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Cultural tourism and the portrayal of the Maya in the Yucatán peninsula

Ailish Carroll-Brentnall

This article explores the relationship of the tourist industry in Yucatán, Mexico, to Maya culture and how certain elements are used to further the marketing of the tourist industry. It is argued that this is done primarily for reasons of economic growth, not cultural conservation of the indigenous culture. Through its analysis, this article outlines how the current model of cultural tourism relies heavily on Maya culture but does not benefit the indigenous Maya, and in fact reinforces the marginalisation of the indigenous Maya in Mexican society.

In the wake of rapidly increasing globalisation, cultural and economic exchange across borders has kept pace accordingly. Spurred on by the North American Free Trade Agreement, President Peña Nieto's recent reforms¹ and the signing of the *Pacto Por Mexico* in December 2012,² Mexico is becoming one of the most important emerging economies³ in Latin America. Tourism is already Mexico's 'fifth-biggest source of revenue and is seen taking on more economic importance by the end of 2018 as international visits rise'⁴. It forms a key part of the economy of the Yucatán Peninsula, which comprises the states of Quintana Roo, Yucatán

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¹ 'Central Intelligence Agency: The World Factbook' Central Intelligence Agency. Available: <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mx.html#Econ>> [Accessed 30.01.2014].

² 'Peña Nieto Firma "Pacto por México"' El Informador. Available: <<http://www.informador.com.mx/mexico/2012/421572/6/pena-nieto-firma-pacto-por-mexico.htm>> [Accessed 30.01.2014].

³ 'The World Bank: Mexico Overview' The World Bank. Available: <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mexico/overview>> [Accessed 29.01.2014].

⁴ J. E. Arrijoa, 'Tourism Seen Jumping to No. 3 Mexico Cash Source by 2018' *Bloomberg* (24 June 2013). Available: <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-06-25/tourism-seen-jumping-to-mexico-s-3rd-biggest-cash-source-by-2018.html>> [Accessed 29.01.2014].

and Campeche. The tourism in the Yucatán Peninsula is predominantly based around the natural beauty of the state and the Maya archaeological sites in the region. Despite its extensive reference to Maya culture, the scope of the tourist industry in the Yucatán Peninsula and its constant moves towards economic expansion stand in contrast, to some extent, with the traditional values of the Maya; despite the income generated by Maya cultural tourism, the indigenous people in the region remain ‘mostly marginalised and in conditions of poverty’ (my translation).⁵ This raises the question of how these two elements - the competitive capitalist economy and the traditional Maya culture - are able to, apparently, be part and parcel of the same tourist endeavour, particularly when there is, simultaneously, such a divide between the social and economic status of the indigenous Maya people. It is this question which I would like to explore, by considering the representation and definition of the Maya culture by the tourist industry in the Yucatán Peninsula, and the degree to which the tourist industry concerns itself with respectful conservation of tradition and promotion of equality for the indigenous Maya people, as well as with financial development.

Although Mexico is sometimes still considered to be a developing country in comparison to its developed neighbours or the nations of the Western tourists who visit, there exist within it many complex socio-economic structures that are, when it comes to the indigenous people, inextricably linked to race. Tourism can aid in raising developing countries from a state of poverty or economic difficulty, but tourism occurring in Mexico cannot be simply seen as ‘Mexican’ tourism, as the society is not simply ‘Mexican’, and nor are the individuals involved in or affected by the tourist industry. In Mexico, the mixing of genes, culture and ethnicity in the wake of Spanish colonisation complicates many terms regarding social groups. For the sake of clarity in this article, I shall refer to the members of the ancient civilisation of the Maya empire as ‘pre-Hispanic Maya’ and their contemporary descendants as ‘indigenous Maya’. Mexicans who do not identify as Maya and are not predominantly genetically Maya shall be referred to as non-Maya Mexicans. Though there are many indigenous groups in Mexico and the

⁵ P. Bracamonte y Sosa, E. F. Q. Avilés, M. G. Pineda and L. H. B. Huerta, ‘Situación Histórica y Actual del Pueblo Maya’ *Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Cultura Maya del Estado de Yucatán* (July 2002), 2. Available: <<http://www.indemaya.gob.mx/descargas/archivos/diagnostico-del-pueblo-maya.pdf>> [Accessed 26.01.2014].

Maya people themselves are spread across neighbouring states and also into Guatemala and Belize, the article will focus solely on Maya in the Yucatán Peninsula.

