

Ijexá and Music Education: The Study of African-Based Music as a Pathway to Valorize Minority Groups' Collective Identities

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades, the music field has been going through significant changes due to discussions related to colonialism, ownership and representativeness. By questioning traditional music-related values and incorporating debates from diverse social and human sciences, researchers with different backgrounds have become attentive to the function of music education in promoting social justice. Focusing on the Ijexá rhythm, the following article has as its main aim to investigate, analyze and discuss implications of the application of approaches to music education that were developed based on minority groups' traditional knowledge. Strongly influenced by the critical paradigm's perspective, this paper presents four specific aims: 1) to present the main sociological, ethnomusicological and religious features of Ijexá; 2) to examine the intentions and effects of traditional Eurocentric approaches to music education; 3) to reflect on the connections between music, music education and collective identities; and 4) to analyze the possible social and educational impacts of the application of decolonization-oriented approaches to music education. Sustained by the aforementioned goals, this research employs the qualitative documental analysis as its methodological approach to examine different sources of written and audiovisual materials, to gather the data, to acquire the information and to develop the knowledge that supports and guides the presented discussions. Its critically oriented reflections intend to contribute to the ongoing scientific debate by investigating the application of an educational approach's strand that is supported by African-based music and African-based traditions.

Keywords: African-heritage music; music education; postcolonial theories; collective identity; Ijexá

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1. Introduction

Similarly as happens worldwide, the Brazilian music context undergoes constant changes, updates and resignifications. This scenario, intrinsically connected with social, political, historical and economic atmospheres, has incorporated discussions that interrogate and challenge the social value that is attributed to African-heritage musics (Palmeira, 2017; A. E. Pereira, 2020).

Scholars with different theoretical backgrounds have been focusing on issues related to the effects of power relations in different modern societies. In the last two decades, such reflections have incorporated discussions that aim to call attention to the effect that social, political and economic relations have not only on the musical field itself but also on the perception that general society's members have regarding the value of artistic manifestations that symbolize different social groups (Calabrich et al., 2017; Queiroz, 2017).

Parallelly, the function that music, music education and music manifestations have in the formation, negotiation and consolidation of identities has also been academically discussed (Campbell, 2003; Fryer, 2000; Lidskog, 2017; Nurse, 2011; Rice, 2007). Researchers interested in the connections between music, society and culture have been reflecting on the role of the music field not only in communicating cultural knowledge through generations in different social groups but also in the formation, disturbance, renegotiation, update and establishment of collective identities per se (Lidskog, 2017).

Additionally, considering the need to ponder about the “multilevel” influence mechanisms (Lor, 2019; Schriewer, 1988), it is possible to reflect on the relevance that different environments can have not only on the perception that general members of a certain society have on minority groups’ musical manifestations but also in the perception that a member of a certain social group has about their own artistic expressions. As an illustration, the presence/absence of an artistic expression in the curriculum of an established educational institution (e.g. a Higher Education Institution) may induce different representations when compared with the presence/absence of an artistic initiative in the program of an entertainment organization (e.g. a nightclub). This kind of representativeness discrepancy may trigger effects in both group members and non-members.

By recognizing the influential position that academy-oriented music education institutions hold, authors from different nationalities have been developing, applying, testing and evaluating materials, methods and approaches that acknowledge, reinforce and incorporate the role of music and music education in the promotion of democratic societies (Hess, 2015; A. E. Pereira et al., 2021; M. V. M. Pereira, 2018; Schmidt, 2005; Stanton, 2018). In this sense, the systematic study of musical manifestations that represent subaltern groups in social (and musical) hierarchies can contribute to the desired social emancipation. In the Brazilian scenario, considering the ethnic-racial populational distribution and the influence on popular music, it seems pertinent to consider African-based music as the raw material for such studies.

Focusing on Ijexá, this article aims to investigate, analyze and discuss implications of the application of approaches to music education that were developed based on minority groups’ traditional knowledge. Strongly influenced by the perspective of the Critical Paradigm – which argues that its adepts should not only investigate a phenomenon but also contribute with the solution of the identified issues (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) – this article has four specific objectives: 1) to present the main sociological, ethnomusicological and religious features of Ijexá; 2) to examine the intentions and effects of traditional Eurocentric approaches to music education; 3) to reflect on the connections between music, music education and collective identities; and 4) to analyze the possible social and educational impacts of the application of decolonization-oriented approaches to music education.

