

Elderly Migrants, Primordial Affinities, and Ethnic Identity

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ABSTRACT

The following essay explores one small piece of the ethnic identity puzzle in the context of transnational wage labor migration: that contribution of the elderly as they and their families make decisions about their lives. It is suggested that these decisions, though seemingly peripheral to the core of migration phenomena, bear lasting ramifications in the construction and maintenance of ethnic identity.

KEY WORDS: Migrants, ethnic, identity, transnational, mexican.

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora una parte del fenómeno de la identidad étnica en el contexto de la migración laboral transnacional: la contribución de viejos cuando ellos y sus familias toman decisiones sobre sus vidas. El autor sugiere que dichas decisiones, aunque aparentemente periférico al centro del fenómeno migratorio, llevan ramificaciones que perduran en la construcción y el mantenimiento de la identidad étnica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Migrantes, etnicidad, identidad, trasnacional, mexicanos.

INTRODUCTION

Transnational traffic between Mexico and the US is a phenomenon with seemingly limitless capacity to engage the attention of politicians, lawmakers, vigilantes, voters, and researchers on both sides of the border. The historic increase in northward border crossings since the early 1990s has brought in its wake a surge of legislative initiatives, political debates and citizen involvement on every conceivable facet of the issue. Despite the furor raging

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overhead, folks on the ground continue to move in search of whatever personal and family benefits may accrue from their own migratory experiences.

The Mexico-US migration story is only one strand in an immense fabric of worldwide migration, the research literature of which reveals remarkable lessons that migrants provide about the human condition. For obvious reasons, the bulk of research about transnational wage labor focuses on the core of a migrant population, the workers themselves – who they are, where they come from, why they move, how they cope, what they think. In addition to this core, however, countless individuals are swept along in the currents of labor migration, and many of these people are invisible to the passing gaze, not working outside the home and not making decisions of significant interest to researchers. These are the “peripheral” participants in the migrant world north of the border – the spouses, children, and parents of migrant workers.

This essay represents the initial stages in an investigation into one part of that periphery, specifically the elderly. I suggest that the elderly, once they are no longer working, take on new and important roles in the symbolic and cultural life of a migrant community, roles which are understated but which hold lasting potential to affect the ethnic identity of their community’s members. In an effort to support this argument I will (a) survey several areas of current research literature on migration to demonstrate that the elderly, as a topic of migration research, are largely absent, (b) weave into the discussion a local case study of a small town with a significant Mexican migrant community, (c) review three theoretical concepts about ethnic identity that are pertinent to the case study, and (d) attempt to show how these three concepts play out in the lives of migrants in the case study. This is an admittedly anecdotal essay the intent of which is to lay out some strands of research which may logically follow from its arguments and suggestions.

WORKERS’ FAMILY MEMBERS IN MIGRATION – GLOBAL PATTERNS

With regard to families, migration patterns are quite clear globally: males, usually migrating as singles, forge into an area of employment potential, establish working networks, adjust and redeploy in those networks, and eventually bring family members. With housing a family priority, kids in local schools, and other community involvement, the established employment networks evolve into social and familial networks, the attractions of which have been shown to drive transnational labor migration with as much, if not more, vigor than the original economic and demographic impulses (Bouvier 1992:49).

The demographics of a local migrant population, with its relatively artificial genesis and maintenance, offer a contrast to demographic observations available within a non-migrating population. The first arrivers, the core of

workers, analogous to an indigenous population's wage earning sector, become sandwiched between young non-wage earners and elderly non-wage earners. These two groups, at least early on in a migrant community's history, are often present as a direct result of intentional, complex, and risky decisions on the part of the wage earners themselves. To bring wives and children, and eventually elderly family members, few of which have worked in the migrant circuit long enough to have obtained legal documentation, is a choice that carries with it the benefits of family stability and comfort, but also many burdens. Bluntly stated, newly arrived undocumented family members, be they children, wives, or parents, bring with them all the needs for housing, food, healthcare, and transportation, but few of the requisite linguistic, cultural, employment, or social tools necessary to satisfy those needs on their own. The choice facing the single male worker in such circumstances is whether the benefits of family members' company outweigh the added risks and difficulties inherent in their presence.

