



Social networks, immigration and culture: Arabs and descendants in the Ponta Porã (BR) / Pedro Juan Caballero (PY) frontier economy

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, scholars have demanded the need for an interdisciplinary approach in understanding phenomena considered to be properly economic. The migratory displacements, in turn, point out as an interesting experience for the analysis of the relationship between culture and economy. The relational character of economic transactions is increasingly recognized. This article, in turn, intends to apply the idea of social networks in order to understand the presence and performance of the population of Arab origin (immigrants and descendants) in certain economic activities on the border between Ponta Porã, Brazil, and Pedro Juan Caballero, city located in Paraguay. Therefore, some reflections on aspects that may have determined the arrival and expansion of the Arabs to the above-mentioned border are undertaken. Through the delimitation of certain family trajectories, built from interviews, we seek to demonstrate the importance of social networks in the construction of the latter. In conclusion, we show that the Arab immigration movement and its socioeconomic insertion are influenced by the actions of their respective networks. Furthermore, social capital, expressed by relationships of trust, cooperation, and commercial skills, is based on its cultural principles and presents itself as a social factor in economic relations, being a significant factor in the process of social and economic formation in the region.

Keywords: social networks; Arabic immigration; border.

Redes sociais, imigração e cultura: árabes e descendentes na economia da fronteira Ponta Porã (BR)/Pedro Juan Caballero (PY)

Resumo

Desde os anos 1990, estudiosos reivindicam a necessidade de uma abordagem interdisciplinar na compreensão de fenômenos considerados propriamente econômicos. Os deslocamentos migratórios, por seu turno, apontam como uma interessante experiência para a análise da relação entre cultura e economia. O caráter relacional das transações econômicas é algo cada vez mais reconhecido. Este artigo, por sua vez, pretende aplicar a ideia de redes sociais a fim de se compreender a presença e atuação da população de origem árabe (imigrantes e descendentes) em certas atividades econômicas na fronteira entre Ponta Porã, Brasil, e Pedro Juan Caballero, cidade situada no Paraguai. Para tanto, empreende-se algumas reflexões sobre aspectos que podem ter determinado a vinda e a expansão dos árabes para a fronteira em epígrafe. Através da delimitação de certas trajetórias familiares, construídas a partir de entrevistas, buscamos demonstrar a importância das redes sociais na construção dessas últimas. Conclui-se que o movimento migratório dos árabes e sua inserção socioeconômica são influenciados pelas ações de suas respectivas redes. Ademais, o capital social, expresso pelas relações de confiança, pela cooperação e habilidades comerciais, pauta-se em seus princípios culturais e apresenta-se como um fator social das relações econômicas, sendo um fator significativo no processo de formação social e econômica da região estudada.

Palavras-chave: Redes sociais. Imigração árabe. Fronteira.

Redes sociales, inmigración y cultura: árabes y descendientes en la economía fronteriza Ponta Porã (BR) / Pedro Juan Caballero (PY)

Resumen

Desde la década de 1990, los académicos han reclamado la necesidad de un enfoque interdisciplinario en la comprensión de los fenómenos considerados propiamente económicos. Los desplazamientos migratorios, a su vez, apuntan como una experiencia interesante para el análisis de la relación entre cultura y economía. El carácter relacional de las transacciones económicas se reconoce cada vez más. Este artículo, a su vez, pretende aplicar la idea de redes sociales para comprender la presencia y desempeño de la población de origen árabe (inmigrantes y descendientes) en determinadas actividades económicas en la frontera entre Ponta Porã, Brasil, y Pedro Juan Caballero. ciudad ubicada en Paraguay. Para tanto, se realizan algunas reflexiones sobre algunos aspectos que pudieron haber determinado la llegada y expansión de los árabes a la citada frontera. A través de la delimitación de determinadas trayectorias familiares, construida a partir de entrevistas, se pretende demostrar la importancia de las redes sociales en la construcción de estas últimas. En conclusión, mostramos que el movimiento migratorio árabe y su inserción socioeconómica están influenciados por las acciones de sus respectivas redes. Además, el capital social, expresado en relaciones de confianza, cooperación y competencia comercial, se fundamenta en sus principios culturales y se presenta como un factor social en las relaciones económicas, siendo un factor significativo en el proceso de formación social y económica de la región.

Palabras clave: Redes sociales. Inmigración árabe. Frontera.

1 Introduction

Over the past few years, culture¹ has been acknowledged as an important vector in development process. In that context, a series of movements emerged seeking the acknowledgement and appreciation of cultural identities. Ponta Porã (MS) and Pedro Juan Caballero (PY) frontier region² has broad cultural diversity and, therefore, deepening that discussion has great relevance for that region.

The frontier under study is marked by the expressive presence of Arab culture, although Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Indians and other immigrants also coexist there. The Arab presence is mainly made up of Lebanese and Syrian people and its area of activity in economic terms is highlighted by its concentration in the service sector, with emphasis on trade in general and on the food sector, such as restaurants.

It is important to point out that, in the case of Ponta Porã and Pedro Juan Caballero cities, the Arab influence is perceptible both in local and international trade. That is easily identifiable from the wide variety of Arabic names on restaurant storefronts (*Al Tayeb*), as well as in import commercial stores, such as *Salem Imports*; *Yazmin Center*; *Sammer Center*; *Hassan Celular*, *Kamal Celular*, *Kassen Celular*, and many others. In addition, in several nightclubs, especially in Ponta Porã, customers are provided with so-called *arguiles*³, or hookahs, which are one of the main symbols of Arab culture.

This paper itself intends to apply the idea of social networks in order to understand the presence and performance of the population of Arab origin (immigrants and descendants) in certain economic activities on the border between Ponta Porã, Brazil, and Pedro Juan Caballero, a city located in Paraguay. For that, we will first carry out a theoretical discussion about the concepts of social networks and social capital. Later, we will contextualize the region's economy, highlighting trade activities, a sector in which the majority of the population of Arab origin operates. Finally, some trajectories of Arab families whose presence is remarkable in the region's economy and history will be exhibited. Delineated through interviews, these trajectories demonstrate the usefulness of the concept of social networks for understanding the insertion of this group in certain economic activities in that region.

