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The Mero Ikojts and the Wind: Energy Assemblages and Indigeneity in Mexico

Growing worldwide energy requirements, the approach of “peak oil”, and the effects of climate change can be counted among the major global challenges of the twenty-first century. Events like the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe exacerbate the pressing questions around future sources of energy. Recently, renewable energies and the feasibility of a turn towards alternative sources have therefore figured more prominently in the public interest and in political and economic debates. As a consequence of this development, certain regions are becoming economically attractive – regions that, up to this point, had not received a lot of attention from either corporations or governments. This is true of the territories of indigenous peoples, which are increasingly being considered by various stakeholders as areas of potential for renewable energy. On the one hand, governments and transnational corporations are pushing for an accelerated commoditisation of renewable energy sources, which have been made available by newly-developed technologies. On the other hand, a method of managing natural resources based on economic and geopolitical considerations has proven unacceptable to indigenous societies, as it is hard to reconcile with indigenous practices and perceptions of the natural world.

This is the case in Mexico, in the region around the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where strong northerly winds that persist for more than six months are generated every year from October. This environmental phenomenon is currently viewed by transnational corporations as well as by the Mexican government as a “green” and urgently-needed resource; they therefore intend to pursue an intensive construction program, producing the highest regional concentration of wind turbines in the world. Meanwhile, the resident Mero Ikojts—better known by the name of their language group, Huave—see this as a threat to their environment, biodiversity and related cultural practices.

My project therefore examines the culturally specific, competing representations of “energy” and “nature” that position themselves within this constellation and mutually affect each other. To do so, the project will seek to characterise the interpretations, interactions, and constantly modified conceptualisations, based on various ontologies, of “renewable energy”—and thereby of “nature”—as dynamic assemblages. The goal of the project is to better understand the complex forms of exchanges and the transcultural interaction between humans, nature, knowledge, and technology in the field of renewable energy, and to analyse particular examples of such encounters. The project aims in this way to contribute to research on energy and indigeneity, hoping to highlight in particular the interweaving of the two areas.