2. Methodology

This research employs the qualitative document analysis (QDA) as its methodological approach to examine and select materials that can contribute to the development of the knowledge that will support the presented discussions. The QDA can be understood as a set of procedures for the search, selection, systematization and analysis of the data contained in several types of materials (Bowen, 2009; Wach & Ward, 2013). Bowen (2009), states that researches guided by QDA should consider as “documents” the materials that were developed without the researcher’s participation. As posited by the author,

Documents that may be used for systematic evaluation as part of a study take a variety of forms. They include advertisements; agendas, attendance registers, and minutes of meetings; manuals; background papers; books and brochures; diaries and journals;

event programs (i.e., printed outlines); letters and memoranda; maps and charts; newspapers (clippings/articles); press releases; program proposals, application forms, and summaries; radio and television program scripts; organizational or institutional reports; survey data; and various public records. Scrapbooks and photo albums can also furnish documentary material for research purposes (Bowen, 2009, pp. 27–28).

Following this trail, the construction of the presented article underwent searches for academic publications which address one or more of the following themes: the Ijexá rhythm, music education, postcolonial theories, collective identity, social identity, cultural identity, decolonization of education, Afro-Brazilian music. The search was triggered by the aforementioned keywords and supported by some search engines like Google Scholar, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine (BASE), World Wide Science and university repositories. Once the materials were found, they were systematically examined by the qualitative documental analysis procedures in order to provide a proper background to the discussions and reflections developed in this paper.

Supported by Bowel's (2009) recommendations, to collect the best and most accurate information from the found materials, the relevant documents were analyzed based on QDA processes that involved skimming (superficial examination), reading (careful and detailed examination), and interpretation. As will be further presented in the Literature review section, the publications of some authors were particularly relevant to the construction of the current article. As examples it is possible to mention: 1) Cardoso's (2006) PhD thesis – which contributed by providing a thorough examination of the processes in which the Ijexá rhythm is traditionally employed in Afro-Brazilian communities focusing on religious ceremonies; 2) Becker's (2014) PhD thesis – that offers a historical and musical analysis of the application of Ijexá in non-religious ceremonies, such as the street carnival; 3) Stekelenburg's (2013) article – that promoted a meticulous review about the collective identities' theme from sociological, psychological and anthropological points of view; and 4) Young's (2001) book – that, by addressing the Postcolonial Theories and the Postcolonialism from ontological and epistemological perspectives, provided the philosophical background that supported not only the knowledge development from a robust and influential set of theories but also fostered the development of the presented reflections and discussions.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Ijexá Rhythm

Ijexá is a Yoruba word that is used to refer to a rhythm, an African region (currently in the Nigerian territory) and a *Candomblé* nation (Cardoso, 2006; Oliveira, 2014). In Brazil, Ijexá is usually understood as an Afro-Brazilian rhythm employed in *Candomblé* ceremonies. Cardoso (2006), states that *Candomblé* cannot be comprehended as “one” religion, but as an oversimplified classification that encompasses several Afro-Brazilian religions which have some common features like the use of percussive music in their ceremonies. According to the author, “*Candomblé* is a generic term used to describe some Afro-Brazilian religions that share certain characteristics, such as the phenomenon of possession” (Cardoso, 2006, p. 394)¹.

In Salvador – the biggest out-of-Africa city in the number of African-descendant people – the Ijexá is broadly known as the touch² dedicated to the deity named *Oxum* (A. Becker, 2014; Cardoso, 2006; Konopleva & Pereira, 2020; A. E. Pereira, 2019; A. E. Pereira & Konopleva,

¹ Here and ahead: authors' translation.

² In *Candomblé*, the rhythms are known as touches (Palmeira, 2017, p. 30)

2018). However, this rhythm is also employed to worship other Candomblé's divinities such as *Oxalá*, *Ogum*, *Oxaguiã* and *Logun Ede* (A. Becker, 2014; A. E. Pereira, 2020). Additionally, in Salvador there is also a Candomblé nation³ that is called *Ijexá* (Cardoso, 2006). In this nation, the *Ijexá* rhythm is executed in the ceremonies dedicated to almost all divinities, being almost the only employed touch (A. Becker, 2014; Cardoso, 2006).

