

ESSAY

Exploring the Mexican Cultural Identity:
A Journey Through History, Art, and Traditions

Explorando la Identidad Cultural Mexicana:
Un Viaje a Través de la Historia, el Arte y las Tradiciones

Ariadna Solano Morales ¹

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1 Ariadna Solano Morales is a student of International Relations at the Latin American University of Science and Technology, and of Customs Administration and Foreign Trade at the University of Costa Rica. ORCID: 0009-0006-6769-5339. Email: asolanom829@ulacit.ed.cr.

Abstract

Understanding Mexican culture is vital for promoting cultural diversity, fostering international cooperation, and enhancing global cultural understanding. By appreciating Mexico's rich heritage, people around the world can experience a deeper connection to one another. This research delves into the concept of identity within the Mexican context, exploring how it is shaped and expressed through history, art, and traditions. The study aims to examine Mexico's Cultural Continuity, focusing on the links between the past and the present that define the nation's identity. To achieve this, the research includes a series of interviews with experts in Mexican culture, providing valuable insights into the enduring legacy of Mexican traditions and their relevance today. Additionally, the research is supported by various sources, including magazines and books, to provide a well-rounded understanding of how Mexico's historical and cultural narratives continue to influence contemporary life, highlighting the importance of preserving and celebrating this cultural richness.

Keywords:

Mexican culture, cultural diversity, cultural understanding, international cooperation, identity, cultural expression, cultural continuity, history of Mexico, Mexican art, Mexican traditions, interviews with experts, academic sources.

Resumen

Comprender la cultura mexicana es vital para promover la diversidad cultural, fomentar la cooperación internacional y mejorar el entendimiento cultural global. Al apreciar el rico patrimonio de México, las personas de todo el mundo pueden experimentar una conexión más profunda entre sí. Esta investigación profundiza en el concepto de identidad dentro del contexto mexicano, explorando cómo se conforma y se expresa a través de la historia, el arte y las tradiciones. El estudio pretende examinar la Continuidad Cultural de México, centrándose en los vínculos entre el pasado y el presente que definen la identidad de la nación. Para lograrlo, la investigación incluye una serie de entrevistas con expertos en cultura mexicana, que aportan valiosos conocimientos sobre el legado perdurable de las tradiciones mexicanas y su relevancia en la actualidad. Además, la investigación se apoya en diversas fuentes, como revistas y libros, para proporcionar una comprensión completa de cómo las narrativas históricas y culturales de México siguen influyendo en la vida contemporánea, destacando la importancia de preservar y celebrar esta riqueza cultural.

Palabras clave:

Cultura mexicana, diversidad cultural, entendimiento cultural, cooperación internacional, identidad, expresión cultural, continuidad cultural, historia de México, arte mexicano, tradiciones mexicanas, entrevistas a expertos, fuentes académicas.

Hypothesis

This research will demonstrate that the greatness of Mexican culture, shaped by tribal history, colonialism, and modern influences, can be better understood by studying its history, art and sustainable practices, such as traditions and festivals. This study will show that by observing trends, such as the ones just mentioned, it's possible to see how Mexican culture has changed, developed and strengthened over time, which contributed significantly to the diversity of world cultures and provides insight into the interactions between Mexican cultures.

Methodology

As was already mentioned, numerous interviews with experts in the field were conducted and various academic sources, such as magazines and books, were utilized to support the information presented.

Introduction

Cultural identity is a multifaceted and deeply rooted aspect of human and historical existence that shapes our sense of belonging and self-being. This concept may include factors such as values, beliefs, traditions, culture, language among others, that at the end, bind a group of people together. These series of factors not only determine or define who we are, but also how we interact with the world around us. Exploring, studying or knowing cultural identities, in this case the Mexican Cultural Identity, is essential for the diverse and dynamic nature of society, because it provides an insight into the historical roots of the region, artistic expressions, and traditional practices that have shaped communities over time. As it was already mentioned, this essay will study and explore the concept of identity, its meaning and expression in the Mexican context, by using the perspective of history, art, and traditions to analyze Mexico's Cultural Continuity: the links between the past and the present.

As many other regions or countries, Mexican culture is a difficult spectrum shaped by historical events, artistic expressions and cultural practices. Throughout its history, Mexico has been a melting pot on indigenous people, including the pre-Columbian civilizations of Aztecs, Mayas and Olmecs, European domination and international influence. These ancient outcomes left without a doubt a mark on the country's identity and contributed to a unique society. In addition, Mexico's rich heritage, and artistic approach - including aspects such as visual arts, literature, music, dance and gastronomy - have played an important and particular role in defining and preserving the country's essence and identity. In addition, traditional practices rooted in indigenous continue to be woven into the fabric of Mexican culture, showing this way, the persistence of heritage.

