Mariachi and Mexican National Identity

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ABSTRACT

In this article, Mary-Lee Mulholland explores the many meanings of mariachi and the ways in which the Mexican identity was, and in many respects still is, a reflection of its historical origins. She highlights in particular the importance of cultural forms of expression to the building and maintenance of unified national identities.

Yo soy mexicano, mi tierra es bravía Palabra de macho que no hay otra tierra Más linda y más brava que la tierra mía.	I am Mexican, my land is wild My word as a macho, there is no other land More pretty or more fierce than my land
Mi orgullo es ser charro entero, valiente y bragado traer mi sombrero con plata bordado que naiden me diga que soy un raja'o.	My pride is being a charro, brave and whole Carrying my silver embroidered sombrero, nobody can tell me that I am cowardly
Correr mi caballo en pelo montado Pero más me gusta ser enamorado. Yo soy Mexicano muy atravesado[1].	I ride my horse bareback But what I love most is being in love I am Mexican, I am a trouble maker.

Images of mariachi musicians wearing sombreros and silver-studded cowboy outfits, strumming guitars, drinking tequila and serenading women have long penetrated the Mexican imaginary as well as the imagery of Mexico. At worst, mariachi is a stereotype, the drunken mariachi singing a sad ballad of unrequited love while stumbling down the street with a bottle of tequila in hand (as illustrated by Speedy González); at best it is a national symbol celebrating Mexico's revolutionary past, regional diversity, and mestizaje.[2] As noted by ethnomusicologist Daniel Sheehy, mariachi "is a symbol and stereotype, ancient and modern, glorified and scorned, profession and avocation, a form of musical expression, and a way of life." (Sheehy 1999) Performances of mariachi and representations of its historical origins reflect, erase and produce certain ideals of what is Mexico and who is Mexican. Specifically, mestizaje, machismo and regionalism are important notions in Mexican nationalism that are entangled with a nostalgic longing for an authentic Mexican essence performed by mariachi. It is this link between mariachi and a perceived Mexican "essence" that allows mariachi not only to perform idealized and, at times, hegemonic representations of the Mexican identity, but it also becomes a powerful site wherein this identity can be contested, transgressed and fragmented.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, mariachi has transformed from a rural, regional and indigenous musical style to an urban, mesitzo and national popular cultural phenomenon. As early as the 1850s mariachis were popular in predominantly rural regions of western Mexico and were comprised of small groups of 3 or 5 musicians that played string instruments such as the violins, guitars and harps. These mariachis were not full-time musicians, but rather peasants and workers who would play dressed in work clothes or in the traditional white cotton clothes of the local indigenous people at fiestas, such as weddings, in and around their town or village.[3] Contemporary mariachis[4] are musical ensembles comprised of 8-12 predominantly male musicians that play string instruments such as violins, guitars, vihuela (small mandolin-like guitar), guitarrón (large bass guitar) and unlike traditional mariachi, most contemporary mariachis include trumpets. Mariachis play a variety of music including danceable *sones, jarabes* and polkas, as well as romantic and epic ballads. Most well-known outside of Mexico is the Mexican Hat Dance, or *Jarabe Tapatío*[5], and *Cielito Lindo* ("Ay ay ay, canta no llores," sung most famously by Speedy González). Mariachis play at a range of venues including plazas, restaurants and bars, large state-sponsored performances, and in private parties such as weddings and baptisms. Modern mariachi ensembles dress in matching *trajes de charro* (literally, a cowboy's suit) which are stylized outfits consisting of sombrero and suit with silver or gold buckles.

Mariachi in Pre-Revolutionary Mexico

The performance of regional or folkloric musical forms at state-sponsored events has been an important strategy in political campaigns and nation-building in Mexico since the 19th century. After achieving independence from Spain in 1810,

it was an important task for Mexico's new governing elite to forge a Mexican identity that would resonate with a large, diverse and disparate population while at the same time distinguishing itself from Spain. As a result, the concept of mestizaje, the mixing of Spanish and Indigenous people and culture, and the recognition of Mexico's indigenous heritage became central to the Mexican national identity. There is evidence indicating that music was used by the state to rally a sense of national identity as early as reform president Benito Juarez (1855-1858, 1867-72), who incorporated the performance of *jarabe* between acts at national plays (Geijerstam 1976).

