

Culture as Commodity: Harmonizing Dichotomies

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the creative use of culture as a commodity that enhances international cultural diplomacy as well as ensures cultural continuity within the economic world market. This study is based on my interactions with the Bribri people of Costa Rica and my analysis of their cultural and economic livelihood in a globalized world.

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“The private property of the worker in his means of production is the foundation of small-scale industry, and small-scale industry is a necessary condition for the development of social production and of free individuality of the worker himself.” Karl Marx, Capital: Volume 1, 1867.

The economic world-market has become the standard of living globally. Its effects filter into political and cultural international dynamics. Considering the current interface between economy and culture in the globalized world this paper considers the role of culture as a commodity. I explore a small Indigenous community in Latin America, the Bribri of Costa Rica, who negotiate their economic, cultural and environmental survival through the use of an international diplomatic ethic. The Bribri ‘diplomatically’ negotiate between tradition and modernity anchored within a capitalist model. For the Bribri, culture becomes a mode of production in which the laborer directly benefits from its exchange-value. As a small Indigenous community living against all odds, Bribri incorporation of a capital ethos is a form of cultural resistance through diplomacy. The Bribri operate grassroots eco-tourism enterprises within the Indian Reserve highlighting their cultural traditions. Throughout this essay, I argue that cultural ‘authenticity’ is a harmonizing ethic that balances the dichotomies of ancestral culture and modern economic reality.

Cultural *authenticity* is a slippery term that needs to be realized within its own context. To be authentic implies the meaning of validity to a true essence – to have a guarantee that something is valid by a set of standards. The question here is, who sets the standards for cultural authenticity? In contemporary society, the scope of culture tends to pertain to an “Other”, a person of another culture who looks different, wears certain clothing, speaks a different language and expresses a sense of *Otherness* that makes them *authentically* different from the rest. In this framework, the authentic label is stamped from an outsider’s point of view – such as, a “real” Indian is someone who “looks” like an Indian and lives a life in nature outside of modernity. However, the label *authentic* needs to be evaluated from within the culture instead of outside the culture. What is truly authentic is something that exists in the present, which gives a culture a sense of their own understanding and interpretation of who they are. Cultural traditions are handed down from ancestors throughout generations and are re-interpreted according to the present needs of the society, this does not devalue tradition or authenticity but enhances cultural essence by keeping it alive and current. Therefore the fragile balance between ancestral knowledge and contemporary reality is the true authentication of cultural essence. In order to understand a cultural ‘Other’ it is necessary to rid ourselves of our own cultural exoticism and consider the globalization of our current world. Since the world-market is the driving agent for modernity, economic factors are an integral part of all societies and play a significant role within cultural determinants.

Taking into account world market economics, it is well documented that there remains an unequal transfer of capital between first-world and third-world countries detrimentally affecting the poorest members of the third-world population. In the Americas, neoliberal policies have weakened the economy of Latin America and have displaced many Indigenous from their land and their means of survival. The phenomena of the unequal transfer of surplus-value inherent in

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the capitalist model was first investigated by Marx¹ in the mid-nineteenth century and more recently by Enrique Dussel,² an Argentinean ethical and political philosopher. Dussel has written extensively on Marxist theory and advocates for the continuance of Marxist ideology unto current economic politics. Dussel favors a trend in Latin American countries towards nationalist populist regimes in an attempt to break the cycle of economic ‘Dependency Theory’. Currently there is a shift towards a nationalist independent trend, which has become part of the increasingly new political landscape of Latin America³. However, there still exists a strong inter-dependency relationship throughout the Americas and the rest of the globe due to international participation within the Geocultural world-system.

Globalization, economically based on the world market system also incorporates international exchange in the broader sense, inclusive of a shared natural environment, shared universalist humanism and a shared ethical dimension. The international cultural diplomacy practiced by the Bribri emphasizes a global humanist connection while still grounded in economic materialism. Danilo Layan Gabb, a Bribri leader, and owner of Ditsöwou (a communal lodge) states: “We have many voices, many faces, many colors, but only one heart and only one god, Sibú.” Danilo makes this statement when he welcomes international visitors to his lodge enterprise. In its essence, this statement makes reference to a global humanity that is united under one universal ethical connection. The god Sibú is specifically Bribri; in Danilo’s welcome speech he conveys a sense of totalizing universality despite/alongside Sibú’s specific cultural reference. The mention of Sibú is significant in that the context of the exchange asserts cultural specificity through a diplomatic means – All are welcomed, but you are in Bribri territory.

The Bribri are of the Chibchan linguistic group from South American Amazonia. The Mesoamerican Bribri currently reside in southeastern Costa Rica and northeastern Panama within the Talamanca mountain rainforests on government reservation land. Within Bribri historical traditions, these lands were ancestral since time immemorial. I have worked and lived with a community of Bribri localized in Bratsi, Costa Rica, with a large family network that encompasses a wide geographical area within the Talamanca Reserve; yet they have a very small population demographically. The entire Indigenous populations (64,000) of Costa Rica represent 1.7% of the total population of the nation; however not all Indigenous people are counted in the national census. The Bribri are one of three Costa Rican Indigenous groups, the others are the Boruca and the Cabécar, also of the Chibchan linguistic group.

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital Vol.1, Part viii: “The Modern Theory of Colonization”* 1867.

² Enrique Dussel, *Marx’s Economic Manuscripts of 1861–63 and the “Concept” of Dependency* 1990.