Results and Analysis

The history of Mexico is a tapestry connected by threads of indigenous peoples, Spanish conquests, and the fusion of different influences that created a unique cultural identity. Indigenous identity has been portrayed as being fixated in time and space, and has been created by or imposed within a historical power relation, where many times there has been a representation and/or a creation of stereotypical indigenous identities (Lopez, 2002). Mexico's indigenous peoples, including the Aztecs, Mayans, and Olmecs, laid the foundation for the country's cultural heritage. The Spanish colonial period, characterized by conquest and col-

onization, left an indelible Mexican culture and identity. The combination of indigenous and subsequent European influences resulted in a unique and dynamic cultural mix, reflecting the complexity of Mexico's heritage. Long before the arrival of the Europeans, Mexico was home to an advanced civilization that flourished in various regions. The Olmecs, known as the *Mother Culture* of Mesoamerica, appeared in 1400 before Christ and left behind a legacy of large stone heads and fossils. The Mayans flourished in the Yucatan Peninsula from 2000 before Christ to 1500 before Christ. The Aztecs, also known and registered as Mexica, founded the great city of Tenochtitlan and created an empire that ruled Central Mexico in the 15th and early 16th centuries. These pre-Columbian civilizations made great achievements in art, science and social structure which formed the basis of Mexican culture.

A turning point in Mexican history began during the Spanish rule, which began with Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztec Empire in 1519. The Spanish introduced new technology, agriculture and religious beliefs, all of which interfered with local culture. Due to the position of Christianity, the spirit of the natives was combined with the Catholic religion, which made the syncretism continue in modern Mexico. Many temples and churches were destroyed and rebuilt, showing the complex relationship between rule, and movement. The combination of indigenous and European influences during the colonial period laid the foundations for a unique Mexican cultural identity. This combination was the greatest in the art and architecture of the period, where local artists introduced European styles and their own traditional symbols. During the same period of time, the mestizo identity, born from the fusion of Spanish and indigenous people, became the main concept of Mexican society. Regarding the previous information, Lopez (2002) states that

In Mexico as well as in the United States, the Mestizo image has been promoted as the main Mexican identity. Even though the Mestizo image supposedly acknowledges the contributions of both indigenous and Spanish cultures, the contributions of indigenous people in Mexican history have been recognized in theory only, while present-day indigenous culture and people have not been accepted. (p. 1)

The effects of this combination became evident when Mexico gained independence from Spain in the 1800s. The seeds of this identity planted during the colonial period became a national movement, and artists and intellectuals celebrate the heritage of citizens and promote the idea of unity.

The Mexican Revolution of the 1900's inspired this idea, which was based on land reform and a focus on civil rights. Cultural connections from the past and the present can be seen in all aspects of Mexican life, from the very known celebration *Día de los Muertos*, which honors dead ancestors, to traditional songs and folk songs based on stories from the past. Mexican cuisine, a fusion of local cuisine and Spanish traditions, is world-renowned for its depth and flavor. The heritage of indigenous languages and traditions continues to enrich the country's cultural tapestry, despite centuries of colonial rule. Ultimately, it may be said that Mexico's cultural identity is the result of a complex mix of indigenous communities, Spanish colonialism, and a strong mix of cultural influences. The three previously mentioned pre-Columbian civilizations, the Aztecs, Mayans and Olmecs, provided undoubtedly the foundation, and the Spanish colonial period provides its own mark. The combination of these different elements create a distinct Mexican identity that emphasizes heritage and innovation. This remarkable and extraordinary combination reflects the richness of human history, and the enduring ability of cultures to move forward and honor their roots.

In the 1900's, an art movement appeared in Mexico, and aimed to bring art out of museums and into the public domain. The Mexican muralist movement, according to The Modern Museum of Art (2023) "A movement beginning in the early 1920s in Mexico in which the government commissioned artists to make art that would educate the mostly illiterate population about the country's history and present a powerful vision of its future" (par. 1). This movement, led by artists such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, left its mark on the country's culture, reshaping how art is seen, ways to communicate and connect with history and culture.

