Moisés Ville, the first Jewish agricultural colony in Argentina established in 1889, now with 2,500 inhabitants (Guelbert de Rosenthal 2008). Both are in the north of the Argentinean province of Santa Fe, in the department of San Cristóbal. This region belongs to what is called the Chaco Santafesino, in the south of Gran Chaco.

Indigenous groups already lived in these areas when the immigrants arrived. They were the *Guaycuru* groups, that included the *Abipones*, *Mocovíes* and *Tobas*, who have inhabited the northern region of Santa Fe at least since the end of the seventeenth century and continued to subsist by hunting and gathering, even after the arrival of the immigrants (Giménez Benítez et al. 2002). These groups often lived amongst the colonists, influencing them.

Between 1868 and 1872, the "línea de fortines" – a line of forts or national security establishments extending along the national frontier (Ceruti and Cocco 1998) – was erected in order to consolidate the occupation of this region, which was part of the aboriginal territory, later repopulating it with European immigrants settled in agricultural colonies (Ruggeroni 2006). In this context, the term "colonization" refers to a social process devised by the State in order to occupy the low-population areas by bringing in European immigrants to undertake agriculture and cattle raising. Waves of immigration took place from the mid-nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century (Gori 1988). The State hoped that the European immigrants would act as a "civilizing force" (Juliano 1987).

There were many kinds of immigrants. In the case of our study, some of the Italian non-Jewish colonists were farmers and others were craftsmen back in Europe. Not all of them were spontaneous, independent emigrants, some were selected in Europe by colonizing companies and entrepreneurs, to be relocated in specific agricultural colonies (Gori 1958). The Jewish immigrants were Ashkenazim from East and Central Europe (Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland and Germany), some were Hasidim and others were Mitnadim; in Europe they were not farmers but professionals, merchants, or in some cases, rabbis and scribes of the Torah ("soifers"). These Jewish families were selected in Europe by the Jewish Colonization Association and relocated in its agricultural colonies in Argentina (Cociovitch 2005). By examining the conditions of life for the colonists both before and after their immigration, we can better comprehend their

**Fig. 86.1** Nestor A. Cuaglini, informant of the rural area of Santurce, burning wood in his firewood stove, for cooking bread. April 2012. (Source: author's archive)

understanding of the sky and the relationship between this and their farming practices at both stages.

The different European immigrant groups and their Argentinean descendants, who were present in the colonies comprehended in this paper, interacted among themselves and also with *criollos* from the region, who were often hired as farm workers by the "colonized" families (Gori 1947). To these complex interactions, we must add up the relationship with the *Guaycuru* groups, who were displaced by the advance of the agricultural frontier, becoming sedentary and seasonal farmhands (Dalla-Corte Caballero 2012). This variety of identities and socio-cultural relationships characterize the multicultural context of the agricultural colonies in this region of the South American Gran Chaco.

## The Ethnographic Work

We gathered information about many astronomical representations and practices through ethnographic field research. Part of this fieldwork was done among children and grandchildren of Italian immigrants "colonized" in Santurce Colony in the beginning of the twentieth century, who are still living and working in the rural area of this village (Fig. 86.1); and another part was done in Moisés Ville among Jewish

immigrants from East and Central Europe and their kin, and descendants of Italians from Piemonte, all of them settled in the beginning and mid twentieth century in Virginia, Moisés Ville, Monigotes and Capivara Colonies. Although they all live in Moisés Ville, some of them still work in the rural area. Those interviewed in both of these localities form a representative sample of the settled communities.

We visited informants' homes and carried out open-ended interviews with one or more informants together. Our methods included surveying life histories in an effort to link astronomical knowledge to the socialization processes of the colonists and their descendants, encouraging informants to draw astronomical representations, participating in local activities with the informants, taking photos, and recording audio and video conversations. Along with the ethnographical work, we have tracked previous documentary sources, which we have analyzed from comparative and ethnohistorical perspectives (Hammersley and Atkinson 1994; see ▶ Chap. 30, "Cultural Interpretation of Ethnographic Evidence Relating to Astronomy").

## The Celestial Rhea: *el ñandú*

Among the astronomical representations registered in Santurce, we found two particular asterisms located in the Milky Way, both denominated *el ñandú*, which represent a *Greater Rhea* (*Rhea americana*), a flightless bird found in this region.

