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"Did You Find Culture There?": Yuquí Artisanry of Bolivia and the Uncertain Control of Self-Representation through Cultural Commodification

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“Did You Find Culture There?”: Yuquí Artisanry of Bolivia and the Uncertain Control of Self-Representation through Cultural Commodification

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ABSTRACT

Through discussion of my experience with Yuquí community members in Bolivia, I reflect upon a widespread phenomenon: when people with limited options resort to the sale of their culture for their economic survival. There is substantial literature that supports that indigenous peoples can influence the representations of themselves communicated through artisanry or touristic products in such a way that is self-asserting; however, the Yuquí case demonstrates that such representational control may not always be possible. The image that Yuquí crafts communicate is of an archaic, vestigial people, an image that the Yuquí do not esteem. Although it is an invalid and incomplete image of the Yuquí that the artisanry conveys, the Yuquí sell it out of economic necessity. Anthropology, with its long-standing study of remote, indigenous peoples, tends to authenticate this partial and exoticized image and in this way can be a discomfiting accomplice in its promotion and sale. By helping indigenous research consultants articulate more complete self-images through their cultural commodities--images that they can actually relate and identify with--perhaps anthropologists can help indigenous peoples participate in their cultural commodification in ways that return to them their human dignity.

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INTRODUCTION

As our small boat puttered closer to the shore of Puerto San Marcos, my Yuquí traveling companions and I discerned a taxi cab parked at the river bank. This was a fortuitous sighting because it meant we would not have to wait hours for the infrequent taxi cabs that make the trip from Puerto San Marcos to Chimoré, the small town where we were hoping to arrive before nightfall. The family with whom I was traveling needed to proceed to an outpost of their indigenous territory to receive payment for sale of their timber; I was traveling with large and cumbersome artisanal items that I had purchased while in the Yuquí community. I simply wanted to get to Chimoré as soon as possible to find a quick and easy way to transport them to the city of Cochabamba, my home base while in Bolivia

The driver was standing by his car, and as our boat pulled in our navigator Francisco[1] called up to him, "Hey, do you have passengers?"

"No, I've been waiting for you guys," the driver joked. We all laughed from the boat.

We climbed out and up the bank, each carrying a portion of cargo from the boat. I was bearing a particularly awkward load, several sets of bows and arrows that people in the Yuquí village had sold to me. Several had sold me large sets, long bows of seven feet, as well as a number of medium size sets of four feet. It was difficult finding space for them in the cab, but the driver was good-natured and helped me situate them among the various parcels and passengers, lengthwise in his station wagon.

As he handled one of the longer sets with white feathers, he admired them saying, "Wow, just look at this! These are valuable." He gazed upon them as if he were scrutinizing artifacts from an ancient time; the rustic-looking bow and arrows bespoke of a particularly harsh lifeway of daily struggle with the physical environment.

In the meantime, the Yuquí had squeezed themselves into the cab. I crammed myself in next to Silvia, Francisco's wife.

The driver was exceedingly talkative and proceeded to chat with the Yuquí as he drove along. He also asked me about my motives for having visited the Yuquí village. I explained briefly that I was doing research for my anthropology studies.

"Ah, wonderful!" he exclaimed. "So what have you found? Is there still culture there?"

The Yuquí were silent.

"Yes, of course," I replied tersely. My Yuquí companions' wordlessness made me uncomfortable. I thought of the bows and arrows we carried in the taxi, the certain savage image they signified to non-Yuquí Bolivians like the taxi driver, and I compared that image with the Yuquí themselves, riding in the taxi. The majority were wearing T-shirts and jeans. Silvia was wearing a particularly becoming white blouse along with jeans and a pair of tan clogs that I had been admiring while in the boat. The lifestyle and people that the bows and arrows signified seemed the opposite of the lifestyle that the Yuquí embraced and desired to have.

These thoughts flashed through my mind at that moment. I wasn't certain how to continue the dialogue with the taxi driver. So I remained silent.

This discomfort followed me as I continued my travels to Chimoré and then Cochabamba that night, and I encountered more awe-filled responses to the Yuquí artisanal goods from non-Yuquí outsiders. The encounters suggested that the image of the Yuquí that outsiders appreciated and even expected was that of a simple, primordial group. The Yuquí were selling an image of themselves that played into the expectations of Bolivian outsiders, and my role in the process made me uneasy.

[1] All names used are fictitious.

