Getting Organized: Political and Economic Dilemmas for Maya Handicrafts Vendors

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Abstract
Faced with increasing competition, domestic crime, and conflicts with local politicians, Maya handicrafts vendors in Antigua, Guatemala are collectively organizing to protect their economic interests. While not known for mobilizing politically, handicrafts vendors are developing strategies to cope with changes in the Guatemalan economy in general and international tourism in particular. This paper discusses how they draw on resources from both their hometowns and foreign tourists for economic and political security.

Introduction
For decades, Maya handicrafts vendors have conflicted with Antigua’s municipal government and police forces over rights to sell in the city. This struggle is part of daily life for street vendors and those selling in the Compañía de Jesús marketplace. Over time, vendors have employed various strategies in order to stay in Antigua, despite pressure from government officials and local businesspersons to cease vending handicrafts.

The strategies that Maya vendors utilize illustrate how handicrafts vending intersects with one aspect of globalization, that of international tourism. This intersection allows for a discussion of the effects of global and transnational forces on the ways that vendors organize themselves economically and politically. International tourists (averaging hundreds but into the thousands during Holy Week) and the ways vendors make economic connections with these tourists, the influence of broader political and social movements on vendors, and changes in Maya participation in the political system all contribute to the ways that vendors organize. These processes are part of changes related to globalization: greater international touristic interest in Guatemala, related to the popularity of Maya epigraphy (Coe 1999, Schele and Freidel 1992) and Maya calendrics and ritual, in particular, by New Age Spiritualists (Arguelles and Swimme 1987, Jenkins and McKenna 1998, Prechtel 1999, 2001); international political pressure, due partially to interest generated by Rigoberta Menchú Tum’s (1984) and Víctor Montejo’s (1987) testimonies; high-profile human rights issues (Harbury 2000 and Wilkinson 2002) and intense missionization by U.S. Protestant religious sects (Garrard-Burnett 1998). Along with commodities flowing into Guatemala (apples from the US, padlocks from China, music CDs from Mexico) and others flowing out (broccoli to the US, hand-woven textiles all over the world), these forces illustrate some of the multiple ways that Guatemalans are part of a global economic and political system.

In contrast to Appadurai’s (1998, 2000) recent theories that globalization has contributed to ethnic violence and insecurity, I argue here that such global forces open with new political spaces from where Maya handicrafts vendors can organize collectively and increase personal and

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1 This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Guatemala beginning in 1992 and continuing yearly through 2002 for a total of 47 months. This paper is in process; please do not quote or cite it without permission of the author.

2 According to Appadurai (1996) and others (Inda and Rosaldo 2001) such flows profoundly alter people lives, leading to new forms of economic, social, and political organization and exploitation that can even disarticulate individuals from collectives and geographic spaces.
economic security. I do not want to imply that this discussion of economic, social, and political forces acting on Maya vendors is, in general, a positive endorsement of globalization. In fact, the global economy can exacerbate problems for weavers (see Grimes and Milgram 2000 and Nash 1993a). Despite overwhelming evidence for the negative impact of globalization, especially on developing countries and economically marginalized people (Burawoy, et. al. 2000, Goldín 1999, Inda and Rosaldo 2001, King 1997, Lowe and Lloyd 1997), globalized local spaces are not predictable and people within these spaces come to creative solutions in order to make their economic and political lives more secure.

Maya handicrafts vendors’ direct participation in global economic and political arenas also distinguishes them from most vendors of utilitarian items and food, and it can help explain why they have elected to use different strategies for acting politically within Antigua’s local politics and economy. On an individual level, these vendors utilize numerous strategies to make money and protect themselves from police forces. My interest here, however, is their collective forms of organization, not the wide range of individual strategies.

Tourism and Handicrafts Vendors in Antigua
Maya vendors who sell in Antigua come from more than twenty-eight municipalities scattered throughout the country. They speak Kaqchikel, K’iche’, Ixil, Tzutujil, and Mam, in addition to Spanish, and they know basic phrases in the languages of the most numerous tourists: English, French, German, and Japanese. Although they have the occupation of vendor-craftsperson in common, what motivates them to go to Antigua and participate in the tourism-oriented handicrafts market varies widely.

