

Barriers Natural and Unnatural: Islamiento as a Central Metaphor in Kuna Ecotourism

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This article considers ecotourism among the Kuna of the San Blas Archipelago in Panama, using the term I use the concept of *islamiento* to describe both ‘isolation’ and ‘island-isation’ as central metaphors to understand Kuna strategies in demarcating tourist and community spaces. The local autonomy exemplified by the Kuna in tourism is just one transformation of the way in which they utilise island configurations as a source of physical and ideological independence. While competition for resources between tourists, non-Kuna ‘outsiders’ and Kuna ‘insiders’ is common, pressures on local inhabitants, resources and the need for privacy and community life are exacerbated in island tourism. Through various mechanisms that turn the physical properties of the archipelago to their advantage, the Kuna limit the impacts of tourism on daily life and strengthen their autonomy.

Keywords: ecotourism, indigeneity, islands, Kuna, Panama, politics of identity.

Two positions contribute to a growing interest in indigenous ecotourism: on the one hand, indigenous peoples view ecotourism as a way to generate revenue while maintaining greater autonomy without draining resources (Zorn, 2004); on the other hand, conservationists view it as a way of preserving the significant amount of biodiversity that remains in the hands of economically vulnerable indigenous populations (Schwartzman and Zimmerman, 2005). A report by the Global 2000 Program of World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) found that indigenous peoples inhabit nearly 80 per cent of the world’s eco-regions identified as possessing the earth’s richest biodiversity (Toledo, 1999). This is all the more significant considering that an estimated 3,000 indigenous groups comprise only 5 per cent of the world’s population. From an environmentalist perspective, indigenous communities would have an obvious vested interest in conserving the islands of biodiversity in which they live, if the preserved landscape itself were a source of revenue (McIntosh, 1999; McLaren, 1999; Weaver, 2001).

At the same time, ‘indigenous ecotourism’ (Swain, 1989) is increasingly important to indigenous peoples whose lands, furthest from centres of development, are now in the path of fast-growing ecotourism markets (Honey, 1999; Notar, 2007). Indigenous ecotourism differs from conventional ecotourism in its adherence to social as well as

environmental criteria. Many indigenous practitioners call for the need to develop ecotourism programmes that are socially responsible as well as environmentally sustainable. An ecotourism 'attraction' is the result of dialogic processes between local suppliers and tourists. While many ecotourism providers seek to offer the cultural experiences that they anticipate their customers will want, the new indigenous approach aims to consider indigenous prerogatives and to redefine the tourist experience (Zanotti and Chernela, 2008). The question at hand is whether it is possible to maintain and promote biophysical, social and cultural diversity in the context of ecotourism. This question becomes critical as ecotourists seek ever more remote locations. Notably absent from the record are experiences and outcomes in which local peoples manage their own ecotourism.

The Kuna indigenous peoples of the San Blas Islands in Panama are pioneers of indigenous ecotourism. Kuna Yala comprises an area of 924 square miles of coastland and islands. The Kuna population numbers 32,000 people living in 49 villages, 36 of which are located on islands whose sizes are less than 100 m across. Average population per island is estimated at between 1,000 and 1,400 (Goreau and Thacker, 1994). The Kuna are the principal decision-makers and beneficiaries of their own ecotourism venture, and as such are positioned to define the tourism experience according to local meanings and values. The Kuna model of ecotourism involves maximum participation by local people, extending local management beyond prevailing limits toward a more thorough reconceptualisation of the tourism experience according to Kuna goals and interests. The case study in this article is derived from fieldwork conducted by the author in 1997 in Kuna Yala, in addition to subsequent meetings with Kuna outside the area, and a review of recent literature to consider both the achievements and the challenges of this emerging trend in ecotourism. As such, it provides an opportunity to consider the twin goals of social and environmental sustainability in the context of ecotourism. The unusual case of the Kuna, in which local, indigenous control of ecotourism is greater than others reported in the literature, reveals both effective solutions and ongoing challenges.

