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## "The Only True People"

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## Foreword

JONATHAN D. HILL

In *“The Only True People”: Linking Maya Identities Past and Present*, Bethany Beyyette and Lisa LeCount have assembled the works of ethnologists, linguists, and archaeologists to critically rethink the complex interrelations between contemporary Maya identities and those known through archaeological studies of ancient Mayan sites. In the waning years of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century, indigenous Mayan peoples have shown a remarkable ability to embrace new technologies and create new forms of political organization for representing their interests among themselves and at state, regional, national, and global levels. These indigenous forms of political and cultural creativity are unfolding today in contexts of the globalizing nation-states of Latin America and across the long-term historical processes of Colonial and national state expansion as well as associated traumatic losses of life, autonomy, land, and other resources.

Rapid intergenerational shifts are unfolding in villages, towns, and cities across Mesoamerica and the rest of Latin America as indigenous peoples move from oral traditions to literacy and from word of mouth to the Internet in a matter of years. Researching these contemporary transformations and the emergence of new forms of identity politics has become a rich field of study for ethnologists and historians (see, e.g., Warren and Jackson 2002; Ramos 1998). Because of their concern for documenting ethnogenesis and other long-term historical processes, including not only socio-cultural and historical but also linguistic and archaeological lines of inquiry, the essays that make up *“The Only True People”* are directly relevant to the rapidly

changing cultural politics of indigeneity in Mesoamerica. The past lives on in the present in a diversity of ways, and the struggles of today's Mayan peoples to create new political and cultural spaces for persisting within the globalizing nation-states of Mesoamerica are both shaped by and give new form and meaning to cultural transformations that have been under way in the region for at least two millennia.

As wrong as it would be to ignore the momentous historical events and forces of Colonial and national state expansions in Latin America while trying to understand contemporary indigenous forms of creativity and identity, it would be just as incorrect to assert that these contemporary practices have little or no relevance for understanding long-term processes that have been unfolding in Mesoamerica for at least two millennia and that "pre-contact" Mayan peoples lived in some pristine, "prehistoric" state of nature. The concept of ethnogenesis, first used in a Latin American context by Norman Whitten (1976) and later developed in *History, Power, and Identity* (Hill 1996) and other works (Anderson 1999; Galloway 1995; Restall 2004; Hornborg 2005; Fennell 2007; Hornborg and Hill 2011), offers a way out of the essentializing of "peoples without history," whether in past or present times. This approach is rooted in Fredrik Barth's (1969) pioneering approach to social differentiation as a process of ethnic boundary marking and also builds upon Edward and Rosamond Spicer's (1992) concept of "persistent identity systems" that have endured across centuries of Colonial domination.

More recently, James Clifford (2004:20) has drawn upon ethnogenesis and related concepts to argue that emerging indigenous American identities are better understood as a creative process of "authentically remaking" rather than "a wholly new genesis, a made-up identity, a postmodernist 'simulacrum,' or the rather narrowly political 'invention of tradition' analyzed by Hobsbawm and Ranger . . . , with its contrast of lived custom and artificial tradition." "*The Only True People*" expands upon Clifford's characterization of ethnogenesis as a process of authentically remaking new social identities through creatively rediscovering and refashioning components of "tradition," such as oral narratives, written texts, and material artifacts. We can see this ethnogenetic process of authentically remaking identities at work not only in the efforts of contemporary Mayan peoples struggling to refashion identities through ancestral languages, attachments to specific geographic places, and shared senses of history but also in material artifacts from Late and Terminal Classic Maya society that demonstrate an escalation in the use of diacritics and boundary-marking practices (see LeCount, this volume).

Ethnogenesis, when defined in broad terms as "a concept encompassing peoples' simultaneously cultural and political struggles to create enduring identities in general contexts of radical change and discontinuity" (Hill 1996:1) as well as peoples' historical consciousness of these struggles, allows for an integrated historical,

linguistic, and archaeological approach to studies of pre- and post-contact transformations of indigenous Mayan social identities and cultural landscapes. While acknowledging the profound changes brought about by European colonization and the rise of independent nation-states, the chapters of *"The Only True People"* also avoid essentializing approaches that categorize pre-contact Mayans as "peoples without history" or post-contact indigenous identities as merely artificial "reinventions" of past cultures.

