

"Challenges and memories"- global connection and the spreading of knowledge about globalization within anthropological research.

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Paper:

Introduction:

The mayor purpose of my thesis project had been to write a text about the history and present situation of the indigenous community El Coire in Mexico within the context of globalization process. When I had completed a first version (in Spanish), I produced 30 booklets of the text. Last February I traveled with these booklets in my rucksack back El Coire in Michoacán, México.

Some of my colleagues had argued that people will only look at the pictures and that I should not expect too much of a response. Finally it was not the pictures in my book that interested the people too much, neither was it the historical part about their origins. What interested the readers of my project most wasn't the pictures but my description of the community in the present and connected theories about globalization.

What had struck me already during my research was the ever repeating encounter with strongly "colonial" or "modern" views of the indigenous people as backward, traditional, narrow minded, without reason and underdeveloped. Those visions, articulated mostly by local development agents, tourists, neighboring "mestizo" and "white" villagers and some people of Coire itself didn't correspond to the reality I have encountered. As a consequence I challenged these judgments in my book with anthropological theoretical assumptions about globalization, and empirical examples. I presented my data to families and to the community during assemblies and in long conversations. I did workshops on my topic in schools and gave a presentation at the regional Indigenous Intercultural University. All these encounters gave opportunity to dispute common views of local stagnation, ignorance and wilderness.

This paper is based on several fieldwork periods during the last two years in the so called *Costa Sierra Nahua de Michoacán*, Mexico. In the 56.000 hectare territory of the agrarian community live about 4.000 people (*Comuneros of Coire*) in around 35 little settlements in the mountains and valleys along the Pacific Coast. In my research I gave

special attention to Faro the Bucerías, a coastal tourist village founded in the late sixties. Faro counts about 300 permanent residents who are all *comuneros* of Coire. Land tenure in Coire is comunal but the rights of land use are individual. The assembly of *comuneros* is the highest political authority. My work consists basically of ethnographic accounts that are put into a national and global context. The region is characterized by a large amount of migration towards the USA, there is a great lack of medical attention and only a few existing possibilities of higher education.

My aim here, is to go beyond my thesis. After a general and theoretical introduction and an empirical example of my arguments, I will reflect on how my research results were received and commented on by local people. My main argument in this paper is that through engagement in local discourses that are in fact often based on "European discourses gone global" anthropology has the potential to become relevant in the day to day lives of people. By doing anthropology it is possible not only to participate in academically discourses as EASA but also in the discourses of the people we are writing about.

Theoretical Assumptions:

All historical collectivities existing today have had certain experiences with “modernity” and European expansion. By taking in account these global connections, no contemporary ethnography can be regarded as purely local. Social reality is always interconnected. The people and the organizational structure of Coire, for example, have continuously been shaped by larger networks, global flows of ideas, money, tourism and more, they did not just rise out of the community itself. It was already some 25 years ago that Eric Wolf warned that:

“We often take the data observed or recorded as realities in and of themselves rather than as more or less tangible results of underlying processes operating in historical time”¹

Features of cultural difference or particularity are often explained as having evolved in one single place or grown out of the isolation of a definite group. My research findings strongly oppose this view. Anna Tsing hits the point when she argues that:

¹ Wolf 1981 cited in Roseberry 1995:51

“Cultures are always both wide ranging and situated, whether participants imagine them as global or local, modern or traditional, futuristic or backward”²

Therefore I assume that the things we regard as “cultural differences” are not only a place bounded phenomena but a continuously ongoing process within larger contexts. In classical anthropology cultural difference was often scaled in a “traditional” to “modern” or a similar dualistic continuum. One could even argue that this oppositional difference between modern and primitive was the axis upon which anthropology was initially constructed and practiced.³ Binary concepts such as wilderness/civilization, tradition/modernity, or stagnation/progress have made their way around the globe and have been used as a scale through which scientist interpreted and measured lifestyle and culture of people. Michael Kearney, who has written about the defiance that transnationalism means to anthropological theory argues that:

“In all of these (classical) dualist theories of individual differences, the marked form is defined as lacking some quality that is present in those individuals who are fully developed.”

The “anthropological community” has, in a long and ongoing process, challenged and sometimes overcome such perceptions of reality. However our obsolete approaches have become globalized forms of perceiving the world. Classifying peoples in a traditional to modern continuum is a very common form of let’s say “globalized knowledge” that has its roots in “European” social Science and Humanities. Development agents, people of the village where my family have their weekend house, my own relatives, politicians and television documentaries often present certain groups by reference to such binary concepts. At times, even marginalized groups, e.g. some Mexican indigenous peoples, define themselves through reference to these concepts.

But, current discourse about globalization, expressed in the extended works of Eric Wolf (1982), Arjun Appadurai (2000), Michael Kearney (1996, 2004), Anna Tsing (2002, 2005) and many others strongly opposes this form of “globalized knowledge” of binary based thinking. To clarify, it is not to say that there is nothing we could classify as “traditional” “modern”, but these two concepts are usually so intertwined and dynamically connected that a dichotomy of the two poles does not correspond to the reality we encounter. In the actions of

² Tsing 2005:122

³ Kearney 1996:4

historical collectivities, a wider range of dynamics is at work at once. I will illustrate this argument with an empirical example.