The Yuquí experience is indicative of a widespread phenomenon: when people with limited options resort to the sale of their culture for their economic survival. This paper reflects upon this quandary through discussion of the case of the Yuquí of Bolivia. A recently sedentarized hunter-gatherer group, the Yuquí have few options available to them for income: they profit from wage labor for private forest enterprises, and the sale of their community's timber, agricultural products, and crafts. There is substantial literature that supports that indigenous peoples can control or influence the representations of themselves communicated through artisanry or touristic products in such a way that is self-asserting; however, the Yuquí case demonstrates that such representational control may not always be possible. The image that Yuquí crafts communicate is of an archaic, vestigial people, an image that the Yuquí do not esteem. Although it is an invalid and incomplete image of the Yuquí that the artisanry conveys, the Yuquí sell it out of economic necessity. Anthropology, with its long-standing study of remote, indigenous peoples, tends to authenticate this partial and exoticized image and in this way can be a discomfiting accomplice in its promotion and sale.

After a brief discussion based on Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) and Povinelli (1999) on cultural commodification and authenticity, the paper discusses the case of the Yuquí as a demonstration of indigenous artisans' lack of control over self-representation. The research is based on fieldwork from the summers of 2009 and 2010.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE

John and Jean Comaroff (2009) note a movement in recent decades to commodify and brand that which is "ethnic"—in other words, deemed exotic and unique to a particular group of people or area. The business of selling and marketing cultural goods and even an ethnic group's identity--"ethno-prenuerialism" (51)--has become prevalent with the rise of neoliberalism. Subaltern groups find that in order to survive economically, they must participate in the market; thus, they commodify that which is most available to them and of marketable value: their artisanry, village, and lifeway. Despite the advantages of assertion of an indigenous identity, Povinelli (1999) notes that subaltern peoples must often play the role of the "melancholic subject of tradition" as they strive to prove that they do represent that lost indigeneity that modern society finds so attractive.

The Yuquí find themselves assuming the role of "melancholic subjects of tradition." While they are not actually involved in organized business ventures regarding their cultural products, they would aspire to have their crafts displayed in stores with shiny tags identifying them as "Yuquí." Accordingly, they strive to manufacture some emblem of Yuquí for sale—a piece of "culture," what the taxi driver seemed to be looking for and wondering about that afternoon. The following section provides background information on the Yuquí and then describes popular discourse surrounding the Yuquí. The paper then analyzes the current Yuquí artisanry trade and their lack of control over self-representation.

YUQUÍ OF BOLIVIA

Numbering some 250 people (CINEP-CERES-CEDESCO 2005), the Yuquí live at the base of the Bolivian Andes mountains in the department of Cochabamba in the wet and heavily forested Chaparé region (Stearman 1989). Protestant Evangelical missionaries of the New Tribes Mission brought three bands of Yuquí to their current settlement of Bia Recuaté (the "place of the people" in their native language of Yuquí) over the period of the 1960s - 90s.

According to Bolivian and North American New Tribes missionaries who lived with the Yuquí in previous years, missionaries introduced artisanal production for sale to the Yuquí in the 1970s (Mariano Ichu, Personal Correspondence, June 26, 2010; Mary Garland, Personal Correspondence, May 8, 2010). The Yuquí women had always made string from the fibers of the Ambaibo tree (*Cecropia Acutifolia Trecul*), or "imbai" in the Yuquí language, commonly found in their forests. From the string they had woven arm slings and hammocks for their own use (Stearman 1989). The missionaries, however, taught the women to weave macramé plant holders and shoulder bags from the imbai string (Figure 1). The women most commonly make the shoulder bags now, and they have learned to decorate the bags with seeds from the forest (Figure 2). Some women have also learned how to make curtains and articles of clothing, for sale to outsiders, from the imbai string. Unfortunately, the imbai string is coarse and scratchy and can be irritating to the skin (Ely Linares, Personal Correspondence, May 8, 2008). Also, the bags are rustic-looking, not as fine as artisanry of the South American highlands, for instance. For these reasons, as noted by a development practitioner that works closely with the Yuquí, the shoulder bags do not sell well.

Figure 1: Yuquí woman weaving while traveling via taxi from indigenous territory to town of Chimoré.

Figure 2: Finished Yuquí shoulder bag.

The missionaries also encouraged the men to make their seven feet bows and arrows for sale. Yuquí men began using more colorful macaw, hawk and egret feathers for the arrows as they realized this made the items more interesting to purchasers (Allyn Stearman, Personal Correspondence, November 13, 2009). Previously, they had used mostly black feathers from the most commonly hunted bird. Additionally, in the mid-1980s, a young Yuquí man learned how to make the smaller bow and arrow sets of the Yuracaré, a neighboring indigenous community, and the knowledge disseminated to others in the Yuquí village. These sets are more transportable and ornamental. In this way, the Yuquí adopted commercial artisanry-making and gradually developed their products according to consumer tastes.

