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No somos nada: Ethnicity and Three Dominant and Contradictory Indigenist Discourses in Costa Rica*

Karen Stocker
Department of Anthropology
University of New Mexico

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According to many scholars, discourse has the capacity to create the nation rather than simply reflect it\(^1\). By purporting to objectively describe reality, various texts turn into authoritative voices that determine the ways in which readers perceive that reality. In the case of the Chorotega of Costa Rica to be discussed here, three dominant indigenist discourses --historical, legal, and anthropological -- have formed a trinity of contradictory, yet definitive, authoritative voices regarding the description and definition of Costa Rican indigenous peoples.

These three discourses simultaneously create an absence and an ambiguous presence of indigenous peoples in Costa Rica, generally, and of the Chorotega, in particular. History, legal discourse, and anthropology have constructed a vision of the nation which ostensibly intends to assimilate and define indigenous peoples but in practice results in excluding them from the nation as a whole. Furthermore, these discourses render invisible or insignificant the social class differences among citizens, thus creating a vision of a homogeneous nation. To some extent, the citizens of this nation and the Matambugueños -- inhabitants of Matambú, the Chorotega Indigenous Reservation in Northwestern Costa Rica -- have internalized the various perspectives promoted by these discourses.

However, along the fissures of these discourses seeps a marginal discourse that contradicts the way in which the dominant voices have erased the Chorotegas from the present-day Costa Rican nation. Within Matambú, this voice less valued on a national level emerges through oral history and collective "memory." This "memory" recalls events which the homogenizing discourses attempt to oblige the citizen to forget: indigenous peoples' history of relegation to the fringes of society, social stratification, and even slavery.

All three of the above-mentioned dominant discourses -- historical, legal, and anthropological -- draw to some extent on indigenism. Héctor Díaz Polanco defines indigenism (from the Spanish term *indigenismo*) as a

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\(^1\) Among these scholars are Benedict Anderson (1983), Homi Bhabha (1990), Timothy Brennan (1990), Peter Wade (1997), Renato Rosaldo (1989), and Michael Taussig (1984).
movement which includes “attitudes, expressions, or practices vaguely associated with appreciating or even defending the Indian” (1997: 23).

Furthermore, indigenism is a "sociological category that refers to the relationship among sociocultural groups in given economic, social, and political contexts. In this sense it implies subordination and conflict" (Díaz Polanco 1997: 23; emphasis in original). Although Díaz Polanco does not refer to the Costa Rican case, his definitions are appropriate to this context. The three dominant discourses regarding attitudes and practices toward Costa Rican indigenous citizens are history -- which has erased them from the modern nation; legal discourse -- which officially declared their existence and enclosed them in reservations with the goal of acculturation; and anthropology -- which has evaluated each reservation according to a constructed hierarchy of perceived "authenticity" or legitimacy in each community's merit of reservation status. Each one of these discourses has turned into a "reality" for Costa Ricans generally, as well as for the so-called Chorotega Indians.

Costa Rican historiography has excluded the indigenous person from the modern nation. It is widely believed (though erroneously so) that there were scant indigenous populations in Costa Rica at the time of Spanish coloniztion. Of the eight ethnic groups now recognized as having once existed within the country's boundaries, early twentieth-century Costa Rican historian Carlos Gagini considered the Chorotegas to be the tribe of greatest importance for the ethnographer focusing on Costa Rica (1917: 72). However, apparently this importance of the Chorotegas was already relegated to the past by early decades of the last century, as manifested by the fact that Gagini never writes of the Chorotega in the present tense. Another turn-of-the-century historian describes the "complete disappearance" of the Chorotegas (Peralta 1893: xvi-xvii; translation mine). In the second half of the twentieth century, respected Costa Rican historian Carlos Monge Alfaro also writes about the Chorotega only in the past tense (1960).
The latter historian promotes a national myth which suggests that in Costa Rica, contrary to situations which characterized other Latin American countries, “social classes or castes did not arise” (Monge Alfaro 1989: 12). Monge Alfaro supplements a claim of remarkably small -- and thus insignificant -- indigenous populations in colonial Costa Rica with the following description:

There were no despotic officials who arrogantly kept themselves apart from the populace. There were no groups of strong and powerful criollo landowners, nor Indians who hated the Spaniards, nor a wretched mestizo class which had to endure the landowners’ abuse.” (1989: 12).

