Witchcraft tourism in Catemaco, Mexico: a liquid modernity perspective

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ABSTRACT

The picturesque town of Catemaco in Mexico is popular with nature enthusiasts. However, it is also known as the "Land of the Witches" and has become a centre for witchcraft tourism. While most who participate in witchcraft are involved in innocuous white magic rituals, others are motivated by black magic, engaging in what is labelled malevolent tourism, rather than dark tourism. The study investigates, from a societal perspective, why individuals travel to take part in witchcraft practices in Catemaco. It uses Zygmund Bauman's liquid modernity as a lens from which to view contemporary Mexican society and to consider whether the increasingly fluid, dynamic, and changing nature of society, which can result in personal distress and uncertainty, is a contributing factor towards witchcraft tourism at Catemaco. A qualitative approach is adopted that involves interviews conducted with participants who have travelled to the annual International Witchcraft Congress at Catemaco with the intention of participating in *brujeria*, along with further interviews undertaken with residents and a witchcraft practitioner. Findings suggest that witchcraft serves as a coping mechanism for certain individuals facing social challenges that have arisen from liquid modernity, such as relationship problems and work-related issues. While most of the participants required white magic rituals, a smaller, yet significant proportion were driven to indulge in black magic.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mexican city of Catemaco is situated 160 km inland from the port of Veracruz in the east of the country. Although the area offers a variety of nature-based tourism attractions, it is particularly renowned for being a centre of witchcraft, or *brujeria* to use the Spanish term. Most visitors simply enjoy the kitsch nature of witchcraft paraphernalia; however, there exists a significant proportion who travel with the intent purpose of actively indulging in witchcraft (Olmos, 2012), a practice which continues to be broadly popular in Mexico. These visitors come from a variety of socio-demographic backgrounds, yet one aspect they have in common is the superstitious belief that local witch-doctors- henceforth to be called witchcraft practitioners- have the ability, through the conjuring of magic, to help them

resolve personal problems or achieve goals, usually connected to health, relationships, or work (Castenada, 1991).

Usually, these individuals participate in white magic, which refers to inoffensive, or acceptable magic, such as healing or cleansing rituals; nonetheless, occasionally a person might request magic of a more sinister nature, namely black magic, or sorcery, in which they seek to harm, mentally or physically, an adversary. If this occurs, the motivation and expectation behind the visit is very different: rather than being based on hope and a positive outcome, it is grounded in maliciousness and destructive consequences.

Early studies on witchcraft in Melanesia and Africa concluded that it helped to promote and conserve social cohesion and structure (Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Malinowski, 1922). Wallis (2017, p. 233) explains that witchcraft had "a useful psychological function because practitioners feel that they are doing something to address a particular problem and this action alleviates the frustration and anxiety presented by the problem." It was generally expected that as these societies modernised and became infused with Western science, witchcraft would eventually fade (Gershman, 2023); nevertheless, as is evident in Catemaco, such practices continue to persist. Gershman (2022, p. 14) suggests that reasons for the longevity of witchcraft include cultural traditions, conformity and practices related to well-being (spiritual and healing), yet he also mentions how "rising inequality, globalization, technological change, and migration... [serves to] revive witchcraft beliefs..." This can be related to the concept of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), which explains how the age of modernity, characterised by stability, has made way for a fluid-like society in which constant change is the norm. Individual autonomy is increasingly prioritised over collective efforts, leading some individuals to experience alienation from society, accompanied by feelings of uncertainty, frustration, bitterness, and fear. Hence, Bauman (2007, p. 10) suggests that humans, "unable to slow the mind-boggling pace of change, let alone predict and control its direction...focus on things we can, or believe we can, or are assured that we can influence". For some, witchcraft serves as that focus, a means of generating change and taking control in a world which is otherwise difficult to navigate.

The main objective of this study is to explore the possibility of a connection between liquid modernity and witchcraft tourism in Catemaco. It seeks to answer the question- Do the manifestations of liquid modernity in Mexican society compel certain individuals to seek a solution through witchcraft, in this case by participating in witchcraft tourism in Catemaco?

At the same time, as a sub-plot, the study will also consider whether the act of travelling to a particular location to participate in *black magic* falls under the umbrella of dark tourism, or if a separate label would be more appropriate. As will be discussed below, the motivations to participate in black magic and its associated characteristics are markedly different from those typically associated with dark tourism, and this study provides an opportunity to evaluate these distinctions and consider an alternative.

The specific objectives are:
  (i)   Explore the relationship between liquid modernity and the act of travelling to Catemaco to partake in witchcraft tourism.

(ii)   Evaluate whether witchcraft tourism that involves black magic should be considered a subset of dark tourism or recognised as a distinct phenomenon that merits its own label.

The study is structured in the following manner: to serve as background to the empirical research, it will first discuss whether witchcraft tourism in Catemaco associated with black magic should be regarded as a subset of dark tourism or not. It will then examine the sociological explanations for witchcraft, before considering Mexican society from a liquid modernity perspective. Details relating to the methodology will be explained and then the findings of the study will be discussed to establish whether there is indeed a connection between liquid modernity and witchcraft tourism in Catemaco. The conclusion will serve as a summary of the research, acknowledging the limitations of the study and presenting suggestions for future research.

2. CATEMACO

Catemaco is located in a rainforest region in the southeast of Mexico. It is a tourist destination, attracting visitors interested in nature-based activities such as bird watching, boat tours that visit *Las Islas de los Changos* (the Monkey Islands), and heritage tourism that is based on several pre-Hispanic archaeological sites (Venter & Lyon, 2015).

