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# THE "ART OF RENT": PAINTERS, TOURISTS, AND CHANGE IN SAN JUAN LA LAGUNA, GUATEMALA

Laura Riddering  
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THE “ART OF RENT”: PAINTERS, TOURISTS, AND CHANGE  
IN SAN JUAN LA LAGUNA, GUATEMALA

LAURA RIDDERING

MAY 2015

A MASTER’S RESEARCH PAPER

Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts in the department of  
International Development, Community, and Environment

And accepted on the recommendation of

Kenneth MacLean, Ph.D., Chief Instructor

## ABSTRACT

### THE “ART OF RENT”: PAINTERS, TOURISTS, AND CHANGE IN SAN JUAN LA LAGUNA, GUATEMALA

LAURA RIDDERING

This qualitative case study explores artisanal painters’ views on tourism and their impacts on cultural change in San Juan la Laguna, Guatemala. They struggle with new cultural and economic identities through art. Painting is a way to overcome historical discrimination based on their identity, while they explore, develop, and communicate their cultural identities to themselves and outsiders. By selling paintings of cultural scenes that are of interest to them and to tourists, they strengthen their voices in the marketplace. Harvey’s (2002) concept of “space of hope” and Appadurai’s (2004) concept of “capacity to aspire” frame an understanding of this process of change. The painters in San Juan la Laguna create a space of hope through painting to support indigenous cultural identity and economic identity development. They use their identities to increase their unique position in the market and strengthen their capacity to aspire, that is, to engage with globalization on their own terms to shape their future. This is the “art of rent” (Harvey, 2002): the painters must artfully use their cultural and economic identity to earn rents from tourists. They must craft a space to negotiate the terms of the encounter with globalization to struggle for a better life.

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Ken MacLean, Ph.D.

Chief Instructor

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Second Reader

ii

DEDICATION

To artisans who struggle for a better life

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CONCEPTUAL APPROACH .....	2
CASE STUDY: SAN JUAN LA LAGUNA, GUATEMALA.....	6
METHOD .....	6
HISTORY OF PAINTING .....	8
HISTORY OF MURALS .....	15
ANALYSIS.....	20
CONCLUSION.....	26
REFERENCES.....	28

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Mural of artisans, demonstrating importance of art in cultural and economic identity, by Antonio Coché in San Juan la Laguna.....	10
Figure 2: Victor Vasquez Temo - Harvesting and Maintaining Onions.....	12
Figure 3: Mural titled Weaving Our History .....	16
Figure 4: Tour guide showing Mayan calendar mural to tourists.....	17
Figure 5: Process of cultural and economic change for <i>Juanero</i> painters.....	21



## INTRODUCTION

A painter sits at an easel and paints a stunning scenic vista of Lake Atitlán, while I sit on the cement floor of his art gallery. I look past him, out the door of his gallery, to see the street, dock, and hillsides surrounding a volcanic crater lake in the western highlands of Guatemala. As he tells me about the struggles he and his organization have fought to maintain this small gallery, I see the rising lake level that is only two inches below the doorway. Their first art gallery flooded and they moved to this one. Now, every night they take down the paintings, which cover every inch of wall space, and hope that the lake level will not rise further. He tells me with pride that “San Juan is visited a lot because it is an artistic place.” As he continues to tell me about his art, I watch tourists walk by the gallery as they glance inside at the colourful paintings.

This scene of artisans working, demonstrating their art, and maintaining a store to sell their art to tourists is now a common scene in the Tz’utujil Mayan town of San Juan la Laguna or simply San Juan. Over the past 15 years, dozens of artisan organizations formed to sell art, mostly naturally dyed weavings and paintings, directly to tourists. San Juan grew in reputation among tourists and travel agencies for offering art in a different setting. As one foreign tour guide told me:

When people go to San Juan they have a different sense than the other towns. In San Juan, wow, the streets are wide. The streets are clean, the people are clean, they're proud. And that is the first thing the tourists notice and they're turned on by that.

He always takes his tours to San Juan to buy weavings and paintings directly from the artists in the galleries because “the demonstration is what sells the product and what gets people excited.” Compared to other towns around the lake, there are no pushy intermediaries in San Juan because artisan groups manage the galleries.