I use the concept of *islamiento* as a central metaphor with which to understand a range of Kuna behaviour, past and present. *Islamiento*, which refers to both geography and culture, sheds light on the innovative strategies the Kuna have used to demarcate tourist and community spaces and to maximise their autonomy. It thus reflects the way in which the Kuna have utilised insularity as a source of physical and ideological independence. As such, it represents a creative, and, as yet, unexplored, approach to the challenges in reconciling tourist and community prerogatives. While competition for resources between tourist outsiders and local insiders is common, pressures on local inhabitants, resources, and the needs for privacy and community life are exacerbated in small island tourism. Through various insulating mechanisms that turn the physical properties of the archipelago to their advantage, the Kuna limit the impacts of the tourist encounter on daily life and strengthen Kuna autonomy.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism refers to a complex set of travel services that are grounded in ethical values and rules of conduct. For many proponents, the normative basis upon which ecotourism is founded—conservation of the landscape and the well-being of the local community—sets it apart from other types of travel (Ruschmann, 1992; Wallace and

Pierce, 1996). In 1987, IUCN Special Advisor Hector Ceballos-Lascuráin defined ecotourism as 'environmentally responsible travel to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations' (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1987: 13). This definition and its associated criteria have since been stipulated by the IUCN in its guidelines for ecotourism (IUCN, 1997). Thus, even in its inception, the goals of ecotourism have included social as well as conservation criteria (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1987).

However, many analysts and practitioners focus exclusively on meeting environmental criteria in the design and implementation of projects. When social criteria are considered, these are limited to income generation and most often regarded as secondary to, or in the service of, primary conservationist goals. For example, social responsibility may be appropriate only insofar as it makes good sense from business and conservationist standpoints: 'Local communities are most likely to protect or maintain a resource base in a form that is suitable for tourism if they stand to benefit from it. In this case, they have an incentive to protect the resource' (Blamey, 2001: 12).

Buckley's list of criteria for ecotourism operations demonstrates this common undervaluation of the social. They include: 'a nature-based product or setting; active management to reduce environmental impacts; an environmental education component; and a direct or indirect contribution to conservation of the natural environment, which commonly requires close cooperation with and practical benefits for local communities' (Buckley, 1994, 2003: 1). Social criteria here are relevant only to the extent that they are instrumental in furthering conservationist objectives.

Such analysts position local peoples as recipients in an ecotourism that originates from and is managed outside. The matter becomes increasingly serious as problems associated with ecotourism and local peoples reappear (Brosius, 1997; Honey, 1999; Barkin, 2000; McLaren, 2003; Russell and Wallace, 2004; Chernela, 2005). In the name of ecotourism, local peoples have been restricted in activities or displaced from parks and other protected areas (Weaver, 1998; Honey, 1999; Weaver, 2001; McLaren, 2003; Carrier and Macleod, 2005). Offsite tour operators rarely invest in local economies, preferring to hire from outside, employing local residents in menial tasks only (McLaren, 2003). Lodges too often sell imported items over locally produced ones (Wallace and Pierce, 1996), and funders may impose agendas on local peoples, monopolising decision-making and shaping local participation to meet the expectations of a First World tourism market (Chernela, 2005).

Indigenous Tourism

The term 'indigenous ecotourism' was first used in 1989 by Margaret Byrne Swain who distinguished it from 'ethnic tourism' and defined it as 'tourism based on the group's land and cultural identity and controlled from within by the group' (Swain, 1989: 85). Swain viewed Kuna indigenous tourism as 'a type of self-sustaining development' (Swain, 1989: 83). Indigenous ecotourism became more prevalent during the 1990s with a number of prominent case studies reported from Australia and Ecuador (Schaller, 1995; Zeppel, 2007). In these cases indigenous ecotourism constituted a move away from a prior commercial tourism that did not take local needs into account. Concerns about the consequences of tourism development for the autonomy of indigenous peoples and the

rights to their lands and resources motivated the shift from commercial to indigenous ecotourism.

By 2000, the movement of indigenous ecotourism reached a turning point. In 2002, representatives of thirteen American nations met to convene an International Forum on Indigenous Tourism in response to the UN's International Year of Ecotourism (IYE). Held in Oaxaca, Mexico, the alternative forum represented a critical review of ecotourism from the perspective of indigenous peoples. The Forum produced a document known as the Oaxaca Declaration, which was presented two months later, in May of 2002, at the World Ecotourism Summit (WES). The declaration asserts, 'Indigenous peoples are not objects of tourism development. We are active subjects with the rights and responsibilities to our territories and the processes of tourism planning, implementation, and evaluation that happen in them' (Oaxaca Declaration, 2002: 3). It further states that ecotourism projects among indigenous peoples can succeed only when they are 'designed and implemented by indigenous peoples ourselves' (Oaxaca Declaration, 2002: 3).

In conventional tourism it is a common assumption that a tourist 'attraction' is determined solely by consumer demand. However, proponents of indigenous ecotourism take a different view. Prerogatives include managing indigenous cultural land, heritage and resources; minimising impacts on environmental and cultural resources; and maximising benefits to the community. As such, indigenous tourism requires the active leadership and control of the local indigenous people in planning, development and operation. Indigenous tourism may emphasise, or it may protect indigenous knowledge, values, and customary practices. Such examples are demonstrated in the current case.

