

Travel and the Homeland Connection : American Colonists in Mexico

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Abstract : People have settled away from their homelands for many centuries. Something that characterizes these various groups is their societal longing for the motherland. Some scholars argue that this longing becomes even more profound as the world becomes more globalized, modernized, and fast-paced. People need their roots to be able to cope with their present condition. This short case study examines one particular American religious group that migrated from its US-based homeland in the late 1800s and has been successful in preserving its Anglo-American identity in Mexico amid a Hispanic society through a variety of social mechanisms, including tourism. The paper examines the forms of travel undertaken by the descendants of these original American colonists and how travel underscores the identity, territory, and loyalty of place that defines the American 'homeland'.

Keywords: Mexico, United States, Mormon colonies, Diaspora tourism, Identity

Introduction

People need a sense of belonging. Migrants from all over the world are known for keeping connections to their original homeland alive through various activities, communications, travel, and family networks. Migrant populations desire a sense of rootedness to be able to understand their own heritage, where they are from, and how they fit in with their present social surroundings (Hollinshead 1998; Lowenthal 1998). To be disconnected from their original homeland can be traumatic for some diasporic peoples, characterized by a never-ending search for who they are, where they fit in, and a constant feeling of being 'hyphenated' (e.g. African-American or Pakistani-Brits). Such states of 'in-betweenness' create identity crises among peoples who may not feel African or American, British or Pakistani (Coles and Timothy 2004). One outcome of this hyphenated identity crisis is the preponderance of migrant groups to surround themselves with like-cultured people and to maintain ties to the old country, largely through travel

and other social networks.

Cultural geographers have had a long interest not only in migration but also in the development of culture regions and domestic homelands. Much of this work has taken place in North America. This paper presents a case study of one particular group of Anglo-American emigrants who settled small, agricultural villages (colonias) in northern Mexico. It focuses primarily on the group's socio-spatial connections to its homeland (the western US states and Mormon Culture Region) and examines cross-border travel as one of the group's most salient means of retaining its ties to the American homeland.

Culture Regions and Homeland Connections

According to Gieryn (2000), most conceptualizations of place involve three components: geographic location, material form, and investments with meaning and value. Places are located in geographical space; places have "physicality" (material form); and places are perceived as meaningful by individuals and social groups. Places often give inhabitants or visitors a sense of belonging and meaning, sometimes referred to as place attachment or sense of place, and entails bonds between place and people through emotion or feeling, cognition through knowledge or beliefs, and practice through action and behavior (Gustafson 2002: 23).

The concept of rootedness has long been an important metaphor for place attachment in western society. As Malkki (1992) points out, roots is part of a symbolism that links people to place, and identity to territory. In this context, rootedness signifies emotional bonds with the physical environment but often also contains notions of local community and shared culture. In Gustafson's (2002) thinking, roots involves not only place, but emotional bonds to that place. One of the most salient manifestations of this is the notion of a culture region, or an identifiable area where certain distinctive cultural characteristics dominate the human landscape and society. Since the 1990s, cultural geographers have attempted to refine this geographical concept by delineating domestic homelands in the United States, suggesting that homelands are more linked to the notion of place attachment or rootedness than traditional culture regions. The domestic homeland is,

according to Hurt (2003:21), "a tightly knit ethnic community that occupies limited territory, creates a distinctive cultural landscape, at least partially segregates itself socially or spatially from other communities in order to maintain unique forms of cultural life and history, and invests that space with an emotional loyalty that includes defending group space". More than a dozen of these 'homelands' have been identified in the United States by cultural geographers in recent years.

In 2001, Michael Conzen attempted to clarify the idea of homelands by suggesting that their characteristics can best be couched within a broader, threefold set of conceptual attributes: cultural identity, territoriality, and loyalty. In his study of an American homeland, Bennion (2001) highlighted the Mormon Culture Region of the US west, which includes Utah and parts of Idaho, Oregon, Colorado, Arizona, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Nevada, with a small appendage extending across the border into northern Mexico (Francaviglia 1978; Jackson and Layton 1976; Meinig 1965). Smith and White (2004) investigated the two remaining small Anglo-Mormon settlements in northern Mexico against the three conceptual dimensions of Conzen (2001). In their words, "no term within the geographic lexicon captures the essence of people's deep-seated feelings of attachment to place better than the concept of homeland" (Smith and White 2004: 59). Their study found that the residents of Colonia Dublán and Colonia Juárez, both populated by third-, fourth- and fifth-generation Anglo-Mormon colonists, have deep-rooted attachments to their cross-border homeland in the western United States.

