



Top: Mexico and neighboring countries.
Above: The god/goddess Xochiquetzal.

Mexico

by Stephen O. Murray

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The population of Mexico, the country of 1,923,040 square kilometers immediately south of the United States, recently exceeded one hundred million (with an estimated annual rate of increase of 1.5%). Thirty percent of the population is entirely or predominantly *indigeno* (Amerindian), sixty percent *mestizo* (mixed Amerindian and Spanish descent), nine percent of entirely European descent (*blanco*), and one percent other.

Preconquest Mexico

Maize (corn) was first domesticated in what is now Mexico and was the staple of diets in civilizations that rose and fell before the sixteenth-century Spanish invasion--most notably, Olmec, Maya, Teotihuacano, and Toltec ones. The Nahuatl-speaking Mexicas (Aztecs) built an empire from a base in the valley of Mexico where the current capital is located. The city of Tenochitlán at the time the Spaniards arrived was larger than any European city except Paris.

The Mexicas held public rituals that were at times very erotic, but they were very prudish in everyday life. In their pantheon, the Mexicas worshipped a deity, Xochiquetzal (feathered flower of the maguey), who was the goddess of non-procreative sexuality and love.

Originally the consort of Tonacatecutli, a creator god, Xochiquetzal dwelled in the heaven of Tamaoanchan, where she gave birth to all humankind. However, subsequently she was abducted by Tezcatlipoca, a war god, and raped. This event transformed her character from the goddess of procreative love to the goddess of non-reproductive activities.

Xochiquetzal was both male and female at the same time, and in her male aspect (called Xochipilli), s/he was worshipped as the deity of male homosexuality and male prostitution. In Xochiquetzal's positive aspect, s/he was the deity of loving relationships and the god/dess of artistic creativity; it was said that non-reproductive love was like art--beautiful and rare. But in her other side, the deity of sexual destruction, s/he incited lust and rape, and inflicted people with venereal disease and piles.

The Mexicas' mythical history, like those of other Mesoamerican peoples, asserted that there had been four previous worlds. During the immediately preceding one, the "Age of the Flowers, of Xochiquetzal," the people supposedly gave up the "manly virtues of warfare, administration and wisdom," and pursued the "easy, soft life of sodomy, perversion, the Dance of the Flowers, and the worship of Xochiquetzal."

There is also a classic Nahuatl word, *patlacheh*, for a woman "playing the role of a man" penetrating women. The *patlacheh* is described at some length (as a scandal) in the Florenine codes (one of the two major extant collections of writings about the Aztecs).

Although the Aztecs were publicly sexually exuberant and privately prudish, their subjects varied greatly in their sexual customs. For example, the area which is now the state of Vera Cruz was very well known for practicing same-sex sodomy. When Bernal Díaz del Castillo reached Vera Cruz with Cortés, he wrote of the

native priests: "the sons of chiefs, they did not take women, but followed the bad practices of sodomy." Their practices included boy prostitutes and cross-dressed adults.

Although its veracity is somewhat suspect, since such revelations were used to rationalize the European conquest, Cortés wrote his king, the Emperor Carlos V, "We know and have been informed without room for doubt that all [Veracruzanos] practice the abominable sin of sodomy."

Colonial Mexico

The Mexicas had not conquered all the peoples, particularly those living on both the Pacific and the Gulf coasts, who were most notorious for their sexual availability. Thus, the Spanish were able to make alliances against the Mexicas. Malinche, the coastal woman who became the sexual partner of conquistador Hernán Cortés and aided the Spanish conquest, became the prototype of the "fucked/fucked over" Mexican. In Octavio Paz's analysis of Mexico's fatalistic national character, the mixed-blood (mestizo) children are "hijos de la chingada," the children of the fucked one, la Malinche.

The Spaniards condemned homosexuality more vociferously than the Aztecs had. After the conquest, all pagan rituals were banished and their rationale discredited. Mestizo culture came to exhibit a melding of Aztec attitudes towards private homosexuality and those of the Spaniards. The former ritual tradition that celebrated homosexuality as communion with the gods was lost.