Mexican artist Diego Rivera created paintings that clearly illustrate the history of Mexico and its problems. His paintings adorn public buildings and institutions, allowing the public to view the artwork. Rivera's paintings, for example the ones at the Royal Palace in Mexico City represent important periods in Mexican history, from the pre-Columbian period to the Revolutionary period. Interweaving historical themes and historical texts, Rivera's paintings demonstrate the continuity and pride of Mexican culture². Another similar artist, David Alfaro Siqueiros, is known for his method of pushing the boundaries of art. His famous *Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros*³ in Mexico City uses contemporary sculpture to immerse the audience in the breadth of Mexican history, from Spain's past to the present. Siqueiros' paintings

2 Rivera's paintings are an example.

3 *Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros* by David Alfaro Siqueiros.

are powerful tools of public expression, promoting justice and human rights through the medium of art.

The importance of the mural movement goes beyond art. These old paintings are not just decorative, they are important statement pieces that give historical and social meaning to many. By placing art in public space, artists seek to demonstrate culture and knowledge so that citizens of all nations can ascertain their heritage. According to Mandel (2007) “the transformative practice of the muralist movement which, in its multiform and plural production, has implanted the recovery and appropriation of the past against insignificance and spontaneous habituation” (p. 52). Because of this, we may say that the arts promote national unity and pride as a means of expressing history, culture and shared experiences.

Although painting remain as the mainstay of Mexican art, other forms of activity have also contributed to the richness of culture. Known for its artistry and bright colors, folk art plays an important role in preserving traditional culture. Alebrijes, according to CARAPAN (2023) “are surreal creatures from an oneiric world that were “brought to life” by Pedro Linares Lopez (1906-1992), a paper Maché artist from Mexico City” (par. 1). These stunning carvings depicting mythological and magical creatures are some examples of the fusion of ancestral beliefs and modern art⁴. On another note, beautiful handmade Talavera pottery⁵ has Spanish colonial origins and reflects Mexico’s long history of cultural fusion.

In Mexican contemporary art, a new generation of artists continues the cultural evolution. Artists such as Gabriel Orozco and Frida Kahlo (whose work combines art and technology) offer new perspectives on identity, gender and society. Orozco’s installations challenged conventional notions of space and form, while Kahlo’s abstract paintings delves into human form and personal perspective. These artists continued to build on the foundation laid by their predecessors, making Mexican art visible to the world while maintaining its unique culture.

It may be said that the Mexican Mural Movement, exemplified by the genius of Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, represents a revolutionary period in Mexican art. These artists use the power of images to convey historical and social issues, inviting dialogue and conversation. In addition to murals and folk art, Alebrijes and Talavera continue to follow Aboriginal traditions and customs. Today, modern Mexican artists have the opportunity to create

4 *Alebrijes* by Pedro Linares Lopez.

5 Handmade Talavera pottery is an example.

art that reflects continuity and innovation. As Mexican art progresses, it remains rooted in its traditions, advancing the history of art and culture.

When talking about important forms of art in Mexico, plastic arts are not the only way of expression, because cuisine and gastronomy are certainly crucial aspects of the country's cultural identity. Mexican cuisine is diverse, and each region has its own indigenous cultural heritage. Indigenous cultures such as the Aztecs and Mayans developed their own eating habits, their own agricultural methodologies, their own food preservation strategies, among others. Nowadays, modern Mexican cuisine has evolved into a vibrant art and craft as the culinary traditions of different cultures merge. Spanish conquests brought European foods such as pork, beef, and milk that enriched traditional foods. This combination has given rise to popular dishes like pastor tacos, which are a marriage of Middle Eastern shawarma and Mexican spices.

As it was already mentioned, food plays an important role in Mexican culture and is a source of cultural identity. Local food that showcases traditional cuisine and culture is its hallmark. Mexican festivals have a lot to do with it. Events such as the important *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), feature traditional food served at altars in memory of the dead. *Pan de muerto* (bread of the dead) and sugar skulls are not only fun, but symbols of memory and cultural respect.

Mexican gastronomy is a symbol of the dynamic interplay between ancestral heritage, past experience and modern technology. The diversity of traditions in each region, the influence of important products such as wheat, cheese, chocolate, and the role of food as cultural symbols and celebrations show the strong connection between food and Mexican identity. The fusion of culinary traditions from different cultures has inspired Mexican cuisine, allowing it to evolve while staying true to its roots. As the Mexican culinary scene evolves, it respects its past and embraces its future.