Catemaco is also known as the "Tierra de brujos" (Saldivar Arellano, 2009)- the 'land of the witches'. A significant proportion of the tourists that travel to the location do so with the aim of *participating* in witchcraft (González Kuk & Muñoz-Márquez Trujillo, 2022), making witchcraft tourism in Catemaco distinct from the experience to be had at sites such as Pendle in the UK (James et al., 2024) and Salem in the US (Stone & Stewart, 2024), which involve visiting and *gazing* upon the scene of historical witch trials. Many visitors attend the International Witch Congress that is held each March. Indeed, Mckinley Jr (2008) remarks that "Catemaco is known throughout Mexico as a center for witchcraft and... magic has become a big tourist draw" with tourists arriving "from all over Mexico and from major cities in the United States with large Mexican communities". Most tourists visit witchcraft practitioners for innocuous reasons, such as treating an ailment, pursuing a job promotion, or a cleansing. Nonetheless, occasionally the intention is of a more sinister nature; perhaps a "jilted suitor" will feel inclined to "bewitch his fickle sweetheart and make her ugly so no one will marry her", or even worse- a "jealous wife" may wish to "eliminate her rivals..." or "a man who has been insulted" might attempt to "get even by using witchcraft to inflict his enemy with sickness, death or financial failure" (Madsen & Madsen, 1969, p. 5). In such cases the person will seek a sorcerer, rather than a witch doctor or shaman, to assist them.

3. LEADING TO MALEVOLENT TOURISM

Dark tourism was originally described as the act of tourists traveling to sites of death, tragedy, and suffering (Foley & Lennon, 1996). Sharpley (2009, p. 6) later observed that the term had become "diluted and fuzzy," with its boundaries expanded to encompass a variety of 'dark' experiences related to tourism. Light (2017) further argued that there is little consensus on what constitutes dark tourism, describing it as a 'mosaic' made up of diverse

and occasionally tenuous components, such as morbid tourism, genocide tourism, battlefield tourism (González Vázquez, 2018).

At first glance, it might seem appropriate to categorise witchcraft tourism in Catemaco—particularly the kind that involves visitors practising black magic—as a subset of dark tourism. This is because the act of visiting "practitioners of mystical harm" (Singh, 2021, p. 3) inherently carries a sinister and macabre tone. However, it is important to note that there are significant differences that set apart the sociological components of black magic related witchcraft tourism with those of dark tourism.

Dark tourism typically involves people traveling to particular sites to gaze upon the scene of a dark event or to explore a memorial to human suffering (Ivanova & Light, 2017). It offers a means for contemporary societies to confront and negotiate their relationship with "death, suffering and the seemingly macabre" (Stone, 2006, p. 146), by providing "a potential opportunity to contemplate death of the Self through gazing upon the Significant Other dead" (Stone, 2011, p. 697). For example, Stone and Sharpley (2008) suggest that dark tourism sites provide a space for thanatological contemplation for people who live in societies in which 'real death' has become sequestered. That is, it brings death to the forefront for individuals who might struggle with existential questions and issues related with mortality. Meanwhile, sites associated with past atrocities, such as concentration camps or battlefields, encourage societies to confront and acknowledge the uncomfortable, darker aspects of their history, promoting ethical reflection and possibly dialogue aimed towards reconciliation and justice (Biran et al., 2011). Nonetheless, the potential of dark tourism as a means of addressing the present-day societal challenges brought about by liquid modernity is uncertain, as the lessons offered by dark tourism's focus on the past might not translate into solutions for current concerns.

Yet witchcraft tourism- white or black- that involves participation, *can* arguably provide consolation and reassurance by offering those who have faith in it a solution to contemporary issues. Rather than *passively* consuming a *past* tragedy, witchcraft tourists are *actively* participating in a ritual that they believe will act as a catalyst for a change in their fortunes. Consequently, the sociological connotations of witchcraft tourism reflect a society dealing with instability, and a desire for *tangible* interventions in times of personal crisis. Unlike dark tourism, with its focus on collective trauma and motivated by curiosity and historical interest (Farmaki, 2013), witchcraft tourism emphasises the immediate and personal. This distinction demonstrates a shift in needs for various segments of society, from a reflective engagement with the past to a search for solutions in the present.

Witchcraft tourism, therefore, is future oriented and the motivations to attend are driven by individual longings. For those participating in black magic rituals, the objective lies in future harm- an intense desire for control or revenge. At the same time, there exists a strong belief in the supernatural not necessarily present at dark tourism, while the ethical and moral implications of the act are of a much more contentious nature.

Hence, while both dark tourism and witchcraft tourism associated with black magic intersect through their association with the macabre, they differ significantly in terms of their sociological implications and the nature of participation, the overall objectives, the

motivations, the beliefs, and the moral implications. For this reason, it is proposed that witchcraft tourism, of the black magic variety, be categorised separately as *malevolent tourism*, defined as *the act of traveling to a location specifically associated with black magic rituals, with the primary intention of engaging in practices designed to manipulate outcomes that result in harm, whether physical or psychological, to specific individuals or groups.*

Table 1 below demonstrates the various reasons why malevolent tourism is distinct from both traditional dark tourism and witchcraft tourism that involves white magic.

Criterion	Malevolent tourism	Dark tourism	Witchcraft tourism (practicing white magic)
Nature of participation	Active and intentional participation in harmful rituals (e.g., black magic, curses).	Passive observation or reflection at sites associated with death, suffering, or tragedy.	Active participation but in rituals intended for healing, protection, or benign outcomes.
Objective	Future-oriented, aiming to achieve specific personal outcomes that involves inflicting harm on others.	Past-oriented, focused on understanding or commemorating historical events, suffering, or death.	Future-oriented but aims for positive or neutral outcomes (e.g., healing, good fortune).
Emotional and psychological motivations	Driven by intense personal emotions such as revenge, jealousy, or desire for control.	Driven by curiosity, empathy, historical interest, or moral reflection.	Driven by desire for protection, healing, or personal improvement.
Belief in supernatural processes	Involves belief in and use of supernatural or mystical forces to influence real-world outcomes.	Generally, does not involve belief in the supernatural; focuses on tangible historical or cultural experiences.	Involves belief in supernatural forces but directed towards positive or neutral ends.
Ethical and moral implications	Raises significant ethical concerns due to the intention to cause harm or suffering to others.	May raise ethical concerns (e.g., commodification of tragedy) but does not typically involve intent to harm.	Raises fewer ethical concerns as it is typically intended for benign purposes.

Table 1: Distinctions between malevolent tourism, dark tourism and witchcraft tourism associated with white magic. Source: own elaboration.

4. SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR WITCHCRAFT

The first anthropological studies to consider witchcraft beliefs emphasised the functional role that witchcraft played in society. For example, Malinowski (1922), conducting research in Melanesia, suggested that witchcraft provided explanations for certain events, a process that helped to provide social cohesion within the community (Davies, 2017). Later, Evans-Pritchard (1937) published an account of witchcraft and magic derived from his fieldwork with the Azande in Sudan, North Africa. In this case, witchcraft and sorcery were used to explain the occurrence of disease, death and unfortunate events that were otherwise difficult to account for. Meanwhile, Kluckhohn's (1944) research of the Navaho in the Southwestern United States concluded that witchcraft "contributed positively to society by encouraging generosity, conformity to social values, and by leveling economic differences, as community members sought to avoid accusations of witchcraft" (Moro, 2017, p. 7). In

short, these functionalist approaches revealed how witchcraft was able to fulfil the human need to understand the world, navigate uncertainty and maintain social norms (Birx, 2010).

As mentioned above, it was generally presumed that ´modernisation' processes would eventually eradicate witchcraft in 'third world' societies; yet contrary to expectation, this has not been the case. Indeed, it appears that "witchcraft ideas…have become a prominent way of conceptualizing, coping with, and criticizing the very "modernity" that was supposed to have done away with them" (Stewart & Strathern, 2004, p. 5), and as a coping mechanism for the anxieties and irrationalities brought about by the processes of capitalism and globalisation (Geschiere, 1997). Thus, the motivation to indulge in witchcraft in the post-modern era appears to remain very similar- it is a way "in which humans both make sense of their world and find ways in which to influence the course of their lives" (Birx, 2010, p. 216).

Feelings of envy and a desire for retribution are identified as key motivators for the practice of black magic, often reflecting social tension within communities. (Madsen, 1966; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999). Additionally, psychiatric illness also plays a role in some cases (Field, 1970). Singh (2021), meanwhile, suggests that often people will indulge in black magic because they suffer some kind of misfortune and suspect that they themselves are victims of sorcery. Such paranoia occurs because the person feels threatened and is distrustful of others or is unable to identify with social groups (McIntyre et al., 2018).

5. THE PERSISTENCE OF WITCHCRAFT IN MEXICO

Witchcraft in Mexico holds deep historical and cultural roots (Lewis, 2003). Idolatry and shamanism dates to pre-colonial times and despite colonisation by Spain in the 16th Century and the subsequent Mexican Inquisition, these practices prevailed. It eventually resulted in the formation of a belief system that incorporated the pre-Hispanic notion of *hechiceria* with those imported from the Spanish colonisers and African slaves, a fusion which became "beyond erasure or redemption" (Behar, 1987, p. 51).

Zavaleta & Salinas (2009, p. 312) insist that: "The practice of witchcraft, or brujeria, is as popular now as it was hundreds of years ago. Because there are so many people who seek to use witchcraft against their neighbours, sadly, the practice of witchcraft is thriving…The individual will contract a real witch, or warlock, in Mexico…to cast deadly hexes and spells; usually evil ones". Indeed, many children are raised to accept witchcraft (Nutini & Roberts, 1993), while superstitious beliefs are abundant throughout the country (for example, an indigenous community in rural Tlaxcala believed that "blood-sucking witches" (Fabrega & Nutini, 1993, p. 793) were responsible for sudden infant death syndrome.)

While the persistence of witchcraft in Mexico can partly be explained by its cultural links, its allure and relevance has been reinforced by societal changes and the drift from modernity to postmodernity, as is also evident in other locations throughout the world (see Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993; Parish, 2000). Despite the link between witchcraft and post modernity, as far as the author is aware this is the first study to consider the association between witchcraft and liquid modernity (as a social manifestation of post modernity).

6. LIQUID MODERNITY

Liquid modernity, as conceptualised by Bauman (2000), emphasises the rapid, unpredictable changes in society that contrast with the solid structures of the past, leading to increased feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. Bauman identifies five core elements of liquid modernity:

(i) Emancipation: While independence and freedom of choice has increased over recent years, Bauman argues that this 'new freedom', or emancipation, is burdened with the responsibility of constant self-reinvention, creating anxiety and insecurity rather than true empowerment.

(ii) Individuality: The weakening of traditional social norms has led to instability and isolation as individuals constantly redefine their identities, further accelerated by digital technology: "Individuals set out on their holidays alone, rely on their own means and come and go without following orders, in relative oblivion to what everyone else is doing." (Oxenham, 2013, p. 20).

(iii) Time and space: The acceleration of technological innovation compresses time so changes that once took years to unfold can now happen almost instantaneously, leading to disorientation. Moreover, wealth disparities allow the rich to travel and operate faster. The territorial separation resulting from the wealthy residing in exclusive enclaves has minimised contact with 'others', eroding civility and compromise (Bauman, 2000).

(i) Work: In liquid modernity, job security has eroded. Flexibility and adaptability are key, but the result is uncertainty and difficulty planning for the future. Lifelong careers have been replaced by temporary work, placing pressure on individuals to be responsible for their own professional trajectory and having to constantly adapt to a changing labour market.

(ii) Community: In liquid modernity, traditional communities are breaking down. New virtual communities are emerging, yet without the stability of physical communities. Individuals need takes preference, resulting in a decline of solidarity and trust and an increase of social polarisation.

These elements, in many aspects overlapping, have contributed to a world of 'liquid fear', characterised by an overwhelming sense of individual insecurity and vulnerability. In Bauman's (2006, p. 18) words, such fears include:

"… being picked out from the joyous crowd singly…and condemned to suffer alone while all the others go on with their revelries. Fears of a personal catastrophe. Fears of becoming a selected target, earmarked for personal doom…Fears of being left behind. Fears of exclusion".

6.1. Mexican society and liquid modernity

Bauman has been criticised for the Eurocentric nature of his work (Rattansi, 2017), thus making it necessary for the purposes of this study to consider the five core elements of liquid modernity from a Mexican perspective.

(i) Emancipation: A significant portion of Mexican society has seen an increase in personal autonomy. Nonetheless, a sense of apprehension remains, influenced

by recurrent crises and inadequate governance: Indeed, "Mexicans often take a fearful view of the future, imagining catastrophes and difficult times ahead" (De La Calle & Rubio, 2012, p.28). Therefore, while for many there has been an advance in freedom from traditional social structures, the reality is that most are unable to fully appreciate their 'emancipation' because they are living in an atmosphere of uncertainty "in a world devoid of stable and trustworthy meaning" (Bauman, 2000, p. 108).

