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Judith Mair

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Marco Hernández-Escampa, Daniel Barrera-Fernández

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Tourism pressure as a cultural change factor

The case of the Guelaguetza festival, Oaxaca, Mexico

Marco Hernández-Escampa and Daniel Barrera-Fernández

Introduction

Cultural experiences nowadays constitute the basis of leisure and function as a repository of the values of modern society (MacCannell 1976; Rifkin 2001). As a result, such cultural experiences, especially events and attractions, now play a key role in global society, due to their function as ‘factories of meanings’ (Rooijakkers 1999) for the visitors’ consumption. This means that traditional festivals might become in high demand for those seeking the appeal of authenticity. This is the case of the Guelaguetza, an indigenous festival in Mexico, which yearly attracts thousands of visitors nationwide and from abroad, all interested in experiencing ancient values and cultural expressions.

Tourist pressure at traditional festivals

Tourists make an intense and short-time use of a very limited number of heritage assets and cultural attractions. The reason is to be found in the fact that tourist experience in cities is measured in days and hours, even in minutes in the case of cultural attractions or seconds in particular sites. In addition, cultural tourists do not often repeat their visits to the same place, and they are continuously looking for new attractions (Ben-Dalia, Collins-Kreiner & Churchman 2013). As a result of this, a process of selection of cultural assets takes place since only a few buildings and social representations are able to be adapted to the tourist visit. Furthermore, the cultural attractions they choose must be easy to comprehend, in order to meet their expectations and take into account the visitors’ limited knowledge of local history and culture (Meethan 2003; Ashworth 2009). The main difference between the selection of cultural assets made by locals and the one made by tourists is that, for the latter, only a limited choice is made, usually among the largest, most spectacular and unique resources.

The tourist’s approach to a local culture or ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry 1990) is built on socially constructed images, implying that sometimes they are flexible. These preconceptions mean that one of the main objectives of a journey is to see what must be seen (Delgado 2002), i.e. what is presented by tourist guides, leaflets, advertisements, movies, TV shows, web pages and social media. In the creation of the ‘tourist gaze’, markers are also crucial since they
help identify places that ‘deserve’ a visit. As a result, signage, sculptures and urban landscape all help to reinforce a tourist’s selection of attractions. The power of markers has been widely studied in places such as Stratford-upon-Avon, where the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust has achieved a key role in defining which places are considered as authentically related to Shakespeare and which are not (Urry 1990).

Such decisions as to the ‘must see’ status of various cultural assets imply a change of values conferred on heritage in particular, taking into account that heritage is a political resource used to give legitimacy to a social reality, dividing between ‘them’ and ‘us’. As a result, tourists need to feel that the heritage assets that they have selected are especially relevant for them. At this point, Poria and Ashworth (2009) distinguish between conservation and ‘heritagisation’. Conservation seeks to protect the past as exactly as possible, while ‘heritagisation’ refers to the use and abuse of an idealised or even invented past for the occasion. Such a dual dynamic is especially powerful when deeply rooted representations of culture strive to adapt to modern tourist demands.

As Gunay (2008) points out, the tourist use of local culture and heritage can serve to reinforce identity thanks to its outward projection. However, when interest is exclusively economic, the value of displaying the culture and legacy of a social group is lost and only those representations of culture seen as relevant for tourists are promoted, always with the aim of achieving the maximum economic profit. As a result, when the selection of heritage assets and cultural representations made by and for tourists and locals differs significantly, conflict may arise, not only in the choice of resources but also in their interpretation and use. This situation is especially likely when locals and visitors are from very different cultural backgrounds or when relatively recent cultural representations are considered.

In addition, the kind of heritage selection that gives priority to commercial value has the disadvantage of short duration, since it is viable only while economic benefit is considered adequate. This is because cultural tourism is closely linked to changes in fashion and lifestyles, and thus is clearly a volatile market. In fact, it has been estimated that investments in cultural tourism last for only ten years on average (Ashworth & Larkham 1994). Consequently, tourist products are quickly perishable in essence, and new products need to be offered once again.

