

Debating “Culture Loss” in Urban Indigeneity in the Metropolitan District of Quito, Ecuador

Debatiendo la “Pérdida Cultural” en los grupos indígenas urbanos del Distrito Metropolitano de Quito, Ecuador

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Photo 1. Plaza de la Identidad, Lumbisí, Ecuador during the St. Bartholomew Patron Saint Festival.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the modern, popularized discourse of “culture loss” in the urban indigenous community of Lumbisí, Ecuador. The political ideology of mestizaje that emerged in the mid-1970s-80s became the reigning nationalism of Ecuador well into the first decade of the 21st century. This ideology catalyzed conflicting discourses of “whitening” and narratives of “culture loss” from within white-mestizo populations towards indigenous ones. Over the course of 30 years, the foothold obtained by these discourses shaped urban indigeneity, for some like the Kitu-Kara, justifying their “culture loss” followed by the subsequent regeneration of indigenous identities and cultures. In this article, I examine the case of Lumbisí, where residents maintain a strong urban, indigenous identity, rooted in their land, ancestry and traditions, yet perceive cultural shifts and innovations from within their own community as steady “cultural loss.” I argue that the Lumbisí narrative of culture loss becomes a harsh self-critique that aligns with an unattainable notion of culture stasis rather than a natural process of shift and innovation.

Key Terms: Urban indigeneity, “culture loss,” mestizaje, “whitening,” Lumbisí, Quito, Ecuador

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, Ecuador’s newly ratified constitution recognized indigenous peoples as citizens of a plurinational Ecuador, marking the end of an era that idealized Ecuadorean nationalism founded in *mestizaje*. According to scholars such as Stutzman (1981), Whitten (1981, 2003a, 2003b, 2011), Fine-Dare (2006, 2014), Beck and Mijeski (2000), Colloredo-Mansfeld (1999), the mestizaje of the 1970s

through the early 2000s, highlighted the blending of white-Spanish and indigenous ancestry and culture. While the ideology of mestizaje theoretically aimed to unite diverse Ecuadorian populations through a homogenized understanding of racial and cultural admixture, the implication of cultural and socio-biological concepts of “whitening,” equivalent of “*mejorando la raza*” or “improving the race” continued to limit indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian populations’ citizenship and participation in the State to the present (Becker 1999). This process of “whitening,” *blanqueamiento* in Spanish, implied the abandonment of indigenous language, dress, ancestral practices and traditions to acculturate to a revered white-western, or specifically a white-European-Spanish, cultural imaginary prescribed by the wealthy and landed elite. Geographically speaking, their collective imaginary of urban spaces evoked this process, especially as rural to urban migration and cultural contact among indigenous and white-mestizos surged. For over 30 years politicians and white-mestizo citizens alike supported the ideology of mestizaje and processes of “whitening,” and declared those who identified as indigenous or Afro-Ecuadorian as counter-culture, resistance, or in short the “enemy” of the State (Stutzman 1981).

Many indigenous peoples, given the option to choose citizenship and inclusion (mestizaje) or continued discrimination and rejection by the State (indigeneity), ceded to the pressure of acculturation, “acceptance,” and mestizaje. Other indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian groups refused, maintaining their identities in contraposition to Ecuadorian nationalism. Ancestrality and ideas of tradition and continuity opposed “whitening,” which called for the abandonment of any trace of indigeneity to fulfill the idealized mestizaje (Stutzman 1981). Visible and audible markers of indigeneity served to distinguish populations and resulted often in their discrimination, especially in urban settings.



Photo 2. Costumed performers during the Patron Saint Festival in Lumbisí. 2014

Urban centers, particularly Quito, the country's highland capital, became nuclei of rural-to-urban migration, resulting in the abandonment of traditional agricultural practices in the rural periphery and a concentration of diverse populations occupying the same, albeit strictly hierarchized, city space as their white-mestizo counterparts. Quito became one of many transitional axes that catalyzed the whitening process, and thus bore witness to the now prolific discussion of "perdida de la cultura" (culture loss) that white-mestizos' idealized process of "whitening" provoked.

