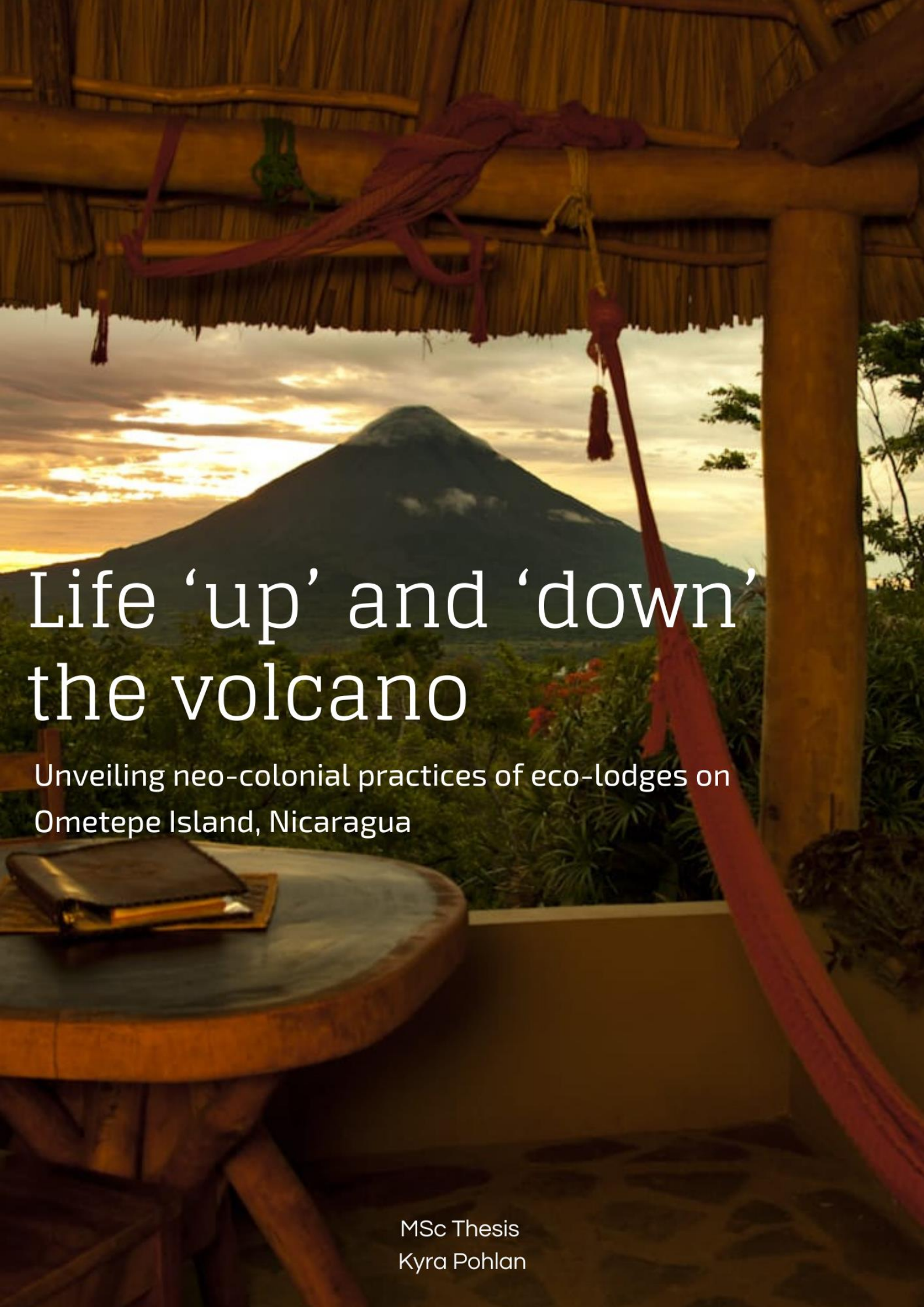

Life ‘up’ and ‘down’ the volcano

Unveiling neo-colonial practices of eco-lodges on Ometepe Island, Nicaragua

MSc Thesis

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Life ‘up’ and ‘down’ the volcano: Unveiling neo-colonial practices of eco-lodges on Ometepe Island, Nicaragua

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In a time of ancient tribes, Nagrando, a fearless warrior,
dared to love Princess Ometepetl from a rival clan.

Forbidden and concealed, their secret affair was uncovered by Ometepetl's stern father,
who vowed to kill the young warrior Nagrando.

Fleeing into the mystical forests, the unfortunate pair realized escape wouldn't grant them a future.

To preserve their love, they chose the ultimate sacrifice, embracing death in each other's arms.

As Ometepetl died, rains flooded the valley of the gods, forming what is now known as Lake Cocibolca. Her breasts grew into the twin volcanoes that we know today as Conception and Maderas while Nagrando's spirit shaped Isla Zapatera.

Thus, Ometepe, the island of Gods, emerged—a testament to the enduring love that transformed tragedy into mystical landscapes.

(Legend of Ometepe, Selvista, n.d.)

Abstract

This research investigates the complex dynamics between foreign-owned eco-lodges, local communities and the natural environment in Balgüe, Ometepe island. Drawing from qualitative research methods including 12 semi-structured interviews, field observations, and Critical Discourse Analysis, the case study aimed at answering the main research question: *In what ways do the presentations and practices of foreign-owned eco-lodges impact the local community and environment in Balgüe, Ometepe island and how do these compare to the notion of neo-colonialism in ecotourism?*

While the study validates conventional definitions of ecotourism and eco-lodges, emphasizing their representations of environmental conservation and community development, additional dimensions such as self-development and the formation of foreign communities were found. I argue that the fulfillment of common eco-lodge characterizations can lead to harmful consequences for local communities and the environment. Hereby, gaps between representations and practices of eco-lodges were found. While eco-lodges promise significant economic support and job opportunities for locals, the economic benefits are minimal and disproportionately favor the lodge owners. Despite claims of supporting local communities through development projects, these initiatives are often discontinued and disregard local needs and perspectives. Additionally, eco-lodges claim to involve and connect with the local community, but were found to exclude them in social as well as professional settings. The commercialization of indigenous traditions, often showcased through activities like cacao ceremonies, create discussions about cultural appropriation and exploitation.

Moreover, contradictions within the concepts of eco-lodges were found. Findings reveal a complex landscape where the need to be located remotely and practice self-sufficiency inadvertently isolates the eco-lodges from local life, hindering cross-cultural exchange and creating a culture of exclusion. Additionally, the reliance on natural resources for construction and operation presents challenges in balancing environmental conservation with community livelihoods. Furthermore, the emphasis on luxury experiences within eco-lodges highlights the paradoxical relationship between luxury and social sustainability.

Integrating these insights with the concept of neo-colonialism, the study reveals how economic, cultural, and institutional dominance perpetuated by foreign-owned eco-lodges reinforces uneven power structures, paternalism and marginalization. Despite these challenges, the study also shows the local support of ecotourism, particularly in terms of economic growth and employment opportunities. Moreover, it highlights how eco-lodge practitioners do not act on ill-intend, but are blinded by their 'white gaze'. By critically examining these dynamics, the research underscores the need for context-specific approaches to eco-lodges and encourages ecotourism practitioners to remove their 'blind spots'.

Key words: eco-lodge, ecotourism, neo-colonialism, white gaze, Ometepe island

Preface and acknowledgement

If I had to describe my thesis journey, this saying comes to mind:

Sometimes, when things are falling apart, they may actually be falling into place.

Writing my thesis sure knew its ups and downs. I originally planned on writing my thesis on a topic in Kenya, which I had become very passionate about during the course 'Academic Consultancy Training' at Wageningen University. I had started writing my proposal, made contact with organizations and people in Kenya and had booked flights tickets to Mombasa. Unfortunately, this plan did not go through.

That time was very difficult for me, I felt defeated, hurt and demotivated. Luckily, my supervisor Stasja Koot, study advisor Martina Sedlakova and MTO program director Jan Philipsen were there to support me. Stasja and Martina made sure I knew that I was valued, believed and trusted and for that I am extremely grateful. Without their kindness and support I would have not found the energy and motivation to start over. I also want to thank Boudewijn who always listened to me, made me laugh and assured me that I had somebody on my side.

After cancelling my original plans, I had to completely start over and think of a new thesis topic that I would be equally passionate about. A while ago, I spent some time in Central- and South America, in which I worked and volunteered at different eco-lodges. My memories of Central America and Ometepe hold a special place in my heart. In a time where I was feeling down, I knew that I should go back to my happy place. During my studies at Wageningen, I learned to question and critically assess development and ecotourism interventions. Therefore, I wanted to go back to Ometepe with a fresh outlook and newly gained perspectives on ecotourism.

I want to thank all the kind and open people I met during my field work. Without their time, input and openness, this research would not have been possible. Moreover, I want to thank all the employees and owners of the eco-lodges I was allowed to work, stay and do research at.

Finally, I want to thank Sam who always made me coffee and kept me calm when I doubted myself. And my parents, who never put pressure on me.

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1 Introduction

Since the concept of sustainability was introduced in the 1987 Brundtland Report (Butler, 1999), and with the establishment of the 2016 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ecotourism has witnessed remarkable growth, becoming one of the most rapidly expanding sectors in the tourism industry (Fennel, 2020). The surge in interest is fueled by a growing recognition of the social and ecological damage caused by conventional tourism practices, especially mass tourism, on a global level. Examples of these harms include air and waste pollution, cultural appropriation, dependency of local communities, and conflicts over natural resources (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Fennel, 2020). Consequently, ecotourism is being recognized as a strategy to mitigate the negative impacts of 'regular' tourism as it aims to be respectful towards both people and nature. There are multiple definitions of ecotourism, but the most commonly used definition is by Honey (2008, p.35), who defines it as:

travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strive to be low impact and often small scale. It helps to educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights.

While there is no general consensus on definitions, there is a widespread agreement that ecotourism seeks to address the negative impacts associated with conventional tourism (Fennel, 2020). It is often portrayed as community-oriented rather than economically-driven and environmentally friendly rather than damaging (Chan & Bhatta, 2013). This has led to the consensus and the prevailing perspective that ecotourism serves as a form of alternative tourism (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Fennel, 2020; Wondirad et al., 2020) while 'regular' tourism embodies a form of neo-colonialism, in which tourists from the Global North dominate regions without significantly benefiting local economies and people (Wondirad et al., 2020). Moreover, 'regular' tourism is characterized by non-local ownership, seasonal employment, high dependency, and commercialized attractions, resulting in westernized representations of local culture and the displacement of people and livelihoods (Fennel, 2020). In this context, 'regular' tourism is perceived as a "practice for the privileged – the practice of using the 'other,' the 'weaker,' and the 'poorer'" (Cywiński, 2015, p. 22, as cited in Wijesinghe et al., 2019), taking away local populations' resources and autonomy (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022). Conversely, ecotourism is often portrayed as a panacea for all tourism-related issues. Positioned as a strategy within the Global North's new agenda of 'sustainable development,' it aims to engage and include local communities (TIES, 2019), dismantle settler-colonialism structures (McClurg, 2003), and promote a new kind of tourism that is small-scale, locally owned, participative, and grassroots-oriented (Wondirad, 2019).

However, as Cater already noted in 1993 (p. 85): "There is a very real danger of viewing ecotourism as the universal panacea, and the eco-tourist as some magic breed, mitigating all tourism's ills". This caution is echoed by research showing a significant gap between the narrative of ecotourism and the reality of it in practice (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Hunt & Stronza, 2011). On the one hand, ecotourism projects have been found to provide positive outcomes aligned with its theoretical principles, such as providing income and employment opportunities, fostering improved environmental ethics, and enhancing the well-being of local communities (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Hunt & Stronza, 2011; Wondirad, 2019). However, despite these positive outcomes, the notion of the 'savior' in ecotourism has widely been contested, with a prevailing perspective that it also exhibits a form of neo-colonialism,

similar to regular and mass tourism (Fletcher, 2009; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Lewis, 2005). The neo-colonial model "rests on the notion that high-income countries exploit low-income countries by exercising their power of capital" (McClurg, 2003, p.124). This can be applied to ecotourism, where foreign governmental, non-governmental, and private investors drive the industry, displacing locals from the market, their land, and resources (Fennel, 2020; Fletcher, 2009; McClurg, 2002). Additionally, there are ecotourism cases linked to 'green grabbing,' involving the acquisition of large pieces of land by foreign investors for 'green' markets (Wieckardt et al., 2020), and the practice of 'greenwashing,' falsely claiming to be environmentally and socially sustainable (Fennel, 2020). The governance of ecotourism often excludes local stakeholders from the planning and decision-making process, challenging the notion of being truly community-oriented (Hunt & Stronza, 2011).

Furthermore, Fletcher (2009, p.281) highlights that "ecotourism tends to be framed within a constellation of beliefs, values, and assumptions largely peculiar to white, upper-middle-class members of post-industrial societies". This suggests that neo-colonialism in ecotourism extends beyond economic and spatial dominance, but goes as far as dominating cultures by pushing 'Western' beliefs and values onto host communities. Consequently, the notion of ecotourism may not always represent a matter of free choice for societies and governments in the Global South, affecting their sovereignty behind the mask and good intentions of ecotourism.

This opens up discourses of whether striving for ecotourism within the Global North's sustainable development agenda is a form of neo-colonialism as well. This view is backed by scholars who argue that the idea, term and concept of 'sustainable development' originate from the Global North and is designed to primarily benefit those countries, helping them uphold and improve their current lifestyle while gaining more influence over low-GDP and formerly colonized nations (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Peña, 2015; Koch, 2023).

Still, within the framings and practices of ecotourism, the two perspectives are portrayed as opposing each other: ecotourism is either seen as sustainable development and an alternative to regular tourism or; as a form of domination by foreign investors, governments, NGO's and societies over low-income countries and communities, serving into the neo-colonialist perspective. However, from an academic standpoint, both perspectives may inherent the same neo-colonialist characteristics as sustainable development is seen as inherently neo-colonial and having a 'white gaze' problem (Pailey, 2019). Therefore, the perspective of ecotourism as a form of neo-colonialism is the focus of this research, hereby also challenging the sustainable development framing of ecotourism.

This is done by means of a case study of ecotourism on Ometepe island, Nicaragua, with a special focus on the concept of 'eco-lodges'. The research sheds light on the representations and practices of eco-lodges and investigates how these compare to their practices in reality and the impacts it has on the real-life experiences of the local community and the natural environment. Finally, the research analyzes how these findings and local experiences equate or contrast with the perspective of neo-colonialism. By doing so, the research contributes to a local perspective on ecotourism and eco-lodges, a viewpoint that is often overlooked within ecotourism practices as well as tourism research (Hunt & Stronza, 2011).

1.1 Problem Statement

Within the context of ecotourism, 'eco-lodges', a special form of tourism accommodation designed to be based on the definition, principles, and meanings of ecotourism (Salih & Abaas, 2022), have become a sort of tool and figurehead for achieving the goals and promises of ecotourism and with it; sustainable development. Eco-lodges are one of the biggest growing trends within ecotourism, with the highest concentration of eco-lodges in Mesoamerica (Wood et al., 2004), including Nicaragua.

Nicaragua is the country with the second lowest GDP per capita in Central America (world bank, 2023), which has led the government to highly incentivize tourism: "Devastated by war, natural and unnatural disasters, and a debt-driven need for foreign exchange, Nicaragua is aggressively promoting tourism in rural areas" (Hunt & Stronza, 2011, p. 275). This push for foreign investment has increased since the social crisis in 2018, in which a newly proposed social security reform sparked country-wide protests demanding the removal of the current government (Ali, 2023), and the global Covid-19 pandemic (fieldnotes, 08.12.2023). The political and economic crisis that began in 2018 and exacerbated with the Covid-19 pandemic, led to an abrupt decline in tourism activities (Serra, 2022). Since, the Nicaraguan *"government wants to show to people from abroad that 'everything is fine here', they can come and invest."* (Interview 3, 06.12.2023). However, the government is known to leave the planning up to foreign investors, resulting in the domination of wealthy countries and foreign investors over Nicaragua's tourism industry and local communities. Tourism planning is most lacking in the country's rural areas, leaving the host communities little choice in becoming a destination, especially affecting its rural poor (Hunt, 2022).

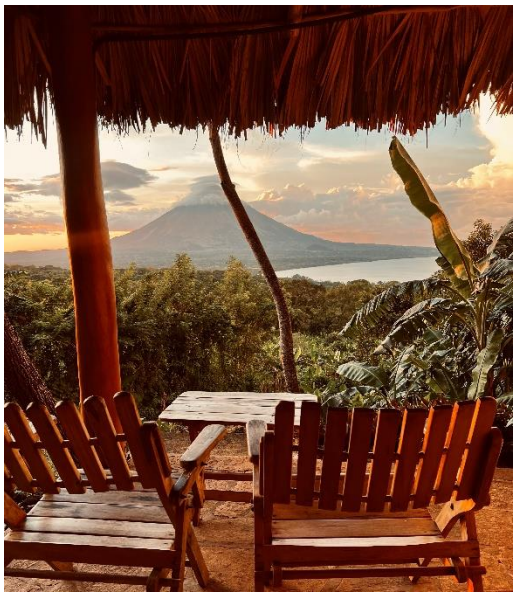

Figure 1: View on the Volcano Concepcion and the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve from the terrace of an eco-lodge on Ometepe island, source: Author

The island of Ometepe, an island formed out of two volcanoes and located in Lake Cocibolca in Nicaragua, is one of those rural destinations. In 2010, the island of Ometepe was declared as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, which led to ecotourism becoming the main tourism sector on the island. The island is home to a population of just over 32.000 people (Serra, 2022) and receives an average of 40.000 visitors a year (Shearman, 2015). Just before the crisis in 2018, tourism visitations had reached an all-time high of 60.000 (Serra, 2022). Economically, the boom in tourism and ecotourism yields mixed results: On one hand, there has been a notable increase in small local businesses, employment and income generation. On the other hand, many places and extensive parcels of land have been bought and privatized by foreign, private investors and waste pollution and deforestation are increasingly damaging the natural environment (Serra, 2022). Through the political crisis in 2018 and the global Covid-19 pandemic, many local as well as foreign-owned businesses had to close down, trade was being limited, people were let go of their jobs and poverty and hopelessness took over (fieldnotes, 08.12.2023; interview 1, 02.12.2023; interview 3, 06.12.2023; interview 5, 11.12.2023). As a result, many local people that were in need for 'quick money', sold their land to people from the Global North. Now, foreign investments are dominating the island, with locals

claiming that about 60-75% of hospitality businesses on Ometepe are owned by private investors from the Global North (Ehrlich, n.d.; Interview 3, 06.12.2023; Interview 11, 26.12.2023). One of the biggest ecotourism sectors on Ometepe island are so-called 'eco-lodges'/eco-hotels/eco-hostels (see Figure 2), who's luxurious amenities stand in stark contrast with the poverty and marginalization suffered by the local population and the environmental degradation of Ometepe's natural reserve.

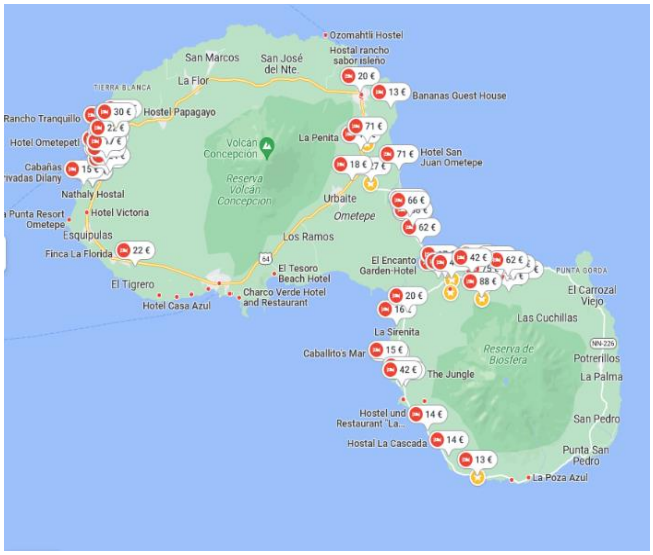

Figure 2: Results in Google Maps when typing in "eco" on Ometepe island, Nicaragua, source: Author

Yet, the websites and social media pages of the eco-lodges and eco-hotels on Ometepe island state the following: "Totoco brings responsible entrepreneurship, sustainable land management and community development together in a new model for eco-tourism'' (Totoco, n.d.), "Selvista has contributed to the local community for the last 20 years." (Selvista, 2022), "We value creating and maintaining a harmonious and synergetic relationship with the Earth and with our community." (El Pital Chocolate Paradise, n.d.) and "we have put into making the whole area as natural and eco-friendly as possible using renewable energy and a particular regard for a 'no waste' policy" (Zopilote Organic Farm, 2016).