³ ALBA *Alternativa Bolivariana par alas Americas* is an international cooperative organization based on the idea of social, political, and economic integration between the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. ALBA (Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia and Nicaragua) has a socialist agenda promoting economic solidarity within Latin America and a separation from United States influences. ALBA favors free trade agreements instead of trade liberalization. Other Latin American alliances are also forming encouraging international free trade accords and forging Latin American alliances within the region. A democratic based group began in 2011 includes Mexico, Peru, Columbia and Chile. Additionally, Bogotá, Lima, and Santiago are combining their stock exchanges into Mercado Integrado Latinoamericano (MILA).

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In this study I concentrate on the Layan-Gabb Bribri of Talamanca and their contingent family network, which are united through blood ties as well as through economically dependent eco-tourism ventures. The great, great grandfather of Danilo was William More Gabb, an American paleontologist who in 1875 conducted a topographical and ethnographical survey of Costa Rica as well as a study on Bribri linguistics.⁴ Gabb's linguistic study was an invaluable resource for Alanson Skinner, an anthropologist associated with the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation. ⁵Skinner conducted the first comprehensive ethnographic research on the Talamanca Bribri living alongside the Teliri River during his 1917 expedition. The Teliri River is the area in which the Layan-Gabb family currently reside, the river runs eastward through the Reserve, continues alongside Bratsi and into northern Panama. Skinner's 1920 monograph is still used as a foundational baseline in Bribri anthropological scholarship.

At the time of Skinner's monograph the Teliri River was crossed by dugout canoe and the Bribri villages were reached on horseback. Currently the Bribri still use dugout canoes to cross the river (with an occasional addition of a motor), but are reached via a tourist van. Horseback riding is still a mode of transportation, particularly in the interior secluded mountains. The Cabecar reside within the interior mountain ranges and live more isolated and impoverished, they remain wary of strangers. The Bribri of Talamanca still adhere to traditional values but have become involved in mainstream commerce. Danilo is a leading force in Indian advocacy and holds a position with the Bureau of Indigenous Affairs.

In August 2011, Danilo organized the first *Gran Feria Cultural Ak Kuk*, a weekend gathering of all the Talamanca Indigenous in one setting. The advertised impetus for the gathering was to celebrate and showcase Indigenous culture. The gathering was a subliminal 'Woodstock for Indian Rights'. Present were local artisans selling carved gourds (a Bribri ancestral art), portable food stands selling rice, beans and *platanos*, a loud borrowed boom-box playing salsa and reggae music, traditional Bribri dancing as well as contemporary salsa dancing among all the gathered. It was a festive atmosphere but with a purpose beyond entertainment. Local politicians were also invited and attended as well as the local Christian religious leader, *Padre Benito*. While the celebrations were focused on Bribri cultural pride there was an obvious political strategy in the honorary gratitude that was directed towards the government representatives. Danilo made a concerted effort to point out the difficult circumstances for the Indians when trying to obtain social services and the Costa Rican citizen ID card, *cédula de identidad*, which is required for all public transactions, governmental or otherwise. Many Indians do not have the means to travel to the government offices to obtain these cards; therefore, many live without any public services, such as health care, proper housing, plumbing and electricity.

Costa Rica holds a unique politically stable position in Latin America, having had the strongest democratic traditions and the most egalitarian society in Central America. Costa Rica maintains a strong democratic republic and remains without a national military since its abolishment in 1948. However, the country does retain an active Police Guard. United States imperialist policies have

⁴ William More Gabb, *On the Indian Tribes and Languages of Costa Rica*, 1875. American Philosophical Society.

⁵ Alanson Skinner, *Notes on the Bribri of Costa Rica*, 1920.

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had a negative impact in Costa Rican government and society. During the 1980's anti-Sandinista crusade the United States militarist agenda operated a Contra "southern front" out of Costa Rica while pumping millions of dollars to strengthening the civil police. The CIA supplied the Contras with military weapons and turned a blind eye to drug trafficking that benefited the Contra efforts. The nationalist sensibilities of the Costa Ricans were awakened by US interventionist policies and in 1986 elected Oscar Arias to the presidency. Arias defied the will of the United States and established a comprehensive peace plan in Central America – the Esquipulas Peace Accord of 1987, winning the Noble Peace Prize for his efforts.

As a consequence to Arias independent stance, the United States channeled large sums of money toward the conservative parties (PUSC) and by the mid 1990's North American neoliberal policies (NAFTA) became entrenched, increasing class inequality and poverty throughout Costa Rica. As a result of divergent government interests, reductions in public social services occurred alongside an increase in government corruption. The political climate grew tense and an anti-neoliberal populist party was established by the opposition, but never ascended into power. Apathy among voters increased as well as a strong trend away from conservative politics yet still maintaining a restraint against revolutionary socialist movements. The neoliberal onslaught scathed Costa Rica (albeit not as severe as its neighbors) and had political and economic consequences that eventually caused a restructuring of politics and economic policies. Currently the 2010 elections elected the first woman president in Costa Rica of the PLN (democratic) party, Laura Chinchilla, an ally of Arias.

The neoliberal economic policies of the 1980–90's severely impacted Costa Rica's import/export economy essentially making it another Latin American 'banana republic' for the monopolistic US based United Fruit Company. The presence of the United Fruit Company as well as the push toward mono-crop agricultural exports weakened the economy, disrupted traditional agricultural practices and devastated the natural environment. The rainforest is an integral aspect of the Costa Rican geography and a biodiversity hotspot, containing 4.5% of the world's biodiversity. Almost half of the country is covered by forest though only 3.5% is primary forest. Deforestation is a devastating epidemic affecting about 50,000 ha annually. A primary reason for deforestation is agro-export (banana, coffee, pineapple, palm oil) and cattle ranching (the hamburger connection), activities dominated by US corporate monopolies.