In this article, I examine the popular discourse of "culture loss" in the urban indigenous community of Lumbisí. The 2008 Constitution played a key role in recognizing the indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, and coastal Montubio peoples' rights in theory upending the 30-year political ideology of mestizaje and cultural whitening, proclaiming "*La Patria ya es de todos,*"--the Homeland now belongs to us all [Author's Translation]. The ideology of mestizaje took a lasting toll on indigenous populations, resulting in differential intergenerational acculturation. For example, indigenous grandparents who suffered discrimination and a range of violence based on their traditional attire, native language, and lack of formal, westernized education, encouraged cultural change among their children to discontinue the cycle. They sent their children to urban schools, encouraged the use of their second language, Spanish, and distanced themselves culturally from their ancestral past, adhering to the prescribed whitening process. Meanwhile, their children raised their grandchildren adept in urban cultures and aware of their indigenous roots. The grandchildren became more curious about their ancestral past at a time when the appreciation of ethnic diversity surged, spiking processes of revitalization (Fine-Dare 2014) and ethnogenesis (Whitten 2003). In this article, I argue the discourse of "culture loss" emanates from white-mestizo imaginaries of indigenous peoples creating



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simultaneous acceptance and rejection of “whitening,” while the same discourse has become naturalized in urban indigenous populations as self-critique, when their reflections on their own culture relate more to locally-managed, inevitable culture change over time.

THE “CULTURAL LOSS” CRITIQUE

Conversations about race, genealogy, and kinship that reinforce claims to white-European-Spanish ancestry abound in white-mestizo social circles. Inevitably, conversations turn to historical and contemporary connections between military heroes, Catholic saints, intellectuals, and successful politicians to establish familial prestige and privilege. To further reinforce the distinction between white-mestizos and indigenous Ecuadorians, conversations in the former’s social circles generally form a diametric opposition to indigeneity. White-mestizos between the ages of 35-75 often shared stories of memories and images that reminded them of indigenous peoples. From these conversations, two primary genres of narratives emerged. One genre focused on the nostalgia of haciendas, personal contact with hacienda workers or domestic servants, and memories of hard workers or loving caregivers that helped rear them as children. These figures were described in folklorized legends and essentialized visions of traditional clothing, long braided hair, especially in the highland region, and the use of Kichwa, their native language, all considered traditional visual or audible markers of indigeneity. The indigenous peoples envisioned in this genre are relatively revered and admired as monolithic entities incapable of change and “modernization” without “culture loss.” The thought of potential changes or observed differences generate “lament,” and a patriarchal critique. Phrases like, “What a shame, they are already losing their culture” or “They no longer speak their language” are common, especially in urban settings where using visible and audible

indigenous markers result in mistreatment, discrimination, or even verbal and physical violence.

Acceptable change and innovation seem to pertain only to white-mestizos, who do not suffer “culture loss” when obtaining a second or third language, wearing new fashion, or changing their lifestyles. The binary of survival or culture loss epitomizes a monolithic understanding of culture, one stuck in the nostalgic genre of indigeneity outlined above (Lyons 2006). Culture change and innovation may occur in two primary ways, either from newly imposed dominate culture standards over a marginalized group such as the ideology of mestizaje in relation to indigenous populations, or as choice from within the cultural group to select or innovate, incorporate, and revalue locally new symbols and practices. The latter among white-mestizos signifies culture loss within indigenous or marginalized populations, meanwhile in white-mestizo groups the former is customary, revered, typical, and envisioned as a normalized process. New forms of fashion, second language learning, particularly English, and the consumption of goods and services with western provenience are in fact desired as prestigious. However, the converse is true for indigenous populations, as these innovations remain envisioned as an erosion or loss of culture. Interestingly, a quick search of academic databases such as Google Scholar for the term “culture loss” turns up results that highlight, almost exclusively, pan-indigenous culture loss.

White-mestizos use “culture loss” to explain to foreigners, such as myself, the abandonment of “traditional indigenous practices.” The lack of visible and audible markers highlight this loss for white-mestizos; however, urban indigenous peoples, while conforming to the prescribed process of “whitening” employed semblances of white-mestizo, Spanish, and other urban clothing styles to blend into the

cityscape, making their presence much less detectable and therefore less apt to be discriminated against.

