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Hidden but vibrant — Mexihcah culture survives

por Joe M. Arce y Joe Cardona-Faus

A show of photographs documenting the descendants of the Aztecs, called “Mexihcahs: Keepers of the Fire” continues at Guadalupe Cultural Center through the first week of November. The photographs by Wesley Billingslea capture the vibrancy of a people who have long been referred to as the “forgotten ones.”

Among the guests at a reception kicking off the exhibition was Ozelocoa Ramirez Muñoz, a Mexihcah priest who came to Kansas City to conduct a series of workshops on the Mexihcah in conjunction with the exhibition. The reception was also held at GCI, which is located at 1015 Avenida César E. Chávez on Kansas City’s Westside.

“It is more than a pleasure to be here,” Ramirez told Kansas City Hispanic News. “It is a necessity, it is an obligation. We as a people are obligated to preserve and conserve and educate and pass on our culture.”

The history of the Mexihcahs and other indigenous people has been destroyed, distorted or denied, he said.

As it has with many, the exhibition gave Gilbert Guerrero a greater understanding of his own history. Guerrero, who is associate director of education and youth development for Guadalupe Center, helped to bring the exhibit to Kansas City.

In a past interview with KCHN, he said the exhibition had opened his eyes. “This show is about the Aztecas, a group we always learned about. When I saw this I thought, Wow! They are still alive!”

For Ramirez, Guerrero’s reaction is not unique. “Our philosophy has been distorted over the years, at first by the invading Spanish who justified (their) actions by distorting and inventing many lies.... It is a history that is taught to our children, and it is full of falsehoods.”

Ramirez said the true story of the indigenous peoples lives on in the traditions, customs, and language of the descendants. The oral tradition becomes the vehicle that passes on this story from generation to generation.

“We learn of the ancient ones that preceded us, and it is transmitted



Ozelocoa Ramirez Muñoz, a Mexihcah priest, dressed in traditional Mexihcah attire for the opening of the exhibit. People like Jerry and Mary Adriano got an opportunity to visit with Ramirez. Ramirez said it’s important that people in the Midwest and all of the United States know of the history of his people.

in the family unit as oral history," he said.

Ramirez told KCHN that the preservation of the indigenous tradition has become a goal of many of the descendants of the once-powerful Aztecas.

"In Mexico, we are only now beginning to write our true story," he said. "This (photo exhibition) speaks with images, (saying) that we are still living, that we still exist. It speaks of our feelings, our science, our philosophy. We are fighting to conserve and spread this story."

"We are writing the authentic history of our people for ourselves — and, obviously, for those intellectually-curious people who have the open mind to consider the two sides of the story," he added. The attention that is being paid to Mexico's indigenous people has led to the formation of indigenous professional groups entrusted with the task of writing down and recording their languages, including the Nahuatl spoken by the Mexihcahs.

Mexico's indigenous cultures have been pushed to the margins of society, leading to serious inequities in the treatment of the people. Ramirez told KCHN the Mexihcahs and other groups suffer from discrimination. They lack adequate political representation, and must survive despite a shortage of educational, social, and medical services.

"To be Indian is a phenomenon," he said. "It means to be considered poor, ignorant, retarded, and worthless. That is nothing new. It has been a constant for all the multiple invasions of our continent. We lose our independence and prosperity and fall into a marginalization that today exists through the length and breath of Mexico."

Because of prejudice, coupled with ignorance about the indigenous cultures that formed the base of today's Mexico, members of the country's dominant culture look on the contributions of the original people with disdain.

Ramirez noted that, when politicians discuss the indigenous people in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, their words indicate an opinion that the indigenous "people that live in the most humble and culturally backward of conditions. All of our values are considered sins."

Through their attitude, Ramirez believes "they have taken away our right to our customs."

Ramirez believes that, when they embrace their traditions and history, the Mexihcahs and other Indian peoples find the dignity and worth that the dominant culture denies them.

"If we do not have an origin, we are not going to have a destiny," he noted. "We are going to be vagabonds. We need to look in the most profound depths of our heritage to know where we are coming from."

"But we have our own identity," Ramirez said. "We are Mexihcah, we are Nahuatl, and in our language, we are Matehuales."

In reclaiming their history, the Mexihcah have embraced their traditions and culture in a way that is reminiscent of the Chicano and black pride movements in this country. Ramirez said he proudly presents himself as Mexihcah. He also embraces the term "Indian," despite the negative connotations placed on it by Mexican society, and said it's easy to recognize that he is an Indian.

"The term 'Indian' is a term of opprobrium or offense — but today we have taken that appellation with gladness," he said. "Yes, I am Indian. (It means) we know where we come from, we know who we are, and we know what we want because we know where we are going."

This message of cultural identity is one that Ramirez feels must be

shared with the people of Greater Kansas City.

"Many of our people here are lost. They do not know where they came from." But for Latinos here, to look in a mirror is to look at their own indigenous heritage, he said.

"We need to make a personal connection with our people (in the U.S.) to clarify the doubts that have risen during so many years," he said. "We want to share our stories with our brothers (here), because for us — even though we are far from our people here — we know and feel the needs that are here."

Ramirez finds a spiritual opportunity in his visit to the geographic center of the country. "This is the center of the country," he said. "We not only expect our message to shine but to radiate like the rays of the sun to all the corners of the country."

For more information about the Mexihcahs exhibit, call (816) 421-1015.

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