

Identities on the Periphery: *Mestizaje* in the Lowlands of South America (1) (2)

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Abstract

Identity in Latin America is addressed most commonly with a specific focus on the organizing framework and ideology of *mestizaje*. This paper examines two distinct Latin American identities that exist on the margins of the dominant framework for understanding identity in Latin America. Scholarly work dealing with *mestizaje* emphasizes Indian-White polarities while also highlighting the ambiguities inherent in the *mestizo* identity. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in coastal Ecuador and Amazonian Peru, this article explores the similarities between *montubio* and *ribereño* identities. This article emphasizes the place-based nature of these unique identities while at the same time examining economic practice as fundamental to both *montubio* and *ribereño* cultural identities. Additionally, this article examines the shifting meanings associated with each identity while suggesting that *montubio* and *ribereño* identities can be viewed as undergoing parallel processes with regard to the nation-state and the dominant ideology of *mestizaje*.

Key words: Identity, *Mestizaje*, Latin America, Amazonia, Ecuador, Peru

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Introduction

Latin America is home to extraordinary ethnic and cultural diversity. This diversity is commonly referenced with regard to indigenous, black, white, and *mestizo* identities and a substantial amount of scholarly effort has gone into examining the various ethnic identities that comprise the categories of indigenous and Afro-American, particularly as they relate to the organizing framework and ideology of *mestizaje*. However, relatively few studies have attempted to examine the specific ethnic identities that fit within the broader category of *mestizo*. This article explores two identities from differing contexts in the lowlands of South America, the *ribereño* identity of lowland Amazonian Peru, and the *montubio* identity of lowland coastal Ecuador.³ Building on the work of Chibnik (1991) and his analysis of “quasi-ethnic” identities, the research presented here examines the parallels that exist between two regional identities from distinct locations in lowland South America. In doing so, this article posits that much like indigenous and Afro-American identities, *montubio* and *ribereño* identities exist at the periphery of the dominant Latin American ideology of *mestizaje* and while they are distinct from one another, they share common features that separate them from the prevailing *mestizo* identity. I begin with a brief review of *mestizaje*, followed by a detailed discussion of the *montubio* and *ribereño* identities that references the historical emergence of each identity, the contemporary cultural manifestations of each identity, and an analysis of boundary making with regard to each identity. I conclude with a presentation of the recent politicization of each identity in what marks a transition from the periphery to the center.

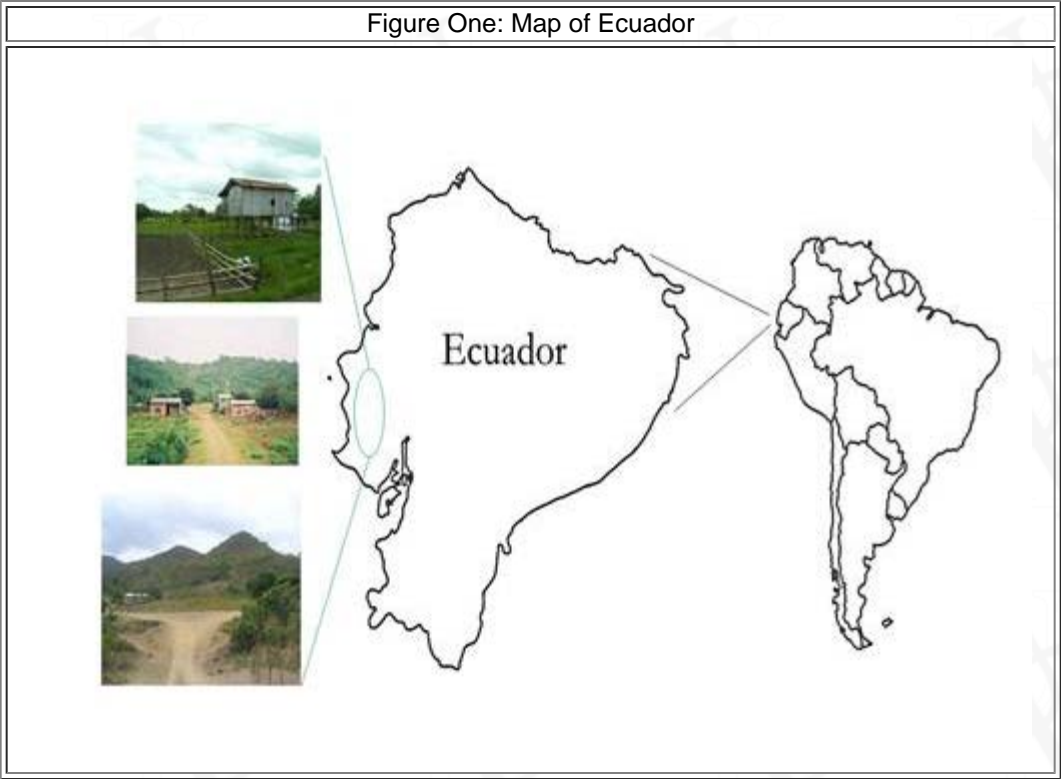
The following discussion of identity, ethnicity, hybridity, and *mestizaje* recognizes the problematic nature of such terms while acknowledging that each is ideologically constructed and historically situated. Following the work of Hall (1994), this work approaches identity, whether ethnic or otherwise, not as a fact, but as a process of continuous production in which said identities are intimately intertwined with questions of power

