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# MEXICAN-AMERICANS: A CULTURE OF STRUGGLE, DIGNITY, AND SURVIVAL

By Aurora Bravo

*In this Paper Aurora Bravo explores her own cultural identity as a Mexican-American living in California. Her essay is a fascinating window to the vision that a college student has on her own complex experiences living in California at a time when language, education and economy are both the means and objects of socio-cultural contestation.*

## **Introduction**

Culture is a product of civilization and human creativity; it includes all aspects of human adaptation. These are sets of values, beliefs, and norms common to a group of people. Culture includes language, food, ideas, customs, codes of behavior, social roles, institutions, works of art, music, religion, rituals, ceremonies, and marriage patterns among many other elements. (Jurmain, R., Kilgore, L., Trevathan, W., Nelson, H., 2004). Culture is a set of learned behaviors transmitted from one generation to the next by nonbiological means. We most commonly use this term to identify a minority group. Historically, culture has been used to oppress communities. There is a dominant culture accepted by the American mainstream; this idea has been used as a control method to impose power and encourage assimilation to the mainstream culture.

## **Mexican-American Culture**

As it is the case for any human culture, the Mexican-American is varied and constantly changing due to the influence of other cultures. The particular case of the Mexican culture in the United States seems to be special: there is constant cultural exchange between Mexico and the United States, a constant flow of ideas and traditions back and forth. Mexican-

Americans hold very strong bonds to their language, people, traditions, and homeland; mainly to the proximity of such. In the United States the Hispanic population (12.5%) is the largest and fastest growing minority group, Mexican-Americans comprise 66% of all Hispanics. By the middle of the twenty-first century one out of every six Americans will be of Mexican descent (US Census, 2000).

Spanish is the main language, nevertheless Spanglish, which is a combination of Spanish and English, is being used more and more frequently among younger generations. The Mexican-American nuclear family is what the American culture considers an extended family. Typically Mexican-Americans have very strong bonds to grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, godfathers, godmothers, and so on. In the 1920 US census of Salinas, CA the only household that had cousins as part of the nuclear family was the Tavares family who emigrated from Mexico to Salinas, California. This is a proof of the strong bonds and family ties that are indispensable to Mexican-American culture.

Food is a defining aspect of every culture and the Mexican-American culture is not an exception. The Mexican food is very unique and special. Some of the typical authentic main dishes are tamales, po-

sole, and tacos, just to mention a few. They are mainly cooked for special occasions such as Birthdays, Christmas, and New Years. These dishes vary from family to family, mainly influenced by the state of Mexico from which they were brought to the United States. Other dishes, to other cultures, might seem a little exotic and even disgusting. Among the more extravagant and exotic meals are the grasshoppers, menudo (a soup made from cows stomach), tacos de cabeza (made from cows head), tacos de lengua (made from cows tongue), and tacos de cesos (made from a cows brain). Not all Mexican-Americans eat these kinds of meals; I personally haven't tasted many of these. This assumption might be compared to the stereotype that Asians eat dogs. Cooking some of these dishes is a moment for family gathering and story telling. The Mexican food eaten in Mexico is different from that eaten in the United States. The perfect example of this is the Taco Bell fast food restaurants, in Mexico there were no burritos but due to a cross-cultural exchange from the United States now there are.

Social roles are very straightforward, especially to the more traditional families. Mexican families are mainly patriarchal and male dominated; nevertheless as families become assimilated to the dominant culture these roles have changed. The traditional role of women was to stay home and take care of the children; on the other hand the role of men was to work in the labor force and provide for the family. Children were taught at a very young age their role and were expected to abide by it. Things have changed since more and more Mexican-American women are working outside of their homes but now they have a double chore; to work, to have dinner ready and take care of the children.

Another unfounded stereotype associated with Mexican-Americans is that they are all Catholics, which is not true. A majority of us are Catholic but they are also Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Mormons, etc. Catholic religious holidays are very important in the Mexican-American culture: for example, El Dia de la Virgin de Guadalupe, Easter, Day of the Death, and Christmas. Marriages, Baptisms, and first Communion are very special occasions that deserve big celebrations.

