



# **Commodification and Culture**

## **How can culture be economically used without selling it out?**

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Bachelor Thesis for Obtaining the Degree

Bachelor of Business Administration

Tourism and Hospitality Management

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## Affidavit

I hereby affirm that this Bachelor's Thesis represents my own written work and that I have used no sources and aids other than those indicated. All passages quoted from publications or paraphrased from these sources are properly cited and attributed.

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## Abstract

In this paper it is proposed that our highly commodified society can in fact provide a means of bringing economic and cultural aspects together in a united framework without allowing culture to be purely commercialised. As today's prosperity and quality of life can be maintained on a long-term basis only with a sustainable system, the study focuses on the need for responsible practices by entrepreneurs. The paper thus discusses the topic of commodification as well as the issue of sustainability. The exemplary clothes company Ibonica was chosen as the case study for this paper and evaluated in terms of its business conduct. Ibonica produces garments for women that combine the traditional patterns of Maya embroidery from Yucatán and modern fashion aspects. Ten in-depth and semi-structured interviews were carried out with the owner of the company as well as with various customers in order to discuss the issues of commodification and sustainability. The paper attempts to draw attention to the beneficial combination of cultural and economic aspects. Additionally, criteria for the implementation of responsible practices within a company are discussed. The results suggest that entrepreneurs should make use of commodification, as consumers seem to approve of adapting culture. Nevertheless, consumers put a higher value on the quality than on the authenticity of the products, even though they do appreciate the cultural aspects. The results also show that the sustainable conduct of a business is not of importance to consumers. The study then proposes for further research in the field to establish certain guidelines as well as to examine the big picture. This includes the overall perspective from the consumers' as well as from the entrepreneurs' side so as to find out more about the opportunities of using culture as an economic resource.

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## 1 Introduction

Commodification has become an eminent subject in today's global society, as it goes hand in hand with consumerism. Every aspect of culture, whether it involves tangible goods such as clothes or intangible factors like traditions and customs, is nowadays transformed into a commodity. Throsby (2005) also argues that it is important to maintain cultures in the form they "naturally" evolve. However, the commercial side must not completely obscure the cultural elements. Hence, a conflict between culture and commerce exists in which the relationship is very complex and characterized by interdependencies. On the one hand, the process of commodification contributes to culture not simply becoming extinct. On the other hand, only the existence of culture makes the practice of commerce possible. This therefore raises the question how culture can be economically used without selling it out and what challenges are associated with commodification.

Sustainability is of high importance in today's civilisation in order to be able to ensure long-term survival of societies and communities as well as the planet we live on. The UN World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) first formulated the principles of sustainability and sustainable development and made them known to the public. Consequently, those principles were then also adapted to the field of culture. The UN World Commission on Culture and Development (1995) provides here some practical concerns and establishes a connection between economic development and culture. As long as cultural and artistic outputs are perceived as being culturally relevant to a certain community, the activity can certainly be described as sustainable. As a consequence, cultural sustainability is an issue of efficient and equal inter- as well as intra-generational resource allocation. (Throsby, 2005)

The study deals with the sustainable combination of culture and commerce while preserving their respective assets such as old traditions or economic activity. The aim is to examine different perspectives and points of view in order to get a vivid picture of the situation. The overall research question "How far can culture and commerce be linked in a responsible way" is to be answered by dividing it into two elements, namely the process of commodification and the practice of sustainability.

Those two sub-topics are then again broken up into different questions to be addressed so as to obtain an answer to the research question, as can be seen in the following list:

#### Process of commodification

- What are the traditional and what are the modern aspects of cultural goods?
- How far is a certain commodification perceived as negative or positive for a culture?
- To what degree does authenticity play a role when it comes to commodification?

#### Practice of sustainability

- How can culture be used without selling it out?
- How is the concept of sustainability to be perceived?
- What are the risks and opportunities of using culture as an economic resource?

The overall goal is to determine to what degree the practical linkage of culture and commodification can be reached in a responsible way. The study should be seen as an encouragement for companies to enhance actively their working politics by showing them the importance of upholding culture at the same time as being involved in commerce.

To tackle the research problem, a case study approach is chosen. The case of the company Ibonica, which successfully integrates traditional Maya aspects into its modern business concept, is examined while focusing on the company's responsible practices. Ibonica is a women's clothing line that combines traditional Maya hand embroidery with fashionable new clothing designs. Ibonica is thus exemplary for the conflict between culture and commodification. In-depth and semi-structured interviews with the company owner as well as nine customers were conducted and formed the basis for answering the research questions.

The present report is organised into three main sections. In the first section, literature related to culture, the global capitalist economy, the process of commodification and sustainable entrepreneurship are discussed. Afterwards, the methodological approach is outlined. In the third section, the findings of the study are described and then compared with previous studies in the field. Finally, some conclusions are drawn. Additionally, the limits to this study are outlined and recommendations for future research are listed.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Importance of culture and identity

#### 2.1.1 The meaning of culture

Generally speaking, the study of culture deals with the social and the historical aspects. On the whole, there are about 5,000-6,000 cultures worldwide, of which 4,000-5,000 are cultures of indigenous peoples. They therefore constitute about 80-90% of global cultural diversity. The main indicators for defining a culture are regarded as the existence of a great biological variety in a certain region along with the availability of a large range of languages. (Toledo, 2000) Nevertheless, there have been different theories concerning the definition of culture over past periods. During the pre-industrial era, culture was considered to be everything within the structured human society. In modernism, however, culture was limited to the specific field of creativity only. By contrast, theories of post modernism again come back to the idea of a cultural omnipresence. (Dunn, 2008) Bourdieu and Thompson (1991) go even one step further, regarding culture and society as systems of relations and culture as a tool showing social diversity. Hence, every action is of cultural significance and can be socially interpreted. People make use of their actions in order to position themselves with regard to the individual or the collective and also to distinguish themselves from others. (Tomlinson, 1999; Dunn, 2008)

However, as Nietzsche (in Babich, 1994: p.38) already mentioned in his dictum “everything is interpretation”, culture is a rather unsteady framework. In fact, the term culture is one of the most complicated words within the whole world of English communication (Williams, 1976; Barnes, 2002). Additionally, the ambiguity of

culture, namely material aspects of culture on the one hand and “lived” occurrences on the other hand, adds further complexity when looking for a definition (Eagleton, 2000; Barnes, 2002). Culture therefore not only demonstrates simply the connections within a social system but also refers to the big picture of a community. It also includes the community’s complete mode of life with all its individuals and their daily activities and experiences. (Dunn, 2008) This conceptualisation focuses on the meaning of culture being ordinary. Therefore, culture refers to all daily habits and includes all common practices in life. (McGuigan, 1992; Williams & Gable, 1989; Tomlinson, 1999) Tomlinson (1999) attributes culture even to the satisfaction of basic needs, since most actions are generally carried out with the intention to satisfy practical or economic needs. Nonetheless, these basic activities have to be understood within a more wide-ranging construct of culture. This study will define culture as a construct of activities such as publishing, artistic work, media and economies on the one hand and viewpoints, customs and principles such as values on the other (Throsby, 1995).

### **2.1.2 The maintenance of identity in today’s world**

Every community possesses its own set of values and ideas as well as its own way of living, which all together makes up the very individual history of each community and constitutes its identity (Meyer, 2011). Each member is therefore given a home and in return defends the community against external influences (Herzfeld, 2005; Tzanelli, 2008). This very identity is extremely important in making a strong local development possible and should even form the point of reference of the latter. The particular culture of a community hereby constitutes an important component of identity. This means that the fundamental definition, content and very core of local development should be made up by the identity of the community including its culture, history and local conditions. (Verhelst, 1987; Meyer, 2011) Only when staying within the cultural margin of the commune is a proper planning and realization of progress feasible. Here it is of great importance to consider the constantly changing pattern of identity. The past, present and future are very dependent on each other and hence produce continuous development. (Sahlins, 1985; Hitchcock, 1999; Meethan 2001; Meyer, 2011) As a consequence, identity is

upheld through the practice of languages, music, arts, social and political systems, customs or simply daily living patterns (Meethan, 2001).

However, the prevailing problem within the majority of countries worldwide is the institutional enforcement of modernised progress from national governmental level (González, 2006; Meyer, 2011), which leads to a weakening or even complete elimination of local identities. National implementation does not take into consideration that a certain degree of cultural identity will always prevail among communities and that it must therefore not simply be ignored. Although a government's task is to bring a nation together, if no attention at all is paid to the special characteristics of each community, the development will be thwarted. (Verhelst, 1987; Meyer, 2011) Communities therefore try to prevent governments from extinguishing their tradition and offer resistance (Stephen, 1991b) by upholding their identity even more (Meyer, 2011). They reinvent their identity in order to provide an alternative way apart from their identity commoditized by governments (Stephen, 1991b). As a result, a great increase in identity politics has been noted over the last decades. More and more indigenous communities want to be represented and recognized as distinct entities and demand full empowerment from governments (Taylor, 1994; Sunder 2005). Governments again make an attempt to profit from this shift towards identity and develop a "national identity" to represent the country to other nations. However, this union of different indigenous identities into one general national identity leads to a restriction of the single communities (Friedlander, 1975; Stephen, 1991b). Although governments promote the general practice of identity that way, their main intention is to market the country's identity, for example within the tourism sector (Canclini, 1982; Graburn, 1982; Cook, 1984; Stephen, 1991b). Indigenous communities therefore hold only a minor position (Smith, 1985; Stephen, 1991b).

Traditional communities hold the point of view that the economy is about more than just profit making. Although the economic realm offers subsistence and food, prosperity is gained through the wealthy culture and the relationship with land and sea. (Kuokkanen, 2011) It is therefore of utmost importance to find a certain middle way that is accepted by the communities as well as national governments. With respect to this, first attempts have already been made with the so-called

“etnoderrollo”, which developed in the 1980s in different countries of Latin America. The identity of the respective communities forms the basis of this new development and is then combined with universal principles, which adhere to national standards. The idea of this multiple organism concept is the maintenance of the “popular cultures” of sub-national, indigenous territories and hence an ethnic distinctiveness. This democratic type of development with indigenous participation protects the local social, economic and political process. In spite of everything, overall national consent is given, as all of the different communities still follow national general arrangements. (Gros, 1998; Meyer, 2011) This development should be regarded as the objective in today’s society, since communities can actually define their identity on their own (Stephen, 1991a; Stephen, 1991b).

## **2.2 Theory from the macro perspective**

### **2.2.1 The subsistence economy**

Quite a lot of people consider the term subsistence economy to be negative, as they associate it with a primitive standard of living, ancient ways of life or simply a poor kind of civilization from the countryside or the past in developing countries (Kuokkanean, 2011). However, as Elias (1995) states, a subsistence economy constitutes the most consistent structure of economy in the long run. (Kuokkanean, 2011) A subsistence economy could also be very well integrated into the approach of the previously mentioned etnoderollo. As etnoderollo combines traditional patterns with modern, governmental principles it could constitute a contemporary form of subsistence economy. (Gros, 1998; Meyer, 2011) Additionally, a subsistence economy considers the important aspect of sustainability. The protection of the environmental and social form, together with economic qualities such as economical use of resources, creativity, interpersonal respect and a generally harmonious working and living together, make an independent development of the respective organisation possible. (Berry, 2009) As can be seen, a subsistence economy is a construct that integrates an economic as well as a social system. While applying traditional, economic practices fitted to the conditions of the respective region with the focus on managing resources in a sustainable manner, all the different flows of goods and services constitute the community’s culture, identity and values. This specified combination shows a certain degree of interdependence but

simultaneously also leads to a particular level of reciprocity, which guarantees the maintenance of the system. (Kuokkanean, 2011)

The main differences between a subsistence economy and today's global capitalist economy are to be seen in their objectives. To traditional societies, the degree of richness of their culture is of great importance, which then defines the wealth of the community. They put the wellbeing of their families and community as well as the environment first. In contrast to this, capitalism focuses on profit for the individual, competition and steady growth (Kuokkanean, 2011) while neglecting general economic virtues. It is all about consumption in today's economy equating it with personal enrichment. However, the act of saving would be much more an economic quality. (Berry, 2009) This clearly indicates that small-scale economic activities, appropriate to local conditions, and the sustainable management of resources should be seen as promising opportunities to implement sustainable forms also in today's contemporary systems (Kuokkanean, 2011). Only once certain standards of subsistence economy have been established in contemporary societies can there be an advance to a market economy. Standards, for instance, also include the shift in values. To begin with, today's systems would have to re-set their priorities on needs and move back to pure wants. The word "priceless", for instance, then relates to absolute values such as clean air and water or ecological health instead of exclusiveness or expensiveness. (Berry, 2009)

