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Knowing of Indigenous Ways: Fieldwork Dispatches from Atitlán, Guatemala

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Coupled with the aesthetic beauty of its highland volcanic landscape, the modern indigenous culture of ancient Mayan descendants is a primary factor in bringing over 300,000 international and domestic visitors to the Lake Atitlán, Guatemala region each year. In this field report, I share the evolution of my ethnographic research process within one of these indigenous groups, the Tz'utujil residents of Santiago Atitlán, as they navigate the development and ongoing production of tourism in their town. I provide a vignette of a tourist's typical morning in Atitlán, convey the methods by which my ethnographic insights were derived, and reflect on these fundamental field experiences as they influence my research ethic as a burgeoning scientist.

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1.0 Morning in Atitlán

The majority of tourists arrive in Santiago Atitlán (simply Atitlán to locals) via *lancha* (water taxi), disembarking on a large floating dock at the *Playa Pública Chi Nim Ya'*. Stepping off the boat, passengers are greeted by adorable girls as young as 5 years old, dressed beautifully in handmade clothing, who pause their laughter-filled play to sell trinkets to the new arrivals. Following the dock's boardwalk, the passengers are routed through a small gazebo with a thatched roof, where they will find at least 2 of the benches occupied by young guides in their 20s or 30s – decked out in outdoorsy clothes with INGUAT (the Guatemalan Tourism Institute) authorization badges hanging around their necks – offering local sightseeing tours. The dock area is home to several cafes and mini-markets, public restrooms, and an “artisan walk” filled with upwards of 70 vendor stalls. These stalls are small one-story shacks with open fronts, bursting with blankets, bags, shoes, headbands, notebooks, and every other item that one could possibly imagine. The products are made with brightly-colored and intricately-patterned woven and embroidered fabric that is referred to simply as *típica* (typical).

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At 9:45 a.m. on a sunny Thursday morning in mid-July 2017, about half of the stalls are open for business, while the other half are just slowly coming to life or remain shuttered. After all, at this hour, only 1 public water taxi has arrived so far, bringing those who got an early start from Panajachel, the tourist hub across the lake. Heading downhill to the dock from the center of town, I pass several young women in colorful *traje* (the traditional clothing worn by the Tz’utujil people), toting baskets of shiny beaded keychains and bracelets, each with one arm hung heavy with necklaces and headbands. From inside the open stalls, seated women call out to me as I pass by: “¡Hola! ¡Hola!” (Hello!) and “¡Pase adelante!” (Come inside!). An older man in jeans, reflective sunglasses, and a cowboy hat stands in his usual spot at the bottom of the hill, yelling out destinations across the lake and directing potential passengers to the boats waiting to be filled. He asks me where I am headed – “San Pedro? Panajachel?” – but upon hearing that I do not plan to leave town this morning, he offers me a trip to visit *Maximón*, a local attraction, instead. Even 9 weeks into my stay in Atitlán, he still repeats this routine with me every time we cross paths, hoping that one day I will take him up on it.

I take a seat on a bench in a small open plaza area near the dock. When I arrive, a neighboring group of tourists is in the company of two *vendedoras ambulantes* (directly translated as “traveling saleswomen,” but used here to refer to the peddlers who operate on foot) carrying goods with them and moving around to approach tourists in various locations. The *ambulantes* are indigenous women dressed in traditional *traje*, and they each have one shoulder draped with a pile of patterned tablecloths and table runners. They keep their hands free for unfolding and displaying the various textiles, but some carry even more items in baskets artfully balanced on their heads. Within several minutes, the *ambulantes* outnumber the tourists, and they are persistent in their attempts to sell their beautiful products, displaying many different options and listing off prices in English. When the tourists begin to walk away, the women trail them to their departing boat, repeating their offers.