This work focusses on the Guelaguetza festival, held yearly in Oaxaca, Mexico, and whose origins can be traced back more than 500 years. This case is of particular interest not only because of its importance as an indigenous celebration but also due to the tensions between tradition and cultural change. The main aim of this research was to clarify the role of tourist pressure in cultural change. On the one hand, adaptations to modern visitors’ requirements imply the production of new cultural displays, but at the same time, the process arguably reinforces identity and traditions. Sometimes, the new adaptations might lead to new heritage creation, as it is the case of architecture, accessories, designs and even gastronomy in terms of installations. In order to achieve this aim, direct participant observations were performed during the 2017 edition of this festival, questionnaires were administered to visitors and also local authorities were interviewed regarding the organisation of the event. Initially, the history and meaning of the festival will be summarised in order to create a background for the reader, due to the complexity of meanings implied in such a long historic process as is the case for the Guelaguetza. Thereafter, the remainder of the results of the research will be presented.

**Oaxaca: diversity as background**

Located in the southern portion of North America, Mexico represents the interface between two major biogeographical zones, and due to its great number of species, it is considered to be a megadiverse country (Cantu, Wright, Scott & Strand 2004). Cultural diversity is also
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relevant since the country was home to most of the Mesoamerican civilisations, and contact with the cultures from other parts of the world has only added to its sociocultural complexity (Fuentes & Reyes 2000). The state of Oaxaca is located to the south, and it is the most diverse Mexican area, both naturally and culturally (Poole 2007; Robson 2007).

Oaxaca conjures up images of time, continuity and change. The Central Valleys, where the capital city is located, constitutes one of the most recognised archaeological regions in the world. Universally relevant social processes such as the origin of agriculture, invention of writing and the rise of complex societies occurred in the area, producing astonishing examples of material culture exemplified in archaeological sites like Monte Albán, Mitla, San José Mogote, Yagul, Dainzú, Zaachila and many others (Marcus 1990; Brumfiel & Fox 2003; Flannery & Marcus 2005). It is worth mentioning that the historic city of Oaxaca, together with Monte Albán archaeological site, is listed on the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage List (Niglio, Cruz & Alfonso 2013).

The introduction of Christianity and Western culture during colonial times indeed eroded the ancient social structures; however, syncretism and resistance eventually yielded new results. Just to give an idea of cultural richness in Mexico, besides Spanish and other introduced languages, 11 linguistic families are still spoken in the country, 6 of them in Oaxaca (Martin et al. 2011).

Guelaguetza, the great Fiesta of Oaxaca

Guelaguetza is a Zapotec word which can be translated as ‘to share’ or ‘to cooperate’. The origins of the contemporary festival can be traced deep into history. During Pre-Hispanic times, the Central Valleys of Oaxaca had been inhabited by a number of ethnolinguistic groups, including the Zapotecs and later the Mixtecs. These societies created complex systems until the Mexicas, also known as Aztecs, conquered the region in the 15th century. Following this, a city was founded whose name was Huayxácac, which can be translated as ‘in the nose of the huaje tree’ (huaje is a particular kind of tree). This city was multicultural from the beginning as a range of groups thrived there until the next century when the Spanish conquerors arrived. It has been documented that these indigenous people used to perform rites which included offerings to a dual or bisexual God/Goddess of the maize called Centéotl. These ceremonies presumably used to take place in a nearby hill nowadays known as ‘Cerro del Fortín’ (Hill of the Small Fortress) which has been since those times the site of the Guelaguetza or its preceding versions (Lizama Quijano 2006; Flores-Marcial 2015).