For some informants *el ñandú* is represented "with stars in the Milky Way", "a little bit away from *la cruz del sur* (southern cross)"; while for other informants *el ñandú* is a stretched asterism formed by the union of *the* Milky Way's dark clouds, whose "head" is close to *la cruz del sur* (Fig. 86.2), and has a "little eye" represented by a "red star". According to these informants, the observation of this *ñandú* formed by "dark spots along the Milky Way", in a certain moment of the year, is associated with rain periods. It is important to mention that all the informants assured us that *el ñandú* was pointed out to them in their childhood by their parents or by *los antiguos*, referring to the first relatives settled in the area.

It is interesting to recognize firstly that among *chaqueños* aboriginal groups, like *Mocovíes* and *Tobas*, we also found a celestial representation of a rhea called *Mañic*, the master of the *Greater Rheas* (*mañic*); secondly that it is also identified by two different asterisms: the stellar *Mañic*, symbolized by the southern cross, and the milky *Mañic*, corresponding to an extended region of the sky formed by Milky Way's dark clouds (Fig. 86.2). In this case, the *Mañic*'s head is identified by the Coalsack, and its body is stretched up to dark zones in the Scorpius constellation (Lehmann-Nitsche 1924, 1927). Thirdly, it is relevant to note that among our informants and also among *Guaycuru* groups, there are accounts that relate the celestial rhea to the rain (Giménez Benítez et al. 2002).

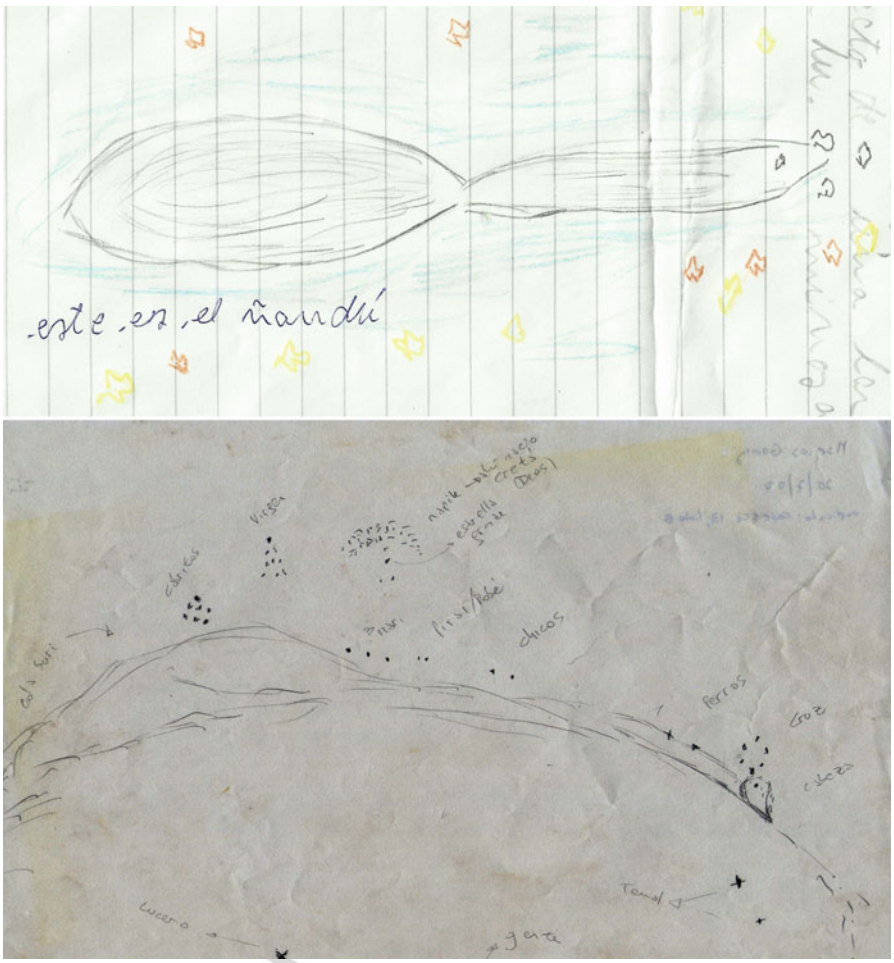


**Fig. 86.2** *Up*: Drawing of *el ñandú* formed by milk way's dark clouds, done by Hilda N. Matter de Cuaglini. Gathered by the author in March 2012, in Santurce. *Down*: drawing of the milky *Mañic*, done by Marcos Gómez, a *mocoví* from Colonia Cacique Catán, in southwest of Chaco province. Gathered by Sixto Giménez Benítez and Alejandro López in July 2002

Based on life histories we have recovered in our fieldwork, we have developed the hypothesis that the celestial representations of *el ñandú* were incorporated by the European colonists and their descendants in Santurce, through relationships established in the work sphere and in daily life with *criollos* from the area, who were descendants of the *chaqueños* aboriginal groups. It is possible that these asterisms were incorporated due to the need for a time marker in this new environment that could alert the new inhabitants to the natural cycles, such as the rain periods, very important for agricultural activities.