Kuna ecotourism is explicitly and consciously indigenous in its priorities and goals. The Kuna hold that if ecotourism is to succeed, it must be consistent with Kuna values and must meet Kuna needs (Inatoy, 2001). For the Kuna, the concept of indigenous ecotourism builds on ideas of sustainability, but considers heritage to be among the resources worthy of preservation and maintenance. 'Indigenous tourism', explains Enrique Inatoy, Director of the Kuna Fundación para la Promoción del Conocimiento Indígena, means 'something different [...] to manage our natural resources within our territory for the well being of the next generations, without turning away from [...] our heritage' (Inatoy, 2001). Having developed it to the level of legislative regulation and oversight, the Kuna are alone among indigenous peoples in having institutionalised ecotourism within their territories.

Kuna History and *Islamiento*

The concept of *islamiento* enables us to understand transformations in Kuna notions of community and identity, as well as Kuna uses of island geography as a strategy throughout colonial and post-colonial history. Kuna territory encompasses 378 small, low-lying coral islands of the San Blas Archipelago along the northern Caribbean coast of Panama, as well as 320,600 ha of forested slopes on the adjacent mainland bordering Colombia. The Kuna inhabit 36 of the islands, reserving the forested slopes of the coast for hunting animals and growing manioc, maize, plantains, bananas, rice, sugar cane and coconut palm (Chapin, 1983; Sherzer, 1983; Howe, 1998; Ventocilla, Nuñez, Herrera and Chapin, 1995). Fish from the biologically rich reef zones are a significant source of both food and revenue. The Kuna also engage in wage labour in urban Panama and ecotourism.

Kuna achievements in political autonomy are widely recognised (Ventocilla, Nuñez, Herrera and Chapin, 1995). According to Rogelio Alba, the Kuna congressional spokesperson, their autonomy is 'an example that many brother Indians from other countries [...] come to see' (Arauz, 2004). In his landmark study, James Howe gives name and history to Kuna autonomy in the subtitle of his book, referring to them as 'a people who would not kneel' (Howe, 1998).

Kuna notions of identity were forged in centuries of struggle with European states. Historical chroniclers document Kuna acumen in leveraging European colonial powers against one another to secure autonomy. In the contest over Central America in the 1700s the Kuna negotiated political alliances with European powers, courting the support of the French in opposition to Spain and England (Stier, 1979; Langebaek, 1991; Tice, 1995). In the mid-eighteenth century they turned against the French, appropriating their lands and driving them from the region (Cuervo, 1891: 258, cited in Langebaek, 1991 and Tice, 1995). As owners of the former French cacao plantations in which they had once laboured, the Kuna were able to capitalise on their lucrative holdings to trade with the British to obtain tools, cloth and weapons. According to Tice (1995: 35), success in international trade has provided a reliable source of income to the Kuna ever since.

In the mid-nineteenth century the Kuna began to move their villages from the northern, Atlantic coast to the nearby San Blas Islands, retaining the mainland for cultivation and forest. The strategic use of these Caribbean islands has allowed the Kuna greater cultural and political autonomy than might have otherwise been possible.

Skillful political negotiation was demonstrated again between 1903 and 1920 when the newly independent nation of Panama attempted to impose a 'national culture' on the Kuna by means of missionaries acting on behalf of the state. According to Howe, the Kuna appropriated the mission centres for their own purposes and used existing rivalries between Catholic and Protestant missionaries to further their own independence (Howe, 1998). The latter experience allowed them to distinguish between North and Central American interests, and to leverage these competitive relations to their advantage.

The struggle for Kuna autonomy culminated in the Kuna Revolution of 1925 (La Revolución Tule) in which the Kuna declared San Blas an independent republic. In subsequent negotiations, the Kuna once again deftly leveraged alliance and opposition. A peace accord between the Kuna and Panama, brokered by the US government, traded Kuna concessions of allegiance to the Panamanian government in return for recognition of a semiautonomous Kuna territory and the removal of the coercive government presence (Howe, 1998). Once again, the Kuna relied on the alliance of one nation-state in negotiating with another. The conditions of peace at the end of the Revolution assured the Kuna the rights to carry on their traditional social, cultural, economic and political practices without interference from the Panamanian government (Tice, 1995: 40). It inaugurated a new period of legal bargaining by the Kuna for self-determination, local governance and federal participation. In 1938, these efforts bore fruit, as the region was officially recognised as a legal territory constituting the Comarca of San Blas and referred to as Kuna Yala (Howe, 1998: 296, 353). A Kuna constitution, known as La Carta Orgánica de San Blas, was approved in 1945 and ratified by the Panamanian national congress in 1953. Political and economic relations between San Blas and the government of Panama continue to be contested as the Kuna negotiate for more complete autonomy, or, as I have referred to it above, *islamiento*.

