FAIR TRADE TEA AND SUSTSAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AMONG INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF AMAZONIAN ECUADOR: A CASE STUDY

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Guayusa is a traditional tea found in the Amazon region of Ecuador. For generations the indigenous Kichwa people have been drinking it ceremonially in the morning hours to energize their bodies and souls. Historically, this tea has had immense cultural significance, but our research aimed to assess what guayusa means to modern-day Kichwas. Runa, a newly formed company, works with local farmers to cultivate and sell guayusa in the United States and Canada. With both a non-profit and a for-profit side of the company, Runa hopes to increase local income and standard of living while making a profit. As our host community embarked on the beginning stages of involvement with this company, we were interested to see how Runa operated in terms of cultural sensitivity, and assessed the cultural and financial implications of this project within the community. We conducted interviews to understand where guayusa fits into the daily life of the Kichwa people today, and how they feel about the Runa initiative. Ultimately we found that within this community, involvement with Runa is mutually beneficial. Indigenous farmers see it as one of a variety of economic initiatives that bring in money in an ecofriendly and culturally acceptable way.

There has been a recent surge in ”fair trade” and “green” businesses selling products that are marketed as being socially and environmentally responsible. Typically, a fair trade company interacts directly with producers to sell their product to a wider, often international, market. These companies operate with the goal of increasing the local standard of living for the producers while also making a profit. One such fair trade company is Runa Tea which works with indigenous Kichwa communities in Ecuador to cultivate and sell a traditional tea called guayusa. Runa has very recently begun working with a Kichwa community called Sapo Rumi which, like most indigenous communities in South America, is struggling to maintain its traditional culture in the face of globalization and environmental destruction. This summer, my research partner, Evan Marcus, and I traveled to this Kichwa village to study the ways an indigenous community views and engages in sustainable development initiatives. Our analyses were conducted during a four-week stay in Sapo Rumi, Ecuador, and a subsequent two-week internship in the city of Tena, Ecuador. We approached the study in a cross-disciplinary way, using my background in Anthropology and my partner's background in Finance. Our research goals were to understand what guayusa tea means to modern-day Kichwas in Sapo Rumi, observe the cultural and financial implications of Runa's engagement within Sapo Rumi, and evaluate whether Sapo Rumi's involvement with Runa offers an alternative to other potentially harmful economic activities. As I will show, the relationship between Runa and Sapo Rumi is a positive one. Both culturally and economically, the Runa initiative is acceptable and beneficial to the indigenous people, as well as to the company.

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Background Information

In the Amazon, people create their livelihoods through direct and constant interaction with the natural environment. In order to survive, Amazonian natives have established an often mutually beneficial relationship with nature by utilizing available resources while reciprocating with respect and concern for the environment. Philippe Descola and other ethnographers have documented the ways that indigenous peoples conduct themselves in relation to their surroundings and have described their interactions with the environment as almost social in nature.[1] That is, they do not treat the forest as an inanimate resource but rather as a member of the extended family. Whereas the Western school of though typically defines "nature" as a system of occurrences that are completely uncontrollable and separate from human interaction, Amazonian people live within a paradigm that incorporates all entities, whether human, plant, animal, or spirit, into its sphere of social interaction.[2] As a result of this worldview, it is not surprising that native Amazonians view resource extraction and commerce very differently than Westerners do. Though many indigenous communities aim to maintain traditional practices, virtually all have been affected by the ever-expanding world market and are attempting to figure out a balance between their ancestral practices and their increasingly globalized world.

Historically, Western business ventures have entered the area with profit as their single goal and have operated with disregard for the people or environment affected by their operations. More recently, however, many companies have realized that it may be more economically and socially beneficial to create a business model that not only makes a profit but also diminishes adverse affects on the producers. For example, after Runa co-founders Tyler Gage and Dan MacCombie realized the great qualities of Amazonian guayusa, they set out not to create a business that would simply make profit, but to create one that would also nurture a better livelihood for guayusa farmers. Runa's organization contains both a for-profit and a not-for-profit arm. The for-profit arm manages all buying, processing, and exporting, while the not-for-profit arm focuses on conservation, environmental and crop management, and the farmer's association.[3] The farmer's association, otherwise known as the Producer Executive Body, is a representative group of farmers involved with Runa that meets to discuss operations, goals, and grievances. While a pound of guayusa is sold at $0.35 per pound, Runa puts an additional 15% into a Social Premium Fund, which is managed by the Producer Executive Body and is allocated exclusively to community development.

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Runa is making a profit through selling guayusa tea, but they are also taking major steps to ensure that their successes are coupled with the successes of those making their product possible. The farmers involved with Runa not only gain access to increased income but also become integrated in a regional social group dedicated to community development. This ensures that they are not only making money but are also included in important decisions and are able to voice concerns. Because of differing worldviews, it can be difficult to navigate through market operations within a society that typically does not function on such terms. During my time working at Runa, however, I observed nothing but dedication to honest business practices considerate of all those involved.

Guayusa: Then and Now

Guayusa tea (*Ilex guayusa*) has been grown and consumed by the people of Sapo Rumi for generations. Traditionally, it was consumed during a ceremony before sunrise. Everyone would gather around a fire, and the women would heat and serve the tea while people sang songs and told stories. Dreams from the night before would be shared and interpreted in order to plan the coming day; according to the Kichwas, dreams can foretell anything from a good hunting day to imminent death. Guayusa contains extremely high levels of caffeine and antioxidants, so it was consumed to gain physical strength and prepare for a day of work. Aside from physical strength, Kichwas also believed that guayusa made their spirit strong and increased ability to fight off any bad energy. The plant itself was considered by the people to be very special, with powerful spirit guardians protecting it.

