

# Constructing local traditions in the face of national and global changes: The Manito festival of Ocú, Panama

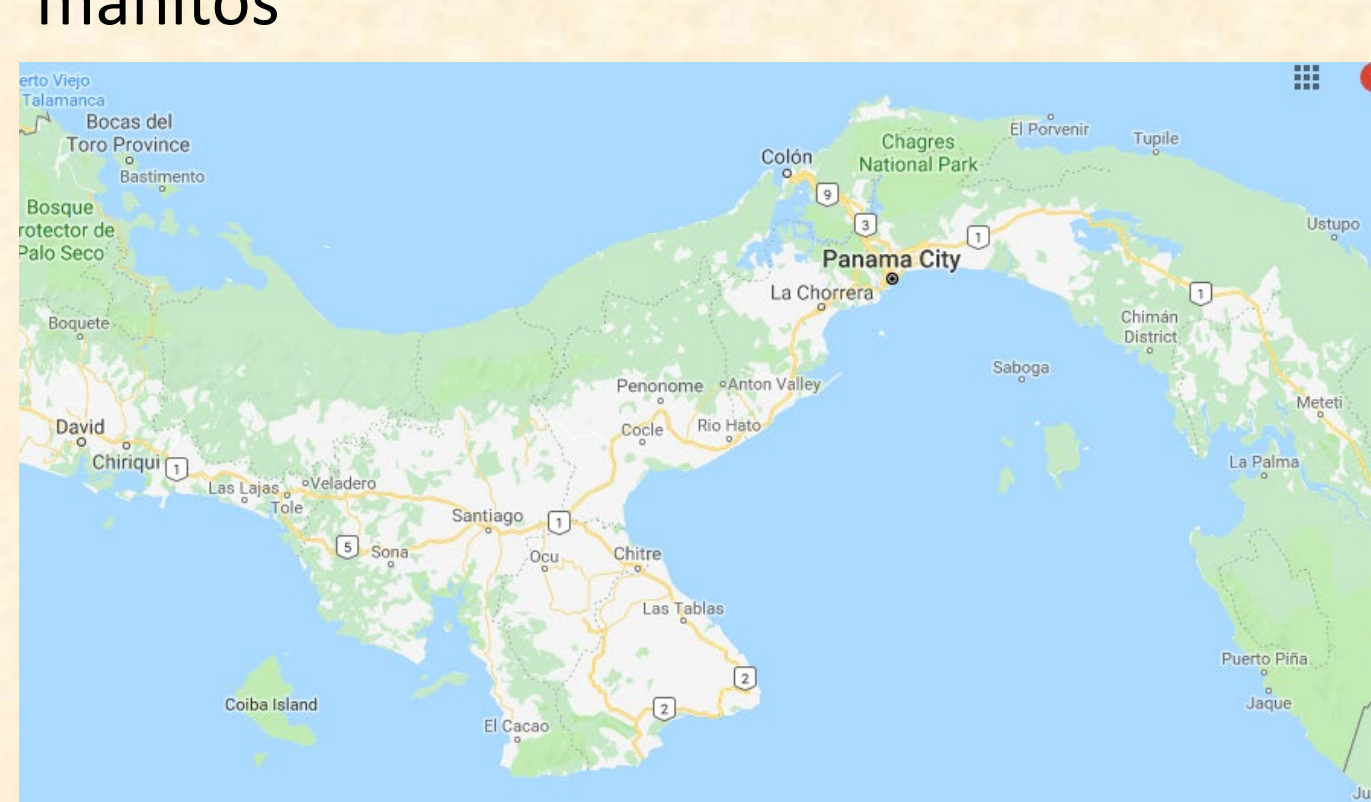
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## FESTIVALS AND HERITAGE

- Festival are a form of public performance, which may serve functions such as enforcing hierarchies and values, sharing specific interpretations of a historical event, enhancing community coherence or allowing an outlet for otherwise culturally unacceptable behaviors (Cudny, 2016).
- According to Falassi (1987), “*Festival commonly means a periodically recurrent social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees all members of the whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview*”
- Heritagization and festivalization of cultural practice part of protection from unpredictability of modernity : “When deemed successful, safeguarding (1) *reforms the relationship of subjects with their own practices* (through sentiments such as “pride”), (2) *reforms the practices* (orienting them toward display through various conventional heritage genres), and ultimately (3) *reforms the relationship of the practicing subjects with themselves* (through social institutions of heritage that formalize informal relations and centralize dispersed responsibilities)” (Hafstein, 2018)

