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Archaeology and Cultural Mixture



Edited by W. Paul van Pelt

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Ethnogenesis and Hybridity in Proto-Historic Nicaragua

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Introduction

Ethnicity is a difficult concept to apply to living populations, due in large part to the dynamic nature of a complex interplay of social identities, including religion, nationality, status and biological descent. Ethnicity is also situational and fluid, as aptly expressed in the Corona beer advertisement that "on St. Patrick's Day everyone is Irish". It is also a fairly new concept anthropologically, having evolved in the mid-twentieth century out of a politicized rejection of the concept of 'race'. As anthropologists recognized the greater importance of cultural characteristics over purely biological traits, ethnicity came to encompass a tapestry of social fibers.

Anthropologists such as Barth (1969) and Cohen (1974) have considered dual aspects of ethnicity, which here we will term 'subjective' and 'objective' qualities. Subjective ethnicity represents internalized concepts of self-identification, meaningful with only coincidental correspondence to external expressions. For example, an indigenous individual may maintain strong ideological ties to his/her community despite having adopted the outward trappings of the dominant society. Alternatively, objective ethnicity may be expressed through overt symbols of dress, ornamentation or speech, among other traits. While these may be useful for signalling in-group identity and for excluding 'others', they can also express mixed messages with idiosyncratic meanings. For these and other reasons, contemporary anthropologists are wary of ethnicity as a concept, often considering it too convoluted to be practicable in an analytical sense. Similarly, conservative archaeologists dismiss attempts to recognize ethnicity in the past as utter folly.

One archaeologist who has devoted considerable attention to the archaeology of ethnicity is Jones (1997), whose principal area of interest is ancient Europe. Perhaps because of the intense nationalism of the region, as well as the rich textual and artistic information available, ethnicity is here more commonly discussed within an archaeological framework. One important insight that can be gleaned from Jones's work is the value of combining archaeological data with historical models as a means of inferring potentially significant symbols of identity, including ethnic identity. This conjunctive approach—conjoining archaeology with history and especially with art history—offers powerful potential for overcoming some of the challenges of identifying ethnic qualities of past ethnic groups using exclusively archaeological data.

This paper presents a related application of the conjunctive approach to archaeological ethnicity, using a case study from late Precontact Central America. Recent interpretations of the Mesoamerican world system (Carmack and Salgado González 2006; Smith and Berdan 2003) maintain that the southern frontier was located in the Greater Nicoya region of Pacific Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica. This



Fig. 1: Map of migrations from central Mexico to Central America. Drawn by Larry Steinbrenner.

claim is based on ethnohistorical and linguistic evidence for Nahuatl and Oto-Manguean speakers in the region at the time of the Spanish conquest in the early sixteenth century. These Mesoamerican groups allegedly migrated into Central America beginning about 800 AD (fig. 1), when they at least partially displaced existing populations inferred to have been related to the greater Chibchan linguistic family (although this hypothesis has not been adequately tested). Specifically, we will discuss the archaeological evidence for integration of the new migrant populations into autochthonous society and thus the creation of a 'new', hybrid culture during the Sapoá Period (800–1250 AD).

Cultural Context

Chroniclers such as Oviedo (1976 [1540]), Torquemada (1975–1983 [1615]) and Motolinía (1951 [1540]) recorded details of the indigenous cultures of Pacific Nicaragua, including the use of the Mexican pantheon, calendrical system and ritual practices (Abel-Vidor 1981; Chapman 1974; Fowler 1989; León-Portilla 1972). The majority of the information pertains to the Nahuatl-speaking Nicarao, whose king Nicaragua gave his name to the major town of the region and ultimately to the entire nation. It is generally

believed that the Oto-Manguéan-speaking Chorotega represented an earlier migration to the region and while they were not as thoroughly documented by the earlier chroniclers, Chorotegan 'Mesoamerican-ness' served to contrast them with autochthonous populations (probably Chibchan-speakers). In sum, the assertion of Mesoamerican cultural identity in late Precontact Nicaragua is strong, albeit with its foundation in historical and linguistic sources.

In the twentieth century this historical evidence was augmented through art historical studies by scholars such as Lothrop (1926), Stone (1982) and Day (1994) who considered the strong 'Mixteca-Puebla' stylistic elements on the polychrome pottery of the area (Nicholson 1982; Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994; see also McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005a). Prominent among these elements are images of feathered serpents, a diagnostic trait of the Quetzalcoatl cult that spread across Mesoamerica in the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic Periods (Ringle et al. 1998).