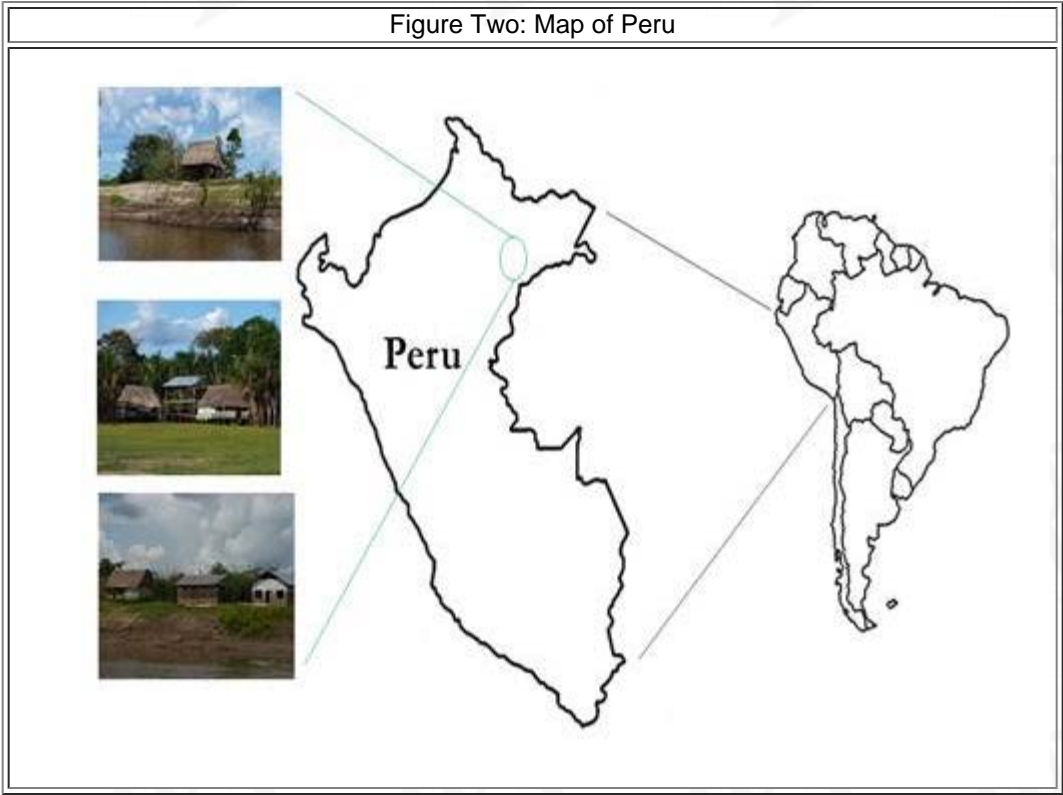
and often represent spaces of contestation. Similarly, hybridity is not here regarded as an objective fact, but as an ideological construct that is best understood by referencing, or minimally by recognizing, the ways in which the complex realities of power relations give shape to cultural realities (Radcliffe 2000). Thus, “hybrid cultures” are to be understood with regard to the historical conditions from which they develop. In the case of Latin America, the dominant force of contact and colonization must be referenced in order to understand the form and content of resulting hybrid identities.

A Brief Note on Methodology and Settings

Ethnographic research for this project was carried out in two distinct lowland South American settings, the Pacific lowlands of coastal Ecuador and the lowland Amazonian region of northeast Peru. Research in coastal Ecuador took place from 2002 to 2013 while research in Amazonian Peru occurred from 2012 to 2014. In both cases, research focused on the contemporary manifestations of identity and the rural life-ways of residents in these traditionally marginalized settings. Research included participant observation and both semi-structured and unstructured interviews and portions of the data reflected here were gathered as part of an extensive survey addressing questions of identity in rural coastal Ecuador.

The settings for this research include rural Manabí Province, coastal Ecuador and the rural Amazonian interior of the Tahuayo region of Loreto District, Peru (See Figure One and Figure Two). Both regions are decidedly rural with similar histories of resource extraction and integration. These features will be outlined in more depth in the forthcoming pages. In each location, research was conducted in multiple villages. The coastal Ecuadorian communities where research was conducted are situated a little more than three hours by bus from the closest regional urban center. In Amazonian Peru, the communities of study are located approximately three and half hours by high speed motor boat from the urban center of Iquitos. Travel on a local boat, known as a *colectivo*, takes approximately twelve hours. Both environments are humid, tropical environments, situated in close proximity to the equator. In both contexts, local residents are the descendants of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples with the term *montubio* being used as an ethno-racial classifier for the residents of the coastal Ecuadorian context and the term *ribereño* being used in the case of Amazonian Peru. This article is about those identities and their meanings as they relate to the politics of *mestizaje* in Latin America.





Mestizaje and Foundations of Hybridity

In the ethno-racial structure of Latin America, the *mestizo* identity is positioned prominently at the center, both at the level of ideology and praxis with “whites” or *criollos* firmly positioned at the top of the ethno-racial hierarchy. A conspicuous characteristic of *mestizaje* is its homogenizing simplicity. The net effect of which, is that “peripheral identities”, those that do not correspond to the essentialized cultural features associated with the broadly conceived categories of indigenous, black, white, or *mestizo*, are hidden from view. The complexity of identity is intentionally masked by a committed focus on the normalizing discourse of *mestizaje* and the omission of identities that do not fit neatly into this model.

Mestizaje is necessarily about boundary making or creating distance between those who are viewed as belonging, and those who are not. However, the pervasive focus on the creation and maintenance of boundaries between *mestizos* and non-*mestizos* and the homogenization of *mestizo* identities, both ideologically and practically, overshadow the existence of identities that do not fit into the neatly constructed package of *mestizaje*.

Contributions to the discourse of *mestizaje* date back to the early colonial period in Latin America with particular attention paid to the coming together of indigenous and Spanish identities as a consequence of contact and conquest. *Casta* paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries point to *mestizaje* as a natural process which seamlessly combines European, indigenous and African physical and cultural features into a newly emergent *mestizo* type. However, *mestizaje* and its counterpart hybridity, do not refer to specific types, but are complex conceptual frameworks that must be understood with regard to histories of exploitation, subjugation, and inequality.