Since the number of Mexican-Americans is so large especially in California, Arizona, Texas, Nevada, and New Mexico it is very easy to maintain these cultural ties among the various communities. Some of the biggest celebrations that reinforce the cultural traditions of Mexican-Americans are Cinco de Mayo, and 16 de Septiembre ( the anniversary of Mexican independence). They are celebrated all across the United States, including the White House.

I grew up in Salinas, California, a predominantly Mexican-American community. As of the year 2000, Salinas had a population of about 151,060 people and approximately 64.1% of this population is of Hispanic/Latino descent. The majority of this population is of Mexican descent (US Census, 2000). Growing in this type of community my cultural experience would have been very different if, for instance, I would have been Jewish. As a child I grew up in a relatively culturally monotonous environment. All the schools I attended were predominantly Mexican-American. I was able to maintain my traditions, language, and customs without been mocked or looked at strangely. If I had been a Jew, my language would have been different, obviously as would have my religion, religious holidays, and traditions. When everybody else would be celebrating the Day of the Death, I would have felt

no connections or emotional ties to that celebration. I would have not been able to communicate with anyone in the language that might have been spoken at home and when everybody else spoke Spanish I would have felt extremely uncomfortable. It might have been more difficult for my parents to enforce and maintain my culture. Assimilation would have been a tempting approach to ease these differences; who knows, I might have identified with the Mexican-American culture rather than the Jewish one.

### **Power Relations, Equity, and Social Justice**

Mexican-Americans have been deprived of equity and social justice since the formation of what is now the United States of America. When President James K. Polk acquired the presidency in 1845, the idea of "Manifest Destiny" was very strong among the American people. This idea gave the United States the "right" to invade, "conquer," and "civilize" as much of the American continent as possible. This idea of Manifest Destiny persuaded the Americans to think of themselves as the chosen people of God and as the race of the Lord. President Polk eagerly sought the war with Mexico because this war meant more land, not only Texas but more than that. He offered Mexico \$5 million dollars for California, but Mexico rejected the offer. With this rejection the United States decided to take it by force if necessary. The war began in April 25, 1846 and ended in February 2, 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna was the president of Mexico, and when the Mexican-American war erupted, Santa Anna was an exile in Cuba he was no longer president. He was called by the Mexican Government to serve as general in the war. Later he was imprisoned by the United States military forces and forced to sign the Treaty of Guadalupe

Hidalgo, so the treaty that took half of Mexico's territory was not valid because generals don't sign treaties. There was never monetary exchange between Mexico and the United States. As we study history we never learn this truth. We are always taught that the Mexican government was very ignorant to sell half of its territory for five million dollars. A great inequity is to be derived from a truth that changes the perception of your history and of your people (Acuna, 2000).

Mexican-Americans are among the many minority groups subordinated by the American mainstream. They've had long struggles for power, equity, and social justice. Mexican-Americans have always been part of the liberal agenda of the American mainstream; this is a way in which minorities are supposed to assimilate to the dominant culture. The Mexican-American movement arose during the 1950's, parallel to the civil rights movement. This movement was formed in response to the destruction of a culture and of a people.

This is not only history it is still relevant today. The Mexican community has been targeted with various different racist propositions, mainly in the state of California. In 1986 California voters passed proposition 63, making English the official language. Proposition 187 was proposed under the Pete Wilson administration. He called the increase of Mexican-American population in California the "Mexican invasion". Mexican undocumented workers were an easy scapegoat. This proposition would deny Mexican undocumented immigrants health and educational services. A \$1.5 million campaign was launched in favor of proposition 187. Our current senator Dianne Feinstein ran an ad claiming that 3,000 "illegals" crossed the border each night. Another ad showed thousands of Mexicans crossing a