Despite its religious traditions, in the XX century the *Ijexá* started being widely used in popular music manifestation through the foundation of *Afoxés*⁴ (Assunção, 2003; Fryer, 2000). Becker (2014, p.22)⁵, posits that “the afoxés emerged as a need for people who frequent Candomblé to participate in carnival with their own music”. The author states that, even though these two terms carry different meanings, due to their strong connection, *Ijexá* and *Afoxé* are often (and wrongly) used as synonyms.

As in the majority of Candomblé touches, the *Ijexá* is a complex rhythm that needs several percussive instruments to its complete execution. In Candomblés *Ketu* – one of the three most relevant nations of Salvador (Palmeira, 2017) – these musical instruments are called: 1) *Agogô*, which is responsible for executing the rhythm key; *Lé* and *Rumpi*, who maintain their individual constant rhythms; and the *Rum*, responsible for playing the rhythmic variations – the complex rhythms played in *Rum* are understood as the connection between music and dance in candomblé ceremonies.



Figure 1. Constant rhythms of *Ijexá*
Source: The Authors

3.2. Postcolonial Theories

From a time-period viewpoint, postcolonial can be understood as the period that begins immediately after the political independence of a colony (Sawant, 2011). However, this term can also be applied to designate structured reflections that aim to reveal and comprehend the hidden structures that influence the dynamics of different sectors of politically independent countries. From the later perspective, Postcolonial Theories (PCT) seek to analyze how colonial or imperial mechanisms continue to operate in “self-governed” states (Hickling-Hudson et al., 2004; Walsh et al., 2018; Young, 2001). Likewise, PCT can be comprehended as a tool to analyze a big range of social, gender, political, ethnical, anthropological, historical,

³ Insofar as Candomblé is a generic categorization, Nation is a broadly used terminology to specify the type of Candomblé (Cardoso, 2006; Palmeira, 2017; Passos, 2016).

⁴ *Afoxés*, popularly known as “street candomblé”, are organizations that usually deliver their main performance during carnival parades.

⁵ Here and ahead: authors’ translation.

artistic economic and music structures. Santos (2006, p. 39)⁶, defines postcolonialism as “a set of theoretical and analytical currents [...] which have as a common characteristic the focus on theoretical and political aspects of the unequal relations between North and South in the explanation or understanding of the contemporary world”. Concomitantly, Sá (2019, p. 132)⁷ argues that postcolonialism can be understood as a “set of strategies (discursive and performative) that frustrate the colonial vision, that resist colonialist ideologies”. Additionally, Hickling-Hudson et al. (2004, p. 5), argue that, from a postcolonial perspective, “essentialist binaries constructed between white and non-white, good and evil, East and West, and Orient and Occident are analyzed to show how they serve to legitimize privilege, economic exploitation and its continuation”.

It is important to emphasize that the previously mentioned forms of influence also incorporate philosophical and psychological dimensions (Sá, 2019; Sawant, 2011; Walsh et al., 2018). Abib (2019) states that coloniality refers to the process of destroying a people's “symbolic world” and replacing it with the colonizer's worldviews; the process of westernization of peoples. According to the author, coloniality represses “the beliefs, spirituality, knowledge of the colonized and imposes new ones. Thus, the naturalization of the imagination of the European invader is instituted, the epistemic subordination of the non-European and the invisibility of non-European historical processes” (Abib, 2019, p. 8)⁸.

3.3. Collective Identity

Group identity has been an important issue for scholars from different academic fields and, hence, diverse terms have been used to address this element (e.g. Collective Identity, Social Identity, Ethical Identity, Professional Identity, etc.). In this sense, even though there are some possible divergent points in the conceptualization and application in different fields, throughout this article the expressions “collective Identity”, “cultural identity” and “social Identity” are used to refer to the group level of identity. Thus, in the current text, these terms are understood as interchangeable.