Advances in Kuna self-determination appear to be further safeguarded by new legislation at the state level to protect indigenous rights to their lands, as well as to

cultural autonomy. Panama's 'General Environmental Law' (Republic of Panama, Law No. 3 July 1, 1998, Gazette No. 23578), for example, guarantees the rights of indigenous peoples to control and develop their own lands and resources. The recently enacted Panama Law 20 ensures the 'protection of cultural identities and traditional knowledge' of indigenous communities. The law and its related institutions provide procedures for protecting collectively owned rights and property, as well as means and incentives for the promotion of cultural activities. These rights lay the basis for indigenous control over ecotourism in the Comarca. Law 20 differs in a number of fundamental ways from other national or inter-governmental instruments to protect indigenous rights. While many international agreements seek to open markets to cultural productions in order to meet neoliberal goals, Law 20 restricts access to cultural production. (See, for comparison, UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001). According to it, indigenous councils, federations, and local communities, rather than national governments, for example, initiate decisions regarding the cultural assets that may be protected. By establishing that cultural identity and knowledge are community based, and by linking the two to industrial property law, the legislation is an innovative support for indigenous rights.

The system of self-governance established in the Carta Orgánica functions by means of inclusive, integrating, representational mechanisms. The highest political authority of Kuna Yala is the Kuna General Congress. It represents the Kuna within nation-state politics and it also administers social, educational and environmental projects within the Comarca. Representatives from every community and ceremonial leaders known as *Sabilas* or *Saylas* participate in the Congress, diffusing power throughout the community. Delegates propose issues for discussion and follow strict rules for participation. Procedures for settling disputes are intended to lead to solutions through processes of consensus.

Tourism in Kuna Yala

The Kuna Constitution contains an extensive Tourism Statute (Congreso, 1996) intended to protect Kuna rights and autonomy and to build in safeguards for political, economic, and environmental sustainability. An internal Tourism Commission is charged with overseeing the tourism sector so that it meets the criteria established in the Tourism Statute, which regulates Kuna and tourists alike. The first article states that only tourist activities that 'respect, conserve, value, and defend the natural resources, environment and bio-diversity of the Comarca, as well as the socio-cultural, political and religious Kuna norms and customs' will be permitted in Kuna Yala (Congreso, 1996: Art. 253). The Statute also stipulates that all tourism activity in the Comarca must be approved and certified by the General Congress (Congreso, 1996: Art. 254, 260). Before receiving authorisation, all operations undergo a trial period in which the Congress monitors them. The Congress holds the right to appropriate any activities that breach the regulations of the statute.

Among the main income generation activities in Panama – tourism, banking and commerce – only tourism is a significant contributor to local development. With its growing market, economists identify ecotourism as the biggest sector for investment growth. Within this context, the beaches of San Blas and the attraction of an indigenous culture make San Blas a logical tourism destination. Beginning in the 1960s, hotels owned by non-Kuna proprietors operated in the vicinity of Cartí where an airstrip

linked them to Panama City. In the mid-1970s, the Panamanian Institute of Tourism (IPAT) attempted to draw international investors into a plan with the Kuna as its centre. IPAT documents described the Kuna as 'one of the principal tourist attractions [of] the country' (Chapin, 1990: 43). The project, to be funded by a combination of private and multilateral investors, including the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), would have built a USD 38 million artificial island housing a hotel and an international airport (Chapin, 1990). The Kuna, who would have been labourers in this venture, would have benefited through revenues received from services and craft sales. However, Kuna participation was to be limited. Kuna, for example, were prohibited from fishing the waters near the resort and were otherwise subject to restrictions in what they considered to be their own territory (Swain, 1989).

The Kuna rejected the project outright and extended their opposition to all foreign investment in tourism in Kuna Yala. Any non-Kuna entrepreneurs, among them many hoteliers and tour guides who had worked in the area for decades, were prohibited from carrying out any activities in the area. According to Kuna reports, the outsiders 'did not respect the rules of the communities' and 'did not have codes of conduct' (Inatoy, 2001). Recently, when two non-Kuna outsiders tried to build hotels in the Comarca, they were found unlawful and were made to leave.

