

ADAM UHNÁK

The Mexican 'Pueblos Mágicos'. A Qualitative Research Using Ethnological Methodology



The Mexican 'Pueblos Mágicos'. A Qualitative Research Using Ethnological Methodology

ADAM UHNÁK

Department of Ethnology and World Studies,
University of SS. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
adam.uhnak@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The main focus of this study is on the 'magical villages' in Mexico. The magical villages were originally established based on a political project with the aim to increase travel and tourism and revitalise the culture. In the introduction, the author describes the type, function and goals of this project based on the official requirements set by its originators. Firstly, the author explains the aims and methods of the intended research supported with theoretical hypothesis to analyse the project as a whole. Secondly, the author defines the methodology used to describe locations of the researched topic. In conclusion, the author provides own hypothesis and expected outcomes of the research.

KEY WORDS: Mexico, magical villages, revitalisation, traditional culture

Introduction

'Pueblos mágicos' or The Magical villages project has been created along with other projects, where the main focus of the Mexican government was to increase profits from travel and tourism. This project was aimed to provide an alternative point of interest to modern resorts across the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean; as well as an alternative to a vast amount of sightseeing from Pre-Columbian and colonial times.

The magical villages or cities, or rather towns, provide tourists with a typical illustration of an authentic Mexican village whilst portraying conventional living, legends and myths, characteristic habits and original professions.

In 2001, when this project was created, four magical villages were established: Huasca de Ocampo (Hidalgo), Mexcaltitán (Nayarit), Tepoztlán (Morelos) and Real del Catorce (San Luis Potosí). In the period of twelve years, the list of the magical villages and towns reached 85 and this number has still not been finalised. This project has been constantly updated with regular changes and requirements to match the current definition of a 'magical village or town'. The main reason why the number is persistently growing is the financial resources. Majority of villages and their mayors are trying to meet the requirements from the Ministry of Travel and Tourism in order to receive financial resources to increase their budget. Despite the fact that there have been suspected some special cases where the illegal practices had been applied, there are very strict rules to get approval. Here are some of those mentioned above:

1. Preserve symbolic attributes and original architecture
2. Maintain and share aboriginal myths and legends
3. Identify the original culture and its connection to the past
4. Avoid innovation
5. Establish autonomy of residents and their involvement with this project
6. Preserve its original habits and customs
7. Minimum population of 20,000
8. The location must be less than 200km (or two hour) away from the nearest destination
9. Maintaining order¹

Further reasons of this project were identified, such as increased GDP, and improved cultural environment as well as revitalisation of the traditional lifestyle. However, the core focus on means to increase the national budget was defined by the originators of this project in several points:

¹ www.sectur.com

1. Direct more travel and tourism to the locations with significant historical and cultural attributes
2. Generate more space for restoration of conventional professions, support current professions, festival, events and traditional cuisine
3. Present available attractions and adventures
4. Maintain and develop touristic attractions of the whole country, representing an alternative way to satisfy constantly growing demand from international as well as national visitors
5. Support products from travel and tourism such as adventures and extreme sports, eco-tourism, fishing
6. This program was created to encourage people to preserve and maintain richness of the culture and history of their home country²

However, some argue that this program is more anti-productive than beneficial in relation to the population living in these magical villages and towns. In some cases, there was a numerous alteration of traditional landmarks found regardless its status of a magical village/town. Unfortunately, this creates a tension among residents and local authorities. Moreover, this is only one out of several existing issues, which are constantly appearing in regards with this project. Since its announcement, there have been arguments identifying excessive alteration of traditional culture and characteristics of a village/town. Some of the states in the Mexican federation have rejected the project, as they believe this project could damage not only the material but immaterial heritage as well. They consider this government's support to increase travel and tourism through such a project a consequence of social and economical changes within the country. Furthermore, there are many international companies entering the magical villages and dispersing their own traditions, while taking job opportunities and profit that should stay within the villages and be used for local developments and improvement of social life. High levels of travel and tourism can encourage elitism of a particular class, which is mainly profiting from products and services offered to tourists and therefore, disturbing the relations among residents even more. It has been criticised that many villages and town have completely lost their original character due to a high impact of international resources. In addition, many of investors are buying a