### **2.2.2 The capitalist economy**

As concluded above, it is quite difficult to define the term "culture". This has led to a certain degree of cultural eclecticism (Jameson, 1984; Dunn 2008), but the re-aestheticization of culture also marked the creation of today's consumer-culture industry. In our daily life we are steadily confronted with the visual representations of items and illustrations. (Dunn, 2008) "We are at the point where consumption is laying hold of the whole of life." (Baudrillard, 1998: p. 29) This quote clearly demonstrates the strong influence consumerism has on today's society. Nowadays it is usual to shop for someone as a sign of demonstrating his or her love (Miller, 1995; Sayer, 2003). According to theories of classical economics, consumption is the aim of production (Featherstone, 2007). Commodities, which can either be products or services, are means of exchange, which are produced within fields of capitalism

(Appadurai, 2005). One distinguishes between the exchange and use value when looking at a product. Thus, there are different valuations: the qualitative, social classification of an item and the purely quantitative categorization. (Marx, 1976; Sayer, 2003) Hence, each article can be seen from two viewpoints: one can consider the object itself or one looks at the further cultural meaning of the commodity. From this point of view, consumerism receives a new significance: shopping becomes a cultural experience. (Dunn, 2008) In our time, spending gives people the opportunity to express their identity and way of life as well as to demonstrate their affiliation to a particular culture (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Consumption is thus an act of economic activity, yet is carried out on a cultural basis (Alonso, 2007). Hence, we now live in a commodity society where we constantly evaluate economic and cultural values (Dunn, 2008).

### **2.2.3 Natural culture building as alternative**

The entire market depends on people's reasonable decisions made with the aim of increasing their welfare (Keat, 1999). We can therefore say that we are nowadays all participating members of an economic system (Throsby, 1995). The Business Dictionary (2012) defines the latter as an ideal consistent construct created through sound choices by rational customers, which are additionally backed up by governmental institutions. Simultaneously, people are involved in cultural systems, which are made up of values, beliefs and a certain affiliation regarding identity. The goal is now to combine economic systems together with cultural systems in a cohesive manner in order to make a so-called culturally sustainable development possible. Attention has to be paid to ensuring that society does not primarily focus on economic growth. Those components should rather be looked on as complementary features. (Throsby, 1995) For instance, commercial alliances between rural communities and distribution or transformation companies are approaches toward mixed economics. Here it should be noted that both sides need to respect principles of equity and complementarity, work together on a fair basis and share their profits as well as their risks. Another form of such mixture economies can be found in, for instance, urban or industrial areas where neoliberalism and traditional, sustainable development merge into one system. Indigenous people take their traditional values and practices with them and add

them into the new contemporary context. (Toledo, 2000) According to Toledo (2000), this new form of working and living together is generally positively accepted and welcomed by both, natives and neoliberals. Nonetheless, Polanyi (1957) discovered that the reason for the visible degradation of indigenous communities is a problem of disintegration of indigenous communities and not the misuse of resources through the pure focus on profit as previously believed. As a result, it has to be constantly ensured that indigenous people are fully integrated with dignity and justice together with their different sets of culture and values (Toledo, 2000). The revolt of Chiapas in México in 1994 also provides an example of a mixed economy. Indigenous community members obtained their economic knowledge within fields such as commerce, production, social organization and the use of natural resources. By rising in revolt against the government, they wanted to achieve their goals, some of which are autonomous regional and local administration, self-management, the affirmation of culture and an increase in quality of life. Although the rebels were politically rather inexperienced, they gained success in various areas and successfully established new rights for native peoples. The revolt of the Chiapas clearly shows how a change to a more modern, alternative world without abandoning particular cultural features could be carried out. (Toledo, 2000) Nowadays, indigenous communities pursue “alternative pathways of economic development that transcend linear analytical categories”, meaning an adaptation to a popular distinction (O’Neill, 2005; Kuokkanean, 2011: p.221). This is to say that the complete delineation of contents regarding traditionalism and modernism is thus prohibited (Usher, 1982; Kuokkanean, 2011).

Throsby (2010) describes yet another possibility to keep up cultural elements within society, namely the active participation of governments. When supporting native performers, governmental goals such as the increase in cultural industries, a connection to other economies and a general sustainable development can in fact be reached. Governments have a lot of opportunities to support cultural communities. However, as governments are primarily limited to the economic area, it always has to be ensured that support is carried out because of cultural motives and not for purely economic purposes. One method to ensure cultural intentions could be the focus on sustainable development. Social alongside environmental and economic factors would then have to play a central role. Governments’ activities can

range from the development of markets in a specific region, the setting up of regulatory structures, the distribution of incentives for small businesses and the promotion of innovation processes to the general provision of education and training facilities. Active contribution can range from financial assistance e.g. placing an order, certain grants in order to enable artists to keep working on their projects instead of doing other work, providing facilities to enable artists to live close to the workplace, social payments such as welfare system benefits or unemployment income support to the general support in education, research and the on-the-job training. (Throsby, 2010) Last but not least, the consumers have to be included as well. Governments are now faced with the task of promoting new forms of consumption with the aim of educating consumers and making them aware of the new economic models. (Toledo, 2000)

As the examples above demonstrate, a natural cultural building is becoming more and more prevalent. It is thus focused on the sustainable combination of cultural and economic systems. As shown before, it is possible for indigenous people as well as governments to take a step toward each other. Overall it can be said the concept of natural cultural building is a very good option for today's capitalist economy. The application of such should thus be considered on a wider basis.

#### **2.2.4 The aspect of sustainable responsible practices**

List (2009) suggests that only when keeping the principle of sustainability in our minds can today's prosperity and quality of life be maintained. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to make fundamental changes to our present lifestyle. The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987: p.15) defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs", which soon became the starting point of general sustainable development. Throsby (2010) has been one to take up this definition. He determines inter- as well as intra-generational justice, cultural diversity, avoidance of risk and an overall interconnectedness of economic, cultural and social factors as indispensable conditions for sustainable development. This also includes the focus on a long-term basis in order to provide solutions over a prolonged period of time (Throsby, 1995).

The simple industrial model lacks important components and is therefore incomplete. This demands a so-called post-modernization including a new awareness of our planet that also considers natural and cultural factors. Since indigenous territories have exceptionally high levels of biodiversity at their disposal, those areas are alone from the ecological point of view of great importance. According to Toledo (2000), it can be said that cultural diversity can be associated with those regions where a vast concentration of biodiversity can be found. Hence, indigenous people control significant areas of natural resources. They are to be judged to hold about 12-20 percent of the total amount worldwide. In Mexico, for example, 60 percent of all protected areas nationwide are located within territories of native communities, which again are strongly represented with 12 percent of the overall population. Looking at sustainable development from Toledo's (2000) perspective, a modern alternative can be reached as long as the new model respects natural as well as cultural processes and connects them to economic aspects on a fair basis. Nevertheless, Toledo's approach towards a modern alternative focuses primarily on the environmental side of sustainability and might thus neglect the complexity of sustainable development.

Throsby (1995) by contrast divides culturally sustainable development into four categories. First of all, he emphasises the progression of welfare, which includes characteristics such as quality of life or human and cultural development. The focus is put on the development of a certain balance between economic, cultural and social factors within a community. Intergenerational equity in order to ensure the evolution of cultural assets comes second. Here it is important to concentrate on long-term viability in relation to necessities and privileges of present as well as future generations. Cultural capital has to be protected in whichever form it arises: physical capital, intellectual capital or economic capital in terms of lived culture. Thirdly, justice has to be postulated within the present society. This involves fair conduct regarding culture issues as well as adherence to each individual's rights. The last condition is the principle of interdependence between economic, cultural and social aspects. This means that one must not look at the different variables separately but instead at the whole system, as all of those processes are crucial for the further progress of humankind.

As can be seen all over the world, sustainability has become an important subject in today's society and has been attracting more and more attention. As a consequence, innumerable methods have been developed in order to make the new concept gain acceptance. Zeitz (2012), for instance, has developed the so-called four Cs approach, which promotes sustainability through the equilibrium between commerce, community, conservation and culture. Nonetheless, with Zeitz being the chairman as well as the chief executive officer of the brand PUMA, the promotion of the appliance of sustainable practices is also supposed to serve as a marketing tool to increase sales. Meyer (2011) holds the view that products have through the sustainable conduct of the company added value at their disposal and are thus a lot more competitive on the global market. The integration of cultural identity into products, for example a certain way of production, can also be seen as an additional feature by customers and hence contribute to higher demand for the product. Especially in a globalized environment, identity maintains its great significance as a tool of distinctiveness and confirms the unique quality of a product. (Meyer, 2011)

Taking all of the above into account, it can be stated that the concept of sustainability indeed constitutes an ideal solution to the conflict between subsistence and capitalist economies. A sustainable concept responsibly connects the two forms in the middle, as it takes environmental, economic and social conditions into consideration. Thus, certain equilibrium of the three aspects is created. Numerous models have been developed in order to establish sustainable development. The above-mentioned model by Throsby (1995) seems to be one of the most acceptable and feasible ones. It adequately addresses the complexity of sustainability. It can also be illustrated that the topic of sustainability is handled quite controversially. The implementation of sustainable practices can be carried out because of the wish to act responsibly or in favour of added value provided to the customers.

## 2.3 Theory from the micro perspective

### 2.3.1 Culture as an economic resource

With the establishment of bureaucratic, political and economic structures worldwide, the economic system took an upward trend, leading to the development

of a wide range of products. Naturally, culture was affected as well and is in today's world highly economized. People thus depended more and more on the economy (Sayer, 1999) and finally discovered how to use culture as an economic resource. For instance, handmade products offer here the opportunity to promote culture within a niche market in the economic domain. (Stephen, 1991b; Meethan, 2001) Generally, culture can be perceived more easily in developing countries than in the industrialized world. Communities benefit from new market opportunities while producing cultural goods. Those are of great significance, as they redefine culture and that way keep the community's identity alive (Kopytoff, 1986; Meethan 2001; Throsby, 2010). UNESCO defines cultural goods in the report of the "Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions" as follows: "cultural goods refer to those goods, which at the time they are considered as a specific attribute, use or purpose, embody or convey cultural expressions, irrespective of the commercial value they may have" (2005; p.6). Cultural goods therefore have next to their commercial purpose also a communicative value (Throsby, 2010). In contrast to traditional sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing, which are shrinking, the cultural sector is on the rise, as can be seen in the graph (Cano et al. 2000, Throsby, 2010).

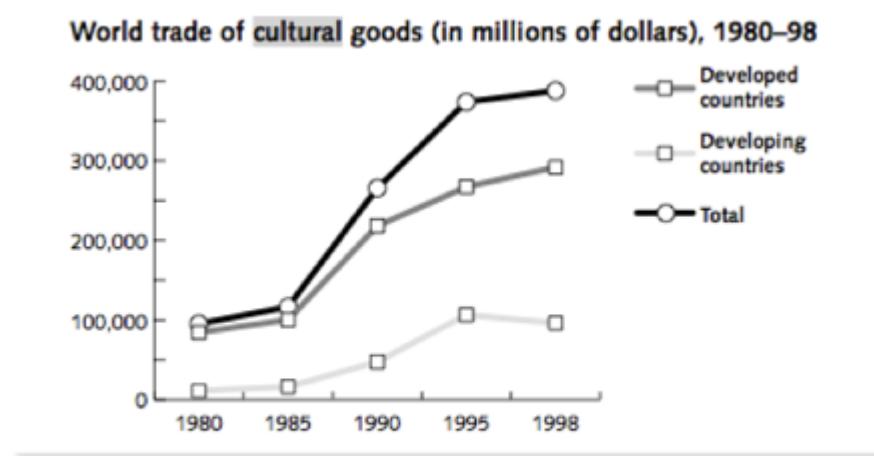


Figure 1: World trade of cultural goods (Cano et al. 2000: p.15)

This can be explained by new technological possibilities and steadily rising demand for this sector. Hence, cultural industries constitute a considerable part in today's economy. (Throsby, 2010) Nevertheless, this raises the question as to who owns this

cultural property, which is derived from the past, and who claims ownership to it (Messenger, 1989). Messenger (1989) offers three different approaches as a solution. Everyone could own the past, as it is common heritage of all people, but the past could also belong to a specific assembly of people only such as museums, indigenous people or nations in order to represent its significant value. Or it could even be argued that no one owns the past, as it is not ownable.

