

Affiliative Reterritorialization: Mobile Heritage and the Japanese Colony in Peru

Helaine Silverman
Department of Anthropology
University of Illinois

Abstract

A multidisciplinary literature documents the embodied and tangible placemaking activities of immigrants that engender alternative landscapes of meaning and complex and contingent notions and performances of identity in new diasporic environments as immigrants maintain strong ties to or preferences for homeland traditions.

A less common and less commonly recognized phenomenon is what I call “affiliative reterritorialization” whereby an immigrant group seeks to draw a relationship between itself and its host country and thus assert its participation and place in the nation from a diasporic position of anxiety. I discuss the Japanese colony in Peru from this perspective.

Of all the foreign communities in Peru at the turn of the twentieth century the Japanese were the most recent, one of most numerous and the most ambitious – eager to create a space and place for themselves in a new country. As a readily identifiable group, and a self-identifying group, the early Japanese colony found official welcome but public animosity, thus occupying an ambiguous place in Peruvian society.

The Japanese diaspora seized upon the centenary celebration of Peruvian independence from Spain (1821-1921) to sponsor a great monument to the mythic founder of the Inca Empire, Manco Capac. In so doing they were drawing a connection between themselves as originating in an “Empire of the Sun” and Peru’s heritage in its own indigenous “Empire of the Sun.”

Several years after its erection the Manco Capac monument fell victim to the shift in political regime. The monument was moved to a lower-class working district, itself full of foreign and highland immigrants. That location has since been dramatically altered and with it the narrative of the Manco Capac monument and the Japanese colony.