

Urban ethnic associations are allowing Chile's Mapuche to reclaim Santiago as an indigenous space



Santiago's array of ethnic associations are ensuring the survival Mapuche culture and de-invisibilising those who have made the city their home, writes [Dana Brablec](#) (University of Cambridge).

The Mapuche living in Santiago de Chile are seeking spaces in which to revive, create, and exercise their endangered identity. Since these collectives received legal recognition via the post-authoritarian Indigenous Law in 1993, ethnic-based voluntary associations have been established, joined, and run with renewed vigour by rural Mapuche migrants and their descendants.

Ethnic associational work has served not only to support the survival and practice of Mapuche cultural, socio-political, and organisational practices, but also to empower, de-invisibilise and re-ethnify those Mapuche who have made Santiago their home.



A Mapuche cultural performance takes place on Santiago's Cerro Santa Lucía ([Mara Daruich](#), Municipalidad de Santiago, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Mapuche associational development in Santiago

The longstanding consequences of conquest and colonisation have meant that migration has been a mainstay of recent Mapuche history, with many forced to abandon their remaining lands and travel to cities in search of better life prospects. Various processes of forced state dispossession of their lands have left them with around five percent of their former territory, and the combined scourges of poverty and marginalisation have taken a severe toll.

Today, the Mapuche people are a minority even in their former territory, having been dispersed to many different urban areas around Chile. Santiago's relative economic development has made it a magnet for low- and medium-skilled workers, including rural Mapuche migrants, and it now boasts the largest share of the Mapuche population, at 37.4 per cent.

While Santiago was indeed part of the extended Mapuche territory before Spanish rule, the biological and cultural mixing of two different ethno-racial components (*mestizaje*) led the Mapuche to lose their sense of belonging above the border established with the conquistadors along the Biobío river.

With Mapuche life developing mainly below this demarcation line, transmission of oral history has been concentrated within this territory, rendering the northern lands as a non-indigenous and therefore alien space. In practice, this border has acted as an identity divide between the Chilean-mestizo (*winka*) in the north and the Mapuche in the south.

As I found during my own extended fieldwork in Santiago, the city is still broadly perceived by Mapuche members of ethnic associations as an alien environment in which the culture of Mapuche migrants is subsumed into the dominant *mestizo* culture.

While some have yielded to the often racist centripetal forces exerted by the dominant non-indigenous society's efforts to make the Chilean *mestizo* the sole national citizen, others have struggled to recover, maintain, and exercise their identity in the city.

Mapuche associations have been fundamental for this purpose as they represent protective and culturally-familiar gathering points for indigenous people to reproduce their culture.

The city as an alien milieu

The distance of the Mapuche people from their rural communities of origin, coupled with the effects of strong socio-economic and racial discrimination, have resulted in a complex process of ethnic ascription, particularly for those generations born in urban areas.

The significant loss of cultural traits like the Mapuche language (Mapuzungun), absorption into the generalised pool of urban labour, and a tendency to reside in marginal areas of the city have led to an invisibility of the Mapuche.

This apparent lack of distinctiveness has served as a simplistic but convenient argument for the Chilean state to promote the idea of a country based on a single, majority ethno-racial category, the mestizo, with indigeneity relegated to the rural setting. This oversimplification has contributed to the exclusion of the urban situation from public policy, as the indigenous factor is associated instead with a milieu of rural poverty. Invisibility has thus operated as an active expression of discrimination, depriving individuals of the chance to freely express their own ethno-racial identity.

Yet, migration to the city has not been synonymous with identity loss. Indeed, the Mapuche have increasingly made the asphalt of Santiago the backdrop to development of their culture.

Participation and the endurance of identity

Ethnic associations have become a key channel for the preservation, recreation, and reassertion of Mapuche practices and culture. Through their dissemination of Mapuche culture in the city, these associations have become poles of attraction for local Mapuche wishing to reconnect with their origins.

During my fieldwork I came into contact with Mapuche from various age groups, migrant generations, gender identifications, and far-flung corners of the *Wallmapu* or 'ancestral' territory. Despite this diversity, the work of the associations – of which there are [82 registered](#) – was able to bring these groups together to plan for and engage in a diverse range of events and economic activities.



A map of 1870 showing the border between state and Mapuche territories along the Biobío river ([Unknown author](#), public domain)

There were workshops on Mapuzungun, weaving, herbs, the Mapuche worldview, and traditional Mapuche health practices, as well as fairs, traditional ceremonies (like the *we tripantu* and *nguillatun*), and meetings to discuss socio-political topics affecting Mapuche people around the country.



A traditional Mapuche *We Tripantu* new year celebration ([Municipalidad de Santiago, CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

Associations have in some ways made up for the lack of a comprehensive urban indigenous policy by creating opportunities for interaction and learning whilst also reasserting the importance of Mapuche practices, customs, and traditions, which are key to the social construction process of differentiation. They have likewise helped to generate support and cooperation networks amongst ethnic peers inside and outside of the capital. In more political terms, these associations have served as a launchpad for claims linked to ongoing processes of rural alienation and for incipient demands for a better quality of life for urban Mapuche.

A better Mapuche future in Santiago

Urban Mapuche associations today occupy an important position in the city as they allow for the cultural, psychological and sometimes political development of large numbers of Mapuche in Chile's capital. The advantages of participation in urban ethnic associations are extensive, but a number of challenges must yet be addressed in order to improve the associative dynamics of the urban Mapuche population in Santiago.

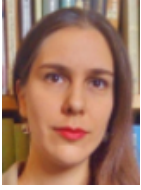
The state constructs the reality of urban Mapuche in terms of economic marginalisation, thereby depriving them of a comprehensive vision that could recognise the role of the indigenous factor in their present condition. To combat this, it is vital that ethnic associations be allowed to guide their own development, with their voices being effectively reflected in final regulations.

Public authorities also need to improve transparency and accountability in terms of resource management, as well as in decision-making processes regarding urban indigenous affairs. This can contribute to the generation of greater confidence between the Mapuche and the public sector, while also driving greater cooperation at the inter-association level.

If the role of urban ethnic associations key to the protection of Mapuche culture is to be protected and reinforced, these issues must be addressed quickly and diligently through dialogue with Mapuche leaders and members of Santiago's ethnic associations themselves.

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