(ii)   Individuality: According to Abrahamson (2004), what distinguishes liquid modernity from early modernity is the lack of stable institutions and it is due to this gradual weakening of traditional institutions such as religion (Perez-Lozano et al, 2009); family (Cerrutti & Massey, 2001); and community (Acosta Silva, 2011), that individuals are increasingly required to make their own choices and construct their own identities. It is important to note how individuality can affect *compadrazgo* ties, an important aspect of social relationships in Mexico. *Compadrazgo* is a "traditional ritual fictive kinship system that provides a network of mutually supportive relationships…" (Gill-Hopple & Brage-Hudson, 2012, p. 117), yet as individuals become more isolated, such bonds are adversely affected and the individual's level of social support is diminished.

(iii)   Time and Space: Mexico's stark wealth inequality creates a 'territorial separation' (Bauman, 2000), evident in urban spaces like Mexico City where there is a preponderance of gated enclaves, like a "medieval town sheltering behind its thick walls, turrets, moats and draw bridges" (Bauman, 2000, p. 91). The wealthy enjoy faster mobility and more leisure time, while the poor struggle with overcrowded transport and time scarcity. When impossible to avoid, contact with other social classes is often minimal and forced. According to Caprón (2016, p. 65) in "gated communities, the other is conceived and singled out as a threat, an intruder who threatens the security and tranquillity of the inhabitants" and consequently the poorer people "internalize this differentiation and self-image, which adds to the inequalities in profoundly inequitable societies, such as Mexico's, and make social cohesion impossible."

(iv)   Work: Globalisation and neoliberalism have eroded job stability in Mexico, reflecting Bauman's ideas on individual responsibility for career trajectories. In Mexico, this has created pressure on those that provide for their families, traditionally a role employed by the male but in recent years one that has also fallen on women. Temporary contracts and informal labour make it difficult for people to plan, while migration, both internal and to the U.S, further contributes to a sense of uncertainty.

(v)   Community: Political democratisation and economic changes have affected traditional communities in Mexico: "This has led to a kind of "tribalization" of social relations, that is, the establishment and consolidation of individual and collective practices that tend more towards the configuration of "tribes" in competition for territories and scarce resources than societies made up of

cooperative citizens" (Acosta Silva, 2011, p. 60). Immigration has also disrupted family structures, altering gender roles and weakening community ties.

In summary, liquid modernity has profoundly impacted Mexican society, affecting traditional structures and leaving many people with a pessimistic outlook on life (De La Calle & Rubio, 2012). As traditional support systems fade, individuals face greater isolation and uncertainty, reshaping the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and communities.

7. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was adopted to allow the researcher to consider the multiple realities- the subjective experiences- of those engaging in witchcraft practices in Catemaco (Crotty, 1998). Hence, the plan was to conduct several semi-structured interviews with tourists who had travelled to Catemaco to participate in witchcraft. Nonetheless, the nature of the research suggested a potential challenge before the fieldwork was begun. That is, it was suspected that many of those partaking in witchcraft, and in particular black magic, would be reluctant to participate in the research due to the sensitivity of the topic. As Singh (2021, p. 11) points out: "People are notoriously reticent about discussing harmful magic with ethnographers, let alone admitting to using it". Even if the motive for witchcraft is 'acceptable' white magic, it is still a delicate topic for those involved and is often done in secrecy.

As a result of this concern, it was decided to conduct the fieldwork on the Friday and Saturday surrounding the first Friday of March (3rd of March 2023), which is when the traditional annual witchcraft congress is held at Catemaco. During this period, the area contains around 10,000 visitors (Viña, 2023) who traverse the many shaman tents asking for spells of a varying nature. Due to these numbers, it was considered that this would be the most convenient and likely time to locate interview participants. The plan was to mingle with the crowds on the first afternoon (Friday 3rd) to take note of which tents were used for white magic and which tents were inhabited by practitioners of black magic. Friday night and Saturday would then be used to approach potential participants as they exit the tents. The purpose of the research would be explained to the individual (along with assurances of confidentiality), and a semi-structured interview would be immediately undertaken if the person agreed to be involved.

Many people were approached but the vast majority refused to participate, as was expected. Eventually, fifteen semi structured interviews were completed- thirteen with participants who were involved in white magic and two with those that were in Catemaco for purposes of black magic. As the research was concerned with Mexican society, only Mexican nationals were interviewed. The participants were aged between 31 and 66 years old. Seven of the participants were female, while eight were male.

It was important to confirm that the participants had visited Catemaco primarily to engage in witchcraft practices and held a strong belief in its ability to influence personal outcomes. Once this was ascertained, they were asked questions which were designed to determine if there exists a relationship between their motivations for the visit and liquid modernity (table 2). The concept of liquid modernity was not mentioned until the final question, to

avoid adding bias to the participants' responses. Even when the concept was explained to them, it was deemed important to provide an objective description that would not influence their response, following Kvale (1994) and Kvale & Brinkmann (2008).

Liquid modernity element	Objective of question	Examples of questions
Emancipation	To identify whether the consequences of this element were a contributing factor towards the participant's decision to partake in witchcraft.	Do you find that you have more autonomy in your life than before, or from what your parents experienced? Is this a good thing, or could there be drawbacks to having too much autonomy? Would you say that your decision to engage in witchcraft is a response to the uncertainty and lack of fulfilment provoked by having perhaps too much freedom?
Individuality	To identify whether the consequences of this element were a contributing factor towards the participant's decision to partake in witchcraft.	Do you think that there has been a gradual weakening of institutions such as family and religion? What is your opinion of this? Can it make one feel lonely, or isolated from society, in a way disengaged from the system? Would you say that your decision to engage in witchcraft has been influenced by this?
Time and space	To identify whether the consequences of this element were a contributing factor towards the participant's decision to partake in witchcraft.	Do you think that there exists a separation between the rich and poor in Mexican society? Has this affected you in any way? Do you feel that your space and time is restricted in comparison with others? Do you ever feel, in a sense, disorientated by the way that things can move so quickly these days? Would you say that your decision to engage in witchcraft has been influenced by this?
Work	To identify whether the consequences of this element were a contributing factor towards the participant's decision to partake in witchcraft.	Do you have what you would consider to be a secure, stable job? Do you feel that the labour market has changed in Mexico? Is this worrying for you? Would you say that your decision to engage in witchcraft has been influenced by this?
Community	To identify whether the consequences of this element were a contributing factor towards the participant's decision to partake in witchcraft.	Do you feel that traditional community values have declined? How has this affected you? Would you say that your decision to engage in witchcraft has been influenced by this?
Liquid modernity	To identify whether the participants regard the phenomena of liquid modernity (as a whole) to be a contributing factor towards their decision to partake in witchcraft.	Have you heard of liquid modernity? (If the participant had not heard of liquid modernity, the concept was briefly explained to them.) Do you think that the personal consequences of liquid modernity might have contributed to your decision to come to Catemaco?