While most of the literature on homelands has dealt with domestic homelands, there is increased recognition of the importance of cross-border migration and the diasporic groups that settle elsewhere. With this growing awareness in the cultural, geographical, and migration studies spheres, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of migrant-homeland connections through travel and various social networks by tourism scholars, many of whom have studied tourism and personal connections to place, rootedness, rootlessness, and national identity (Basu 2004; Coles and Timothy 2004; Lev Ari and Mittelberg 2008; Maruyama et al. 2010; Timothy 1997; 2008).

The Anglo-Mormons of Mexico

From the early 1840s until 1890, a minority of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon Church or LDS Church) practiced polygamy for various social and religious reasons. However, in 1882, the US government outlawed the practice, and the Church banned polygamy in 1890. After 1890, plural marriages were not performed; however, the plural families that already existed were permitted to live out their familial obligations for the rest of their lives, although they could not do so in the United States. As a result, a number of polygamous families departed the US, settling in Canada and Mexico. In Mexico they established eight colonies (colonias) in the states of Chihuahua and Sonora. The colonies were abandoned early in the 1900s with the intensification of the Mexican Revolution (Hatch 1954; Romney 1938). Following the war, approximately one quarter of the colonists returned to only two of the settlements: Colonia Dublán and Colonia Juárez, both in the state of Chihuahua, 110 and 125 km south of the US border, respectively.

Today there are between 2,500 and 3,000 inhabitants in the two villages (including Hispanics), and while the Anglos still dominate the local populations, there has been a steady influx of non-Anglo Mexicans since the mid 1900s, with some of them converting to Mormonism in intervening years. Polygamy is no longer practiced anywhere in the church, including Mexico, but the descendents of the original settlers still dominate the local demographics, and most are full-fledged Mexican citizens. These 'displaced persons' in the village of Colonia Juárez are the focus of this case study.

Methods

To expand the research by Smith and White (2004) among American colonists in Chihuahua, Mexico, a case-study approach was adopted and data were collected in Colonia Juárez in December 2006 and January 2007. Research was done only among the village's Anglo residents, because of their potential connection to the American homeland.

Three primary data-collection methods were used. First, in-depth interviews were conducted among community leaders and community

members at large, utilizing a snowball sampling method. The end result was 25 key-informant interviews. Second, observations and field notes were employed systematically to examine how the homeland concept and Colonia Juárez residents might be visually connected to the United States, much the same way Smith and White (2004) did in their study. Finally, a self-administered survey was conducted with the drop and collect technique, where the questionnaire was left with respondents and picked up later. All 119 Anglo households in Colonia Juárez were contacted by telephone using a community telephone list. All agreed to participate in the study; subsequently, questionnaires were delivered to all residences in person. This approach worked well, resulting in 107 returned and usable surveys, for a response rate of 89.9 percent. In the survey, participants were asked about their personal relationships with the United States and Mexico and their travel patterns to the United States. All of the respondents were over 18 years of age; 45% were male and 55% female.

The USA Homeland Travel Experience

The first of Conzen's (2001) character sets is cultural identity. Clearly religion is an important part of Colonia Juárez's cultural identity, for nearly everyone in the community are active participants in the LDS faith, including a growing portion of the Hispanic residents. In fact their *raison d'être* as an Anglo island in a sea of Mexicans was their religious heritage. Aside from the obvious faith connection, Smith and White (2004) found that the Anglo residents refer to themselves as Americans, rather than Mexicans, even though they are citizens of Mexico. Many of them possess dual citizenship via marriage to American women or men, or through their lineage. As most of the youth attend college and university in the United States, they often end up bringing spouses back to Mexico, resulting in a complex network of dual citizenships where most residents are nationals of both the US and Mexico. There is also an element of spatial segregation between the members of the Anglo community and their Hispanic neighbors. While almost all residents born and raised in the colony speak Spanish, some of them do not. Likewise, many of the non-Anglos are Catholics and do not attend worship services with the Mormons. As in all societies, this creates an unintentional cultural divide, and while they are on friendly terms, their

interaction is somewhat limited by cultural distance. There are also concerted efforts to keep the American culture alive, undiluted by the Latin influence (Smith and White 2004).