Before moving on, two important points are highlighted: the first refers to the methodological aspects of the research. Initially, a broad and in-depth bibliographic review was carried out based on the consultation of books,

¹ Culture can never be substantiated, that is, thought of as a sealed, self-centered and totalizing reality. It is always dynamic, relational and susceptible to "borrowing". As defined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1978), culture is nothing more than a web of meanings woven by human beings when they relate to each other. This web, in turn, guides human existence.

² Regions are subdivisions of space: total space, national space and even local space, because larger cities are also subject to regionalization. Regions are a space of convenience, mere functional places of the whole, because, besides places, there is no other way for the existence of the social whole than the regional form. The energy that presides over this achievement is that of the successively installed divisions of labor, which impose successive changes in the form and content of regions. (SANTOS, 1994, p. 48).

³ Arguile is a pipe used for smoking, prepared with flavored tobacco and lit with specific charcoal. It's a cultural symbol of the Arabs, also called narghile in Brazil.

dissertations, thesis, and other scientific works published on the subject. In addition to the literature review, this paper benefits from the fieldwork of Balbuena (2020), who carried out research based on the application of (semi-structured) interviews with Arab migrants and their descendants who live in the frontier area under investigation⁴. Furthermore, this research uses Oral History, as a qualitative research methodology, since the subject under study is an exploratory area, for which there are few sources of information. It is noteworthy that, from the interviews, it is possible to characterize a type of oral history, the *life story*. Last but not least, it is worth noting that this research benefits from the qualitative method of participant observation since throughout the development of the work (in some cases, long before) the researchers lived and interacted for long periods with the observed group.

The second point to be highlighted is the relationship between this research and regional development. Among other perspectives, we emphasize the culture's role. More specifically, we understand culture (in its multiple dimensions) as a fundamental variable for economic and social development. Our main inspiration (not the only one, though) is the work of the economist Celso Furtado. For him, development involves a set of transformations in social structures and forms of behavior that accompany the accumulation of the production system. In other words, development must be understood as a cultural and historical process that responds to a system of social domination. In that sense, as the idea of social networks is applied to understand the presence and performance of the Arab-originated population on the border under study, it is possible to identify the process of construction, evolution and reach of those networks, as well as understand how certain cultural aspects shaped, influence and, in certain aspects, still determine elements of the regional development process, especially based on their influence on the dynamics of certain economic activities.

2 Social networks and social capital in the migration process: concepts and their relationships

This topic aims to briefly review the theoretical conceptions about social capital and its relationship with the theory of social networks used in migratory movements. According to Cruz and Falcão (2017), the debate inherent to migration processes is a contemporary trend that is much discussed in the US and Europe. The immigration process is linked to social categories such as families, groups of friends promoting the mobility of individuals through physical and social displacement which is facilitated by social networks. Immigrants seek social ties in order to mitigate the risks that new experiences can bring, they also use these ties to ease loneliness and facilitate their coexistence through affective memories. (FUSCO, 2001). The migratory movement is usually involved by relationships of interest between immigrants who arrive and those who are already established in the place.

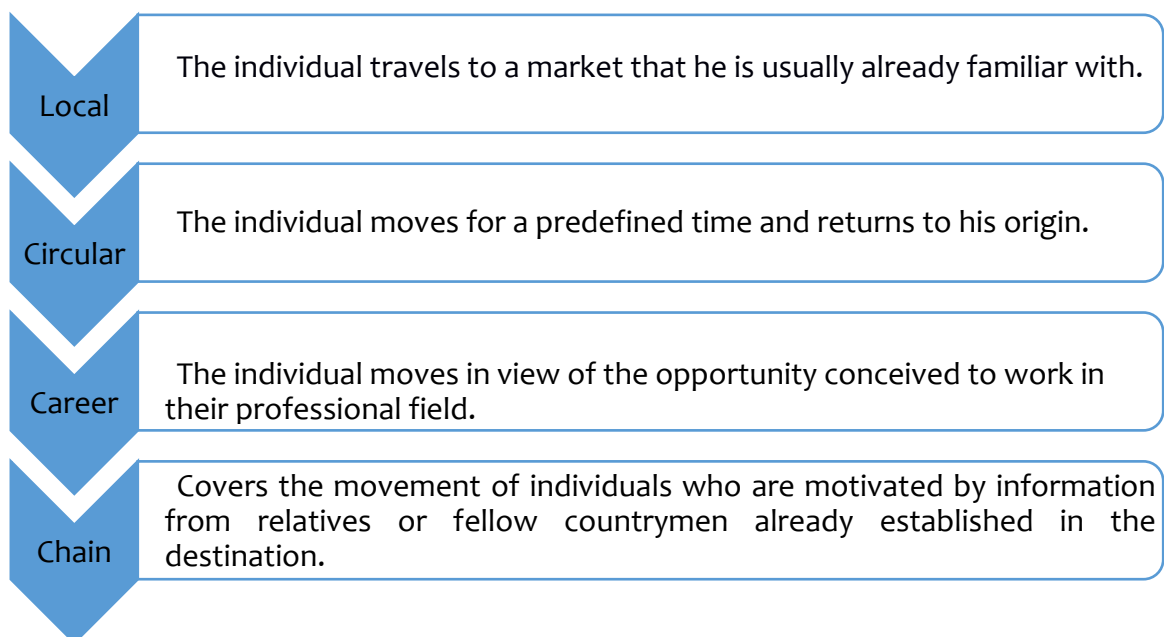
⁴ The field research developed by Balbuena (2020) surveyed commercial stores belonging to Arab immigrants in the region. The presence of 49 stores and 4 restaurants was found in the region. Of these, 16 were interviewed. The interviews were recorded (an average of 30/60 minutes) and transcribed.

According to Carleial (2004, p. 2):

These are networks of a certain type of sociability, of reciprocity, which give new meaning to social actions, reterritorialize⁵ social groups, rearrange partnerships, in the passage or staying of the immigrant in the place of destination, integrating him, adapting him or redefining his situation. (CARLEIAL, 2004, p.2). [translation by the authors]

Oswaldo Truzzi (2008) investigates the use of the concept of networks in migratory processes. According to the author, the perspective of networks succeeds the notion of migratory chains. In that context, what feeds the displacement of a chain of emigration is the information disseminated by relatives, fellow countrymen and advertising agents, among others. Therefore, information and relations of common interests among immigrants, disseminated through networks, are essentially related to bonds of social and economic relations, which encourage the individual to migrate.

