“Creating Heritage Elites: The Language of Rights and the Practice of Privileges in an Afro-Descendant Community in Colombia”

The town of San Basilio de Palenque, in Colombia, was proclaimed “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” (ICHH) by UNESCO in 2005. In this talk, I present how rights discourse has been appropriated by intellectual elites in this Afro-descendant town to solidify social, symbolic, and political distinctions. Following the proclamation of its “cultural space” as ICHH, local rights rhetoric in San Basilio de Palenque has operated as a marker of status and class that has helped define a new kind of political subject, ethnic citizen, and heritage entrepreneur. I argue that rights discourse has become a valued resource for local elites that has further entrenched social exclusion and forged new forms of inequality between Palenqueros. Indeed, entrenchment of difference and the creation of elitism are evidence of heritage’s limitation to foster inclusiveness and equality. I underline the irony of this situation, whereby a theoretically liberating discourse on rights and equality is used on the ground to create divisions and reinforce status differentiation. I call attention to the language of rights, benefits, and entitlements used by Palenqueros today, and trace the way in which elites justify their current privileges as earned rights for their work on Palenque’s ICHH nomination. Given the increasing attention that rights rhetoric receives in current heritage scholarship, and the rising levels of inequality worldwide, it is timely to examine ethnographically how heritage-based rights talk may be used locally as an element of segregation and elitism.

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