The handicrafts market is a multiethnic and multilingual place. Vendors are (from the most to the least prevalent place), Kaqchikel, K’iche’, Ixil, Mam, Ladino, and Tz’utujil. Only a few are from or are based permanently in Antigua. For several decades, Kaqchikel-speaking vendors from the department of Sacatepéquez (basically the state where Antigua is located) have sold handicrafts to tourists there. Kaqchikel Maya vendors from San Antonio Aguas Calientes, Santa Catarina Barahona, Santa María de Jesús, and other towns in this department consider selling hand-woven items in Antigua an economic tradition. For Maya vendors hailing from the departments of Sololá, Chimaltenango, Quiché, Huehuetenango, and Totonicapán, international tourism centers, such as Antigua and Panajachel, were relatively safe havens within the country, where politically motivated killings and State forms of terror were difficult to enact.

Most Maya vendors sell on city streets, in public parks and plazas, within Spanish language schools and tourism hotels, and in Catholic Church courtyards, where vending may or may not be sanctioned by the city or the church. For example, from 1986 to 1992 vendors sold illegally within the Compañía de Jesús Monastery ruins, until a deal was struck with the Spanish and Antigua governments. In 1992, the Antigua city government formally recognized the Compañía de Jesús Artisan Market by requiring vendors to pay rent, but it closed a weekly Sunday handicrafts market in the Central plaza and tried to force vendors off the streets.

Kaqchikel Mayas have regularly sold handicrafts to international tourists since the 1930s (Little 2000) and to other Guatemalans since the 1500s (Swetnam 1975). These vendors are overwhelmingly women. However, few of them work independently of men, husbands, spouses, or children. Unlike traditional division of labor scenarios, where women yield control of the products and earned money to these men, Kaqchikel Maya weavers and handicrafts vendors retain control of both products and money. I return to these issues below, since some of the
reasons for this relates to the particular ways that tourism has developed in Guatemala.

Until the late 1980s, there were a few dozen handicrafts vendors in the city. The increase reflects social and political changes since the late 1980s, changes that also facilitated the growth of the Maya Movement (Fischer 2001, Warren 1998). Government and guerrilla campaigns (Green 1999, Montejo 1999, Schirmer 1998) waged against Maya communities diminished, but real wages and land available to Maya farmers decreased (SNUG 1999, 2000). The decrease in violence, combined with promotional campaigns by the Guatemalan Tourism Commission (INGUAT), lead to tourism increases, despite problems with security and attacks on tourists.

Just as increasing numbers of workers throughout Guatemala commute between their homes and distant cities, Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City, Maya handicrafts vendors travel regularly between their hometowns and Antigua. Some take periodic vending excursions to places in Mexico and Central America. A few even take business trips to the United States and Europe. Compared to most other Mayas, they are relatively wealthy, many earning in excess of $2,700 per year. Most vendors invest some of their profits to support cofradías, festivals, and other traditional customs. They are educated and informed, following the news in the daily papers, television, and radio. They are experienced with non-Maya culture, through their commercial dealings with foreign buyers, and with local and national government officials.

The buyers who come to the tourism market include foreign tourists (primarily from El Salvador, Europe, Japan, and the United States), Mayas, and Ladinos. At any one moment, it is possible to listen to bargaining in Spanish, Kaqchikel, K‘iche’, English, German, and other languages. Vendors take pride in being able to conduct business in three or four languages. While few claim fluency in a language other than a Maya language and/or Spanish, business is often initiated in the language of the customer. Spanish tends to be the lingua franca, while Maya languages are used for private conversations, such as setting prices, family matters, and comments about the local and state government. French (2000:168-169) notes that Maya women vendors and customers in the utilitarian marketplace in Quetzaltenango code-switch into and out of Maya and Spanish languages during bargaining transactions. Mayas in the Quetzaltenango marketplace, likewise, use Maya languages to keep Ladinos from understanding them. With handicrafts vendors, the use of Mayan languages serves an additional function. It helps emphasize their difference, thus helping establish their Mayanness or their worth as a tourist attraction.

**General Problems Related to the Political Organization Vendors**

In contrast to research on the informal economy, Cross (1998:35-36 argues that street vendors in Mexico City act collectively in order to obtain some security from harassment by the government and legal, government-regulated businesses. He contends that, because they work within an economic space that is not regulated, they regulate themselves in order to agree on recognizing each others’ rights to selling locations and reducing competition. By organizing, they are a stronger front against attempts by the government officials and regulated organizations that try to evict them. Such collective actions according to Cross, put vendors in a better position to negotiate with government, union, and business associations for occupancy and selling rights.