## The Moon: Agrarian Calendar and Identity

Among the information about the astronomical practices gathered in Moisés Ville, we found many practices that related the observation of the lunar cycle to the execution of certain agricultural activities (Mudrik 2011). In these practices, the role of the moon in the agricultural cycle conceived by some colonists becomes evident. Most of these practices have also been noted among farmers in Europe (Iwaniszewski 2006).

According to informants who are descendants of Piemontese colonists, different agricultural activities are coordinated with different Moon phases. For example, the waxing phase is considered the best time to plant vegetables "that develops upwards" (such as lettuce, corn, cabbage and parsley). However, Alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) cultivation is only carried out during the waning phase. This is due to the observance that animals who fed on Alfalfa planted during the waxing phase "got flatulence". Trees are felled for firewood during the waning phase so that the wood "will not spoil"; also animals are castrated and slaughtered at this time, so they "have less blood" and "the meat will not spoil as fast", respectively. Therefore, the moon's phase changes are a time marker that determines an agrarian calendar.

We also found among Piemontese descendants the term *luna buena* (good moon), which is used to refer to the moon phase that is good to carry out a certain activity, thus giving the moon, in this case, a qualitative characteristic in marking certain time periods. According to these informants, all these ideas were transmitted orally and through practice.

On the other hand, among Jewish immigrant colonists and their descendants, we have not found the use of the moon in choosing the proper time to carry out agricultural activities. However, many of these informants recognize that they have incorporated only the practice of Alfalfa cultivation during the waning phase, as advised by neighbors who were Piemontese colonists, or by Piemontese farmhands hired by the Jewish colonists (Fig. 86.3). This kind of relationship between Jewish and Piemontese colonists was very common in the Jewish colonies studied (Bizberg 1941), and moreover, the Alfalfa cultivation was the most important economic activity in this colonies, during the first half of the twentieth century (Cociovitch 2005).

It is interesting to note that all the Jewish informants see the use of the moon as a time marker for carrying out agricultural activities as an exclusive practice of Piemontese colonists and *criollos*. This construction becomes evident if we consider firstly the previous relationship that the Jewish immigrants had between the sky and agriculture, and secondly, the different role of the moon in the Jewish tradition, precisely in sacred matters regarding the Jewish calendar (see ▶ Chap. 195, "Ancient and Medieval Jewish Calendars".

Therefore, in this case, we see how astronomical practices become part of the identity of the groups involved. The uses of the moon represent a system of values, with which a group classifies itself and the others (Cardoso de Oliveira 1976).

**Fig. 86.3** Jewish colonists and Italian and *criollo* farmhands, next to a haystack of Alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) at the end of its harvest, in Virginia Colony, 1949. (Source: historic and Communal Museum of Jewish colonization "Rabino Aarón Halevi Goldman", Moisés Ville, Santa Fe – Argentina)

## Conclusion

The presence of immigrants with different kinds of previous contact with the sky, and with different agricultural practices, generated a variety of new relations with the celestial realm after they arrived in South America. The astronomical knowledge has been interchanged between different groups in the agricultural colonies of this region in Argentinean Chaco. Astronomical practices and representations were incorporated by some groups, according to the needs generated in this new environment. This research intends to add to the understanding of how the processes of cultural interaction affect the social production of astronomical knowledge in the context of Chaco region, and also the interpretation of how the European colonists and their kin interacted with their new environments: natural and socio-cultural. All the points investigated in this paper create interesting routes to access not only the cultural astronomy of these different groups and matters regarding identity determination but also other issues to be developed in future research works, such as those related to authority conflicts, leadership construction, and the processes of constructing and interpreting traditions in a multicultural context.

## Cross-References

► Ancient and Medieval Jewish Calendars
► Chaqueña Astronomy
► Cultural Interpretation of Ethnographic Evidence Relating to Astronomy

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