² www.sectur.com

mass of properties, or even appropriating public spaces. In this case, it is more about economical concerns than anything else. A majority of critics may agree that the creation of a similar project with aims to increase travel and tourism is the right way to go. However, they rather criticize its implementation, as it affects the nature of the villages and towns as well as the lifestyle of their residents. Some believe that the project is targeted to attract tourists mainly from USA and Canada. They also refuse to accept the fact that this program can educate residents about their own history and culture where they live. The tension among residents is also considered a good way to revivify the traditions. It is true to the certain extent as the impulse is coming out of this project itself. The question concerning the project's ability to suit the purpose and the reality remains unanswered.

The main aims and critics characteristics of the project briefly outline the definition of a current Mexican village. The magical villages project was created to present the original but still current culture, which, as it seems, is a great area for research, especially to look for answers to many anthropological questions. Researchers can find topics for their research such as identity of current residents of Mexican villages, preservation of traditions and customs, revitalisation of culture as well as questions on assimilation and segregation. Most likely, all of these social and cultural effects influence magical villages and towns to the point where they change their nature.

Research Objectives

My main aim of this study is to describe and interpret social and cultural portrait of the Mexican magical villages. The researched areas will provide me with cultural expressions of the society enabling me to analyse how authentic it is. Due to a variety of opinions and reactions on the impact of the project, it is absolutely essential to attempt to carry out their evaluation. Apart from ever-changing culture, there is also another area worth researching: the identity of residents living in the magical villages, their self-awareness and representation of traditions and customer of the culture. Thus, my further area of the study will be an evaluation of the identity, predominantly an evaluation of identities of residents of atypically created villages. In this study, I will focus on residents of particular magical villages, where I will analyse their attitudes, approach and social status within the community influence by the project. I will also focus on criticised areas, especially the issues of globalisation and assimilation resulting in replacing and obliterating the traditional reactions of the Mexican residents. I would like to provide findings explaining the catalyst of those worries and seek the areas where they predominantly occur.

Based on the project's conditions, it is already obvious where the magical villages meet the requirements, although the main question on how they meet those requirements to be accepted remains unanswered. Thus, my study also analyses the revitalisation of traditional culture through the project. I will examine the way the project affects the revitalisation process in researched areas.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The project on the Mexican magical villages and towns is only at its beginning and apart from commercial articles there is a bare minimum of studies analysing the project from an academic perspective. Despite the fact that the intended research is focused on more actual ethnological topics, I consider literature review from colonial times to be the primary source of my theoretical background. In times of colonization, information on original Mexican culture was gathered and noted by chroniclers and mainly by Misiones arriving from Spain. Their studies provide detailed life of the original residents of Mexico as they had a direct contact with aboriginals. Nowadays, these studies are considered to be the primary source of literature background to illustrate the way of thinking and behaviour in particular areas. These sources are an appropriate source when seeking links among cultures, and therefore avoiding misinterpretation of various kinds of phenomenon.

My research will be conducted in villages with strong Indian background, and therefore the original studies from Spanish Misiones will be a suitable source to explore fundamental characteristics of the original culture. Predominantly, I will concentrate on studies from Bernardin de Sahagún, Toribio de Benavente Motolinia, Diega Durána etc.