Another boat has now docked, and two visitors with large backpacks are heading uphill toward me, followed by one of the young guides, who is displaying a paper map with English descriptions and pointing to the different destinations he can take them. As I watch the interaction, one of the older *ambulantes* approaches me, offering to sell me a beaded quetzal keychain for my backpack, but quickly loses interest when she sees that a group of six middle-aged women have paused in front of her stall at the very top of the hill. She takes off, running up the steep street (at an impressive pace) to greet them.

I leave my vantage point on the bench and pursue a group of eleven tourists as they continue their way slowly uphill away from the dock toward the center of town. Several members of the group pause to browse at stores selling *recuerdos típicos* (typical souvenirs), while others stop to order a cup of locally grown and roasted coffee at the first of the six coffee shops that they will eventually encounter on this block. Two of the group members enter one of the mini-market style *tiendas* (stores), selling snacks and daily sundries, to purchase sodas, and yet a few more wander into one of the several art galleries to peruse the brightly-colored paintings covering the walls. This is the heart of *Calle Real*, referred to by some locals as *Calle Gringo* and others as *Calle Principal*.

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I continue to follow the group through this primary vein of town, which serves as the introduction to Atitlán for the majority of tourists that arrive by boat. Soon they reach the indoor market building and the main square of town. In the middle of the square is Central Park, a mostly concrete open area with benches, several statues, and a relief map showing the surrounding towns in the Lake Atitlán area. Facing the near side of the park is a large building that contains the municipal meeting room and a secondary school, while on the far side a combination basketball/soccer court is filled with teenagers kicking around a plastic ball. The opposite 2 sides of the park contain the municipality building on 1 side, and a set of stairs leading up to the plaza of the town's 470-year-old Catholic Church on the other. Though it is not 1 of the bi-weekly market days, the blocks around Central Park are lined with vendors selling fresh fruits and vegetables, used clothing, shoes, household goods, and more. Many of the women are dressed in striped blouses adorned in embroidered flowers and birds, *hüipiles* tucked into ankle-length skirts made of colorful patterned fabric, *cortes* that are held up with wide belts, or *fajas*; collectively these items make up the local indigenous *traje*. Fewer indigenous men than women dress in *traje*, but those who do are wearing wide-legged culottes that hang below the knee, white with vertical purple stripes and adorned with intricately-detailed embroidered birds. A scarf-like length of woven fabric tied around the waist serves as a belt and storage pouch; the men pair this with collared work shirts and cowboy-style hats.

Each morning, *Calle Gringo* comes to life as described, shopkeepers filling their allotted two meters of sidewalk space with colorful goods hanging from floor to ceiling and crammed onto every surface. Coffee shops and restaurants open their large sliding doors, setting up outdoor seating and displaying menus to catch the eye of people passing by. Tourists come and go by the boatful – small numbers arriving on the public water taxis also used by local commuters, and many arriving on privately-chartered boats in groups ranging from just a few to up to 50 people. As the arriving visitors slowly ascend the steep hill into town, and the departing ones mill about waiting for their boats to leave, the local vendors and guides vie for their piece of the market. By midafternoon – or earlier if it's raining – the reverse metamorphosis begins. Displays are shifted inside, corrugated metal garage doors pulled down, and then, by nightfall, the town is completely transformed. Food carts fill the streets, throngs of locals pour out of cafes and congregate in Central Park, and the powerful sound systems blasting from the Evangelical churches compete over one another. Each evening, the townspeople of Santiago Atitlán live their after-work lives largely devoid of the sounds, sites, and demands of the tourists that pulse from clubs, restaurants, and hotels in other lakeside towns like Panajachel and San Pedro La Laguna. Yet, asking around, one will find that those residents involved in the tourism industry do not consider the current situation in Santiago Atitlán ideal.