Today, Kuna control all tourist operations and related commerce and investment. With over seventeen NGOs, the Kuna are well positioned to eliminate intermediate parties and handle all contracts and funds themselves. For example, the Kuna do not allow lodge arrangements to be made through independent travel agents. Instead, they require that contact be made through Panama's Tourist Office and Information Department or directly with the Kuna. Despite outcry from international trade bodies, including the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), the Kuna General Congress is currently strengthening regulations to further reduce negative impacts and require that tourists respect Kuna culture (Inatoy, 2001). The protective monopoly and the limits to supply and investment are conscious attempts to curb uncontrolled tourism.

In order to professionalise ecotourism services, the Kuna formed the Fundación para la Promoción del Conocimiento Indígena. Together with assistance from multilateral organisations, IPAT, and donor NGOs, the Fundación carried out a pilot programme in ecotourism. A technical team conducted workshops in the principles and practices of ecotourism, waste management, guiding and tourism promotion (Inatoy, 2001; Arauz, 2004).

Tourism is the primary source of revenue to the island Kuna. The Comarca has tourism facilities on ten islands, with twelve authorised lodges that target a variety of market niches. The Anai Lodge, for example, on the island Wichubwala, is one of the most frequently visited in San Blas. There, the Kuna offer vacations to uninhabited islands with pristine beaches and hotels where visitors can enjoy diving, snorkelling, swimming and relaxing. For a more metropolitan side of Kuna life, including bilingual schools, libraries, churches, post offices, airports and shops, tourists may visit the densely populated islands of Sugtupu and Ailigandi. The island of Ailigandi also has a modern hospital, restaurants and a local Congress House. La Palme Hotel, a concrete, one-story building with plumbing and electricity, is the oldest Kuna-owned hotel and is operated by the Ailigandi town cooperative. A number of lodges, lacking electricity and plumbing, and offering only rudimentary services, are attractive to tourists who value a simple, rather than luxurious, experience.

Two overlapping tourism markets are those of travellers with interests in environmental beauty and conservation (ecotourism) and travellers with interests in cultural, historical experiences. The Kuna also recognise the tourism niche for 'exotic' cultural experiences. The Kuna who live in several traditional island villages, such as Tigre, perform ceremonial dances for tourists. A number of festivities move from island to island so that residents and tourists alike may enjoy them. In February, for example, Playón Chico, Tupile, and Ailigandi celebrate the anniversary of the Revolution by presenting dramatisations of past battles and dances. At the festivities they serve and sell local traditional foods. In July, Mulatupo holds a celebration honouring the legendary figure Inakina with dances, specialised food dishes and games. These festivities bring tourists to locations they might not otherwise visit for a limited period of time, thereby extending the influence of tourism.

Craft production is an important source of revenue to local manufacturers. The widespread reputation of appliqué squares, known as *molas*, used as blouses, or framed as art objects, continues to attract buyers. *Mola* figures are usually pictographic, combining anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures with aeroplanes, national flags or political acronyms. Depending upon the quality, a single *mola* may be sold in local tourist markets or to international art dealers at prices that range from USD 2 to USD 500. *Molas* are designed and made by women, usually in their spare time, who spend between one and three months to make each item. *Mola* manufacture thus may provide women with a supplementary income of between USD 5 and USD 165 a month.

The offshore location of the archipelago allows the Kuna a greater degree of control over tourism in their island-territory than would be possible on the mainland. The physical attributes of the islands – separated as they are by ocean waters – limit the possibilities for unaccompanied movement, restricting tourist accommodations and activities to islands. Access to the islands is possible only by aeroplane or by boat. Within the inhabited islands, the Kuna limit tourists to designated spaces by constructing both physical and regulatory barriers that function to segregate Kuna daily life from the interferences brought by outsiders and to protect the Kuna from the 'tourist gaze'. Cultural tourists are provided an outsiders' view of thatch-roofed homes, meeting houses, and market women in colourful clothing with jewellery and beadwork. Although this may intrigue the tourist, only a selected portion of any village is accessible to them. Daily life takes place away from the tourist circuit. Regulations concerning what tourists may and may not visit are decided by community members on the basis of consensus. In the village I visited, a tall wall of tightly aligned bamboo separated the small tourist area from the residential and ceremonial spaces that were off-limits to outsiders. A guard in official capacity representing the Federation, served as gatekeeper, monitoring the entry point, and prohibiting tourists from meandering into the residential sector. Through these means, the Kuna closely control that which is within, and that which is outside. A different strategy is to transport tourists early in the day to uninhabited islands where they sun themselves and swim until evening. In these ways the Kuna strategically utilise island space as a mechanism of *islamiento* – to isolate tourists and limit their impact on local life.

