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Indigenous Cultural Solidarity in Resistance to Mass Tourism

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<u>Introduction</u>

This research explores an increasingly rare situation in which tourists confront unexpected resistance from those they visit. Indigenous cultures are increasingly rare, remote and commodified and these populations serve as stewards of the world's most biodiverse places – the world's remaining wildernesses. Some of globalization's impacts on indigenous people are the continued loss of traditional customs, connection to the land and subsistence from the earth. These are among the reasons that tourists who are accustomed to international travel in a "mass tourism" style occasionally seek remote destinations. In pursuit of respite from busy urban landscapes and the increasingly complex ways that civilization deters communion with nature, ourselves and each other, traveling is an antidote to alienation, a chance to reconnect.

Some cultural tourists are drawn to remote places as a manifestation of imagined nostalgia for a simpler, more physical connection to land and community. A vacation from capitalism is found in a place where people live in subsistence, harvesting and hunting, pulling their food from the sea, carving boats out of palm trunks, thatching their roofs with palm fronds, sewing their clothes and spending the majority of every day near their children.

However, when a heterotopic space is to tourists "a destination" and to locals their familiar village, the subsequent dynamics yield revelations about tourist expectations, borne of expectations of hospitality learned in grand hotels and resorts on developed islands. When the "host" is neither hospitable or interested in the tourists, interactions must be *negotiated.* Tourist reactions can reveal a great deal about expectations framed by mass tourism and expectations of hospitality. Consequential interactions and tourist reactions suggest theoretical questions about the way that a touristically-constructed perspective has been created by the hospitality industry of mass tourism.

Tourism researchers have empirically observed that as people become more affluent, they travel more and the experience of travel is cumulative. They become more adventurous and confident as their levels of affluence and travel experience increase. For this traveler, unusual travel experiences contribute to developing a narrative of discovery and self-representation from experiences with the Other (Galani-Moutafi, 2000). Modern tourists travel for adventure to remote regions in order to quell the mundanity of everyday life and incorporate unusual experiences as part of a deliberate construction of identity (Wang, 1999) and life narrative (Crang, 2004).

Tourist arrivals have physical impacts and culturally negotiated influences. The physical impacts are usually managed by developers and governments, yet cultural influences generally lack a lobbying force. While groups such as the Maasai from Kenya (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1994) the Djubugay in Australia (Dyer, Aberdeen and Schuler, 2003), the Maori in New Guinea (Zygadlo et al, 2003) have benefited from presenting an exotic spectacle, the cultural identity of most indigenous cultures have been compromised in this process. Cultural identities and traditions are repackaged as commodities, with antiquated costumes and historic dances revitalized as performed spectacle. While this sometimes creates a reinvigorated sense of patriotism, cultural appreciation and a heightened sense of history and unity for community members of all ages, the disparaging effects of cultural dissolution and acculturation are frequent negative influences (Bruner, 2005).

Ideological presumptions of the complex global tourism industry are subsumed into the character of individual tourists, wherein they absorb an Althussurian sense of power. Althusser

maintained that power is carried within the masses, as ideology (Althusser, 2006). The service-oriented aspects of hospitality, airline personnel and even tourism police support this tourist's perceptions. A Western ethnocentric ennui leads these tourists to the Other, where they assume a tourist role. These tourists are the ideological descendants of colonists (Hunter, 2001). Tourists self-objectify in these interactions, finding function in an economic role (Hunter, 2001) or sometimes as bearers of gifts. Marx described money as leading to commodified, inauthentic interactions that lead to false relationships (Marx, 1972).

Today's tourist expects to be accommodated as a guest and consumer (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). Alienated from their true selves, the individual in a tourist role presumes the endowment of privileges assumed by a paying customer. They expect attention and service, introductions and guidance from hospitality providers. Therefore, literature on host-guest intercultural interaction in the Third World often conveys the trope of a supercilious, perverse self-concerned tourist that subjugates servile hosts (Urry, 1990).

"Power is invisible in tourism when it is conceived after the image of rulers and politicians. This approach instead focuses on the ground-level and everyday (micro)interactions of tourists" (Cheong and Miller, 2000). Power is expressed in subtle daily interactions between tour operators, guides and tourists. This is a ritualistic aspect of tourism, wherein the dynamic requires that the hosts comply and respond appropriately to the tourists' presumption of authority. Much of the literature on host-guest intercultural interaction in the Third World conveys the trope of a supercilious, perverse self-concerned tourist that subjugates servile hosts (Bruner, 1991). Tourists often self-objectify in these interactions, finding function in an economic role (Hunter, 2001) or sometimes as bearers of gifts (Cole, 2007).

Meaning is often discerned when reality clashes with expectations (Gottdiener, 2000). "Meaning manifestly has to do with the relationship between what you expected to find in the first place, which is nowhere visible in the image, contrasted with what is actually in the image," Stuart Hall said (1997). Absence means something and signifies as much as presence."

This creates a dissonance in interaction. Although these tourists may seek to learn about another culture, the tourists' self-objectification into a tourist role exacerbates the distance, estranging them into an outsider role (Evans-Pritchard, 1989). These extreme travel interactions reveal more about the tourist than the host, as their excursion is into a fantasy environment wherein tourists are not their genuine selves and neither are the Other.