Territoriality is manifested in Colonia Juárez by the distinct cultural landscape that looks as though it belongs in Utah or Idaho, transplanted among Mexican villages and desert. As Meinig (1965) noted 45 years ago, the colonies are an essential appendage of the Mormon Culture Region, and Francaviglia (1978) noted the landscape features that are present in Juárez, just as they are in rural Utah—architectural styles, well-kept lawns and gardens, grid-patterned town planning, tree-lined wide streets, irrigation ditches in town, the recently built temple, the church, and the Academy, where the community's children are taught in bilingual curriculum that is certified for both Mexican and US educational standards. According to Smith and White (2004), these are all clear indications of homeland territoriality in Mexico.

Conzen's (2001) third character set is loyalty to the homeland. Smith and White (2004) point out the numerous US-based holidays celebrated in the colonies and other American practices. For example, the Anglo children learn to recite the American Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of their school day. The community celebrates US Independence Day every July 4, and Pioneer Day (July 24) is commemorated each year to mark the arrival of the first Mormon Pioneers into the Salt Lake Valley in the 1840s. American satellite TV and radio relay stations, as well as the propensity of Juárez's youth to attend university in the US attest to the loyalty of the colonists to their American homeland.

Our findings support those of Smith and White in many regards but add extra elements associated with travel and tourism as an important link to the colonists' American homeland by enforcing cultural identity, territorial connectedness, and loyalty.

From the perspective of cultural identity, according to our survey, nearly two-thirds (63.6%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that Anglo residents of Colonia Juárez are more socially and culturally connected to the US than they are to Mexico (Figure 1). As far as formal education is

concerned, 90.57% of the residents surveyed had received at least some formal education in the US. When they visit the US, 78.5% feel at home or that they belong in the United States. When asked about their citizenship, 39.25% claimed to have US citizenship only, while 43.93% said they were nationals of both the United States and Mexico, making 83.18% of those surveyed US citizens (Figure 2).

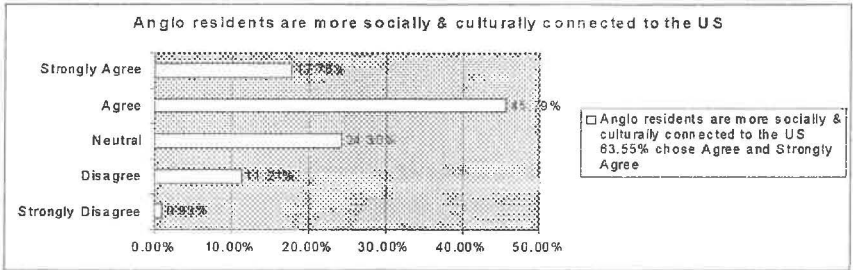


Figure 1. Anglo Residents' Social and Cultural Connectedness to the US

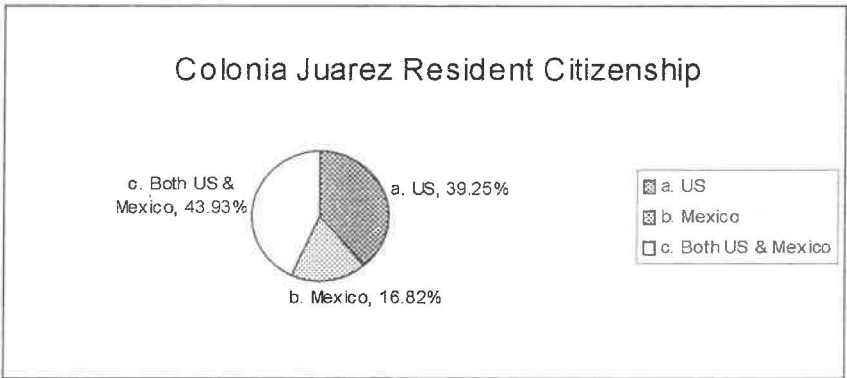


Figure 2. Colonia Juárez Residents' Citizenship

To fulfill the historic connection that Hurt (2003) suggests, the residents were asked if their family roots were originally from the colonies (among the earliest pioneer immigrants) or if they were a recent immigrant. 63.65% stated that their roots were from the colonies (see Figure 3). This intergenerational rootedness contributes to the cultural identity that pervades this small community and connects it to the American homeland. Children

in Colonia Juárez grow up hearing about stories of their pioneer forebears and celebrating US-based holidays and faith-based celebrations. Because of the ethnic, linguistic, and religious connections to the homeland across the border, travel and many other social connections are geared toward the Mormon Culture Region to the north. Residents of the village grow up in this transnational, hyphenated (Hollinshead 1998) environment with clear expectations of seeking an education, a spouse and possible future residence in the United States.