Joshua Karliner, a U.S. environmentalist has written regarding the impact of U.S. foreign policy in Central America and has noted the devastating environmental and social affects on the local populations, he states: "While these export crops were booming, food production in Central America sank and malnutrition soared."⁶ The agro-export shift has exacerbated the already unequal land tenure system and pushed the landless peasant into the foothills of the rainforest who cut down the forest in order to plant corn and beans for survival thereby further destroying the rainforest and traditional life ways. Currently environmentalist efforts are of primary significance in Costa Rica's government policy for conservation as well as for the economy. Many environmentalist activists (foreign and domestic) have established a strong presence in Costa Rica and have become strong advocates in sustainability and reforestation efforts. The

⁶ Joshua Karlinger, *Central America: Political Ecology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (73) 1990.

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government also advocates the environmentalist ethos in terms of the economic benefits gained from the tourism market.

Due to the economic instability of mono-export agriculture, Costa Rica began to develop tourism with an emphasis on nature-based tourism in the 1980's and have cornered the eco-tourism market. At present, eco-tourism is the highest grossing national product and main provider of employment throughout Costa Rica. They have built a world-renowned national park system in the past few decades and have become a model for other underdeveloped countries striving for sustainable development. Currently Costa Rica has a global reputation for nature-tourism and advertisements have brought an onslaught of tourist unto tiny Costa Rica all seeking the explorers adventure among the pristine rainforest. The majority of the eco-eager tourists are Americans and Costa Ricans are more than eager to show off their natural ecology or at least what is left of it (green washing). An interesting offshoot of the Costa Rican eco-tourism boom has also filtered into the Bribri Indigenous community. The Bribri residents of the Talamanca reservation have always lived a sustainable existence within the rainforest and now that sustainable development and rainforest ecology have become vogue and Internet communication is easily accessible, the Bribri and the international tourist have 'discovered' each other. The Internet phenomenon is an aspect of modernity, which has allowed for widespread international communication among the people, thereby enhancing an equalizing commonality en masse.

Economically, most of the Bribri are classified as living at or below the poverty level, while some have left the villages to seek jobs in the city many of the Bribri I encountered have chosen to stay in their ancestral lands and have augmented their existence thru the establishment of small eco-tourism enterprises that co-exist with their lands and their traditions. Socially the Bribri are also marginalized due to their Indigenous class status, the Indigenous community in Costa Rica were only given voting rights in 1992. While many speak Spanish some are only Bribri speakers thereby making it difficult to navigate government offices for social services. Since the lands are classified with reservation status (Indigenous Law of 1977), the land is designated for Indigenous people only, however a large part of the reserve is still populated by non-Indigenous. The Costa Rican government provides free cement-block houses to low income families on a wait list basis, many of the Bribri have acquired one of these homes after a waiting period from about 6 months to one year. The land is proprietary by family inheritance and 'ownership' is considered loosely. There is a communal land ethic, which extends towards the large family networks.

Danilo built his communal lodging house in 2000, it is known as Ditsöwou (meeting of cultures). The lodge accommodates tourists who are visiting the area and also is a means to employ the local Bribri. The architectural form of Ditsöwou was designed in the traditional style and consists of an open wooden structure utilizing the timber from the local trees in their natural formation. The structure's thatched roof is made from palm fronds tied together with natural twine and shaped into a huge conical form. The initial lodge has undergone numerous additions over the years and currently can accommodate and feed up to one hundred people with a rotating staff of about twenty employees. Danilo has teamed up with tourism companies that cater to a volunteer and educational tourism agenda. The area is remote for most mainstream tourist, but for many who seek a more 'authentic' experience Ditsöwou is a perfect destination.

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The ‘authentic’ experience is contracted by Danilo to his extended family network who augment the eco-tourist experience with boat rides in the dugout canoes, hikes in the rainforest, butterfly and frog tours, a visit to the traditional *casa conica*, a cacao and coffee plantation tour, a boat trip to Panama, a cacao house tour, an organic banana plantation tour, a nature hike into a remote Bribri village tucked in the mountains, swimming under the waterfall, a visit to the local shaman, a visit to the local artisan for craft items, fishing the Indigenous way, and communal gatherings in which the Bribri recount traditional stories and dances surrounding the central bonfire – all for a nominal fee paid through the contracted tour company who has arranged the travel of the visiting tourist. The extended networks are all Indigenous owned and operated micro-enterprises. These small-scale ecotourism enterprises are all local based and all are based on conservationist ethics as well as Bribri cultural ethos. The Bribri are showcasing their culture in its natural environment with an adaptation to modernity as well as a sustainable cultural and environmental ideology.

The Bribri tour hosts share their cultural knowledge with outsiders as a genuine means to maintain their cultural traditions and maintain the preservation of the local rainforest through a concerted capitalist method of labor (use-value) → commodity (surplus-value) exchange system. Witnessing and experiencing these activities is a unique and insightful anthropological commentary on contemporary Indigenous life. The cultural exchange experienced in the various tours are also thought provoking since it is the Indigenous landowner who conducts the activities and the information given is solely based on Bribri oral traditions and personal life experiences; the only mediator in the cultural process is the English language translator (if needed). Therefore a two-fold process of exchange happens, economic and cultural, both engendered by the existing Geocultural world-system. The Bribri navigate their cultural and economic survival through the use of a creative cultural diplomacy – essentially they have re-created their cultural traditions through a syncretic process, which merges ancestry with modernity. The dichotomy of contemporary cultural authenticity balances culture as a remembered past through the use of imagination stimulated by materialist economic survival.