These are only a few examples of the hopeful and promising assurances of foreign-owned eco-lodges on Ometepe island. Based on these statements, I investigated if these promises and presentations are being fulfilled truthfully and if they serve the interests and values of the local community and the natural environment or if their practices align with neo-colonialism, as eco-tourism literature suggests (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Wijesinghe et al. 2019). This was essential to explore as ecotourism, with the tool of eco-lodges, is continuously being used as a sustainable development strategy by countries and societies of the Global North. Hereby, this research provides useful information on whether the popular framing of ecotourism as a form of 'alternative tourism' and "green passport to developmental success" (Hunt, 2022, p. 69) is actually valid and useful for host destinations or if changes within governance, policies, research and the representation of ecotourism are necessary. This information is needed for future ecotourism and development interventions as it has the ability to point out inaccuracies or unsubstantiated claims within ecotourism. Additionally, by pointing out which practices align with neo-colonialism, this research contributes to necessary information needed towards the decolonization of sustainable development.

So far, research has addressed ecotourism from many different angles, for example community-based tourism (Mostafanezhad et al., 2016) and nature conservation (Stronza et al., 2019). Even though hospitality businesses like eco-lodges are known to be an important tool within ecotourism, their impacts have rarely been researched, especially in Nicaragua (Hunt, 2022). Despite the growing academic interest in ecotourism and its effects on the agency and inclusiveness of local communities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Mostafanezhad et al., 2016), there is a limited understanding on the concept of eco-lodges in Nicaragua and the experiences of local communities (Stronza & Hunt, 2011).

Herewith, this study addresses the existing literature gap of eco-lodges as a tool within ecotourism in Nicaragua. Moreover, the study sheds light on the current framings of ecotourism as a 'win-win' solution for communities and ecosystems (Hunt, 2022). This was done by comparing my observations and local peoples' real-life experiences with the representations and practices of foreign owned eco-lodges in Balgüe, Ometepe island. Finally, the research serves as a foundation for further research on ecotourism practices as a development strategy in Central America and other low-income countries.

1.1.1 Research aim and question

This research aims to investigate how the presentations and promises of foreign-owned eco-lodges hold up to their practices in reality and how these practices affect the local community and natural environment of Balgüe, Ometepe island. Furthermore, I explored how representations of 'the local community' and the natural environment in ecotourism are reinforced through eco-lodge promotion. Finally, it was analyzed in what ways the current practices of foreign-owned eco-lodges align with the notion of neo-colonialism in ecotourism. As a case study, Ometepe island was chosen as it is considered an ecotourism hotspot in Nicaragua that is characterized by foreign private-ownerships (Ehrlich, n.d.; Serra, 2022). The research scope was limited to the village of Balgüe as it has a high concentration of foreign-owned 'eco' businesses.

This led to the following research question:

In what ways do the presentations and practices of foreign-owned eco-lodges impact the local community and environment in Balgüe, Ometepe island and how do these compare to the notion of neo-colonialism in ecotourism?

To answer this research question, the following sub-questions were developed:

1. How do foreign-owned eco-lodges in Balgüe, Ometepe island, represent themselves and their practices regarding the local community and the natural environment?
2. How do the representations of eco-lodges compare to their practices and their impacts on the local community and environment in Balgüe?
3. In what ways do the experiences and perceptions of Balgüe's local community regarding the practices of foreign owned eco-lodges reveal notions of neo-colonialism in ecotourism?

The concepts used in this research are presented in a conceptual framework (Chapter 2), in which academic results and debates about the concepts of the white gaze, local communities, ecotourism, eco-lodges and neo-colonialism are presented. Chapter 3 presents and elaborates on the methods that were used to collect the data for this research and lays out the island of Ometepe as a case study in more detail. Chapter 4 presents and analyzes the results concerning the first two sub-questions of the research. Chapter 5 addresses the third sub-question and compares the findings with existing literature on neo-colonialism. Chapter 6 examines the results in the context of academic literature and discussions on ecotourism and eco-lodges. Finally, Chapter 7 answers the main research question and offers recommendations for further research.

2 Conceptual Framework

For this research, five interrelated key concepts were identified: the white gaze of development, ecotourism, local communities, eco-lodges and neo-colonialism. Thus, Chapter 2 reviews and analyses existing academic literature and debates on these concepts. This enabled a deeper understanding of the contexts and experiences of local communities within ecotourism and eco-lodge practices, which was necessary to determine whether or not notions of neo-colonialism aligned with the findings of this research.

2.1 White gaze of development

Before delving into the concepts of ecotourism, local communities, and eco-lodges, it is important to address the discourse and language dominantly used to analyze these concepts. As previously described, ecotourism is often positioned as part of the Global North's sustainable development agenda, with eco-lodges functioning as tools to achieve its goals and promises.

Pailey (2019) argues that the development sector, like many others, suffers from a 'white gaze problem.' This white gaze associates 'whiteness' with power, prestige, and progress, while 'blackness' is linked to inferiority and provincialism. Consequently, non-colonial countries are portrayed as informal institutions, while European or 'Western' countries and their values and knowledge are made the centralized, 'formal' norm. Musila (2017, as cited in Pailey, 2019) describes the white gaze as a 'blindspot' that restricts perspectives to a white single-lens view of the world, perpetuating the idea that "white is always right, and West is always best" (Pailey, 2019, p. 734).

Such narratives are reinforced through the language used in the development field, including problematic binaries like "developing vs. developed, industrial vs. agrarian, low-income vs. high-income, Third World vs. First World, and global South vs. global North" (Pailey, 2019, p.734). Despite recognizing the issues associated with this terminology, I use these terms in this research. This is due to a lack of alternatives, but also to identify whether the intrinsic meanings and narratives of the 'white gaze' are present in the practices and intentions of the eco-lodges examined in this research.

2.2 Ecotourism

The previously described discrepancy between perspectives on ecotourism is also recognizable within how ecotourism is defined and presented by scholars and institutions. The most widely cited definition of ecotourism by Honey (2008) has been rephrased and built upon but most institutions regularly create their own, like The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2019), who defines it as:

Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education.

The numerous definitions have prevented the creation of an internationally agreed upon definition that could measure and implement ecotourism in a cohesive way and prevent the term from simply being used as a marketing tool (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2018; Wondirad, 2019). Even though the definitions vary, Weaver & Lawton's (2007) study found that there are three common concepts that reappear in most ecotourism literature: nature-based attractions, responsible visitor behavior, and sustainable development and management practices. However, since the definition and practice of sustainability is also a highly debated term, it stays unclear what these sustainable practices should

look like. Similarly, Wondirad (2019, p. 1049) notes that ecotourism is often characterized by three main attributes:

(1) ecotourism as a tool to foster environmental conservation and education,
(2) ecotourism as a tool to improve communities' livelihood,
(3) ecotourism as a tool to create environmental awareness both among tourists and residents.

Hence, it can be said that most definitions and framings of ecotourism by scholars and tourism practitioners from the Global North always entail a combination of anthropocentric (development) and eco-centric (conservation) aspects of tourism (Chan & Bhatta, 2013). Consequently, Fletcher (2009, p. 272) refers to these concepts of ecotourism as 'Western' concepts and points out that these may be "alien to the members of the rural communities" based on different worldviews, values and belief systems.

To counter the 'white gaze' (Pailey, 2019), indigenous people and local communities in rural areas have largely rejected most Western definitions of ecotourism and its development goals (Lewis, 2005). They associate ecotourism with issues of self-determination, resilience, resistance, and connections with place (Amoamo et al., 2018). This stands in contrast to the three characteristics identified by Weaver & Lawton (2007) as well as Wondirad (2019). Therefore, Amoamo et al. (2018) argue that, from a local's perspective, ecotourism should aim at balancing land rights, self-determination, and culture, instead of focusing on the need for employment, economic growth and capacity building. This highlights a discrepancy between how ecotourism is presented by practitioners from the Global North and the real-life experiences and values of local and indigenous communities.

In this regard, Gumede & Nzama (2019) argue that it is important to include both knowledge systems in ecotourism projects to enhance the participation of all stakeholders. Moreover, they contend that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to ecotourism leads practitioners to make trade-offs at the expense of community well-being and environmental health. This is because unique, site-specific situations and individual perspectives are often overlooked in ecotourism planning and practice (Turner et al., 2012).

Since this research aimed at producing a local perspective on the presentations and framings of ecotourism while also identifying the representation of foreign owned eco-lodges, neither definition or approach was chosen over another. This was to recognize which perspectives and presentations of ecotourism are being practiced and presented in Balgüe.

2.3 Local communities

By focusing on perceptions and experiences within ecotourism, one cannot escape the word 'local community'. Even though it has become a buzzword for governments, NGOs and the private sector alike (Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021), researchers still agree that many of the negative notion's connected to ecotourism "can be prevented if the community gives its prior informed consent to any ecotourism projects in its area, participates in tourism development, and remains part of the process." (Wood, 2002, p. 38 as cited in McClurg, 2003). Furthermore, 'local communities' have become an important pillar in reaching the goals of ecotourism and sustainability, as explained above (see 2.1 ecotourism). As buzzwords often serve to make it appear like development practitioners are on the right track, it is important to continue to investigate these words and how they work out in practice

(Wondirad, 2019). By researching and analyzing the perspectives and experiences of the 'local community' in Balgüe on Ometepe island, it was necessary to define who is meant by this.

Thompson-Carr (2016, as cited in Mostafanezhad et al., 2016, p. 25) found that tourism and development scholars define 'communities' as "a group of individuals who may share characteristics such as ethnicity, heritage, religious, spiritual, cultural beliefs and values as well as geographical spaces." In addition, Scherl et al. (2007) expand on this by defining a 'local community' as a group sharing a specific area along with the meanings and resources attached to it. Thus, local communities are defined as:

Groups of people with a common identity and who may be involved in an array of related aspects of livelihoods. (…) local communities often have customary rights related to the area and its natural resources and a strong relationship with the area culturally, socially, economically and spiritually. (Scherl et al. 2007, p. 71).

Herewith, this research defines the local community based on the following shared characteristics and specific area: Nicaraguan nationality, residents of Balgüe, living and or working near a foreign-owned eco-lodge in Balgüe or working for a foreign-owned eco-lodge in Balgüe.

In addition to this, Agrawal & Gibson (1999) point out that when analyzing communities within the context of development and tourism, other actors and their interests should be included. Similarly, tourism literature by Thompson-Carr (2016, p. 26) refers to these other actors and institutions as "newcomers to communities". These newcomers can be tourists, government agencies, NGOs, migrants, politicians or non-resident business and property owners. This research defines these 'newcomers' (Thompsen-Carr. 2016) or 'actors' (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999) as foreigners owning or managing an eco-lodge as well as tourists coming to stay or volunteer at an eco-lodge in Balgüe. This was important to include as foreign-owned eco-lodges can be seen as newcomers or actors with a diverse set of interests, that might – or not – stand in contrast with the interests from individuals within the local community.

2.4 Eco-lodges

The term 'eco-lodge' was first introduced at the organizational meeting of the TIES on the Virgin Islands in 1994–1995. Back then, TIES defined an ecolodge as a type of holiday accommodation designed to be based on the definition, principles, and meanings of ecotourism (Salih & Abaas, 2022). Based on the growing interest and the growth of the eco-lodge industry, the definition developed towards:

eco-lodges aim to fulfill the conservation of land and natural resources, benefiting local communities, facilitating an understanding between local populations and guests as well as the environmental education of local populations and guests. (TIES, 2019).

According to Wood et al. (2004), additional characteristics of eco-lodges are:

1) they are mostly located within or on the periphery of a protected area,
2) they are built from natural building resources and aim to function self-sufficiently,
3) they have programs and foundations to support the local communities and aim to operate community-based

In order to fulfill these definitions and characterizations, many eco-lodges apply the principles of 'Permaculture' within their agricultural, operational and social practices. Permaculture emphasizes the mimicking of patterns found in nature that work in closed loops and follows the values of "Earth care, people care, fair share" (Habib & Fadaee, 2022, p.442). Hereby, eco-lodges represent a sort of tool within ecotourism that can facilitate ecological and social sustainability at the same time.

Comparing eco-lodges with definitions of ecotourism outlined by scholars such as Honey (2008), TIES (2019), Weaver & Lawton (2007), and Wondirad (2019) reveals overlaps in their goals and representations, which is why Almeyda et al. (2010, p. 803) argues: "considering their [eco-lodges] influence on the natural environment and local communities, the success of ecotourism depends, in part, on the performance of eco-lodges". This close association can present challenges for eco-lodge operators. Hunt & Stronza's (2011) study on the eco-lodge 'Morgan's Rock' in Nicaragua illustrates how the pressure to maintain an 'authentic' ecotourism image can lead to practices like greenwashing. Despite claims of social and environmental sustainability, the eco-lodge was found to use non-local products, prioritize tree plantations over biodiversity and denied local communities access to electricity and water. The absence of formal certification programs for eco-lodges exacerbates this issue, leaving ethical decisions as a choice to practitioners. As a result, the pursuit of an idealized version of ecotourism often leads to unethical behavior among eco-lodge operators (Hunt & Stronza, 2011).

There are more cases like 'Morgan's Rock', in which local communities and tourists are being deceived by the representations of eco-lodges. This links back to the concept of 'environmentourism' (Koot, 2021, p. 816), in which it is "important that the performance of the act is visible, much more than the content of the act". This 'performance' can be applied to the representations of eco-lodges, but also to the tourists choosing to stay at an eco-lodge. Ecotourists are encouraged to "travel with a purpose – a personal purpose and a global one" (TIES, n.d., as cited in Butcher, 2008, p. 320). Thus, according to Salazar (2004, as cited in Koot, 2021, p.817), by choosing a niche- and 'ethical'-tourism like eco-lodges, tourists can affirm "their personal and socio-cultural identity". Therefore, in addition to the idea that eco-lodges represent an 'ethical' form of tourism, visitors of eco-lodges are driven by a wish for self-betterment and purpose (Pistolaki, 2022). Azarian et al. (2020, p. 76) connect this desire for self-betterment with the element of spirituality:

the prophecy of the [tourism] journey lies in its spiritual achievements and choosing an eco-lodge as a travel accommodation provides the context for mutual relationships with human and nature, reaching meaning and excellence and lastly a spiritual understanding.

The 'quest' for spiritual experiences has become a vital part within eco-lodge promotions, services, and products. Eco-lodges are known to offer retreats and workshops performed in small groups for personal empowerment that align with what scholars refer to as 'spiritual tourism' (Bell, 2012; Heinonen, 2023). In Central and South America, the promotion of spiritual tourism through eco-lodges mainly draws from Maya spiritual practices or what tourists believe them to be (Bell, 2012), which mainly revolve around cacao- and Ayahuasca ceremonies (Bell, 2012; Heinonen, 2023) or shamanic mushroom rituals (Walia & Jasrotia, 2021). Although Heinonen (2023, p. 8) describes this newly gained interest in indigenous spirituality as "New Age cultural romanticism", it is common that these practices

tend to be borrowed from a variety of cultural sources and are reproduced, re-imagined, and marketed for the spiritual ecotourist (Heinonen, 2023). Consequently, eco-lodges can become instruments in the marketing and commodification of culture. These issues are further laid out in section 2.5 on neo-colonialism.

In addition to being considered 'spiritual' and 'ethical' tourists, those who can afford eco-lodges tend to be accustomed to luxury. Ryan & Stewart (2009) argue that eco- and wilderness lodges in remote areas are often regarded as luxury experiences. Koot (2021) introduces the concept of 'environmentourism,' drawing on literature about 'philanthrocapitalism,' wherein wealthy individuals use capitalist methods to address environmental and social issues. This creates a moral justification for commodity consumption abroad, positioning the ecotourist as a development agent rather than a 'regular' tourist (Baptista, 2017).

Within this perspective, the self-proclaimed 'ethical tourist' and the owners of eco-lodges actively embrace capitalist systems, which further contribute to regional inequality (Koot, 2016). While eco-lodges emphasize ecotourism practices, the preferences of luxury consumers for amenities like spas, pools, and gourmet food, coupled with the need for extensive infrastructure and travel, raise questions about the compatibility between luxury and the 'eco' label (Ryan & Stewart, 2009). Additionally, many eco-lodges, despite promoting support for the local community, often employ more experienced staff from other areas or countries to cater to luxury tourists (Koot, 2016).

In Central America, this often manifests as volunteer tourist experiences (Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011). Although volunteer tourism aims to facilitate cultural exchange and contribute to local communities (Wearing et al., 2017), the services of 'free labor' frequently benefit the volunteers and the eco-lodges more than the local communities (Wearing et al., 2017). This creates a paradox where luxury and niche tourism, like eco-lodges and ecotourism, are introduced in marginalized areas, but due to existing marginalization, 'quality' staff and skills are limited, leading eco-lodges to employ staff or volunteers from outside the community, further marginalizing the local population (Koot, 2016).

Alternatively, Tadesse et al., (2018) notes that the conservation of eco-lodges significantly relies on the perspectives and engagement of local communities and that the active participation of local residents plays a crucial role in the management and sustaining of eco-lodges. This has led to the promotion of concepts like community-based tourism or so-called 'cooperation-lodges' (Koot, 2016). The idea behind this is that the private operator can introduce managerial and marketing know-hows to the collaborative project and offer job opportunities to local communities. While these projects offer potential benefits such as financial gains, they also bring issues of economic growth and modernization to the forefront, potentially neglecting concerns like inequality, human rights, and sustainable resource governance (Pailey, 2019; Lewis, 2005).

2.5 Neo-colonialism

Although many people from the Global South connect tourism with livelihood diversification or direct financial support for protected areas (Hunt, 2022), it often results in issues such as exploitation, spatial domination, cultural destruction, physical dispossession, and environmental degradation (Devine & Ojeda; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2017; Koot, 2021). Many examples of tourism practices are consistent with neo-colonialism as they involve the imposition of external development plans onto host countries and communities, taking away their autonomy, control over resources and increasing their dependency

while benefiting governments and societies from the Global North (Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Wondirad et al., 2020). According to Wijesinghe et al. (2017, as cited in Wondirad et al., 2020, p. 145):

neo-colonialism is a practice where former colonizers or new emerging superpowers subtly impose their interests and enforce economic, political and cultural dominance.

While ecotourism is often introduced to rural, low GDP areas as a "green passport to developmental success" (Hunt, 2022, p. 69), negative effects of ecotourism prevail (Angessa et al., 2022; Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Hunt, 2022; Sowards & Banerjee, 2021; Wondirad, 2019). Koch (2023) refers to these negative effects as 'unintended consequences'. Yet, he argues that these 'unintended' consequences are not truly unintended or accidental, as many development interventions by people from the Global North come with a "willingness to accept collateral damage" (Koch, 2023, p. 3).

Devine & Ojeda (2017) describe these negative consequences as diverse sets of 'violence', namely; physical, structural, symbolic and epistemic violence. They adopt a holistic perspective on violence, arguing that violence can come in "different forms of domination, exclusion and suffering" (Devine & Ojeda, 2017, p. 608) and emphasizing that it extends beyond physical and structural violence, like robberies or corruption, but encompass everyday aspects of life such as losing land, community, or language. Moreover, Kapoor (2013, as cited in Koot & Veenenbos, 2023) classifies violence in objective (invisible) violence and subjective (physical, material) violence: "Whereas the latter is clearly and immediately visible and 'performed by an identifiable agent', objective violence is not directly visible and required for the 'normal' functioning of our social and economic systems" (Zizek, 2008, as cited in Koot & Veenenbos, 2023, p. 3). This can be linked to Janzer & Weinstein (2014, p. 338) who argue that neo-colonialism is done without any "obvious or formal control", hereby showcasing how neo-colonialism can be a form of objective violence.

