

CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION AND FOLKLORIZATION OF THE “MAYA”: THE CASE OF THE GUATEMALAN ARCHAEOLOGY

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Keywords: Sociology, Guatemala, cultural identity, ethnicity, folklore

This work represents a preliminary effort and the beginning of a comprehensive process of research about the relationship between nationalism, archaeology and identity. Therefore, our point of departure is the very specific case of Guatemalan archaeology, poorly studied from the point of view of its relationship with the construction of a nation project, and particularly with that which is considered Maya. But this is as well the age of redefinitions, identity-wise, and of the formulation of local cultural proposals intended to have some effect on the global and national spheres.

THE MODEL OF MONO-CULTURAL NATIONAL STATE

The concept of “nation” established by Benedict Anderson (1993) will be assumed as the starting point for establishing the relationships between archaeology and state. The national state is the hegemonic form of social and political organization of the so-called “modern societies”. To Anderson, the nation is a political community envisioned by its members; a subjectivity through which individuals share a territory, a language, a history, a mythology, a past, and a common destiny (1993:23). It is important to note that this “imagined community” installs itself on other previous ones, that is to say, on religious communities and preceding dynastic kingdoms, some of which at times almost constituted states, though not national states.

The context wherefrom national states emerge must not be forgotten: the expansion of capitalism, the print, and the imposition of “official” and “national” languages, all of which allows as well for an expansion of the national state as the favorite form of social and political organization during the XIX century and up to our days (Anderson 1993: 63-68).

While in the previous dynastic states sovereignty resided in the divine delegation of power from some deity to a ruler, in the national states such sovereignty resides in a citizenship conceived as of liberal individualism (Anderson 1993:25). In this sense, the members of a nation imagine themselves as “relatives”, though they do not know one another or will never meet with one another, or even when they have different identities of origin –cultural, religious, kinship, etc (Anderson 1993: 23, 200 and 217). Thus, the nation may be understood as a narrative that binds together cultural diversity and makes of it a matrix within which individuals

believe to share a present, a past and a future, space and territory (Anderson 1993:25; Alonso 1992: 398-399).

National narrative needs an official history to back it up and reproduce it. Thus, in face of the usually pre-existing cultural diversity regarding the national state, a dominant group, who takes charge of building official history, emerges. To give the nation such homogeneous appearance, the standardization of an official languages and the definition of the “national” artistic expressions are established, while the “history of the nation” is taught at school. And this is the history that narrates an official past and simultaneously lessens the significance of all previous othernesses, groups, cultures and identities that may have preceded the arrival of the national state.

If we use the concept of folklore defined by Ana María Alonso (1994), it is possible to argue that in the construction of the official past, the state instrumentally uses those cultural traits that will not be a definitive part of national culture beyond their nature of folklore and cultural patrimony which the nation inherits as a property of its own. Such notion lays the foundations of the state-nation, monocultural model, wherein the indigenous cultural traits and their past are fossilized at the core of the nation’s official history (Alonso 1994: 398-399). Thus, included in the cultural homogeneity that a nation entails, the traits different to those of the national culture will be by definition, folklore and national patrimony. However, there are other contemporary models of state-nation that will be approached later.

NATION AND ARCHAEOLOGY

But, what does this folklorizing state that Alonso refers to, have to do with the archaeology of Guatemala? According to Anderson (1993:251), the archaeological discipline has played an important role in the construction of nationalisms around the world. For example, the museums in Southeast Asia are a sample of how the national state exhibits before its citizens those cultures or civilizations presumably extinct. Around the mid-XIX century, the new state-sponsored colonial archaeology was the one in charge of integrating the cultural patrimony by legitimizing the official history of the new national states. Soon, the national state took an interest in the restoration of imposing monuments from ancient civilizations and their further public dissemination in maps and printed editions.

RESEARCH ASSUMPTIONS

If archaeology has played a relevant role in the configuration of an imaginary of nation, then this paper should begin by presuming that archaeologists, viewed as social individuals, do actively participate in the construction of such a discourse. In that sense, the archaeologists, with their practices and academic production, would be participating in the construction of the Guatemalan nation by producing knowledge for scholarly, public and tourist consumption (Castañeda 1997).