While *mestizaje* is frequently associated with a perceived inclination toward hybridity and homogenization, there are inherent contradictions associated with *mestizaje* as both ideology and practice. One of the contradictions is the assumption of equal blending or mixing. Wade notes that in its original form, *mestizaje* emphasized biological mixing. However, the term was quickly expanded in colonial Latin America to encompass “the spatial mixture of peoples and the interchange of cultural elements, resulting in mixed and new cultural forms” (Wade 1997:28). A second inconsistency is the emergence of *mestizaje* as a discourse of unity that sought to bring together disparate cultural groups and unify them under the umbrella of a

national *mestizo* identity. Published in 1925, Vasconcelos' *La Raza Cósmica* is arguably the most prominent example of the use of *mestizaje* in a nation-building project. However, as numerous scholars have suggested, *mestizaje* is not nearly as inclusive a project as envisioned by Vasconcelos.⁴ Miller for example notes that Vasconcelos was comparable to many of his contemporaries in that "his inclusion of the Indian in projects of regional and national citizenship focused on pre-Columbian contributions" (2004:31) while Doremus (2001) suggests that Mexican national identity, as proposed by Vasconcelos, was predicated on a notion of racial mixture that would ultimately lead to the "Indian's extinction through racial mixing" (380). In mid-twentieth century Mexico, the focus turned from biological mixing to cultural mixing with the intention of creating a modern nation-state through the elimination of indigenous cultural markers. This is what might be considered the fatal flaw of *mestizaje*. As a conceptual framework for understanding the post-contact Americas, it elevates European cultural contributions over indigenous cultural contributes thus fostering a social space of inequality and exclusion while espousing inclusion and equality. This is reflected in Stutzman's analysis of *mestizaje* as an "All-inclusive ideology of exclusion" (1981:45) and Hale's argument that *mestizaje* is founded upon a "unifying myth" (1996:2) For Stutzman, inclusion into *mestizo* (e.g. dominant) society comes at the cost of abandoning indigenous cultural markers, as maintenance of such markers would lead to exclusion. Stutzman's point is directed specifically at nation-building projects and the adoption of a *mestizo* national identity that creates unity in order to overcome diversity for the perceived betterment of the nation in a manner that corresponds to Anderson's (2000) noteworthy discussion of nationalism in which the nation is "imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality an exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). Thus, *mestizaje* espouses an imaginary comradeship through the creation of an identity that is supposedly accessible by all. However, the following diagram, adapted from Stutzman (1981), illustrates the simplistic homogenizing nature of *mestizaje* while also providing a visual representation of the marginalizing character of *mestizaje*.

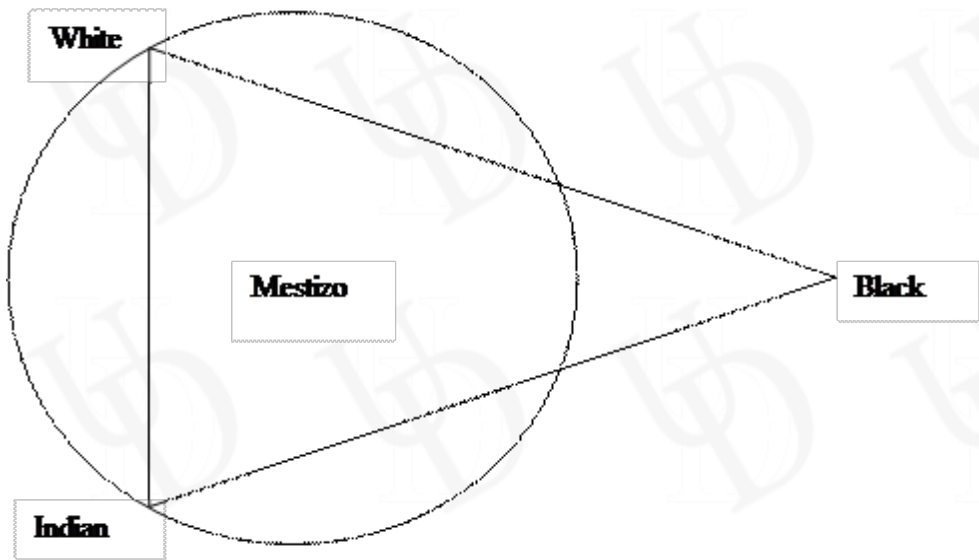


Figure Three: *Mestizaje* (Modified from Stutzman 1981)

Related to the work of Stutzman, Hale (1996) suggests that attempts at creating a unified *mestizo* national identity are often divisive as certain identities, white and *mestizo*, are privileged over identities that exhibit indigenous or African influences. This is what Whitten (2003) reflects upon as the top-down nature of *mestizaje*. It is an elitist imagery that is created and maintained by those in power just as it was in the early colonial period. del Valle Escalante's (2009) work on nationalism in Guatemala points to the pervasive nature of *mestizaje* as an ideology that privileges "whiteness" in the form of *criollo* and *ladino* identities over all other ethno-racial identities. In reflecting on indigenous Guatemalan students and their positions within society, de Valle Escalante notes that *mestizaje* and the *mestizo* or *ladino* identity is supposed to be representative of the modern nation, but such an achievement "tramples on the very dignity of Indian subjectivity, as well as any relationship he or she may have with the indigenous world, to the point of denial and even hatred...colonialism secures its power, creating conditions in which the colonized can be made into one more colonizer, becoming the oppressor of his own people" (2009:134-136). del Valle Escalante's use of the phrasing colonized and colonizer refers less to the historical act of colonization and instead to

cultural colonization, read as domination, of indigenous people by whites and *mestizos* through the implementation of a system that focuses on cultural differences and privileges a certain set of cultural characteristics including education, literacy, and Christianization. The end result is the diminished cultural value of Indianness in favor of cultural markers deemed representative of the modern nation-state.