Social identity can be seen as people aggregation to broader communities, organizations and institutions. In this direction, Polletta & Jasper (2001, p. 3), defined collective identity as “an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly”

The identification of features that promote group filiation can come from diverse sources and be associated with different characteristics, for example: people who live in a neighborhood, people who like the same sport or root for the same team, people with the same profession, people with the same religion, etc. Among the myriad of features inherent to human life, some of them became sources of community formation and others do not. In spite of speculations about the likelihood of certain decisions, researchers from different fields seem to agree that the adhesion into a collective identity is an individual choice based on what people comprehend as relevant for their lives (Ellemers et al., 2002; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Sen & Avcı, 2016; Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009). Therefore, characteristics like skin color, gender, profession, religion, sports preferences and sexual orientation may be important features to the formation, engagement and development of groups. As stated by Stekelenburg (2013, p. 3)

⁶ Here and ahead: authors' translation.

⁷ Here and ahead: authors' translation.

⁸ Here and ahead: authors' translation.

“individuals come to see themselves as part of a group when some shared characteristic becomes salient and is defined as important”.

Insofar as people can perceive various characteristics as important, it is inferable that one person can have more than one social identity. Harmonically, Oyserman et al. (2012, p. 164) argue that “each of us has a range of different, cross-cutting, social identities, including those derived from highly meaningful and clearly delineated groups as well as those referring to more abstract and perhaps ambiguous social categories”.

As diverse human social features, collective identities’ characteristics are fluid and dynamic rather than fixed and settled (Lidskog, 2017; Stekelenburg, 2013). Following this trail, collective identities are “constantly under construction” (Stekelenburg, 2013), they are malleable and tend to be constructed at the moment, depending on the audience with which the person is interacting with. Accordingly, Polletta & Jasper state that,

collective identity involves an act of perception and construction as well as the discovery of preexisting bonds, interests, and boundaries. It is fluid and relational, emerging out of interactions with a number of different audiences (bystanders, allies, opponents, news media, state authorities), rather than fixed. It channels words and actions, enabling some claims and deeds but delegitimizing others. It provides categories by which individuals divide up and make sense of the social world (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 16).

4. Discussion

Adopting a postcolonial perspective, it is possible to expose the hidden structures and mechanisms that influence a myriad of elements of a society’s daily life. The western patterns, values, standards and processes are consistently and systematically integrated into different societies’ segments as the natural, erudite and proper ways of coping with certain phenomena (Barry, 2002; Bertens, 2008; Castro-Gómez, 1998; Gandhi, 2018; Young, 2001). Barry (2002, p. 128) states that “Eurocentric universalism which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western and the inferiority of what is not”. Harmonically, Bertens (2008), declares that,

West and East form a binary opposition in which the two poles define each other. The inferiority that Orientalism attributes to the East simultaneously serves to construct the West’s superiority. The sensuality, irrationality, primitiveness, and despotism of the East construct the West as rational, democratic, and progressive. The West always functions as the ‘centre’ and the East is a marginal ‘other’ that simply through its existence confirms the West’s centrality and superiority (Bertens, 2008, p. 164).

Based on this comprehension and considering that the several mechanisms of colonial influence can impact on diverse contexts by different means and in unique proportions, it is possible to infer that the values, models, processes, beliefs and principles which present similarities with the western dominant culture are favorably affected by colonial systemic mechanisms. On the other hand, the more a culture, values and traditions are divergent from the dominant, the more it is negatively impacted by coloniality and other colonial structures.

Similarly, whilst the social groups that identify with the dominant culture, values, appearance, symbols, principles, philosophy and reasoning are constantly beneficated by systemic power structures, the social groups that do not find similarities with the “Eurocentric universalist” culture are intermittently harmed by the same systemic arrangements (Hess, 2015; Lidskog, 2017; Souza et al., 2020). Furthermore, if it is possible to understand the discrimination against certain minority groups as a consequence of power structures that penalize discrepancies with

dominant values it is also pertinent to ponder about the possibility of manifestations of minority groups being negatively impacted by colonial structures due to its connections with discriminated and underrepresented social groups. This cross-feeding characteristic creates a “snowball process” of valuation for the dominant groups and a devaluation snowball for minorities, in which the group is harmed due to their culture and their cultural manifestations are harmed by being associated with a minority group.