This article details how the painters perceive the potential for art and tourism to shape culture and contribute to a better future for the Tz’utujiles in San Juan la Laguna. Drawing on Harvey’s concept of the “art of rent” (Harvey, 2002): the painters need to artfully use their cultural and economic identity to earn rents from tourists. They must craft a space to negotiate the terms of the encounter with globalization to struggle for a better life.

## CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

Worldwide, there are an increasing amount of indigenous communities involved in the tourism industry, in a wide variety of ways. Each community hopes that cultural tourism will contribute to income generation and a better future (Bunten, 2010). Tourism can be an “industry that masks its own forms of cultural exploitation under the guise of cultural promotion and recognition” (Anderson, 2013, p. 276). Or it could be an industry “that leads to the valuation of uniqueness, authenticity, particularity, originality and all manner of other dimensions to social life that are inconsistent with the homogeneity presupposed by commodity production” (Harvey, 2002, p. 107-108). Understanding the continuum between exploitive globalization and alternative kinds of globalization is

important since increasingly more communities chose to engage in globalization through tourism.

There is a large body of scholarly literature that is relevant to cultural tourism in the Global South. Broadly speaking, the literature can be divided into writings on culture or tourism. Generally, anthropologists and geographers analyse culture, whereas economists and managers write on tourism. Even when someone writes on a combination of culture and tourism his or her field of study influences the research.

The relevant literature on culture is on cultural commodification of indigenous people. Harvey states that even though the boundary between ordinary commodity and cultural commodity is porous, it is undeniable that culture has become a commodity (Harvey, 2002, p. 93). Comaroff and Comaroff argue that the 'identity economy' essentialises culture so that it becomes a subject of choice and consumption in the Age of Entrepreneurialism and Human Capital (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009, p. 150). Buntén (2008) develops a theory of 'self-commodification' in her research of heritage tourism in Alaska. She defines self-commodification as "a set of beliefs and practices in which an individual chooses to construct a marketable identity product while striving to avoid alienating him or herself" (Buntén 2008: 381). Therefore, these authors strive to understand the nuance of how culture is used, changed, and manipulated in global markets.

The other relevant literature on cultural tourism is research of the impacts of tourism *on* indigenous communities (some recent examples are Spenceley & Meyer, 2012;

Usher & Kerstetter, 2014; Yang et al., 2013). This body of literature is vast, but largely focuses on the negative effects over time from tourism projects on communities. In general, the tourism literature assumes that tourism transforms and degrades culture, even if it can spur economic development (Shepherd, 2002, p. 185). The assumption is that cultural degradation is part of tourism. Much of this research focuses on top-down tourism projects. However, as the tourism market continues to grow, more indigenous people choose to pursue tourism as a bottom-up economic development strategy.

Consequently, there is a gap in the literature on understanding the lived experiences of change from within community-organized tourism. This research begins to fill the gap through research from the perspective of artisans involved in self-organized cultural tourism in San Juan. The artisans organize into groups to sell their hand made products, at prices they set, directly to the tourists. Through an examination of the selling of artisan crafts it is possible to examine the struggle for cultural identity and economic identity. San Juan offers a unique case study of Harvey's (2002) concept of "space of hope" and Appadurai's (2004) concept of "capacity to aspire".

Harvey (2002) posits that multiple local spaces must conjoin into a broader movement to present an alternative to the current form of globalization. Capitalists will always search for monopoly rents, or income from unique tradable items. Usually, these rents come from a resource, commodity, or land; however, this is a contradiction since monopoly rents need uniqueness. The necessity for uniqueness to make profit, in turn

reinforces distinct local initiatives. By valuing these initiatives, capitalists encourage the need to create unique items and in turn encourage diversity. In the case of cultural handicraft tourism, capital encourages distinctive cultural producers to craft unique tradable items. Consequently, capital cannot co-opt the crafts, monetize them, or exploit them because the process of supporting uniqueness strengthens the identity of the producers. Then the producers have stronger identities and have louder voices to speak against exploitation. With louder voices, they can change market dynamics when they sell their products to international tourists. This type of globalization is not completely antagonistic to globalization but desires to interact with it *on different terms*. This is the ‘space of hope’ – where “progressive forces of culture can seek to appropriate and undermine those of capital rather than the other way around” (Harvey, 2002, p. 109). Capitalists cannot close down these spaces of hope because they only produce profit through actively constructing unique cultural forms displaying authenticity, originality, and tradition.