Enrique Dussel has provocatively researched the economic and cultural implication in reference to the Geocultural world-system from ethical and political theoretical perspectives. What emerged from his analysis are very poignant issues that speak of the grave implications of a world-system dominated by corporate capitalist hegemony. Dussel predicts that the hegemonic domination of global capital produces a weakening in the economic world balance, which transforms citizens into alienated consumers and further immiserize the poor in both economic and cultural deprivations. Dussel states:

“In the meantime, the vast majority of humanity – which the Human Development Report 1997 declares is about 80 percent impoverished – mostly lives in rural areas or marginalized urban areas, and continues a traditional life within the structures of ancestral cultures, modified at times superficially by the ‘geoculture’ of the ‘center’ of the world-system, but far from eliminating those ancestral structures. The problem of a world-system culture and its clash with the multiple cultures existing in Africa, Asia, Latin America and in various regions in Eastern Europe (and even in Western Europe), reflects that at the end of 500 years of modernity the majority of the human population is either excluded from the supposed progress of modern civilization, or else it is confronted

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with a progress against its own culture, against its own way of life, a process of alienation of its own personality.”⁷

Dussel posits a devastating alienation effect due to the preponderance of a dominating cultural presence that continues to further conquer any vestiges of ancestral periphery cultures. The technological progress associated with modernity is something that Dussel advocates but also realizes that it carries serious cultural consequences. He states that at times a superficial modification of the outlying cultures become influenced (modernize) but result in non-specific progress, which further eliminates ancestral ties. Dussel poses a contradiction between modernization as progress and modernization as cultural exterminator.

The argument presented by Dussel is becoming a historical reality as can be witnessed by the continual interventionist policies by dominant cultures on periphery cultures. From a cultural standpoint, it can be inferred that the past 500 years of conquest explorations have “discovered” the entire globe and “authentic” Indigenous cultures are only an ideological remnant of an idealized nostalgia. Numerous global examples exist that witness a shift of rural Indigenous populations migrating to urban centers in the hopes for a ‘better life’ in terms of economic survival. The Latin American/North American examples are significant since border migration is an ever-increasing phenomenon in which the periphery is migrating en masse into the center due to the elimination of their lands and livelihood. The sobering statistics keep rising and a fragile and unpredictable global existence continues to be negotiated with the hopes of achieving a meaningful egalitarian balance between society and environment.

The Bribri cultural enterprises stands in sharp contrast to modernity’s negative effect on native cultures since they incorporate modernity’s influences into their cultural viability and future continuity. An integral aspect to the Bribri situation is the rainforest environment alongside the popular focus on sustainable ‘green’ efforts. At the modernist consumer level a unique phenomena also occurs within the alienated consumer who seeks a break from their commodity world and a more thought provoking *Raison D’etre*. The Bribri endeavor lures the tourist that is seeking an escape from modern life and desires a connection with the ever fleeting and vanishing natural world (ideologically and realistically). The uniqueness of the Bribri ‘corporate’ agenda is its juxtaposition of contradictory modernist paradoxes grounded on the basis of the natural world. Contrary to Dussel’s prediction of ancestral cultural alienation, the eco-tourist enterprises re-enforce cultural traditions as well as re-establish cultural pride, since in order for these enterprises to be financially successful the Bribri must engage and educate themselves about their own past traditions. Indigenous knowledge becomes the ‘selling’ point of the various advertised tours.

One of the most memorable Bribri eco-tours is the frog and butterfly hike in a densely rainforest area. As the hike proceeds into the forest the immense foliage overwhelms the atmosphere and the natural world closes in, gradually filling your senses with unfamiliar sounds, fragrant smells, green vastness and the damp moisture of the surroundings. Inevitably you become immersed within the land feeling a sensory connection to the soil, air and leaves. The Bribri guide, Eto, takes the group deeper into the forest and points out details, which would otherwise go unnoticed. He states: “an Indian knows the forest and therefore the forest will always protect

⁷ Enrique Dussel, *Debate on the Geoculture of the World-System*. (245) 2002.

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him, feed him when he is hungry, cure him when he is sick, and satisfy him when he is thirsty.” Eto cuts a tree limb with his machete and lets the water flow from its pores to show the benevolence of the forest. As the walk progresses Eto mentions how this area is a reforested area that has re-established itself since the draught of the 1980’s. The draught washed away the banana plantation owned by the United Fruit Company that was once this forest. The small ferns growing on the forest floor and the return of the frogs and butterflies are nature’s evidence of a healthy environment. Since the drought, the United Fruit Company vacated the area and that is when Eto returned his family to their ancestral lands. The United Fruit Company neglected the area due to its unproductively and the economic losses they suffered. Due to a natural set of circumstances the forest and the Indian were once again reunited and both are thriving under the rainforest canopy. Eto states his business is doing very well and that he enjoys teaching others the way of the trees. Eto is not a forest ranger nor does he hold a degree in ecology or sustainability; his father and grandfather have passed down their knowledge and in order for the knowledge to live on, he passes it on to those who know how to listen.