Building on these theoretical insights, the question that drives the present research, is what then becomes of those that are left on the margins of such a project; on the periphery of *mestizaje* and the *mestizo* identity. *Montubio* and *ribereño* identities are two such identities. This does not however mean that they are outside the spectrum of the *mestizo* identity. *Montubios* and *ribereños* are particular types of *mestizos* and an argument can be made that they are hybrid identities. Certainly the term “hybrid” has garnered much attention and criticism as applied to questions of culture. However, in recognizing the various connotations of the term, it is used here forward not in a biological sense, and it is not here intended to imply equal mixing, but instead following the presentation of García-Canclini (2005) hybridity is used here to refer to complex identities that consist of a variety of indigenous and non-indigenous features that combined result in unique identity markers associated with both *montubio* and *ribereño* identities. However, it is important to note that *montubio* and *ribereño* are not synonyms for *mestizo*. They are qualitatively different identities that are overshadowed by the dominant *mestizo* identity and reflect the homogenizing process of *mestizaje*. In the pages that follow, I trace the historical emergence of these identities and emphasize the existent similarities in diverse geographic contexts.

The Historical Foundations of Difference

The *montubio* designation refers to being a coastal peasant native to south-central coastal Ecuador. However, the meaning of *montubio* is much more complex than this simple one line definition. The term *ribereño* is used throughout the Peruvian Amazon and translates to mean river-dweller. It is often used in conjunction with the term *bosquesino* or forest-dweller. However, the *bosquesino* is more commonly used to refer to inhabitants of *interriverine* environments. Both terms reflect an association with the tropical Amazonian environment. As with the term *montubio*, the meaning of *ribereño* is more nuanced than the meager definition given here. The detailed meanings associated with *ribereño* will be elaborated upon in the forthcoming pages.

Identity formation in the cases of both *ribereño* and *montubio* identities can be traced historically to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the emergence of these identities is linked to the process acculturation and change. Each identity is also related either directly or indirectly to a history of economic expansion and resource extraction. A brief historical overview of the formation on *montubio* and *ribereño* identities is provided in the pages that follow.

--Montubio History

The most important scholarly contributions to understanding the *montubio* include the works of Crespo (1959), de la Cuadra (1996), Estrada (1996), and Roitman (2008, 2009). Each work attempts to present an analysis of *montubio* cultural identity while simultaneously referencing important historical trends in the development of a contemporary *montubio* identity. The contributions of Crespo, de la Cuadra, and Estrada are predominantly descriptive whereas Roitman engages in critical analyses of *montubio* cultural identity with reference to the politics of race and ethnicity in Ecuador.

De la Cuadra (1996) suggests that the term *montubio* had little cultural meaning prior to the late nineteenth century, and rural coastal dwelling peasants were instead more often referenced as being *campesinos* (peasants). Thus, the underlying meaning associated with the *montubio* was one of social class or economic status, a meaning that still forms one component of *montubio* identity in its contemporary manifestations. However, the meaning of *montubio* has always extended beyond class designations to encompass the idea of *mestizaje*. In ethno-racial terms, the *montubio* is generally characterized as having mixed indigenous and European heritage. However, some scholars including Murra (1963) also make reference to African contributions to the *montubio* identity, particularly as they relate to northern Manabí province; an area with a relatively large Afro-Ecuadorian population. It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the term *montubio* began to take on more profound cultural meanings. Economic growth and agricultural expansion in coastal Ecuador were central to this shift.

The beginning decades of the twentieth century ushered in increased agricultural production in coastal Ecuador with a growing emphasis on the production of cacao and coffee and the extractive exploitation of *tagua*.⁵ In the early 1920s Ecuador was exporting an average of six-thousand and eight hundred metric tons of *tagua* per year (Larrea 1924). The development of the region increased relations between wealthy investors from the urban centers including Guayaquil and Manta and peasant residents of the rural coastal

zone. Acosta-Solis (1948) references the relationship in the following way, "For the "montuvio" of the coast tagua always means money, a roof and food; for the farmer, money and shelter; and for the merchant and the State, profit and revenue" (46). Acosta-Solis continues by painting a picture of the *montubio* as reckless in his resource use, as "it does not matter...whether the forests are destroyed or not; the only thing that interests him is to collect the tagua and get money for his expenses and vices" (57). Acosta-Solis' characterization of *montubios* is reflective of the tense relationship present between *montubio* peasants and the non-*montubio* population.⁶ The agitations were not however one-sided. In many instances, *montubios* attempted to protect their land and resources from outsider exploitation. McEwan et al. (2006) note that various communities in southern Manabí organized in order to protect their resources and territories and Southon (1985) provides a detailed account of the growth of a coastal *hacienda* and the subsequent death of its foreman at the hands of the local laborers. One can only imagine that while this event might have been extraordinary in its outcome, the underlying strains were most likely quite common throughout this period of economic expansion along the rural coast.

I suggest that it was the historical conditions of unequal labor relations based in an extractive resource industry driven by the western consumption of *tagua*, and to a lesser extent cacao and coffee that resulted in the emergence of pejorative connotations of "ferocious" and "wild" being associated with the *montubio*. Crespo for example makes reference to the *montubio* as a "wild man who lives in our tropical jungles" (1959:9) and de la Cuadra (1996) cites the *montubio* as being perceived of as ferocious while Whitten (1965) references the *montubio* as characterized as uncivilized and dangerous. Citing de la Cuadra, Becker refers to the *montubio* as "semi-acculturated" (1999:537). In all cases, the implication is that the *montubio* is not tamed or domesticated and as such the meaning of *montubio* extends beyond the domain of economics by referencing something more than mere class or peasantry. While I posit that these deleterious characterizations of coastal dwelling peasants grew out of tensions motivated by economic expansion and inequality, characterized by the patron-client relations of wealthy landowners and laborers, de la Cuadra (1996) suggests that the origin of the *montubio* identity can be traced to Ecuador's Liberal Revolution and the role of *montubios* as revolutionary fighters. I do not find the two to be mutually exclusive and I do believe that there is room for both perspectives in understanding the emergence of the *montubio* as both label and identity. In either case, the meanings attributed to *montubio* identity have a direct correlation to cultural contact and the resultant tensions.

