

BECOMING MANTA: ARCHAEOLOGY, PLACE, AND MEANINGS OF INDIGENEITY¹

Daniel Bauer
University of Southern Indiana

This article examines the recent representations of Manta identity in rural coastal Ecuador as a process of secondary ethnogenesis. It emphasizes the role that archaeology has played in its emergence and analyzes how a place-based notion of identity forms. The residents of Pueblo Manta communities draw conceptual links between the archaeological record and their knowledge of the region's prehistory as these relate to personal experiences to conceptualize their identity. They exemplify how local identity is interpreted and reinterpreted both for the individual and the collective. (Ethnogenesis, place, identity, archaeology, Ecuador)

This article is concerned with the production of identity as it relates to symbolic frames of meaning in the politicized context of rural coastal Ecuador. Following Hall (1990), it positions identity on practice. To analyze the ethnogenesis of the *Pueblo Manta* and its Manta identity, it employs the theoretical foundation put forth by Hill (1996). *Pueblo Manta* refers to the political organization, realized in 2006, of four *comunas*² located in the south of Ecuador's Manabí province. The term Manta as used here refers to the identity of the residents of Pueblo Manta communities. It should not be confused with the city of Manta. The self-referential term, Manta, serves in part to mark a political distinction between residents of Pueblo Manta communities and neighboring Manta-Wankavilka (alternate spelling Manta-Huancavilca) communities that are most prominent in the provinces of Guayas and Santa Elena.

In 2007 the *comuna* Salango celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the local archaeological museum. The museum has come to symbolize the prehistory of the region and the cultural identity of local residents. Prior to the celebration, Manuel, a resident of Salango and a tourism guide, reflected on the importance of the museum as a representation of local history and culture.³ Manuel noted the importance of archaeology for the community and said he took pride in his identity as a descendent of the pre-Columbian Manteño culture of the region. On other occasions Manuel showed me ceramic artifacts that his father and brother had unearthed while they were planting or engaging in construction projects at their homes. One artifact was part of a ceramic vessel typical of those produced by the pre-Columbian Manteño. Asked about it, he explained, "it is something made by our ancestors." I asked if the piece, in the form of a human face, had any meaning for him. Manuel paused before

explaining, "Sure, it represents the culture of this place ... of our village. We have a village full of history and it [the ceramic] is part of the history." Manuel's assertion that the ceramic represents "*nuestro pueblo*" (our village) speaks to the significance of archaeology for notions of identity in the village and surrounding communities.

The residents of Pueblo Manta communities conceive of and express their own identities, and a sense of belonging, with reference to notions of prehistory and the archaeological record. The social construction of the archaeological record informs identity. In examining how people in Pueblo Manta communities interpret and reinterpret their identities, this article has three aims. First, it relates the emergence of community identity to scholarly contributions pertaining to ethnogenesis. Second, it aims to illuminate how the archaeological record is leveraged by Pueblo Manta communities to buttress claims about their ethnic identity in order to counter the hybridizing impact of *mestizaje*. The third aim is to explore how residents of Pueblo Manta communities construct their identity with reference to essentialized notions of place. Identity there is based upon an archaeological record that elevates an indigenous identity with the past, symbolically fashioned to interpret the present. Claims to an indigenous identity by residents of Pueblo Manta communities are not without contradictions. The contradictions are highlighted by examining the shared histories of member communities and the experiences of their people.

THE SETTING

Research was carried out in south-central coastal Ecuador. The area has many villages and hamlets, which trace their ancestry to the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Ecuadorian coast. The occupation of the southern Manabí region dates from approximately 3500 B.C. to the present (Martínez, Graber, and Harris 2006). Accounts of first contact with the inhabitants of the Ecuadorian coast date back to the sixteenth century Manteño culture. But only within the last decade did the coastal communities in southern Manabí province gain indigenous rights and recognition of collective indigenous (ancestral) identity. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that much of the region was repopulated within the last two centuries. This points to a central paradox with regard to the nature of identity in southern Manabí, as recently made claims to a political indigenous identity often emphasize continuity and an attachment to place.

