Performing Identity in Artistic Spaces in Yucatan

Since the time of the Spanish conquest of Latin America in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, the people of the Yucatan have struggled to maintain a sense of ethnic and cultural awareness and pride while withstanding the growing domination of Spanish culture. The term \textit{mestizo}, meaning “of mixed origin,” is the official term used to categorize the majority of Mexicans. I am exploring where the ethnic lines are drawn between Mayan, \textit{Mestizo} and Spanish identity and what factors are most indicative of people’s self-perception.

Academics have long been using art as a tool in social and cultural studies. Beneath the work of artists, one finds themes such as religion, politics, ideology, heritage and ethnicity, which often reflect both individual and collective identity. I am looking at two art forms to help me understand Yucatecan identity: pottery and traditional Yucatecan dance, the \textit{jarana}. Examination of how ethnicity is used as a tool in the performing and visual arts gives insight into its place in Yucatecan society.

There are three objectives for this project: first, to shed light on the complex relationship between ethnicity and social identity in Yucatan, second, to examine the importance of the jarana dance and the impact it has had on Yucatecan self-identity, and third, to draw attention to the ancient Yucatecan pottery tradition that has never been recorded in writing.

Methodology for this project will combine ethnographic fieldwork with library research. My ethnographic field data comes from Ticul, Yucatan—a small city in southeastern Yucatan that is off the tourist route and where people continue to speak Yucatec Maya. I spent the summer of 2007 living and working with a group of local
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potters and young jarana dancers in Ticul, funded by the University Scholars Program. Data collection methods included participant observation and interviews.

Library research has consisted of individual research under the supervision of Dr. Allan Burns during the Fall ’07 and Spring ’08. I am assessing the importance of these two arts in *Ticuleño* self-identity and also how pottery and jarana dance both express and contribute to Yucatecan identity simultaneously. Richard Thomson’s ethnography “The Winds of Tomorrow: Social Change in a Maya Town (1974),” has allowed me to compare and track the social changes that have occurred in Ticul over the past few decades, while Samantha Closz’s master’s thesis “Musicking in Merida (2006),” has aided me in the close study of Jarana music and dance.

I have found that ethnicity is hardly seen as rigid in Yucatan and a person’s identification varies depending on context. The jarana is often called a mestizo dance, representing the blending between Mayan and Spanish music and movement. I argue that jarana dance is a manifestation of *mestizaje*—the transculturative process that has attempted to integrate mestizos into the nation-state. Consequentially, this dance encourages participants to identify as mestizo. My thesis will show how the jarana portrays ethnic relations quite differently than most Yucatecans realistically experience them but also how jarana has actually come to influence how Yucatecans conceive their ethnic identity.

I will be presenting my research in its current state at the annual conference for the Society for Applied Anthropology in March ’08. Additionally, I hope to publish the final paper in the Journal of Undergraduate Research.