wire fence, forcing their way to the United States. These kinds of unfounded and unrealistic ads created paranoia among the people of California against Mexicans. This forced the Mexican-American community to separate and 52% of them voted in favor of this proposition. Unfortunately this racist proposition passed but it was removed due to its unconstitutionality. In June 1998 Proposition 227 made its way through. This Proposition terminated bilingual education; it was referred to as the "English for Children" initiative. This proposition did not value the merits of bilingual education but it was passed by the numerous untested assumptions that destroyed the programs effectiveness. Bilingual education was one of the many programs advanced by Mexican-American activists; it was an attempt to transform society into a more culturally tolerant place. Later it became a strategy to transition Spanish speaking immigrants into a more tolerant bilingual educational system that facilitated the process of learning English.

There have been many attempts by the Mexican-American community to obtain equity. In the 1970's, Mexican-Americans in Colorado formed La Raza Unida party. This was a political party aimed to elect Mexican-Americans to office, first locally and then hoping these elections would be national. Quickly this party spread to Texas and California. Some of the main leaders of La Raza Unida party were Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, Bert Corona, and Jose Angel Gutierrez. The goal of this political party was to become a national third party. The pressure was so great from the dominant group to this relatively new and inexperienced political party that, as soon as this dream was becoming a reality and the numbers of Mexican-Americans were becoming so big and important in the

Southwest, this party was forced to dissolve. Many of their political gatherings and conferences were broken down by police harassment, massive arrests, imprisonment, and brutalities. In one occasion the "founding father" of this party, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, served a 40-day jail sentence accused of carrying concealed weapons. This party was a promise and hope for the Mexican-American's struggle for justice. Mexican-Americans were becoming a majority in the cities of the Southwest, for example, Los Angeles, CA; Crystal City, Cotulla, San Antonio, and Carrizo Springs, TX. By 1975 all of the school board members and personnel of the Crystal City school district were Mexican-American. The movement grew and Mexican-Americans threatened to take control of these cities. The dominant group has always feared giving up and having to share power, so they took La Raza Unida party off the ballots forcing them to file a lawsuit. This was a very expensive process and the party did not have sufficient funds to pay this expense, leading to the dissolution of this promising political solution.

### **Contemporary**

Mexican-Americans were equally as segregated and discriminated as blacks. Schools in poor Mexican-American neighborhoods are predominantly Mexican-American with no other race, isn't this segregation? These schools have the lowest budgets, the lowest number of after school programs, the worst campuses, and the oldest and out of date textbooks. The income of Mexican-Americans is 40% less than that of non-Hispanic whites. People of Mexican decent are less likely to work in managerial or professional occupations. Mexican-Americans are the group with the lowest level of education, only 7% have a bachelor's degree (US Census, 2000). Is this equity?

Mexican-Americans comprise 66% of all Hispanics, yet they are still underrepresented politically. Political campaigning has recently been aimed to the Mexican-American population due to its great and increasing number of registered voters; nevertheless, our votes are being sought but our issues are still not being addressed. Mexican-Americans have not acquired equal treatment as of today. Some of the issues affecting this sector of the United States population today are: inequality in the labor force, poor working conditions, education, health insurance, and the lack of proper representation,

Health insurance is an issue that affects Mexican-Americans directly, as 66.9% of the population living in the Southwest does not have health insurance (US Census, 2000). This number is so large due to the effect of the uninsured Mexican-Americans living in this sector of the United States. Because of the lack of health insurance the Mexican-American community does not obtain any form of preventive care. The Mexican-American population ranks number one in high risk for diabetes; 10.2% of all Mexican-Americans suffer from this disease.

Mexican-Americans have the lowest level of educational attainment compared to any other major group in the United States. Another key area of inequity is in the Federal

TRIO programs. Currently Mexican-Americans comprise 30% of the students eligible to participate in the Federal TRIO programs (Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, and Educational Opportunity Centers) yet make up only 15% of the participants. Currently the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) is urging congress to direct the US department of education to address this underrepresentation. This underrepresenta-

tion is caused by the lack of counseling and attention directed to Mexican-Americans at the high school and community college level.

