

THE REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY AND MATERIAL CHANGE
AMONG A GROUP OF ARTISANS IN HUANCHACO

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INTRODUCTION

Huanchaco is a town that is in turmoil due to the influx of tourists that have flocked primarily to the beaches of the area. Many of the people that have cherished their unique and prolific cultural traditions feel that the identity of Huanchaco is gradually slipping away. In the past Huanchaco has been known as a quiet fishing town with a rich cultural heritage. Recently the ever-increasing tourist industry has impacted the community greatly. Tourists themselves have had a huge affect upon the personality of the town, and upon the products that are being sold to them.

The artisans of the Feria in Huanchaco sell almost entirely to tourists. These products depict the identity of Huanchaco. The community as a whole should be concerned about how they are represented. The legacy of the town of Huanchaco will be remembered from the items tourists take home. Is Huanchaco to be known as a Mecca for surfers, or a gateway to the archaeological and cultural sites in the area? Authenticity will be perceived by tourists through the products available to them. The attitudes concerning cultural identity will be reflected in the material production being sold. Is the artisan community in Huanchaco entirely driven solely by profit, or do they take responsibility for advancing the cultural heritage of the people in the area?

There are many changes that have been introduced over time. The products being produced are changing. New artisans are entering the scene and there are old ones that are leaving the community for others who will follow. Because these changes are often slow and gradual few realize the impacts that new products have towards the contamination of the previous market. It remains the privilege of the people of the town to determine if they want the town of Huanchaco to be portrayed as it is currently being through material production.

An artisan in Huanchaco takes great pride in their work. The raw materials are transformed into finished products that represent their love for their own identity. Whether it is the totora reeds that grow out of the ground, or the bundle of wire that is used for jewelry, materials are relatively inexpensive, but the finished product such as the necklace, or caballito de totora boat is a physical representation of many things valued by the artisan. Products are symbols that the artisan identifies with and claims as objects of his own cultural heritage. The selling of objects is the love for one's family, as it is the income that provides food to eat. Given that the making of their products are for sale it is necessary that they provide the buyer with what they desire. Objects that are popular with tourists will then be produced in greater number to meet the demands and needs of those that purchase the goods.

Huanchaco has claimed as part of its identity the symbols of the Moche, and Chimú cultures. Around the town of Huanchaco can be found statues and depictions taken directly from the artwork of the ancestors of Huanchaco. These symbols are also incorporated into the current, modern day artwork of the local artisans. Most of the artisans in the Feria wish to see these traditional symbols perpetuated as they claim them as their own.

BACKGROUND

The Feria de Artesanos is located twenty meters south of the pier in Huanchaco, Peru. This is an area containing 42 white booths where vendors and artists sell their products. The booths are each about 6x8 feet and contain a waist high table where the majority of the vendors' items are displayed. At one side is a small door where the artisan enters and perches behind the table awaiting potential buyers. In the community of artisans there are painters, jewelry makers, shoemakers, those who make the small replicas of the caballito de totora, and

other crafts. There are also those there who claim not to be artisans, but more like vendors selling the crafts and work of others. They all depend on tourists and other visitors to purchase their wares. This area is so different from the other vendors in Huanchaco because it is an organized and a now permanent area that exists for the purpose of welcoming and giving tourists memories in the form of physical products. Artisans have sold their merchandise in the area for decades. Until three years ago the artisans had to carry their belongings to this area and set up a table. All who are now part of this permanent community feel better about the new set up where they are able to leave their things for the next day and have the security of locking up their things. These artisans attempt to appeal to those who are visiting the beach or the pier. They are proud of their craft and are willing to display their work so that others will come and enjoy their art.

M E T H O D S

I incorporated a vast variety of field methods while attempting to discover the changes in the products of the artisans. As I met many of the artisans I made some key contacts, those who I felt made the best contacts for my project were those artisans who have been there for many years and who have observed the changes firsthand. I also mapped out and observed which areas seemed to attract the most attention from tourists. I observed which products seemed to be the most popular and what people were buying the most as souvenirs. I also talked with the tourists who were shopping and purchasing items to find out what they were looking for,

and why it was that they bought the items that they did. I used a series of open-ended research questions to discover what general themes were emerging.