A LOCAL COMMUNITY CASE STUDY

It will be useful at this point to bring into the discussion the specifics of a local case of rural migration that has been the focus of a two-decade long ethnographic study. A brief synopsis of its history reads as follows: Shortly before the end of the Bracero Program in the early 1960s, a small trickle of migrant workers "discovered" and "were discovered by" the farmers around Macken¹, a small rural community in the Midwestern US which, for nearly 100 years had been the center of a regional apple and peach industry. The discovery was purely accidental, but within a short period the trickle became a considerable flow of migrant workers from the same town in the P'urhépecha Highlands of Michoacán, Mexico. By the 1970s, Michoacanos were working in nearly equal numbers in the fields along side their white and black counterparts, migrant fruit workers from Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas, who had worked the orchards in the region since the late nineteenth century. The 1980s saw these latter groups largely supplanted in the orchards and packing sheds by the migrants from Michoacán. Although migrants and immigrants in Macken now hail from many parts of Mexico, the original influx was overwhelmingly P'urhépecha and specifically from a single town.

Such migratory arrangements are not unusual, either globally, or between Mexico and the US, and the ethnographic and historical details of this particular communal relationship are documented elsewhere (Anderson 1977; Anderson 1999; Anderson 2004). Its primary interest here is the fact that, for a variety of reasons, early in this localized migration history, intact families found their place within the swelling flow of single males and began

¹ Not its real name.

to take up residence in Macken as well. With dual parent households, children of all ages, and elderly, the small town came to host what can only be considered a demographically well rounded population of migrants and immigrants. The presence of family members, and particularly their impact on local schools and churches, is notable, for not only did they establish themselves as family units, but they settled and stayed, buying houses, forming church congregations, organizing public celebrations, raising a voice in the local school, and opening up shops and eateries, and all in a rural community of little more than 1,000 population.

The early presence of families brought about at least two unforeseen, but largely beneficial consequences, both for the community of Macken as well as the migrant community in its midst. The first of these was the village's awareness of the needs of migrant children, primarily in the public school, but also in the areas of daycare and preschooling, an awareness which eventually² resulted in special language programs (ESL and Bilingual) in the local K-12 District, summer tutorial programs, and the establishment of one of the largest migrant Headstart Programs still operating in the state. Children, nearly always a non-threatening buffer in the potential clash of cultures, presented to the town a softer image of the growing migrant community it hosted. The universally recognizable tug of a mother caring about her children and wanting the best for them added a measure of familiarity to the otherwise "invisible" army of foreign, single, male orchard workers in the farms surrounding the village.

Children inevitably nudged parents and parenting into the spotlight of public scrutiny, and migrant families were largely lauded for their evident appreciation of home and kin. A virtuous cycle evolved, wherein intact families lent an impression of stability to the migrant community, a characteristic not lost on bankers and social agents responsible for community development and wellbeing. Money lent, houses purchased, kids in school, parental involvement, bills paid – all pointed to a sector of the entire village society that was "carrying its weight." Stability attracted stability, and more families arrived, to the point where, in the late 1990s, people of Mexican origin owned as much as twenty percent of the homes in the town.

A second consequence of stable families has been the cohort of elderly which forms an important part of the community. In some instances, the elderly are actually the men that remain from an original group of a dozen migrants who first arrived in the region in the 1960s and early 1970s. True to global patterns of transnational labor migration, after establishing themselves in the employment network, they returned to Michoacán with the intent of

² This short history should not be taken to imply that all the developments herein described were quick or without problems and setbacks, with proponents and adversaries orbiting each issue. As with any movement across borders and boundaries, the very fact that one group was in another group's space brought with it struggles and contested claims.

bringing their families back north. The stability of the region's employment opportunities (predictable albeit unfailingly low paying) with known orchard growers, the general security of small town life, and the resulting decades of residential stability have conspired to keep the originals – called by one migrant worker “*los pioneros*” – around as cultural anchors, patriarchs, and reliable historians. Those who are still alive are now grandfathers and great-grandfathers.

A second contingent of elderly includes those parents of migrants who have come north to be with their adult children. This group, far less public than *los pioneros*, nevertheless serves to anchor family units, extend functioning kin networks, and provide a sense of continuity and generational ties back home. In Macken at least they are less prone to work outside the home and constitute to some degree that “beneficial burden” referred to above.

