Interaction, social identity, agency and change during Middle Horizon San Pedro de Atacama (northern Chile): A multidimensional and interdisciplinary perspective

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ABSTRACT

In the present paper we discuss different levels of social identities operating simultaneously in the social landscape of San Pedro de Atacama (northern Chile) during the Middle Horizon (ca. 500–950 AD). Complementary lines of evidence are approached from an interdisciplinary perspective in order to identify distinct patterns of affiliation and differentiation which were played out by local agents. We propose these patterns reflect different levels of social integration, whereby the local community of San Pedro de Atacama reinforced its corporate identity in spite of growing social differences and integrated into a higher-level organization of nested hierarchies making up the Tiwanaku state.

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Introduction

The study of identity and ethnicity has gained renewed interest during the last decades in the social sciences and particularly in archaeology (see for example Amundsen-Meyer et al., 2010; Banks, 1996; Díaz-Andreu et al., 2005; Emberling, 1997; Eriksen, 1993; Fernández-Götz and Ruiz Zapatero, 2011; Hernando, 2002; Hu, 2013; Jones, 1997; Meskell, 2001, 2002; Reycraft, 2005a; Shennan, 1989; Stovel, 2013; Vermeulen and Govers, 1996; among many others). The work of Barth (1969) has been fundamental in this process, bringing anthropological attention on ethnicity, as well as challenging former "essentialist" approaches on social identities.

Three important conclusions arise from Barth and his colleagues' edited volume which have been especially relevant to archaeologists: (i) ethnic categories are not fixed social "molds", but rather subjective categories of adscription centered around the organization of cultural differences; (ii) social agents strategically ascribe themselves to such subjective categories in particular social, ecological and political contexts; (iii) cultural differences are managed in scenarios of cultural interaction so that ethnic identities are not defined by their intrinsic cultural content, but rather by the mobilization of differences between an "us" and an "other". The consequence of such a claim is that social identities (ethnic or otherwise) are formed through a process of construction and reproduction of differences in the context of situated practices of individuals and groups. Practice theory thus seems especially relevant to address issues of identity and community formation in archaeology (i.e. Bentley, 1987; MacSweeney, 2011, among others), inasmuch as it transcends the dichotomy between concepts of social identity as "a passive reflection of similarities and differences in the cultural practices and structural conditions in which people are socialized" (Jones, 1997: 90) or as merely a product of strategic social interaction "where epiphenomenal cultural symbols are consciously manipulated in the pursuit of economic and political interests" (Jones, 1997; see also Hu, 2013). Yaeger has further explored the application of practice theory to the understanding of group identity formation, analyzing the ways in which practices and/or discourses "of affiliation" which represent affinities and commonalities among individuals, explicitly define (and contest) community membership and boundaries across social landscapes (Yaeger, 2000: 125).

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From this perspective, social identity is not an independent variable which explains individual and social behavior, but rather a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that needs to be researched and understood on its own (Comaroff, 1985; Pauketat, 2000). It is because of this that anthropology is in need of a comparative ethnology of the diverse strategies through which social identities are formed and transformed within specific contexts of interaction (Barth, 1969: 14; see also Stovel, 2013: 4). Archaeology occupies a privileged position to contribute to this agenda, given its long-duration perspective (Hu, 2013) and ample spatial analytical scale. However, the material record has evident limitations and thus the archaeological identification of social identities is a complex task. Moreover, to infer if these social identities are ethnic, political, economical or otherwise, and also how they intersect with individual identities related to gender or age, may prove problematic (MacSweeney, 2011; Meskell, 2002).

We follow Emberling (1997), Jones (1997), Hu (2013) and Stovel (2013), among others, and contend these limitations can be overcome to a certain extent. In order to do this we have attempted to: (i) study social identities from a diachronical perspective (Stovel, 2013), which emphasizes the process through which social boundaries are defined and reproduced; (ii) identify the discourses and practices of affiliation through which these social boundaries are produced and recreated by local society in specific sociohistorical circumstances (Yaeger, 2000; MacSweeney, 2011); (iii) employ a multidimensional strategy applied at differing spatial scales (Reycraft, 2005b; Stovel, 2013) in order to observe how differing patterns of affiliation are produced and reproduced through concrete material mobilization, stylistic (iconographic) boundaries, bodily modifications and ritual activities; and (iv) complement standard typological and stylistic approaches to artifact variability with archeometric techniques applied within an interdisciplinary research strategy.

In this paper we have employed such an approach in order to understand the formation and transformation of social identities in San Pedro de Atacama (northern Chile) during the Middle Horizon (MH), ca. 500–1000 AD (Fig. 1). This period is characterized by intense interregional interaction and influence by the Tiwanaku state in San Pedro de Atacama (SPA). We focus on a multidimensional analysis of ten different biocultural markers (see below) and explore how these create boundaries, similarities and differences across the social landscape of the MH. These markers were selected because they have been considered relevant for defining social identities in the Andes (i.e. textiles, artificial cranial deformation, metals, among others), and due to their state of preservation and ubiquity in the archaeological collections housed at the Museo R.P. Gustavo Le Paige, in SPA. After presenting the results on the analysis of these markers, we discuss them in the light of the "practices and discourses of affiliation" concept, in order to understand group identity construction and reproduction during the MH in SPA.

