The tourism industry and drug trafficking in Mexico:
from the perspective of the Mayan Peoples

Before the advance of the presence of the State, the Maya Máasewáal nation lived in times of abundance. However, schools began teaching that the milpa was “poor man’s” work, whiles mass tourism turned the Mayas into a source of cheap labor. The arrival of tourists to cities such as Cancun, Playa del Carmen and Tulum resulted in a market for drug trafficking and drug dealing in the region. In the same light, the mega-project of the (misnamed) Mayan Train is bound to have destructive consequences for nature. At the same time, the tourism industry will expand to rural regions that until now have lived from the production of the land and have not suffered from organized crime. Hope lies in community organization, resistance and struggles for the defense of the land.

By Angel Sulub - April 1st 2022

Five decades have been enough to (once again) transform the lives of the Mayan peoples of Mexico in a significant and alarming manner. In 1970, the creation of the Cancun Project turned the Yucatan Peninsula into the main center of tourist development in the country and one of the most important in the world. The promotion of mass tourism on the Caribbean coast was yet another blow to the Mayan autonomies that up until 1940 had maintained territorial control of the region.

Based on their own forms of political, spiritual, military and commercial organization, the Maya peoples managed to keep the Mexican State, which they had resisted since 1850 (three years after the great armed uprising of the Maya, known as the Caste War), on the sidelines. The
Mexican military incursions were intended to invade the center of the Maya government: the town of Noj Kaj Santa Cruz Xbaalam Naj K'ampokolche' (now called Felipe Carrillo Puerto).

The Maya Máasewáal nation remained free and outside of the political life of Mexico. In this way, they strengthened their communal ways of working the land, maintained the rituals in their ceremonial centers which united them as an autonomous people, deepened their commercial relations with British Honduras (now Belize) and put into practice their diplomacy to enter into agreements with other states and expel the Mexicans from their territory.

Memories of abundance

The grandmothers of the Mayan villages tell how they lived their childhood and youth in abundance and wealth. Their parents and grandparents worked in the milpas (small traditional farming plot including maize) and never lacked food. In the milpa they grew corn, beans, tomatoes, pumpkins, chili peppers, sweet potatoes, jicama, yucca, lentils, and other tubers. In the plots of the houses, there was an endless number of fruit trees, foods, and medicinal plants. On top of that, animals were also raised in the houses.

The harvest satisfied the food needs and what was left over was sold in the markets of nearby towns. The money from the sale was enough to purchase fabrics and supplies to embroider the colorful hippiles worn by the women and the men's costumes. It was common to see the women wearing gold chains and luxurious filigree earrings and the men wearing their finely elaborated suits and hats. Maya clothing holds a strong spiritual symbolism. Unfortunately, the abundance of the past stands in stark contrast to the present condition of the increasingly impoverished and exploited Maya peoples.

Education also took place in the milpa, which was the space for work, rituals, socialization, and learning. The children and youth were guided by the grandparents in their love for the land, the seeds, and the sense of community. The grandmothers say that misery began when the school imposed by the Mexican State arrived: the teachers taught that the milpa was for “poor people” and that, to get ahead and better oneself, it was necessary to study and find a good job.
Today, the “good job” that the system offers the Mayan is typically that of an office job in a large hotel owned by some Spanish enterprise. The truth is, however, that it is a slavish job in which rehearsed smiles are exchanged for generous tips. Today, tips are the main source of income for most Maya workers in the tourism sector.

The death industry

With the creation of Cancun and the emergence of new tourist centers such as Playa del Carmen and Cozumel, the hell of criminality also made its way into the Mayan territory. For the Mayan people, tourism represented the violent transition from self-sufficiency to dependence on service sector labor, such as working front desks in hotels, waitering in restaurants or vending on the beach.

The tourist industry meant a rupture with ancestral life: from the dismantling of forms of cultivation to the breaking of relations between communities. Sacred spaces were renamed as "archaeological zones" and became tourist attractions for travel agencies. Tourism forced the migration of youth to the new urban centers and, gradually, the Mayan milpa, which had since ancestral times served as the most sacred and essential space for community life, was abandoned.

The Maya became the source of a cheap labor force that now sustains the urban centers. It is the Mayans who build the hotels, the houses, the roads, and all the infrastructure that supports the tourist industry. It is the Mayans who serve in the restaurants, clean the beaches, and wash the public toilets. The Mayans are servants in the same territory that was taken from them. It is also the Mayans who now live through the hell of criminality - from childhood they are tempted into drug consumption, drug dealing, and drug trafficking controlled by the cartels that have taken control of the cities.

Along with the mass tourism, urbanity and “progress” that came with capitalism to Mayan lands, arrived the drug cartels, human trafficking, extortionist mafias and sex tourism. Just like the tourism companies, these criminal groups come to take their slice of the economic profits stemming from the appeal of the sun and the beach of the Mexican Caribbean.
Tourism and drug trafficking

The city of Cancun and the Riviera Maya have become true paradises for tourism and partying, but also for drug dealing. The presence of drugs in every nightclub, bar, restaurant, beach, and shopping mall has impacted the social dynamics of the popular and marginal areas of the city. In this way, they have become territories of dispute, settling of scores, forced disappearances and executions for the control of drug plazas (turfs).