2.0 Background and Research Setting

In the central highlands of Guatemala, about 100 miles west of the capital city, several rivers converge at the base of 3 towering volcanoes to fill an ancient collapsed caldera with the 92 square miles of Lake Atitlán – referred to by Aldous Huxley as the most beautiful lake in the world (Huxley 1934). The shore of the lake has long been dotted with communities of varying size and social makeup, all of which have a majority indigenous population. In the 17 governmental municipalities making up the Lake Atitlán basin, tourism has grown dramatically right alongside its growth at the global scale (World Tourism

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Organization 2017). Tourism is one of the major driving forces for the phenomenon of globalization, which ushers in a tide of political, ecological, and socio-cultural change. I set out to study these issues in Santiago Atitlán.

Coupled with the highly aesthetic landscape, the modern indigenous culture of descendants of the ancient Maya is a primary pull factor, bringing over 300,000 international and domestic visitors to the Lake Atitlán region each year (INGUAT 2015). Santiago Atitlán is pueblo-rich with this living culture – the town is alight with its vibrant colors, patterns, sounds, and smells. This culture is reflected in the language, clothing, traditions, customs, and artisanship of the local Tz’utujil people. In addition to the highly visual cues of culturally based tourism, Santiago Atitlán holds a wide variety of lesser-known attractions of the type that tourists travel the world to seek, yet few know they can be found here. The town offers religious tourism in the form of the afore-mentioned *Maximón*, a mysterious deity of blended Maya and Christian origins that is celebrated by local spiritualists. The Catholic Church is not only impressive for its architecture and age of nearly 500 years, but also infamous as the site of the martyr of a revered Roman Catholic priest from Oklahoma during the country’s violent civil war. The town is also home to the Central American headquarters of Evangelical mega-church Palabra Miel, which brings thousands of visitors, during its various retreats, several times each year. The town’s nature-based attractions are also numerous, including a wide range of floral and faunal biodiversity, access to the 3 volcanoes that punctuate the iconic views throughout the region, virgin forests, archeological sites, beaches and lakefront parks, a wealth of bird species, viewpoints, trails, and more. Yet, despite abundant potential, many of the tourists who venture to Santiago Atitlán stay for only a few hours’ visit. Those residents who work in the tourism sector express concern about the town’s status and future as a destination.

Santiago Atitlán sits in the mouth of a narrow bay that extends from the southern side of Lake Atitlán in the central highland department of Sololá, Guatemala. Nestled in the crux of 3 volcanos – protected by the lake on its front and the steep forested slopes at its back – the municipality encompasses 136 square kilometers (Municipalidad de Santiago Atitlán 2012). This land is comprised of a small urban center and expansive rural surroundings that are a mix of forest and agricultural production. On the highways leading into town, billboards welcome visitors to the “Capital of the Tz’utujil Reign.” The modern name of the pueblo, Santiago Atitlán, dates back to the Spanish conquest, when the first Christian church – named for Saint James the Apostle, or *Apóstol Santiago* in the Spanish language – was established in the town; however, the majority of local indigenous residents refer to the town simply as Atitlán, a name of Tz’utujil origin that roughly translates to “by the water” (Municipalidad de Santiago Atitlán 2012).

In the twenty-first century, there has been a lot of concern with protecting the lake – aesthetically for its beauty, for reasons concerning human health, and more broadly for conservation and biodiversity protection. But, in addition to environmental threats, there are social ones; Lake Basin heritage is being threatened by new technology, rapid changes, growth, and the encouragement (and desire) to modernize. In characterizing the current situation, one informant – an expert on lake biology who has done a lot of

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natural sciences work in the Lake Atitlán region – said, “The human environment is deteriorating much faster than the lake environment” (J. Skinner, personal communication, June 9, 2017).