Artisanry-making has become a part of the Yuquí habitus. Today Yuquí men and women learn how to make crafts from family members; they also learn from outside organizations that come to the community to give trainings. Production is a long process. First, it begins with men

and women foraging to collect the raw material from which the string is made. There are seven shades of imbai fibers, and the most valued by purchasers—a white-shaded imbai—is more remote from the community. Once the string is made, it takes a Yuquí woman one day to make a small bag. To make a large bag or hammock it can take four to five days. The Yuquí also must forage in places far from the community in order to find feathers for the bows and arrows. It can take a Yuquí man two to three days to make a bow and arrow set—in this case, what takes the longest is finding colorful feathers.

Artisanry sales usually take place in towns two hours or so from the community or in the city of Cochabamba an additional four hours away. When going into town to make purchases or conduct other small business, Yuquí take crafts along with them to sell in order to pay for travel and food expenses while outside of their community (Ely Linares, Personal Correspondence, May 8, 2008). There are also buyers and friends of the Yuquí—particular development practitioners, missionary families, and researchers (like myself) with whom the Yuquí are familiar, and they will call upon these individuals specifically on a regular basis to sell them artisanry.

With their inclusion into mainstream Bolivian society, the Yuquí have tended to disparage their hunter-gatherer past. Missionary influences educated the Yuquí, when first brought to their present settlement, that their previous lifestyle was backwards and shameful (Stearman 1989). Discriminatory encounters with mestizo society also engrained in them this judgment (Gironas Sotez 2006:52; Stearman 1996:217).

Among mainstream Bolivian society, the Yuquí have a certain fame as a nomadic, hunter-gatherer people. In particular, they have an aura about them of a people who are vanishing and dying out (as demonstrated in the popular press: Opinión 2006; Delgado 2005; La Prensa 2007). When interviewed regarding their knowledge of the Yuquí, tourism business owners in the region mention mostly the poverty and vulnerable situation of the Yuquí. As an example, they explain that some Yuquí who had begun living in larger towns in the area had resorted to begging for survival. The business owners also emphasize that the Yuquí's poverty makes them unsuitable for inclusion in any touristic image of the region.

The previous discourse paints an image of a people that is a relic of the past, presently caught in a time and space to which they are not well-suited. Additionally, the Yuquí have few resources or occupations that are really lucrative. However, they do find value in the exploitation of that archaic image. The following section provides analysis of the artisanry trade and the image of the Yuquí that it conveys.

YUQUÍ ARTISANRY AND IMAGE

The outlandish bows and arrows, as well as the rustic-looking bags that do not sell well, complement the image of the Yuquí as a people living on the margins of society. The crafts sell an image of the Yuquí that plays on those commonly-held stereotypes. It cannot be discounted that Yuquí are innovative and have come up with new ideas for styles: the men, for example, have borrowed the smaller style arrows of a neighboring indigenous community for better sale to tourists; women, perhaps acknowledging that their shoulder bags do not sell well, have attempted to weave other products out of the imbai string that are finer or more useful, for example, objects that resemble purses and backpacks. The products, however, are often a bit crudely made—purses hang awkwardly on the carrier and backpack straps are overly long, for instance. The innovations fall into the image of rustic primordiality; they connote a strange ethnicity that

struggles to sell its awkward crafts. The products they have made do not contradict the commonly-held image of "Yuquí."

And the Yuquí cannot ignore the fact that the image that always sells well for them is that of the primordial savage. In a weekend fair showcasing the forest products of Cochabamba, Yuquí artisans were allowed a stand to sell their artisanry, shoulder bags and sets of bows and arrows. Sales were not successful: the Yuquí sold no shoulder bags, although they did sell bows and arrows. Also, total sales were not sufficient to cover the costs of the Yuquí's travel and lodging in the city. This contrasted greatly with a sales experience from one year before. A Bolivian missionary group helped obtain a booth for Yuquí crafts at an artisanry fair of several days in the city of Santa Cruz, Bolivia. They brought a Yuquí artisan couple, but the couple made crafts at the booth while the missionaries did the actual sales. At the same time, the missionary group played a video about the Yuquí at the booth. The results were significantly different from the experience at the timber fair. The booth sold out of artisanry, and the Yuquí man had to spend a night making additional bows and arrows to meet the demand at the fair. This certainly suggests that marketing and presentation can make a difference in sales; in the latter case the image of Yuquí exoticness and otherness was conflated and sales were successful.