Nusa Dubu

The Kuna Yala Lodge on the island of Nusa Dubu (Isla de Ratón) was approved by the Kuna Congress in November of 1996, after a year of monitoring. The lodge was

owned by a couple that resided on the island, and two generations of their children, who negotiated between the islands and the mainland. A son-in-law, employed by an air taxi service in Panama City, was well positioned to channel tourists to the island hotel. A grandson on the mainland purchased food and other supplies, transporting them by means of the same air taxi service. A network of kin ties, then, linked the islands with the metropolis, allowing for specialisation and flexibility, and serving a variety of important mediation roles that benefited the islands' tourism.

Family members built the hotel between 1994 and 1995. In order to create space on the densely inhabited island, the land base had to be expanded. Over several years, the community transported coral fragments from uninhabited islands and reefs to Nusa Dubu. The hotel was built on a small portion of this landfill. A tall bamboo wall, with a full-time monitor, marked the boundary between the zone in which tourists were permitted, and the community. The tourist zone or 'tourist island' (metaphorically speaking) consisted of a hotel, veranda and a dedicated port.

The figures for expenses presented here were gathered in interviews with operators and are rough estimates. According to these operators, building costs for the small hotel, using local cane and cement, and built with the proprietors' own labour, amounted to approximately USD 5,000. Capital expenses included a boat, built by family members at a cost for materials of USD 500, and an outboard motor that was purchased for USD 2,000. Kitchen utilities, including a stove and gas supply, constituted an additional expense of about USD 700. A solar battery that functioned 3 hours a day, from 6 to 9 pm, was purchased for USD 1,000. Total capital investment amounted to approximately USD 9,200.

In 1997, the Kuna proprietors of Nusa Dubu charged tourists a daily fee of USD 40 per person for a room, three meals and excursions. Simple rooms constructed of cane walls contained a bed and a kerosene lantern. Showers and toilets were housed in outer compartments about 5 m from the main quarters; waste water discharged directly into the sea. After breakfast, tourists were ferried to uninhabited islands to swim or to inhabited islands to shop for local crafts. Lodge personnel brought lunches to the tourists by boat, despite the additional fuel costs, rather than increasing tourist time in the vicinity of the community.

With 12 rooms and a capacity of 24 persons, the maximum gross income that can be generated by the lodge per day is USD 960. The annual tourist season, however, is limited to about 100 days during the high summer and winter seasons. If we calculate full capacity for 100 days per year, the estimated gross annual income from the hotel would amount to USD 96,000. Half of the income is used in maintenance and expenses. The other half is divided equally between the owners and the Congress. In Nusa Dubu, the USD 40 daily charge per person, was allocated into USD 10 (25 per cent) to the owners and USD 10 (25 per cent) to the Congress. The remaining USD 20 per person per day was spent in maintenance and expenses. Under ideal conditions, then, annually, the sum of USD 24,000 would be distributed among the members of the three-generation extended family including those living in Panama City. An equivalent amount would be submitted in the form of taxes to the Congress and to the ceremonial chiefs toward community events.

Family members carried out all daily tasks, including cooking and cleaning, except for one non-relative employee who received food and lodging for herself and her child in exchange for her labour. All fresh food was purchased from local Kuna fisherman, which helped distribute tourism revenues throughout the community. Some essentials, including bottled and canned beverages, were brought from the mainland.

Air transport costs, calculated in terms of distance and weight, were, and continue to be, high. The greatest ongoing expense for the operators continues to be fuel for air and boat transportation. In 1997, the price of gasoline was USD 2.50 per gallon. The hotel provided daily excursions to natural and cultural attractions for sightseeing. The operation used approximately 3 gallons of fuel per day, on average. Considering the high cost of fuel, the Kuna option of investing in additional boat excursions to remove visitors to what may be called *tourist islands*, rather than impinging on Kuna daily life, well illustrates the strategy of *islamiento*.

The Kuna continue the policy of complete monopoly of tourism within their territory. This protectionist approach, an obvious response to a history of dispute, has led to criticism from both the government of Panama as well as international entities.

Economic and Ecological Sustainability

The case of Kuna indigenous ecotourism allows us to consider local participation according to criteria of sustainability in three areas: economic, environmental and social. When working well, ecotourism should provide revenues to serve the needs of the local community. In the Kuna case, ecotourism has brought important revenues to the Comarca. Although only a few individuals have a direct role in any single tourism operation, one-half of the profits of each venture are directed to the Kuna confederation for territory-wide projects. Ecotourism is one of the few income sources to benefit both island and metropolitan Kuna. Tourism income helps shield Kuna in urban Panama from the risks of the labour market, while those who remain on the island can earn income without leaving their home villages. Tourism enterprises can even strengthen the links between family members on the island who run the operation and those on the mainland who provide support services and other necessities, in this way contributing to the continuity of cultural and family life. Ecotourism also benefits local craft manufacturers, a population of specialists that extends throughout the community. By bringing consumers of Kuna manufacture to local markets, and engendering demand, ecotourism contributes to linking local with global economies. The manufacturing of *molas*, for example, is a lucrative industry that targets both tourists and exporters. *Mola* revenues extend to the most informal segments of the workforce, as they are produced at home by women of all ages (Tice, 1995). Although the income per hour of labour appears to be minimal, *mola* preparation easily accommodates other household tasks. Moreover, legislation such as Law 20 should protect Kuna manufacturers from outside competition and from unlawful imitation by non-Kuna.