The other genre in white-mestizo discourse on indigeneity emanates from harsh social criticism and xenophobic stereotypes of unknown indigenous peoples. Precisely the indigenous people in this genre represent the ones that the ideology of mestizaje aimed to “improve.” Long held pejorative stereotypes of “indios” in Ecuadorian society remain. The term “*indio*” in Spanish literally translates as Indian in English, but conveys a much deeper racial slur, especially when used by white-mestizos to discuss Andean indigenous peoples, who refer to themselves in their native Kichwa as *runa*—fully human beings. The stereotype evoked in this genre portrays indigenous peoples as rural bumpkins, lacking hygiene, being hypersexual, illiterate, and violent individuals, who white-mestizos should fear (Weismantel 1988 and 2003). Indigenous poverty often gets conflated with ideas of intoxication, laziness, and crime committed to steal material wealth from the upper and upper-middle social classes. Mestizaje aimed to abolish this substrate of society, equating the process of “whitening” with the loss of these characteristics, and the “bettering” of Ecuadorian society as a whole, but in particular the indigenous substrata. The ideology of mestizaje, therefore, encouraged “culture loss,” not only within the xenophobic stereotype, but reaching as far as the nostalgic, accepted genre of indigenous folklore.

URBAN INDIGENOUS PERCEPTIONS OF “CULTURE LOSS”: THE CASE OF LUMBISÍ

Located approximately 17km southeast of Quito, Ecuador, the Comuna San Bartolomé de Lumbisí sits between the natural borders of Ilaló and Las Monjas mountains. The majority of Lumbisí’s population

of 3,500 self-identifies as native Lumbiseños or indigenous peoples with approximately 300 families inscribed in the community’s census. They consider roughly a third of the population as *gente de afuera* (foreigners to the community) (Sacancela 2012). Lumbisí occupies approximately 613 hectares of land, legally recognized and registered as a *comuna*, private, collective property, in the semi-urban parish of Cumbayá. Founded in 1535, Lumbisí is the oldest of 47 documented comunas in the Metropolitan District of Quito (Tusa Lucano 2018 personal communication). This community exemplifies the contentions of the phrase “losing culture,” in the sense that native residents view cultural change and external influences as a homogenizing cultural force, nonetheless they still strongly self-identify as an indigenous community, proud of their cultural, ancestry, and heritage.

The discourse of “culture loss” has entered urban indigenous communities as fervently as white-mestizos embrace their own culture change. While communities recognized by the urban indigenous alliance Kitu-Kara directly proclaim that white-mestizo usurpation of their ancestral land and “whitening” lead to the destruction and subsequent 2005 ethnogenesis of their indigenous identities (Quijos et al, 2006), By contrast, Lumbiseños recognize longevity and continuity in their identity, as the comuna is the longest standing within the Metropolitan District. Unlike many indigenous communities within Quito, Lumbisí has a pre-Colombian past. They maintained relative autonomy, resisted colonization, and maintained traditions such as their patron saint festivals since 1590 (Rebolledo 1992).

My ethnographic research, lies squarely in the collection and interpretation of culture through participant-observation and a variety of formal and informal interview practices to understand the current and recent pasts of the people with whom I work. While these exercises offer

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snapshots and thick descriptions into their lives and thoughts (Geertz 1973), I provide insights into the understanding of processes of inevitable change over time. I work within the framework of culture as an ever-changing process susceptible to both internal and external processes of change no matter the ethnicity of the groups studied. Lumbisí offers a particularly interesting case of culture change that I argue incorporates goods, symbols, and practices from outside their community, revaluing them, and rather than erasing aspects of their past due to culture contact and “whitening,” they strengthen their identity through these innovations (Williams 2012). The people of Lumbisí have maintained contact and worked in and around Quito nearly since its Spanish colonial foundation in 1534. Urban indigeneity, as I have defined it, consists of indigenous populations residing in urban and semi-urban settings, who self-identify as indigenous, but do not necessarily conform to essentialized notions of indigeneity (Williams 2012). Their lifestyles resemble the description that Frank Salomon provided for the Quito Runa (Salomon 1981). Salomon (1981) states that the Quito Runa are virtually indiscernible as indigenous people in the urban setting, but in their home communities and during festival performances, their identity shifts in line with concepts of local indigenous identity.