Figure 1 - Categories of migratory mobility



Source: Tilly (1978 apud Truzzi, 2008, p. 200), adapted by the authors.

The figure above exemplifies the types of mobilities in migratory processes and their main characteristics. For Truzzi (2008), pioneer immigrants, specifically the successful ones, serve as an attraction link for the establishment of other immigrants, which facilitate the permanent fixation of others, in addition to determining the professions they will occupy. Therefore:

⁵ “More than uprooting deterritorialization, there is a spatially discontinuous and extremely complex process of reterritorialization” (HAESBAERT, 1994, p.214). According to Guattari and Ronilk (1986, p.323 apud Haesbaert 1994 p. 127) “In simple terms, we can state that deterritorialization is a movement by which territory is abandoned, “it is the operation of the escape line” and reterritorialization is the movement of construction of the territory.”

The use of the terms like chains and networks, in their narrower or broader meanings, seeks to underline the circumstance that many decided to emigrate after being informed in advance about the opportunities and (difficulties) with previous immigrants, either by letter or when they returned. These could provide both information, regarding the prospects of jobs and initial accommodation, such as resources, through monetary remittances, which could finance and thus make the trip viable (TRUZZI, 2008, p. 203). [translation by the authors]

It is in that sense that the concept of social capital is related to that of networks. According to Putnam (1993), a society based on reciprocity is more efficient than a society that lacks it. Trust is fundamental in social life and engagement networks facilitate the expansion of information regarding the trustworthiness of others. The author also emphasizes the importance of dense social networks, which are commonly supported by family bases or ethnic communities abroad, which foster trust and information, aiming to reduce transaction costs.

The emergence of Social Capital theory is very remote. In Brazil, this concept was disseminated with the work developed by Putnam (2006) entitled *Community and democracy in the regional governments of Italy*. For the author, social capital is linked to essential aspects of social organization, such as trust, norms and systems, which contribute to a more efficient society, since:

[...] like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, enabling the achievement of certain goals that would be unattainable if it did not exist (...). For example, a group whose members demonstrate trustworthiness and who have broad trust in each other is able to accomplish much more than another group that lacks trustworthiness and trust [...] (PUTNAM, 2006, p. 178). [translation by the authors]

The author also assumes that social capital has trust as its basic element. Therefore, the higher the level of trust in a community, the greater the possibility of cooperation. In turn, cooperation itself generates trust, causing virtuous circles that translate into high levels of cooperation, trust, reciprocity, civility, and collective well-being (PUTMAN, 2006). Boisier (2000) corroborates by emphasizing that, substantially, social capital is understood as the individual's propensity to exercise interpersonal help. This help is based on the trust that there will be reciprocity when the other requires help. Trust, therefore, generates diffuse reciprocity, overcoming more evident ties, such as family ties.

Furthermore, it is necessary to consider that the concept of social capital is linked to joint factors of cultural order, such as trust, cooperation, and actions for the common good (BOISIER, 2000). Abramovay (2000) emphasizes that understanding the influence of social capital on the dynamics of a region allows us to see that individuals do not act independently, as their goals are not determined in isolation.

In addition, Higgins (2005) adds that social relations constitute a "non-visible" but a highly effective asset, serving social subjects, whether individual or collective, with the engines of collective action being trust and cooperation.

Bourdieu (1989), on the other hand, states that the quantification of the social capital of certain people or groups will depend on the size of the extension of

the relationship network one could move and on the volume of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) related to each of those to whom one is connected. In other words, these effects are visible to a durable network of relationships that a given social group can generate, given that social capital is complementary to economic, cultural, or symbolic capital, generating a multiplier effect. Thus, social capital, according to sociology scholars, presupposes that the dynamics of sociability and collaboration relationships between actors from a location provide opportunities for reaching new sources of capital: mutual trust, norms, and social networks (FIALHO, 2016). These sources, within the context of a region's development, can be a determining factor.

In that sense, Truzzi (2008) argues, with regard to the information, that the key variable for its propagation is contemplation through networks, whose coverage stage is very diverse. There are networks that are limited to (smaller) family circles and others of greater amplitude, which permeate information to an entire village and/or an entire micro-region. Therefore, what determines the reliability attributed to the information are the primary social relations, that is, the individual's trajectory influences the system as a whole. Reliance on personal information (whether by letter or in person) is more assured than non-personal information.

Thus, it is evident that the information provided by family members, friends, and other fellow citizens must be trusted so that the individual makes the decision to emigrate. There is also a family plan to subsidize the travels:

The contact itself in the country of destination of the potential emigrant partially facilitated or even fully financed their trip. That could be a relative (it is very common, for example, uncles calling nephews, or brothers calling brothers) (TRUZZI, 2008, p. 203). [translation by the authors]

Also according to the aforementioned author, this is not a rule, as it is very common for individuals to travel with their own resources. The decision to send one or more family members to emigration is intended to benefit the family as a whole.

Coleman (1988) uses the idea of social capital as a resource capable of generating benefits and uses economic terms. Thus, social capital alters the general conception of capital as it extends the reach of the social actor. In other words, the human person is no longer considered in isolation and interacts with society, becoming a builder of bonds of cohesion, from which it ends up facilitating coordinated actions in order to deal with collective dilemmas (WOOLCOCK, 1998). Therefore, social capital is another component of development to be analyzed with the ability to build development opportunities through social negotiation networks (RIBEIRO; FERNANDES; RIBEIRO, 2012).