Appadurai (2004) complements the idea that culture is relevant in economic development because he argues that culture is embedded in the future of poverty reduction. He reasons that culture is not only about nurturing the past but also about nurturing the future. He argues that, “the cultural actor is a person of and from the past, and the economic actor a person of the future” (Appadurai, 2004, p. 60). Consequently, he calls for studies of both cultural identities and economic identities to analyse how collective aspirations are shaped. It is assumed that identity construction is processual and produces

subjects<sup>1</sup>. Appadurai's research highlights how the "poor could find the resources required to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 59). He stresses the importance of the 'capacity to aspire' to battle poverty. The capacity to aspire is a cultural capacity to strengthen voice, mobilize in groups, and articulate aspirations to a good life. The capacity to aspire is a navigational capacity or the ability to imagine alternative futures (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69). The capacity to imagine alternative futures can be a path to social change. In sum, the capacity to aspire is the capability to connect the cultural identity and economic identities of the past, present, and future.

The painters in San Juan la Laguna create a space of hope through painting that supports the development of both cultural and economic identity; in creating this space they have the cultural capacity to aspire for a better life. The following section sketches the importance of painting and murals in San Juan la Laguna. Through art they struggle to produce stronger cultural identity and economic identity.

## CASE STUDY: SAN JUAN LA LAGUNA, GUATEMALA

### *METHOD*

I interviewed 52 people involved in the tourism industry in San Juan la Laguna during six weeks of research in May and June 2014. In the interviews with *Juaneros*, or people from San Juan, I used a life course approach so the interviewee could detail the changes in their lives as they experienced them (Davis, 2010; Kothari, 2005; Lahiri-Dutt,

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<sup>1</sup> See Castells' discussion of project identity (Castells, 2009, p. 10).

2011). In the semi-structured interviews, I focused on three time periods: childhood, when they became involved in the groups, and their aspirations for the future. Although this research is focused on a bottom-up approach, I, a researcher from the Global North, nonetheless did the analysis. I have a bias as a transnational author raised in the United States. I do not propose a universal framework of Western change that assumes change occurs in the same way in all settings. Rather, I examined the data on how the *Juaneros* see changes from tourism and art.

This case study focuses on the interviews with five male and two female painters in San Juan la Laguna. I chose their art, over that of other art forms in the community<sup>2</sup>, because they earn the most money and have the most visible impact on the community. Most of the painters in San Juan are organized in groups; they are not cooperatives that share profits. The group members work together to rent gallery space, share travel costs to exhibitions, and buy materials in bulk to lower the costs. The groups connect with globalization because they almost exclusively sell their paintings to tourists who can pay higher prices.

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<sup>2</sup> The majority of artisans in San Juan, and what the town is arguably most famous for, are the female back strap weavers who use natural dyes.

*HISTORY OF PAINTING*

In Guatemala there are 21 different Mayan<sup>3</sup> ethno-linguistic groups (Schackt, 2005, p. 270). The country is divided between indigenous people who identify with their municipality and language group; and *Ladinos* who identify with the nation-state, and the Spanish language (Tax, 1937). This division exists since colonial times and perpetuates a belief that the indigenous are inferior to *Ladinos*. For 500 years, the Spanish and then *Ladinos* imposed their will on the indigenous to assimilate into their culture and economy (Krogstad, 2014, p. 96). This idea of inferiority is in the public discourse and is still frequently linked with the ‘problem’ of culture and poverty (Schackt, 2005, p. 271). In turn, the indigenous people in Guatemala internalize this inferiority. Montejo (2005) wrote that, “we must change our own mentality of seeing ourselves as oppressed and dominated Maya, into one of creative and supportive Maya [...] We need generations of Mayas who perceive themselves in positive ways” (cited in Krogstad, 2014, p. 96). This shift to change from acculturation to indigenous pride began in the last 60 years with political and economic Mayan organizations.

