Interculturalism and socio-economic development of Indigenous islander populations: The case of the Kuna Yala

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About the author

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Abstract

Many Indigenous islander populations in Latin America and the Caribbean have been facing high levels of poverty and widespread economic and social exclusion. Based on a case study approach, this paper proposes the concept of interculturalism as a means toward collaboration between Indigenous islander communities and non-Indigenous stakeholders, to influence the Indigenous islander communities' socio-economic development. The study focuses on the Indigenous people of the autonomous Kuna Yala region of San Blas in Panama and explores how intercultural principles and characteristics could contribute to a cross-cultural dialogue between the Kuna people and external stakeholders, and to the socio-economic growth through tourism development in the Kuna region. Considering that certain aspects related to the Kuna culture are of a compound and complex nature, mutual trust and awareness, intercultural understanding and dialogue are critical in this process.

Keywords

interculturalism, Kuna Yala, island community, Indigenous, San Blas, tourism

In this paper I explore how intercultural principles and characteristics could foster cultural inclusiveness and cross-cultural dialogues to support and enable sustainable socio-economic development among Indigenous communities in remote and isolated regions and islands. Baker (2011) has highlighted in her work of the last Hawaiian island, Moloka`I, the importance of Indigenous traditions and cultural inclusiveness for islander communities' socio-economic development. Focusing on the case of the autonomous Kuna Yala Archipelago of San Blas in Panama, I propose interculturalism as a concept that nurtures cultural inclusiveness and cross-cultural dialogues between the Kuna people and other stakeholders. This is to support the socio-economic growth in the form of a sustainable[1] tourism development in the Kuna region.

The article contributes to the research of Indigenous communities in Latin America and the Caribbean in remote and isolated regions such as islands and archipelagos, their cultural particularities, and the limited understanding and socio-economic integration of these cultural particularities in Western or Westernised societies and organisations. The limited cultural understanding and inclusiveness remain some of the key reasons as to why many of Latin America's 30–50 million Indigenous peoples and their communities continue to be deprived of sustainable socio-economic development (United Nations Population Fund 2010). In particular, in rural and remote regions, Indigenous peoples face poverty rates that can be twice as high as for the rest of Latin America, and continue to face widespread economic and social exclusion (Calvo-Gonzalez 2016; World Bank 2016).

In the following section, I discuss the notion of interculturalism in greater detail and in comparison to multiculturalism. Then I introduce the Kuna and the study's focus on the Kuna's tourism industry, and outline the methodology. In the main part I present the findings of my case study, followed by the discussion and conclusions. In the latter, I outline implications of interculturalism for the future development of indigenous communities in Panama and Latin America, and for non-Indigenous communities facing increasingly cultural diverse environments and contexts.

Interculturalism

The concept of interculturalism has been addressed by authors in a wide range of disciplines, including politics (see Meer & Modood 2012), linguistics (see Sarmento 2014), communications (see Frame 2009), education (see Abdallah-Pretceille 2007), and public policy (see Cantle 2012). According to the disciplines in which interculturalism has been discussed, its meaning varies in perspective and focus. Consequently, definitions and descriptions of interculturalism and its roots are manifold. For example, according to Sarmento (2014), the concept of interculturalism emerged in France during the 1970s "due to the need for inclusion of immigrant children and consequent adaptation of educational methods in the face of an increasingly multicultural society" (608). Within anthropological research, interculturalism developed in the 1960s as an alternative to the much criticised concept of acculturation (Little 2005). In Canada, discussions about interculturalism emerged in the mid-1980s (Modood 2014) with respect to Canada's Anglophone and Francophone populations "as a model for integration" (for Quebec) "and the management of ethnocultural diversity" (Bouchard 2011, 437; see also Taylor 1994, 2012). The examples illustrate the diverse roots and varying historical contexts from which interculturalism has emerged.

According to Bouchard (2011), interculturalism is influenced and shaped by a duality paradigm. The latter is defined by the relationships between cultural minority and majority groups (which are often considered as foundational[2]), and the search for conciliation of

mutual tensions and anxieties that can emerge from these relationships. The majority culture can feel threatened by the minority culture and its hostility to the traditions and values of the former group, and by its resistance to integration. Minority cultures, in turn, can feel threatened by their own feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about their future (Bouchard 2011). Interculturalism focuses on the integration of the coexistence of these diverse traditions and cultures: it favours genuine interactions, exchanges and connections between the different cultures (Bouchard 2011; Meer & Modood 2012), and it is "critical of illiberal cultural practices" (Modood 2014, 303).

