

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE

TEJANO CULTURE: CULTURAL EVOLUTION AS A MEANS OF SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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Abstract

This paper explores the manner in which Tejano culture has evolved to incorporate aspects of other cultures (primarily Anglo-American) into their own. It argues that this practice has allowed Tejanos to avoid full assimilation and to overcome past and present challenges they have encountered. The argument is dominantly supported by journal articles, professional studies, oral history interviews, and newspaper articles.

Introduction

Moving from Edgewood, Texas to Chicago, Illinois in the 1950s meant much more than a change from a small town to a massive urban center for Maria Martinez (born Maria Rodriguez). Then, only nine-years-old, Martinez encountered a world full of discrimination and segregation practices that appeared in many places and forms around her and which completely differed from her childhood experiences in Texas. In an interview, Martinez recalled the segregated Chicago public transportation system of that time, in which all Latinos and African Americans were forced to sit near the back of the buses in order to allow whites to sit near the front. Mexicans particularly faced persecution by the Italians in her neighborhood. During this time, they were often victims of physical assault, targeted solely for their heritage. As the only non-Anglo ethnic group in the neighborhood, Mexicans found themselves largely culturally isolated.¹

Although this was the case for many Mexicans, the personal experience was different for Martinez and her family. As Tejanos, they represented a unique subculture of Mexican-Americans. “We [the Rodriguez family] never had to sit in the back of the bus,” Martinez explained, when describing her personal experiences with the segregated bus system, adding, “No one ever made us do that.”² Additionally, the Rodriguez family was never subjected to the threats or concerns of physical violence against them that other families of Mexican origin were. Martinez and her family experienced overwhelmingly positive race relations in each location they lived in

¹ Ortiz. Interview with Maria Martinez. 11/09/2013.

² Ibid.

Chicago. In fact, the first time Martinez remembers ever feeling racism directed towards her was well into her adult life.

Martinez attributes these differences in experiences to her Tejano culture. “That’s the only reason I can think of,” she explained. The fact that Tejanos blend American culture and Mexican culture meant social protection in many ways for the Rodriguez family. By appearing more “American” and less unfamiliar to whites in Chicago than others with Mexican heritage, Martinez and her family were able to maintain their non-Anglo cultural traditions while also avoiding discrimination.³

Adopting specific Anglo-American cultural traits has allowed Tejanos to maintain a distinct cultural identity while also bridging the culture gap between themselves and Anglo-dominated society in order to improve social and economic conditions for themselves. Tejanos’ history of cultural integration has allowed them to develop a unique cultural identity that is still alive and evolving today. This is particularly true for the cultural aspects of food, music, and language. The ongoing integration of multiple cultures into these areas has helped Tejanos overcome challenges throughout history, develop strategies to address current issues, and foster relationships between diverse communities.

Tejano is a difficult term to define. On one hand, the literal translation of “Texan” is tidy and manageable, with an apparently clear meaning and application. In spite of this, a one-word translation can barely begin to describe the culture and people who identify as Tejano. In general, “Tejano” refers to people of Mexican heritage who live in

³ Ortiz. Interview with Maria Martinez. 10/06/13.

or were raised in Texas, and their culture.⁴ The term first came into use in 1824 in reference to simply the citizens of the Texas territory; however, it became a term of self-identification among Latinos in Texas beginning in 1833. The third shift in the use of “Tejano” came after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, when Tejano became a word specifically and much more exclusively applied to Mexican Texans.⁵ With this in mind, Tejano must be recognized as a dynamic term that has different meanings for different people. It also constantly evolves as an identity, changing and shifting in relation to significant events and eras in the United States, and even varying from person to person.

Historiography

Tejanos have been largely ignored as a cultural group by historians and sociologists alike. While many studies and research have been conducted on Latino Americans in general - and the Latino American experience is beginning to achieve more accurate, representative portrayals in U.S. society - as a small subgroup within the Chicano community, the Tejano story remains all but hidden. Fortunately, several historians and social scientists have begun to pursue a better understanding of Tejano people and their culture.

One such individual is professor of sociology at University of Texas-Pan American Chad Richardson. Richardson, in *Batos, Bolillos, Pochos, and Pelados: Class and Culture on the South Texas Border*, describes many of the cultural traits held by Tejanos in the U.S.-Mexico border region of South Texas. In this text, Richardson

⁴ Benavides. “Tejano.”

⁵ Ibid.

describes South Texas as “the cradle of Tejano society and culture...” However, although Richardson is successful at outlining the history of Tejanos and cultural traits they maintain, he is less successful at relating the development of the Tejano culture to the social and economic conditions they have faced.⁶ Similarly, several other papers produced on Tejano culture highlight only one aspect of the culture and, in the same way as Richardson, neglect to relate these characteristics to a broader context.