The southern Manabí region consists of nearly a dozen villages and hamlets that make up the comunas of Las Tunas, Salango, El Pital, and Agua Blanca. Each comuna has its own history, but collectively they are linked by a shared prehistory. The current residents of the region trace their ancestry to

the pre-Columbian inhabitants of coastal Ecuador, and recently the archaeological record has been used to stake claims to an indigenous identity. Despite these apparently profound connections between the past and present, the southern Manabí region has historically been regarded, by outsiders as well as residents, as *mestizo* (of mixed European and indigenous heritage) or *Montubio* (a regional designation that refers to coastal peasant horticulturalists and has the negative connotations of ignorant, backward, and uneducated).

This article is about the changing scope of identity on the southern Manabí coast, how identity is fashioned with reference to the archaeological record and embodied in place-based experiences, and how those with the Manta identity claim a primordial or essential essence. Within the last decade, many comunas in southern Manabí, on a platform that highlighted cultural heritage, archaeology, and a contemporary indigenous identity, petitioned for and gained government recognition as ancestral communities. In 2006, the comunas of El Pital, Agua Blanca, Las Tunas, and Salango formed Pueblo Manta. This formation provides a context for analyzing the process of ethnogenesis and how an identity that is socially constructed is used to leverage political power in response to the marginalizing ideology of mestizaje.

ETHNOGENESIS AND MESTIZAJE

The scholarly literature on Latin America has long emphasized the political dimensions of identity and their reconfiguration (French 2009; Jackson and Warren 2005; Whitten 1976a; Yashar 2005). Ethnogenesis, as a framework for understanding the reconfiguration of identities, goes back to the 1960s (e.g., Levin 1963). Other writings on ethnogenesis as both process and theoretical framework include Whitten (1976b, 1996) and Hill (1996) and debate how the emergence of ethnic identity has emphasized instrumentalist and primordialist perspectives. Following Barth's (1969) classic contribution, which highlights boundaries and contestation as elemental features of ethnic formation, Hill's (1996) edited volume, while supporting Barth (1969), extends ethnogenesis to the historical emergence of a people with shared "historical consciousness" (Hill 1996:1). While most anthropological accounts of ethnogenesis have a significant ethnohistorical component, there have been few accounts of ethnogenesis in the present. Especially lacking are accounts that reflect the process in action as opposed to reconstructions.

In connection with Maroon societies in the Guianas and Jamaica, Bilby (1996) emphasized two complementary ways of approaching ethnogenesis. One is "primary ethnogenesis ... which is the gradual emergence of wholly new peoples or ethnic groups over time," while "secondary ethnogenesis" is "linked with shifts in political and economic circumstances that have suddenly rendered ethnicity useful as an organizing principle for the conscious

mobilization of interest groups” (Bilby 1996:136). In both cases, history and, more specifically, historical relations of power between dominant and subaltern groups are important for understanding ethnogenesis as practice.

With reference to the archaeological record, *mestizaje* valorizes the indigenous past while stigmatizing indigenous identity in the present. The value placed on the past as a contribution to national identity is celebrated with museum exhibits and tourist attractions that highlight pre-Columbian indigenous culture. “The greatest problem is that these representations, while idealizing and admiring the pre-Columbian past, look down upon the Indians of the present” (del Valle Escalante 2009:21). This holds true for coastal Ecuador. Recently, however, the prehistoric record and its representations have been forced to reconcile with established notions of indigeneity. How then has this archaeology influenced the recent ethnogenesis of the Manta?