Tourism and International Investment in Faro de Bucerías

I will focus on the reaction of a majority of the community El Coire to multinational investment in tourism. My argument is that indigenous communities that take active steps to control their territory should not be seen as culturally closed and resistant to all forms of social change.

The village Faro de Bucerías is only a four hours drive away from the huge metropolis of Guadalajara (population of six million), and an increasing number of people are spending their holidays at the village's beautiful beaches. There are still no hotels which is an even more surprising fact when one finds out that for more than 25 years companies from Asia, Europe and North America have been trying to invest in the tourist infrastructure of the region. Are indigenous people resistant to progress? Do they have another concept of development? My answer is no. It is rationality, reason and social (articulated) memory that is at work.

A brief History:

In the 1980s politicians and representatives of European tourism companies investors traveled with Mexican development planners through the untouched and "poorly connected" coastal zone of Michoacán. A coastal highway had just been built and the "backward region" was therefore ready for development and economic exploitation with the "generous" support of European financial capital. Soon engineers began to measure beaches and lands for possible projects. An indigenous teacher commented:

*"Empezaron a medir sin permiso de las comunidades, con aparatos de todo tipo, como los españoles, se llevaron nuestro oro, ahora los invasores quieren arrebatarnos nuestra única alternativa de abandonar la miseria: nuestros recursos naturales"*⁴

⁴ Comment of a *Comunero* concerning plans of tourist development in the eighties. Cited in Sánchez Díaz 1988:4 Revista Proceso, N° 255, México, 21 de Septiembre 1981:20

“They began to measure without permit of the communities, with apparatus of all types, like the Spanish were taking our gold, now the invaders want to steal our only possible alternative to abandon the misery: our natural resources”

A vast majority of the local population strongly opposed the project and investors had to leave. The road, which nobody had opposed, was still there and tourists and their money began to stream into the village. In the mid nineties another “megaturist” project promised 300 million Dollars of investment in the infrastructure of the village Faro de Bucerías. Again the project was rejected by a great majority of the village population. Until today all subsequent projects have been successfully cast off by the indigenous community. Federal development officials and many individuals in the neighbor mestizo communities wonder about the attitudes of the indigenous population. Why are these indigenous people so strongly opposed against progress which would provide so many benefits; employment, infrastructure and development. Was the indigenous culture perhaps a reason? Common views about the narrow mindedness of indigenous peoples and their inability to think rational are often articulated if one talks to state development agents or people in the neighboring mestizo village about the events.

The truth is that hardly any *comuneros* are against the construction of a hotel. Neither subsistence orientated indigenous thinking, nor love for great Mother Nature but very different reasons are hindering the construction of big hotels. The questions raised while one is talking about tourism development with the indigenous village population are: How can such a project be financed by the community? Who is employed in building the hotel? Who will get the jobs there and who will make the money? Each one of these questions is a very difficult task. There are more than 4.000 *comuneros* all of whom are in a way *dueños* (owners) of the land and all of whom want to benefit from such a project. All their different views lead to a wide range of arguments, and dissimilar point of views that are great challenges for the communities’ integrity. Until today only a few small touristic projects have been launched and gestured by the community.

In Coire a lot of discussion and dispute are going on and there are some people that put the common land tenure in question, as they have built up small thriving tourist enterprises on their own. Some people that own little capitals did not construct hotels “because they wouldn’t be their private property”. The assembly of *comuneros* is still controlling the land.

Many people do leave the community in search of another way of live and wealth towards the north. Still, what is important for almost all of the people is not to loose control of *their land*, to be able to plan their own development. There is this one argument that is supported by almost everyone: The control of the land should not be given to foreigners. Land ownership be it individual or communal offers future perspectives and dignity. Tourism by now is one of the most important financial sources for the *comuneros* living in Faro de Bucerías. The wide-ranging extent of this position within the community has a lot of additional contemporary⁵ and historical patterns.

Memory

I will concentrate here on articulated memory connected to the resistance against foreign investment. In my analysis I used the concept of Social Memory as defined by Fentress and Wickham (1992) to define these memories.⁶ Three different Social Memories are commonly articulated in arguments against foreign investment in tourism:

- 1) Colonial exploitation
- 2) The invasion of mestizo settlers during the years 1870- 1935
- 3) Experiences of migrant employment in the USA

The Invasion of mestizo settlers is a recurrent Memory that highlights the importance of the control of the territory. Asked why people don't want to sell land to investors, answers very often refer to the cruel events of the 1930s, when mestizo settlers started a genocide against the indigenous population:

"(...) mi abuelito contaba que... que ellos, los abuelos de ellos luchaban mucho por esa comunidad, morían muchísima gente para esa comunidad para poder ganar para

⁵ I may add here two examples: (1) The presence of Cuban development agents and the presence of leftist ideology through the left wing Party of a Democratic Revolution (PRD) and (2) the big business some people still make with drug trafficking in the area. All those activities have lead to a great resistance towards forms of foreign intervention in the territory.