There is a strong interaction between economy, culture and society prevalent in today's economy (Ray & Sayer, 1999; Barnes, 2002; Featherstone, 2007; Throsby, 2010). The difficulty is to determine a legitimate balance between the economic and the cultural side (Barnes, 1999; Fraser, 1999; Throsby, 2010). UNESCO (2005, p.4) acknowledges this challenge and calls for consideration of the cultural aspect:

"Cultural diversity is a rich asset for individuals and societies. The protection, promotion and maintenance of cultural diversity are an essential requirement for sustainable development for the benefit of present and future generations."

This clearly shows that cultural identification and differentiation within the political context (Fraser, 1995; Driver & Martell, 1999) as well as the integration of cultural principles in economics are gaining importance in today's society (Harrison, 1992; Albert, 1993; Hutton, 1995; Driver & Martell, 1999). There are already plenty of enterprises that set a good example. For instance, the Zapotec Weavers of Teotitlán de Valle in Oaxaca in Mexico established the traditional production of woollen textiles as their first source of income. Originally exclusively subsisting, they now manufacture cultural crafts and have become one of the most profitable communities in the whole of Mexico. The Kuna Mola Makers of San Blas in Panama represent an excellent example as well. (Stephen, 1991b) The mola is a traditional costume worn by Kuna women, which is either produced for them or for export (Hirschfeld, 1977; Stephen, 1991b). After having made a few adjustments, it is partially also marketed to tourists (Salvador, 1976; Stephen, 1991b). Yet another example is the famous Austrian fashion designer Lena Hoschek, who also allows the influence of traditionalism and nostalgia in her collections of "Dirndl's" (Hoschek, 2012). The case study of the company Ibonica focused on in this study will provide further insights into the opportunities and challenges of using culture as a commercial resource.

### 2.3.2 The process of commodification

The term tradition can generally be defined as the quintessence of cultural authenticity over a period of time (Meethan, 2001). Nevertheless, the word in fact only makes sense when pairing it with modernity as its opposite (O'Neill, 2005). The contemporary period, which is steadily moving forward, always serves as a means to measure tradition (Harvey, 1989; O'Neill, 2005). It can therefore be stated that tradition is eternal (Meethan, 2001). However, one must not separate the two terms, as this would lead to the wrong conclusion, namely to assume a dichotomy of traditionalism and modernity. In fact, they exist alongside each other and this exact overlap constitutes commodification. (Lewis, 1991; O'Neill, 2005)

The commodification of goods only began in the post-Fordist political economy as culture was becoming increasingly connected to the economy (Frow, 1997; Meethan, 2001). There has been a lot of research about the phenomenon of commodification; for instance, the Frankfurt School around Debord (1977) contributed tremendously to new insights into the topic. In their studies, they concentrated on the consequences of trends such as new technology and mass consumption. (Dunn, 2008) Meethan (2001) sees commodification as the active employment of culture, which helps to preserve and adapt activities. Since promoting culture is a rather complex issue, the commercialized cultural goods will always be an adjustment, which fits consumption needs and thus gives the commodity its clear purpose. Sayer (1999) summarizes the progress of commodification concisely: we sell what we think will sell instead of selling what we think should be sold. Other researchers including Radin (2005) focus on the social component of commodification and the cultural values people see in commodities. Sayer (2003) argues that commodification only influences while working or consuming; unlike Simmel (1968), who claims that the process of commodification alters the whole of cultural and social life.

Over the last centuries, there has been a great spread of products being commodified, leading to the expansion of cultural industries (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). All of the cultural facets can be converted into commodities (Featherstone, 1991; Meethan, 2001). The interrelationship between authentic, artistic manufacture and market production plays a central role here (Miège, 1987; Hartley, 2005;

Tzanelli, 2008). The demand for artistic craftwork and cultural goods was prevalent, yet they also had to be produced and placed on the market. Consequently, indigenous cultures were pressed for time not to lose track of the changing economic structure (Nash, 1977; Tzanelli, 2008). Several communities, hence, relented to the commoditization of their cultural expressions as it promised to be of economic benefit such as the creation of new professions and jobs (Greenwood, 1977; Tzanelli, 2008). Especially women started entering the new market of necessity. Nonetheless, as a side effect they became more independent as they were able to liberate themselves from the established, conventional system (Sayer, 1999).

There seems to be a general confusion concerning the definition of commodities. A lot of people associate the term commodity falsely with the process of mass production and, hence, an inevitable loss of authenticity. However, in reality individual objects also are defined as commodities. A general trend away from mass production can even be detected. Demand for bulk production, hence, decreases and people tend to search for authentic products. (Frow, 1997; Meethan, 2001) This attaches considerable weight to commodification processes and therefore to indigenous culture due to the unique cultural aspects of commodified goods (Stephen, 1991b; Meethan, 2001). Another misunderstanding occurs when talking about commodification and only looking at it from the perspective of the producer instead of from the perspective of the consumer as well. A negative perception is then automatically created. While doing this, the procedure of decommodification of the product by the customer is often overlooked. The latter is defined through cultural and social contexts and thus leads to a completely personalized way of how the product is used. The process of decommodification is one of the main reasons why people are so pleased with capitalism. After having purchased the product, the client thus stops thinking about the exchange value of the article but focuses on its use value. Only if the good is supposed to be resold is a process of recommodification of the article started. This is to say that the more a good is commodified by the producer, the stronger is the cultural response of the purchaser when decommodifying the good. It can therefore be stated that the act of commodification can be seen as a process. First of all, simple cultural aspects and parts of individuals' identity are commodified and sold by the producer. This again

leads to the process of decommmodification by the customer in order to represent part of his or her identity. Afterwards the good may or may not be recommodified depending on if the good is to be resold or kept. (Kopytoff, 1986; Sayer, 2003)

The term commodification is often perceived as very negative. Early commodification theories argue that the process of commodifying native culture rather results in alienation than in protection of the latter (Kirsch, 2001; Sunder 2001; Sunder, 2005). For instance, once a Mexican indigenous ethnic group accused the government of utilizing the sign of the tribe on its flag without even having their authorisation (Sunder, 2005). A loss of authenticity could thus be noted which would ultimately lead to a different perception of history (Samuel, 1994; Meethan, 2001). Frank (1972), for instance, supports the dependency theory, which highlights a strong correlation between the growth of capitalism and cultural decline. He and others argue that capitalists worked their way to the top while expropriating and exploiting indigenous land (Frank, 1972; Jorgensen, 1971; O'Neill, 2005). Commodification would thus serve only as a tool for capitalism to move upwards. Furthermore, the quality of artifacts is tremendously reduced, as mass production is prevalent for the most part in today's capitalist world. Therefore it can easily happen that manufacturers act only as if their products were authentic and that they focus rather on the aspect of entertainment than on the educational feature. (Samuel, 1994; Meethan, 2001)

Sayer (2003) argues that we nowadays live in a highly commodified society where we measure value by profit or price. According to him (2003), this constitutes a threat, to which special attention should be paid. Concentrating on the exchange value rather than on the use value could cause an immense change in society's view of goods. He fears Oscar Wilde's character who "knew the price of everything and the value of nothing" (Wilde, 1892; Sayer, 2003: p. 355). Superficialities, some of which are appearances, vanity or status, are then more important than traditional values such as achievement and worth. Unbridled commodification could easily influence culture and social relations when focusing too much on capitalist production. It is therefore necessary to aim at combating the pure acceptance and spread of such new moral opinions in order to prevent traditions from declining. (Sayer, 2003)

Nevertheless, commodification must not be exclusively seen as a negative notion but quite the reverse, as it also has positive traits. Both extremes, complete commodification as well as complete non-commodification, could cause serious disruption. Non-commodification, for instance, would lead to the exclusion of important, social and participant involvement within society. Hence, it has to be decided in every case and repeatedly anew over time whether a certain degree of commodification is appropriate. (Radin, 1987; Sunder, 2005) Generally speaking, cultural goods are produced for the internal economic development of a community or for export which jointly determines the size of production (Novelo, 1976; Novelo, 1981; Berkeley & Haddox, 1987; Stephen, 1991b). The production processes can strengthen local, indigenous identity as well as socio-economic demarcation and therefore permit the existence of a continued cultural identity. (Stephen, 1991b) When looking at commodification from a neoliberal perspective, one can say that it promotes individuality and private investments (Sayer, 2003). Culturalisation theses also confirm the trend toward the support of consumerism and commodification with consumption nowadays representing fulfillment (Driver & Martell, 1999; Ray & Sayer, 1999). It is true that the commercial distribution of indigenous representations might use culture in a different context (Tomlinson, 1999; Tzanelli, 2008). Nonetheless, this exact practice again stimulates national and local, cultural reactions (Foster 1991; Milne & Ateljevic 2001; Ray, 2002; Nederveen Pieterse 2004; Tzanelli, 2008).

Taking everything into account, commodification is an abstract connection of social, cultural and even temporal influences. In order to successfully promote a commodity, a common social context between the producer and the buyer or adequate knowledge of the shopper is needed on the one hand, while exchangeability within a particular environment has to be given on the other hand. Whether a community is highly or poorly commoditized therefore depends on the degree of the commodity context. Nonetheless, generally speaking modern capitalist societies usually show a higher degree of commoditization than non-capitalist societies. (Appadurai, 2005)

The process of commodification automatically initiates a further development, namely the transformation of commodities into culture. Anthropological

functionalism theories look at goods as objects of use, which have a functional reason and are complemented by adding social value. (Dunn, 2008) Products can thus be seen from two perspectives: the viewpoint of their purposes or the viewpoint of their social meanings (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996; Slater, 1997; Dunn, 2008). Culture contributes to establishing the relationship among different goods. On the hand, the process of consuming is just a simple routine of buying goods according to their purpose. On the other hand, consumption constitutes a significant component of culture as the latter expresses the social meaning of the good. (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996; Dunn, 2008) According to semiotic models, this means that consumption goes even beyond the aspect of use and exchange value and enters the sphere of culture. (Dunn, 2008) Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates that exactly those places where goods are traded the most, for instance shopping centres, are now locations of cultural production. Economic products are converted into cultural goods according to their social meanings. Likewise, the commodity form by Baudrillard (1981) describes the cultural demonstration of commodities besides their economic and political values. According to Baudrillard (1981), each commodity is part of a social system of objects and thus has a particular cultural sign value. Two forces therefore influence production: the planned commodification process and the constant recreation of culture by the consumers themselves, also known as popular culture (Featherstone, 2007). According to cultural studies any commodity could become culture: "All objects in the world can be regarded as 'cultural' insofar as they are meaningful and part of subjects 'lived experience'" (Dunn, 2008: p.66).

The constant interaction between persons and their surroundings creates a dynamic frame of cultures (Stephen, 1991a; Stephen, 1991b). As a result, all cultures naturally evolve over time and are subject to fluid changes (Le Mons Walker, 1999; O'Neill, 2005). This leads to the so-called cultural syncretism, which combines traditional elements with new attributes from influences outside (Teague, 1997; Meethan, 2001). Consequently, from the mixture of the older composition and the new political, economic and social environment the dynamism of culture arises (Diamond, 1951; Stephen, 1991b). Nevertheless, those new compositions are still genuine and constitute self-styled emergent authenticities comprising new traditions, which are adapted to modern times (Cohen, 1988; Meethan, 2001). Sahlins (1985) speaks about an interrelation between traditional conditions from the

past and the contingent context from the present, which in the end leads to the reformation of culture. It can therefore be stated that culture refers to a dynamic flow created by all of its members (Nederveen Pieterse, 1997; Tzanelli, 2008). Subsequently, cultural products receive their real meaning by being adapted and then by being actively made use of (Kopytoff, 1986; Meethan, 2001). For instance, artists in Hawaii started manufacturing cultural goods that also contained particular modern features in order to be able to sell them to tourists. Soon afterwards, those very products also became available on local markets and entered the realm of new cultural tradition (Linneking, 1997; Meethan, 2001). By adjusting cultural practices to contemporary circumstances tradition is ascribed a new meaning as well (O'Neill, 2005). This leads back to the co-existence of traditionalism and modernism mentioned above where modernity already holds its own traditions (Gusfield, 1967; Usher, 1982; O'Neill, 2005).