Other studies have examined Tejano culture and lifestyle in relation to other Chicanos. In “Interests Not Passions: Mexican-American Attitudes toward Mexico Immigration from Mexico, and Other Issues Shaping U.S.-Mexico Relations,” political science professor Rodolfo de la Garza focuses on comparing and contrasting Tejano political views on foreign policy to the views of Mexican-Americans from California. Although a valuable comparison, it does not address the history or cultural traits of Tejanos which serve to shape those political ideologies. As a result, the reader is left with a foundational understanding of trends in Tejano and other Chicano political views but without any insight into the reasons for these tendencies.⁷

One of the most common approaches seen in Tejano literature is acknowledgement of Tejanos in solely a historical sense. These texts draw attention to the early presence of Tejanos in the modern-day United States and the failure of the current education system to give credit to Tejanos for their role in critical historical events, such as the Alamo. As part of these writings, emphasis is placed on the lack of mention of Tejanos in historical writings pertaining to the Southwest. The problem with

⁶ Saad Saka. Book Review: *Batos, Bolillos, Pochos, and Pelados: Class and Culture on the South Texas Border*.

⁷ De la Garza. “Interests Not Passions: Mexican-American Attitudes toward Mexico, Immigration from Mexico, and Other Issues Shaping U.S.-Mexico Relations.”

these publications, however, is that they treat Tejanos as a cultural group from the past. While imperative to finally celebrate Tejano figures in United States history, examining Tejanos as only figures of the past is inaccurate and misleading.

All of these studies and publications prove useful in specific ways, yet are limited in others. Literature on Tejanos is scarce, and literature connecting their distinctive cultural traits to the broader context surrounding their lives has not yet been elaborated. Likewise, little to no work has been produced that recognizes the evolution of Tejano culture as a necessary reaction that has served as protection from both assimilation and the socio-economic factors standing as barriers to the Tejano people. This research gap must be addressed, and this paper will serve to direct attention to these neglected areas of study.

Historical Background

Tejanos have a rich and deep-rooted history. Spanish immigrants first arrived in what is now Texas in the mid-1600s. Their presence there was centered strongly on building relationships with American Indians who already lived in the area, mostly from the Apache or Commanche tribes.⁸ From that point, upon recognizing the potential of this region, the focus of Spanish settlement turned from temporary to permanent, resulting in heavier immigration. Beginning in the 1700s, the first families of Spanish descent settled in the modern-day San Antonio area of Texas, creating a ranching-based community and culture. From the start, the ranch culture and high land ownership

⁸ Gonzalez. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, p. 99.

numbers set these settlers apart from those residing in the rest of Mexico (New Spain, at the time).⁹

Until 1821, the only residents of the Texas territory were the indigenous peoples from the North and Central Americas, Spanish settlers, and *mestizos* who had a blended heritage from the former two groups. In 1821, when New Spain gained its independence from Spain and became the Republic of Mexico, Anglo settlers from the United States began immigrating into the Texas territory. The mayor of San Antonio, Jose Antonio Navarro, believed allowing Anglo settlers into their region would help its economy recover from the damage done to it by its former Spanish rulers. He also believed that this would create opportunities for international trade between Mexico and the United States. In order to arrange for a smooth transition for this new influx of residents, Navarro collaborated with U.S. citizen Stephen F. Ambrose to screen the potential settlers prior to their entry into the Texas territory. Together, they dreamed of creating a vibrant, cotton economy in Texas.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the intended controlled flow of select, qualified Anglo settlers exploded and strayed beyond the regulation and overseeing eyes of Ambrose. Before long, Anglo settlers and the slaves they brought with them outnumbered the Tejanos, reaching 30,000 people by 1830; that same year, only 4,000 Tejanos lived in the territory.¹¹

Shortly after the new arrival of Anglo settlers, leaders in the Republic of Mexico decided to merge the Texas territory with the state Coahuila. Coahuila, the most northeastern state in the Republic of Mexico, lay to the west of the Texas territory. While

⁹ Lovgren. "Alamo's Unsung Heroes – Remember the Tejanos."

¹⁰ PBS Online. "Remember the Alamo."

¹¹ Lovgren. "Alamo's Unsung Heroes – Remember the Tejanos."

simplifying rule for the Mexican federal government, this change caused problems for residents and politicians in Texas. When Texas joined Coahuila into a consolidated state, it lost its right to have an entire regional legislation representing its unique interests and agendas. Instead, Texas was required to have a joint state legislation with Coahuila, reducing its level of representation. Around this same time, Mexico's federal government began placing into effect plans to close its borders to United States immigrants. The Mexican government became concerned by the overwhelming number of Anglo immigrants entering Texas; these immigrants brought slavery into Mexico, which was illegal in the rest of the nation, and their unexpectedly high numbers soon grew to a concerning height in the eyes of the Mexican government.



(Image courtesy of Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps)

While uncomfortable with these political shifts, Tejanos worked to make the most of their new position as part of Coahuila. Navarro earned a position on the reworked state legislature, allowing Texas to maintain a voice in the regional government through representation by this trusted figure. The turning point in Texas' relationship with the rest of Texas was in 1834 when President Santa Anna of Mexico dissolved all of Mexico's state legislatures, centralizing all of Mexico's governing power in Mexico's capital, Mexico City. In doing this, he would be able to more easily control the land and people under his power.¹² Upon this decision, the Tejanos, led by a local political figure named Juan Seguin, revolted against the Mexican government in an attempt to regain local rule. Seguin raised a Tejano militia and collaborated with Anglo settlers in Texas to fight the Mexican army; while they originally fought to simply regain their state legislation, the reactions of the Mexican army to their resistance gradually transformed their efforts into a battle for independence. The most famous battle in the Texas Revolution, the Alamo, typically generates thoughts of Anglo soldiers and war heroes, such as Davy Crockett; however, Tejanos were the primary force behind the revolution efforts. Working alongside Anglo settlers helped the Tejanos to win Texan independence, although the positive war-time relationship between Tejanos and Anglo residents of Texas did not last the way the revolution's leaders hoped it would.¹³

Soon after Texas' attempt to gain independence from Mexico in 1835, the United States declared war on Mexico. Driven by Manifest Destiny and the unyielding ambition to acquire as much land as possible, the United States government ultimately won the war with Mexico, settling on an agreement in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.