The combination of 'Mixteca-Puebla'-style polychrome pottery, ethnohistoric elements suggesting central Mexican religious ideology and the accounts claiming a Cholula origin for the Chorotega migrants to Central America served to pique curiosity, directly leading to our research. Having a long interest in the archaeology of ethnicity and the archaeology of Cholula, McCafferty's decision to move south to Nicaragua seemed like an ideal opportunity to study ethnogenesis. His previous research in Cholula often considered the Classic to Postclassic transition, when Maya-related peoples known as the Olmeca-Xicallanca supposedly migrated into central Mexico (McCafferty 1989, 2001, 2007). Along with the arrival of the Olmeca-Xicallanca came the introduction of polychrome ceramics in early renditions of the 'Mixteca-Puebla' style and some of it is remarkably similar to early polychromes from Pacific Nicaragua (Day 1994; McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005a). Following on suggestive speculation by the great Mexican ethnohistorian Jiménez Moreno (1942, 1966), migrations of these 'enigmatic' Olmeca may have been responsible for both the Cholula and Greater Nicoya migrations.

Chronology is a key issue in the ethnohistorical accounts of the migrations 'out of Mexico'. According to Torquemada (1975–1983 [1615], 1: 452), writing in the early seventeenth century, the migrations occurred "7 or 8 lifetimes of an old man" before his time. Some scholars, including Davies (1977: 117), have suggested that the "lifetime of an old man" corresponded to twice the 52 year calendar round or 104 years. Seven or eight of those spans prior to Torquemada would put the migrations at between 750 and 850 AD. A more conservative estimate of a single calendar round would put the migration at about 1200–1250 AD. Unfortunately, both of these time periods correspond to dramatic periods of change in the Pacific Nicaraguan archaeological record: the first at the transition between the Bagaces and Sapoá Periods, when Mesoamerican traits first begin to appear, and the second at the Sapoá/Ometepe transition when, allegedly, Nahuat-speaking Nicarao replaced the Chorotega in the Rivas region.

In contrast to the bordering regions of Mesoamerica and Andean South America, Central America is poorly understood in archaeological terms. Furthermore, due to political, economic and environmental factors, Nicaragua has received very little scholarly attention and the majority of recent archaeological focus has related to regional surveys (Niemel 2003; Salgado González 1996) and small-scale rescue projects (Espinoza Pérez et al. 1999; Lange 1996). Consequently, while the potential for studying ethnic migrations and consequent processes of ethnogenesis is high, fundamental culture historical questions (including well-developed chronologies) are minimally developed and have inhibited more theoretical interpretations.

Archaeological Investigations in Pacific Nicaragua

Beginning in 2000, intensive archaeological investigations have been conducted along the shore of Lake Nicaragua in order to evaluate historical claims of Mesoamerican migration to the region. Important regional centers of the Chorotega culture have been located at the sites of Santa Isabel and Tepetate, along with a secondary site at El Rayo (fig. 2; McCafferty 2010, 2011). All of these sites date to the Sapoá Period