In ecotourism, prominent forms of objective violence are symbolic and epistemic violence (Devine & Ojeda, 2017). According to Koot & Veenenbos (2023) symbolic violence refers to the way in which representations through language and visual imagery shape the portrayal of certain individuals or groups. Hereby, tourism-related symbolic violence takes shape in what Salazar (2012, as cited by Devine & Ojeda, 2017. p. 608) calls "tourism imaginaries", which are constructed images and perceptions of tourism destinations and populations. The term encompasses the mental images and expectations that tourists, as well as those involved in the tourism industry, have about tourism destinations. These imaginaries are not only about physical landscapes but involve cultural, social, and experiential aspects. Hereby, stereotypes are formed, a dynamic Devine & Ojeda (2017) refer to as 'spatial fetishism'. The process and dynamics of 'spatial fetishism' include the "commodification of place and cultures" (Devine & Ojeda, 2017, p. 9) to produce objects of consumption – ranging from Indigenous cultures to beaches. In ecotourism, the idea of 'wilderness' is a commonly made commodity, in which tourists use terms like pristine, isolated, remote or unspoiled landscapes (Gilbert, 2004; Devine & Ojeda, 2017). Hereby, Gilbert (2004) notes that labelling areas as 'wildernesses' create a commodification of natural resources – even prior to a tourism visit.

According to Shiva (1987, p. 233) epistemic violence is the establishment of a knowledge monopoly that is based on "violence against the subject of knowledge". Moreover, Teo (2010) lays out that epistemic violence is the interpretation of knowledge in a way that showcases the 'Other' as inferior or as problematic. The concept of 'Othering' goes back to Orientalism, in which Said (1995) revealed

how ‘the West’ has constructed ‘the East’ as an ‘Other’. This results in judgments about the character, qualities, and status of those in ‘the East’, placing them in an inferior position compared to the West. In ecotourism, ‘authentic’ encounters with locals and indigenous people (Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Gilbert, 2004; Koot, 2021) are promoted. The rhetoric of authenticity implies that ‘the local’ is traditional rather than modern and adopts orientalist practices that marginalize and portray local residents as the ‘Other’. A good example of this is the spiritual element of ecotourism in Central America, in which the ecotourist seeks a connection with the ‘primitive’ people, untouched of modernization – like the Maya (Bell, 2012). Hereby, Bell (2012, p. 215) puts forward that “traditionally, colonized nations have been considered to be producers of culture but not producers of knowledge”. Notably, tourists never see what actually occurs in Maya or other indigenous culture, but experience what they believe it to be and what the spiritual tourism industry re-produces for the Western market (Heinonen, 2023). Hereby, epistemic violence in ecotourism takes place in the erasure of real-life identities and cultures into touristic historical narratives (Devine & Ojeda, 2017). This appropriation of indigenous religious knowledge fits Rogers’s (2006, as cited in Heinonen, 2023, p.18) definition of cultural exploitation, which is “the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation”.

Objective forms of violence, like tourism imageries, can lead to subjective forms of violence, like ‘physical dispossessions’ (Devine & Ojeda, 2017). In tourism, dispossession can take place in denying local people access to natural resources, beaches, and forests, for example by turning them into privately-owned spaces. Within ecotourism, this often happens behind the mask of ‘sustainability’, in which the appropriation of land is presented as necessary for environmental protection – also referred to as ‘green grabbing’ (Wieckardt et al., 2020). Additionally, Wieckardt et al. (2020) found that the value and perception of land and nature often differs between community members’ and ecotourism practitioners from the Global North; the local community does not necessarily value land and nature in terms of money, but also in terms of livelihoods and intrinsic value. This shows how dispossession does not just mean losing physical things like natural resources or land, but also losing one's heritage, history and power position (Devine & Ojeda, 2017).

Within ecotourism, a strong emphasis is put on the support of ‘local communities’ (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Fletcher, 2009). The representation of supporting the local community often takes place without the consent or consultation of indigenous and local communities. People from the Global North position themselves “as the one who knows best how to govern his 'subjects', viewing them as in need of development” (Koot, 2023, p. 305). Koot (2023) defines this superior-inferior relationship as paternalism, which describes a policy or practice of treating or governing people in a manner that limits their autonomy for their supposed benefit. In a paternalistic approach, authorities or individuals make decisions on behalf of others, assuming that they know what is in their best interest. This creates the belief of ‘white superiority’ and the belief of inferiority of the ‘Other’ (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022). According to Koot (2023), the continuation of paternalist relations comes from ‘above’, but also from ‘below’, meaning that affected communities often start to believe in their own inferiority and white superiority. Hereby, ecotourism projects can lead to the dispossession of decision-making powers and sovereignty of host communities (Devine & Ojeda, 2017) and re-produce colonial, paternalistic relations and power dynamics (Koot, 2023).

Consequently, subjective as well as objective forms of violence (Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Kapoor, 2013 as cited in Koot & Veenenbos, 2023; Zizek, 2008 as cited in Koot & Veenenbos, 2023) within

ecotourism showcase how “former colonizers or new emerging superpowers subtly impose their interests and enforce economic, political and cultural dominance” (Wijesinghe et al. 2017, as cited in Wondirad et al., 2020, p. 145) onto ecotourism destinations and people – hereby aligning with notions of neo-colonialism.

3 Methodology

3.1 Case study selection

After reviewing the literature on ecotourism and eco-lodges, it became evident that while there is extensive research done in Costa Rica (Almeyda et al., 2010), Nicaragua remains a gap in the literature (Hunt, 2022). Additionally, eco-lodges remain one of the lesser researched topics within ecotourism academia (Hunt & Stronza, 2011). Drawing from my visit to Ometepe Island in 2016, I knew that the island hosts many foreign-owned eco-lodges that promote collaboration with and support for local communities, along with ecologically sustainable practices. The village of Balgüe was chosen for its status as an ecotourism hotspot with numerous foreign-owned businesses, as well as locally-owned hostels and restaurants, providing an interesting dynamic for the research.

Furthermore, the eco-lodge where I volunteered during field research is located in Balgüe, making it an ideal site for studying the interactions between eco-lodges, local communities, and tourists.

It is important to note that this research is not representative of the entire population of Ometepe Island or Nicaragua, as it focuses on a specific area. While some experiences and findings may be applicable to broader Nicaraguan communities and other areas with foreign-owned eco-lodges, the data collected is specific to Balgüe. Therefore, this research does not purport to speak for 'the people of Nicaragua' nor does it represent all foreign-owned eco-lodges universally or as a homogenous group.

3.2 Research population

The population of this research includes owners, employees, guests, and neighbors of eco-lodges in Balgüe on Ometepe Island. Exploratory research aims to gather qualitative insights rather than quantifiable results, which guided the sample size based on the principles of saturation and time constraints.

To select the research sample, a combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling, both elements of nonprobability sampling (Boeije, 2010), was employed. Purposive sampling involved the researcher's judgment in selecting participants who possessed specific characteristics deemed relevant and useful for the research. For instance, participants included foreigners owning eco-lodges and Nicaraguans operating businesses near eco-lodges.

Due to the six-week time limit for field research, convenience sampling was also utilized. This method involved approaching participants who were readily accessible within the limited timeframe, considering factors such as availability and willingness to participate.

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3.3 Choice of research design

This research is qualitative and ethnographic in nature. The aim was to analyze the experiences and perceptions of the local people of Balgüe, making qualitative methods the most suitable choice. Qualitative methods are well-suited for allowing research participants to express their perspectives, experiences, and emotions in their own words. This approach is preferred for topics considered

'uncommon', as it grants participants greater autonomy and control, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of the 'unknown' (Boeije, 2010).

Given the nature of exploring relatively uncharted territory, an exploratory research methodology was employed (Brotherton, 2015). This decision was informed by a review of existing literature, which highlighted the need for further analysis and exploration of the chosen research topic, specifically eco-lodges in Nicaragua.

3.4 Research methods

The methods used for data collection in the field included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). These methods aim to describe, interpret, and clarify behaviors, practices, and experiences while not disrupting the natural conditions of the existing situation (Boeije, 2010). The fieldwork took place on Ometepe Island, Nicaragua, spanning a period of six weeks. Detailed explanations of these methods will be provided in the following section.

3.4.1 Participant observation

During the fieldwork on Ometepe Island, participant observation was conducted to answer sub-research questions 1 and 2. This fieldwork took place over six weeks in November and December 2023. Participant observation involved closely engaging with the local community, expats, and tourists in Balgüe. This was facilitated largely through my volunteer work at one of the eco-lodges, where I was fully immersed in the daily activities of both the eco-lodge and the village of Balgüe. This immersion allowed me to get to know employees, neighbors, guests, residents, managers, and owners of the eco-lodge, establishing connections that fostered an environment of ease and trust.

Additionally, I spent weekends exploring Balgüe, dining at local and foreign-owned restaurants, and staying at various foreign-owned eco-lodges as well as local hostels. This approach allowed me to observe and take notes daily while forming relationships and connections essential for conducting interviews.

The observations at the eco-lodge and in the village were crucial for identifying and investigating the representations and promises of eco-lodges, and for comparing these with their actual practices. This was especially important for sub-research question 2, which aimed to identify practices and their impacts on the local community and natural environment. Furthermore, the practice of participant observation, both while working at the eco-lodge and spending time in the village, sparked many casual conversations that provided additional insights and access to information that would have been challenging to obtain in a formal setting (Driessen & Jansen, 2013).

Working at the eco-lodge also helped to identify underlying power structures and the relationships between foreign owners and guests with employees and local residents of Balgüe. This was necessary to examine within the context of neo-colonialism.

3.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

To comprehensively gather data for sub-research questions 1 and 2, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection, aligning with the exploratory nature of this research (Boeije, 2010). Unlike surveys or questionnaires, semi-structured interviews aim not only to capture information on the what, where, when, or how often, but also delve into the underlying reasons and nuances of issues (Brotherton, 2015). Given the research's goal to provide a

local perspective on eco-lodges and their practices in comparison to neo-colonialism in ecotourism, understanding the underlying relationships and personal experiences was essential.

In total, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with ten conducted in English and two in Spanish. The interviews typically lasted between 50 to 75 minutes and were recorded for transcription, with permission from the participants. Due to the political situation in Nicaragua, two participants preferred not to have their interviews recorded, and these were conducted with note-taking instead. To ensure anonymity, transcripts of the interviews are not included in the Appendix. However, in order to understand the context of the collected data, it is important to get an insight into the interviewee's role (for example employee, owner, guest) and if they are considered to be a person from the 'local community' or the 'newcomers' of Balgüe. Therefore, Appendix E shows a list of the interviews and their corresponding information. This was approved by all interviewees as no names, nor specific nationalities or workplaces are named.

3.4.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

To answer the first sub research-question 'How do foreign-owned eco-lodges in Balgüe, Ometepe island, represent themselves and their practices regarding the local community and the natural environment?' Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 1993) was used as a supporting method. It provided a deeper and critical understanding of the representations of foreign-owned eco-lodges regarding their values, promises and practices as well as the narratives this produces regarding the local communities and the natural environment. CDA is characterized by its analytical focus on examining how discourse plays a role in both sustaining and challenging existing power relations that contribute to social inequalities (Fairclough, 2013), hereby providing a tool to analyze how prejudices, marginalization and oppression are (re)produced by discourses in language and picture (Mullet, 2018). This is highly relevant within the neo-colonial context of this research, in which the power imbalances between eco-lodge owners from the Global North, the local community and the natural environment are to be investigated.

The CDA was conducted by analyzing the websites of five foreign owned eco-lodges in Balgüe and their corresponding Instagram pages. The five eco-lodges were chosen based on the following: they were named and used as examples during the interviews, they are located in Balgüe, I was able to visit the places personally during my fieldwork. After the data sources were selected, I scanned the pages for similarities in wording, content, photos, authors and intended audience. Once similarities were found, I went on to compare these with results and statements from the interviews. The most prominent similarities and overlaps were then selected to become the eco-lodge's main representations and promises.

3.5 Data Analysis

Based on the qualitative nature of the research, the collected data is in the form of narratives and stories. The interviews were conducted and recorded with an app on my phone. Then, the recording was uploaded into an online transcription software named 'Otter.ai'. The software transcribed the interviews word by word, which supported me in the transcription process. However, the software did not get every word correctly and I recognized that not every word or information from the interviews was necessary and important to answer the research questions. Therefore, I listened to the interviews again, corrected words or sentences that the software transcribed incorrectly and took notes when a theme or quote stood out to me. Then, I went on to erase words, stories and information not considered to be important for the research aim. Listening to the interviews, filtering out the most

important data and taking notes gave me an overview of reoccurring themes and topics that were needed to answer the research questions. Lastly, I read the shortened and now very concise transcripts over again. Then, I compared them with the analysis of the CDA and field notes to combine everything in the results chapter (Chapter 4) and to answer the main research question (Chapter 7).

3.6 Ethical consideration

Ethical norms must be considered when conducting research to support the meaning of research, such as knowledge, truth and the prevention of errors (Gajjar, 2013). This research used the five moral principles by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2007) as its ethical guideline. All research participants received information about the research, its purpose, scope and the recording of the interviews beforehand. The participants kept their autonomy as they we able to decide whether or not to share or publish what had been said during the in-depth interviews. This was especially important to consider for the more vulnerable research population, like employees of eco-lodges or local activists. The employees might have feared for their job security if critical words were said against their place of employment and locals as well as foreigners were careful with what was said regarding the government and the current state of Nicaragua. Additionally, locals might have a general mistrust or fear towards 'Westerners'. Therefore, it was very important to keep all conducted information confidential and anonymous and make sure that all participants felt safe and comfortable with me and my research. This means that any information that was not considered necessary for the research or harmful to the participant, is held confidential or was erased.

3.7 Positionality and access to the field

The topic of neo-colonialism deals with the uneven power relations between people from low- and high-GDP areas of the world. As a white, educated researcher from the 'Global North' conducting research in Nicaragua, it was important to reflect on my own positionality, especially how my socio-economic privileges were both an advantage and a disadvantage.

To gain deeper insights into the topic and closely engage with the research participants, I volunteered at an eco-lodge in Balgüe. This immersive approach aligns with Brunder's (2005, p.1, as cited in Koot, 2019) perspective that working in tourism allows an ethnographer to "study tourism from the inside... participating, observing, talking, traveling, eating, and sightseeing with the tourist." By volunteering, I became an 'insider' in the eco-lodge community while simultaneously being an outsider, a researcher, and a tourist. My role mainly involved consulting the new eco-lodge owners on hospitality management. Despite only spending five weeks there, I got assigned a significant position of power within the organization. This occasionally made me uncomfortable, as I had to advise or correct local employees, thus participating in paternalistic patterns where the white person 'knows better.'

Local employees and residents of Balgüe expressed concerns about volunteer-tourism taking job opportunities from local people while Westerners came to the island to *"teach the locals"* (Interview 5, 13.12.2023). Often, I had to admit to the participants that I was also volunteering and giving advice at a lodge, thus acknowledging my role in perpetuating these issues. While many participants accepted my explanation that it was for research purposes, the power dynamics and privileges inherent in my position were made clear. On one hand, my association with the foreign eco-lodge owners might have lent credibility to my research, making people take it seriously. On the other hand, many locals thought I was aligned with the lodge owners and that my research aimed to support them. This required me to distance myself from the eco-lodges and the 'white' expat community on Ometepe before each

interview. I had to explain that my research was focused on understanding the locals' experiences, rather than supporting the foreigners. While many locals appreciated the focus of my research, they often questioned my motives and why Ometepe Island and their experiences mattered to me, a 'Western' researcher.

The prominence of cacao ceremonies and the commercial use of other indigenous practices on Ometepe was unexpected. As my research progressed, I became increasingly passionate about this issue. However, many locals did not understand my interest, often questioning what it had to do with me. This led me to periodically question whether I was the right person to research and write about these topics.

Despite these challenges, working closely with both the foreign owners and local employees of the eco-lodge allowed me to deeply investigate the research aims, analyze the relationships and dynamics present, and act as a confidante to employees and owners alike. The relationships built during those five weeks facilitated finding interview participants who felt comfortable with me, having seen me around, worked with me, shared meals, or even danced at a birthday party together. Overall, this form of autoethnography, combining insider and outsider perspectives, enriched the research outcomes. The findings are deeply connected to the experiences, observations, and conversations I had while working within the community. This approach was crucial for comparing the representations of eco-lodges with their actual practices.

3.8 Case context

To analyze the results of this case study in the context of neo-colonialism, it is necessary to get an understanding of the culture and history of Ometepe island, especially regarding its colonial history. In this way, existing power relations and social systems that might still occur today, can be related back to colonial practices and structures that stem from the island's history. In this research, diving deeper into history is especially important regarding indigenous culture, land rights and land use and the relationships between people from the Global North and Nicaraguans.

3.8.1 Short history of Ometepe

The first indication of permanent settlement on Ometepe island dates back to 2.000 BC (Haberland, 1963). The first inhabitants were self-sufficient fishers, farmers and hunters who lived in small settlements scattered around the shores of Ometepe. The invasion of Chorotegas, Nicaraos and Spaniards as well as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and droughts were the primary influences on the development of Ometepe's civilization (Serra, 2022). The Nicaraos were an indigenous group from Mexico that migrated South to flee the expansion of other empires and forcibly displaced most of the Chorotegas in Nicaragua, also on Ometepe (Minority Rights Groups, 2020). Several Nicarao chiefs ruled the island of Ometepe and the exchange of products was carried through family trade or using cacao seeds as currency. The land was communally owned and could not be sold (Serra, 2022). This is important to regard as today the local community of Ometepe still views land as a communal resource and locals describe how *"the land doesn't have owners, the land is of everyone"* (Interview 10, 26.12.2023).

There are more connections and remains of the indigenous people and culture of the Nicaraos. They were known to be excellent farmers that had developed agricultural practices that would be referred to as 'ecological agriculture' nowadays – which the foreign owned eco-lodges are trying to bring back to Ometepe today, for example with Permaculture (Interview 6, 16.12.2023). Even though many locals do not practice ecological agriculture today, the main source of income remains farming. The Nicaraos spoke 'Nahuatl', the native language of Mexico. Today, around 600 words remain in use in Nicaragua (Mantica, 1994), as is also visible with various geographic names of Ometepe. Even the island itself has a Nahuatl name, meaning 'two hills' (Figure 3).

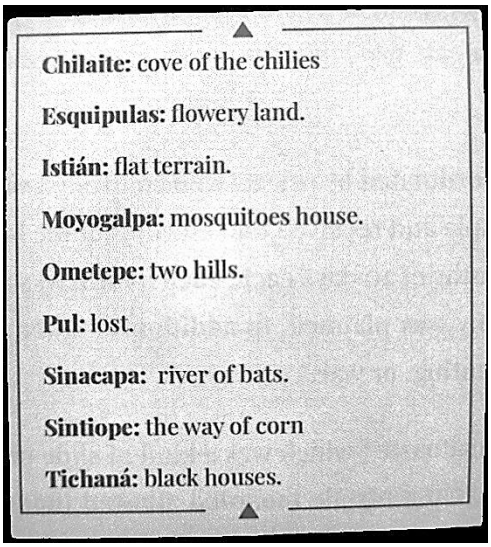

Figure 3: List of places on Ometepe named in Nahuatl language, source: Serra, 2022, p. 19

In 1523, Spanish forces arrived in Costa Rica, pushing into Nicaraguan territory. After 3.500 years of peaceful living on Ometepe island, the indigenous communities suffered a terrible impact of the Spanish conquest. At the time of the Spanish arrival, it is estimated that around 10.000 indigenous people lived on Ometepe island. After the conquest of the Spanish, the indigenous population had been reduced to 378 people in 1685. The main reasons for the decline were slavery, newly introduced diseases, forced labor, high taxes and deaths under mistreatments (Serra, 2022). The indigenous

communities on Ometepe were divided into encomiendas[1] and the Spanish established private ownership of lands that they reserved for the production of export goods, such as cacao and indigo (Newson, 1987). Private landownerships by other social groups than the Spanish was not possible and colonial society enforced hierarchy based on skin color, discriminating against non-'fair' skinned individuals and propagating prejudices to justify perceived white superiority (Serra, 2022).

Nicaragua declared independence in 1821. However, the political independence of Spain did not lead to substantial changes in the socio-economic and cultural systems of Nicaragua and Ometepe. Instead, it merely resulted in a change in the power structure, with a Creole[2] elite of landowners taking positions of authority. In the latter half of the 19th century, Creole governments enacted various laws to dismantle indigenous systems of community landownership, opening up their lands to the capitalist market (Serra, 2022).