The town is growing at a notable rate, close to 3 percent annually, and projections put the 2018 population just over 53,000 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE] 2008; Centro de Salud Santiago Atitlán 2011). According to 2011 data, 98 percent of *Atitecos* (the name used for residents of the town) identify as members of the indigenous Tz’utujil race (Centro de Salud Santiago Atitlán). The Atitecos base much of their economy on farming and the production of artisan goods. Coffee, avocados, corn, beans, and other produce is grown on the volcanic slopes for subsistence use, sale in the local market, and widespread distribution through large corporations. The town is known for its quality woven fabrics, clothing, and glass beads, which are sold to locals, national and international tourists, and indigenous peoples from other regions of Guatemala. However, the Tz’utujil ethnic population, which is heavily concentrated in Santiago Atitlán, ranks among the lowest in the department of Sololá in the Index of Human Development (IDH) rating – a demographic measure based on the 3 dimensions of health, education, and income level (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 2011). Likewise, in the last Guatemalan national census, Santiago Atitlán, as a municipality, ranked below both the national and departmental averages of IDH (INE 2002).

3.0 Ethnographic Fieldwork

During 10 weeks of fieldwork in Atitlán in summer 2017, I built a large body of ethnographic evidence for socio-cultural change while documenting local stakeholders’ efforts to engage in the global tourism market. Realizing that what I set out to study was broad, my work took me in several exciting, new directions as I narrowed my focus. While future publication efforts will focus on elaborating the many themes within these data into additional findings, the purpose of the current field report is to convey a detailed account of the evolution of my research process, from which my ethnographic insights were derived.

My data collection began during a summer field school program, wherein I learned ethnographic research methods through a combination of traditional classroom instruction and in situ practice. During my first few weeks in Atitlán, I spent as much time as possible establishing connections within the community and building rapport with my host family, as well as creating concept maps of institutions, the physical community, and social networks. After field school, I remained in Atitlán to continue my work, resulting in a total of ten weeks at the field site. I collected two broad forms of data. I sought and compiled existing archival data in the form of local government planning documents, social media posts, external reports, and relevant scientific and academic research. I also collected original ethnographic data in the form of participant observation (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011), structured survey interviews (Babbie 2013), and in-depth, semi-structured, key informant interviews (Bernard 2011).

I recorded observations of tourism interactions and exchanges, conversations, meetings, transportation systems, personal informal interviews, photographs, and detailed notes jotted down at the scene. I

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converted jot notes into full field notes as soon as possible, resulting in about 200 pages of observation data. I utilized a typical case sampling strategy in my structured interviews (n=34) to build an emic understanding of local business stakeholder opinions on the tourism market (Creswell 2007; Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013). As such, I conducted these interviews with employees and owners of souvenir shops, art galleries, coffee shops, cafés, restaurants, and convenience stores along the main drag of *Calle Real*, described above. I employed several purposive sampling strategies in my semi-structured key informant interviews, including intensity sampling for cultural expertise, stratified sampling to capture key tourism industry sectors, and chain referral (Creswell 2007; Guest et al. 2013). This resulted in 14 hours of recorded interviews from 15 sources. All interviews except 1 were conducted in Spanish, a second language for myself as well as all but 2 of the informants. The majority of the informants spoke Tz’utujil as their mother tongue. Only 1 interview was conducted in English, the first language of both the informant and me.

I combined my archival data, detailed field notes, and interview transcriptions into a single corpus of text using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. I am currently in the process of open coding the data to iteratively develop a rigorous codebook for subsequent text analysis. This codebook will incorporate both structural coding to organize the data and inductive thematic coding (Bernard 2011; Saldaña 2015).

4.0 Preliminary Analysis

I interviewed and observed Atitlán’s Tz’utujil residents and their institutions across the tourism sectors. I asked them about their cultural identity – both how it is incorporated into their work in tourism, and, conversely, how their contact with tourists affects their identity. I witnessed immense pride in the language, clothing, art, and customs of the Tz’utujil people. Despite the history of persecution and racism that indigenous peoples of Guatemala have faced, the Tz’utujiles I spoke with expressed nothing but pride to me when discussing their cultural identity and the opportunity to share it with visitors. When asked how he learned the job skills he needed to be a guide, one respondent replied simply, “It’s my life. I lived it.” I also asked them about their community – current tourism trends, strengths and challenges, the future they would like to see for Santiago Atitlán, and their ideas on how the town can reach those goals. As I start the coding and analysis process, I have recognized patterns and thematic areas. I have triangulated these themes from within multiple sources, supported by anecdotes and evidence from the greater body of evidence from my ethnographic field research.