How collective vendor organization everywhere actually plays out depends on local gender relations, and economic and political conditions. So although in general vendors act collectively in order to improve economic opportunities and protect themselves politically, there is no uniform response to similar economic and political conditions.
Feminist scholars have long discussed the difficulties for women balancing work inside and out of the home (Bourque and Warren 1981, Bossen 1984, Ehlers 2000, MacCormack 2000, Moore 1988, Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). The expectation of women to provide for both their own livelihoods and those of their dependent offspring without the aid of men has been widely discussed in this scholarship. Research on vendors has yielded a number of different responses by women managing childcare and marketing. Clark (1994) has shown that women in Africa may drop out of the market when caring for small children, if they do not have female kin or older daughters who can watch them. By contrast, Chiñas (1992) reports that vendor women bring their children with them to the market. Kaqchikel Maya women selling handicrafts also follow the latter pattern, but instead of childcare being a double work burden for women to manage, they are used to enhance selling possibilities with tourists.

Kaqchikel women can and do bring their children to the handicrafts market, because of the most common trope of tourism in Guatemala: women, often with their children in tow, are the objects of tourists’ gazes and the most represented subjects of international tourism discourses. This is common knowledge among Kaqchikel vendors, who see themselves and their children in newspaper, magazine, guidebook, and postcard photographs (see Little 2000, n. d.) Even though female handicrafts vendors may have the added benefit of incorporating their young children into they too face the challenge of managing domestic and public life that can impede there participation in collective organizations. For instance, Babb (1998:167) notes for Huaraz, Peru market women report that during economically difficult times and when they have small children their participation in the political organizations of the marketplace is limited. The constraints of domestic life on women’s economic activities is widely described in marketplace-based ethnographies in Latin America and in other economic spheres in the region (Bourque and Warren 1981, Bossen 1984, 1989, Colloredo-Mansfeld 1999, Ehlers 2000, French and James 1997, Seligmann 2001, Weistmantel 2001).

These constraints on women may relate to power relations between men and women. Bossen (1989:336-337) observes that, in general, there is a sexual division of labor in the market. Women produce food and crafts for themselves and their respective families, selling surpluses in local markets. Men control long-distance trade. Even in tourism markets men may control the sale of products made by women. For instance, in Yucatan Maya men sell hammocks made by women, and in Guatemala K’iche’ men sell handicrafts woven by women.

Furthermore, gendered power relations in economic spheres leading to conflicts between men and women in the market and at home have been documented by numerous ethnographers (Babb 1998, Bossen, Ehlers 2000, Nash 1993b, Stephen 1993). Ehlers (1991, 1993) and Nash (1993b) observe that Maya and Ladino men in Chiapas and Guatemala have taken over successful women’s businesses and controlled all processes from production to sales, up to the point of killing economically successful and politically active women (Nash 1993b). Ehlers (1991) also notes that even in local marketplaces women are disadvantaged, since prime vending spaces and the most lucrative products tend to be controlled by men.

Competition is commonly considered another constraint on all vendors’ abilities to mobilize collectively. Babb (1998:157-158) explains that market women in Huaraz, Peru assist each other in various ways that help maintain peaceful marketplace relations among themselves that are similar to the ways that Maya handicrafts vendors utilize. For instance, they will sell items from each other’s inventory by getting the item from the vendor who possesses it, rather than send the customer away. They watch each other’s selling places and give absentee vendors
the money earned from sales. They also share information about products, prices, and government officials.

Although Peruvian market women do conflict over competitive issues, such as getting customers and obtaining products, the social atmosphere of the marketplace is usually calm (Babb 1998:157). Arguments within marketplaces or in other common selling places in Antigua, as handicrafts vendors know, impede their ability to sell by alienating potential customers and attracting the police. Even vendors who are feuding will not argue in the market, because lost sales hurts all vendors. Generally, vendors, who are not successful, reap benefits from those who make sales, because they are all part of the same mutual support system. They cannot rely on government officials, the police, non-Maya residents, or other businesspersons in Antigua (Little 2002).