Here he erases class difference and denies the existence of a significant indigenous population.

According to these perspectives, it appears that the theory of ethnicity or of “Indianness” which dominates Costa Rican history is one based on essentialist purisms. As Néstor García Canclini notes, this type of purist perspective falsely suggests that the “great majority of indigenous peoples of the continent had not lived, throughout decades, processes of migration, mestizaje, urbanization, diverse interactions with the modern world” (1990: 277). That a national myth, such as that outlined by Monge Alfaro above, should be taken as fact is not uncommon. Les Field, in reference to Nicaragua, notes that mainstream discourses play “profound roles, becoming powerful and authoritative in the realms of identity formation and political activity” (1999: 28). Jeffrey L. Gould refers to the effects of this type of discourse as “the Myth of Nicaragua Mestiza” -- which he defines as the myth of “cultural homogeneity” or of an ethnically homogeneous (mestizo) society (Gould 1998: 10). Similar to the Nicaraguan case, Costa Rica’s official historical discourse treats indigenous peoples according to what Ana Alonso calls “state strategies of temporalization [which] fossilize indigenous peoples, identifying them with an epic past rather than a national future” (Alonso 1994: 398).
In 1977, Costa Rican law contradicted History and created twenty two reservations, thus acknowledging the existence of eight indigenous ethnicities (Chorotega, Bribri, Cabécar, Huétar, Guaymí, Maleku/Guatuso, and Brunca). The State created reservations in sites inhabited by self-identified indigenous peoples and in places described by historical discourse as having been inhabited by indigenous peoples at the time of conquest. Matambú fulfilled the latter criterion. The intention underlying this abrupt recognition of indigenous peoples is debatable. According to one theorist, the purpose motivating the creation of reservations was "to convert the Native Americans into more standard peasants, and to ignore the problem of helping them to find ways to retain their lifestyle" (Murillo cited in Adams 1991: 203).

According to Costa Rica’s National Commission on Indigenous Affairs, known as CONAI (Comisión Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas), the reservations were created with the express goal of assimilating the indigenous populations to mainstream Costa Rican life (without openly acknowledging the irony of promoting assimilation through separation). In the words of this organization, the goal behind the establishment of reservations was the “social, economic, and cultural betterment of the indigenous populations” in order to “elevate their conditions of life and to integrate the aboriginal communities to the development process” (Matamoros Carvajal 1990: 69; translation mine).

Thus, in Costa Rican indigenist politics, as Guillermo Bonfil Batalla suggests is true for the Mexican case, “Indianness is identified with a nucleus of rustic customs and with backwardness, and it [is] something that could be eliminated” (Bonfil Batalla 1972: 109; emphasis added; translation mine). The creation of indigenous reservations in Costa Rica was one aspect of the effort to create a homogeneous nation. As Héctor Díaz Polanco notes, referring to Latin America in more general terms, “national homogeneity has been presented as a desirable and necessary goal” (1997: 4). In this manner, legal

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2 One reservation has been added since. There are currently 23 indigenous reservations in Costa Rica.
discourse recognized the existence of indigenous peoples within the Costa Rican nation, but only with the contradictory goal of ultimately eliminating them by means of forced acculturation, thus enacting a sort of cultural genocide.

In the case of Matambú, the Chorotega reservation in North Western Costa Rica, the designation of a parcel of land as an indigenous reservation did not serve to suddenly describe its inhabitants as Indians, but rather had the curious side effect of absolving those outside the reservation’s borders from this stigmatized label. The result is a sort of placism, if you will -- a form of discrimination based on a specific place of residence which is perceived as an indicator of racial difference and inferiority. During my fieldwork in 1993-1999, I was able to observe that inhabitants of the reservation are systematically discriminated against by people (often of the same ethnic heritage) living immediately outside the reservation’s borders, as these borders serve to label those within as Indian -- a stigmatized label in a country that projects a view of homogeneous whiteness with pride and an estimation of Indianness as being synonymous with backwardness.

Like legal discourse, Costa Rican anthropological discourse has also supported its arguments with primordialist views of ethnicity. Judith Friedlander, in reference to a similar Mexican context, describes a situation in which the “religious and government missionaries came to the pueblo to save the Hueyapeños from being too Indian, and now the cultural extremists have appeared to save them from being not Indian enough” (Friedlander 1975: 182). While the State, through law, paradoxically created indigenous reservations to diminish Indianness and to promote assimilation, Costa Rican anthropologists have declared the inhabitants of Matambú insufficiently Indian to merit reservation status, thus becoming complicitous in the negation of Matambugueños’ Indian heritage proclaimed by historiographic discourse.