Table 2: Elements of liquid modernity: objectives and examples of the interview questions. Source: own elaboration.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted for an average of thirty minutes. The researcher has been based in Mexico for several years and speaks proficient Spanish, although extra care was taken by employing the method of cross-language interviewing proposed by Lopez et al. (2008). All the data were analysed using the coding methods proposed by Jennings (2010) and Strauss & Corbin (1998).

In order to broaden the perspective of the study, further interviews were conducted on the 19th, 20th and 21st of August, 2024, with ten members of the local population and a witchcraft practitioner who agreed to an interview. The questions were again designed to gather insights into a possible association between liquid modernity and witchcraft tourism.

Liquid modernity element	Objective of question	Examples of questions
Emancipation	To understand if locals feel that increased autonomy has led to people seeking witchcraft.	Do you think people today feel that they have more freedom but also more uncertainty?
Individuality	To explore how the weakening of traditional family and religious structures affects individuals and encourages witchcraft.	Do you think the role of family and religion has changed? Do you think this influences why some people visit Catemaco?
Time and space	To evaluate how rapid societal changes and growing inequalities have influenced witchcraft.	Do you think that the differences between rich and poor have led more people to witchcraft? Do you think more people today feel disconnected, and that they want to use witchcraft to regain control of their lives?
Work	To assess how job insecurity has influenced people's reasons for seeking witchcraft.	Do you think that that the lack of stable jobs and careers has affected people's reasons for visiting Catemaco?
Community	To examine the decline of traditional community bonds.	How has the decline of community impacted upon people's lives and their decision to come here for witchcraft?

Table 3: Elements of liquid modernity: objectives and examples of the interview questions with local residents. Source: own elaboration.

Liquid modernity element	Objective of question	Example of questions
Emancipation	To explore if the witchcraft practitioner believes that people seek witchcraft due to feelings of powerlessness or uncertainty.	Do you think that people come to you because they feel uncertainty in their lives?
Individuality	To understand if the weakening of traditional structures has contributed to people embracing witchcraft.	Do you think that the weakening of family and religious structures has contributed to witchcraft?
Time and space	To explore whether social inequalities and the pace of life has influenced witchcraft.	Do you think that people come here because they feel that society is moving too fast? How does the gap between rich and poor affect the types of services people ask for?

Work	To assess how job insecurity has influenced people's reasons for seeking witchcraft.	Do many people come to you seeking help with work related issues
Community	To examine the decline of traditional community bonds.	Do you think that the decline of the traditional community has influenced people to visit you?

Table 4: Elements of liquid modernity: objectives and examples of the interview questions with a witchcraft practitioner. Source: own elaboration.

As before, the interviews were conducted in Spanish for a duration of thirty minutes. The cross-language technique was again followed with the same methods of data analysis.

8. FINDINGS

8.1 Witchcraft/ white magic

The following section is based on those participants who stated that they were in Catemaco to partake in 'white' magic.

When asked why they were visiting Catemaco, all the participants replied that it was to attend the witchcraft congress. Indeed, for several of the participants, the congress was an event that they visited on an annual basis. It was something that they felt an affinity towards, mainly because they believed that witchcraft does have a certain power that can influence outcomes. All the participants confirmed that they arrived with the purpose of visiting a witchcraft practitioner.

"I come here each year for the festival. For me it's mostly a bit of fun but I do believe that witchcraft has the power to change things. I ask that they help me with one or two health problems that I have, maybe a cleansing, and I believe that it does function, more or less."
(Participant 3, personal communication, 3 March, 2023)

The following findings are related to the questions concerning the elements of liquid modernity.

Emancipation- The participants were asked if their level of autonomy to make decisions has increased over the years, or when compared to previous generations. Most of the participants agreed that they had more freedom, yet some felt this to be stifling rather than liberating. For example, one participant said:

"I have more freedom than my father's generation had, for example. But I am not sure if this is really a good thing. I feel under a lot of pressure to make the right decisions. My father worked for the Electricity company here in Mexico, and it worked well for him. He had a secure job and now has a good pension. I would love that."
(Participant 8, personal communication, 4 March, 2023)

However, despite many participants expressing concern that increased autonomy could have negative implications, it was not alluded to as being a reason for their visit.

"I suppose the freedom to make your own decisions in today's world is a good thing, even if it might not work for some people. I do not see how witchcraft could really change it."
(Participant 2, personal communication, 3 March, 2023)

Hence, while emancipation (defined as autonomy) was acknowledged as a potentially troubling situation in certain cases, it was not seen by the participants as an influence on their decision to visit Catemaco.

Individuality - When the participants were asked if they had observed a weakening of institutions such as family and religion, the majority suggested that while it was evident, it was not deemed particularly significant for them. Nonetheless, two individuals commented upon how a family situation had caused them upset. One participant said the following:
"I thought that my family was good until my parents died and everybody started fighting over the house and money. Now I do not speak to my brothers."
(Participant 7, personal communication, 4 March, 2023)

The other participant revealed that she wanted to use magic so that her husband, who she was separated from, would return to her.

