

The Other Mexicans

Indigenous people come from a world apart from Spanish-speaking Mexicans.



A Mixtec man in Fresno, California, works harvesting onions in the fields.

Photograph by Antonio Nava, Nava Photos

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On a dusty highway in California's Central Valley, a black Chevy truck heads toward bright fields of grapes dotting the barren brown earth. It is a warm June day, and the truck's windows are cracked open to get a little air. Out wafts a rap song: Spanish rhymes interspersed with the occasional English phrase — "hell yes." Toward the middle of the song a third language beats its way in.

"That is Mixteco," says the driver, Miguel Villegas.

Mixteco is Villegas's native language. It is the only language he spoke fluently when he came to the United States sixteen years ago at the age of seven. The trilingual rap song is his own creation and he takes to heart its Spanish language refrain: "Mixteco is a language, not a dialect. It's the gold that I treasure."

Villegas spent two years working in the grape fields where his older siblings still toil. Now he is a community worker at the Fresno headquarters of the Binational Center for the Development of Oaxacan Indigenous Communities, a nonprofit that focuses on the specific needs of indigenous Mexicans who have migrated to California. Across the United States these indigenous migrants are isolated even more than other immigrant groups. They speak neither English nor Spanish and are often looked down on by Spanish-speaking Mexicans.

They may not be the Spanish-speaking migrants that politicians picture when they discuss immigration reform, but as their numbers increase and trilingual members like Miguel organize, they have their own stake in the fractious debate in Washington. A possible language requirement would be particularly difficult for indigenous communities. Without Spanish, their road to English fluency will be that much harder. Their own languages are not traditionally written languages. Many have not had formal schooling.

At the extreme, an inability to speak Spanish and English can lead to tragedy, as in the 2010 case of Jaminez Xum, an indigenous day laborer from Guatemala who was shot and killed by Los Angeles police officers after he did not respond to English and Spanish commands.

People of the Rain

In the 2000 census, 407,000 people nationwide self-identified as Latinos of indigenous origin. In 2010 the number was 685,000, the most recent statistic available. "That's a 68 percent increase," said Jonathan Fox, department chair of Latin American and Latino studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Migrants from Mexico's more than 60 indigenous groups have been coming to the United States for decades, but their numbers and proportion in the larger Mexican migrant population have increased in recent years. In addition to California, where they number at least 200,000, Fox said large populations can be found in Texas, 90,000; New York, 53,000; Arizona, 39,000; and Colorado and Illinois, both with about 25,000.

Very often, indigenous people come from a world apart, which adds to the pain of adjustment. Their communities have historically been cut off from the greater Spanish-speaking population of Mexico by their geographic isolation in rural areas and their lack of Spanish language skills.

Among the more than 60 languages spoken by indigenous groups, there are numerous variations that make communication between groups difficult. The languages themselves tend to have a poetic quality, said Juan Carlos Aguirre, director of a New York-based Mexican cultural organization. The Mixteco, for example, refer to themselves as "people of the rain." Instead of saying they speak Mixteco, they say, "I speak the sounds of the people of the rain."



Indigenous Zapotecos prepare to celebrate a saint's day in Los Angeles, California.

Photograph by Antonio Nava, Nava Photos

In Mexico, indigenous communities tend to be small and close-knit, and women traditionally marry young. Schools only recently began offering bilingual education, and children are often needed in the fields. Crafts and farming are the main industries, and traditional healers are relied upon more than doctors. In most cases, problems are resolved by elders instead of a formal government.

Community members are expected to volunteer their time to help put on the traditional festivals and celebrations, which tend to mix traditional nature belief systems with Christianity. Even those like Villegas, who have left the country, participate however they can—if they expect to return to their village with their heads high. Since he turned 18, Villegas has twice been asked to help at festivals. He sent money instead.

Looking Mexican Doesn't Mean You Speak Spanish

Odilia Romero began working with local police in the Los Angeles area on cultural training regarding indigenous migrants in 2006; she expanded the process following the 2010 shooting. The trainings educate both communities, teaching the police about the different languages and customs of indigenous peoples and teaching indigenous people about police protocol.

"It is a two-way thing," Romero said in a telephone interview, switching seamlessly among three languages. "We need to familiarize ourselves about U.S. customs, but also they need to know the fact that [because] you're brown or look Mexican doesn't mean you speak Spanish."