Mayans resist acculturation by making their culture visible for everyone to see; one way they have done this is through art. Mayan paintings have obtained iconic status

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<sup>3</sup> See Fischer (1999) for a summary on the constructivism and essentialism debate in academia, especially in regards to the Maya ethnic group. I assume that Mayan culture is dynamically constructed as a “historically continuous construction that adapts to changing circumstances while remaining true to a perceived essence of Mayaness” (Fischer, 1999, p. 488).



worldwide (Arias, 2006, p. 255). The first self-taught painters were Kakchiqueles from San Juan Compalapa, and Tz'utujiles<sup>4</sup> from San Pedro and Santiago Atitlán (Arias, 2006, p. 256; Johnston, 2012). Painters began to earn recognition nationally beginning in the 1960s (Carey & Little, 2010, p. 8). Carey and Little (2010) argue that these paintings are like Gramscian 'prison notebooks' because the painters lived in a society that discouraged them from being critical of the government. Therefore, the paintings "brought Maya aesthetic sensibilities and little-known Maya beliefs to non-Maya Guatemala and to the world" (Carey & Little, 2010, p. 8). Mayan are a visual testimonial to everyday indigenous life.

Antonio Coché Mendoza was the first painter in San Juan in the mid-1980s. After him, more painters learned and informally taught others. The first generation of painters in Guatemala, and in San Juan, was self-taught. As one painter of the second generation explained:

The history of painting in San Juan, well, there are many artists that are older than me. They were the ones that began first, like Antonio Vaquez, or Felipe Ujpan, and also Antonio Choché. There are also other artists like Antonio Ixtamer and Diego Isaías Hernandez, or another is Victor Temó. There are other artists also, that rest in peace now, like Gilberto Gilcom. That is the order that they started, really. Then comes me like the second generation of artists.

This shows the importance of the first generation of painters for the second generation. The first generation struggled to teach themselves to paint and they fought to establish a market

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<sup>4</sup> Tz'utujiles and Kakchiqueles are two different ethno-linguistic Mayan groups in Guatemala.

in San Juan. Now, the second generation has the ability to earn an artistic education in Guatemala City, however, they cannot always finish their university degrees because of the high costs. Now both generations sell their art in galleries in San Juan to tourists.



Figure 1: Mural of artisans, demonstrating importance of art in cultural and economic identity, by Antonio Coché in San Juan la Laguna

Today, the majority of art galleries are found on the main street that leads from the dock into town. Tourists typically arrive by boat. Of the total 43 businesses on the main street, eight are art galleries. The rest of the stores sell handicrafts, weavings, souvenirs, and other services for tourists. Only four businesses on the street are not exclusively for tourists; they are convenience stores. In town, there are five more art galleries with a total of 13 group art galleries in a population of 5,000 people.

The overwhelming majority of the painters in San Juan are men. There are a handful of women who paint, however, they are not all part of the groups in the same way as men. One painter told me his wife paints, but cannot be part of the group.

My wife is not part of the association because, now in our case, it is that, it is for the children that she can't go to the exhibitions. Because what she knows how to do is work here in the gallery and she sells her products in the gallery. However she doesn't have a lot of time to participate in the [meetings]... because there are requirements in the association to attend all the meetings that happen. But if someone doesn't participate in the meetings they don't have the right to participate in the [exhibitions]. When I leave to [exhibit], she has to open the gallery here.

This demonstrates that men do most of the painting because of the traditional division of labour. One of the reasons that the men can earn more money from painting, compared to women who sell weavings, is that the men travel to exhibitions. When they travel they leave the women behind to take care of the children and the galleries.

The paintings illustrate a wide variety of scenes. Many illustrate cultural ceremonies, like funerals or processions; or economic activities, like coffee harvesting or weaving; or disasters scenes like hurricanes or mudslides; or scenes of the environment around Lake Atitlán. The majority of the paintings have people in *traje*, or traditionally made woven clothing. None of the painters I spoke with wore *traje*. It is uncommon for men in San Juan to wear *traje*, however, the majority of women in San Juan wear modern versions of *traje* that are not hand woven and therefore cheaper.



Figure 2: Victor Vasquez Temo - Harvesting and Maintaining Onions

The paintings play two roles: to document parts of their culture that make them unique and to earn money to support their families. As one painter told me:

The artist manages various concepts, right. The artist makes something that he likes and even better they pay him to make it, right. [...] In my case, I work like this: I make both commercial art and I paint things that I like, what is truly art. [...] The benefit of making something that you like, a buyer who is interested in art, pays better for the art compared to a commercial painting. You can make a living a little off of that. They are strategies that one has to find.

He is strategic about what he paints because he needs to earn a living even doing an activity that he enjoys. He listens to the demands of the tourists, but also keeps his own artistic vision in mind. He makes commercial art that can be produced faster and can be offered at a lower price. He also chooses to make art, which is not as commercially viable,

but can earn more money. It is important to note that the painters do not paint relics of the ancient Maya or copy ancient images. Instead, they paint scenes from their daily lives and their parent's lives.