Bourdieu (1989, p. 67) observes that social capital depends on the amount of relationships in the network that it can move:

Social capital is a set of current or potential resources that are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of inter-knowledge and inter-recognition or, in others, we have a link to a group, as a set of agents that are not only endowed with common properties [...] but that are also united by links [...] the volume

of social capital that an individual agent has depends then on the network of relationships one can effectively mobilize and on the volume of capital (economic, cultural, or symbolic) which is the exclusive possession of each of those to whom it is connected (BOIRDIEU, 1989, p.67). [translation by the authors]

For Vilela (2011), social networking approaches show how pioneer immigrants serve as a connection for those who migrate later. That connection refers to the information and resources disseminated among them, such as financial help, job offer, information on how to manage the business, which is fundamental for the professional position that the immigrant will occupy. According to the author:

The help and solidarity networks created by immigrants are not only used in decisions to migrate and where to migrate. They are maintained throughout the immigration process, including insertion in the labor market, employability, and the occupational position of group members (VILELA, 2011, p. 158). [translation by the authors]

According to Portes (1995) apud Vilela (2011), the homogeneity of the occupational choice of members depends on the size and plurality of social networks. This explains why certain ethnic groups tend to specialize in a few niches of economic activities and go through several generations. In that sense, the first immigrants paved the way for their successors through the establishment of connections in which it was possible to obtain financial support, paid activity and emotional solidarity, and these are the link that enables more people to come and settle in a certain place, influencing even in the profession that will be exercised (VILELA, 2011).

One of the theoretical-methodological perspectives that seek to explain the social mechanisms that operationalize the labor market is the one that focuses on the notion of social networks. Here, we work with the specific notion of social networks as a set of relationships that establish bonds between two or more individuals, that is, they are relationship structures that constitute one of the dimensions of social relationships.

Generally speaking, a network is a set of actors linked by a relationship; a network thus characterizes the system formed by *direct and indirect* links (the contacts of my contacts) between the actors. By analogy, it is a form of social interaction that puts actors in contact [...]. (STEINER, 2006, p. 77). [translation by the authors]

That structure of relationships has a procedural nature: there are several viable relational trajectories, making it possible to establish new links with other actors over time. The nature of the social ties woven by individuals, it should be noted, is “oriented by the social contexts in which these relationships take place” (SANTOS, 1991, p. 109).

The most important aspect, privileged from this perspective [the perspective of social networks], is the relationships between individuals, not the attributes of each one of them. The fundamental point is to seek, from each individual, the identification of their network of relationships. Thus, the concept of networks conceives society as a set of relationships

and introduces a dimension of social structure understood as a structure of relationships, which is quite different from imagining it as structured according to aggregative categories (TRUZZI, 2008, p. 214). [translation by the authors]

Analyzing the development of the concept of social capital - the one understood as the ability of individuals to ensure benefits arising from their location in social networks - Portes (1998) highlights the fact that this notion suggests not only the positive consequences of sociability but also the normative and excluding character of social networks. The reach of assurances and implicit potential obligations in interpersonal relationships depends, in turn, on the quantity, content and intensity of the ties that link the delimited set of individuals (PORTES, 2005).

The concept of social networks, therefore, appears like a genuinely sociological tool for thinking about the construction of labor markets, since relational resources would be important points of reference for occupational insertion. Labor supply and demand would come into contact and materialize within social networks (SANTOS, 1991). The most important thing, however, would be less to demarcate a network, but to demonstrate how the relationships established within it provide possible advantages and disadvantages, as well as how social resources flow and with what consequences (POWELL, SMITH-DOERR, 1994; MIZRUCHI, 2009).

The relevance of social networks does not consist only in influencing the place of origin and fixation, but permeates labor relations, whether in relation to employability as well as the market itself, in addition to the occupational position of group members. It is inferred from Martes and Dimitri (2010) that the more dense and multiple the social networks, the broader the homogeneity of professional choice by its members will be, specializing in few niches of an economic sector that can span generations.

3 The border between Ponta Porã (BR) and Pedro Juan Caballero (PY) and the role of commerce

The State of Mato Grosso do Sul (MS) was created from the dismemberment of the State of Mato Grosso by Complementary Law No. 31, of October 11, 1977 and implemented in 1979, sanctioned by Ernesto Geisel. “The state of Mato Grosso do Sul is composed of 79 municipalities, 44 of which make up the international border strip, totaling 1,578 kilometers in length on the border lines with the republics of Paraguay and Bolivia” (TORRECILHA, 2013, p. 120).

Evidently, aspects of the historical and economic formation of MS were determined long before its “official” creation in 1979. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that the diversity of the respective productive bases of the states that make up the Midwest region, in general, and of MS, in particular, goes back to the specificities of the historical process of internalization of transport routes and the consequent integration of these areas into the national economy.

For example, the implantation of the railway built to the West (the Northwest of Brazil Railroad) under the allegation of the garrison of the international borders with Bolivia and Paraguay, in the first decades of the 20th century, boosted the growth of the south of Mato Grosso, which allowed the

exchange with other cities in Brazil, facilitating the movement of people and goods (LE BOURLEGAT, 2000; BERTHOLI, 2006). Added to the end of the Triple Alliance War in the immediately preceding period and the subsequent organization of the exploitation of mate herb and livestock, the expansion of transport routes allowed the economic strengthening of the region (MISSIO; RIVAS, 2019).

An important point to be highlighted is the importance of migration from different regions of Brazil, which contributed to MS' economic and cultural development, as well as international immigration. People from São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and, later, from the south of the country, entered the state from the 1830s onwards (BERTHOLI, 2006; QUEIROZ, 2008; BITTAR, 2009; ESSELIN, 2011).

At the same time, the advent of peddlers enabled the diffusion and distribution of goods, which stimulated the development of commerce in MS. This attracted Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, many of them underresourced. In search of commercial opportunities, a good part of these immigrants settled in Corumbá (ROSA; CASTELÃO, 2014), which was the distribution hub for goods to locations in the south, east and center of MS at the time, consolidating their business in the region. The immigration of Syrians and Lebanese continued over time in MS, reaching other regions and cities in the state, such as Dourados (Souza, 2007) and the border region, especially Ponta Porã.

Ponta Porã, located south of MS, borders the city of Pedro Juan Caballero, which is the capital of the Department of Amambai, Paraguay. The territory that covers the international limit of that border is approximately 13 km long. That border has a series of historical and economic particularities, such as the fact that it was one of the stages of the Triple Alliance War, or even being part of the Federal Territory of Ponta Porã, created in 1943 (SANTOS, 2016).