Eto’s eco-tourism venture is a harmonizing balance of cultural traditions juxtaposed with modern reality. Instead of migrating out of the area to become a wage laborer, Eto has chosen the ways of tradition incorporated with a business ethos that also benefits the earth globally. There is a strong trend in the area towards reforestation. Along the foothills of the mountains many of the cattle fields are being reforested and the cattle are being sold. The Bribri I spoke with envision the re-growth of the forest as their future and as their natural stability. Justo, a village elder from the mountains, informed me that he was not Costa Rican but Bribri and that this is where he will always belong since this is his land. His emphasis is on keeping traditions alive among the people; he informed me that the Bribri language is taught in school and that they only hire Bribri schoolteachers, stating that it is important to be with your own kind. It was curious to him that people were interested in their culture and he was happy to share it.

Bribri diplomacy and inter-cultural exchange is atypical among most Indigenous communities. The enterprising Bribri that I have encountered are very willing to please tourist request and pose for the camera. Their means of cultural interchange is not an anthropological/informant relationship but a diplomatic business relationship that equalizes the cultural exchange. The Bribri ask just as many questions of the tourist as they ask of them. The Bribri also feel a strong sense of cultural identity and rootedness in their Indigenous heritage. The assertion of Indigenous identification is also atypical since Indian identity has been marginalized as stated earlier and considered inferior to white status throughout Latin America history. Since the Spanish *casta system* (fifteenth and sixteenth century) many Indians, *mestizos* and *mulattos* shift identity classifications in order to move up within the racial hierarchy status markers. While this racial system no longer operates the lasting effects of discrimination still compel many to deny their Indigenous or Black lineage. Bribri Indian identity affirmation has many dense layers, historical, psychological and social. What will be considered here are the international modernist affect as well as their geographical and historical isolation from a colonizing epicenter. The visiting tourist celebrates Indian heritage as something exotic and postmodern, this attitude has engendered a new sense of self while also encouraging the Bribri to showcase their culture. They take pride in this ‘new reawakening’ of the Indian as a part of the postmodern ideology as well as a part of their own exclusive cultural identity. They do not ‘sell out’ but ‘sell in’, in a sense their

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cultural integration become reinforced instead of disintegrated due to the *value* (ethical and economic) of their unique culture.

Another highly significant dimension to Bribri cultural integration is their uniquely distinctive geography and the specific history of the Talamanca area. The land is the essence that ties this culture to their continuity and it is the land that has been able to be a steadfast asset to their existence. As noted by Marx, the private property of the worker is his means of production; therefore land ties the individual and the group to its fundamental nature. The Talamanca mountain range are steep with the highest peak reaching 3,820 m. and covered by impenetrable dense forests, the land plateaus eastward unto the Caribbean Sea. This area surrounded by the Talamanca Mountains on the western side and the Caribbean Sea on its eastern shore is known as Limón Province. In the fifteenth century the Limón area remained insignificant to the Spanish conquistadores due to its mountainous inaccessibility and lack of exploitable natural resources. The Indigenous Chibchan were nomadic agriculturalist without a primary state center such as the Aztecs in Mexico or the nearby Maya. The Caribbean seaport, Puerto Viejo, was the sole entry for any new migrating people.

Due to its terrestrial isolation from the center but its accessibility by sea, Puerto Viejo became the port of entry for notorious pirates, Black slaves, turtle-hunters, Jamaican refugees, and other Caribbean immigrants who were escaping the center. The displaced Others settled in the area and established a culture of resistance against the colonizing White center. Because of their Afro-Caribbean ethnicity, the Costa Rican government did not recognize them as citizens and restricted their movement outside of Limón province up until 1948. Therefore, the geographical and historical separation has enforced cultural identity integration within a marginalized group of people. Since this was the land of the displaced 'Other' it is their land of established resistance and to this day has a distinctiveness of its own. It is the only area in Costa Rica in which Creole English is just as commonly spoken as Spanish. The culture of resistance is also strongly evident among the Bribri who have steadfastly remained on their lands and continue their ancestral traditions despite Christianization and integration with the local community.

Anja Nygren, an anthropologist who has studied Bribri mythology and its transformation in contemporary times, states: "Collapsing Indigenous people within a global system of subordination ignores their capacity to cope with difficulties, to create selective skills of perception and alternative sources of resistance."⁸ Nygren's study focused on the transformation of the central imagery of the characters within the Bribri myths and noted that the ancestral strife between clan disputes were transformed to the contemporary strife between Indian and White relationships. She interprets this transposition as evidence for cultural resistance and as a means for the Bribri to cope with the trauma of a colonized subaltern identity. In my experience with the Bribri another alternative as a means of resistance becomes evident within a materialist framework. The Indian and White dichotomy is mediated by cultural diplomacy instead of by a transposition of role reversal in the retelling of myths. The diplomatic mediation and assertion of cultural vitality is also a means for economic profit.

⁸ Anja Nygren, *Struggle over Meanings: Reconstruction of Indigenous Mythology, Cultural Identity, and Social Representation* (33) 1998.

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The ability to ‘create selectively’ as a coping mechanism was an integral aspect of Bribri encounters within their tourist endeavors; the Bribri sincerely adhere to their cultural norms but also adjust to modernity demonstrating their cultural resistance through diplomacy. In terms of religion, a very curious cultural phenomena was evident that exhibited the most resistance, while also mediating diplomacy. The *Bikakra Kekepa* (shaman) speaks Bribri when he speaks of sacred things and Spanish when he speaks of the mundane world. He allows you to photograph the construction of the sacred *casa conica*, since it is an exterior space; but does not allow you to photograph him in his interior meetinghouse. When he speaks in the interior house, he closes his eyes, sits barefoot on his swinging hammock, holds his staff (symbolic of his status) and he sways and hums as the words of the past echo from his memory. While his eyes are closed he is completely aware of the surroundings and every cough or jittery movement makes him stamp his staff and reprimand the audience; therefore all eyes are on the *Bikakra* and a mood of silent respect pervades the tree limb structure. The meetinghouse is an open wooden floor space enclosed by vertical tree limbs and covered by a thatched palm frond roof. The audience sits cross-legged on the floor in silence while tropical sunrays filter through the irregular openings filling the interior space with a misty glow of afternoon sunlight. The atmosphere is church-like and the murmur of his speech and song lulls the audience into reverence and awe. Through interpretation he begins the stories of the myths but he never finishes the story, instead he reverts to the language of Christianity and the church connection becomes more tangible than simply atmospheric.