In conclusion, it can be said that the process of commodification suitably connects traditional, authentic, artistic aspects with modern, production features. Commodification processes are generally perceived to be positive as long as they are kept at an adequate level. Thus, it has to be steadily ensured that the focus on economic profit is not excessive, which would lead to a loss in authenticity. In general, commodification is of great importance, because it contributes to the development of communities' identity, as it helps to keep the culture alive.

## 2.4 Problems

### 2.4.1 Homogenization of culture

According to Talalay et al. (1997) culture refers to a national, if not regional, concept and is therefore seen in terms of globalization in a rather fixed context. Nevertheless, as fabrication and circulation of products and services extends, technical and cultural facets from a diversity of countries are mixed together on the world market. Simultaneously, each good is assigned certain meanings and associations beyond its materialistic attributes, which could possibly distort original cultural factors of a product. Commodities and services nowadays constitute an important component of how we perceive our environment and connect to it on a social as well as on an individual level. Consumerism has become a means to express

our identity whereby economic and cultural features have fused together: know-how, expertise, proficiency and organizational infrastructure on the one hand and values, traditional knowledge and practices on the other hand. (Talalay et al. 1997) As a consequence, humankind within times of globalization is primarily connected through trade and communicative tools. As globalization increasingly forges a bond between different cultures, it can very easily happen that several aspects from different communities are fused together through the different influences. This clearly highlights the importance to maintain original culture and distinctiveness (Ford & Havrda, 2006). For instance, many indigenous people are concerned about a homogenization of culture, and therefore a decrease in culture, through globalization and the internet. As a consequence, they turn to certain property intellectual property laws in order to protect their culture from homogenization. Indigenous people see those types of laws as a strong tool for keeping control over their intangible cultural aspects. The laws concern intellectual assets such as customs, signs, works of art as well as the experience to create them. The implementation of e.g. copyrights, trademarks or patents could avoid the misusage of the latter. (Sunder, 2005) The harmful consequences of global capitalist economy have already been outlined in regard to environmental and social influences; nevertheless, the impact on indigenous communities has so far been left out (Kuokkanean, 2011).

Aside from the main threat, globalization, Throsby (2010) points out some other factors which could decrease cultural diversity. He divides them into economic, cultural and physical threats. Economic factors include the high competitiveness within international markets, the simple ignorance of the cultural aspect of goods, the lack in inquiries or excessive production costs. Cultural threats contain the acceptance of cultural aspects from other communities by means of imported goods, apathy of customers towards their own culture or simply the need for traditional knowledge. Physical impacts could, for instance, be extreme weather conditions destroying heritage places. Contrary to this list of risks to cultural diversity, Meethan (2011) argues that parallel to homogenization of culture, globalization could also lead to a greater demarcation of cultures among themselves. He argues that globalization could also lead to a greater differentiation and a certain

reassertion of indigenous people due to a greater feeling of the urge to show one's identity.

#### **2.4.2 Disavowal of culture**

It just about seems that we are selling the folkloristic image of our countries simply for the benefit of a few who then boast with their political and economic power. The thousand-year-old Maya culture, for instance, is world-renowned for its art and traditional clothing; nevertheless, it is never stated who is the genuine owner of those goods and from where they originate. (Gabe, 1995) Likewise, Galeano (2002) notes that in all of America dominant culture does see indigenous peoples as ethnicities worth studying, nonetheless, the latter are never treated as parts of history. According to Galeano's (2002; translation from Spanish, Gabe, 1995: p.7) observations "indigenous people have folklore and no culture; they exercise superstitions and no religions; they speak dialects and no languages; they manufacture craftwork and no art." Cultural diversity is hence threatened as today's capitalist society see indigenous culture as less worthy. This leads often to the misuse of indigenous culture as only the possibility to generate profit is of interest. Consequently, the question is raised as to how the identity of a sub national community can be fully recognized by the whole population, as it is quite complex and multidimensional. (Gabe, 1995)

#### **2.4.3 Focus on global capitalist economy**

Traditional economic systems are nowadays regarded as rather ineffective and uneconomic in contrast to the international competition. However, the global capitalist economies created this very inefficiency of traditional systems as indigenous communities had and still have to suffer from various conflicts with the former. The struggle for territory and exploitation of natural resources, state directives, ecological damage and expropriation of indigenous territory or even the immigration of alien cultures made it difficult for traditional systems to maintain their efficiency level. The fact is that although governments state they support traditional systems they impose strict state laws limiting subsistence systems or affecting indigenous regulations negatively in some other way as they consider subsistence pursuits as a barrier to the global capitalist system. (Kuokkanen, 2011)

However, the exclusion of traditional systems in the international market also prevents indigenous people from receiving wage payments, financial support and other market linked crediting (Poppel, 2006; Kuokkanean, 2011). As a consequence, indigenous communities are forced to occupy themselves with other, mainly profit-determined, matters within the global capitalist economy and hence have to give up their sustainable working methods (Kuokkanean, 2011). The discussed process is shown on the picture, which also illustrates the banishment of culture in general as a result (Korten, 1998).

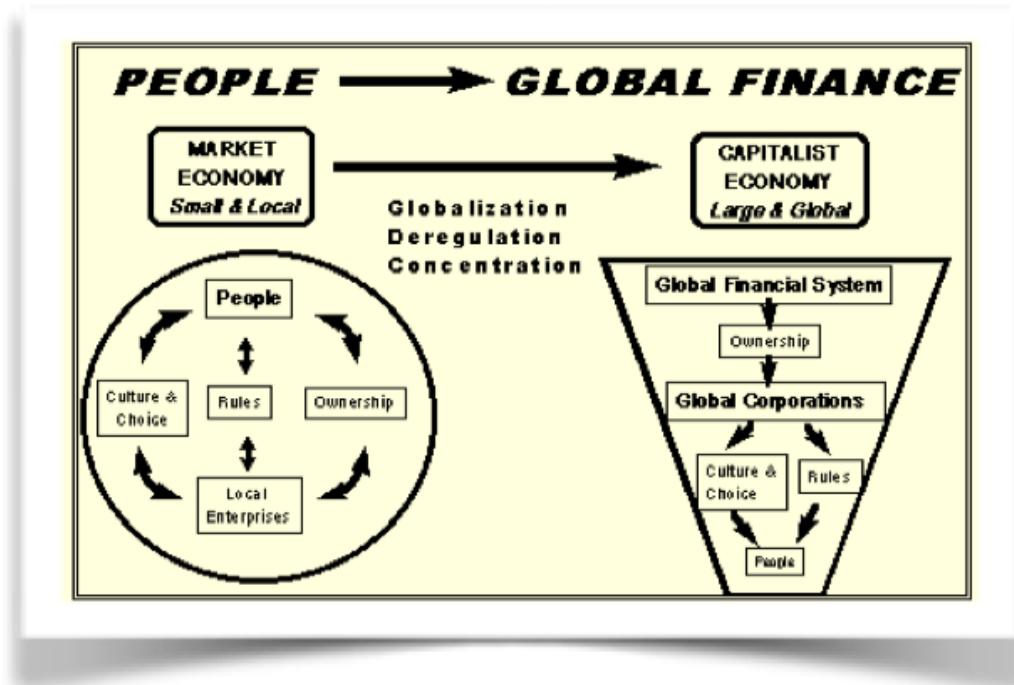


Figure 2: Power shift (Korten, 1998: p.4)

The figure shows the shift of the position of communities and their culture due to globalization, deregulation and concentration processes. The transformation from the small and local market economy to the large and global capitalist economy changed the status of communities. In the market economy, people were seen in the first place and were able to live according to their self-determined cultures and rules. In the capitalist economy, by contrast, the global financial system acts as the driving force. Global corporations define cultures and rules, to which people are then supposed to adhere. (Korten, 1998)

## 2.5 Concluding remarks

The literature outlined above gives a clear overview of the meaning of culture and the importance of communities' identity. Furthermore, prevailing conflicts between traditional and modern forms of economy in today's society are outlined. The literature suggests certain models such as different models of natural culture building in order to overcome these problems. However, another controversial issue arising from the conflict between different kinds of economy is the process of commodification, which combines traditional and modern aspects in commercial products.

This study aims to shed more light on the concept of commodification. In the literature there are some gaps on how commodification can be applied accurately and the combination of commodification with sustainable practices.

On the basis of the exemplary company Ibonica, the study intends to deal with issues such as consumers' view of commodification and the role of authenticity in terms of commodification. It also aims to discuss the aspect of sustainability from the point of view of the company as well as the consumer. The study seeks to find out if commodification combined with sustainable practices could in fact provide a solution to the conflicts mentioned above.

## 3 Research Methodology

### 3.1 Case study

#### 3.1.1 Maya culture

Maya culture can be found on the peninsula Yucatán as well as in the states Chiapas and Tabasco of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and western regions of Honduras and El Salvador as shown in picture 1.



Picture 1: Maya map (De la Cova, 1997)

Owing to different kinds of development, the Maya region is generally divided into three zones: the north, the centre and the south. Maya culture reached its peak at ca. 900 AD in the centre and ca. 1200 AD in the north. (Solana, 1991) From a temporal point of view, Maya culture is classified into four phases: the early hunter's period, the pre-classic period, the classic period with the erection of pyramids and cities, and the post-classic period up to the arrival of the Spanish (Coe, 1987). The Maya are noted for their excellent architectural skills and sculptures. Furthermore, the Maya culture is especially well known for its great wisdom. The Maya excelled in mathematical and astronomical computations and developed their own script and a set of values and regulations for their community life. Furthermore, they developed various arts and crafts to realise their culture in their daily lives including painting, embroidery and pottery. (Solana, 1991)

The reason for the collapse of the prevailing Maya culture is still widely discussed. One distinguishes between ecological and non-ecological models of explanation. (Richardson, 2011; Villalobos, 2011) Non-ecological reasons would include invasions, catastrophes or epidemics. However, the majority of Maya researchers doubt that the Spanish invasion, as often assumed, was the main reason for the downfall of the civilisation. (Wilk, 1985; Webster, 2002; Braswell, 2003; Montejo, 2005) Ecological approaches consider the relationship between human beings and nature. The

deterioration of the civilisation due to a growing population on the one hand and the limited land suitable for cultivation on the other can be identified. (Cook, 1921) Thus, ecological models are thought to explain the decline of the Maya civilization with climatic variations and droughts, which hindered the demographic and social development of the Maya (Haug et al. 2003). The habitat of the Maya has summers with high rainfall and dry winters. As a consequence, the Maya developed systems to save water for the arid periods. Nonetheless, as the population grew strongly as a result of favourable weather conditions, the Maya could not cope with the droughts of the ninth century and many did not survive. (Richardson, 2001; Haug 2003; Wirsing 2003)

Insights into Maya culture are given by research both on Maya history as well as on contemporary Maya life with its traditional customs and the language. Although the Maya no longer constitute the dominant culture, they still preserve their traditions on the peninsula of Yucatán and in the highlands of Guatemala where they live together with their families and in communities. Some Maya towns even have their own social and political organisation. Their daily life with its routines helps to keep the traditions alive including the main economic activities (agricultural as well as artistic practices) in contemporary Maya communities. Each town specializes in a different production and is hence famous for its wares. (Solana, 1991)

### **3.1.2 Ibonica**

#### **3.1.2.1 Presentation of the company**



Picture 2: Ibonica (Ibonica, 2012)

Ibonica is a clothing brand for women, which displays the traditional patterns of Maya embroidery from Yucatán adapted to modern style (Ibonica, 2012). Adolfo Peniche, who already had a factory for T-shirts, founded the company Ibonica about two and a half years ago. He wanted to do something with fashion as well as include

the Yucatec aspect, which gave him the idea of establishing Ibonica. After finding sufficient embroiderers after a year of searching, Peniche opened his first store in Mérida, Yucatán about one and a half years ago in order to “create and manufacture fashion made in Yucatán in a sustainable way” (Peniche, 2011). Ibonica is a newly established business but has already achieved a high degree of recognition. Although there are many copies of Ibonica products, e.g. in the centre of Mérida on the market, Peniche does not consider them to be real competition, as they are manufactured by machine and are hence of lower quality. (Peniche, 2011)

