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**Cognitive Anthropology of the Urban
Performance of the Historic City and its
Relationship with Tourist Marketing**

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Abstract

The concept of built heritage has changed from the initial idea of isolated monuments to complex sets which include landscape and sociocultural elements. Historic cities have been identified and delimited both, physically and conceptually. Therefore, social constructions play a key role in the imaginary realm where constructs lead to extremes from sublimation to trivialization. This is especially true under tourist pressure which can also lead to selective theming. In any case, such processes have been part of the marketing display through which these cities attract visitors. Therefore, urban performances tend to drift apart from actual historic discourse altering local self-perception. Even so, such changes can be accepted by the inhabitants due to the actual or perceived benefit of tourist presence or due to self-idealization of a mythic past. The aim of this work is to explore the complex relationships between tourist marketing and social representation in order to clarify this phenomenon. The historic city of Guanajuato, Mexico, which is included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, is taken as a case study. Urban Studies, Cognitive Anthropology methods and data are considered in this research. Results may be useful to assess the impact of imaginary changes in the tourist activity as well as in sociocultural identity.

Keywords: cognitive anthropology, urban anthropology, theming, tourist city.

Introduction

The concept of heritage and its management has changed through time. Evolution of such ideas can be traced through the famous declarations or charters proposed by ICOMOS or similar national or international institutions. This way, in the Athens charter, issued in the 1930's, it can be seen that the material quality of single monuments was highlighted to define heritage (Kanashiro, 2004). Later in 1976 in the Nairobi recommendations, the former concept of monument was substituted by sets of entities, stressing the importance of sociocultural values (Soto, 2011). Since then, both the intangible and natural components of heritage have been increasingly taken into account in the heritage conservation theories and practices.

The city is a complex entity composed of material and intangible cultural systems. In order to understand social perception, Cognitive Anthropology becomes a tool because it deals with the relationships between societies and the human mind. Therefore, this discipline studies the thoughts that people have about objects, subjects and events in the surrounding world (D'Andrade, 1995), including social constructions about identity. The appearance of Cognitive Anthropology related with the Cultural Relativism theory, Linguistics and Psychology, all of them stressing the importance of an emic point of view (Agar, 1982; Colby, 1996; Erickson and Murphy, 2003). Franz Boas was a pioneer of the discipline because he proposed the psychic unity of the humankind and defined culture as a mental content (Brown, 2006).

Once established that culture resides in the collective discourse, it becomes clear that urban societies continually produce new narratives regarding their own self-perception as well as others directed to project this image beyond their frontiers. Under tourist pressure, this phenomenon might accelerate because of the need to stay competitive in the market in order to attract visitors (Barrera-Fernández, 2016). It is so that historic accounts become one of the major sources of identity, yet idealization tends to occur during the process (Sommer, 1991). Therefore, actual historic facts and postmodern urban imaginary tend to drift apart following both social and economic benefits.

The aim of this research was to explore the complex relationship between sociocultural discourse change and tourist marketing. While the first might be understood as a standard process, the second element provides an extra pressure which sometimes deprives symbols from meaning, leading to trivialization and consumerism. The other extreme would be romantic idealization of historic events, creating a mythic past, equally distorting, but at least, identity reinforcing. The historic city of Guanajuato, Mexico, which is included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, was taken as a case study to explore all these processes. Relevant to both, urbanism and anthropology, the analysis was performed through the interpretation of material culture sources located in the urban space. Written materials and questionnaires were also employed to create this account. These consisted of standardized questions oriented to measure perceptions during events. More than 200 visiting

individuals were surveyed during the most relevant cultural event of the city known as the Festival Internacional Cervantino.

The Historic City of Guanajuato in the Imaginary Realm

Located in the semi-deserts of central Mexico, this city was founded during the 16th Century because of the presence of rich mineral deposits. Actually, the gold and silver mines of Guanajuato yielded mayor percentages of worldwide productions of these metals during colonial times. Mining demanded the existence of a working class which in this case implied native and African people forced introduction (Castro Rivas, López Rangel and Tovar Rangel, 1999). Due to the exceptional architectural beauty of the city center, and the continued technological mining tradition, which keeps going in the present, this site was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. *General View of the Historic Center of Guanajuato showing its Astonishing Landscape*



Source: the authors.

As appealing as richness and gold production sounds, the historic reality of Guanajuato actually includes some harsh aspects. Mining is a health threatening and physically demanding activity which leads to extremely short lifespans and poor life quality (Saha, Pattanayak, Sills y Singha, 2011). Also, it implies a high environmental cost which caused the river city pollution levels to rise to unbearable extremes. In fact, one of the major urban works in the city consisted on vaulting the river, which led to the creation of the now admired underground streets system of Guanajuato (García, 2007). A further difficulty of the city relates to the historic split up between the different economic groups. This way, an opulent and monumental center coexists with a surrounding housing context consisting of small properties located in the hill slopes. These areas deteriorate physically and socially as farther they are placed in respect to the downtown. Topography provokes one of the most dual

effects because it creates romantic and picturesque alleys or passages near the center, which become service deficient or deprived labyrinths as they develop up the hills. (Figure 2)

Figure 2. *Another View of the Center of Guanajuato. Hidalgo Market, to the Left and the Alhóndiga de Granaditas Historic Building to the Right Share the Image with Increasingly Deteriorated Neighborhoods Uphill*



Source: the authors.

