

Mexican Culture a la carte

Book Review by Brenda Walker

This book was published in 2001, so it is not new. But *True Tales from Another Mexico* is so fascinating in its embrace of strange subcultures and the curiosities of life among ordinary Mexicans that it deserves more readers who appreciate the extremes of diversity for whatever reason. Furthermore, the book is a ground-level look at the society that is transferring itself en masse into our country.

It must be admitted of course that every nation has its underbelly of weirdos and odd subcultures, so it would be unfair to judge the whole of Mexican society on the evidence from the chapter-by-chapter vignettes presented in this book, which range from music glorifying the drug trade to the drag scene in Mazatlan and the murders of young women in Juarez now numbered in the hundreds. Certainly the drag queens of San Francisco are no more over the top than their low-rent counterparts in Mexico, where a large subculture of gays and transvestites work as prostitutes within the larger macho environment.

That said, some of the stories are shocking to the core. The tale of how two unlucky traveling salesmen came to be lynched by the town of Huejutla reads like pitchfork justice from the Dark Ages. When the men had chased off a group of children from their truckload of merchandise, one of the salesmen grabbed a young girl and remarked how he would come back in a few years and kidnap her, a crude remark – one that was not beyond the social norms of rural Mexico. But

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because there was a rumor going around that a group of organ-snatching child kidnappers was in the area, the children's fearful complaints landed the men in jail. The people of the Huasteca region are known for credulously believing the most unlikely tales of crime, which is not surprising. Like many in the Mexican countryside, the villagers of Huejutla are poorly educated and their minds are filled with superstition. Even the diversity-loving BBC has called Mexico "a deeply superstitious society."

After the town's local radio station ran "news" spots advising the people to demand justice for the children, an angry mob congregated around the jail to oppose bail. Add copious amounts of sugarcane alcohol to a belief that there is no justice to be had from the authorities, and the local citizenry

went on a rampage. After a little preliminary torture they strung up the two salesmen in the town square.

The author, journalist Sam Quinones, notes in passing (ho hum) that lynching is not an unusual occurrence in Mexico; in fact, he reveals that his file of clippings on lynchings from 1994 until 2000 is three inches thick. The state of Morelos, south of Mexico City, has a particular penchant for community executions. In 1994, four men accused of robbery were "shot, stabbed, kicked, hacked, beaten, stoned, and finally burned." In a Veracruz village, a man suspected of rape and murder was given an extra-legal trial followed by his being tied to a tree, doused with gasoline and burned to death as the event was videotaped.

It's not just rural towns which engage in community murders. A Mexico City suburb was the site of a horrific killing when a mob burned two federal police officers alive, an event which was partially shown on television as it occurred in November 2004.

**True Tales from
Another Mexico**
by Sam Quinones
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University of New Mexico Press
333 pages, \$29.95 paper



Keep in mind that President Bush and other elites want a shotgun wedding between the U.S. and Mexico, a political unification accomplished through immigration, trade treaties and a "security perimeter" around North America.

Back in Huejutla, the aftermath of the lynching did not bring anything that could be called remorse. "We're poor," whined one resident. "We didn't have any money; that's why this happened."

The mayor opined that the lynchers were out-of-towners. The father of the accusing girl feared retaliation from the families of the murdered salesmen and complained, "Now we want peace. Look around; you can see from how we live that there's no one to protect us."

Too bad there was no effective system of law to protect the hapless salesmen from the bloodthirsty townspeople of Huejutla.

Another view on the glorification of crime in Mexican culture is explored with the story of Chalino Sanchez, whose photo is on the book's cover. The young man is in a serious pose, with a gruff sneer and hat tilted in unmistakable attitude. You might not immediately notice the substantial handgun stuck in his pants, since the pearly grip blends into the tones of his cowboy shirt. Chalino lived hard and died young as a *valiente* (a tough guy, the sort of fellow who packs heat when he goes to a party) and an unlikely musician. His recording career was an accident but his popularity sprang from his down home Mexican manner. He sang with a raspy voice, and pronounced words in the peasant style familiar to millions of other illegal aliens residing in southern California.

The author unsurprisingly has little regard for the distinctions of borders and sovereignty, and refers to Chalino as "undocumented" when he bothers to mention immigration status at all: Mexicans simply "move" from their homeland to America as they feel like it.

Chalino struck a chord among his displaced homeboys in southern California with the rough-edged songs he wrote and sang. A dope dealer himself, his

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corridos (ballads) celebrated the real lives ordinary Mexicans were living in the U.S., full of drug use and violence.

Chalino's recorded cassettes moved quickly from fleamarket tables to Spanish language radio and wide popularity from there. But as a public tough guy, he was a target for punks and drunks looking for a quick upgrade to their macho rating. He was

plunked during a gunfight that broke out during a Coachella gig where he shot back at his attacker from the stage. He later was shot dead during what was supposed to be a triumphant return to Mexico. He was found in a ditch after being taken away by some rough men in a police car after a performance in Sinaloa. But like Elvis, a shocking demise only drove the value of his stock higher, and sales of his music increased following his death.

