

21A.506 Section IV: Module 2

Summary of *The Chicken and the Quetzal: Incommensurate Ontologies and Portable Values in Guatemala's Cloud Forest*, Chapter 1 (NGOs, Ecotourists, and Endangered Avifauna)

Chapter 1 of Paul Kockelman's book *The Chicken and the Quetzal*, "NGOs, Ecotourists, and Endangered Avifauna," describes the history of an NGO's interventions in the village of Chicacnab in Guatemala. Kockelman focuses on the NGO's efforts to foster an "ecotourism program as a means to promote conservation of the cloud forest." By giving an ethnographic description of a group of ecotourists, Kockelman reveals the "discrepancy and overlap between the NGO's portrayal of a standardized ecotour and ecotourists' actual experiences."

Kockelman explains how the NGO got started: ten German ecologists visited Guatemala to evaluate the "extent and condition of the cloud forest." They found that only a fraction of the original cloud forest remained; major destruction had occurred during the civil war. The Germans decided to focus their conservation efforts on a few regions where there was a high density of quetzals (the national bird) and where the cloud forest was in immediate danger due to indigenous peoples' clearing of it. They aimed "to incite a co-existence between the Indians and the forest." They figured that if the indigenous peoples were offered economic incentives, they would stop 'destroying' the cloud forest. The funding agencies and national organizations, on the other hand, would be motivated by ethical arguments, such as loss of national identity and biodiversity. Over the next ten years, the Germans' conservation efforts become the NGO Proyecto Eco-Quetzal (PEQ). PEQ's goal was to protect the cloud forest by working with "indigenous residents to promote sustainable use of the area's resources and to identify other sources of income."

Ecotourism began in Chicacnab, a village in the Sierras, in 1993. The hope was that "tourists' income will serve as an incentive to preserve the forest and its endangered flora and fauna, as a valuable resource." Kockelman reproduces a guide from the PEQ offices of what tourists should expect of the ecotourism experience, called "Priming the Ecotourism Experience." The guide describes what the tour and accommodations would be like: tourists would stay with a host family in the forest and eat the food that they cook. It explains how tourists would get to the cloud forest. It lists activities, such as hiking and seeing the quetzal, as well as prices. Finally, it informs the tourists of what to bring with them, it asks tourists to fill out an evaluation form, and it lists some questions and answers.

The guide outlines how a tourist should experience the ecotourism experience if such an experience were standardized; however, there were many discrepancies between the NGO's projected standards and the actual tourist experience. Kockelman offers an anecdote of the experience of a group of ecotourists in order to reveal these discrepancies. Kockelman points out that "standards applied to tourist with varying success." Some tourists slept badly, some had guides that were not prepared and didn't speak Spanish, and some were unprepared for the strenuous hike. Overall, their experience of the cloud forest was "reduced to discomfort, exhaustion, and speed: and most of their time in the village spent unsuccessfully trying to sleep." Therefore, the NGO needed tourists of "particular stamina and sociability; and so personality was often the deciding factor as to whether guests enjoyed their stay or not."

Kockelman ends the chapter with an analysis of immaterial labor and explains that interaction is an example of immaterial labor. He argues the NGO was attempting to

“enclose (standardize, utilize, price, etc.) one of the kinds of processes least easy to enclose – interaction understood as a fundamental site of intersubjectivity shared disclosure.” Villagers were “capacitated” and ecotourists were “primed” to “interact under the same description,” whereas each of these actors is used to acting under very different descriptions.

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