Romero grew up speaking Zapoteco in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, home to 16 of Mexico's indigenous groups. She was ten when she was reunited with her parents in Los Angeles. She was placed in a local school where she was mocked by both English- and Spanish-speaking classmates when she spoke

Zapoteco. Far more troubling are the cases she has heard about of monolingual indigenous migrants being taken advantage of by their employers or becoming victims of sexual harassment.

It is not just the language that is unfamiliar to indigenous migrants. Romero remembers how her village of about 2,000 people had no jail, no cars. There was a river and a very close relationship with nature. Everyone grew their own food and fetched their own water. "Back home, before you cut a tree you ask permission of the Earth," she explained. "Here there are no trees."



A migrant worker in Stanislaus County, California.

Photograph by Jose E. Chavez

Every year, the big event was the Day of the Dead festival. She and her classmates rebelled against the Spanish-speaking teacher, who Romero said would hit them for their refusal to speak Spanish. "We in a sense did not know there was anything beside the community and language, that we lived in Mexico, or that we lived in the state of Oaxaca," she said.

The rural background of indigenous groups is something she fears will further hinder them when it comes to immigration reform. Most lack birth certificates or any other official documentation of their identity in Mexico, something she believes might be required in order to legalize their status in the United States.

Culture Shock, Cultural Clashes

Juan Santiago, a 25-year-old activist in California's Central Valley, was the first in his family to finish high school. He wears glasses and a buttoned-down shirt and agrees to meet in the cafeteria of the community college he attended in Madera, near Fresno. Like Romero, he is Zapotec. He arrived in Madera at the age of 11 and went to work in the grape fields alongside his parents and older siblings.

When his parents were told he was too young to work, they instructed him to hide when the boss made his rounds. Child labor and education laws were not something they understood. Santiago was eventually sent to school and is now studying political science at California State University in Fresno. Although he is not married, most of his peers are. One of his cousins got married when she was 15.

"It's something normal that happens in our community," he explained. "My mother got married when she was 15."

Early marriage may be normal in rural Mexico, but in the United States it can mean a brush with the law. In 2009 an indigenous Mexican migrant was arrested in California after arranging a marriage between his 14-year-old daughter and a neighbor in exchange for money.

In New York City, where indigenous migrants tend to find work as day laborers and in the food or child-care sector, cultural clashes have resulted in child protective services involvement, said Juan Carlos Aguirre. It is usually a little thing, said Aguirre, executive director of the Mexican cultural and arts nonprofit *Mano a Mano*, which offers indigenous languages interpretation. For example, a small accident might occur when teenagers are watching their younger siblings and escalate when communication with the parents breaks down.

People in city government need to understand "that there is a big culture shock when a lot of people come to the U.S. and things here are very different from the way things are run back in Mexico and many other countries," said Aguirre.

Mano a Mano began integrating indigenous programs into their work two years ago after noticing an increase in the number of indigenous migrants. A survey conducted with the Mexican Consulate found that 25 to 30 percent of respondents in the tristate area of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut spoke an indigenous language.

Holding On to Tradition

The Gunnison County, Colorado, Multicultural Resource Office saw the percentage of Mexican migrants belonging to the indigenous Cora group rise from 39.9 percent to 47 percent between 2009 and 2012. Cora, who come from the small state of Nayarit, just to the north of Puerto Vallarta, now account for 40 percent of the county's Latino migrant population. They get in trouble for minor things like not wearing a seat belt or not having their child in a car seat, things that are unregulated in their rural communities, said Ellen Pedersen, the office's health official.

More worrying to Pedersen is the decline of their culture. The younger ones no longer speak Cora, and traditional festivals are no longer celebrated.

In California, where indigenous migrants have a longer and deeper history, the Oaxacan harvesttime festival of Guelagueta is celebrated in Fresno every September. This March, the Binational Center for the Development of Oaxacan Indigenous Communities began offering Mixteco language lessons to the community on Thursday evenings.

Villegas is the teacher. It is a strange twist for a young man who spent years trying to hide his indigenous roots, even attempting to blend in with his Spanish-speaking countrymen by joining a Mexican gang. It wasn't until he was in his late teens and was introduced to indigenous cultural groups that he began to view his Mixteco heritage as an asset instead of a hindrance.

Now he wears a brown and turquoise cloth bracelet on his left wrist. To him the brown symbolizes the Earth and the color of his skin, and turquoise was the color commonly used in early pictographs of the Mixteco language. On Saturday mornings Villegas offers additional Mixteco language lessons to the children of his friends, family members, and colleagues.

"They love it," he said. "They say, 'I want to rap in Mixteco.'"