Most importantly for the painters, art can be an occupation. The paintings sell from five to a couple hundred dollars. If they sell enough it can be their full time job. It requires hard work and an investment of time and materials, but can be profitable. The painter continues to say:

I think that, for me, making art is, how can I say, it is a better quality of life. I have been painting for maybe 10 years. And for me this is an income source for my family. With this I pay the tuition for my children, the rent for the gallery, and also the family expenses. All of this I pay for, the art sales cover my expenses. Because I have always dedicated myself to painting and at this point I am not going to change, I don't think about quitting even if I try, because I am looking to the future to continue earning more, right. Because I feel that my business with art always is getting better, even though it isn't a huge step, but I have always tried to increase my earnings.

He makes a living from painting and can now aspire to a better life. While we were talking his two daughters came into the gallery at the end of the school day; they were both wearing uniforms from the private Catholic School in town. The painter's father grew coffee seedlings and his mother wove, now he is a painter that can afford private school for his children. He dreams for his daughters to complete university because he was unable to do that. He took a risk to try a new career and has supported his family through it. Tourism and painting construct his economic identity.

Other painters supported this sentiment painting contributed to economic development. Antonio Coché, the first painter from San Juan, told me: “Every artist has their own mindset and vision. Now there are more than 100 artists. It attracts tourists and for that reason art is very good for the community” (Antonio 2014). The tourists bring money that support many businesses. He stated that he earns Q5,000 (~\$675) a month from art sales in his gallery. Another painter stated that he earned Q3,500 (~\$475) a month, or the equivalent of what public school teachers earn. He said this is the norm for the people that work hard in his association. Both of them refer to their association as community businesses.

Therefore, art legitimizes painters, in the eyes of foreigners and *ladinos*, as Tz’utujil businessmen who document and sell their culture; it strengthens both their cultural and economic identity. The previous generations of *Juaneros* did not have the option to identify as painters or business owners; their options were limited to subsistence farming or plantation labourers. Globalization and tourism offer new possibilities for the future of San Juan. The painters choose to take advantage it.

*HISTORY OF MURALS*

Over the past 15 years more than 30 murals have been painted throughout the dense city centre that is less than 1 square mile. In contrast to the paintings on canvas sold in the art galleries, murals are painted directly onto walls. The themes of the murals depend on the painter. Some of the topics include: weaving, education, birds, agriculture, cultural traditions, legends, and the Mayan calendar. Many of them have been funded by international non-governmental organizations. They usually buy the paint and pay for the meals of the painter while they work.

There are so many murals that Atit'ala' has started marketing the town as an 'Open Air Museum'<sup>5</sup>. One of the painters, who painted the mural in Figure 3, told me:

That is one of the attractions in the community of San Juan la Laguna, the murals in open air. It was a project of an institution and they invited us to collaborate with them, because from that big work we did not receive anything. They only paid for the materials. So, us youth had to offer a lot of goodwill and dedication to work on the wall.

Therefore, he is proud of the murals and his participation in painting one, even though he did not earn money from it. He does paint for a gallery and earn money from paintings, but he painted the mural for free. He is the president of a group called Jóven Arte – or Youth Art, they are now the third generation of painters. They cover wider themes including

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.sanjuanlalaguna.org](http://www.sanjuanlalaguna.org)

climate change and genetically modified crops. The group worked together to paint the 40-meter long mural titled “Weaving Our History” (See figure 3). They are proud to be dedicated to painting to explore cultural identity and earn an economic identity from it.



Figure 3: Mural titled Weaving Our History

There is also a series of 13 interspersed murals that explain the *Oxlaju Baktun*, or the change in the Mayan calendar that occurred in December 2012 (See figure 4 for one example). When tour guides walk through town they stop in front of the murals to explain parts of the Mayan culture, ancient and contemporary, to tourists. The vast majority of *Juaneros* do not use this calendar today, however they are more curious about it since it received so much press in 2012.





Figure 4: Tour guide showing Mayan calendar mural to tourists

Therefore, the murals are created for both tourists and locals. Instead of the paintings that stay in the art galleries or are sold to tourists, the murals stay in town and decorate buildings. During the course of my interviews, I entered two homes that had murals inside their homes. In addition, in the interview with the Coordinator of the Municipal Tourism Office, I saw photographs of every mural in town decorating his office. This demonstrates that some Juaneros are also proud of them.

