

# **‘Service Providers or Transnational Campaigners?: A comparative Study Between the Colombian and Bolivian Migrant Associations in the UK’**

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Latin Americans are one of the fastest growing communities in the UK and one that is largely overlooked by migration scholars. Latin American communities in the UK, however, have started organising and creating a wide-range of associations that provide services to the community and/or maintain ties with their countries of origin. What accounts for the creation of migrant organisations in the British context? How do migrant organisations differ among Latin American communities? Our inquiry into these questions addresses how the type of organisational activities of migrant communities are determined by both causes related to the country of origin – geographic origin, culture and cause of migration – and the way migrant communities have settled in the country of reception – context of reception, level of cohesion within the community and expectation of return. As we show through a comparative analysis of the Colombian and Bolivian communities in the UK, migrant communities such as the case of Colombians, who mainly come from urban origins, have experienced a violent conflict back home and find themselves in a disadvantaged status in Britain tend to create migrant organisations that provide community services as well as get involved in political activities (i.e. campaign for amnesties in the country of reception or influence political developments at home). The more recently-arrived Bolivian community in the UK, on the other hand, whose members come from mainly rural areas and experience high levels of community division tend to create hometown associations in order to recreate cultural and social experiences from their region of origin and along ethnic lines as well as to maintain strong ties with the country of origin.

## **Extended Abstract**

The creation of migrant associations and their activities have recently received increasing attention from the academia[1-3]. Most studies tend to focus on migrant associations’ activities in the host country as well as their transnational linkages with their countries or regions of origin. Most research on the organisational nature of migrant communities, however, has been carried out among migrant communities in the United States, in particular, the case of Mexican migrant clubs and hometown associations [4-8]. There has been a specific focus on the donations sent by Latin American migrant clubs in the US towards public-related work in their communities of origin[9, 10]. In Europe, however, few studies have analysed the activities of migrant associations in this side of the Atlantic [11-13] and only one has systematically attempted to explain the determinants of the formation of migrant associations within the European context. Soysal’s ‘Limits of Citizenship’ offers a cross-nationally comparative analysis of the main European immigration countries’ integration and migration policies and how they influence the way migrant communities organise. None the less, it falls short of explaining why migrant communities’ associations and clubs differ so much even if they exist within the same context and come from the same world region.

This paper, thus, has as primary objective to compare the organisational nature of migrant communities in the same country of reception and from the same region of origin. The Colombian and Bolivian migrant organisations offer us the tools to find out what are the main determinants that explain the formation and the type of migrant associations that come into being within different migrant communities. We rely on in-depth unstructured interviews with Colombian and Bolivian community leaders that have been carried out since May 2007. In addition, we have carried out a 60 UK-residents Bolivian and Colombian nationals survey sample to find out the demographic characteristics of both communities in the UK.

### 1.1. Setting the context: the Colombian and Bolivian communities in the UK

Colombian migration to the UK started in the mid 70's as a consequence of a governmental program created to alleviate the shortage of workers in three specific areas: domestic services, hotel and catering industry and health workers. From 1975 until 1979, when the work permit scheme ended, it is thought that more than 6,000 Colombians arrived and settled in the UK.

The second wave of migration took place between 1980 – 1986 and was characterized by the arrival of relatives and friends of those who migrated during the previous period. Most of the new arrivals entered the country as students or tourists and overstayed their visas then becoming undocumented migrants; however, there are also reports of Colombians that were smuggled into the country via Dover or through using false documentation (i.e. forged Spanish, Venezuelan or Mexican passports).

If previously the majority of Colombians left the country in order to escape the country's economic crisis, the next phase (1986- 1997) was characterized by the migration of thousands of Colombians that were fleeing from violence and political persecution. The situation of violence in Colombia deteriorated dramatically during this period and, as a consequence, it is known that approximately more than 20,000 Colombians sought for asylum in 26 different countries. In the UK's case, the asylum applications raised from 15 in 1986 to 1,185 in 1997 for a total of 4,233.