San Pedro de Atacama in (pre)historical perspective

San Pedro de Atacama is a group of 13 small oases or *ayllu*[1] clustered in the highlands of the Atacama, the driest desert in the world (Fig. 2). Even though the area has been inhabited for more than 10,000 years, it was only during the Late Formative Period (ca. 100–400 AD) that permanent settlements were established in all of these oases. Local society during this period based its economy in camelid herding, small-scale agriculture and collection of local fruits of chañar [*Geoffroea decorticans* (Gillies ex Hook. & Arn)

Burkart] and algarrobo (*Prosopis alba* Griseb.). In relation to previous periods, a demographic increase is suggested during the Late Formative by the appearance of dense habitational settlements with or without architecture (Agüero and Uribe, 2011; Barón, 1986; Llagostera et al., 1984; Uribe, 2006), various cemeteries (Le Paige, 1964; Llagostera and Costa, 1999) and complementary smaller settlements on adjacent ravines (Agüero, 2005; Agüero and Uribe, 2011; Núñez, 2005). Ceramics, textiles, basketry, architecture and mortuary ritual exhibit a marked local tradition during this period, which have prompted scholars to propose the formation of a common group identity for the inhabitants of the oases (Adán and Urbina, 2007; Agüero and Uribe, 2011; Llagostera et al., 1988; Orellana, 1985; Stovel, 2002; Tarragó, 1989; Torres-Rouff, 2008). At the same time, SPA communities were part of an extensive and complex network of interacting polities through which raw materials, goods, produces, people and ideas circulated throughout the South-Central Andes (Browman, 1980; Goldstein, 2000; Llagostera, 1996; Núñez and Dillehay, 1979; Stanish, 2002; Tarragó, 2006). Some authors contend that SPA played a relevant role in this network (Berenguer et al., 1980; Berenguer and Dauelsberg, 1989; Llagostera, 1996, 2006a, 2006b; Núñez, 2007; Núñez and Dillehay, 1979; Tarragó, 2006), enjoying a privileged social position at least in part due to its strategic location, connecting the extreme north of Chile, the Bolivian altiplano, northwestern Argentina, north-central Chile and the Pacific coast (see Stovel, 2008; Thomas et al., 1985 for critical positions). Other researchers have added that the Tiwanaku state, whose urban capital was located some 800 km north of SPA, played a key role in local prosperity and regional importance of SPA (Benavente et al., 1986; Berenguer, 2004; Berenguer and Dauelsberg, 1989; Llagostera, 1996; Thomas et al., 1985). However, unlike other Tiwanaku colonies, such as Arica, and especially Moquegua, in SPA there is no evidence for Tiwanaku administrative or religious architecture, there are no mixed ceramic styles and no Tiwanaku cemeteries have yet been reported. Hence, most scholars agree that Tiwanaku influence in SPA was different from that in Arica or Moquegua, the former an ideological influence on local elites, the latter a direct colonial occupation (see Berenguer, 1998; Berenguer and Dauelsberg, 1989; Berenguer et al., 1980; Goldstein, 2007; Uribe and Agüero, 2004).

Whatever the specific relation with Tiwanaku, the fact remains that the peak in social complexity and affluence of SPA communities was achieved during the MH, which encompasses the local Quitor (ca. 400–700 AD) and Coyo phases (ca. 700–950 AD) (Berenguer and Dauelsberg, 1989). The cultural apogee of SPA society (Berenguer and Dauelsberg, 1989; Llagostera, 1996; Núñez and Dillehay, 1979; Torres-Rouff, 2008, 2011, amongst others) is best seen archaeologically through a demographic increase, a diversified economy, the local availability of prestige objects coming from distant regions (Llagostera, 1995, 1996, 2006a, 2006b), unique Tiwanaku contexts in some of the cemeteries (Le Paige, 1961; Stovel, 2001; Tamblay, 2004), the overall wealth of the tombs (Le Paige, 1964; Llagostera, 2006a, 2006b; Tarragó, 1989), the presence of SPA ceramics in far-off communities and the leading role of SPA in interregional networks (Tarragó, 2006). Furthermore, SPA's inclusion in a network of interaction among populations inhabiting areas with different ecological contexts and economical specialization would have had as a consequence a dietary shift in the atacameño populations, which experienced an improvement of nutrition and health in general (Neves and Costa, 1998; Costa et al., 2004). However, according to some authors, this increasing prosperity in the oases would have created the basis for social inequality and conflict as well (Hubbe et al., 2012a, 2012b; Tarragó, 1989; Torres-Rouff, 2008, 2011).

We are interested in understanding the process of social identity formation in SPA during the MH, a period characterized by increasing social complexity, intense regional interaction and the

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[1] In the Andes, an *ayllu* is a social unit of affiliation usually associated with a corporate kin group with access to common resources. In SPA, the term refers also to each of the 13 oases, which seem to have been social units in the past.