Lumbiseños construct and practice their own urban indigeneity, defying external, folklorized notions of what indigeneity means in their day-to-day lives, and satirizing it in their festival productions. However, on more than one occasion, Lumbisí residents have bowed their heads and proclaimed woefully their “culture loss.” During the last several festival cycles (2011-2017), multiple residents raised in Lumbisí by well-known native families of the community approached me and repeated the former nationalist mestizaje creed, “we are all mestizos [already],” distancing themselves from an indigeneity that like all cultures has experienced indisputable



Photo 3. Plaza de la Identidad, Lumbisí, Ecuador, Costumed residents dance during the Patron Saint Festival, celebrating St. Bartholomew.

change. Despite these changes, just as many or more Lumbiseños insist that their identity remains strong. I posit that the “culture loss” narrative has become naturalized into community interactions with “others” vis a vis the daily interaction with white-mestizos, who do not envision Lumbiseños or other Quito Runa as pertaining to either of their imaginaries of indigeneity. Thus, the constant repetition of “culture loss,” observed in popular media, conversations among intellectuals, and related through popular discourse becomes an illusion of “truth” in these white-mestizo-indigenous interactions (Rosaldo, 1993).

Different generations of Lumbiseños understand this change and “culture loss” from varying perspectives. In an interview with a 76 year old Lumbisí

elder, María Dolores, when asked about the strength of Lumbisí identity, she emotionally laments the slow loss of culture in the form of traditions, a reaction that most foreigners or white-mestizos would anticipate or expect when speaking with urban indigenous residents. She states:

Unfortunately, little by little, [the culture] is leaving, [we are] losing the traditions. It is no longer what it was like before. It used to be very peaceful, but now, unfortunately, little by little, with so many people from outside that are coming to live here [in Lumbisí] from different parts, little by little, little by little, [we are] losing the traditions of our lands (Quishpe 2018) [Author’s translation].



Photo 4. Aya umas, an innovation to the Lumbisí Patron Saint Festival celebration in 2014.



Photo 5. Receiving a *limpia*, Julie Williams receiving a mock ritual cleansing performed by Lumbiseños in costumes typically worn by the indigenous people of Otavalo, a northern indigenous market town.

The *limpias* are primarily targeted to the authorities and honored members of the community attending the festival activities.

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However, later in the interview, I asked her what traditions still demonstrate or highlight Lumbisí identity, to which she responded with a voice cracking with emotion and pride:

...the work of the community, *mingas*, general assembly meetings, and the celebration [of our patron saint], the running of the roosters, *gallomote* (a traditional chicken broth soup with multiple grains grown in the community), the orchestra/band, and the dance of the yumbos that still exists but it is different. (Quishpe 2018) [Author’s Translation]

The earlier lament on “culture loss,” María Dolores associates outsiders influencing the culture from within the community. Renters that live within Lumbisí have multiple places of origin and ethnic backgrounds, bringing with them outside influences they practice within their households in a relatively self-isolating community (Williams 2012). While these renters may affect Lumbiseños in terms of economic production practices or even safety, these outsiders have little power to impose identity shifts, much less “whitening,” or acculturation as minorities within the community. María Dolores’ latter statement highlights the sentiment of change, but framed within “culture loss.” According to her, little by little, everything in the community is changing and they are losing the traditions of their lands; yet, her list of cultural practices demonstrate weekly, monthly, and annual cultural events. While activities within these spaces have shifted, continuity and strength of Lumbiseño identity pervades in these activities.

Her daughter, Lucía, now in her mid-forties, had a differing opinion, centered in community residents that still speak Kichwa, their native language, also an audible marker of indigeneity. Lucia not only

recognizes and reveres this language use, but it is also recognized by non-indigenous others as a marker of indigeneity. She states:

In my opinion, and as the comunera that I am, I have grown up here, and it seems to me that yes [Lumbisí identity is strong]. Yes, we are still the identity that we use to identify ourselves. Why? Because there are still ancestors and comuneros that incite and speak in Kichwa and I feel proud to live here and to be a comunera (Lucano 2018) [Author’s translation].