According to Bouchard (2011), "traditionally, multiculturalism does not cultivate these concerns to the same degree" (448). The prefixes of the two concepts illustrate why: "the prefix inter assumes that two or more cultures interact, while the prefix multi does not assume hybridisation, but instead the coexistence of various cultures, stratified and hierarchical" (Sarmento 2014, 608). In her discussion of interculturalism and its pragmatic consequences in academia and society, Sarmento (2014) states that "as something greater than coexistence, interculturalism is allegedly more geared toward interaction and dialogue than multiculturalism" (607). For Sarmento, "what the present formulation of interculturalism emphasises is, beyond question, communication [and] conviviality" (609-610).

In contrast, multiculturalism, with its focus on coexistence, aims at a "cautious tolerance", stressing typologies and categorisations that hinder rather than nurture cultural inclusiveness and cross-cultural dialogues (Sarmento 2014: 611). Such dynamics can be seen in management and organisation studies exploring cultural diversity and differences, which have either focused on cross-national differences between groups and individuals and addressed local cultural diversity issues and their variations across countries (see Agocs & Burr 1996; Egan & Bendick 2003; Sippola & Smale 2007), or which have studied cultural differences within multicultural groups (see Barinaga 2007; Barkema & Shvyrkov 2007; Earley & Gibson 2002). While the two applications refer to conceptually different social phenomena (Harrison & Klein 2007), they both reflect the differentiating nature of managing cultural diversity. Litvin (1997) criticises such a categorising perspective and calls its discourse "divisive and disabling" (207). Lorbiecki and Jack (2000) caution that the current discourse of managing cultural diversity could "mark just another colonizing moment of the Other" (29), and engenders "responses of antagonism and resentment on the part of the 'managed diverse'" (29). The multicultural perspective on which both applications are based has been described "as a delimited, static space, within which different cultures cohabitate in a self-enclosed, silent ignorance" (Sarmento 2014, 606), rarely considering notions of cultural inclusiveness and cross-cultural dialogues (Robertson 2006).

According to the Council of Europe and the European Commission (2015), multiculturalism is "reinforcing walls between culturally distinct groups that can lead to ethnic clustering and ghettoisation". In line with Sarmento's arguments, interculturalism for these two European institutions is about doing everything possible to "increase interaction, mixing and hybridisation between cultural communities" (Council of Europe and the European Commission 2015). The two institutions define interculturalism as a means of building trust and reinforcing the fabric of the community.

In conclusion, studies of interculturalism agree widely on the concept's strong focus on cultural integration, cross-cultural interaction, communication and dialogue, cultural awareness and sensibilisation, trust building, and the importance of these characteristics for the development of sustainable relationships between culturally diverse groups.

The Kuna Yala

There are approximately 55,000 Kuna Yala living in around 49 communities in the San Blas Archipelago located along Panama's northeast coast. The Kunas found refuge in the San Blas region from the subjugation of Spanish colonisation (Barrie 2014). Since then, the Kuna Yala have struggled to maintain their traditions and to resist assimilation. Living on many of the 365 islands that make up the San Blas Archipelago kept the Kunas isolated from the mainland and resulted in a strong social cohesiveness in the Kuna population and its communities (Barrie 2014). In 1925, the Kunas rebelled vehemently against the Panamanian government's policies to ban traditional dress and religious customs. The violent and bloody protest ended successfully in the establishment of the Kunas' semi-autonomous territory (Comarca) and the protection of their own language and culture. As a rather conservative society the Kunas do not wear any revealing clothes despite the extreme heat. Men typically dress in t-shirts and pants, and the women wear colourful handmade dresses, or *tulemolas*. On their arms and legs, they wear multicoloured beaded bracelets known as *winnis,* which are believed to protect against bad spirits (Barrie 2014). The Kuna social structure has not changed for centuries, and Kuna villages only vary in size and degree of modernisation. Most Kuna live a traditional way of life, which is simple and reliant on nature for basic needs (e.g. fish and coconuts). While there has been some development in terms of waste management, many islands do not have a garbage disposal system and/or plumbing. Malnutrition among children and diseases linked with contaminated water remains common (Bennett 1999).