The statements mentioned above can be contrasted with the tourist discourse expressed in guides and brochures. The analysis of this kind of evidence is justified because, from the cognitive point of view, they are semiotic and semantic communication tools which express the dominant thought imposed and/or reproduced by the society. Basically, the destination is considered “cultural” or “colonial” in nature. This perception is also supported through the questionnaires performed to support this research. In the given explanations, the appeal of the city is related to the powerful mining industry which financed the monumental center. Some brochures insist on the beauty of the urban landscape and go right to the extreme of stating that Guanajuato is the most beautiful city in the world.

A very interesting fact is that the considerable African demographic and cultural presence required historically for mining and extensive agriculture during colonial times in the region, (Montiel, 1994) is never mentioned, despite its potential cultural and narrative values. As a result, Guanajuato is not taking advantage of its African roots, which could serve to enrich the arguments presented in tourist guidelines and other promotion tools and also as source of identity discourse. Opposite to the case of Guanajuato, other Mexican states such as Veracruz and Guerrero have been able to combine their Afro-American presence with more widespread ethnic origins (indigenous and Spanish in the case of colonial Mexico), resulting in an exciting cultural mix. Instead, a fictional pure indigenous past is referred, later conquered by the Spaniards, even when this specific location, unlike other Mexican cities, has no major

precedent in terms of previous urban foundations. As explained above, the reason to establish the city was the mineral richness of the deposits.

Regarding the tourist behavior, surveys show that short stays from national visitors are the most common practice. Attractions recommended in the government tourist brochures include the following: historic centers in general, adjacent mining sites, museums (Alhóndiga, Quijote and Diego Rivera), Juárez Theatre, Hidalgo market, Pípila monument and its belvedere and finally, San Gabriel de la Barrera Hacienda. In the past, the Mummies Museum was usually highlighted but its current deterioration might be the reason of the omission. Still, this site prevails as one of the most popular destinations for visitors. In any case, it is fair to acknowledge that a visit to Guanajuato tends to please the visitor in general, although some drawbacks according to the tourist perceptions include accessibility, security in the alleys, trash disposal and vehicular traffic issues. It is pertinent to mention that gentrification has occurred as in most tourist destinations and that a vivid nightlife is also appreciated due to a numerous offer of bars and clubs.

Currently, Guanajuato has a dispersed urban structure and it includes a conurbation of smaller previous localities (Ávila Rangel, 2005). However, the actual access to the historic nucleus is landmarked by a roundabout displaying sculptures of miners. (Figure 3)

Figure 3. *In Guanajuato, Sculpture of Miners receive and Bid Farewell to Visitors*



Source: the authors.

This sculptural work becomes highly important from the point of view of this research. Despite the actual difficulties of true mining life, the workers are portrayed as healthy and powerful. All the problems related historically to social wellbeing, environmental challenges and also the current urban issues become erased by the symbol of the miners.

The resumed data and comments expressed in this section allow to state that historic cities tend to create new social constructions in the imaginary realm. In this case, it has been shown that the lack of conspicuous indigenous

past is compensated by the creation of an illusion narrative, while denying the African historic and contemporary presence. This might be explained by the overwhelming desire of belonging to the mainstream discourse, equally African negative, where Mexico was built by the mixture of Spanish and Pre-Hispanic cultures. Another romantic ideal relates to the supposed unmatched beauty of the city. Indeed, Guanajuato possesses more than enough landscapes and architectural beauty as to belong to the UNESCO Heritage List, but such statements are also indeed excessive. This kind of affirmation has two components, because even when it can be understood as just excessive pride, it also aids in the status quo of the city by convincing the locals about a far from true ideality of the social fabric and urban system. Actually, one of the unsolved historic issues still remaining is related to the pollution in the river which can be proved by visiting the not vaulted sections. This way, a political bias could be implied in such a fake perfection discourse. Finally, the complex mining past and present is also highly symbolized, depriving the discourse from any painful memory or fact.

Just to complete the overview, Guanajuato was the scenario to some of the most significant battles during the Mexican War of Independence. The building known as Alhóndiga de Granaditas, originally a grain storage, was used to hide from the royal army, who was defeated by the pro-independence forces. This national transcendent episode makes of the Alhóndiga, now a history museum, a well visited attraction. The Pípila belvedere is also related to this discourse.