There were narco-*corridos* before Chalino, but his style and story popularized a tougher version of the music. The demise of the star spawned a gaggle of imitators with each trying to be badder than the rest. Their songs included Mexicanized gangsta topics like battles with police, peddling dope and getting shot.

A performer boasting of drug involvement and posing with serious armaments, from shiny handguns to bazookas, is thought to demonstrate macho bona fides which enhance sales. The genre continues to be popular, and clearly expresses the love many Mexicans have for their criminals, the belief that the drug smuggler is more romantic trickster figure than murderous hoodlum.

On a more uplifting note, a view into Mexican religiosity is accorded attention with the story of Sinaloa saint Jesús Malverde, aka the Angel of the Poor, who has his own hometown shrine. Mr. Malverde is also known as the Narco-Saint, who presumably looks down from heaven on drug smugglers and aids the successful pursuit of their nefarious business dealings. The spiritually aware dope smuggler will ask for the blessing of the Narco-Saint before sending his product north and will respond to success with some sincere expression of thanks, such as a special serenade by Jesus' in-house

band or perhaps a memorial plaque reading ‘From Sinaloa to California.’

The historical Jesús Malverde is a doubtful proposition and may be an amalgam of two actual bandits of a century ago. Still, his followers believe in JM’s homespun miracles, such as the return of a lost cow or a last-minute reprieve from drowning. The shrine contains two concrete busts of the saint, and the community is also blessed with such emporia as ‘Malverde Clutch & Brakes,’ ‘Malverde Lumber,’ the cafeteria ‘Coco’s Malverde’ and other local reflections of JM grandeur. A constant stream of people comes – each with a candle, prayer or thank-you note for favors granted.

One man has left thanks for the Narco-Saint’s help in surviving a stay in San Quentin, another is grateful for a child late in life, and there is a pile of photocopied passports. The people believe in the power of Jesús Malverde.

Author Quinones clearly has an eye for society’s extremes, and he is not averse to slumming to show his ‘street cred.’ The photo of him getting down with Mexican gang members is revealing – we see a cheerful yuppie surrounded by three menacing *cholos* making their gangster hand signs. (You can see photos from the book on the author’s website www.samquinones.com.) But he is evidently comfortable enough with his Latin roots to hang with young Mexican criminals – ah, the joy of cultural solidarity. And the thugs respect Quinones enough not to rob and kill him. Or maybe they just want to see their names in print. Perhaps Sam has a Mariachi remake of *West Side Story* in mind, with the boys singing, ‘We’re deprived on accounta we’re deprived.’ Or a gangsta rap version in Spanish.

The story of gang-banger Simio is instructive to citizens who see Mexican thugs lurking on American streets and wonder how they came to get here. He made the common immigrant pilgrimage to the United States for a better life, but Simio did not come to work, but to rob. Upon arriving in a nondescript Los Angeles suburb, he was disappointed that it was not livelier, but he ‘saw there were all kinds of chances to steal.’ He also discovered crack cocaine while in the U.S., which was a good fit with his chosen profession as thief. The need to obtain crack fueled his normal routine of robbing two houses during the day and one

at night in order to maintain a thousand-dollar-a-day habit. He returned to Mexico after three months in juvenile detention with exhortations for the homeboys to get more serious about their gangstering. ‘I woke those boys up,’ Simio reported. ‘They were all asleep. They didn’t have the urge to rob. They weren’t stealing anything.’ In such ways do respected elders disseminate culture to the young.

Apart from the book, Americans in highly impacted areas have certainly noticed that Mexicans are different. From the resistance to educational assimilation lasting several generations to the criminal behavior that is filling U.S. prisons with Mexican nationals, the cultural attributes of the new Hispanic residents are not cheering.

When Hispanic birth rates and immigration threaten to overwhelm the historic American population, responsible citizens need to think hard about the kind of future being concocted for their grandchildren. Mexican author Jorge Ramos likes to brag that the United States will be majority Hispanic in a century or so – such is the relentless power of demographics, particularly when borders are open. If Americans were given a choice of what culture with which they might like to merge, Mexico would not likely be the choice, not by a long shot.

Throughout our history, Americans have worked to improve the rule of law and expand gender and racial equality. We value scholarship and scientific inquiry. Our concept of ‘family values’ includes educating young people for many years rather than sending them out into the workplace at age 16 or encouraging teen marriage for girls. A closer integration of our cultures is entirely negative for America and destructive of our tradition of fairness under law. The unassimilated millions of Mexicans in this country bring with them their culture’s violence, disdain for education, endemic corruption and gender inequality.

For a concise overview of the basic cultural bifurcation regarding ‘progress prone’ versus ‘progress resistant’ societies, see Prof. Lawrence Harrison’s chart and remarks (‘Immigrants and Culture,’ *The Social Contract*, Vol. XII, No. 2, Winter 2002). His brilliant chart analyzing cultural differences tells you the most you can learn on the subject in one page.

Sam Quinones has done us a favor by providing

a close-up view of Mexican society through readable reportage and personal stories. Although the author nearly swoons in his admiration for Mexican culture of all ilks, the book is a litany of dysfunction that will further educate Americans about their millions of uninvited guests.