The Comarca status has given the Kunas the right to internal administration of laws and social policies under the jurisdiction of the federal Panamanian government. The 1925 rebellion is illustrative of the Kunas' strong endeavour for independence and autonomy throughout their history, and for their determination to strive for their own future (López 2002). Kuna political life is dominated by a congress conducted by a chief and the interpreter. The chiefs derive their authority from their knowledge of the sacred chants, and the interpreters derive theirs from their ability to interpret the chants for the people (López 2002). In formal gatherings of the eldest men, laws are discussed and disputes are settled. Agreement and decision making is collective and reached with a consensus rather than majority vote. Decisions are based on the notion of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), a way of granting or denying permission by giving or withholding consent (see Solis 2016). This decision-making model has traditionally worked very well among the Kunas, striking a balance between the conservation of natural resources, social cohesion and self-determination (see Solis 2016). However, outside parties have criticised this consensus-based, decision-making method as being too slow and costly. And despite being considered a formal instrument in human rights legislation and being included in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Kunas' way of decision making and self-determination is not fully recognised and accepted by the Panamanian government and its legislation. The Kunas' right to consultation and the right to FIPC are still to be integrated in Panama's legal framework. As a result, there have been numerous conflicts between the Kunas, the Panamanian government and other stakeholders with regard to projects that impact the natural environment of the Kunas, including mineral extraction, the building of dams and hydropower plants, and the construction of hotels and other forms of accommodation and tourist attractions. In particular, the development of the Kunas' tourism industry has had significant influences on their population and culture, and the natural habitat. Tourism, concentrated in the western part of San Blas, increased dramatically during the 1960s, with tourists from luxury cruise ships and Panamanians visiting the many Kuna islands. The tourism sector has become one of the few growth options left to the Kunas' economy since the coconut trade has declined and lobsters have

been over-fished (Bennett 1999). However, since the development of small hotels in the 1960s by Panamanians and other nationals, there have been regular conflicts between Kunas and foreign hotel owners and investors, and sustainable tourism investment and development in the Kuna region remains challenging.

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of this research project, a case study approach was deemed the most appropriate research design to follow. In particular, its flexibility favoured the case study approach over other research designs. As the case study, the Indigenous community of the Kuna Yala in Panama was chosen. This study could be seen as a "snapshot" or pilot case rather than providing data that claims external validity and statistical generalisations.

A number of different research tools and data collection methods were employed, including the collection of a range of secondary data such as governmental reports and documents; non-participant observations during three two-day visits to different islands with different stages of modernisation and tourism facilities; and eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with local Kuna tourism service providers and a regional officer of the United Nations Environmental Program (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Medio Ambiente [PNUMA]) operating out of Panama City. The data collection process started in June 2017 and took approximately 3.5 months. During the three two-day visits, non-participant observations were conducted on five different islands. Each island was different in terms of modernisation and tourism attractions and services, ranging from zero tourism services to islands with restaurants, tents and cabanas, showers and toilets for the tourists. Observations included interactions between Kunas and tourists, wastage behaviours of both groups, and any other behaviours by the tourists that had an influence of the environment of the islands they visited. The interviews included local Kunas working in the transportation of tourists, as tourist guides, and/or on the islands working in the different tourist attractions and services. The interview with the PNUMA official lasted one hour face to face and focused on sustainable production and consumption, waste management and environmental policies within the region.

Due to the study's exploratory nature, a holistic position was taken towards the overall data preparation and analysis process, focusing on the richness of the collected data rather than "turning it into numbers or … quantitative statements" (Easterby-Smith et al. 1996, 105). With regard to the interviews, data were organised (i.e. translated and transcribed) as soon as it was collected. Similarly, detailed field notes and summaries of observations and informal discussions with Kuna employees were taken. Data were analysed using a content analysis approach. The following section outlines and discusses the key findings regarding the current tourism development in San Blas.

The fallacies of recent tourism development in San Blas

Like other Indigenous cultures and/or islander populations of the world, the Kunas have been facing change due to internal pressures such as social change and environmental degradation (e.g. climate change consequences, overfishing …) and external pressure to market natural resources from the growth of tourism: "Opening our islands to more tourists is one of the few and last options we have to make some money and survive" (Kuna Interviewee 4). While the Kuna vision of tourism is to manage their own natural diversity within their own territory without losing the essence of culture, recent tourism development in the San Blas archipelago continues to be undertaken with trade-offs. Foreign-owned

hotels have been closed, foreign hotel owners have been banned from the Comarca, and foreign investments have been restricted. Yet, with only limited local capital, little access to markets, limited knowledge and expertise in running hospitality operations, and strained relationships with Panamanian tourism developers and governmental agencies such as the Panamanian Tourism Institute (IPAT), many of the interviewed Kunas view the development of a sustainable tourism industry in the San Blas region as challenging.