THE POLITICS OF MANTA ETHNOGENESIS

Ethnogenesis occurs where there are cultural and political struggles in a context of discontinuity and radical change (Hill 1996:1). Hill’s observation applies to the Manta. At its center is the political organization of the Ecuadorian *comuna*, which is both an organizational body and a political space for engaging in debates pertaining to ethnicity (Becker 2008; Clark 2007; Colloredo-Mansfeld 2009). The *comunas* of Pueblo Manta were established at varying times between the late 1930s and 1970s; and while each *comuna* has its own history, a common theme that connects them is a struggle for control of land and resources. Las Tunas was formed in 1938 in an attempt to protect traditional territory from outsider development. The *comuna* Salango, formed in 1976 and in 1991, received title to 2536 hectares of land that was previously controlled by Hacienda El Tropical. El Pital was formed in order to protect territory and resources from outside exploitation by la Casa Tagua de Manta. The *comuna* Agua Blanca formed in part to resist territorial encroachment and to protect communal resources (McEwan, Silva, and Hudson 2006). Both El Pital and Agua Blanca later saw communal landholdings threatened by the 1979 creation of Parque Nacional Machalilla. These circumstances, coupled with more recent struggles, provide the backdrop for the emergence of Pueblo Manta. While territorial claims and a struggle for control over ancestral resources were typical features of all four *comunas* in the early twentieth century, it was not until the start of the twenty-first century that the ongoing struggles were expressed in terms of ethnicity.

The *comunas* that constitute Pueblo Manta differ in many respects. Salango is principally a fishing village with direct access to the Pacific Ocean through a protected bay. In contrast, Las Tunas also has direct access to the ocean, but its bay is not protected. Both El Pital and Agua Blanca are inland

communities separated from the ocean by more than eight kilometers. Over 300 communities in coastal Ecuador are recognized as belonging to Pueblo Manta-Wankavilka. This is a broad-based movement asserting a collective identity across much of the Ecuadorian littoral (Álvarez 1999; Bazurco Osorio 2006). In the case of Salango, the Manta-Wankavilka designation served as a preliminary step in the development of Pueblo Manta. From 2004 to 2006, leaders in Salango met with leaders from the comunas El Pital, Las Tunas, and Agua Blanca in an effort to distinguish themselves from the Manta-Wankavilka communities of Guayas and Santa Elena provinces. The basis for the distinction was a prehistoric connection that links the four comunas. In the spring of 2005, the leaders of Pueblo Manta submitted a letter to the Consejo de Desarrollo de las Nacionalidades y Pueblos del Ecuador (Council for the Development of Nationalities and Communities of Ecuador) (“CODENPE”) requesting governmental recognition as an ancestral/indigenous community. Sixteen points made reference to the prehistory of the region as the foundation on which claims to indigeneity were based. The letter referred to Salango and Agua Blanca as comunas with important connections to the indigenous past. The final request of the letter was for Pueblo Manta to be recognized as an independent entity distinguished from broader Manta-Wankavilka ethnicity. Pueblo Manta’s ethnogenesis can be viewed as rapid, intentional, and directly related to the political interests of the various comunas and their ongoing struggles to protect territory and create an identity bound to place and prehistory. Moreover, gaining official recognition as an indigenous community registered with CODENPE provides access to government resources that are allocated for Ecuador’s indigenous communities.

ARCHAEOLOGY AS IDENTITY

The archaeology of southern Manabí is well documented, and its social construction is important for understanding Manta identity. The claims to an indigenous identity by residents of Pueblo Manta are firmly supported by the archaeological record, and local understandings of the regional prehistory provide the basis for claims about indigeneity. Archaeological investigations in southern Manabí began in the late 1970s with Presley Norton’s work in Salango. This provided the basis for establishing the Museo Salango in 1987, currently known as el Centro de Investigaciones Museo Salango. In 1997, Florida Atlantic University began an archaeological field program in Salango. The archaeological record continues to be important for the inhabitants of southern Manabí to buttress claims about indigenous ethnic identity and the formation of Pueblo Manta.

Beginning in the 1980s, Agua Blanca, like Salango, has been a site of significant archaeological interest. As a result of Agua Blanca’s location

within Parque Nacional Machalilla, the residents have faced numerous restrictions on utilizing natural resources within the park. Community members who previously relied extensively on timber extraction and charcoal production prior to the implementation of park regulations limiting such practices found that archaeology, in conjunction with the formation of the park, provided an economic alternative (Morse 1994). The work of archaeologist Colin McEwan resulted in the creation of the Museo Agua Blanca in 1990. Today, the museum is one of the most important attractions of the park receiving approximately 9,500 visitors annually (Hernández-Ramírez and Ruiz-Ballesteros 2011).