Like most traditional practices, the culture surrounding guayusa and the guayusa ceremony is changing. We wanted to investigate the significance of guayusa tea in a modern-day Kichwa village and formulated research questions to help us understand people's perception of this tea, what it means to them, and how it fits into their daily lives. In order to address these questions, we used participant observation, interviews, and pile sorts, which is a method of study used to elicit judgments of priority among items of social concern in a cultural domain. This is done by having participants arrange index cards containing culturally relevant concerns such as "clean water" and "family" by order of importance in daily life. Undoubtedly our most valuable method, however, was simply conversing with people in a casual way. We found that we could learn the most while sitting around the dinner table or working side by side in the field; basically, we were able to learn the most about their life by living their life.

We found that although guayusa remains a symbolic and valued part of modern daily life, the culture surrounding it has changed in more recent generations. Our observations and interviews showed that all community members still drink guayusa almost every day, however they do not hold a traditional ceremony and simply drink it with breakfast. They still believe that waking up and drinking guayusa is the best way to prepare their bodies for the work day but have strayed from drinking it only hot and often serve it chilled or at room temperature. Most people describe the physical alertness and cleansing properties of the tea as its most powerful benefits, while only a few reference the cosmological or spiritual significance of the plant which was important in generations past.

Cultural and Financial Implications of Runa within Sapo Rumi

When we arrived in Sapo Rumi, the community was in the very first stages of involvement with Runa. We worked alongside the locals to clear a 50 X 50 meter plot of forest and planted 150 guayusa saplings given to us by Runa. Since the plants are so young and our trip was so short, we were not able to observe the entire process from planting to selling.

However, through both formal and informal interviews, we worked to understand how people view Runa's operations within the community. For example, when asked about the commoditization of guayusa and the idea of outsiders drinking it, perhaps without full understanding of its cultural symbolism, the vast majority of community members expressed little concern. In fact, they were happy to share their tea and saw it as mutually beneficial; others got to experience the effects of the tea and Sapo Rumi got paid for production.

One older member of the community, who acts as the community leader and medicine man, expressed reservations towards selling guayusa based on cosmological and symbolical reasons. He still supports Sapo Rumi's involvement with Runa, but worries that if Runa doesn't treat the people or the plants with respect the guardian spirits of the forest and of the guayusa plants will punish him and Runa. Though only one member of the community expressed these feelings, I believe that his view is significant to the anthropological findings of this study, particularly due to his elevated political and cultural status.

We found that Sapo Rumi's economy is relatively stable and that most of their basic survival needs are met. Before our research began, we knew little about how much income they earned. Once we arrived, we found that Sapo Rumi's main economic endeavor was local tourism. Unlike most communities in the area, Sapo Rumi is uniquely suited for tourism because of its natural beauty and small size. Local tourists come from neighboring communities to swim in the lagoon, play sports, and listen to music, and residents are able to charge for entrance at the gate and also operate a small store, which brings in money for each household.

Involvement with Runa as an "Economic Alternative"

During our research we realized that our initial idea of Sapo Rumi's involvement with Runa as an economic alternative to other economic activities was not entirely correct. Though involvement with Runa would indeed bring extra income to the community, residents explained that they planned to use these extra funds to supplement their tourism endeavor. Along with using the income to build infrastructure, many members of the community were excited by the prospect of being able to bring visitors to the guayusa garden, showing them how it is grown, and explaining its significance to their culture. It is therefore possible that marketing guayusa could actually revive, rather than undermine, some of their fading traditions.

Our initial hypothesis was that, given the means to gain extra income, the community would bypass cattle ranching or other environmentally destructive economic activities. What we learned was that they already had a way to bypass such activities through income gained from tourism and that involvement with Runa could help them make this source of livelihood even more successful. A combination of natural assets, as well as the arrangement with Runa, makes it possible for Sapo Rumi to avoid environmental destruction, even though the Runa initiative does not act as an economic alternative on its own.

Conclusion

It is unrealistic to think that the cultural significance of guayusa would remain unchanged forever. Because of globalization, young people are growing up in a very different world compared to that of their ancestors. Runa is not necessarily accelerating Sapo Rumi's integration into the global economy, but is instead giving it the tools it needs to survive an inevitable trend. Through involvement with Runa, the community is able to make extra money and also be a part of an activity that celebrates traditional Kichwa culture. Some older members of the community stated that if Runa makes guayusa a popular product in the Western world, they hope that the young people may feel a new sense of cultural pride.

Like most studies, this one remains a work in progress. My partner stayed in Ecuador while I returned home. When he returns, we will be able to answer some of the questions posed at the end of our study: we hope to know how long each harvest will take, and how much the community makes per harvest, taking into account plant mortality. Also, we are interested to know how the community uses the extra income from guayusa sales to help increase tourism, whether new tourism endeavors will be started, and whether these projects will, in turn, attract more visitors and bring more income.

It remains to be seen whether Runa will continue to function as it does today, with respect for the farmers and indigenous people in the area. After all, even fair trade companies that market themselves as "green" are often compelled to endorse priorities and take actions that are not always in the best interest of the people and communities they purport to serve. Our results nonetheless indicate that should Runa continue to handle business in the honest and considerate way they have done thus far, the project will be of mutual benefit to the enterprise and to Sapo Rumi.

1 Descola, Philippe (1996). The spears of twilight: life and death in the Amazon jungle. Janet Lloyd (trans.). New York: New Press.

2 Viveiros De Castro, Eduardo (1998). Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 469-488.

3 "Runa," last modified December, 2012, http://www.runa.org/