--Ribereño History

Similar to the development of the *montubio* in the Pacific lowlands of coastal Ecuador, the *ribereño* is a product of cultural contact related to economic interactions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The rubber boom of the late nineteenth century is one of the most distinguishing features of northwest Amazonia and the industrial revolution in the United States and Europe created a demand for Amazonian rubber that was satisfied by massive exploitation of the region from approximately 1850 to 1920.

The commercial growth of the northwest Amazon and the Loreto district of northeast Peru more specifically, resulted in significant cultural changes and the emergence of the *ribereño* as a cultural identity. Stanfield (1998) provides one of the most detailed historical accounts of the Amazonian rubber boom in northeast Peru and as such, I draw heavily on his contributions here. Three things are of note when discussing the rubber boom in Amazonia. The first is that the rubber boom is characterized by major demographic shifts in the form of white colonization of the Amazonian interior and the development of Amazon cities such as the city of Iquitos. Iquitos, founded along the banks of the Nanay River as a Jesuit settlement in 1757, had a population of only two hundred residents nearly one hundred years later in 1850. The population grew to two thousand by 1880 and to over fourteen thousand by 1900. The rapid growth is directly related to the expansion of the rubber industry and movement to the city by whites and *mestizos* from within and outside of Peru as well as indigenous individuals being drawn into the city for access to material goods. During this same period, Peruvian rubber exports increased dramatically, with the most notable increase taking place from 1880 to 1888. Eighty-four metric tons of rubber were exported in 1880. This number increased to over two-thousand metric tons by 1888 (Thorp and Bertram 1978).

The need to harness labor and exploit rubber brought colonizers, white, *mestizo*, and Asian, into contact with indigenous populations of the Amazon basin and its tributaries. Intermediaries, or traders, set up posts at locations along major waterways and minor tributaries and purchased locally extracted materials in exchange for consumer goods. In many cases, marriage relations were established along with permanent settlements. Padoch (1988) makes direct reference to the *ribereño* identity as emerging from the cultural interactions of various groups.

The new community...was composed of people of diverse backgrounds. There were ex-Ashaninkas, ex-Cocamas, mestizos descended from Cocama-European unions...ex-Quichuas...several ex-Yagua women. All consider themselves *ribereños*. Their village composition as well as their ethnic identity is very clearly the result of a strange history of forest-production exploitation in the Peruvian Amazon (132).

Padoch's use of the prefix *ex* to describe individuals of various indigenous backgrounds relates to Chibnik's (1991) use of the phrase "de-tribalized Indians" in referencing *ribereños* and Newing and Bodmer (2003) provide a similar insight by defining *ribereños* as "detribalized riverside dwellers" (110). This corresponds well to the definition of *montubios* as "semi-acculturated peasants" (Becker 1999:537) and points to the need to recognize a component of identity that extends beyond social class and peasant status in both the case of the *ribereño* and the *montubio*.



Figure Four: Scarred Rubber Tree, *Hevea brasiliensis*, located near the Río Blanco, Loreto, Peru. Photo taken by the author, 2013

In my own research in the Tahuayo region of the Peruvian Amazon, there are clear signs of the impact of the rubber boom on the area. The most notable indicator is the existence of scarred rubber trees that were tapped nearly a century ago. In addition to this, inquiries into the histories of local villages illuminate connections to rubber exploitation and other extractive resource industries that have brought together wealthy investors and peasant labor populations and in some cases villages carry names associated with the early traders who set up trading posts in order to take advantage of the economic windfalls of unregulated resource extraction. For example, in the case of one village, local residents recite the history of the village with reference to an Asian trader who moved into the area in the early 1900s. The development of trade relations resulted in permanent settlement and formation of a community made up of individuals with a variety of indigenous ethnic backgrounds including Quechua, Cocama, Shuar, and Yagua. The work of Newing and Bodmer (2003) supports this by acknowledging the movement of peoples (*ribereños*) as influenced by demand for resources from national and international markets. Thus, the history of resource exploitation and the corresponding movement of native peoples resulted in the development of contemporary *ribereño* communities and the formation of a *ribereño*

identity.

Contemporary Manifestations and Embedded Social Meanings

The histories of natural resource extraction that underpin the emergence of *montubio* and *ribereño* identities provide a background for the comparison of contemporary manifestations of these respective identities. Such a comparison of these two identities points to marked similarities as they relate to *mestizaje*. The first similarity is that neither identity is understood within its own cultural context to be of equal cultural value to the dominant *mestizo* identity. A second similarity is an emphasis on economic practice as a defining feature of both identities. A final parallel comes in the form of the regionalization of each identity.

--Montubio

The meanings of *montubio* are complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, we can approach the *montubio* from the perspective of the cultural characteristics associated with the identity. On the other hand, there is also a need to examine the significant cultural meanings attributed to the *montubio* identity, both by those who claim the identity and those who reference the *montubio* with regard to difference.

I began conducting research in rural coastal Ecuador in 2002. At the time I was unfamiliar with the cultural significance of the term *montubio* and it was only after an extensive amount of time in the field and significant reflection on my past field experiences that I am able to articulate the meanings of this complex term. With this in mind, it is fair to say that to be *montubio* is to embody a certain lifestyle or culture. De la Cuadra (1996) suggests that the term *montubio* references *monte* (hill or mountain) and *bio* or *vida* (life). *Montubios* are therefore "hill people" who make a living as horticulturalists and in some cases peasant

fishermen along the Ecuadorian littoral where the ocean meets the land and low-lying hills rise abruptly from the coastline.