¹² PBS Online. "Remember the Alamo."

¹³ Suarez, *Latino Americans*, 29.

This treaty had tremendous consequences –for Tejanos in particular.¹⁴ According to San Antonio journalist Leonard Favela, “...no one treaty has transformed an entire cultural population like Guadalupe-Hidalgo has done to the *mexicano*.”¹⁵

The treaty established a new border between the United States and Mexico: the Rio Grande. This new border awarded the United States with nearly one million square miles of new territory, including modern-day California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Texas, Utah, and parts of Colorado. As a result, Tejanos who were previously citizens of Mexico became immediate United States citizens upon the signing of the treaty. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo allowed Mexican residents of Texas up to one year to choose whether to stay in Texas or move back into Mexico. Those who stayed were to have their property rights and culture protected and honored by the United States government and their fellow residents; however, these proved to be empty promises for most Tejanos.¹⁶

While property rights were meant to be protected, a combination of legal complications and discriminatory treatment by Anglo residents resulted in a significant number of Tejano landowners losing their farms and ranches. Conflicts between Anglo residents of Texas and Tejanos manifested themselves in other ways, as well, during this period. These conflicts were exacerbated by the rapidly increasing population of Anglo settlers in Texas, which greatly exceeded the Tejano population by 1865. Soon after annexation, names of cities and towns throughout Texas became Anglicized, and many communities saw a rise in racially segregated neighborhoods and overall

¹⁴ Hernandez, *The Legacy of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on Tejanos' Land*, 101.

¹⁵ Favela, “Scholars Gather to Discuss Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty,” 1A.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 102.

discriminatory practices against Tejanos. This transformation of Texas and its social hierarchy also resulted in a dramatic loss of Tejano representation in both local and regional politics.¹⁷ While these events spanned across centuries of time, they generated significant change for Tejanos. The social and economic upheaval that manifested itself in the lives of Tejano people as a by-product of these changes required Tejanos to find ways to adapt. Opposed to assimilation, the Tejanos chose instead to incorporate only select aspects of Anglo influence into their pre-existing culture in order to preserve a strong cultural identity and survive the changing conditions around them.

Food

Making the connection between foods and overcoming social and economic challenges may not seem obvious upon initial consideration, but for Tejanos it has not only served that purpose but has also functioned to develop beneficial relationships between Tejanos and individuals from other ethnic and cultural groups. When given further thought, this should be unsurprising, as, regardless of background, food wields the power of bringing people together. History professor Daniel S. Margolies even goes as far as to cite food as a close second in cultural importance to music in Tejano identity.¹⁸

Tejano cuisine, known more commonly as “Tex-Mex,”¹⁹ gradually began to take shape starting in 1821 when Anglo settlers began arriving in the Texas territory. While often mistaken as a failed attempt to recreate authentic Mexican dishes, Tex-Mex is an

¹⁷ Hernandez, *The Legacy of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on Tejanos' Land*, 102-107

¹⁸ Margolies, “Voz de Pueblo Chicano: Sustainability, Teaching, and Intangible Cultural Transfer in Conjunto Music,” 37.

¹⁹ The term “Tex-Mex” came into use in the 1940s.

entity all its own.²⁰ Tex-Mex fare represents a fusion of Mexican cooking, regional availability, and Anglo-American influences.²¹ Its signature flavors and ingredients emerged out of both accommodations to spice-sensitive palates of Anglo settlers and necessary adaptations based on Tejano socio-economic conditions. Out of these factors emerged a style of food in which cumin, chili powder, and beef became prominent.²²

Many Tejano culinary traditions can be traced to efforts made in overcoming the poverty Tejanos faced following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The loss of land and political influence as indirect consequences of the Treaty meant a struggle to earn a living for many Tejanos. As a result, foods that were readily available in their region and foods that were inexpensive became staples in Tejano diets.²³ One way this has manifested itself in Tex-Mex cuisine is through the frequent use of beef in cooking. Texas' first settlements revolved around ranch culture, and the cattle industry remains powerful in Texas to this day. The abundance of beef meant that it was a more affordable option for many Tejano families than most other sources of protein. However, because Texas Anglos held the majority of the state's wealth following the Treaty, most Tejano families found choice cuts of meat unaffordable. Out of this challenge was born a number of creative solutions. One of these was *arrachera*. *Arrachera*, a cut of skirt steak located in the cow's diaphragm, is common in Tejano cooking. The *arrachera* is a chewy and stringy cut of meat; however, the Tejano preparation using a marinade of

²⁰ Tejano cooking does, however, share many similarities to the cuisine in Northern Mexico; this can be explained by the close proximity that made many of the same foods regionally available, Texas' political history of being part of Mexico, and the Mexican heritage of Tejanos.