All told about 250 embroiderers from four different towns in the south of the state Yucatán work for Ibonica (Peniche, 2011; Ibonica, 2012). All the embroiderers are Maya women from the municipality of Tecoh where about 80 percent of the inhabitants are Maya (Ibonica, 2012). While all the embroiderers work in their homes, Peniche has one woman as his contact person who acts as the bond between Peniche and the Maya women. This woman also provides the designs of the embroideries, passed on to her by her grandmother. The other embroiderers are then given photographs of the flower motifs in order to show them what the embroideries should look like. They work independently in their homes and can submit their work to the contact person when they are finished. Ibonica then pays this person for the embroideries and she in turn pays the women for each piece handed in. Some women work on the embroideries only in their free time for instance in addition to household duties, while others, e.g. young women, work full time for Ibonica. (Peniche, 2011) The hand-embroidered floral motives are made with the Xocbichuy technique, the cross stitch (Ibonica, 2012). This particular feature of Ibonica is then taken up and adapted to a fashionable garment drawn up by designers (Peniche, 2011; Ibonica, 2012). The articles of clothing range from house dresses to clothes for special events. To sum up, the flower patterns are produced in the towns, whereas the design of the clothing and final production takes place in Mérida, where the garments are then also sold in an Ibonica shop in a shopping centre. (Peniche, 2011)



Picture 3: Bordando la moda (Ibonica, 2012)

### 3.1.2.2 Strengths & weaknesses

Ibonica's main strength is its strong connection to the contact person from Tecoh, who ensures compliance with Ibonica's concept of authenticity. The relationship between her and Ibonica is very important, as she provides the company with the design of the embroidery, with the knowledge of the embroidery technique as well as the workforce. As a consequence, Peniche works very closely with this woman. He also visits the towns of the embroiderers twice a month in order to get to know the Maya women and find out more about their culture. Compared with competitors, Ibonica has a clear advantage, as it hand embroiders the motives, whereas other firms use machines. The close ties to the producers and the type of production permit great flexibility. As fashion constantly changes, Ibonica can issue a new collection four times a year while the competitors always lag behind. (Peniche, 2011) Besides, Ibonica pays its workforce very well, which rival companies do not. The embroiderers receive about 180 pesos (approx. €10.50) per piece delivered to the lady. As the workers decide on their own how many pieces they want to submit in a certain period of time, payments can be quite high or constitute only extra income. Nonetheless, when comparing income by payment per stitch, Ibonica pays the workers more than what they would earn in general. (Peniche, 2012)

Ibonica holds a strong position within the market at the moment. However, its main problem is its lack of ability to expand. First of all, growth would require a larger workforce but this can be increased only slowly as embroiderers have to be Maya

and know how to apply the Xocbichuy technique. Furthermore, the cooperation with the Maya women would have to be more structured and could in the case of growth not only rely on the contact person's connections. Peniche is thus currently working on the idea of establishing a training centre where different designs could be shared amongst Maya women. (Peniche, 2011)

### **3.1.2.3 Marketing activities**

Ibonica's target group is women aged between the age of 30 and 50 focusing on the middle and high class, as Ibonica's products are rather highly priced. People with Maya ancestors or relatives, national tourists or women who simply like Ibonica's clothing style make up a great proportion of the customers. Buying Ibonica products has become very politicised. The Yucatec governor Ivonne Ortega Pacheco is one of Ibonica's main clients and thus often also wears Ibonica's clothes at public events. As she attracts a lot of attention for instance from the press, people have soon started to recognize the brand Ibonica. However, a widespread misunderstanding is that the governor herself is the owner of the company. Hence, mainly voters for Pacheco's party enter the shop. However, this misunderstanding does not bother Peniche, as it only constitutes publicity for him. The only negative aspect is that the upper class generally votes for Pacheco's rival party and thus does not consider buying Ibonica garments.

Ibonica's main marketing activities are conducted via Facebook with one employee working full-time on online marketing. Posts on a regular basis draw people's attention to Ibonica where they can also find certain promotions. Additionally, Ibonica hosted a casting show for the new Ibonica model in order to make the company known to the public. The best 20 girls could be selected via "likes" on Facebook, which, of course, led to a rapidly growing degree of brand awareness. Out of those 20 girls, five were selected to participate in a kind of reality show to select the winner who then presented the new spring collection. (Peniche, 2011) This means innovative communication and modern communication channels are used to promote the cultural commodities.

## 3.2 Interviews

### 3.2.1 Qualitative research methods

Qualitative research methods are an approach to scientific research conducted in order to obtain answers to a particular problem while making use of certain procedures. Hence, results are unknown previously and should then be able to be generally applied to similar cases. The aim of qualitative research is to gain insights into multifaceted opinions by various stakeholders in order to be able to illustrate different relationships and explain personal feelings in relation to the research problem. In contrast to quantitative research methods, qualitative research seeks to obtain individual perspectives of locals involved in the particular area. Qualitative models are employed especially when cultural information such as values, points of view, attitudes, behaviour and social frameworks are examined. As a consequence, qualitative research is utilised when looking at the human aspect of a research problem, as one is able to detect intangible factors such as social rules, ethnicity and gender roles. Researchers can thus examine complex contexts and obtain unanticipated responses, as interviewees' responses can be quite contradictory. Owing to the flexible nature of qualitative interviews, responses are very valuable and explicatory as well as significant and culturally relevant to the interviewee. (Mack et al. 2005) As the research questions in this study aim to explore the perceptions and opinions of all stakeholders involved in Ibonica, qualitative research methods are used.

### 3.2.2 In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews are especially useful when addressing sensitive topics while examining personal histories, experiences, perspectives, feelings or points of view because the interviewee feels confident enough to give his personal thoughts and also enjoys sharing his or her opinion. The interviews are usually carried out face-to-face or by phone and include one interviewer and one interviewee. While participants describe their individual perspectives, the researcher is able to obtain a vivid picture in relation to the research problem. As in-depth interviews ideally proceed like conversations with the participant being seen as the expert, the interviewer is able to let the interviewee expand on certain aspects of interest or

issues of personal importance. In-depth interviews thus help to give interpretive, maybe even contradictory, perspectives of how an individual perceives a certain event or phenomenon and how he or she relates to it. (Mack et al. 2005) In this case, in-depth interviews over the phone were considered most appropriate, as it was difficult to reach the customers due to the nature of the customer interaction. Owing to time constraints during the interviews over the phone, some questions were also answered in a semi-structured manner. Subsequently, the findings of the study are more structured than to that would be expected from purely in-depth interviews. In the few cases possible, the interviews were carried out via face-to-face in-depth interviews, as they make it possible to build a confidential relationship. Although the other interviews were conducted via phone, the bond between the interviewer and the participant could still be ensured, as the interviewees were all valued customers of Ibonica and the interviewee could refer to this relationship.

### 3.2.3 Interview preparation

First of all, it had to be determined which groups of stakeholders are of interest and could provide further insights into the research problem. The following stakeholders were then identified as interview partners: Adolfo Peniche as company owner, customers of Ibonica, embroiderers of Ibonica and Maya people independent of Ibonica. Unfortunately, however, only interviews with Peniche and customers could be conducted because the interview dates with the embroiderers as well as with the Maya community were rescheduled to a later time that was not suitable for the interviewer.

The interviews then had to be prepared. For each stakeholder group an interview guide based on the research questions was drawn up to serve as a guideline during the interviews (see appendix). The research question “In how far can culture and commerce be linked in a responsible way” was divided into the two elements commodification and sustainability and discussed with the help of several working questions. The aim was to obtain as many individual perspectives as possible in relation to the research topic as possible. As in-depth interviews were chosen as the research approach in this study, attention had to be paid to the right formulation of the questions. They had to be open-ended and unbiased in order to obtain as much information as possible. Follow up questions and probes also had to be developed in

case a particular aspect needed to be expanded on during the interview. As the interviews were conducted in Spanish and the interviewer was not a native speaker, special attention was paid to the use of vocabulary.

Furthermore, interviews had to be scheduled with the interview partners. After Mr. Peniche had been informed on the approximate length of the interview, an appointment was arranged. It was originally planned to question the customers directly in the shop. However, Ibonica usually has only a few people entering the shop because its main customers make appointments or live far away. Hence Mariana Esquivel Segura, supervisor at Ibonica, advised the researcher to contact the customers directly by e-mail or by phone in order to be more successful in obtaining data. Esquivel Segura was very supportive and provided access to the client database of Ibonica. After electing 24 clients based on their place of residence, e-mails were sent to them asking for an interview and announcing a call for the following day. A phone interview was then conducted with five clients. The interview sometimes was sometimes carried out right away or another date or time for the interview was scheduled. Because of the owner's lack of time, Esquivel Segura was trained to carry out the interviews and assisted the researcher. The interview guides were later also sent out via e-mail to the selected sample of clients, who did not answer the phone. These had to be completed in writing.

### **3.2.4 Carrying out interview**

The in-depth interview with Adolfo Peniche was conducted on January 25th 2012 in his office. As there had previously been other meetings and correspondence with Mr. Peniche, the topics and the process were already clear and the interview could be started right away. After the recording equipment had been set up, the interview was started. It lasted about one and a half hours. All of the responses were recorded on tape as well as documented with field notes. After Mr. Peniche was thanked for his time and his insights, the interview was finished.

Interviews with Ibonica's clients were carried out starting from February 13th until March 20th. The majority of Ibonica's customers were questioned by phone in the form of semi-structured interviews due to the constraints mentioned above. After a short introduction about the researcher, the purpose of the interview was explained

to the interview partners. Confidentiality was assured, and the duration of the interview was affirmed. If the interview partner had only limited time, the interview had to be more structured in order to obtain the most important information. Interviews were documented with the aid of field notes. As soon as all interview topics were discussed, the interview ended with a note of thanks.

Owing to the time limitations encountered when calling the clients, additional e-mails including the interview questions were sent to all of the 24 selected clients of Ibonica for answering in writing. Just as in the phone interviews, the e-mail contained a short introduction by the researcher, an explanation of the purpose of the interview, the assurance of confidentiality and an expression of gratitude. Unfortunately, only one person responded to the e-mail. As a consequence, Esquivel Segura, the supervisor, also conducted three face-to-face interviews when meeting her clients. Having contacted 24 clients of Ibonica, a total of nine customers were interviewed. Five interviews, one in-depth interview with Mr Peniche and four semi-structured interviews with Ibonica's customers, were conducted via phone, three interviews were carried out face-to-face and one customer answered the questions in writing. Older women tended to decline to take part in the research.

As affirmed when looking at the database, almost a 100 percent of all customers of Ibonica are female shoppers, which can be explained by the fact that the embroideries are only traditional female clothing elements. Thus, male shoppers only purchase a product at Ibonica's when for instance looking for a present (Peniche, 2012). The consumer profile obtained from the interviews also shows that Ibonica's clients are equally distributed between the age of 24 and 40 and that the majority of customers has their origin in Mérida, Yucatán. Besides, one lady from Monterey, Nuevo León, and two tourists took part in the research.