*"The Only True People"* addresses these theoretical issues and makes a strong case for the value of integrating ethnology, linguistics, and archaeology as a means for generating new knowledge and lines of inquiry that are inaccessible to scholars working in any one of these specializations in isolation from the others. The kinds of material artifacts Mayan peoples use in creating distinct ethnic identities are often the most likely to perish rather than preserve in the archaeological record. The goal of establishing a clear-cut ethnic habitus, whether for contemporary Mayan peoples or in the archaeological remains of past Mayan communities, remains elusive or worse, since different groups wear similar clothing, have similar work habits, eat the same foods, and construct identically shaped houses. Ethnic identities are instead more likely to be defined through markers far less likely to show up in the archaeological record: "cultural elements such as language, place of residence, and a sense of common history" (see Marken, Guenter, and Friedel, this volume). This heightens the need for collaboration with ethnographers who can explore what kinds of artifacts are most likely to indicate ethnic differences and how they are made, exchanged, and used in public contexts.

The cross-disciplinary collaboration found in *"The Only True People"* also contributes to the growing awareness in anthropology that material things and associated ideologies of materiality are often radically different in indigenous American societies than in societies with capitalist regimes of value. The objects and artifacts unearthed by archaeologists are likely to have had a plethora of different meanings and degrees of agency for the people who made and used them. Although many of these differences of subjectivity and agentivity are irretrievable from the archaeological record, ethnographic studies of the different ways of being a thing in contemporary Mayan communities can provide guidelines for hypothesizing about which kinds of things are most likely to become subjectified and to be regarded as having agentive powers (Santos-Granero 2009a). Researchers working on similar issues in Amazonian South America (Basso 1985; Santos-Granero 2009b) have found that artifacts associated with communicative powers, such as sacred wind instruments or shamanic stones, are usually regarded as the most agentive. For the Mayan communities discussed in *"The Only True People,"* perhaps the increased importance of diacritics indicating attachments to specific geographic locales (see LeCount, this

volume) provides an example of artifacts having heightened communicative and agentive powers.

The chapters in *"The Only True People"* also demonstrate that collaborative efforts among ethnologists, linguists, and archaeologists can identify possible correlations between linguistic affiliations and socio-cultural practices in ways that avoid the essentializing and spatializing of such correlations and that rigorously embrace both reflexive awareness of power relations inherent in the construction of scientific knowledge and the central importance of studying and comparing language histories (Hill and Santos-Granero 2002). Adherences among material cultures, language families, and other markers of ethnicity can be discerned in archaeological, linguistic, ethnological, and historical records, but it cannot be assumed that such correlations are inevitable or unchanging. A more nuanced, historically dynamic perspective "suggests that language affiliation and material culture tend to stick together, not because there is any sticky glue involved but because both are transmitted over similar channels. Depending on circumstances, this 'null' condition may be reinforced, actively resisted, or casually ignored" (DeBoer 2011:95). As anthropologists, we need to study these processes of convergence and divergence among languages, material cultures, and ethnic identities.

Finally, *"The Only True People"* contributes to a growing recognition of the need for anthropologists to understand how they identify themselves both within and beyond academia, how they "divide up the continuum of human cultural variation into analytical units," and how "power plays a large part in determining in what ways and by whom cultural variation is compartmentalized" (see Schortman, this volume). The problem here is a specific example of the more general need for cultivating a critical reflexive awareness of the historical roots of such Western scientific concepts as "language family," the use of which historically coincided with the political subjugation of New World and other non-European peoples and with the Enlightenment project of rationalist social theories. The very notion of "family" is based on a metaphor of biological relatedness that tends to place emphasis on exclusivity, fixity, and boundedness and to shift attention away from inclusivity, fluidity, and historical engagement across language differences. The role of language documentation and classification as tools for political subjugation during Colonial history cannot be overestimated, and they have continued in that historical role throughout the modern period of nation-state expansion in Latin America. With its focus on the Mayan peoples of Mesoamerica, *"The Only True People"* makes important substantive, methodological, and theoretical contributions to these challenging issues.

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