²¹ Gold, "Tex-Mex," 41.

²² Ibid.

²³ Pilcher, "Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New-Mex, or Whose Mex? Notes on the Historical Geography of Southwestern Cuisine," 669.

lime juice, garlic, and salt, allows it to become tender enough to be sliced and eaten in tacos.²⁴ In this way, Tejanos changed the way that they ate and prepared food in order to counteract the economic struggles they encountered.

Another way that Tejanos historically sought to overcome the challenge of poverty served a dual purpose of also solving some of their societal obstacles. Tejano restaurant owners recognized their need for Anglo business, as Anglos held much of the region's wealth at this time. The Tejano community also recognized that they could likely make more progress toward regaining political representation and ending some of the discrimination they faced if it worked to build relationships with members of the Anglo community.²⁵ They used food to address these problems. One approach was to reduce the level of spice in their dishes. Very few Anglo settlers could handle dishes prepared with spicy *chiles*, so certain dishes underwent a substitution process of replacing *chiles* with chili powder.²⁶ These dishes remained similar to their original state, yet became accessible for the first time to Anglo-Texans.

Ingredient replacement was not the only way Tex-Mex cuisine functioned to please both Tejano and Anglo preferences. In the early 1900s, Tejano restaurant owners invented combination plates. Combination plates represented a revolution that affected not only the Tejano restaurant market but has taken over the entire U.S. food industry. These dishes came numbered in the menu and were typically served topped with a sauce and with a side of beans and rice. This adaptation appealed to Anglo

²⁴ Pilcher, "Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New-Mex, or Whose Mex? Notes on the Historical Geography of Southwestern Cuisine," 669.

²⁵ Oral History Interview with Bidal and Olga Aguero, 1998, by Jose Angel Gutierrez.

²⁶ Chili powder is a flavorful spice blend consisting of powdered mild red pepper, garlic powder, Mexican oregano, cumin, and salt.

customers for two reasons. First, Anglo customers preferred sit-down meals rather than the small, wrapped lunches that Tejanos typically ate for easy consumption on work breaks. By designing menu items that featured a serving of the main dish combined with two sides, Tejano restaurateurs were able to offer a more filling, sit-down meal for their target market. The second reason for the success of combination plates in attracting Anglo customers was that it simplified ordering. Very few Anglo-Texans spoke or read Spanish, which made stating a number to place an order the preferred option over stumbling over the pronunciation of dishes in Spanish.²⁷

By modifying the food they served in restaurants and the manner in which they presented the food, Tejano restaurant owners not only were able to improve their economic situations by attracting more customers, but they also opened up doors to improved Tejano-Anglo relations in the community. Tejanos avoided assimilation by developing creative solutions to the obstacles blocking them from attracting Anglo-Texan customers in their restaurants. By combining tradition with Anglo preferences, Tejanos achieved incredible results in the relationships they developed with non-Tejano Texans. Tex-Mex food, as it evolved under the hand of Tejanos, has become representative of Texas as a whole. The common ground Tejanos found with Anglos in regard to cuisine has created a sense of unity among all Texans, helping to improve social equality across all ethnicities.²⁸

²⁷ Pilcher, "Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New-Mex, or Whose Mex? Notes on the Historical Geography of Southwestern Cuisine," 670.

²⁸ Pilcher, "Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New-Mex, or Whose Mex? Notes on the Historical Geography of Southwestern Cuisine," 668.

Tejano cuisine has contributed to solving more current challenges facing the Tejano community, as well. Although Tejanos have fought to maintain their cultural identity and resist assimilation, maintaining this goal requires deliberate effort on the parts of Tejanos, particularly the older generations.²⁹ According to many Tejanos, lack of education about Tejano history and culture is the greatest issue facing Tejanos in recent decades. One of the most significant ways Tejanos are using food to address this issue is with food festivals. These festivals not only liberate Tejanos to celebrate their culture, but they also function to develop cooperative efforts with non-Tejanos directed toward collaboratively solving some of the problems facing Tejanos.

One such festival, known as *Menudoso*, is held in West Texas. *Menudoso* is an event that celebrates the Tejano and Mexican dish called *menudo*.³⁰ At this festival, individuals and restaurants compete in a *menudo* cook-off, and events are organized to immerse attendants into Tejano culture, ranging from culinary experiences to folk dancing and traditional music. Regardless of who cooks the best pot of *menudo* at this festival, everyone benefits from attending, as the experience allows for increased understanding of Tejano culture by attendees from different backgrounds, making small but important progress toward overcoming the challenges facing Tejanos.³¹ After all, educating both Tejanos and non-Tejanos about Tejano culture and history is a critical factor in allowing Tejanos to develop and maintain a clear sense of identity and pride as individuals and as a community.³²

²⁹ Almanza, "The Hispanic Heritage Center of Texas Celebrates Tejano Heritage," 7B.

³⁰ *Menudo* is a soup containing pieces of cow stomach (*tripas*); its broth is made from a blend of guajillo chiles, ancho chiles, and garlic.