Despite the escalation of the armed conflict, the high number of internally displaced population due to the violence and the recognition of Colombia as one of the most dangerous countries in the world that until today characterize the country's political situation, there is the perception from the British authorities that Colombians are foremost economic migrants; this is reflected in the high number of asylum applications rejected and the increasing barriers implemented for Colombians trying to leave Colombia or apply for asylum. For instance, in 1997 Colombians were required a Visa permit to enter the UK and as a result asylum applications dropped to 425; this measure was reinforced by the implementation of a Transit visa in 2000 which saw the applications steadily falling from 360 in 2001 to only 50 in the first quarter of 2005. In the same manner, the percentage of applications that gained refugee status was incredibly low; between 1992-1996 the refusal rate was 93% and the average number of Colombians granted exceptional leave to remain on initial decision in 1993-2001 was 27, whereas 536 were refused and during 2004 and 2005 only 9 were granted asylum. Among the reasons brought up by the authorities to justify the low level of approvals are: 1) insufficient or excessive (suspicious) proves; 2) it has not been recognized that Colombian is going through a civil war, 3)

Colombians can seek refuge in closer countries (safe third country grounds) and 4) Colombian migration is caused by economic rather than political reasons.<sup>1</sup>

Since the possibility of successfully applying as a refugee is very limited and the constraints imposed to economic migrants are every day more difficult to surmount, Colombian migrants have returned to using migration practices that were popular during the second wave, as such we can see how the number of students and tourists that overstay their visas have increased. Unfortunately, a high number of Colombians that left their country fleeing the violence and poverty will find it impossible to cope with the economic constraints of paying for schools or universities fees and visa renewals, due to the fact that almost 70% of their monthly income is used to support families back in Colombia and to pay for the huge debts in which they incurred in order to leave and they will eventually become undocumented migrants.

The majority of the undocumented migrants and failed asylum seekers reside in London. The reason is that this city is the only city with a big and strong network to support this type of population. However, the community is going through a period of impoverishment (finding a job has become more difficult than in the past) and social tension and instability (the police has strengthened the persecution against Colombian irregular migrants thus affecting the forms of solidarity and protection that the community developed during the first waves of migration and settlement. Cases of Colombians being exploited by other Colombians is something sadly common nowadays). In spite of the difficult situation that the population face in the UK the thought of returning is perhaps not the first option if taken into account that thousands of Colombians families have a better standard of living due to the remittances sent back home.

Despite the difficult conditions of exit, reception and settlement Colombians have learnt how to adapt and make the best out of the adversity; proof of that is the complex network of social services, media, recreation, business that today positions the Colombian community as one of the best organized and prosperous if compared with other Latin American communities.

In contrast to the Colombian community, the Bolivians are the new migrants from Latin America. Although Bolivians started arriving in London in the late 1960's, it is only in the last 5 to 3 years that the number of Bolivians have significantly increased. The exact number of Bolivians who currently reside in the UK is unknown as there are many that have an irregular migration status. According to the 2001 census, there were 1,142 Bolivian-born people living in the UK; 57 percent female and 43 percent male. Community leaders estimate, however, that there are up to 25,000 Bolivian-born people living in this country. Many Latin American community organisations in London report that they serve twice as many Bolivian nationals as they used to three years ago. According to Latin American community workers and service providers, Bolivian nationals now account for about 25% of the total number of their clients or members.

Two waves of Bolivian migration to the UK can be identified. The first Bolivians came to the UK to escape the military coups and juntas that took place in Bolivia from the late 1960's to the late 70's. They numbered approximately 500 to 1,000 and are now long-term residents in the UK and the majority of whom have acquired British

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<sup>1</sup> All the information was obtained from the study 'Colombians in London: A diversity of narratives on migration, identity and community formation' by Adriana Castro. University of Birmingham, 2007

citizenship. The second migration wave resulted from the economic crises which have ripped the country since the mid 1980's until today. According to the World Bank (2006), nearly two thirds of Bolivians currently live below the poverty line. Initially Bolivians preferred to migrate to neighbouring countries such as Argentina and Brazil as well as the United States. However, Argentina's unstable economic situation and the stricter visa regulations in the US have pushed Bolivians to explore new destinations mainly within Europe. Spain remains the main country of reception of Bolivian immigrants in Europe followed by the UK. As respondents signalled, Spain is chosen on the basis of a common language, which facilitates adapting to the new country and finding work. On the other hand, many Bolivians see Spain only as an entry point to Europe and the UK as a final destination. Research reveals that there is a widespread perception among Bolivians that the UK offers better opportunities to find better-paid jobs as well as having a more tolerant and welcoming society.