However, there is a wide range of appreciation of the murals and their cultural significance. I asked a woman who is 74 years old what she thought of the murals and she said:

I haven't paid attention to them. I have not stopped to see what there is and what they contain. It is more for the kids and youth that have studied and have made paintings. They make them pretty because of their studies and life experiences, they think about different things.

Therefore, she does not connect to the murals because she thinks they are something only for the younger generation. She does not understand what they see in them, however she knows have different lived experiences than her. For example, when she was a child there were minimal economic resources and the houses were made of corn stalks, today, the cement houses can be painted. The murals do not speak to her.

Additionally, she does not identify herself as a Mayan because she is Evangelical.

Until now I have not thought a lot about all that stuff that is related to the Maya, like the *nahuales* (personal Mayan spirit based on Mayan calendar birthday). But maybe it is a good thing to value it because, according to what they say, we come here from the Maya and what they did needs to be rescued because they are the first ones of us.

This shows she recognizes that her ancestors are Mayan, but she does not identify as the same type of Mayan as them. She knows she is Tz'utujil because she speaks the language and wears *traje*, however her religion does not permit her to be the same as the ancient Mayan.

When I asked a 20-year-old man, who does not paint, about his connection to the murals, he had a very different opinion. He explained how he saw the 40-meter mural that Joven Arte painted:

The whole mural is about the economic activities of San Juan. Starting from the back strap weaving and coffee with the work of the men in onions and fishing. All of it can be found in the mural of diverse activities. Also, there is a Mayan Ceremony and all that happens in San Juan. And our roots that are, that come... more than anything there is Tikal, where there are the most palpable Mayan monuments.

Not only did he notice the mural, but also he could explain it in detail to connect the history of Mayan people at Tikal. I continued to ask him if he felt connected to the Mayan culture and he said:

Personally, I do feel part of that now. Because I am Catholic, but that does not implicate that I cannot believe in all of the cultural part. Because I have seen that when one respects all of that he receives... receives an inner peace. Even though personally I am not very involved in that, but I consider myself apart of it now. It was not a history of the past, but one that is always present. And recently there has been a recovery of that part because a lot of times people feel confused. [They think] if I go to [fire ceremony], then I am turning my back on my beliefs. And [they think] if I go [to Church], I can't go [to the fire ceremony]. But that has nothing to do with the question. Better yet it is necessary. Or it could be that one is free... one can be in the two [places] because they are doing the same, and that is expressing gratitude to the Supreme Being.

Unlike the 74-year old woman, he is connected to the Mayan ancestors. He wants to be thankful to the Supreme Being in both Catholic style, in Church, and a Mayan style, in fire ceremonies. The murals, the tourists, and the *Oxlaju Baktun* activities enabled him to reflect on his past and future. The reflection led him to a desire to embrace his identity as a Tz'utujil Mayan connected to ancient Mayans.

Even though outsiders funded the murals, they are appreciated by some of the *Juaneros* as a demonstration of local skill and recognition of cultural identity. They represent both the visual exploration of different interpretations of Mayan culture and the development of a new economic trade. Every person in San Juan connects to the paintings, their Mayan identity, and the tourism trade differently. This is an illustration of globalization supporting diversity. *Juaneros* have choices about their identity and their jobs; the murals are one form that the diversity is expressed.

#### ANALYSIS

The *Juanero* painters use art to create a “space of hope” that supports the development of cultural identity and economic identity. This then increases their “capacity to aspire” for a better life. This is not a linear process that impacts every *Juanero* the same way; it is an iterative process that is shaped by the varied identities in San Juan.

The artisans choose to engage with tourism and the marketing promoted by the state that Guatemala is the “Heart of the Mayan World”<sup>6</sup>. In Guatemala, the income earned from tourism is beneficial to both the *Ladinos* and indigenous. This is similar to Picard’s research on the importance of Balinese identity for nation building in Indonesia (Picard 1997). The Guatemalan government recently promoted the Mayan identity, especially in relation to *Oxlaju Baktun* event, to improve tourist revenues for the nation-state. Since mass tourism to Guatemala is relatively new, it is yet to be seen how tourism will promote

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<sup>6</sup> See: <http://www.visitguatemala.com/en>

Mayan identities as defined by the indigenous people themselves. Or if the increased tourism will promote the identities the state wants the Maya to have. For that reason, it is necessary to understand what is currently shaping the identities of the painters in a predominately indigenous town like San Juan as they continue to strive for more tourism.