3.8.2 Ometepe island today

During the 20th century, the expansion of agricultural production for export and the rise of tourism led to a surge in population. Initially characterized by local exchange, the economy gradually shifted towards international markets. While international investments injected vitality into the island economy, they mainly benefited larger companies, leading to unequal distribution of wealth. The demand for land for export items resulted in the concentration of land in a few hands, while locals end up being expelled from land for a lack of property titles (Serra, 2022). Today, much of the land-ownership is still based on ancestry and locals are increasingly demanding title deeds: *"70% of the land on the island doesn't have an official title, (…) Locals are like 'I don't have the title deed, so my land has no value'. We believe that the piece of paper can have more value than our history."* (Interview 5, 13.12.2023).

The designation of Ometepe as a "Natural Reserve and Cultural Heritage" in 1995, followed by its recognition as a "UNESCO Biosphere Reserve" in 2010, signaled a significant shift. The island transformed into an international ecotourism destination, attracting visitors from the USA, Europe, and Central America. Tourism grew steadily, registering 40,845 visitors in 2011 and around 60.000 in 2017 (SwissContact, 2012). The influx of tourists brought economic opportunities for local families. However, this boom also strained the island's resources, leading to increased demands for energy, water, transportation, and waste management. While improving connectivity and livelihood opportunities, these developments contributed to the island's increased reliance on imported goods and foreign income. Hereby, Serra (2022) points out that the island has lost its original focus on self-sufficiency. The privatization of many areas by foreign investors has pushed up land prices and the demand for wood for construction and furniture. The start of the political and economic crisis in 2018 meant a severe blow to the island's tourism sector, resulting in a sharp decline in activity. This downturn significantly impacted local businesses and led to widespread unemployment, forcing many islanders to seek opportunities elsewhere, often outside the country. The situation was further worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, deepening the difficulty of poverty for numerous families across the island (Serra, 2022).

[1] Spanish conquistadors and settlers were granted right by the Spanish crown to extract forced labor from indigenous people in a particular area. In exchange for their labor, the indigenous people were supposed to receive protection and the Christian faith.

[2] "Creole" generally referred to people of European descent who were born in the Americas.

3.8.3 A short history of cacao

Nowadays, cacao remains significant on Ometepe, with many eco-lodges planting cacao and hosting cacao ceremonies to honour the *"spirit of the plant"* (Interview 9, 23.12.2023). Therefore, I found it important to include a short history of cacao to lay out how cacao was originally used and how it got into the hands of people from the Global North.

The history of cacao traces back to the Maya civilization, who discovered it in the Central American rainforests. They fermented, roasted, and ground the seeds to make a hot, frothy, bitter drink. In Maya society, everyone could enjoy a cacao drink – regardless of status. However, it was more common for the wealthy and rulers and was mainly consumed during special occasions. For example, cacao pods were used by priests to offer blood to the Maya gods or Maya couples drank the cacao drink as part of their marriage ceremonies (ChocoMuseo, 2023; Coe & Coe, 1996).

When the Aztecs gained control over southern regions of Meso-America, cacao became integral to their trade and religious practices. The Aztecs did not only use it as a drink reserved for the classes, but were also the first to use it as offerings to the gods and as a form of currency. They used it as a luxury drink, serving it cold and associating it with divine origins (ChocoMuseo, 2023; Coe & Coe, 1996). According to an Aztec legend, it was the god Quetzalcoatl who brought cacao to Earth. For his act of giving this godlike drink to humans, he was cast out of the paradise. Consequently, cacao was thought to be the 'foods of the gods' and priests often made offerings of cacao seeds to Quetzalcoatl and other deities (ChocoMuseo, 2023; Coe & Coe, 1996).

The contact between Spaniards and the Aztecs opened a gateway for the exchange of goods for the European market, like cacao. This is when the history of cacao took a 'bloody turn'. In 1521, the Spanish defeated the Aztec emperor and the Aztec were required to hand over all of their treasures or be killed, among them cacao beans. The cacao beans were shipped to Spain on sail boats and the first official shipment arrived in Sevilla in 1585. Prince Philip of Spain tasted the cacao drink and it became a fashionable trend in the Spanish court, and the demand for cacao beans in Europe increased. The demand led to the implementation of slavery and forced labor in the Americas. The Spanish were the first to mix cacao with sugar, and replaced the word cacao for 'chocolate'. Based off its high calorie content, 'chocolate' was known as a restorative and nutritious drink, and cacao started to get used as medicine – especially for malnourished soldiers (ChocoMuseo, 2023; Coe & Coe, 1996).

4 Results

4.1 Representations of eco-lodges

The results to answer the first sub-question*: How do eco-lodges in Balgüe, Ometepe island, represent themselves and their practices regarding the local community and the natural environment?* stem from the CDA, the semi-structured interviews as well as field observations.

4.1.1 Eco-lodges support the local community

All five websites mention phrases like 'community commitment,' 'community involvement,' 'community development,' or 'community relationships' as key pillars of their business model. The exact definition of the term 'community' is not clearly stated on the websites. Nevertheless, they consistently refer to the community they support as the 'local community,' which is evident from the use of the term 'local' on their websites and Instagram pages. For instance, pictures of people from Nicaragua are labeled with 'local development,' and images of Nicaraguan children engaging in activities like football or learning English are tagged with 'community commitments.' Thus, it becomes evident that the eco-lodges consider the people of Nicaragua and Ometepe island as the 'local community.'

Figure 4: Website photo of an eco-lodge promoting their Foundation that supports a local school. Source: Totoco, 2023

In interviews and on their websites, the eco-lodges express their primary support for the 'local community' by investing in the development of Ometepe island. This includes improvements in infrastructure, water systems, and facilities for the growing ecotourism industry, such as the eco-lodges themselves, as well as micro-financing for local entrepreneurs. This shows how foreign eco-lodge owners mainly associate 'development' with modernization and economic growth (Lewis, 2005). In addition to this, they support the local economy by *"only purchasing local produce and products"* (Interview 6, 16.12.2023) and providing employment and training to people from Balgüe: "We support our local community by providing locals with work so they can feed their families. We teach our local workers how to work with cacao, how to make quality chocolate and other cacao recipes." (El Pital, n.d.). Hereby, they also emphasize that they provide a form of *"self-development"* (Interview 9, 23.12.2023) to locals by encouraging them to learn new things; like driving a car, participating in a cocktail workshop, teaching them English or new ways of agriculture. Additional ways of support are donations to healthcare, schools and sports teams. Hereby, the results of the CDA, semi-structured interviews and field observations mainly show five reoccurring examples of how eco-lodges represent themselves as 'supporters of the local community':

1) They invest in island development and the local economy,
2) They provide employment and training to local people from Balgüe,
3) They sponsor a local sports team in Balgüe,
4) They donate to or have built a school in Balgüe,
5) They donate to or provide healthcare facilities in Balgüe.

This popular combination of how eco-lodges present their support is shown in this quote by a foreign eco-lodge manager:

There's lots of ways that you can help in the local community. We're registered with the local health center, we do the same with sports equipment for the local teams, both children and adults. (…) Teaching children in all their basic subjects of primary school (…) in English. (Interview 6, 16.12.2023)

This relates back to the elements of community support in the definitions of ecotourism (Honey, 2008) and eco-lodges (TIES, 2019; Wood et al., 2004), as well as the ethics of permaculture (Habib & Fadaee, 2022). The representation of 'helping' and 'supporting' the local community also relates back to the structures of paternalism (Koot, 2023) and the overall framing of sustainable development, in which host communities are displayed as 'the Other' that needs taking care of by the more 'developed' (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022).

Figure 5: Instagram picture with the caption 'local development', source: Totoco, 2024

Figure 6: Website picture with the caption 'local communities', source: El Zopilote, n.d.

4.1.2 Eco-lodges build inclusive communities

In addition to supporting the 'local community,' the eco-lodges aim to foster a sense of community and build connections among their guests. They express this intention by stating, "Here, we come together as a community" (El Pital, 2023), and emphasizing their goal to "*create this community hub*" (Interview 9, 23.12.2023). Again, the identity of this community is not clearly defined.

Nevertheless, captions on Instagram posts featuring people from the Global North enjoying the eco-lodge refer to the individuals in the pictures as "our community" (El Pital, 2023). Moreover, during my time working at the eco-lodge, I was invited multiple times to join two WhatsApp groups: 'Ometepe Homies' and 'Ometepe Activities Board.' These groups were described to me as a form of 'community news board' (field notes, 15.12.2023). Notably, the majority of group members were expats living on the island, and the most active participants were foreign eco-lodge and hospitality owners who promoted their 'community events'. The differentiation between 'our community' and the 'local community' reflects a form of 'Othering' (Said, 1995), where Westerners position themselves as superior rather than equals to the local population on the island. In this case, it manifests through the creation of a distinct community for foreigners, separate from the local population. This is also felt by members of the local community, as this local business owner describes:

And all those people they try and build their own community (Interview 3, 06.12.2023)

However, this is not how they represent themselves and their practices to the outside world. When analyzing the pictures and statements as a researcher, the differentiation between the 'local

community' and the eco-lodge community becomes apparent, but it might not to the 'regular' reader and tourists. Through phrases like "Everybody is welcome!" (El Zopilote, 2024), "we are excited to connect with you" (Totoco, 2023), and by extending invitations for volunteering at the eco-lodge to "JOIN EL ZOPILOTE FAMILY!" (El Zopilote, 2024), they convey a message that guests and other 'outsiders' can become part of their inclusive community. They present themselves as a home away from home, free from societal pressures or judgments, welcoming anyone who shares "our passion for human connection" (El Pital, n.d.).

Thus, despite the eco-lodges making a distinction between the 'local' community and their 'own' community, they project an image of inclusivity, inviting everyone to participate in their practices, events, and spaces – whether they are foreigners or locals, as described by this foreign eco-lodge owner:

I feel that connection between foreigners and locals. (…) I really want to make [name of eco-lodge] *inclusive for the locals, for everybody. The overall vision is to build an exceptional place where all people can come and enjoy themselves* (Interview 9, 23.12.2023).

This representation relates back to the original idea and definition of eco-lodges, that aim at facilitating an understanding between local populations and guests (TIES, 2019) as well as the central idea of volunteer tourism, aiming to facilitate cultural exchange (Wearing et al., 2017). The idea of an own community of 'like-minded people' relates back to how spiritual tourism is performed in small groups for personal empowerment (Heinonen, 2023) and corresponds to the central idea embedded in permaculture; to be inclusive and build a global community (Habib & Fadaee, 2022).

4.1.3 Eco-lodges heal people and the Earth

The words 'regenerative', 'holistic', 'healing', 'nurturing', 'balance', 'harmony' and 'connectedness' are reoccurring themes on the websites, Instagram pages and interviews with foreign eco-lodge owners and managers. With these words they aim to represent their practices regarding people, but also the natural environment; especially the soil and forest.

4.1.3.1 Healing mind, body & soul

Staying at an eco-lodge is often referred to as a personal 'journey' that enables people to 'regenerate' and 'reconnect' with themselves and other 'like-minded' individuals. The eco-lodges offer workshops and events that aim to support the guests' 'personal journey' towards self-transformation and spirituality, as stated on this eco-lodge's website:

Your stay with us isn't just a getaway; it's a journey to natural well-being (..) Join us on this transformational journey in the Jungle of Ometepe. (Totoco, 2024).

In order to facilitate this 'journey', they offer Yoga and meditation retreats, massage therapies, cacao ceremonies, ecstatic dances, full-moon rituals and breathwork sessions. Hereby, I found that eco-lodges represent themselves as being a kind of mediator between the spiritual world and one's self. This mediation is done by providing the previously mentioned events and workshops, but also by presenting a connectedness to the ancient, indigenous people from Nicaragua, as well as the Maya and a connectedness to the 'island of gods', Ometepe. Especially popular is the celebration of the 'spirit of cacao' and promoting that 'cacao is a medicine' that can 'nourish your body'. In addition to this, there are eco-lodges that name their rooms in the Nahuatl language and after gods of the Nicaraos, the ancient indigenous people of Nicaragua (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Rooms named after the Nahuatl word for 'rain' and 'wind', source: Author

Furthermore, there are eco-lodges that are named after local legends and history, as for example “El Pital is named after the place itself! (…) The location of where its located is known to the locals as "El Pital." (El Pital, n.d.) Moreover, local, ancient legends and history of Ometepe are also used to promote and represent the spiritual connectedness that the island and therefore the eco-lodge hold:

> *According to local ancient legends, Concepción and Maderas were once mighty warriors transformed into mountains, frozen in time to guard the island's sacred lands. This is probably why, all across Ometepe it's possible to sense a mystical and spiritual energy.* (Totoco, 2024)

Figure 8: Instagram Reel on the volcanic spring water, source: Totoco, 2023

Regarding the environment and landscape of Ometepe island, the eco-lodges often refer to the island as the ‘Island of Gods’ and state that the island holds a special 'energy vortex’ because of the two volcanoes that formed the island. The eco-lodges promote that their water stems from ‘volcanic spring water’, which they present holds a sort of ‘healing power’ (Figure 8). Furthermore, they often refer to the ‘magical untouched nature’ of Ometepe’ and use words like ‘lush jungle’ and ‘paradise’ to describe the location of their eco-lodge, a word that indicates some place that is out of this world.

In portraying themselves as gateways to the spiritual world of Nicaragua's ancient indigenous peoples, the eco-lodges also position themselves, the environment, and the people of Ometepe island as bearers of this ancient spiritual knowledge. This reflects to the concepts and practices of spiritual tourism as found by Bell (2012) and Heinonen (2023) and the commodification and exploitation of culture that results out of it. The representations of the ancient people of Ometepe and the displaying of the environment as untouched paradise reflects on what Salazar (2012) found to be present in ecotourism imageries and ‘spatial fetishism’ (Devine & Ojeda, 2017).

Notably, the significant emphasis on spirituality in the practices and representations of eco-lodges remains largely unaddressed in existing eco-lodge literature. These findings underscore the importance of considering spirituality as an additional element when describing the characteristics and defining the concept of eco-lodges in Central America.

4.1.3.2 Healing the Earth

In addition to this, the words ‘regenerative’ and ‘healing’ are also used when describing the practices of the eco-lodges regarding the natural environment and the land. The eco-lodges represent that their

practices are not damaging nor disturbing to the environment, but that their practices serve as a way "to ensure that we are regenerating, protecting and preserving the earth" (Selvista, 2022).

The eco-lodges all describe that their 'regenerative' practices are based on the concept and principles of 'Permaculture'. Herewith, they represent that the purpose and aim of their eco-lodge is to conserve and help to cultivate the natural environment. This relates back to the original definition of eco-lodges by TIES (2019) as well as the idea that eco-lodges should be based on the definition, principles, and meanings of ecotourism (Salih & Abaas, 2022). The eco-lodges in Balgüe represent that this is done by following the guidelines of permaculture, as this foreign eco-lodge manager explained:

For 20 years, whether its current and their original aims, it has been reforestation. All of this was flat farmland, all just plantain fields. We base a lot of our decisions on permaculture, which means that we appreciate the diversity for the soil. We appreciate things working together and trying to maintain things. (Interview 6, 16.12.2023)

Hereby, the eco-lodges represent themselves as entities that can 'heal' and 'regenerate' spaces that were in need of care; this being the mind, body and soul as well as the natural environment.

4.1.4 Eco-lodges balance sustainability with luxury

Regarding their operational practices, the eco-lodges use words like 'sustainable', 'eco-friendly', 'natural', 'responsible', 'organic, and 'locally sourced'. Additionally, the practices of permaculture were represented to be the main guidelines for their eco-lodges.

The eco-lodges all state four main practices that make them 'eco-friendly' and 'sustainable':

1) They function 100% on solar energy,
2) they use compost toilets or septic tanks,
3) they grow their own food and offer a farm-to-table restaurant,
4) they are built from natural building materials

Additionally, they emphasize on the concept of 'circularity' and self-sufficiency as central parts of their operations and practices. Hereby, they present that their hospitality practices do to not disturb the natural environment, but rather function as 'natural' as an ecosystem, as this eco-lodge manager describes:

We run on solar panels only, we treat all the grey water through a natural filter and keep the beauty of the garden. And the cabins have composting toilets, which allows you to use it as fertilizer for the garden. So, you can see that it's like a real ecosystem. (…), and we produce vegetables to provide food for the hotel. (Interview 5, 13.12.2023)

This relates back to the characteristics of eco-lodges by Wood et al., (2004) and the principles of permaculture by Habib & Fadaee (2022). It also resonates with the case study of Morgan's Rock by Hunt & Stronza (2011), in which the eco-lodge represented the same sustainable hotel practices.

Simultaneously, the eco-lodges emphasize that their 'eco-consciousness' does not affect the 'luxurious experience' of the guests. They describe their rooms and amenities as 'exclusive', 'private', 'eco-friendly luxury', 'comfort', 'elegant' and 'unique' and offer amenities like pools, private terraces, king-size beds, laundry services, daily housekeeping and warm water showers. This connects to the questions that Ryan & Stewart (2009) pose on whether the framing of being 'eco' is compatible with luxury.

Notably, the eco-lodges in Balgüe represent that living eco-friendly should be seen as the ultimate luxury. Hereby, they do not represent it as opposing each other, but as two things that enhance and complement each other. The word 'barefoot luxury' and 'down to earth life' are used frequently and implies that living eco-friendly and 'down to Earth' is what makes the experience luxurious. Hereby, they equate living sustainably with luxury and represent that offering a more luxurious experience means being more sustainable and more 'natural'. This is described by one of the foreign eco-lodge owners:

> *For me, it's exactly what goes together. If I have like high quality products, if I'm working with like natural products (…). I feel like that's when for me luxury begins. Luxury for me is as natural as possible. (…). So, I feel like we can get more and more luxurious and so more and more close to nature.* (Interview 9, 23.12.2023).

This connects to 'environmentourism' by Koot (2021), in which the ethical representation of ecotourism justifies commodity consumption abroad and emphasizes capitalist methods and ideas to address current environmental issues. Furthermore, it connects to the topic of authenticity within ecotourism and spiritual tourism, in which the eco-tourists want to connect with the 'primitive' lifestyle that is formed out of their tourism imageries (Salazaar, 2012). Notably, the need for extensive travel to reach the eco-lodge (Ryan & Stewart, 2009), is largely ignored by the eco-lodges.

4.2 Practices in reality

Now that it is clear how the eco-lodges represent themselves and their practices, the next step is comparing these representations with the reality in practice and the impacts their practices might have on the local communities and the natural environment of Balgüe. The following results are based on field observations and in-depth interviews and aim at answering the second sub-research question: *How do the representations of eco-lodges compare to their practices and their impacts on the local community and environment in Balgüe?*

4.2.1 Lack of support

As laid out above (4.1.1), the eco-lodges represent themselves as 'supporters of the local community'. Overall, the experiences and opinions of the local community regarding the support they receive were different from what the eco-lodges representation. When asked if the eco-lodges fulfill the promises they state on their websites and social media accounts, the answer of community members often came with a prompt and harsh 'no' and that if they do, it is not out of genuine care for the people: *"You are asking what kind of things they do and give back to the local community? Nothing, no. And if they do, it is always because there is something behind it."* (Interview 7, 21.12.2023)

Also, initiatives to support the local community that were taken by local hospitality owners and neighbors of eco-lodges were turned down, as described by this local business owner and neighbor of a foreign-owned eco-lodge:

> *And then sometimes I've been talking with the owners, and I've been trying to make something together and it never works out. I always tell them like 'it will be easy if we put like $50 a month into a fund for the community', (…), we can make many changes in our community. But they never want to.* (Interview 3, 06.12.2023)

This leads locals to express that they feel like the foreign owners and managers only use their support of the community for marketing purposes as they *"see that it's not real what they are selling, they are marketing something."* (Interview 3, 06.12.2023). This relates back to the practice of greenwashing

(Fennel, 2020). However, it is important to note that I found a discrepancy between foreign-owned eco-lodges that are managed by a local and eco-lodges that are managed by foreigners. It was found that eco-lodges managed by locals tend to fulfill their community commitments more effectively, whereas those managed by foreigners often fall short of their promises. This was also recognized by a local manager himself who explains that "*Many places probably don't have the right person to manage these kinds of projects."* (Interview 10, 26.12.2023). This relates back to what Tadesse et al. (2018) found to be an integral part for a successful eco-lodge; the active participation of local residents in the management and operations of the lodge. Next to the lack of local input and participation, another reason for the shortcomings in community commitments stems from a disconnect between 'real' community needs and what foreign owners believe community needs to be. Within this regard, locals describe that foreign owners *"…should just go and ask those families what their real needs are*." (Interview 3, 06.12.2023). This can be related back to the white gaze and how the 'single view lens' creates 'blindspots' that disregard other perspectives (Musila, 2017, as cited in Pailey, 2019).