Scholarship on tourism's impact on undeveloped areas is often framed as a socioeconomic interplay wherein the Western tourists as guests are consumers, the hosts are producers and the consequent power relationship is interpreted as having negative echoes of colonial hegemony (Aitchison, 2001). However, this phenomenon relies on host complicity with this power dynamic.

Conforming to becoming a living tourist attraction can affect every aspect of a host's life – from the work an individual does, to the way they dress and even the way they are to behave in daily life. Under this microscope, individual and communal behavior become a matter for public and political discussion and review. Conflict can arise within communal groups seeking to benefit from tourism as their culture is commodified. Members of a visited community may consider and negotiate which behaviors and actions are appropriate for tourist consumption (MacCannell, 1976). In New Zealand, Maori identity sometimes countered the narratives of national tourism promotion and therefore Maori tourism operators acted with agency to negotiate a "third space" (Bhabha, 1990) with tourists. Maori tourism guides were complicit in presenting

themselves as "Other" to European tourists, acting as postcolonial agents to benefit from the gaze (Amoamo, 2007). In this manner, the outside revenue brought into this community was worth the compromise of absolute authenticity.

Community empowerment can take several forms and can be a contentiously negotiated political struggle (Timothy, 2007) Tourism impacts are generally more positive when the community is empowered and has a voice. Involving as many stakeholders as possible allows for meaningful participation, rather than an imposition of top-down authority or tokenistic participation, in which community input is solicited merely as a gesture.

Research Location

The Guna indigenous people of Panamá are exemplary amongst their brethren worldwide as a remote group that sustains and preserves cultural identity despite an ever-increasing influx of international tourists. Their certitude has been central to their independence for 500 years, resulting in autonomous governance of their stretch of coastal land and a mostly uninhabited archipelago in the Caribbean. In the last 60 years, their cultural survival has been continuously reinforced and sustained in resistance to the uninvited tourists that infiltrate their island villages and daily lives.

Guna Yala refers to a stretch of mainland on the northeast stretch of the Panamanian isthmus and about 400 coral islands in the Caribbean Sea. Only 49 of the islands have villages and tourism is managed by the Guna. The Guna call their territory – including sea, rivers and spirit regions "Guna Yala," a moniker mostly unrecognized by tourists. "San Blas" was the term given by Spanish conquistadors, pirates and colonializing, oppressive forces.

No foreign investment or ownership of islands, structures or tourism ventures are permitted by non-Guna. Tourism has increased consistently over recent decades, but has

expanded greatly in the last decade, due to notoriety in guidebooks and the Internet. The Guna do not promote tourism, but the Panamanian state uses Guna iconography and photos in state tourism advertising. Tourism in Guna Yala has historically been a contested issue, to which the Guna have displayed mediated resistance (Savener, 2012). Because remote civilizations are increasingly sparse and rare, and because the Guna fiercely retain customs and dress that appear traditional and primitive and because the Guna are both geographically isolated enough to foster isolation and yet close enough to allow tourists to easily arrive within a few hours. The Guna are currently receiving an annual influx of tourists that exceeds their population (Perez and deLeon, 2010).

Research Questions

- How is resistance enacted by Guna community members, either in direct communal law or also by individual behavior?
- How do tourists react and interpret their experiences when visiting an undeveloped place where the inhabitants live in subsistence?
- What assumptions of mass tourism frame tourist expectations in Guna Yala?

Research Methods

This research is based in participant observation, interviews and ethnographic interaction with the Guna and tourists who visit them. Initial open-ended questions with tourists and Guna community members will form the basis for human subjects-approved semi-structured interviews with Guna elected and appointed officials and community members. Respondents' answers will be recorded via pen and paper, with individual perspectives coded for anonymity, using

geographic identifiers, sex, nationality and age. Field notes will be compiled on-site and transcribed later, with additional coding performed for repeated themes.

Preliminary Results

The Guna response to tourism reflects an ongoing effort to resist mass tourism. The Guna do not allow foreign investment or provide infrastructure. The official governmental stance does not deter tourists, but they do not provide a great deal of comforts or hospitality. While some entrepreneurial community members offer services to individual tourists or groups, the official political stance toward tourism is defined by resistance, evasion and neglect. The majority of villages do not welcome tourists, nor do they provide signage or infrastructure (such as plumbing or electricity) that would accommodate tourists with the standards of hospitality offered by most Caribbean islands and resorts.

This research will continue to document define the myriad ways in which the Guna exemplify resistance and maintain boundaries on one of the last remaining remote destinations in the Caribbean. ("Remote" is a relative term, in this case, as tourists can arrive in a half-hour flight from Panama City.) The geographic space that the Guna occupy helps to emancipate them from a subservient role in that the Guna enact their independence via physical distance, occupying islands that tourists cannot easily reach. They strategically deploy themselves to a comfortable psychic distance, retreating to safe distance from tourists unfamiliar with the territory. The boundedness of island villages that allow tourists lend territoriality to tourist perceptions. They are clearly visitors. As gates close and windows are pulled shut upon their approach, tourists are reminded that they are intruders.

Because indigenous groups worldwide are reknowned for being marginalized and oppressed (Blaser, 2010), this study provides insight into the ways that a community can take

forthright action to promote cultural unity. Staunch communal identity provides a form of

resistance that provides an example to indigenous brethren.

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