MIGRATION RESEARCH LITERATURE: EXTENSIVE BUT MISSING THE ELDERLY

The research literature (not to mention the public and political dialog on both sides of the Mexico-US border), if taken as a gauge of the principle areas of concern within the vast array of issues comprising the migrant phenomenon, reveals three areas of focus, each with its own subdivisions of research: migrant workers (often, but not exclusively single males or male heads of households), their spouses, and their children.

Not surprisingly, the primary concern is with the core of a migrant population, the workers themselves. Demographers, ethnographers, statisticians, healthcare researchers, educators, and law enforcement agencies have scrutinized virtually everything about their behavior. Investigations into the “core” of the migrant population generally fall along one or another of two dimensions: hard facts – numbers, trends, places, quantifiable behaviors (crime, disease, mobility, wage earning, remittances, etc.), and soft facts – ethnic identity, psychological profiles, language attitudes, beliefs and values, assimilation and acculturation, self-perceptions, and so forth. Furthermore, innumerable topical targets crosscut these two dimensions, and these fall conveniently into the following four categories:

1) *Border phenomena* US interest in migration often finds its most convenient and engaging focus to be the border itself, the numbers, origins, and legal status of its crossers, border security, border enforcement, and border demographics. Ongoing studies by Massey et al. (2001), Bean et al. (2001), Marcelli and Cornelius (2001) and others keep a constant eye on the numbers as reported by both Mexican and US population monitoring sources as well as interpret such important trends as the increasing rate of return migration over the last few decades. Analyses of the remarkably dynamic nature of migration networks, their evolving complexity and sophistication, fill the pages of academic journals and edited volumes (Durand and Massey 2004; Zuniga and Hernandez-Leon 2006; Fussell 2004a; Fussell 2004b). Recent

investigations by Guzman et al. (2008) reveal the elaborate give-and-take of technological investments in border control vis-à-vis the documentable reduction in illicit cross-border traffic. A keen focus on the border also provides insights into US values and public debates regarding national hospitality versus national sovereignty (Vite Pérez 2006). Public concern with the border waxes and wanes with the seasons of politics and other distractions, but academic research has maintained a constant fix on this “line in the sand.”

2) *Affects of transnational migration in Mexico* The interplay of out-migration and its social-political effects back home has attracted a wide range of attention. Research in the state of Oaxaca alone offers an example of the diverse and creative probing of researchers in every field. Recent studies include women and political participation in the absence of migrating husbands (Velásquez C. 2004), the capacity of rural indigenous governance systems to incorporate the influx of migration dollars (Tucker 2005), women’s migratory patterns (Cohen et al. 2008), the application of “skills and knowledge [as opposed to just remittances]...to improve living conditions” (Robles Camacho 2004:468), the transnationally redefined rural values of returning second generation migrants (Petrón 2008), and the practice of sending “envios,” small packages containing food and other items, from home north to California (Grieshop 2006). Studies touching all geographic corners of Mexico as well attempt to unravel the complex circumstances of a people traversing geographic and cultural boundaries, from obscure features of widowhood (Frank 2005) and drug use in both rural communities (McDonald 2005) and urban areas (Borges et al. 2007) to the better studied elements of labor supply, remittances, and development back home (Airola 2008; Airola 2007; García García 2006), from the educational and psychological impacts on children left behind (Antman 2007; Aguilera-Guzman 2004) to children receiving binational educational attention (Leco Tomás 2006).

3) *Migrant behaviors in the US* North of the border, the behavior of this growing sector of the US population forms a third major subject of research scrutiny. The investigative lens has captured everything from the upper class of high-tech professionals (Alarcón 1999) to the indigenous migrants on the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004). As with studies about the migrant population south of the border, those focused on the north are equally remarkable for their variety and depth. Among the hundreds of journal articles and monographs, a brief sampling demonstrates the nature and range of the research: structured popular labor organizations (Rosen 2005), gangs and violence (Vittori 2007; Hernández León 1999), extended families and living arrangements (Van Hook 2007), rural areas (Zarrugh 2008; Henken 2006), and health (Bade 2004; Machledt 2007; Organista 2006; Rubalcava, 2008).