Cultural integrity

According to one of the Kuna interviewees, in the past, foreign hotels that have been allowed to own operations within the Kuna jurisdiction have exploited their Kuna employees and disregarded the Kuna culture: "They only wanted to make money fast – they didn't care about us or the environment in which we live" (Kuna Interviewee 7). Hotels owned by non-Kuna Panamanians from the capital ran operations within the Kuna jurisdiction and excluded the Kunas from the profits: "We did not see much of the money. Very little went back to the community" (Kuna Interviewee 1). This type of attitude created resentment towards Panamanians from the city, and the hotels were expelled from the Comarca. In turn, the Kuna have been seen by many Panamanians as money hungry (Kuna Interviewee 7).

Today the Kunas are controlling the tourism development and earnings within their region. This has created a hierarchy based on income in the Kuna society that is supposed to be egalitarian in nature. As one interviewee points out: "When the Kuna themselves are exclusively in charge of tourist facilities, they therefore are more closely involved with tourist and other outsiders, more easily compromising and degrading Kuna culture" (Kuna Interviewee 5).

Other tourism-related factors that influence the Kunas' cultural integrity and the change or loss of their Indigenous identity and values include commodification, monitarisation and Westernisation (see also Solis 2016). Commodification describes the phenomenon by which local cultures and their religious rituals, traditional ethnic rites and festivals are turned into commodities and are reduced and tailored toward tourists expectations (see Barrie 2014). For example, historically the mola is a traditional art form that is of great spiritual value and quality. Today, the Comarca "tourism has transformed it into a commercial trade, the art is losing […] the designs of the molas are changing according to the interest of the tourist—from molas with designs of the American flag to mola cell phone holders and mola soda can holders—and at the same time, women are losing their knowledge of the old designs and their meanings" (interviewed Kuna guide). Furthermore, there "is so much competition that women sell their molas to tourist for just $3, which is placing no value on the effort and time invested in their creation" (Kuna Interviewee 2).

Introducing a monetarised system and market values to a remote living society like the Kunas affects the community's traditional egalitarian lifestyle and its younger generation's (un)willingness to learn about the Kuna's traditional lifestyle. The younger Kunas "have no desire to participate in our traditional ways of doing things because they can get as much or more money from tourism" (Kuna Interviewee 1).

Furthermore, tourists come with predetermined expectations and/or limited cultural awareness. This can cause a certain loss of respect, disregard or misunderstanding of the traditional Kuna culture. "Many tourists come for a day or two and only get a quick glance at the local life without a genuine interest in our culture and our local customs" (Kuna Interviewee 6). For example, "there is a rule on one island prohibiting the lighting of lamps

when local leaders are having a meeting…but you cannot tell the tourist that they have to eat in the dark […] they are not used to it" (Kuna Interviewee 6). Thus, cultural traits continue to change and adapt to better accommodate tourists' demands and needs.

Environment

The environment is another area of concern for the Kuna. Some of the problems contributing to San Blas' environmental degradation as a result of tourism are waste and sanitary facilities management, and the potential threat of tourists going for hikes or scuba diving and damaging native plants and species.

While on a number of islands the Kunas have created some waste facilities and landfills with the help of foreign NGOs, many other islands continue to face the challenges of dealing in a sustainable way with the garbage tourists leave on the islands and in the surrounding marine environment after their visits to San Blas. In particular, when looking at the exposed roots of the coconut palms and in the sand, plastic is present everywhere— from larger pieces such as water and soft drink bottles, lost shoes, small pieces of cups and thermal containers made of styrofoam (many Panamanian and Colombian tourists are used to eating and drinking from Styrofoam containers), toothbrushes, beach toys, buckets to small fractions of extracellular polymeric substances (EPS) among the white coral pieces and algae leaves bleached white by the sun and several centimetres deep in the sand (see also Seacology 2016). While many of the larger pieces and parts could be collected and recycled, many of the particles in the sand are impossible to clean out (see Coplare 2016). And it is often these tiny fragments that have severe effects on marine life such as fish and sea turtles—and in turn on the Kunas who eat the fish. Without the coral reefs and maritime wildlife, and instead with polluted and dirty beaches, the natural habitat and the key source of income for the Kunas is being destroyed.