"I am sad because my husband left me for another. My friends say I am crazy, but I want him to fall in love with me again."
(Participant 12, personal communication, 4 March, 2023)

Both participants were asked if they were hoping to gain some kind of retribution, or vengeance, but they insisted that this was not the case. Participant 7 emphasised that the reason he was there was to find a remedy for an ongoing medical condition that had nothing to do with his family situation, while participant 12 insisted that her only wish was that things could return to as they were before, and that she wanted no harm to come to her husband.

Like the element of emancipation, the notion of individuality was not identified as a principal motive for visiting Catemaco among most of the participants. That is, only the comments of two individuals could be linked with this element and just one (participant 12) was partaking in white witchcraft for reasons directly related to individuality.

Time and Space- The participants were asked about the rich/poor divide in Mexico, whether this affected them and if it had contributed to their visit. They were also questioned whether the speediness of life left them feeling occasionally disorientated and bewildered. It was at this point that the answers became slightly more introspective and applicable to the research. For example, *all* the participants recognised the separation of social classes in Mexican society, and it was a source of frustration for many.

"Of course, my time and my space does not compare to the rich and I would consider myself Mexican middle class. I live in an ok neighbourhood, but it is not closed off and protected. I know that I work to make the rich richer."
(Participant 14, personal communication, 4 March, 2023)

"I had to save up a lot of money to come here on the bus and it was a long journey, very uncomfortable. Yes, I am frustrated with my job in particular because they do not give me enough money or respect because I am dark-skinned."
(Participant 9, personal communication, 4 March, 2023)

When asked if this was the main reason for partaking in witchcraft, participant 9 agreed. While not expressly wishing physical harm to his employers and colleagues, he wanted the situation to improve.

"My colleague, this one guy in particular, looks down on me because I look Indian. I have asked for that to change."
(Participant 9, personal communication, 4 March, 2023)

The words of participant 9 demonstrate the frustration felt among many Mexicans who suffer discrimination due to their socioeconomic status. In this case, the participant does not wish physical harm to his work colleagues, but he is hoping that the situation can be resolved by witchcraft. This indicates how this participant is willing to explore unconventional methods to address his feelings of frustration and seek a resolution.

The other participants did not suggest that time/space was the reason for their visit, but the underlying resentment towards the class divide in Mexican society was evident. The participants were also asked if they ever felt a sense of disorientation due to technological advancements which have contributed to a faster pace of life. In this case, all the participants remarked that they themselves were content with the changes, but they knew others, especially ageing friends and relatives, who occasionally found it problematic.

Work- The element of work intersects with that of emancipation, individuality and time and space, yet rather than focusing upon matters of workplace discrimination as above, it refers specifically to the fact that in a rapidly changing labour market, work is no longer an anchor that gives structure to the future. That is, where once a job was for life, now work is often episodic, affecting an individual's ability to plan and thus creating anxiety and uncertainty. Furthermore, the personal fulfilment and sense of identity offered by a rewarding career is absent. When prompted to share their thoughts regarding work, the frustration among the participants was clear. Like the viewpoint of participant 8 (emancipation section), the majority were apprehensive about their job situation, some resentful that previous generations often enjoyed a degree of job security that is difficult to find today.

"I cannot find a job which makes me want to stay. They want you to work 12 hours a day for low pay and no promise of promotion. Honestly, I have a degree in business, and this is the best I can get."
(Participant 1, personal communication, 3 March, 2023)

Several participants were upset by the fact that in many cases desirable jobs are given to people that they see as undeserving of the role due to corruption and favouritism.

"The best jobs go to family and sons of compadres [best friends], *who don't even know what they are doing."*

(Participant 13, personal communication, 4 March, 2023)

When asked whether their exasperation was the chief motive to indulge in witchcraft, five of the participants agreed, yet they stressed that they did not want any harm to come to their employers or colleagues.

"Look, I don't want them to come to physical harm, but I want something to happen that will improve my work situation. I've tried everything else to make things better at work so now this is my last resort."
(Participant 2 personal communication March 3, 2023)

The disillusionment felt by many participants in the light of job insecurity, low pay, and lack of opportunities was palpable. Furthermore, they were fully aware of the bias and discrimination that exists in the workplace yet felt powerless to prevent it or change things without turning to witchcraft.

Community- Community identity has weakened as individuals prioritise personal needs. Indeed, the former sense of belonging and identity that led to social cohesion appears to have dissolved as new forms of community have emerged (often of the virtual kind) to replace older ones. (Bauman, 2000).

The participants were asked if they had noticed a decline in community spirit and whether this had personally affected them. Eleven of the participants said that they were aware of a change in community activity, mentioning reduced interaction with neighbours and a feeling that their community had become increasingly disconnected over the years. While expressing regret and nostalgia, the participants appeared resigned to the changes.

"I remember when I was a child, I knew the name of all my neighbours. We would play in the street, and they would look after us. I do not let my kids play out on the street. As old neighbours die, new ones come but they do not introduce themselves, maybe a quick hello but that is all."
(Participant 8, personal communication, 4 March, 2023)

While recognising the changes in the community, there did not appear to be a connection between the community element of liquid modernity and the participants' motives for visiting Catemaco.

On the concept of liquid modernity- When asked, four participants were already familiar with the concept, while the others were provided with a simple and concise definition, along with an explanation on how it relates to witchcraft. The majority suggested that they could recognise the presence of liquid modernity in their lives (when explained as a whole, rather than dissected into separate elements),

To illustrate this, here is an example from one of the interviews:

Researcher:
"Liquid modernity refers to the fluid and constantly changing nature of modern society. The idea behind it is that everything is constantly shifting and nothing feels stable or permanent.

The traditional structures and institutions that we have just talked about that provided stability, like secure jobs, religion, family, community, are now more uncertain. They still exist but not quite the same as before. This can lead to people feeling disconnected, and anxious and not really a part of this world."

Participant 3:
"Yes, I can relate to this. I often feel anxious about the future."

Researcher:
"It has been suggested that people turn to things like witchcraft as a way to cope with this disconnection and anxiety. This is because witchcraft can apparently give you the ability to influence situations and regain control. What is your opinion of this?"

Participant 3:
"Yes. I have never really thought about it in this way. I often feel trapped and not able to change my life and I see witchcraft as a thing that can help me."