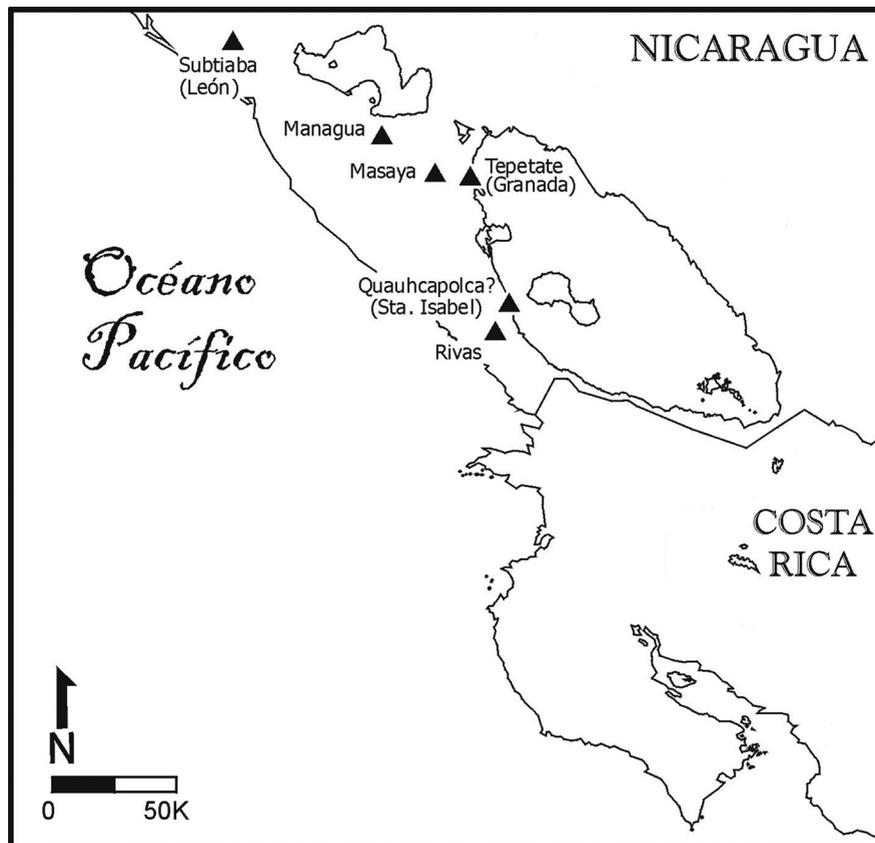


Fig. 2: Map of Pacific Nicaragua, showing location of archaeological sites. Drawn by Larry Steinbrenner.

(800–1250 AD), consistent with the historical arrival of the Oto-Manguean-speaking migrants from central Mexico. The name 'Chorotega' is derived from the 'Cholulteca' culture from the highland Mexico religious capital of Cholula and the working hypothesis of the project was that cultural models derived from Cholula would be useful for interpreting Pacific Nicaraguan material culture and, more broadly, ethnic identity strategies of the migrant group.

Previous archaeological work in Pacific Nicaragua consisted of several settlement pattern surveys and small-scale salvage projects with little problem-orientation. One notable exception was a 1960s project

conducted by Harvard archaeologists under the direction of Willey in the Rivas region (Norweb 1964); this work was synthesized by Healy for his PhD dissertation (1974) and the subsequent publication continues to form the cornerstone of current interpretation (Healy 1980, 1988). Santa Isabel was one of the major sites explored by Willey and from 2000 to 2005 archaeologists from the University of Calgary investigated the inner core of the 300ha site, excavating at five of the larger residential mounds. This represents the most intensive archaeological study ever conducted in Nicaragua and produced a wealth of information for evaluating domestic practice and ethnicity at the paramount centre of the settlement hierarchy (McCafferty 2008; McCafferty and McCafferty 2008, 2009; McCafferty et al. 2007).

One of the first of many surprising discoveries of the project was that the ceramic chronology of the Postclassic Period was essentially wrong, with so-called 'late' diagnostics actually beginning several hundred years earlier (McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005b). Based on 17 radiocarbon dates from Santa Isabel we now know that what had originally been recognized as Nahua Nicarao diagnostics were, in fact, introduced with the arrival of the earlier Chorotega migrants. A reconsideration of all absolute dates from Pacific Nicaragua indicates that the final Ometepe Period (1250–1525 AD) is almost completely unrepresented in controlled excavations and thus the final phase of migration remains a mystery.

In 2008 investigators moved up the coast of Lake Nicaragua to begin research at the site of Tepetate, the Precolumbian centre on the northern edge of modern Granada associated with the Chorotega capital of Xalteva (McCafferty 2010). Historical accounts indicated that the original archaeological site featured mounded structures with stone slabs covering the surfaces and arranged in possible plaza groups (Salgado González 1996). Unfortunately, modern development and intensive looting have destroyed much of the archaeological zone. It was possible to excavate one of the last remaining mounds and also expose several multiple burials from an adjacent cemetery. Mound 1 was badly disturbed to a depth of over 1m, but portions of a paving stone floor were



Fig. 3: Deep excavation unit at El Rayo with stratified Bagaces and Sapoá Period levels.

encountered, as was a slab-lined burial crypt (the contents of which had been looted).

A recent road cut exposed a Precolumbian cemetery at the site of El Rayo on the Asese peninsula south of Granada and in 2009 and 2010 the research team moved there to excavate at the cemetery, a multi-component residential area and another cemetery associated with a small shrine. An important piece of the chronological puzzle fell into place due to deep stratigraphic testing, where a rapid and dramatic change in the material culture occurred at about 800 AD, representing the transition between the Bagaces (300–800 AD) and Sapoá Periods (fig.