Once the Spanish domain was established in the Central Valleys, Huayxácac was re-founded as Antequera, in honour of the Andalusian city of the same name (Niglio et al. 2013). Still other names have been used for the site, such as the original Luá (Zapotec) or different versions of the Náhuatl name Huayxácac which ended as Oaxaca and was eventually formally selected. As happened in other places in Mexico, the ancient rites were deeply rooted in the indigenous culture. A strategy of the evangelising friars was the adaptation of traditional ceremonies in order to make them look Catholic, with the aim of completing the shift away from the indigenous cultures; however, this was never totally accomplished. In fact, this process has been studied in one of the Guelaguetza dances called ‘Danza de la Pluma’ (Oleszkiewicz 1997). As part of this process, a Catholic temple devoted to the Carmen Virgin was built near Cerro del Fortín. By this stage, Centéotl had acquired a level of acceptability to the conquerors. Since this virgin is venerated on July 16th according to the Catholic ritual calendar, it was established that the nearest two Mondays to that date would be festive. This is why nowadays, the Guelaguetza is celebrated in two Mondays of July,
known as Lunes del Cerro (Mondays of the Hill). Exact dates can fluctuate, especially if they overlap other festivities. Another important fact during colonial times was that tribute to the Spaniards was imposed over the natives, sometimes associated to this festivity (Oaxaca State Government 2015).

The Independence War in Mexico, initiated in 1810, provoked a tumultuous historic period not surpassed until the Mexican Revolution ended in the early 20th century. Governments in the post-revolutionary period had to guarantee peace and also encourage a sense of nation in order to legitimate their rising powers. Both Marxism and Indigenism were rooted in the country, which led to the indigenous past being emphasised in the nationalistic official discourse. Most foreign elements were regarded as imperialist and therefore potentially harmful to the new regime. Art and imagery in general took inspiration from the Pre-Hispanic past and also from the rich Mexican folklore. For example, painter Frida Kahlo dressed herself as *tehuana* (woman from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region) to create her appealing personal image (Helland 1990). In the specific case of dance, this art contributed in many ways to reinforce the nationalistic imaginary (Pérez Montfort 1994). In Oaxaca, a vast array of traditional dances and dresses had survived during the colonial period, sometimes with Pre-Hispanic content. The modern Guelaguetza contributes to this regional and national identity.

In 1932 the 400th anniversary of the designation of Oaxaca as a city took place. To celebrate it an ‘ethnic tribute’ was organised, where all the regions of the state performed their traditional dances and music, and gave offerings of local products such as food and handicrafts to Miss Oaxaca and the public (Lizama Quijano 2006). Until 1973, this modern Guelaguetza took place in a natural slope of the Cerro del Fortín, where every year wooden structures were built for the occasion (Oaxaca State Government 2015).

The main part of the Guelaguetza is framed by the two consecutive festive Mondays. The scene for this event is the auditorium at Cerro del Fortín. On both of these days, a woman, representing Centeotl, the ancient deity, opens the festival. After that, the dances from the regions start (Figure 36.1). After each performance, the dancers throw gifts to the
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audience to share, but also as reminiscence of the colonial tributes. Prior to these Mondays, the delegations march on Saturdays in a parade through the main streets of the historic city as open invitation for the main events. The auditorium is also used for other complementary spectacles such as concerts or performance arts. Many other squares and buildings in Oaxaca City also stage cultural events through the Guelaguetza season. Gastronomy and handicrafts are also offered to the visitors in special events. One of the most visited venues established during Guelaguetza is the Feria del Mezcal, where visitors can taste and buy this alcoholic beverage obtained from different species of agave plants. The liquor is similar to tequila.

Tourism pressure and cultural displays during the Guelaguetza

Oaxaca and surrounding sites have a concentrated set of tourist resources which include the city itself and its colonial monuments such as baroque churches, palaces and the cathedral. A number of museums exist in Oaxaca, including one located in Santo Domingo Monastery which is home to the famous archaeological treasures found in Monte Albán. The typical market of the city is another key attraction where diverse merchandise can be bought, including local food. One-day tours to surrounding sites, such as archaeological sites, mezcals factories and the Hierve el Agua petrified cascades, are offered. Nearby towns like Teotitlán del Valle, Tlacolula and Zaachila can also be visited. Another important attraction is the Tule tree located in Santa María del Tule village. This tree is more than 2,000 years old, and it is considered the largest living organism in the world. Ecotourism is also developing in the nearby northern mountain range.