A strong religious syncretism pervades the talk of Sibú, the eternal god of us all, the god of the vampire bat who resides in the house of Sibú, the god of the tapir daughter who was stomped on the ground, the god of the crushed bones of the girl, and the god of the white people who have come to listen to the teachings of Sibú. Sibú the almighty, who allows all of us to eat corn, Sibú the almighty, who allows all of us to drink chocolate, not just the Indian, but the Yellow man, the Black man, the White man, all the men eat corn, all the men drink chocolate and thank Sibú for all his blessings, you must thank Sibú for all the world that he alone has created. The talk shifts to mythology but again reverts to Sibú’s blessing. At times, the *Bikakra* shifts his focus and begins to talk of dream visions and of all the sacred things that are revealed in dreams. He talks of the souls of men, of the footprints on the earth, the life of the trees, the life of the air we breathe, the life of the rainforest, all because of Sibú. The talk is circuitous but follows a pattern – inclusiveness, exclusiveness – universalism, uniqueness – the world, the Bribri.

The *Bikakra* never reveals any Bribri mythology and “Sibú” is a figure of ethical understanding and unification in the interplay of visitor and host. The *Bikakra* keeps the secret of Bribri religious essence as he performs for the audience. The authenticity of his manner is fully sincere. A *Bikakra* should never divulge what is sacred therefore he is authentic to his shaman status. He is also authentic in cultural modernity since he shows the pride of his beliefs and graciously shares a sacred space with others in a spiritual and communal unity. The audience is beyond moved by his presence and the religious aura of a sacred space is a felt sensation that stirs the spirit of the curious. The *Bikakra* rises from his hammock and asks all that are present to join arms and dance the dance of the Sorbón. The audience rises, joins arms and the dance proceeds in a swaying circular pattern while the *Bikakra* chants and the audience chants in response following his directions. The rhythmic sounds echo alongside the pounding of the shuffling feet in the swaying human circle.

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The ritual sacredness associated with a shaman is a traditional belief that still overpowers the community. The shaman is called upon to bestow blessings on people as well as blessings on sacred objects. It is interesting to note, that in Skinner's 1920 ethnographic study, Bribri sacredness played a role in the exchange of goods. Skinner states:

“On going into Bribri houses we frequently were earnestly warned by the Indians not to handle certain objects, as they were *hukurii* or *tabu*. On inquiry it was learned that it was customary for an Indian who wished to leave home to pronounce certain charms over his valuables, which then became *bukurll*, or *tabu*, not only to others but to himself, until a shaman was summoned to remove the spell by blowing upon them and singing to the time of his sacred rattle. Thus we were sometimes obliged to wait several days until the *tabu* was removed before we could buy various objects.”⁹

As can be noted from the past record, there are strict sets of rules and taboos associated with the sacred sphere. Bribri cosmology and mythology is complex and the shaman is the one responsible for keeping these traditions alive, therefore a shaman's education is a long process that is passed on by oral traditions through strict teachings and regimented respect for the sacred world. In contemporary times, even though the *Bikakra* commodifies his culture he does not sell its sacredness. It was important to follow his rules or else this experience would not have been allowed; he senses how much to divulge and how much to hold back depending on the audience and his assessment of the atmosphere's receptiveness to the teachings. Skinner also followed the rules associated with the pure/impure objects. Many of the objects Skinner purchased from the Bribri are currently in the collections of the New York Museum of the American Indian and the American Museum of Natural History.

The shaman is also trained in the knowledge of the medicines of the forest. As was noted earlier, many Bribri do not have any means to access public health care. There is one small clinic in Bratsi, established in 2009 by The Humanitarian Assistance Program, which is open on a part time basis and free for the residents (provided they have a *cédula de identidad*). However, most of the community still consults the shaman in matters of health and all the Bribri I met are very well acquainted with herbal remedies. Rainforest medical knowledge is something that world corporations also find valuable since they can screen the plants and produce pharmaceuticals for wide-scale sale. In 1989, Merck, the world's largest pharmaceutical company contracted with INBio¹⁰, a conservation regional company, for the rights to screen plants, microbes and insects for their possible use in drugs. Since a conservation company had been contracted the gathering of plants will have a conservationist approach and will enhance the forest instead of depleting it. When I informed the shaman of this progressive modernist approach towards the 'saving of the forest' he seemed baffled as to why there was a need to go through so much trouble to extract the medicine from the plant when all you have to do is boil the leaves in water for a few minutes and drink the tea – why not drink the tea for free now, instead of paying for a drug that you have to wait for? Obviously Bribri logic does get to the core of the issue and also reveals that their “capitalist” ventures are not as “advanced” or dubious like the corporate world-market. The commercial enterprises of the Bribri are not based on expropriation of land resources and exploitation of labor – the agenda of the industrialist capitalist – but based on a direct

⁹ Alanson Skinner, *Notes on the Bribri of Costa Rica*. (67-68) 1920.