Cooperation is in the best interest of vendors and as outlined earlier can lead to political changes: unionization and officialization of marketplaces by the government (Cross 1998). These outcomes may not be what vendors want or even considered, when they originally organized. In the ethnographic literature of marketing and vendors, vendors almost everywhere weakly receive unionization and/or co-optation. Babb (1998:164-165) notes that Huaraz market sellers are familiar with unions, but they do not tend to participate because they feel the unions do not represent their interests or that membership is too expensive. Female vendors are also suspicious of these male controlled organizations and feel they would relinquish some of their autonomy. Vendors do attend union meeting as non-members, when issues directly affect them. Field (1999) observes that artisans and vendors in Nicaragua did not become revolutionary actors in the Sandinista party because of conflicting gender and livelihood ideologies between the party and the work conditions of these people.

In contrast to this literature, Cross (1998) explains that Mexico City street vendors organize in response to the government’s attempts to remove them, that their collect organization is a form a resistance that puts them on the path to becoming legally sanctioned and official. Although this certainly may be the path that vendors find themselves, it may not be what they desired. Castañeda (1997:113-114) explains that food and handicrafts vendors in and around the archaeological tourism site of Chichén Itzá have resisted or avoid officializing strategies employed by the Mexican government because they saw these attempts as assaults on their abilities to sell. Castañeda notes the irony of the government trying to unionize vendors who do not work for someone else. Without an employer against which vendors could be opposed, union rhetoric no drawing power. Instead some of the larger handicrafts merchants did form associations, but small vendors and craftspeople formed such groups. The latter vendors, instead employed tactics to sell, compete with other vendors, and avoid the tourism site’s security officers.

Vendor invasions of Chichén Itzá and relatively successful evasions of the police eventually led to the construction of an official handicrafts marketplace where only 120 of the 300 vendors agreed to enter the marketplace. All other vendors were expelled from the site (Castañeda 1997:115). One of the factors behind the vendors’ concession to enter the marketplace or cease selling in the site was the low tourist turnout for months following a hurricane in September 1988. The resulting decrease in revue made it difficult for vendors to maintain their invasion and avoidance tactics.

Castañeda (1997:118-122) contends that the officialization of an internal marketplace at Chichén Itzá functions as a panopticon, where under the perceived observation of government
officials and police, vendors monitor their behavior, hence reducing the government’s energy to enforce compliance. The marketplace effectively neutralized the tactics of “verbal threats, vandalism, stealing, and violence” that vendors had used among themselves and “between them and the authorities” (Castañeda 1997: 123). Instead, self-monitoring led to the political realignments and reorganization of vendor that further divided vendors.

In Antigua, the situation is different from these cases because the local conditions are different. Intimidation of handicrafts vendors by the police varies in relation to the number of tourists in the city. Those who sell on the street or in the central plaza, rather than in marketplaces, are more subject to national police, tourism police, and local sheriff harassment. All vendors have had at least one run-in with police forces when they transport merchandise to and from storage facilities. Some of these have been fined, jailed, or had their merchandise seized by the city. It has been widely noted in the ethnographic literature on vendors (Babb 1998, Clark 1988, Cross 1998, Dannhaeuser 1989, Seligmann 2001, and Weismantel 2001:141-142) that vendors in other areas of the world have similar problems.

Resistance to the government has not lead to unionization, political party participation, or any clear officialization path, in part, because Antigua’s political and business leaders do not envision Antigua as a Maya place. Rather, it is a Ladino and Spanish Colonial place, where Mayas are expected to be silent and invisible, while they provide cleaning, construction, gardening, and other services to Antigua’s non-Maya residents. This expectation is rooted in the city’s colonial legacy (Lutz 1994). In general, non-Maya and non-tourism oriented Antigua does not want Maya handicrafts vendors to become legal vendors. The rhetoric by legal, tax paying businesspersons and government officials is that the vendors should be expelled. Even when an official, legal marketplace was constructed in 1998, few Maya handicrafts vendors were granted spaces. Maya vendors looked at this situation as revealing Ladino ethnic prejudices against Mayas and as a direct assault on small-scale, economically independent artisans and handicrafts vendors, since the Ladino vendors are, for the most part, sales employees of larger firms. Instead, it was primarily occupied by so-called traditional Ladino craftspeople. Some Maya vendors who secured spaces in the new marketplace in 1998 returned to their earlier affiliations --informal street vending networks or the semiformal association of the Compañía de Jésus marketplace -- explain that poor sales, the exclusion from the real economic and political workings of the marketplace, and social isolation from their peers as reasons for the return.