Although the preponderance of research attention rests on migrant workers, the number of studies focused on their immediate family members, namely, spouses and offspring has grown in volume and sophistication in its

own right. Again, a brief sampling serves to highlight the broad spectrum of research efforts, from what might be termed the traditional “gender relations” studies (Malkin 1999) to specific issues in which women find themselves involved: political participation and organizational experiences (Maldonado 2004; Velasco Ortiz 2006), marriage, health, fertility, and home (Lestage 1999; McGuire 2006; Lindstrom 2002), and female migration (Cerrutti 2001). Children, the individuals truly caught up in the current of migration with little to no voice in the decision-making, have been brought into the compass of scrutiny as well as their parents, with education forming a major topic of interest (Feliciano 2005; Hamann 2006; López Castro 1999; López Castro 2006), paralleled closely by children’s health (Hummer 2007; Kanaiaupuni et al. 2005).

4) *Cultural and social linkages between Mexico and the US as a result of migrating populations* Unlike all prior groups of migrants and immigrants in the US, no oceans separate the current flow of Mexican and Central American migrants from their homelands, a fact that facilitates the development of dense and intricate social, economic, and cultural ties between the two countries. These ties have resulted in a fourth fertile area of research on the Mexico-US migration phenomenon: the transnational character of its actors and their communities. Indeed, “transnational” becomes the adjective of choice whether it be attached to citizenship (Besserer 1999; Johnston 2004), communities and organizations (Goldring 1999; Burke 2004; Santiago-Márquez 2004), municipal governance structures (Kearney 2004), romance, weddings, and celebrations (Durand 1999; Rodríguez 1999), or simply ethnic identification and cultural associations and manipulations (Bottinelli Cardoso 1999; Hitlin 2007; Masuoka 2008; Mummert 1999a; Ochoa Serrano 1999; Aguirre Ochoa 2006). Each investigative pass at transnationalism calls more deeply into question the notion of a one-to-one correspondence between a bounded state and the “national” affinities of its residents.

The preceding review, of course, represents at best a sampling of the myriad studies on migrants and migration. From employment and mobility to substance abuse, education, violence, and sexuality, our understanding of this once clandestine population deepens even as it struggles to keep pace with migration’s own evolving dynamic. While no exhaustive survey of the literature, the foregoing nevertheless serves to highlight a particular gap in the mosaic of research on Mexico-US migration – a focus on the elderly. Studies regarding the elderly in their hometowns in Mexico are available (e.g. Glantz 2007), but few focus on them as part of the US migrant and immigrant populations. Healthcare studies comprise the one area of exception to this general neglect. As the absolute numbers of Mexican migrants grow, and as more and more of the aged remain north of the border even in their less-than-healthy retirement years, the elderly are, by necessity, receiving their due of research if for no other reason than that the US healthcare system must

increasingly bear the burden of attending to them (Markides 2005; Egede 2007; Gaugler 2006; Mutchler et al. 2007).

Outside the realm of healthcare, gerontology, and nursing, little information about elderly migrants and immigrants is available. This is hardly surprising, given that, as a group, the elderly are no longer at the center of the engine of migration, with its urgent socio-economic and ultimately political implications. It is not the elderly who are finding novel places to work or innovative ways to keep kith and kin together. It is not they who are agitating for legal documentation, labor representation, better working conditions, or employment benefits. Moreover, they are unlikely to be the ones to lead the charge in reshaping cultural values and identities (Gutmann 1999). In many instances, years of grindingly strenuous work render them prematurely incapacitated to perform the tough labor for which their younger compatriots are made so famous in the US media. In short, though as workers once the center of research attention, age has now removed them from the picture.

THE ROLE OF THE ELDERLY IN ETHNIC IDENTITY

Ethnic identity looms large in the research on migration. Can it be that the only players in the ethnic-identity-in-migration puzzle are the young? What effects do the elderly have on the maintenance of ethnic identity for their communities beside the obvious roles of story-tellers, oral historians, and living ancestors? Remarkably durable are the endearing stereotypes of *abuelita* caretakers with great-grandchildren slung across their hips and old *viejos* warming park benches and driving ploddingly yet precariously down the very roads that used to carry them to work. Unarguably, the contributions of the elderly to the migrant community cease to be financial and become largely confined to familial spheres, although not necessarily exclusively in the home. A closer look at the lives of the elderly, however, suggests that they have a significant cultural role to play, albeit neither intentional nor even conscious, that goes far beyond occupying the patriarchal/matriarchal positions sometimes accurately, sometimes quaintly, assigned to them. As elderly migrants experience the ebb of their wage labor productivity, they and their families face a new set of choices that are neither optional nor easy. Among the choices are where to reside, what to do with any retirement benefits accrued from working in the US system, and finally, when the time comes, where to be buried. Each of these issues carries long-term ramifications, and therein lies the potency that makes elderly contributions to cultural and ethnic identity so unique, both for their tacitness and for their effectiveness.