In my opinion, it is very important to clarify the fundamental impression of cultural background forming the magical villages. The historical events, which are outlining the current nature of modern Mexico from the political perspective, represent a historical heritage from pre-Columbian times. Colonization and Christianisation of the Mexican population were the main characteristics during the state formation. In the 19th century, the era of formation of national states, it was difficult to adapt to new conditions. The most common and fundamental principle to form a national state was a unite community. It was defined as a community of 'mesticov' (mixed). After a long period of Indian oppression and enforcement of the idea that anything Indian related is linked to a poverty and submission, it was mainly Indian community that was attempting to exclude themselves from other national states. They became a specific characteristic symbolizing authenticity and uniqueness. These changes were brining an obvious disturbance during the process of identification of the Mexican population. Undoubtedly, the surrounding and the changes during the formation of the state and its principles are bringing an inconsistency in

searching for definition of the identity of this country. As claimed by Benedict Anderson, *'a nation has been built on the bases of hypothesis and nationalism and therefore, it is necessary to comprehend it as a connection to foregoing big cultural systems.'*³

Based on this thought, we can assume that the endeavour to apply the idea of a united community under those circumstances, such as a tribal-based Mexico, can encourage a creation of various situations leading to various outcomes. Besides, the formation of the state was already resulting in chaotic impression of a nation as well as all endeavours to create the identity. The attempt to assimilation with the original culture and its connection with the past is also included in those attempts to create own identity, as defined in the project of the magical villages.

In fact, the cultural setting itself, which was created based on the representation of a magical village, is linked to an idea of a united participation and considered similar to Andersen's term *'imagined communities'*. The idea of imagined communities specified by Andersen is very important especially for its relation to the current representation of a magical village. It is almost a demonstration of a cohesive mechanism, which is on one hand playing a critical role in the process of creation of the program, whilst on the other hand, working only on the surface according to its members (the residents of those particular magical villages in this case).

In the process of the creation of the project of the magical villages, there is an apparent question if the selected way of enforcement of renovating traditions has a contra-productive impact on this process as well as its meaning in the researched area. Based on these theoretical findings of Eric Hobsbawm and his concept of *'invented tradition'*, we can assume that the enforcement of traditions in this way is forming an invented tradition. Hobsbawm has defined this as *'the process of formalisation and ritualization of invented cultural aspects, which have been mocked in very vague and historic past. Tradition is then defined as a collection of practices resulting from open, silently accepted rituals and rules, instilled values and norms caused by a constant repetition, whilst this repetition points out the illusion of a continuity with the past'*.⁴

³ ANDERSON, B. 2008. *Představy společenství. Úvahy o původu a šíření nacionalismu*. Praha, p. 62.

⁴ HOBBSAWM, E. 1993. Introduction. In: *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.1.

Despite the fact that there are various interpretations of actual questions that are linked to the theme of a cultural meaning of Mesoamerica, in this case, Mexico and the program of magical villages in particular, I find hypotheses of Michael Foucault on his understanding of gaining the control absolutely necessary to consider. He rejects a categorisation as well as spontaneity being classified as a phenomenon, which should be rather characterising the behaviour of an individual. His epistemological approach, which provides individuals with rules of relevant thinking, is an appropriate tool to be used for research of phenomenon in Mexico. In addition, Foucault's concept of discourse described as '*...principles of thinking that consists of thoughts, attitudes, various kinds of behaviour, beliefs and practices, which are systematically constructed subjects and areas that are being talked about*'⁵, could be a suitable indicator of the approach to be used in this study.

Methodology

In the previous findings, it is apparent that the area of Mesoamerica requires very specific methodology and, as I mentioned in the previous part of this study, various theoretical approaches. This was not aimed to highlight the authenticity of the research area, but rather to identify its specifications. A distinctive approach should be used to avoid errors when completing the research. It is necessary to avoid exaggerated credulity towards evidence, which are initially very clear, as well as separate from the comprehension of some outcomes resulting from regularity of the environment.