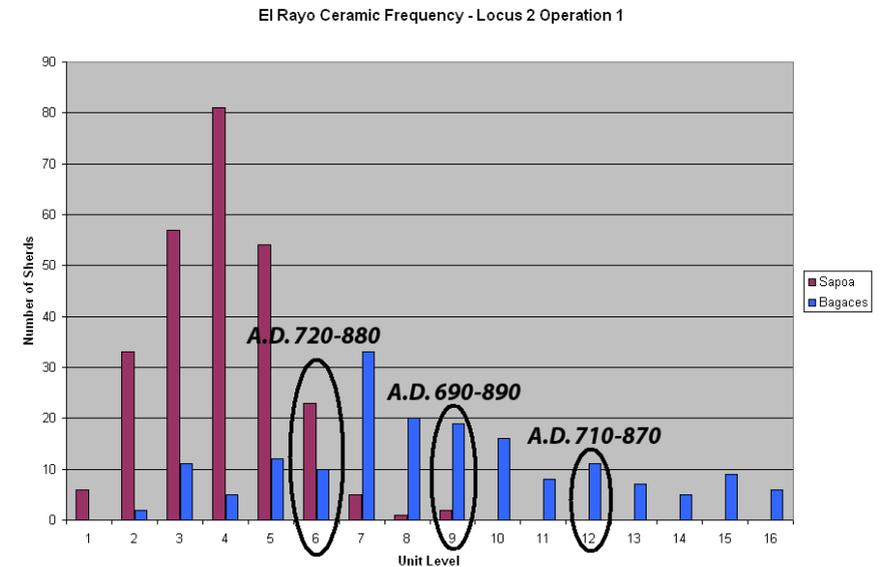


Fig. 4: Graph of frequencies of Bagaces and Sapoá diagnostic ceramics from El Rayo.

3). The Bagaces pottery was predominantly a polished red ware known as Tola Trichrome with variations including Chavez White-on-Red. Following traditional culture historical inference it was most likely associated with the native Chibchan culture. Within a stratigraphic span of only 20cm the ceramic assemblage was transformed from one featuring almost exclusively Bagaces diagnostics to one more typical of the Sapoá Period (fig. 4), with Papagayo polychromes and Sacasa utilitarian wares that are generally associated with the Chorotega group. The precise dating of this transition is confounded since three radiocarbon dates from below and above the transition all have the exact same intercept at 780 AD. Interestingly, immediately before this transition polychrome pottery with north-central Honduran characteristics, notably the locally made Momta polychrome, suggests influences from the Ulúa Valley. This suggests that the cultural changes characterized as Chorotega may have more Mayan antecedents than Mexican. Furthermore, while the transition occurred dramatically, trace elements of the Bagaces Period pottery continued

to appear mixed with the predominant Papagayo polychrome types in several subsequent levels, suggesting a degree of cultural continuity.

Excavations at Santa Isabel, Tepetate and El Rayo have contributed to a re-evaluation of the culture history of Pacific Nicaragua, especially for the Sapoá Period when, following historical traditions, Chorotega migrants were the dominant ethnic group. No ethnohistorical accounts discuss the autochthonous Bagaces Period inhabitants, but recent speculation has suggested that these may have been part of the macro-Chibchan culture that inhabited Central America from eastern Honduras south into Colombia and Venezuela. The integration of the original 'Chibchan' occupants with the newly arrived 'Chorotega' is the focus of our consideration of ethnogenesis and hybridity.

Chorotega Ethnicity

So who were the Chorotega? Ten years of intense investigation have amassed a considerable body of data on the domestic practices of this group (McCafferty 2008, 2011). Excavations at Santa Isabel, Tepetate and El Rayo have exposed permanent residential structures made of stone and wattle and daub, with floors of packed earth, flagstones and occasionally a thin plaster. The regional centres of Santa Isabel and Tepetate measured several hundred hectares in size with dozens of low mounds and probably housed populations in the thousands. No evidence of urban planning has been identified, though extreme looting and modern development at Tepetate have destroyed mounds that earlier scholars described as having formed plazas and that featured flagstone facades. Based on ethnohistorical accounts of small clusters of residences interspersed between orchards, Steinbrenner (2010) has referred to the settlement pattern as being one of dispersed 'garden cities'.

Outstanding preservation of faunal and botanical remains at Santa Isabel and El Rayo provide an unprecedented source for inferring past foodways—defined as the content, preparation and consumption of food—and of particular interest is the near absence of domesticated



Fig. 5: Polychrome pottery from Pacific Nicaragua: (a) Papagayo: Casares variety; (b) Madeira: Las Marias variety; (c) Vallejo: Lazo variety. Courtesy of Mi Museo, Granada.

plants and animals. Fish comprised over half of the faunal remains, but the meatier deer probably provided the majority of the meat protein in the diet (Lopez-Forment 2007). Reptiles, birds, amphibians and freshwater molluscs were also consumed, but no evidence of domesticated dog or turkey has been identified. Hundreds of carbonized seeds have been recovered, almost exclusively representing wild species. *Jocote*, a small fruit used to make a bitter wine, comprised over 70 per cent of the macrobotanical remains. After both micro- and macrobotanical analyses it can be stated definitively that maize played no significant role in the Chorotega diet during the Sapoá Period. Instead, the presence of thousands of possible grater blades at Santa Isabel suggests that manioc may have been an important part of the diet there (Debert and Sheriff 2007); curiously these small microliths are rare at Tepetate and El Rayo, suggesting a significant difference in foodways between the southern and northern parts of the study area.