However, it was under the 30-year long rule of Porfirio Díaz, known as the Porfiriato (1876-80; 1884-1911), that the use of popular music to construct a national unity became more common. It was during the Porfiriato that the *indigenisma,* situating modern Mexican identity on the foundation of its indigenous past, developed as a major motif in Mexican nationalism. Porfirio Díaz sought to create a modern cosmopolitan image of Mexico by contrasting it with its indigenous past. This performance of folkloric and indigenous traditions set the state stage for the elevation of "regional mestizo culture into iconic referents of national belonging." (Zolov 2001: 237)

Mariachi, a regional musical ensemble popular among the working class and peasants in western Mexico, exemplified characteristics believed to be essential in folk culture in that the musicians were peasants (campesinos), dressed in indigenous clothing, whose music was a true product of the mestizaje in its mixture of Spanish and Indigenous instruments, rhythms and melodies. Although mariachi ensembles had faced some censure by local elites in western Mexico, their performance of a quintessential regional folk music elevated their image to one that was "typical," "regional," "folkloric," and most importantly "picturesque" (Jáuregui 1990: 30).

It is not surprising then that in 1905, Juan Villaseñor, administrator of a hacienda in Cocula, Jalisco, took the local mariachi, led by Justo Villa, to the state capital of Guadalajara and later to Mexico City to play for Porfirio Díaz during the national celebrations. This is the first documented performance of a mariachi in Mexico City and the first one to play at a national event. This mariachi, later known as the Cuarteto Coculense, would return to Mexico City to perform and would be the first mariachi to record in 1908. Mexican anthropologist Jesús Jáuregui cites a description of their concert in a major park in Mexico City in 1907 from a local newspaper:

> In front of the grandstand, small boats full of flowers paraded by, some carrying typical orchestras on board while others carried an indigenous couple wearing classical regional clothes. A Jaliscican mariachi that came expressly from Guadalajara played *sones* and *jarabes,* while two charros and two *tapatías* were dancing in time to the harps and the violins. (El Mundo Ilustrado, October 6, 1907, as cited in Jáuregui 1990: 30)

In this description we see how the notions of regionalism, mestizaje, and indigenous culture, were collapsed into a romantic image of Mexican identity.

The Revolution

Although Porfirio Díaz was ousted in the 1910 Revolution, the incorporation of regional music in the promotion of Mexican nationalism thrived and, in fact, became "a systematic nationalistic ideology." (Mayer-Serra 1946:32) After the revolution, Mexico was extremely unstable and perhaps even more divided by class, race, and regionalism than it was after Independence. Through different educational and cultural policies, the revolutionary government sought to create a unified Mexican identity through the promotion of *patrias chicas* (literally small nations, a notion that Mexico is a country of many cultures and peoples), mestizaje, and the glorification of an indigenous past. For example, the government sponsored artists, most famously Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, to paint murals in public buildings throughout Mexico that promoted its indigenous heritage, the tragedy of colonialism, the triumph of independence, and the evils of the Porfiriato, fascism and capitalism. Music and dance were also supported by the state, most notably music nationalism and the folkloric ballet, which became influential national cultural institutions.[6]

In the years following the revolution there was a mass migration of people in search of work to Mexico City, including mariachi musicians from the western state of Jalisco. With the presence of musicians and workers from Jalisco and other western states, music from the region began to enjoy increased popularity and attention. Although mariachis were common in many parts of western Mexico before the revolution, it was the mariachis from Jalisco, particularly from the towns of Cocula[7], Tecaltitlán and Tecolotlán that would popularise mariachi in the capital and as a result shape its future. In 1920, under the patronage of Dr. Luis Rodríguez, the Mariachi Coculense de Cirilo Marmolejo became the first mariachi to permanently move to Mexico City. First this mariachi travelled to Guadalajara to play for the Governor of Jalisco and, due to its success in the state capital, was later invited to play in Mexico City by Dr. Rodríguez for members of Mexico's new revolutionary elite, including then President Alvaro Obregon. Cirilo Marmolejo and his mariachi decided to stay in Mexico City and would become one of the most popular and influential mariachis of their time. They would become the first to appear in a Mexican film[8], the first to make electronic recordings, and they would travel to Chicago in 1933 to represent Mexican culture in the World Fair.

Other mariachis would soon arrive in Mexico City from Jalisco to take advantage of the growing popularity of the music, including the Mariachi Tapatío de José Marmolejo (nephew to Cirilo Marmolejo) and Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán. In this new urban context, the look, style and form of the ensemble would change dramatically. In order to appeal to an urban middle-class audience, many mariachis grew in size, incorporated trumpets, adopted new types of songs, and most drastically they replaced indigenous or work-clothes with the flashier and more expensive *trajes de charros.* This outfit was adopted by mariachis from charros, professional Mexican cowboys who were generally the land owners or hacienda managers. Interestingly, charros would have been the bosses of

traditional mariachi musicians who worked as peasants or underlings of hacienda bosses. Jesús Jáuregui argues that the *traje de charro* was adopted to disguise the roots of mariachi as indigenous or African, to become a "mestizo prototype" situated in an international paradigm of the American cowboy and the Argentine gaucho (Jáuregui 1995).