The first of these issues, residency, simply offers two basic choices. Stay in the US, where children, grandchildren, and, in many cases, great grandchildren, reside permanently. Return to the town of origin in Michoacán. A straightforward enough choice on the surface, but after decades of building

a life for self and family in a foreign land, often never having attained a useful enough grasp of the language or culture to feel truly at ease, “home” may have evolved into a much more elusive concept than it once was. To what will an elderly migrant return for permanent residence? Informal interviews in Macken with several elderly migrants who have dutifully maintained homes in Michoacán and Macken over many years reveal ambivalence on this issue. The case of one couple nearing retirement is particularly (and poignantly) revealing.

Nearly twenty years ago, after years of watching her husband and grown sons go “north,” Doña Graciela³ joined them and declared with great despair upon her arrival at the small town of Macken that she had no intention of staying in this little, ugly place – “este lugarcito tan chico y tan feo” (cited in Anderson 1997). She remembered that her husband silenced her instantly, declaring that, however disappointing or little or ugly, the town would now be her home with him and their children.

With two decades behind them and retirement looming for her husband, he now mentions his interest in returning to Michoacán to live, an idea that she now rejects outright. In a brief conversation in September of 2007, she asked me, “Return to what? An old house and nothing to do? No children? No grandchildren? He can return if he wants, but I am staying here.” The irony of the reversal of their sentiments was not lost on her, and she chuckled resignedly when I reminded her of our conversation and her disgust many years before.

As is often the case for life in general, the reality falls far short of the dream when the facts are scrutinized objectively. Life in a neighborhood devoid of so many people now up north – old friends, kin, and youth – no longer holds the allure that has sustained their tolerance of difficult and foreign living and working conditions over the years.

The second issue, requiring less commitment and therefore less potential trauma, is nonetheless an important choice to make – retirement benefits. The undocumented Michoacano who has spent years working illegally finds himself at the end of his employment and, as regards the world of paid labor, with no more ties to the US than his personal relationships and memories. A tenure of legal work presents an entirely distinct set of circumstances, however. As the federal government has harvested its *mordida* from his paycheck, so it is now obligated to lend its support to his non-working years. The receipt of a retirement check from the Social Security Administration requires a secure mailing address, and I have watched many an interview for benefits in the local Social Security office temporarily delayed for want of a street and mailing address in Michoacán which is more precise than *domicilio*

³ A pseudonym

conocido. The search for a specific domicile speaks to the larger question of where this “final” supply of income, no longer anchored to the particulars of a work site and employer, will be delivered. Where is “home” when it is not necessarily connected with employment? This is a question that faces all retirees, but when the choices are transnational in nature and they cross cultural lines, not only are they more complicated to make, but the very making of them has powerful ramifications both for the retiree and for family members.

During the summer months of 2005, what seemed like an avalanche of requests for translation help at the local Social Security office accompanied the arrival, almost en mass, of many of the “pioneers” referred to above at the threshold of retirement age. These elderly gentlemen, pleasantly surprised to learn first hand that the rumors of a pensión could actually be realized, and that, furthermore, the benefits could be mailed to their residences in Michoacán, lost no time in making sure their claims. Few of them in my experience, wanted their Social Security benefit checks automatically deposited in banks in the US. A local – and secure – mailing address back home was the primary goal. For some, the earnestness to get the checks to Michoacán was because of spouses and family who had always remained behind. For others, however, their houses lay empty; the destination of the check appeared to be simply an endorsement of where “home” really was.

A third decision concerns the choice of one’s final resting place, certainly the most sobering of the three. In this arena, it has been my experience that the Macken families from Michoacán are no better prepared to make this decision than the mainstream of Anglo society; a death occurs, specifically anticipated or not, and only then are plans and preparations put into play. The choice of burying a family member in a local cemetery in Macken or transporting the body back to Michoacán is no small matter, for the latter choice entails heavy financial burdens, uncomfortable time delays, and exposure and submission to an impersonal, foreign bureaucracy at the very time when the intimacy of personal, familiar relations is most important.