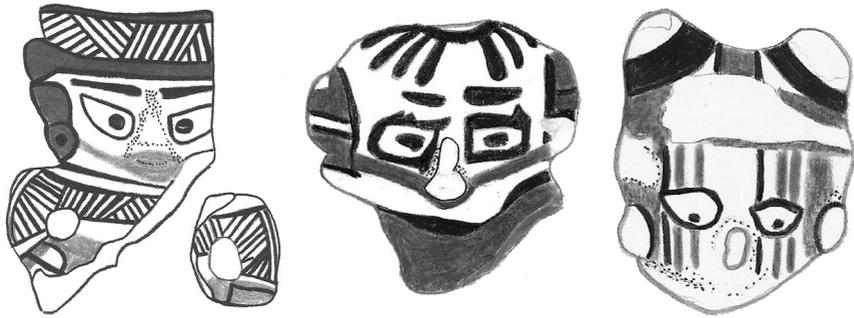


Fig. 6: Papagayo type figurines. Drawn by Kristina Zamec and Sharisse McCafferty.

Polychrome pottery appeared in a rainbow of colors in Papagayo, Vallejo, Madeira, Pataky and Bramadero types that possibly indicate different production centres and therefore complex exchange networks (fig. 5; Steinbrenner 2010). Intensive compositional analysis of the pottery is currently underway to help determine this aspect of the ancient political economy (Dennett n.d.; McCafferty et al. 2007). As noted above, these types can all be recognized in the Sapoá Period, but detailed analysis is in process to identify regional microchronologies that will be more sensitive to cultural changes. Of particular importance to the theme of Mesoamerican influences is the presence of 'Mixteca-Puebla' symbolic elements (McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005a). Beautiful feathered serpents appear on Vallejo polychromes, especially on the Mombacho variety where the painted decoration is combined with fine-line incising.

The aesthetics of self-image, sometimes referred to as the 'body beautiful', are another prominent form of identity that may reflect ethnicity, among other qualities (Reischer and Koo 2004). As Joyce (2005) has pointed out, this can be recovered archaeologically through actual body modification (for example, cranial or dental modification, etc.), ornamentation and artistic representation. A wide range of ornamentation has been recovered at Chorotega sites from Pacific Nicaragua, including beads, pendants and earspools (McCafferty and McCafferty 2009, 2011). Unfortunately, these have not been securely linked with well-preserved skeletal remains, so association with aged or sexed individuals is not

available. Some items, such as thin-walled, hollow earspools are found at all three sites; size differences may relate to age group or status. On the other hand, several hundred reworked sherd pendants were recovered at Santa Isabel while these were rare at the sites in the Granada region, suggesting a distinction in ornamentation between the two sites.

Artistic representations of the 'body beautiful' are available on monochrome and polychrome figurines, which feature characteristics of hairstyle, body paint or tattooing and clothing (fig. 6; McCafferty and McCafferty 2009). These characteristics of personal aesthetics probably relate more to gender, status or age grades than to overt ethnic identity. The majority of the gendered figurines appear to be female and may relate to historical documentation that the Chorotega were largely—as were the Nahua, Maribios and Chontales, to varying and lesser extents—ruled by women (Werner 2000: 104, 112). Alternatively, Wingfield (2009) has recently completed a PhD on the subject of female shamans from the Greater Nicoya region, based on figurines from these and earlier time periods. She argued it is likely that political and spiritual authority was conflated in Chorotega society and that these figurines may have played a symbolic role in related ceremonies.

Mortuary patterns also distinguished the different communities. At Santa Isabel, infants were buried in elongated 'shoe pots' (McCafferty 2008). Adults and adolescents were buried in flexed positions directly in the earth. At Tepetate, however, adults were buried in and around the 'shoe pots' and infant burials were not recognized. Two cemeteries were excavated at El Rayo, possibly representing elite and isolated burial grounds. 'Shoe pots' were again abundant, but human remains were rarely inside of them but were instead scattered around the outside of the urns.