## FESTIVAL NACIONAL DEL MANITO

- Located in the province of Herrera, the town of Ocú serves as district seat. The city was home to just over 7000 residents in 2010. This is an agricultural area, and the town is surrounded by hilly areas difficult to access. In those areas, some agricultural practices are not modernized
- The Manito festival was founded in 1967 by public school teachers as a celebration of the cultural heritage of the area, specifically the peasants of the rural hilly areas. It serves as a celebration of the collaboration, practices, clothing, and music typical of the Manito
- The term “*Manito*”, signifying “little hand” or “little brother”, symbolizes the people of the area and in particular the collaboration ingrained in the peasant life-style. The gentlemen in the picture below are dressed and appear as “authentic manitos”



## FESTIVAL EVENTS

- Adult and Children Competitions:
  - Traditional attire and music
- Performative events
  - Queens and princesses dance
  - Peasant wedding
  - Duel at the Tamarind
  - Parade
- Merchandise and commerce:
  - Handicraft and food stands



Left: The festival parade. Showcase agricultural traditions and dancers show the attire deemed specific for the region

## METHODS

- Collaborative fieldwork was conducted during the August 2018 celebration
- Field work was part of a project spanning now three years focused on tourism and festivals in Panama, a collaboration between a group of anthropologists at Ashford University and the CEO and founder of PanamaTipico.com, Mr. Jaén Espinosa.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with festival leadership, founders, participants, and local business people. Observations were conducted before, during and after the festival, and festival visitors were surveyed.



- Clockwise from top left: A) The performance *Duel at the Tamarind*, which reenact stories of duels and punishment before the establishment of official police force in the area. B) The bride and groom at the center of the peasant wedding leaving the church on horseback, riding towards the festival grounds. C : *Manito preparation at a public school* Food is served and children taught about the tradition. D) Children performing dance and showing clothing at the Manito festival
- Center: After the Church ceremony and horse-back parade through town, the bridal couple are carried to the festival stage and fed by hand.

## MANITO: ORIGIN, PURPOSE

- Working with public school teachers, several early organizers and co-founders also had backgrounds in folklore and folk music.
- Motivator was desire to teach young people about traditions and celebrate the authentic Ocueños, the everyday peasant traditions.
- Need to establish something specific, from both national and international traditions, and preserve it.
- One organizer was instrumental in writing national law on heritage and folklore support.



Above: The Queen and Princesses of the Manito festival. Being high school girls, they are selected based on knowledge of folklore and the festival

## RESULTS

The festival’s resilience can be attributed to:

- Its ability to reach the people it purports to represent, the peasants in the outer-laying areas, and engage them as organizers and participants
- The focus on schools to facilitate and transmit the tradition
- The ability to operate also on a national level to ensure formal recognition as a heritage festival with a *patronato* as organizational leadership
- Strict adherence to the constructed authenticity, in terms of what counts as traditional attire, music and dance.

The festival can be seen as a resistance to modernization and external influences through the heritagization process as argued by Hafstein (2018):

- 1) Reforming participant’s relationship with their practice: recurring themes were “defenders of tradition”, “pride” and “authentic”.
- 2) Practices reformed into display: Clothing and music are taken from their daily functions and put on stage, while the wedding is a practice simultaneously functioning as a ritual display of traditions.
- 3) Reform the relationship of the practitioners with themselves through social institutions: *Patronao* established for formalizing the festival both internally and externally, and judges at the competitions enforce criteria of authentic Ocueños.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Manito festival of Ocú has succeeded in establishing itself as a national Panamanian folkloric festival: the recognition resulted from the ability of organizers and founding members to influence legislation and rule-making on the national level. As a deliberate construct, the festival serves as a form of resistance to external cultural influences. The cultural practices put on display are still a lived experience for some people and as such, it is both a living tradition and a celebration of cultural heritage. The resistance to external process can be understood through the three elements of heritagization as discussed by Hafstein (2018), and should also be understood in the context of the Panamanian experience of making concrete a cultural and national identity separate from Colombia and U.S.A.



## REFERENCES

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