In early Colonial times, when Bishop Zumarraga was the Apostolic Inquisitor of Mexico, homosexuality, and particularly sodomy, was a prime concern for the Inquisition. The usual penalties for homosexuality were stiff fines, spiritual penances, public humiliation, and floggings. However, homosexuality was tried by the civil courts as well, from whence people were sentenced to the galleys or put to death.

The only records providing a glimpse of homosexual social life during the Colonial period are the records of court proceedings when homosexual scandals occurred. Of such events, a purge that took place in Mexico City between 1656 and 1663 is the best known. It resulted in a mass execution.

Whereas heretics and Jews were burned in the Alameda, now a park near the center of Mexico City, homosexuals were burned in a special burning ground in another part of the city, San Lázaro, because homosexuality was not a form of heresy and thus fell into an ambiguous category of offenses. Thus, the group to be executed was marched to San Lázaro where the officials first garroted them. They were "done with strangling all of them at eight o'clock that night . . . then they set them afire." Novo states that several hundred people came from the city to watch the event.

It should be noted that strangling the victims before burning them was considered an act of mercy; for burning was such terrible agony that it was feared that the prisoners would forsake their faith in God and thus lose their immortal souls.

The purge seems to have ended when the Superiors in Spain wrote back to Mexico that they did not have Papal authority to grant the jurisdiction the Mexican Holy Office requested, and that the Inquisitors were "not to become involved in these matters or to enter into any litigation concerning them."

Postcolonial Mexico

Mexican independence from Spain in 1821 brought an end to the Inquisition. The intellectual influence of the French Revolution and the brief French occupation of Mexico (1862-1867) resulted in the adoption of the French legal code in which sodomy was not a crime.

This decriminalization of sodomy did not grant people the right to be overtly homosexual; for included in the "minimum ethics indispensable to maintaining society" were laws against solicitation and any public

behavior considered socially deviant or contrary to the folkways and customs of the time. Such vagueness in the law accorded wide latitude to interpretation by police. Shaking down (demanding money and jewelry from) those who a policeman decides are an "affront to public morality" has provided a source of supplementary income for policemen, some of whom have also demanded (and received) sexual favors.

On the night of November 20, 1901, Mexico City police raided an affluent drag ball, arresting 42 cross-dressed men and dragging them off to Belén Prison. One was released. The official account was that she was a "real woman," but persistent rumors circulated that she was a very close relative of President General Porfirio Díaz, so in Mexican slang *cuarenta-y-dos* (42, the one who got away) refers to someone who is covertly *pasivo* (a male who is sexually receptive to other males).

Those arrested were subjected to many humiliations in jail. Some were forced to sweep the streets in their dresses. Eventually, all 41 were inducted into the 24th Battalion of the Mexican Army and sent to the Yucatan to dig ditches and clean latrines. The ball and its aftermath were much publicized, including in illustrated broadsides by caricaturist Guadalupe Posada (who provided the cross-dressed men with mustaches and notably upper-class dress).

The raid on the dance of the 41 *maricones* was followed by a less-publicized raid of a lesbian party on December 4, 1901 in Santa María.

The spectacular growth of Mexico City in the 1930s was accompanied by the opening of homosexual bars and baths, which supplemented the traditional cruising locales of the Alameda, the Zócalo, Paseo de la Reforma, and Calle Madero (formerly Plateros). Those involved in homosexual activity continued to live with their families. There were no homophile publications or organizations, so homosexual activity was practiced clandestinely or privately.

In the absence of a separate residential concentration, the lower classes tended to accept the stereotypes of unions between masculine insertors (*activos*) and feminized insertees (*pasivos*). While some of the cosmopolitan upper classes rejected the stereotypical effeminacy expected of *maricones* ("faggots"), they tended to emulate European dandies of the late nineteenth century.

During World War II, ten to fifteen gay bars operated in Mexico City, with dancing permitted in at least two, El África and El Triunfo. Relative freedom from official harassment continued until 1959 when, following a grisly triple murder, Mayor Uruchurtu closed every gay bar under the guise of "cleaning up vice" (or at least reducing its visibility).

The perceived failures of masculinity of *maricones* made (and makes) them "fair game" to be robbed, beaten, and used as sexual receptacles by males upholding conventional "macho" notions of masculinity, particularly policemen.