### 3.3 Research limitations

The main limitations of the research were the missing interviews with Ibonica's embroiders and the Maya community. Obtaining insights into the perspectives of the Maya embroiderers themselves would have been very fascinating. Additionally, opinions on Ibonica and its concept from an independent Maya community would have also provided further interesting perspectives. Another restriction was the time

limitation, as the researcher could conduct active research only until February 19th and Mr. Peniche was very busy during that time, so he could not assist to the extent previously planned. In the end, only two weeks were left for conducting the interviews, but thanks to Esquivel Segura all the needed interviews planned with Ibonica's customers could still be carried out. Additionally, access to interview partners was limited by the small number of customers in the store. Interviewing Ibonica's clients on the phone was rather more complex than speaking to them directly face-to-face, as it is more difficult to go into depth and expand on topics. Another constraint was the Spanish language since, although spoken fluently, it still involves certain limitations such as the time needed to explain the questions and clarify possible misunderstandings.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Commodification

When interviewees were asked regarding cultural aspects of the garments of Ibonica, the majority indicated that culture could be very easily detected in the products. An interviewee describes her impression: "One can recognize culture at a glance because traditional Maya embroideries are used." (translation from Spanish, client of Ibonica, 2012) This exact embroidery constitutes the main attribute of Ibonica's clothes for most of the people interviewed. As regards cultural aspects, the majority identifies the flower pattern as well as the colourfulness as the most remarkable features. Furthermore, most of the interviewees see the products as very authentic. However, others also state "one cannot say that the clothes are representative of Maya culture, but that it is rather fusing something native to something modern" (translation from Spanish, client of Ibonica, 2012). Most interviewees see culture as a quite important characteristic for purchasing Ibonica's clothes, even though the greater part of the interviewees does not identify themselves with the historic Maya tradition. The interviewees associate Maya culture with the Yucatán peninsula with all its traditions, for example the distinctive kinds of food. One interviewee defined culture as follows: "culture symbolizes different characteristics which are shared by a certain ethnic group such as knowledge and values..." (translation from Spanish, client of Ibonica, 2012).

Wearing Ibonica's clothes allows the interviewees to demonstrate their sense of belonging as well as their Yucatec identity.

When Mr Peniche first talked to the Maya woman presenting to her his corporate plan of Ibonica, she gave her consent right away. She only raised the objection that she would not be able to produce that many embroideries at one time. Nevertheless, she generally agreed to the new concept because it constituted a faster and more convenient way of earning money than before while still being able to exercise traditional craftwork. (Peniche, 2012) Although most of the interviewees do not think that the owner of Ibonica is Maya, they still have the impression that the relationship between him and the Maya is good. Ibonica and the Maya “want to represent their relationship in their clothes and that way illustrate the connection between tradition and modernity” (translation from Spanish, client of Ibonica, 2012).

Mr Peniche (2012) sees the modern elements as necessary in order to sell the clothes. Customers agree with him, as they themselves want to be up-to-date when purchasing a new item. When adapting the traditional design of the clothes, the designers of Ibonica follow modern, contemporary tendencies, as can for instance be seen in the collections of the brand “Zara” (Peniche, 2012). The only feature of Ibonica's clothes that remains exactly the same is the embroidery itself. Mr Peniche (2012) explains this process: “it is not pure craftwork anymore, it is now fashion” - hence, a combination of traditional and modern aspects. The great majority of interviewees perceives this development as quite positive and agrees that culture should be adapted instead of being maintained in its traditional form. One interviewee explains the need for adaptation: “Only adaptation makes us what we are today. Everything results from what our ancestors passed on to us” (translation from Spanish, client of Ibonica, 2012). The interviewees regard style, design and manufacturing processes as the modernized and commercial features of the clothes. Moreover, they note that the store's elitist location in a shopping centre is a rather modern, commercial aspect. The interviewees also state that they prefer purchasing Ibonica's clothes instead of the “huipil” normally worn by Maya women. The “huipil” is a traditional garment which indigenous women still wear from Central America up to México. It is most widespread amongst the Maya women in México. The fact that

clients choose Ibonica's clothes rather than "huipil" clearly indicates the interviewees' consent and openness to the adaptation of the traditional to something more modern.

Apart from the women with Maya origin who wish to express their identity through their clothing, other interviewees without any personal relations to the Maya community are also fascinated by Maya culture. Two of the interviewees indicated that they are very interested in learning more about the Maya culture, as the Maya brought great wealth to the Yucatán peninsula. The interviewees show a great degree of respect for the Maya and their culture in general. Many Yucatec people might therefore not be of Maya origin themselves due to the Spanish invasion, yet they share many cultural aspects with them and feel a sense of belonging to the Yucatec peninsula, just as the Maya do.

Authenticity of the products is not particularly important to customers when deciding on a purchase. Only two out of the nine interviewees indicated that authenticity played a central role in their purchase decision. Most of the interviewees regard issues such as price and quality of the product, modern aspects and the overall design as more important. The interviews hence suggest that culture and authenticity are not automatically considered to be the same in the eyes of customers but that instead buyers carefully distinguish between the two. This can be seen in the purchasing behaviour of the interviewees. They pay great attention to the existence of cultural aspects within the clothes but then do not value the authenticity itself of the embroideries. Interviewees also highly appreciate the fact that the products are handmade in contrast to other companies' machine-made embroideries. The embroideries might then not look as perfect, but Ibonica's clients still put great value on the fact that they are hand-made. Although, the interviewees indicated that they highly valued Maya culture, they still did not necessarily demand authenticity from the products.

Overall, one can assess Maya culture to be commodified, however only to a limited degree, which is still acceptable to most of the interviewees. Culture is used as an economic resource; nonetheless, culture is still very detectable in the products of Ibonica. The interviewees commonly approve the representation of the Maya and the simultaneous shift to a more modern design. The great majority does not miss

any traditional aspects within the clothes of Ibonica, indicating that the embroidered elements were perfectly sufficient. It can therefore be said that the process of commodification is generally perceived to be highly positive by the interviewees as well as by the Maya representative. The interviewees agree that it always depended on one's individual's taste, but that it was in general a good idea to make the design more modern and more attractive.

## 4.2 Sustainable responsible practices

Ibonica aims to be sustainable, whereby it focuses particularly on social aspects. Mr Peniche (2012) first of all associates responsible practices with the adherence to the law. In his opinion, this constitutes the most basic prerequisite, the minimum an entrepreneur has to comply with. However, this is not yet sufficient to Mr Peniche when talking about acting responsibly. A certain practice might be legal according to the law, yet it might be highly unethical. As a consequence, acting ethically beyond obeying to the law always depends on what the entrepreneur considers ethical and moral.

The embroiderers are not directly employed at Ibonica, but work independently and perform their job in their own homes. Ibonica's possibilities regarding responsible practices are therefore currently mainly related to payment. Ibonica provides the Maya women with jobs. This is especially important in little towns, as there is normally no work available at all, which then often leads to a high rate of alcoholism. Ibonica also pays the Maya women very well. When considering the amount of stitches, they get paid twice as much as generally. Normally they would be working four to six months on a single garment and would get paid only when they go to the city and sell it. Ibonica provides the embroiderers with a regular income and facilitates the vending process, as the Maya women do not have to go into the city any more to sell their finished products. Furthermore, the fact that they are able to work at home is highly appreciated by the embroiderers. This allows them to look after their children and the household next to work and therefore gives them more flexibility. Nevertheless, Mr Peniche (translation from Spanish, 2012) himself does not consider this as a responsible practice: "It is not a question of doing or not doing; it is how it is but it could seem responsible."

Additionally, Ibonica helps to preserve Maya culture and tradition. Although Maya women generally do know how to make the embroideries, many Maya women stopped embroidering due to time and money constraints. They have to take care of their children and household as well as participate in work in addition to artistic labour in which they are able to gain money more efficiently. This neglect of embroidery would eventually lead to the extinction of the tradition. Ibonica enables them to practice their tradition and also teach their children. (Peniche, 2012) Mr Peniche (2012) would like to conduct a survey in order to find out more about the current lifestyle, living conditions and necessities of the embroiderers. That way, Mr Peniche would be able to assist them for instance in submitting forms for governmental financial support or make their lives easier by assisting them in the home, for instance with the provision of household appliances. This again would be beneficial for the company, as the embroiderers would have more time available for Ibonica. Taking everything into consideration, Mr Peniche (2012) currently focuses mainly on the adequate and circumspect management of money for instance the high wage he pays to the embroiderers. According to Mr Peniche (2012), this particular financial aspect allows him at this time most to put responsible practices into action, as it enables him to directly implement them. While attaching great value on the monetary management, he concentrates above all on proper treatment of the embroiderers.

Environmentally, Ibonica does not possess any certificates in any way regarding sustainable practices, yet attention is still paid to being responsible for instance with avoiding the use of harmful chemicals during production. (Peniche, 2012)

As seen from the study, the employment of socially responsible practices is connected with many challenges. Mr Peniche allows the embroiderers great freedom. He allows them to work independently in their houses without being directly employed at Ibonica. Hence, it is quite difficult for him to keep an overview and plan the amount of submitted pieces within a certain period of time. The circumstance that some Maya women work full time on the pieces but others only on the side make it more difficult to calculate how many pieces to expect in a particular period of time. Furthermore, Mr Peniche does not get informed about Maya women not being able to work for some time because of, for instance,

sickness or other personal issues. However, the main challenge is Mr Peniche's great dependency on the Maya women. Without having her by his side, Mr Peniche would not be able to produce a single garment. The Maya woman thus has control over how many garments are produced in a certain period of time. In order to decrease his dependency and to permit better planning, Mr Peniche once tried to make the embroiderers work eight hours per day directly in his company. However, his attempt to facilitate forecasts of pieces to be embroidered failed. Firstly, the work is very tiring and hence infeasible to perform for such a long period of time, and secondly, it made it impossible for embroiderers to stick to their traditional lifestyle as they were separated from their families in their towns. Additionally, the Maya woman did not want to simply give up her position and consequently the overall Maya influence on the company. Furthermore, Ibonica would benefit if a Maya lady worked directly in the company in order to make the company more efficient and enhance the business from a Maya perspective. The Maya lady could, for instance, establish certain colour patterns for the embroiderers. Some of the Maya women know very well how to embroider but are not quite creative and sometimes combine colours in an unattractive way. A Maya woman directly in the company could survey working procedures and make suggestions on how to enhance the well being of the Maya women and, hence, how to increase overall productivity. Nonetheless, it is very difficult to integrate Maya women into the company, as they do not feel comfortable when abandoning their traditional lifestyle in their towns. (Peniche, 2012) Mr Peniche (2012) would like to still employ the Maya women directly despite of conducting their work in their homes. Unfortunately, this is not possible, as Mr Peniche is too dependent on the Maya women and would not have any control on how many hours the Maya women in fact spend working on the embroideries. At this moment in time, Mr Peniche (2012) holds the view that the best solution for all persons participating is to pay the Maya women on the basis of pieces completed.

Generally, it can be stated that it is quite complex to combine the social needs of the embroiderers and the financial profitability of the company. Although, the shop itself is cost-effective, the overall production process is not. The fact that the embroideries are produced externally adds various further costs. For instance, the constant trips between Mérida and the different towns in order to provide the Maya women with production material and afterwards to collect the pieces completed

involves monetary costs as well as being time-consuming. Furthermore, production by hand constitutes additional time expenditure for Ibonica. This means that the shop has to reconcile the costly production process in order to achieve financial stability. However, as Ibonica has only one shop, it is currently not profitable and does not generate sufficient income, which suggests that more shops or more distribution points are necessary in order to reach financial profitability. (Peniche, 2012) Mr Peniche (2012) does not plan to change the overall production process, as he wants to maintain the conduct of the socially responsible practices. Nonetheless, a few changes could be undertaken in order to make it more efficient. The production process could, for instance, be improved by a higher workforce or by existing embroiderers working more time for Ibonica. As mentioned already above, Mr Peniche, thus wants to get to know the embroiderers better and find out more about their lives such as their children and husbands, their social security, how much money they receive from their husbands and how they spend the earnings from Ibonica. Once their needs are known, Ibonica could in fact assist them while addressing their respective life situation and support them with their children or protect them from their husbands if necessary. This again would result in more time available for Ibonica with better or more pieces produced in the end. However, at this time, only shortly after the foundation of the company, Ibonica lacks the funds necessary to cover the financial outlay as well as time that would be involved with this course of action. Ibonica, hence, only can implement this kind of supplementary assistance once the business runs at a profit. The other possibility to increase overall profitability would be to increase the workforce. Nonetheless, this is also quite difficult to do on a socially responsible basis. With currently only one shop continuous production requires about 50 embroiderers. The month before the new collection comes out, which is four times a year, about 250 embroiderers are needed. This is to say that opening up another store would require about 500 embroiderers all together as well as more "leaders" such as now the Maya woman in order to act as a link between Mr Peniche and the embroiderers. This implies the need for more potential embroiderers in other towns. However, first of all the same degree of quality of their work would have to be assured. Additionally, the collecting of the finished pieces would become more complex. The greatest challenge, nonetheless, would be to combine the already existing type of embroidery with the

new designs and embroidering styles of the other towns. (Peniche, 2012) Taking all of the above into consideration, Ibonica is still a profitable business planning to expand in the future. However, as opening a second store involves high investment, selling products in additional vending places such as other shops, hotels or even in other states will constitute the next step for expansion. (Peniche, 2011)