President John F. Kennedy's Executive Order (E.O.) 10925 passed affirmative action in 1961. "Affirmative is an action to ensure that applicants are treated equally without regard to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin." Created by the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, this program opened the doors to many Mexican-American students who now had an opportunity to enter universities and graduate schools. Nevertheless this law was too good to be maintained, in 1998 the banning of the use of affirmative action in admissions at the University of California system went into effect. UC Berkeley had a 61% drop in admissions of African American, Mexican-American and Native American students, and UCLA had a 36% decline (NAACP, 2005).

### **What is at stake?**

There have been many institutional strategies to obtain power, equity, and social justice for Mexican-Americans; for example, La Raza Unida Party and affirmative action. When these strategies seem to obtain importance, authority, and start being effective whether it's reverse discrimination or expensive court hearings they are destroyed. Unfortunately our society seems to be taking one step forward and two steps back with respect to equity for Mexican-Americans.

Affirmative action needs to be returned to the Mexican-Americans. This is the only opportunity we have to obtain higher education. In the United States income equals a better education, Mexican-Americans are among the poorest and least educated group; does this mean we don't deserve an equal education? The Aca-

demic Performing Index (API) is a California Standards tests in English, Language Arts, Mathematics, and Social Sciences. As shown in the table below, the school with the greatest number of Hispanics is the one with the lowest API score.

**Table 3.** School API and Ethnic Background, (Gutierrez, 2002-2003)

School name	API	Wht	Af.Am	His
La Mesa Elementary School	870	70%	8%	13%
Bay View Elementary School	840	64%	5%	21%
Foothill Elementary School	805	65%	4%	16%
Monte Vista Elementary School	798	73%	3%	10%
Marshall (George C.) Elementary School	796	66%	13%	10%
Olson (Ione) Elementary School	779	36%	12%	18%
Crumpton (J. C.) Elementary School	690	29%	21%	21%
Marina Vista Elementary School	690	27%	9%	36%
Marina del Mar Elementary School	655	19%	15%	42%
Larkin (Thomas O.) Elementary School	648	41%	5%	46%
Del Monte (Elementary)	645	32%	6%	57%
Del Rey Woods Elementary School	631	15%	4%	73%
Ord Terrace Elementary School	589	15%	12%	55%
Highland Elementary School	553	9%	19%	60%
Cabrillo (Juan) Elementary School	433	1%	2%	94%

This is a matter of opportunity and Mexican Americans deserve the same opportunity, as affirmative action stated; not considering race, religion, color, and socioeconomic status.

My contribution to the struggle for equity and social justice for Mexican-Americans is going to be through counseling. I plan to work as a counselor for Ali-

sal High School in Salinas, CA, a predominantly Mexican-American school. I intend to help students find a path to reach their educational aspirations. I want to help them understand that it might be hard because we are part of an underprivileged group, but it is possible. Through education and hard work conditions for Mexican-Americans will improve.

Schools that are predominantly Mexican-American should have a higher number of teachers, custodians, librarians, principals, and staff who are Mexican-American. It is very difficult for a student to relate to somebody that does not look like them and does not understand their culture, values, beliefs, and priorities

### Conclusion

The Mexican-American culture is very rich in traditions, values, and believes but very poor in its access to power relations, equity, and social justice. Mexican-Americans are the largest group inside the Hispanic category yet being so large they are the most underrepresented, undereducated, and marginalized in the American society. In the southwest they are the group that has been here for the longest time (historically), besides the Native-Americans. Our struggle does not end here, we are no longer going to cross our arms and wait for a better tomorrow; we are going to fight for one. La Raza Unida party of the 1970's might have been forced to collapse but I am sure some of us are going to continue this struggle for equity and social justice. There is hope for a new and reformed Raza Unida Party; Hispanics including Mexican-Americans are becoming very large and important in 7 out of the 12 largest and most important cities in the United States. Propositions like 63, 187, and 227 are not going to take us anywhere, as a culture we need to unite

and step forward, we've had enough of the one step forward and two steps back.

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