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Indigenous community based tourism: In search of the „re-existence“

The presentation addressed the question if indigenous community based tourism projects, which are planned by and based on collaboration among indigenous community's members, promote a decolonizing process within the community by providing not only self-administered economic resources, but also by enabling autonomous decisions on the definition of indigenous cultural heritage and its mediation to national and international visitors. It further discussed the role of the anthropologist in the communities' endeavor to escape the „colonial matrix of power“ (1), which is apparent here in the overwhelming dominance of global tourism markets and Western imaginary of 'the authentic Maya'.

Tourism business in Quintana Roo and Maya cultural heritage

My geographical starting point is the Riviera Maya, a broad coastal area between Cancún and Tulum in Mexico's southeast Caribbean corner, part of the Mexican federal state of Quintana Roo. This federal state has experienced a tremendous economic development due to national and international touristic interests since its beginnings. In fact, the state was founded only in 1976 because of the rapid economic rise by incoming travelers, subsequent infrastructural developments (hotels, restaurants, roads, communication systems, entertainment business, supermarkets and shops, souvenir production, supply industry, etc.) since the end of the 1960-ies, which also led to the foundation of new urban areas, e.g. Playa del Carmen between Cancún and Tulum. Thus, tourism industry, focusing on sun-and-beach supply, is the most productive economic sector of the federal state which belongs to the most profitable when it comes to its contribution to the national gross domestic product: in 2019, tourism industry contributed with 8,8 % to the Mexican GDP (www.datatur.sectur.gob.mx). (2)

However, Quintana Roo shows extreme inequalities if one compares the municipalities according to infrastructure, household income and aspects of vulnerability (lack of food, lack of medical services, schooling, access to public transport, etc.). Thus, the coastal area (3) shows high to normal income rates and an international population, while rural municipalities in the interior show low income rates, based on small scale agriculture mixed businesses or even subsistence economy. Those areas, known as settlement areas of the Yucatec speaking *cruzó'ob maya*, pay the distance to tourism with a lack of infrastructure, accompanied by poverty, high rates of illiteracy.(4)

For younger generations of the *cruzó'ob maya* it is common to migrate into the urban coastal zones created by tourism industry in order to escape rural poverty. However, most of them work in low income sectors, formally or informally. They live in squatter settlements outside of the touristic zones, because they cannot afford to live in the centers, although transport costs to and from their workplaces are high.

“Sun and beach”-tourism at the Riviera Maya works very well in combination with visits to the forgotten or in dark jungles hidden archaeological Maya sites (e.g. Tulum, Cobá, Chichén Itza). In fact, tourism industries and further mass media business sectors as literature, TV documentaries, magazines and film productions have created a Western imaginary of “the maya”. There is the exotic, but cruel and mystic because lost ancient Maya world, which can be seen in real and walkable ruins in Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras. In tourists' minds there are still authentic and old-fashioned Maya villages where people wear their traditional clothes, know plant medicine and live very healthy because of the 'rural nature' of their

cooking. This “tourist gaze” (Urry and Larsen 2011) has launched a lot of ideas how tourist’s desires can be satisfied in formal and informal ways. Tourism market created forms of exchange by inventing indigenous markets and handicraft production, selling reputed indigenous clothing, music and dancing and all kinds of invented *folkloric* traditions to the visitors. An exemplary case is the entertainment park of Xcaret (5) - offering different outdoor sports, the display of exotic animals in an artificially created environment, including rivers, caves and ‘traditional’ villages with restaurants, shops and dance shows for the cultural delight. Yucatec Maya people work there – as waiters, garden keepers, vendors or presenters of folkloric dances – because they make the park ‘authentic’. In the informal sector, groups of men may disguise as Maya warriors and receive money for the pictures taken (as can be seen in the following photo).



Figure 1: Maya warriors in front of the Castillo of Chichén Itzá
(Foto: A. Gunsenheimer 2010)

The main objective of theme parks like Xcaret and other entertainment offers is to comply with the tourist’s imagination of how Maya culture is in accordance to their preestablished “gaze” based on TV documentaries, glossy magazines and Coffee table books they consumed before travelling. However, this is not how Yucatec Maya would define and perform their cultural identity and heritage by themselves. In communication, some of my counterparts expressed their disgust towards the touristic display of their culture, others laughed about tourists and their ignorance.

To summarize the current development of tourism industry in Mexico, we may conclude that within the „colonial matrix of power“, tourism industry takes over and commodifies aspects of indigenous cultural heritage. Indigenous people are allowed, even wanted to take part in a

theater-like, Disney World-like performance of their own life, being the least paid in the business. Additionally, due to the infrastructural developments they lose their land rights and thus, lose previously autonomously administered income resources which puts them into dependency of new income resources (e.g. in tourism infrastructure).