¹⁰ National Institute of Biodiversity of Costa Rica

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relationship between laborer (the Bribri tour host) – commodity (culture) – consumer (the tourist visitor).

The most “enterprising” business that I encountered is the Chocolate House Tour. A charismatic and energetic Bribri woman, Petronila, runs this “tour” in her home. Her back yard grows cacao plants and she has been processing cacao seeds into chocolate as part of her daily living for years. Looking for a means to sustain herself and her family she decided that perhaps the local tourist would like to see how chocolate was made using the Bribri method. The venture started with a small idea and she was amazed at the response and the requests to buy the processed chocolate. She quickly added a “store” next to the demonstration table and her chocolates are continually sought after. Petronila only speaks a few English words but told me she does pantomime if they do not understand her English and the message always gets across.

During her demonstration she also references the traditional role of the Bribri women and childbirth practices. Petronila’s “lecture” is conveyed in a colloquial manner with an ironic sense of humor and practicality. In regards to birthing rituals, Petronila states that she ‘gave up all that old stuff about being put far away in the birthing hut and went directly to the hospital to have her baby’. All the women in the audience nod their heads in agreement and end up buying many bags of chocolate for their souvenir gifts to bring back home. Petronila’s business is thriving and her work ethic is remarkable. She feels a sense of independence that she has never felt before and is proud that she can support herself and her family. She is grateful to the tourist and tells me that she could never do this in the old days since women could never own a business by themselves and always had to depend on their husbands. Petronila considers herself a ‘modernist’ in that she prefers a progressive approach to gender relationships and the freedom to do as she pleases. In this manner capital and modernism is understood as a creative cultural approach instead of a destructive industrialist approach. Petronila adjust the terms of ‘capitalist progress’ within a creative endeavor which advocates for her economic independence within a male dominated society.

The globalized push of industrial modernization has had severe consequences on the planet as well as its citizens. The ethical environmentalist Mike Smith states:

“Modernity, the social condition of our contemporary world, is characterized in thought and in deed, by its Promethean striving to go beyond all given limits. This continual and accelerating movement is the basis for that dominant myth of progress that typifies and justifies the modernist enterprise.”¹¹

Mike Smith advocates for a creative modernity at the thought level, which considers the ethical and political questions in terms of environmental activism. In the above quote he also alludes to the ‘myth’ of progress. Myths carry a cultural baggage in the contemporary world that is associated with a primitive understanding of the universe. Prominent scholars, such as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss¹² have studied the value of native myths as a means of understanding culture and as a means for understanding a humanist Universalist ethic. Contemporary environmentalists also recognize the intimate connection between nature and

¹¹ Mike Smith, *An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity, and Social Theory* (1) 2001.

¹² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture* 1978.

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Indigenous mythology. The environmentalist, Jim Cheney¹³, advocates a return to a “primitive” form of nature, for Cheney postmodernism heralds a long-awaited return to a “primitive” understanding of our place in the world. However, romantic idealization of a so-called ‘primitive’ past does not take into consideration that Indigenous people are active members of modernity coping with all the destructive forces and social prejudices that have stemmed from a primitivist romantic lexicon (the noble savage). The idealization of “a tribal humanity at one with nature” relegates the Indian as a relic of a melancholic past that has become extinct along with nature. As can be appreciated, the Amerindian is very much alive and very much aware of modernity. While mythology at one level enhances the understanding of cultural Others, it also surrounds itself with misplaced exoticism; hence the Bribri *Bikakra* holds back mythical information in order to retain his cultural integrity. A delicate balance needs to be negotiated between the conflicting tensions of opposing dichotomies.

Mike Smith’s form of environmentalist ethics actualizes a more contemporary realization of modern circumstances. He advocates for a ‘Radical Ecology’, which takes into account current social practices and worldviews, including economic and social inequality. Smith states:

“We do no one any favors by adopting a framework that fails to recognize the cultural and moral complexities of other societies and their environmental relations. More importantly we have to be reflexively aware of the origins and operation of the complex and often conflicting moral narratives to be found within our own modern society (of which Romanticism is one). Modernity and modernism need to be seen in the context of their specific historical and cultural settings.”¹⁴

While Mike Smith advocates a radical trend in environmentalist thought, his theory is anchored in philosophical ideology. Smith dispels with abstract formulae and favors a trend towards the understanding of the internalization of an environmental ethos. However, Smith is not a political activist per se, but a philosophical activist who hopes to stimulate the debate in environmental ethical policy – “philosophy as an instrument of social management rather than as an expression of genuine moral concerns”.¹⁵ The philosophical dimension is significant since thought influences action. Danilo also appreciates the primacy of humanistic ethics and bases his form of cultural diplomacy within the ethical sphere. Danilo’s language is subsumed in the language of ethics as a shared global philosophy that he believes is the unifying element that brings cultures together in a mode of mutual acceptance.

The small eco-tourism enterprises of the Bribri also exhibit sustainable economic practices that are contiguous with conservationist development. The generalized eco-tourism boom in Costa Rica contains discrepancies in environmental and economic ethics, such as overdevelopment, land encroachment, green washing, and unequal economic benefits. The environmentalist, Susan E. Place, states:

¹³ Jim Cheney, *Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative* 1989.

¹⁴ Mike Smith, *An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity, and Social Theory* (7) 2001.

¹⁵ Mike Smith, *An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity, and Social Theory* (16) 2001.