The image of Maya culture which is presented by much of the tourist industry is mainly based around the culture of the pre-Hispanic Maya, due to the numerous pre-Hispanic Maya archaeological sites in the area, including Tulum, Uxmal and Chichén Itzá, deemed one of the New Seven Wonders of the World⁶. The industry mainly comprises tours, the sales of arts and crafts, and associated sectors of the hospitality industry, such as hotels, homestay programmes and restaurants. Many Mexicans express great pride in the Maya heritage of their country and many Mexican shops incorporate it into their branding. To a foreign tourist, the destination is partly sold by the 'authenticity' of the experience, an idea supported by the large population of indigenous Maya, numbering 1.5 million⁷, and the continued use of the Mayan language by approximately 900,000 people⁸. However, within its domestic context the portrayal still neglects to include a holistic, complete representation of both pre-Hispanic and indigenous Maya and repeatedly separates the indigenous Maya population from the rest of Mexican culture. A prime example of this selective depiction of Maya culture is the marketing in the lead up to the end of the Maya calendar on the 21st December 2012. Though it was almost unanimously understood by the local population that the end of the calendar marked the end of an era for the pre-Hispanic Maya⁹, certain members of the international community speculated that it heralded the end of the world. The tourist industry presented the event in its more dramatic guise in an attempt to draw 'apocalypse tourists' to the area, which directly contradicted the understanding of the indigenous Maya people and propagated deliberate cultural ignorance in order to boost the influx of tourists. The indigenous Maya who wished to practise their traditional ceremonies were prevented from doing so by the government body *Instituto Nacional de*

⁶ 'Chichén Itzá Home Page'. Available: <<http://www.chichenitza.com/>> [Accessed 1.02.2014].

⁷ G. Benchwick, *Lonely Planet Cancun, Cozumel & the Yucatan* (Hong Kong, China: Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd, 2010, 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹ J. A. Schertow 'Maya banned from performing ceremonies at ancestral temples in Mexico' *IC Magazine*, December 6th 2012. Available: <<http://intercontinentalcry.org/maya-banned-from-performing-ceremonies-at-ancestral-temples-in-mexico/>> [Accessed 25.01.2014]

Antropología e Historia, on the basis that their rituals would damage the architectural sites. However, some indigenous Maya assert that this was a choice grounded in a desire to maintain the image of the campaign¹⁰. If so, the existing spiritual aspect of the indigenous Maya culture was, therefore, omitted from the tourist publicity for the 21st of December and also from the international tourist's awareness of Maya culture, because it was deemed unsuitable for the tourist industry's marketing image of Maya culture.

'Not all of the expressions of culture are appreciated in the same way',¹¹ (my translation) and the tourist industry highlighting and privileging certain elements of Maya culture has an impact on the way the culture is perceived, and therefore experienced by both the domestic non-Maya Mexican population and foreign tourists. This is not problematic in itself so much, as some aspects of a culture are always more prevalent than others; what is problematic is what determines the elevation of some aspects over others, and who influences those decisions. As is demonstrated by the above example, what is important to the indigenous Maya community is not being communicated or brought to the fore. The tourist industry amplifies the aspects of the culture which sell, which in turn are primarily defined by the external influence of Western tourists. The money generated by this industry does allow for the restoration and upkeep of, for example, Maya ruins and archaeological sites. It could, therefore, be argued that tourism does contribute to cultural conservation, which would not be possible without out it, and 'facilitates the preservation of a cultural tradition which would otherwise perish'¹². The issue still remains that the parts of the culture which are being conserved are being defined by a Western group whose influence is financial. A tour guide interviewed also stated that there were 'federal

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ A. R. Mantecón 'Patrimonio Para La Inclusión? Hacia Un Nuevo Modelo De Turismo Cultural' *Patrimonio Cultural y Turismo. Políticas Públicas y Turismo Cultural en América Latina: Siglo XXI* (Cuadernos #19 September 2012), 53. Available: <<http://www.conaculta.gob.mx/turismocultural/cuadernos/pdf19/articulo5.pdf>> [Accessed 28.01.2014].

