Mexico Essay, Research Paper

Mexico

Mexico, officially United Mexican States, is an important country because is sharing common border throughout its northern extent with the United States. Consequently, we should spend time analyzing and researching its human culture and environment because this culture is influences United States for its relative location to El Paso, Texas. Mexico is bounded on the west and south by the Pacific Ocean (Fig. 1.), to the east by the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea and on the southeast by Guatemala and Belize. Mexico is roughly triangular in shape and covers and area of 756,066 square miles (1,958,201 square kilometers). It is very interesting that while it is more than 1859 miles across the country from northwest to southeast the width varies from less than 135 miles ant the isthmus to Tehuantepec to more than 1,200 miles in the north (Encyclopedia Britannica Online).

Mexican?s culture has some peculiar characteristic. For example, Mexico is the giant of Middle America, with a 1997 population of 97.8 million, exceeding the others countries of the realm by 27 millions (Blij and Muller 215). Mexico had a series of very sophisticated early civilizations; the Olmecas, Mayas and the Aztecs and their cultural heritage and background is reflected in all the arts, especially their paintings, sculptures, handcrafts and much more. In addition, the Spanish colonial architecture is consider one of the most attractive aspects of the cultural scenery of Mexico, such as the old dwellings, public buildings, and religious structures that remain in the countryside and towns.

The climate has an exceptional characteristic too. It is divide into three climatic zones. First, the cold land (above 6500 ft. to the show line), which includes the high plateau and mountain regions, and has average annual temperatures of 65° to 70° F. Second, the temperature land (2500 to 6500 ft.) where temperatures range between 70° to 75° F.; and third, the warm land, where a very warm to hot climate prevails (Villaca?a 18). Another important aspect is that, this country faces significant environmental challenges affecting almost every section of the country. Vast expanses of southern and southeastern tropical forests have been denuded for cattle raising and agriculture. ?Soil destruction is particularly pronounced in the north and northwest, with more than 60 percent of land considered in a total or accelerated state of erosion? (Merrill and Miro 89).

In this research, of the human culture and environment of Mexico, I would concentrate in some important points that are the following: what makes this area unique? How do people and goods travel through the region and world? What common characteristics are present? And finally how do people interact with their environment?

Social Order

This country has a particular political structure. ?Mexico?s government institutions and political culture bear the imprint of three centuries of Spanish colonial rule? (Merrill and Miro 231). The type of government that prevails in Mexico is a Federal Republic operating under a centralized government. Merrilli and Miro observes, ?the 1917 constitution provides for a federal republic with powers separated into independent executive, legislative, and judicial branches? (231). In practice, the executive is the dominant branch, with power vested in the president, who promulgates and executes the laws of the Congress. The president also legislates by executive decree in certain economic and financial fields, using powers delegated from the Congress. The president is elected by adult choice for a six-year term and may not remain in the office a second period. There is no vice president; in the event of the removal or death of the president, the Congress elects a temporary president (Merrill and Miro 232). The removal of the constitutional restrictions on the Roman Catholic Church, were one of the biggest achievement of Salinas? administration in 1991, the former administration. They fought for a more realistic church-state relationship and they won it. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon, the current President, was sworn in on December 1, 1994 (Fig. 2). President Zedillo is opening Mexico’s political system, reforming the justice system, curtailing corruption, strengthening the fight against narcotics trafficking, and furthering Mexico’s market-oriented economic policies.

Ideology

In order to discuss the Mexican?s ideology, we have to start saying that Mexico has three layers of culture. The Indian is the oldest and actually was composed of a multitude of diverse cultures: The Toltecs, the Mayas, the Olmecs, the Mixtecs, the Zapotecs and the Aztecs. If we visit Mexico we would find that from these cultures great ruins remain, showing the high degree of artistic and social development gain by these peoples (Fig. 3.). The deeply religious feelings of the Indian?s culture were reflected in all areas of activity, agriculture, commerce, architecture, drama, music and science.