Both Salango and Agua Blanca have experienced significant outside influence in the form of archaeological investigations. El Pital has also experienced a recent increased archaeological presence, with research involving local residents. In turn, community members have gained knowledge about the prehistory of the region through their time as laborers and through formal training as tourist guides. Informal training has also occurred through interactions between archaeologists and community members by way of employment during excavations and surveys.

Archaeology has clearly had an impact on Pueblo Manta communities. Even though the goals of archaeological research may not have been intended to benefit the communities where it occurred, archaeology has become an important contributor to local politics and debates surrounding identity. The establishment of archaeological museums in Agua Blanca and Salango and increased knowledge of local prehistory serve as meaningful points of reference for local inhabitants with regard to claims about indigenous identity. The continued work by archaeologists throughout the region helps to bolster local claims about ethnic identity and increases knowledge of the prehistory of the region (Bauer and Lunniss 2010). The museums in Agua Blanca and Salango are managed by the communities, and local residents “forge identity and buttress self-esteem” (Lowenthal 1994:46) through references to the past as well as by participating in archaeological surveys and excavations. The result is a newly imagined identity that is fashioned from a “subjective antiquity” (Anderson 1983:14) and informs ethnic politics in Pueblo Manta communities.

Conversations with Manta residents include a strong tendency for them to refer to the prehistory of the region when discussing local notions of ethnic identity. They do so in a manner that shows how “indigenous groups infuse representations and discourses with elements of their own making” (Radcliffe 2000:167). For example, many residents claim an identity linked to the pre-Columbian Manteño population. Some make direct reference to how archaeology influences their understanding of their own identity by asserting

that “the archaeologists say ... our ancestors lived here for five thousand years [and] tell us we are of Manteño blood.” Despite the fact that prehistory and archaeology were common themes in conversations with locals, few demonstrated a detailed knowledge of the region’s prehistory.

Official recognition of indigenous identity occurred in 2004, but it was common before then for residents to speak about their identity by “ancestral roots” and “indigenous roots.” For example, Doña Esperanza, a 50-year-old Manta resident, claimed: “We are an indigenous community ... we have indigenous roots.” In Salango and Agua Blanca, prehistory is an important contributor to contemporary identity, and this can also be seen in El Festival de la Balsa Manteña (Bauer 2010; Rowe 2012). The festival commemorates the prehistory of Salango, beginning on the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, and has grown into a yearly event in both Salango and Agua Blanca that draws visitors from throughout Ecuador and other countries around the world. The festival serves as a public ritual that marks collective identity and reinforces connections to the pre-Columbian past. Since its inception in 1992, it has grown to include invited participants from El Pital and Las Tunas. The celebration recalls the past populations of the Manabí coast, while simultaneously making a connection between past and present. The construction of a replica balsa raft and the use of material links to the past—including stone anchors, hammer-stones, and net weights of the Manteño period—symbolize cultural continuity. The festival establishes a common frame of reference and a collective consciousness of the significance of the Manteño culture for contemporary identity.

People claim to recognize an indigenous contribution to contemporary Manta identity beyond what is reflected in the presentation of the festival. During a 2012 interview with Diego, a member of a Manta community, he stated, “People from the villages ... have indigenous racial features.” His references were like those of others. In numerous conversations with residents of Manta communities, indigenous identity was linked to the past, yet claims of an indigenous identity were bound as much to location and territory as to prehistory. People made reference to the Manteño culture when discussing their own identities. Commonly encountered responses to questions regarding identity and the past were often similar to that given by Doña Rita, a 52-year-old resident, who stated, “We have ancestral roots, but I am mestiza.” Overall, indigenous identity in Pueblo Manta communities is compartmentalized, in the sense that claims to an indigenous identity are most prominent within local politics.

ETHNOGENESIS, PLACE, AND STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM

As perpetually marginalized citizens (Cervone 2010) who have traditionally been regarded as lower-class mestizos or Montubios, residents of Pueblo Manta are acutely aware of their inferior place in Ecuadorian society. It is this recognition of marginalization that gave rise to ethnogenesis and the emergence of an indigenous discourse as residents attempted to redefine their place in Ecuadorian society.