As an additional attack on Maya vendor sensibilities, the city constructed this new handicrafts marketplace on the outskirts of town. By the end of Summer 2002, an annex that looks like a prison was added to the far outside of the marketplace. Since then, the city has intended to force as many street vendors and Compañía de Jésus vendors into the annex as possible and expel any remaining street vendors. As of a recent November 2002 visit to Chicago by some Kaqchikel vendor friends and an e-mail note in February, vendors have resisted moving into the annex. There is some irony in this resistance, since both street vendors and Compañía de Jésus vendors have organized politically over the years to become legal vendors in Antigua. Street vendors have argued that the city should sell permits allowing them to sell on designated streets and tourism sites throughout the city. Compañía de Jésus vendors have attempted to get a long-term lease in the Compañía de Jésus, or, at least, official, legal permission to split up the marketplace by allowing them to occupy other centrally located tourism sites in smaller numbers. Both street and Compañía de Jésus vendors have fought to stay in the center of Antigua for both economic and ideological reasons. They recognize that this area of Antigua gets the most tourism
traffic, which can lead to more opportunities to make sales. Their primary clients, groups on tourism buses, independent tourists, and Spanish-language students do not spend their free time or visit the new handicrafts marketplace on the outskirts of the city. Aside from hit-and-run tactics of selling to tour groups (noted of Mayas by Castañeda (1996) in Yucatan and van den Berghe (1994) in Chiapas), Maya vendors in Antigua also utilize a slow selling strategy that they use to cultivate tourist-clients who stay in Antigua for a week or longer. Basically, they strive to create fictive friendships with clients, before apply gentle pressure and guilt to get them to purchase items. In order to employ this strategy vendors need to be close to the Spanish schools, hotels, and tourism sites in central Antigua. For ideological reasons, that Maya vendors have difficulty articulating why, they feel that the center of the city, the Plaza is where they should be, that it is literally the heart, the spirit of the city (\textit{ruk’u’x tinamít}). The importance of the market being conducted in \textit{ruk’u’x tinamít} has been identified in K’iche’ areas of the country by Goldín (1985), but Fischer (2001) demonstrates that the concept of \textit{k’u’x} is central to Kaqchikel Maya ideology and used metaphorically in relation to the body, the household, and the community. Hence the location of the new handicrafts marketplace with its recently constructed annex conflicts with Maya vendors’ rational economic interests and their ideological concepts.

Such ideological differences between non-Maya Antigua and general resistance by the government to legally recognize Maya handicrafts vendors put vendors into a situation that is unlike the comparative cases illustrated above and contribute to their forms of collective organization. In contrast to vendors who sell utilitarian products, Maya handicrafts vendors do not sell items that consumers need. Tourists have other places to purchase souvenirs, local businesses do not rely on the vendors’ products, and the city government gains little revenue because it cannot effectively enforce vendors to report sales. Common strategies by food and utilitarian vendors in other areas of the world have little chance of success, when employed by handicrafts vendors. For instance, blocking streets and traffic agitates legal businesspersons, the government and tourists, the last of which vendors cannot afford to alienate. Strikes by vendors in utilitarian marketplaces that keep consumers from getting products they need cannot be used by handicrafts vendors, because they do not provide the city’s residents with necessities. Combined with the city government and non-Maya business person’s attitude that the Maya handicrafts vendors should not be extended the right to sell in Antigua anyway, these types of protests run the risk of not only driving off transient foreign customers, but worse making them sympathetic to the city government. Vendors in utilitarian marketplaces also have regular economic relations with known clients, who can also be used to apply pressure on the government. Handicrafts vendors, too, try to use clients to position themselves favorably, but their clients do not commonly understand the political workings of Antigua and reluctant to become embroiled in local controversy.

The tenuous relationship that Compañía de Jésus and on the street vendors have with the local city government is similar to marketers in other areas of the world (see Castañeda 1997, Clark 1988, Cross 1998, Seligmann 2001). A former president of the Compañía de Jésus Artisan Association claimed, “Antigua has never had a mayor who was interested in helping us.” Listening to this comment, a vice president of the association in 1997 concurred, “It doesn’t matter who is mayor. He will want us out of Antigua.” Others say that the best that they hope for is a mayor who does not pay attention to them. This rarely happens, in part, because the marketplace is one block from the central plaza, the location of city hall. Since the mid-1980s when a few vendors began squatting in Compañía de Jésus, they have had numerous run-ins with
the mayor’s office, which charges vendors rent for non-existent public services. The city cannot collect rent for the physical space because the Spanish government owns the former colonial Jesuit monastery. Street vendors feel similar pressures to cease selling activities, but because they are scattered throughout the city, working individually and in small groups, they are at great risk to arrests, merchandise seizures, and abuses by local non-Maya business persons.