Other examples of indigenous ecotourism may be more lucrative. Tourism to the Peruvian indigenous community of Ese'eja, described by Stronza (2005), for example, has won acclaim for its commercial success. The venture involves a joint partnership with Rainforest Expeditions, a private tourism operator that has invested half a million dollars in the enterprise and also oversees operations and hires and trains community members. The tourism enterprises of the indigenous Maya (Little, 2004) and the Andean Islanders (Zorn, 2004) support local crafts industries. Kuna tourism ventures may be less lucrative, but enjoy greater autonomy from outside interests, reinforcing the trend of Kuna history to place value in *islamiento* above financial profit.

Insofar as the island exemplifies a bounded and limited resource, island tourism offers a useful context in which to evaluate development pressures and ecological impacts (Tompkins, 2003). If the island is small, and biological diversity fixed, ecological

impacts of any endeavour, including tourism, are readily perceptible. When tourism vies with other social uses such as habitation, as it does in the small, densely populated islands of San Blas, the conservationist role of ecotourism may be compromised.

Several indicators suggest that the islands of San Blas are approaching or have reached the limits of growth. Living space is no longer considered sufficient for residents' well-being and survival, as inhabitants now use coral reefs to extend the island land base for increased occupation (Chernela, 2004). Competing for the same space, food, and services as local inhabitants, tourism exacerbates existing pressures on scarce island resources and contributes to deteriorating living conditions. My data and those from Pearce (2003) show that residents and tourists alike contribute to problems from inadequate sewage and garbage disposal. Nutrient loads from organic waste show deleterious effects on coral reefs, while inorganic wastes produce an additional source of pollution (Pearce, 2003). In 1994, Goreau and Thacker used the San Blas case to illustrate a correlation between population densities and eutrophication (nutrient pollution) because of the release of sewage into the archipelago (Goreau and Thacker, 1994). The excess of nutrients caused by sewage run-off spurs algae growth and decreases oxygen levels; this makes the surrounding zones less hospitable to marine wildlife and produces health problems.

A further concern is the overharvesting of certain marine species, such as lobster. Kuna obtain lobster by free diving without traps, nets or scuba. Impact on lobster supply should be relatively low, given these benign capture methods and the possibilities for lobster sanctuary in areas of depth. However, Castillo and Lessios found a relatively high yield in San Blas in 1998 (67 kg per km²) as compared with other areas of the Caribbean (Castillo and Lessios, 2001). Lobster meat is used for local and tourist consumption, as well as export. The removal of small, pre-reproductive individuals and the harvesting of shallow coral threaten the survival of these marine populations.

The practices of reef predation, pollution of the aquatic environment, and overharvesting provide convincing evidence that San Blas may be nearing the limits of its carrying capacity. In addition to other negative consequences, these predatory practices threaten the very resources on which Kuna ecotourism depends, as reef life is one of the attractions that draws tourists to the area.

Social and Political Sustainability: Strategies of *Islamiento*

Definitions of ecotourism combine the dual goals of environmental protection and benefits to the local community. The Kuna case demonstrates three related socio-political strategies with regard to these considerations: (a) maximising local participation; (b) reinventing ecotourism so that it is based in indigenous meanings; and (c) restricting supply and tourist circulation in order to minimise both cultural and environmental damage.

Kuna spokespersons maintain the position that they must control their own tourism industry in order for ecotourism to work effectively for them. To this end the Kuna limit the extent, size and access of visitors to their villages, and maintain a monopoly on all tourism activities in the Comarca. The Kuna make all decisions, manage enterprises, and return all profits to the Kuna. Exclusive control over cultural patrimony and access to it, as specified in Panama Law 20, place the Kuna in an unusually advantageous position. Enrique Inatoy explains, 'indigenous tourism must come from our own conception and not as a cultural or ethnic tourism package. Indigenous communities cannot be part

of a tourism attraction, like objects for sightseeing' (Inatoy, 2001). He contrasts this pro-indigenous approach, to the pattern whereby tourism promoters 'use indigenous communities [who then] remain socially, culturally and economically dependent ... They put on a show to entertain the visitors. This is not our intention ... Indigenous villagers have their own stories to tell' (Inatoy, 2001). The Kuna see educating tourists as a goal, while at the same time taking every precaution to limit the cultural impact of the tourist encounter. Among these challenges are those of managing competing demands for individual and cultural autonomy, including community space and privacy.