To further understand why members of the local community feel let down by the eco-lodges, it is important to further uncover unmet promises and the effects certain practices had on the local community. In essence; I now compare the eco-lodges' representations regarding community support with their actual practices. As previously outlined (section 4.1.1), five recurring themes emerged regarding how the eco-lodges portray their support for the local community. The following results will shed light on how these five promises manifest in reality. The aim is to show the 'why' behind the negative reactions local community members hold against the foreign eco-lodge's community practices.

4.2.1.1 'Modern' developments

The eco-lodge owners state they support the local economy by buying local products and hiring local workers. While there are eco-lodges who employ *"local people from down the street. (…) there are others who for example get people from the main land, especially for construction."* (Interview 4, 08.12.2023). Furthermore, during my time working at the eco-lodge, I noticed that many products were sourced from a chain supermarket in Moyogalpa or from the mainland. This practice seems to be exacerbated by the growth in tourism, as indicated by this local restaurant owner:

(…) everyday almost there is a truck selling fruit and vegetables. And that is food that is coming from the main land. And now at the moment, because it is high season for tourism, there is more trucks coming from the mainland. (Interview 7, 21.12.2023)

Figure 9: New concrete road connecting Santa Cruz and Balgüe on Ometepe island, source: Author

Concerning infrastructural development and the economic growth of the island, the local community associates several negative impacts with the increased popularity of Ometepe as an ecotourism destination. While one of the main development objectives of eco-lodge owners is to improve roads and access to Balgüe (Interview 9, 23.12.2023), locals perceive this as creating a paradox. They feel that *"Now that the island is more developed (…) and easier to get to, different guests come: they are young, have less money and party"* (Interview 4, 08.12.2023).

This situation reflects Koch's (2023) concept of unintended consequences and also reflects Eurocentric views on modern progress within the 'white gaze of developent'.

Another consequence is the growing interest from private foreign investors who are purchasing land and driving up land prices. This trend was particularly notable during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, as people from the Global North sought to *"escape the cities and the rules from their own countries. They wanted to live a quieter life with nature – so a lot of Europeans bought land here"* (Interview 4, 08.12.2023). These individuals, called *"Covid refugees"* (Interview 4, 08.12.2023), were acquiring land while *"at the same time, locals were out of work – everybody needed money and sold their land, sometimes for very little money"* (Interview 4, 08.12.2023). This process has led *"people coming and buying lots of land, not just a Manzana[3] for their own house. We're talking about large sections of parts of the volcano. (…) it's having the effect that local people cannot buy land. The price of land since 2018 has quadrupled."* (Interview 6, 16.12.2023).

It was observed that being labeled as an 'ecotourism destination' and being renowned for its 'lush paradise' and natural beauty can actually pose risks for host communities. People from the Global North seek to escape the constraints of the 'developed' world and aspire to live long-term in countries free from modernization (Bell, 2012). They find what they are looking for in destinations labeled as 'eco'. The negative implications of the 'ecotourism' label has yet to be addressed more in more depth in ecotourism literature.

Furthermore, there is a process going on, in which foreigners buy large pieces of land below the market price in exchange for the promise of a job, which is described as 'the deal' by this local restaurant owner: "*The people that owned the land of the eco-lodge, they are now working on the land, for the foreigners who bought their land. That's the deal; "I sell you the land for a good price and you will give a job to my family."* Interview 7, 21.12.2023). Hereby, locals go as far as describing this 'deal' as a form of slavery: *"I would say they like kind of become slaves for the people who buy their land because they work like for the rest of their life for the white people who bought their land."* (Interview 3, 06.12.2023).

The results show how the tourism industry on Ometepe has grown due to foreign investment and that 'modern' developments, such as concrete roads, have come to reality. In that way, the eco-lodges stay true to their representations. However, while this growth benefits eco-lodge owners, it can bring negative side-effects to the local community (Koch, 2023). These include the exploitation of marginalized communities (Devine & Ojeda; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2017; Koot, 2021), for example by green-grabbing large pieces of land for below market prices (Wieckardt et al., 2020) or land 'deals' that reinforce the economic dominance of people from the Global North (Lewis, 2005) and create paternalistic power structures (Koot, 2016). Additionally, the false representation that eco-lodge only buy 'local', shows how the trickle-down effect of eco-lodges into local economies is limited. While these examples lay out negative consequences for the local community, it is important to note that the majority of community members expressed that they are supportive of the tourism and ecotourism industry, mainly as a way to diversify their livelihoods and generate income. This highlights the importance of considering power structures when investing in tourism industry growth and

[3] *Manzana* is the term used in Central America to describe a plot of land that measures around 7,000 m^2 (1.7acres).

modern developments, emphasizing the need for thorough research into potential negative impacts on local communities and existing structures – before taking action.

4.2.1.2 The costs of employment

Most interviewees and local people from Balgüe agreed that having an increase in ecotourism has had a beneficial impact on their life. The general consensus in Balgüe seemed to be that *"tourism is a good thing"* (Interview 3, 06.12.2023) and that eco-lodges provided employment opportunities. Members of the local community expressed how *" (…) people are starting to learn English, get a job. They have different opportunities. (…) are involved more in tourism. Trying to make a little bit more money than just working in agriculture and harvesting."* (Interview 1, 02.12.2023).

Simultaneously, the growth in ecotourism employment has increased locals' dependency on the industry, making the local community vulnerable to changes and fluctuations in tourism, a common occurrence in rural ecotourism destinations (Wondirad et al., 2020). This vulnerability was especially evident during the Covid-19 pandemic and the political conflicts in 2018, when *"most of the places closed"* (Interview 1, 02.12.2023) and opportunities on Ometepe diminished. Local community members express how foreigners have the privilege to leave unfavorable situations, whereas locals are left to fend for themselves: *"they* [foreign owners] *know they can leave. When everything happened, you know, they sell their business and then they're gone"* (Interview 3, 06.12.2023). This highlights how employment provided by eco-lodges is not always secure nor sustainable, further enabling unbalanced power dynamics between foreign eco-lodge owners and local community members (Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Koch, 2023)

These power relations are also visible in how some of eco-lodges practice employment. According to foreign owners and managers of eco-lodges, they only employ local people from Balgüe and the nearby village Santa Cruz, presenting that "*like half of the people of the village are like somehow working already with us."* (Interview 9, 23.12.2023). However, when talking to employees of the eco-lodges, they experience it in a different way and describe that in fact "*(…) they don't employ many people from Balgüe. They get it from a different area to have the 'best' you know."* (Interview 8, 22.12.2023). In addition to this, the eco-lodges make use of short-term volunteer tourism (Wearing et al., 2017) that ends up taking away job opportunities of local people, as described by this local business owner and previous employee of an eco-lodge:

> *All those places they have volunteers. I mean, a lot of people working there for free even though some local can do that kind of job. But they prefer to bring free labor from somewhere else than the local one.* (Interview 7, 21.12.2023).

This ties back to the paradox identified by Koot (2016) in luxury tourism ventures, where marginalized communities become further marginalized. Similarly, there are discrepancies between representations and realities of working conditions at the eco-lodges. While working at the eco-lodge, I encountered statements from foreign owners displaying paternalistic relationships (Koot, 2016) and practices of 'Othering' (Said, 1995). It is important to note that the following statements stem from one of the eco-lodges. Therefore, I want to note that it might be different at other foreign owned eco-lodges. At one eco-lodge, owners expressed frustration with their 'local' employees, stating; *"you need to tell them everything like three times and they still do not remember. You have to talk to them like they are children"* (field notes, 13.12.2023). The foreign owners attributed the locals' 'poor' performance to their 'poor' living conditions, noting that *"most of them do not even have windows or*

floors in their house – so of course they do not know how to clean them" (field notes, 06.12.2023). This view might inherently be connected to the owners 'white gaze' that provincializes the 'Other' (Said, 1995) and believes in the 'Others' inferiority.

Moreover, the eco-lodges state that their employees get "*a good salary"* (Interview 5, 13.12.2023), while many employees describe that compared to the Western prices of the eco-lodges, their salary is rather low, as they *"get 5000 Córdoba's* [US$ 135] *for 15 days"* while the eco-loges "*make 100$US with just selling one night in the lodge."* (Interview 8, 22.12.2023). To many of the local employees, it feels like *"they [the eco-lodges] make a lot of money there, but it's not for the people that work there" (Interview 1, 02.12.2023).* At the same time, the locals *"can't complain, because this is the minimum wage"* (Interview 3, 06.12.2023) and even if they would *"they know that if tomorrow I say 'I won't keep working because you don't pay me well', the next day there will be three more people ready to work for this money, because there are not enough jobs"* (Interview 1, 02.12.2023). Additionally, the employees describe that they work many over-hours, only get one day a week off and have too many tasks to handle for one person without much compensation: *"We are working, working, working but not getting good money."* (Interview 8, 22.12.2023). Paradoxically, this overload of work is connected to the concept of eco-lodges themselves, as can be seen in this quote:

> *It's a cacao bar, it's a hostel, they also grow their own stuff in the garden. And one person cannot be on top of everything. And they offered me more money for the management position, but the difference was like maybe 1$ per hour.* (Interview 1, 02.12.2023)

This connects again to what Koot (2016) found in luxury tourism ventures; the mismatch between what is expected and what can be 'delivered' by employees from the host destination. The fact that the concept and elements of eco-lodges negatively impact the working conditions has not been explored much in eco-lodge literature.

The dissatisfaction with salaries was a prevalent across multiple eco-lodges in Balgüe. However, frustrations regarding overtime and task overload appeared to be more common among higher-level positions at the eco-lodges; the higher the position, the greater the frustrations. For instance, regular restaurant staff generally seemed content with their jobs, whereas restaurant managers expressed dissatisfaction. Despite many employees of foreign-owned eco-lodges feeling unfairly compensated and treated, there was a general consensus in Balgüe that the opportunity to work at the eco-lodges, – to learn new skills and work outside of agriculture – was a greatly appreciated and supported by the local community.

These findings reveal that eco-lodges have indeed brought livelihood diversification and the acquisition of new skills to the Balgüe community, aligning with their representations. However, some of the employment practices employed by eco-lodges can be associated with the exploitation of marginalized communities (Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022). Many locals have shifted from agriculture to tourism-related work, becoming increasingly dependent on foreign-owned eco-lodges and vulnerable to accepting unfavorable working conditions. Moreover, many of the eco-lodges overlook employing locals from the Balgüe community, contradicting their initial claims.

These findings raise questions about the true benefits of employment at eco-lodges and highlight how, instead of providing fair employment opportunities, there are eco-lodges that capitalize on the lack of job opportunities, laidback employment regulations in Nicaragua, and free labor through volunteer tourism. Although many employees seemed dissatisfied, the diversification of livelihoods and learning

opportunities, were greatly appreciated and important to locals. This shows the need for fairly compensated, local employment.

4.2.1.3 The other side of the coin

Next to employment and island development, the eco-lodges are involved in what they refer to as 'community projects'. The community projects mainly evolve around local sports teams, education and healthcare. Regarding the realization of these projects, I found that the projects were set up in reality. However, once set up, the continuation of these projects proofed to be lacking and have resulted in conflicts between members of the local communities and eco-lodge owners.

All of the eco-lodges sponsor a local sports team. This means providing equipment and the organization of games and trainings. However, members of the local community report that after the eco-lodge initially set-up the sponsorship, the support and attention was only given when investors of the eco-lodge needed 'proof'. This is described by this local who is part of a sports team that was set-up by one of the eco-lodges:

In the beginning they set everything up, but then I remember we had to be begging for help, like simple things like 'we need a new ball'. But the funny thing was like when the people who gave the money for the foundation came to visit Ometepe, they used to call us and tell us that we need to tell the people that 'We're doing fine, everything is going great'. (Interview 3, 06.12.2023)

Foreign investment also came to play with a healthcare facility jointly set up by two of the eco-lodges in Balgüe. However, the facility had to be shut down when one of the owners left the island, withdrawing her financial support: *"We used to work quite closely with the laboratory in town. But after they left, that financial support from there dried up."* (Interview 6, 16.12.2023). These experiences have left the local community wary of community projects initiated by foreign-owned eco-lodges, with some locals expressing skepticism, suggesting that such initiatives may be driven more by a need to appease investors rather than genuine support (Interview 7, 21.12.2023). While the continuation of community projects seems to be lacking, the setting-up of community projects could also display a genuine wish by foreigners to support the local community. But as already noted before, they might not have the right person to manage these projects. Furthermore, it is important to mention that the government of Nicaragua is currently not allowing foreign aid and the setting up of foreign NGO's, which complicates the practice and ongoing of foreign funded community projects.

Regarding the development of local schools, some of the foreign-owned eco-lodges had worked together on building a bilingual school, in which expat children as well as local children would learn side-by-side in English as well as in Spanish. However, once the school was set-up, the separation of local and foreign children was encouraged based on 'different skills' the foreign children had:

They had that place, the bilingual school, and then they decided to do some kind of segregation. They separated the local kids and the foreign kids. And they say 'it's because our kids have different talents, different skills. We are doing two groups, one group for the local, the other for the white.' And that's happened right here in this town. (Interview 7, 21.12.2023).

The foreigner owners display the local children as inferior compared to the 'Western' children (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022) and encourage colonial patterns and power relations to stay intact by segregating the two groups. It also poses the question if the purposes of building the local school was actually meant to support the local children or to provide a school for their own children.

Again, there is a difference between foreign-owned eco-lodges that are managed by a local and eco-lodges that are managed by a foreigner. In the case of a foreign-owned eco-lodge that is managed by a local, the funding and sustainable practice of a local school proved to be more successful and was directly included in the operations of the eco-lodge as they *"offer a tour of the property for our guests, (…) and the price of the tour, the customer pays directly to the teacher of the school. We don't get any money from that tour."* (Interview 10, 26.12.2023). The local manager of this eco-lodge also told me of another eco-lodge that had successfully set-up a school for local children *"and that was also run by a local, somebody who really knows the needs and the community."* (Interview 10, 26.12.2023).

These findings underscore the necessity of involving locals in the management and decision-making processes of community projects intended for their benefit. While the initiation of such projects may genuinely aim to support local communities, there are instances where foreign eco-lodge owners may establish these projects to secure foreign funding and enhance their reputation. Consequently, although these eco-lodges may appear to align with their representations by initiating community projects, they often prioritize their own interests over community needs once the projects are established. Moreover, while eco-lodges may promote these projects on their websites and social media platforms, they frequently neglect their continuation, misleading tourists, investors, and locals alike. This can be linked back to the concept of 'environmentourism' by Koot (2021), in which the performance of the act is more important than the actual content as well as greenwashing (Fennel, 2020). Additionally, consequences such as the segregation of children can be viewed as 'collateral damage' (Koch, 2023) on the eco-lodges' path towards modern 'developmental success' (Hunt, 2022). Moreover, the push to teach local children English reflects a form of cultural dominance within the framework of neo-colonialism (Wijesinghe et al., 2017) and the white gaze of development (Pailey, 2019). The division between foreigners and locals is further analyzed in the next part; the foreign bubble (4.2.2).

4.2.2 The foreign bubble

As analyzed above (4.1.2), the eco-lodges represent themselves as inclusive places that welcome everybody inside their spaces and invite everybody to partake in their practices, events and workshops. Hereby, they aim at building a 'community'. However, as already found in their social-media communication; the talk of 'community' and 'our community' mainly includes people from the Global North that are guests, other expats or eco-lodge owners. This is often described as "*coming in and having your own little foreign bubble."* (Interview 1, 02.12.2023) by members of the local community.

When asked about the relationships they have with foreign eco-lodge owners, the locals experience a lack of communication and interest to form relationships, digital as well as in the 'real' world as "t*here is like this community of foreigners that include maybe 2% of the locals. For example, in these WhatsApp groups 'Ometepe homies'. But the truth is that in real life, there's no communication."* (Interview 5, 13.12.2023). This exclusion goes beyond WhatsApp conversations, but goes as far as excluding locals from social activities and events, as described by a local business owner:

> *And they keep talking about community, but when they make a party or some event, locals are not invited or even allowed to get in. Because it's kind of like you know 'locals, what are you doing here? You're not making money.' So, you're just not welcome. So, when they speak about community, it's like the white community.*
> (Interview 3, 06.12.2023)

Members of the local community often refer to foreigners as the 'white community', hereby distancing themselves from the foreigners based on their ethnicity. Additionally, it underscores the differentiation made based on economic status, with individuals categorized as either having 'money' or not. Local community members recall a time when such distinctions based on race and wealth were absent on Ometepe island, expressing that: *"we were equal here before, no poor, no rich people, no races. But now I see its definitely unbalanced."* (Interview 3; 06.12.2023). This shows how 'Western' beliefs and values are being introduced and pushed onto the host communities (Fletcher, 2009), like the categorizing of 'poor' and 'rich' and 'white' and 'local'. This new divide is also present on institutional levels, in which locals are being treated differently than foreign eco-lodge owners. This local interviewee describes how foreign eco-lodge owners have much more decision-making power on Ometepe island and receive favored treatment based on their status:

If they just form a group of 10 foreign hotel owners saying 'we want to change this', they will 90% of the time get it. And with a local group, that would not happen. For example, I was trying to open my bank account at the beginning of the year. I arrived to the bank and they were like 'no, we are busy'. Then I went there with my boss (…) and they said 'yes, we will have it ready for you in a couple of hours'. So, they say no to me, but yes to my boss. So, it's like my own people act against me. (Interview 1, 02.12.2023)

This institutional power is also visible with practices that are Illegal , like building at the beachfront or cutting down trees in protected areas of Ometepe. There are foreign eco-lodge owners that *"just do a deal with a mayor and pay"* (Interview 7, 21.12.2023) and the *"police have instructions from the government to leave foreigners and tourists alone"* (field notes, 02.12.2023). This shows how foreigners have the economic and social position to corrupt local institutions and not obey to rules that locals have to follow. While this largely benefits foreigners in Balgüe, the example in the bank shows how foreigners can use their power position to help members of the local community and use it for their own as well as the locals' benefit.

Consequently, the introduction of 'Western', neoliberal ideologies has influenced institutional processes on the island, leading to the exclusion and differential treatment of locals by both foreigners and certain local institutions. This is reminiscent of paternalistic practices from 'above' as well as 'below', wherein locals may internalize beliefs of their own inferiority and white superiority (Koot, 2023). Additionally, it relates to how dispossession entails more than just the loss of physical resources like land, but also losing one's heritage, history and power position – connecting to symbolic and epistemic violence by Devine & Ojeda (2017). This is also evident in the opposing perspectives on the relationship between humans, land, and natural resources. While locals perceive humans as inseparable from the land as *"land doesn't have owners, the land is of everyone. (…). And we are a part of it."* (Interview 10, 26.12.2023), foreign eco-lodge owners often privatize land, restricting locals' access to it and its resources. This highlights distinct epistemological differences between foreigners and locals and has had an effect on the local culture, as this local eco-lodge manager describes:

(…) in the end it will be in private hands. And when that happens that is where we are losing our culture. Because usually people used to walk everywhere, we are friends and I could just pass anywhere. But when that land becomes part of a private property of some foreigner, they always put up a fence. And no one can pass. (…) they are trying to stop the local access to the beach, even though this has always been free to all. And I remember when they started to build [name of eco-lodge]*, they started to say to local people that they could not be there and started to make separations between the business and the local people. (…) someone comes in to install another culture by saying 'private' and the island loses the community vision and culture.* (Interview 10, 26.12.2023).

Hereby, the eco-lodges create their own contradiction by representing that they are thriving for an inclusive community, but push out established cultures that were already driven around the concept of community. This cultural shift on Ometepe reflects the adoption of Western modes of thinking, including notions of white superiority and inferiority complex (Koot, 2023). This transformation illustrates how the dispossession and exclusion of land and natural resources can impact culture, representing how physical dispossession reinforces symbolic and epistemic violence (Devine & Ojeda's, 2017). The forming of the 'foreign bubble' within the pursuit of community, has not been explored in eco-lodge literature yet. However, the results suggest that this is linked to foreigners assuming that the qualities, lifestyles and interests of locals do not match with their own – instances of 'Othering' (Said, 1995) and social paternalism (Koot, 2023).

To conclude, the representations of foreign owned eco-lodges thriving for an inclusive community proof to be true for their 'own' community, but exclude already established, local communities. This division has not only created a rift between locals and foreigners but has also fostered internal divisions among locals themselves. Consequently, the prevailing shift in local culture is characterized more by exclusivity than inclusivity.