The second layers of Mexican?s culture were from Spain, imposed by conquerors and preached by friars and missionaries. Sword and Cross-together laid the foundations of the nation by giving it a common cultural background, European, a common language, Spanish, and a common religion, Roman Catholicism. Villica?a says, ?today, the culture is Mexican. It was born from independence in 1821. Also, agrarian reform and industrial development have now transformed the country into a modern nation, which is neither wholly Spanish nor wholly Indian, but certainly American? (50). As we can notice three races have gone into the creation of Mexican: the Creole, the Indian, and the mestizos. Mestizos is a term used to describe the ethnic blend of people descended from Native Ameridians, the indigenous peoples of the region, and the Spaniards who conquered in the 1500s.

Some customary beliefs of this culture, as Villica?a says, are for example:

it is considered, for the Indian world, a bad thing for a mother to see an eclipse of the sun or the moon, the child always bears the name of his saint?s day, with such other names as the family chooses from its own closest members. Some example relating marital practice is that among the poorer urban classes marriage usually come very early; the girls marry when they are about 14, the boys at about 17. In most cases the marriage has been agreed to by both sets of parents; sometimes the bride and bridegroom have had no part in the arrangement and perhaps have never even met (50).

Most Indian ceremonies in Mexico have been modified by the influence of the Catholic Church; but this has generally not been strong enough to destroy the distinctively Indian character of these ceremonies. Among some tribes such ceremonies are elaborate and complex and require a great deal of time. For Example, ?the Mayas of Cha-Dom continue to worship their ancient tribal gods, giving them the general title of Yuntzilob (the lords)? (Villica?a 61). One thing very significant is that these same people are sincere, even fervent, in their belief in Christianity, but as individuals belonging to essentially unchanged agricultural communities they still recognize the old gods as protectors of the harvests and rulers of the rain. (Villica?a 61)

Touching about holiday, at least one-third of the 365 days in the years are holidays in Mexico and many of these holiday are celebrated with festivals which require long and careful preparation (fig. 4.). Such as, the street has to be decorated, special dishes prepared musicians and singers engaged, costumes renovated, dances practiced. They have two kind of celebration: feasts coming down from pre-Columbian time and feasts of Spanish and Catholic origin (Villica?a 70).

Food

The cooking of Mexico, as much as anything else in this country, is the result of a union of the pre-Columbian past with the Mediterranean tradition. When the Spanish conquered Mexico they provide a link to the foods of France, Italy and, of course, Spain (Villica?a 70). Vallica?a reports that, ?the food of any country is on the one hand deeply rooted in tradition since it is dependent on the available resources and on the other amen-able to change since it is affected by the tastes of conquerors and traders? (70).

Since the foods of Mexico have a very ancient origin I would like to mention three of the long list of contribution Mexico has made to the world?s food. First, chile: includes peppers of many kinds and shapes, both hot and mild. They are used both as an ingredient in cooking and a condiment. Second, Maiz: this is the maize or corn of the New World. Third, Aguacate: the avocado pear, the fruit of the avocado tree; its flesh is thick and buttery with a somewhat nutty flavor. It is widely used in salads and sandwiches (Villica?a 70-71).

A breakfast in Mexico, as elsewhere in the world, is generally served between 7 and 9 in the morning. They usually open with a bowl of fruits such as papaya and pineapple, or fruit juice. Eggs either fried or raw follow this served with bolillos, small Italian or French-type breads, or tortillas (the flat pancakes of ground corn meal). The beverage is coffee, milk or chocolate. The dinner is eaten between 1 and 3 in the afternoon. It may start with one of the much rich and good soups, followed by spaghetti, macaroni or rice, accompanying an entr?e of meat, fish or fowl. A salad and fried beans usually fill out the dish. Fruit or dessert, and coffee or tea ends the meal. Super is a relatively light meal is eaten between 8 and 10 PM. Generally it is only a beverage such as milk or chocolate, serve with pozole (a pork stew), tamales (corn flour shaped like bananas and filled with ground meat, beans and Chile) and sweetbreads. Something to remember is that the Chile is never out of a Mexican?s plate. Villaca?a agree that the most famous of the traditional dishes is mole poblano (mole from Puebla). The dish was developed in the city of Puebla in 1531 at the Santa Rosa House of Lay Sisters (Villica?a 71).

