

There is no such thing as 'the' Indian

An increasing number of mayors in Guatemala are of Indian origin. Dutch researcher Elisabet Rasch went to find out what this development means and discovered that there is much more to building a multicultural democracy than electing Indian mayors and presidents. This is due to the enormous range of interpretations of identity: there is no such thing as 'the' Indian.

Indigenous movements tend to portray the Indian population as unchangeable and authentic in order to demand certain political and cultural rights. They do this by appealing to international treaties and national legislations, which likewise uphold a clear-cut definition of 'indigenesness'. However, is it actually possible to determine who is and who is not an Indian? And, on this basis, can it be determined what a multicultural democracy should look like?

Rasch's research explored how different indigenous identities and cultures are defined and interpreted at a local level, and what actually goes on behind treaties, laws, fine speeches and glossy pamphlets. She demonstrates how local authorities and politicians judge indigenous characteristics - such as the use of certain clothing, the speaking of an indigenous language and partaking in Indian spiritual ceremonies - in different and sometimes conflicting ways. To some these elements of indigenous culture are almost sacred; to others they represent underdevelopment and backwardness.

Nevertheless they all feel indigenous and they all have ideas of what an indigenous multicultural democracy should look like. This causes tension between mayors, traditional Indian authorities (such as councils of elders) and community magistrates. In one of the villages, where Rasch carried out fieldwork, this even led to the abolition of one of the traditional authorities.

Multicultural co-existence

On 29 December 1996, after 36 years of civil war, a peace treaty was signed between the Guatemalan government and the armed opposition. Since these peace agreements, Guatemala has been transformed from a homogenous nation state into a society that calls itself 'multicultural'. Two actors continue to play an important role in this process.

On the one hand there are an increasing number of indigenous mayors who choose whether or not to allow their Mayan identity to influence their governing practice. At the same time, the indigenous Maya Movement tries to contribute to the building of a multicultural democracy. The Maya Movement's mission is the social and political integration of the indigenous population in Guatemalan society, based on Mayan identity. It focuses on active political participation being part of their universal and ethnic civil rights.

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