Introducing the concept of liquid modernity within the context of witchcraft tourism enabled many participants to contextualise their feelings and frustrations within this broader social framework. It allowed them to observe the impact of liquid modernity on their lives and to reflect upon how they were addressing personal difficulties through the practice of witchcraft. When asked the final question as to whether they thought that the personal consequences of liquid modernity might have contributed to their decision to come to Catemaco, nine of the thirteen 'white magic' participants agreed.

8.2. Witchcraft/ black magic

The following section focuses upon the two participants who stated that they were in Catemaco to participate in 'black' magic.

When questioned about their reasons for visiting Catemaco, both participants said that they were attending the witchcraft festival and engaging in witchcraft practices. However, the distinction between these and the other participants was that they openly acknowledged that their specific purpose was to participate in rituals associated with black magic*.*

Liquid modernity - The participants were posed the same questions, focusing on the five elements of liquid modernity, the aim being to discover the underlying motivation behind their involvement in black magic. It became apparent that themes of individuality- particularly the fragility of human bonds and work-related concerns- were particularly relevant. For instance, one participant harboured feelings of vengeance towards a former partner following a relationship breakdown.

"She left me after three years and I want her to feel sorry. I want her to have an accident that makes her ugly. We will see what she does then when nobody looks at her."
(Participant 10, personal communication, 4 March, 2023)

The second participant expressed frustration over work-related issues and wished bad fortune upon his boss and colleagues. While this sentiment was similar to the other participants who had voiced their annoyance about work problems, the notable difference was that this particular individual expressed a desire to resolve his grievances through aggression.

"I have tried to be nice at the office, but everybody ignores me and laughs. I want to make them all suffer but particularly my boss. That is the person that we targeted before."
(Participant 15, personal communication, 4 March, 2023)

When the concept of liquid modernity was explained to these participants, both acknowledged its potential relevance to their respective situations.

"Well, it makes sense. I am angry with my girlfriend, but I suppose there were other problems in my life before that. That word-disconnected- yes that sounds like me."
(Participant 10, personal communication, 4 March, 2023)

It is evident that feelings of envy and the desire for retribution related to the elements of individuality and work serve as significant motivators for these participants. What differs is their willingness to escalate matters and resort to outcomes intended to cause harm, fitting with the proposed definition for malevolent tourism. As nothing is known about the background and personality of these two participants, it is not possible to bring other factors into the discussion such as mental illness or addictions; however, it is evident that they felt compelled to seek vengeance against those they perceive to have wronged them. Like the other participants, these individuals found resonance in the concept of liquid modernity and acknowledged its potential to have influenced their decisions.

8.3. Local resident response

The residents of Catemaco recognise that societal changes provoked by liquid modernity have influenced witchcraft. That is, the participants agreed that the uncertainty and instability brought about by increased autonomy, the weakening of family and religious structures, economic inequality, the fast pace of modern life, the lack of stable jobs and careers, and the decline of community spirit have contributed to an increase in the number of visitors seeking the services of a witchcraft practitioner.

Question	Resident answer
Do you think people today feel that they have more freedom but also more uncertainty?	*Yes, people have more choices now, but it confuses them. It makes them anxious.* Participant 17, 19 August, 2024
Do you think the role of family and religion has changed? Do you think this influences why some people visit Catemaco?	*Families aren't as close as they used to be, and fewer people go to church. That leaves a lot of people lost, so they come here looking for answers.* Participant 22, 21 August, 2024
Do you think that that the lack of stable jobs and careers has affected people's reasons for visiting Catemaco?	*Yes, and it stresses them out. They come here for spells or rituals to improve their job situation.* Participant 20. 20 August, 2024

Table 5: Sample answers from residents. Source: own elaboration.

8.4. Witchcraft practitioner response

The witchcraft practitioner in Catemaco agreed that many individuals seek his services due to the instability and unpredictability of contemporary life, growing social inequalities and the weakening of family, religious and community structures. Along with requests for assistance with health concerns, which have always played a significant role, there has been an increase in clients who seek help with work and relationship related issues.

Question	Witchcraft practitioner answer
Do you think that the weakening of family and religious structures has contributed to witchcraft?	*People come to me because they don't have anything else to rely on. They see witchcraft as a way to fill that gap.* *Cqtemaco, 21 August, 2024*
Do many people come to you seeking help with work related issues	*A lot of my clients ask for help with their jobs. They want spells to change their fortunes, sometimes black ones.* *Catemaco, 21 August, 2024*
Do you think that the decline of the traditional community has influenced people to visit you?	*Yes, like with family, it is not what it was, so they look to fill the gap.* *Catemaco, 21 August, 2024*

Table 6: Sample answers from witchcraft practitioner. Source: own elaboration.

9. DISCUSSION

The findings from both phases of the research serve to emphasise the influence of liquid modernity on witchcraft tourism in Catemaco.

While emancipation, expressed by a rise in autonomy, was recognised, it did not directly motivate the participants to visit Catemaco. Individuality emerged as a direct stimulus for two participants- one to participate in white magic, the other to partake in black magic- both cases involving relationship issues. Meanwhile, societal inequalities connected to the time/space element were acknowledged by the majority, such was the case for one participant who hoped that witchcraft would enable him to gain respect from a racist colleague.

Lack of job security was notably significant, with six participants stressing that job challenges were their primary reason for engaging in witchcraft. One resorted to black magic, further demonstrating how despair can provoke individuals to commit malicious acts (another example of malevolent tourism). Additionally, while many participants were aware of the decline of community, none specifically suggested that it was direct reason for their visit.

Both residents and the witchcraft practitioner further confirmed these insights, noting that job insecurity, relationship struggles, and social inequality were a common factor among those arriving to participate in witchcraft, including malevolent practices. The practitioner acknowledged that some individuals specifically request harmful rituals, driven by feelings of powerlessness and social disconnection.

