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# Performing Tourism: Maya Women's Strategies

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## Performing Tourism: Maya Women's Strategies

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Maya women who sell handicrafts to tourists are public figures. Their images are featured in hotels, restaurants, airports, and other places frequented by tourists. Often they are the only indigenous persons whom tourists traveling to Guatemala and to the Mexican states of Yucatán and Chiapas meet. In Guatemala, not only are Maya women represented in tourism brochures, guidebooks, postcards, and advertising campaigns, their images are used in newspaper articles on crime, the economy, and health reports that are not related to handicrafts sales.

Like most visitors to Guatemala, I met Maya women and men in the handicrafts market in Antigua. That was in 1987, before I began graduate studies in 1990, and this initial meeting has led to twelve years of research. The deft ways that they sold to foreign tourists and the seamless cultural transitions between their indigenous-oriented hometowns and the non-indigenous, tourism-driven Antigua in large part inspired me to begin graduate studies. Intending to learn how work and identity were inter-related for these vendors, I focused my attention on the public performances they made for tourists in the marketplaces, plazas, church courtyards, and streets of Antigua. Gradually I realized that these performances were

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more than strategies to make sales. I became a person to them by means of many intersubjective experiences, including the sharing of meals of *ichaj* (Kaqchikel for greens); socializing with them along with my daughter, who played with their children; gaining fluency in Kaqchikel; and learning basic *K'iche'*. These experiences permitted me to see how vendors actually critique the tourism development of which they are subjects. The following examples highlight common ways that Maya women perform for tourists for economic reasons, as well as how they use humor to critique and undermine the tourism system that they live and work in but do not directly control.

Maya women mobile street vendors use calculated performances to sell their handicrafts in what might be called tourism as performance. A typical economic exchange between a vendor and a potential customer does not begin with the expression “Buy something.” Vendors resort to such formulas when they are “bored,” “want to go home,” or “are hassling bad customers.” Instead, the sales pitch begins slowly and subtly. Usually working in pairs or small groups (mother-daughter, siblings, cousins, or friends), women, adolescents, and girls stop and then sit next to a potential customer. They speak to each other in Kaqchikel—usually sizing up the tourist, trying to predict what he or she might buy. They may take out thread to weave bracelets as they talk.

Only when the tourist begins to watch does one of the vendors address him or her. Neither vendor asks the tourist to buy. Instead, they build rapport by making small talk, as the following conversation (translated from Spanish) illustrates:

*Vendor:* Do you want to learn how to make a bracelet?

*Tourist:* No. Is it difficult?

*Vendor:* Not very. Where are you from?

*Tourist:* San Diego. Where are you from?

*Vendor:* We are from San Antonio. It's near Antigua.

*Tourist:* Your *huipil* [hand-woven blouse] is beautiful. Did you make it?

*Vendor:* Yes. That is one of our traditions. You should learn how to weave one.

*Tourist* (laughs): I don't know. It looks complicated.

*Vendor:* It is, but there are good teachers in San Antonio. You should go there.

The vendor then explains how the blouse was woven by taking a *bnipil* from her bundle of merchandise, pointing out the designs, and emphasizing that the reversible pattern is unique to San Antonio. She brags that it is the most complicated weaving in Guatemala.

*Tourist:* That is very difficult. I'm traveling for just two weeks.

*Vendor:* Not much time. You should stay longer. You could visit us in San Antonio.

*Vendor* (to her daughter in Kaqchikel): Go sell.

The girl walks around the fountain, asking tourists if they want to buy various types of hand-woven textiles, but she does not have any success.

*Tourist* (looking at the girl): It must be difficult to sell.

*Vendor:* Very! No one wants to buy anything. It is very slow.

*Tourist:* What do you have?

At this point the vendor shows her some merchandise and eventually makes the sale.

I highlight here how vendors build rapport with tourists rather than simply try to achieve the sale. Such exchanges demonstrate Brechtian theatrical techniques in which tourists become part of the play. Independent tourists, like the woman above, who travel at slower paces and control the time they spend in any given place allow vendors to engage subtle selling techniques. When vendors realize tourists may be in Antigua several days, they will spend days courting them. Performances cater to each respective tourist. Some are teased. Some are given advice—how to avoid thieves, where the best restaurants are, what bus companies are the most reliable. Some are engaged in discussions of politics. And some are even invited into vendors' homes to see what Kaqchikel Maya life is like. Vendors share local food specialties, demonstrate weaving, and tell stories about traditions. They offer to help tourists practice Spanish and to learn words in Kaqchikel. Many vendors encourage reciprocal language-learning relationships where they help the tourist with her or his studies in exchange for lessons in the tourist's language. All these activities minimize the economic goals and emphasize that the vendors are the bearers of traditional Maya culture that contrasts with the tourists' culture.

I call these sales tactics *performances* because vendors' time is too limited given their household obligations and because the pressure of making money is too urgent to permit the development of genuine friendships with tourists who rarely return. In fact, these performances have a strong political component. Although Maya vendors in Antigua are featured on postcards, brochures, and in guidebooks, all of which contribute to tourists' perceptions, in fact the municipal government promotes Antigua for its Spanish colonial architecture and Spanish-language schools. Although tourism promotion highlights the colonial, Maya vendors adorn the sites. The touristic importance of the colonial period has been fortified through formal declarations that the city is a national monument (1944), a monumental city of the Americas (1965), and a UNESCO World Heritage Site (1979). Furthermore, local non-Maya merchants complain to city officials that street vendors disrupt their businesses and taint the colonial image. No law exists prohibiting handicrafts sales by street vendors, but that has not impeded local police forces from seizing merchandise, levying fines, and occasionally jailing vendors for selling on the street.