Collective organization of handicrafts vendors in Antigua relates to the avoidance of internal conflict and external conflict, because of the socio-political context in which they are located, as well as the types of gender relations that predominate within the marketplace and in the household, which I take up below. Unlike vendors of subsistence goods, handicrafts vendors do not insult their customers (Seligmann 1993) or stage strikes (Babb 1998: 173-176) because of who comprises their customer base – non-Guatemalan tourists. Handicrafts vendors in the Compañía de Jesús marketplace avoid behavior that alienates tourists. They are preoccupied about negative stereotypes about the marketplace. Spanish schools and tour guides warn tourists about the dangers of the marketplace, that there are thieves, that the quality of the merchandise is poor, and that the vendors rarely give fair prices. For tourists studying Spanish, Ladino hosts also advised them to stay away.

To counteract these negative stereotypes Maya handicrafts vendors employ different collective strategies to attract tourist sympathy and money that can be used to politically protect their economic domain. It is literally in the social, economic and political space that is created by sympathetic international tourism and government repression that vendors’ political strategies evolve. An effect of this was the creation of the Compañía de Jesús Artisan Association. It is the most active and powerful collective organization of vendors in Antigua. The association is now ten years old. And since 1996 has successfully blocked attempts by the city to close its marketplace. It has been and continues to be run as a democratic institution. Similar to the unions in the Huaraz marketplace (Babb 1998:167), women play important roles in the association’s leadership. Both Maya men and women have held the posts of vice president, treasurer, and secretary, as well as chairs of committees that have formed to address specific problems or threats to the marketplace. The office of president is the only position that has not been held by a Maya. The president for all practical purposes does not have any power and one who sought to use his position for economic gain was removed. Rather, Ladino figureheads are elected with the expectation that the municipal government and non-Maya businesspersons will be more receptive to one of their own. Maya vendors explained that this strategy merely makes dealings with the mayor and other government officials “more peaceful,” but it has yet to yield any lasting positive results. Street vendors have also taken advantage of this space of sympathy and repression to stay in the Plaza and on the streets, but their collective strategies are less permanent and transient in nature. It is precisely the ways both of these types of vendors take advantage of the global dimensions of tourism and handicrafts sales that allow them to protect their economic interests and devises political strategies to stay in Antigua.

Organizing Strategies of Handicrafts Vendors in the tourism marketplace
In contrast to research on handicrafts producers (Nash 1993a, Grimes and Milgram 2000), the global tourism economy has expanded economic opportunities for vendors in Mesoamerica (Castañeda 1996, 1997, Little n. d. Nash 1993b, Wood 2000) and in Ecuador (Colloredo-Mansfeld 1999). Cross (1998:96) notes that street vendors selling a variety of items, not necessarily aimed at tourists, in highly traveled tourism zones is “the only form of tolerated [by
the government] street vending . . .” in Mexico City. But this is because authorities do not want tourists to get a bad impression of the city.

Aside from carving out a economic niche in city economies because political leaders, business persons, and officials, like vendors, recognize the importance of happy international tourists, tourism revues earned by vendors have contributed to the revitalization of Maya culture (Little 2000, n. d., Krystal 2000). In these cases, reinvesting in local culture has both social and economic rewards that reaffirm local traditions as important to community members, whose senses of collective indigenous identity are strengthened and valorized with the interests of tourists. Similarly, Pan-Mayanism has had such positive effects (see Fischer 2002, Warren 1998), because it too is part of a global economics and politics. The interest of foreign investors, tourists, non-governmental organizations, and scholars in Maya cultural practices counteracts the national anti-Maya discourse that Mayas confront on a daily basis. International tourism, in particular, has contributed to forms of collective action that is not utilized by utilitarian vendors or Pan-Maya activists.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the collective organizational practices of handicraft vendors, I want to sketch the some of Guatemala’s touristic dimensions that are recognized by Maya vendors themselves. Male and female vendors are well aware that foreign tourists associate Guatemala with traje-wearing Maya women. Vendors see the pictures of themselves and other women on government tourism brochures, foreign guidebooks, and other printed tourism-related materials. From personal experience, they know that Maya women in traje attract the most customers. Kaqchikel women from towns surrounding Antigua have long dominated the local handicrafts marketplace, while men worked in agriculture, construction, and other jobs. As agricultural land has become scarcer and the ability to get construction and factory work has related to economic booms, men have increasingly become more involved in their wives handicrafts producing and vending enterprises.