Oaxaca is visited by national and foreign tourists year round. Even so, a major peak is caused by the Guelaguetza. In 2006, social disturbances in the historic city affected the festival, causing a decrease in the number of visitors, which lasted a few years. However, more recently, the festival has become increasingly popular, and it has been announced by the Tourism Department that the 2017 edition of this event finally surpassed the 2005 statistics with nearly 100 per cent of hotel occupation (Rodríguez 2017). In fact, the tourist sector wants to extend the Guelaguetza to a third week in recognition of this success, which seen from another viewpoint, would be inconsistent with the traditional setup of the event.

At this point, it is becoming clear that the Guelaguetza traditional indigenous event is under heavy pressure from tourism. In order to produce economic profit and tourist satisfaction, several adaptations have occurred. For example, there have been urban and architectural modifications in the city. Street modifications for pedestrian use are currently a global trend; however, in the specific case of Oaxaca, such a decision has followed tourist demand and not local preference. In fact, the historic city of Oaxaca has been subject to heavy gentrification, especially northwards from the main square. Currently, Macedonio Alcalá, a pedestrian street, joins the main square with the Santo Domingo Monastery, and it accommodates most of the tourist stores and restaurants. Since the market is located just south to the main square and has kept its original commerce function, the southern portion of the historic city is more frequented by locals. As a result, the tourist activity concentrates around Santo Domingo, although tourists also are present around the main square.

Architectural additions to the city are also clearly related to tourism activity and specifically to the Guelaguetza festival. It could be expected that a pedestrian path would link the historic city and Cerro del Fortin. Instead, and paradoxically in respect to the pedestrian adaptations in the city centre, a massive car park was built in the slope of the hill causing a number of urban difficulties such as traffic congestion during the celebrations. In fact, the
site of the celebration had been previously been segregated from the city because of the construction of a highway. In practice, it is becoming difficult to get there for tourists unless taxi or car is used. Further, originally, the location for the Guelaguetza was an open-air auditorium. However, a structure has been built to partially cover the site. The structure is clearly visible from many points in the central valleys, and beyond aesthetic appreciations it has become part of the landscape. Shocking as it was to some people, the new auditorium now is another urban icon.

In relation to social organisation, a relevant feature in Oaxaca is that many stores in the city are run by communities. People from surrounding towns have created cooperatives to produce and sell handicrafts by themselves. These cooperatives rent or own a number of premises in the city centre. Local producers sell their handicrafts to the tourists and later divide the profits according to their internal social organisation. Some cooperatives are actively run by women. In the state of Oaxaca, many different traditional dress designs are currently used in the daily life, especially by women. In most cases, men have abandoned their traditional clothes to adapt themselves to modern urban styles trying to get better jobs. Still, it can be seen that some handicraft sellers are dressed in traditional ways. This represents at the same time authenticity and social performance directed to tourists. In part, tourist pressure is helping to preserve this kind of heritage. In contrast, most clothes sold to tourists in the streets contain indigenous designs, but are adapted to modern trends. As example, modern shoes or purses can be bought which are modern in shape and use, but created with textile indigenous designs. This implies a commercial strategy but also ethnic differentiation. Only true indigenous people may use authentic traditional clothes, and these can be appreciated in the streets or in major splendour during Guelaguetza dances.

Traditional cultural attractions include tangible heritage and activities where the visitor is a simple consumer, while creative tourism implies participation and experience (Richards & Wilson 2007). In this sense, social performances and intangible heritage increasingly play a leading role as tourist attractions by themselves. Creative tourism conceives culture as a process (Landry 2008), where the work of the artists, actors, dancers and cooks is more important than the final product. Creative tourism can be observed in Oaxaca in different ways. Traditional activities have been given renewed attention by tourists searching for the authentic or indigenous, of which Oaxaca is one of the most important representatives in Mexico. That is the case of the traditional food market in the city centre, where all kinds of local products are perceived as ‘exotic’ especially by foreign visitors. Apart from going into the market to take pictures and try some local specialties, nowadays a wide range of activities related to local gastronomy are offered, including city tours to taste mezcal or chocolate and Oaxacan cooking classes. The increasing demand from creative tourists has resulted in the creation of new facilities such as the Gourmet Market. It complements the traditional market with more avant-garde products. This case exemplifies how creative tourism not only helps by revitalising traditional activities but also adds to the intangible cultural offer of a destination.