From the second half of the 20th century, the region's economy specialized in re-exports, which, in turn, boosted shopping tourism. The trade of these imported products, which was consolidated during that period and continues to this day, supplies the demand of Brazilians, mainly from MS, who seek renowned international brands (clothes, shoes, perfumes, toys and electronics in general, among others). The international line currently concentrates most of the companies that carry out the re-export trade" (Lamberti, 2006, p. 63).

The point to be highlighted is that, in that period (mid 1970s), the economic dynamics more directly influenced the demographic dynamics, as the border city began to receive immigrants from Asia, Arabs, among others, from Ciudad del Este, where they were already established, or directly from their country of origin. These immigrants were attracted by the then consolidated and expanding tourist market.

Banducci Jr. (2015) reports that, in addition to Brazilians and Paraguayans, foreign immigrants such as Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians, Indians, among others, also reside on the border. These become owners of stores on the Paraguayan side of the border and, thus, present themselves as protagonists of commercial relations, as well as cultural exchanges. Also, according to the author:

[...] the border towns of Pedro Juan Caballero (Paraguay) and Ponta Porã (Brazil), conurbation centers in a dry border area, have their daily lives marked by a large flow of people and goods. From the 1980s onwards, an extensive popular market for imports was formed on the dividing line

between the twin cities, fueled by Brazilian shopping tourism, which began to attract final buyers and bagmen, mobilizing the economy of both cities (BANDUCCI JR., 2015, p. 2). [translation by the authors]

Shopping tourism is an important activity for the economy of the border region. There is a constant presence of Brazilians from different regions of the country as final buyers and “sacoleiros” (or “bagmen”), who take goods to resell from stores established in Paraguay to other regions of Brazil. The Brazilian side of the border, on the other hand, meets the demands of buyers, offering services related to hotels, restaurants, leisure and so on. Just as Brazilians benefit from the lower prices of imported products in Paraguay, Paraguayans (specifically pedrojuaninos) also shop in Ponta Porã, especially for clothing and home appliances. In the latter case, they take advantage of the installment plan system, an unusual practice in Paraguay. In a nutshell, trade-in border regions is a common practice "and derive both from the flow of goods and people, as well as from the possibilities of enjoying the facilitations arising from the different norms and legislation provided by the existence of two national states" (LAMBERTI, 2006, p.42).

In short, the condition of the international conurbation and the peculiar dynamism of these two municipalities make this border a place with particular singularities and specificities.

4 Social networks and Arab immigration on the Ponta Porã/Pedro Juan Caballero border

For the investigation of the Syrian and Lebanese population on the border of Ponta Porã (MS) and Pedro Juan Caballero (PY), a time frame was established from 1950. This period includes the arrival of pioneer Arab immigrants in the city of Ponta Porã. In this context, it was possible to trace the trajectory of these immigrants, relating their arrival to the opening of the first commercial stores.

The city of Ponta Porã-MS attracted the attention of Arab immigrants precisely because of its proximity to Paraguay. These immigrants, already established in Brazilian territory (and also in some cities in Paraguay), began to concentrate in Ponta Porã in search of greater commercial opportunities. Therefore, Arab immigration to Ponta Porã presented itself as a local continuity of international migration.

It is noteworthy that they come from the 2nd migratory wave (period 1900-1914), which arrived both through Brazilian ports and from Argentina. A third-generation descendant's account on the formation of the Arab community on the border helps to clear this point:

One of the first immigrants was my grandfather, who would be codenamed Nickname João Martins and in fact, he would be if I'm not mistaken Jaleil Zain Haidar, he left Lebanon in 1900 and ended up in Argentina, landed at the Port of Argentina, there he stayed for a while, after that time had passed, he went looking for a cousin he hadn't met for a long time, then he left and ended up in Asunción (RESPONDENT K, GRANTED IN NOVEMBER 2019). [translation by the authors]

Also, according to the interviewee, his grandfather moved to Coronel Sapucaia-MS and married a woman from of state of Rio Grande do Sul, with whom he had several children. One of the daughters, the interviewee's mother, had been promised to marry one of the other grandfather's children, her grandparents being brothers and her parents being cousins, as is customary in the Arab world. Then, his father came to Brazil from Lebanon, in 1952, when he was 22 years old, in search of his promised marriage. He landed at the Port of Santos, where he worked for 5 years as a peddler. After the marriage, he moved to Ponta Porã-MS, where he was an important trader and entrepreneur. In the city, he built the first building, and on the ground floor was his store, the Casa Popular, which opened on 8/25/1969, 50 years ago located on Marechal Floriano avenue.

In that way, another aspect of the ethnic economy can be seen in the formation of social networks. With a tradition of arranged marriages, businesses tend to always focus on the same family. In other words, the cultural value of the group (the tradition of arranged marriages) influences economic activities. Furthermore, the history of a set of relationships/connections, that is, social networks, is essential to explain the presence of certain groups in certain economies/societies.

From the interviews, it was also possible to identify that, in that period (before the inauguration of the Casa Popular), there were already Lebanese and Syrians present on the border, that is:

Then he came here, he met the other fellow countrymen, he met Aley Ale (Casa Ale), he met his Rafaat, who was also here for a long time, he met the Georges family who were his Issa Jacob, the Iskandar Jacob Georges, Dr. Jorge Jacob and Ezzat Georges who were Volkswagen representatives here. And there were other patricians too, they were also at Paraguay, my father is not the oldest here, there were others, but with regard to bold people, these were that people at the time, so much so that the Jacob family was a great booster of Ponta Porã's development, they fostered many jobs and had different types of businesses (RESPONDENT K, GRANTED IN NOVEMBER 2019). [translation by the authors]

Based on these reports, it is possible to observe certain entrepreneurship of the Arabs in view of the opportunities that were arising in the border areas, since they were places in the process of expansion, especially from a commercial point of view. The search for inserting “news” in the region is directly linked to cultural and historical principles, as well as its commercial vocation:

Trade was practically born in the Middle East region, and the Arabs have always been linked to trade and here it won't be different, Arab or descendant or son or grandson it is the insistence because the right way to win, in fact, the greatest millionaires in the world they are merchants and our Arab community is actually present in practically every country in the world for the strength, the experience, the struggle they do because they know that commerce is what wins above all, commerce is what sustains a family, a country, a state, a city, where commerce comes, as they always say, in the blood of the Arabs (INTERVIEWED O, GRANTED IN NOVEMBER 2019). [translation by the authors]

That speech naturalizes the skills (the propensity to trade) that are actually transmitted generationally through education, that is, through their social relationships. It should also be noted that social networks influence the arrival of Arab immigrants to the region. The disseminated information and employment opportunities are determining factors for the immigration process.