In large part, Costa Rican anthropologists have traditionally defined Chorotega customs (in the Boasian tradition as quantifiable inventories of
“purely” Chorotega traits or ceremonies) as lost traditions once considered national patrimony. As Ana Alonso notes, theorizing generally on the intertwining of state formation, nationalism, and ethnicity, “[o]n the one hand, tradition is held to be transmitted in the blood or handed down from one generation to the next; on the other hand, when defined as patrimony, tradition can be lost” (1994: 398). Above all, anthropologists point to the lack of an indigenous language within the Chorotega Reservation, where community members speak only Spanish, as proof of the Matambugueños’ de-Indianization.

Although Costa Rican anthropologists recognize that other Costa Rican tribes find themselves in a process of transculturation -- characterized by the appropriation of outside customs or cultural elements -- they consider that the Chorotegas have already acculturated. Well-known anthropologist María Eugenia Bozzoli de Wille is the only Costa Rican anthropologist to write specifically about the Chorotegas of Costa Rica (as opposed to the Chorotegas of Nicaragua). Nevertheless, she describes them as individuals who are no longer indigenous given their lack of customs distinct from those of people living immediately outside the reservation (Bozzoli de Wille 1969 and 1986). Instead, she considers Matambugueños campesinos or mestizos.

According to this view, indigenous culture can only be considered indigenous when it is opposed to mestizo culture. For when it approximates mestizo culture, it is not considered so much that the mestizos or ladinos have appropriated elements of indigenous tradition, but rather that the Indian has acculturated.

This is carried to the extreme in the case of the Costa Rican Chorotegas, whose traditions have been appropriated by dominant culture as “national traditions:” the “typical [folkloric] dance” known as el baile típico, food considered typically Costa Rican, and other elements presented nationally as Costa Rican culture are no longer recognized as indigenous or Chorotega in origin. On the contrary, Costa Rican anthropologists ironically assert that the Chorotegas’ practice of these “national” customs proves their approximation
toward national (read: non-ethnic) culture. According to the anthropological
definitions in use regarding a culture’s own traditions, for a custom to be
considered Chorotega, it would have to exist only within the reservation. In
other words, it could only be practiced within a space of 6.63 square miles.
Seen this way, anthropologists’ constructions of Costa Rican Indianness are
very evident.

Although her experience within Matambú was brief -- she passed
through briefly fifteen years ago, -- Bozzoli de Wille’s assertion that the
inhabitants of Matambú are more campesino or mestizo than indigenous has
had a great impact (Bozzoli de Wille, personal communication 1994).
Anthropologists who have published subsequently to her writings have
ignored Matambú in their considerations of Costa Rica’s indigenous
populations. The classification of Matambú as no-longer-indigenous and the
adoption of this perspective as much by other anthropologists as by the
inhabitants of reservations considered “more legitimate” in Costa Rica
resulted in Matambú’s current position in the lowest rungs of the legitimacy
ladder which, to some extent, determines the distribution of federal funds to
the various reservations as well as the respect accorded to each.

What the Costa Rican anthropological perspective fails to recognize
relates to Bonfil Batalla’s concern regarding indigenismo in general, that “de-
Indianization leads, above all, to a greater exploitation, because the individual
loses indigenous communal protection and is easier prey for the exploitative
mechanisms of the dominant world” (1990: 200; translation mine). In the
Costa Rican context, anthropology pretends to protect “legitimate” indigenous
groups by distinguishing them from the more “acculturated” ones in order to
preserve indigenous tradition. However, by designating Matambugueños as
de-Indianized, social scientists deprive many Matambugueños of their
identity and do not take into account that their influence is responsible for
leaving Matambú, as a reservation, “sin el santo ni la limosna” -- falling
through the cracks. Caught in a bureaucratic double-bind, the community of Matambú no longer receives sufficient federal funds (distributed to other, so-called more “legitimate” reservations) due to what is viewed as its insufficient Indianness. Yet it also receives few funds from its local municipality because this local government claims that the National Commission on Indigenous Affairs is responsible for providing economic aid to Matambú. Furthermore, as a result of living within the borders of a reservation, Matambugueños still have to confront discrimination and prejudice which exists on a local level, in schools, clinics, and businesses which surround and supposedly serve the reservation.