Based on this extensive data set much is now known of Chorotega lifeways. Several specific lines of evidence can now be used to consider ethnic identity and specifically to evaluate 'Mexican' affiliation. Foodways have been found to be a very sensitive trait for expressing ethnicity. One



Fig. 7: (a) Vessel supports representing Ehecattl wind god; (b) Representation of feathered serpent on Vallejo Polychrome potsherd.

of the first indicators we had about problems with our hypothesized Mexican ethnicity was the lack of *comales* at Santa Isabel. *Comales* are wide, shallow griddles typically used for heating tortillas and in Postclassic contexts at Cholula they make up about 20 percent of all rim sherds (McCafferty 2001). Lack of *comales* implies a lack of tortillas—and a severe blow to the concept of central Mexican ethnicity. *Comales* were also absent at Tepetate and El Rayo. Of the several hundred carbonized seeds, none were of maize, a hardy seed that preserves when most others do not. Residue and phytolith analysis from fragments of *manos* (hand-held grinding stones) and *metates* (slab mortars) recovered evidence for the preparation of unidentified fruits (possibly *jocote*), but no maize. Ongoing phytolith analysis of organic soils from Santa Isabel is failing to identify maize, even though maize is, again, a readily identifiable species. This lack of maize is a surprising development and strongly runs against the presence of a Mexican identity. It also contrasts with the use of maize, *comales* and tortillas in Early Historical Period Nicaragua. Perhaps these were introduced by the Spanish and resettled groups from central Mexico after conquest, but further research should address the history of this important characteristic.

Religious ideology is another characteristic often diagnostic of ethnic identity and the ethnohistorical accounts for Postclassic Nicaragua

emphasized Mexican gods and practices (León-Portilla 1972). For example, Oviedo (1976) noted the importance of the deities Quiateot and Hecat, corresponding respectively to the Mexican rain god, Tlaloc, and the wind god, Ehecattl. Aspects of both of these deities are found in the archaeological assemblage. Particularly common are vessel supports of the wind god on several types of polychrome pottery (fig. 7a). As noted above, feathered serpents are also a prominent motif (fig. 7b) and represent another facet of the Quetzalcoatl/Ehecattl complex. Based on this iconographic content, it is evident that contact with central Mexican religious ideology was established by at least 1000 AD and perhaps as early as 800 AD.

Another prominent aspect of central Mexican religious practice, however, is strangely absent in Pacific Nicaragua during this time period. Burning incense was a fundamental form of communication with the supernatural and incense burners make up a significant component of the Early Postclassic Period Cholula ceramic assemblage (McCafferty 2001). No obvious incense burners have been found from the Chorotega Sapoa' Period, though admittedly other vessels could have been used for the purpose. But specialized incense burners, particularly the long handled *sahumador* type, are diagnostic of Mesoamerican religious practice, especially as part of the spread of the Quetzalcoatl cult of the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic (Ringle et al. 1998).

Ten years of archaeological investigations in Pacific Nicaragua have produced a plethora of information that simultaneously supports and contrasts with expectations for a Mexican identity for the Chorotega. While some superficial elements, such as the adoption of Mexican deities, correspond with affiliation with the 'Mixteca-Puebla' religious complex, other more basic elements, such as foodways, indicate more regionally specific cultural practices. This may also be seen in the variation among mortuary practices in which all three sites use Sacasa Striated 'shoe pots', but in different ways. This complex contradiction may well relate to the subjective/objective distinction discussed in the introduction of