Considering that Guatemalan archaeologists are “nation-builder individuals”, the opinion of a sample of our colleagues was explored, in an attempt to identify defined groups with elaborate discourses on their different imaginaries of nation. We asked them what they understood by “Maya”, their motivations to pursue the career, and who, in their opinion, were to administrate the archaeological sites. They were asked as well in what way they envisioned the relationship between archaeology and tourism. Due to time restraints and the limited funds with which this survey has been conducted, it was not possible to achieve significant statistical levels based on quantitative data. The continuity of this work may be established using different patterns, such as age, school where the subject is attending or has studied, and the origin and ethnic adscription of the archaeologists.

With these methodological biases in mind, we found that one sector of the archaeologists was very clearly ascribed to the discourse of a culturally homogeneous nation. To them, the Maya were an extinct civilization circumscribed to a specific temporality and territory, as claimed by this archaeologist when he was asked: *To you, who are the Maya? “They are the ancient indigenous population that achieved the parameters of development that characterize a civilization”.*

All quotations originate in the database under construction, based on the inquiries made to students and professional archaeologists from the schools that teach archaeology in the country. The name of the colleagues is not quoted because ours was an anonymous survey. When asked about their motivations for studying archaeology, some archaeologists referred explicitly to the historic function of the discipline, to the role it played in the construction of the nation, as shown in the following answers: *“To understand the future of the nations through their past...”, or, “To support the reconstruction of the past in order to achieve a stronger national identity”.*

This notion of national identity may be understood like an additional support to the model of a culturally homogeneous nation that takes possession of other cultures and turns them into a part of their cultural heritage. For example, when asking: *What is your opinion about indigenous populations managing archaeological sites?* One archaeologist replied: *“I think that sites are a national patrimony and that they belong to Guatemalans as a whole, not to any particular group”.* Another archaeologist replied to the question: *“What do you think that the relationship between archaeology and tourism should be like?”*, *“Internal tourism allows visitors to assess the resources they have, to learn more about their history... to directly or indirectly participate in the conservation of the tangible and intangible natural heritage”.*

Faced to the discourse of the homogenizing nation, there are archaeologists who see the Maya from a different, more culturalist perspective. To the question of who are the Maya, they reply: *“They are a society formed way back in time and that still exists with certain changes in the cultural, social, political and religious aspects”.* Or: *“They are the native speakers of any language of the linguistic Maya family”.* These conceptions make it possible to see the Maya as a modern cultural identity which “coexists” with the national culture, as shown by the answer of this

archaeologist to the question of whether there is any connection between the ancient Maya and the modern indigenous population: *“If culture is what we are talking about, it goes from generation to generation, obviously with changes and variations within... the modern indigenous peoples are linked with the ancient ones, both in politics, religion, and social aspects”*. This version is contradicted with arguments such as this one: *“The Lakandon, the Itza’ or the Mopan, perhaps, and only perhaps, could be said to have an ancestry from the “Classic” Maya, but that is also relative... A long time has passed from the Terminal Classic to our days”*.

TOURISM AND FOLKLORIZATION

The other angle we have stressed in this paper is the handling of the Maya as a market commodity. In this pursuit, we have critically concentrated on the model of multicultural nation that the Guatemalan state has been articulating since the 1990’s and to this day. It is a multicultural-nation discourse designed as of the model of a homogeneous nation, where all other non-national cultural identities are folklorized. In the current model of a multicultural Guatemala, and although the cultural identities are already recognized as living cultures, they still seem to be viewed by the state, by several indigenous populations, and by non-indigenous tourist promoters like folklore for sale in the tourist market. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the archaeologists of our survey envisioned tourism in prehispanic cities as a vehicle of development for the indigenous communities settled in the vicinities. This is the most adequate discourse in the era of economic globalization, where tourism plays a crucial role in the generation of wealth but also in the reinforcement of the homogeneous nation, the folklore, and the cultural heritage, where “the other cultures”, different from the national one, have a place. Again, this is an obstacle that makes us see the Maya as a mere cultural patrimony, and not as a modern and legitimate culture.

When archaeologists were asked: How do you envision the relationship between archaeology and tourism? one colleague argued: *“The concept of promoting tourism as a strategy for local development is definitely a viable alternative in the pursuit of an economic boom for this nation. However, this requires a carefully balanced planning for the necessary creation of infrastructure and training and for establishing priorities in the protection and preservation of the cultural and natural heritage”*.

If tourism can foster a particular model of “Guatemalan nation”, archaeologists can provide contents to those models of nation still under construction. Another colleague notes: *“Tourism is usually promoted at an international level leaving aside the national sphere, one that is important for the development of our country, particularly for the formation of the generations to come. It is necessary to promote the Guatemalan culture”*. One could wonder which culture within the Guatemalan nation this answer refers to. One important thing about this is that archaeologists should be well aware of how the state and the market use the archaeological data they gradually generate, and what is the model of nation and cultures within they support.