Unlike Nash’s (1993b) and Ehlers’ (1993) examples where men seized control of women’s economic enterprises, Kaqchikel men in the Sacatepéquez region have chosen to play supporting roles, allowing women to maintain control of the money and the working of the business. Women decide what to weave or should be woven by extended family members (including men weaving on backstrap looms). They contract expert weavers to design specialty items, though some vendors are experts in their own right. They negotiate with middle persons over prices and design changes. Both male and female middle persons prefer dealing with women, because experience has shown them that female vendors know their consumers better than males and can make better predictions about what will sell. Men, instead, contribute to domestic tasks at home, freeing women to work in the market and even travel out of the country on vending related business. They also do the physically difficult and tasking labor of transporting merchandise between the market and home or market and Antigua-based storage facilities. They take care of children, run errands, and bring their wives, sisters, and daughters meals, when they are selling. Most men sell on slow, low-volume days, giving women some respite from the market.

It is ultimately the strong link of Maya women to touristic discourses about Guatemala and tourists’ expectations to meet and interact with Maya women that shape the highly visible public roles that Maya women play in the handicrafts market. In recent years, male K’iche’ leather and blanket vendors from Chichicastenango and Momostenango have started to bring their wives to Antigua to sell or employ local Kaqchikel women and girls, because tourists are
reluctant to purchase from men.

With the touristic preference towards Maya women, street vendors and Compañía de Jesús vendors employ some similar collective strategies and occasionally work together. These include: petitions to city government, visits to United Nations in Guatemala’s Human Rights lawyer, alliances with Ladinos, and invasions of public spaces during high tourism periods. Women have, by and large, been the primary activists in these collective mobilizations. Most of these types of organization are related to tourists. The most common form of collective mobilization relates to petition drives directed at the city government. While vendors’ demands have include wanting permits to sell, centrally located marketplaces, protection from thieves and physically assaults by Ladino men, better public services access to shelter in poor weather and water, as well as direct criticisms of government policies and police brutality, there expectations are modest. None of them expect any of these changes, but a successful petition campaign can reduce government crackdowns on vendors. This is because handicrafts vendors do not rely on drumming up support among local Ladinos and other non-Mayas. Instead, petition drives are aimed at foreign tourists. Vendors spread throughout Antigua with computer-printed explanations and blank lists looking for tourists in restaurants, hotels, Spanish schools, and tourism sites. Because they are not attempting to sell anything, tourists tend to be receptive. Often they are surprised by vendor accounts of their problems with police, officials, and businesspersons, because Antigua appears peaceful. Playing on general tourist sympathy for Indians, Maya vendors collect hundreds of signatures before presenting them to the mayor. As one vendor said, “This makes the mayor aware that tourists know about our problems.” Indeed, some tourists attune themselves to the ways vendors are treated by Ladino business persons who deny street vendors service and police officers who escort Maya vendors out of the Plaza, while allowing Ladino vendors of toys and candy to Ladinos to stay. Such sympathetic relations can also lead to sales, when even tourists who are hesitant to buy handicrafts, decide to economically support problem plagued vendors.

With the opening of Guatemala to great scrutiny by international human rights organizations and the keen awareness of vendors that negative media coverage of human rights can directly affect tourism businesses, vendors amass and file grievances with human right organizations. Although individual vendors go to human rights organization lawyers, collectives have more of an impact on the local situation. For instance, when the Compañía de Jesús vendors go as a group to the local United Nations human rights lawyer, the city government and business take notice. Their immediate response is to generally treat vendors better or to ignore vendors. Although handicrafts vendors reap economic benefits from tourism, the big winners are the hotels and restaurants, some of which charge prices comparable to the United States. The owners of these businesses, as does the government, know that negative press means significantly reduced revue.

