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What Does It Mean to be Mexican?

What does it mean to be Mexican? To be Mexican is to be conflicted. In order to examine this theory, it is necessary to observe the influences that have converged over time and have been critical to the development of the Mexican character. In this regard, three distinct themes must be considered: the Indigenous influence, the European Influence, and Mexican modern society.

As we consider the question, “What does it mean to be Mexican”, we must examine the influences of the Indigenous cultures on the matter of Mexican identity. As we know, the land that is now Mexico was not “empty land” when the conquistadores arrived from Europe on the 1500’s. It was a land densely populated by many diverse and successful civilizations. One such civilizations was that of the Aztecs. The Aztec society in Mexico was at its height in 1519 under the rule of the emperor Moctezuma. Their capital was the great city of Tenochtitlán in present day Mexico City. The Aztec society centered around agriculture and they were known to be great warriors. They were, perhaps, most notoriously know for their practice of human sacrifice. Upon hearing of human sacrifice one may mistakenly conclude that the Aztec people were violent and horrific for the sake of violence and horror. Upon closer inspection one may realize that the practice of human sacrifice was rooted in a much more complex presentation of cultural and religious identity. As cultural historian, Irma Clendinnen, explains in her essay *The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society*, “Aztec rhetoric and Aztec ritual were unified in the endeavor to sustain a social order sufficiently in harmony with the natural order to survive within it.” (pg. 78) Within the context of Indigenous influence,

one can conclude that to be Mexican is to be conflicted by the desire to find harmony and value of oneself within a society with a history deeply rooted in human sacrifice.

To further answer the question of what it means to be Mexican one must examine the European influence that arrived in Mexico by way of the conquistadores in the 16th century and the ensuing imperialistic colonization that followed. Upon arriving in the “New World” the conquistadores mistook the Indigenous people as being simple minded, lazy, and prone to violence toward their own. The Europeans were quick to denounce the Indigenous cultures and spread their oppressive laws, views and religion on this newly conquered people. The Indigenous people were forced to adopt the ways of life, the religious practices and were even forced (actually or metaphorically) to procreate with their oppressors. According to Octavio Paz, in his essay, *Sons of Malinche*, the mixing of the European and Indigenous people and the resulting mestizo race can be metaphorically described as “Los hijos de la chingada” as heard in the Mexican war cry “¡Viva México, hijos de la chingada!” Paz explains that this term “hijos de la chingada” (sons of she who was violated) can be attributed to the violation of the mother (the Indigenous people - represented by the Indigenous girl, La Malinche) by the father (the Europeans - represented by the conquistador, Cortes). The subsequent denouncement by the Mexican people of both “the mother” and “the father” is further explained by Paz: “In this shout we condemn our origins and deny our hybridism. The strange permanence of Cortés and La Malinche in the Mexican’s imagination and sensibilities reveals that they are something more than historical figures: they are symbols of a secret conflict that we have still not resolved.” (pg. 26) Within the context of European influence, as exemplified by this quote, to be Mexican means to be in constant conflict against one’s own self identity and perhaps to deny the very existence of that identity altogether.

Finally, an examination of Mexico’s modern society is useful in answering the question of what it means to be Mexican. In her examination of Mexican “modernity”, Alma Guillermoprieto speaks to the theme of mexicanidad in her essay, *Mexico City, 1992*. The North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement between Mexico and its northern

continental neighbors was signed in 1992 in an effort, asserts Guilleromoprieto, to “modernize” Mexico by uniting commercial with the U.S. and Canada and imitating Western culture. Now, she argues, Mexicans have become Americanized with a McDonald’s on every corner and credit card bills piling up, but in their hearts they still identify with the lyrics of their beloved *Ranchera* music: “Hardly anyone knows anymore what it is to live on a ranch or to die of passion, and yet, when it comes to the defining moments of *mexicanidad*, *ranchera* music, with its odes to love, idyllic landscapes, and death for the sake of honor, continues to reign supreme.” (pg. 42) Through an examination of Mexico’s modern society we see that to be Mexican is to be conflicted by the notion of remaining loyal to the “way things were” while simultaneously seeking “modernity” alongside the rest of the world.

In conclusion, to be Mexican is to be in constant conflict with oneself. The ancient Mesoamerican act of human sacrifice represents the conflict within the Mexican character to seek balance in a world of imbalance. The violation of the Mexican Indigenous people by the European conquistadores is symbolic of the Mexican conflict of self identity. In modern society, the Mexican character is conflicted by modernization and a need to remain loyal to its traditional roots.