CONCLUSIONS: FUTURE USES OF ARCHAEOLOGY

It is a well known historic fact that globally, archaeology has been used to build monocultural nations (Anderson 1993). In the official national history, it is clear that the Maya was treated as a homogeneous, extinct or “perished” whole, fit to be exhibited at the national museum. However, it should be noted that currently, the concern of the State and the market for using archaeology has grown wider. Each day, tourism becomes more important for the economic sustenance of the country. Therefore, we cannot help to observe the use that the State is currently giving to archaeology, one that will probably reinforce within the population the practice of imagining themselves as a homogeneous “Guatemalan nation”. Within such framework, the Maya –past and present- are still merely a national patrimony, folklore, and in addition, a product for export (Castañeda 1997).

Once the archaeologists become aware of the use given to the information they gradually generate and of the theoretical and epistemological frameworks where the hegemonic interpretations that dictate what is, or what is not, to be considered “Maya” are coming from, they will be able to more clearly decide which model of national state they are helping to create. The degree of current information handled by archaeologists in regard to other disciplines that provide information on the relationship of the past and modern indigenous –linguistics for example-, must be very seriously taken into account, as this would help archaeologists to be more sensitive to continuities in front of ruptures.

The scenarios of a nation to be built or rebuilt may be three: the monocultural state-nation, the multicultural state-nation, and the multinational state.

In the first, the nation of Guatemala did not envision itself as a *mestizo* nation, but it was built instead with diacritics of the different Ladinities aimed at creating citizens and nationalizing the non indigenous sectors, leaving the indigenous population with a status of “underage citizens” who were to be tutored until they were modernized (Taracena 2002: 396, 414-416). In the first model, the Maya will continue to be imagined as an extinct culture, of which only its aesthetics remain as part of the national folklore preserved as “national heritage”.

In the second model, the multicultural state-nation, each cultural group is part of the State and can be ascribed to one sole nation like in the United States, where, without disregarding the issue of color and discrimination that still exists, a person may be ascribed as Jewish-American, German-American, Afro-American, etc., preserving his/her original cultural identity. Archaeology could be of help to make the Maya known as a “living culture” within the national imaginary. This would result in switching from an aesthetic to an ethic level (Diené, personal communication 2004), a level of relationships, respect and cultural tolerance. The modern Maya population would be perfectly entitled to be constitutionally identified and recognized as Guatemalan-Maya. Archaeology could open new interconnections adequate to reach beyond the artifactual visions, from the starting point of a theoretical framework of identity beyond the trait or the artifact, for the understanding of ethnicity. The problem with this model is that cultural patrimony would be disputed and would have to be shared, if like a reaction, the

Ladino culture is redefined as *mestizo* by those individuals that ascribe themselves into it. Then, they would claim that the Maya is also part of their history and of their subjectivities, though it would be better that it was a part of their present and of their identity. Then, it would remain to be seen to what extent and in what situations this group proves able to articulate the *mestizo* as a binding element allowing more individuals to envision themselves as part of a *mestizo* nation.

In the third model, that of the multinational state, there is only one state with several nations and their respective national cultures. The case of Spain illustrates this model. There, the Catalan, Basque, Galician and Spanish nationalities are recognized, and each one preserves, in addition to their territories, a cultural and national identity of their own, with their corresponding tensions and conflicts (Bastos, personal communication 2004).

Presently, the Maya movement, together with other proposals in Mexico and South America, claims in different ways the concrete possibility that the Guatemalan state acknowledges other nations or peoples, such as the Maya, the Xincas, or the Garífuna. In Mexico, for example, there are claims from the Purhépecha (Zárate 1995), the Zapotec, and the Mixtec (Bastos 1998) nations, and in Bolivia from the nationalist organization Tupak Katari, integrated by the Quechua and the Aymara peoples. These parallel national narratives claim for themselves that which the State had conceived like its national patrimony. In this third model, archaeology would acknowledge the Maya as a nation with a national culture and a national patrimony of their own, one that like the rest of them, is built within the tissue of social relations, power, and the revindication of tradition (Hobsbawn 2002).

Then, archaeology would narrate the national history of the Maya, their heroes and their official national pantheon. As such, the discipline that builds the past can also build future, tolerance and respect.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to express their thanks for the critical examination and comments received from Santiago Bastos, Manuela Camus, Eduardo Zárate and Lucía Robles for the elaboration of this paper.

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