According to key informants recent arrivals enter the UK by legal means rather than by clandestine routes. Bolivians generally come to the UK with a student visa or apply for a tourist visa upon arrival. A large number of Bolivians recently arrived have either overstayed their visa or work more hours than they are permitted under a student visa. As it has been mentioned in interviews, recent arrivals come to the UK mainly to work and send remittances home and do not plan to settle down permanently in this country. Very few Bolivians apply for asylum in the UK, according to key informants only 50 to 100 a year. Thus, the main difference between Bolivians who arrived in the late 1960's and 1970's and more recent arrivals is that the former have mostly acquired British citizenship and have settled permanently in the UK and the latter are mainly economic migrants who expect to return home eventually.

The Bolivian community is characterised by high levels of separation. Divisions exist due to time of residence in the UK, that is to say, between long-term residents and recent arrivals. More established Bolivians and those with a longer period of residence in the UK seem to be well organised. On the other hand, more recently arrived Bolivian nationals do not have a good command of English, which affects their opportunities to find work and in some cases makes them vulnerable to abuses in their workplace (i.e. no pay, longer working hours, etc.).

In addition, interviewees mentioned that divisions at home caused by region of origin within Bolivia, ethnicity and class structure are also recreated in the UK, albeit to a limited degree. In particular, community leaders mentioned that there was a strong disunity between 'Kollas', a term coined to refer to Bolivians from the highlands who are mainly of indigenous descent and 'Cambas', those who come from the tropical lowlands who are mainly mestizo (mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage) and of Spanish descent. This distinction is felt in the composition of the various Bolivian dance and music groups that participate in the various Latin American festivals in the UK (i.e. 'el Carnaval del Pueblo') whose members seem to be from either one of the two groups but rarely mixed. Younger Bolivians in London, however, seem to attempt to overcome such differences. Secondly, in-depth interviews revealed that there is a marked distinction according to social classes that is also reflected in the areas where Bolivians choose to live and gather. Whereas working-class Bolivians concentrate in poorer areas in Southeast London, more affluent Bolivians converge in North London areas and in places where there is not a marked Bolivian presence.

## 2.1. Preliminary findings

### 2.2.1. Colombian migrant associations in the UK

In the Colombian case, the community formation process seems to be delimited by a strong alliance to boundaries that resembles the cultural patterns under which 'community' is structured in the original territory. Therefore, aspects such as class, 'race' and region of origin are the main aspects to be considered when the individual chooses the group that they want to be part of.

Among the literature reviewed the two most important conclusions regarding the characteristics of the Colombian community abroad are 1) that it resembles the cultural patterns under which the Colombian society is structured and 2) that the community is fragmented and it is not possible to find a sense of commonality linked to a collective identity. In fact, these two aspects represent the basis under which identity, social interaction and community formation are structured. Initially, the particular process of conquest, colony and independence that Colombia underwent left a social organization principally founded on the categories of 'race', class and region of origin: the boundary formation process within those categories fractured the country forming different realities with its own common memory, foundational narratives, cosmologies and aesthetics, making it difficult to find a common narrative able to congregate around a collective identity. This is such a representative aspect of the Colombian culture that the population in London resembles the same configuration.

Therefore, the analysis of the Colombian community has to start with the recognition of its social boundaries and the relational and oppositional nature of collective identities' (Amit and Rappaport 2002: 45). As we have seen, within the Colombian population it is possible to find different 'communities' built upon notions of socio-cultural similarity. This aspect not only serves as a generator of a strong sense of group solidarity, it is also the representation of a 'categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and construction of otherness' (Ibid 2002: 46).<sup>2</sup>

The diversity of symbolic and physical spaces that the community has created in London is an expression of the 'structural diversity' that I have mentioned before. Different notions of 'origin' and locations of belonging are the basis of Colombian community formation. Furthermore, the self-identification to specific 'origins' among the community leads each sphere to conceive itself as the 'representation of the Colombian-ness' and, as a result, to exclude cultural practices and aesthetics that do not fit within this imaginary of ethno-national culture.