An 82-year-old man, considered one of the oldest immigrants on the border, reports that his arrival took place three years after his brother's arrival. His first professional occupation was as a peddler, in which he remained for years. At one time he also worked with his brother in the store; then he bought a truck to do the shipping, and when he finally pooled resources, he opened his commercial store, *Casa Cliper*. According to him, he was one of the greatest businessmen at the time and an outstanding merchant on the frontier. He was, for many years, the president of the Lions Club and Trade Association. According to his testimony, he was responsible for bringing his relatives:

I'm an immigrant, I came to Brazil in 1955, but before that my uncle came, in 1850 he went to Argentina, from Argentina he moved to Asunción, he married a Paraguayan woman in Asunción and went horseback selling from Asunción, where did he arrive? In Coronel Sapucaia, formerly called Antônio João, formerly in Mato Grosso, there after Amambai, today it's called Capitan Bado, right, at the end my uncle got there. We both came to Brazil in 1950 or 1951 something like that, arriving in Brazil he sent a letter to Argentina asking them to talk to his uncle, they replied to him [...] his uncle changed his name, today he calls his name João Martins lives in a city called Antônio João in Mato Grosso, today Mato Grosso do Sul, right? She sent a letter to him and he replied, called her, come here, come here... and in the end my brother came to peddle in Barretos, he came to this Paranhos and arrived at Colonel Sapucaia Antônio João (formerly) and met him, when he met he had 4 or 5 daughters and he thought one of them was beautiful and he married one of them called Adélia, they had a popular house here with three-floor...and he married one of them and started working, then he sent me a letter to come to Brazil, I was in Syria in Lebanon on the border, like here in Paraguay, what I did I said, I'll go, I'll see, I showed it to my brother and he said no you won't, I'll send your brother and I said I'll go, and I insisted so much that I ended up coming over (RESPONDENT G, GRANTED IN OCTOBER 2019). [translation by the authors]

According to the Arab Association, the border of Ponta Porã and Pedro Juan Caballero holds the second largest colony of Syrians and Lebanese in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, in which around 200 families are established. This association was founded on August 22, 1988, with the purpose of disseminating Arab customs, tradition, and culture and bringing together people from the Arab community and their descendants, not excluding people of other nationalities, cultivating the broadest fraternity among the members. The founding partners are Antônio Carlos Siufi Hindo, Duraid Yassimm, Gazi Feis Aidar, Charif Sayed Hassan, Iskandar Georges, Ahamad Mohamad Hazime and Aley Ale, as well as Rafaat Fares Toumani, Jamil Kamel Saad, Mohamad Zogaib, and Alberto Afif, members of the deliberative council.

According to the statement given by one of the few Arabs who currently trade on the Brazilian side of the border, Arab immigrants contributed to the growth of the city of Ponta Porã:

We contributed with the construction that was made by the Arabs, the trade, the jobs that were given and the development of the city that grew with the Arabs. In the past, Marechal Floriano avenue was practically the majority of the merchants were all Arabs, today it is a little different because the big companies took over the market, the ancient Arabs here, many died and the children studied and acquired something else in the field of medicine, in the field of law, in the field of economics and in the agricultural field as well (RESPONDENT O, GRANTED IN NOVEMBER 2019).⁶ [translation by the authors]

Therefore, in this community, there is a continuous search for economic and social ascension. Most immigrants invest in their children's studies and liberal professions are the most common among their descendants. Some also became farmers.

Unlike what happened on the Brazilian side of the border, on the Paraguayan side, most Arab immigrants who came to Pedro Juan Caballero-PY were already established on the borders of Foz do Iguaçu-PR and *Ciudad del Este*-PY. According to Rabossi (2004), Lebanese immigrants were attracted to that border in the 1950s, seeing the opportunities that the construction of the bridge of friendship would provide. They also came because of the conflicts in the Middle East. In this way, the Lebanese were one of the pioneers in the construction of trade-in *Ciudad del Este*:

In the late 1950s, and considering the possibility that the construction of the bridge would open up, some traders who had taken Brazilian industrial production to the west of Paraná were located in Foz do Iguaçu with the intention of taking advantage of a virgin market for Brazilian products: Paraguay. **Most of them were Lebanese immigrants** [...] the peculiarity of this border, however, was that the characteristics of the neighboring city allowed some of them to also settle on the other side of the line, selling imported products to the Brazilian buyer. Together with the ease of establishing itself and the presence of acquaintances, this double commercial attraction was what turned this border into a pole of attraction for immigrants from Lebanon and other Middle Eastern countries after the conflicts in that area intensified. **Thus, both the development of trade in *Ciudad del Este* and one of its most significant characteristics -the Arab presence - are linked to Foz do Iguaçu** (RABOSSI, 2004, p.46, emphasis added). [translation by the authors]

From the 1970s onwards, with the tourist market already consolidated and expanding, the city of Pedro Juan Caballero started to receive immigrants from

⁶ It should be noted that this is the view of Arab immigrants about their own participation in the region's development. Every social group tends to overvalue its participation in certain phenomena. To really know the "weight" of the Arab presence in the local economy, it would have to contrast with other sources – official figures, for example. Therefore: this is the interviewee's speech, and it does not represent my absolute conclusions about the phenomenon.

Asian and Arab countries, and even from Paraguay's countryside. Many of these came from *Ciudad del Este*. Over the years, migration became direct, that is, from their countries of origin to the border, thus generating a new migratory flow. Corroborating this aspect:

Most of the Arabs who are here now, are concentrated in Pedro Juan Caballero, the ease of opening a trade is easier than here in Brazil on the Ponta Porã side and the ease of acquiring the goods and the ease of marketing is less bureaucratic than the Brazilian side (RESPONDENT O, GRANTED IN NOVEMBER 2019). [translation by the authors]

In short, the first Arabs who came to the border settled on the Brazilian side, in Ponta Porã-MS, acting as travelling salesmen for years until they gathered capital to open their stores. As for their children, immigrants were encouraged to study⁷, occupying a prestigious place in border society. There are, in the border society, several facades of law offices, doctors' offices, dentists that contain Arab names/surnames, as well as street and neighborhood names⁸.