Anthropologist Richard Jenkins asserts that anthropological definitions, generally speaking, do not tend to hold true for the groups they categorize (1997: 62). However, this is not the case in Matambú. The Matambugueño case is more adequately described in light of the ideas of James Clifford, who claims that ethnography is “always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures” (Clifford 1986: 2). Following this idea, anthropological discourse not only reflects or describes distinct ethnicities, but is in some ways responsible for what Héctor Díaz Polanco calls “ethnophagy”: the process by which the dominant culture “devours” popular cultures (Díaz Polanco 1997: 71).

Various scholars acknowledge discourse’s capacity to create the realities it merely pretends to describe or reflect. What such theorists illustrate, as does Clifford, is that discourses -- or “modes of representation” -- actually construct social realities that can influence the very people they purport to describe. In the words of Peter Wade, “[p]eople’s ways of thinking the world, themselves and others around them are constituted -- rather than simply constrained -- by discursive formations” (1997: 80). According to Renato Rosaldo, narratives “shape, rather than simply reflect, human conduct” and “These discourses contribute to the reality of their participants” (1989: 129). Michael Taussig

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3 This expression literally translates as, “with neither the saint nor the alms.”
asserts that to some extent, “all societies live by fictions taken as reality” (1984: 492).

Within Matambú, all the perspectives previously mentioned (the historical, the legal, and the anthropological) regarding the identity of the reservation’s inhabitants coexist simultaneously. Some inhabitants of the reservation agree with dominant versions of national history which insist that the Chorotegas became extinct centuries ago, be it as a result of European pathogens which preceded the Spaniards (already colonizing nearby regions) in the 1500s, or due directly to the conquerors’ violence. Other Matambuguenos agree with legal discourse which recognizes the existence of indigenous peoples in Costa Rica and some of these believe that the reservation system protects them. Still others promote the anthropological perspective which claims that while the Chorotegas did at one time live in and around Matambú, and that while those Chorotegas were ancestors to the current inhabitants of Matambú, the present-day inhabitants are no longer indigenous, but mestizos -- both racially and culturally. The opinions of other inhabitants of Matambú do not follow closely any one of these three discourses, though the contradictions among the three have had their effect on identity as well.

As one Matambugueño explained to me, referring to the ethnic limbo in which inhabitants of Matambú find themselves, “No somos ni chicha ni limonada. No somos nada” (roughly, “we’re neither one thing nor another, we are nothing”) (personal communication 1996). Les Field refers to Guatemalan scholar Carlos Guzmán-Bockler’s concept of ningunidad (“Nobodyness” -- clearly a relevant term for the Matambugueño described above) which Field notes has been used theoretically “to describe mestizos, who, having been stripped of their somebody-ness, must be empty and undefined” (1999: 436). It seems that the authors of dominant discourses in Latin America did not take into account that now more than ever the people

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4 The literal translation of this phrase is “We are neither chicha (a fermented corn beverage) nor lemonade. We are nothing.”
that they mean to describe can and do read these definitions of themselves, negotiate them, reject them, and/or internalize them (Wade 1997: 114). In Matambú, the debate surrounding what community members are -- Indians or mestizos -- is both common and constant. Within and among families and generations there is no agreement regarding ethnic identity and the appropriateness of Matambú’s designation as a reservation.

Viviano Aguirre, a former leader of the community -- whose point of view does not reflect the opinion of all Matambugueños -- spoke about the objectification of the community as a result of its being designated as a reservation. Speaking with government officials in a community meeting, he explained:

the government entities, the institutions, see the people of Matambú as if we were a clay vessel, as if we were a [museum] piece, they don’t value us and they hold us like a relic: Matambú, the Chorotega Indigenous Reservation. ... They see us like an object... those that don’t know us or think that we wear a feather on our head or a loincloth, and it’s different, we’re different, and maybe we’re the community that’s most different from the others, and although we feel proud to be Chorotega indigenous people, we want progress, our own intellectual progress, that of our children, and that of the children of our children (Asamblea legislativa 1997: 22-24; translation mine).