In my experience, self-proclaimed *montubios* take pride in their ability to live off of the land growing subsistence crops such as plantains, manioc, citrus, bananas, papaya, and a variety of other vegetables in swidden plots that provide for family consumption. Plots are most commonly situated a short distance from one's home and are attended to daily or almost daily. Many self-identifying *montubios* also produce cash crops such as coffee and sugar cane or raise cattle in order to generate income. Other livestock that are important to the *montubio* way of life include pigs, chickens, and ducks along with horses or donkeys. Small-scale subsistence fishing is also practiced, although this is rare as the term *montubio*



Figure Five: *Montubio* home, Manabí, Ecuador.
Photo taken by the author, 2006

is more closely associated with horticultural activities than with fishing. In addition to these characteristic features of *montubio* life, most *montubios* take advantage of opportunities to work for a daily wage when the opportunity presents itself. The most common forms of employment include construction or some other form of manual labor.

Being *montubio* is generally associated with a particular economic status, the status of a peasant or *campesino* (Figure Five). In a 2009 interview with Don Reymundo, a self-proclaimed *montubio*, he relayed the message that to be *montubio* is to work the land. “*Soy montubio...soy Manabí. Trabajando en el campo como campesino es parte de nuestra vida*” (I am *montubio*...I am Manabí [from Manabí]. Working in the country as a peasant is part of our life.) Don Reymundo references two of the most important features associated with the *montubio* identity, the economic component, and the regional component. This compares favorably to Murra’s (1963) discussion of *montubios* in which he states:

The population of the Coastal areas became known as *montuvios*. Racially, they are a blend of White, Negro, and Indian genes in various proportions, with the Negro dominant in the north and the Indian in the south. Culturally, the *montuvio* has been historically an Ecuadorian, meaning a non-Indian farmer cultivating rice, maize, beans, and pineapples, and working on large cacao, indigo, and rubber plantations (817).

Murra’s brief discussion of *montubio* identity provides multiple points for comment. The first is that Murra is correct in his assertion that *montubios* are of mixed ancestry. However, there seems to be very little consensus on the phenotypic features of a *montubio* and the definition is constantly shifting. For example, Murra points to African contributions to the *montubio* identity while in a study conducted at about the same time, Whitten refers to the *montubio* as a “light-skinned Costeño with no striking Negro features, especially one from Manabí or Guayas province” (1965:92). However, Whitten does also make note of the *montubio* term being used, albeit with lesser frequency in the northern coastal province of Esmeraldas where African features are more prominent. These early references to the *montubio* reflect the challenges in conceiving of the *montubio* in ethno-racial terms while at the same time indicating rather clearly, if indirectly, that the *montubio* is a type of *mestizo*.

Roitman (2008) suggests that this mixed heritage includes African contributions both phenotypically and culturally. De la Cuadra (1996) makes a similar claim by suggesting that the *montubio* is an elaboration of “three races and their respective varieties” including indigenous, black, and white (27). In addressing this issue, de la Cuadra goes so far as to provide a summary of the composition of the *montubio* as sixty percent indigenous, thirty percent black, and ten percent white. Of note is that Whitten’s (1965) discussion of *montubios* contrasts markedly with that provided by de la Cuadra. In his text on Afro-Ecuadorians of Esmeraldas, Whitten provides concise definitions of ethno-racial terms utilized in Ecuador and not surprisingly, the term in need of the most definition is *montubio*. What is clear in Whitten’s presentation is that the term *montubio* is not associated with Afro-Ecuadorian or black phenotypic or cultural features and

instead is used to refer to “A monolingual Spanish-speaking Indian native to the coast” or “Any lower- or middle-class, *light skinned* person from Manabí or Guayas province”⁷ (1965: 91). Ultimately, there is little consensus other than the suggestion that the *montubio* is of mixed biological and cultural heritage.

Perhaps more importantly, the *montubio* identity is a place-based identity that is associated most strongly with rural Manabí, Santa Elena, and Guayas provinces and to a lesser extent the northern coastal province of Esmeraldas. The notion of *montubio* as a rural identity is juxtaposed with the urban identity of major coastal population centers including Manta and Guayaquil (Ecuador's largest city with a population of nearly two million residents). The positioning of the *montubio* identity as a rural identity serves as a mechanism for differentiating the *montubios* from the dominant *mestizo* identity that preferences urbanness over ruralness. Thus, the *montubio* identity exists both literally and symbolically on the periphery of Ecuadorian consciousness.

--Ribereño

Like the *montubio* identity, the *ribereño* identity is place-based in as much as it refers to, and is used as a self-referential term by residents of the eastern Peruvian Amazon. Beyond having regional connotations that are place-centered in the Amazon, *ribereño* identity is linked to a particular way of life.

Culturally, *ribereños* tend to live in close proximity to navigable waterways. Contemporary *ribereños* practice swidden horticulture in small plots cut from the forest. Common crops include bananas, plantains, manioc, melons, and occasionally maize. In some areas, rice is produced as a cash crop. Most *ribereños* of Loreto also hunt and fish in order to provide sustenance for their families and to offer an occasional surplus of goods for sale in markets in the urban center of Iquitos. *Ribereños* also occasionally raise animals for household consumption including chickens, ducks, geese, and the occasional pig. Much like *montubios*, *ribereños* tend to be peasants or *campesinos* who make a living off the land and who engage predominantly in the informal economy.

Chibnik (1991:173) notes that the “principle meaning of *ribereño* is non-Indian and rural” and while many *ribereños* are monolingual in Spanish my research indicates that the local dialect of the region is heavily influenced by numerous indigenous words and elders in many communities also speak one or more indigenous languages with Yagua, Cocama, and Quechua being the most common. Moreover, indigenous surnames are quite common among *ribereños* of the Tahuayo and some communities are considered more indigenous than others. For example, the village of Ayacucho is considered by many in the region to be an Achuar community and the village of San Jacinto has a strong Yagua influence both linguistically and culturally.

