

Notes From The Field: Juan Bautista And The Importance Of History

Anton Daughters, University of Arizona

E.E. Evans-Pritchard once wrote that anthropology is history if nothing at all. Past and present are forever linked, inseparable components of a larger social whole. "When an anthropologist writes about a society developing in time he writes a history book; different, it is true, from the ordinary narrative and political history but in all essentials the same as social history" (1950: 122).

Evans-Pritchard's words became especially apparent to me on the shores of Llingua, a tiny but densely-forested island that rises sharply out of the glassy waters of the Archipelago of Chiloé.¹ It was an early fall morning in 2006, three months into my fieldwork, and although I had traveled to Chiloé to examine the effects of industrialization on rural parts of the archipelago, I had arrived with only a vague sense of the influence of the region's history on the collective identity of islanders. My perceptions were soon to change.

The sun was just breaking over the horizon that morning, its rays streaming across the lead-colored ocean beneath a layer of dark clouds. Tiny waves lapped the stony beach where I stood, their rhythmic swish broken only by the crowing of a rooster and the shrill cry of seagulls in the distance. Juan Bautista was up early too. The eighty year-old fisherman lived in a weather-beaten but sturdy seaside wooden house on the south face of the island. He was standing next to his beached rowboat, his back arched over a black net in his hands. As I walked over to him, he greeted me with a toothless smile and a gurgle of words, pointing his stubbled chin at the crab that he was trying to untangle from the net. He was holding the crab upside down, working the nylon strands around the slow moving pincers with his leathery fingers. We stood there silently for what seemed like a long time, perched on the edge of water and space, engrossed in the task at hand.

Finally, Juan untangled the crab. Cradling the helpless crustacean in his palm, he glanced at me and made a passing reference to fishing on Llingua over the generations. His comment piqued my curiosity, and I pressed him further on the subject. He grinned broadly in response, invit-

1 The Archipelago of Chiloé is a cluster of more than two dozen islands near the southern tip of South America.

ing me to join him at his house for a cup of maté.²

Moments later we were sitting in his cramped living room. Juan pulled a thick notebook off a simple wooden shelf above us. The worn pages were packed with handwritten notes on the history of the region—sentences scribbled in tiny cursive as if to maximize space on every page; random charts of scientific data he had compiled over the years; crude sketches of the natural environment and of wild, mythological beings. Juan had attained no more than an eighth grade education, however he had spent most of the leisure moments of his hardworking life diligently recording stories and historical facts about the archipelago.

We sipped maté late into the morning. The more we talked the more I became aware of the fundamental connection Chilotes³ saw between their past and their present. Islanders, it seemed, were perpetually calling attention to their colonial history: the initial Spanish occupation of the archipelago, the centuries of semi-abandonment and isolation from settlements on the continent, the brief but traumatic war with the Republic of Chile in the early 1800s. These events in particular stood out sharply in the minds of many Chilotes.

Juan Bautista epitomized this concern with the past. As we sat in his dusty living room, he emphasized to me the first years of contact between indigenous groups on the archipelago and Spanish settlers. It was true, he said in his thick, colloquial Spanish, that “we are who we are in part because of the minga and our isolation.” But the manner in which Spaniards and Indians were initially thrown together—he explained—along with the self-sufficiency that developed thereafter, also factored into the formation of Chilote culture and identity. The first years of the Spanish colonization “set us on a course,” he said. “We are who we are because of our past.”

“If you want to know Los Chilotes,” he added with a subtle tone of counsel, “you have to know about our history.”

Reference Cited

Evans-Pritchard, Edward Evans

1950 Social Anthropology: Past and Present. In *Man*, no.198, pp.118-124.

2 Maté is a tea-like beverage made of a regional herb with high levels of caffeine.

3 Natives of Chiloé refer to themselves as Chilotes.