Playing on this intersection of tourism economics and tourists’ interests in Maya vendors, vendors also work together to promote Maya culture and costumes to be presented to tourists. Vendors from San Antonio Aguas Calientes, who sell in the Compañía de Jesús marketplace and on the streets, as well as in their town, print flyers and give free weaving demonstrations and lessons at Spanish schools and hotels. These goodwill missions serve multiple purposes, including economic. Within the local politics of Antigua, they help cement positive relations among Mayas, tourists, and some Ladino businesspersons. Like the petition drives, this is another occasion where vendors use non-Mayas to protect themselves from hostile authorities.
After such goodwill missions, Maya vendors are not anonymous to tourists and Ladino businesspersons. Calling each other by name and, at the very least, giving the impression they are friends, make police reluctant to arrest vendors selling in the Plaza and on public streets. Vendors in the Compañía de Jesús have used such missions to counteract negative stereotypes of marketplaces by demystifying it by explaining who is there and how it operates, even explaining the sexual division of labor, and that Maya men are part of the marketplace too. Such information is necessary because tourists are cautious of thieves in the marketplace, as advised by their Spanish schools and hotels, and suspicious of handicrafts sales by men, who are perceived as not being indigenous. The latter preoccupation of tourists relates to complex notions of authenticity of products and authenticity of social experience, where tourists want to have contact with “real Maya vendors” who sell “real Maya handicrafts” that they make themselves. Here again is the central role of Maya women in tourism. Most tourists, however simple their ideas and concepts of Guatemala and indigenous life, are receptive to more complex understandings of the country and people.

One final form of collective mobilization by vendors is the invasion of public space. Unlike the invasions described by Babb (1998), Castañeda (1997), and Clark (1988), which are disruptive and contentious, handicrafts vendor invasions are timed with high-tourism seasons and are peaceful. In fact, when tourist number are low, many vendors do not even attempt to selling Antigua, not because their chances of making a sale are low, but because the police can arrest vendors and seize merchandise with impunity. Within the gaze of tourists, authorities are reluctant to call attention to themselves by arresting friendly, tranquil Maya vendors. Vendors will go in mass when many foreign tourists are present in Antigua. Rather than first going to complain to city authorities and staging rally-type demonstrations, vendors socialize first with tourists, sometimes recruiting them or attracting the curious to tag along, in order to see what is happening. Vendors will invade the Plaza with merchandise, not to sell to the tourists, but to draw the attention of government authorities. Usually the authorities ignore the vendors, but they have begun videotaping vendors who sell in the plaza and fining or arresting them later. Wise to these techniques of surveillance, vendors use these moments to show the subtle methods authorities use to trap them. On one occasion in 1998, following the post-Easter drop in tourism, police forces cracked down on handicrafts vendors with such zeal that legal vendors were arrested because police officers could not distinguish who was a legitimate vendor and who was not. The event catalyzed all handicrafts vendors, who responded with petition drives and an invasion of the Plaza. The police squashed this enthusiastic but poorly planned event and street vendors, especially, were routed out of the city. Afterwards, many of these vendors stayed out of Antigua, selling from their hometowns and weaving. When I asked them about selling in Antigua, they all agreed that the government would not be able to keep them out when tourism picked up.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have outlined some of the basic dimensions of Maya handicrafts vendors who sell in Antigua, Guatemala. They live within a social and political context where they are not welcomed by the local authorities and non-Maya businesspersons. This is a continuing legacy of the colonial period and part of the tradition of violence that has assaulted Mayas and Maya culture for over 500 years (Montejo 1999, Smith 1990).

The increased interest of Mayas in the global political, economic, and social spheres, especially that of
international tourism, has opened a space within the violent, anti-Maya politics of Guatemala for Mayas to gain a livelihood and act politically to protect cultural and economic interests. In fact, vendors from the most war-ravaged areas of Guatemala went to Antigua to escape the violence. They correctly identified that the presence of large numbers of foreigners would help keep them safe. Here, then, is an instance where global forces are not obliterating local cultural expressions and creating confusion (see Appadurai 1998, King 1997). Instead, the intersection of international tourism and Mayas has served to help revalorize Maya culture and protect Maya vendors from hostile government authorities.

References Cited


Clark, G., 1994. *Onions are My Husband: Survival and Accumulation by West African Market*