I first met Don Celestino over a decade ago when I visited the region as an aspiring anthropologist and adventure tourist. At the time his family resided outside of the village of San Jacinto and their family residence was built in traditional Yagua fashion with a round house and thatched roof. Don Celestino has since moved into the village and his family lives in a *ribereño* style home, elevated off of the ground along the river's edge (Figure Six). I visited Don Celestino and his family on warm morning in July, 2013. I was accompanied by my local consultant and guide Xavier. Don Celestino and his wife Doña Isabela, were at the river's edge preparing to visit their *chacra* (horticultural plot). With a small plastic dish they scooped the water out of their canoe with quick movements and rapid precision. Upon recognizing our arrival both Don Celestino and Doña Isabela walked through the tall grass and up the muddy embankment to greet us. Don Celestino's son José, a young man in his early thirties, stood near the family home and cautiously invited us to enter. José was noticeably shy and uncomfortable, he spoke softly and



Figure Six: Typical *Ribereño* Home, Loreto, Peru
Photo taken by the author, 2012

deliberately with a clear sense of self-consciousness that reflected his lack of comfort in speaking Spanish. He commented on Xavier's machete, a new one that Xavier had just recently purchased while we were in Iquitos the week prior. José mentioned that his machete had recently broken and asked to see Xavier's machete. Xavier obliged. José ran the blade of the machete across the wooden bench that he was sitting on and admired the bright orange plastic handle and the precision with which the machete would cut. He spoke only briefly and the interaction was cut short by Doña Isabela as she offered a bowl of *masato* (manioc beer) in a customary fashion of welcoming us to her home. With a look of anxiety in his eyes, José made his way out of the main room of the home and into the kitchen area. Xavier would later tell me that his own interactions with José are normally limited due to what he perceived to be embarrassment at not having a complete competency in the Spanish language.

Don Celestino and his family are representative *ribereños* in as much as they reflect multiple cultural influences including strong indigenous components to their identity. Chibnik (1991) and Campanera Reig (2012) note similar patterns based on their research conducted along the Amazon River and the Marañón River respectively. Citing Hernández (1970), Santos-Granero and Barclay (2000) reference the *ribereño* as distinct from indigenous populations of the Peruvian Amazon and suggest that in its earliest anthropological usage the term *ribereño* made little reference to ethnicity, but instead was a reference to geographic location and economic status. It was not until the 1970s, and the work of San Román (1974) that the meaning of *ribereño* began to take on an ethnic component that included white, *mestizo*, African, Asian, and indigenous contributions. While specific definitions of *ribereño* vary dependent upon perspective and the time of elaboration, *ribereño* communities represent an amalgamation of cultural features that coalesce to form the *ribereño* identity in the ongoing process of *mestizaje*.

--Meanings and Boundaries

The meanings of *ribereño* and *montubio* extend well beyond a discussion of culture traits and representative cultural forms. Representations of *montubio* and *ribereño* identities reflect the role of embedded social meanings in boundary making. Building on the work of Barth (1969), a more refined understanding of these identities requires an examination of the relations of power and the boundaries that are demarcated in order to assert difference. It is imperative to recognize that while such boundaries may be arbitrarily drawn and differences are frequently essentialized for instrumental purposes, ethnic boundaries are linked to embedded social meanings that highlight differences in the process of boundary making.

Both terms reflect boundaries that distinguish them from the broader *mestizo* category and mark the *montubio* and the *ribereño* as particular types of *mestizos*. Historically, the term *montubio* has carried numerous negative connotations that move beyond associations with economy and regionalism. In popular contexts to be *montubio* is to be ignorant, uneducated, and/or backwards. A *montubio* is a *mestizo* who lacks refinement and who exhibits more "indigenous" qualities than Spanish or "white" qualities. Thus, the *montubio* designation is a cultural marker that signifies difference between rural coastal populations in Ecuador and urban, "modern" populations and in both urban and rural contexts, the term *montubio* is used pejoratively to refer to people who are less refined than the speaker. I have encountered this on numerous occasions while spending time with urban elites in the city of Guayaquil and during my time in the villages and hamlets of rural Manabí province. I heard frequent references to ill-mannered children as behaving like *montubios*. The term *montubio* is also used to refer to one who possesses characteristics such as drunkenness and thievery. These characteristics are however not independent of the regional and economic components that I have defined previously.

The term *ribereño*, while similar to *montubio* with regard to economic and regional dimensions, reflects a less stigmatized embedded social meaning. Isla (2009) for example, paints an idealized picture of the *ribereño* as living in harmony with nature and being fully dependent upon the bounty of the Amazon for survival and the maintenance of "the good life". Newing and Bodmer (2003) present a similar assessment by suggesting that *ribereños* "have often been portrayed as natural allies of conservation because of low-intensity use of resources" (2003:111). However, at the same time that *ribereños* receive such positive portrayals, there is also a tendency to contrast these with mainstream notions of the *ribereño* as underdeveloped, backward, poor, and needy (Isla 2009). Illustrating this is former Peruvian President Alan García's characterization of Peru's Amazonian inhabitants, classified generally as *bosquesinos*, as "orchard dogs" that do not take advantage of the bountiful resources of the Amazon while simultaneously attempting to prevent others from gaining access (García 2007). This reference was made as part of a broader dialogue pertaining to conservation and natural resource exploitation in the Peruvian Amazon. As has been common throughout Latin America, García's characterization of rural residents of the Amazon as backward, ignorant, and underdeveloped, serves the agendas of the dominant white and *mestizo* upper class while perpetuating

the marginalization of *ribereños*.