On a recent winter day a funeral ceremony was held at the Catholic Church in Macken. The priest, by happenstance a native of Mexico, celebrated the Mass in Spanish for the assembled friends and family members. In this small Mexican community so far away from home, funerals are well attended, for only the rare individual falls outside the sphere of the diaspora’s fraternity. This ice-cold day, however, saw attendance at the service larger than might be expected, for it was a double funeral, performed for two elderly people, both grandparents in their respective families. Although the two were completely unrelated to each

other, they were both from neighboring towns in the P'urhépecha Highlands. With the Mass completed, the obligatory condolences delivered hurriedly in the biting cold on the front steps of the church, the two families left the premises to go their separate ways. Separate quite literally, for one headed to the edge of town to inter the deceased in the local Catholic Cemetery while the other began the preparations to transport the body of their loved one back across the border for burial in Mexico.

This event in the life of a migrant community, surely repeated countless times in locales across the globe, receives only scattered attention in the literature. Mazzucato et al. (2006) have carried out a series of investigations into funeral economics among Ghanaian migrant workers in the Netherlands, indicating important social, and economic links formed around the death event that go beyond the standard ties forged through remittances, circular migration, and the obvious bonds of family and kin groups. Similar studies have been carried out among Bengali migrants in Britain (Gardner 2002). Funerals and burials of the elderly among Mexican migrant populations in the US receive almost no attention.

In contrast, transnational funerals of younger people resulting from accidents or violence are regular features in the newspapers of larger US cities (see for example Tripti 2003, Feagans 2008, and Porter 2007), and the complexities and costs accompanying such unexpected arrangements open the way for discussion of community solidarity and ethnic identity. Macken hosted just such an event some years ago when a young man was shot to death in a fight on a farm in a neighboring state. Through the numbing haze of the shock eventually emerged an orchestrated effort on the part of the deceased's former "barrio-mates" to raise the money to transport the cadaver back home. Research into this event (Anderson 1999) suggested that transnational funerals reinforce neighborhood connections and bonds that lie somewhere between the organizing levels of kin and the community as a whole.

Ethnic identity rears its head both with the living and with the dead. Our understandings of the construction and maintenance of that identity send us back to the mid 20th century, when theory on this issue underwent a paradigmatic shift and produced concepts that are of excellent analytic value for questions about elderly migrants and their enduring symbolic and cultural roles within their communities.

ETHNIC BOUNDARIES, PERSISTENT IDENTITY SYSTEMS, AND PRIMORDIALITY

Ethnic identity is an issue wherever distinct cultural groups make contact. In those cases where the social or economic stakeholders are equally equipped to confront or negotiate, ethnic identity often takes on a political cast. In the remainder of cases, where power differentials preclude a level playing field,

ethnic identity may lie under the surface of social interactions, apparently dormant or even non-existent, no more than a cultural curiosity or a point of community interest. Macken is arguably an example of the latter scenario – a white community whose denizens of color have historically been outsiders, transient, and resident only long enough to satisfy low-end temporary labor demands. Yet even in a Macken, an analysis of ethnic identity reveals a dynamic give and take and an ebb and flow of what it means, for example, to be a migrant from Michoacán. This dynamic becomes evident with a brief review of three concepts about ethnic identity whose geneses date to the 1950s and 60s – ethnic boundaries, persistent identity systems and primordiality.

Ethnic Boundaries Although a long noted characteristic of the American immigration scene and the subject of long debate (Duany 1989), the shift from an analytic strategy of listing static cultural traits to the analysis of ethnic identity dynamics began to gain momentum in the academic literature with the publication in 1969 of Fredrik Barth's treatise *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Despite some controversial claims in this work (Cohen 1974; Cohen 1978; Du Toit 1991), the focus on boundaries as the key to ethnic identity was hailed by some as something akin to a new paradigm in ethnic studies (Campa 1990). Barth intended to "shift the focus of investigation from internal constitution and history of separate groups to ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance" (1969:10). Decades earlier, Weber had noted the construction and manipulation of "sharp boundaries between areas of externally observable styles of life" (1947:306), and Evans-Pritchard's (1940) work on segmentary oppositions began the development of understanding of "the mutability of ethnic identity", providing a basis for what has come to be called situational identity (O'Brien 1986:898). Nevertheless, it was Barth who put the focus on the "canalizing" function of boundaries in social life, their use as a "socially effective means of social organization" (1969:13, 14). He emphasized the transcendence and persistence of boundaries, viewing them as ecologically situated more than culturally mediated. Also novel was his emphasis on the actors themselves and what was deemed important to them (p.14).