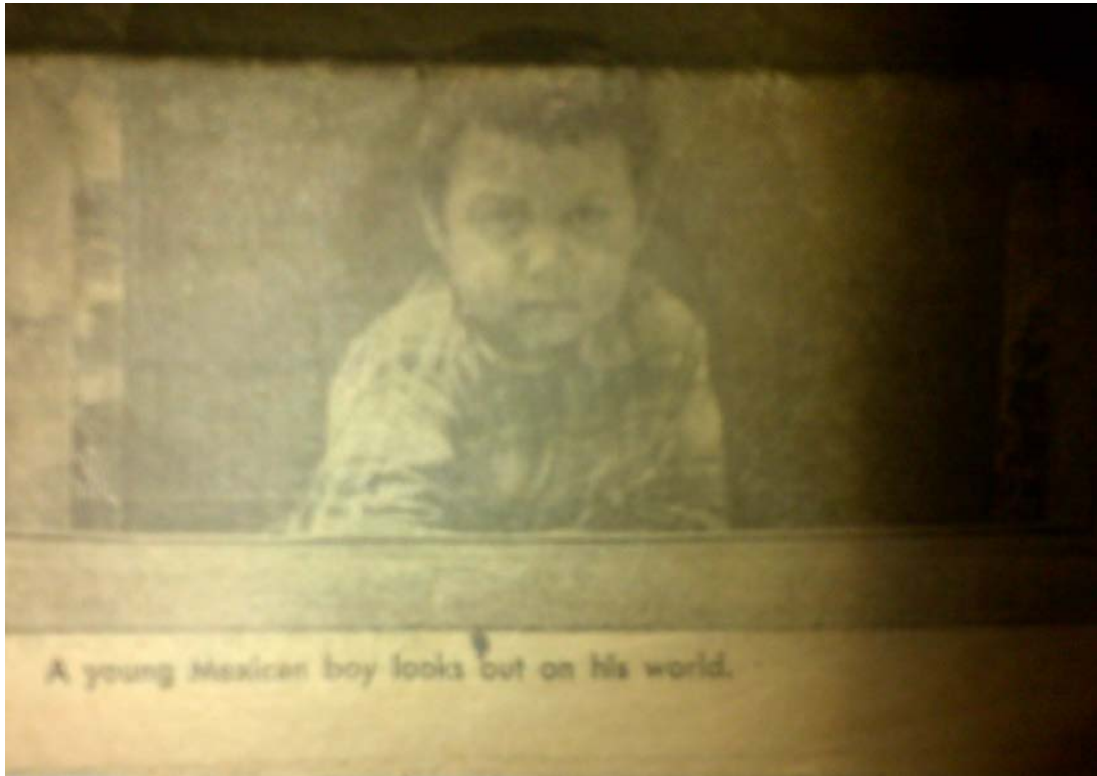
³¹ Oral History Interview with Bidal and Olga Agüero, 1998, By: Jose Angel Gutierrez.

³² Almanza, "The Hispanic Heritage Center of Texas Celebrates Tejano Heritage," 7B.

Increasing awareness about Tejano culture among Anglo-Americans can have a significant impact on relationships between these two groups. Many people outside of Texas have never even heard the term Tejano, much less have an understanding of its culture and identity. In an interview, Maria Martinez described the damaging effects of living in a dominant society that is ignorant of the cultural groups within it. As she spoke, she drew a newspaper article dated in 1971 out from a stack of photographs. Studying the article while shaking her head, Martinez explained that the newspaper reporters had taken her young brother's picture for their article on Mexican-Americans without permission, captioning his face, "A young Mexican boy looks out on his world." Martinez recalled the anger she felt when the article was published in their local paper; while not written to be deliberately offensive, the article provided a highly generalized account of an increase of Mexican-Americans moving to Chicago and presented the information without a remotely clear understanding of its subjects and their lives.³³

Through these efforts to welcome Anglo influence and presence into their culture, Tejanos have been able to retain the most significant traits of their cuisine, as well as overcome challenges facing them socially and economically.

³³ Oral History Interview with Maria Martinez, 6 October 2013, by Jessica Ortiz.; Author Unknown, "The Homeland Ties Remain Deeply Rooted," 3.



(Photograph obtained and used with the permission of Maria Martinez)

Music

Music is another cultural tool Tejanos have utilized to improve their lives. Part of this can be attributed the wide array of Tejano music genres that exist. The term Tejano describes the many musical genres from Texas that blend Mexican music styles with Anglo influences. It first developed into a uniquely Tejano sound after Texas became part of the United States in the mid-1800s, providing a way for Tejanos to express themselves and overcome the challenges of race relations and assimilation attempts facing them in the post-Guadalupe Hidalgo era. Tejano music created a canvas for oral

history that allowed individuals to tell stories about their history and the heroes who sought to correct the injustices facing them.³⁴

Arguably the earliest form of Tejano to develop is known as the *corrido*.³⁵ Dating back into the 1800s, *corrido* lyrics reflected the external and internal conflicts affecting Tejanos, particularly in the South Texas region. On one hand, the 19th century brought conflicts with Anglo settlers over land and race, and on the other hand, this same time period delivered a more introspective challenge posed to Tejanos involving their increasing awareness of their identity failing to align perfectly with Anglos or with Mexicans.³⁶ Through *corridos* and their themes of Latino heroes triumphing over malignant Anglo Texas Rangers, Tejanos were able to address both social issues they were faced with in this period.