The magical villages project being considered mainly a political project, it is important to identify three different categories of its realisation. Firstly, and in this case the highest category in a hierarchy, it is the Ministry of Travel and Tourism. This category was the fundamental principle for creation of this project setting the principles and requirements on what the project should look like and its functions. Secondly, it is regional politics, mainly regional councils governing cities and villages. Regional politics also consists of creators of events and social occasions, and it is an authority responsible for adherence of set rules. Self-government contributes to this program, which cities and villages are represented to the public. Thirdly, it is the residents of villages. They are the last part of the program along with tourists depicting the image of the magical villages. This categorisation should assist with the interpretation of results from the research. It is also essential to specify the research sample on which the research will be applied. In my opinion, the third category, the residents of the magical cities and villages, is the most important sample to be

⁵ FOUCAULT, M. 2002. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. London and New York: Routledge, p.67.

The Mexican 'Pueblos Mágicos'. A Qualitative Research Using Ethnological Methodology

studied. It can be assumed that the residents of the magical cities and villages are the main indicator of any impact of the project.

I have chosen a qualitative form of research. It is because there is an emphasis on process and sequence of circumstances, narrative description with the aim to preserve the neutrality of the research area. The attempt to avoid a disturbance of the research area might appear insensible in terms of researching a different cultural area. Straightforwardly, a researcher can be easily recognised and therefore, not be accepted by the community. Longer a researcher stays in the community, according to the recent experience, bigger the chance of minimising or completely diminishing this problem. The qualitative research concentrates on a smaller sample but for a longer time period. Among the collection of material, I will provide my own observation with the aim to become a part of residents' of the magical village everyday lives to overcome the issues of suspicion from respondents. The methods of my observation will allow new topics occurring in everyday situations. Especially, the disinterest of respondents will aid me to get to the deeper meaning of their problems. Observation is a continuous research with no time limits or boundaries constrained by a voice recorder or direct questions. The researcher is constantly a part of respondents surrounding, while allowing a respondent to drop vigilance towards an unknown person. As well as this overall cultural surrounding, it is crucial for a researcher to stay in the research areas as long as possible in order to completely connect with the research sample. Participation in simple activities within the community will provide opportunities to obtain necessary information without respondents controlling their actions too much.

Another mean of obtaining material for the research will be conversations with respondents in the form of semi-structured questionnaire. From the previous experience, I will be very cautious with this method, although some of the respondents have not enough time to devote to my research and therefore, this method is the most convenient to be used for certain samples. There is always a danger that a respondent provides an expected answer to meet the expectations of the researcher despite the fact he/she might not be able to answer a question. Therefore, I have based the main criterion for choosing the research sample on the third category in the categorisation of the project. I want to apply the research predominantly on residents of the magical villages, which are affected by the project on daily basis. The variety of the research sample should be large, if possible, taking the link to the project into a consideration. This research should include residents who are benefiting from this project as well. On the other hand, it should also include residents who are not affected by this project at all. The passport-related criteria play a fundamental role in this model of the research. I will choose respondents based on my own personal contact. In this case, I will use the method of 'snowing ball', which is suitable for a researcher

looking to spend a long time at a research area. The research will commence with a small group of people who will provide their own recommendations of direct and indirect contacts enabling my research sample to grow further.

The Research Area – Locations

The prime resources of information will be research of the terrain in two villages included in the magical villages project. The magical villages represent a vast topic in terms of the amount of villages and their individual characteristics. The choice of locations was based on the type of questions in order to obtain as much variety of information for further analysis. It might be apparent that this vast topic requires a research at few locations. I realise that the comparison of only two villages might cover the topic to the certain extent and that the conclusion might not apply to other locations. There are two main reasons for conducting this study in this structure. Firstly, I was trying to find locations which are similar to each other in terms of their characteristics so they can be directly compared. When using a large sample of the research area, the obtained material might lack the accuracy due to dissimilar characteristics of research locations. Secondly, the research sample is also defined by the method of my research. I opted for qualitative research, which I consider the most appropriate to achieve the aims of my research. The application of this method requires to stay at the terrain of the researched locations and synthesis of a various amount of data to overreach boundaries of the prepared study. I decided to prepare the research based on a comparison of two villages - Tepoztlán (Morelos) and Cuetzalan (Puebla). Both have a specific feature in common, which is very strong Indian character. It can be considered that this feature can be yet different due to a different geographical location of each village.