This quote refers to the Costa Rican Chorotega Indian’s relegation to the past (as presented by historiographic discourse), and to the perception that the Matambugueños are different from other indigenous communities in the country (as Costa Rican social scientists suggest), and adds that in spite of this transculturation, they continue to be indigenous. Furthermore, Aguirre alludes to the idea that was behind the creation of the reservations: modernization. In this speech, Matambú’s former community leader comments indirectly on the contradictory definitions of the present-day Chorotegas which create for them an externally-imposed identity crisis. None of these discourses adequately define the Costa Rican Chorotega Indian -- perhaps because none of them consulted the Chorotegas when forming their
definitions. Nevertheless, not all Matambugueños question these dominant discourses.

The variety of identities projected by different residents of Matambú became evident to me through fieldwork, open-ended interviews, and participant observation inside the reservation between 1993 and 1999. I conducted research through intensive periods varying in length from ten days to two years during which I carried out well over 200 interviews and immeasurable hours of participant observation. Two important foci of these interviews were the question of identity and Matambugueños' opinions of the reservation. I stumbled onto the former topic while hiking around Matambú, familiarizing myself with the village during my first few days there in 1993. Just having spoken to Gerardo\(^5\) a prominent member of the community who happened to mention his pride in indigenous identity (not at all related to the research I was conducting at the time which included Matambú as one of four rural, non-indigenous communities under study), I was walking down the dirt road past what I later found out to be the house of Gerardo’s sister, Socorro. Without even having met me, Socorro waved enthusiastically and shouted to me in greeting, “Hello! You know there’s nothing indigenous here!”

This intriguing salutation -- juxtaposed with Socorro’s brother’s positive evaluation of his own identity as indigenous -- was my first clue to the identity crisis which divides the community. I soon became aware that neither among nor between generations is there any agreement regarding whether or not the inhabitants of Matambú are Indian or not.

Some Matambugueños I interviewed, drawing upon conventional anthropological categories, point to the existence inside the reservation of the preparation of traditional foods, knowledge of medicinal plants, certain oral narrative practices, the presence of artifacts, the fabrication of ceramics, and the existence of “ranchos” -- thatched-roof, wooden houses with packed dirt

\(^5\) All names have been changed.
floors in the style of pre-Columbian inhabitants of Costa Rica (as reported by early explorers) (Guerrero and Soriano de Guerrero 1982: 64) -- as proof of their Indianness. According to others, the preparation of traditional foods, knowledge of medicinal plants, particular narrative practices and the presence of pre-Columbian artifacts in the reservation are not unique to Matambú, but common throughout the region, thus illustrating that Matambugueños are no more Indian than anyone else in the province of Guanacaste and should not be singled out as such. According to these, the production of ceramics is not proof of indigenous heritage, but the legacy of a Peace Corps volunteer who taught the craft (following designs on museum artifacts unearthed in Chorotega territory).

These same Matambugueños, who oppose both the designation of Indian identity and the reservation status of their land, assert that the thatched-roof ranchos do not prove a connection to the ancient past, but to the current, poor economic condition of their inhabitants.

While some Matambugueños see themselves and their neighbors as modern Chorotega Indians -- an oxymoron for some, -- others see themselves as mestizos or cruzados -- terms which indicate that they consider themselves of mixed racial heritage and as acculturated, ex-Indians. This implies, as Les Field suggests on referring to the situation experienced by the Chorotega in neighboring Nicaragua, that “change of any substantive nature spelled death for indigenous cultural identities” (1999: 44). As mentioned previously, no agreement exists within the community regarding the identity of Matambugueños. What is clear, however, is that Matambugueños, or the so-called modern-day Chorotegas, are familiar with all the discourses that have tried to define them. They know these discourses, negotiate them, and apply them in different contexts according to various agendas. Those that wish to remove their community’s reservation status employ the anthropological

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6 According to Matambugueños interviewed on the matter between 1993 and 1999, a Peace Corps volunteer taught individuals in Matambú and in other nearby towns to produce ceramics adorned with designs from ancient Chorotega artifacts. Several inhabitants of the reservation considered that nobody in Matambú continued to produce these items so as not to prove their Indianness.
discourse which says that Matambugueños are no longer indigenous peoples, but rather acculturated campesinos or mestizos. Those that are in favor of maintaining the reservation or those that project an indigenous identity (though these two groups are not comprised of the same individuals) follow historiography’s primordialist arguments. However, instead of agreeing with the historians that the Chorotegas no longer exist, they utilize the ethnic essentialisms to demonstrate their continued existence.