In a more literal sense, southern Manabí is at the margins of an Ecuadorian national consciousness, which is dominated by idealized images of the Ecuadorian highlands and the Amazon. Urban Ecuadorians often characterize the rural Manabí coast as a peripheral domain of Montubios and backwardness. Residents of Pueblo Manta communities recognize how they fit into the politicized landscape of Ecuadorian national consciousness and the symbolic distance between their communities and those that form the center of Ecuadorian consciousness. A local consultant remarked that Salango is a place that is forgotten, a place that does not even exist on the map. For many outsiders and residents, southern Manabí province has a history of marginalization. Only recently, through the lens of archaeology, have Pueblo Manta communities become valued for their contribution to the prehistory of Ecuador. Evidence of this is seen in the opening of the Museo Presley Norton in Guayaquil in 2007 and the appearance of Pueblo Manta in popular media throughout Ecuador within the last five years, in many articles relating to the country's prehistory.

For many in Pueblo Manta, the meaning of place is linked to the prehistory of the region in a manner that is often essentialized. One example comes from the twentieth anniversary celebration of the Museo Salango held on October 24, 2007, in which community representative Eduardo Lino spoke of Salango as "the most important place on the Pacific coast." Lino was referring to the importance of prehistory in relation to the present. Many in Pueblo Manta share the sentiment that their communities are distinct by virtue of their prehistory.

Pueblo Manta residents show their knowledge of place in the performance of daily activities like hiking through the forest in the early morning hours, rowing a boat to shore in a crashing surf, and finding their way under the darkness of a cloudy night sky. Residents cite their identity through their interactions and the experiences that link them to their communities, and many refer to their identity in a manner that promotes a timeless primordial image. These are their own essentialized constructions. For example, people often refer to themselves as "*hijos del pueblo*" (children of village) or characterize themselves as having regional "*raíces muy profundas*" (very deep roots). In addition, they link their identity to their native community, saying,

for example, “*Soy Salangueno*” (I am Salangueno), or “*Soy de Río Chico*” (I am from Río Chico). When asked to explain what it means to be “*un hijo del pueblo*,” or from a particular village, people refer to the prehistory of a place or to the economic practices associated with a particular village. Connectedness to place is based on experience and knowledge associated with daily interactions people have with their environment. In this way, culture and place-based experiences become the anchors for ethnic identity. More specifically, economic practices and a perceived continuity with pre-Columbian inhabitants of the region inform how residents of Pueblo Manta perceive their identities today. Would such essentialized notions of ethnic identity exist if it were not for the presence of archaeology? While there can be no certain answer, it appears that contemporary notions of ethnic identity are the result of essentialized social constructions of the past by community leaders and residents.

In 2012, Pedro, a lifetime resident of Salango, spoke about his village, proclaiming, “We are a fishing community. We have lived this way for five thousand years.” This was similar to what some community leaders stated ten years earlier, when one individual pointed to the ocean and declared, “the people look in that direction.” This signified more than just looking; it referred to the focus of the community and indeed its identity. Identity is also linked to place and practice in the inland communities. Don Reymundo, a part-time carpenter and horticulturalist, maintained that he was a *campesino* (peasant) first and foremost: “I am from the country. It can be a person who works in fishing or in the mountains. It is the same.” The sameness that Don Reymundo was referring to reflects a similar sense of identity based on cultural practice. Both fishing and horticultural activity in the inland region create the embodied experiences that link residents to their communities by physical interaction and symbolic meaning. For Don Reymundo and many others, notions of place have a material grounding as well as a symbolic essence, and meanings assigned to place are the effects of investing labor and effort associated with place (Peterson and Horton 1995).

Of course, each Pueblo Manta community has a unique history regardless of prehistoric connections. Salango has historically been more integrated into the regional economy than the other three comunas, due in part to the growth of commercial fishing. One prominent family can trace its ancestry back to Mexico, and other families moved to Salango from inland regions only within the past three to four generations, particularly in the last fifty years, as people moved in order to work in the developing industry (Harris et al. 2004).