When Maya vendors develop good rapport with tourists, they make it more difficult for the police to intimidate them. When they perform their culture—making bracelets, weaving, speaking Kaqchikel—to tourists in the Central Plaza, they are subverting a public space that contradicts the municipality's and merchants' designations as to how that space should be used and occupied. Maya vendors are working in the space of the other, the non-Maya.

Like performance artists, they transform the plaza into a combination Maya marketplace and interactive theater. By drawing tourists into the performance, they temporarily control the plaza and protect themselves from the police, who are reluctant to bother them in front of foreign tourists. In 2001, police officers began videotaping vendors working in the plaza in order to fine or arrest them at a later date. When vendors learned this, they covered their own and the tourists' heads with the textiles they sell. Aside from hiding their identities, this tactic makes tourists aware that street vending is not approved by the city and tends to make them sympathetic to the vendors.

Humor plays an important role in such performances. In the exchange I discuss below, joking reveals how Maya handicrafts vendors understand their place within the structure of tourism and their cultural differences from foreign tourists and ladinos (Guatemalans who are culturally defined as non-Maya). In the airport in 1998, I met a young ladina woman dressed in Santa Catarina Palopó clothing. Initially, I mistook her for a Santa Catarina vendor. As I approached her, pleased to see a Maya woman in

a high-profile tourism job, I noticed that she was wearing makeup, which is rare for Maya women. When I greeted her in Kaqchikel and she stared at me blankly before asking in English if I was speaking a European language, I knew she was not a Maya from Santa Catarina. She had been hired by Maya World promoters and the Guatemalan Tourism Commission (INGUAT) to greet tourists, distribute brochures, and provide basic information about tour companies, hotels, and travel in Guatemala. Disappointed, I went to Antigua where I related my experience to friends from Santa Catarina. First they teased me, saying, "Haven't you learned anything? Can't you tell a Ladina from an *indígena*?" Then they explained how it "made sense" that a ladina would work greeting tourists. Ladinass had to greet tourists, they explained, because Maya women were so different and so potent (their character and their sexuality) that tourists would not understand them. Having a ladina dressed as a Maya woman helped ease tourists into the differences they would encounter when they actually met "real Maya women."

They asked me if she was selling handicrafts. Since she was not, they laughed that she was "a fool and didn't know what she was doing." One woman commented, "Just standing in the airport can't be a good job. How much can she make? Why would we want her job, when we can make more money selling handicrafts here [in Antigua]?" They all admitted that they were glad she was there, since they hoped it would help promote Santa Catarina and inspire tourists to buy textiles from actual Santa Catarina women. Joking aside, it is common knowledge that INGUAT employees make relatively high wages compared to the roughly three dollars per day most Guatemalans make performing grueling physical labor.

Maya women's joking reveals how they cope with how they have been described in tourism material and situated within tourism development. The example I have cited illustrates not only how they make light of their work as vendors to tourists but also how they are located within tourism sites according to ethnicity and gender. It suggests their ways of making do from within the space of the other. Here is a social, cultural, and economic space that is largely determined by guidebooks written by foreigners and mass-advertising campaigns by large hotel chains, international tour companies, and governments. Making do often means vendors rework non-Maya-defined space for their own use. To do this they play on the concepts of tradition illustrated in tourism materials to attract tourists looking for a certain type of Maya.

Maya handicrafts vendors work within well-defined touristic spaces. They are not typically engaged in hegemonic struggles over tourism plan-

ning with development organizations or the Guatemalan government. Although tourism incorporates whole Maya towns and marketplaces, there is no mandate for Mayas to participate. However, tourism affects all Mayas in San Antonio Aguas Calientes and Santa Catarina Palopó. Despite their exclusion from decision making, vendors in San Antonio Aguas Calientes and Santa Catarina Palopó have participated in international tourism since the 1930s. They go to Antigua and fit into the tourism service sector, where they sell handicrafts and criticize aspects of tourism through humor. They pattern their lives in ways that exploit tourists' perceptions of Maya women. The ways in which they engage tourists and avoid problems with government officials were developed over decades of personal experience. In Antigua, Maya handicrafts vendors perform from within non-Maya-controlled tourism spaces, where they use tourists' perceptions of Mayas to manipulate and renegotiate those spaces on their own terms to exploit tourism development projects for economic gain. Their ability to produce and renegotiate the terms of what are Maya cultural practices and materials is worked out in small ways through joking among themselves and interacting with tourists on a one-to-one basis.

While it is transparent to tourists that marketplaces exist in order to sell merchandise, vendors engage in numerous tactics to camouflage their economic intentions. Vendors without obvious selling techniques often sell the most merchandise. These vendors make productive use of cultural performance to hook customers and make sales. The performance of "Mayaness" also suggests more than incorporating tourists in the performance and subverting non-Maya-controlled spaces to make money. It also shows how Maya women, as culturally and discursively constructed, matter to tourism and to themselves. Judith Butler's notion in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* of performativity "as a reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" can be seen in these examples of Maya women's strategies.<sup>1</sup> Their awareness and mastery of the situations in which they find themselves permit them to use performance and humor to make sales, protect themselves from police intimidation, and critique tourism development practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.