Even though *Día de los Muertos* was mentioned as an example of the gastronomic identity of the country, the Day of the Dead is a useful example of how Mexican traditions are rooted in the beliefs of the local people. Originating from ancient Mesoamerican people, such as the Aztecs, the holiday commemorates deceased ancestors and celebrates the cycle of death. It demonstrates love and respect to family members and friends that unfortunately are no longer here (Ward, 2022). During this special day, it is believed that the boundaries between the living and the dead are thin, and that loved ones can visit from the other side. Altars are

adorned with things such as flowers, candles, and food to show great respect for the honored ancestors. The practice is reminiscent of the age-old tradition of honoring deceased loved ones and helping them on their journey. The fusion of Spanish colonial patriarchal and Catholic traditions made Day of the Dead an important part of Mexican culture.

Another well-known Mexican spiritual tradition, that undoubtedly contributes to the cultural identity of the country, is the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, celebrated on December 12th. Our Lady of Guadalupe combines birth and Catholicism. His approach to the natives is similar to the symbol of the island, a deep bridge between the two worlds. Loyalty to him transcends religious boundaries and unites Mexicans from different cultures. The role of women in Mexican spirituality shows how religion has been influenced by local cultures, creating unique religious systems.

Mexican festivals are also powerful tools for community development and relationship building. Whether secular or religious, these events bring people together through shared experiences and traditions. The events fuse ancestral traditions, colonial influences and contemporary performances. Through festivals, Mexicans affirm their roots, express their art, and celebrate their history. These events include performances, music, dance and traditional food, reflecting the culture of Mexico. These festivals not only commemorate past events with the gods, but also promote unity and identity. They create spaces where generations can gather, while preserving tradition and embracing change.

Cultural celebrations such as the Day of the Dead and the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe show the strong connection between the beliefs of their ancestors and Mexican culture. These events serve as a bridge between ancient and modern times, showing how cultures survive through change. These events not only connect to the past, but also strengthen the bonds between people, reminding Mexicans of their history and heritage.

Other important aspects that contribute to the Mexican cultural identity, are the music and dances. In Mexico, music is more than entertainment; it's a way of speaking, telling stories, and passing on culture. From mariachi serenades to hallways that tell the story of the past, music is a powerful way to express emotions, experiences and traditions; it is an outlet for sharing stories, beliefs and social media that impact generations. Music is a multifaceted art form that reflects the country's culture and is also an inspiration and strength to many people. Traditional Mexican dances, such as Jarabe Tapatio, are an important part of the coun-

try's identity and provide a visual connection to the past, promoting cultural continuity and empowerment.

Conclusion

In the end, studying Mexican culture can be a fascinating journey through history, art, and culture. Throughout history, tradition and colonial tradition have combined to create a history like no other. Like ancient civilizations, they echo in Mexico's memory, from the great pyramids of the Aztecs to the incredible ruins of the Mayans. The courage shown during Spanish rule shows the spirit of tolerance upheld by the Mexican people.

Art as a form of communication captures the heart and soul of Mexican culture. The great paintings of Rivera and Siqueiros, depicting people's struggles and aspirations, became expressions of myth and symbols of the power of art. Traditional carving techniques rooted in tradition bring life to everyday objects, reflecting the cultural fusion of Mexican culture.

Rituals and festivals are inspiring reminders of the unbreakable bonds passed down through generations. Day of the Dead is a day when people celebrate life and death, demonstrating the great connection between past and present. Religious celebrations such as the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe celebrate the unity of spiritual faith and the enduring unity of the people of Mexico.

A fusion of music, dance and food defines the Mexican experience at its best. From the mariachi sounds to the powerful swing of Jarabe Tapatio, this masterful mix combines the energy and rhythm of Mexican life. The flavors and aromas of Mexican food reflect the diversity of cultures across the country, reminding us that people often love each other.

Mexican culture continues to evolve and maintain its roots in the face of globalization and the modern world. Efforts to preserve and celebrate ancestral traditions testify to the continuing importance of these things in shaping national identity. Contemporary Mexican artists, artists and activists contribute to the ongoing dialogue, keeping the culture alive and breathing.

Mexican culture is a brilliant thread in human history, intertwining time, place and memory. This exploration of history, art and tradition reveals the complexity of the Mexican people, demonstrating a deep respect for the past while embracing the future. As we reflect on this journey, we are reminded that understanding and appreciating culture is not about celebrating diversity, but about the interconnectedness of human experience.

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