For their part, *ribereños* generally do not conceive of the term as carrying a derogatory meaning although in interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013, it was clear that self-identifying *ribereños* do conceive of their identity as it relates to economic practice, rurality, and regionality and local cultural history. *Ribereño* is in a very real sense, a way of being. As one consultant of, being *ribereño* refers to making a living by the river. However, often times the more derogatory term “*chacarero*” is used by people living in the urban center of Iquitos to refer to *ribereños* in a derogatory manner. The term comes from the root word *chacra* or horticultural field and denotes someone who makes a living by using a machete and working horticultural fields. However, it carries a strong negative connotation of being uneducated and backward. Juan Carlos, a young naturalist guide who grew up outside of Iquitos working on his family’s *chacra* and who has since earned a university education, shared with me how he was taunted with this term by city-dwelling children when he was growing up. This apparent contradiction between upper class understandings of *ribereño* identity and the meanings ascribed to it and locally ascribed meanings speaks to the peripheral nature of *ribereño* identity and the top down process of marginalization.

The work of both Chibnik (1991) and Isla (2009) as well as my own research, indicate that the term *ribereño* is used to demarcate boundaries between urban and rural in Amazonian Peru in much the same way that the term *montubio* is used in Ecuadorian boundary making. One example of this is the frequency with which residents of the Amazonian city of Iquitos referenced themselves as *mestizo* while referring to residents of outlying villages as *ribereño*. In conversations with consultants, it was common for them to make references about leaving the city and going into the Amazonian interior as going to *pueblos ribereños*.

In both the case of *ribereño* and *montubio*, the embedded social meanings serve to create distance and distinguish the identity from the dominant *mestizo* identity. The result of this is the peripheralization of these identities. As I have argued, this is due to the historical circumstances surrounding the emergence of these identities coupled with the ethno-racial hierarchy associated with the paradigm of *mestizaje*.

Bringing the Periphery to the Center

While the history of *montubio* and *ribereño* identities in Latin America is one of marginalization and peripheralization, the periphery has recently moved toward the center as *montubios* and *ribereños* challenge the structure of Latin American identity politics. Scholarly research is only starting to address the dynamic nature of these identities as they confront the structure of *mestizaje* and push for recognition.

The emergence of a *montubio* political discourse takes the form of the *Consejo del Desarrollo del Pueblo Montubio de la Costa Ecuatoriana y Zonas Subtropicales de la Región Litoral* (Council for the Development of the Montubio Community of the Ecuadorian Coast and Subtropical Zones of the Littoral Region) (CODEPMOC). CODEPMOC emphasizes ethnicity over class and the formal organization of CODEPMOC in 2001 has resulted in an increase in the value of *montubio* ethnic capital. While *montubios* are not claiming an indigenous identity, they are asserting an indigenous-like identity by adopting an ethnic discourse to promote political awareness. The result of this process of “coming to center” is a recent increase in state allocated resources to *montubio* communities and an increase in political leverage for CODEPMOC (Roitman 2008, 2009).

In Peru, *ribereños* have not adopted an official ethnic discourse. However, *ribereños* do take membership in the *Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana* (The Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest) and many *ribereño* communities have also established partnerships with environmental coalitions. Both of the aforementioned avenues reflect a heightened political awareness and an increase in the politicized nature of *ribereño* identity in recent decades. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly common for *ribereño* communities to “exchange class for ethnicity” in an attempt to secure communal land rights and protect traditional territory from outsider exploitation. In doing so, *ribereños* undergo a legal shift from classification as *campesino* (peasant) to *nativo* (native). In accordance with Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, which recognizes cultural self-identification as sufficient for the legal recognition of indigenous status, *ribereño* communities have effectively gained indigenous rights.⁸ Santos-Granero and Barclay (2000) reflect on this process of indigenization as reversing the process of *ribereñoization* that began in the mid nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Ribereño and *montubio* identities exist on the periphery of the dominant *mestizo* identity that forms the cornerstone of identity politics in most Latin American countries. And while there is a tendency among

scholars to understand *mestizaje* by referencing a model that emphasizes the ethno-racial categories of indigenous, *mestizo*, black, and white, my research points to the dynamic nature of identity and a need to reexamine these categories, particularly the category of *mestizo*. In this article I focus on the position of *ribereño* and *montubio* identities as related to the ideology of *mestizaje* and I argue that despite significantly different geographic contexts, both identities are products of economic expansion and the associated processes of marginalization.

For scholars concerned with identities, ethnic or otherwise, in Latin America, there is a pressing need to look beyond the dominant model of *mestizaje* and question the boundaries of identity by examining those identities that do not fit neatly into the ethno-racial categories that are traditionally examined within discussions of *mestizaje*. As my research indicates, not all *mestizo* identities are equal and while a significant body of literature exists pertaining to indigenous and Afro-American identities as related to *mestizaje*, little has been done to address *mestizo* identities that do not correspond to dominant notions of what it means to be *mestizo*. Just as *montubio* and *ribereño* groups are pushing for recognition, often by highlighting ethnicity over class, there is a need to bring peripheral *mestizo* identities to the center of scholarly discussions pertaining to ethnicity and identity in Latin America and to recognize the restricting of boundaries through political action that emphasizes ethnic components.

Notes:

- 1 An early version of this paper was presented at the 2013 Meetings of the Central States Anthropological Society. **Return.**
- 2 Pseudonyms are used for the names of individuals and locations in order to protect the identity of consultants. **Return.**
- 3 The alternate spelling *montuvio* is also frequently used. **Return.**
- 4 Bauer (2012), Cervone (2010), Hale (1996), Miller (2004), Roitman (2009), Stutzman (1981) and Whitten (2003) for example. **Return.**
- 5 Tagua is a palm nut from the Ecuadorian Ivory Palm (*Phytelephas aequatorialis*). It was exploited in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for use in applications including buttons and other adornments. It is still harvested today throughout much of coastal Ecuador its primary use is in the craft production of carved figurines or as a source of food for livestock. **Return.**
- 6 It is worth noting that Acosta-Solis was the director of the Ecuadorian Institute of Natural Sciences. **Return.**
- 7 Author's emphasis added. **Return.**
- 8 Convention 169 of the ILO recognizes self-identification as a fundamental component of indigenous identity. Peru ratified ILO Convention 169 in 1989. **Return.**

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