In the beginning of my research I had not narrowed down the area of particular interest. As I asked the artisans what they felt was important to them a general theme emerged. They seemed to all mention the heritage they claimed and emphasized the claim of authenticity in their products for sale. They would often claim that their necklaces or pots were original, or at least copies of an original. They seemed preoccupied with giving a cultural history that was associated with the product. Many times this was before that fact that I told them that I was doing research as an anthropologist. So a general theme that emerged was the issue of authenticity and the concern that the changes in the market somewhat disturbed them.

DISCUSSION

Competition

There is a wide spectrum of feelings among the artisans concerning competition. Some artisans feel that there is little to no competition between them because they feel that their products are different and if a buyer is seeking the products they offer than there is no other location where tourists can purchase similar items. Even though the number of artisans has quadrupled in the last six years many vendors will not admit that they feel any added pressure due to the increased amount of competition. This lack of pressure may be due to the fact that most artisans report an increase in the total amount of tourists, which would help maintain the equilibrium of consistency over the years even though so many more artisans have entered the

community over time. Some vendors even feel that the more booths there are the more tourists will feel inclined that they should visit the Feria.

There is some feeling of resentment towards those vendors that sell the souvenirs that are of foreign origin, such as products from Lima or other locations that are not typical of the culture of Huanchaco. Many who sell these objects do quite well and are encouraged by previous sales to purchase more goods that are similar. It also remains the advantage of some to acquire commodities for sale that are different from the products of their counterparts. These are the goods that are the imports or that are radically different from what has been sold in the past.

Change as a Necessary Evil

Those who are offering the new products, such as clothing produced elsewhere, cite as the reason for selling new products is because they appeal to the tourists. They said that the reason that they began selling the new and different products was because no one else sold them and they felt they could cash in on the untapped market that was available to them.

Always a Salesman

The artisan depends on sales for his livelihood; this fact propels the vendor to perfect his selling techniques. As a tourist walks down the isle past the booths the vendor must make his goods appealing to the potential buyer. To provoke a calculated response from an artisan all one has to do is simply glance at the things within the booth.

I realized constantly that as a researcher I am at no time immune to the same sales pitches that they offer to everyone. This I accepted and assumed responsibility on my part towards a reciprocal relationship. I realized that many were willing to offer information and

knowledge because they felt it was a great opportunity to spend time with a potential buyer. Even more than the monetary compensation, appreciation for work well done brings great satisfaction.

The Times that are Best for Selling

Huanchaco has been growing as a tourist town. The beach area is now almost entirely consisting of hotels and restaurants to serve the needs of travelers. The months of August to April are cited as the best time of the year for sales. Weekdays are slow, while Saturday and Sunday are the busiest. The reason for the increase in sales during these times can be attributed simply to the fact that the more people that come to Huanchaco the more sales the artisans receive.

Changes in the Products Over the Years

The changes in goods that have been offered over the last twenty years have been many. For those that have been selling in the same area for years, they report many changes that have occurred. First the introduction of clothing such as tee-shirts and pants is an entirely new phenomenon. The amount of pottery that is being sold is diminishing. What has increased is the selling of necklaces and jewelry.

Hands on Knowledge

I was invited to participate with many of the artisans as they made their products. They were both willing to share their knowledge and their time with me. I suppose they did this for many reasons. First, they are proud of what they do. They are willing to demonstrate how they make their products because as one artisan said, "as people see you making it, they will want to buy it because they will know how much work is put into

it and how difficult it is to make". For the tourist or onlooker the product acquires new meaning and value as the difficulty of production is revealed.