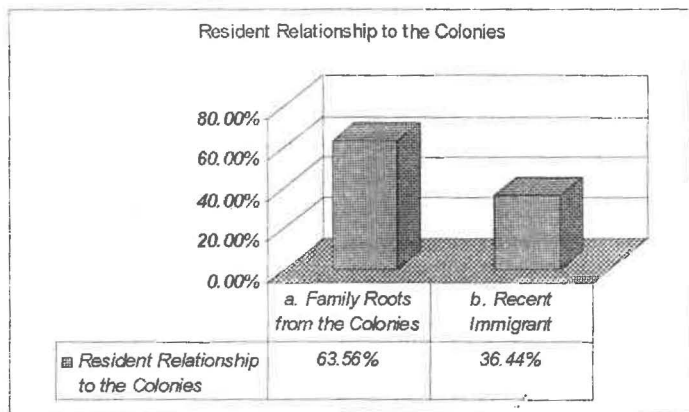


Figure 3. Resident Relationship to the Colonies

From territorial and tourism perspectives, the interviews illustrated that many of the community's residents travel frequently across the border into the United States for a variety of reasons. Some 68.2% of the village's residents travel often to the United States (30.84% travel to the US every 2-3 months, 32.71% travel monthly and 4.67% cross the border on a weekly basis). In large part, this is one way of keeping their territorial and social connections to the American homeland and reinforcing their own American identities, and such practices have existed for generations. Besides this, though, there are many other pragmatic reasons for visiting the USA. Several activities undertaken on their trips to the US were identified in the interviews and included in the survey (Table 1). Shopping is the most significant cross-border activity, accounting for almost 95% of the participants' travel pursuit. This owes largely to the fact that there are no regular shops with American products in the village itself, and the nearest Mexican town, Nuevo Casas Grandes, has several supermarkets and other shops but none that provide

American products at an affordable price. The second most popular activity is picking up mail. Just under 80% of respondents visit the US regularly to pick up mail. Colonia Juárez does not have regular mail service by the Mexican postal agency because of its small size and relatively peripheral location, and many residents consider the Mexican service in nearby Nuevo Casas Grandes to be inadequate, so they rent mailboxes in New Mexico or Texas.

Three-quarters of participants regularly visit relatives and friends in the US. Many of them have family members in Arizona, New Mexico or Texas, but they also travel to all corners of the US to visit relatives. Colonia Juárez falls in the southernmost tip of the Mormon culture sphere which includes Idaho to the north and Utah and Arizona to the south. When asked where in the US they have the most personal connections (family) that cause them to visit the United States, 72.9% of the respondents answered Arizona, followed by Utah (45.8%). This clearly shows that the majority of their connections still fall within the extent of the Mormon culture region. Some people travel across the border for business purposes, and just under one-quarter visit the US for church-related activities, such as conferences, camps and meetings. These last three purposes are the most closely aligned with territorial and social connectedness, but the other more practical reasons of getting mail and shopping also illustrate a degree of connectedness to their American homeland.

Table 1. Activities undertaken on their most recent trips to the USA

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|----------------------------|--------|
| Shopping | 94.39% |
| Picking up mail | 79.44% |
| Visit relatives or friends | 75.7% |
| Business | 51.14% |
| Church-related activity | 20.56% |

Also related to the territoriality issue is incoming tourism to Colonia Juárez. There has been a long tradition of tour groups stopping in or driving through the village on their way to the famous pottery village of Mata Ortiz or the nearby Paquimé ruins (a UNESCO World Heritage Site). According to interviews with key community contacts, visitors are always surprised by the physical appearance of the community. Wright (2001: 589) even

exclaimed of his first visit to the Mormon colonies: "This had to be Utah!" Other visitors have noted Colonia Juárez's resemblance of American villages in New England or the west. The reaction usually comes from the tidy town's stark contrast in appearance to the neighboring Mexican towns. According to interviews in the town, when visitors arrive, they feel as though they have stepped back into the United States.