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“The example of Costa Rica reveals how places reinvent themselves to meet the expectations of the international market, in this case foreign tourists. It also problematizes the notion of “sustainable development”¹⁶

Place is referring to the larger tourist enterprises localized within mainstream Costa Rica that attract a five-star foreign tourist who is willing to spend large amounts of capital and expects a five-star accommodating experience in return. The remote Talamanca area does not attract the type of tourist that wishes to be surrounded by services and amenities. Place recognizes the conflicting tensions associated with sustainable development; while on the one hand an increase in tourist dollars benefits Costa Rica it also overwhelms the National Parks, which are just beginning to regenerate. Another economic fallout is that the emphasis on mainstream tourism only benefits large-scale corporations (Hilton, Hyatt, etc.), which hold a monopoly on the tourism business thereby regenerating economic surplus-value back to the foreign-based (USA) corporation and not towards the economic benefit of the local community. Place concludes that smaller local eco-tourism ventures (such as those promoted by the Bribri) hold the key to environmental sustainability and national economic stability. Place states:

“Village-based tourism, oriented toward domestic and foreign tourist on a budget, has the potential to produce more economic multipliers than the high-priced, tour-package hotels. Moreover, both women and men can participate in the economic spinoffs from this type of tourism.”¹⁷

Therefore the modernist harmonious cultural authenticity practiced by the Bribri is economically beneficial to both the producer and the consumer of the commodity. This direct Labor-Commodity-Consumer relationship stands in sharp contrast to the corporate capitalist Accumulation-Reproduction-Distribution categories that expropriated the native from his land, industrialized the land, exploited the local labor force and transformed them into ‘living labor’ for corporate profit.

The terminology ‘living labor’ originated in Marxist critique of capitalism¹⁸. According to Marx’s text the origination of living labor is the separation from property. The worker no longer labors for his own use-value but labors as a commodity that can only produce surplus-value. Marx refers to living labor, as a denudation, as a purely subjective existence, as absolute poverty, as immediate bodily existence, as object, as *the living source of value*. Therefore the laborer becomes alienated from their self-actualization due to their continual exploitation in a task that does not directly engage or benefit them but that establishes a circular dependency relationship within the capitalist model. As Marx notes, it is the separation from property and the expropriation from their land that causes the laborer to exist as an alienated mechanism in the mode of capitalist production. What is significant in order for the laborer to feel a sense of self-worth is for the laborer to be self invested in their own modes of production, the laborer needs to be free to create their own modes of value and the laborer needs their own property in which to establish an economic exchange that will directly benefit his labor efforts.

¹⁶ Susan E. Place, *Ecotourism and the Political Ecology of “Sustainable Development” in Costa Rica* (222) 2001.

¹⁷ Susan E. Place, *Ecotourism and the Political Ecology of “Sustainable Development” in Costa Rica* (228) 2001.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse* 1857-8.

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As the initial quote to this essay conveys, small-scale industry is a means for the development of social production (modernization) and also a means for the actualization of an individual as a free and independent agent. Marx in the mid-nineteenth century during the early stages of capitalism recognized the need of individual freedom as well as the need for a modernist participation. Enrique Dussel appreciates and emulates Marxist ideological rationality within his own theoretical dialectics as well as envisions a future ethical framework for the continuation of Marx's logic thought, he states:

“I believe that this Marx will not only be the “Marx of perestroika,” but also the Marx of the entire second century (1983–2083), of the philosopher and economist, who critically deconstructs capitalist economics and reconstructs it anthropologically and ethically, in a democratic vision in which the responsible and participating individual is fully recognized in the community and in solidarity.”¹⁹

Dussel envisions an independent populist democratic Latin America that recognizes the ethical dimension of the subaltern as a participating individual within the greater community as an egalitarian equal. These are basic ethical considerations that aim to correct a past of abusive and unjust social inequalities. Marx and Dussel's globalist projects are essential considerations that bear significance when evaluating the community example of the modernist Bribri enterprise.

Marx recognition of free labor creativity is congruent with Bribri creative use of culture as commodity. The Bribri feel a sense of self-investment that would have been denied to them if they had chosen to be wage-laborers in the greater corporate mainstream tourist projects. They are producers of their own product through the use of their own labor power. They negotiate their cultural knowledge and incorporate this knowledge into their own business enterprises as a means of cultural diplomacy. In this manner they are fully realized as individualist but also participate within the modernist exchange system as a part of a global international community. The Bribri method of production is a direct Laborer-Commodity-Consumer model that directly benefit them, thereby even as members of a subjugated minority they maintain their own dignity and pride with continual ties to their ancestral cultures. Dussel acknowledges the ethical dimension of subaltern peoples and refers to them as “innocent victims” of the colonial destructive agenda. However, placing this label on active members of society relegates them to pity by placing an emphasis on victimization. The Bribri do not consider themselves as victims but as active agents in their own destiny and as vital sources of their cultural continuation.

In conclusion this essay proposes that cultural authenticity is a harmonizing balance between dichotomous forces that are mutually contradictory as well as mutually complimentary. The Bribri modernist ethos of using their cultural traditions as a means of economic commodity is a poignant assertion of human dignity. Against all odds this small community of Indigenous laborers work with the world-system in order to maintain and secure the future of their cultural existence. They are cultural diplomats in the most authentic sense since they believe in an egalitarian ethics of a Universalist human connection. It is impossible to return to a ‘time that was’ since we live ‘in a time that is’, therefore authenticity is a product of the current moment. In a globalized postmodern world we must confront the challenges that lie ahead and consider humanist ethics within the scope of a ‘mode of *social* production’.

¹⁹ Enrique Dussel, *The Four Drafts of Capital* (12) 1992.

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