The Yuquí must create this image and sell it to consumers, despite their tendency to be ashamed of their hunter-gatherer past. Understandably, money is important and powerful in their lives, such that they will sell this image. Also, the market for crafts open to them now is a recent occurrence. The Yuquí have not had experience in commerce in local and regional markets, and it was not until recently, in the 1990s, that they were granted certain access to land, through formal land title (Stearman 2006). Stephen (1991) notes that such criteria are important for an indigenous artisanal group to be able to self-manage their craft production—this includes the marketing of the crafts, as well as reinvestment into community cultural institutions. These criteria do not pertain to the Yuquí, and they do not have real control of the self-representations they sell through their craft market.

When asking one Yuquí woman artisan about her artisanry production, however, she acknowledges that it is a mode of survival, one that is particularly fulfilling to her.

"Do you like making artisanry, Maria?"

"Yes," she replied, "I enjoy it because it helps me provide for my family."

Making and selling the artisanry is an important part of her daily life. People must do what is necessary in order to make an income. For the Yuquí, this might mean selling an image of themselves that is demeaning, but it enables them to meet the day's necessities.

CONCLUSION

With few other options available to them, the Yuquí sell an image of themselves that they themselves do not value. This is a product of the large-scale tendency for subaltern peoples to identify and manufacture an object or aspect of themselves that is different and exotic, to satisfy the consumer desires of modern society. What this paper highlights, however, is the lack of opportunity for some cases of subaltern peoples to influence the representation of themselves that gets sold.

While there are many documented instances of indigenous peoples who do succeed in participating in their cultural commodification in a self-assertive way (Pigliasco 2010; Pretes 2002), the case of the Yuquí demonstrates that this is certainly not always possible. In other cases, indigenous artisans and tourism performers influence the information and representations

of themselves in ways that challenge oppressive assumptions outsiders hold of them (Babcock 1997; Bunten 2005). However, in the case of the Yuquí such control and influence is very little.

The popularly held image of the Yuquí is one of an archaic people, a remnant of the past that struggles to get by in the modern world, and the Yuquí do not succeed in challenging that image through their artisanry. The bows and arrows, which generally have more successful sales, play into this image. The rustic shoulder bags, as well as new imbai innovations, although not as exotic as the bow and arrows, also evoke a bygone, coarse, primitive era. What is more, outsiders like missionaries and development workers influence the shape that Yuquí artisanry takes; there is little reflection on the part of the Yuquí on communicating information about Yuquí history through the artisanry. The Yuquí simply hope to produce something that sells, even if it is an archaic image.

We as anthropologists often encourage these demeaning self-representations, as well. Returning to my earlier discomfort when in the taxi cab, it was at this point that I realized my complicity in the perpetuation of a problematic image of the Yuquí, and I did not know what to do. Anthropologists' study of subaltern societies gives formal recognition of their exoticism and identity as Other. Furthermore, we often find ourselves applauding and motivating the exploitation of their cultural goods, in hopes of helping their economic situation.

Perhaps it should be the role of anthropologists to help subaltern peoples provide more complete and complex representations of themselves through their cultural products. Recalling as well the Yuquí's own silence at that moment in the taxi cab, I realize the disconcerting relationship of researcher and studied object that was invoked by the driver at that time. I, as some sort of expert, was looked upon to give a report on Yuquí culture when Yuquí community members themselves were sitting beside me. What is more, the Yuquí seemed to assume the position of studied object easily, as if they had done it before and were used to it. They did not protest or challenge it.

We would do well to help erode the social structures of alterity that hold people like the Yuquí in this place--of studied object, the primitive people struggling to survive--by helping them to articulate more complete histories of themselves, instead of promoting their objectified silence. The bows and arrows and the imbai shoulder bags give limited, partial information on Yuquí actual way of life. They do not communicate, for example, that the producers are people like Francisco and Silvia. Francisco has been educated as a nurse, and is entrusted with the community clinic; Silvia has four sons, including one baby boy, and she often cooks and shares her family's food with visitors to the community like me. By helping indigenous research consultants articulate more complete self-images through their cultural commodities--images that they can actually relate and identify with--perhaps anthropologists can help indigenous peoples participate in their cultural commodification in ways that return to them their human dignity.

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