Intercultural management as a means toward a sustainable tourism model

To deal with these cultural and environmental threats, community-based initiatives have been aimed at developing community awareness and education programs, and sustainable management practices in areas such as communal waste management. However, many of these initiatives require specialised knowledge, skills and financing. The Kuna interviewees explain that they are aware of this challenge and that they have formed strategic alliances with Panamanian governmental agencies, various NGOs and multilateral organisations. The collaborations are not without conflicts due to cultural misunderstandings and the limited trust, cultural understanding and awareness between the different stakeholders and the Kunas (Kuna Interviewees 3, 6, 7 and 8).

For the Kuna interviewees to move beyond cultural coexistence, continuous communication and intercultural dialogues are critical. For such a dialogue, Kunas who have lived in Panama City and Colon are brought back as translators who not only speak the language of the cultures involved (e.g. Panamian and Kuna), but also know the cultures well and can translate cultural clues and traits. These translators are seen by the Kuna interviewees as an important starting point in the development of an intercultural framework, whereby the translators move beyond the simple, technical language translations to more complex interpretations and transmissions of cultural elements and characteristics that describe the Kunas' vision, the consensus-seeking decision-making process, their views about their natural habitat, and their understanding of Indigenous tourism.

The interviewees explained that the community has also been developing the Guna Yala Research and Development Institute (GYRDI) with the aim to mediate between different external stakeholders and the Kunas, to monitor the impacts of different projects that are carried out in the region, and to present new projects semi-annually to the Kuna General Assembly for everyone's information, thus facilitating the adaptable management of the Assembly.

The case of the Kuna also indicates how the intercultural dialogue between the external stakeholders and the Kuna relies on taking a holistic perspective of the Kunas, a perspective by which traditional cultural traits are merged or blended with environmental characteristics that describe the Kunas' context and background. The Kunas' particular environmental context—their seclusion in their isolated Comarca—seems to have had an impact on their particular indigenous world view with regard to Mother Earth and the use of her natural resources. Understanding the historical and environmental context that shapes the culture of the Kuna or "the other" provides the basis for an enabling discourse that differs from multiculturalism in that the former is more of an opening, and less of a categorising and divisive nature (see Litvin 1997 and Sarmento 2014).

Much of the implementation of an intercultural approach and its success depends on the willingness and openness to wanting to sensitise oneself and to understand the other's cultural and environmental context. In the case of the Kuna, external stakeholders, business partners and tourists need to see the relevance and importance of gaining a greater understanding and appreciation of their Indigenous counterparts' cultural and environmental context that creates a trusting relationship between all stakeholders. This trust could be further enhanced by the acceptance and integration of the Kunas' decision-making process and the consultation perspective so important to the Kuna—and an inclusiveness that is characteristic of an intercultural model and that leads to its sustenance of the tourism development in San Blas.

Concluding remarks

This article could have implications for the integration of other islander Indigenous communities in Latin American societies. Sustainable tourism is an attractive source of income because it can bring revenue to build and improve education and health in those communities. This source of income is particularly important to Indigenous groups isolated on islands throughout Latin America (in particular, in Central America and the Caribbean) because they generally represent the poorest members of society[3]. Socio-economic factors such as malnutrition, low literacy rates and high infant mortality are due to unequal distribution of wealth, especially among these sectors of society. Generally, it has been the case that Indigenous groups are marginalised by the country's development plans. This pattern of discrimination was inherited from Latin America's colonial heritage. To address some of these issues, Indigenous groups are forced to come up with their own sources of income to ameliorate the socio-economic problems. An intercultural approach as shown in this Kuna case, which focuses on cross-cultural interaction, communication and dialogue, cultural awareness and sensibilisation, and trust building, could be used as a way forward to develop formalised networks of similar intercultural initiatives across Indigenous and islander communities in other parts of Latin America.

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[1] Considering its strong affiliation with the ecological and environmental context, for this paper, we adopt the definition of sustainability proposed by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). In its Brundtland Report in 1987, the WCED defined sustainability as "the process

that allows the current generation to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland Commission 1987, 43).

[2] Foundational is defined as 'any culture resulting from the history of a community that has occupied a signle area for a long period […] that has formed a territory or settlement […] with which it identifies; that has developed an identity and a collective imagination expressed through language, traditions, and institutions; that has developed solidarity and belonging; and that shares a sense of continuity based on memory' (Bouchard, 2011: 442)

[3] A recent World Bank study (2016) shows that 95% of people living in indigenous areas live below the poverty line and 86% live in extreme poverty.