

Young Mixtecs

The Vicissitudes of Life in Tijuana

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Photos courtesy of the author

towns in Guerrero where their parents are from nor do they identify with those places.

We will see how they live with the notion of being of indigenous origin at the same time that they are city-dwellers, as I underline certain questions like separating themselves from their obligations and the differences regarding job opportunities. Their lifestyle includes a variety of forms crisscrossed by the history of their group, their migratory background, and, of course, by personal experience. Here, youth is understood as a social construct in which the particular variables of the locale must be taken into consideration.¹

LIFE PROJECTS

In the 1970s, people from Mexico's rural areas moved into urban centers. A large number of agricultural laborers from different indigenous groups set out for Northern Mexico, which at that time promised to be an industrial center because maquiladora plants were opening there. Settled since then in cities like Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and Tijuana, Baja California, these people have been part of the changes the cities have gone through and, as groups, have themselves reconfigured their socio-cultural practices. We might think that the descendants of these indigenous migrants have not gone through significant changes with generational turnover; however, this is not the case. We are witness to a diversity of ways of experiencing their youth as members of an ethnic community.

This article deals concretely with the case of the Mixtecs from the mountains of Guerrero, who since 1980 have been settling in Tijuana's Valle Verde neighborhood. Some young people arrived as children, while others were born in the city and consider themselves Tijuana natives. In some cases, they do not even speak Mixtec, and most have never been to the

Being young in an indigenous family is different from being it in a non-indigenous one. The former have gone through processes in which they are forged into urban indigenous or, as in this case, indigenous Tijuana residents. As they themselves say, this means that they understand that they are Mixtec because "it's something inherited; it's in the blood." But they also know that being Mixtec in this city can make them victims of racism. When they identify themselves as Tijuana residents, they show it in their physical appearance and their lifestyles, assuming the image of an "ordinary" urban youth, but whose roots, though not explicit, continue to exist. This means that the dynamics of their border life include the marker of their ethnic background, which they sometimes hide and other times use to identify themselves.

The Valle Verde neighborhood, located to the east of Tijuana, is one of the more than 10 areas inhabited by indigenous people in the metropolitan area.² Solidarity Street is noteworthy for the number of Guerrero Mountains Mixtecs living there, among them women working in the community center's garment workshop, set up by the good offices of the Valle Verde Mixtec Association. Together with the municipal government and the federal Ministry of Social Development, the association has also set up a communal dining room. The

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community center hosts meetings and has a church of its own, where different ceremonies and festivities are held, such as the festival of Saint Francis of Assisi, patron saint of the mountain town of Xochapa, which has been celebrated in Tijuana since 1994.

During the day, Solidarity Street most obviously follows the dynamic of adults; but in the afternoons, young people socializing on the corners, young men in particular, become more visible. Their clothing is important: it is “more modern” than that of their elders. Some people ask relatives in the United States to send them clothing, or they search out used clothing at the street markets, items of clothing discarded “on the other side [of the border],” but which on this side are highly prized. Just as they dress to distance themselves from the stereotype of “what an indigenous person should look like,” as young people in the city, they listen to music different from their parents’ preferences (above all *chilenas* performed by bands and groups from their region of origin) to mark their identity. So, they listen to all kinds of music: Northern *banda* groups, *reggaeton*, and romantic music, among others.

In addition to their clothing and music, young people think they have a certain autonomy in more important decisions, such as marriage, since here they do decide who and when they want to marry:

Before, they did respect what they [their parents] said. . . . Well, you’re Mixtec and you’re going to marry a Mixtec. That is, before, they used to force you. Before, but not now. Most of my fellow Mixtecs get married to mestizos . . . , girls from different states, from the state of Puebla or the state of Mexico, Sinaloa, Nayarit, a mixture, like. They might marry a gringo, but it’s not that you have to marry somebody. You marry who you want to. (Ana, interviewed by the author in Tijuana, 2011)

Even so, young couples who have children very early are common. Very often they marry people with the same roots because they’re neighbors or boys they’ve spent a lot of time with. Ivonne, who is mestiza, married a young man she met while she was studying middle school close to Valle Verde. After getting engaged, she found out that her fiancé’s family was Mixtec from Oaxaca; he had never told her about it—he arrived in Valle Verde when he was four years old—and he didn’t want a child of theirs to speak Mixtec. However, Ivonne thinks that her fiancé’s history is important and that he should feel proud of it.³ In addition to showing that young people consider the possibility of marrying differently, this example

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reveals that having an ethnic background is not something they talk about when they introduce themselves.