In regards to the social conflicts between Tejanos and Anglo-Texans, *corridos* allowed Tejanos to have an outlet for subtle resistance against Anglo oppression.³⁷ In the years of early *corrido* emergence, Tejanos often faced unwarranted persecution by Texas Rangers and local lawmen, becoming victims of harassment, denial of court proceedings to assert guilt or innocence, and even lynching. While the lyrics of the *corridos* that protested Anglo oppression may not have generated overt activism, they allowed Tejanos to maintain pride and dignity despite the discrimination they faced from the Anglo-Texans. This is illustrated powerfully in the legendary folk song, “*El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez*.” In this song, the folk hero (Cortez) shoots a sheriff in self-defense

³⁴ Gonzalez, “The Power of Tejano Music: Home Grown and Full of Soul.”

³⁵ *Corridos* are narrative-style Spanish folk ballads native to South Texas.

³⁶ Flores, “The Corrido and the Emergence of Texas-Mexican Social Identity,” 166.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 169, 171.

while trying to protect his brother; Cortez manages to evade the authorities by utilizing his impressive riding and shooting skills. As illustrated in the following translated excerpt from the *corrido*, Cortez is upheld as the *mexicano* hero who overcomes Anglo oppression with dignity and honor:

Gregorio Cortez said,
With his soul ablaze:
"I'm not sorry for killing him,
Self-defense is justifiable."

He fled toward Gozalez.
Several sheriffs saw him
But they didn't want to pursue him
Because they were afraid.

When the sheriffs arrived
Gregorio turned himself in.
"You can take me only on my terms,
No other way."³⁸

These folk songs that were developed created an outlet for Tejanos to escape the prejudice directed toward them without abandoning their culture and assimilating into Anglo ways.³⁹ Represented in the lyrics are the Tejano perspectives on events and issues, giving Tejanos a voice despite social oppression.⁴⁰ The motif of the Texas Ranger and the *mexicano* hero in *corridos* has continued to allow Tejanos to apply these symbols to problems and issues they encounter through any period in time.⁴¹

Corridos also served to help Tejanos develop a clearer sense of identity in the early 1900s. About 1910, Tejanos began to notice a distinction between themselves and other Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. To address this newfound awareness of this socio-cultural split, Tejanos used *corridos* to find their unique voices and identities

³⁸ "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez," Folk Song.

³⁹ Ibid, 172.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 171.

⁴¹ Flores, "The Corrido and the Emergence of Texas-Mexican Social Identity," 170.

throughout the course of their quest to find a place between Anglos and *mexicanos*.⁴² Through writing and singing *corridos*, Tejanos were able to reflect on and express their position as people caught between two worlds and as people who faced persecution without cause.⁴³ Without *corridos*, Tejanos may not have been able to develop a secure sense of their own cultural identity, and may have given in to pressures to assimilate in order to escape their social oppression.

Another form of Tejano music, known as *conjunto*, has existed in various forms since approximately 1890 and has served similar purposes to Tejano people as *corridos*.⁴⁴ *Conjunto* music is known for its use of accordion and 12-string base for instruments and its representations of working class culture, community life, and Tejano identity, often including lyrics about contemporary politics and issues affecting Tejanos.⁴⁵ This musical style correlates to the way that the rest of Tejano culture has been influenced by both Anglos and Mexican roots; it exemplifies the relationships built between Anglos and Tejanos in Texas and how time and effort have led to more positive exchanges between the two groups. *Conjunto* has been most significantly influenced by German polka music; however, it has evolved to incorporate music styles representative of Czech and Polish tradition, as well.⁴⁶

The term Tejano, in recent years, has been applied more commonly to newer forms of music played by Mexican-Texans that merge rock and pop sounds with

⁴² Ibid, 174.

⁴³ Ibid, 176.

⁴⁴ Margolies, "Voz de Pueblo Chicano: Sustainability, Teaching, and Intangible Cultural Transfer in Conjunto Music," 40.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 38.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 40-41.

traditional Mexican ones.⁴⁷ This newer variation of Tejano music – known simply as Tejano - has been the most powerful in serving to develop relationships across cultural lines while still remaining true to Tejano identity. The lyrics reflect this multi-cultural influence, often flowing between English and Spanish throughout the course of a single song.⁴⁸ In fact, Tejano is now the fastest-growing genre of Latin music in the United States.⁴⁹ Originating in San Antonio, Tejano music became a \$5 billion industry by 1994.

Possibly the most famous Tejano artist was a young woman named Selena Quintanilla, known most often as simply “Selena.” Her work in the Tejano music industry contributed to its rise in popularity between the late 1980s and mid-1990s. An idol for young Latinas, Selena gained fame for her kind and mature personality, her signature fashion style, and for her achievement of earning an award for the Female Vocalist of the Year in the 1987 Tejano Music Awards.⁵⁰ Born in Lake Jackson, Texas, Selena began her career in music at a young age, guided by her father, Abraham Quintanilla, who had experience in the music industry himself. While raised speaking English, Selena sang exclusively in Spanish in her early career, transitioning to English songs for her last album. Her album being recorded in 1995 was intended to be a crossover record to increase her market and gain even more commercial attention. Unfortunately, Selena was murdered at age 23 before she was able to finish her English-Spanish fusion album.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Leland, “Born on the Border,” 80.