As Comaroff and Comaroff argue “the process of cultural commodification, and the incorporation of identity in which it is imbricated, is less linear, less teleological, more capricious than either classical economics or critical theory might suggest” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 20). Likewise, in San Juan the process of cultural and economic development is not linear, but a continuous feedback loop that connects the past to the present and to the future as seen in Figure 5. The feedback is from both tourists and *pueblo* – *which* means both the town and the people of the town.

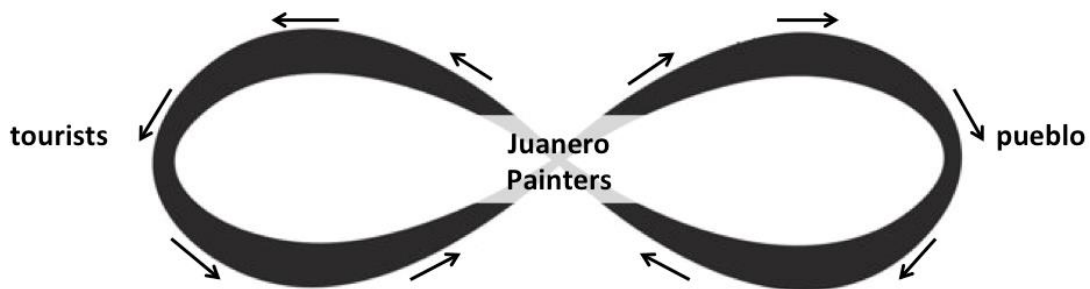


Figure 5: Process of cultural and economic change for *Juanero* painters

In this cycle it is possible to see that there is not a beginning or end to how cultural and economic identities are shaped. Importantly, the names tourists, painters, and pueblo

do not represent a homogenous group but a varied collection of people in similar spaces. The left side of the cycle represents selling paintings to tourists, and the right side represents painting murals for *pueblo*. The painters receive feedback from both sides of the cycle and shapes future work. At the same time the painters explore connections to the past and present of the Tz'utujil Mayas in their art. Also, as they paint, they are a connection to the future because they earn money to fulfil new dreams for their children and for the *pueblo*.

To begin with the loop on the left, the painters sell paintings to tourists. As the painters sell representations of culture as an economic gain, they enter the economy that they were marginalized from by the *Ladinos*. At the same time, painters choose how to represent their own conceptions of Tz'utujil culture and life. The paintings document the breadth of their culture. They document their customs to become more visible. When the paintings are sold to tourists their culture travels and becomes part of a globalized world. This documentation and dissemination of their art is a way to make their culture legible, strengthen their voices, and passively resist acculturation (Carlsen, 1997, p. 7; Scott 1985). For the first time the painters can choose how to define and represent themselves.

In turn, continuing the return loop to the centre in Figure 5, the tourists see the visual representations of Tz'utujil culture and respond to them through the exoticification of the Maya. The painters hear from tourists that they are unique and different. The tourists who purchase the paintings value this uniqueness by supporting the local economy. This is

an act of acquisition to incorporate the culture of the other into the tourist's life (Azarya, 2004, p. 954). Therefore, the painters consciously choose what to share and what not to share with visitors. When the painters receive feedback from the tourists, they continue to explore marketable versions of their identity and to reflect on what their identity is and is not. For 500 years, outsiders treated the Tz'utujiles as inferior. Now, over the past 15 years, the interaction changed. Tz'utujiles no longer have to present the identity the dominant group imposed on them. They have choice.

At the same time, the painters produce murals. This is denoted on the right side of the Figure 5. Again, the painters choose what to represent, explore, and communicate to their own neighbours. As explained above, this can range from commemorating labour, documenting customs, or exploring the ancient Maya. The murals can open a conversation between artists and neighbours about what is important to paint. They choose what to document and represent amongst themselves.