In Brazil, the condition of Portuguese colony that haunted the country for more than three hundred years, incorporated power structures that continues to affect the Brazilian population’s life even after the declared independence. These colonial mechanisms are particularly perceptible when the political, economic, educational and social status of the Brazilian African-descendant peoples are considered (Conceição, 2017; Ferreira & Queiroz, 2018; A. E. Pereira et al., 2022; Silva & Pires, 2015). As an illustration, after the Brazilian slavery abolition in 1888, the Brazilian government started projects of “whitening” the country in which every characteristic of black communities (e.g. religion, music, dance, culinary, languages, ceremonies, accents, etc.) was officially persecuted (Albuquerque & Fraga, 2006; Amaral, 2011).

However, the Brazilian cultural identity was forged strongly influenced by African peoples’ cultures. As posited by Pereira and Konopleva (2018, p. 12)⁹, African cultures participated in the development of a myriad of Brazilian’s features such as “habits, beliefs, culinary, military techniques, security, sport, clothing, language, constructions, plantations, dance, visual arts and music”. Despite the enormous influence of African-based cultures in the development and consolidation of Brazilian national identity, manifestations that can be directly traced to Afro-Brazilian communities tend to occupy unprivileged social places (Conceição, 2017; Ferreira & Queiroz, 2018; Silva & Pires, 2015).

In the musical field, the devaluation snowball acts throughout diverse structures and can be noticed by diverse forms and in contexts like: the relevance of western music in distinguished environments; the social value attributed to African-based music; and the influential position European music holds in higher education music curricula (Queiroz, 2017; Souza et al., 2020). Additionally, the coloniality (psychological influence) can endorse the hierarchization of musical manifestations that symbolize different collective identities (M. V. M. Pereira, 2018; Queiroz, 2017; Rice, 2007). The terminology “musical epistemicide” has been employed by Queiroz (2017) to designate the depreciation process that, based on Eurocentric values, excludes non-Western music of prominent social places. As asserted by the author, “musical praxis not aligned with the perspectives of Western classical music [...] were excluded from ‘civilized’ contexts of music production and, consequently, from the institutionalization process of music education” (Queiroz, 2017, p. 137)¹⁰.

Based on the Ijexá’s brief description provided above, it is possible to note its potential to contribute in formal contexts of music education, such as 1) ethnomusicologically it can be investigated to support the development of knowledge that can contribute to the comprehension of music function in the African-based traditional ceremonies; 2) compositionally it can be explored as rhythmic and melodic motives to guide the construction of songs, suites, symphonies, etc.; and 3) instrumentally it can be used to guide the development of technique, improvisation and interpretation studies.

During the last decade, some authors with different musical backgrounds have been dedicating efforts for the development of materials devoted to guiding teaching and learning processes

⁹ Here and ahead: authors’ translation.

¹⁰ Here and ahead: authors’ translation.

that employ knowledge that arose from systematic and scientific examinations of Ijexá. As illustrations it is possible to mention Becker (2014) and his doctoral thesis entitled “Training proposal for improvisation through the rhythm of ijexá” (Originally in Portuguese – “Proposta de treinamento para a improvisação através da rítmica do ijexá”) which is focused on improvisation; Pereira and Konopleva (2018) with the article “The Ijexá Rhythm on Piano: Interpretive Aspects” (Originally in Portuguese – “O Ritmo Ijexá ao Piano: Aspectos Interpretativos”) that is devoted to the development of pianists skills and competences; Oliveira (2014) and the Book named “Afro-Brazilian Rhythms on Drumkit” (Originally in Portuguese – “Ritmos Afro-Brasileiros na Bateria”) that dedicates a whole chapter to the application of Ijexá in the construction of rhythmic patterns for drums; and Becker (2013), who developed the material called “Brazilian Grooves for Acoustic Guitar” (Originally in Portuguese – “Levadas brasileiras para violão”) which presents adaptations of Ijexá for guitar, focusing on rhythmic possibilities for accompaniment.

As African-heritage, Ijexá-oriented initiatives are affected by the structures that hierarchize different Brazilian social groups. Considering the presented educational potential, the small participation of this Ijexá in formal music education environments can only be traced to the structures that assign different values to expressions that represent people with different collective identities. However, the availability of the aforementioned materials can indicate an increasing participation of Ijexá in teaching and learning official music education institutions.