The circularity of some of Barth's argument (the reification of ethnic divisions) has been noted (Cohen 1974:xii-xiii) as well as the fact that boundaries are not thought to be as stable and ongoing as originally implied in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Cohen 1978:387). Nevertheless, Barth's two major themes, the dynamics of boundaries and the socially situated constitution of ethnic identity are the assumptions implicit in any discussion of ethnicity today.

Persistent Identity Systems Shortly after the notion of boundaries surfaced, Edward Spicer wrote in *Nature* about culture systems that endured despite changing social environments. Continuing the move away from static categorizations of culture traits, he discussed what he termed identity systems, "an individual's belief in his personal affiliation with certain symbols"

(1971:795). A key ingredient to the persistence through time of cultural identity is the belief in attachments, more than the factual relationships. For example, the objective facts of history were not as important to persistent identity systems as was “history as people believe it to have taken place” (ibid:796). In addition to persistence, Spicer discussed common elements to be found in identity systems which persisted. Among them were “some combination of land and language”, geographic displacement, language loss, music, dance, and heroes. At a minimum, in Spicer’s analysis, a persistent system requires a common language, shared moral values, and political participation.

Primordiality and Identity A great deal of discussion has revolved around the primordial versus the constructed nature of ethnic affinities. Early on, within the race and culture paradigm, authors (see Shils 1957, for example) wrote straightforwardly about the primordial attachments to primary groups. Citing such factors as race, kinship, territoriality, the roots of ethnicity seemed quite clear. Today few researchers are still prone to an exclusively primordialist view, most preferring to view ethnic identity as issuing from some combination of primordialism and constructionism, the extreme form of which sees ethnicity as a purely situationally contrived phenomenon.

Ethnic identity in the constructionist paradigm is consciously created, interpreted, negotiated, and contested (Cook and Joo 1995; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Comaroff 1991; Eriksen 1995; Astuti 1995). Ethnicity as the focus of group loyalties is known to have been consciously and systematically constructed from virtually nothing by colonial administrations in the past (Comaroff 1991) as well as by present day nation-states (Eriksen 1995). Ethnicity is based on tradition, not tradition as popularly conceived, but tradition which is “a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present.” The conception of a group’s tradition is a continually changing “process of thought — an ongoing interpretation of the past” (Handler and Linnekin 1984:274, 276). The claim that ethnicity is fundamentally interpretive in nature has implications for ethnicity’s historicity and its processual development. It is learned and is a “process of transformation that unfolds through time, rather than being fixed in time” (Astuti 1995:477). It is not therefore dependent upon what once was, but only by what is now, the social contingencies of a group’s present realities. Time no longer holds the potential to erase one’s identity, or for a group to lose its identity (Astuti 1995). Threats to ethnic identity no longer issue from the passage of time but from its susceptibility to the “deception, invention, opportunism, or manipulation by insiders and outsiders alike” (Cook and Joo 1995:50).

The primordialist approach, in the work of more recent scholarship seeking to incorporate notions (and empirical facts) of change, has been clothed in an organic metaphor. The ethnicity of a group can change, becoming always new, yet ever retaining the essential qualities by which it can be identified. Two problems emerge in this view: Ethnicity is still unavoidably a thing, an

essential object, bounded and distinct from other objects. Yet the boundedness itself poses a further problem in that “the boundaries of such things are inevitably ‘fuzzy’ for both actors and observers” (Handler and Linnekin 1984:275; Jackson 1995; Eriksen 1995). O’Brien laments not only the tenacity of primordialist views in disciplines other than anthropology, but its near dominance in popular conceptions as well. People without question consider that “the arithmetic of biological reproduction...gives you your ethnic identity” (1986:898).

It can be argued that the process of ethnic identity maintenance in a place like Macken embodies elements of these three concepts – ethnic boundaries, persistent identity systems, and primordiality. Of particular importance is the Barthian emphasis on ethnic boundary transcendence and persistence (a theme developed in Spicer’s work as well) and his emphasis on what the ethnic “actors” viewed as important in the context of their particular circumstances. Within Spicer’s analysis of the persistence of identity systems, a critical idea is that a people’s *belief* in cultural affinities may trump the facts of those relationships. Furthermore, his claim that common elements in such systems generally include attachments (either perceived or factual) to territory and language leads directly to notions of primordiality in the maintenance of ethnic identity.

