

The Mixteco Presence in Tijuana

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Translated by Olivia Cadaval

A más de 3.000 kilómetros de su lugar de origen, los mixtecos encontraron en Tijuana, Baja California, un territorio base para asentarse y distribuirse. A esta ciudad llegan y se quedan, o bien de ésta salen hacia San Quintín, al sur del estado, o bien hacia el norte, a los campos y calles de California. En ese movimiento se ha ido forjando en Tijuana una comunidad mixteca de más de 5.000 miembros que se llaman a sí mismos paisanos, mixtecos o oaxaqueños y que los demás los nombran inditos, oaxacas, marías, sureños. Se asienta la mayoría de los mixtecos en la colonia Obrera, al suroeste de la ciudad, entre lomas y cañadas que mucho les recuerda a su natal Mixteca o “pueblo de nubes”.

Since 1960, many Mixtecos have migrated more than 3,000 kilometers (2,000 miles) from their home villages in the state of Oaxaca to Tijuana, settling there and using their community as a way station for further migrations south to San Quintín or north to California. In Tijuana a Mixteco community of more than 5,000 members call one another *paisano* (fellow countryman), *mixteco*, or *oaxaqueño* (Oaxaca), while others call them *inditos* (little Indian), *oaxacas*, *marías* (term for Indian migrant street vendors), or *sureños* (southerner). The majority of the Mixtecos have settled in the Obrero district in the southeast of the city, among hills and narrow canyons reminiscent of the landscape in their native Mixteca or “country of clouds.”

In the cultural mix of Tijuana, to which indigenous and mestizo peoples from all over

Mexico continue to migrate, Mixtecos insist that they are an accepted and recognized part of urban society. At the same time most of them continue to explore their remembered traditional culture. Mixtecos in Tijuana still value this cultural heritage, although they perceive that in their present lives it is of little use to them. They still desire aspects of the life in Mixteca, and they return there when they can to celebrate feasts, to check on land holdings, or for other family matters. Mixteca remains a focus of collective memory.

The Mixtecos have achieved recognition among ethnic groups in Tijuana for the way they celebrate the Day of the Dead. To this traditional feast in the popular religious calendar of Mexico, Mixtecos have added mysticism and symbolism beyond the common Catholic practices in Tijuana. Each year members of the Mixteco community are asked to assist in the design and preparation of Day of the Dead altars at educational and recreational centers. The city's primary and secondary schools hold competitions in Day of the Dead altars, in which Mixteco influence has become quite evident in expressive styles not commonly seen in other cities of northern Mexico.

In Tijuana Mixtecos speak their own language among themselves but learn Spanish and English for social and economic survival. Each region of Mixteca from which migration comes has its own dialect, but these sociolinguistic differences are minimized in Tijuana.

Mixtecos draw social distinctions on the basis of “having made it” economically, giving prestige to the older and more successful members of the community, to bilingual Mixteco teachers, and to those with relatives on the other side of the border who send support. Mestizos among the Mixtecos often distinguish themselves in the ethnic slurs they use, the fights they provoke, and the socioeconomic advantage they take. On their

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Curriculum in the Escuela Bilingüe El Pípila includes Mixteco language and culture. Photo by Ricardo García

side, Mixtecos often want to become like mestizos, speaking Spanish, dressing urbanely, and gaining access to higher levels of consumption — although some Mixtecos live better than mestizos in the Obrero district of Tijuana.

Among Mixtecos, women have greater contact with mestizos in the rest of the city, for women sell diverse products in the market places. Mixteco men work mostly in the United States. A large number of young Mixtecos now work in *maquiladora* assembly plants, as domestics, as masons and construction workers, and as gardeners. Some have become public employees.

Mixtecos see language as the key to cultural identity. The permanent flow of migrants to and from Oaxaca has supported the continued use of Mixtecan in Tijuana. And in daily classes, Mixteco teachers transmit knowledge and pride in their language, using it to explain and celebrate the value of their traditions, especially foods, fiestas, songs, and stories.

The rural, ethnic, and community based culture of Mixtecos in Tijuana is undergoing a transformation whose outcome cannot be completely predicted. Many families continue to preserve their culture, while others let traditional practices fall by the wayside, for there is no communal obligation to keep the faith as there is in the Mixteca. Most insist on the community basis of Mixtecan culture, but now also recognize the

existence of individualism. The necessities and opportunities they encounter in the city oblige them to adopt this other kind of identity. Distinction and stratification are becoming more visible, measured in income and expressed in social ostentation.

With all of this, members of the Mixteco community in Tijuana aspire to find a better way of life. They honor their cultural heritage, but finding it not respected and, furthermore, a cause of discrimination, they continue to lose what they value as they confront the need to search for ways of being counted in the larger society. At the same time that they demand respect for their rights as citizens, as workers, and as human beings, they are adopting many aspects of Mexican border culture.

Mixtecos perceive their future in Tijuana is one of hope and possibility. Confronted with returning to the extreme poverty of the Mixteca, the majority seems ready to remain in Tijuana. The cost is a change of identity, never being the same again. The benefit is survival.

Further Reading

Moreno Barrera, Francisco J. 1992. La tradición oral de los mixtecos en Tijuana. In *Entre la magia y la historia: Tradiciones, mitos y leyendas de la frontera*, ed. M. Valenzuela. México: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.