Kuna ecotourism entails three kinds of barriers: conceptual, physical and regulatory. Through these mechanisms of *islamiento*, the Kuna minimise negative impacts of tourism on their lives. Kuna commitment to an ideology of separation is embodied in and facilitated by offshore isolation from the mainland and the distance of islands from one another. By making use of the island formation as a spatial and social strategy, the Kuna route tourists away from local communities towards dedicated tourist spaces. The same ideology is legitimated and enforced by means of formal regulatory mechanisms at both local and state levels.

A major component of the tourism attraction of Kuna Yala is cultural. Here, the product of consumption is 'otherness' and 'difference' where the degrees of contrast between the tourist's own customs and those of the 'natives' is proportional to the value of the experience. For this type of ecotourism to be socially sustainable, providers must carefully manage the tourism so that it does not impinge upon the lives of its providers. Kuna strategies of *islamiento* are an effective way to accomplish this goal.

Kuna tourism policies and practices act to control the inflow of visitors in order to minimise the risks of adverse and unsustainable consequences. These include Kuna limits on the number of hotels; capacity per hotel; number of licences granted to operate facilities; and control over investment. Kuna policies that limit the size of the industry and prohibit investment by non-Kuna have come under criticism by observers (including representatives of the World Trade Organization (WTO)) who hold that Kuna protective measures are at odds with ('violate') Article XVI of the 2006 General Agreement on Trade in Services, which advocates efficiency and competitiveness through liberalisation of markets. These international trade bodies would like to see Kuna tourist markets opened up and protectionist policies dismantled. However, if criteria for sustainability in ecotourism call for measures that 'conserve the natural environment' and 'bring practical benefits to local communities', as the Ecotourism Society definition and guidelines suggest, the logic in market restrictions makes sense from several standpoints. Limiting the size of the tourism industry in an over-extended island context that already shows signs of stress would appear to constitute wise management. An effective means of accomplishing this, while providing benefits to the local community, is to exercise limits for both operators and consumers. An island tourism open to any level of investment or consumer demand would be challenged to satisfy the norms and criteria that define ecotourism.

Conclusion

The case of the Kuna provides an important model and reveals the challenges involved in any island ecotourism project. Kuna ecotourism has been advantageous in several ways. In terms of economics, it provides an income source that benefits island and mainland dwellers alike, while tourism contributes to the sustainability of Kuna ways of life

and perpetuates community cohesion. The case is also a model of local empowerment. Benefits from ecotourism, including income generation and capacity building, are distributed throughout the community.

However, in order for an ecotourism enterprise to be successful, it must preserve the value of the resource that is its 'product'. This is accomplished differently in cases of natural and cultural resources, both of which must be maintained. Conscious efforts by the Kuna toward an indigenous tourism facilitated by strategies of *islamiento* over time serve to protect Kuna prerogatives and integrity. The Kuna understand the attraction of 'culture-based' tourism, as they also understand that ecotourism will only be sustainable in the long run if indigenous groups (a) are decision-makers in all aspects of tourism in their territories; (b) do not themselves become 'watchable wildlife' for the client observer-user; and (c) benefit justly from the rewards of tourism.

Island geography mimics the compartmentalisation and separations of self and 'other', 'inside' and 'out', creating a de facto zoning system and demarcating the boundaries between locals and tourists. The Kuna utilise the physical characteristics of the archipelago to separate, demarcate, and route tourists in several ways. Limiting the percentage of Kuna territory dedicated to tourism will serve the sustainability of the practice in the long run. A tourism that intrudes upon the daily lives of peoples will be unsustainable and will foment dissent.

Through various strategies of *islamiento*, the Kuna have worked for two decades to institute measures in practice and policy that minimise negative impacts of tourism. The Kuna regulate tourism in order to reduce threats to their homelands and environment. If the Kuna are successful in their regulation of tourism, they may manage development and thereby minimise impact on their own lives and on the environment.

Explorations to date of the two-way encounters between tourists and local providers have provided analyses that are only partial, as sufficient studies of host communities and their varying approaches to ecotourism remain lacking (Stronza, 2001). The Kuna approach, explored here, is one in which hosts limit the ecotourism industry, rather than actively grow it. In so doing they are able to better manage fragile island resources and to protect the integrity of their communities.

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