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<sup>2</sup>In explaining the concept of 'community' from a post-structuralist approach it is impossible not to mention the important work of Anthony P. Cohen and his book, 'The Symbolic construction of Community'. Within the many important ideas that Cohen develops it could be useful to start with the notion that communities are best approached as a 'communities of meaning'. In his work Cohen argues that 'community is based on the symbolic construction of boundaries...by which the community differentiates itself from others. Symbolization is the affirmation of the existing order of the community by boundary formation' (Delanty 2003: 46). As Cohen (1985: 15) states 'community is just such a boundary-expressing symbol', but these symbols are also the expression of cultural patterns, and in this sense the ascription to the individual to a particular community depends on the sense of identification that the individual finds in the symbols around which the community is structured.

Furthermore, the community's socio-cultural configuration has affected the mechanisms that Colombians create to protect and support its diaspora. We can see how political and social organizations are ascribed to different spheres of the community and, as such, function independently from one another. The main difficulty has been to find a point of suture, a consensus about what Colombians are and from there being able to congregate the community around the pursuit of its welfare in London. As Guarnizo (1999: 421) states, 'Colombians have not found a common conscience- or *gemeinschaft* – a totality of belief and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society independent of the particular conditions in which individuals are placed'.

Other aspect that has been important in the process of community formation is the marginal location of the Colombian community within the 'host' society, as well as the imaginaries created around Colombian and Latin American culture. For many Colombians, this has served as a generator of strong social networks and solidarity, on the contrary, for others it is a burden that leads them to break any link that, at least, publicly, relates them to their origins.

Colombians in London suffer the contradictions embedded in the host society around issues of multiculturalism and the treatment given to ethnic minorities. Hence, when the aim is to make a political statement about 'multicultural London', we can see British politicians, leaders, media or public participating and praising cultural activities that the community has created in London (e.g., Carnaval del Pueblo, Latin American Film Festival) but when it is needed to design and implement policies orientated to control immigration this 'multicultural togetherness' disappears. Therefore, for many Colombians it is difficult to understand why in some cases their origins and culture are admired but in others the same aspects are used to marginalise, segregate, exclude and diminish them.

From this point of view, the lack of integration within the community and to the host society can be seen as a reaction to policies of exclusion and cultural racism that it faces in London.

### 2.2.2. Bolivian migrant associations in the UK

Bolivian migrant associations vary significantly among the different Bolivian groups according to time of residence in the host country, social class and region of origin in Bolivia. Bolivian national long-term residents in the UK have two main organisations 'Friends of Bolivia' and the 'Anglo-Bolivian Society' that organise mainly academic, cultural and social events in affluent areas in London that cater for this group and the English public. On the other hand, even though recently arrived Bolivians represent a community that is close-knit, they still do not have any Bolivian society that represents them in contrast to other Latin American communities in the UK (i.e. Colombian and Ecuadorian communities). Therefore, most Bolivians seek advice in community organisations and use services founded and run mainly by Colombians where Spanish is spoken. This is one of the main concerns among Bolivian community leaders because, as they mentioned, most community workers are not fully aware of the problems that face Bolivian nationals and are foreign to the Bolivian culture and beliefs. At the time of writing, significant efforts are currently being made by Bolivian community leaders with the support of the Bolivian embassy to set up a Bolivian Society that would attend the needs of the community as well as maintaining links with Bolivia.

In addition, there seems to be an important distinction between the type of organisations set up by Bolivians from the highlands ('Kollas') and those from the tropical lowlands ('Cambas'). Bolivian migrants from the highlands, for instance, tend to create more hometown associations and dance and music groups to recreate cultural experiences from their communities of origin.

Migrant communities, however, are not fixed entities. They are also in constant process of transformation and adaptation, not only due to external factors, such as the way they are treated by the host society or trigger mechanisms that define its dynamics of integration or isolation but also internal factors, such as the heterogeneity of its members, delineate the forms under which the community is structured.

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