Clothing

The Mexican dress has an important part in their culture. In the rural area most men wear simple cotton shirts and pants of the same color, generally white, though pink, yellow and other bright colors are sometimes seen. Differences occur in the cut of the shirts and pants from region to region. Often the men also wear broad sashes of wool or cotton wrapped several times around the waist. In some villages less traditional garments are worn. For example, (Fig. 8) the typical male Indian?s costume in the state of Chiapas consists of short pants, a decorated shirt and a woolen jacket, which is fastened at the waist with a leather belt. The basic masculine costume is completed by the sarape (literally, cover) and the sombrero (hat). The sarape is a blanket of hand-woven wool, with an opening for the head, which is worn like a sleeveless cloak.

No designer could have created a hat more suited to the climate and terrain of Mexico than the sombrero (hat). Sombreros are made everywhere, and there are many variations in materials, shape and size of crown and brim. (Villaca?a 86).

The national women?s costume is known as the china poblana. The original costume consisted of a full red cotton shirt; a green yoke; a white sleeveless blouse; a dark shawl, worn over the shoulders and crossed on the breast; a string of pearls with several strands; headgear of colored ribbons; and red or green high-heeled boots. The sleeveless, white cotton blouse, sometime embroidered with silk and little pearls, is the most common kind of blouses.

Shelter

I consider that one of the most attractive aspects of the cultural scenery of Mexico is the Spanish colonial architecture, such as the old dwellings, public buildings, and religious structures that remain in the countryside and towns. In the sixteenth century Spaniards introduced two main types of rural house, both from southern Spain. One was the one-story, rectangular dwelling of whitewashed stone or adobe walls, with a gabled roof of hollow tile or straw thatch. The other type was the squat, flat-roofed adobe house, often windowless, but frequently having a built-in hearth with a chimney (Whetten 285).

Most of public building and many of the private houses of the rich were more pretentious and durable than the small rural and town dwellings. This public building was usually of stone and mortar; each building was normally constructed around a courtyard or patio, with colonnaded porticoes or arcades facing outward on the plaza. Today, arcade buildings of colonial style still grace the plazas of many old Mexican towns, such as Oaxaca, Morelia, and Puebla. According to Whettem, in the rural population, a housing census conducted on a national scale in 1940 classifies 45 percent of all dwellings in Mexico as huts and hovels. The huts consist in a single room, which serves as a kitchen also. Often the cooking is done over an open fire outside the hut (285).

In the presence, a lack of adequate housing is one of Mexico’s most serious problems. Although substandard housing is more visible in urban areas, living conditions are probably worse in rural areas. Within the cities, the federal government has built multiunit housing projects. The Mexican Economic Report in October of 1999 reports that:

in the past five years, an additional 8.3 million Mexicans have been provided with drinking water services and 10.5 million with drainage and sewer systems. Electric power now reaches 95% of Mexico’s homes. Half a million families in low-income neighborhoods have received regularized deeds to their lots, and 2.1 million have obtained financing to purchase or improve a house or apartment. Last November, INFONAVIT made a commitment to finance the construction of 200,000 housing units in 18 months, the most ambitious objective the institute has ever set (Mexico Connect).

Systems of Livelihood

Mexican society is clearly divided by income and educational level. Although a middle class is developing in the cities, the principal division is between the wealthy, well-educated elite and the urban and rural poor.