The power of globalization has reached even the furthest, sheltered corner of Lake Atitlán in the Guatemalan highlands. Despite Atitecos’ widespread and immense pride in their heritage, socio-cultural changes – due in part to globalization – have nonetheless driven shifts in Tz’utujil cultural institutions. In Atitlán, I saw socio-cultural change exemplified in concepts of indigenous identity, issues of ownership of knowledge, and new forms of constructed reality and authenticity. These changes have contributed to various cultural changes, including widened gaps between groups and generations, increased competition and rivalry, reduced social bonds and norm adherence, and an eroded ability to work together.

In ongoing and future analyses, I will continue to iteratively work with my data through coding and thematic analysis. This analysis will draw upon priori themes present in existing literature and theory (e.g., indigenous culture research, social capital and community capitals theory, collective action), yet also allow for emergent themes grounded in the data that may offer alternative explanations for the ways that indigenous peoples in Atitlán manage their shared cultural heritage and institutions in the context of tourism.

5.0 Reflections on Knowing Indigenous Ways

As my first field work experience, this project was a roller coaster ride of emotions, challenges, and excitement. Knowing that many foreigners had come and gone before me, and that many more would follow, I felt uneasy about my place as an outsider in the community. I thought often about my ethical responsibility as a researcher. I believed I would find a community that was wary of outsiders studying and using its people for their own benefit and professional gain, without investing in the town in return. Instead, even though I tried to express that I was a student and still learning how to conduct research, I was regarded as someone with the power, knowledge, and potential to help change lives. Perhaps this was due to differences in schooling systems, access to education, and a misunderstanding of what it means to be a graduate student in the United States. I wanted to convey my care and respect for the Atiteco people and my desire to contribute my knowledge to them in any way possible, but also felt a need to be clear in communicating the exploratory nature of my research and limited financial means. At times, I also felt conflicted about my presence as a tourist. It felt frivolous to want to go kayaking on the lake for fun – and pay money to do so – when many residents (my host father included) paddle wooden canoes across the bay each day as the means to an end (to fish or to access their farmland).

Guatemala, in general, and the tight-knit community of Santiago Atitlán, in particular, are characterized by obstacles to trust and safety. I received a slightly different version of the same story from every person asked, and sleuthing out the “truth” felt, at times, to be an insurmountable challenge. The entire data collection period had the uncomfortable feeling of toeing the line of danger in order to get anywhere. Though I am aware of differences in culture and worldview in this area, I was subject to what I consider to constitute as sexual harassment on a daily basis. Being a woman opened many doors, yet closed others. A research partner of the opposite sex would have been helpful, and more time in the field could have enabled both a greater opportunity to build rapport and the ability to devise alternate ways of attaining data when safety concerns prevented initial attempts. I made a lot of quick decisions about the lengths to which I was willing to go in the name of research, and I would be lying if I said that I had no regrets; however, the outcome was an incredible experience that resulted in both personal and professional growth and insights.

As one informant articulated, “All cultures change, but they aren’t always forced to change this fast.” Scholars acknowledge that “in the rapid global environmental change experienced in the twenty-first century, indigenous and other rural communities face the challenge, perhaps more than before, of integrating the wisdom of past generations with the reality of the present” (Berkes 2012, 27). This

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resonates deeply with my time in Atitlán, and I am greatly appreciative of the opportunity afforded to me by ICIK, whose recognition of the importance of this field of inquiry allowed me to apply my interest in community-level work to an indigenous population. This experience has no doubt influenced my long-term research trajectory. As I develop my ethic as a scientist, I will continue to reflect on these fundamental experiences.

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