Ponta Porã's growth attracted the installation of national chain companies in the clothing, footwear, furniture sector, among others, integrating the city into a new commercial dynamic. Added to this, the consolidation of the tourist market in Pedro Juan Caballero, in the 1980s, meant that Arab immigrants had the city of Pedro Juan Caballero as their new destination.

5 Arab immigration trajectory to the border and the theory of social networks in the immigration process

In Pedro Juan Caballero, Paraguay, Arab immigrants are part of the pioneer families that founded the first stores in the city. They arrived in the 1970s, from their homelands (Lebanon and Syria) or from other regions of America, such as *Ciudad del Este*, in Paraguay. However, more specifically in the 1980s, there was a greater flow of Lebanese immigrants, mostly Muslims. Most are young, single men; some marry Brazilians or Paraguayans, but the vast majority seek marriage within their own community.

In addition to general causes (wars and the search for better economic opportunities), another factor that drove other waves of Lebanese immigrants to the border was the connection with pioneer immigrants. In other words, there was a whole network of help for newcomers, which included information disseminated by family members, relatives, fellow countrymen or friends, as well as job offers, accommodation, among others. This is evident in the following testimony:

In fact, we came from there, fleeing from there, from the war, and as there are relatives here, there are people, the Lebanese must be good,

⁷The Arab presence in the local economy can be seen beyond trade, but also in liberal professions. A common fact in the trajectory of this group in Latin America. For a more detailed study see (TRUZZI 1997) *De mascates a doutores*.

⁸Existem ruas homenageando os imigrantes árabes que contribuíram com o crescimento de Ponta Porã, a saber: Rua: Fayes Hussein Haidar Ahamad; Rua: Iskandar Georges; Bairro: Kamel Saad, entre outros.

that's why I had acquaintances already on the border, I just communicated with them I'll wait, then they wait us to get to know the place, they receive us in their homes for the first two days, five days a week, then they start to get together, rent a house, an apartment, just like the students do here. We arrive with a little bit of money to begin with, we work picking up merchandise from Ciudad del Este and come here and sell it to other stores, then every month you grow, right? Because you don't pay rent or employees, then you arrive with a little bit of money then you open a store already, then you start to stay at the store (INTERVIEWED GRANTED IN JUNE 2019). [translation by the authors]

Or yet:

I came straight from Lebanon in 1998 in this case and my uncle already lived here and he asked my father if he wanted to send a son here to work and help the family with the expenses, here is the border, both in Paraguay and Brazil are easier to work in order to earn money and improve life, unlike Lebanon, which has more difficulty doing these things, and then the choice was me, my father asked, do you want to go? And I said I'm going, I have more brothers who live there and I decided to come over, I came straight to the Brazil-Paraguay border *Ciudad del Este*, right? From there I came straight here and I stayed here, I always stayed here, I worked here and my uncle already knew a little about commerce (RESPONDENT H, GRANTED IN NOVEMBER 2019). [translation by the authors]

Therefore, the main reason reported by Arab immigrants for the maintenance of the migratory flow to the border continues to be job opportunities. The trade of *Ciudad del Este* is connected to the cities of Guaíra and Pedro Juan Caballero, showing a connection between the border areas. When this sector is incited by competition in *Ciudad del Este*, merchants move to other border cities, aiming for new markets. It can be said that this was the case at the beginning of the formation of Pedro Juan Caballero and Guaíra cities. Currently, these cities are developing along with *Ciudad del Este*.

Thus, it is understood that the multifaceted and integrative character, provided by the border scenario, offers multiple possibilities for different social groups. This is exactly what the next section seeks to show, addressing everything from the reasons that motivated the expansion of Arab immigration to the different forms of reproduction of these actors, which may have contributed to the progress of Ponta Porã and Pedro Juan Caballero.

It can be said that social networks are essential mechanisms that serve to facilitate the immigration process, they produce trust through their relationships between pioneer immigrants and newcomers. All interviewees stated how easy it is to come and receive help with housing and work.

Regarding the occupational space of Arab immigrants, both the first and the most recent flows are concentrated in commercial activity, in wholesale or retail, ranging from small commercial stores to importing businessmen, Arab restaurants, shopping malls, and smaller stores at newsstands. A considerable part of these projects is family stores.

Social network theory, along with the opportunities that border trade offers, helps to understand the rapid economic rise of these migrants. Furthermore, it should also be considered that in Lebanon, many migrants already had different

professions or worked with services (such as locksmiths and barbers, for example) and in restaurants and ports. There were also the military and (merchants in the clothing and fabric sector and in trade in general). Evidently, it was a very different type of trade from the import trade in Paraguay:

In my country of origin, I was a merchant, an everything-trader, market, clothing trade, selling from town to town, planting, selling fruit, everything you can imagine, raising cattle, selling milk, really everything, service from a farmer (RESPONDENT P, GRANTED IN NOVEMBER 2019). [translation by the authors]

The testimonies also portray the hard life they had before immigrating to the border:

My father was a blacksmith and door welder, he had a very hard life. He carried the iron gate on his back up to the seventh floor, poor man. He struggled (RESPONDENT B, GRANTED IN OCTOBER 2019). [translation by the authors]

At the border, peddling activity was the gateway for new migrants. The pioneers, already established on the frontier, supplied goods on time so that newcomers could begin their work. It was also common to look for goods in *Ciudad del Este* and to supply the shops of *Pedro Juan Caballero's* patricians. The only ones who did not work as peddlers were the Lebanese with family members who already had stores installed in the region, as this was the place of work until these migrants found capital to open a second unit. This reinforces the colony's solidary ties:

Pick the merchandise up, walk around the stores offering and selling, we were all like that, the majority, only those who have a brother like that and have a store, then they come to stay with their brother at the store, the rest goes like this, and they learn the language also on the streets, in commerce and listening to the words from here, asking friends what it means and memorizes it (INTERVIEWED AND, GRANTED IN OCTOBER 2019). [translation by the authors]

The occupational insertion of the Arabs to the border followed, mostly, in the branch of commerce. All respondents say they received financial help to start the work. In addition to having widespread information on how commerce works, they already came to the border predestined to work in the electronics sector, whether initially as peddlers or helping in stores. In other words, they received assistance on how to run their businesses and other information that made it easier to get started.