By the 1930s the promotion of regionalism, or patrias chicas, had reached its pinnacle. With the left-leaning presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), the promotion of regionalism in nationalism was further augmented by a renaissance of all things indigenous and anti-imperialism. During this time, cultural industries such as painting (particularly the muralist movement), nationalist music, ballet folklorico, and folklore studies thrived. With the intent to "unify all things Mexican" (Zolov 2001: 241), images of the rural, indigenous and revolutionary past became important in the myth making of an imagined Mexico. Cárdenas wanted to use a regional music in his election campaign, a music that would "unite the Mexican races" appealing to workers and peasants (Ochoa Serrano: 1994: 108). He selected mariachi marking the beginning of his patronage and appreciation of the music, and in particular his patronage of Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán who would play at his inauguration. In addition, Cárdenas would later help protect mariachi from police harassment and would assist Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán obtaining a job as the official musical group for the Mexico City Police Department (Clark 1992). The incorporation of mariachi into Cárdenas' political campaign and official state events were significant in the legitimization of mariachi in the capital and its status as a national tradition.

The Golden Age

Although the patronage of Cárdenas legitimized mariachi as an example of Mexican regional culture, it was the power of film and radio that would transform mariachi into a national icon. In the 1930s and 1940s, while cultural institutions such as art, music and dance were heavily supported by the state, emerging cultural industries such as film, radio, and popular music became extremely powerful in the promotion and articulation of Mexicanness in and outside of the country.[9] Carlos Monsiváis, Mexico's leading public intellectual, commented that "between 1935 and 1955 (approximately, of course), it was the cinema more than any other cultural instrument that… reshaped the notion of Mexican national identity by turning nationalism into a great show." (1993:144) Often referred to as the "Golden Age" of Mexican culture and nationalism, this era produced several important cultural icons, most importantly the *charro cantor,* or singing cowboy, genre of film. Combining the music of mariachi and the cowboy tradition of charros, these films produced an image of the idealized Mexican man: a rural, mestizo cowboy who possessed a loyal, brave, and stubborn character.

As mentioned, mariachi appeared early on in Mexican film, first debuting in Mexico's first sound film, *Santa* (1932). However, it was the release of the film *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936) that marked the beginning of the immensely popular *charro cantor* films that dominated Mexican film and Mexican identity in the Golden Age. This film was typical of the genre in that it was set in rural Mexico (in this case, on a hacienda in Jalisco) and it combined three important symbols of Mexican nationalism and masculinity: tequila, mariachi, and charros. The heroes of these films were hard-working, hard-loving and hard-drinking charros who fell in love with either a noble poor indigenous woman whose family worked on his hacienda, or a foreign wealthy exotic woman seduced by the rugged charms of the Mexican machismo and landscape. Essential components in these films were the serenade and the cantina scene in which the hero, backed by a mariachi, would either sing to his love outside her window, or lament the loss of her love in a cantina. During the Golden Age, Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán became Mexico's most famous mariachi, due in large part to their appearance in over 200 films.

In conjunction with the popularity of *charro cantor* films, radio also had an influential role in the promotion of mariachi's popularity and its status as a national symbol. During this era, Mexico City was home to several important radio stations, but it was the powerful XEW, "the voice of Latin America," that would have the largest impact. Beginning in the 1920s, XEW had live shows that showcased different types of Mexican music and several of the mariachis now residing in Mexico City were invited to play live at the radio station. These performances were very popular (particularly those of Mariachi Vargas de Tecaltitlán) with the audience and station owner Don Emilio Azcárraga. Eventually, Mariachi Vargas de Tecaltitlán would have their own show and would accompany many of the stars of the *charro cantor* films on screen and in the recording studio. Stars of the *charro cantor* films, such as Pedro Infante or Jorge Negrete, popularized *musica ranchera,* a genre of music where a singer performs dressed in *traje de charro* backed by a mariachi. The image of the macho mariachi popularized on screen and radio by *charro cantor* films, *musica ranchera* and mariachi itself became entangled with the image of Mexican identity not only within Mexico, but also Latin America and the rest of the world.

Morphing Mariachi: Music as Identity Narratives

Roger Barta, a leading Mexican academic on nationalism, argues that in the face of the rapidly modernizing world and the influx of foriegn, specifically American, cutural influences, Mexico began a "frantic search for 'Mexicanness' that accompanied the postwar modernizing boom." (Barta 2002: 5) A combination of state support for music, dance and folkloric studies and the powerful influence of cinema and radio, mariachi transformed into a national symbol and archetype of ideas at the core of Mexican identity: mestizaje, machismo and regionalism. The use of expressive culture, whether it be music, dance or art, was, and continues to be, a central strategy in the "frantic search for Mexicanness" due to the ability of these cultural forms to express, create and produce what Bennedict Anderson (1983) has called "imagined communities."