She also believes that the idea of “culture loss” comes from outside of the community, primarily by immigrants to the comuna that have had conflict over land in their place of origin. She said she might have heard of the term “culture loss” from them, but she reiterates, “Us comuneros, no, [we don’t think of culture loss]. What is more, we try to do our best to always advance our identity [Author’s translation].” Lucía also points to the many activities that keep that identity strong such as their monthly general assembly meetings, weekly communal work parties, and annual celebrations, all of which are lesser known and less visible to white-mestizos from outside the community.

Finally, in a follow-up conversation with María Dolores’ granddaughter, Wendy, a university student in her early 20s. Wendy also frames the strength of Lumbisí identity within the discourse of “culture loss.” When asked if she thought Lumbisí might be at risk for “cultural loss” she stated:

I think that with the passing of time, everything has changed, and also in every sense, technology has been an important

factor that in one way or another has generated a cultural loss in different places. For example, I used to communicate [to the community] through press notes or communications. Now, everything is [communicated] through Whatsapp or social media that not all people have access to, and for that reason cultural loss has been a factor, not only in Lumbisí but also in other places (Tusa 2018) [Author's translation].

Innovations such as social media, for example, complicate "traditional" communication methods within the community, as not all comuneros have a smartphone or computer on which to use them, she relates. Yet, in recent months, social media and technology has been used by community youth as self-promotion and means to record and share memories, legends, traditions, practices, and recounts of festival pasts on Facebook Live or through Whatsapp invitations. So, while Wendy envisions technology as a detractor from local culture, causing in her opinion, "culture loss," further examination of technology use within the community I interpret as change that ultimately empowers local youth to participate in the passing of knowledge from generation to generation.

Within three generations of the same family, the participants show similarities in the narratives of "culture loss;" however, they also indicate their identity is still strong, and that they maintain activities that strengthen or highlight this identity throughout the year. The "culture loss" narrative and self-critique of Lumbiseños points to the incorporation of and naturalized self-castigation for the critique of outsiders, specifically of white-mestizos, and what Lumbiseños expect from them. The internalization and use of this narrative serves also to protect the urban indigenous identity of Lumbisí, which remains invisible to outsiders unfamiliar with their history.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the popular "culture loss" narrative in Quito and urban indigenous communities serves as an illusion of "truth," that highlights culture shift and change. While white-mestizo populations consider their own culture shift and change as integral to their social status and prestige, they consider the opposite true in the case of indigenous populations, especially urban ones. White-mestizos consider indigenous culture as static, evoking nostalgia or that fit an equally static, pejorative, and racist stereotype of indigenous peoples. The latter promotes the "whitening" narratives of mestizaje among white-mestizos, inciting indigenous "culture loss" as the way to achieve "improving the race" and mestizaje. Urban indigenous affiliates, such as the Kitu-Kara, point directly to these narratives and the process of acculturation through whitening as detrimental to their indigeneity, which made their urban indigeneity invisible until 2005 experienced revitalization and resurgence. However, for Lumbisí the narrative of "culture loss," camouflages the rich culture, ancestry, and heritage of its people. Quotidian practices render Lumbiseños invisible to those unfamiliar with their community and history; however, the weekly, monthly, and annual celebrations of their indigeneity reflect their own construct, understanding, and practice of urban indigeneity. Shifts in the means and modes of cultural practices are undeniable in the community and constitute an inevitable process in every culture group in contact with "others." The limitations set forth by the "culture loss" narrative complicate the local explanation of shifts, changes, and innovations that emanate from within or external to the community, particularly when communicating these phenomena to outsiders to the community, who they presume expect the "culture loss" narrative. The naturalized use of this narrative within Lumbisí provides a buffer

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between external expectations and internal lived realities, protecting the identity as it exists beyond the reach of essentialized imaginaries and folklore.

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