⁴⁸ Leland, “Born on the Border,” 80.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Terry-Azias, “Tejano Music Queen: Selena Quintanilla’s Untimely Death Came Before her Crossover Success,” 28.

⁵¹ Anonymous, “Barrio Culture: Hasta la Bye-Bye,” 27-28.

Selena's role in the Tejano music industry symbolized the significance of Tejano music on strengthening ties between Tejanos and non-Tejanos. Tejano music's multicultural appeal allowed for shared experiences and interests between Anglos and Latinos, an occurrence that has not always been common.⁵² Tejano songs reflect both instrumentation and lyrics that resonate with diverse audiences, even while maintaining a distinct connection to the Mexican roots of the genre. Although Selena did not live long enough to complete her crossover album, she can be credited for having a powerful role in both expanding the audience of Tejano music and reinforcing cultural pride in Tejanos for the identity the music still held for them.⁵³

While different genres of Tejano music have served varying roles, they have all had a positive shaping force in the lives of Tejanos. Tejano music has provided, and continues to provide, Tejanos with a voice that allows them to give name to the social, economic, and political problems they encounter. It also empowers Tejanos to recognize members of their own community as heroes – past and present – in the ongoing history of their people. Whether referring to Gregorio Cortez or Selena Quintanilla, Tejano music has profited Tejano culture by establishing legacies of pride in Tejano identity that last beyond a single lifetime. In addition to serving as tools to overcome challenges, Tejano music has fostered positive relationships between Tejanos and other diverse groups through the exchange of musical styles and instruments and through the use of timeless and universal concepts in lyrics. These exchanges build respect for one another and contribute towards reducing pressure for non-Anglo cultures to assimilate into the dominant society.

⁵² Leland, "Born on the Border," 80.

⁵³ Terry-Azios, "Tejano Music Queen: Selena Quintanilla's Untimely Death Came Before her Crossover Success," 28.

Language

Language determines how people communicate with the world and, in turn, how those people perceive the messages delivered to them by others. In short, language shapes reality. With that in mind, language can easily be argued as the most significant cultural factor affecting Tejanos in their processes of overcoming challenges and in developing relationships among diverse communities. Tejano history made bilingualism a necessity. Although English did not enter the Texas territory as a language until 1821, when the first Anglo settlers arrived, it soon became the language of power in that region.⁵⁴ Because Tejanos believed in incorporating aspects of other cultures into their own for cultural survival, bilingualism was their only alternative to assimilating to exclusive English use.

One of the historical causes of bilingualism becoming part of Tejano culture was mandatory use of English in public schools. Some individuals, such as Maria Martinez, grew up speaking English in the home. While these students experienced less discrimination by Anglo students and teachers at school for their familiarity with English, many acquired Spanish language skills, as well, either from their parents or by other means later in life. In the instance of Martinez, she was raised in a bilingual household. As she grew up, her father spoke to her and her siblings exclusively in English to prepare them for interacting outside of Tejano communities; at the same time, Martinez's mother used Spanish to communicate with her children in an effort to equip them with the skills to communicate within Latino communities. Despite her bilingual

⁵⁴ "Vaqueros: The First Cowboys of the Open Range," *National Geographic News*.; Schecter and Bayley, "Language Socialization Practices and Cultural Identity: Case Studies of Mexican-Descent Families in California and Texas," 514.

upbringing, Martinez never became fluent in Spanish until adulthood, after she got married and learned Spanish from her husband.⁵⁵

Students who grew up in Spanish-only households frequently found adjusting to attending public schools much more challenging than students in bilingual households. The Anglo teachers tended to be more hostile towards these students, and these students were often limited socially by language barriers.⁵⁶ As a result, Tejano families began to adopt more frequent English use, while still retaining Spanish. Socially, this cultural shift to bilingualism had two consequences. The first social impact of increased bilingualism was an ability to navigate between multiple environments with ease. Language no longer became a limitation for individuals in regards to ability to understand the content of legal documents. It also led to heightened confidence and clarity of communication when interacting with individuals from other cultures.

Unfortunately, evolving into a bilingual culture led to less positive outcomes for some individuals within the Tejano community. The rise in English language usage among Tejanos has led to a feeling of being *repatriados* (outcasts). This sentiment has emerged among Tejanos who feel as though this bilingualism has created an environment in which Anglos look down on them for their race, even though they can speak English, and other Latinos look down at them because the adoption of English has sometimes resulted in weakened Spanish skills.⁵⁷ Tejano folklorist and writer Americo Paredes experienced this same confliction in his own life. Paredes opened his

⁵⁵ Oral History Interview with Maria Martinez, 6 October 2013, by Jessica Ortiz.

⁵⁶ Oral History Interview with Irma Mireles, 1998, by Jose Angel Gutierrez.