Perception of experiences during the Guelaguetza

The State’s Secretary of Tourism is the main organiser of the festival, showing the high relevance that this event has for the state’s administration. There is an Organising Committee assisted by three departments with strategic functions: Legal-Administrative, Logistical-Operative and Promotion-Marketing. Every department is divided in a number of subcommittees, 17 in total,
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including ticketing, security, staging and tourist information (Oaxaca State Government 2015). However, so far no measurement of experiences has been performed for this event.

In order to analyse the perception of visitors during the 2017 edition of the Guelaguetza, 200 questionnaires were applied in total in both the auditorium and the Feria del Mezcal. Initial data analysis shows that foreign visitors are well represented, especially from USA, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Germany, Italy, China and Japan. Mexican visitors come from basically every part of the country. Most of respondents had visited the festival before, and they plan coming again. In addition, most of people answered that the festival was the main reason to come to Oaxaca. These two statements show high levels of loyalty to this festival, something uncommon in cultural tourism (Ben-Dalia, Collins-Kreiner & Churchman 2013). Emotional experience during the festival was highly rated and clearly surpassed any difficulties. The most common complaint related to urban mobility and difficulty in accessing and leaving the auditorium. In fact, a section of the auditorium has free entrance, and a more than 2 km long queue was recorded, formed by people waiting hours and hours to get a place.

In contrast to the visitors’ enthusiasm, the Guelaguetza has been criticised by the academy. Despite the contemporary sense of the event, devoted to highlighting local traditions and thus creating a sense of identity, it also promotes division and may even encourage racism (Montes García 2005). This may be a consequence of the colonial system, where social strata were related to the concept of race and were used to imply a pyramidal structure in society that is being reinforced in the festival. Another possible criticism derives from direct observation relates to gender roles. Indigenous traditions tend to promote hetero-patriarchal behaviour in an already rigid society. This can be observed in some dances related to courtship, where women are depicted as male possessions or they play submissive roles. In this sense it is interesting to note that in the Isthmus region, some traditional cultures conceive a third gender called muxhe consisting of biological male individuals who play feminine roles (Martos 2010). However, they are not depicted in any way in the festival. A final observation relates to animal welfare since in a specific dance a living turkey is put on public show with the consequent stress for the animal. All these topics represent future challenges for this ancient festival within a postmodern context.

Conclusions

Despite its multiple contradictions, the Guelaguetza constitutes one of the major cultural events in the American Continent. Its origins can be traced back, in the form of precedents, to more than 500 years ago. Some of its primordial elements are clearly still identifiable, such as the figure of the ancient deity called Centéotl. Another long-term component is the location itself because its site at Cerro del Fortín has also been preserved, even though modern accommodations have been built to satisfy contemporary visitors’ requirements. As a display of culture, its inherent essence has been expanded throughout the years, an example being the symbolised colonial tribute now performed as offering gifts to the audience.

As in any major festival, there are some challenges for improvement. Transport in general and accessibility to the auditorium have been identified as two of the major issues to be resolved. It is also very important to underline the fact that a considerable degree of authenticity is still one of the main values of this indigenous event. Indeed, modern tourist pressure may have modified the nature of some elements but has also created new heritage manifestations. Examples of material cultural such as handicrafts have evolved to satisfy postmodern tourist demands. On the other hand, gastronomy and other intangible kinds of heritage remain reasonably unchanged. Paradoxically, cultural change can become a means
of survival, and the Guelaguetza represents a compromise between tradition and modernity, with efforts placed on preserving what is considered genuine.

This event contributes effectively to the locals’ identity, pride and economy even if some of its traditional traits such as ethnicity, social domain or gender roles have been criticised as not representing what is considered to be progress. In the case of visitors, in many cases, cultural distance between the visitors and the full cultural meaning implied in the social representations might become an interpretive obstacle. Still, any person visiting Oaxaca during this grand event is likely to become satisfied intellectually, aesthetically as well as emotionally, and evidence for this is provided in the results of this study. So far, history suggests that this sacred hill of Oaxaca will receive worship from locals and foreigners, and the dance and music will go on.

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