Specifically:

My uncle was already here; he was already helping me because he already had his credits. Then I got it like that, I got credit [...] sometimes someone knew my family, I also got credit around and I started working, working here and paying the bills and that's how credit grew and I managed to make capital, I started working with the own capital that I have, but that too takes time. We also have a good thing, in the Arabs like this, if when someone new comes here, people try to help, try to do a small credit to see, right? As a test for the person to see if he will be a good person or

not because many that come over are not like that, they're not like that [...] As I was helped by some of my fellow countrymen, I should also provide for those who come now, right, because when I came, many helped me so now if someone comes, I try to help in a way or another (RESPONDENT H, GRANTED IN OCTOBER 2019). [translation by the authors]

In that way, the existing cooperation between the Arabs is evident, as well as the feeling of repaying the help they had from their countrymen. That is, cooperation itself generates trust, causing virtuous circles of interpersonal relationships, based on the assumption that there will be reciprocity when the other one requires help. In summary, there is a network spread by three factors that contribute to that economic rise: i) information; ii) knowledge, and iii) trust.

Therefore, the practice of mobilizing financial loans among ethnic groups is related to cultural aspects:

Most of the financial resources used to start businesses among ethnic groups are not the result of loans from outside, but of savings mobilized by the owner, his family, friends and fellow countrymen. In turn, as both the ability to save and the ability to mobilize networks are ultimately culturally determined variables among different groups, some provide entrepreneurs with greater wealth than others. Similarly, it is possible to pursue the same type of determinant, with a cultural background, in explanations that privilege inequalities in the availability not of financial capital, but of human capital between groups (TRUZZI; SACOMANO NETO, 2007, p. 42). [translation by the authors]

Therefore, initial help came from credits, which generally materialized in the form of goods or money (used to buy goods). Added to that, a particularity about the peddler activity is related to the type of merchandise sold. It is worth mentioning the option for electronics in general to meet the demand of commercial stores in the Arabs that are concentrated in this sector. This type of professional occupation ended up enabling many to prosper, also providing growing Arab participation in commerce with the opening of several stores (all in the electronics sector, some restaurants or stores that sell hookahs). In that aspect, the capacity and expertise of the Arabs in doing business, buying and selling (importing and exporting) is admitted. This, of course, has effects on the development of border trade.

The main products sold by the Arabs come from *Ciudad del Este*. Some are imported from China, the United States, Japan and other regions of Brazil. The products are of high technological standard. On the border, the concentration of certain ethnic groups in certain economic axes/segments is noticeable, that is, trade is ethnically stratified. The Arabs are mostly concentrated in the electronics sector, hookah stores and some restaurants; the Chinese predominate in the toy sector (all imported from China) and the Koreans are concentrated in the clothing sector (imported from Korea). The following report shows the differences between the sectors and products of the different groups of immigrants established on the border:

So in this case, the Korean or Chinese only get things from China, something from there, like the Koreans only get their clothes from Korea, right? And they find a good price and the Chinese only get toys from China, while the Arabs look for more advanced things, American, Japanese, Brazilian things, not expensive things, for example, in Chinese, you don't find stuff that cost fifteen or twenty reais, these Arabs get cameras that cost three thousand reais, four thousand reais, DVDs, monitors that cost thousands, right? They are more expensive things, aren't they? Advanced electronics, and you see there are good ones from China in the United States, from Brazil they are also original things (INTERVIEWED IN JULY 2019). [translation by the authors]

It is assumed, then, that Chinese, Korean, and Arab immigrant groups are concentrated in specific economic segments in the host society, thus monopolizing the toy, clothing, and electronics sector. Behind this stratification is the relationship between economic activity and cultural values. In other words, cultural values influence what is consumed and, at the same time, what is produced. Therefore, the consumption of certain products from an ethnic group is also associated with their cultural habit.

6 Concluding Remarks

As it was possible to observe, since the beginning of their immigration processes in Brazil and Paraguay, more especially in their border towns, the Arabs were mainly active in trade activities. Over the years, they boosted their commercial activities by valuing their work from a perspective of future investments. Furthermore, they formed and expanded a community network, which serves as mutual support and assistance.

It is also observed the presence of an ability transmitted between generations via social networks among Arab immigrants. Valuing individual and family prosperity is directly linked to cultural and historical principles. As it was possible to observe, as they prospered in the commercial sector, many immigrants dedicated themselves to the wholesale trade, offering goods to the arriving patricians⁹ thus generating a circle of relationships.

In other words, the ease of the Arabs in boosting their commercial activities is essentially related to their own culture. Furthermore, valuing family and work creates a “type” of virtuous circle, as the immigrant already established on the border ended up bringing friends and family. In this process, the “frontier” Arab passed on all the aspects and information necessary for the insertion of these actors in local commerce, which ended up creating social relations endowed with trust.

Therefore, it is understood that the Arab peoples, in view of all historical and cultural aspects, have a high level of social capital, which is disseminated by social networks because trust, which is one of the main elements in the construction of cooperative relationships and social organization, was well evidenced. All these aspects make significant the influences that Arab culture has played in the

⁹Person of the same country or locality, a compatriot, countryman.

construction of both daily lives in the city and in the economic growth of the Ponta Porã (BR) and Pedro Juan Caballero (PY) borders.

Help among immigrants, related to work opportunities, flows through their ethnic social networks. They occur, for example, through credits or goods, as the intention is that each immigrant who arrives at the border has his own trade. We identified three factors, characteristic of social capital, that contribute to an individual economic trajectory: i) information; ii) knowledge, and iii) trust. In other words, these credit networks contribute to the establishment of Arabs in the border region. These three factors form the social capital of Arab immigrants and depend on the amount of relationships in the network that it manages to move.

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