To grasp the colonists' sense of loyalty, the survey asked community members about whether or not they identify themselves as belonging to a specific group with common heritage roots, as Hurt's (2003) homeland criterion and Smith and White's (2004) analysis suggest (Figure 4). Some 88% felt a sense of patriotism or loyalty to the United States, with the majority (62%) considering themselves more American than Mexican. This is even the case among third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation community members.

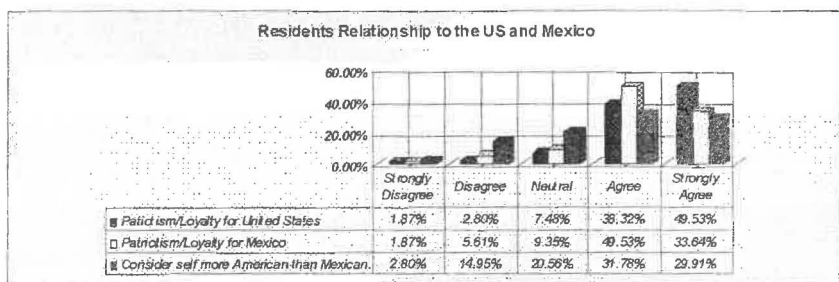


Figure 4. Resident Relationship to the United States and Mexico

Many of the travel patterns, such as visiting church sites or travel for church-related purposes, shopping, and visiting relatives are also important manifestations of loyalty, not just cultural identity and territoriality. Despite having been born and raised in Mexico, even for several generations, there is still a preference for consumer goods and services that are American. Shopping for American merchandise in US stores illustrates a commitment to a different range of products than what is available in nearby Mexican communities, and most people's leisure vacation pursuits are directed northward rather than to other parts of Mexico, much the same way Hispanic Mexican-Americans have a tendency to spend their vacation time visiting relatives back in Mexico (Timothy in press).

Discussion and Conclusion

Cultural geographers have long been interested in culture regions and homelands as socio-spatial phenomena that help explain the human relationship with the earth. Beyond the normative culture region, scholars have proposed a more intense connectivity with place known as the homeland, which has been well studied in the context of the United States. The primary characteristics of the homeland can be viewed as socio-cultural identities and connections to the homeland by its present or past inhabitants, a certain territorial extent or spatial realm, and a sense of loyalty toward the homeland by those who call it their homeland. Smith and White (2004) examined these elements in the context of the Mormon Culture Region as a homeland for American Mormons who live and have lived for generations in small, relatively isolated communities in northern Mexico. They suggest that the Anglo Latter-day Saints of Colonia Dublán and Colonia Juárez, Mexico, reinforce their identity, territorial connections, and loyalty to their American homeland through telecommunications, cultural landscapes, educational curriculum, citizenship and marriage, and celebrations of US and Mormon holidays and events. The present study supports their arguments empirically and argues that these three definitional elements of a homeland are also upheld through various forms of tourism.

Residents feel a part of a tightly-knit and geographically integrated ethnic community, and they work especially hard to maintain their American identity. Most feel closely connected to the American homeland and do much to maintain their Anglo identity. Most retain US citizenship, identify more closely with the US than with Mexico, use English as their primary language, frequently eat American-style food, and watch American media broadcasts. Almost all colonists maintain their attachment to the Mormon culture homeland by attending university in the United States and marrying American spouses.

The Anglo-Mormons of the Mexican colonies reinforce their own cultural identities, territorial extension, and loyalty to the American homeland via cross-border travel for shopping, visiting relatives, undertaking church-related activities, attending the semi-annual church general conference in Salt Lake City, and conducting business. All of these activities show a

strong tie to the United States among Anglo-Mexicans of Colonia Juárez. They nurture social interaction in the United States through their repeated trips across the border, and most residents receive regular visits by acquaintances and family members living in the United States. These leisure and touristic activities north of the border essentially extend these Anglo-Mormon-Mexicans' action space (territoriality), bolster their unique cultural islands, and augment their loyalty to the United States and their original spiritual and cultural homeland.

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