The return loop to the centre is the response from the *pueblo* about the cultural representations in the mural. The marginalized Tz'utujil identities can be openly discussed. The murals can inspire the next generation of artists to contribute to the discussion on Tz'utujil culture. The murals also legitimize the painters as economic actors in the *pueblo* that contribute to improve it and they support the identity of San Juan as an artistic community. Then the artists in the centre of the process can hear the feedback from the *pueblo* and shape the themes of paintings for tourists

Several authors found that murals that represent marginalized groups have an impact on identity. McCarthy found that murals in Manchester's Northern Quarter and Belfast's Cathedral Quarter are "linked to local identity and/or image enhancement" with the potential for regeneration of identities (McCarthy, 2006, p. 244). Through research of South African murals, Marschall found that they "open up an avenue for collecting diverse view-points of what the city means to different stakeholders" (Marschall, 2008, p. 22). Additionally, she found that murals are "about asserting identity and resistance; they create a sense of place and ownership; [and] they talk in a specific language targeted at a local community audience" (Marschall, 2002, p. 52). Another scholar found that Catholic murals in Chicano neighborhoods in Los Angeles "reflect sets of customs, values, and a sense of shared history that can encourage local unity as well as represent the community to outsiders" (Sagarena, 2009, p. 94). A final example is a case study done of murals in Philadelphia that resulted in artwork that countered stereotypes and constituted modes of resistance for disenfranchised communities (Moss, 2010, p. 372). This research supports similar components of the impact of the murals in San Juan la Laguna. The *Juanero* murals enhance local identity, demonstrate different artist's view of their culture, resist stereotypes of Mayaness, create a sense of ownership, and present a unified identity.

*Juaneros* illustrate the simultaneous independence and interdependence of culture with ongoing sociopolitical process of wider societal contexts (Fisher, 2001, p. 14). Their cultural identity is a process of interaction to define themselves in relation to their ancestors, themselves, tourists and other indigenous communities around the lake.



*Juaneros* are not part of the Pan-Mayan political social movement; they do not engage in the Mayan constructivist and essentialist debate; instead they are an economic social movement. They aspire to a better future and are in the process to place themselves in the wider socio-economic contexts of globalization. They have yet to join broader movements, but could with their strengthened cultural and economic identities.

In both of these loops the painters continue to strengthen their voices and identities through artistic expression. This is apparent through the increasingly wider range of themes painted in art works and murals. Additionally, to increase their earning potential, they mobilize in groups. The groups are also beneficial to complete the larger murals. Through this entire process they shape collective aspirations together. They all work in careers that were unimaginable for their parents. Through painting they have found a way to connect their cultural past, to improve their current economic conditions, and imagine a better future with a strengthened cultural identity.

## CONCLUSION

The painters of San Juan la Laguna illustrate that it may be possible to create a space of hope; to strengthen the capacity to aspire; and to become cultural actors and economic actors. Through art they both struggle and produce new cultural and economic identities, both individually and collectively. Art is a way for the painters to overcome the pressure to assimilate. Paintings and murals are a way to begin to explore, develop, and communicate their indigenous cultural identities to themselves and others.

At the same time, art is a way for painters to adapt to the changing circumstances of tourism, by developing a high-valued commodity that offers them a future out of poverty and increases their voices as economic actors. Through painting cultural scenes that are of interest to them and to tourists, they reinforced their cultural identity and strengthened their voices in the marketplace. This is not to say that their culture is completely malleable and only based on economics, but that their cultural identity is a historically continuous construction that is currently represented and explored in one way by the painters. The past, present, and future of their history, culture, and identity are in their paintings.

*Ladinos* and foreigners dominate the Guatemalan tourist market, they are the capitalists, but the *Juaneros* stronger identities could be used to change the tourist market in the future. Even though it is possible for capitalists to co-opt and exploit their art, the capitalists themselves need the cultural difference of the Tz'utujil painters to continue

marketing Guatemala as the ‘Heart of the Mayan World.’ The painters are not wholly antagonistic to globalization, but outline an alternative kind of globalization in which the forces of cultural identity can seek to appropriate and undermine those of capital (Harvey 2002: 109). They use their art to confront a nation-state that marginalized them and global forces that threaten their relevance.

If they can do this, and connect with multiple spaces doing the same, then they can create spaces of hope for a different type of capitalism to create a better future. This is “the art of rent” (Harvey, 2002): the painters need to artfully use their cultural and economic identity to earn rents from tourists. They must craft a space to negotiate the terms of the encounter with globalization to struggle for a better life. Since the painters have created Harvey’s “space of hope” and have Apparudai’s “capacity to aspire” it may be possible for them to use their cultural and economic identities to transform San Juan.

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