Generalized rural poverty is a serious problem. Agrarian reform in the central and southern parts of the country has decrease the opportunities for economic or social advancement. As a result of an increasing proportion of the rural population, most of them are landless and depends on day labor, often at less than minimum wages, for survival.

The Encyclopedia Britannica agree that the largest segment of the urban population is in the lowest socioeconomic class. They estimated that at least 40 percent of city

dwellers have incomes below the official poverty level, including a significant percentage of workers who are government employees. Extensive squatter settlements, often lacking basic services, are a common element of all Mexican cities. (Encyclopedia)

Merril and Miro in their book Mexico a Country Study observe that,

in 1988 employers and the self-employed constituted 29 percent of the labor force, employees 56 percent, and unpaid family workers 15 percent. Agriculture, forestry, and fishing employed some 24 percent; trade, hotels, and restaurant employed 19 percent; construction employed 5 percent; finance and real estate employed 5 percent; transportation and communications employed 4 percent; and 21 percent were engaged in other service work. They continued saying that about half of all manufacturing workers were employed in small and medium size enterprise (298).

The principal industrial centers of Mexico include the Mexico City metropolitan area, Monterrey, and Guadalajara. ?In the early 1990s, the capital area alone accounted for about half of the country?s employment, and almost one-third of all manufacturing enterprises. Manufacturers likes Mexico City because they can find large and highly

skilled work force, large consumer market, low distribution costs and proximity to government decision makers and nation?s communication system? (Merrillo and Miro 301). By the 1980s, more than two-thirds of all foreign investment in Mexico was concentrated in maquiladora zones near the United States border because offered foreign investors both proximity to the United States market and low labor costs. This new economic source is as a result of NAFTA, which is a government program between Mexico, United States and Canada to expand their role in international trade and rise their economic Merrillo and Miro 302).

Transportation

Mexico’s land transportation network is one of the most extensive in Latin America.

More than 4,000 kilometers (2,400 miles) of four-lane highway have been built through government concessions to private sector contractors since 1989. The 36,000 kilometers (22,000 miles) of government-owned railroads in Mexico are currently being privatized through sale of 50-year operating concessions. The Northeast railroad, Mexico’s primary freight carrier, was privatized early in 1997 for $1.4 billion. Another significant section, the Northwest railroad, was privatized in June 1997 for $400 million (Merrillo and Miro 205).

The most heavily traveled highway routes is linking Mexico City with the large population and industrial centers of Guadalajara and Monterrey, as well with the main port city of Veracruz. In spite of the fact that, much of Mexico?s public highway system is in poor condition as a result of insufficient investment in road maintenance. According to the World Bank, ?in 1994, 61 percent of Mexican public roads were in poor condition, 29 percent were in fair condition, and only 10 percent were in good condition. They added that, in 1995 there were 12.1 million registered vehicles in Mexico? (Merillo and Miro 207).

Tampico and Veracruz, on the Gulf of Mexico, are Mexico’s two primary seaports. Recognizing that the low productivity of Mexico’s 79 ports poses a threat to trade development, the government has constantly been privatizing port operations to improve their efficiency.

A number of international airlines serve Mexico, with direct or connecting flights from most major cities in the United States, Canada, Europe, Japan, and Latin American (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Family

The Mexican household, those family members who dwell under the same roof, differs from the North American household. Mexican households can include the parents? nuclear family as well as that of a married son or daughter and their young children. In most cases in which two or more nuclear families share the same roof, each nuclear family keeps its separate budget and, a separate kitchen. After a few years of living with their parents, married children who choose for this arrangement often set up independent households.