Agua Blanca and El Pital have also grown after the founding families arrived around 1900. Many residents of Pueblo Manta communities recognize that the communities have undergone fluctuations of habitation. For example,

Agua Blanca was founded in the first decade of the twentieth century, and Salango emerged during the same period. Despite these recent origins, the community's initial lack of "pure" indigenous blood is not a reason to deny its indigenous identity (Muñoz 1995). The recognition of recent origins of individual communities seems to be at odds with the timeless, primordial identity that is associated with Pueblo Manta. However, the archaeological record provides an appropriate foundation for essentialized claims about the collective Manta identity that are locally cultivated. And, where continuity does not exist, residents attempt to establish continuity through reference to embodied experiences, often in the form of economic endeavors that connect them to place. In this way, residents of Pueblo Manta communities establish their own identity through a discourse Latorre (2013) refers to as "ancestrality" or "peoplehood." Claims to an identity based on feelings of asserted ancestral connection to a place or a particular ecosystem have the ability to question dominant notions of indigeneity that emphasize race.

CONCLUSION: THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF MANTA IDENTITY

The complex historical conditions that gave rise to Pueblo Manta identity are reflected in contemporary challenges to that identity. In spite of the current legal designation as Pueblo Manta, many individuals still only recognize their indigenous heritage while not necessarily self-identifying as indigenous. For many residents, indigeneity is an important component of community and regional history, yet it is not a determining factor in individual ideas about ethnic identity. In fact, in many ways, individual notions of identity appear to be at odds with collective expressions of identity that acknowledge, if not embrace, indigeneity. Just as residents of Pueblo Manta stake claim to a collective identity that is expressed with an asserted primordial essence bound to the prehistory of the region, they draw a conceptual boundary between the past and present, as indigeneity takes on different meanings depending upon context. For example, María, a 35-year-old woman, pointed out, "indigenous people inhabited this community, but we are not Indians." Josefina, a woman in her late 40s, responded to a question about Pueblo Manta by asking, "Are we not Pueblo Manta?" Her question came in the form of an uncertainty about her own identity as a result of the recent Pueblo Manta designation. She explained that she understood that she was classified as indigenous because she has "Indian blood."

For other residents, identity is embedded in location or place. However, location and place cannot easily be disentangled from the past. As a consequence, many residents in Pueblo Manta identify as being from a particular community, one that is identified by the indigenous past. The result is that an asserted Manteño identity, a term used by many residents prior to the official

formation of Pueblo Manta, seems to be formed individually based upon shared experiences and a shared sense of culture, while the Manta identity represents a political identity that originated with the 2006 separation of Pueblo Manta from the Manta-Wankavilka.

Identity in southern Manabí does not fit neatly into a discrete indigenous category. My research suggests the importance of asking what constitutes identity and what role indigeneity plays in the expression of identity for Pueblo Manta communities and residents. I propose that a fundamental component of identity lies in the connection that people have to place and its association with the past.

With the collective expression of an indigenous cultural identity comes a need to understand the political dimensions as well as the local understandings of that identity. Ethnogenesis is not a linear process; rather, ethnogenesis occurs in conditions of social change and disruption. In the case of Manta ethnogenesis, local political tensions, an expanding national indigenous movement, and a growing focus on pre-Columbian heritage set the process of ethnogenesis in motion. In Pueblo Manta communities, the emergence of a collective indigenous identity is linked closely to the archaeological past and to notions of place. The dynamics correspond to a growing trend in Latin America, where the politics of identities challenge historically entrenched models of what it means to be indigenous. Questions about indigeneity, prehistory, and place are being confronted by Pueblo Manta residents in a way that problematizes the normative model of *mestizaje*, while empowering local communities to engage in debates about what it means to be indigenous.

NOTES

1. A version of this paper was presented at the 2012 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association. I thank Jan French, Michael Kearns, and the anonymous *Ethnology* reviewers for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. Partial funding for the research came from the University of Southern Indiana.
2. The *comuna* is the smallest political unit in Ecuador. It provides for oversight and allocation of communal land to comuna members.
3. Pseudonyms are used in the text when referring to communities and individuals.

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