¹² L. K. Medina 'Commoditizing culture: Tourism and Maya Identity' *Annals of Tourism Research* (Volume 30, Issue 2, April 2003), 355. Available: <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160738302000993>> [Accessed 29.01.2014].

programmes who grant financing to different groups for tourist projects, but most of the time they do not centre on the real conservation of Yucatecan/Maya culture'.¹³ (my translation) As the indigenous Maya are those who still identify Maya culture as being an authentic part of their identity, critics of the tourist industry believe that the indigenous Maya ought to have more say over cultural conservation projects and that 'tourist programs should encourage the education of interpreters and guides [...] to increase the role of the local population in the presentation and interpretation of their own cultural values'.¹⁴ (my translation) They also argue that the majority of the money generated by the tourist industry does not filter down to the indigenous Maya people, as 'the greatest economic beneficiary of the consumption of tourism is primarily the large investors; hotel owners, restaurant owners and owners of transport companies ... the inhabitants and neighbours of these tourist destinations are benefited only through work as street vendors, offering services on a small scale, or the employment which they come to fill'.¹⁵ (my translation)

If this is the case, it ultimately means that the financial power of the Western influence on the tourist industry is altering culture to take a form which is pleasing to the tourists, rather than something which has meaning for the society that culture originated from, so they are receiving the culture 'not as [it is] but as, for the benefit of the receiver, [it] ought to be'¹⁶. In this instance, the manipulation is split into two levels. For the most part, the people involved in the more lucrative sections of the tourist industry who are Mexican do not identify as Maya; however, they are the ones re-packaging the culture for a foreign, mostly Western, market. The culture is then received by the tourists, who pay for the aspects which interest them. These aspects then get further privileged and receive priority treatment for conservation or further exposure. The selective reinforcement of culture, therefore, has its basis in a view of that culture which is

¹³ P. Toño, Interview by A. Carroll-Brentnall. Merida, Mexico, 24th January 2014.

¹⁴ M. Martín 'Reflexiones críticas sobre Patrimonio, Turismo y Desarrollo Sostenible II' *Boletín de Interpretación* (Número 6, 2010), 4. Available: <<http://www.interpretaciondelpatrimonio.com/boletin/index.php/boletin/article/viewFile/76/76>> [Accessed 28.01.2014].

¹⁵ Mantecón 'Patrimonio Para La Inclusión?', 56.

¹⁶ E. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003), 67. Available: <[http://www.odsg.org/Said_Edward\(1977\)_Orientalism.pdf](http://www.odsg.org/Said_Edward(1977)_Orientalism.pdf)> [Accessed 26.012014].

twice filtered by economic factors: the first being the efforts made to increase marketability by the non-Maya Mexicans managing the tourist industry, and the second being the outside influence caused by the financial power of the tourist. Which elements of the culture are conserved is defined by a supply and demand relationship. The non-Maya Mexicans are the ones who profit most from the interaction, creating a competitive economic climate for only a certain, already privileged, section of Mexican society and, in turn, tacitly allowing the continued marginalisation of the Maya.

The non-Maya Mexicans, who so proudly extoll their Maya heritage, are the ones who largely benefit from the boosts to the economy and the external perception of the Yucatán Peninsula as a place of cultural value, and are not having to confront any of the challenges that come with being an indigenous Maya or a Mayan speaker. Discrimination against the indigenous Maya in Yucatán takes many forms, most notably having to face prejudice and insults¹⁷, being economically disadvantaged¹⁸, and not having sufficient linguistic provision in education, as ‘in Yucatán there is no bilingual and intercultural educational system beyond elementary school’¹⁹. Maya culture and the lifestyles of the indigenous Maya in all their forms are not respected to the extent that the prevalence of ‘Maya Palace’ hotels would make it appear. In the tourist industry, then, Maya identity is primarily lauded not for its cultural value in and of itself but for its potential to be financially valuable.

The traditional Maya culture, therefore, is being used for the purpose of financial advancement for a specific demographic in Mexican society. Some of this may have a positive impact on certain aspects of conservation or in contributing to the

¹⁷ J. González ‘Mayas de Mérida en desventaja cultural y discriminación’ *Unión Yucatán*. Available: <<http://www.unionyucatan.mx/articulo/2013/01/12/gobierno/merida/mayas-de-merida-en-desventaja-cultural-y-discriminacion>> [Accessed 28.01.2014].

¹⁸ P. Bracamonte and Sosa y Jesús L. Quijano ‘Marginalidad indígena: una perspectiva histórica de Yucatán’ *Desacatos. Revista de Antropología Social*. (Num 13, Winter 2003.). Available: <<http://www.mayas.uady.mx/articulos/marginalidad.html>> [Accessed 28.01.2014].