Another interesting aspect of Mexican?s family is that members of the family are expected to display affection openly and reciprocally, as well as provide each other material and moral support. The traditional family has the power to enforce these virtues through the exercise of pressure over its members and through a series of actions usually performed by its elder members. These include social pressure, manipulation, and gossip. In a national survey in 1995 sponsored by the Institute of Social Research of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) observe,

the family remains the most important social institution. Respondents also associated the family with such positive terms as love, household, children, and well being. Approximately half of all respondents agreed that husbands and wives should jointly handle child-care duties and perform housekeeping chores. However, such views were very differences with the low income and minimally educated respondents who argue regarded household tasks as women?s works. In addition, men often subjected these women to control, domination, and violence. Observer noted that women generally were held to stricter sexual code of conduct than men were. Sexual activity outside of marriage was regarded as immoral for ?decent? women but acceptable for men (Merrillo and Miro 117).

Music and Dance

Mexican music is part of the precious culture of their people. The Indian had the earliest musical?s culture of the region because they ruled the region before the Spanish conquest. In the Indian?s times music played a vital and extensive part in Indian life. Every festival, ceremony, religious rite and military parade was accompanied by music and dancing. Whole orchestras comprising both wind and percussion instruments were used, as well as large choirs. The Spaniards introduced the musical traditions of Europe, and during their rule they developed a wide division between the music of the Church and aristocracy, which followed European styles, and of the common people, in which native elements remained strong. From the Spanish folk songs and dances brought to Mexico by the conquerors, there evolved the Mexican sones, jarabes and huapangos (types Mexican folk?s music) (Tylor 267). ?After the Revolution of 1910, a growing spirit of nationalism caused a new interest and respect of native themes and melodies?, observe Tylor (267).

In recent decades art and popular music have grown closer together as classical composers have sought to combine modern techniques with traditional elements to create music that conveys the unique spirit of Mexico. An important type of 20th century popular music consists of soldiers? songs of the revolutionary period. They often based on already exiting melodies, to which new words have been set. Many of them have a ballad-like, episodic character, but many have no obvious political content. A number of these songs, such as ?Adelita,? ?La Cucaracha,? and ?Valentina,? have won great popularity outside Mexico itself. Other popular music, especially ranchero and mariachi music, has attracted a wide following throughout the Spanish-speaking world,

and Mexico City has become one of the majors recording centers for America (Merrillo and Miro 150).

To encourage and help disseminate Mexican music in all its forms, the federal government sponsors the National Institute of Fine Arts. Under its auspices are the programs of the National Symphony Orchestra, the Ballet Folkloric, and the Modern and Classical Ballet, all of which perform nationally and internationally to promote

Mexican culture, Folk and popular culture also receive support through government bodies, among them the Native Institute, which seeks to preserve and stimulate traditional craftsmanship (Merrillo and Miro 150).

Arts and Crafts

Folk arts, including the weaving of magnificent textiles, pottery making, and silver work, have flourished in Mexico throughout its history, but with the coming of the Spanish to Mexico the native peoples were introduced to European art, especially painting, and building techniques. Many Spanish paintings were brought to Mexico, and during the 17th century gifted native artists became adept to religious oil painting, modeling religious figures in wax, and the art of polychrome wood sculpture (Cumberland 175). ?The early native art combined with the Spanish influence give to Mexican painting a richness of color not yet achieved in Spain at that time? (Merrillo and Miro 155). In fact, ?fifty years before Murillo made his mark as a colorist; Mexican artists were already giving their works rich red and blue tones. This type of work is sometimes referred to as Mexican baroque to distinguish it from the more rigid European baroque,? explain Rojas (30).

?Balt?sar de Echave the elder (c.1548-1620) is considered to be the first great Mexican artist; he founded the first native school in 1609. His Agony in the Garden (begun 1582) is an example of a Renaissance work with a Spanish character? (Rojas 33).

Rojas continues,

Contemporary Mexican painters and sculptors have continued to produce an extraordinary variety of works in many styles and techniques. Major figures include Jos? Luis Cuevas, Jorge G. Camarena, Mart?nez de Hoyos, Frida Kahlo (Diego Rivera’s wife), Enrique Echeverr?a, and Leonora Carrington. Of the abstract easel painters, Rufino Tamayo is an outstanding 20th-century figure (33).