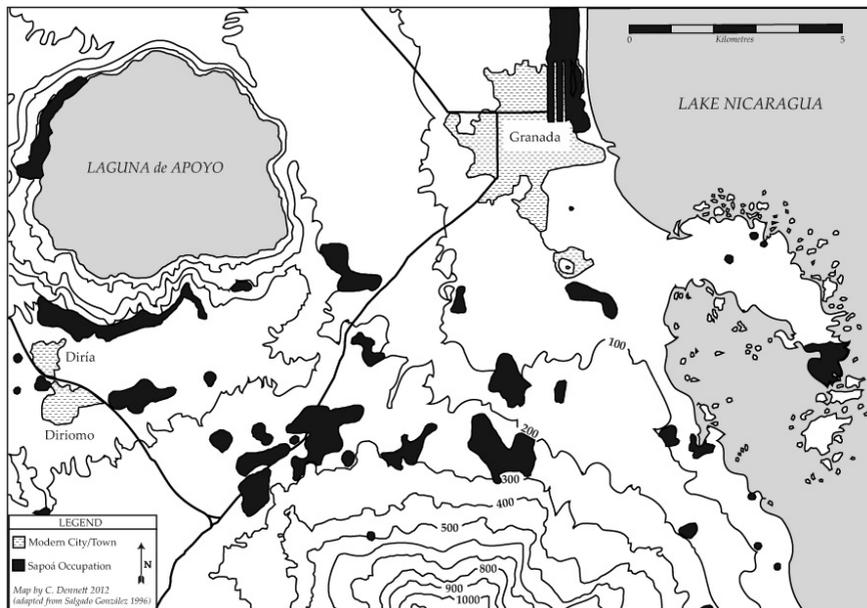
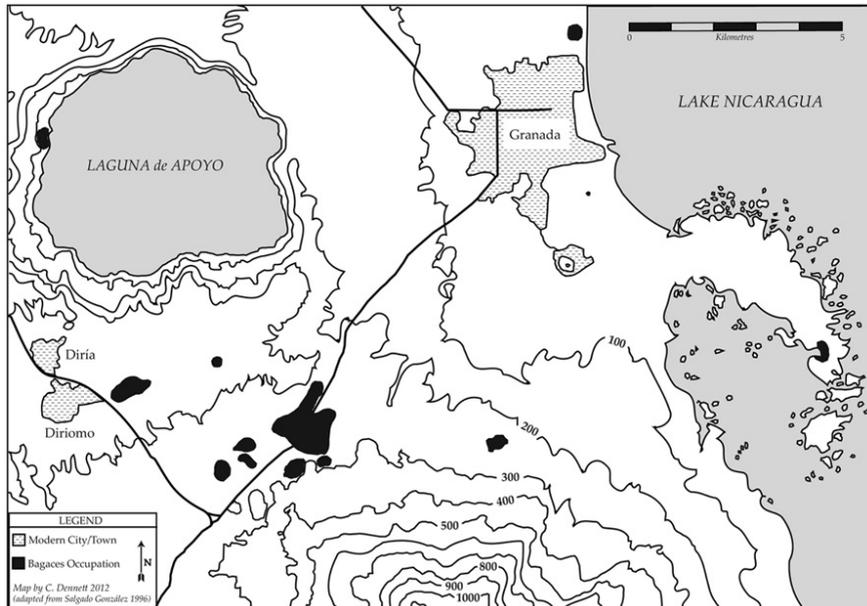


Fig. 8: Comparison of Bagaces and Sapoá Period settlement patterns from Granada (after Salgado 1996).

this paper, in which overt symbols of ethnic identity contrast with more internally meaningful persuasions.

Ethnogenesis and Hybridity in Pacific Nicaragua

One challenge of archaeological interpretation involves the use of synchronic artefacts for diachronic reconstructions, especially when time periods are cumbersome long. Is the confusion we are seeing in this case study the result of dynamic changes as indigenous groups increasingly adopted Mexican traits through a gradual process of contact and acculturation? The rapid changes exhibited during the Bagaces to Sapoá transition at El Rayo can be considered consistent with population replacement or indicative of an 'invading' ethnic group, yet the earlier introduction of foreign, Honduran pottery types prior to the transition and the continuity of some earlier pottery types may be interpreted as a more gradual period of culture change.

To better understand the process of change, additional lines of evidence are available. For example, settlement pattern studies by Salgado González (1996) and Niemel (2003) demonstrate a dramatic shift in site location and population between the Bagaces and Sapoá Periods both in the Granada area, including Tepetate and El Rayo (fig. 8), and the Rivas area (including Santa Isabel). The Rivas data in particular demonstrate not only a population shift, but also a greater concentration at the Santa Isabel site implying an increase in sociopolitical complexity. Settlement pattern change is a strong indicator of population replacement, as old sites were abandoned and new ones established. In this regard, however, it was surprising to discover a Bagaces Period component beneath the Sapoá remains at El Rayo (not recognized during the settlement pattern survey) and even at Santa Isabel there were some Bagaces ceramics and figurines found in the lowest excavation levels.