Homi Bhabha notes that national historiography, which generally serves to homogenize the nation, many times erases the dark moments of national history and obliges the citizen to forget these (1990: 310). The Costa Rican myth presented by historian Monge Alfaro --which conflates race and class while postulating that no social stratification existed in colonial Costa Rica due to the relative lack of indigenous peoples in the country -- has come to represent national reality for many Costa Ricans. It is a myth which is widely believed throughout the country.

In spite of the myth of a Costa Rican egalitarian society of homogeneous Spanish descent, a marginal discourse exists inside the reservation which challenges the idea of national history. In reference to the western world in the postcolonial age, Bhabha notes that “the national memory is always the site of hybridity of histories and the displacement of narratives” (Bhabha 1990: 319). Through the fissures of the dominant discourses which define Matambugueños in one way or another without consulting them, there has emerged a “collective memory” and corresponding oral narratives which contradict the dominant discourse and remember what national history tries to forget.

An elderly woman in Matambú recalls that her grandmother told her about a time when Matambugueños were required to take firewood and egg whites (to be used in adobe) to the site where they were building what is now known as “the Colonial Church.” This church, built by indigenous encomienda labor, still stands in the nearby town of Nicoya as physical evidence of the “memory” that could not have come directly from her
grandmother, but from earlier ancestors, passed from one generation to another as orally-transmitted memory. Others told me how some of the ancient Matambugueños buried themselves alive along with their possessions when the Spaniards arrived since they preferred to die by their own hand than by that of the conquistadors.

These “memories” reveal the slavery and *encomienda* service that existed in the colonial era of this presumably egalitarian nation that Monge Alfaro would have us believe had no indigenous slave labor, nor violence against its native inhabitants, nor even existing indigenous peoples. Thus, this minority discourse reveals what the official “history” has suppressed.

Another marginal discourse in Matambú consists of oral narrative. Many Matambugueños told me *historias*7 -- and they stress that these are “histories,” and not “legends” or “myths” -- of spirits and witchcraft. These histories are narrated in so-called “bad Spanish,” which, incidentally, is peppered with Nahuatl words (see Stocker 1995). Nahuatl replaced the Mangue language spoken by the Chorotegas in the colonial era and was used as a *lingua franca* by the Spaniards throughout Mesoamerica. The Spaniards’ efforts with regard to the promotion of Nahuatl were probably facilitated by the fact that due to extensive trade routes throughout Central America, it is likely that some level of bilingualism and comprehension of Nahuatl already existed. In spite of this linguistic history, however, the dialect spoken in these narratives is not recognized as an indigenous language, but only as a poorly-spoken Spanish. Anthropologists have largely based claims of the supposed de-Indianization -- of ceasing to fulfill definitions (or stereotypes) of Indianness -- of the Matambugueños on language loss. The language used in these narrations, however, reminds us of the forced assimilation which occurred in the colonial era as the Spaniards promulgated the use of Nahuatl rather than Mangue.

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7 The Spanish word *historias* can translate as both “histories” (implying factual accounts) and “stories” (connoting fiction).
The Chorotegas’ presumably “dead” language (which is manifest in a sprinkling of Nahuatl terms and Mangue place names in an otherwise-Spanish language spoken text) emerges in the context of oral history when Matambugueños comment --through narrative -- on how one should speak, on social structures, on ceremonies no longer practiced, and on traditions declared as witchcraft or as diabolical long ago. This marginal discourse contradicts the Costa Rican anthropological discourse which states that no ancient indigenous traditions remain in Matambú, while simultaneously utilizing traditional anthropological categories, such as the presence of oral history, as proof of Indianness. In this manner, and in conformance with Martin Diskin’s ideas regarding Nicaragua but relevant to this case, “the ethnic discourse, a tool in ongoing social negotiation, is therefore eminently situational, with strategic and tactical aspects. For this reason, the ethnic voice may assume a variety of identities” (1991: 157).