¹⁹ J. C. Mijangos-Noh ‘Racism against the Mayan population in Yucatan, Mexico: How current education contradicts the law’ (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association San Diego, California, April 14th, 2009), 3. Available: <<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED505698.pdf>> [Accessed 29.01.2014].

economy, but there is still a disparity between the Maya world of promotional materials and the daily life of the indigenous people. To understand the reconciliation of this inconsistency in the minds of those involved in the tourist industry, it is helpful to look at the level of awareness of the two dichotomous sides of the reality, and how Maya culture is conceptualised by non-Maya, both Mexican and Western. Maya activists often bemoan the lack of focus on the culture of the living Maya, saying that ‘nobody wants to talk about the living Mayans [sic], just the dead ones’, meaning that living indigenous Maya ‘remain invisible’²⁰. This is presumably based on the strong tendency to simplify Maya culture, to focus only on the prehistoric Maya and discount the experiences of the indigenous Maya currently still living in the Yucatán Peninsula. A flattened, simplified version of the past is being projected onto the present by the non-Maya purveyors of Maya cultural tourism, to the detriment of the exposure and, consequently, people’s awareness of the situation of modern indigenous Maya. Edward Said wrote that ‘All cultures impose corrections upon raw reality, changing it from free-floating objects into units of knowledge. [...] It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness.’²¹ It is understandable for a tourists’ knowledge to be lacking in complexity and nuanced understanding, however, there is a difficulty presented by how powerful that simplified version of culture can be, when it is the perception permeated by a group in a position of financial power in terms of the cultural exchange and also in a position of culturally hegemonic power in global terms.

I would here like to return to my earlier point of ‘layers’ of cultural interpretation. Maya culture being interpreted by non-Maya Mexicans to present to foreign tourists, and the foreign tourists’ interpretation of that presentation, both exist as manipulations of the Maya culture by groups with much more power than the indigenous Maya. The emphasis on pre-Hispanic Maya culture has led to the historical aspect monopolizing the outward perception of Maya culture received by Western tourists, but it has also monopolized the outward perception being

²⁰ D. Dudenhoeffer, ‘Dead Mayans Only, Please! Mexico Tourism Driven by Ruins, Shuns Natives’ *Indian Country Today Media Network*, September 13th 2013. Available: <<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/09/13/mexicos-mayans-last-benefit-tourism-151258>> [Accessed 25.01.2014].

²¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 67.

generated by the non-Maya Mexicans to be sold to the tourists. By relegating Maya culture to a fixed point in the past and then projecting that limited view onto the present indigenous Maya population, the need to address the difficult cultural issues is diminished, as the culture is no longer dynamic and living but a static representation affixed to a living population. It paints the culture as an exotic construct. The grandiose scope of the way the Maya culture is treated and the sheer quantity of the tourists present at some Maya sites, particularly in the wake of the so-called 'End of the World', has 'constituted a factor in the sensationalism and trivialisation of the cultural products which tourists come into contact with, which are not shown in all their complexity and richness'²² (my translation), instead showing a culture devoid of its nuances and intricacies. The tourist industry does not concern itself with dead Maya; tourists are not interested in the Maya as a people, they are interested in the culture of the dead Maya, which has been affixed to the indigenous Maya to aid the marketing campaign.

Separating the elements of a culture which are deemed valuable from the remaining population who feel it is a relevant part of their identity and marginalising the rest of their culture, and then discriminating against the people themselves has, understandably, created a complicated situation for the state of indigenous Maya identity and ethnicity. 'In Mexico, the communally accepted indicator to identify members of an indigenous group ... has been their language'²³ (my translation). In recent years many of the young generation, whose parents would have described themselves as Maya and were Mayan speakers, would now no longer necessarily feel they had a right to that label, or that they wanted to associate that label with themselves²⁴. After this move away from their parents' traditions, the tourist industry is now prompting a younger generation to return to their Maya heritage in order to get jobs as guides or in other professions related to cultural tourism. They are not, however, going to the older people in their community - the native Mayan speakers or those who still practise Maya rituals - but are learning from Western representations of the culture, such as 'taking short courses from archaeologists [...] and reading books they purchase themselves,

²² Mantecón 'Patrimonio Para La Inclusión?', 54.

²³ B. Quijano & L. Quijano 'Marginalidad Indígena'.