In both Mexico City and Guadalajara, there have been short-lived gay liberation groups since the early 1970s. For example, La Frente Liberación Homosexual formed in 1971 to protest the firing of gay employees by Sears stores in Mexico City. La Frente Homosexual de Acción Revolucionaria organized protests of 1983 roundups in Guadalajara, and small gay rights organizations have continued to pop up and fade away in large Mexican cities.

There are now annual gay pride marches, gay publications, and gay and lesbian organizations in touch with organizations in other countries.

Constructions of Homosexuality

Although there have been challenges to the dominant conception of homosexuality as necessarily related to gender-crossing, the simplistic activo-pasivo logic ("I'm a man [*hombre*]; if I fuck you, you're not a man")

continues to channel thought and behavior in Mexico, as elsewhere in Latin America.

The *norteño* (or North American) conception that males who have sex with males, regardless of the sexual role taken, are "homosexual" is not unknown and may account for some of the unease and outright denial sociologists Murray and Prieur elicited from *activos*. There is also a recognition that some seemingly ultramasculine men could be penetrated.

This phenomenon of "flipping" is frequently discussed among male transvestite prostitutes, and the pleasure of "surrender" to penetration is not inconceivable to masculine-appearing males. Indeed the prospect frightens more than a few males who have penetrated males and directly observed the reactions of the penetrated. "If I let him fuck me I'd probably like it and then I'd do it again, and then I'd be queer," is consciously articulated. "You don't know how your body might react, or your mind. Morally, you don't know what might follow. And if I am a man, I want to stay like that forever," an interviewee named Roberto told Prieur. There is even a term, *hechizos* (made ones), for former *mayates* (insertors) who have become passive partners in anal intercourse over time.

Still, the feared anal penetration does not turn everyone who has experienced it into a *maricón*. Nor does it inevitably compromise masculine deportment or end masculine self-conception, especially if the stigmatized behavior occurs with those who live outside one's *barrio* (neighborhood).

The homosexual involvement of some persons is an open secret, that of others is not discussed, and some homosexual involvement is genuinely secret. There is reticence about discussing one's own homosexuality and that of one's friends and family members. Moreover, there is the tendency to bundle sex(uality) and gender into the activo/pasivo role dichotomy. Those who are perceived as not being able to take care of themselves will "naturally" get both fucked and fucked over.

Although this understanding remains dominant in the lower classes, it is regarded as backward by middle- and upper-class male and female Mexican homosexuals who pride themselves on their modernity and cosmopolitanness. Those who reject being categorized as either *pasivo* or *activo* are labeled *internacional*, a term with positive connotations of sophistication and modernity.

Héctor Carrillo's study of changing sexual patterns and conceptions in Guadalajara explores middle-class sexual modernity. Surveys of self-reported sexual behavior find roles less dichotomized now than they were when the ethnography of Joseph Carrier began in the late-1960s, especially in Mexico City.

[Recent Political Advances in Mexico City

In 2006, Mexico City, the nation's capital and largest city, adopted civil unions, which gave same-sex couples many of the rights and responsibilities of married couples, though it did not convey adoption rights.

In December 2009, Mexico City's legislature passed a bill permitting same-sex marriage. The bill, which defines marriage as "the free uniting of two people," was quickly signed into law by Mayor Marcelo Ebrard. The law permits same-sex couples to adopt children, apply for bank loans together, and be included in the insurance policies of their spouse, as well as the rights that were provided in the domestic partnership law.

The law was bitterly denounced by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and challenged as unconstitutional by Mexico's federal government, but after the nation's highest court refused to intervene to stay the law, the city began issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples in March 2010.

In August 2010, the Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of same-sex marriage in Mexico City. On a 9-2 vote, the Court also ruled that the same-sex marriages performed in Mexico City must be recognized in all 31 Mexican states. Although the other states are not required to perform same-sex marriages themselves, they are obligated to honor the legality of all the marriages performed in Mexico City.]

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Stephen O. Murray earned a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Toronto. Since completing a postdoctoral stint in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, he has worked in public health. His books include *American Gay*, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, and *Homosexualities*.