As Guillermo Bonfil Batalla notes, “de-Indianization is, socially, the result of violence, although individually it may come to be represented as a free decision” (1990: 200; translation mine). Anthropological discourse in Costa Rica has failed to recognize the cause of Matambú’s de-Indianization and language loss and has punished the reservation for this through delegitimization. As Latin Americanist Martín Lienhard asserts, “to see ‘the Indians’ under the label of campesinos is to negate their exoticism” (1991: 270; translation mine). Nevertheless, to see the indigenous person as necessarily possessing certain exotic traits is also to essentialize him or her. To prove their aboriginal heritage in a form credible to Costa Rican social scientists, Indian peoples now are all but obligated to exoticize themselves since otherwise they are “mestizo until proven Indian” and the burden of such proof is on them. Those that have been defined by national discourses, however, are not only capable of managing these discourses, but also of proposing alternative, marginal ones that comment on those which do not take into account their own opinion, experiences, or identities upon defining them as-- or judging their “legitimacy” -- as a cultural entity.
In the words of Timothy Brennan, a scholar whose work examines western constructions of nation and nationalism, "Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role" (1990: 49). These cultural fictions -- in the Costa Rican case, historical, legal, and anthropological discourses -- are contradictory and incomplete. Marginal texts, coming from the community level in Matambú, contradict them, manipulate them, and add to them, thus salvaging "forgotten" historical aspects. In this manner, marginal discourses demonstrate the heterogeneity and hybridity of a nation presented as homogeneous by dominant discourses.

The Matambugueño case is unique in many regards. First, while throughout the Americas the trend toward a push for greater autonomy of Indian peoples appears to be gaining momentum, in Costa Rica, the reverse seems to be the case. Be it as a result of de-Indianization, the assimilationist goals of the reservation system, or due to long-standing exclusionist policies, indigenous groups in Costa Rica have had to fight to be considered Costa Rican nationals. In this context, autonomy as a goal would be counterproductive to the effort to secure Costa Rican citizenship. Though citizenship was less elusive for inhabitants of the Chorotega reservation, a representative of the Bribri reservation in Southeastern Costa Rica commented on the irony of the difficulty in attaining citizenship for those who consider themselves Costa Rica's first citizens (Guillermo Rodríguez, 1993, personal communication). Les Field notes that in much of Latin America, "indigenous identity is shaped not merely by traits retained from the ancient past but by a history of resistance to nation-states" (1998: 432). In Costa Rica, however, a push for autonomy of indigenous peoples has been eschewed in favor of an insistence on recognition of their belonging to the nation.

As discussed above, the discrimination faced by Matambugueños is place-based -- resulting from residence within the borders of a reservation, not on markedly different customs or ethnic background. Thus,
Matambugueños’ efforts to overcome such discrimination and definition by outsiders are also place-based. One of the most interesting of these efforts is a fight for federal unrecognition as an ethnic group and withdrawal of reservation status. I have witnessed or heard of four examples of attempts (some formal; some informal) to remove Matambú’s reservation status, all of which occurred during the 1990s. All have been complicated by the community’s lack of agreement on this issue. The first strategy I heard of was a woman’s attempt to get a lawyer to take care of this by means of a petition of Matambugueños against the reservation in 1993. Due to this woman’s strained relations with the rest of the community, I was informed, her effort was unsuccessful. The second, and even more informal, attempt to which I was privy occurred during an interview I conducted with Matambú’s youth group in 1997. At the end of the meeting, one youth estimated that 90% of the young people were against the reservation status. In light of this, he expressed the hope that in the future I (the visiting, aspiring anthropologist) would help them abolish the reservation (personal communication, 1997).

The fourth strategy (the third of which became aware of, but not the third chronologically) to remove reservation status which I observed was through local elections in January of 1998. A young man from Matambú ran unsuccessfully for local government hailing the slogan “youth and action.” His platform included removing Matambú’s reservation status. The final example of which I am aware -- and the one best documented here -- of an attempt to remove Matambú’s reservation status occurred in a 1997 meeting (at which I was not present, but of which I obtained a transcript) between the reservation of Matambú and delegates from the federal government. The delegates of this committee regarding indigenous issues met with each of the twenty three reservations in Costa Rica seeking input for the revision of the law which created the reservations in the first place and now seeks to protect indigenous rights (Asamblea Legislativa 1997).

This meeting, which intended to update the law that defines, delimits, and otherwise affects the reservations of Costa Rica, was soon turned into a
meeting in which community members pleaded with the delegates present to abolish Matambú’s reservation status and thus obtain unrecognition as an ethnic group. Even some of those who had held pro-reservation opinions for years provided reasons against maintaining the reservation.