²⁴ Medina, 'Commoditizing Culture', 359.

borrow from one another, or receive as gifts from archaeologists or tourists'²⁵. The indigenous Maya are now generating what was originally the culture of their parents, as a performance learnt from a Western perspective due to the increasing tourist demand and the financial benefits it has. Though there are still Maya anthropologists or historians to refer to who take an essentialist, more spiritual approach to the culture and 'define it in terms of continuities that have persisted across centuries from pre-colonial times into the present'²⁶, learning from the West will clearly have an impact on the way Maya culture is enacted and perceived by the indigenous Maya themselves. Though culture is dynamic and there is nothing unprecedented about a culture adapting or changing over time, what is fascinating in this instance is that it is being altered to fit external perceptions of the culture in order to meet needs of another more globally powerful culture; that of the West. Certain members of the indigenous Maya community have taken the Western version of their own history and started to act it for a Western audience. Some anthropologists argue that such 'commodification changes the meaning of cultural products and practices to such a degree that they eventually become meaningless for their producers'²⁷. In terms of the conservation of a living culture, something which is clearly valued as indicated by the indigenous Maya who find fault with the over emphasis of dead Maya, this could lead to a further decrease in attention being paid to marginalised Maya groups, their customs and their way of life, as well as reinforcing a homogenised and performative version of Maya culture whose value derives from external perceptions.

One of the Yucatán Peninsula's selling points is the large Maya population, which allows the area to be advertised as a more 'authentic' experience. In this way, the indigenous Maya people themselves are being used to advertise a culture which is becoming further and further distanced from their lived reality. Though some tourist enterprises which are run by indigenous Maya exist, such as Sian Ka'an Community Tours whose website declares themselves to be a '100% Maya

²⁵ Ibid., 364.

²⁶ Ibid., 366.

²⁷ Ibid., 354.

community enterprise'²⁸; they are rare and in order to make themselves competitive with the already established more financially stable tourist businesses, some may resort to fitting the same groove of imitating the prehistoric Maya culture or relearning their own history from Western sources. Given the dilemma as to whose culture the hybrid being sold by the tourist industry is and the fact that indigenous Maya who would not necessarily identify themselves as culturally Maya are now endorsing it, straight forward statements of cultural appropriation perhaps exist in too much of a grey area. What remains problematic is the fact that a culture that was extrapolated from one particular ethnic group, namely the prehistoric Maya and to some extent their descendants the indigenous Maya, is now being projected onto the same ethnic group to try and authenticate the culture in order to further boost marketability. This makes the indigenous Maya a tacitly consenting part of a system which further benefits the privileged non-Mayan Mexican population over the indigenous Maya through their mere existence. By having a culture externally attributed to them, the indigenous Maya become objectified, commodified, as a part of the tourist industry. They become a part of a marketing campaign to sell a certain image to a Western audience. The use of a particular group to help market a commodified culture, thereby, also commodifies and dehumanises members of that particular group.

Though it may first appear that the cultural tourism in the Yucatán allows both the emergence of a competitive economy and the preservation of the traditional Maya culture, the coexistence has continued until this point because the tourist industry has emphasised certain facets of Maya culture, primarily pre-Hispanic ones, and minimised others. It has externally defined Maya culture and in doing so has marginalised the elements which are indicated by the demand of the tourist market to be undesirable. This is not a balanced relationship between the two, but merely a variation of the same unequal power balance between the indigenous Maya and the non-Maya Mexican population, as well as a way of maintaining the culture's malleability as subject to the financial power of the West which defines the supply and demand type relationship and influences the cultural shift. Despite the trend of indigenous Maya relearning their cultural heritage from the West, the examples of Maya tourism by indigenous Maya such as Sian Ka'an show that

²⁸ 'Community Tours Sian Ka'an Home Page'. Available: <<http://www.siankaantours.org/en/>> [Accessed 30.01.2014].

alternative models of cultural tourism can bring income into the economy of the Yucatán Peninsula, as well as promoting living Maya culture, its heritage and economic equality, and without making the indigenous Maya part of the tourist product but not making them beneficiaries economically. Before the relationship between international tourism and the indigenous Maya can be resolved, it must be first defined who the Maya are now and what they define their culture to be in the aftermath of so much exchange and reinvention, which could be a lengthy and complex process. In the meantime, to reduce the commodification of the indigenous Maya and redress the portrayal which allows them to be flattened and simplified into a two dimensional cultural accessory, marginalised as a legitimate and complex social group, the tourist industry could eliminate using the indigenous Maya people as a part of their marketing and instead focus on a de-sensationalised, de-romanticised portrayal of pre-Hispanic Maya culture, while acknowledging that it is a historical narrative, not the lived reality of the modern indigenous Maya they are conveying. Ultimately, until the indigenous Maya are viewed as equal by the non-Maya Mexicans in the tourist industry and the tourists who visit the Yucatán, the relationship will remain unbalanced, the indigenous Maya will continue to not be the point of focus unless it is financially convenient, and the tourists will be deprived of a complex, honest and respectful dialogue with the culture they have come to seek.

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