Tepoztlán is one of the first villages which were approved in the project and it has been a part of the project since its beginning. It belongs to the top four founding villages of the project, although it did not manage to avoid sanctions. In 2008, Tepoztlán was removed from the list due to being unable to comply with terms and conditions. A similar mechanism has been applied at Ministry of Travel and Tourism and it is still in place, which proves that any advantages of being approved as a magical village have some boundaries. Every member of this project must provide an evidence of compliance with requirements on yearly basis, as well as a list of activities, in order to receive a renewal certificate. Tepoztlán did receive a renewal certificate in 2010 based on the evidence provided and it was added to the list again. The reason why I have chosen Tepoztlán for my study is because of its short distance from the capital city Ciudad de México. Presumably, the proximity of the capital city amends the Indian character and therefore, its modern features affect the traditional specifications of Tepoztlán. In general, Tepoztlán is more of a

tourist location mainly for residents of the capital city. According to statistics carried out by the originators of this project, the frequency of tourist visitors to this destination is one of the highest. In comparison with Cuetzalán, which is completely isolated from those impacts, hence the lifestyle is entirely different. The advantage of this location is its status in the project. Despite the fact that Cuetzalán was not among the founding magical villages, it achieved its approval in 2002 and has been a member ever since. The main reason for choosing these two locations is for their similarity based on fundamental attributes, which have been met to be a part of the project. They are both linked to each other through their cultural similarities, which also allows further comparison and analysis.

Research Hypothesis

I consider that the part of my research sample will be supporting the aims of the project and its realisation. I believe that this sample will be represented by part of the population that is involved with ensuring the project's functioning or the project is a part of their living. Naturally, they will be biased towards the opinions they represent.

I consider that another part of my research sample will not be able to represent their opinion clearly and will be partially in agreement with the project, although these people will understand the cons of the project's functioning. The vague opinion will be a result of the combination of these people being involved with the project and receiving profits, although they are expecting more in the future.

I consider that another part of my research sample will disagree with the project. The opinion might be influenced by a negative experience, no participation in the project, or just a personal disapproval with the aims of the project that have an impact on the community.

Conclusion

Hitherto, the project of the magical villages has opened a plethora anthropological themes. We can consider this project a new area for research as there is a variety of factors influencing the cultural potential. It contains ethnological processes, which may change due to impact from the specifically created conditions. The aim of my study of two locations is to clarify the functioning of this project and its impact on the local communities. I think, the research can contribute to the themes on the project of the magical villages. On the other hand, my study can reveal how the project influences the surrounding in which the project operates. My study can provide the basis for future long-term research and synthesis in similar research areas. It will contain my personal attitude towards the project. Based on the previous experience in this type of cultural surrounding, I formulated theoretical hypothesis

and methodology to analyse this theme. In theoretical background I am considering contemporary anthropologists. The magical villages create a complex of modern cultural, social and community themes. In order to interpret those themes appropriately, it is required to consider current questions. In methodology I am using well-known methods which are normally applied for a research as such. The character of the methods used are also tested by Slovakian ethnologists, which are using those methods in Mesoamerica themselves. The credibility of the aims and hypothesis of the planned study will provide results directly in terrain. The outcomes of the research will be used in my dissertation draft. The magical villages will represent a spectacular project with a promising future. Its originators are looking for inspirations in various cultural surroundings in order to achieve the full potential of the magical villages. There is an idea of creating magical villages for whole Latin America. Currently, it is very difficult to assume is the project will thrive and grow further and what will be the final number before it stops. For anthropologists or ethnologists, it already provides a great area for research and further analysis.

Bibliography

ANDERSON, B. (2008): *Představy společnosti. Úvahy o původu a šíření nacionalismu*. Praha.

FOUCAULT, M. (2002): *The Archeology of Knowledge*. London and New York: Routledge.

HOBSBAWM, E. (1993): *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

www.sectur.com

www.visitmexico.com