⁶ "We can usually regard social memory as an expression of collective experience: social memory identifies a group, giving it a sense of its past and defining its aspirations for the future" Fentress and Wickham 1992: 25

poder vivir ahora en esa tranquilidad que uno vive, así mis abuelitos decían, mi abuelito dijo cuando murió: “que cuiden la tierra”.⁷

“(…) my grand father told that...that they, their grandfathers fought a lot for this community, many people died for this community for to be able to earn, to be able to live now in this tranquility in which one lives, that’s what my grandfathers said, my grandfather said when he died: “protect the land”

Social (articulated) Memory is always selective, comparative and determined by present strategies and future perspectives. Faro the Bucerías was founded under very hard circumstances as a reaction to the construction of a coastal highway, only to prevent the settlement of landless mestizos in the comunal territory. Regarding the communities history within all these contexts one slightly gets into understanding that resistance towards foreign appropriation of the land has nothing to do with the opposition towards regional development or specific indigenous prehispanic thinking .

Another important detail is that for 40 years there has been a steadily increasing migration movement to the USA. Most *comuneros* have had experiences as workers in restaurants, and hotels north of the Rio Grande. (Some of them had commented that during their stay in the US, being dependent on an employer they felt really poor, whereas in the community land tenure and social structure assure certain dignity in life as lords of the land.) In a hotel at their beaches that are owned by foreigners the *comuneros* wouldn’t count much more than in the US but earn much lower wages. People are aware about this fact.

Feedback of the People of Faro the Bucerías

When I presented my assessments of global reality through local examples – tourist investment, ecological projects in the region, the abandoning of the indigenous language between 1850 and 1930, and Migration issues – to the people of Coire they were very grateful to my contribution as it provided a kind of intellectual empowerment against assumptions of indigenous traditionalism versus national progress. It conceded reasonableness to people that are still very often referred to as *gente sin razón*, people without reason.

⁷ Ney Márquez Cruz Interview 10.4. 2005 Faro de Bucerías.

Razón was also a key word at the talks in the Indigenous Intercultural University, whenever people underlined that their rejection of the big tourist inversions were made with reason. I also remember very visibly the open mouths of some of the local politicians while listening to my arguments, and the often repeated question; *Do you really think they act with reason?*

Many people also commented on the following story that I presented in my booklet:

Some time ago a friend in Austria asked me if “those indigenous people” in Faro de Bucerias were living in a traditional or modern style. I didn’t really know how to answer, so I started to tell her about what I had experienced. I described the communication system of the villages youth who are using Walkie Talkies to stay connected (There are only a few satellite telephones in the village accessible). I was telling her of the many assemblies that I had assisted to where everyone was asked to give his or her opinion to current issues. I told her about all the American, Mexican movies and telenovelas (soaps) that I had watched during the evenings at the Mini Supermarket or at friends’ places. I told her about fishermen that once where peasants, about peasants who grew corn in the same way as their ancestors 500 years ago and who had been working as industrial workers in the United States to be able to buy a car, I told her about fruit gardens where Mangos and Papayas were grown. I told her how a lizard stew was prepared, about traditions that were in a way global, US American, Mexican or Catholic but usually intertwined and many other things that I had observed in Faro. But still I cannot say if the people do live modern or traditional lives. I think the question is just wrongly posed. (my translation)

One teacher told me that exactly this story and the theoretical part about globalization, was what he liked most about my book. He wasn’t the only one. After my presentation I received very many invitations to do more presentations and also to do fieldwork in neighbor communities. I don’t think it was because my work was so extraordinary good or special, it was just the fact that some of the topics and dynamics it included were of relevance for the people of the village.

Conclusions:

Hardly any society as a whole is consciously traditional as opposed to modern.⁸ All human communities have had experiences with modernity and European discourse. I think it is our obligation to challenge old discriminating binary discourses. I don't want to question notions of progress and development as such, people in Coire weren't questioning them either. I observed that most of them are very happy to get medical attention, a road, infrastructure, electricity and television. What my presentation in the region challenged was the common view that indigenous people don't want or need these benefits.

Globalization is a great challenge to the integrity of every human community. In El Coire there are many that believe in a positive future development gestured by the people. Indigenous identity politics, Human Rights as indigenous Rights, and Ecological movements that I did not mention in this paper strengthen all these initiatives. People do act with reason (in the very modern sense), but within this reasoning they also do have diverse aims, needs and future projects that easily enter into frictions. Still, and this maybe is more a vision than a scientific conclusion, I hope that one day the people of Coire will also be able to come to Europe, be it for holiday or to assess our lives just as I did with them. I would be grateful if one of them would present his or her work about us to me, especially if it would challenge common prejudices that I'm worried about.

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⁸ An interesting exception of collective resistance against (mostly technical) progress is the „Amish People“, which as a community consciously reject „modern lifestyle“. Their Project might be described inside a dichotomy of modern versus traditional.

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