The reasons presented in favor of removing reservation status were familiar. Some referred to the ways in which Matambú has never been like the other (“legitimate”) reservations. Others alluded to their having successfully achieved the original assimilationist goal of the first law, noting that they are more like mainstream Costa Rican society than the inhabitants of other reservations. The government delegates acknowledged that in contrast to the other reservations, Matambú is “up to date” and “at a higher level than the others” (Asamblea Legislativa 1997: 16; translation mine).

Those who supported this movement to use the delegates’ presence to plead their anti-reservation case urged, “we want to be free” (Asamblea Legislativa 1997: 18; translation mine). Such phrases invoke Charles Frake’s “verbal fence” concept in which a place name serves to limit populations and refer to the placism which Matambugueños confront (Frake 1996: 235). A woman who insisted several times that “we want to be free” based her plea for unrecognition and the abolition of the reservation on the lack of difference between the inhabitants of Matambú and surrounding communities in the province of Guanacaste not labeled indigenous. She stated,

If the Indigenous Reservation has brought us problems, we don’t want to say that we don’t want to be Indians, let that be very well understood, the fact that we don’t want the Indigenous Reservation is not that we don’t want to be Indian, nor carry Indian blood. I feel proud to be Indian, because all of us Guanacastecos carry Indian blood” (Asamblea legislativa 1997: 18; translation mine).

At the time of publication of this paper, Matambugueños have not achieved federal unrecognition, and Matambú remains a reservation. Upon hearing about the attempt at unrecognition which took place in the 1997
meeting with federal delegates, it appeared to me that the lack of agreement between pro- and anti-reservation Matambugueños had narrowed since my original interviews on the matter conducted from 1993 to 1994. The number of people willing to openly declare their indigenous identity appeared to have increased, and it seemed that the two factions on different ends of the identity debate (those proclaiming and those denying indigenous identity) had joined the effort to abolish the reservation in order to stop being singled out as Indians locally, and thus avoid discrimination. This impression of increased unity, however, was deceiving. Shortly after the 1997 meeting with delegates, the community held an empajo — the fiesta which accompanies the thatching of a roof — a type of celebration which has not occurred on a large scale in Matambú for years. A new community meeting hall was built in the style of a rancho — the thatched-roof building reminiscent of pre-Columbian times. People of various opinions surrounding Matambú’s classification as a reservation turned up at the empajo to help with the rancho’s construction and thatching. Yet this image of seemingly unified activity is also deceptive.

By means of conclusion, I present it here to emphasize the variety of identities present among the “Chorotega” of Matambú, Costa Rica.

Given many Matambugueños’ past resentment of being represented by archaeological symbols and stereotypes of Indians, it is interesting that the community has chosen this traditional indigenous style for its new meeting hall. This new hall will house any future anti-reservation meetings with government delegates, all events following multi-community soccer tournaments, and dances which bring people from a variety of places to Matambú. It is surprising that the Matambugueños have chosen to represent themselves publicly in a manner which may reinforce outsider views of their Indianness. The community-wide effort to build the rancho culminated in perhaps the ideal physical representation of the identity debate in Matambú.

Yet this irony — of a town trying to emerge from under the stigma of imposed identity while seemingly promoting the very identity they protest — is appropriate, given the malleability of this symbol. The rancho, to some,
evokes the memory of an Indian past. To others, it is a reminder of the Indian present and all that this entails, including a socioeconomic condition which dictates a certain lifestyle for many who cannot afford a more popular cement model of housing. At the same time, the *rancho* is a regional symbol standing for Guanacasteco culture -- for those who see themselves as more allied with such a regional identity than an ethnic one. Thus, the *rancho* symbolically encompasses the interpretations of the various dominant, yet contradictory, discourses. It can elicit the historical message of extinct Indianness, the legal image of persistent indigenous existence, and the anthropological view of an ethnic-turned-class identity. It is a symbol which both permits and presents the image of Matambugueños as at once all of these permutations of their imposed identity, and thereby the self-proclaimed identity of many Matambugueños as being nothing -- "ni chicha ni limonada. No somos nada." This most recent representation of Matambú still does not agree on one identity for all its inhabitants. However, it is, at least and at last, a self-definition which does not speak for all, but allows for individuals’ interpretations of their own identity and at the same time acknowledges the variety of ways in which outsider definitions have influenced those inside the reservation.
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