Community based tourism projects: Strategies to leave poverty and to regain authorship

Approximately after 2000, the concept of small scale, community based tourism projects gained impetus due to financial programs run by the state favoring private-public enterprises. Basic idea was and still is the development of infrastructure to make natural resorts (e.g. village cenotes or lakes) accessible and vendible to visitors, to create new jobs in the maintenance of the outdoor entertainment (life guards, park guards, etc.) and to attract supply industry for the visitors (food and beverages, souvenirs, etc.). Especially for rural communities in the backward area of the Riviera Maya, this idea seemed to be attractive because it could stop migration to the coastal zones by bringing tourism business into the community. (6)

Creative development did not stop at natural environments. Instead, the idea of community based tourism was taken up by Yucatec Maya cultural associations that originally were founded to foster and support the continuation of Yucatec Maya language and culture. By creating a touristic walking tour in a Maya village, they saw the opportunity to show national and international visitors their idea of community life and authentic everyday life of a Maya village. They saw community based tourism as a way to re-claim agency towards the overwhelming tourism industry. Their previously negatively connotated 'marginalization', now might turn out to be of advantage because it would enable them to redefine and re-signify their life in conditions of dignity in accordance to Adolo Albán Achinte when he talks about the process of "re-existence" (2008: 85 – 86). In the words of the Yucatec Maya social cooperative *U belilek kaxtik kuxtal* from the town of Tihosuco it is about to bring back "la dignidad en la vida maya yucateca" ("to bring back dignity to the life of Yucatec Maya"), expressed by members of the cooperative in a communication with me in 2010. In the following, I will briefly present two community based tourism projects: 1) *U belilek kaxtik kuxtal*, based in Tihosuco and *Xyaat*, based in the small village of Señor (both located in the rural areas of Quintana Roo, México) and their development in the last ten years.

Presentation of community based tourism projects in the Maya area

The socio-cultural cooperative of *U belilek kaxtik kuxtal* („The road to our existence“) was founded in the city of Tihosuco (Quintana Roo, México) in 2003 by village residents in close cooperation with the organizing team of the local *Museo de la guerra de castas*. The museum, founded in 1993, has a unique status as the first and only real museum on the history and the people of the Caste War, which dominates Yucatecan history from 1847 to 1901 (and which developed to be a historic marketing theme in the 1990-ies by state driven renovations of historic places). (7)

As objectives of their tourism project, members explained to me in 2010 that they intended to present "the real" (*verdadera*) Yucatec Maya culture and identity to travellers by local tours, visiting local houses, tasting locally produced food. The "false picture of the Maya", displayed at Riviera Maya touristic sites, should be corrected. It was their goal to generate income for young and old community residents. Older, senior citizens (mostly mono-lingual Yucatec Maya speakers) were favored because of their rich knowledge about history, community life in the past and local know how on plant use while younger people should translate from Yucatec Maya into Spanish and English and intermediate with the visitors. The cooperative's members had also clear ideas that those culturally driven ideas should be combined with environmental protection by performing a careful use of resources and waste management.(8) Waste management is a major problem in Mexico since waste disposal is not sufficiently supplied by the municipalities. A further specialty was the production of natural cosmetics, supporting local plant gardening and subsequent local processing. It met with an eager tourist's interest by then.

Thus, in the beginning, the idea of the project in Tihosuco had two impact directions: it was meant to commodify Yucatec Maya everyday life in the village in an autonomous, self-defined process, illustrating Maya life to foreigners (outward impact direction). A close inter-generational cooperation should be fostered and community belonging strengthened. A sustainable project like this, with financial gains to all members should strengthen local Yucatec Maya identity by valorizing the use of Amerindian language and the local way of living and should provide a role-model for ecological thinking (inward impact direction). *U belilek kaxtik kuxtal* („The road to our existence“) had all good intentions to realize the idea of coming into „re-existence“.

In the meantime, the project is known as a 'settled' community tourism project now. It has been sponsored by major national and international funding organizations (Semarnat, Sagarpa, Conabio, Maya ka'an, Citybanamex, World Bank, gef) with regard to expert consultancy and the setting of infrastructure (see for example its *facebook* entry). The Museum is a continuous magnet for tourists touring the peninsula. The project provides now guided tours in the village and the museum of Tihosuco, local food, embroideries (of local production), short Yucatec Maya language courses and some local historical and cultural anecdotes and Maya music. So, considering the original goals and the performance ten years later, some continuity can be seen with regard to informing on the use of plants (medical and pharmaceutical local knowledge), history and cooking. However, with the inclusion of embroideries (local handicrafts) and Maya music, it also shows clearly the profile of state tourism policies and the national understanding of 'indigenous culture' in the narrow framework of language, cooking, handicrafts, dance and music (according to CONACULTA). In economic terms the project is not self-sustaining, but an additional income factor for the actors. Future research with the cooperative's members will work on the question how they consider by themselves the development of the project in comparison to their original ideas of autonomy and cultural self-definition and the impact of global and national dependencies (global market and national political frames).