4.2.3 Healing the Earth and 'Western' people

4.2.3.1 Permaculture replacing agriculture

The eco-lodges present themselves as spaces capable of 'healing' and 'regenerating' areas in need of care, whether pertaining to people or the natural environment. They employ Permaculture principles to 'heal' the Earth, the nature reserve and soil. Within this representation, I found that the rise in land acquisition for ecotourism ventures, like eco-lodges, has positively impacted sustainable land use and environmental education in Balgüas *"they* [locals] *learn to work in the organic way, building more sustainably, planting more trees, you know, like living more natural."* (Interview 3, 06.12.2023).

Before ecotourism emerged in Ometepe, agriculture was the primary source of income in Balgüe. However, harmful agricultural practices, including the use of agrochemicals, escalated environmental pollution (Serra, 2022). The following quote highlights the essential role of farming for locals, while also showing the need to make Balgües' ecotourism industry more self-reliant and less dependent on foreign owned eco-lodges and investments. Without this independence, a cycle of deforestation during tourism downturns followed by reforestation during upturns is likely to occur, as this quote by a local eco-lodge employee explains:

> *The local people value the nature very much, but they also need to eat. So, when there are no tourists, they plant more bananas and turn their property into monoculture farmland. This is what happened for example during covid: all the eco-owners went back to their home countries and the employees were out of work – so everybody went back to the bananas.* (Interview 4, 08.12.2023)

Here, the findings demonstrate that reliance on ecotourism not only harms local communities but in turn also the natural environment – a factor overlooked in ecotourism literature. This raises the question of how eco-lodges can achieve long-term environmental success without continual foreign funding and support.

Since foreigners have been purchasing larger tracts of land formerly used for monoculture farming, these lands are now being claimed for eco-lodges and permaculture. Consequently, these areas appear to be undergoing a 'regeneration'. Upon acquiring farmland, the eco-lodges prioritize reforestation efforts, involving all staff in nursery work, seed planting, plant bagging, and tree and fruit

cultivation (Interview 6, 16.12.2023), emphasizing their commitment to reforestation. It's worth noting that not every parcel of land acquired by foreigners in Balgüe is repurposed for sustainable practices, but the eco-lodges in this case study showed dedication towards reforestation. It is important to mention that these regenerative practices were found on the eco-lodge's own properties, but that there are cases of owners participating in deforestation outside of their own property, which is further outlined in part 4.2.4.

In addition to employing permaculture techniques, the demand among eco-tourists for 'organic' products and the 'farm-to-table'-trend underscores the need for improved agricultural practices in Balgüe, benefiting locals as well. The cultivation of organic food and emphasis on sustainable land use primarily serve the needs of eco-tourists but also provide opportunities for environmental education, as described by a local eco-lodge manager:

We tried to make an orchard to produce our own vegetables and fruit (…) we were doing it to make it easier for people to get organic food. It's not only for our consumption, it was also for educational opportunity – we brought the kids from the school to help in the orchard (…) coming here and working on the orchard, planting a seed and see the process. (…) More ecotourism and eco-lodges can make a change for local people, because they are promoting the care of the environment. (Interview 10, 26.12.2023)

Therefore, it was found the eco-lodge's in Balgüe stay true to their representations of 'healing' landscapes that were in need of care, as shown by their extensive reforestation efforts and the adoption of Permaculture to replace environmentally damaging agricultural practices. Especially the permaculture value of "Earth care" (Habib & Fadaee, 2022, p.442) is put into practice while also working as a sort of example for the local community to change habits and practices that were regarded as environmentally polluting, connecting to the element of environmental education within eco-lodge definitions (TIES, 2019). Notably, it was found that these positive processes only work long-term when the ecotourism industry can be a form of secure and sustainable income for the local community. Furthermore, the need for exclusive food products, like 'organic' and food self-sufficiency, pose challenges for the eco-lodges and have negative side-effects for the local community and the environment. This is presented in part 4.2.4.

4.2.3.2 'Western' healing practices

In addition to their focus on healing the Earth, eco-lodges also aim to regenerate and heal people. This representation is put into practice through various events, workshops, and retreats designed to enhance mental well-being, including practices like meditation and yoga, as well as 'spiritual' activities such as cacao ceremonies, ecstatic dances, and full-moon parties (see Figure 10). Moreover, the eco-lodges' location in the 'natural paradise' of Ometepe, coupled with the island's connection to ancient spirituality, is portrayed as fostering a positive energy for body and mind.

Figure 10: Event promotion at an eco-lodge in Balgüe, source: Author

Guests of the eco-lodges often describe the accommodations and their surroundings as "*beautiful*" (Interview 12, 28.12.2023) and "*isolated (...) off the beaten track and really in nature*" (Interview 2, 05.12.2023). They also emphasize the peaceful and relaxing atmosphere, noting that *"it was a really*

peaceful environment and very relaxing experience." (Interview 12, 28.12.2023). During my own stay on Ometepe Island and at the eco-lodges in Balgüe, I observed that they regularly offer the above-named events, workshops and retreats, hereby staying true to their promises. Furthermore, experiencing the natural surroundings firsthand, I personally felt a deep sense of peace and contentment. In this way, the eco-lodges uphold their portrayal of providing an environment beneficial to mental and physical well-being, that is set amidst the 'lush jungle' – this is when looking at it from a guest or visitor perspective.

While eco-lodges remain committed to providing activities they believe are rooted in ancient spiritual knowledge, the local community questions the legitimacy of practices like cacao ceremonies. This casts doubt on the representation that eco-lodges can serve as mediators between the ancient spiritual world and their visitors. Although foreign eco-lodge owners appreciate that *"they* [locals] *have a lot of wisdom to share with us. (…) and know a lot about the local plants and how it can be medicine"* (Interview 9, 23.12.2023), the people who are employed at the eco-lodges to perform the ceremonies and call themselves 'shamans' originate from the Global North: *"we have shamans here that are from London"* (Interview 6, 16.12.2023). The knowledge on cacao ceremonies that 'Western' practitioners have, has most likely not been passed down from Maya people, but instead *"they* ['Western' shamans] *just read one book and then they think 'because I read it, I know how this work.'"* (Interview 7, 21.12.2023) or the Shaman "*went to a guy in Tulum where they have like Shaman schools*" (Interview 7, 21.12.2023). This raises concerns about the transparency and integrity of these practices. As one local business owner pointed out, tourists may not know the background of the practitioners and may easily be swayed by their explanations simply because they speak the same language and seem familiar:

> *How do you as a tourist know what they are doing? They can tell you whatever they want and you will believe it. Because he* ['Western' shaman] *is somebody who speaks your own language, you can understand him and you will believe that.* (Interview 7, 21.12.2023).

Thus, the local community and indigenous people are seen as the producers of indigenous culture and spiritual wisdom, but not as the deliverers of knowledge (Bell, 2012). The locals' own capability to reproduce this knowledge is undermined and people from the Global North are seen as more qualified to deliver indigenous practices. This connects to the practice of 'Othering' (Said, 1995), fetishizing of local people and seeking 'authentic' experiences (Bell, 2012). Foreign eco-lodge owners justify their involvement in these ceremonies by suggesting that locals have abandoned their own cultural traditions. One owner expressed this sentiment, stating, *"I have more the feeling that they forgot about their own culture, because I don't see anyone practicing it. (...) For me it's more like we're holding a tradition."* (Interview 9, 23.12.2023).

Locals assert that these Western practices of cacao ceremonies and spirituality are not traditional or in other words 'authentic.' Instead, they argue that such practices are tailored to meet the desires and expectations of spiritual tourists (Bell, 2012; Heinonen, 2023). From the local perspective, this signifies that individuals from the Global North are appropriating indigenous traditions for their own purposes, while tourists and practitioners perceive it as a genuine spiritual experience. A member of the local community illustrates this 'misuse' by comparing the historical use of cacao to how it is currently portrayed by eco-lodges and tourists:

And cacao ceremony, they misuse it. (…) in the past, this was just for somebody who was Royal or for important warriors. For the most important people. It was a mix with corn, roasted corn and then you mix them with the cacao, it's called Pinolillo. So it wasn't for medicine, not for spiritual awakening. That's what the tourists want to believe. (…) I learned from my grandma how to make Pinolillo. So, they don't know what they do. They just do a kind of show: 'Let's make cacao together, lets interconnect with the universe'. (Interview 10, 26.12.2023)

This leads to tourists not experiencing nor seeing what actually occurs in Mayan or other indigenous practices, but rather encountering a portrayal crafted by the spiritual tourism industry to appeal to Western markets (Heinonen, 2023). In seeking an 'authentic' experience, tourists and tourism practitioners inadvertently create an inauthentic experience and end-up de-ethnicizing the origins of the culture for Western use. Consequently, people and their cultural practices are commodified for commercial gain (Heinonen, 2023; Koot, 2016). However, this commercialization fails to benefit the communities from which it originated. As this local eco-lodge employee noted, it primarily benefits foreign eco-lodges:

And the cacao is our history, but at the moment it belongs to the people who make a business with it. And yes, it brings money to the island, but the money is for them, not for us. (Interview 8, 22.12.2023).

Therefore, the foreign eco-lodges manage to deliver their representations of being mediators towards spiritual awakening and spaces to connect with ancient knowledge to the tourist, but by taking the practices and culture out of context and not giving credits and benefits to the local communities, they are taking part in the appropriation and commercialization of indigenous, religious knowledge and Maya culture. Lastly, these acts of cultural exploitation (Rogers, 2006, as cited in Heinonen, 2023) and the process in which the need to fulfill the tourism imagery pushes out initial cultures (Devine & Ojeda, 2017) stand in contrast with how eco-lodges represent themselves.

4.2.4 Fulfilling the eco-lodge image

As presented above (see 4.1.4), the eco-lodges all represent to operate based on four 'eco-friendly' practices: 1) they function 100% on solar energy, 2) they use compost toilets or septic tanks, 3) they grow their own food and offer a farm-to-table restaurant, 4) they are built from natural building materials.

Through field observations and participation in guided tours of eco-lodge properties, points 1 and 2 are indeed implemented, thus aligning with their representations. However, points 3 and 4 were found to be lacking or to have negative side-effects (Koch, 2023) on the community and the natural environment. As already established in 4.2.1.1, the claim that eco-lodges only buy locally was found to be false as eco-lodges make use of food trucks and supermarkets from the mainland. This also challenges their representation of growing much of their own food for their in-house farm-to-table restaurant. While many eco-lodges have fruit orchards as well as chicken farms, the majority was not found to grow other large amounts of produce that could satisfy the demand needed for their restaurant. While guests are under the impression that *"the food is really natural and I guess that's from what they grow here."* (Interview 2, 05.12.2023), it was found that most eco-lodges need to get

Figure 11: Solar panels on the eco-lodge roof, source: Author

products and produce from outside their property. Since many products do not stem from local farmers (see 4.2.1.1), the actual 'farm content' of their 'farm-to-table' restaurant, seems to lack. However, this is not how they portray themselves, showing that their practices do not match their representation.

On the other hand, many of the eco-lodges have crops like coffee, cacao, papaya, herbs and citrus fruits, and some produce own honey and eggs. While this shows efforts and success in 'growing own food', the focus on 'circularity' and self-sufficiency poses disadvantages to local communities: *"if your goal is to have quality food, then yes its good (…) if your goal is to support the community; self-sufficiency is not the way."* (Interview 10, 26.12.2023). The concept of self-sufficiency was found to stand in the way of community support, as described by this local eco-lodge manager:

We can harvest, we can grow. But if we do that, we are avoiding income for the people that we say we want to help. Many foreigners that come here are like planting and growing and producing everything, they are producing their own coffee, cacao, honey, fruit or producing their own lettuce. So, what is the local going to do? (Interview 5, 13.12.2023)

Consequently, it was found that two of the main elements and classifications of eco-lodges, as characterized by Wood et al. (2004) and the TIES (2019), actually contradict each other. Namely, the support of the local communities and self-sufficiency. As one interviewee pointed out, if eco-lodges *"plant all [their] own food, do everything. Then basically, you're isolated"* (Interview 6, 16.12.2023).

Figure 12: Guest cabin built from wood and palm trees, source: Author

The term 'isolation' also resonates with another element of eco-lodges by Wood et al. (2004), namely their location in remote, natural areas. This might relate back to the lack of relationships and inclusiveness between local communities and foreign-owned eco-lodges. These contradictions within eco-lodge characterization have yet to be addressed in eco-lodge literature, but are addressed in more detail in the discussion (see Chapter 6).

The pressure to conform to the characterization of an 'eco-lodge' is also evident regarding point 4, 'the use of natural building materials'. Most eco-lodges are indeed constructed from wood, bamboo, and cob, aligning with their representations. However, the utilization of these natural materials for tourism purposes, such as cutting down trees for buildings and furniture, has significantly contributed to the deforestation of the island. This local eco-lodge employee describes how some foreign owned eco-lodges pay locals to illegally cut down trees:

Figure 13: Bamboo being prepared to build a new 'Yoga Shala' at one of the eco-lodges, source: Author

A lot of those new eco places they say they are eco, but because of that they do things that are bad. They buy land, but their own land does not have enough resources to build. Of course, because they are 'eco', they want to build with wood. But they don't have enough wood to build – they need to get it somewhere else. So, a lot of them pay young locals to get wood and bamboo out of the forest, but that is illegal – the forest is protected. (Interview 4, 08.12.2023).

This raises questions about the true 'eco' nature of building with natural materials and how foreigners leverage their economic advantage to fulfill the representations of eco-lodges. Regarding building and land use, it is noted that "*local people always need permits and registrations*, *but the government kind of close their eyes when it comes to foreigners*" (Interview 4, 08.12.2023). The 'superior' economic position of foreigner's has also been presented in '4.2.2. the foreign bubble'. Additionally, it illustrates how representations and promises of eco-lodges can seem fulfilled from an outsider's perspective, but the practices used to achieve these representations lead to negative consequences (Koch, 2023), contradicting what the eco-lodge actually stands for.
However, some eco-lodges have responded to deforestation by making 'compromises' in their choice of building materials. As described by one foreign eco-lodge manager:

Sometimes you just have to compromise. So, the building materials was a big one. So wood, for example, we've shifted away from that recently, and we started using steel frames and steel posts. Now that seems at first, like it's counterproductive to the sustainable idea. But then if we were using wooden posts for every house and clearing a nature reserve, that's not the way to do it. If we need wood, we grow and use eucalyptus, because that is not a native tree. (Interview 6, 16.12.2023)

This poses questions on the portrayal of sustainability and eco-friendly practices of eco-lodges and links back to practices of greenwashing (Fennel, 2020). Moreover, the contradiction between the desire to support the community and achieve self-sufficiency and the negative implications of building with natural materials raises questions about the usefulness of definitions and characterizations of eco-lodges. It demonstrates how the need to fulfill the eco-lodge image and characterizations often leads to outcomes contrary to the eco-lodge's original intentions. This resonates with the 'Morgan's Rock' case study by Hunt & Stronza (2011), where the owners and managers attempted to maintain the 'perfect' eco-lodge image, ultimately ending up practicing the opposite of their initial presentations.

Furthermore, the eco-lodges portray sustainability and luxury as compatible. When viewed from the perspective of guests, this representation appears to stay true in practice. The eco-lodges indeed provide all the amenities desired by 'luxury tourists', including pools, fans, double beds, hot showers, and spa treatments. Importantly, these amenities operate primarily on self-sufficient systems, such as solar energy, affirming the notion that luxury and environmental sustainability can work hand in hand.

Typically situated higher up on the volcanoes, eco-lodges offer stunning views while also having access to natural reserves and resources, like water. As highlighted by one foreign eco-lodge owner: "*We get our water directly from the volcano springs – so we get it fresh, right before everybody else does*" (fieldnotes, 15.12.2023). While eco-lodges proudly promote their direct access to fresh water from volcano springs, this privilege highlights a stark contrast with the reality faced by many households in Balgüe. In the same area, numerous households, including those on the same street as the eco-lodge, lack access to running water and struggle to meet their basic needs, especially during the dry season. This inequity in access to water, as well as in lifestyle, is apparent to members of the local community. As expressed by a local business owner:

It's ironic that you have pools and sunshine up, and no water for the community down. (...) They are robbing water, taking it first (Interview 11, 27.12.2023).

The contrast between 'sunshine up' and 'no water down', as described by this interviewee, highlights the stark disparities in living standards and access to resources and modern amenities like running

water or electricity. Locals perceive themselves as living in poverty while others are able to enjoy and profit from the beauty of eco-lodges, as one local interviewee expressed:

*What I don't understand is how you can sell something so beautiful, like [*name of eco-lodge*], but like 200metres down on your street people live in poverty. (…) I would say if there would be more consciousness about really helping the community, they should just go and ask those families what their real needs are, things that would make them happy.* (Interview 3, 06.12.2023)

Figure 15: House on the same road as the eco-lodge with no water, no electricity. On their way 'up', guests, employees and owners are passing these houses, Source: Author

Figure 14: Pool and view at the eco-lodge, source: Author

Just as the interviewee above, locals believe that foreign eco-lodges could take more initiative to help them get access to water or electricity. At the same time, locals believe that foreigners do not feel responsible to do so, because "*they think that if you don't have electricity or running water, that's because our government is wasting money on stupid things. So, the foreigners mostly feel like it's not their responsibility."* (Interview 1, 02.12.2023)

This poses the question of the responsibility people from the Global North have regarding 'helping' the local community with the improvement of their living standard and poverty elevation. The significant disparity between luxury eco-lodges and the poverty experienced by the local community reinforces existing tourism imagery that portrays people from Nicaragua as traditional rather than modern (Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Koot, 2016). In turn, societal structures that marginalize local communities and spread notions of white superiority stay intact. The recognition of this difference by locals themselves, referring to the eco-lodges as 'beautiful' and their own lives as 'poor', reflects a form of paternalism from below, in which locals internalize their own inferiority and uphold beliefs of white superiority (Koot, 2023). At the same time, it also shows that eco-lodges might have the wrong priorities when it comes to community support, neglecting the 'real' needs such as access to running water – which connects back to the 'white gaze' as foreigners believe they know 'best' what the local community needs. This also relates back to the case study of 'Morgan's Rock' by Hunt & Stronza (2011), where the eco-lodge failed to provide the community with water or electricity.

Thus, in terms of environmental sustainability, the representation of eco-lodges balancing luxury with sustainability mainly holds true. However, when considering social sustainability and the marginalization experienced by the local community, the idea that luxury and eco-lodges are compatible, is not appropriate.

5 Connections to neo-colonialism

After reviewing the representations and practices of eco-lodges, this part is to discuss the research findings with the literature and concept of neo-colonialism and hereby answer the third sub-research question: *In what ways do the experiences and perceptions of Balgüe's local community regarding the practices of foreign owned eco-lodges reveal notions of neo-colonialism in ecotourism?*

According to Wijesinghe et al. (2017), neo-colonialism can be described as the economic, cultural and political dominance of former colonizers or new 'superpowers' on host destinations. Hereby, there are three layers (economic, political and cultural) to consider when analyzing a case from a neo-colonial perspective. The results indicate that people from the Global North, eco-lodge owners as well as eco-tourists, mainly dominate the economic and cultural dimensions in Balgüe. Although foreign eco-lodge owners and managers were found to have more decision-making powers in Balgüe, literal political power was not present. However, findings show that foreign eco-lodge owners have certain power over people that work in official offices – showcasing some dominance over institutions that have political influence. These findings will be laid out more in detail in the following section (5.1).

5.1 Notions of neo-colonialism in Balgüe

The presence of foreign-owned eco-lodges often promises economic benefits to local communities in Balgüe, such as job opportunities. While this holds true and many locals are employed at foreign eco-lodges, economic benefits are often minimal and disproportionate, as already noted by Devine & Ojeda (2017) and Wondirad et al. (2020). The economic gains tend to favor the lodge owners rather than the local community, for example by charging international rates while paying national wages or employing volunteers. The unequal economic position increases dependency, where the local communities rely on foreigners for employment and livelihoods, making them more vulnerable to unfavorable working conditions and land 'deals', showcasing the exploitation of marginalized communities (Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022).