Guanajuato and Cervantes, its Invited Symbol

In 2005 Guanajuato was declared America's Cervantes City thanks to its contribution to the knowledge and dissemination of Cervantes's literary works. How a Spanish writer and his characters, especially the Quijote became associated to this city represents a theming process, but also a symbolic insertion of meaning in a previous cultural discourse. The beginning of the process can be found in the annual representation of Miguel de Cervantes' *Entremeses* by Prof. Enrique Ruelas since 1953 (NOTISEM, 2013). After almost two decades, this eventually gained relevance and eventually led to the creation of a major annual festival in Guanajuato. This happened in 1972 when the first edition of the Festival Internacional Cervantino was celebrated. In its foundation participated the Foreign Affairs Secretariat, the National Institute of Beaux Arts and the Mexican Department of Tourism (Guanajuato State Government, 2008). This first edition took place in the Plazuela del Quijote, in Mineral de Cata, as a contribution to the Americas Tourism Year, promoted by UNESCO (Noticieros Televisa, 2012). Later, the festival occupied all possible spaces in the city.

An urban survey showed that due to this theming strategy, the center of Guanajuato is full of references to Cervantes and his literary characters. There is a museum devoted to different iconographic representations of the Quijote. The Cervantes theatre is another example of this theme related urban

equipment. Sculptures of Cervantes and the Quijote appear in the city in different styles. (Figures 4 and 5)

Figure 4. *The Quijote Sculpture and the Cervantes Theatre in the Background*



Source: the authors.

Figure 5. *Modern Sculpture Representing the Quijote in Semi Abstract Style*



Source: the authors.

Associated to the Spanish culture theming in Guanajuato, it is important to mention the attraction known as Estudiantina. Dressed in traditional clothes, a group of actors and musicians create a musical and semi-theatrical spectacle. Followed by the audience, these performers sing, play and act, telling stories through the most central alleys of the city. Even when this tradition has a few decades, it has become one of the most conspicuous images in the historic city.

However, the most relevant urban performance related to the introduction of these new symbols is the cultural festival itself. At some point, it gained prestige as the most relevant cultural festival in Latin America, joining a vast array of artists and visitors from all around the globe. During this event, the city's capacity is nearly surpassed, especially regarding lodging, traffic and residues collection. Originally culture oriented, it also became a pretext for youngsters to gather and enjoy nightlife, to the point that this became a public concern due to excess of alcohol consumption and antisocial behavior. This has been corrected in the past years. In economic terms, it is supposed that the Festival Internacional Cervantino implies a major source for the city. However, this is only partially true because it benefits the tourist sector, but not the overall population. Even when a considerable quantity of inhabitants work in this industry, the salaries tend to be notoriously low and the job conditions precarious. Furthermore, the money earned through tickets selling is managed from Mexico City and not by the local entities (Hoel, 2007).

The introduction of the Cervantes-Quijote complex into the imaginary realm of the city has been successful in general. The locals embrace this new discourse with pride and social identification. Even so, during the process, which implies cultural substitution and some degree of globalization, other local traditions have diminished their relative value. As an example, the traditional handicrafts of the region are now competing with imagery from all around the country in the local stores and markets. Also, more profound traditions, expressed in a number of local dances and processions, even when still performed, no longer attract relevant audience. Another relevant factor is that this modern introduced discourse might have reached maturity in tourist attraction terms. As said above, tourist cities must renew their appeal constantly. This is not happening notoriously in Guanajuato. The surveys performed in this research show that a vast majority of current visitors are nationals and foreigners are seldom represented. This could be interpreted as a loss of former international attraction. Seen like this, loss of intangible cultural heritage is happening while the new social constructions can only bring temporary and relative benefit. What is next in the process is still to occur.

Conclusions

As many other tourist destinations, Guanajuato needs to strive for a position within the competing market of attractions. Therefore, a constant evolution in its symbolic discourse has occurred in order to maintain its appeal to invite visitors. In order to do so, concrete strategies such as highlighting the importance of specific monuments has been applied. Idealization of the past and construction of totally new and even foreign discourses has also been performed. This happens because a point comes where the traditional or original set of tourist products loses its novelty and therefore its attraction potential. In fact, Guanajuato currently suffers from some sort of depletion on

this sense, potentially becoming not competitive, especially at the international level.

The marketing strategy of adding the Cervantes-Quijote complex into the imaginary realm of the city became successful in both, local acceptance and as source of tourist appeal. In this second sense, the economic consequences have been adequate for a specific sector of the population, while leaving aside the vast majority of the inhabitants, even when many of them do work in the tourist industry, but not well paid. Successful as it is, this cultural change has its drawbacks because more legitimate discourses have been lost in the process. In this sense, it seems that at some point, the general consequence of introducing new icons or symbols in the imaginary realm is that of intangible heritage loss.

From a cognitive anthropology point of view, the case showed two different levels of cultural change, the first one based on self-idealization constructed on more or less actual historic facts. In the specific case of Guanajuato this implied denial of painful memories regarding the mining practices, desire to highlight a very weak indigenous past and omission of the African cultural and demographic precedents. The second cultural change process refers to the sudden addition of alien symbols. This causes new social and urban performances, in this case a whole new set of symbolic icons spread in the city and also a massive cultural festival. Cultural change is a constant process everywhere. Even so, this kind of marketing strategy should be assessed in detail in different contexts to precise its impact in cultural heritage.

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