In 2010, a group of villagers in Señor started their community based tourism project called *Xyaat: Ecoturismo Comunitario Maya* (www.xyaat.com). Based on previous experiences with public-private tourism enterprises, the new co-operative aimed also at the mediation of the 'real', the 'authentic' Maya village life to mainly international tourists. The program is comparable to the formerly described village tour program. Right from the beginning local community members, producers and service providers were included, e.g. the village tour starts with transport in local *tuktuks* (small open taxis on motorbikes). In 2014, visitors were brought to different locations and learnt about the use of plants in daily work, in medical use, the local honey production, the former production of henequen/sisal. Finally, they learnt about the local history of the Caste War and were invited to a traditional Yucatec Maya meal in the cooperative's center building, a traditional Maya hut. At each location, mainly older people were waiting to inform and instruct. Translation from Yucatec Maya into Spanish is given by the main organizer of the cooperative, who is also guiding the tour, and – depending on the visitors group - accompanied by a translator translating from Spanish into English or German. It is a major aspiration to include men and women, with their different competencies, including also local handicraft production. Revenues are distributed among participants.

In the meantime, the program changed because it focuses now much more on the learning of Yucatec Maya, the production of traditional dresses, highlighting the Yucatec art of flower embroideries, local plant use for curing and tourists listen to local stories of the Caste War. This programmatical change might illustrate the interdependency between organizers and consumers: on the one hand, visitors reacted more positively on specific items which they already knew (embroidery and the fun in learning an 'exotic' language) and the organizers reacted in concentrating on those aspects while planning their village tour. In the end, the generated income is far from making people rich, it is an add-up to their small scale income which advantages those can comply with the "tourist gaze", while others might give up. To fully understand these developments, future research is needed.

Decolonization by taking agency and the role of the academic: interim conclusion

For both cooperatives, it seems that the economic promise of tourism business is less splendid than originally thought of. And, what about the ideals of mediating the 'real', the 'authentic'?"

Maya way of live, the autonomous definition of indigenous cultural heritage? In the beginning, community based tourism seemed as a key to take agency by autonomous project planning and realization (even if based on starting grants by the state or NGO's), to turn marginalization and authenticity into an economic resource, to turn actors into agents. In the end, it seems that in both projects, the program was adjusted to tourist's interests. Thus, one could conclude that there is no escape of the "colonial matrix of power" – here in form of global tourism business. If indigenous people want to succeed, they have to act and to play according to Western rules. However, a broader topic has not been tackled so far: In which way did the Yucatec Maya organizers change their attitude towards goals of the community based tourism project due to continuous practice, communicating with and experiencing the behavior of those visitors that came to their villages? They are still taking agency in presenting themselves. How and why they decided to do it in the way they perform today, is subject to the work of anthropologists.

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Endnotes

- 1) In accordance with the works of Anibal Quijano (2000) and Walter D. Mignolo (2007) among others.
- 2) Some data according to the Ministry of Tourism of the federal state of Quintana Roo for 2019: 15 Mio. Tourists (36 % of national origin, 63 % international visitors; about 15,000 Mio. US\$ revenues (Source: www.sedeturgroo.gob.mx [July 2020]).
- 3) The coastal area encompasses the four municipalities of Benito Juárez (including the city of Cancún), the islands of Cozumel, Isla Mujeres and Solidaridad (including the city of Playa del Carmen): of those municipalities only up to 5 % of households apply to common definitions of extreme poverty and vulnerability because they are not able to supply sufficiently food to family members, up to 9 % of them cannot provide education and health service, up to 27% cannot provide the necessary infrastructure (e.g. transport, clothing, school material). Source: INEGI Census on nutrition, education, health and infrastructure provision (2005).
- 4) Those municipalities are: Felipe Carillo Puerto, José María Morelso, Lázaro Cárdenas, Othón P. Blanco (including the border city of Chetumal). Between 40 and 47 % of all households in these rural districts cannot provide sufficiently food to family members, between 50 and 56 % of them cannot provide education and health service, between 70 and 77 % have not resources for infrastructural costs (e.g. transport, clothing, school material) with the exception of Chetumal. Source: INEGI Census on nutrition, education, health and infrastructure provision (2005).
- 5) <https://www.xcaret.com/en/>
- 6) The concept of community based tourism (*turismo comunitario*) is not limited to Mexico, but has to be seen as a global phenomenon in the tourism market which was included in Mexican tourism policies at the end of the 20ties century specifically for indigenous communities (but not exclusively). Three characteristics define indigenous community based tourism: indigenous leadership, sustainability and cultural immersion. The United Nations declared 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, see: <https://www.unwto.org/archive/global/press-release/2015-12-07/united-nations-declares-2017-international-year-sustainable-tourism-develop> [2020_06_03]

- 7) El *Museo de la guerra de castas* on its own, is part of that federal state driven enterprise, but also for example the renovation of the *Fuerte de Bacalar* and the inauguration of *la ruta de la guerra de castas*.
- 8) This is not particular to this socio-cultural cooperative, but quite common in many other comparable organizations which I got to know in Yucatán. Member's do not see themselves as preserver of local/regional cultural traditions, but also as responsible global citizens.

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