The eco-lodges initiate development interventions, such as local schools or modern infrastructure. While they aim at supporting the local communities, these initiatives frequently overlook or dismiss the perspectives and 'real' needs of the local community. This neglect shows a form of paternalism as foreign eco-lodge owners assume to know what is 'best' for locals (Koot, 2023). The study findings underscore how the white gaze, as conceptualized by Pailey (2019), might be the underlying cause for this dynamic. In Balgüe, this gaze often portrays locals as people 'far from modernization' (Bell, 2012) that are in need of support. Consequently, this portrayal justifies taking over the decision-making power as foreigners view their development interventions as a way to make it 'better'. However, the findings show how this compromises the sovereignty of locals as decisions on land use, resource management, and cultural representations are made without input from locals.

Neo-colonialism involves the control and exploitation of resources by external powers (Devine & Ojeda, 2017). In the context of ecotourism in Balgüe, foreign-owned eco-lodges were found to exert control over natural resources, like land and water. The economic gap between foreigners and locals, coupled with rising poverty, enables foreigners to purchase large tracts of land, privatize previously open-access areas and deny local access to land and natural resources. Herewith, economic dominance manifests in physical dispossessions, as defined by Devine & Ojeda (2017). This displays processes of 'green grabbing' (Wieckardt et al., 2020), where lands traditionally used by the community are appropriated for eco-tourism. This shift in land ownership undermines local

sovereignty and reinforces colonial power dynamics as these ‘land deals’, in which locals sell their land under value for the promise of employment, also resembles the shift in land ownership during colonial times (see 3.8.1).

The stark divide, where foreigners reside in luxury 'up' on the volcano while locals live in poverty 'down', highlights profound disparities in monetary and physical resources and underpins societal positions. The inequality preserves the illusion of white superiority and reinforces the notion of inferiority of the 'Other' (Higgins-Desboilles, 2022), which in turn creates the internalization of ‘paternalism from below’ (Koot, 2023), as locals describe their own lives as ‘poor’ and the eco-lodges as beautiful. This makes an addition to Koot (2016), illustrating how the side-by-side existence of luxury and hardship can become an additional factor in marginalization of already marginalized community.

The influx of foreign buyers to Ometepe is primarily due to its reputation as an 'ecotourism destination,' portraying the island and its inhabitants as a remote paradise where one can disconnect from the modern world and engage with ancient indigenous cultures. While the findings echo Gilbert (2004) who argues that labeling areas as 'wilderness' commodifies natural resources, this study emphasizes the commodification of local communities rather than natural resources. Moreover, it shows how symbolic violence (Devine & Ojeda, 2017) is already at hand before the tourists’ arrival as people from the Global North impose expectations about the people and culture of Nicaragua, confirming the presence of tourism imageries by Salazar (2012). In order to fulfill tourists’ expectations, eco-lodges reproduce these tourism imageries, for example by offering workshops and events in the name of Maya culture and representing themselves as deliverers of indigenous knowledge, participating in what Heinonen (2023) refers to as cultural exploitation.

Furthermore, the local community in Balgüe expressed how the culture and epistemology of local people in Balgüe has changed since the increase in foreign land ownership, for example by introducing differentiations based on race and wealth. This supports Wieckardt et al., (2020) who found that changes in land-ownership and the introduction of ‘Western’ values can result in the alienation and disconnectedness between land and local communities. The change in local culture gets pushed through the ‘foreign bubble’ that creates a culture of exclusion and separation between eco-lodges, owners, guests and the local communities. Herewith, a change in local value- and knowledge systems was found, displaying the presence of epistemic violence (Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Teo, 2010; Shiva, 1987).

According to Janzer & Weinstein (2014), neo-colonialism operates without obvious or formal control. However, in certain instances, the dominance exerted by foreign owners are unmistakably visible, enacted through the police or bank officials. The economic resources and social status of foreign eco-lodge owners afford them a level of freedom regarding legal violations, like engaging in deforestation within protected areas, often resolved through corruption. Moreover, foreigners enjoy priority treatment within institutions like banks. This underscores how the presence of foreigners perpetuates paternalistic patterns from both, above and below (Koot, 2023), illustrating foreigners disproportionate governmental influence on the island compared to the voices of local residents.

In conclusion, the experiences and perceptions of Balgüe's local community regarding the practices of foreign-owned eco-lodges illustrate several elements of neo-colonialism. The results show evidence of economic exploitation, physical dispossessions and green grabbing in the form of control and

denying locals access to natural resources and land. Furthermore, symbolic and epistemic violence in the form of tourism imageries, cultural exploitation, a shift of local culture, the creation and internalization of paternalism and interventions built on the white gaze, are evident. By imposing external values, disregarding local needs, and monopolizing decision-making power, foreign eco-lodges create inequality and replicate colonial power structures. Ultimately, this manifests the presence of economic, cultural and institutional dominance of people from the Global North in Balgüe – revealing elements and practices of neo-colonialism.

6 Discussion

In this chapter, the results of this research are linked to the conceptual framework. It is discussed how the results align with and contribute to current debates in ecotourism and eco-lodge literature.

A contribution is made to already existing definitions and characterizations of eco-lodges, namely by adding the elements of spirituality, self-development and community. Furthermore, I argue that the 'white gaze' might play a bigger role in negative consequences than ill-intend. Next, I lay out how some characteristics of eco-lodges work contradictory, like the requirement to be built from natural resources and the conservation of natural areas. This calls for more context-specific concepts of eco-lodges. Finally, I argue that there is a need to include locals in the management of community projects and eco-lodges. Lastly, the limitations of this research are addressed.

6.1 Beyond communities and conservation

Ecotourism and eco-lodges have traditionally been defined by their commitment to environmental conservation, support for local communities, and promotion of environmental education and awareness. Weaver and Lawton (2007) and Wondirad (2019) emphasize that ecotourism primarily revolves around environmental conservation, improving local livelihoods, and fostering environmental education. Similarly, Chan and Bhatta (2013) and TIES (2019) describe ecotourism as a blend of anthropocentric and eco-centric aspects. Definitions of eco-lodges, such as those by TIES (2019) and Wood et al. (2004), largely overlap with these ecotourism definitions, supporting Almeyda et al.'s (2010) claim that the success of ecotourism depends significantly on the operation of eco-lodges. However, these definitions may not fully capture the evolving roles that eco-lodges play in the lives of operators, visitors and employees.

While many eco-lodges strive to meet these traditional definitions, there is a noticeable shift in places like Balgüe. Here, eco-lodges have evolved beyond supporting local communities and nature conservation, incorporating dimensions like community-building, personal development, and spirituality.

Azarian et al. (2020) highlight that eco-lodges can promote spirituality by connecting guests with nature. I found that the spiritual aspect of eco-lodges is not limited to their natural surroundings; many locations are considered spiritually significant due to their indigenous heritage, enhancing the visitors' experience through a perceived mystical or spiritual energy. This suggests that spirituality does not stem solely from connecting with nature but also from the belief that places with indigenous history hold a special, spiritual energy that can be transferred to visitors.

In Balgüe, both owners and visitors emphasize the importance of spiritual experiences that contribute to self-development and the formation of an enhanced self-identity. Lee and Jan (2017) note that self-identity involves differentiating oneself from others in compliance with the beliefs and behaviors of particular social groups. Similarly, Salazar (2004, as cited in Koot, 2021), put forward that eco-tourists affirm their identity by belonging to a special 'niche' of people. It was found that eco-lodges in Balgüe foster a sense of community among visitors and owners by creating what can be described as a 'foreign bubble'. Within this niche, events centered on indigenous culture and personal development are popular, highlighting the role of eco-lodges in creating a 'niche' of like-minded individuals that can affirm the tourists personal and socio-cultural identity (Salazar, 2004, as cited in Koot, 2021). Eco-lodges thus offer a space where tourists can explore and enhance their self-identity, even if only temporarily. Notably, this focus on personal development is not solely limited to foreign tourists and

owners, but is also found in the local community. Although limited to employment, local employees were found to embrace and enjoy opportunities for self-development the eco-lodges provided, such as vegan cooking or a permaculture apprenticeship – it was mentioned as one of the main things that differentiated working at an eco-lodge from a regular or locally-run hotel.

The desire among eco-lodge owners and visitors for a romanticized experience of indigenous and 'simple' way of living, aligns with Heinonen's (2023) concept of 'New Age cultural romanticism' as well as Pailey's (2019) and Bell's (2012) argument that countries and people in the Global South are seen as provincial and far from modernization. While owners and guests of eco-lodges represent their desire for self-development and spirituality with the formation of a better version of themselves, I put forward that it entails a form of escapism for people from the Global North. The findings of this research confirm what Butcher (2009) suspected all along; that ecotourists from the Global North might be seeking a "break from global politics" (Butcher (2008, p. 320). This argument is supported by the increase in eco-lodges in Balgüe during the Covid-19 pandemic, when so-called 'Covid-refugees' left their 'formal' countries (Pailey, 2019) to settle in 'informal' places like Ometepe island. Visitors and owners may seek these places to escape, finding comfort in the perceived 'simplicity' of the Global South and spirituality of indigenous cultures.

In light of increasing political conflicts in the Global North, the findings suggest a shift from eco-lodges solely focusing on natural surroundings, ecological sustainability and local community towards the role of eco-lodges as refuges and places where visitors, owners and employees can work towards a 'better' version of themselves.

Given these findings, I suggest to update the definitions of ecotourism and eco-lodges to reflect their contemporary roles:

When integrating these findings into existing frameworks, I suggest adding a fourth characteristic to Wondirad's (2019) definition of ecotourism: *4) Ecotourism as a form of self-development*

Furthermore, regarding Chan & Bhatta's (2013) framework, I propose incorporating an aspect of *'self-realization'* into their definition of ecotourism.

As for the eco-lodge characterizations by Wood et al. (2004), including that *eco-lodges provide experiences that promote self-development*, opens up the opportunity to update these characterizations.

While these additions reflect current practices in foreign-owned eco-lodges, it is important to recognize and address the potential reinforcement of a 'white gaze.' As Fletcher (2009) and Amoamo et al. (2018) point out, many concepts of ecotourism stem from Western views. Thus, while these updates aim to present an accurate picture of modern eco-lodge practices, they should not be taken as endorsements of further Western-centric definitions. Incorporating elements of self-development, community, and spirituality into the definitions of ecotourism and eco-lodges offers a more comprehensive and contemporary understanding of these concepts. This updated perspective not only reflects the evolving desires and goals of eco-lodge operators, visitors and employees but also enhances the relevance and appeal of ecotourism in a rapidly changing world.

6.2 Blind spots of the white gaze

As discussed earlier, this research aligns with Almeyda et al. (2010), indicating that definitions of eco-lodges often mirror those of ecotourism. This alignment is expected, considering it reflects how eco-lodges represent themselves and their practices. Hunt & Stronza (2011) identified a significant gap between the representations of eco-lodges and their realities. While some findings in this study echoed their argument, such as misleading promotions of locally-grown produce or local employment, many representations and promises of eco-lodges were upheld, contrary to Hunt & Stronza (2011).

However, I found that these upheld promises are primarily based on surface-level observations, such as those made by tourists. From this perspective, the representations often appear truthful. Yet, a deeper examination revealed negative side effects on local communities and the environment, such as increased land prices and deforestation. Connecting Koch's (2023) concept of unintended consequences to the idiom of the 'tip of the iceberg' – or in the case of Ometepe, the tip of the volcano – only a small portion is visible above ground while the majority remains hidden beneath the surface. The tip of the volcano represents the visible and seemingly truthful representations of foreign-owned eco-lodges. Beneath the surface lie the negative consequences for the environment and local communities, often visible only to those directly affected.

Koch (2023) argues that these negative side-effects may not be entirely unintended. Moreover, he posits that these negative consequences stem from a 'willingness to accept collateral damage' and might be intended after all. I found that many wrongdoings and negative consequences mainly go unnoticed and stay unrevealed to foreign owners themselves. Contrary to Koch (2023), I put forward that negative consequences of eco-lodges might be unintended or 'accidental' after all.

Musila (2017, as cited in Pailey, 2019) describes that the white gaze can be seen as a 'blindspot' that limits one's perspectives to a white single-lens', perpetuating the idea that "white is always right, and West is always best" (Pailey, 2019, p. 734). In Balgüe, foreign eco-lodge operators act based on what they have been taught is in the best interest to people and the environment in so-called 'developing countries'. They believe they are 'doing good' by acting in line with their ideas of progress and development, such as building English-speaking schools, practicing agroecology and investing in infrastructure. Hereby, the 'white gaze' (Pailey, 2019) can undermine Koch's (2023) argument on the willingness of negative side-effects; this research shows how the 'white gaze' can act as a blindfold to foreign eco-lodge practitioners and hinders them from looking 'beneath the surface'. While Pailey's (2019) 'white gaze' mainly focuses on development and the way people from the Global North perceive the Global South, the findings show that ecotourism and eco-lodges also encompass an 'environmental white gaze', in which ecological sustainability based on agroecology, permaculture, self-sufficiency and natural building materials are made the centralized norm – even though these practices might end up in negative consequences such as deforestation or local exclusion (see 6.3). The perspectives, values and knowledge of the local community are largely overlooked, showing that the notion of "white is always right, and West is always best" (Pailey, 2019, p. 734) extends into ecotourism and eco-lodges, in which Western views on the environmental and development are the 'best'.

The promises of eco-lodges often appear fulfilled in practice, especially to tourists and eco-lodge owners. From an outsider's perspective, this might suggest that eco-lodges can effectively realize ecotourism goals, as proposed by Hunt (2022). However, this perspective only considers the tip of the

volcano, overlooking the deeper issues beneath. Thus, although eco-lodges adhere to the core principles of ecotourism, this study shows how implementing 'Western' concepts and definitions of ecotourism into eco-lodges in the Global South can lead to negative side effects for local communities and the environment.

This challenges dominant definitions of ecotourism, such as those by TIES (2019), and raises questions about the utility or disadvantage of applying universal ecotourism definitions. Moreover, since unbiased implementation can be obscured by the 'white gaze' (Pailey, 2019), there is a need to review current characterizations of ecotourism and eco-lodges as vehicles for sustainable development (Hunt, 2022). Eco-lodges operators and visitors must address the blind spots of their white gaze (Pailey, 2019) to uncover the issues that lie beneath the surface.

6.3 Contradictions of eco-lodges

Many of the findings in this study echo the 'Morgan's Rock' case study by Hunt & Stronza (2011), where the pursuit of the perfect eco-lodge image led to harm the environment and local communities. In this study, similar examples were found, such as the reliance on supermarket foods instead of home-grown produce and the use of wood sourced from natural areas for construction. As discussed earlier (see 6.2), foreign-owned eco-lodges in Balgüe often align their image with definitions and characterizations of ecotourism, such as those presented by the TIES (2019). Moreover, it was observed that eco-lodges in Balgüe conform to typical characteristics for eco-lodges as outlined by Wood et al. (2004). Consequently, alongside the pressure to meet the ideal ecotourism image, I put forward that many characteristics of eco-lodges, as described by Wood et al. (2004) and the TIES (2019), are actually contradictory or are deemed to end in negative consequences.

According to Wood et al. (2004), eco-lodges are located in a protected area, are built from natural resources, aim to function self-sufficiently and have programs to support the local communities. TIES (2019) adds an emphasis on the conservation of land and natural resources, environmental education and cross-cultural exchange between locals and guests. The following sub-sections will lay out how some of these characterizations work contradictory and result in negative consequences.

6.3.1 Remote location and self-sufficiency vs. community support

Most of the eco-lodges in Balgüe are built high up on the slopes of the volcano, within natural reserves, thereby fulfilling the first eco-lodge characteristic by Wood et al. (2004). Although this location provides a vast diversity of resources and a beautiful surrounding for guests, it also leads to the eco-lodge's isolation from local communities and everyday life in Balgüe. This isolation is exacerbated by their goal of self-sufficiency, which makes locals and their products redundant and removes the need to rely on and connect with local people and businesses.

Furthermore, this isolation intensifies the creation of the 'foreign bubble' (see Results 5.2.2.), as foreign eco-lodge owners and guests remain 'up' on the volcano, missing opportunities to connect with the local communities 'down' in the village. Thus, fulfilling the characterization of being situated in 'the periphery of a protected area' (Wood et al., 2004) and functioning self-sufficiently (Wood et al., 2004) can negatively affect the fourth eco-lodge characteristic: supporting local communities. Moreover, this isolation largely undermines TIES (2019)'s aim to promote cross-cultural exchange between locals, guests, and foreign eco-lodge owners.

6.3.2 Natural resources vs. environmental conservation

At first glance, the characterization that eco-lodges are built from natural resources and located within natural areas seems logical – where else would they source these materials? However, it was found this requirement can contribute to deforestation and over-use of natural resources. Consequently, the characteristic that eco-lodges should be built from natural resources (Wood et al., 2004) can negatively impact the aim to conserve land and natural resources (TIES, 2019). Additionally, it shows the 'environmental white gaze' within ecotourism and eco-lodges, where the aesthetic and ecological values of foreigners from the Global North dominate perspectives and practices. This gaze perpetuates a form of environmental Eurocentrism, where eco-lodges' perceptions of 'being green' can end up contributing to the destruction and dispossession of local resources and land.

Moreover, the need to use natural resources and the eco-lodges' location within natural areas can exclude locals from said resources and regions. In this study, for instance, such exclusion affected local access to water sources and pathways to the volcano. This finding aligns with previous studies on ecotourism by Devine & Ojeda (2017) and Wieckardt et al. (2020), who connect this process to concepts of physical dispossession and green grabbing. Finally, the appropriation of land and the exclusion of locals from these natural resources sharply contrast with the goal of supporting local communities, as outlined by Wood et al. (2004).

6.3.3 Luxury vs. sustainability

While TIES (2019) and Wood et al. (2004) do not explicitly cite luxury as a characteristic of eco-lodges, this study revealed that offering luxury was a predominant feature for most eco-lodges in Balgüe. This aligns with Ryan & Stewart (2009), who found that eco-lodges can be considered luxury tourism experiences. The eco-lodges in this research asserted that luxury and environmental- and social sustainability complement each other. However, the negative effects found in this research show that luxury is especially tricky to combine with the aim to support the local community. For instance, the high standards of eco-lodges and their guests led to further marginalization and exclusion of local employees. This phenomenon echoes the paradox identified by Koot (2016) in 'environmentourism'. Furthermore, it was observed that the concept of luxury eco-lodges can result in substandard working conditions. This shows how eco-lodges aiming for social sustainability and luxury might not be able to fulfill their promises. While Ryan & Stewart (2009) mainly question the compatibility between luxury and the framing of being 'eco', the findings of this research suggest the need to question the compatibility between luxury and the framing of social sustainability, or in Wood et al. (2004)'s words, the support of local communities.

One of the reasons Ryan & Stewart (2009) question the compatibility of being eco and luxury is that ecotourism attracts tourists from the Global North who travel to remote areas, often by plane. Notably, the issue of travel is not addressed by any of the eco-lodges in Balgüe. The focus on balancing 'eco' with luxury was found to be a site-based issue, and the question of extensive travel was largely overlooked. However, it is not surprising that the eco-lodges avoid this topic, as they target a wealthier demographic from the Global North, just as suggested by Ryan & Stewart (2009). This raises the question: 'Would it not be more sustainable to focus on attracting local tourists?' This inquiry uncovers a new connection between social inequality and environmental sustainability. Foreign eco-lodge owners aim to attract and market their products to affluent individuals from the Global North to maximize profitability and appeal to those they perceive to share their values. Consequently, they neglect to make their property and services accessible and affordable to local tourists and residents,

further marginalizing already disadvantaged groups (Koot, 2016) and inadvertently contributing to global pollution.

This creates a paradox wherein eco-lodges strive to operate in an environmentally sustainable manner, conserve nature, and benefit local communities. However, by catering to a luxury market primarily from the Global North, they inadvertently contribute to environmental pollution and enable social exclusion and marginalization.

6.3.4 The importance of the context

In conclusion, this research has uncovered contradictions within the concept and definitions of eco-lodges. The findings demonstrate that adhering strictly to eco-lodge characteristics can lead to conflicting outcomes, such as the simultaneous goals of self-sufficiency and supporting local communities, or the desire to connect with locals while maintaining a remote location. Therefore, I propose that it may be more advantageous for eco-lodge practitioners, the environment, and local communities to adopt a more flexible approach that moves away from rigid definitions and common characteristics of eco-lodges and ecotourism.

Practitioners should step back from the 'perfect' image of what an eco-lodge must look like, as Hunt & Stronza (2011) suggest, and start implementing more site- and context-specific concepts. Eco-lodge owners should ask questions such as: 'What resources are available and what resources should be protected at all costs?', 'What are the social and environmental issues at the destination?', 'How can I find out the real community needs?', and 'What do locals find beneficial?'. Additionally, they should consider their own positionality by asking: 'How much impact will the eco-lodge have on people and the environment?', and 'How can my positionality be useful or harmful to people at the destination?'.