Deep excavations at El Rayo allowed a sampling of Bagaces Period domestic remains and therefore provide a basis for comparison with later Sapoá Period material culture. As noted above, the transition between



Fig. 9: Comparison of vessel forms of Bagaces and Sapoá Period; (a) Tola Trichrome type composite silhouette bowl; (b) Castillo Engraved type composite silhouette bowl. Courtesy of Mi Museo, Granada.

the Bagaces and Sapoá Periods is clearly indicated in the change from burnished red-slipped wares to the polychromes painted over a whitish slip. The white-slipped pottery features strong stylistic similarities with pottery of the Mixteca-Puebla style from central Mexico and the Gulf Coast. However, recent compositional analyses of pottery from El Rayo by Dennett indicate that the same manufacturing areas and resources were used by both Bagaces and Sapoá Period potters. Additionally, similar vessel forms were used in some of the Sapoá Period ceramics, especially seen in the Castillo Engraved type (fig. 9). This evidence suggests that following a *chaîne opératoire* perspective there was not a clear break in ceramic manufacture, but rather a distinct innovation in surface finish and decoration, perhaps more indicative of objective changes in ethnic identity as opposed to more internalized subjective identity.

Figurines, a fairly abundant artefact class found in domestic contexts, also represent a superficial change in style between the two time periods. Bagaces figurines are generally solid representations of seated females (fig. 10), finished in the red slip typical of the Tola type. Sapoá Period figurines again represent seated females, but are often hollow, mould-made objects that are then painted to depict clothing and body paint. The overarching theme of female representation indicates continuity while the explicit way of characterizing these miniature figures changes with the larger ceramic tradition.



Fig. 10: Comparison of Bagaces and Sapoá Period female figurines.

In considering other aspects of material culture between the two phases of El Rayo occupation, earspools were found in both contexts though there were more earspools made of fish vertebrae in the Bagaces levels while hollow ceramic earspools were introduced in the Sapoá Period. Both contexts feature ceramic net weights for fishing, but there are innovative styles added to the assemblage in the Sapoá Period. Spindle whorls were also found in both phases, with bone whorls found in the Bagaces Period levels and ceramic whorls in the later context. One apparent innovation was in the use of obsidian in the form of prismatic blades, which were not found in the earlier Bagaces deposits. Obsidian would have been traded from Guatemala and prismatic blades are a diagnostic tool type of ancient Mesoamerica.

A final comparison between the Bagaces and Sapoá cultures is found in burial practices. As noted above, the Sapoá Period Chorotega employed large burial urns, often of the Sacasa Striated 'shoe pot' form. While the specific details of how these were used varied between the sites that have been investigated, the ovoid 'shoe pot' is ubiquitous at sites

of this time period. Burials from the Bagaces Period are primary, direct burials in either extended or flexed position. In locus 2, two adult burials and an infant were found in association with residential debris and were lacking in grave goods. At locus 1, however, beneath the Sapoá Period urn burials, several individuals in extended position were found in association with Bagaces Period ceramics. One of these was found with three nearly complete vessels and another was found with a *mano* grinding stone and a spindle whorl. While it is tempting to identify this individual as female based on the associated artefacts, the very poor condition of the skeletal remains made the sexing of the skeleton impossible. It is interesting that although the actual mortuary practices changed dramatically between the Bagaces and Sapoá Periods, the Sapoá inhabitants nevertheless chose to continue burying their dead in the same location as their predecessors.

In light of the information recovered from Bagaces and Sapoá contexts at El Rayo, we believe that there may have been more of a cultural transformation rather than cultural replacement. Cultural practices changed unquestionably, but as specific behaviours changed others remained the same and others still were introduced. Referring back to the discussion of objective and subjective expressions of ethnicity from the beginning of this essay, we argue that the more overt expressions of ethnic identity developed fairly rapidly, probably through contact with new groups employing a distinct symbolic vocabulary. Adoption of some of these outward themes may have represented emulation of this foreign group by residents of a hinterland community.

Based on the intensity of this research project and the quality of the information that has been gathered, we feel compelled to proclaim something profound about Chorotega ethnicity and the process of ethnogenesis demonstrated in the transformation from Bagaces to Sapoá occupation. Perhaps the ambiguity caused by too much information is the problem—we cannot agree with the simplistic affirmations of Mexican identity that have characterized previous interpretations. On the other hand, there are clear convergences. The 'Mixteca-Puebla'-style feathered serpents are undoubtedly Mexican. Some of the Nicaraguan

polychrome pottery would be right at home on lab tables in Cholula and they are probably tied into long-distance exchange networks linked to the development of the Quetzalcoatl cult and the procurement of cacao and other valuable commodities. Ultimately, the lack of maize agriculture and incense burners suggest a more fundamental expression of cultural practice and lead us to reject the idea that these new migrants into Pacific Nicaragua were ethnic refugees from central Mexico. Change did occur, but those changes were negotiated by the autochthonous residents who were able to adapt to new influences and perhaps new neighbours, but were nevertheless able to maintain fundamental cultural practices.

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