Figure 1 helps to summarise the findings. It shows liquid modernity (consisting of liquid individuals, liquid capitalism, liquid society and liquid identity) and its five elements- emancipation, individuality, time/space, work and community. All the elements can be seen to lead to a state of perpetual anxiety and fear- an erosion of confidence, frustration, anger, and jealousy- which together result in a sense of weakness for the individual. Witchcraft tourism serves as a vehicle to oppose these feelings and gain control over life, which causes the individual's weakness to fade and personal power to increase.
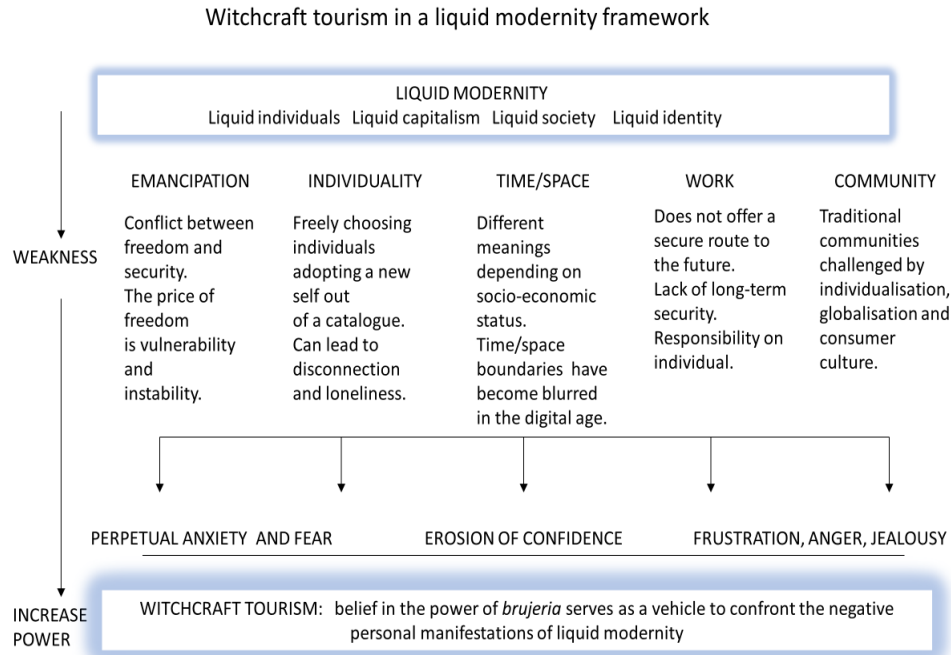
Figure 1: Witchcraft tourism within a liquid modernity framework. Source: own elaboration.

As mentioned above, when the notion of liquid modernity and its relationship with witchcraft was explained, it did appear to enlighten many participants, especially those who were previously unaware of its existence. It provided a sense of relief for those most troubled because it provided a means of explaining their actions, particularly for the participants whose principal reason for visiting Catemaco could be linked with the individuality, time/space and work elements. Other participants, hoping to find a cure or respite from a physical ailment, were also drawn to the concept, two suggesting that their visit might also be connected to the negative consequences of liquid modernity, which perhaps in their case was manifested in health issues.

10. CONCLUSION

Zygmund Bauman's concept of liquid modernity provided the framework for the study. Characterised by several interrelated elements, liquid modernity is a state of flux in which traditional structures and identities that once provided a sense of stability are now dissolving. As a result, some individuals begin to feel somewhat disconnected from society and struggle in various facets of their lives. Witchcraft has traditionally served as a stabilising influence for people in certain societies: indeed, the practice of *brujeria* remains

prevalent in Mexico (De La Torre, 2013; Najar, 2010). It was therefore suggested that certain visitors to Catemaco, affected by liquid modernity, might participate in witchcraft tourism because they view it as a solution to personal issues which otherwise they feel powerless to influence.

Before focusing upon the empirical aspects of the study, it was considered of particular interest, along with being relevant to the study, to ascertain whether witchcraft tourism, of the sort associated with black magic, should be regarded as a subset of dark tourism, or whether it warrants a separate label. Due to differences in the characteristics of both phenomena, in a sociological context and due to the distinct nature of participation, objectives, emotional and psychological drivers, and ethical implications, it was suggested that witchcraft tourism involving black magic requires its own categorisation. Hence, the term 'malevolent tourism' was proposed. The notion of malevolent tourism provided an intriguing subplot to the overall case study, and while it was only possible to conduct two interviews with individuals that would admit to taking part in black magic, the relatively high number (26) of refusals from people emerging from 'black magic' tents indicated that there were a significant number of visitors engaging in black magic practices. Malevolent tourism demands further research, perhaps focusing on understanding the unique motivations and psychological drivers of participants. Comparative studies could explore similarities and differences with related tourism sectors, such as paranormal or spiritual tourism.

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the potential link between liquid modernity in Mexican society and the prevalence of witchcraft tourism in Catemaco. Most participants admitted experiencing varying degrees of social disconnection and perceived witchcraft—whether through white or black magic—as a way of addressing their personal challenges. Consequently, Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity proved to be an appropriate framework for understanding the motivations and dynamics behind witchcraft tourism in Catemaco.

Future research could consider how liquid modernity contributes to other forms of niche tourism. Comparative studies could explore whether other forms of ritualistic or spiritual tourism—such as those involving healing retreats, shamanic rituals, or paranormal experiences—similarly attract individuals seeking solutions to personal issues. It would also be valuable to examine witchcraft tourism in diverse geographical and cultural contexts to understand how local belief systems and societal conditions influence participation. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach combining sociology, anthropology, and tourism studies could yield richer insights into the complex interplay between modernity, tradition, and tourism.

Of course, there are limitations with the research. As discussed above, one of the main preoccupations prior to conducting the fieldwork was the sample size, the concern being whether the visitors would be willing to discuss their reasons for consulting a witchcraft practitioner. This resulted in a relatively small sample size, which could potentially limit the generalisability of the findings.

Returning in August 2024 to interview local residents and a witchcraft practitioner did help to address the limitations posed by the small sample size. It provided additional perspectives from a community and an insider viewpoint, offering a more holistic understanding of witchcraft tourism in Catemaco.

To conclude, the study illustrates how liquid modernity, enduring traditions, and tourism intersect. Liquid modernity allows us to reflect upon negative societal changes and how this affects individuals. The enduring nature of witchcraft in Mexico offers a solution to a significant proportion of these individuals. Tourism, meanwhile, another hallmark of the modern age, is the conduit for this to happen, serving to connect the modern world with tradition.

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