Analogously as the devaluation snowball that imposes negative effects on initiatives organized by underrepresented groups, the increasingly academy-oriented valuation attributed to the Ijexá may start an appreciation snowball that positively affects adepts of several African-based social identities. As described by Schmidt (2005, p. 4) music education “has the potential to reach as a transforming power to different realities; [...] it must not only establish its value in cognitive and emotional connections alone, but also search for social and thus, personal, transformation”. Concomitantly, Stanton (2018, p. 4) defends that “decolonial music education, broadly conceived as occurring both inside and outside of academic institutions, carries profound implications not only for decolonizing music as such, but for larger decolonial struggles”.

In this direction, Pereira (2018) suggests a “deconservative” approach in order to “denaturalize” the selection of western music as “the” content of music education. This approach fosters curriculum development and content selection based on parameters that equally consider musical expressions that are relevant for different social groups by attributing the same value for manifestations of different cultural identities. The employment of this approach can benefit not only the Ijexá and the minority groups that traditionally play it in their religious and artistic expressions but also benefit minority’s collective identities in general by adopting unbiased criteria for the search, analysis and selection of different styles, genres, rhythms and musical expressions in the development of music education curricula.

5. Conclusion

Music expressions can acquire different social, political, economic and religious functions in different situations and for different social groups (Campbell, 2003; Lidskog, 2017; Rice, 2007). According to Lidskog (2017, p. 11) “music can serve both to stabilize and maintain identities and belongings – but also to destabilize them, providing new material and resources for identity formation”.

By scrutinizing the Ijexá, it is possible to notice its relevance not only for the underrepresented groups which traditionally play this rhythm in their manifestations but also for the whole Brazilian culture. Supported by the perception of Ijexá's underappreciation, this article aims to contribute both to discussions about the role of music and music education in the promotion of

balanced societies and to the recognition of African-heritage music as a valuable research source for the field of music education.

Even though the Ijexá does not represent the entire Afro-Brazilian community, it is expected that the example provided by the application of Ijexá in academic-oriented contexts can foster reflections and discussions that may stimulate the rethinking of the currently established music education traditions. As asserted by Hess (2015, p. 336), in music courses “Western classical music is constructed as ‘natural’ and the curriculum tokenizes alternative practices by making them tangential to the main curriculum. In many respects, Western music in music education acts as a colonizer”.

Consonantly, Bradley (2016, p. 7) reports that many programs do not embrace “other” types of music and “if such musics are included in the curricula, they often tend to perpetuate the sense of ‘different or exotic’ (Campbell, 1994), rather than musics as equally important components of the curriculum”. Either by removing non-Eurocentric manifestations from educational contexts or by presenting them as “exotics”, naturalization processes give western music the status of “the” culturally valuable music, “the” academic music and “the” valuable music. However, as stated by Pereira (2018, p. 20)¹¹, criticizing standardized music education courses and proposing the rethinking of curricula and courses content do not “deny or exclude what has been addressed in educational processes [...] it only breaks with arbitrary cultural hegemonies, leading classical music to the status of one of several possibilities for musical practice, for the systematization of musical knowledge”.

It is expected that the development of educational initiatives oriented by the knowledge constructed based on the systematic examination of Ijexá’s traditions can lead to music education’s emancipation processes. Furthermore, considering the mutually influencing relation between the music field and the whole society, it is noticeable that the scientific investigation of Ijexá holds the power to contribute to the democratization of broader sectors of society, allowing artistic, cultural and musical manifestations of people from different collective identities to be appreciated, examined and judge based on a decolonized set of values. By denouncing the power structures which support the hierarchization of different music initiatives, this work also aims to promote a fair valorization of minority groups’ manifestations, democratizing the artistic scenario and enabling truly liberated musical activities as a form of representation and expression of all kinds of cultural identities. Lately, it is also important to stress that democratic societies should set the ground for free expression of all kinds of social identities not only to guarantee the group members’ right to free expression but also to ensure the audience’s right to appreciate all types of artistic, cultural and musical manifestations. Only by being exposed to different groups’ initiatives the public can truly develop the knowledge that assures the recognition of features and characteristics that may culminate in personal identification with a certain social group.

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