The fact that the young people in the neighborhood share certain traits does not make them all the same. There are those who “bum around and fall into vice” —this is how the adults and other youths who do not associate with them describe them—, and those who consider themselves “good young people,” who have surpassed average levels of schooling to go to high school and university. They have fulfilled their parents’ migratory project that consisted of giving their children a better life, and they do not want to be associated with those they call “bums,” who do nothing but paint graffiti on the walls, like the little groups gathered on Solidarity Street corners. The “good young people” also see themselves as different from those who live in the towns where their parents are from, and different from what their parents were like, not only when they lived in Guerrero, but also living in the city. That is why, until now, they have not continued the family customs; they are more open to change and try to be understood from that perspective. For this reason, when asked what they will do in the future if they do not intend to continue with the traditions, the answer is simple: study.

DIFFERENCES IN GETTING A JOB, WORKING, AND STUDYING

Bachelor’s degrees in law and education are two of the most popular among these young people, who also sometimes work to pay for part of their upkeep. This is the case of Rosenda, a law student at the Autonomous University of Baja California and a supermarket cashier. Working is nothing foreign to these young people; some of them worked when they were little and accompanied their mothers who did itinerant sales around the San Ysidro border crossing and in downtown Tijuana, and some continue to do this today.

Going into education can also be considered a labor niche for Mixtecs in the city; the difference is that today they must

complete formal schooling, which they usually do at the National Pedagogic University; in the past, it sufficed to pass an exam at the Indigenous Education General Office for them to be assigned to one of Tijuana's intercultural bilingual schools and there become professionals. Female teachers are usually found in schools in the Bilingual Intercultural System and less frequently in the regular educational system.

Some of the other jobs on the border that young people do are itinerant sales (usually without a municipal license to do so) and the maquiladora manufacturing jobs. The maquiladora plants have been characteristic of the city's economy since 1964 and are catalogued as jobs for migrant labor. Since these are companies that have few prerequisites for hiring like minimal schooling or basic Spanish fluency, female former agricultural workers or palm-hat makers can find a place in these factories.⁴ Some of the young women with little schooling see these jobs as a way forward. Isabel tells us about her experience:

I went to school, but not a whole lot: just until third grade. . . . I was also one of those dumb-heads. . . . No, it [maquiladora work] isn't hard. You just get in and if you want to work, they train you; like, they give you what you need to do it; they help you with all that, they teach you. . . . I'm in the molding area; we make pieces, little pieces used to send to the park . . . like showers—I don't know what you call them—like little faucets that open up in the park. That's what we make there. (interviewed by the author in Tijuana, 2011)

The young men, for their part, go into brick-laying, and both in Mexico and the United States, are outstanding at it. So, Tijuana is not the exception, and the mason's trade is passed down to their children. One example is Teodoro, 30, whose father taught him to be a brick-layer and who says he is proud of being able to put up the braces to build a house and then take charge of the works until it is finished, in addition to being able "to build prettier houses."

The fact that young people continue to do the kind of work that indigenous people in cities have done for generations shows the difficulties of dealing with certain exclusionary barriers thrown up because of their ethnic origin. Nevertheless, it is important for the communities that this kind of work be recognized and that they be able to continue doing it because this is a way to win a place in destination societies and in the profession, one of the reasons they moved to Tijuana in the first place.

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CONCLUSION

Some young people distance themselves from the groups they are part of by blood and tradition because they become aware that being indigenous brings with it a disadvantage. But they also are part of a process of normalization and integration into urban life, which dictates codes of conduct that stipulate what it is to be young people in a city. They also develop new ways of relating to each other with regard to marriage, work, and school—as students they see studying as a way to move up socially and to attain better jobs. However, none of them is exempt from precarious labor.

This article has presented some of the possibilities these young Mixtecs have in the city because, as Maritza Urteaga and Luis Fernando García point out, today, "a new regime is changing space and time, producing new, very different parameters in the production of youth, the ethnic, and contemporary culture."⁵ Amidst the social and cultural changes this new generation of young people is experiencing, they find different ways to discover meaning in the hegemonic positions, and they try to position themselves in relation to them, producing political "othernesses." This would be another issue to analyze with regard to being young and indigenous in the context of the urban experience. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, "La juventud no es más que una palabra," in Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociología y cultura* (Mexico City: Grijalbo/Conaculta, 1990), pp. 163-173.

² The neighborhood was established through resettlement. In the case of the Guerrero Mixtecs, this came after the rains of 1993, caused by the El Niño storm systems. The plots in Valle Verde have been sold on credit and the government supported the installation of basic public services and utilities.

³ Interview by the author with Ivonne in 2015 in Tijuana.

⁴ Areli Veloz, *Mujeres purépechas en las maquiladoras de Tijuana: Experiencias y significados del trabajo* (Madrid: Editorial Académica Española, 2011).

⁵ Maritza Urteaga and Luis Fernando García Álvarez, "Juventudes étnicas contemporáneas en Latinoamérica," *Cuicuilco* vol. 22, no. 62 (January-April 2015), p. 10.