According to Anderson, nationalism is based on a collective identity that is "imagined" (Anderson 1983) producing a sense of connectedness between people who will never meet. It is the emergence of print capitalism that provides the means to facilitate such an imagined

community and the promotion of common histories and traditions that produces a sense of continuity and connectedness. The emotive nature of music, dance and folkloric art make them powerful tools in the evocation and reproduction of important origin myths and symbols of the nation. For example, the performance of mariachi is at once an emotive performance of nostalgia for Mexico's revolutionary, rural and macho past, as well as reflection and production of a cultural and racial mestizaje.

Moreover, musical styles or genres, such as mariachi, are often productive narrative spaces in which struggles of conflicting identities of gender, region, class, nation, ethnicity and generation are performed and contested. Musical styles are "fought over" and "crossed" as regularly as nation-state boundaries (López 1997) and the danger of conceiving genres or styles as discrete is that the "fixing" of music categories can also lead to the "fixing" of identities (Guilbault 1996). Subsequently, the saliency of images of mariachis as male, macho, heterosexual, rural and mestizo has also transformed the performance of mariachi into a powerful site for the contestation, transgression, and fragmentation of hegemonic notions of Mexican identity. The relationship between mariachi and the idealized male Mexican is continually interrupted and unsettled by claims and counter-claims to the origins of mariachi by different segments of Mexican society and by jokes and parodies of mariachi as stereotypes of Mexican masculinity, ethnicity and class.

For example, debates over the origins and authenticity of mariachi call attention to the indigenous and African influence in the music, whereas the increased participation of women in mariachi has both challenged and reproduced certain norms of femininity and masculinity in Mexican society. Furthermore, the performance of mariachi as mestizo, masculine and rural has become archetypical opening up the performance to parody, critique and failure. Elsewhere I demonstrate how performances of traditional and conservative notions of Mexican identity and Mexican masculinity by well-known mariachi singers are interrupted and undermined by rumours and gossip regarding their (homo)sexuality (Mulholland: forthcoming).

To conclude, mariachi became an integral part of the longing to create a unified national imagery in a time of great national conflict and regional discontent. Expressive culture forms, such as mariachi, are important in the imagining of national identities due to their emotive power in the telling of the national history and origin myth and their production of national identity. Paradoxically, mariachi is at once a symbol of an essentialised Mexican identity and a powerful site wherein this identity can be contested and fragmented due to its immense symbolic capital in the national imagining.

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Notes

1 Exerts from "Yo Soy Mexicano (I am Mexican)" written by E. Cortázar and M. Esperón in 1943 and performed most famously by Jorge Negrete. All translations by author unless otherwise noted.

2 Mestizaje is a term used in Mexico to describe the historical mixing of Spanish, Indigenous, and, to a lesser extent, African peoples. The majority of Mexicans identify as mestizo and is an important notion in Mexican nationalism.

3 Due to the association of the mariachis with weddings, it was believed for many years that the word mariachi was adopted from the French word *mariage* during the French occupation of Mexico in the 1860s. Although the specific meaning and origin of the word is still debated, it is generally accepted that the word is of indigenous origins and predates the French presence in Mexico.

4 It is important to note that while most mariachis in Mexico are predominantly all-male, some mariachis do include female musicians and there is a growing presence of all-female mariachis. Interestingly, many mariachis in the United States include both male and female mariachis. Finally, "traditional" or *mariachis antiguos* are still common in western Mexico.

5 Tapatío or tapatía means someone or something from Guadalajara or more generally from the state of Jalisco.

6 Music nationalism, "fathered" by Manuel M. Ponce and later developed by Carlos Chávez, promoted the composition of orchestral music inspired by regional, indigenous and pre-Colombian melodies. Similarly, folkloric ballet emerged as an institution that celebrated indigenous and regional cultures. A typical performance of folkloric ballet begins with a representation of a pre-Colombian Aztec dance followed by a tour of different regions of Mexico with dancers dressed in "authentic" costumes, dancing "traditional" dances, backed by "typical" music.

7 The exact origin of mariachi is a highly contentious issue among historians and ethnomusicologists that study it. Many argue that mariachi is a musical form from western Mexico in general, others argue that the town of Cocula is its birthplace. However, it is generally accepted that it is the mariachis from Cocula that had the largest influence on the rise in popularity of the music ensemble.

8 *Santa* (1932) was also Mexico's first film with sound.

9 Mexican film and radio were extremely popular throughout Latin America.