Modern architecture has also flourished. Functionalism, expressionism, and other schools have left their imprint on a large number of works in which Mexican stylistic elements have been combined with European and North American techniques.

About architecture, in the great manufacturing center of Monterrey we can find fine examples of industrial architecture. Perhaps the most outstanding achievement of contemporary Mexican architecture is the Ciudad Universitaria (Fig 6) (University City) outside Mexico City, a complex of buildings and grounds housing the National Univ. of Mexico (Rojas 34).

Norms and Behavior

Mexican?s culture actually is made of two contradictory elements, tradition and revolution. Tradition enters into the smallest, everyday things of his life as well as into the largest and most exceptional. For example, every home owns a metate, the rolling pin and platform made of volcanic stone for the making of tortillas, the cornmeal cakes the Mexican eats as bread. These objects survive from the pre-Columbian times. In poorer home, the Mexican still dies on the pepate, the straw mat on which he was born and learned how to make love. In richer home, the pepate is used as a rug, while in still others it is a wall decoration. This too is of pre-Columbian origin. All the knowledge, and ability that the Mexican have about herb, animals and birds for medicinal purpose is generations old. His most familiar drinks, tequila as well as chocolate and foods, turkey and tortillas, are similarly ancient. Tradition is also present in his folk arts and crafts. Each state has its own specialties: Michoacan is known for its ceramics, copper objects, Guadalajara for its glass and pottery; Oaxaca for it woolen and cotton goods, and back pottery; Querrero for its silver, masks and red pottery. These products reflect the variety of the peoples and cultures in pre-Columbian age (Villaca?a 47,48).

If tradition is one element of the Mexican?s culture, revolution is the other. It has taken no less than two revolution, the War of Independence in 1810 and the Revolution of 1910, to bring about the reconciliation and redefinition of the dual inheritance, Spanish and Indian, that makes the modern Mexican. And yet the revolution themselves have made its value, along with independence and economic improvement, stability and continuity. Therefore, it is quite natural that the politics of a Mexican tend to become institutional, formal and ceremonial (Villaca?a 48). For example, nothing express this more quickly and clearly than the name of the party in which the revolution has come to culmination, the Party of Revolutionary Institution. In other words, the Mexican has institutionalized their revolution.

?The personal qualities of the Mexican reveal an array of paradoxes?, said Villica?a (48). He continues,

from his loves and regard of tradition, he values courtesy and manners. He is friendly to others and ready to go out of his way to be helpful. And yet, suddenly he can be impenetrable and stoic, not merely ready to endure pain, want and failure silently, but to endure them with self-sufficiency; or he can be exuberant, wild and violent in action. He loves life, children, their baptisms, first communion, marriage and birthdays are major occasions of joy and celebration (48).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this research has transformed the perception that I have about the Mexican?s culture. The cultural diversity and racial mix of modern Mexico owes much to its complex, colorful and ancient history. Mexico is a nation of a profound history that at the same time is open to the future. They are proud of their culture and of the diversity with which it is manifested in their regions. As I mentioned before their cultural heritage and background is reflected in all the arts, especially in their paintings, sculptures handcrafts and much more. Also, throughout this paper, I have learned that three great civilizations?the Mayas, the Olmecs, and later the Toltecs?preceded the wealthy Aztec Empire, conquered in 1519?21 by the Spanish under Hernando Cort?s.

Mexico shares a fraternal bond with Central America that unites them in a special way within the greater Latin American community. They share their history, language and hopes for progress. They share a profound link with Europe that dates back to the creation of their nations, and which has persisted constructively for centuries. Today, they share a World that is more united than ever before through communication and economic exchange. Throughout the ages Mexico has contributed to the civilization of mankind greatly . Today this legacy continues to live and will endure until the end.

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