Using culture while applying social responsible practices certainly contributes to the business' success, as it provides the entrepreneur with various opportunities for the further conduct of the business. Ibonica highly values culture and acts in a socially responsible way. This clearly differentiates it from the rest of the market such as for instance purely fashion-focused companies including Zara, which produce their clothes in China or other low-wage countries. (Peniche, 2012) Mr Peniche (2012) compares the fashionable side of Ibonica to the collections of Zara, but does not see the company as competition. As Ibonica produces designer clothes, it focuses on a different target group. Ibonica supports regional embroiderers which Ibonica's clients appreciate because the embroideries are still handmade. Additionally, by allowing the embroiderers to work in their houses traditions are actively kept alive and thus also conserved while being passed on to the Maya children. Furthermore, traditions are reinforced and upheld as Maya women or women with Maya relatives purchase Ibonica's clothes in order identify themselves. While the interviews conducted for the study do not officially confirm that Maya purchase clothes at Ibonica, Mr Peniche (2012) states that Maya women account for a valuable percentage of Ibonica's client database. Nowadays clothes have become an important means of expressing one's identity and values. Those women might not feel comfortable wearing a traditional Maya costume, but dressing in the style of Ibonica still gives them the opportunity to distinguish themselves and to demonstrate their identity while being fashionable at the same time. (Peniche, 2012)

Mr Peniche (2012) sees a competitive advantage in the application of responsible practices resulting in little if any competition. As sustainability is still only on the rise these days amongst population and entrepreneurs, making use of it provides the opportunity to differentiate one's company from the others, hence resulting in little direct competition. However, the answers from the interviewees show that the sustainability of Ibonica is not important to clients. About 50 percent of the

interviewees were repeat customers and had already visited the shop at least two times. However, all of the interviewees affirmed that they would return to Ibonica. The time of their next visit depended very much on the origin of the interviewee. For obvious reasons, it is difficult for tourists to return within a short time even if they wanted to do so. The answers from the inhabitants of Mérida ranged from a revisit within the next week or month to the time of the arrival of the new collection. Also, all of the interviewees that were repeat customers stated that they had made a purchase there at least two times. The majority bought something for themselves, but about one third of the interviewees also purchased products for others, for instance as presents. However, none of the interviewees stated Ibonica's sustainable concept as the reason for their return. The majority simply enjoys the "fusing of the modern style with something typical" (translation from Spanish, client of Ibonica, 2012). In the case of Ibonica, the vending of cheap copies of Ibonica's clothes could theoretically constitute competition. Nonetheless, as their embroideries are produced by machine the products are not comparable and therefore according to Mr Peniche (2012) no real competition. The only company that could really be seen as competition to Ibonica is the similar Mexican brand Pineda Covalin. The company focuses on clothing and accessories and produces solely traditional items with indigenous motives from all over Mexico. However, their quality is also lower, as they also produce all of their goods with the machine. It can thus be concluded that the interviewees prefer to shop at Ibonica, but for reasons such as the handmade embroideries not the sustainability of the company. Ibonica thus holds a kind of monopoly position within the market due to its exclusiveness with the quality of its products thanks to the cooperation with the Maya women, a combination that has not yet been practiced in any other company. (Peniche, 2012)

In conclusion, it can be stated definitively that it is a lot more challenging to conduct a business while applying responsible practices, as higher monetary as well as timely costs have to be considered than usually. Nonetheless, when looking at it from the big picture the application of responsible practices is absolutely rewarding as one is able to provide the embroiderers with a healthy working environment on the one hand and to offer quality products to the clients on the other. (Peniche, 2012)

#### 4.3 Finding the middle way – culture as an economic recourse

Finding an acceptable compromise between maintaining the cultural aspect on the one hand and the saleable, commodified elements on the other hand is a quite complex task. Although this particular middle way varies from company to company and cannot be generalized, one can compare activities but still should always stay cautious. That way one can determine if one's performance is extremely good or bad and which additional aspects still have to be included into the business concept in order to reach the so-called middle. Every entrepreneur thus has to decide on his or her own practices to add in order to find an acceptable medium. Mr Peniche (2012) indicates that it is of utmost importance to reconsider permanently and monitor constantly one's balance between culture and commerce. It has to be steadily ensured that the balance is as good as can be given the circumstances at the time. Only this makes the special combination of the co-existence of the two different aspects possible. On the one hand, Ibonica makes use of indigenous Maya craftwork and the employment of the traditional as an economic resource. On the other hand, Ibonica utilises modern commercial tools including contemporary fashion trends, the promotion of the products in a shop located in a shopping centre or innovative communication and modern communication channels. This exact combination then helps Ibonica to find the equilibrium.

As commodification is often associated with the extinction of authentic cultural features, Mr Peniche (2012) identifies four vital performance criteria for Ibonica in order to ensure the cultural integrity of the goods from Ibonica. First of all, careful attention has to be paid to economic factors, as they form the necessary basis and foundation of the overall business concept. For example, if the embroiderers are paid well with regard to their effort they will continue to work at Ibonica. Secondly, continuous economic growth as well as the future existence of the company has to be guaranteed in order to be sustainable and make the business attractive as an employer especially for the embroiderers. Thirdly, it is necessary to recognise that the Maya need enough freedom to practise their tradition. This includes, for instance, leaving the choice regarding working hours to the Maya women themselves so that they also still have the chance to produce their own traditional costumes alongside their work. Mr Peniche (2012) also gives the Maya women the

opportunity to produce their own costumes at Ibonica for free. Nonetheless, the Maya women do not get paid for their embroideries then. Once a year each Maya town dresses up in their traditional clothing in order to celebrate their patron saint of the municipality. By giving the Maya such a kind of freedom, it can be ensured that tradition will not be lost and thus the resource for the business will most likely be available in times to come. The fourth condition is to guarantee the demand of future clients. Fashion is a quite artistic concept, as can for instance be seen in the collections of designers such as Armani or Dolce & Gabbana. However, the clothes presented on the catwalk are often hardly wearable, in contrast to Ibonica's fashion. Hence, the ability of Ibonica to adapt well to fashionable changes, assures Ibonica its future clientele at least for the next ten years. (Peniche, 2012) Peniche (2012) concludes that only when taking all of the four prerequisites described above into consideration is it ensured that the cultural aspect will be maintained within the business. Only then can a certain balance between the cultural and the commodified side be made possible. It is therefore feasible to use culture as an economic resource without selling it out. (Peniche, 2012) There has not been any empirical evidence yet on the approach. The situation might be a little bit more complex than described by Mr Peniche. His approach seems to be rational and feasible, yet it might not be sufficient to consider only those four conditions as finding an acceptable compromise is connected to a lot more issues such as the willingness of the Maya to keep working for Ibonica. The approach might also have certain side effects. Although it is important to keep upcoming activities in mind, by concentrating for instance too much on the growth of the company or future demand the focus on the "now" might be neglected. Generally, Mr Peniche's approach can be seen as a new and good concept aiming at the utilization of culture in a commercial context, nevertheless little supplements to it might be helpful.

## 5 Discussion

This section will discuss the findings of this study in relation to research carried out previously. Ford and Havrda (2006) already highlighted humans' responsibility of bearing in mind our pasts along with our indigenous cultures within global society. The case study of Ibonica shows very well that the cultural aspect can indeed be

maintained and actively used in today's global capitalist economy. Throsby (2010) states that when cultural features are united with economic progress, both aspects can actually benefit. Ibonica has been on the market for only two years and already proves Throsby's statement to be true. This can clearly be seen from Ibonica's great success due to its particular characteristics. The Maya benefit, as their tradition is kept alive because they are able to hand embroider while still making an earning. The attractiveness of the handmade products and the high demand then again enables Ibonica to become an economically profitable company. However, it is still a challenge to combine culture and economy into one framework and to find the responsible balance (Fraser, 1999; Throsby 2010). Ibonica's task is therefore to establish the right balance between excellence and access, quality and quantity, efficiency and equity, economic value and cultural value (Throsby, 2010). This means that Ibonica needs to ensure both, Maya employment of traditional quality work and the economic effectiveness of Ibonica. Thus, it is important to adhere to certain criteria in order to make this development possible. First of all, it is necessary to establish a healthy working environment for the artists, which in this study are the embroiderers (Throsby, 2010). Ibonica managed this well, as the embroiderers are able to work in their own houses and hence produce the embroideries in their own environment and under flexible working conditions. The study also showed that the Mr Peniche is quite dependent on the Maya representative establishing the link between Mr Peniche and the Maya. This finding is supported by previous research, as it is very important that the traditional communities retain a considerable degree of control over the industrial company (Stephen, 1991b).

As seen in the study, Ibonica also fulfils all of the economic and social conditions necessary for a company integrating indigenous communities. The still very prevalent Maya culture in the south of Yucatán ensures access to a sufficient number of Maya women still being able to apply the Xocbichuy technique. This, hence, guarantees the further production of the embroideries as long as goodwill with the Maya is ensured. Mr Peniche contributes with his commercial knowledge of the local as well as of the regional market, as he already possesses 25 years of experience from managing his t-shirt company. The fact that the handmade production for Ibonica has been very well accepted and integrated into the Maya

activities demonstrates that the cultural side and the economic side are properly connected and that the company will be viable in the future. (Stephen, 1991b)

The study revealed that the items produced at Ibonica can be classified as cultural goods according to further research because the products all possess their distinctive characteristics. The goods promoted have to be cultural goods when responsibly combining cultural and economic aspects. First of all, input for the cultural goods is provided through the creativity and intellectual knowledge of the Maya women. Secondly, it can be seen that Ibonica's products have a cultural as well as commercial value. The clothes aim to be representative of the Maya women while generating wealth to all the persons involved including embroiderers, designers, suppliers, dealers, shareholders as well as the community in general. Ibonica's clothes thus go far beyond simple utility for the customer, as they serve communicative reasons and spread symbolic meanings. The goods are therefore valued by the embroiderers as well as by the customers because they express cultural identity. (Throsby, 2010) Ibonica's goal therefore is to create value and wealth while keeping the Maya tradition alive.

Nonetheless, the study also demonstrates that although clients respect the culture and the hand embroidery of the Maya they still do not place high value on authenticity of the products. The literature proposes that authenticity is a rather subjective topic and that every customer decides on the degree of authenticity of a product on his or her own. The study draws a parallel with literature, as buyers do look for symbolic meanings and cultural significance in products (Evans-Pritchard, 1989). Ibonica's clients do look for the cultural aspects in Ibonica's products and see culture as a quite important characteristic for purchasing the clothes. Nonetheless, a certain cultural competence is necessary in order to be able to understand the real meaning and hence sincerely value the authenticity of the product (Bourdieu, 1984). The insignificance of authenticity of the products to Ibonica's customers can therefore be explained by the clients' lack of identification with the Maya culture, which they mentioned in the interviews.

It can be seen that the Maya women highly appreciate the fact that Ibonica gives them the opportunity to occupy themselves in a sustainable business where they are able to contribute to the production of authentic goods. On the one hand, Ibonica

offers them an alternative to the usual artistic work characterized by low financial rewards, high variability of earnings and short-term projects (Throsby, 2010). On the other hand, Maya women can make themselves independent from the still conservative circumstances at home, for instance the influence of their husbands or a previous divorce (Sayer, 1999). The customers also value the fact that Ibonica employs Maya women and that the embroideries are hand-made, as the designs look a lot more genuine than when manufactured by machine. Previous research confirms that increasing demand for hand-made ethnic products offers a special niche market in order to use culture as an economic resource (Stephen, 1991b). Nevertheless, although customers respect the work of the Maya women, they in fact attach no importance to the sustainability and the responsible practices of Ibonica. This finding is quite contradictory to previous studies, as literature, for instance Meyer (2011), suggesting sustainability could be used within the business as added value in order to promote products better. Nonetheless, as can be seen in the study the sustainable aspect is only of importance to the company itself meaning Mr Peniche, the embroiderers and the Maya community as well as other employees. Ibonica's clients were either completely unaware of Ibonica's sustainable practices or did not name it as their motivation to shop at Ibonica. The concept of sustainability is rather irrelevant to the customers. Added value through sustainable conduct can therefore not be used as a selling concept in order to market Ibonica's clothes better. Clients seem to be more focused on capitalism than illustrated in the literature by Meyer (2011). Interviewees stated reasons such as tastefulness of the clothes or simple curiosity as their main motives when entering the store and not the sustainability of the store.