Caballitos de Totorá

Probably the most dominant symbol of cultural identity that exists in Huanchaco is the caballito de totora. These reed-fishing boats are lined up along the beach and have both historical and cultural significance for the people of Huanchaco. There is one artisan that specializes in making them; others stated that they used to make them but that they don't know how to anymore. They are made similar to the life sized versions only on a smaller scale. The caballitos de totora are recommended as a gift even from those who do not sell them. Being the most powerful image concerning Huanchaco and the cultural heritage of the area, many of the artisans state that they wished the tourists would be interested in the history of the boats and remember them when they think of Huanchaco.

Jewelry

Jewelry, most likely, is now the most prevalent commodity found at the Feria. Artisans claim that jewelry is inexpensive for them to make and is a very popular item among tourists. In making jewelry the cost is determined by how time consuming it is to make and what materials the jewelry is made out of. An item that many artisans make is the Chaquira necklace. It is a replica of the necklaces that have been found in Moche and Chimu sites in the area. Made out of ground seashell and stone, they are time consuming to make and command a greater price than other necklaces offered. Earrings, rings and bracelets are other examples of jewelry

offered. Jewelry is an item preferred by many tourists because it doesn't take up much space while they are traveling, and they can even just wear it as one tourist said.

Clothing, Shoes, and Other Products

There is an increasing amount of tee-shirts depicting various clever sayings and one-liners of wisdom. One depicts a surfer on the verge of being swallowed whole by the open mouth of a ferocious shark. There are shoes in the form of leather sandals, many with the soles made from the rubber of recycled tires. There are various crafts made from seashells, polished rocks and wood. One item many of the vendors had was leather boxes that exhibited stamped patterns for decoration. Clothing and other unique products are gaining increasing popularity.

My Influence as an Outsider

My presence was felt and I impacted the daily scene and routine of many of the artisans. I know that some felt it was good that I was there for many reasons. Being a participant in the production of their crafts I not only helped them, but also provided them with company they seemed to appreciate. I also often purchased many of the items, such as jewelry, that I helped them make, or watched them make. They would state that sitting in or standing next to their booth would often get repetitive and they would be exhausted by their daily routine. They would be happy to see me not only because of a sale but because I was someone to talk to that was different than their fellow vendors they would see and talk to everyday. I would help them with their English skills as they would help me with my Spanish. All thought that learning English is a worthwhile endeavor because so many of their buyers speak English. Many of the artisans are taking or

have taken English courses. On multiple occasions I attracted additional attention from tourists. One artisan that I was sitting with told me that I provided him with additional sales that he would not have gotten if I were not there. English speaking tourists would have the advantage of me explaining to the significance of the caballitos de totora, or about other cultural site around such as Chan Chan. Peruvian tourists would be fascinated with why I would be inside the booth talking with the artisan and asking him questions. For some reason the tourists would look at the artist's things with a new sense of validity. I had more than one tourist from Lima or Trujillo take their picture with me. I assume that I look so different in physical appearance from them. Overall I would say that although my appearance there did cause impacts from the regular routine, it was only a positive difference for all involved.

CONCLUSIONS

The Future for Artisans at the Feria

The market will continue to be dominated by the desires of the buyer. It is the buyer that dictates the market. Many tourists feel that clothing is a great souvenir because it is easy to pack and not breakable.

Jewelry likewise is a great purchase because it does not take up much room in a suitcase or backpack. There are a large number of backpackers that are very conscious of what they buy and how much space particular items would occupy. For tourists that I talked to that were from outside Peru, Huanchaco was not their only destination on their tourist agenda. What they take with them and how they are going to get souvenirs home is a major concern for most tourists.

In the future I would like to see more work done with the members of the town of Huanchaco that are not part of the group of artisans. I think it would be a productive endeavor to discover how the members of Huanchaco feel about how they are currently being represented. If they feel that changes need to be made, what would those be? Another issue that requires further investigation is the tourist sector. When it is determined how the people of Huanchaco would like to be represented through the art, it can then be determined how the visitors would receive any possible changes.

It is my desire to inform the people of Huanchaco that the artisans in their community have a great impact on how the entire community is viewed. It remains the privilege of every person in Huanchaco if they feel inclined to be active in helping to develop a positive and accurate representation of what they feel their identity to be.