⁵⁷ Suarez, *Latino Americans*.

first book of poetry, *Cantos de Adolescencia*, with a prologue that expressed these very feelings:

The verses enclosed in this book are not only the diary of an adolescent. They are the diary of a Mexico-Texan adolescent. Adolescent! Physical phenomenon caused by the proximity of two ages; individual that is neither child nor adult. Mexico-Texan! Sociological phenomenon, stubborn plant, man without a true and proper country that is neither Mexican nor Yankee.⁵⁸

Clearly, Paredes struggled through processing his sense of “in-between-ness” in regards to both his age and his heritage. While this challenge for certain Tejanos began early in the 20th century, to this day it remains an obstacle that exists as an unfortunate side-effect to avoiding the loss of their traditional language while adapting to life in a society dominated by English.

Language is at the root of not only historically based issues but also more recently developed concerns for Tejanos. In recent decades, Tejanos have begun organizing to utilize bilingualism as a foundation for preserving and reconnecting with their traditional culture and identity.⁵⁹ Although Tejanos have diligently worked to avoid excessive assimilation, over time, certain aspects of culture and details of history can become lost. Because of this, Tejanos are looking to reemphasizing the bilingual aspect of their culture to restore traditions to, particularly, the younger generations of Tejanos. One hope from these efforts is that by focusing on building Spanish skills in English-dominant Tejano youth, young Tejanos can increase communication with their elders in order to gain a better understanding of their history and culture. Strengthening

⁵⁸ Lopez Morin, Excerpt of *Cantos de Adolescencia* from “The Life and Early Works of Americo Paredes.”

⁵⁹ Favela, “Scholars Gather to Discuss Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty,” 1A.

communication with older family members is projected to have a positive impact on young people's development of clear, confident Tejano identities.⁶⁰

Bilingualism as a cultural trait has also helped Tejanos economically. In fact, Tejanos' dedication to avoid assimilation into English-only language use has benefitted them greatly in recent years. Many Tejanos value the ability to communicate in both English and Spanish because they recognize its worth in the job market. Tejano parents and grandparents emphasize the importance of maintaining a tradition of fluency in both languages during modern times, focusing not only on its usefulness in preserving culture but often more on the opportunities it can create.⁶¹ Martinez passes on the hope of pursuing bilingualism to her grandchildren and their families, accentuating that speaking more than one language not only is beneficial in getting hired to any job, but it is especially useful for obtaining well-paying jobs that can better support a family.⁶²

Tejanos' value of bilingualism has also supported the development of relationships with other cultural groups. By being able to communicate in more than one language, bilingual Tejanos have created advantages for themselves in regards to fostering connections between diverse communities. Maintaining Spanish allows Tejanos to collaborate with other communities of Spanish-speaking Latinos in order to work together towards shared social, economic, and political interests, such as immigration policies and multicultural education programs. In addition, having adopted English as a prominent language in the Tejano culture, communicating across racial

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Schechter and Bayley, "Language Socialization Practices and Cultural Identity: Case Studies of Mexican-Descent Families in California and Texas," 529.

⁶² Oral History Interview with Maria Martinez, 6 October 2013, by Jessica Ortiz.

and ethnic lines is nearly limitless in the United States. Use of English has allowed Tejanos to gain media attention for their interests and causes and to partner with commercial corporations to receive funding for special projects and cultural events.⁶³ Without this bilingual advantage, Tejanos would struggle to remain connected to much of the United States.

Bilingualism serves many purposes for Tejanos. From its historic roots of protecting the people from discrimination for use of Spanish only, bilingualism among Tejanos in recent times provides individuals and groups with extra tools for communicating and creating their own identities. The ability to communicate in both English and Spanish means that bilingual Tejanos have options, which is what provides true empowerment in approaching issues and obstacles that arise.

Conclusion

The evolution of Tejano culture through incorporation of Anglo influences has greatly shaped Tejano food, music, and language. These cultural traits, in turn, have been powerful forces in managing the social and economic issues facing Tejanos throughout the course of history, into present times. Equally as important as these cultural traits are and have been for overcoming challenges is the ability these cultural characteristics have in fostering beneficial relationships between Tejanos and a diverse assortment of other communities.

Tejanos have experienced significant success in making social and economic progress in the United States. However, more progress is needed. Few strides have

⁶³ Oral History Interview with Bidal and Olga Aguero, 1998, by Jose Angel Guteirrez.

been made in the approximately forty years since the end of the Chicano Rights Movement. At the forefront of concern among Tejano activists and social leaders is education. According to civil rights activist Irma Mireles, many of the same educational issues that were identified as problematic in the 1970s and 1980s have yet to be resolved to this day.⁶⁴ Tejanos will not be able to experience social and economic equality in the United States until their graduation rates and ratio of representation among public school staff and administration matches their Anglo counterparts.⁶⁵ Until that day comes, Tejano cultural evolution will likely continue in response to the needs and interests of the Tejano community.

⁶⁴ Oral History Interview with Irma Mireles, 1998, by Jose Angel Gutierrez.

⁶⁵ Saad Saka, Book Review. "Batos, Bolillos, Pochos, and Pelados: Class and Culture on the South Texas Border."

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