Literature gives a general idea of how to approach sustainable development. It is of utmost importance to maintain cultural identity despite commercial use. Several prerequisites have to be met in order to attain the equilibrium mentioned above. First of all a certain degree of economic knowledge is needed along with sufficient production capacity. Additionally, the focus has to be lain on the upkeep of subsistence structures, the preservation of identity as well as having adequate human labor at one's disposal. (Stephen, 1991) Last but not least the cultural side has to be taken into consideration. A steady, durable cultural development has to be guaranteed along with the involvement of the community in cultural activities

and value creation. Nevertheless, the practical implementation constitutes many challenges as can be seen in the example of Ibonica. The case study confirms previous studies in highlighting the difficulty of combining economic aspects with cultural and authentic features. To maintain economic viability while having higher production costs due to responsible practices, costs have to be compensated through the charging of a premium price, an adequate economy of scale as well as a passable infrastructure. (Throsby, 2010) Ibonica plans to overcome those challenges by making use of additional canals to distribute its products for instance hotels or other companies' stores in other Mexican states. In the long run, Ibonica intends to open up a second store belonging to the company. Nevertheless, authenticity has to be assured at every point during the growth of the company in order to maintain its degree of sustainability. This has to be taken into consideration when for instance employing a higher workforce. With the dependence on the Maya women, Ibonica automatically steadily verifies that the Maya influence is kept at the same level and is not reduced with the expansion of the company. Ibonica hence puts its focus on what is also suggested by previous literature. The business places non-profit motives before consumer culture motives and the pure orientation to consumer trends. (Teague, 1997; Meethan, 2001) and focuses on the attachment of cultural value to commercial products rather than the commercial adaptation of cultural identity (Smith, 1985; Stephen 1991b). Ibonica, hence, aims to ensure that authenticity of its products is not lost by concentrating too much on commercial benefits (Teague, 1997; Meethan, 2001) and that the Maya women maintain their essential position within Ibonica (Stephen, 1991b). Toledo (2000) states that it is impossible to search for solutions to specific material problems without adequately addressing related cultural and political rights as well as the organisation of indigenous families and their communities. In order to be able to enhance the overall business process, Mr Peniche plans to hand out questionnaires to the Maya women.

When taking all of the above into consideration, the proactive example of Ibonica clearly demonstrates how cultural development combined with innovative entrepreneurship can in fact strengthen indigenous communities and reinforce cultural identity generally (Stephen, 1991b).

## 6 Conclusions and limitations

This section summarizes the study and discusses study limitations and avenues for future research.

### 6.1 Concluding remarks

The aim of the study was to determine how far culture and commodification can be linked in a responsible way. The topics culture, authenticity, commodification and sustainability were discussed and evaluated with the help of the case study of the company Ibonica. A total of ten interviews with the company owner and clients were conducted in order to find an acceptable compromise between cultural and commercial elements.

The study gave insights into the traditional as well as modern aspects of culture. The process of commodification was generally perceived as positive. At the same time, customers seem to distinguish between the importance of culture in general and the authenticity of the product itself. The study also revealed that the application of responsible practices was necessary in order to combine culture and commodification successfully. However, the aspect of sustainability was rather important to the company itself than to its clients. As expected previously, the study demonstrated that it was not possible to find a perfect balance between cultural and commercial elements but that a balance has to be constantly re-adapted in order to provide sustainable viability.

The study showed that cultural aspects along with economic aspects can indeed be very well combined within a responsible business concept and should not be treated in a separate manner as it is shown that both are beneficial for each other. Generally, the business is meant to be economically viable while maintaining cultural features and authenticity of the products. It is, hence, aimed to strike the balance between those two elements. From the consumer side, the study revealed that customers are evidently in favour of the adaptation of culture and thus show a positive attitude toward the process of commodification. Interestingly enough, the study also showed that customers do see culture as highly important, nonetheless the authenticity of the products themselves is not necessarily required in their point

of view. In order to find a sustainable balance between economic and cultural aspects, the owner of the company investigated suggested four criteria: a stable economic basis, the ability to expand, the upholding of tradition and the ensuring of future demand. However, the execution of such a business concept is combined with a lot of challenges, for instance keeping up the cultural degree while expanding. Nonetheless, using culture as an economic resource provides the company with great opportunities, as this field is still a niche market and is expected to expand in the future. However, contradicting the literature discussed above, the sustainability of the business cannot be used as a sales argument because consumers do not seem to pay great attention to this aspect.

Taking everything into account, it can be said that achieving the sustainable middle way is quite challenging, as the exact procedures have to be determined from case to case and over time anew. However, in the end all people involved benefit from it leading to good for humanity as a whole. The study therefore implied that culture should definitely be used in order to keep culture and tradition alive and not let the world become homogenized. However, it should always be kept in mind that those distinctive cultural features must not be simply imposed from outside but that they originally have to be already integrated in the community when founding the business. Only then an authentic adaptation of those cultural features to more modern aspects is possible. Bearing in mind that customers also support commodification, entrepreneurs should then leap at the chance to make use of culture as an economic resource if the cultural background is given.

## **6.2 Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research**

As the study only evaluated the case of one specific company, only a narrow view of the situation could be examined. Additionally, it would have been helpful to include a wider range of perspectives of the case study of Ibonica in order to obtain more different opinions on the issue. It also would have been interesting to assess the company over a prolonged period of time as right now only a snapshot of the situation could have been evaluated. Hence, the limitation of the study was that the company itself has not been investigated on a sufficiently wide basis in order to

obtain an overview of all the aspects involved in the complex issue. Another limitation of the study was that the big picture of using culture as an economic resource was not looked at which makes it at the moment impossible to generalize the suggested principles to other companies. In order to retain a more complete overview, more businesses would have to be evaluated. Here attention should be paid to the assessment of companies from different industries as well as from various countries. Circumstances could vary from industry to industry and also depend on the cultural and economic environment of the business. It would also be necessary to distinguish between lightly and highly commodified societies as results most likely will differ.

An area still not covered in the literature is the business conduct of the Maya. Previous literature has focused on the history of the Maya and their development. Nonetheless, recently there has hardly been any research completed on the Maya in today's commercialized society and their perspectives on it. It would also be interesting to have research conducted by the Maya themselves in order to get new insights. Since the Maya are well known for their sustainable conduct, it certainly would also be very important for research to focus on the Maya values and methods. As the topic of sustainability generally is still a rather new concept but attracting great attention, the field of work offers great opportunities for further development and expansion. Further research should therefore concentrate on the development of sustainability over time and the different meaning of sustainability to entrepreneurs and consumers. Additionally, research should outline clear advantages of responsible practices over purely commercialised ones.

In order to gain more insights into the topic of using culture as an economic resource, the issue should be discussed by entrepreneurs in the field as well as by experts. Entrepreneurs should report on their own experience in publications and act as models. Additionally, examples should be made widely known in order to have practical principles to work with and to have a foundation to compare already existing systems. Experts should then actively talk about those publications at for instance conferences and critically reflect on them. Conferences or podium discussions should simultaneously contribute to the joint development of new solutions with regard to using culture as an economic resource. Additionally, this

kind of further research should contribute to the establishment of certain guidelines. Experts should provide the theoretical framework for the application of responsible practices and come up with new concepts. Successful entrepreneurs should present their business concepts to the public. Furthermore, experts and entrepreneurs should together, for instance at congresses, develop new possibilities for using culture as an economic resource. This would then help entrepreneurs who are still new in the field but willing to act responsibly to apply sustainable practices. Responsible entrepreneurship would thus be generally encouraged.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview guide for Mr Peniche

#### The role of the Maya

- Hasta qué punto tienen voz y voto en la empresa?
  - Se pueden iniciar cambios?
- Apoyas o incluso organizas actividades de las Mayas?
- Hasta qué parte depende el pago a las bordadoras del beneficio?
  - Reciben las bordadoras un parte del beneficio o un porcentaje?
  - Ganan las bordadoras más que el salario mínimo?
  - Cuánto ganan las bordadoras por un diseño?
    - Todas lo mismo?

#### Characteristics of degree of commodification of culture

- Cuales son los elementos modernos en la ropa de Ibonica?
- Cuales son las modificaciones realizadas al bordado tradicional frente a la ropa moderna de Ibonica?
- Cuales de éstas modificaciones son necesarios para vender la ropa de Ibonica?

#### Perception of commodification

- Qué era la impresión primera de las bordadoras cuando les preguntaste si quieran participar en el proyecto Ibonica?
  - Qué pensaron del concepto de Ibonica?
- Ahora cual aspectos de la tradición faltan en la ropa moderna?
- Cual conflictos con los Mayas has encontrado yendo tras tu idea de Ibonica?
  - Cuales fueron los desafíos de establecer éste tipo de moda?
  - Cuales fueron los desafíos de llegar a un acuerdo con los Mayas/ las bordadoras?
- Qué crees piensan las Mayas de Ivonne Ortega Pacheco cuando lleve la ropa de Ibonica?

- Cuales son los aspectos negativos de Ibonica con relación a la cultura?
  - Aspectos de usar la cultura
    - Cómo es la relación/ comunicación con los Mayas?
      - Cuántas veces comunicas con los Mayas?
    - Cómo es el reparto de roles entre ti y los Mayas?
    - Cómo consideran los clientes la autenticidad?
    - Cómo consideran los clientes el lugar de la tienda en una plaza?
    - Qué son los aspectos políticos de usar la cultura de una minoría (sin estar Maya tú mismo)?

#### Opportunities

- Porque te decidiste usar la cultura de las Mayas como una fuente económica?
- Cuales son las oportunidades de usar esta cultura?
- Cual éxitos no serían posibles sin la cultura?

#### Challenges

- Cuales son los desafíos de usar la cultura?
- Cual desafíos son evitados si no prácticas responsables son aplicados?
- Cómo se supera el desafío de la sustentabilidad?

#### Culture used economically without selling it out

- Cómo se supera encontrar el medio entre la cultura y el comercio?
  - Y qué haces para encontrar éste medio?
- Cómo se puede garantizar el mantenimiento de la cultura dentro de la ropa de Ibonica?
- Qué significan prácticas responsables para ti?
  - Qué es lo importante cuando se aplique prácticas responsables?

## Appendix B: Interview guide for Ibonica's clients

### General questions

- Sexo:  femenino  masculino
- Edad:
- Dónde vive? (lugareños vs. turistas)
- Por qué entró la tienda? Por qué compró ropa de Ibonica por la primera vez?
  - A propósito
    - Por qué?
    - Primera vez o repetición que entró?
  - Aleatorio la vio
- Cuándo era la última vez que compró algo?
  - Si sí: para usted o para otra persona?
- Había comprado algo antes en ésta tienda?
  - Si sí:
    - Cuanto veces?
    - Por qué?
- Van a regresar a ésta tienda?
  - Si sí: más o menos cuándo?

### Culture/ identity/ authenticity

- Hasta qué punto es su cultura y patrimonio cultural importante para usted?
  - Qué significa cultura para usted?
- Hasta qué punto se identifica con la cultura tradicional de los Mayas?
- En una compra, cuál papel desempeña la autenticidad en comparación con otros atributos por ejemplo el moderno, el precio... para usted?

### Perception of commodification

- En su opinión, cultura se puede adaptar al estilo de vida de hoy o se tiene que mantener en su forma tradicional?
- Hasta qué punto reconoce cultura en la ropa de Ibonica?
  - Cómo considera la ropa de Ibonica?/ Cómo se da cuenta de la ropa?
    - Piensa que es autentico/ representativo de la cultura Maya?

- Cual aspectos muestran eso?
- Qué es su impresión de la relación entre Ibonica y los Mayas?
  - Supone que el propietario de la tienda es Maya?
  - Supone que el propietario apoya los Mayas?
- Cual aspectos culturales se encuentra en la ropa de Ibonica?
- Cual aspectos comerciales se encuentra en la ropa de Ibonica?
- Qué piensa del cambio de los diseños más modernos y atractivos?
- En su opinión, ahora cual aspectos de la tradición faltan en la ropa moderna?