This study supports Gumede & Nzama (2019), who found that the predominant 'one size fits all' approach to ecotourism often results in practitioners making trade-offs that compromise the well-being of communities and the environment. Therefore, embracing site- and context-specific concepts of eco-lodges has the potential to yield greater benefits for natural environments and local communities alike.

6.4 Local and foreign insights

Tadesse et al. (2018) emphasizes the crucial role of local perspectives and engagement in the successful conservation of eco-lodges. However, my findings suggest that this holds true primarily when eco-lodges genuinely strive to benefit local communities. In such cases, local engagement and insights are necessary. Yet, my research indicates that operating a profitable eco-lodge can be sustained without significant input from local communities, partially contradicting Tadesse et al. (2018).

This research found differences between foreign-owned eco-lodges managed by locals versus those managed by foreigners. The former tends to excel in fulfilling community commitments, whereas the latter often struggle to initiate and sustain community projects. While this observation aligns with Tadesse et al. (2018), many eco-lodges that fall short in their community engagement efforts were found to be as economically successful, if not more so, than those that prioritize community involvement. Notably, this assessment of ‘success’ is from an economic standpoint. This raises the question: What defines success for an eco-lodge? Is it measured by fulfilling commitments to local communities and the environment, or by achieving profitability? Since there are no international

bodies of control, my findings support Hunt & Stronza's (2011) argument that ethical considerations need to be at the core of decision-making.

While local managers play a crucial role in designing and managing community commitments, foreign managers often possess knowledge and skills in setting up eco-lodges, implementing sustainable farming practices, and achieving energy self-sufficiency. Consequently, many foreign-owned eco-lodges in Balgüe exhibit characteristics resembling what Koot (2016) refers to as cooperation lodges.

Contrary to the focus on economic and environmental aspects, Aomamo et al. (2018) argue that from the local perspective, ecotourism should prioritize balancing land rights, self-determination, and culture, rather than economic growth and capacity building. However, while some foreign-managed eco-lodges prioritize economic success over community and environmental needs, it is important to recognize that not all members of the local communities necessarily disagree with this approach. Although this research identified issues highlighted by Aomamo et al. (2018) (see chapter 5), locals also recognize the importance of economic benefits that eco-lodges bring to Balgüe and Ometepe, such as employment opportunities and the establishment of local businesses. Hereby, I argue that economic elements in ecotourism should not be disregarded and that viewing local communities as important economic stakeholders with economic interests, can contribute to removing current prejudice about people from the 'Global South'.

Currently, local- and indigenous communities are portrayed as the 'Other' (Said, 1995) and as people who live a 'traditional' life free from modernization (Bell, 2012; Devine & Ojeda, 2017). However, it is important to recognize that these communities are not immune to the forces of capitalism; rather, they are deeply embedded in neoliberal systems and reliant on the same economic resources as individuals from the Global North. While I am not advocating for a focus on economic growth and modernization as a sustainable approach for ecotourism and eco-lodges, I argue that it is important to acknowledge the economic realities and needs faced by local communities. By viewing local communities as stakeholders with legitimate economic interests, we can move beyond the simplistic portrayal of them as living outside capitalist influence and recognize their involvement in economic systems. Hereby, alongside prioritizing community support that revolves around topics such as environmental education, this perspective underscores the significance of offering local communities fair and equal opportunities for economic well-being – and not disregard them as people free of economic needs.

Thus, this research demonstrates the necessity of local insight for implementing valuable and genuine community commitments and projects. However, if the goal is merely to operate a profitable eco-lodge and possibly engage in greenwashing, local insight and engagement may not be considered necessary to sustain profitability. Consequently, local managers should be tasked with people management and community commitments, while foreigners could contribute their knowledge of environmental sustainability systems and advocate for economic well-being. In this way, the research aligns with Gumede & Nzama's (2019) argument that it is important to incorporate both local and foreign knowledge systems in ecotourism projects. However, for equitable benefits to all stakeholders, I add that it is crucial to recognize local communities as stakeholders with legitimate economic interests. Ideally, by integrating both local and foreign knowledge systems and dispelling stereotypes, eco-lodges can achieve 'success' by effectively balancing community needs with environmentally sustainable practices.

6.5 Limitations

The primary limitation of this research was the time frame within which the fieldwork was conducted. Spending six weeks on Ometepe limited the depth of meaningful connections with people and first-hand experiences at different eco-lodges. Moreover, the research is specific to the particular location of Balgüe and including other villages in Ometepe and mainland Nicaragua would have been valuable to enhance the external validity of the findings. Additionally, interviewing and including local people less involved in ecotourism and residing in areas with fewer eco-lodges could have provided a broader range of opinions and experiences, as individuals closely associated with eco-lodges may have biased or strongly opinionated perspectives. Hence, the scope of the research, number of interviewees, and their connection to the research topic can be identified as potential limitations.

Another limitation is the language barrier and the diversity of interviewees' nationalities. Although ten interviewees spoke English fluently, variations in word meanings and expressions across cultures could have led to misunderstandings. Consequently, some results may have been inaccurately translated or interpreted differently by me compared to the interviewees' intended meanings.

Finally, my own positionality can be considered a limitation. Some villagers preferred to keep conversations superficial, possibly feeling intimidated by a white researcher from the Netherlands that is connected to one of the eco-lodges. Moreover, the political climate in Nicaragua restricted the field research, as freedom of speech is largely suppressed and research participants may have been less accessible or comfortable.

7 Conclusion

This research aimed at answering the following research question: *In what ways do the representations and practices of foreign-owned eco-lodges impact the local community and environment in Balgüe, Ometepe island and how do these compare to the notion of neo-colonialism in ecotourism?*

The research findings shed light on the multifaceted impacts of foreign-owned eco-lodges on local communities and the environment in Balgüe, Ometepe Island. The study validates existing definitions of ecotourism and eco-lodges, emphasizing their representations on environmental conservation, community livelihood improvement, and environmental education. Based on the representations and practices of eco-lodges in Balgüe, additional dimensions such as spirituality, personal development, and the formation of exclusive eco-lodge communities were found. While the representations of eco-lodges regarding the support of the community and natural environment can be regarded as truthful from an outsider's perspective, the fulfillment of eco-lodge and ecotourism characterizations can have negative consequences for the environment and locals alike. While many negative side-effects occur, they mostly stay invisible to foreign eco-lodge practitioners, proving no ill-intend, but rather a blindness through the 'white gaze'.

Through the adoption of Permaculture principles and a focus on sustainable land use, eco-lodges have contributed to the regeneration of degraded areas and the promotion of organic farming practices. This shift away from harmful agricultural practices towards more sustainable and regenerative approaches not only benefits the environment but also provides educational opportunities for locals and visitors alike. While eco-lodges generally adhere to side-based environmentally friendly practices, such as using solar energy and implementing compost toilets, there is often a discrepancy in their claims of sourcing food locally for their farm-to-table restaurants. Many eco-lodges resort to purchasing food from external sources, undermining their narrative of self-sufficiency and community support.

The gaps between representations and practices highlights several paradoxes and contradictions within the concept of eco-lodges. The reliance on natural resources for construction and operation, while aligned with principles of permaculture and ecotourism, can contribute to deforestation, resource reduction and create tensions between conservation efforts and local livelihoods. Despite promoting inclusivity and community-building, eco-lodges may inadvertently exclude local communities from their activities and events. This isolation, in combination with building an own community, creates a 'foreign bubble', where eco-lodge owners and guests remain disconnected from the local population, obstructing the aim of ecotourism to facilitate cross-cultural exchange. The offering of spiritual activities like cacao ceremonies by eco-lodges may appear to provide guests with authentic cultural experiences. However, the involvement of 'Western' practitioners and the commercialization of indigenous traditions raise concerns about cultural appropriation and exploitation. These practices prioritize the desires of tourists over the integrity and authenticity of indigenous cultures.

While luxury amenities may enhance guest satisfaction, they showcase social inequalities and the difference between living 'up' on the volcano versus 'down' in the village. Eco-lodges often market themselves as luxurious and sustainable destinations. However, the disparity between the luxury

enjoyed by guests and the lack of basic resources like running water in the local community underscores broader issues of social inequality and economic disparity. Despite the eco-lodges' portrayal of luxury and social and environmental consciousness, the reality for many local employees is one inadequate compensation and the increased reliance on tourism for income creates vulnerability among local communities.

Building upon these impacts on the local communities and the environment, the research addresses the question of how these intersect with the concept of neo-colonialism in ecotourism. In Balgüe, economic and cultural dominance is primarily exercised by individuals and entities from the Global North, including eco-lodge owners and tourists. The commodification of local resources and communities is driven by tourism imageries. While this provides a form of escape to tourists from the Global North, this process leads to the exploitation and commodification of local culture and resources. Furthermore, the economic inequalities between foreign eco-lodge owners and local communities contribute to physical dispossessions and paternalism. This economic dominance not only pushes local people out of the local market, but also reinforces unbalanced power structures. Moreover, it contributes to a change and replacement of local culture towards a more 'Westernized' way of thinking that is based on race, economic possessions and property borders. Furthermore, the study unveils institutional privileges. Foreign eco-lodge owners wield influence over local institutions and authorities by making use of corruption. Notably, in some cases they can use it to the support the local community. While the existence of various forms of dominances showcases connections to neo-colonialism and reveals negative consequences for locals and the environment, it is important to highlight that the local community supports the idea of ecotourism and eco-lodges, especially in regards to economic growth, employment opportunities and self-development. Hereby, the findings suggest that a balance between local and foreign perspectives, is essential for an eco-lodge that genuinely benefit both communities and the environment.

In conclusion, the experiences and perceptions of Balgües' local community regarding the practices of foreign-owned eco-lodges reveal notions of neocolonialism, encompassing tourism imageries, symbolic and epistemic violence, paternalism and physical dispossessions. The study emphasizes the need for a critical examination of power dynamics and a re-evaluation of existing eco-lodge characterizations. Moreover, the study stresses the need for more context-specific approaches to eco-lodge conceptualization and management and encourages eco-lodge practitioners to reflect on their 'white gaze' and own positionality.

7.1 Findings in a broader context and recommendations for further research

Since this research is specific to Balgüe and Ometepe Island, it is important to outline how its findings can be applied in a broader context and for future research.

The additional layers of spirituality, self-development and eco-lodge communities explored in this study are believed to be phenomena not exclusive to Balgüe. Other researchers such as Bell (2012), Heinonen (2023), Pistolaki (2022), and Azarian et al. (2020) have also delved into these topics. Therefore, when conducting research on eco-lodges, the findings of this study can be used to investigate if these additional layers are present elsewhere and to analyze the role of eco-lodges in shaping narratives of local and indigenous communities, as well as issues like cultural appropriation and exploitation. Additionally, exploring the motivations behind 'escaping' the Global North and the role of eco-lodges and ecotourism in this process could help predict how events and issues in countries

of the Global North might drive demand for ecotourism businesses, potentially leading to challenges like green grabbing or dependency on local communities.

Furthermore, this research reveals that many eco-lodges base their concepts on global and generic definitions of ecotourism, adopting a 'one size fits all' approach. However, this approach may not be beneficial. Thus, the findings of this study can be used to investigate whether more site-specific concepts of eco-lodges and ecotourism would be more advantageous for both people and the environment, and how such concepts could be implemented. Additionally, the observation that locally managed eco-lodges with foreign owners tend to fulfill their promises better than those managed by foreigners could be further explored in other locations.

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9 Appendices

9.1 Appendix A: Interview Guide - (Foreign) eco-lodge owners and/or managers

Introduction

- Greet and thank the interviewee
- Introduction of researcher and research topic
- Explanation of the purpose of the research
- Lay out the length of the interview (approximately 30 - 40 minutes) and what to expect from
- the questions
- Ask if the interviewee has enough time and if he/she feels comfortable with answering the
- questions
- Ask permission to record the interview and let the interviewee know that all information will be held confidential and anonymous
- Ask for personal information:
  - Nationality
  - Occupation
- Start the official interview, inform the interviewee about this

Body

1. What inspired you to establish an eco-lodge, and how has your vision evolved over time? Did you have any experience in this kind of business before?
2. Can you provide an overview of your eco-lodge, for example including location, activities and amenities you offer, key features, vision?
3. What do you know about ecotourism? How do you implement it? Do you feel any “pressure” to fulfill this concept?
4. How do your practices and day-to-day operations look like regarding the environment?
5. How do your practices and day-to-day operations regarding the local community look like?
6. Your eco-lodge's website emphasizes [insert based on what specific eco-lodge states]. Could you elaborate on that?
7. Regarding the last three questions; Why is this important to you? What is your motivation?
8. In what ways do you involve the local community of Balgüe in the planning and operations of your eco-lodge?
9. Can you provide examples of collaborations or initiatives aimed at working together or supporting the local community? If yes, in what way did they participate/not participate?
10. What does being environmentally / socially sustainable mean to you and how do you practice it in your eco-lodge?
11. How do you balance providing a “luxurious” experience for guests with sustainability?
12. From your interactions with the local community, have you received feedback regarding your eco-lodge and your practices? If yes, please elaborate.
13. Have there been instances where people (guests, other business owners…) have expressed concerns about your eco-lodge? If yes, please elaborate.
14. How would you like to see the eco-lodge evolve in the future? What are your visions regarding the environment and community?

Round off

- Thank the interviewee again his/her time and the willingness to participate
- Explain how the recorded interview will be used
- Ask if the interviewee has any questions to the researcher
- Ask for a confirmation to use the given information
- Let the interviewee know in what way he/she helped with the development of the research
- Wish the interviewee a good day and say goodbye

9.2 Appendix B: Interview Guide - Eco-Lodge employees (local)

Introduction

- Greet and thank the interviewee
- Introduction of researcher and research topic

Explanation of the purpose of the research

- Lay out the length of the interview (approximately 30 - 40 minutes) and what to expect from
- the questions
- Ask if the interviewee has enough time and if he/she feels comfortable with answering the
- questions
- Ask permission to record the interview and let the interviewee know that all information will be held confidential and anonymous
- Ask for personal information:
  - Nationality
  - Occupation
- Start the official interview, inform the interviewee about this

Body

1. Can you describe the eco-lodge and the people you work with?
2. Can you describe your role and responsibilities within the eco-lodge? Why did you come to work here?
3. Did you know about eco-lodges before? If yes, what were your thoughts? If not, what have you learned about the concept so far?
4. In what ways has working at the eco-lodge impacted/affected/changed your life?
5. Ometepe has become very popular with ecotourists. Has the island changed because of it? If yes, in what way?
6. Has the island changed since the opening of many eco-lodges and other eco-hotels? If yes, in what way?
7. Has your life and the life of people on the island changed? If yes, in what way?
8. Can you share any challenges or concerns you have regarding eco-lodges? For example on the island, its people or the natural environment.
9. The eco-lodge you work for is owned by a non-local person. How has your experience been regarding this? Are there differences from local business owners/managers? If yes, please elaborate.
10. Most guests that come to stay at the eco-lodge come from other countries. How has your experience been regarding this? Are there differences from local people? If yes, please elaborate.

11. The eco-lodge/owners emphasizes that they aim to [insert based on what specific eco-lodge/owners stated before]. How have you experienced this? Is it working out? Do you agree with these ideas/concepts?
12. Do you feel there is communication between the eco-lodge management and the local staff regarding plans and changes? How have you and other people from the community been included? Do you feel like you get included regularly?
13. How would you like to see the eco-lodge evolve in the future? How would you like to see your role evolve in the future?

Round off

- Thank the interviewee again his/her time and the willingness to participate
- Explain how the recorded interview will be used
- Ask if the interviewee has any questions to the researcher
- Ask for a confirmation to use the given information
- Let the interviewee know in what way he/she helped with the development of the research

9.3 Appendix C: Additional interview questions for neighbors, tourists and local business owners

9.3.1 Questions for tourists/guests of eco-lodges:

1. Can you share your overall experience staying at an eco-lodge and what made you choose the eco-lodge for your stay?
2. Did you know about eco-lodges before? If yes, what were your thoughts? If not, what have you learned about the concept so far?
3. What is most important to you regarding a stay in an eco-lodge? What do you expect?
4. Were you aware of the eco-lodge commitment to the environment and the community before your stay? If yes, did this influence your decision to choose? If yes, why?
5. The eco-lodge states on their website that they …[insert based on what specific eco-lodge states]. Were these practices noticeable during your stay? If yes, in what way? Did it live up to your expectations?
6. Do you believe you have an impact on the island (on environment, community, culture)? If yes, how?
7. What role do you believe the tourist (you) has on Ometepe island?
8. Were/are you aware of the ownership structure of the eco-lodge? If yes, how do you experience this as a guest? Does it matter to you?
9. Did you have opportunities to interact with the local community during your stay at the eco-lodge? If yes, how was your experience? How is your general impression of the local community?
10. How is your general impression of how the owners and local community work together and communicate?

9.3.2 Questions for neighbors, community members of Balgüe, Ometepe

1. Can you share your overall experience of living near the eco-lodge? How has it impacted you/your business?
2. Did you know about eco-lodges before? If yes, what were your thoughts? If not, what have you learned about the concept so far and what are your thoughts now?
3. Ometepe has become very popular with tourists. Has the island changed because of it? If yes, in what way?
4. Has the island changed since the opening of many eco-lodges and other eco-hotels? If yes, in what way?
5. The eco-lodge states on their website that they …[insert based on what specific eco-lodge states]. What are your experiences regarding this?
6. How would you describe your relationship with the staff and owners of the eco-lodge?
7. Have you noticed any changes in the community since the eco-lodge was established, and if so, what are those changes?
8. Have you noticed any changes for the natural environment since the eco-lodge was established, and if so, what are those changes?
9. Do you feel that the eco-lodge actively seeks input from the local community in its decision-making processes?
10. Are there concerns or positive experiences related to the eco-lodge environmental practices that you would like to share?
11. Are there concerns or positive experiences related to the contact with the local community that you would like to share?
12. How do you experience your interactions with the guests of the eco-lodge?
13. How is information about the eco-lodge communicated to the local community, and do you feel well-informed about its operations and initiatives?
14. Is there a system in place for locals to provide feedback or raise concerns about the eco-lodge's impact on the community?
15. Looking ahead, what expectations or hopes do you have regarding the continued presence of the eco-lodge in your community?

9.3.3 Additional questions for neighbors that are local hospitality business owners and or managers

1. How has the presence of the eco-lodge influenced your business and other local businesses in the area?
2. What do you know about ecotourism and do you feel any “pressure” to fulfill this concept? Since the development of eco-lodges
3. Are there any collaborative initiatives or partnerships between your business and the eco-lodge?
4. Are there opportunities for local businesses to showcase their products or services to eco-lodge guests?
5. Are there concerns among local business owners about the influence of foreign investors on the island?

9.4 Appendix D: Specification of interview participants

Date	***Interview Number***	***Specification Position and Foreign/Local***
02.12.2023	Interview 1	Hotel manager in Balgüe and former employee of foreign-owned eco-lodge (local)
05.12.2023	Interview 2	Guest foreign-owned eco-lodge (foreign)
06.12.2023	Interview 3	Hostel owner in Balgüe (local)
08.12.2023	Interview 4	Foreign owned eco-lodge employee (local)
13.12.2023	Interview 5	Foreign owned eco-lodge manager (local)
16.12.2023	Interview 6	Foreign owned eco-lodge manager (foreign)
21.12.2023	Interview 7	Restaurant owner in Balgüe (local)
22.12.2023	Interview 8	Foreign owned eco-lodge employee (local)
23.12.2023	Interview 9	Eco-lodge owner (foreign)
26.12.2023	Interview 10	Foreign owned eco-lodge manager (local)
27.12.2024	Interview 11	Former owner of eco-lodge and social activist (local)
28.12.2024	Interview 12	Guest foreign-owned eco-lodge (foreign)

9.5 Appendix E: Use of ChatGPT

https://chatgpt.com/share/d7995036-7ff9-47b3-b842-dc579ce18a99

https://chatgpt.com/share/7c502db7-ade5-4d9a-aef3-81ba0c9316ef

https://chatgpt.com/share/4be2a679-9431-4753-8e68-75b206ccb75c

https://chatgpt.com/share/d81fd434-4242-48c7-9b78-a82f8968d56f