In recent years, this growing and unstoppable violence springing from drug trafficking has reached areas previously considered violence-free. In 2021, shootings were recorded in Cancun's hotel zone, in Playa del Carmen's Quinta Avenida, and in restaurants in Tulum and Puerto Morelos which were crowded with tourists. In all these cases, people were killed and wounded, including tourists, locals, and drug dealers. The increase in crime has already caused countries such as Germany and the United States to warn their citizens about the risks of visiting the Mexican Caribbean.

The presence of drug cartels in Quintana Roo is not limited to urban and tourist areas. In recent years, their presence has reached the rural regions where they control the passage of drugs coming from Central and South America. In these territories where the Mayan peoples still live, violence has taken hold. In Felipe Carrillo Puerto, the sacred ancient city and capital of the Mayan people, 13 executions were perpetrated during 2019 – unheard of for this community. These murders occurred due to the arrival of a drug cartel that drove local drug dealers out of the plaza. This situation has repeated itself in other places where tourism is accelerating, such as Bacalar. In this town known for its crystal-clear lagoon, two international and one local cartel have established agreements with local governments to maintain community order.

In the south of Quintana Roo, on the border with Belize and Guatemala, a strategic corridor has been established for the arrival of drug planes bound for Mexico and the United States. For the Mayan communities, this situation has led to a breakdown of their community fabric as the co-optation of agrarian authorities to facilitate the landing of airplanes has triggered serious internal conflicts. Likewise, the dispute over territory has provoked the forced displacement of a group of
inhabitants of the Maya Balam community, who are former refugees from Guatemala's civil war (1960-1996). Four decades later, they are facing the beginning of a new armed conflict unleashed by drug trafficking.

The train that is not mayan

The largest megaproject currently being imposed in the southeast of Mexico is the so-called Tren Maya (Mayan Train), the most important project for the current government. The touristic passenger and freight train is intended to cross five states: Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo. Along its 1,500 kilometers, it will connect the tourist resorts of Cancun and Playa del Carmen; archeological zones such as Calakmul in Campeche, Chichen Itza in Yucatan, and Tulum in Quintana Roo; and colonial cities such as Merida and Campeche. In this way, the train will pass through nature reserves and rural communities.

This megaproject, whose execution began in 2020, violates the rights of self-determination of the Mayan peoples. An indigenous consultation should have been carried out, as established by the ILO Convention 169, considering the significant impact on the communities the project is bound to have. However, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has stated that the consultation has not been properly carried out. In addition, the project violates national laws and regulations related to nature, the right to a healthy environment, as well as the right to information and of citizen participation.

The (misnamed) Mayan Train aims to replicate the Cancun and Riviera Maya models in those rural regions which possess exceptional natural assets. The project will create at least 19 cities with a tourist vocation. The environmental, social, cultural, and economic impact is overlooked, not to mention the increase in crime and drug trafficking. While tourism development generates immeasurable economic activity, this industry mainly benefits transnational corporations that invest in the developmental model of large hotels, energy companies, agribusiness, and real estate.

In the World Travel & Tourism Summit of the World Travel & Tourism Council held in Cancun in April 2021, the Ministry of Tourism of Quintana Roo reported that significant investments from
the world’s leading hotel groups had been announced: "It is estimated that by 2022 our destinations will be able to provide more than 120,000 hotel rooms; prospecting a tourism investment of more than 2.3 billion dollars". Tourism growth is the region's main economic policy, but the tourists’ demand for drugs will inevitably transfer the violence of criminal groups to these territories.

From hell to hope

In geopolitical terms, the Yucatan Peninsula is a region of relevance for the United States. In this context, drug trafficking cannot be understood without paying attention to the phenomenon of touristification: tourists are an extremely attractive market for drug cartels. To the increase in violence and criminality, we must add the arrival of mega-projects financed by transnational corporations, which generate serious environmental, economic, and cultural damage.

In recent decades, the Mayan peoples of Quintana Roo have experienced the dispossession of their lands, the imposition of new logics of life, the modification of their social dynamics related to the planting and cultivation of corn, the dependence on the tourism sector that enslaves them, and the normalization of violence exercised by criminal cartels – both in the cities and now in rural areas. The Mayan peoples have seen how their ancestral territory has become a disputed territory for the control of drug transit and plazas for drug sales.

Despite this bleak panorama, there is still hope. Hope lies in the communitarian organization, in the resistance and in the struggles for the defense of the land. It is in every farmer who grows corn, in every Mayan-speaking person, and in every organization and collective that works for the good life of the people. All of the anti-capitalist and anti-colonial efforts that are being articulated in the Mayan territory today nourish hope.

Angel Sulub is a Mayan delegate to the Congreso Nacional Indígena de México (National Indigenous Congress of Mexico).