An illustration of how these concepts are exercised in the attitudes of Macken’s immigrants follows:

One hot summer evening, a group from Michoacán was attempting to keep cool in the faint breeze of the village park and a discussion ensued about the lack of running water in their houses back home (in a town many times the size of Macken) and the seemingly limitless supply of such “luxuries” in rural communities in the US. A middle-aged couple, the Guzmáns⁴, offered the explanation that it was because they were indios, and not mestizos or whites. Those gathered around the picnic table agreed. “Así somos – inditos jodidos, nada más.” [That’s how we are – just screwed little Indians, nothing more.] A variety of other topics has elicited a similar “rationale” for things being the way they are. Being “Indian” – a self-directed derogation – is a useful means to explain (to self and ostensibly to others) an array of behaviors and beliefs. In this way, this picnic table discussion group resembles many others from their hometown. I have heard Mr. Guzmán laugh off the very characteristics he claims to disparage with a shrug of the shoulders, a smile, and some comment about “that’s just how we Indians are...” Interestingly, when pressed about “we Indians”, he, like many from his town, resorts to a fairly standard list of features that make them so, prominent among them being language (Púrbépecha),

⁴ A pseudonym

origins in the Meseta (the Highlands), and the term “sangre” (blood), which is an index for any number of physical characteristics typical of people from the town or its environs.

This picnic table discussion exposes several interesting features of ethnic identity. The Guzmáns offer a response to what makes a person an Indian, and primordial as the list sounds, the Guzmáns’ fatalistic acquiescence to its unalterable control likely has roots in the constructed social milieu of their community in the context of Mexico’s historical treatment of its indigenous rural populations. The mixture of biological and cultural indicators “has been central to the historical process of nation-state building or ‘nationalization’ in Mexico” (Cook and Joo 1995:33). The Guzmáns are heirs to an identity with biological underpinnings, but the force of that identity is a “truth” accepted through history by the natives from outsiders. Jackson (1989) claims that if enough people accept such a concept as so, it becomes a part of their culture regardless of its historic veracity or who originated the idea or with what motives.

Despite the empirical facts of material betterment derived through migratory wage labor (a situationally constructed condition), the resort to Indianness (a primordial condition) to explain a host of behaviors speaks to the strength of this *belief* in the immutability of cultural affinities. Within the socially constructed universe of labor migration, there is no need for it. No native of Macken need know what *indios* are like in Michoacán. For most residents of Macken, the fact of the matter is that Michoacanos are simply dark skinned Mexican workers who speak, eat, and act differently than the mainstream Anglo in town, and little or nothing is known about how different they are from mestizo or white Mexicans.

CONCLUSION

The appeal to primordial roots, which these theories suggest form the anchors (both material and symbolic) for the establishment of dynamic ethnic boundaries, are part of the common vernacular of “lay” social analyses on the streets of Macken. Preliminary interviews focused on self-ascribed ethnic identity among rural, indigenous migrants in the town reveal that the decisions regarding life choices of the elderly are often grounded in precisely those primordial bases of ethnic identity spelled out by Shils (1957) and others – race, kinship, and territoriality. Furthermore, the belief in these cultural affinities, particularly as they are reinforced by return residency, monetary investment (retirement benefits), and burial, make them a persistent element of Macken’s migrant community and, concomitantly, its sense of identity in a foreign land.

It is difficult to pinpoint with any confidence the reasons behind the choices made on issues as sensitive as leaving family behind and burials, and such queries form the impetus for further ethnographic research. However they are arrived at, the decisions about end-of life residency and burial locale are permanent and thus hold implications for ensuing generations. A young, third generation immigrant who has never been to the *Meseta* of Michoacán and who speaks no P’urhépecha and only halting Spanish, but whose grandfather is buried in a named town there and whose grandmother is considering going back there to live, has a permanent mark etched into her identity. Indeed, her grandparents, by their decisions, have contributed to a powerfully enduring portrait of who she is. The simple declarations of final “home” and the unalterable claims to sacred ground, explored here in the context of primordial attachments and persistent identities, form a latent yet compelling symbolic statement in the construction and maintenance of a community’s ethnic identity. Such a voice has not only received limited attention in worldwide migration literature, but represents a particular dimension of ethnic identity that is often lost in the intricacies of current discussions surrounding culture contact, identity politics, and ethnicity.

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